

MALTESE IMPERIAL MENTALITIES:  
SUBJECTING THE MALTESE MIND TO IMPERIAL RULE

Mario Ellul\*

By the inter-war period the political considerations at the Colonial Office together with the naval and military requirements in the Mediterranean had come to dictate the fortunes of an ever growing number of families on the island. The demise of the commercial and local manufacturing sectors in the immediate pre-World War I years, checked the development of serious alternatives to the Dockyard or the fleet as employment centres<sup>1</sup> and the majority of the population came to be fully dependent on the ability of the imperial authorities to provide direct and indirect employment or its living.

This growing dependence on military spending was even more significant to the inhabitants of the Cottonera, especially after the final consolidation of the naval base in French Creek. With the construction of docks four and five and their ancillary facilities (completed in 1907), the last vestiges of a commercial harbour disappeared<sup>2</sup> and the origins of the daily livelihood of nearly all the families in the Three Cities could almost invariably be traced to the presence of the Royal Navy in Maltese waters. From the dockyard worker or naval rating, to the dghajsaman or the washerwoman scrubbing away at the coarse sailor uniforms, the control over the fortunes of these people was absolute and so was the control over their minds.<sup>3</sup>

As long as the British remained committed to the naval base, a wide cross section of the population remained largely loyal to the imperial cause or if not, to the continued British permanence on the island. This trend was even noticeable among the ranks of the so called 'pro-Italian party' and foreign observers somewhat cynically noted that 'I maltesi vogliono la religione di Roma, la lingua di Dante e la sterlina inglese'.<sup>4</sup> As long as the British presence guaranteed a living, the bulk of the population was perhaps more wont to see them as generous benefactors rather than as usurpers of

---

\* Mario Ellul, a member of *Storja's* editorial board, holds a first class honours degree in history from the University of Malta; he now teaches at De La Salle College.

sovereign or constitutional rights.

Indeed, as long as the political struggles centred on constitutional issues, the language question and resistance to the British authorities, the national debate remained 'not just alien but under certain aspects antagonistic to urban working class interests'.<sup>5</sup> Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici himself, an erstwhile supporter of Italian culture in the island, declared that the squabbles over the language question had hindered the solution of a host of problems which afflicted the lower classes.<sup>6</sup> Though the speech came at a point when 'il-Gross' was trying to justify his defection from the Nationalists' to the Government's side, it is surely very fair to note that the problems of infant mortality, unemployment, sub-standard housing, the minor outburst of plague in 1936, were more real to the population at large than the issues of nationhood.

#### PATRONS AND CLIENTS

The forces in a distant metropolis which underwrote the Maltese worker's scanty living were unfathomably detached from the prevailing social realities on the island, at least as much as the Maltese were ignorant of the workings of Whitehall or Downing Street. Moreover, on going through the correspondence which flowed between Malta and London, one is bound to notice that many a time the vision at one end was not necessarily shared by the other. The unrealistic Maltese expected too much of the rich and mighty British Empire,<sup>7</sup> noted the Colonial Office. While the Governor's reading of the Italian situation was not necessarily shared by London, especially the Foreign Office. One solid reality bridged the two sides - that the security of the fortress depended very much on the loyalty of the inhabitants.

In the context of detached rule, patronage flourished and developed into a prominent trait of Colonial Malta. It has been pointed out that a true patron 'must have monopolistic control over some scarce or desired resource'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as the local representatives of that distant power in London, a whole class of officers ranging from the Governor to the local foreman at H.M Dockyard came to be the ones who in the absence of formal institutions, guaranteed access to such rare commodities as steady employment. In return, as in a typical patron-client relationship, the imperial authorities and their subordinates obtained prestige, power and most

important of all loyalty. In the colonial context, Malta itself has been described as a 'client state'<sup>9</sup> and there was no lack either of patrons or of clients. Appeals were made to anyone who possessed a hint of power and status, from village level to the Governor at Valletta. Nor were the Secretary of State or the King spared requests ranging from pleas for the abolition of the N.A.A.F.I., to letters begging intercession with Oxford University examining boards for good pass marks.<sup>10</sup> A system of institutionalized begging which placed all subordinates in the same relation to a paternalist overlord.

The local dispensers of patronage were of course quite conspicuous figures and their activities often verged on the limits of corruption, especially if they controlled access to the most precious commodities available. One of the most notorious cases, often quoted<sup>11</sup> and common knowledge to many a Cottonera inhabitant who still remembers those years,<sup>12</sup> was a recruitment racket organized by one of the Dockyard Heads of Department and led by his sister. The case, which has passed in history as that of 'is-Sinjura tal-Birgu', was exposed by The Dockyard Worker<sup>13</sup> newspaper in its March 1937 edition. Under a thin veil of fiction, the editor told the story of a 'mysterious sorceress' who worked miracles 'at a price':

A price is not a bribe. Everybody in the yard knows that. Only it is the price that does the trick ... I would charge you £60 if you insist to be too wise. I would charge others different prices ranging from £10 to £50. It is for you to choose<sup>14</sup>

