

SOME NINETEENTH CENTURY STREET CRIES

Anna Borg Cardona B.A., L.T.C.L.

The custom of carrying out all sorts of trades and occupations out in the street has long been a characteristic feature of Maltese life. Up to the first half of the 20th century, it was still common to hear a cacophony of sound from hawkers "crying their saleables" through the town and village streets. Each vendor had his own particular recognisable cry which involved a short melodic motif, very often with stereotyped phrases carried down from previous generations.

Many age-old occupations have now died out or have been moved to fixed regular shops. The cry which was so important in announcing the presence of the *venditore ambulante*, lost its *raison d'être* when the hawker was no longer mobile. It is unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable, that each individual cry was not recorded at the time. Today we are left with very few of the colourful sounds so common in generations past. We can only imagine past market sounds in Malta through those few cries still in use today and, also, through informative travelogues, especially those written in the 19th century. From these accounts, I have selected a few extracts involving cries commonly heard in our streets some 200 years ago.

One early 19th century traveller, AENEAS ANDERSON leaves us a particularly interesting picture of a trade which has now become obsolete. In his *Journal of the Forces* (1802) he describes woodcutters in Valletta as he saw and heard them in the winter of 1800: "These men who are more numerous than may be imagined, are armed with an axe and a saw, with a chisel and a wedge, and thus equipped they pass through the streets, making known their want of employment by a certain kind of cry peculiar to their occupation." (p.180)

Their street cry was evidently a motif or phrase typifying the woodcutter's trade, and, at that time, easily recognisable to all. Unfortunately, Anderson goes no further in the description of the cry, leaving us none the wiser as to the words or type of intonation used. A hand-coloured etching portrays a woodcutter of the same period (Fig.1) certainly armed with an axe and possibly with more tools inside his *ħorġa*.

Another visitor, the poet **S.T.COLERIDGE** enjoyed a lengthy stay of over a year in Malta, during which time he became under secretary and later public secretary to Alexander Ball. During these months of 1804, his continued addiction to laudanum made him increasingly irritable. With his nerves in such a state, the hubbub in Malta seemed particularly acute and noticeable to him. In one of his letters he in fact described the Maltese as "the noisiest race under heaven" (SULTANA p.152). As for the street vendors' cries, he described these in a nutshell as "a sudden bellow shot high up into the air with bomblike burst..." (SULTANA p.147). Coleridge seems to encapsulate all street vendors' cries within this description without specifying individual calls, indicating that sudden high pitched motifs were then a typical ingredient, as indeed they still are today.

In 1831, an American traveller by the name of **ANDREW BIGELOW** published a far more vivid description of some other occupations common to 19th century Maltese life. Bigelow was on the island in 1827 and, like most travellers of the time, took up residence in Valletta. During his stay, he encountered water sellers who were then commonly seen in the streets of the city: "There is a tribe of water-carriers who go about town crying *Acqua*, but barbarously pronounced *Arkoo*. They are chiefly useful to the poorer families which occupy a single apartment or two, as is usual in the many of the great buildings, and who have not the privilege of private cisterns. A large stone vessel is daily replenished by the carriers in each of these little domiciles at an expense of a few grains - five of which only amount to a cent. The men bear the water about in small casks. They supply them at the several city fountains.. ." (p.123)

Two 19th century lithographs, (Figs. 2 & 3) both depict water sellers very similar to Bigelow's description. Each is seen carrying a small wooden cask slung round the neck and held beneath the arm. The cask has a little tap on one side through which the water is let out. The water sellers also carried tumblers round the waist for any individuals requiring to quench their thirst. With elementary rules of hygiene being non-existent, the same tumblers were presumably being passed round to all and sundry.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

In the Brocktorff lithograph the robust water seller, impatiently awaiting payment, is in sharp contrast to the puny looking gentleman to whom the water is being sold. It is worth mentioning that C. Brocktorff's visual representations (Fig. 3) were at the time particularly relied on as faithful replicas of the subject depicted. We find George Waring (1843) singing their praises and describing them as "accurate drawings" at a time when photography was still in its infancy and travellers had no other memento to rely on other than an artist's impression. .

In the cold month of February of 1827, Bigelow also heard another cry which has faded out of existence, that of chestnut vendors. His description is as follows:

"Besides the perpetual cry of *acqua*, there is another scarcely less constant of *Castagne, Castagne*.. The chestnuts (so the word implies) are sold roasted. They are unusually large being thrice the size of our native ones. They are said to be Spanish. But there would be no end to describing the various vociferations of the passing crowds. All is noise, hubbub and hurry."

