

A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON 'THE DIALOGUES' OF DE SOLDANIS

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CANON Gian Francesco Agius Sultana lived from 1712 to 1770. Known today as De Soldanis, this was in fact the name which he himself used in his own day. A native of Gozo, De Soldanis is one of the most famous early Maltese writers, although by no means the only one. He is, however, perhaps better known for his Grammar (1750) and for his unpublished Dictionary than for his Dialogues, the subject of the present study.

The Dialogues may be regarded as being of vital importance for several reasons, some of them linguistic, some of them socio-historical. From a linguistic point of view, the Dialogues are one of the earliest examples of Maltese prose writing, the only other such prose writing deserving of mention being the Maltese Doctrine of the priest Francesco Wzzino: but even this is indebted to De Soldanis, since it was he who designed an alphabet for use in his Grammar, and it was thanks to this alphabet that the Maltese Doctrine could be written in the language of the people. Also from a linguistic point of view, the importance of the Dialogues lies in their being written in idiomatic Maltese (although they had an Italian translation beside them), thus throwing valuable light on the way in which Maltese was spoken in the middle of the eighteenth century: because spoken languages are constantly changing, the Dialogues thus give a first-hand picture of the language of an earlier age. Closely connected with this aspect is the fact that they also show a number of words which, though in common use at that time, have now either fallen into disuse or changed their meaning.

The importance of the Dialogues from a socio-historical point of view is no less great, because they illustrate clearly, and again at first-hand, aspects of the manner of life and work of the eighteenth century Maltese people. It is from this latter point of view that the present study is concerned. The Dialogues have been translated into as close an equivalent idiomatic English version as possible, and various factors emerging from them are commented upon, explained or illustrated.

Before we look at them, however, something must be said in general

about the Maltese Islands at the time when the Dialogues were written, in order to put their contents into their proper social and historical background setting.

By the time at which De Soldanis was writing, Malta had been under the rule of the Knights of the Order of St. John for some two hundred years. The Knights had originally come to Malta in 1530, after having been driven from Rhodes, and became the absolute masters of the island. By and large, it cannot be denied that the Maltese islands and people benefited considerably from the presence of the Knights. Lacking in any natural resources and largely barren, Malta had for long simply not been viable from an economic point of view. The Knights, however, put a tremendous amount of money into the country, and this investment was to have both direct and indirect advantages for the local population. As a result of the vast building programmes undertaken by the Knights many Maltese found employment in this industry. The dockyard was flourishing, and Malta was an important arsenal. Many Maltese also found employment in domestic service, and the money spent by the Knights gave rise to a large community of craftsmen and artisans. It was also thanks to the money which the Knights invested that trade flourished, which it would almost certainly not have done in their absence.

Two classes of people, however, strongly objected to the presence and rule of the Knights. First, there were the former Maltese nobility, who had lost their position and influence. They were not unnaturally strongly irritated, and this feeling was aggravated by the fact that the ruling Knights were a small minority. Relations had almost constantly been strained to varying degrees, and were not helped when, by the eighteenth century, there had been a distinct change in the attitude of the Knights, and especially some of the Grand Masters, as the Order fell into decline. While the Knights may never have genuinely cared about the Maltese, they had, at least in their earlier days, been chivalrous, and had indeed performed some good works. This had now changed. It had for long been the custom that each new Grand Master should swear in the hands of the Jurats of Notabile (Mdina), the old capital of the island, that he would uphold and respect the rights and privileges of the Maltese. For some time now, however, this oath had been nothing more than a hollow promise, because no Grand Master had ever really considered the rights and privileges of the people very seriously, and some Grand Masters totally ignored them. During half of De Soldanis's life, and at the time when the Dialogues were written, the Grand Master was Pinto, who ruled from

1741 to 1773. His reign is often referred to as a long, prosperous and glorious one: it was indeed long, but the other epithets would seem to be somewhat exaggerated. Under him, the Knights led an easy life, intrigue was rife and debauchery common, and the Maltese people, far from having any rights and privileges, were virtually ignored except as a source of income. Pinto himself had aspirations of grandeur and was obsessed with dreams of Sovereignty. Unable to be a monarch on any grander scale, he always tried to be an absolute ruler in Malta, and it was under him that the Order saw the final decay of any virtue it may have had left.

The Knights' quarrel with the Church was an even more serious form of discontent. The Knights said that they were directly responsible to the Pope, and need not have any reference to the Bishop of Malta. The clergy, however, felt that some at least of the many churches which had come into existence under the Order should be under their control. The Bishop, for his part, claimed that in many matters he was outside the jurisdiction of the Grand Master, and he frequently appealed directly to Rome. To make matters even more exacerbated, in the late sixteenth century the office of an Inquisitor had been established in Malta, and the Inquisitor, too, could, and did, report on matters directly to Rome without any prior reference to the Order. The result was that, even though the Order's supreme control was never very seriously disputed, there were three separate authorities in Malta each claiming the right of direct access to the Pope. The reports of the Bishop and the Inquisitor often gave the Vatican knowledge of local affairs which the Order resented, and although it was true that the Pope was the earthly head of the Order, few of the Grand Masters were prepared to have the Pope interfering directly in the island's affairs and listening to the people's requests over their heads. The friction thus engendered increased, and there were a number of sharp clashes between the followers of the Order and those who supported the Bishop or the Inquisitor. Although these quarrels may not have had any direct effect on many of the native population, the resultant ill-feeling no doubt made itself felt and permeated its way to some extent into the lives of the mainly very religious people.

But what about the great number of the Maltese people who lived either directly or indirectly by the land? Some of the Dialogues deal specifically with peasants, so we must see what their conditions of life were like. Unlike the upper class Maltese, the peasants had very few rights and privileges to lose or be ignored, and their predominantly hard life would

continue very much unchanged regardless of who might be ruling or exploiting them. As far as they were concerned, the problems they had to face were more immediate and more tangible. Chief among these was the perennial problem of food. Apart from certain temporary periods of decrease owing to war or the plagues which periodically ravaged the islands, the population had risen steadily during the previous centuries, and had risen quite markedly during the nearer past. In the mid-eighteenth century the population of the Maltese islands was about 85,000. Unfortunately, however, much of the land in Malta was barren rock, and the corn grown could supply the needs of only one third of the population, the remainder having to be imported. Before the Order settled in Malta the task of purchasing corn for the islands had been the responsibility of the Università, a form of Council. Corn had been bought chiefly from Sicily, and there was a special arrangement by which an amount could be exported from Sicily to Malta free of taxes. Under the Knights, the Università continued to be responsible for the purchasing of corn, but with the increase in the population its task became increasingly difficult. The Università requested much greater amounts of corn from Sicily, and this led to some hard bargaining and frequent disputes. As Sicily lost the export dues on the corn for Malta, the authorities were obviously unwilling to increase the allowance, and had to be thoroughly convinced that Malta's population had indeed increased as the Università claimed. The result was that sometimes the imported grain did not arrive when it was most needed, and many of the population became accustomed to suffering hunger at times. Although attempts were made to bring new land into cultivation, the task often proved too difficult for the means and resources of the farmers, who had to admit defeat and gave up the attempt. And indeed, in the face of a sometimes malignantly cruel nature, a number of people left the island to try to alleviate their lot elsewhere.

Another worry facing the people stemmed from Malta's other main agricultural product, cotton. More will be said in greater detail about the cotton industry later. Suffice it to say here that cotton was widely grown in Malta, and had indeed been grown from a very early date in the island's history. In the eighteenth century it was by far Malta's chief export, and the cotton industry was thriving as never before. Yet, paradoxically, this very success was a cause of worry to many Maltese farmers. The demand for cotton could absorb all the supply, and as a result the industry was profitable – but how long could it last? Prices for the necessities of life

were rising, and thus it needed only a year or two of bad weather, and many farmers would find themselves in debt.