The existence of such a racket was a too well known secret, which until it was exposed was tolerated by all and sundry. After all, the crowds of unemployed workers standing at the Dockyard's Cospicua Gate did not even bother to rush up to the 'sorceress' if the occasion for employment at a price arose out of there.<sup>15</sup> Mr. Joe Mizzi, of Cospicua remembers very clearly that his father obtained employment in the yard in this way, standing at Cospicua Gate where he was approached by a Dockyard employee. The latter, a Maltese chap with an English surname, instructed Mizzi senior to report to a certain foreman 'u ghidlu li bghattek jien', at a price of course. It is generally believed that this employee was well known to the Admiral Superintendent of H.M. Dockyard: 'l-Ammirall kien ihobbu hafna lil dan it-tali ... forsi ghax kellu kunjomu Ingliz'.<sup>16</sup>

Those dockyard workers who were more licitly enrolled, especially the young apprentices who had passed the highly competitive Dockyard

Examination had a lifetime sinecure opened up for them:

Jekk xi hadd ikun dahal apprentice id-Dockyard, kulhadd kien imur jifrah lil ommu. Qisu sar xi professur ghax dahal id-Dockyard, allura ghandu l-hobza ta' kuljum ghall-familja zgur. Anke t-tfajliet, lil dak kienu jkellmu, ghax dak ghandek futur mieghu.<sup>17</sup>

The unskilled drafts or the casual workers were in a much more vulnerable position. For these, holding on to their dockyard job was a costly affair since their permanence on the yard's rolls often depended on their ability to pay bribes. During the periodic dismissals or spells of long leave, those who did not pay were the first to go. Other workers hung under the menacing shadow of the 'Shoal Lists': a system whereby workers were graded by their chargemen, supposedly according to their performance. Those at the bottom of the list would be the first to go in times of reduced work at the yard.<sup>18</sup> Dr. J. Saliba still remembers the anxiety which reigned at home when the rumours of approaching dismissals started circulating in the Dockyard. The intercession of a patron had to be bought off and Saliba senior would have to buy a seven shillings' worth bottle of eau de cologne for the Maltese chargeman in his section to ensure his retention. No mean price to pay out of a weekly salary of about thirty shillings which had to go into supporting a family of six and two grandparents. These 'voluntary' contributions were a very common practice at H.M. Dockyard and collections of a customary five shillings were held regularly for the buying of gifts to chargemen or supervisors. Failure to comply, normally spelled the inclusion of your name in the foreman's black book. It was even customary to pay something like half a crown to be selected for work in confined space (for which a special allowance was paid) or overtime.<sup>19</sup>

#### DIVIDE ET IMPERA

The consolidation of a class of 'go between' in the dockyard is very symptomatic of the emergence of a new pro-British middle class on the island. The British connection opened up the way for a group of people who otherwise would have found it difficult to step up the ladder through the more traditional avenues of titles, landed wealth or university education. Taking as an example the Dockyard employee who had just been promoted:

As a first step ... he puts on his festa dress for daily use ... he insists on being called 'signor' by his former mates. He will not answer unless they

address him so. He is ashamed to call himself workman ... Comparing himself with the clerico-legal-commercial classes, he rents a costly house and buys a new set of furniture ... he keeps a servant because without a servant neither he will be called 'signor' nor his wife 'signora'<sup>20</sup>

As a class, this group of people owed their existence to the British connection and could thus be counted upon as prime supporters of the imperial authorities on the island. As such, this class even managed to penetrate one of the purely British strongholds on the island: the Sliema branch of the Union Club, where the only Maltese whom one could come across were 'a sprinkling of the nobility and those holding minor posts at the Dockyard'.<sup>21</sup>

As a matter of official policy, the higher ranks in the yard were not open to 'natives' and as long as the Dockyard remained under the direction of the Admiralty, the highest post open to a Maltese was that of 'local supervisor'.<sup>22</sup> However, the newly arrived engineer or officer from England was more often than not ready to throw himself into the hands of this class of Maltese subordinates and act on their advice especially in matters which involved relations with other workers in the yard.<sup>23</sup>

The privileged position of this class of intermediaries was clearly resented by the lower class of workers in the Dockyard, who gradually became even more dependent on the British as their only means of redress. It is surely very interesting to note for example that the general tone of the Union of Dockyard Employees through The Dockyard Worker, was more often than not ready to lay the plight of the workers' lot at the feet of the Maltese 'agitators who fooled the English officers into accepting their guidance'. According to the same newspaper, those Englishmen little understood the petty jealousies and bias of these locals who 'caused great harm to more Anglo-Maltese understanding in the yard'.<sup>24</sup>

This class of 'go between' was even accused of being behind the 'unnecessary' demands for higher wages by inciting 'the ordinary workman who lives a frugal life against the authorities'.<sup>25</sup> According to The Dockyard Worker, these men were living beyond their means and simply needed the increase in wages to finance such extravaganzas as a new car or a new set of furniture. The Unions urged moderation among the disaffected ranks of workmen and even the officers of the Dockyard and Imperial Workers Union professed their intention of clearing misunderstandings between the workmen and the authorities which are liable to be exploited to the detriment

of the workmen themselves and to the detriment of the Empire.<sup>26</sup>

The Union claimed to be making:

A genuine endeavour to cooperate with the Authorities, and the Admiral Superintendent has invariably been most courteous and kind whenever we had occasion to meet. Quite recently the local Italian newspaper attacked the spokesman of the Dockyard and Imperial Workers Union as being servile to the authorities because in speeches delivered in a public meeting, we carefully refrained from stressing unduly the workers' grievances. I would submit that this educative effort of my managing committee might receive wider appreciation<sup>27</sup>