To Bigelow the "vociferations" of the Maltese were particularly notable, as they were to every traveller unaccustomed to this Mediterranean element. It is curious that both the cries mentioned by him, uttered by the presumably uneducated lower orders of society, seem to have been in the Italian language - *Acqua*, which, to Bigelow sounded like *Arcoo*, and *Castagne, Castagne*. It is of course possible that the traveller could have mistaken the similar- sounding Maltese word *Qastan* for *Castagne*, but, on the other hand, there is also no doubt that Valletta was then more cosmopolitan and that street hawkers had therefore to cater for these divergencies as best they could.

The same author was particularly horrified that on Sundays, the poorer people were "going about the streets crying wares, water and fruit for sale" (p.194), and records that nowhere had he encountered "such a total perversion of the Sabbath" (p.118).

A typical fruit seller that the American traveller would have seen is depicted in a lithograph also attributed to one of the Brocktorff artists (Fig. 4). This print shows the fruit vendor selling late summer or autumn fruits including water melons, grapes, pomegranates and prickly pear. He is here depicted in the process of clinching a sale of the latter fruit, which he is cutting open with a knife in much the same fashion as is



still done today. It would have been interesting to know whether this particular vendor was crying "*Tax-xitel il-bajtar*" as he does today, but that . . . we will never know.

We find that several vendors appearing in 19th century iconographic sources are depicted holding their hand up to their cheek or ear while crying their wares. This feature is clearly an integral part of Maltese street crying. Two lithographs (Figs. 5 & 6) depict street vendors very clearly in this pose and another by Michele Bellanti (Fig. 7) illustrates a vendor in Strada Levante, Valletta, caught in the act of street crying with his hand raised to his ear. It is interesting that this same gesture is also a crucial detail in traditional singing known as *Ghana*. We find a 19th century lithograph by L. Brocktorff (1838) which portrays five *ghannejja* with their hand likewise raised to their ear whilst singing, (Fig. 8) This practice is still carried on by some *ghannejja* to this day, though street hawkers seem to have given up the custom.

All street vendors in the past gave great importance to their cries and considered them an integral part of their trade. There is in fact a Maltese saying which refers to the importance of a good street call: *L-Għajta nofs il-bejgh*, meaning that half the sale is already achieved with a good street cry. Most families in the past were likely to carry on the same trade as their fathers before them, so that the younger generation would have learnt the art of street calling by listening and imitating their elders, often continuing to use the exact same words they were accustomed to hearing. In this way similar intonation and motifs continued to be recycled from generation to generation.

Though the above quoted travelogues and the iconographic sources are all sadly lacking the street crier's melodic motif which would be of so much interest to us, yet, every detail available proves priceless in piecing together and elucidating the picture of our past. Now most business is carried out *inside* shops and one may even go through daily life rarely encountering street hawkers. A trip to a village market, however, may prove most rewarding to those who enjoy a "sudden bellow", "hubbub" and "vociferations". Each little melodic motif heard today is the trademark of the individual hawker, but is also a dwindling remnant of cries from generations past.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANDERSON, Aeneas. *A Journal of the Forces*. London: J. Debrett, 1802.
- BADGER, George Percy. *Description of Malta and Gozo*. Malta: printing and lithography by M. Weiss, 1838.
- BIGELOW, Andrew. *Travels in Malta and Sicily with sketches of Gibraltar in 1827*. New York: Carter, Hendee & Babock, 1831.
- SULTANA, Donald. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Malta and Italy*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969.
- WARING, George. *Letters from Malta and Sicily*. London: Harvey & Darton, 1843.
-

- Fig. 1 Casseur de bois Hand coloured etching, 19cm. x 13.5cm (image), Museum of Fine Arts, Malta, Inv. No. 1534
- Fig. 2 Acquajuolo- Water Seller. 19th century coloured lithograph, 25.0cm x 17.6cm (image). Museum of Fine Arts, Malta, Inv. No 1072.
- Fig. 3 Maltese selling ice-water, C. Brocktorff, coloured lithograph, 16.5cm x 19.7cm (image), Museum of Fine Arts, Malta, Inv. No. 1004.
- Fig. 4 Fruit seller. Brocktorff (?) lithograph. Private collection, Malta.
- Fig. 5 Pollajuolo-Poulterer, 19th century coloured lithograph, 25.0cm x 17.6 cm (image). Museum of Fine Arts. Malta, Inv.No.1062.
- Fig. 6 Pasticciere-Pie man, 19th century coloured lithograph, 25.0cm x 17.6 (image). Museum of Fine Arts, Malta. Inv. No 1068.
- Fig. 7 Strada Levante. M. Bellanti, lithograph, 19.6 cm x 15.0 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Inv.No. 1030
- Fig. 8. *Għannejja* . Detail from lithograph by Luigi Brocktorff in *Badger's Description of Malta and Gozo* (1838 image) . Museum of Fine Arts, Malta. Inv. No. 1062
-