There was also a certain lack of security, especially for those who lived in poorly protected places near the coast, although this lack of security was nothing new for the Maltese, who had for centuries been pawns in other people's political games. As the Knights were intent on attacking and destroying 'the infidel', there were frequent military encounters between them and the Muslim Turks. Although there was to be no other encounter between them on the scale of the siege of 1565, nevertheless for much of the period during which the Knights ruled Malta the people lived in varying degrees of fear of a Turkish attack or of raids by Barbary corsairs. On occasions the Turks, and later to a greater extent the corsairs, did indeed raid the island and either kill some of the native population or carry them off as slaves.

In addition to the fear of physical danger from foreign sources, there was also quite a good deal of petty crime at home, mainly theft. Although the mainly deeply religious Maltese were predominantly calm and law-abiding, extreme poverty and the prospect of complete destitution drove some of them to theft and robbery. Consequently, a good many Maltese were wary of going out at night. There was very little lighting anywhere apart from in the towns – and we must remember that the Dialogues are set against a distinctly rural background – and those going about at night were in danger of being set upon and possibly severely beaten, as well as being robbed. Nor were the poor peasants free from possibly being the victims of theft, as they might find that some intruder had been at night and stolen some of their crops. It was virtually useless for some poor victim to attempt to get legal redress, since he might then be intimidated by threats of further damage to his crops, his animals, and even to his home.

Life was not all bad, however, and the Maltese had their recreations and entertainments to amuse them, some of these entertainments being of their own making, others being organized on a larger, national scale. One of the main pastimes of the Maltese, still now as in the olden days, was the enjoyment of conversation. They would sit by their doors in family groups, especially on the warm evenings of summer, and talk. The men might also go to some tavern where, in addition to talking, they might play at cards or at mora (a game in which one player tries to guess the number of fingers held up simultaneously by another player). Groups of men would also play an open-air game rather like a mixture of quoits

and bowls. They would form two teams of three or four men each, and would throw stones, shaped roughly in a cube, towards some mark, the aim being to get one's stone as close as possible to the mark, another small stone called *lozzu* or *likk* (the jack). Then on certain days, such as the festival of the patron saint of some church, the people would celebrate a festa, when a statue of the saint might be carried in procession.

The principal entertainment on a national scale was the Carnival, held on the two or three days immediately preceding Lent. The main feature of the Carnival was the *Kukkanja*, held on Shrove Tuesday. The *Kukkanja* was a structure built in the great square of Valletta. Long beams were attached to the guard-house, opposite the palace, and between the various beams rope ladders were fastened. The framework thus made was covered with branches of trees in leaf, and various kinds of provisions were then attached, such as hams, sausages, fruit, baskets of eggs, and even live animals. Crowds of people thronged the square, and on a given signal they rushed forward and attacked the *Kukkanja*, grabbing what provisions they could and then fighting their way out through the crowds with them.

Another popular spectacle was the *Ġostrà*, or slippery pole. This was a large wooden pole which stretched over the water, and was entirely covered in grease. Fastened at the end was a flag, which constituted the goal. The competitors tried to walk along the pole to reach the flag, and thus win the prize. They would fall into the water, to the great delight of the crowd, not only as a result of the grease on the pole preventing their getting a firm footing, but also because, as the pole became thinner towards its end, it became unstable and vibrated. (The *Ġostrà* may, in fact, still occasionally be seen at the present time).

A second type of slippery pole spectacle was the May Pole, customarily held on May 1st, again in the square in front of the palace in Valletta. The May Pole consisted of a tall mast, covered with grease to about one third of its height. At the top was a loop, to which were attached, as with the *Kukkanja*, various provisions. The competitors attempted to reach the top of the pole, first standing on the shoulders of their fellows on the ground, and then working their way up by twisting bands of material around the pole in order to secure a foot-hold or hand-hold.

Races were also popular, and were held on both land and water, on certain traditional days. The most important were those on St. John's Day (June 24th), held in Valletta, and on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul

(June 29th) at Buskett. In celebrating the latter festival, many of the crowd assembled the previous evening and danced all night.

There were also periodic entertainments of a 'theatrical' nature, ranging from outdoor gymnastic displays, by foreign performers, to plays, given either at Birgu or later, after its construction in 1731-3, at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta.

In addition to the two aspects of life in Malta at which we have so far looked – work and recreation – there was also an increasing cultural side to life in the eighteenth century, although it must be admitted that this aspect affected only the higher classes of society, and passed the majority by. Despite his faults arising from his dreams of grandeur, Pinto was keen to see the furtherance of knowledge, and he generously patronized the arts. Both some Knights and some Maltese scholars of the time wanted to know more, in particular about the Maltese language itself, which now began to be seen as a possible key to Oriental languages. Pinto's reign was also a peaceful one, and although there was still fear of the Turks and corsairs among the poorer, agricultural classes, the fear among the higher classes was now considerably less, and consequently the atmosphere was much more conducive to study and cultural progress. The influence of Italian and French studies and models played a considerable part, and although quite a lot of the literary products of Malta may have been at first somewhat shallow and artificial, nevertheless there was a nucleus of sound scholarship and sincere literary output, much of the latter in the form of useful diaries and journals.

Formal education, however, was still very deficient, and was limited virtually to those of the higher classes, who might wish to enter one of the professions, or might enter some religious institution. For those who could pay, there were teachers available, and both the sons and even at times the daughters of some of the higher classes received some formal education. But for the vast majority of the people, education was still some unattainable and, as far as they were concerned, almost unnecessary luxury. They needed no formal education to be farmers, hunters, or to work in some branch of the cotton industry, on the sea, or as a craftsman. The necessary knowledge for their trades could be passed from father to son, and their wisdom was summed up in their proverbs and other related sayings.

Such, then, in brief is the background picture of eighteenth century life in Malta against which the Dialogues are set. Let us now see, in more detail, what emerges from these conversations of some two hundred years ago.

One introductory remark about the text remains to be made. In the original version of *De Soldanis*, the different speeches in Dialogues I-V were introduced by the letters D. and R. for *domanda* and *risposta*. In the edited version of Ġ. Cassar Pullicino, *Id-Djalogi Ta' De Soldanis* (Malta, 1947), the letters were changed to M. and T. for *mistoqsija* and *twegiba*. The letters used in this translation are Q. and A. for *question* and *answer*. In Dialogues VI-VIII the original letters used were V. and P. for *visitatore* and *padrone*. These same letters were used in the edited version, and consequently have been retained here.

I. DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO PEASANTS ABOUT THE NEWS

Q. Good morning, friend, where are you coming from in such a hurry?

A. God help us. I'm just coming from Malta.¹

Q. Why are you looking so pleased with yourself?

A. What's special about me?

Q. What's new in the other island?

A. Those who are well off are lucky, those who aren't, then it's just too bad. In twenty four hours I had only one meal: it cost me over a patakka.²

Q. Whoever goes into somebody else's house finds it more expensive. Didn't you know that?

A. If it hadn't been necessary I wouldn't have gone out of my own house.

Q. Tell me what you heard, for goodness' sake, because we never hear anything here?³

A. I noticed the Grand Master like a rose in full bloom.⁴ I saw the Sultana,⁵ larger than life and more beautiful, and giving no cause for pity, since it is said that she is going back to where she came from. The King of France with his money is taking it and giving it back to its owner.⁶ He who had nothing, what did he have? After joy I hear them say that tears will come. How much blood, how much good, how many people? Everything went in the twinkling of an eye.⁷ Those who appeared to be rich are begging alms: there was a curse on all. There were some who became slaves, some got married, some left the island and some stayed.