The only source of protection for the poor workman and his family against the abuse of his fellow countryman was the Admiral, or perhaps better still a whole handful of them who held command ashore and afloat. In the Cottonera, this officer was nearer to the people's hearts than the Governor because to a great extent he was more closely linked with their pockets than the general across the harbour could ever be. Admirals were freely described as 'Christian' if the fleet was kept long enough in harbour for many people to keep their families in bread and that something extra more.<sup>28</sup> A particularly long Summer Cruise or a fleet deployment were the causes of major concern for the tens of thousands who depended on a strong fleet's presence in the harbour. It should come as no surprise therefore that in the popular imagination, the Admiral C-in-C's or the Admiral Superintendent's figures developed into those of a bemedalled, blue clad St. Francis who kept the fleet in harbour for the exclusive welfare of the Maltese and distributed alms in shape of employment.<sup>29</sup>

It is surely very interesting to note that even today, when the Cottonera people speak of 'the' Admiral, most of them are normally referring to the Admiral Superintendent, the executive head of H.M Dockyard. This officer was particularly popular with the Cottonera people. For one he lived 'on their side' in a 17th century palace on the Vittoriosa Marina and perhaps more significantly, for the resources he had at his disposal. The Admiral's patronage was most thoroughly striven for, especially by such bodies as band clubs and scout groups and the gratitude and respect of the people showered on him like rain:

Għall-festi per ezempju, lil min ser tistieden? Lill-Ammirall tad-Dockyard ghax dak ser jaghmillek unur. Gej l-Ammirall! ... stedint lill-gran alla meta jigi l-Ammirall jonorak bil-prezenza tieghu u kienu jaghmlulu t-

tapiti homor u kulhadd jinkinalu.<sup>30</sup>

The sense of permanence personified by the office of the Admiral Superintendent left a strong imprint on the minds of the population at large. That the mighty British Empire would one day have to reduce its world wide commitments was a possibility which no one dreamt of and while the absence of the fleet may have spelled reduced work in the yard, the Dockyard could not sail off on a Summer Cruise. Even after the savage pruning carried out after the end of the First World War, the Admiralty remained the largest employer in the island and its employees the best paid of the whole lot. No other employer could ever challenge its standards of employment.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the workforce at the yard was reckoned to be the most loyal in pro-British terms, a loyalty which arose out of the simple yet very powerful axiom of 'not biting the hand that fed them'.<sup>32</sup>

## THE DOCKYARD AS A CENTRE OF PRO-BRITISH FEELING

Employment conditions at the Dockyard were far from ideal. Indeed, it has often been pointed out that the unfair conditions prevailing there brought about the birth of a proper trade union on the island, a full scale strike in 1917 and that the dockyard workers were among the most prominent of disaffected people in the events leading to the Sette Giugno.<sup>33</sup> However, in spite of this, employment in the yard remained among the most envied occupations of all and a cursory glance at the salaries of the various categories of workers in 1936<sup>34</sup> ought to show immediately why.

In this period the Dockyard workers were engaged in a struggle for the remittal of salary and bonus cuts which had been imposed on the yard in the wake of the Great Depression. The earlier part of the 1930s had been one of great hardships for a host of dockyard employees who were put on forced leave, placed on a 4 day week or simply dismissed. In 1931, prior to the cuts, the lowest basic rate of pay for a locally entered employee (a polite euphemism for the Maltese worker at the Dockyard, which distinguished him in terms of lesser pay and treatment from the worker enrolled in England) was fourteen shillings per week, which together with a weekly bonus of nine shillings, brought the weekly salary to a grand total of twenty three shillings.<sup>35</sup> In October 1931, a reduction of one shilling was made in the bonus, while in January of the following year there was a further reduction of one shilling (more in the case of employees with higher wages). This still left the lowest

paid worker in the yard with a weekly salary of around £1, no mean thing considering that the majority of the islanders were lucky enough to manage a few shillings in one week. Domestic servants for example, were paid 10-15 shillings per MONTH<sup>36</sup> and the washerwoman in the laundries not more

TRADE	WEEKLY WAGES		
	£	s	d
Dockyard Workers			
Boiler Maker		2	2 0
Assistant Boiler Maker		2	0 0
Shipwright	1	17	6
Engine Fitter		2	1 0
Ship Fitter	2	2	0
Electrical Fitter		2	2 0
Assistant Fitter		1	16 2
Rigger		1	10 0
Others			
Field labourer		1	2 0
Field labourer		1	15 0
Tailor	1	14	0
Fisherman	1	10	0
Fatiguelman	1	7	0
Shoemaker	1	11	0
Labourer	1	3	0

than two shillings per week.<sup>37</sup> For the majority of the lower class people across the island one pound was the dream of a lifetime.<sup>38</sup>

Statistics compiled in 1936 during a campaign which lobbied for the retraction of the Dockyard cuts, show that the average weekly salary across the island was in the region of 31s/6d (£1. 11s 6d). The majority of the dockyard workers represented in the survey were above this but a host of others were well below that figure. The relation of the wages with the prices of basic commodities ruling in the open market<sup>39</sup> will confirm that relatively speaking, the Dockyard worker was indeed having a much better deal than the average worker on the island.

