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# 'BEYOND THE CAPACITY OF A SMALL ISLAND':<sup>1</sup> A REVIEW OF UNPUBLISHED RESEARCH BY WA GRIFFITH ON MALTESE DOCKYARDS\*

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## Abstract

*The paper is concerned with a piece of unpublished research on the history of Maltese dockyards by WA Griffith, completed in 1917. It is in three parts. Firstly, the background to the commissioning of the work by the Senior Naval Officer in Malta between 1916 and 1919 is described. The problems facing the ultimately abortive project are then examined, and finally a critical review of the research is offered.*

## Background to the Commissioning of the Research

However much writers may hope their endeavours will find a publisher, usually for financial or academic reasons not all their outpourings appear in print. This paper concerns research by W A Griffith entitled *A Brief Outline of the Foundation and Detachments of HM Establishments at Malta*, which was never published, but a copy of which is held by the National Library at Valletta, dated 1917. It is clear that Griffith did not write his history about the Maltese dockyards for academic reasons, but was commissioned by Admiral Ballard, the Senior Naval Officer (SNO) in Malta between 1916 and 1919, with the intention that the work would be used as a sort of propaganda by the British at a time when the morale at the dockyards was low. The choice of Griffith was not arbitrary, he simply appeared to be the best person capable of undertaking this type of study. He was well versed in the humanities, indeed, in one of the confidential typed papers sent to the Admiralty in London, he was described as 'Officier d'Académie Française'.<sup>2</sup>

Not much biographical information is available about Griffith<sup>3</sup> in Malta. His name does not figure in the local Maltese biographies. He worked for a number of years

with the Admiralty and while in Malta showed interest in Maltese archaeological studies. In fact, he published a paper on the subject at a time when he worked as Assistant Cashier of the Admiralty dockyards.<sup>4</sup> More plentiful is information on Rear Admiral George Alexander Ballard. From the cradle, he was destined for the navy. His life has been the subject of a number of studies and articles, some of which can also be downloaded from the internet.<sup>5</sup>

What is of particular relevance is the fact that Griffith's commission came at a time of real significance in the history of the Malta dockyards. During Ballard's tenure of office at the dockyard, unprecedented events happened which had the effect of undermining his reputation with the Admiralty Office. His war and torpedo strategy against the German submarines during the early days of hostilities failed to have the desired effect and seems to have been behind his premature removal from office and promotion to head of the Malta dockyards. Then, when he was SNO, the first major strike erupted in 1917 and another occurred after the end of the war in 1919. This was followed a few days later by riots and disturbances in Valletta which resulted in the death of six people. There appear to have been a number of different reasons which encouraged Ballard to commission the study.

Firstly, the available information suggests that it was merely a propaganda exercise. As SNO, Ballard wanted to use the work as positive propaganda in favour of the British.<sup>6</sup> According to Ballard, the reason for the current antagonism against the British in Malta, in particular at the docks, was due to the illiteracy of the masses. At the time, there was an extensive debate in Malta about the need to educate the working classes and how

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they could be better instructed. One particular person who held this staunch idea and who was very influential in government and Imperial circles, was the Crown Advocate Dr. Mikielang Refalo.<sup>7</sup> The succeeding Crown Advocate Arturo Mercieca continued to develop this idea and supported the need for the Imperial Government to have a permanent system to combat negative criticism by giving information to the people.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, pushing forward the idea of education and using the research as a form of educational material to show to the general Maltese public the importance of the dockyards to Malta, was in line with what the Crown Advocate was proposing. One needs to remember that the British Colonial Administration based its rule on the advice of the Crown Advocate. He was the linchpin between the Governor and the Maltese elite, being the legal representative of the elected Maltese members to the Council of Government.

At the time, the dockyard authorities lacked historical knowledge about shipbuilding and repairing in Malta. Despite the fact that the British had been in Malta over 117 years by 1917, the Admiralty had scarcely any information about the history of its new arsenal. Furthermore, the information about the arsenals of the Knights was predominantly in Italian, a language which was foreign to many British administrative officers. Most probably if such information existed, or if in the case of the Knights' period, it was available in books written in English, the Rear Admiral would not have felt the need to ask Griffith for a brief outline about the history of Malta's arsenals and dry docks. This issue emerges very clearly from the correspondence that passed between Ballard and the Admiralty in London.

