

NEWMAN'S VISIT TO MALTA IN 1832

By DONALD E. SULTANA

It does not seem to be widely known that John Henry Newman was one of the many English literary figures who visited Malta in the nineteenth century; his name, in fact, is unmentioned in the chapter in Sir Harry Luke's book on Malta which deals with the visits of Coleridge, Byron, Scott and other writers who were Newman's contemporaries. Like Thackeray twelve years after him, he paid two calls at Malta in the course of a Mediterranean tour which included the Ionian Isles, Sicily and Italy. His original plan was to proceed to Sicily direct from Malta but the itinerary was slightly altered to enable him to go on to the Ionian Isles via Malta and return to the island for the crossing to Sicily. His first call was made on the 24th December 1832 when his steamer, the *Hermes*, a packet taking Mediterranean mails, put into Marsamuscetto Harbour, took in coals and put to sea again on the 26th December. The second call, much longer for it lasted four weeks, was made on the 11th January 1833 when the *Hermes* returned from the Ionian Isles and Newman moved into the lazaretto for a confinement of a fortnight in accordance with the strict quarantine regulations of the time.

He was then an Anglican clergyman, aged thirty-one, and Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. His fellow-travellers were Archdeacon Froude and his son, Richard Hurrell Froude, who was also a clergyman and Fellow of Oriel, and Newman's most intimate friend. The Froudes had decided to winter in the Mediterranean because Hurrell was consumptive, and Newman had accepted their invitation to travel with them. It cannot be said that his own health received any fillip from Malta because, as soon as he was released from the lazaretto, he was afflicted with a bad cold which confined him to his room for almost another fortnight, during which he was subject to loneliness, as one letter to his mother from Valletta makes clear. It is unfortunate that these confinements prevented him from doing much sight-seeing and, worse still, seem to have affected his general opinion of the island, which was not enthusiastic. In a letter from Rome he regretted the length of his stay in Malta because, after leaving the island, he found that there were several places in Italy which he wished to visit but which time, or rather the lack of it, prevented him from including in his itinerary.

This does not mean that he was uncomfortable in the lazaretto, on the

contrary, he had spacious rooms in the block locally known as 'il-palazz' which R.H. Froude in one of his letters described as 'the best apartments in the lazaretto'. There they were attended by 'a man of all work' and allowed to walk upon the terrace over the water and to be rowed about the harbour. They had 'booked' their rooms when they had paid their first call for they had been told that quarantine was the inevitable price they had to pay for going east and on Xmas Day 1832 they had walked across the plank from the *Hermes* to the lazaretto and had chosen four rooms and a kitchen. These were large and lofty in the style of the houses of the Knights and had a gallery on the inside supported by ordinary Maltese corbels which were as novel to them as the flagstones and the large recesses in the walls of the rooms. Since Newman was obviously interested in these features of Maltese domestic architecture, it is a pity that he was subsequently unable to see more of them in Valletta, as exemplified — to mention but one building — in the attractive courtyard in the palace built by Bishop Cagliares (now the Archbishop's Palace).

The Froudes, who drew and painted, had no shortage of views: 'There is much that is picturesque and singular about this place,' Hurrell had written, 'that I do not despair of occupation for all the 15 days in drawing, if the weather is only tolerable. The boats, and the dresses, and the colours and forms of the buildings are all as good practice as anything I can fancy, and I shall not be sorry to have time on my hands for studying them at leisure.' Newman, apparently, was surprised that 'in the whole Lazaret there is but one fireplace beside our own' — a mild hint of inadequate heating which is often echoed nowadays by visitors who winter in the old buildings of Valletta. He had no complaint to make, however, about the food which came from 'an hotel across the water', nor was he unduly inconvenienced by the lack of furniture which, he was told, could be had 'almost for nothing, for a few dollars'. It was only the waste of time that disturbed him and made him appear a little querulous in his first reactions to the prospect of imprisonment, for he was not the relaxing type of traveller. 'Life is short,' he exclaimed, 'and one has so much to do...' — a characteristic utterance from one so earnest and mission-minded, who, nonetheless, lived to be ninety.

