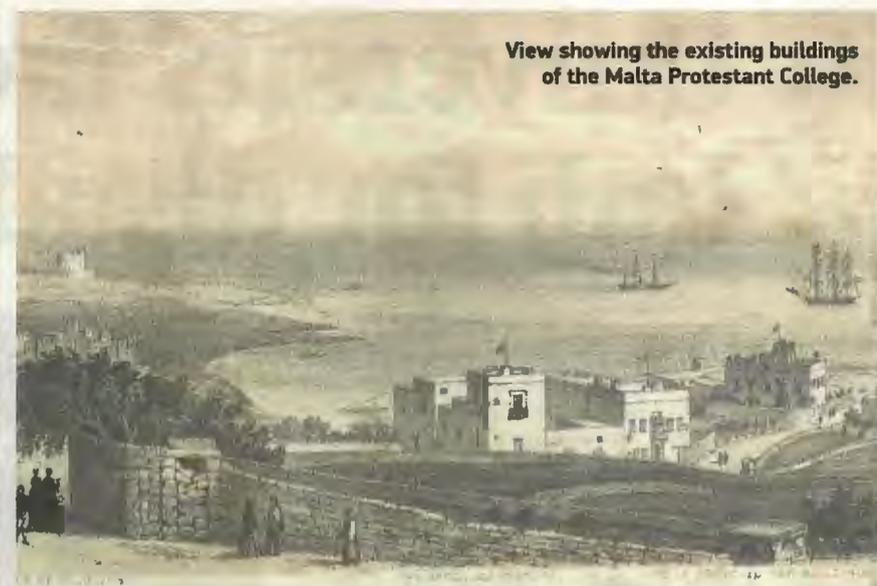




The Malta Protestant College, sold by G. Muir, Malta.



View showing the existing buildings of the Malta Protestant College.

John Watson's 'Belvedere' and the Malta Protestant College



ALBERT GANADO

One of the earliest British merchants who came to Malta in the early 19th century was John Watson, who made a name for himself on the island and, in a special way, in the history of St Julian's. Although he was a prominent citizen of Malta, very little has been written about him and his family. From various sources, I have tried to produce some tesserae of his chequered existence.

Watson was born in Preston, Lancashire, a centre for the cotton industry, the son of John Watson Senior. His wife, Elizabeth Pilkington, bore him eight children – seven sons and one daughter: Richard Henry, Shuttillworth Myers, William, Samuel Woodhouse, Octavious Peter Lowe, Henry Barton, Julian Adolphus and Josepha Mary Elizabeth. He came to Malta in 1806 or thereabout, aged 31.

During the Napoleonic wars, England placed all French territories in Europe under blockade, known as the 'Continental Blockade'. This brought about a sudden influx of British merchants to Malta from Mediterranean countries. They planned to open flourishing commercial houses, a source of considerable prosperity for them and the islanders. Besides, they were all aware that Malta had the best lazaretto in the Mediterranean, which unfortunately did not scare off the terrible plague of 1813.

Watson soon joined hands with John Wright, but their partnership was dissolved in 1818. He was one of the British mercantile agents in 1822, and by 1829 he had acquired an interest in the Malta Tanning Company at Marsa, together with the well-known writer Thomas Mac Gill and two others. Truly, Malta had been 'discovered' by the British mercantile body. Through his business acumen Watson became one of the richest merchants on the island.

Around 1827 he acquired the lands named *Ta' Mela il-Kirxa* at St Julian's from the autonomous *Confraternità della Consolazione* erected in the church of St Augustine in Valletta. The lands were subject to an annual perpetual ground rent of nine *scudi* (around 16s. 8d.). He built a large villa with a coach house and surrounded the whole estate of about eight fields with high walls that obstructed the view from outside.

He was a great promoter of agriculture and, according to his obituary notice, he established himself at the villa, named 'Belvedere', for the purpose of rearing and introducing the

Brazilian cotton plant for the first time in Malta. The whole development cost £5,000.

For some unknown reason he decided within a few years to dispose of his investment, if so it was. The estate came up for a judicial sale by auction (*subasta*) on June 28, 1830 under the authority of the First Hall of the Civil Court. Was the sale provoked at the instance of creditors? Whatever the case, the sale was not proceeded with or the bidding did not reach the estimated value.

Over a year later, on July 20, 1831, an advert appeared in the *Malta Government Gazette*, offering for sale "The clever and well-known pony" named *Smut*, admirable in all its paces, and as sound as a suckling foal. Any interested person was to contact Watson, at *Villa Belvedere*. On August 4, 1831, together with one of his sons, he left for Tripoli on the Austrian *Pilego Ronco*, most likely on a business venture.

Watson was not only interested in making money, but he took an active part in the fortunes of our native land. He was certainly one of the main promoters of the 1821 petition of merchants and inhabitants of the Maltese islands drawn up to be sent to the House of Commons complaining of the maladministration of the local colonial set-up.

