

A PROPOSED BULLETIN OF  
MALTESE LINGUISTIC STUDIES IN 1938

The first number of the *Journal of Maltese Studies* came out in 1961. During the 37 years of its existence it has contributed in a positive way to the promotion and maintenance of a scholarly tradition in local academic circles.

The need of such a publication had been felt since before the last War. It was considered at the time that a review of this nature would have clinched the various language reforms carried out in the Thirties, which raised Maltese to the status of an official language, together with English, in the Administration and in the Law Courts, introduced its teaching in the primary and secondary school and set up a Chair of Maltese and Oriental Languages at the University.

There were in fact two unsuccessful efforts to issue a Maltese linguistic review in the Thirties. An attempt by P.P. Saydon and J. Aquilina, then an undergraduate, to plan the publication of a similar review in the mid-Thirties came to naught and it was never published<sup>1</sup>. In 1938 another proposal to publish such a Bulletin received official financial backing and it had every prospect of succeeding, but the War intervened and Death prematurely snatched away the person who was the driving force behind the whole project. Details concerning this proposal are contained in the relevant Government file<sup>2</sup>.

The idea was first mooted by Dr G. Micallef, a former Minister of Agriculture and at that time Director of Agriculture, and Mr Anthony (*Ninu*) Cremona, veteran grammarian who held the post of Senior Translator of Maltese Official Documents. A pencilled note in the file, initialled by then Governor, Sir Charles Bonham Carter, on the 3rd August, 1938, reads as follows:

Dr Micallef and Mr Cremona wish to publish a Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies and in time to establish a Maltese Oriental Society.

Purpose to illustrate the Maltese Language and compare with other Semitic Languages. Must have some help in the form of propaganda—a small sum of money £30—40 which will be returned in the form of copies of the Bulletin, for distribution to schools and libraries.

*Parenthesis:* Suggest that more money be devoted to the purchase of Semitic Literature.

1. J. AQUILINA, 'On the need for a Lecturship in Arabic in our University', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No. 1, 1961, p. 1.

2. L.G.O. File 1825/1938: "Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies" and "Establishment of a Maltese Oriental Society".

On the following day Captain R.O. Romage, Assistant to the Lieutenant Governor, addressed Dr Micallef as follows:

4th August, 1938

Dear Dr Micallef,

With reference to the proposal to publish a Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies and, in time, to establish a Maltese Oriental Society, would you please forward a memorandum setting out exactly what you and Mr Cremona have in view, and also the expense which would be involved? On receipt of this information your proposal will be considered in connexion with next year's Estimates.

2. One of the points made by you is that more funds should be devoted to the purchase of Semitic Literature. It is presumed that you have in mind the diversion for this purpose of some of the existing provision for the purchase of books, and not an addition to such provision, which in the present financial position might be a source of difficulty. Have you a list of books and their price, which you think might be purchased?

Yours sincerely,  
(Sd) R.O. Romage

Micallef's view on the proposed Bulletin, forwarded from his office in the Department of Agriculture, reflects his long-standing scholarly interest in Maltese and in Semitic studies:

173, Strada Cristoforo,

Valletta, 10th August, 1938.

Dear Captain Ramage,

I am to refer to your note of the 4th instant, No. 1825/38, regarding the publication of a Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies. The purpose which both the Maltese Oriental Society and the Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies will have in view will be illustration of the Maltese Language in all its bearings—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexicon, literature and history of the language, and folklore—both on its own merits and as compared with other Semitic Languages. It is common knowledge that all other extant Semitic Languages have been and are being studied scientifically by well-known scholars, while no standard work has been produced on Maltese either by local scholars or by scholars overseas. Moreover, languages which have been dead and forgotten hundreds and thousands of years ago have been unearthed, deciphered, translated and illuminated by British and foreign scholars, who have helped to push our knowledge of our beginnings two or three thousand years back. No Maltese scholars have been

beginnings two or three thousand years back. No Maltese scholars have been able to partake of this noble work of research: the Bulletin will open up a field of research for all local students willing to expand their knowledge of Maltese and Oriental things, particularly linguistics; while outside scholars will be given in the illustration of the Maltese Language an additional key to help open the Seven Gates of the East.