He related all this, and much else, in the letters which he wrote almost daily to his mother and sisters and, less often, to college friends. Indeed, his copious letter-writing was one of the ways in which he kept himself occupied in 'this house of my imprisonment', which the Knights had originally built for the Turks. As an industrious letter-writer he belongs entirely to the 19th century and is unlike some Oxford scholars of to-day who are hardly models of good correspondents. In his time a letter

from Malta sometimes took about a month and a half to reach England, and, although his letters got to their destinations in due time, those which he was longing to receive from home had delayed or desultory deliveries, and he appears to have been somewhat fretful at times on this account. His repeated plea that he had no time to read his letters over did not apply, of course, to his period of quarantine when he found he had enough leisure to warrant his hiring a violin which he had cultivated since childhood.

When not writing letters and reading Homer and Virgil, which became a *vade mecum* 'directly old Atlas was visible', he kept himself occupied by composing poems or 'verse-making', as he aptly called it, since a good number of the poems he wrote were little more than metrical exercises on scriptural themes. In a letter from Rome to a pupil of his he explained that if one had no employment verse-making was a useful pastime, 'particularly in times of excitement', or as an alternative to some such exercise as mathematizing, 'as some men do on the top of coaches'. He had taken up its practice in earnest from the first day at sea in the *Hermes* (especially when he felt qualmish!) and the quiet moralizing in which he indulged at Malta found fruitful expression, though mediocre inspiration, in the poems he 'threw off' at the diligent rate of about one a day. One other reason for being so industrious was that he had arranged with a certain clergyman, the Rev. Hugh Rose of Cambridge, to contribute verse to his magazine, and he honoured his undertaking in a characteristically prompt manner by finishing a series of Patriarchal Sonnets at Malta, which appeared in *The British Magazine* and were included in *Lyra Apostolica* in 1836.

He transcribed some of these poems at the end of his letters to his family, who were accustomed to read his most intimate confidences, which he would perhaps have reserved to a wife had he not decided, well before this tour, that marriage was not consistent with his profession. In view of this it is curious, if not amusing, to read the following sentence in a letter to his mother during his cold: 'I have sent to the library and got "Marriage" to read!' — a confession which, had it come from a less unbending man than Newman, might have been interpreted by a speculative mind as a hint of a broken or wavering resolution under the romantic pressure of the Mediterranean! The news of his indisposition, when it reached the family, caused alarm and he thought it necessary to allay their anxiety from Rome in a letter to his mother in which he sought to refute his sister's strictures on Hurrell Froude for the lonely days he had spent indoors. Hurrell, he explained, had offered to sit with him or read to him but he had insisted on being left alone; as a result, it was only the Froudes who availed themselves of the 'round of English parties' to which they were invited and 'in the course of which', the younger Froude wrote, 'we did

not learn much, except that the English there are very hospitable, and live very well'. The words are an echo of the impression of the young Disraeli who visited Malta two years before them and had a full taste of English society in its heyday, with much greater relish of course than the three clergymen.

The origin of Newman's cold, as accounted for by him, was unusual. He blamed it on 'the mysterious night visitants' who kept him awake several times in the lazaretto with their strange steps which he imagined one night to be coming from a ghost who, proving too noisy, obliged him to sit up in bed for a considerable time ready to spring out in case a reply should come to his 'who's there?' The cough which followed was first treated by himself with blisters but he was later attended by Dr. Davy, a well-known physician and the author of a book on the geology of Malta and the Ionian Isles. Davy recommended '50 drops of antimonial wine three times a day' and Newman attributed the disappearance of his cough to this remedy and not to Nature.