Q. Where are you going now?

A. Home to Nadur.⁸

Q. What have you bought for your wife and children?

A. I have neither a wife nor children. I live with my old mother. In Malta more than one person wanted me to get married. But I am afraid of the Maltese women: they look beautiful externally, but inside they are ugly. It's better to have our skin which we know than fifty Maltese cows.⁹

1. We must remember that De Soldanis was a Gozitan who spent most of his life in Gozo, Malta's sister island. Consequently, the Dialogues are set in Gozo.

2. A patakka was an old Maltese coin, worth about 7d. We can sense that the Gozitan felt that a patakka was a lot to pay for a meal. His own meal at home would certainly have cost him less, but, as his next remark implies, he was compelled for some untold reason to visit Malta.

3. The only way in which news could travel in the Maltese islands at the time was by word of mouth. Probably only very few of the people of Gozo visited Malta, and then only of necessity. Consequently their visits were the main way in which ordinary news reached Gozo. Despite the closeness of the two islands, one can sense in the questioner's remark that the people of Gozo may well have felt isolated and left behind, a similar feeling indeed existing among many Gozitans even at the present time.

4. Pinto, 1741-1773.

5. A galleon, the full details about which are given in the next paragraph in Note 6.

6. In September, 1760, a Turkish galleon, was cruising in the Greek archipelago, and dropped anchor near Stamio. On board was the Turkish Pasha Mehmet, who was busy levying taxes on the islands. Together with most of his Turkish crew he disembarked. The vessel was manned by Christian slaves, and they decided to take this opportunity to make a dash for freedom. They hoisted sail and made for Malta, where they arrived a little under three weeks later. It must have come as no small shock to the Maltese to see a Turkish galleon approaching in full sail, but, as the vessel appeared to show no hostile intentions, eventually a boat was sent alongside. It was a great surprise to the boarding party to find the galleon manned by Christians. It was towed into Malta, and the Knights welcomed the Christians and took possession of their richly laden vessel.

The Turkish Sultan, Mustapha III, was so outraged at this event that

he threatened to invade Malta unless the vessel were returned immediately. The Knights sent back to him a haughty answer, and consequently the Turkish Sultan was preparing for an attack on Malta the following year (1761), while the Knights were busy preparing to meet this attack and defend the island. However, the King of France intervened in the dispute, and forced the Knights to release the vessel. He sent the Bailiff de Fleury to Malta, where he bought the vessel and arranged for its return to the Turkish Sultan.

This event, incidentally, is the subject of a famous epic poem, *Li-Ġifen Tork*, by the Maltese poet Ġananton Vassallo, who lived from 1817 to 1868. He started to write it in 1842, but it was not until 1852 that the poem appeared.

7. These reflective sentences refer to previous occasions on which the Turks had attacked Malta. There had, even after their defeat at the siege of 1565, been periodical raids throughout the following two centuries, especially on Gozo, which was less well defended than Malta, and therefore proved to be slightly easier prey. These references to Turkish attacks will also be seen later in the Dialogues.

8. A village in the south east of Gozo.

9. The Maltese people still tend to live in very close-knit communities, and even at the present time it is not unusual for marriages to take place between blood relations, and certainly among a couple whose families are close friends. It is therefore not surprising that the wary Gozitan should have been suspicious of girls from the comparatively strange Malta, and should have preferred to take his wife from his native island.

II. THE MARRIAGEABLE PEASANT

Q. There's no time for anything. Marriage is a thorn. Women like to have their own way, they are only nice towards their husbands when they want something from them.¹

A. If I marry it will be because of my mother, as she is very old and senile. I have never been in a hurry, and I am not now. Many people wanted to marry me off. I never paid any attention. How do I know whether, after all, I'll get caught in the end? I hear them say that before marriage is contracted in this world, it will be made in Heaven forty days before.² Actually I don't want her to be either young or old, beautiful or ugly, or I will have to keep looking after her. I want to live as God wishes. Get a city girl and you are never sure of her fidelity, because you will have to get her a maid, prepare her

shoes, a starched handkerchief, the cloak. In one word, I want her all my own, not mine and the Market's: I want her to be mine, and not me to be hers. I'm not a boy any more, I'm getting on in years, although my hair still hasn't started to go grey.

Q. God give you good luck, and may you find a woman who pleases you, because times are changing considerably. I remember the women in olden days used to go out wearing a white faldetta on top, then they had it made green, finally of black material, nowadays of woollen material or of silk. Work, man, in order to clothe your wife.³

A. That's why there's so much misery. God keep you happy.

1. An attitude which one still hears expressed nowadays, when a man may regard a wife as more of a hindrance than a help: if he is married, it means he has an extra mouth to feed and an extra body to clothe. There was, however, a deeper motive which may have made the peasant unwilling to marry. His work in the fields would keep him busy from sunrise to sunset. If he had a wife to keep, not only would she involve him in extra expense, but she would also want a lot of his time, and this was an even scarcer commodity than his money.

2. This apparently strange remark is in fact a Maltese proverb, its original in Maltese being: *Iż-żwieġ qabel ma jinkiteb (jinghamel) fl-art, ikun miktub erbgħin ġurnata fis-sema*. De Soldanis himself says that it was a very common saying among peasants, and it is therefore hardly surprising that he should put the words into the mouth of one of the peasants in the Dialogues.

To this proverb may be compared the English equivalents: 'Marriages are made in heaven', and 'True it is that marriages be done in heaven and performed in earth'.

3. The second half of this Dialogue throws an interesting light on some aspects of the clothes which women wore in the eighteenth century. In order to put the comments into greater perspective, more must therefore be said about women's clothes.

The faldetta was worn by women of all classes. Originally of differing colours, the faldetta, by the time of De Soldanis, was always black, and made of either wool or silk, according to the means of the wearer. The faldetta was a sort of veil, gathered into plaits, and was thrown over the head. It covered half of the face, and therefore tended to give the wearer somewhat of an Oriental look, as she was peering from only one eye out of a half-hidden face. A short shift was also worn, and a long

coloured petticoat, usually blue, together with a bodice with big sleeves. Many women may also wear a *mantar*, or cloak, which they put on to go out of doors, and this covered them entirely from head to foot. The upper class women wore shoes, but the lower classes always went about barefooted, although they may well carry their shoes in their hand. Should they be going to Valletta, they would carry their shoes with them until they got to the city gate, and then put them on. All women were very fond of ornaments and decorations.

At home the women would wear a white smock, or the women of the villages might alternatively wear a striped gown, made of linen, and bordered with white.

Some upper class women occasionally abandoned their native dress in order to follow the French fashion as this made itself felt, although they were in a very small minority, and were sometimes regarded somewhat strangely and disapprovingly by their fellows.

Although not directly connected with this Dialogue it might be appropriate to mention also men's clothes. Their dress normally consisted of a shirt and waistcoat which reached to just above the small of the back. It had gaily coloured buttons and was surrounded by a brightly coloured girdle. For trousers they wore large breeches, which may leave the lower part of the legs bare. On their heads the men usually wore a coloured or striped cap. Like the women, they almost invariably went barefooted.

Occasionally the men may also wear an overcoat, either to keep out the cold of winter, or to be better dressed in order to attend a funeral or other such ceremony.

