

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Keith Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, Malta, Midsea Books 2009, pp. xvi + 450, illus. ISBN: 978-99932-7-249-6**

Dr Keith Sciberras has, over the past decade, established himself as a leading academic point of reference on the art of Baroque Malta and its protagonists. This has gained him a well-merited good academic reputation in international art historical elite circles. Dr Sciberras has built on Professor Mario Buhagiar's *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands* (Malta 1987) and ungrudgingly shows his indebtedness to Professor Buhagiar's seminal work which has done so much to stimulate an academic interest in Malta's art history and to whom we all owe a great measure of thanks.

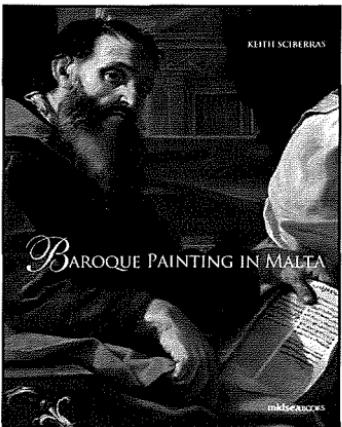
This is a book of very significant importance to Malta's art history, but its appeal is not limited exclusively to the academic or the specialist. It can be read with pleasure and profit by anyone with an interest in art and Melitensia.

Dr Sciberras studies Maltese Baroque painting as the development of a satellite of Italy. The importance of the presence of the Order of St John is emphasised, and the political and social contexts are meticulously analysed in the study of *objets d'art*. The Knights, who were well-informed patrons, dramatically moulded Malta's Baroque culture. This is not surprising, considering the many contacts the Order had in Counter-Reformation Europe. The glowing prestige of the Knights was instrumental in attracting to Malta many great artists, Caravaggio included.

By splendidly applying his vast knowledge of the subject and his painstaking archival research, Dr Sciberras has perceptively given new attributions. His stylistic analysis is impeccable. This is the book's major contribution.

The book delves into the life and work of many artists who were either Maltese, or Malta-based, or worked for Maltese patrons. In this way, it zooms into the life and work of important protagonists and lesser-known artists. As stated in the opening pages of the book, Malta's Baroque paintings are many and varied in style and quality.

In the book's eighteen chapters, one reads about artists spanning from Caravaggio to Antoine Favray, with an in-between mix that includes Leonello Spada, Mattia Preti, Pedro Nuñez de Villavicencio, Suor Maria de Dominicis,



Stefano and Alessio Erardi (and their style inspired from Baroque classicism), Gio. Nicola Buhagiar and Enrico Regnaud (and their sense of *horror vacui*), the great Francesco Zahra, the decadence of Baroque art that began with Rocco Buhagiar, and the winds of change that began with the great promise of Giuseppe Grech who, like other famous artists, died in his early thirties.

The introductory chapter gives context to the earliest commissions, by the Order, that resulted in the Mannerist works of Matteo Perez d'Aleccio and Filippo Paladini, whose frescoes were among the first programmes to embellish the new city of Valletta.

Caravaggio's stay on the islands is dealt with in an individual chapter as it rightly deserves. Albeit brief, his months in Malta were a milestone period in his career in which he painted his most ambitious and largest painting, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*. This chapter introduces realism to Maltese painting and offers a splendid contrast to the subject of the next chapter, the classicist Bolognese school and tradition set up by the Caraccis, which is the antithesis to the Caravaggist tradition. The first artist to be mentioned is Leonello Spada, who came to Malta from Florence where he had been a student of the Carracci Accademia.

K. Sciberras's knowledge of Caravaggism has allowed him to really delve into the many Caravaggist paintings in Malta, of varying quality, but special mention is made to paintings by Ribera and Caracciolo, among other well-known names.

His research has also been instrumental in contributing to our present knowledge on Francesco Noletti *il Maltese*, who was famous in Rome for his rich still-life paintings with carpets and precious objects. In this same chapter, one gets to know of Maltese vernacular artists painting in a *retardaire* fashion, such as Fillippino Dingli. The focus then moves on to the painter knight Laurent Garnier. The next chunky chapter deals with Mattia Preti, the Baroque *macchina*, and he is given the attention he so rightly merits.