A trip to the Cospicua market with just two shillings would almost invariably end with a basketful of merchandise for the housewife whose husband worked at the Dockyard.<sup>40</sup> Not so for the others, who in spite of



the rock bottom prices could only gaze at the shop windows or stalls and live on a monotonous diet of minestra, salted anchovies and bread, many a time bought on credit from the shop next door: 'kollox kien irhis, imma flus fl-idejn ma kienx hawn wisq'.<sup>41</sup>

ARTICLE	UNIT	£	s	d
Bread	Rotolo			3
Tomato Paste	do		5	
Rice	do		4	
Sugar	do		2	
Coffee	do		9	
Cheese	do	1	8	
Oil	Nofs		8	
Paraffin	Gallon			6
Soap	Rotolo			7
Beef (fresh)	do	1	6	
Vegetables	do		2	
Eggs	Dozen		2	
Milk (condensed)	Tin		5	
Lard	Rotolo		1	
Tea	do	2	4	
Butter	do	2		
Wine	Kwarta		2	

In November 1936, the 1931 Dockyard salary and bonus cuts were repealed. In soliciting this move, Governor Bonham-Carter stressed the need for removing the grievances from 'so large a section of the population as the Dockyard employees and the political expedencies which in a fortress like Malta warranted to be sufficient to justify better conditions for maintaining the loyalty of the Yard's hands.'<sup>42</sup> The fortress formula has always been a very powerful device in the history of colonial Malta. At least, it comes as a breath of fresh air to find it used in furthering the interests of the Maltese.

#### IN THE NAVY

Service aboard H.M Ships was another comfortable sinecure which guaranteed good pay and a relatively comfortable living. The rates of pay

were far more advantageous in the Navy than in the Dockyard, but the stints of service in distant waters may have discouraged many from joining up.<sup>43</sup> Here again conditions were far from ideal and largely discriminatory. Right up to the post Second World War years for example, the Maltese recruit could only join up as a steward (officers' valet/ servant) or as a cook.<sup>44</sup> There were periods when even these openings were closed up. When this occurred the population's general consternation was great especially that 'of a considerable number of men whose employment with the fleet had long been usual'.<sup>45</sup>

Eventually the recruitment of Maltese cooks, stewards and carpenters took off again and during the crises of the thirties (eg Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War and Munich), volunteers were enrolled as shore service seamen for the duration of the emergencies.<sup>46</sup> Only Englishmen of 'pure stock' could join up as regular seamen for service afloat and the unstable service conditions as emergency drafts were a particular cause of annoyance to the children of mixed marriages who wished to join the navy as Able Seamen.<sup>47</sup> However, the Maltese cook, steward or his dependents, rarely found a cause for complaint and they certainly endeared themselves with the Service and all it stood for:

Ma nistax nahbi l-fatt li lejn il-flotta Ngliza kelli gibda kbira ... kif kellhom hafna Maltin ohra. Missieri kellu paga ta' hmistax -il lira fix-xahar, li dak iz-zmien kienu jiswew hafna, u bis-sahha taghhom zammni ghaxar snin l-Universita'. Kien igib minn abbord fliexken tal-whisky ...; pakketti tas-sandwiches bl-ahjar perzut u butir; bicciet tal-cake u fil-Milied kien igib ukoll Christmas pudding. Kultant il-kuxjenza kienet tippermettilu jgib xi bott zebgha biex nizbghu l-bieb ta' barra u l-gallarija<sup>48</sup>

The Maltese serviceman had a very good reason to attach himself so strongly to the Navy. The chance of finding another employment was very slim indeed and so he did his very best to impress. His British counterpart behaved somewhat differently, since more often than not he left the Navy after a customary stint of three to five years and had better prospects of finding a job back home. As one ex-steward has it: 'Ahna konna sefturi tal-fizzjali ... Konna naghmlu minn kollox biex ninghogbu u lill-fizzjal tieghek kont kwazi rasal biex tilghaqlu z-zarbun'<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, as in the Dockyard, the Maltese serviceman received a treatment inferior to that of his English mates: 'gatt ma konna stmati daqshom, anke jekk jiena bahri bl-istess rank tieghek, jien fuqek. Hekk kienet il-procedura u Malti ma kiex jista' jilhaq

aktar minn Petty Officer'.<sup>50</sup>

The pay of the Maltese serviceman compared very well with the rest of the wages on the island and there was always that something 'extra' which found its way into the sailors' home:

Kulhadd kien jiehu, anke l-Ingliz ... Il-kit bag dejjem mimli hadtu mieghi id-dar, speċjalment meta konna nservu Ta' Xbiex fil-blokk tar-WRNS. Gamm, butir, hobz, cornflakes, laned. Konna nohorgu mimlijin mill-pantry u flok ifittxulna kienu jghidulek "good night" ... Darba kont niezel l-iskaluna tal-bastiment u nqatali l-handle u l-basket baqa' niezel. Kien hemm fizzaġal u gabaruli hu stess!<sup>51</sup>

It is very reasonable to suppose that the authorities were very much aware of the pilfering from the military stores, which went on across the island on a grand scale. Service property bearing the crown's marks could even be found for sale in the open markets,<sup>52</sup> while the Occurrences Books of the Water Division show that the Police Force had a busy time in controlling the illicit traffic between ships, naval establishments and the shore. Ropes, canvas, metal sheets, provisions and a host of other items were very precious commodities either for sale on the market or for use at home<sup>53</sup>. It is surely very indicative to note that prosecution of these cases was in the hands of the Malta or the Dockyard Police Force and that the majority dealt more with the infringement of customs regulations rather than theft. If it was the case of the latter, British servicemen would many a time be found in collusion with the accused.<sup>54</sup>

It is an open secret that to a certain extent the Naval authorities tolerated an amount of pilfering. Leading Steward Mizzi, remembers very clearly the day when he was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal (which was awarded after 15 years of continuous service with a spotless conduct certificate). The Captain read the citation in front of the assembled crew and pinned the medal, getting near enough to whisper 'you're lucky you've never been caught.' Today the steward is still blessing 'the Admiral' for providing so generously to his family and the extra pounds which the Good Conduct Medal has added to his service pension.<sup>55</sup>

#### SERVICES TO THE SERVICES

For those who could neither join the Navy nor H.M Dockyard, there were several other methods which could come in handy to make ends meet.

