

THE EVENING CLASS, 1960-1964

By RICHARD J. BECK

THE only way to write a book is to sit down and begin it; the only way to take a degree is to sit down and begin it. Realising the vital need for at least a proportion of properly-taught and adequately-qualified teachers in Malta, the Union of Teachers, under the able leadership of the late Alfred Buhagiar, approached Professor Aquilina as Dean of Arts on the feasibility of an evening degree course. Their pleas could not have fallen upon more sympathetic ears. Professor Aquilina 'sold' the idea of an evening course to the University authorities and, with the full co-operation of the university administration, and the subsequent blessing of the Department of Education, the Evening Class was launched in October, 1960.

One of the many ways in which Professor Aquilina showed his foresight and experience was in his insistence that the courses pursued should be identical with the day courses. Only in Classics were the students allowed to study Greek and Latin authors in translation instead of in the original, and this only on the understanding that no student would take Classics in his final two years; ironically enough, many evening class students developed a greater love for the Classics than their younger counterparts in the day class, probably because of their greater maturity of appreciation. Apart from Classics, every subject was taught in the same way, and every examination was identical in every respect. Thus the degrees which these students have just earned are of exactly the same value as the day degrees, and have the full authority of the Royal University of Malta behind them.

There were difficulties, of course; not all the seed could be expected to fall on fruitful soil. An evening course in Science proved to be a practical impossibility with small staffs and too limited a time for laboratory work. Even in Arts the numbers dwindled, though not by very much. And some of the losses were honourable ones, as when one of the students married one of the lecturers, Mr. David Farley-Hills! But after the first year, there was no going back. Thirty young men and women turned up regularly, four nights a week for three hours and every Saturday morning, to learn whatever anyone was willing to teach them. They did not realise how encouraging their enthusiasm, their greater maturity of judgement and depth of understanding, were to the members of the teaching staff.

The Evening Class, then, was a joint effort by keen teachers and eager learners. And the results were all that could have been hoped for. Passes in the first class in B.A. General subjects are few and far between, but in June 1964 there were more of them than there have ever been before in the university's history; and a good proportion of them had been gained by evening class students.

In other ways, too, the evening class students played their part. Some of them sat on the Students' Representative Council, others represented the University at international Congresses abroad. Some of them won scholarships and read for Honours and, subsequently, M.A. degrees. All over Malta and Gozo they are disseminating what they have learned. Best of all, perhaps, is the spirit that existed, and still exists, between those who took so eagerly and those who gave so gladly. The dinner given by the sometime students to their former teachers is symbolic of the affection and regard which prevails on both sides. It was with truth that Mr. Maxwell, secretary of the Inter University Council, observed that what the University was doing for the evening class students was one of the most important of its functions.

The Evening Course of 1960-1964 was a great success; this is proved, if further proof be needed, by the flood of applications to join its successor. One thing the University must remember is its responsibility to its graduates in helping to place them where they will be of service to the community commensurate with their new qualifications. But the greatest cause for regret is not this, but that Dr. Buhagiar was not spared to see how rich a harvest was reaped where he so hopefully had sown. May the success of this enterprise remain as a lasting tribute to his memory.