A second reason for the commissioning of the work was Ballard's own particular interest in naval history; indeed after his retirement he wrote a number of articles and books on maritime topics and political-military strategy.<sup>9</sup> This is not explicit in the correspondence with the Admiralty, but can be read between the lines. Ballard had written a short history of the Admiralty Dockyards. There is no doubt that Ballard based his

writing on Griffith's work. Now he wanted to do a favour to Griffith and the best way to publish it was to seek the help of the Admiralty. In fact, Griffith does not only ask for the Admiralty to sponsor his publication, but also to pay him a form of honorarium for it. It was only after Griffith had completed his research that he entered into both informal and formal conversation with Ballard regarding its publication, and it was at this point that Ballard began to toy with the idea of having it published at the expense of the British tax payer.

There seems to have been another covert reason for the publication of the study. Ballard seems to have used the occasion of the correspondence with the Admiralty to further his claim for promotion to become Malta's next Governor after Governor Methuen. Further remarks on this score appear below.

### **Problems Facing Publication**

The British establishment in Malta attributed the unrest manifested in the dockyard workers' strikes to what they called mischievous propaganda put forward by the pro-Italian faction. Furthermore, there were a number of parties at the time agitating the people for self-determination or Maltese home rule. The British were afraid that owing to this negative propaganda, the general public was likely 'to forget what benefits they have already derived, and are likely to derive in future, from British rule'.<sup>10</sup>

In 1919, the political faction that was considered as the biggest threat to British rule was that which expressed pro-Italian sentiments. The British authorities began more and more to sense a sort of mischievous Italian propaganda against them in Italy and that this propaganda was gaining ground in Malta. The trouble in the dockyards was attributed in part to the support that these Italian politicians and local Italian trained lawyers were gaining amongst the dock workers. Many of the workers were judged illiterate and therefore susceptible to swallow any anti-British propaganda as Bible truth. The risk was even higher, as almost all these illiterate workers were very religious and prone to believe all that the priests told them. The

majority of the latter were behind this Italian faction or any party which supported the Italian cause and the clerical interest. In Malta, despite the fact that unified Italy was Liberal and anti-clerical, the Italian language continued to be associated by the clergy with the Catholic faith. Its substitution for English was seen as the language of a heathen religion and its diffusion increased the risk of proselytisation and conversion to the Anglican faith.

In confidential letters exchanged with the Admiralty in London, beginning on 27 May 1919, Ballard advanced the idea that the latter should sponsor both the publication of his public lecture and Griffith's work. For some time, the Ballard's interlocutor in London was Brigadier Simple. According to him, the British had to react in Malta by showing all the people, 'the advantages they would lose by getting rid of British rule and some pro-British propaganda for this purpose seems necessary'.<sup>11</sup> Griffith's work was therefore deemed by Brigadier Simple as useful whilst the costs involved were classified as 'low' and 'very desirable'. After the break up of the June 1919 riots, the idea of creating some sort of positive media reaction gained ground; the publication of any sort of book which could boast about the British presence in Malta was likely to be welcomed by the authorities in London.

Brigadier Simple considered public conferences as being more effective propaganda. In this regard, Ballard gave a public lecture at the old University on the importance of the dockyard. This lecture was held at the University in Valletta, and perhaps for the first time in Malta, the audience was entertained by the projection of a slide show using what were described as lantern slides to illustrate his talk. It was suggested that these lantern slides with a slight adjustment should be loaned and used to give lectures in schools, whilst a copy of the talk was given to Greenwich Maritime Museum.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the Brigadier's view, the publication of books was seen as a far more effective method of public relations. This conclusion was arrived at by experience. Ballard's talk was published in the form of a pamphlet and was sold at the price of one

shilling per copy. The cost was considered too high with the result that sales were small, only 80 copies being sold, with the result that according to the British, 'only a small section of the Maltese public was influenced'.<sup>13</sup> Simple tried to help Ballard in the distribution of this book by suggesting it 'to be placed on the market at a lower price or else combined with Mr. Griffith's history and the two together sold for 1d or 2d provided that the Admiralty will advance the necessary expenses'.<sup>14</sup>

Griffith did much of the groundwork for the publication of his work. He approached the proprietor of a local printing press owned by Augustus Bartolo for a quotation. Bartolo was also the owner of the pro-British newspaper, *The Malta Chronicle*. The quotation for both the printing and the distribution of the book was considered much cheaper than if it had been printed in England. In a letter to the Senior Naval Officer in Malta, Griffith advanced the idea of getting paid for his labour and clearly informed him that the requested sum 'does not include the cost of my private time spent in studying and compiling this Booklet, which, if paid for, would amount to over £50'. Without even waiting for London's reply, a copy of the book was given to Bartolo who immediately began working on its type setting which at the time was undertaken by lead lettering.

