

PRE INDUSTRIAL MALTA

Some Comments and Observations on the book
"Xoghol u Snajja ta' l-Imghoddi" by Prof.G.
Galea.M.D, 1969; 2nd edition 1972.

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One of the important aspects in the study of Maltese folklore, is to know how the Maltese worker earned his living prior to the industrialization era and advent of the new tools and technology, which relieved so much of the hard work of our forefathers.

In this context, Prof.Guze' Galea, M.D., published his book, in 1969, "Xoghol u Snajja ta' l-Imghoddi" (Trades and Craft of the Past) in which he gave information about grape pressing, cigarette manufacture, quilting of mattresses, cotton-wool manufacture, saddle making, careening, knife sharpening, washing, tub-making, plastering, figurines and statues, coal, stoves, sailors' caps, ghonnella, (a sort of mantilla worn by women down to the legs), street cleaning, roof pounders, chair seats, letter writier, clock maker, bell foundry, and numerous other occupations which earned the worker his living.

One can easily see, that the above work was exercised by individuals, when companies and organized industries were still to come, and that generally they were the livelihood of members of one family working at home or in small shops. More-

over, these crafts were passed on from father to son, changing very little, until progressively absorbed by more modern enterprises.

Excluding a few of the crafts, all have vanished, as progress in technology has taken place in all trades, and the Trade Unions have brought the workers together, who nowadays seek employment rather than set up their own.

The importance of this book lies in the fact that it gives us a record of the crafts, with detailed descriptions, and enhanced by illustrations. In this brief article, it is not possible to go through all the book, but we can take one or two examples of how each craft was tackled by our forefathers.

Let us consider the work of the knife-grinder; till before the Second World War, one could see a man, with a cart, drawn by a donkey, furnished with a wheel turned by a foot on a pedal, which controlled the grindstone, on which he sharpened knives, scissors, and sometimes some agricultural instrument. He had a small container full of water, provided with a tap, to pour water on the blades, to prevent them warming up with friction. Moreover, the man also carried files, screwdrivers, pincers, hammers, chisels and other tools which served to adjust scissors and other items needing repair. It may seem strange, but there still exists a primitive shop at Saint Paul Street, Valletta,

where there is, maybe, the last surviving knife grinder; if this worker gives up his craft, I wonder who will sharpen a pair of scissors or a knife, so much needed in every home?

Another craft was that of the saddle maker, at a time, when only horses were the principal means of transport. This craft existed before the advent of the Knights of Malta, when it flourished to an excellent standard, and was one of the most important crafts of the time.

From time immemorial, horses and donkeys were patient helpers of man, for transport and work in the fields. To maintain these animals, one had to provide them with various items of comfort during their activities, and the rider had to have a saddle, usually padded, secured by a girdle and supporting the stirrups; all these were the work of the saddlers. When the Knights came to Malta, the saddlers had to be first class workers, to satisfy the exigences of the Grand Master and his retinue. It would take too long to describe their work, but the book in question gives accurate and lengthy description.

In conclusion, I will refer to the makers of plaster figurines. These figures were of various sizes, from crib figures to decorative statuettes, and at times to full sized busts of historical figures like Don Gaetano Mannarino, Matteo Callus, Dante and other Italian poets, Greek mythological figures, and of course Napoleon, with his characteristic pose with one hand on his chest, and eyes fixed on far-off visions of victory.

These artisans generally learned their art from other members of the family, at times achieving a very high standard of workmanship. I remember one of these artisans who specialized in crib figures, who lived next to our house, and as a child I used to help him press clay in the moulds; he then grooved the clay faces, wetted them and pressed them together, leaving them to adhere for a few minutes. They were then gently turned out of the mould, the edges cleaned of excessive clay, and then left to dry completely for some days before being painted and stored in boxes for wholesale or retail.

Unfortunately, this craft has also done its term, and few are those families who still enjoy, and are proud to own, a crib. Other ideas have now been introduced, as Christmas decorations, and the Christmas Tree in particular, the latter shown off behind the balcony windows, rather than placed in the living room, with the Christmas gifts for all members of the family.

From what we have discussed out of Prof. Galea's book, one can appreciate its importance, as it registers for us the endeavours of our forefathers, who earned an honest living and brought up their families, happy in their humble surroundings, and, above all, God-fearing and honest, in pre-industrial Malta.