Davy lived in one of the large houses of the Knights which Newman thought were like great palaces and which he considered superior to the houses at Messina and Palermo. 'The Knights', he wrote, 'were not allowed to leave away their property', which amounted, when they moved to Malta from Rhodes, to £300,000 a year. Hence immense sums were available for houses, churches and fortifications. Though he thought highly of the houses, he was given to understand that the fortifications were not worth much from the military point of view since they had no 'unity of plan or use for modern purposes', the former criticism being put a repetition of the observation made by many travellers before him that the Grand Masters had kept adding to the fortifications which had consequently grown out of all proportion to the size of the defending garrison. Apart from this and one or two other short allusions, his letters throw little light on the Knights whose history and chivalry had fired the imagination of Scott, one of his earliest favourites.

Undoubtedly the building of the Knights which impressed him most was St John's Cathedral, which he thought deserved a second and even third visit. He did not share the English dislike of baroque architecture, and, though he had not yet seen the basilicas of Rome, he confessed that the little he had seen of the Greek and Latin churches fired him 'with great admiration', adding, however, as a true Anglican, that 'everything in St John's Church is admirable, if it did not go too far'. This opinion was in keeping with his strong bias for 'the quiet and calm connected with our services', which was thrown into sharper relief by his contact with the Orthodox and Roman churches; but he went out of his way to refute, on the

evidence of what he had just observed, the current Protestant representation of the Greek Church as more 'reasonable' in its ceremonies than the Roman; on this subject he could see no difference at all between the two churches.

As an Anglican clergyman he was naturally told of the claim of the imperial government to the ownership of St John's as the property of the Knights and he regretted that 'by mismanagement, it was given to the Romanists, or perhaps it was impossible for us to do otherwise'. His regret was accentuated by the fact that 'the present Protestant chapel is insufficient to contain more than the chief English families' who were thus 'left to either total neglect of religious observance or to the Roman Catholic priests, or to the Wesleyans, as the case may be'. Froude, however, in one of his letters mentioned two Church of England chapels, 'one of which was originally the kitchen of the Grand Master, and the other but little better'. 'Our government,' he added, 'will not give the residents any assistance in erecting something more reputable.' The deficiency of which they both complained was made good six years later by Queen Adelaide who, after coming to Malta in search of health, erected the cathedral of St. Paul at her own expense in the square which now bears her name.

At St John's Newman met the dean, whose name he did not mention and whom he described in the *Apologia pro vita sua* (1846) as 'a most pleasant man, lately dead'. He had a conversation with him about the Fathers of the Church, a subject of great interest to him at this period because he had just finished his first book, *The Arians of the 4th century*, which he intended to revise on returning home from the Mediterranean. In the church, or after his visit to it, he learned of the deception which had prevented the French from plundering the silver rails of the Chapel of Communion, and he was able to account for their unpopularity of which he heard from different sources. No doubt he realized that the English would have made themselves as unpopular as the French had Maitland's advice against turning St John's into a Protestant church been overruled.

The Russians, he found, were liked by the Maltese because of the large sums of money distributed among the population by the wealthy commanders of Russian ships calling at Malta. Newman's letters are a reminder of the presence of Russia in the Mediterranean in the 19th century as one of the three great powers. He learned, in fact, of the pretensions of Grand Master Paul to the sovereignty of Malta and of the hastily concocted cooperation between Russia and France against England over the island. In short, the struggle for mastery in Europe in the 19th century is reflected in the more 'political' passages in his correspondence, especially in the

letters which he wrote east of Malta where the international intrigues and manoeuvres of which he was given a hint in the island were in full play in the Balkans.]