III. BETWEEN TWO PEASANTS ON COTTON WORK

Q. Where are you coming from?

A. From my fields.¹

Q. How is your cotton doing?

A. I haven't yet started picking it.² It looks fine. The pods are full. It won't be long before I start picking it.

Q. This year everybody can thank God and praise Him.

A. Let's hope so, because we need it to pay the landlord of the fields, to clothe ourselves and eat. How much good does cotton bring people. In olden days, that which grew is sown, today it is sown in the dust, all the ground is worked and not a single span of earth is left.³ It's surprising how in seventy reaped areas, three

spans are grown and pods are worked. No one knows exactly how much good our earth does. In very little dust, what is in it brings much good. If you could have seen it a hundred years ago, at that time it was all rocky, today it is all broken up, tilled and manured.⁴ One can reap all the advantages from it. Does it ever have a rest? In a single year sometimes, where there is water, it gives three crops.⁵ What more could you expect your fields to give? This is why the rent was raised so much and provided for their owner. Whoever some time ago used to pay fifty skudi rent, today it is nearer two hundred. The people have increased, clothing and food have gone up in price, and so has the rent. Thank God we can live within our means, and the earth gives us to eat all the year.⁶

Q. Certainly, because the market is full of vegetables and fruit all year.⁷

A. This is the blessing of God.⁸

1. The average peasant tenant-farmer would have some 15 to 20 acres of land. This land was normally held on a short lease of between 4 and 8 years: only if the land were waste or of very poor quality would the peasant hold it on a long lease at low rent.

2. The cotton, which was of two principal types, the white and the red (known as 'red', even though it was in fact the colour of rust), was sown in April or May. In early September the head of the plant was cut in order to increase the size of the pods, which were then gathered in late September or early October. As the pod became sufficiently ripe it would begin to open, and was then immediately picked lest the sun should make the white cotton turn yellow, when it would have been good for nothing but as a foodstuff for livestock.

3. Unfortunately the soil of Malta is not particularly fertile, and to this drawback must be added the fact that, for at least the last 1,000 years, there has also been an acute shortage of water. Gozo is more fertile, and consequently its produce has tended to compensate slightly – but far from sufficiently – for the deficiencies of Malta. The average annual rainfall is only about 20", which falls mainly in short, heavy showers: occasional showers develop into heavy downpours, and despite bringing more water, they also prove detrimental since they wash the precious and all-too-scarce soil from the hillsides. Yet despite these drawbacks, the industry and patient care of the peasants managed usually to procure a good yield from the cotton plants. They would not allow any other kind of

tree to be planted near the cotton plants, so as not to rob the latter of any nutritive value: intensive hoeing and weeding and the use of a large amount of manure further helped to give to the cotton plants the maximum amount of food value in the soil, which was seldom more than a single foot deep. As it grew in the summer months the cotton could be seen giving a green and then later a white hue to much of the surface of the island, since the maximum amount of land possible was devoted to growing it.

4. Much of the surface of Malta is almost bare, barren rock, and it was for this reason that the island was far from self-sufficient agriculturally. The Order owned large areas of such rocky ground, and in order both to provide more work and as an attempt to increase agricultural production, peasants were given grants to assist them possibly to bring some of this rocky land into eventual cultivation. Similar grants were given by other bodies who owned land, such as the Università of Mdina and the Università of Valletta. These grants were occasionally given outright, but the more usual practice was for the peasant to hold the land on a long-term or perpetual emphyteutical lease. Under this lease, his tenure of the land was secure and at only a nominal rent, but he was obliged to make the land cultivable. If the peasant failed to do so, the landowner could invoke forfeiture clauses. In any case, however, the land and all improvements reverted to the landowner on the expiry of the lease, which was usually 99 years or three generations.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries large areas of poor quality land were leased on this basis, and the peasants laboured to bring it into cultivation. The hard surface of the rock was first chipped away and made level, if possible with a slight incline so that excess water could run off. A bed of limestone, crushed into small pebbles, then formed the foundation of the new field. Soil was laboriously collected from the nooks and crannies of the surrounding rocks, sometimes necessarily gathered over a wide area, laid on the small pebbles until there was a sufficient depth of it to be cultivated, and it was well enriched with manure. A dry stone wall was built round the field to protect the precious soil from being blown away by gales or washed away by floods after heavy rain.

Many peasants found the task of bringing new land into cultivation too much for them. Some had insufficient money to support their families while trying to make the new land cultivable, others found the limestone which they were attempting to break up too tough. Yet others gave up the

very hard life of the peasant when there was an opportunity for alternative employment, especially in the towns around the harbour. Nevertheless, many peasants persevered and, although it may have been of marginal quality, a large amount of new land was created, and what had originally been a rocky patch eventually became a cultivable area.

5. The Maltese peasants had learned, by the experience of necessity, how to get the maximum out of their soil. By using ample manure, by careful preparation of the ground before sowing and by constant care while the crops were growing, and as a result of crop rotation, it was no exaggeration on the peasant's part to say that, in a good year, the land could give three crops. These could range from cotton, for which the ground needed most preparation, to garden vegetables and poorer grains, such as barley. It was indeed true that the ground was hardly ever idle and did not rest.

6. Although the peasant here is grateful and is counting his blessings because the earth gives him to eat both in a direct sense, and also in an indirect sense inasmuch as the cotton industry was thriving and therefore provided him with income, one can still sense that fear at the back of his mind that it might almost be too good to last. The rent had risen considerably, the cost of living was rising, and the number of mouths to feed was constantly increasing. It is not for nothing that he seems momentarily to lose heart and dread what would be the outcome of a bad year's crops. Indeed, during the early part of the eighteenth century, hardly a year passed without the Grand Master decreeing that there should be special prayers offered up for rain, as there had been increased periods of drought.

7. Malta has for some considerable time been famous for some of its vegetables and fruit. Particular mention should be made of its oranges and grapes.

8. Still more must be said about the cotton industry in order to show in fuller perspective just how important it was to many of the Maltese. In the country areas of Malta, and more especially of Gozo, the production of cotton and the manufacture of textiles grew in importance during the rule of the Knights, and by the eighteenth century, the time at which the Dialogues were written, the cotton industry was one of the most important from the point of view of the considerable number of people employed in it, and it held a major place in the economy of the islands. With the cotton which was exported, the principal market being Spain, but there were also Marseilles and the Adriatic ports, and that which

was used locally, it was all bought, and under normal conditions the demand could absorb all the supply. It gave employment not only to the peasants who grew it, but also to the many people who were concerned with manufacturing it from its raw state into finished products: it was teased, spun and woven, and made into a variety of products ranging from small items of clothing, through larger items such as blankets, to the sails of ships. The cotton of Malta was generally regarded to be of good quality, definitely superior to that of the Levant, and indeed one type, the nankeen or red cotton, when washed and ironed even looked like silk.

The industry as a whole was generally well organized. The cotton grown by the peasants was usually spun by their immediate families, before being bought by a middleman. He would either arrange for it to be exported in its spun state, or would arrange for it first to be woven into a finished product. No raw cotton could be exported, since this would deprive those who spun or wove it of employment. In the country areas, the processing of cotton meant the difference between poverty and at least a reasonable income. But just as the peasants could be hit by the weather, so those who processed it and depended on the export market could be affected by factors outside their control. An outbreak of some serious disease at a commercial port, as happened at Messina and Reggio in 1743, meant that trade was temporarily suspended, exports were affected, and so those back down the line were hit, including the families who did the processing. Fortunately, however, such occurrences were comparatively rare.

As the cotton industry was so important in the eighteenth century, both as a result of the number of people it employed and the foreign exchange it earned, it became necessary to regulate it carefully. The regulations governing the quality of the spun cotton, which existed but were being circumvented, were tightened up, since it was feared that, as a result of a complaint received from Marseilles in 1733, Maltese cotton may be discredited. Two years later, regulations were introduced governing the way in which the cotton was to be bound up for export, and a few years later, still more stringent control was introduced to check the quality of the cotton. An official inspected the bales before export, and any bales defective in either standard or quality were confiscated. All cotton for export had to pass through official warehouses, and only in this way could the problems of numerous small manufacturers producing different quantities and qualities be overcome.

Not all the regulations worked against the industry, however: other regulations protected it, and local peasants were often helped by those regulations governing the import of cotton. Efforts were made to estimate the peasants' production each year, and thus imports could be regulated so as not to allow too much, if any, cotton into Malta in years when local production was high, nor too little when local production fell and the resultant shortage might lead to speculation.