The petitioners regretted that they had for some years experienced great distress and been subjected to serious evils in consequence of certain defects in the Constitution of the civil government. This led to a state of affairs most unfavourable to Great Britain when compared to Malta's prosperity under the Order of St John; then the inhabitants were happy and contented.

Instead of creating an adequate revenue, the government of Malta was a sinecure, a source of patronage, or a step to preferment. The inhabitants were deprived of their just weight in the management of their own affairs, and carefully excluded from all offices of honour, trust or profit, which brought about misery and discontent.

In conclusion, they formulated under three main headings the remedies that were to be applied in order to restore to the suffering population any proportion of its former prosperity. These were: the formation of a Council or Colonial Assembly, without whose sanction no laws could be promulgated, or any taxes imposed, with the duty of watching



A Mohammedan Turkish family who were baptised at the Malta Protestant College.

over the island; the re-establishment of the Board of Health which had been abolished by Governor Sir Thomas Maitland; and the abolition of the monopoly of corn, which had forced the lower classes to have recourse to barley and Indian corn as substitutes because of the high monopoly price of wheat.

The petition was signed by "all the British and native merchants, and by people of great respectability on the island". The local authorities did their level best to checkmate the petition by playing on the hopes of some and the fear of others. Of the very numerous appendices with the petition, only that marked 'N' was published, together with the petition of 1836, by George Mitrovich.

Watson was described as a charitable, upright and honest man. When the *Comitato*

Generale Maltese was formed to submit Malta's grievances to the Royal Commission of 1836, he took an active part with the Maltese in supporting their cause. At one stage the committee wished to arrange a meeting with Governor Frederick Ponsonby (1827-1836). Watson was the emissary.

According to a manuscript note in the records of the *comitato*, when Watson met the Governor, Ponsonby feigned to be unaware of the committee and asked Watson what was its nature: "Who are they, are they poor or rich?" Watson rejoined that the committee was composed of some of the most respectable men of the island and men of property.

Ponsonby, together with the chief secretary, Frederick Hankey, told Watson he did not think he could interfere with the inquiry going before the Commissioners (John Austin and George Cornwall Lewis) or see the committee till the inquiry was closed.

During this period Watson had become a bookseller with the firm name *Watson & Co.*, at 241, *Sda Reale*, Valletta, moving later to number 278. He passed away on July 2, 1848, at *Santa Venera*, leaving seven sons and a daughter. He was buried at the *Msida Bastion Cemetery*.

By that time some members of the family were living abroad. Julian Adolphus had gone to Constantinople, while William, whose wife, Margaret, had died of consumption on January 3, 1843, aged 22, had moved to Calcutta. In that year Samuel was registered as a broker at *Strada San Antonio*, Valletta. Octavious Peter married *Matilde Balbi* on July 26, 1846. Henry Barton had gone eastwards.

On January 2, 1841, Shuttillworth Myers started business as a licensed auctioneer and appraiser, together with Edward McKenzie, at 43, *Strada Zaccaria*, Valletta. In 1847 he was still in Malta as he signed as a witness to the marriage of John Roon Stocker and *Giovanna Balbi*, *Matilde's* sister.

Mary Elizabeth Watson married Captain George Griffin, RN, serving in 1814 on *HMS Impregnable*, and went to England. Presumably, she soon became a widow and returned to Malta, where she married *Ignazio Pompeiano*. The licence to celebrate her mixed marriage was issued on February 9, 1847.



Proposed new buildings for the Malta Protestant College.



Even in its present state the Protestant College – now known as Villa St Ignatius – is still an exceptional building.

He was a Sicilian lawyer who had sought refuge in Malta, acting two decades before as a consular agent of the Sicilian provisional government. In September 1846, the two witnesses at the marriage of William Hunt and Maria Anna Bonavia were William Watson and Caroline Watson. Was he the 'M. Watson' at 161, Strada Britannica, in 1845?

When William's wife died in 1843 he was a director of the Malta Infant School which opened its doors to boys and girls on August 2, 1841, under the patronage of Queen Adelaide and the auspices of the government of Malta. It was at 9, Sda Scozzese (now Mikiel Anton Vassalli Street), Valletta. The system adopted was that prevailing in Great Britain. Within one month, 150 pupils were attending the school, the boys being outnumbered by the girls. It was run by Jane Shippard and her sister.

“Watson was not only interested in making money, but he took an active part in the fortunes of our native land”

William Watson resided in 1849 at 8, Strada Scozzese, next to the infant school. Much later, in 1873, a William Watson, probably William's son, was advertised as a bookseller and stationer at 248, Strada Reale, and also as a perfumer and yacht agent in 1879 and the 1880s. By 1889 he had taken over the flourishing business of “the late George Muir”. An advert in the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of July 8, 1902, reads that Messrs Watson & Co. and L. Critien at Sda S. Giovanni, and J. Critien in Sda Reale were selling Governor Grenfell's booklet on Malta in 1798, with the proceeds of the sale going to local charities.

The sale of 'Belvedere'

When the judicial sale by auction of John Watson's estate at St Julian's failed to go through, he had to seek other avenues to get rid of his valuable property. After a long wait of over a decade, the project of establishing in the Central Mediterranean a hub of Protestant propaganda became a reality.