However, there were problems regarding the selling and purchasing of the book. It was deemed that the local market could not support the publication of the book as there would not be enough buyers to cover the expenses. In 1919, the price of this book, containing 10,000 words, would have been about one shilling. It was quite expensive for the time as it was about one day's wage of a labourer. In fact, Griffith himself had serious doubts as to how many in Malta would be ready to buy this book for one shilling unless they were offered incentives.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately for Griffith, a measure taken to publish a propaganda pamphlet in Maltese faced resistance from the populace. As a result of the riots, the Government published a propaganda book in Maltese entitled *Il-Mizuri li hal-Gvern; biex Jghin kemm Jista' lill-Haddiem u lill-fqir* (Measures taken

by the Government to help the workers and the poor as much as possible). Amongst other things, the writer tried to explain that the introduction of taxes, such as the succession duty, was not aimed against the poor but against those who had property. However, a covert campaign was organised by the landowning classes to forestall the distribution of this book in the local clubs where the workers met.

Union delegates were chastised for distributing this book to the extent that a union delegate was even assaulted at the dockyard for distributing it. It was also said that the dockyard workers had menaced the parish priest of the Cottonera as well as village priests for speaking and distributing this book to their parishioners.<sup>16</sup> The editor of the *Malta Herald* published half of the book in his newspaper, but after this he was intimidated and was afraid to continue with its publication.<sup>17</sup> Faced with these difficulties, Griffith suggested to the Senior Naval Officer that the Director of Naval Intelligence, Baviere, be consulted and 'requested to express an opinion as to the utility of this brochure for propaganda purposes in Malta'.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of having Griffith's book published continued to be supported by Brian Barthlot, who replaced Ballard as senior naval officer, 'Mr. Griffiths has spent a lot of time and trouble in research work in compiling his history'.<sup>19</sup> And for this reason Griffith deserved an honorarium for his work.<sup>20</sup> Initially the Dockyard Branch was strongly in favour of these two pamphlets being published for propaganda purposes, and in their words 'to combat the so-called pro-Italian movement which is the flag of all the local agitators and anarchists'. Furthermore, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), I W S Henderson, believed that the question of the honorarium for Mr. Griffith had to be considered.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly afterwards the situation in Malta began to calm down, and the total cost of publication, distribution and the honorarium came to be seen as rather high. Thus, Henderson suggested that Malta should explore the possibility of having the two histories published in the *Chronicle*

newspaper, in chapter series. This was considered a golden opportunity as it would 'increase the circulation and reach far more of the Maltese population'. However, Henderson did point out that in England the budget for propaganda had greatly decreased after the end of the war. Thus after peace was signed, it was going to be difficult to justify such an expense. At the same time, he considered this case as 'exceptional in view of the long connection between Malta and the Navy'. Yet the Foreign Office did not want to commit themselves to any form of expense before they had received an indication of all the cost involved.

Ballard sent a handwritten letter to the Secretary of the Admiralty in which he reiterated that the purpose of the publication of the work was 'to help the Maltese to arrive at a proper understanding of the enormous benefits conferred upon Malta by virtue of its position as the Mediterranean supply and refitting base of the principal maritime power in the world'. Furthermore, Ballard sincerely considered that 'the ignorance of the Maltese masses on this point is deplorable and cannot be otherwise than prejudicial to Imperial interests'. At the same time, Ballard admitted that the situation was so critical that he was 'very doubtful whether this state of affairs is one which can be remedied by penny pamphlets'. Ballard shot himself in the foot. This was a useless comment which was to cost him the whole project.

It was at this point that Ballard wrote a long letter in which he expressed his frustration and at the same time tried to put forward his auto-candidacy for the governorship of Malta.

*During the period following the great Dockyard strike in 1917, I had ample evidence that while the educated classes in the island appreciated the great advantages enjoyed by Malta from its status as a British naval base, the illiterate masses which form the bulk of the population had no conception of them at all and I was informed from reliable sources that seditionists took advantage of this ignorance to work up anti-British feeling among the labouring men. Field Marshal Lord Methuen who was at that time the Governor, was quite*

*aware of this, and after the strike it was agreed between His Excellency and myself, with the full concurrence of the naval commander-in-chief that I should deliver a pathetic lecture in person on the subject in the University as something in the way of a possible antidote.*

*I believe in such a lecture recording and at the request of the Maltese Government I agreed that it might be printed and sold by a local publishing agency. But I came to the conclusion afterwards that it had very little real effect for although it was attended by practically every resident in Malta of important social position, whether private or official, there were not the class who required instruction in such a matter and to the uneducated classes printed propaganda is virtually useless because the majority cannot even read.*