Over 1000 paintings are mentioned in the 450 pages of the publication, making it the most extensive list of Baroque paintings to date. *Baroque Painting in Malta* is a magnificent book with splendid photography by Joe Borg who confirms his standing as one of Malta's foremost photographers. It is much, much more than just a coffee table book. It is a feast for the eyes, and the source of much intellectual stimulation.

An important and useful tool is the select list of works, according to artist (in public and ecclesiastical collections), that follows the text. The extensive bibliography and index further facilitate the reader's use of this publication, which is undeniably one of the finest books to have ever been published in Malta. It is the fruit of years of hard work.

*Baroque Painting in Malta* is the kind of book that students in the arts, and particularly in History of Art, aspire to be able to eventually publish.

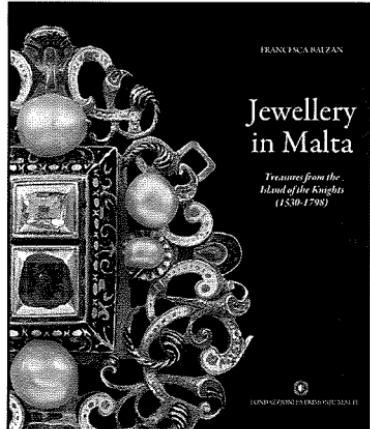
**Francesca Balzan, *Jewellery in Malta. Treasures from the Island of the Knights (1530-1798)*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti / Midsea Books, Malta 2009, pp. xviii +243, illustrated. ISBN 978-99932-7-278-6**

When, way back in academic year 1987-1988, I pioneered History of Art as an area of study in the newly-reconstituted Faculty of Arts, I had serious misgivings about its future. Resources were limited and secretarial assistance minimal. I was fortunate, nonetheless, to have a small but very enthusiastic batch of students. Prospects of a meaningful development took a turn for the better in 1989 when, thanks to the foresight of the then Rector, Professor Peter Serracino-Inglott, I was posted in the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering where I found the enthusiastic support of Professor Richard England. The situation was anomalous. I was co-ordinating a degree course for the Faculty of Arts with the Resources of another Faculty that I serviced with lectures in History and Theory of Architecture.

Looking back, I cannot conceal my pride in what has been achieved. The History of Art classes grew first into an Art Unit and then blossomed into a fully-fledged Department in the Faculty of Arts. The Department has been instrumental in the training of scientifically-prepared art historians and critics who now hold key positions in the country's Fine Arts and related institutions. Francesca Balzan is one of them. The idea of History of Art as a cultural pastime has mercifully started to be discredited, and there is a better-informed attitude to the subject as a rigorous academic discipline. This painstakingly-researched book is an eloquent example. It has the scholarly qualities for an essential work of reference on jewellery as an art and of its place in society. No one interested in the subject can afford to ignore it.

What makes the book so very special is the way in which the author succeeds in giving a meaningful art historical context to the jewellery of Malta of the Knights. She has skilfully woven the art of jewellery into the social fabric of the Society that produced it. This is one of the great merits of the book.

The Early Modern Period, that the book considers, was for Malta an age of refined elegance and aristocratic sophistication hallmarked by an informed artistic patronage. It gave Malta works of art and architecture that stood comparison with the best that were being produced in Italy and other countries of Counter-



Reformation Europe. Jewellery reflected the splendour and good taste of the age, Francesca Balzan shows how the invention, good design, and technical skill that went into its fashioning often raises it from a craft into an *objet d'art*. The invention, or design, was, as a matter of fact, often entrusted to the best available practising artist.

The academic preparation of the author is the major asset. This is all to her credit. For the Department of History of Art, the book is also a source of special pride because it is an indication that its work is yielding a rich harvest.

Francesca Balzan is, as most of us know, the well-deserving Curator of Palazzo Falson, Mdina, which under her directorship is becoming a hive of cultural activity. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, which has turned the historic house into the splendid state of the art museum that it is today, deserves special commendation for the support it is giving Ms Balzan's initiatives, some of which are the result of co-operation with the Department of History of Art.