There were the washerwomen, tailors and seamstresses, 'dghajsamen', bar keepers, prostitutes, gaxin dealers (the gash, or what remained of the food aboard ships' galleys was customarily sold for consumption). Though not directly dependent on the British Exchequer, the loyalty of this class of people still remains very impressive (though to the logical mind, the woman who spent sleepless nights sewing buttons on sailors' uniforms for a few pennies, is more justified in cursing rather than blessing the Navy). Perhaps, the precarious existence of these people made them even more grateful for small mercies than their mates in the relatively stable world of the Dockyard or the Naval vessel.

The boatmen for example, more popularly known even within the Services as dghajsamen, were a class of people whose living depended exclusively on the fleet's fickle presence in the harbour. Nigh on 1300 boatmen were registered in the Grand Harbour alone in 1936<sup>56</sup> and hundreds of boats flocked like ducks after bread crumbs around every merchant and warship that entered the harbour.<sup>57</sup>

Since the Royal Navy ships in the harbour were in an absolute majority, the boatman hung on tenaciously to his connection with the fleet and proudly flaunted the passes issued by particular captains in His Majesty's service. The boat itself was a clear indication of where its owners sympathies lay. The spalliera (a sort of back support on the boat's stern seat), on the majority of the boats in the Grand Harbour would almost inevitably sport a carving portraying Britannia or St. George. Dghajjes attached to a warship's company showed the vessel's name and sported the ship's crest and other Admiralty symbols as general decoration. Certainly these symbols were none too effusive as symbols of loyalty, considering that even the choice woods and metal pieces used in the construction of the dghajsa itself were more often than not pilfered from the Dockyard stores.<sup>58</sup>

For the boatmen, the Royal Navy's patronage became even more crucial when in 1928 the office of the Commander-in-Chief issued an order prohibiting personal trading on board H.M Ships.<sup>59</sup> This measure provoked quite a stir. The Admiral declared that he was simply applying an order which had been in force in home waters since 1911, however the Nationalist press argued that it was aimed at furthering the N.A.A.F.I's interest against that of the local traders. Lord Strickland welcomed the order as due in curtailing the activities of Italian barbers 'who have had many opportunities to get aboard [and] may in future be used as spies on such ships as the new

aircraft carrier'.<sup>60</sup>

Until the enforcement of this order, a wide class of tradesmen carried out their business directly on Royal Navy ships. Then all barbers, bootmakers, curio vendors, tailors, photographers, were prohibited from boarding Naval vessels, spelling the end of a very lucrative trade indeed. Dghajsamen who carried a ship's pass were however exempted and continued to carry goods, laundry and stores on board.<sup>61</sup> Many a time, that 'little something' would surreptitiously end up in the boat too, either down the gangway or else down the gash chute. This way, the boatman could supplement his meagre earnings with choice items from the ship's mess, which either ended up on his table or up for sale at the market. The gash trade was particularly lucrative for the boatman who was lucky enough to be contracted to clear the ship's messes or the galley.

Following the general pattern which had set in during the Great Depression years in the island, the dghajsamen fell into hard times too, so much as to attract the attention of the Governor himself. On the 16 November 1931, awaiting the publication of the Royal Commission's Report and anticipating 'political excitement', General Campbell expressed particular concern about the plight of the boatmen, those 'old servants of the Navy' who were reduced to 'absolute penury and starvation. Campbell believed that the 'political agitators would have a pretty good field in which to work during the Winter' and that disgruntled dockyard men and dghajsamen combined could have given a lot of unwanted trouble. He therefore appealed to the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet to encourage further the use of dghajsas by Naval personnel in order to relieve 'these very good fellows imbued with a fine patriotic spirit'.<sup>62</sup>

Harder times were yet to come and when the Royal Navy left off for Alexandria during the Abyssinian Crisis, the fleet of dghajjes fell into dire straits. Out of the 600 boatmen who served with the fleet or with an occasional tourist ship, 400 usually took up alternative work as stevedores or coalheavers, the remaining two hundred and their dependents were left to feel the pinch.<sup>63</sup> The situation of these destitute boatmen and their families seems to have been so precarious as to attract the attention of Admiral Sir William Fisher at Alexandria. In an appeal to the fleet, Fisher instituted a fund for the relief of the boatmen and claimed that an occasional five shillings could 'tide a Maltese family for over a week of almost complete starvation'.<sup>64</sup> Considering that a passage from French Creek to Bighi Bay cost 4d<sup>65</sup> and

that those four pennies were the maximum which the boatmen could charge on any of the longer routes, the Admiral must have gone pretty near the mark, especially when one keeps in mind the hundreds of boats plying daily the same places. Eventually, Sir William's appeal raised around £100 and three hundred and eighty one boatmen were singled out for aid. The fleet's gesture was described by Governor Bonham-Carter as