*The fact is that the Maltese as a nation are not impressed by what they read but by what they hear and see. What they hear are the harangues of pothouse anarchists and certain local politicians seeking popularity by the easy method of abusing the Government. What they see is that throughout the island it is the military and civil officers who exercise authority while the navy and naval interest are relegated to a minor position.*

*In the light of this experience I cannot believe that printed pamphlets will produce any marked effect. A few eloquent speakers conversant with the language would do more by some visible indication of the close connection between British maritime power and the position of Malta in the Empire is what is really required and in my opinion nothing else will answer. The Admiralty has spent more money in Malta than all the other Imperial Government departments put together, but every man in the island knows that it is only the War Office and the Colonial Office that have any voice in the administration.*

*An incident occurred while I was S.N.O. which I mention here as it appears to bear on the subject. Some little time after the strike had ended, one of the most prominent private citizens in Malta, a gentleman known throughout the island came*

*privately to me, and, assuring me that his views were widely shared, asserted with great emphasis that the Maltese would never understand their proper place in the Empire till they had a naval Governor.*

This last remark brings to the fore the issue of this whole exercise. Ballard seems to have understood that there was no interest in the publication of this book. It was at this point that Ballard expressed in writing another reason for his interest in this publication. In the meantime, the British had nominated another military man and First World War veteran, Field Marshal Lord Plumer, as Governor of Malta. Ballard seems to have had other ideas and considered such a choice as a wrong one for Malta. He quoted in support verbal encouragement that he claimed to have received from 'one of the most prominent private citizens of Malta'. Perhaps, he could have been referring to the archbishop or Lord Gerald Strickland, a prominent Maltese politician who held a seat in the House of Lords, and had returned to Malta after serving as British Governor of Tasmania (1904 to 1909), Governor of Western Australia (1909 to 1913) and Governor of New South Wales (1913 to 1917).

As for the Colonial Office, they sought to limit their interest to the sole issue of publication without delving into other issues of a political nature regarding the governorship of Malta. As the prospects of financing the book receded, discussions began to be held to have it published at the local *Chronicle* office; this was considered as 'an appropriate act' after the latter press was destroyed during the 1919 riots for being 'pro-British'.<sup>22</sup> But as the expenses continued to appear too high, it was suggested that it would be published in serial form in all the Maltese papers. Even this was dropped to save further expense and instead it was suggested that a comprehensive review of the pamphlet be published as a form of advertisement in the four principal papers.

In March 1920, the Admiralty made its first major objection. Whilst agreeing with the principle of educating the Maltese, they could not understand why it should be paid for by the Admiralty when the responsibility for Maltese affairs fell on the Colonial Office.

Furthermore, quoting Ballard's work, the Admiralty did not see the point of the publication when they were informed that 'the majority of the uneducated classes cannot even read'. In this situation, this book 'appears to be of very little value – as this is the class which requires instruction'. The Admiralty therefore decided to withdraw its support.

### **An Assessment of Griffith's Manuscript**

Griffith's manuscript has been extensively consulted and quoted in articles on the history of the Maltese arsenals and dockyard, but it should be pointed out that some of his material is not substantiated by official confidential documentation, a criticism which needs to be borne in mind. However, the piece does provide an insight into cultural issues through references to lost paintings and to important historic buildings.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in his book about the British Navy, entitled *The Crimson Handkerchief*, Comte de Gobineau expresses the cultural interest existing amongst British sea captains and admits that the British had the habit of picking up paintings in Malta to decorate their ship cabins.<sup>23</sup> This custom continued until recent times and many individuals, who used to work at the Malta yard or with the services, recount stories where military and naval officers took historical artefacts as souvenirs, or else ordered carpentry work of naval inspiration to decorate their offices or houses.

Griffith's paper comprised two parts. The first covered the Knights' history and their arsenal at Birgu. The second dealt with the physical transfer of the Knights' arsenal and quay at Birgu into an exclusive Royal Navy jetty, together with the introduction into Malta of modern ship repair techniques and development of dry dock systems on the eastern part of the Grand Harbour next to the towns of Bormla and Senglea. These last two towns were adjacent to Birgu. The script was followed by two appendices reproducing documents and statistical data which indicate Griffith's interest in historical accuracy as well as the importance of providing source material for his work.