The money with which the Russians had enriched the place had given way to extreme poverty which the islanders, according to his information, were bearing without protest. They were more demonstrative, it seems, in their grievances against the English officials who were occupying posts which they felt they should themselves fill. Anglo-Maltese relations, indeed, were not good, and another reason for this was a heavy corn tax levied by the English administration and 'profusely laid out in quasi-sinecures, and, after all, a balance is transmitted to England'. His 'final and confirmed opinion' was that the Maltese 'do not like us'. This was echoed in language even more uncompromising by Froude: 'From all we could learn the English hold Malta by a very precarious tenure; we govern it most oppressively, and the inhabitants hate us; so that it is generally supposed a very small Russian force could wrest it from us. The population is in a wretched state, almost starving, and yet a heavy duty is imposed on imported corn, which puts into the hands of government nearly 130,000 L a year. Of this about 10,000 L goes to pension English sinecurists, and the rest over and above paying for the civil establishment leaves a surplus for the military chest'. This was the period of political agitation by the Maltese nationalists which culminated in the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.]

Newman's opinion of the Maltese was that, racially, they were 'Arabs or Moors in large measure', and that their language was 'entirely or almost entirely Arabic', Italian being 'for the most part confined to the city'. He was much intrigued by the connection he found between Maltese and Hebrew and asserted that 'the common words in both languages (i.e. the necessaries of life) are the same'. The language with which he occupied himself most during his visit was Italian which he studied on his own in the lazaretto and which he practised with a master whom he engaged when he was confined to his room in Valletta. He did this in preparation for his visit to Italy — hence his insistence on conversational Italian — but in actual fact he made little use of his newly acquired knowledge because he found himself largely in English company in Italy.]

Unfortunately he did not give the name or address of his residence at Valletta, but he made it clear that he thought it most unsatisfactory because 'the people of the house are so dirty, cheating and ignorant of English that they make a mistake whatever is told them'. Perhaps it did not occur to him that not all foreigners had the time or the opportunity of learning English in order to afford him the privilege of talking his language

in their own country instead of obliging him to learn theirs. Besides, in 1832 the English language was spoken by a mere handful of the Maltese intelligentsia whose language of education had for centuries been Italian. It was, however, a cardinal principle of British policy to promote the English language in Maltese education and in Newman's time it was just beginning to be taught in the schools, although admittedly they were not many.

The quality for which Newman praised the Maltese more than once was their industriousness, which, he added, was unusual among the Mediterranean races, especially the Ionians whom he had just visited. This comparison is a reminder of the link which then existed between Malta and the Ionian Isles, both of which were under British protection. He referred, in fact, to Maltese servants at Corfu and to several Greek trading vessels at anchor in Marsamuscetto harbour with its familiar scene of little boats 'pushing to and fro, painted bright colours'. As a classical scholar he had exciting memories of the beauty and Homeric associations of the Ionian Isles, about which he wrote with enthusiasm from the lazaretto in a letter to Bowden, his first friend at Trinity College, Oxford, and himself a visitor to Malta in 1839. Even before setting foot in Zante and Corfu Newman had been attracted to the dresses and 'fine countenances' of the Greeks whom he had seen in the parlatorio, although it had pained him to think that as a nation they had 'sunk below the Turks their masters'.

His description of the parlatorio is considerably graphic and deserves to be quoted: 'It is a long naked building or barn divided into several rooms, and cut lengthway from end to end by two barriers parallel, breast high. Between these two, guardians are stationed to hinder contact, the men in quarantine on one side the townsmen on the other, the latter being either friends of the imprisoned party, or pedlars, traffickers, etc. A crowd of persons are on the prison side, each party under the conduct of its own guardian; for if these parties were to touch each other the longer quarantine would be given to the party which had the smaller number. If I were to touch a Greek, I should have fifteen days of quarantine. The strange dresses, the strange languages, the jabbering and grimaces, the queer faces driving a bargain across the barrier, without a common language, the solemn absurd guardians with their staves in the space between, the opposite speaker fearing nothing so much as touching you, and crying out and receding at the same time, made it as curious a sight as the free communication of breath, and the gratuitous and inconsistent rules of the intercourse made it ridiculous.'