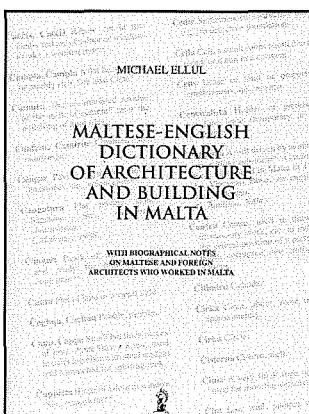
Francesca Balzan's book elaborates on an M.A. thesis by research that she presented in the Department of History of Art in 2006 for which she was awarded a Pass with Distinction, the highest academic award division that a Master of Arts candidate can aspire to. She richly deserved it too and I have been encouraging her to publish the thesis ever since. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti has enhanced its prestigious list of publications with this very important new addition.

**Mario Buhagiar**

**Michael Ellul, *Maltese-English Dictionary of Architecture and Building in Malta, with biographical notes on Maltese and foreign architects who worked in Malta*, Midsea Books, Malta 2009, pp. viii +182, ISBN 978-99932-7-292-2.**

This latest book by Michael Ellul, a well-known and dedicated architect-conservator by profession, is the result of over half a century of painstaking research and writing and certainly fills a long-felt void in our Melitensia bookshelves. It is really a reference work that is not only very useful for architects and Melitensia collectors, but can and should be used as a tool for linguists and, why not, for the general reader who takes a genuine interest in his native country's heritage.

The book is mainly a dictionary of terms, including the legal terminology, used to describe



buildings and architectural features. One may argue that this is no big deal but it is so because many words and terms that are no longer in use have found their place in this book and have, therefore, been saved from oblivion. Saving our language is a must for it is, after all, part of the Maltese collective heritage. And for his part in recording for posterity Maltese words and phrases relating to architecture, Ellul certainly deserves our thanks. Let's take the word *blat/a* (rock/s) as an example: most people would most probably know what *blat samm* is, but would they understand the term *blat għawwiem* or *blat tal-ġungliena*? Continuing on the same vein, all Maltese know what a *ġebla* (stone) is; but what do they (or rather, we) understand by, say, *ġebla mnaħħla*, *ġebla qargħija*, *ġebla qalliegha*, or *ġebla tat-terha*? Workmen in the building industry might probably understand these terms but they're all Greek to the man in the street. And, I dare say, the rising generation of builders is probably just as much in the dark.

And speaking of technical words, it is very probable that most readers would know some English terms but, conversely, have no idea of their Maltese equivalents. Most people would know what a spandrel is but would give you a blank look if you mentioned its Maltese equivalent, *gwienah tal-ħnejja*, or that a sump in the bottom of a well is a *ħażżejma*. Frankly speaking, when reading though the pages, I recalled quite a number of words from my boyhood which I have almost forgotten through lack of use but I was brought up in a village where the usage of such words was common-place. Even as far back as fifty years ago, at the Lyceum, class-mates not exposed to pure unadulterated Maltese sometimes looked in amazement when someone uttered a word that seemed strange to their ears and they would immediately ask for its meaning. Years have passed and many Maltese words have been forgotten, hence the importance of this dictionary – at least for the “architectural” side of the language.

But Ellul's book is also important for another reason: he records pen-portraits of Maltese and foreign architects who worked in Malta, together with entries about a host of master masons, stone-carvers and other technical workers whose identities have never been household names but who, nevertheless, have greatly and collectively contributed to our architectural heritage. Of course, we probably all know about Gerolamo Cassar, Lorenzo Gafa` etc. who are duly recorded. But the author also includes a great number of lesser-known *periti* who also played their part, people such as Girolamo Bonici, Bernard de Fontet, Egidio Lapira, etc. The book is also replete with a host of technical people whose names mean nothing to most of us but whose contribution is very rightly put on record. Moreover, on most occasions, the author also gives the source/s of his information and, at the end of the publication, publishes quite a long bibliography.

Nothing is perfect and, naturally, in a book of this kind, some lacunae do occur. For example, Arthur Zammit is not credited with the first plans of St Sebastian Church of Qormi. Some other mistakes have also escaped the author's eagle eye, such as on pages 40 and 41, where *Maria Assumpta Secondary School* should read

*Marija Regina Secondary School* and where Emvin Cremona is said to have been a sculptor when he was actually a painter. On page 77, the entry for *ħazz* (lichen, etc.) is given twice. Personally, I think that each double-page spread should have indicated the first and last terms included in those pages instead of a running title. Maybe, but this is subjective, the author could have included some information about important architects who are still alive.