A critical assessment of Griffith's work shows that the level of accuracy varies between the first and the second parts. The first

contains a number of historical inaccuracies probably because he did not rely on primary sources. There is no doubt that for the history of the Knights' arsenal and navy, he used published sources, such as Giacomo Bosio, Bartolomeo Del Pozzo and Abbe de Vertot's books. Vertot had an added advantage for Griffith as this was the sole Knights' history of which there was an English translation. The other two books were in Italian. Griffith had at his disposal a number of works in English published in the nineteenth century, such as that by Whitworth Porter.<sup>24</sup>

Griffith pursues the following scheme in his first section; there is an analysis of the state of the fleet of the Order of St John during the period of the Knights' stay in Malta. This is split between their arrival on the island in 1530 and the introduction of the ships-of-the-line or *vascelli* in the eighteenth century. The Hospitaller period is concluded by an overview of the state of the fleet at the time of the arrival of Napoleon's armada in Malta. He then gives an interesting detailed description of the property belonging to the Knights which was used by the navy of the Order. This description does not follow a thematic structure. Instead Griffith adopts a description per location.

The first location to be analysed is that of Vittoriosa, including its three-arched galley arsenal and residences and palaces for the admiral and the generals of the galley fleet, as well as the large storehouses and slave prison. The second is that of Senglea. Here the focus is on the so-called Dockyard Terrace, which, during the time of the Knights, served as the *Hotel des Capitaines des Galères et Vaisseaux*. He also describes the line of storehouses situated at the side of this quay. He gives a description of the French Creek which was situated on the opposite quay overlooking Corradino Hill. Griffith describes the building of the slip and the two storehouses that were used by commercial shipping. The building of the commercial ships and boats owned by the Maltese took place here. Finally, Griffith gives a description of the total income and naval expenditure of the Knights. He ends this section with the capture of Malta by Napoleon and the eventual incorporation of the Hospitaller's

ships into the French navy.

At this juncture, one needs to point out that the word 'dockyard', as used by Griffith, is to this day, arbitrarily used in Malta for an area or place where ship repairing takes place. In reality, Malta had no dockyards until the arrival of the British. In medieval times, the island had first a ship-shed which towards the end of the fifteenth century began to be developed into an arsenal.<sup>25</sup> During the Knights' period, the island lacked a proper dockyard. The Order of Saint John built its naval policy on the creation of distinct and separate arsenals. That in Birgu concentrated on the building of galleys. When the ship-of-the-line concept was introduced in the early eighteenth century, the Hospitallers built a distinct yard at French Creek. On this side of the harbour, in the French Creek, the arsenal of the *tartane* boats was situated. They also created autonomous stores for each category of ship without any real synergy between them.

The British changed the whole concept. They wanted one unified area and throughout their one hundred and fifty year stay endeavoured to follow the British model. The Grand Harbour terrain, with its many inlets, made the development of such a concept a difficult one. Yet, slowly they succeeded in developing this strategy by first abolishing the galley arsenal and then concentrating their resources on developing a complex of yards on the Bormla side, joined together by tunnels and internal roads. Thus a dock complex was created.<sup>26</sup>

This complex began to take shape in the middle of the nineteenth century with the development of the first dry dock in Malta in the area of Bormla known as the Mandaraggio in 1843. Griffith then recounts the history of the construction of the other docks, in particular of the Somerset Dock (1867), Hydraulic Dock (1873), Hamilton Dock (1883), including costs of expansion of the Bormla dock and some of the ships that were docked in these dry docks. He also refers to the sole warship to be built in Malta, the HMS. *Melita* (1889). He also makes reference to extensive works undertaken in 1901 to increase naval accommodation at the harbour which included the building of the breakwater

(£700,000), the New Docks (£800,000), the New Factory (£30,000), the Saw Mills (£17,000), the Ordnance Depot (£102,000), the Coaling Depot (£120,000) and the building of a new road and tunnel within the yard (£49,000).

Griffith gives brief but detailed information of the period of transition from the Birgu site of the galley arsenal to the new hydraulically operated dry dock at Bormla. The shift meant the implementation of a number of policies and the take over of a number of properties by the Admiralty. Griffith details the history behind the development of these properties. It is doubtful whether he was much interested in the economic dynamics, but more moved by the fact that many of these properties were important palaces, believing that it was important to chart how they came into the hands of the Admiralty. He presents a listing of the property owned by the Royal Navy in Valletta, Senglea, Birgu and Bormla.

Griffith then proceeds to give the names of ships which used Malta as their base during different periods of time. Special attention was given to the sea battle of Navarrino, including the detail of expenses for the work done on the repair of ships, the amount of food consumed by the Russian fleet and the cost of victualling the sick and wounded Russian sailors and soldiers.