Finally, it may be remarked that at the time at which De Soldanis was writing, the cotton industry was still expanding, although at times it was becoming more difficult to sell in certain markets. Soon, however, the industry was to decline, and by the end of the century it had already started to regress, and quite quickly disappeared altogether in the nineteenth century.

IV. ABOUT THE WEDDING OF A PEASANT BOY¹

Q. I am coming to your house, friend. I have to talk to you if you are not busy.

A. Come in, you are welcome, and sit down.

Q. How is your wife?

A. Believe me, we were coming together: if we had known you were free, we would have come.

Q. Next time, bring her with you: and how are the children?

A. Fine: they are the reason why I came. I have Kuzza who is growing up and I am thinking of getting her married.² I don't know anyone to take to her. She's like a lamb in the house, as busy as ten: but when the fruit is ripe you have to pick it. She is as strong as a cow.

Q. I know her, she is like the heart of a rose. Whom do you want to take to her? Who has approached you about marrying her?

A. To tell you the truth, many people are after her.³ I am very pleased with her, even if I didn't want to listen: my wife is always encouraging me to get her married, because there are others growing up and every day they are getting bigger. I don't know who will get her. One person from Malta wants to marry her, another from here. What do you think?

Q. What do these bachelors do?

A. They say the Maltese one is smart. How do I know whether or not he is one of those who goes into one shop and comes out of

another? Today it is wine and playing cards, everybody knows them. I wouldn't like her to marry a gambler or a drunkard, otherwise all my efforts will be wasted. The one from here, however, everybody knows him.⁴ He is still a young bachelor, who doesn't like the inn, where there is so much playing at mora for figs or for wine, and if he doesn't often waste his night and day, I have nothing to worry about.⁵

Q. And tell me where nowadays you can find that bachelor without any faults. We were like him in our youth, and bachelors we have remained.⁶ A bachelor thinks like a bachelor, a married man like a married man. He comes from well-to-do people, he is rich and capable. We have come to a time when it is no longer possible to choose. Marriage is like a long gourd, one is long and another bent; and like a cucumber, one is sweet and another is bitter.⁷ Make up your mind, tell your wife, call the marriage broker,⁸ and get her married quickly before he loses interest and gives the handkerchief and the ring⁹ somewhere else and she is left in the lurch.

A. You are not wrong; but before St. John I will not be well off and able to fatten the pig and my wife won't leave me alone because she wants to prepare the betrothal gift.¹⁰ We are right not to rejoice over girls when they are born as we do with boys.¹¹ She is going to ruin me and undo my house.

Q. You should have thought it over before. Our wives didn't do this? So our children will do this to us.

A. Dash it all, when we are youngsters, we think like youngsters. May God make you happy.

1. There is a discrepancy in the title of this particular Dialogue. The Maltese refers to a *tifel bidwi* (peasant boy), whereas the Dialogue is, in fact, concerned with the marriage of a peasant girl.

A further discrepancy occurs in the course of the Dialogue. The Maltese version introduces the speeches, as mentioned earlier, with the letters M. and T. In the course of the Dialogue, two successive speeches are headed 'T', which upsets the sequence. In this translation, this error, and a similar one later, have been rectified.

2. and 8. In Malta at that time marriages were frequently arranged by the parents. They often looked after their own interests and regarded the proposed match from the point of view of its suitability and possible prestige value, rather than paying much regard to the wishes of their children. This was particularly the case with girls, who were allowed

very little freedom at all. They spent most of their time inside the house, and would definitely not be allowed out alone in the evening, although they might be allowed out alone earlier in the day either to go to church or to visit friends or relations. Even then they would be largely covered by the long *mantar*. Boys had more freedom, but prying eyes and gossiping mouths meant that a man had to conduct his life decently in order not to acquire a bad reputation.

Since young people of the opposite sex therefore had virtually no chance to meet naturally, arranged marriages were almost unavoidable. Sometimes, however, a young man might catch sight of a girl who aroused his interest, and the services of the marriage-broker would be employed to act as a go-between between his family and the girl's, and to make the preliminary enquiries and arrangements. Even so, the respective parents had to reach a satisfactory agreement before the couple would have a chance of first speaking to each other, and they would meet only in their parents' presence until they were married.

A basil plant was not uncommonly used at the time, and its presence outside a house, on the window sill or by the door, denoted that there was a marriagable daughter within.

3. There may well be some understandable exaggeration in this statement of the peasant. He may have received some overtures about her from other parents, but he probably exaggerates the number in order partly to dispel any impression that hardly anybody was interested, and also perhaps to give an impression of there being considerable competition, which might make the girl seem more desirable.

4. As mentioned above, a man had to be careful of his reputation. When the desirability of a match was being considered, the parents of both parties were anxious to find out as much as possible about the other party. Great store was set by a person's reputation, not only from a moral point of view, but also from the point of view of his character in general, and his financial and social background and standing. Some of these were matters about which one could not very well ask the other party's parents, and so the value of what other people had to say about the proposed partner became increasingly important. As the communities were usually small and closely knit, it was not difficult to get an overall clear and accurate picture, since very little passed unnoticed.

It is of incidental interest to note that in some of the country districts of Malta arranged marriages still persist today, with the parents collecting the relevant information about their child's proposed match. This custom is, however, quickly dying out, as the emancipation level of the

towns spreads to the villages.

5. Something has already been said in the introduction about the pastimes of the Maltese. Many men would spend their evenings at some inn, where card-games and *mora* would be common sights. It should be stressed, however, that these evenings at the inn acted as social functions, when the men could talk and argue on a variety of topics, and were seldom hard drinking sessions.

If the behaviour pattern of the Maltese today provides any retrospective guide, it should be added that it is an extremely rare sight to see a Maltese drunk.

6. This may at first seem to be another discrepancy. Certainly one, and presumably both, of the peasants in the Dialogue are married men, and yet they are referred to as bachelors. The sentence probably implies, however, that the men continued to conduct themselves as they did in their youth, even though they may now be married men.

7. This sentence contains philosophical similes with a distinctly rural flavour. The remarks about marriage do correspond very closely to some Maltese proverbs on the subject. *A propos* of the first half of the sentence, there are, *lż-żwieġ bħall-ħjar*, 'Marriage is like a cucumber'; and, *lż-żwieġ dollieġha*, 'Marriage is (like) a water melon'. Resembling the latter part of the sentence, a Maltese proverb says, *lż-żwieġ fib il-ħelu u fib il-morr*, 'In marriage there is sweetness and bitterness'.

8. See Note 2.

9. After the parents had settled the contract and the portion had been ascertained, the man first sent the girl a present of a handkerchief, and she became his betrothed. He then sent her a present of two fishes, decorated with ribbon, and in the mouth of one of them was a ring. This ring may well have engraved on it two hands united, signifying the mutual faith of the couple.

10. After the present of the ring, the first meeting took place between the couple, in the presence of their parents and special friends, and sweetmeats and other refreshments were offered. In addition to the presents received by the girl from the man, she in turn gave her future husband a present of a handkerchief decorated with lace and bows of ribbon. The parents and families of the couple also gave presents to them, the future husband's family in particular giving bracelets, necklaces and other items of jewelry.

11. The reason, to put it bluntly, is simply an economic one. Boys could help their fathers with the farm work, and they could help to add to the

family income. Girls, on the other hand, were perhaps more of an economic burden than an asset. They could, admittedly, do some work in the house, especially helping to spin or weave cotton, but most men would prefer to have sons. A daughter was also an economic liability – and this is more specifically what the peasant has in mind at the moment – when she was to be married, for in addition to having to meet the expenses of the wedding ceremony itself, the bride's father would also have to give her a dowry. If it were a son who was marrying, the father's expenses would be much less.