Both timely and beneficial to the recipients and I need hardly assure you of the deep gratitude, not only of the boatmen themselves but also of the inhabitants of these islands who see in this gesture a further example of the practical interest which the Royal Navy takes in all that concerns their welfare.<sup>66</sup>

### BARS AND PROSTITUTION

Throughout the hey day of the British period, Valletta's Strada Stretta, better known to the jolly Jack Tars as 'the gut', managed to preserve its primacy in the field of sailor entertainment, however the Cottonera had its fair share of the trade too. Of the Three Cities, Senglea's open shore was the best location for establishments catering for the entertainment of sailors of the Mediterranean fleet since both Vittoriosa's and Cospicua's waterfronts were occupied by Admiralty property.<sup>67</sup> However, the trade was so lucrative that it also flourished 'inland', away from the shoreline of the Grand Harbour.

In an outward manifestation of pro-British sentiment (and an eye to attracting the sailor with things that sounded like home), the majority of these establishments displayed signs like 'England's Glory', 'The Union', 'King George V', 'Duke of York', 'Malaya', 'Benbow', 'Nelson', 'Coronation', 'Come Home'.<sup>68</sup> Some of them even took to flying the White Ensign or the Union Jack in windows, balconies or doorways.<sup>69</sup> These signs were also indicative of the Maltese partiality for the Navy and in the Harbour area the sailor was certainly much more popular than the soldier.<sup>70</sup> For one, the army was in the minority in numerical terms and the sailor was more of the type to dish out good money for a glass of 'coloured water' and the company of a prostitute who more often than not happened to be well past her prime.<sup>71</sup> The prostitution phenomenon has been interpreted within the Maltese colonial context as a manifestation of the population's own dependent status and 'inability to control their own lives'.<sup>72</sup> The strict code of conduct

professed by the Roman Catholic Church was ever present in the lives of the Maltese, yet the practical realities of widespread poverty made of prostitution one of the many ways of earning a living, especially for single women.

Though prostitution was not practiced in the bars, these establishments provided the ideal venue for barmaids and artistes to meet prospective clients.<sup>73</sup> According to the Police Regulations, barmaids had to be licensed and no women, other than those registered under the regulations and issued with a badge were permitted to loiter inside the bars. The White Slave Traffic Act had outlawed the brothels, however prostitution remained rampant<sup>74</sup> and the existence of certain houses was well known both by the clients and authorities alike.<sup>75</sup> Some of the more notorious prostitutes were known through fame, while some of those who preferred to avoid the bars were sometimes driven into cars, 'soliciting the attention of the passers by.' The latter were of particular cause of alarm since it was assumed that their taking to the streets was mainly due to their reluctance of submitting themselves to the medical test which preceded the issue of the licence. They were thus considered to be potential carriers of venereal infection.<sup>76</sup>

The incidence of venereal disease among the members of the garrison and the fleet, especially the soaring rates among the naval ratings, was a cause of major concern for the imperial authorities. Facilities for free treatment were provided for the prostitutes as an important corollary to the prevention of sexually transmitted disease among the servicemen. However, tragic as it may seem, many women were simply loath to undergo treatment since their period of detention in hospital would have deprived them of earnings which they could scarcely afford to forgo.<sup>77</sup>

The bar with the name of home or his ship continued to be a veritable magnet for 'Jack' and an even greater one for the owner's loyalties. In one typical example, Mr. Lino Bonnici, a Cospicua veteran remembers that the 'Union', the bar kept by his father in Strada Nuova was always full of sailors. Like a considerable number of Cospicua families, the Bonnicis were Nationalist Party supporters (or perhaps better still, to use Bonnici's terminology, Grossisti) on both parents' sides. Not so Bonnici senior however, who was a staunch pro-British 'Striklandjan': a loyalty which according to his son, was bought by the crowds of sailors who always filled the bar.<sup>78</sup>

### THE BRITISH COMMUNITY

The resident British community in the Cottonera area constituted another major source of influence in nurturing the perception of Britain as 'the provider' and as such worthy of praise rarely short of adulation. The higher representatives of the Services, together with their families kept very much to themselves and the life at their club or in their homes was pretty hard for the newly arrived English officers and their ladies to infiltrate, let alone for the lowly 'Malts'.<sup>79</sup> It would seem for example that the only Maltese whom Major Ponder (an infantry officer sent in with the re-enforcements during the Abyssinian Crisis) came into contact with throughout his seven month stay on the island, were the kindly guide at the museum, discourteous shopkeepers and servants who were singularly

Unintelligent, lazy and ... most independent ... Much of the trouble can be traced to the fact that their employers are heretics and only to be worked for because they pay well.<sup>80</sup>

The Imperial authorities higher up the ladder were very much aware of the hostility aroused by the proverbial British arrogance and with an eye on reducing this animosity, Governor Bonham-Carter encouraged the newly arrived officers to cut down on their exclusiveness. According to Sir Charles, this could help in making the Maltese enthusiastic supporters of anything British.<sup>81</sup>