The working staff and their payrolls are discussed by Griffith both in the text and more importantly in the appendixes, together with the size of the workforce present in the different sections of the yard. In itself, this was a very important consideration for which Griffith needs to be given due credit. One should keep in mind that up to a hundred and fifty years earlier, the minor staff employed in the navy was not considered of great importance. The sailors and naval employees were just a number in a larger system. A general very degrading view of the marine staff was shared by the sea captains. In his evocative book, Arthur Herman argues that 'in the minds of most sea captains, the mariners were basically landmen who helped in raising the anchor and handling the guns in a sea fight; otherwise they were an afterthought'.<sup>27</sup> This view is supported by the fact that for a long period of

time mariners lacked any uniform, and were literally dressed in ragged patched clothing;<sup>28</sup> there are studies which show that few sailors were over forty, and almost none lived past fifty during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup> Organisation came about towards the end of the eighteenth century. A system was created by which the British Navy became one of the most over-organised and needless to say rigid maritime institutions at the time. Such reflections by Griffith seem to me a direct response to this situation which made Admiralty establishments able to respond quickly to crisis, even if they remained, as any other institution run by human beings, subject to breakdown at unexpected moments.

The employment situation is also discussed with regard to salaries, a thorny question at the beginning of the twentieth century and a cause of two strikes during Ballard's time. Besides the salary scales and different type of work categories, Griffith discusses problems faced by the British regarding work with the Admiralty. The many religious feasts that used to take place in Malta were having, according to Griffith, a negative effect on the work at the Admiralty naval establishments, as many workers absented themselves from work to celebrate their religious saints. Even in terms of skills, Malta had a deficit, having to import skills from abroad.

Griffith concludes his work with thirteen appendixes touching on different aspects of the yard, half of which concern the amounts paid as wages to different categories of the drydock's personnel.

Griffith's work shows the heady experience that setting up a modern dockyard must have been. But he does not touch on the political issues or the need for political stability which guaranteed long-term planning of naval development. Nor does he delve into the management of the dockyards which must have been based during this period on a sound footing. The local dockyards did not have to face any challenges from the commercial sector. The competitive edge came from political and war crisis. The shock to this system only came in time of peace or when international ententes and treaties

knocked the Malta Admiralty yard from its global perch. Whatever the case, the commission of this research came at a time when the faith of Malta as a British naval base was at the crossroads. It is no coincidence that Ballard knew that the Admiralty's view of the future of Malta was one of gloom.

## **Conclusion**

In retrospect, it is something of a surprise that Griffith's effort was never published as a piece of academic work since it is arguably of value to historians, which was Ballard's view. Moreover, the cost to the Admiralty was minute when set against its overall budget. At the same time, tracking the process which might have led to publication does offer some insight into the workings of naval bureaucracy and individuals' motivations. The Griffith episode also illustrates the way in which a colonial power endeavoured to manage the local populace.

## **Epilogue: Malta and the Navy**

At the turn of the century, the golden age of the Malta dockyards was already over. 'On the British Navy rests the British Empire', said Fisher when he was Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean. Yet Malta failed to feature in his plans. In Fisher's mind there were 'five strategic keys' on which the British Empire and the world economic system rested – Gibraltar and Suez, Singapore, the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Dover.<sup>30</sup> Malta did not feature in his thoughts despite the fact that it was the centre of the Mediterranean Fleet and he was resident on the island. In fact, the focus was now more on the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean. The Mediterranean fleet shrank from fourteen battleships in 1902 to eight in 1904, and six in 1907.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, Fisher did not see any real future for Malta. According to Fisher, the two points of British interest in the Mediterranean were Gibraltar and the Suez Canal. Malta lay in the middle but Fisher's concept of relying on fast ships made Malta's advantageous position practically irrelevant. Unlike Gibraltar, Malta had a large population which was continuously on the increase. Its big population made it an unsustainable island for an Empire whose only reason for

possession was its strategic value. At the same time, it was a value that was losing its political and military importance.

Immediately after the First World War was over, the British did their utmost to try to solve the Malta problem by relinquishing as much as possible of their responsibility for internal affairs, giving the chance to the Maltese themselves to govern and therefore develop their island economically and socially. It was only due to the advent of fascism in Italy and the eventual alliance of Mussolini with Nazi Germany that a new expedient was created for Britain to reaffirm its hold on Malta. They sought to keep Malta so that it would not go to the enemy. The Second World War proved Ballard's prediction right, Malta became a valuable asset. But once the war was over, the post-First World War story repeated itself with the difference that now Malta ended up in the fast track for independence.