As regards lists of Oriental Literature, I remember having compiled a very long list, some nine or ten years ago, which took about two years' work. If the list can be found it will be reduced to essential requirements and brought up-to-date.

As regards funds my idea was to have a separate provision for the Semitic Department of the Royal Library. I am not a member of the Committee of Management of the Library; but, Education "ad int", and as such I had an opportunity of presiding "ex officio" a sitting of the Committee, I remember the Committee adopting my proposal of creating a Semitic Section to be financed from separate funds to be earmarked for the purpose in the General Estimates. No steps appear to have been taken to implement that decision. My idea is to have an Oriental Room, an Oriental Fund, and an Oriental Sub-Committee to take charge thereof. If this is not considered feasible in the present financial condition of the Island, it may well be left over till we have established our Oriental Society, which with some assistance from the Government should be able to fend for itself. At present we are only three who hold a pen on Semitic subjects—Saydon, Cremona and myself; but for the next few years we hope to double our number every year. We will of course enlist the cooperation of British and Foreign scholars.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,  
G. Micallef

On the 31st August, 1938, Ramage informed Micallef that "as regards the grant towards the publication of a Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies, His Excellency has approved that the sum of £40 should be noted for consideration in next year's Estimates". In the same communication Ramage explained that "the vote for books in the Library has already been largely earmarked, but it has been agreed that £5 should be set aside for purchasing books of Semitic Languages".

The ridiculously low provision of £5 for the purchase of books on Semitic Languages elicited some strongly worded remarks by Micallef, who commented as follows on the 9th September, 1938:

...As regards the £5(?) which the Library Authorities have agreed to set aside for the purchase of books of Semitic Languages, I have no doubt that figure is a typist's error for £50; but even £50 would be a very small amount to start with; it would hardly suffice to purchase the past numbers of one of the more important Reviews.

Here one should point out that Government's decision communicated by Ramage in his letter of the 31st August, 1938 was reached after the then Treasurer, Mr J. Pace, had minuted as follows on the 20th August, 1938:

Assistant to Lieutenant Governor,

Now that Maltese is an official language, it would be consistent with the Government policy to raise its standard and sponsor, financially, any scheme towards that scope within reasonable limits.

The allocation of a sum of £40 for this purpose is not very relevant and will enable the Society to exploit their activity with prospects of some success.

With regard to the "parenthesis" in His Excellency's note, I think that, compatible with the requirements of the Royal Malta Library, a token amount should, even now, be earmarked for the kind of literature which His Excellency has mentioned.

20.08.38

(Itd.) J.P.

A provision of £40, described as a 'grant towards the publication of a Bulletin of Maltese Linguistic Studies' was duly included in the Estimates for 1939/40 under Head 14 – Miscellaneous Services. An equal provision figured in the 1940/1941 Estimates while in the Estimates for 1941/1942 the item was suppressed, the reason being, as officially stated in an explanatory note, that the publication was "discontinued".

The word "discontinued" calls for clarification and comment. Micallef died prematurely on February 8, 1940. Cremona, who was closely associated with Micallef in this project, assures us that the articles or studies received by Micallef for inclusion in the first number of the Bulletin, which was to be named *Vox Melitensis*, had been sent abroad for an estimate of the printing costs, and agreement had practically been reached with a London publishing house when Micallef's untimely death, followed by the outbreak of war with Italy in June, 1940, put an end to the whole initiative<sup>3</sup>.

However, the need of a Journal of Maltese Linguistics continued to be felt and after seven years the idea was revived on February 10, 1947 when Professor J. Aquilina addressed a formal request to the University Rector to seek Government approval of a subsidy of £150 for the publication of a Journal of Maltese Linguistics. His proposal read as follows:

3. A. CREMONA, 'Il-Mewt ta' l-Avukat Ġużè Micallef', *Il-Malti*, Marzu, 1940, p. 9.

18, St Andrew's Street, Valletta.  
10th February, 1947

Dear Rector,

With reference to the proposed publication of a **Journal of Maltese Linguistics** duly authorised by the General Council I beg to inform you that I have the available material for publication which can be carried out as soon as there are available funds.