In the parlatorio the Froudes and Newman were visited by Sir John Stoddart, who was a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford, and to whom they had

letters of introduction. Stoddart was Chief Justice and, following Sir John Richardson, was continuing the work of the commissioners who had been sent out 'to adjust the legal and ecclesiastical system' after Malta's accession to Britain. He was engaged in introducing trial by jury — 'the birth-right' of a British subject and, in the eyes of many an English writer on Malta, an anomalous omission in the island's legislation as an inheritance of the Order. Apparently, the other long-standing complaint of the English — namely, the privilege of sanctuary — had been settled by 1832 so that Stoddart did not tell Newman anything about it. He did tell him, however, about the problem arising from the action of the British government to make the local clergy subject to the state courts. This had been one of the most protracted and delicate issues between Church and State in the early years of British rule since *prima facie* it seemed to affect the pledge which Britain had given the islanders on taking them under her protection, namely, to keep the Catholic Religion inviolate. That the British government was anxious to honour this pledge and that it brought into play its traditional diplomatic skill in its representations to the Vatican over this issue is evident in Newman's account of the story — and, presumably, in the annals of Maltese History.

It was also from Stoddart that Newman learned of the other issue between Church and State, namely, the appointment of the Bishop of Malta, who had for many centuries been under the Archbishop of Palermo, for which reason the King of Naples claimed the right of appointment — and indeed, for other reasons, the suzerainty of Malta. This claim the British government had been determined to reject — as also to sever the ecclesiastical link between Malta and Palermo. Specific instructions to this effect had been given from London to the first Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, when Britain's initial uncertainty over the fate of the island had given way to a resolve in 1813 to keep it; but even at the time of Newman's visit the dispute with Naples had not yet been settled.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of information emerging from the account of Newman's talk with Stoddart is the news about the overpopulation of the island, which had already become a problem, since the figure exceeded 100,000 and was increasing by 1,000 a year. The solution of the problem, in the English view, was emigration to Corfu or, as Stoddart wished, to Negropont. It is a fact that emigration from Malta to the Barbary States and the Levant was proceeding on a considerable scale but only a minority of the migrants remained for good in the receiving countries. According to the returns quoted by Montgomery Martin in his *History of the British Colonies*, in the five years from 1830 to 1835 'it appears that about 10,000 have departed in each of those years, and about 9,000

have returned'.

It has been said that few were the distinguished visitors to Malta in the first half of the 19th century who did not bring or obtain during their stay an introduction to John Hookham Frere, who, after retiring from the foreign service, had settled for good in the island in the palatial villa at Pietà. Newman did not mention him in his letters, but Hookham Frere's sister in a letter written from Malta on the 11th February 1833 referred to the Froudes as well as to Newman. The three clergymen, apparently, were about to leave 'just as we found out', adds Miss Frere, 'that we liked them'. Newman had chest trouble but Hookham Frere managed to have 'some good talk with him', though he was unable to discuss with him his translation of Aristophanes on which the diplomat was then engaged. Miss Frere compared 'the becoming simplicity and placidity of deportment' of the three visitors with the finished manners of two French princes, Rohans, who had come to Malta from Naples and who travelled to Messina with Newman on board the *Francisco*. Newman also mentioned them as 'the only gentleman-like men' among an impressive collection of aristocrats who were his fellow-travellers. He seems to have had a most punctilious sense of decorum and he could be extremely critical of those who fell short of his standard.

His own 'placidity' had tended to be ruffled on Xmas Day during his first call when he had been debarred from holding a service on board while the *Hermes* had been coaling. The church-bells - 'deep and sonorous', as he had described them - had added to his pain which had found vent in a poem entitled 'Christmas without Christ'. One pious wish, however, did not remain unfulfilled, for, on getting over his cold, he went to St. Paul's Bay by water to see for himself the Apostle's site of which he had read in the Acts. The bay was one of the first sights he had identified before the *Hermes* had steamed into the harbour and moored opposite to the lazaretto, and the episode of St Paul's shipwreck stood out so prominently in his reading that he wrote a short poem - a homily in intention - on the viper incident. He also relished the thought of going to Rome 'almost by the track of the apostle'. Above St Paul's, he observed, lay Città Vecchia with its site of the old Roman garrison and many antiquities but apparently he failed to go up to Mdina from Valletta.