## References

- 1 I would like to thank Mario Ellul for bringing to my attention and furnishing photocopies of the correspondence that passed between Ballard and the Admiralty in London concerning the publication of Griffith's works.
- 2 TNA, ADM 1/8579/9.
- 3 The spelling of Griffith's surname varies. He signs as Griffith but there were instances when he was referred to as Griffiths – perhaps mixing him with another Griffiths working at the Dockyards at the time.
- 4 It those days, Assistant Cashier was high post equated today with that of an assistant Finance Officer.
- 5 <http://www.paul-ballard.com/pedigrees/george%20portbury%201702.html>
- 6 TNA, ADM 1/8579/9.
- 7 Gerald Azzopardi, *Meta l-Malti għadab : is-7 ta' Gunju 1919 60 sena wara*, Partit tal Haddiema, 1979, 9-10.
- 8 Paul Bartolo, *X'kien għara sew fis-VII Giugno 1919*, Klabb Kotba Maltin, Malta, 1979, 208.
- 9 His most important essay was G A Ballard, 'The Influence of the Sea on the Political History of Japan', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 28(3), 1922, 344-6. The paper was on the direct effects of the 1904 Russo-Japanese war and the battle of the Yellow Sea on Japanese military politics. This was followed in 1927 by a book entitled *Rulers of the Indian Ocean*. He became a regular contributor of the *Mariner's Mirror*.
- 10 TNA, ADM 1/8579/9.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Bartolo, 207-8.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 208.
- 18 TNA, ADM 1/8579/9.
- 19 *Ibid.*

- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 TNA, ADM a/8591/9.
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## SOME NOTES ON CONFERENCE DISCUSSIONS

### Ann Coats

#### Venice

The conference papers drew a range of questions, including 'What happened to two Venetian gondolas and four gondoliers presented to Charles II and visible in a picture of Charles II's wedding in 1662?' None of the assembled company was able to answer, so it remains a matter to be researched.

Lady Frances Clarke from *Venice in Peril* reported that the Armstrong crane no. 2919, built in Newcastle on Tyne of rolled steel, did not have an assured future in the Arsenale. It will cost around 900,000 euros to preserve. It is rusting and a plan is required to make it secure. She sent a full report for the August issue of *Dockyards*.

B Vale asked Dr Rose to confirm that England was not really a seafaring nation until the reign of Elizabeth. She reiterated this point: being surrounded by sea does not make a maritime nation, there are often arbitrary reasons leading to a nation becoming 'maritime'. In the Middle Ages England was preoccupied with fighting the Scots and French. The earliest European seafarers were the Genoese, earliest map makers from Majorca, working for Aragon.

Dr Rose was also asked if religious conflict was a reason for English maritime exploration. Susan replied that John Dee was atypical. The Black Legend (depicting the Spanish Inquisition, the Duke of Alba's actions in the United Provinces and Spanish treatment of aboriginals in the West Indies as brutal) incited anti-Spanish feeling, but religion was not the main motive. Exploration was really about trade, shifting at the end of the Elizabethan period from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Most leading explorers were Spanish, although Cabot was Venetian and Columbus Genoan.

P Dawson asked about the reliability of the claims made in G Menzies, *1421*, for the extent of Chinese exploration. Dr Rose said that many have not been substantiated.

A question was asked about Henry Marten and the Rump Parliament: how strong was republicanism in Genoa and Venice? Dr Caniato replied that the purity of Rome and Venice was a myth. Venice could not be compared with Rome. Venice considered herself a successor to part of the Roman Empire, but looked more towards Byzantium, the eastern Roman Empire. M Ferrari Bravo added that offices had to be sold in the seventeenth century to raise money to cover the costs of war.

Professor R Knight asked 'When was Venice at her peak?' Dr Caniato replied: 'From the fall of Constantinople (1453) to the second half of the sixteenth century. Military losses inspired the expansion of the Arsenale. In the nineteenth century it was revived: wood changed to iron; oar power to steam. Again in the 1970s and 1980s there was another revival.'

It was asked 'Why were Mediterranean slips and docks covered and those in northern Europe not?' Professor Knight answered that in some countries in N Europe covered ships from the 1750s, to protect from damp and cold, but the issues in British dockyards were cost and the disruption of erecting such a large roof span. Mediterranean galley sheds were narrower, therefore easier to cover. Charles Middleton, Navy Board Controller 1778-1790, proposed covered slips to Lord Howe, First Lord of the Admiralty January-April 1783, in the 1770s but they were not speaking to each other in the 1780s. This issue was not satisfactorily solved, therefore, until iron spans adapted from railway sheds were introduced to dockyards in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>1</sup> B Vale commented that the Asia Minor galley sheds in P MacDougall's pictures were grand buildings because they had been built by the ruler.