V. BETWEEN A HUNTER AND A PEASANT

Q. My friend, where are you off to?

A. To my village.

Q. Where are you from?

A. From Naxxar.¹

Q. I thought so from the way you talk.²

A. Ah, and how! Where are you off to with these dogs and these people?

Q. I'm going after rabbits, and I have a ferret to catch them with.³

A. You have come at a good time. Now I have heard that one hunter like you passed by who caught more than fifty. Go near Qbar il-Lhud, go to Mellieha and the Torri l-Ahmar⁴ which you will find.

Q. Did he leave any?

A. A hundred saints. This generation never ends. It wasted all it found in the face of the earth, however many of them are killed or captured.⁵ In our island, if the figures are correct, approximately a thousand rabbits are killed every day.⁶ So why don't you go after hare and partridge? That is food.

Q. If these were caught they would have disappeared from this land. Do you want something to drink? Drink without water; do you want the wine-bottle?

A. God give us strength. I don't want any more because it muddles my brain.

Q. Can we find any water to drink there?

A. Find yourself something to eat. You can find yourself something to drink, and there are streams to quench your thirst.

Q. Are there other hunters before me?

A. And if there are, are you afraid that you won't find any rabbits left? Go on, go on. And if when you are passing you can leave me one, you know I can always eat it.

Q. Why not? Go in peace.

1. A village in the east of Malta.

2. Despite the small size of Malta there are still numerous dialects. One Maltese can often tell immediately which part of the island another comes from, and the inhabitants of some of the villages in the country have a very marked dialect.

It is also of interest to note that, in addition to simply his dialect, sometimes the vocabulary a man uses may help to define the area from which he comes, as certain words are used in certain places and not in others.

3. There are now virtually no wild rabbits in Malta, all the rabbits being bred specially for eating. In the olden days, however, when wild rabbits abounded, hunters went after them either with a gun or with a ferret. When using the latter method of hunting, the hunter would first put nets or snares over all the rabbit holes in the immediate vicinity, thus ensuring that whichever way the rabbit might come out of its warren it would be caught. The ferret was then put down one of the holes, and this frightened the rabbit and drove it out. The ferret itself would then eventually reappear at one of the holes.

4. Localities in the north of Malta. Qbar il-Lhud means 'Jews' graves', Mellieha is an old word meaning 'saltings', and Torri l-Ahmar means 'The Red Tower'.

5. In the eighteenth century rabbits were a scourge, and farmers and hunters alike devoted great efforts to catching and killing them. Whereas now a hunter may go after his prey (birds) as a hobby and largely for pleasure, in the olden days the hunting of rabbits was carried out in much more earnest. The more rabbits captured and killed, the less should be the damage to the crops. But well might the peasant seem rather despondent, for no matter how many rabbits might be killed, they reproduced so prodigiously that there were always offspring to take their place and carry on ruining and destroying the crops.

6. Although a thousand rabbits being killed daily seems to be a very high number, one must remember that the problem facing the Maltese peasants at the time was an extremely serious one. The hunters did, however, get the upper hand, and the problem then changed paradoxically from an excess of wild life to a shortage of it. Even in the later years of

Pinto's reign, at about the time of the death of De Soldanis, it was becoming difficult to see rabbits or game birds. By the time of Ximenes (1773-1775) the problem of the shortage of rabbits and game birds had become so acute that in February 1773, Ximenes was forced to prohibit all hunting activities. Hunting had from time immemorial been the favourite sport of the Maltese, both of the upper classes for whom it was largely a sport, and of the peasants, who throughout Europe generally enjoyed hunting rights on common ground, such as that owned by the Order in Malta, and for whom the rabbits provided a source of food.

Although not strictly within the scope of this study, it is interesting to see the sequel to this episode. At his own expense, Ximenes imported hares, partridges and rabbits from Sicily and other countries, and these were let loose on the Order's lands to breed. Thus, in time, hunting would again be possible. Ximenes hoped that the game reserves would also be able to provide a source of cheap meat as an alternative and supplement to bread which was both scarce and dear. It was thus the peasants who were to be particularly hard hit by the hunting ban, and they suffered considerable hunger.

The ban was due to be lifted in August, 1773, but had to be extended for a longer period as the hares, rabbits and partridges had still not yet reproduced to the expected number. However, hunting was permitted for about a month (November 3rd to December 8th) at the end of the year, but at the beginning of 1774 another ban was imposed. Then in mid-July this ban was partly suspended and some hunting again allowed, and thus some of the hardship removed for the peasants.

VI. COMPLIMENTS BETWEEN UPPER-CLASS WOMEN WHEN THEY GO VISITING¹

V. How do you do?

P. How do you do, madam? Welcome to you and to yours. Fatima,² take off her cloak and faldetta.

F. Certainly, madam. Come, madam, give me the cloak, I will fold it. Bring me the faldetta here, I will put it with the cloak.

V. I know where I am now, I perspired a lot on my way here, for it is so hot outside. Believe me, I could hardly make it.³

P. I believe you, because we are burning with the sun, and the heat doesn't get any less. Rest, there are some chairs, sit down, let me give you some refreshment.

V. I tell you I need it.

P. Take the other, that's higher for you.

V. As you wish, I will sit beside you on account of you.

P. I can't do as I want to, I have to be at each one of them. I also have Ayesha, if I don't press her she won't move.⁴

V. I'm not surprised, because mine is worse than she is.

P. Take this cold drink and drink it.

V. I don't like lemonade, I take almond squash.⁵

P. What's new?

V. Nowadays people only talk about the coming of the Turks.⁶

P. Do you think they will come at this time? I don't believe they will ever come. Istanbul is a long way away from Malta. The Cross frightens them. They never showed it when they fought against us. The Turks know how much blood they lost in this land.⁷ They can harm us, but we can harm them more. We women who can't get the weapons have to suffer. God knows where we have to hide. Our death is the Turks. The men, they hear and see a canon ball; we poor women hear but don't see.

V. Just so. Suffering is for women. Anyhow, the spinning-wheel is better than the gun. God's will be done.

P. Don't worry. All the rulers are with us. The Grand Turk thinks and sees what he is going to do. Everybody has taken the rifle. The walls are surrounded with canons: the beaches even more so. Gozo has become fierce on account of Fort Chambray.⁸ Even Comino⁹ is full of bronze and iron. I don't believe that the Turkish ruler will come, but I have faith in God and St. Paul¹⁰ that if he does come, he will remember but he will not boast.

V. Just so. The Pope has sent also four galleys, two trading vessels, together with all good wishes for Malta, and all that is required against the enemy. I'm going, sister. It is time. Fatima, get me the faldetta and the cloak so that I may go.

P. Why so soon?

V. Do you think it is too soon? It has got dark.

P. What are you afraid of? It's moonlight.

V. I tell you. After dinner my husband would like to go for a walk as usual tonight and I must be with him even though I am tired, because truth to tell, I don't like to leave him alone, especially at night. You have to stay with these men with a lighted candle.

P. You are talking with an experienced one. Fatima, help her to

dress. Put her faldetta right. Put the fold in the middle of her forehead.

F. Certainly, madam. Call Ayesha to help me.

P. Don't you know how slow she is?

F. I've managed now.

V. My dear, I wish you good night.

P. Good night. God be with you. Give my best regards to your husband. Don't be too long before you call again. Next time come earlier.

V. I'll do my best to come. Bye bye.

1. This is the first of two Dialogues about women, both of which are very important since they show us the thoughts and way of life of two distinct classes of eighteenth century Maltese women. This Dialogue deals with upper class women, rich and polite, the next with peasant women of the working class. But the difference between the two classes, as we shall see, is much greater than at first appears from the lines of the Dialogues: it is rather what one reads between the lines that best shows the difference.