However, in my opinion, these are but minor defects that do not seriously detract from the importance of Ellul's publication which has a mine of information to offer its readers. I strongly believe that Michael Ellul's *Maltese-English Dictionary of Architecture and Building in Malta* should find a place on the bookshelves of every serious Melitensia collector.

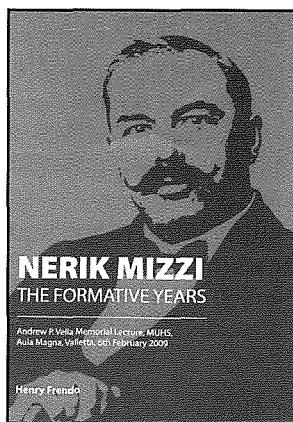
**Joseph F. Grima**

**Henry Frendo, Nerik Mizzi The Formative Years, Malta 2009, pp. 24.**

This booklet, which is the text of the Andrew P. Vella Memorial Lecture organised by the Malta University Historical Society on 6 February 2009, manages to open up a new niche on a hitherto obscure period and not so well-known activity of one of Malta's outstanding protagonists of the twentieth century. To appreciate in full Professor Frendo's keen and fruitful short study, one has to follow the maxim of understanding History by transporting oneself mentally towards and into the particular era of the subject treated.

It is all very well, nowadays, to disagree and perhaps even scorn certain beliefs and convictions of past personalities but, before trudging on such a path, one should look through the lens of yesteryear and, in this case, as the title of the booklet implies, to the youthful years of the only Prime Minister of Malta who died in office.

Delving into the early preparatory studies and political career of Enrico Mizzi, the author has managed to clear away quite a lot of cobwebs from the misty and apparently controversial past that has baffled many admirers of this outstanding politician. He manages to expose and explain the reasons behind Mizzi's convictions about our country's *italianità*. Through direct and at times incisive deliberations, he tries, and succeeds, to intertwine Mizzi's obsession with *l'antica virtù italica* – a matter of time, with the *bel paese* expression – a matter of space,



as inspired by the arcadian atmosphere of gentle Urbino, a city full of academic, artistic and natural importance. It was the two aspects of time and space – in which and through which the young Mizzi was caught in the thick of it – that forged the strong beliefs and iron convictions of his early career.

No person could question Italy's supremacy in the realm of art (she is the guardian of 40% of the world's art treasures), and this point, coupled with the religious and geographical affinities with our closest neighbour, formed the core of Mizzi's up-and-coming career. He even tried to link this ideal of his with that of his motherland (i.e. Malta) through some flights of fancy, at times, such as that of daring to suggest that *il divin pittore* (Raphael) in his masterpiece of the *Divina Sistina* was inspired by the Maltese *ghonnella*!

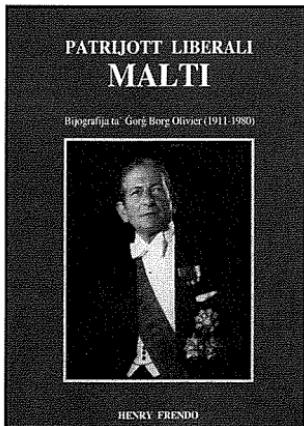
“Academically speaking ..... Mizzi was no shining star” Frendo states; yet, as everybody knows, he managed later on to arrive at a goal where nobody else or, to be more correct, only a very limited few succeeded. An avid writer himself, he outshone his colleagues by his staunch devotion to journalistic ethics, be they legal or moral, with the latter being of much greater importance for him.

Enrico Mizzi ended his academic courses just when the threatening “Gothic” German hordes were looming on Europe's horizon. Yet, and even so, in spite of the British being on the Italian side, he did not shirk from considering the colonial hegemony over Malta as equally obnoxious and, as the author succinctly puts it, “that was the context in which the famous Eritrea exchange was proposed.”

