

## BOOK REVIEWS

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GRECH, CHARLES B.

### **Umbrellel fuq Tas-Sliema**

Book of the Month. No. 114/115

Malta, KKM, 1979. 196pp. Illustrated.

*Umbrellel fuq Tas-Sliema* is much more than a recollected lad's-eye-view of the war in his native town. It is a work of art: naive, it is true, but a work of art nevertheless. No amount of niggling criticism can rule out the rhythmic qualities of the prose, the poetic rendering of carefree youth in a tortured era, the stylistic economy of the dramatic passages. Of course, the work is far from being faultless, but the intelligent reader accepts the faults after having finished the book, his sense of gratitude for the better things proving stronger than any possible irritation.

Charles B. Grech had one great advantage in writing his book: he is not a writer, not a professional. Being a photographer he wrote without the shackling fears, anxieties, cautions and cares of the professional writer, and produced a work of admirable spontaneity. Normally, such a man would require the services of a ghost-writer to improve his prose; it is only on rare occasions that a naive and informal frame of mind produces excellent results. This is the case with *Umbrellel*. The simplicity of the prose is its strength, because it renders the book limpid and direct. *Umbrellel* has the cadences, tones and expressions adoperated by the contemporary educated gentleman, and is thus universally appealing. Because it is so simple and so immediate, it is consequently also vivid. Can there be greater praise for a book than to say that the present critic, at its close, felt that the experiences recounted had become part of him, a quasi-personal memory? This is recorded with the

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utmost sincerity, and is due to any personal predilection for the genre.

It would be most unfortunate if any intelligent reader were to classify *Umbrellel* in the same fashion as the librarian. It is not a war-book in the sense that it deals with the technological or tactical appraisal of war-time incidents. It is not a moronic glorification of heroism, personal or national, nor an arid evaluation of events. It is a delicately-written description of the journey of a tender soul across a weird landscape wherein all the normal constituents, are strewn into perplexing angles and positions. It is a human chronicle.

Literature deals with the elegant expression of durable sentiments, and *Umbrellel* is Literature. Literature can never bore, and *Umbrellel* entertains. Of course, the word 'entertains' begs qualification, because the book recounts some most painful episodes. The reader derives a spiritual and refined entertainment even from passages replete with pain and drama because sharing another man's pain is noble as well as ennobling; It is only possible if the other man expresses his anguish, and the better the expression, the greater is the magnitude of both empathy and sympathy. Without artifice or artificiality, Grech conveys the drama, the pain and the humour.

Grech displays a Dickensian technique for portraying adults through younger eyes, but he is not consistent in it, reserving this Dickensian caricature for persons in the foreground. This, one feels, produces some unevenness, and is one of the book's faults.

Where, however, the book proves most disappointing is in its anti-climactic structure; it tends to dwindle toward the end, mainly because it concentrates more on furnishing a chronology of the war (and this is more or less platitudinous) rather than on delivering this same chronology through personal anecdotes, as was the case earlier. His style is still good, but it is now weakened and hurried. This is where his lack of professionalism starts to show, but it does not spoil the book.

Grech's narrative style is at its best when he recounts moments of greatness or drama, as when he discovers his young friend dead near the Sliema post-office, or when his mentor, the admirable Father Alexander, is found crushed under the rubble. The incident which most impresses, however, is the one wherein Grech and his mother witness (unwittingly at that moment) the releasing of a stick of bombs which kills his brother, his mother uttering words which turn out to be so sadly prophetic. The way he handles this very difficult passage pays tribute to his skill.

The book is well rounded-off with very good photographs (some of them previously unpublished) and some appendices which are more interesting to a war-historian than to the general public.

Charles B. Grech's *Umbrellet* is a delightful book, satisfying beyond most expectations, and it appeals to a wider range of readership than any other book dealing with the way. The greatest compliment I can pay Mr. Grech is to repeat the words of an author friend of mine:

It's a book I wish I'd written myself.

C. CARUANA CARABEZ

LUTTRELL, ANTHONY (Ed.)

**Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings**

Maltese Social Studies, No. 1.

Malta, Midsea Books, 1976. 144pp. Illustrated.

The recorded history of the small *casale* of Hal Millieri spans almost 300 years. The *casale* itself is first mentioned in 1419 and it seems to have been abandoned around 1700. Indeed the last recorded birth there took place on 14 July 1711. Since then it, together with its churches, lay relatively unnoticed in the rolling plain in the south-eastern corner of the Island.

The church of the Annunciation is the best surviving