In 1845, the Malta Protestant College was created. Its constitution was published in London by Alex Macintosh of Great New Street. It was founded in Malta a year later. A detailed study of the college was compiled by Salvatore Mallia and published in *Melita Historica* in 1990.

The idea of an English Protestant College in the Mediterranean had first been broached by the Marquess of Hastings, Earl of Moira, in a conversation with the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury in Italy. Hastings died in 1826.

It was only in the early 1840s that a 'provisional committee' was formed by some 40 philanthropic gentlemen under the chairmanship of Shaftesbury. It considered that the island of Malta was the ideal place that offered the greatest advantages for siting such a college. Its very central position, as the advanced post of the west and the key to the east, being the principal channel of communication between Europe and Asia, would enable it to become the ideal site for evangelising



An architectural detail of one of its entrances.

Asia, Africa and southern Europe. There were some 100 million inhabitants in the east still living in ignorance and degradation.

The missionary spirit of Protestantism in Malta took root, and the choice fell on the large grounds of Watson's estate in St Julian's for the erection of the Protestant College. At some stage, perhaps even in the late 1830s, negotiations with Watson started. They must have taken a long time because of the absence from Malta of some of the co-owners, all family members.

Eventually, the sale of the house, gardens and fields called the 'Belvedere' in St Julian's was signed on October 22, 1844, enrolled in the records of Notary John Assenza, active in Cospicua from 1828 to 1850. The property was described by architect Paolo Attard on coloured plans 'A' and 'B' attached to the deed.

The estate was sold as subject to an annual perpetual ground rent of £1.13.4, or 20 scudi, and the sale price amounted to £2,500, or 30,000 scudi. All the costs of the deed and the duty (scisa) payable to the Collector of Land Revenue, amounting to 600 scudi, were to be borne by the vendors, namely, Watson and all his children.

The keys were to be delivered to the purchaser on January 1, 1845, to give the Watsons time to empty the premises. Unless there was a separate additional agreement drawn up in England, the vendors must have lost a substantial amount of money on the deal.

The property was bought by Henry Innes, HM Dockyard employment officer of P.&O. Co., for and on behalf of Lachlan Mackintosh Rate, a merchant of Bishopsgate Street, London, represented on the deed by Savery Pinsent of London, residing in Malta, “desirous of investing £4,000 in property in Malta”. Although not stated in the deed of transfer, Rate was acting as a trustee on behalf of the college board of trustees, made up of the Rt. Hon. Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Rt. Hon. Earl of Shaftesbury, and others, but the trustees became legal owners only seven years later.

Construction went on apace and the Malta Protestant College was opened on February 3, 1846, although it was soon faced with various conflicting difficulties. Five years later, by deed of conveyance signed in London on June 20, 1851, Rate transferred the said property to the trustees. The deed was registered in Malta on September 10, 1851, in the records of Notary Charles Curry, active in Valletta

from 1812 to 1862. This time, no scisa was paid in Malta. In 1855, the college published in two volumes the journal of a deputation sent to the east by the committee of the Malta Protestant College in 1849. Facing the title page of volume one there is a lithograph with an extensive view of the college signed by 'Day & Son, Lith.rs to the Queen'. It is titled 'View Shewing (sic) the Existing Buildings of The Malta Protestant College' (107 x 172mm).

The mission attained a good measure of success. In 1849 it housed inhabitants from Egypt, Abyssinia, some districts of Eastern Africa, Palestine, Syria, Persia, Arabia, Tartary, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Armenia, Turkey-in-Europe, Greece and other Mediterranean countries. Due to the rapid increase of pupils and the necessity to enlarge the original premises, the college had to borrow £2,500 to cover in part the expenses incurred for alteration of buildings.

Besides, small houses contiguous to the original college premises had been purchased or rented. However, these were only capable of creating room for a limited increase in the number of pupils, and they were situated at some distance from the main building, exposing pupils to the rains of winter and the intense heat of summer.

These and other considerations led to the planning of new buildings, devised to include the existing building, to provide accommodation for a further 100 students, a library, museum, a chemical laboratory, workshops, printing premises, apartments for officials and visitors, and a chapel. The cost of the new buildings was estimated at £18,000.

The huge project was shown on a lithograph signed by T. Picken, published by Day & Son, measuring 107 x 172mm, facing the title page of the second volume. The picture was titled 'Proposed New Buildings for The Malta Protestant College'.

After several vicissitudes, the college closed down, it seems, after July 1865. On March 26, 1872, the trustees sold the property to Dr Pasquale Mifsud (1833-1895), later a judge, and Carlo Maria Muscat, merchant and member of the Council of Government, for the sum of £2,200. The new college, dedicated to St Ignatius, opened as a Jesuit boarding school in November 1877, almost a century-and-a-half ago.

It is interesting to note that the scholar Thomas Walford came to teach in the new college, and, as Carmel Baldacchino wrote lately, it was he who introduced football to the Maltese.