## Salvator Mousù

**Henry Frendo: *Patrijott Liberali Malti Biografija ta' Ġorġ Borg Olivier (1911-1980)*, Publikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, Malta 2005, pp. xiv + 592, illus. ISBN: 99932-41-75-X**

The finest features of Prof Henry Frendo's political biography of Giorgio Borg Olivier is the way in which he ensures, throughout the more than 500 pages of the book, the continuous justification of the title he chose to give it: A Liberal Maltese Patriot. In fact, the choice of the word “liberal” to describe the leader of a political party, the proper name of which was Nationalist affiliated internationally to Christian Democracy, has provoked criticism from some veteran party officials, but it is essentially accurate. Certainly, Borg Olivier did not belong to the tradition of the Italian Liberal Party, neither in its agnostic nor in its economic dimensions. Also there are not many



Maltese who would picture him as an assiduous student of the classical English Liberal tradition from Locke to Gladstone, even though these English Liberal Statesmen, unlike their Italian counterparts, were like him staunch Christians and with a pronounced social conscience. Yet Borg Olivier not only showed in both his speech and his actions that he stood squarely in the lineage represented probably most purely by Alexis de Tocqueville, but also openly declared this conviction.

I recall very distinctly the impression made upon me when, on the occasion of the first meeting in Malta of delegates from the European Christian Democrat parties, Dr Borg Olivier, then Leader of the Opposition, had enlisted my assistance, as he often did in those days, to draft his speech of welcome. He began by telling me: "What I would have liked to confess is that I am a deeply convinced Christian and that I am a Democrat down to my bowels, but I am not a Christian Democrat. Of course I cannot say that in as many words now that our Party has been led into the fold by Ċensu Tabone and the rest. You must find some more subtle way of saying it in other words." Borg Olivier would have been less unhappy to belong to the European Popular Party, partly because it did not use the word Christian in its name. This instinctive preference for non-confessionalism in party politics provides in itself valid motivation and a first installment of substantial content for Frendo's identification of Borg Olivier as a Liberal, although of a somewhat peculiar Maltese variant of the original Tocqueville brand.

A great merit of Frendo's book is that he makes it abundantly clear that Borg Olivier, although he happily inherited his father's quasi-addiction to the celebration of Paul as Patron Saint of Malta, was equally firm in his adherence to the principle of giving God what was God's and to Caesar what was Caesar's. Frendo brings out the fact that Borg Olivier would have been more pleased to tackle Mintoff without the help of the Church, just as Enrico Mizzi would have been to tackle Strickland unaided by crozier and holy water in the nineteen thirties. Archbishop Gonzi's manifest antipathy for Borg Olivier was not rooted only in temperamental dislike of anti-puritism but also in ideological rejection of the "secularism" that was eventually to lead to Borg Olivier's silent implementation of most of the "points" that had earned ecclesiastical condemnation for Mintoff without, however, provoking any sound and fury under cathedral vaults. The form in which archiepiscopal ire was to haunt Borg Olivier took the shape of Herbert Ganado who (as Frendo with his usual bright style provides ample scope for the reader to grasp) was not much of a match for the fox-like craftiness of the adversary he set out to challenge mainly by darkening the hues of the spectre of a possible if not inevitable future Mintoff victory at the polls. Within this scope of this book, despite the flash-forwards into the future in the epilogue, Frendo could not give us his usual balanced judgement on the Borg Olivier/Herbert Ganado feud in the light of what actually happened when Mintoff did win in 1971.

Moreover, Borg Olivier had little sympathy with many of the Italian Christian Democrat Leaders of the time. Their readiness to be involved in dubious alliances

and laying themselves open to accusations of links with *Mafiosi* or engaging in shady financial operations, even if for the sake of the Party rather than themselves, were obnoxious to him. This ground for Borg Olivier's lack of enthusiasm, to put it mildly, for Christian Democracy, understood as the name of a political party, is implied in Frendo's eulogy of Borg Olivier's incorruptibility, but is not explicitly highlighted because of a major methodological choice that Frendo made as he himself explains when he agreed to write this biography.

Prof Frendo is a political historian and has written political biographies always in that perspective and not at all with the novelist's psychological curiosity that has often marked biographers. No doubt, there will be general agreement that Frendo made the right choice in eschewing anything that might have smacked of a gossip column in his account of the life of Borg Olivier. But, in my judgement, he has carried this correct principle just a little bit too far. To leave out or mention of family matters and of pronounced characterological traits results not just in an incomplete representation of a man of flesh and blood but also in some distortion of his political profile itself. In this book, I hardly ever see Borg Olivier as he lives in one of the most typical images of him in my memory: right in the middle of a throng of men young and old, whose throats were not dry, surging around him at the head of the La Vallette Band March in the early hours of the afternoon of the 10<sup>th</sup> February, or in the balcony of the Micallef family in St Paul's Street. Likewise, there is no retelling of the many sometimes slightly off-colour anecdotes of which he had a rich repertoire and many favourites.