A question was asked on how Venice was responding to the threat of global warming and rising sea levels. M Ferrari Bravo

described the current Mose Project launched by Berlusconi in May 2003. MOSE: Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico, an experimental electro-mechanical module, is a prototype testing 79 inflatable gates to stem the flow of water through the three inlets into Venice's lagoon. The whole project was presented by the Consorzio Venezia Nuova in 2002 after many years of technical and political debate. The gates will be raised whenever the sea level rises significantly, three or four times a year. Initially about twelve closures a year were foreseen, but an upgraded project has reduced the range of intervention.

M Tucker asked if the Arsenale galley sheds were big enough to construct the larger eighteenth century ships. Dr Caniato answered that those were built outside the Arsenale.

## Malta

In October 2007 the Society enjoyed its first overseas conference, fourteen members participating in the International Congress of Maritime Museums Conference in Malta Conference Centre, Valletta. Our thanks are due to the fraternal support of Stephen Riley, Mary-Louise Williams and Tony Tibbles of ICMM and Pierre Cassar of Heritage Malta. Jonathan Coad was one of the keynote conference speakers. He surveyed the facilities of overseas bases, showing that in the nineteenth century Malta was the best provided British overseas base because the Royal Navy had taken over the Knights Hospitallers facilities and benefited from the locally trained labour force. ICMM delegates then joined the NDS session whose theme was 'Malta – Dockyard, Strategic Pivot, and Maritime Heritage Outlook', chaired by Professor Roger Knight, Greenwich Maritime Institute.

David Davies's paper traced connections between Malta and the Royal Navy since 1540 when Henry VIII ejected the Knights Hospitallers from England, although many English knights were members of the Order of St John. Commenting on the 'intangible' heritage of the rôle played by the dockyard in society and politics, during the 1930s, Henry Frenndo's paper was an eye-opener for most delegates, as he detailed the extent of

British hegemony and the importance of the dockyard within Maltese social and political life.

Simon Mercierca's paper analysed and reproduced W. A. Griffith's 1917 report which gave an overview of 19th century naval history in Malta, with special reference to the dockyard. It offered comprehensive development and transition of the Knights Hospitallers' Arsenal during the nineteenth century.

Questions followed. Asked about the provision of water for the navy and dockyard, S Mercierca stated that streams drained into the creeks, an aqueduct built in 1640 brought water from Rabat to Valletta, and all houses in Valletta were built with wells. R Knight reported that Nelson's 1st rates needed 3 tons of water a day, therefore his fleet needed 30-40 tons a day.

In response to a query about conservation of the docks, S Mercierca showed a proposed development scheme for the storehouses next to No.1 Dock, which has lost its gates. It threatened the integrity of the original buildings although the original façade will be conserved. Much nineteenth and twentieth century dockyard heritage has not been well conserved, compared with that dating from the period of the Knights, because of the current low regard for its history as part of an imperial past and its association with pollution. H Frenndo stated that there had been a degradation of aesthetics and ethics which was threatening the heritage of the dockyards because there was no current context for this history. Whereas everyone once obtained their living from the sea, few people now use the water and Cospicua children were scared of the sea. The contribution of dockyards is now not obvious to younger generations because their heritage is hidden behind walls. Roger Knight noted that Jonathan Coad had spent 40 years researching and working to protect the British dockyard built environment, saving what we now see at Chatham Dockyard. We need that commitment and knowledge to preserve what is still remaining of dockyards worldwide. Sue Lumas suggested that oral history can also recover the diversity of stories:

To a question about the firing of the noon

day gun, S Mercierca answered that the tradition was began by the Knights to echo the ringing of church bells. It was continued by the British. Together these papers gave a chronological range from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and a thematic breadth of Malta dockyard seen from both British and Maltese perspectives, its tangible and intangible heritage. They added considerably to delegates' understanding of Valetta Harbour creeks, viewed memorably on Wednesday 10 October from a *dghajsa* (a small local boat).

Summing up, Roger Knight welcomed these new insights into Maltese history and into the history of the home yards. In Britain there were two classes in Dockyard Schools, also driven by merit. Walls were also important for British dockyards as a security measure, which paradoxically generated a sense of insecurity. We need to foster each others' stories.

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