2. Fatima, and Ayesha who is mentioned later, are both slave girls. Female slaves, usually black, used to wear clothes identical with those of their mistress, except that the slaves' clothes were made of wool, while those of the mistress would be made of silk.

It is of incidental interest to note here that slavery was still widely practised in Malta until the end of the Order's stay, and in the eighteenth century slaves for export from Malta were considered as merchandise. The history of slavery under the Order went back indeed to the days when the Order was still in Rhodes. It had for long been the custom of the Muslims to reduce prisoners of war to a state of slavery, and by way almost of retaliation the Christians began likewise to reduce to slavery those Turks whom they took captive. The Knights used Turkish slaves to man their galleys both while they lived in Rhodes and when they settled in Malta, when they used captured corsairs as well, and when not employed upon the galleys the slaves were used to help build the fortifications or to work in the dockyard.

The Order not only kept slaves for their own use, but also sold them to private individuals. Consequently Malta became a vast slave market, as more and more slaves were obtained from raids by the Order's galleys against the corsairs of North Africa.

While it may well be that the slaves employed in Malta were better off

than their unfortunate counterparts in other parts of the world, there was potential serious trouble in 1749 when the slaves, of whom there were about 4,000 in Malta at the time, planned a revolt and the murder of the Grand Master and other leading figures. The plot was uncovered, and many of the ringleaders were publicly tortured and executed.

As a result of this plot, the slaves, who previously had enjoyed a comparatively considerable measure of freedom, had restrictions imposed upon them, and were forced to return to the bagnios, or prisons for slaves, every night instead of sleeping in the houses of their masters.

3. One can almost imagine some affected woman fanning herself and complaining about the heat. We will see in the next Dialogue that the peasant women have no time to put on airs and graces and complain about the heat: for them, heat or no heat, there is work to be done.

4. Again, one can almost imagine one of the women complaining in an affected way. Isn't it often the case that the genuine upper class people are real and unaffected, while the pseudo-upper class have to adopt an attitude of supercilious superiority which often expresses itself in the form of 'hurt' complaining and fault-finding?

5. Here again we will see a difference between the women of the different classes. The woman in this Dialogue can have lemonade or almond squash: the peasant woman, although it is not mentioned, we can infer will have only water to quench her thirst.

With reference to the words 'cold drink', it should be pointed out that ice was available in Malta, and so it was possible to have iced drinks. Snow was brought from Mount Etna in Sicily, and kept in reservoirs. The primary use of this snow, however, was not to cool drinks, but for medicinal purposes to help the sick. When the reserves of snow became low, then it was available solely for hospital use.

6. As we have seen before, there was often at the back of people's minds this fear of the Turks, although, as we see in the next speech, it was by this time a largely unnecessary fear. The fact of its being an unnecessary fear will be incidentally illustrated in Note 8.

7. Another reference, such as we have seen before, to the Turkish attacks on the island, and particularly to the siege of 1565.

8. During the Order's rule in Malta, the idea was frequently expressed that the Gozo citadel should be abandoned, and a coastal fortress built to protect the sister island. In 1643 Marsalforn, on the north east coast, was eventually selected as a good site for the proposed fortress town, but the plan had to be shelved because the money needed for it was more

urgently needed elsewhere. Later, the idea was taken up again, but was then rejected.

In the 1720's the Chevalier De Tigne drew up plans for a small fortified town to stand on Ras al-Tafal, 'The clay headland', (above the present Mgarr, on the south coast) from where it would command the channel between Malta and Gozo. Once again, lack of money delayed the start of the scheme, and it was not until 1749 that it was financed. The Knight De Chambray contributed 40,000 scudi to the cost of the fortifications, named Fort Chambray in his honour. Although work started quickly, the fortifications were not finished until 1761.

It is of interest to note that, although building sites within the fortifications were put on sale to the public, there was no great demand for them, and Fort Chambray failed to become a town. The reason for this lack of demand for sites may well be that the fear of a Turkish attack was by now no longer very deep, and the need to live at inconvenient places, even though they were secure, had virtually disappeared.

9. A small island in the channel between Malta and Gozo.

10. St. Paul is Malta's favourite Saint. During his journey to Rome in 60 A.D., he was shipwrecked in Malta, where he stayed for a short while, preaching the Christian message.

VII. COMPLIMENTS BETWEEN PEASANT WOMEN WHEN THEY GO VISITING

V. Good morning, friend.

P. Come in, friend. Welcome. Is this your daughter? Welcome to you and to her. Isn't she beautiful?

V. My daughter is a creature of God.

P. What is she called?

V. Kella.

P. How old is she?

V. Almost twelve.

P. She became a young lady all at once.

V. This seed, friend, has grown up a lot. One moment you see it small, next you see it big. The bad plant always interferes with the good one.

P. You brought your work with you,¹ so we can sit down, because I want you to. It's a long time since you visited me, although I came several times. My husband works outside, stay as long as you like.

V. I brought the cotton for the spinning-wheel, and Kella brought

the spindle. This is the way we live.² I brought the stocking; I brought the sewing; I brought the lace pillow; I brought the cotton for berets.

P. You have brought quite a lot of work with you. Therefore you can stay till the evening.

V. Believe me, I've been meaning to come for a week; but what happens? What with one thing and another, I couldn't: whoever has children can't get about. Whoever wants to live doing manual work can't go visiting.³

P. Take the spinning-wheel, take the reel; adjust it to suit yourself.

V. Somebody is knocking at your door. I wonder who's there?

P. Some neighbour. Who else could it be? Look, she's coming in, I told you she's my neighbour. Welcome, you arrived just in time so that we can have a chat, and so we can work more.

V2. Has our friend been here long?

P. She and her daughter have just arrived.

V2. We haven't met for a long time.

V. Sit beside me.

V2. As you wish. Will this do?

V. Yes.

V2. How are you doing nowadays?

V. Not too bad, thank you.

P. Everyone has a cross to bear.

V. But mine is very big, because my husband is restless,⁴ and the children are a living curse.

P. Times have changed⁵ and become very severe. I can remember in my time that the children always used to be behind their parents. Today, as he starts growing up, they look for him and don't find him, because he wants to feel a man before he is a boy. And the girls are worse. Where do you find them? In the windows, in the doors, on the roofs. They see what they are doing to make themselves look beautiful. They are still immature, but their eyes are on bachelors so they can marry.⁶

V. We are going. Speech is good and sweet like a cherry, but time is pressing.

P. You are going early. Why so soon?

V. Soon? I have wound six reels; the girl brought two shuttles. You know how it is, I want to cook for my husband and the children.

P. Go in peace.

V. God make you happy.

1. Here we see one of the most noticeable differences between the two different classes of women in the successive Dialogues. Whereas the upper-class woman undoubtedly leads a life of leisure, the peasant woman has to take her work with her when she goes to visit a friend.
2. Fuller information about work connected with the cotton industry can be seen under Dialogue III. Suffice it to repeat here that the cotton was worked from its raw state into a spun state by the peasants' wives and families, as well as by other families who specialized in spinning and weaving.
3. Again we see the contrast between the two classes of women. The upper-class woman can go visiting whenever she wishes, the peasant woman can do so only when her domestic chores permit, but even then she takes some work with her.
4. Here, being women as they are, both classes of women agree in grumbling about their husbands! The upper-class woman in the previous Dialogue grumbled because she had to go for a walk with her husband after dinner as she didn't want to leave him alone at night: the peasant woman here grumbles that she has a cross to bear because her husband is restless.
5. How often does one hear people complaining that times have changed, usually specifying that they have changed for the worse. They often refer to 'the good old days', yet how many of them would genuinely like to change their present position and conditions for their lot a decade or two earlier, or more especially for the lot of their forbears?
6. We have here a very good picture of some of the changes taking place in eighteenth century Malta. Perhaps young people were quietly rebelling against the strong repressive bonds that tried to keep them – especially the girls – from contact with the opposite sex, and were seeking some form of emancipation. Even though the girls may not have been allowed to speak with boys, at least they were trying to ensure that visual contact was established in the hope of attracting a potential husband. Family ties were, and still are, very strong in Malta, especially among the lower classes, but we see here the quiet rebellion of youth against parental restrictions.