Prof Frendo himself notes at several points that he would have liked to have had the time to carry out further research on a number of points on which he could not attain full certainty within the limits imposed upon him by the publishers, but these are almost always secondary. He gives full accounts of the main phases of Borg Olivier's career in nine chapters, the earlier ones of which cover shorter phases of more or less three to five years while the later ones cover longer periods of nine to ten years. There are also a double prologue, (the first part of which is a cautionary tale characterizing the author's angle of vision, and the second part of which will surely delight addicts of the non-Nietzschean genealogical type of explanation with its charting of the Borg Olivier dynasty) and a summation epilogue (which seeks to locate Borg Olivier's place in history). Frendo adopts as his predominant style that of a chronicler, who seeks to give as objective and balanced a narrative as possible. He indulges in lengthier analysis only on those occasions when Borg Olivier's behaviour, if only crudely stated, would appear puzzling and hard to understand.

He writes of Borg Olivier with sympathy, but not empathy. This mode of portraiture follows from the initial choice of being almost exclusively concerned with the public *persona*, rather than with individual idiosyncrasies or personal quirks and tics. This approach enables Frendo primarily to highlight the most striking identification marks of Borg Olivier as politician, such as his strategy of cool waiting over relatively long durations and the adoption of firm hard positions

at crucial junctures. These cyclical alternations are shown to have been more effective than Mintoff's unrelieved blustering and threatened violence in the quest of Independence, but not really effective in opposition to the autocratic trends of Mintoff in Government after 1971.

In a second place, Frendo's chosen approach enables him to bring out without too much emphasis those many other aspects of Borg Olivier in Government that had tended to become eclipsed in people's minds by the over-riding achievement of Independence. Among the most notable of these aspects, three are made to slide gently into focus in the reader's mind. The first is in Foreign Affairs which Borg Olivier kept under his care personally. In this area, the proposal of the new Law of the Sea, or more precisely the introduction of the concept of the Common Heritage of Mankind as fundamental in International Law, is without doubt of most enduring importance. Since this move of world-historical importance has come to be almost exclusively attributed to Pardo, it might have been worth recalling Pardo's own unfailing tributes to Borg Olivier (as well as to Frederick Amato-Gauci) for their audacity in authorizing the initiative at the United Nations. The contrast with Mintoff's inability to grasp the significance and potential benefits to Malta of the initiative *Pacem in Maribus*, ideologically justified with reference to Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, is a clear indicator of Borg Olivier's superior statesmanship.

The second aspect is the economic. Again it has already been generally forgotten that Borg Olivier kept the economic governance of the country in his own hands at least until the emergence of Dr Giovanni Felice. From Frendo's low-key documentation, it is still easy to admire with hindsight the sagacity with which Borg Olivier could sift occasionally contradictory advice received, and able to quell all the fears raised at the time of economic and financial disaster for Independent Malta hardly yet out of its swaddling clothes and, as many thought with the umbilical cord to the "Mother-country" still materially if not formally attached. Today, it emerges somewhat more clearly that Borg Olivier was not gullibly following the economic orthodoxy of the time but rather adopted policies the wisdom of which has only come to be recognized recently. This assessment can be deduced from Frendo's text also reading between the lines.

The third aspect is that of culture and education. Frendo brings out clearly the fact, surprising to many, that Borg Olivier, apart from the inclusivity which was being clearly aimed at as a long term prospect, had immediately approved a drive for technical and technological education. This drive was paradoxically slowed down when he went into Opposition, but was instantly resumed when he returned to Government after what one might call the Integration interlude. The width of Borg Olivier's culture and, in particular, his mastery of the Italian language, are also dimensions of his personality that have only been so far partially revealed.

No doubt there will be later historians who will complement Henry Frendo's basic work which I am sure will remain the standard biography of the final

architect of Malta's Independence. Frendo has written in Maltese in a style which is conversational and at certain well-chosen points even deliberately colloquial, which helps to reflect the always dialogic style of Borg Olivier, although not its Italianate overtones. Since it is well-written, this biography of Borg Olivier also serves as a political history of Malta for about the half century up to 1980, although seen with the central light upon the person who was, after all, the most real if not the most spectacular of the protagonists of those years.

**Peter Serracino-Inglott**