The first number will consist of about 150 pages and the estimated cost covering printing and agency fees for our London agents will amount to about £150. I propose the publication of 500 copies, selling price to be not less than 10/-each.

Failing the existence of a publication fund, which is a **sine qua non** for academical research in all British and Continental Universities, I beg that you kindly ask the Government for the grant of £150 for the publication of the Journal in question. The proposed Journal will appear as a publication of the Royal University of Malta under the editorship of the undersigned, with Prof. P.P. Saydon as an associate editor. Sale proceeds will go to the University.

The following are the studies going in the first number:

Maltese Grammars	by Prof. P.P. Saydon
Principles of Maltese Phonetics	by Prof. J. Aquilina
Comparative Illustrations of the Historical	
Phonetics of Maltese	by Prof. J. Aquilina
Some Archaic Words in Maltese Folklore	by J. Cassar Pullicino
Etymology of Some Archaic Words in Maltese	by Prof. J. Aquilina
Folklore	
Quelques Particularités du Nomes Propres	
Maltaises	by Dr C.L. Dessoulavay
Maltese Vowels	by Prof. P.P Saydon
	Fr E. Sutcliffe, S.J.
Reviews	Dr. G. Galea

Yours Sincerely,  
J. Aquilina

Prof. the Hon. R.V. Galea, O.B.E., A.&.C.E.

Aquilina's proposal, which was unanimously recommended by the General Council, was duly referred to Government, but the research value of such a publication was completely overlooked and on March 26, 1947, the Rector was

informed “that it is usual to finance similar enterprises from a University publication fund and not from general revenue” and that “under the circumstances...the request of Professor J. Aquilina cannot be entertained”.<sup>4</sup>

With the grant of autonomy to the University in September, 1947 and the promulgation of a new Statute in 1948 various reforms were carried out in the University. Financial difficulties, however, jeopardised further development. Following the Report of the Commission on the Royal University of Malta presented in September, 1957 legislation was enacted, providing for the appointment of Commissioners to advise on and approve new expenditure. This raised the hope and the expectation that “the much desired development of the studies and research in our *Alma Mater* will be greatly enhanced for the common benefit of all the community”<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this period Aquilina was waiting for an opportunity to publish the proposed Journal. On January 31, 1958, he wrote to Saydon, inviting him to contribute to the *Journal of Maltese Studies* which was to be issued under his editorship.<sup>6</sup> The relevant part of his letter read as follows:

Int nahseb tiehu gost tkun taf li behsiebni nohrog **Journal of Maltese Studies**, fil-qofol tieghu lingwistiku. Xtaqt li Malta tigi rappreżentata tajjeb. Qed jikbuli artikoli Ninu Cremona, iehor G. Cassar Pullicino u b'tieghi dawn huma tieta. Jekk inti tithajjar tikteb artikolu lingwistiku jiena niehu gost inxandru fl-ewwel ghadd. Qed nistenna kontribuzzjonijiet minn barra wkoll...

Various difficulties, including the use of Arabic types, retarded its publication and it was only in 1961 that the first number of the *Journal of Maltese Studies* appeared “published under the auspices of the Chair of Maltese, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta”.

Going back to Micallef's proposed Bulletin, it is clear that although it never reached the publication stage, a number of scholars, foreign and Maltese, had been invited to contribute studies or articles to the new review. Who were these would-be contributors? Micallef himself had explained in his letter of the 10th August, 1938 that “at present we are only three who hold a pen on Semitic subjects—Saydon, Cremona and myself ... We will of course enlist the cooperation of British and foreign scholars”.

At least two foreign scholars had accepted to contribute to the Bulletin. They were the Rev. C.L. Dessoulavy, author of the *Maltese Arabic Word List* (Luzac, 1938), besides several articles on the Maltese language in the *Journal of the University Literary Society*, edited by J. Aquilina between 1932 and 1937, and the Rev. E. Sutcliffe, S.J. Professor of Old Testament Exegesis and Hebrew at Heythrop College, Oxford, and author of *A Grammar of the Maltese Language* (O.U.P., 1936). After Micallef's death their articles were kept by Saydon and later handed over to Aquilina who published them in the first number of the *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* in 1957.