He confessed that he saw little of Valletta itself, which he described as 'a most curious town' in contrast with Froude's eulogy of it as 'a magnificent city; all its houses, palaces and churches splendid to a degree'. Certainly they had a striking view of the capital from their apartments in the lazaretto which looked out upon 'the Greek and other vessels, the fortifications of Valletta, some few houses of the town, two windmills,

and the great church of St. John: a scene familiar enough in the lithographs of Schranz and the drawings of Allen. Having a keen eye for colour he noted the deep green of the sea off 'the Manual Battery' and the golden sky at sunset, for the weather favoured him in his first call to the extent of allowing him to be rowed 'in an open boar without a greatcoat on a December evening', but the cold and rainy season set in during his second call so that his final impression of Malta's climate was that it was 'uncertain and stormy in winter'. The sea, however, was remarkably kind to him all the way from England except for a gale of short duration between Algiers and Malta, which brought on a bout of sea-sickness — and, to the reader's delight, one of his best pieces of writing: 'The worst of sea-sickness is the sympathy which all things on board have with it, as if they were all sick too. First, all the chairs, tables, and the things on them much more, are moving, moving up and down, up and down, swing, swing. A tumbler turns over, knife and fork go, wine is split, as if encouraging like tendencies within you. In this condition you go on talking and eating as fast as you can, concealing your misery, which you are reminded of by every motion of the furniture around you. At last the moment comes; you are seized; up you get, swing, swing, you cannot move a step forward; you knock your hips against the table, run smack at the side of the cabin, try to make for the door in vain, which is your only aim. You get into your berth at last, but the door keeps banging; you lie down, and now a new misery begins — the noise of the bulkheads; they are sick too. You are in a mill; all sorts of noises, heightened by the gale, creaking, crattering, shivering, and dashing. Your bed is sea-sick, swing up and down, to your imagination, as high as low as a swing in a fair, incessantly. This requires strong nerves to bear; and the motion is not that of a simple swing, but epicyclical. . . . And, last of all, the bilge water in the hold; a gale puts it all in motion'.

This is perhaps his nearest approach to humour which was certainly not instinctive in him. Admittedly, he was hardly in a frivolous mood when the passage was written for 'I am sore all over with the tossing, and very stiff, and so weak that at times I can hardly put out a hand'. In fact, the prospect of a quiet, however short, break at Malta after the exciting impressions of the Ionian Isles was very welcome as he had no great love of the sea which he described as 'that restless element which is the type of human life'. Nor was he addicted to wanderlust. Though this was the first time he had been abroad he declared emphatically, 'I shall never take a voyage again' when the *Hermes* left the island without him on the return journey to England. Home was very dear to him, especially the church of St Mary at Oxford of which he was vicar and where he

was later to preach the famous sermons before his conversion. Besides, he was much concerned about the politics of the time as they affected the Church at home. The Whigs were then in power and had passed the Reform Bill before he had set out for the Mediterranean. As a staunch Tory and high Anglican he became increasingly alarmed at the threat, as he viewed it, of the liberals to the church and his fears found confirmation in the weakened position of the church on the continent after the French Revolution. Even at Malta he was told of infidelity among the laity, and the result of all this was 'a sad presentiment' that 'the Christian world is becoming barren and effete, as land which has been worked out and has become sand'. These broodings were really the seeds of the Oxford Movement which landed him eventually in the church of Rome but they matured to a dramatic climax not at Malta but in Rome and Sicily whither he proceeded from the island on the morning of the 7th February 1833 in the *Francisco* in singularly prosperous weather.