If the traditional Maltese upper middle classes of the inter-war period never quite got into the frame of mind desired by Bonham-Carter, the lower levels of the population certainly made deeper inroads. In the major points of contact between the two peoples, the Maltese families interacted at work and at play with the English Dockyard workers, Servicemen and their families. At this level mixed marriages occurred more frequently and friends were made much more easily. The standard of living of the English rankers and Dockyard hands, though relatively higher than that of the Maltese was not that lofty as to inhibit contacts. When even this proved to be impossible, even the host of beggars could hope to scrounge a penny or two:

L-Inglizi kienu jiehdu gost jaraw hafna tfal jigru warajhom u kienu jhobbu jifghulhom xi sitt habbiet. Konna nhobbuhom hafna ... ma konniex nistghu naraw Ingliz. Kulhadd jigri warajh u jghidlu "give me penny Joe". Konna mmorru nghumu hdejn xi bastiment u kienu jifghulek xi sitt habbiet



jew xi sold ... u kulhadd joghdos ghas-soldi. Kulhadd kien hadha f'halqu l -"give me penny Joe". Mindu kelli ghaxar snin kont nahdem ma' hajjat. Dan kien ihallasni bis-soldi, ghalhekk is-sold li kien jaghtina l-Ingiliz konna narawh deheb ... jien kont immur nigri naghtih lil ommi<sup>82</sup>

To a family of ten, living in a casemate within St. Nicholas' Bastion, a group of English Dockyard employees and their families (who occupied a block of flats a mere two hundred yards away), were the living embodiment of that benevolent but mysterious hand at London which fed them. The gift of a second hand rag doll for a twelve year old girl who played at mummy with a stone wrapped in a rug in lieu of the doll which she could never even hope to have, was heaven sent. Her mother could not even afford to buy her brood of children a half penny worth of sweets and even ran into debts to buy the basic necessities and here were these Englishmen who rewarded the odd errand with cakes, sweets and dolls: 'Kienu jhobbuna hafna ... qatt ma kienet tghaddi minn rasna li qeghdin jahkmuna u ahna konna nhobbuhom'.<sup>83</sup> One can just imagine the significance which this gleaming block of flats, full of 'kbarat tad-Dockyard' had in the lives of people living in a hole of a room in a 17th century bastion. After receiving a near hit in the Second World War, the block of flats was demolished and its stones transported to build aircraft pens in the airfields:

Kien bini sabih, b'zewg sulari, arjuz u kollu arkati. Kienu gew is-suldati jwaqqghuh ... konna thassarnieh. Ghalina kien ifisser li daqshekk rajna affarijiet.

In the days when there was no reason to suppose that the Empire would not go on forever, no instrument was more valuable in forging loyalty and attachment than the feeling of helplessness instigated by the mere thought of having to do without 'big brother'. The colonization of the mind may be said to have been total and absolute!

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>S. Busuttill, 'An Overview of Malta's Economic Development' in The British Colonial Experience ed. V. Mallia-Milanes (Mireva, Malta 1988), 161

<sup>2</sup>J. Bonnici & M. Cassar, The Malta Grand Harbour and its Dockyard (Gutenberg Press, Malta 1994), 117

<sup>3</sup>E.L. Zammit, A Colonial Inheritance (Malta University Press, 1984), 11

<sup>4</sup>Ugo Ojetti, Corriere Della Sera correspondent. Quoted in H.Ganado, Rajt Malta

Tinbidel, Vol. II. (Interprint, Malta 1977), 101.

<sup>5</sup>D. Fenech, 'Birgu during the British Period' in Birgu, a Maltese Maritime City eds. L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar & S. Fiorini (Malta University Services, 1993), 178

<sup>6</sup>N.A.R, L. G. O. File no. 2772/1936, Speech delivered by Dr. C. Mifsud Bonnici at Cospicua on 27 September 1936, Police transcript, 13

<sup>7</sup>E.L. Zammit, op. cit. 13

<sup>8</sup>J. Waterbury, 'An attempt to put patrons and clients in their place' in Patrons and Clients eds. G. Gellner and J. Waterbury (Duckworth, London 1977), 330

<sup>9</sup>E.L. Zammit, op. cit. 17

<sup>10</sup>see for example N.A.R, Desp. from the S. of S. to the G. 17 Aug. 1936

<sup>11</sup>See for example D. Fenech, op. cit. 151; and K. Ellul Galea, L-istorja tat-Tarzna. (Aquilina & Co. Malta 1973), 156

<sup>12</sup>Interviews with Dr.J.Saliba, M'Scala 24.10.95 & Mr. J. Mizzi, Cospicua 13 Oct. 1995

<sup>13</sup>The Dockyard Worker was the official organ of the Union of Dockyard Employees.

<sup>14</sup>The Dockyard Worker, March 1937, 4

<sup>15</sup>K. Ellul Galea, op. cit. 113

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Mr. J. Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Dr. J. Saliba, M'Scala, 24 Oct. 1995

<sup>18</sup>The Dockyard Worker, May 1937, 4

<sup>19</sup>ibid.

<sup>20</sup>ibid.

<sup>21</sup>S. Ponder, Mediterranean Memories (Stanley Paul & Co.Ltd, London, undated), 114

<sup>22</sup>K. Ellul Galea, supra, 146

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Mr. L. Bonnici, Paola, 1 Nov. 1995

<sup>24</sup>The Dockyard Worker May 1937, 2

<sup>25</sup>ibid.