4. L.G.O. File 1839/1947: “Subsidy for the publication of a Journal of Maltese Linguistics—Professor J. Aquilina”.

5. S.M. ZARB, Editorial on ‘University Autonomy’ in *Scientia*, Vol. XXIV (1958) pp. 3–10. See also D. MARSHALL, *History of the Maltese Language in Education*, 1971—Chapter on ‘Reforms in the University’, pp. 83–95; and A.P. VELLA, *The University of Malta*, 1969, pp. 103–106.

6. A copy of this letter is in the possession of the present writer.

Both articles were written specifically for the proposed Bulletin in 1939. In "Quelques Noms Propres Maltais" Dessoulavy referred the reader to his *Maltese-Arabic Word List* "que j'ai publié l'année passée chez Luzac a Londres."<sup>7</sup> Similarly in "The Vowels of Verbs with Third Weak Radical" Sutcliffe quoted Saydon's rule regarding the first vowel in the perfect of verbs whose third radical letter is *ghajn*, which appeared in the December 1938 issue of *Il-Malti*.<sup>8</sup>

Cremona's contribution, written in Italian and dealing with comparative aspects of Maltese Folklore, was later amplified and eventually appeared in *Folklore* (N. 1-2, -X Annata (Napoli) 1954), edited by Prof. Raffaele Corso, under the title "Folklore Maltese-Lingua, Credenze e Costumi".

As for Saydon, the present writer recalls that during the last War he often had occasion to call on him at Żurrieq, and Saydon used to explain to him how he had arranged on the card index system the material he had collected on Maltese toponymy and which he had intended to publish in the proposed Bulletin. In 1956 he published a paper, entitled "The Pre-Arabic Latin Element in Maltese Toponymy",<sup>9</sup> which he described as "a brief extract from a larger work" on the subject. In his above mentioned letter of January 31, 1958 Aquilina informed Saydon that he was ready to include his study of Maltese toponymy in the *Journal of Maltese Studies*: "...Jekk trid, tista' tibda għib l-istudju tat-toponomastika li għandek lest, u tagħmel offprints. Billi ser nahseb għal żewġ numri mill-ewwel biex ma jkunx hemm intervall kbir bejn harġa u oħra, nahseb li jista' jirnexxilek iddahhal ix-xogħol tiegħek fl-ewwel żewġ numri."

Saydon did not avail himself of this offer. In 1963, he reviewed Aquilina's *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* mentioning, *inter alia*, that he had compiled a comprehensive list of Maltese place-names "obviously with some omissions, which I hope to publish in the near future". In fact his study appeared in 1966 but in German translation, entitled "Die Ortsnamen der maltesischen Inseln", in *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* (NS 16 (1966), pp. 177-200).<sup>10</sup>

It is possible that Micallef's own contribution would have been the paper entitled "Origin of Semitic Roots" which he had been invited to read at the International Congress of Linguistics to be held at Brussels, Belgium, in September 1939 but which had been cancelled because of the international political crisis leading to the outbreak of World War II. This paper has remained unpublished and, according to Micallef's son, the manuscript of this paper is to be found with the material my mother loaned to Fr (Dionysius) Mintoff."<sup>11</sup>

7. *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1957, p. 42.

8. These dates rectify the impression given by the co-editors of the *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 1957, p. 1) that the two articles "were originally intended for a *Journal of Maltese Studies* which Prof. Mgr. P.P. Saydon and Prof. J. Aquilina, then an undergraduate, intended to bring out some years before World War II". One may add that Aquilina graduated LL.D. in 1937 and between October 1938 and November 1939 was in London reading for the Ph.D. degree (Comparative Semitics) at the *School of Oriental and African Studies* of the University of London.

9. *Orbis* (Louvain), 5 (1956), pp. 191-197.

10. The present writer is indebted to the late Mgr. Prof. C. Sant for this bibliographical information.

11. J. MICALLEF, 'Was Dr Micallef an amateur scholar?', *Times of Malta*-October 20, 1977.