VIII. COMPLIMENTS OF MOURNING

V. God be with you. God make you happy. Long life to you.

P. God give you health. How he was taken away from us. How much he used to think of his children and of his house. He was a good man, we hope he went to God.

V. Don't be sad, because he went to God to pray for you and for us. Why are you crying?

P. Why shouldn't we cry? There is nobody left for us. He who looked after us is gone. A house without a man is like a frying-pan.¹ We have no one left to take care of us. He always used to get up early; first he used to go to mass while it was still dark, then he always carried things back from the Market. There was nothing lacking in the house, and since he was sick we need everything. May God send His blessing on our house.

V. He never shuts one door without His opening another. Nobody ever died of a broken heart.

P. I can hardly go on; all my children are married, they all have someone to work for them. I've become an old woman, nobody looks after me any more.

V. Don't be sad. God's mercy is very great, it doesn't diminish for anybody.

P. Without him, I can't do anything.

V. If I can help in any way, tell me, I'm at your service.

P. May God give you as much good as you wish for others.

V. I will always be willing to help you, because when my friend was alive he used to treat me well.

P. However, he passed away, he has gone and left us once and for all. He was a good man, he knew how to conduct himself well. He has left me a great sadness. We are not rich, but everybody knows that nobody ever knocked at the door and went away with nothing, either money or food. Just catch me doing like him. The income has decreased. From where is the money coming now for me to give? What he did, he found, but as for me, because I don't do anything, I don't find anything. I have acquired four pieces of material, I can't wear them and I can't give them away. The best thing I can do is sell them.

V. Everything passes. Nobody came and stayed with us and that's what will happen to us today or tomorrow. Don't sell anything. Keep

everything. A woman is never old except when she dies. She can if she likes appear young whenever she wishes.

P. Don't you believe that he used to talk about you when he was alive?

V. Why not? We knew each other very well. Don't you remember I was at your wedding?

P. Don't remind me about that time. I was married to him for twenty years with never a regret, but so what? Time passed like a dream, it seems as if I was never married; it seems as if I never had a husband. He never ill-treated me. Sometimes I used to tease him, and he never complained. Sometimes our husbands are wrong to caress us, because afterwards we feel superior. Now I'm feeling sorry and it's useless, now I'm crying and nothing can bring him back to me. I can picture him with my eyes. His illness is on my mind because he never complained, and he never wanted me to stay by his bedside for long. I never left him either openly or secretly. He died like a sparrow, and he neither was afraid nor was he ugly. God give him rest, and to us long life that we may pray to God for him.

V. I'm going. I wish you long life.

P. And to you, friend, God grant you peace.²

1. Although this simile sounds proverbial, there is no record of any Maltese proverb to this effect. There are a number of proverbs dealing with the presence of a man in the house, but none dealing with his absence.

2. Very little need be said in connection with this Dialogue. The sentiments expressed are no doubt those expressed universally and timelessly at the death of some loved one, and need no comment.

Although not relating to any specific part of the Dialogue, however, one or two brief comments may be made about old funeral customs in Malta.

A century before the time of De Soldanis, when a Maltese died, two women, known as *newwieħa*, 'keeners', were specially hired for mourning purposes. Wearing long mourning garments, they went to the house of the deceased and sang in a low dismal voice some moral verses. They then knelt at the foot of the coffin and sang the praises of the deceased. These ceremonies were stopped by an outbreak of plague in 1676, and were not revived.

At the time of De Soldanis, however, although the use of the *newwieħa*

had died out, there was a substitute at funerals in the form of two women who wailed in the funeral procession carrying on their heads pans, in which perfumes were burnt.

According to Maltese custom, the dead were dressed in their best clothes before being put into the coffin, and, after being carried to the church, they were often left lying there for 24 hours before the coffin was nailed down and the burial took place.

Although, as was stated at the beginning, this article has been primarily concerned with the Dialogues from a social and historical point of view, mention was also made of their importance from a linguistic point of view. It might not, therefore, be inappropriate if just a few words were said on this theme by way of illustration, although this is not the place for detailed comment.

The Dialogues are written in Maltese which is idiomatic in two senses. The Dialogues are idiomatic inasmuch as they are written in the way in which people spoke in the eighteenth century, rather than in a specific literary manner. They are also idiomatic in that they contain a number of idioms and expressions, as does any language, with a particular sense. Two examples from the not infrequent number in the Dialogues will serve to illustrate this latter point. In Dialogue I we read *Kull min għandu jis-wielu, min ma għandu xejn jista' jsaqqi l-ħass*, 'Those who are well off are lucky, those who aren't, then it's just too bad'. And in Dialogue IV, *tibqa' bħal xemx f'nofs in-nbar*, '... she is left in the lurch'.

The vocabulary used in the Dialogues is almost entirely Semitic Maltese, with only a very small number of Romance words. This fact is paradoxically both surprising, and yet perhaps not really so. As Italian, which was the literary language of the period, exerted a very strong influence, one feels that more Italian words might perhaps have crept into the pages of the Dialogues. And yet, on the other hand – and here the more credit is due to De Soldanis for his accuracy – the Maltese spoken by peasants, and especially by the peasants of Gozo, would be a much purer Semitic Maltese, only little affected by Romance words. This is to quite an extent the case even now, when the country people speak a purer language than the town dwellers, whose tongue has been greatly affected – for the worse, dare one say? – by Italian and English, and which contains many words of the latter languages.

Within the Semitic Maltese vocabulary used in the Dialogues there are, as was mentioned in the introductory remarks, a number of words or constructions which have now fallen into disuse, of which a few of the more

interesting examples follow. In Dialogue I there are three such examples. There is the word *dalwaqt* (for *dan il-waqt*) which in the context of the Dialogues mean 'just': this word now means 'soon, before long'. There is then the expression *makbar u masbah ma hi*, translated idiomatically as 'larger than life and more beautiful': here we have a compound construction of the indefinite pronoun *ma* with the fourth form of the verbs *kiber* and *sebah*. The fourth form of the verb is now almost completely extinct in Maltese, surviving almost solely in certain religious expressions, such as *m'akbrek Mulej*, 'how great thou art, O Lord', and *m'akbar Alla*, 'how great is God'. There is also in Dialogue I the word *ghaguza*, meaning 'old woman': although this word is still in use when referring to a type of fish, it is now obsolete with the meaning given above, except for its retention in the proverb *Għalbekk l-ghaguza ma tridx tmut: għax aktar ma tikber iżjed titgħallem*, 'That is why the old woman does not want to die; because the longer she lives, the more she learns'. Another word from the same root occurs in Dialogue VIII, where we have the verb *ghagiżt*, now also obsolete, meaning 'I have become old'.

Two further examples from another Dialogue will suffice. In Dialogue IV we have *mexgħul*, 'busy'. This word, a passive participle, is now obsolete in Malta, although it may still be heard in some of the villages of Gozo. The more usual word used now is the passive participle of the third form of the verb, *imxieghel* although it has a slightly different sense. Finally, there is the construction *o ... o ...* 'either ... or ...' This is not Maltese at all, since the usual Maltese construction would be *jew ... jew ...*

There are further examples, but those quoted above will serve the present purposes. Suffice it to say that the Dialogues of De Soldanis would repay deeper linguistic study: only rarely is one lucky enough to find a first-hand example illustrating Maltese linguistic history.