<sup>26</sup>N.A.R, L. G. O. File 1119/1936. Letter from Mr. J. Olivieri Munroe, President of the Dockyard and Imperial Workers Union to Mr. G. Shakespeare, Parliamentary and Financial Secretary at the Admiralty, 19th September 1938

<sup>27</sup>ibid.

<sup>28</sup>H. Ganado, Rajt Malta Tinbidel Vol. I (Malta 1977), 34

<sup>29</sup>See for example The Dockyard Worker August 1937, 2

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Dr. J. Saliba, M'Scala, 24 Oct. 1995

<sup>31</sup>N.A.R, L.G.O. File no. 1119/1936. Correspondence between the Dockyard and Imperial Workers Union and the Admiralty, 19th September 1938.

<sup>32</sup>D. Fenech, op. cit. 136

<sup>33</sup>See for example M. Sant, Sette Giugno (S.K.S. Malta 1989), 58-65

<sup>34</sup>N.A.R, Despatch from the G. to the S. of S. 30th October 1936

<sup>35</sup>ibid.

<sup>36</sup>H. Ganado, op. cit. Vol. I, 26

- <sup>37</sup>Interview with Mrs. R. Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995
- <sup>38</sup>A. Buttigieg, Mill-Album ta' Hajti, Vol II, L-Ghazla tat-Triq. (Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1980), 180
- <sup>39</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 1725/1936. Prices ruling in the open market at Valletta, November 1936
- <sup>40</sup>Interview with Mr. John Brincat, Cospicua, 13 Jan. 1996, whose father was on the higher scale of storekeepers at the Yard
- <sup>41</sup>Interview with Mrs. Rita Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995, one of the eight children of a cartman
- <sup>42</sup>N.A.R., Desp. from the G. to the S. of S., 30th October 1936
- <sup>43</sup>Interview with Dr. J. Saliba, M'Scala, 24 Oct. 1995
- <sup>44</sup>T.O.M., May 25 1937, 10
- <sup>45</sup>N.A.R., Desp. from the G. to the S. of S., 16th Feb. 1923
- <sup>46</sup>T.O.M., 25 May 1937
- <sup>47</sup>T.O.M., 17 October 1938
- <sup>48</sup>A. Buttigieg, op. cit. 161
- <sup>49</sup>Interview with Mr. J. Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995
- <sup>50</sup>ibid.
- <sup>51</sup>ibid.
- <sup>52</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 1434/1921, Prosecution of persons found in possession of Crown Property
- <sup>53</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 142/1929, Suggested legislation against pilfering
- <sup>54</sup>ibid. letter from Rear Admiral, Commanding at H.M.S Egmont I, 24 Oct. 1928 and Water Police Occurrences, Vol. 11, Case no. 2414; Vol. 31, Cases nos. 3262, 157; Vol. 25, Case no. 2945
- <sup>55</sup>Interview with Mr. J. Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995
- <sup>56</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 1056/1936. Report by the Captain of the Ports, 4th February 1936
- <sup>57</sup>See for example J. Muscat, 'The Dghajsa - in Memoriam', The Mariner's Mirror, vol. 77 no.4 (Nov. 1991) 389
- <sup>58</sup>Information supplied by Mr. J. Muscat (ex-Maritime Museum), Rabat
- <sup>59</sup>N.A.R. L.G.O. File No. 170/28, 4 June 1928
- <sup>60</sup>ibid. Handwritten note from the Head of the Ministry, 2 June 1928
- <sup>61</sup>Information supplied by Mr. J. Muscat, Rabat
- <sup>62</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 501/31. Confidential report re. use of dghajsas by Naval personnel, 16 November 1931
- <sup>63</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 1056/1936. Report by the Captain of the Ports, 4th February 1936
- <sup>64</sup>4 ibid. Appeal by Sir W. Fisher for the relief of dghajsamen, 1 January 1936
- <sup>65</sup>Guida Generale 1939, (Malta Herald, Valletta), 354
- <sup>66</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 1056/36 Letter from Sir Charles Bonham-Carter to

Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, 25 April 1936. (My emphasis)

<sup>67</sup>D. Fenech, op. cit. 154

<sup>68</sup>L. Bugeja, 'Birgu during the Second World War' in Birgu, A Maltese Maritime City. eds L. Bugeja et. al. (Malta University Services 1993), 191 and information given by Messrs. Bonnici, Mizzi, Saliba.

<sup>69</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 159/26

<sup>70</sup>H. Ganado, op. cit. Vol. I, 331

<sup>71</sup>A. Buttigieg, op. cit. 159-168

<sup>72</sup>G. Dench, The Maltese in London (Routledge, London 1975), 107

<sup>73</sup>N.A.R., Confidential Desp. from the G. to the S. of S. 30 December 1937

<sup>74</sup>N.A.R., L.G.O. File no. 54/1930

<sup>75</sup>A. Buttigieg, op. cit. 167-168

<sup>76</sup>N.A.R., Confidential Desp. from the G. to the S. of S. 30 December 1937

<sup>77</sup>ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Interview with Mr. L. Bonnici, Paola, 1 Nov. 1995

<sup>79</sup>S. Ponder, op. cit. 89

<sup>80</sup>ibid. 88

<sup>81</sup>V. Bonham-Carter, In a Liberal Tradition (Constable, London 1960), 207

<sup>82</sup>Interview with Mr. J. Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995

<sup>83</sup>Interview with Mrs R. Mizzi, Cospicua, 13 Oct. 1995