

# Charles Vere - and His Controversial Attempts to Open a School in Malta

Joe Debono

NOTIZIE D'EUROPA: CIVILI  
Istituzioni Caritative.

Dal 19 Ottobre 1863.

Il Dr. G. B. Schembri ha da essere, provvisoriamente, Medico e Assistente Superintendente e Scrivano, in vece del Dr. Cioè Balausti, che ha risegnato.

Per comando,  
Palazzo, Valletta, Victoria Colonna,  
27 Ottobre 1863. Principale Segretario di Governo

CIVIL ASSOCIATION:  
Charitable Institutions.

From 19 October 1863

Dr. G. B. Schembri to be, provisionally, Medical Officer and Assistant Superintendent and Clerk, vice Dr. Cioè Balausti, resigned.

By command,  
Palazzo, Valletta, Victoria Colonna,  
October 27th, 1863. Chief Secretary to Government,

(Continuazione al No. 1422.)  
Il Marchese di Hastings, successore al generale Ponsomby, una quantità di prelo ornato, cui merito fu eretta la famosa colonna conosciuta col nome di lui. Per altro bravo militare, che aveva condotto in Waterloo riportando una ferita a' ortelli; affabile, caritatevole. Ma ci bisognava uniformarsi al famoso calcolo partito di Bail; e l'indole particolare di Ponsomby ci stava proprio a capello, trattandosi una già di far del gran male, che egli era inteso al grande sì in male che bene, ma di lasciar correre io così come stavano. Il Ponsomby, in otto anni di governo, badò a darsi buon tempo, godendosi quella grazia di Dio delle cinque mila lire annue nei giuochi, nella caccia, nei viaggi. Un fatto avvertito nel 1827 varrà a metterlo in maggior luce l'indole di Ponsomby ed a mostrare la continuazione di quell'esecrata politica che per tanto tempo ci oppresso, se pur non ci annegava ad opprimere.  
Era venuto dall'Inghilterra un tal Carlo Vere, il quale volendo dar saggio della propria abilità domandò al governo il permesso di stampare nella tipografia del governo, non essendovene altro allora, un opuscolo intorno a cose commerciali per uso dei negozianti: il permesso fu bensì accordato, ma l'opuscolo restò sotto il torchio per due anni e nove mesi e il Vere ebbe a pagare per la stampa il doppio. Dopo questo precludo lo stesso Vere domandò il permesso di aprire una scuola per insegnare la lingua inglese. Ponsomby riferì la domanda al Consiglio dell'Università perché verificasse e rapportasse sull'idoneità del ricorrente; il Consiglio, dopo esaminato il Vere, lo dichiarò idoneo. Dopo questi fatti il governo si ne fece secco secco colla risposta seguente: — « Non ostante il rapporto del consiglio della

Università, il quale ha detto che il supplente è "certo" nella lingua italiana ed inglese, e nell'aritmetica commerciale, trattata il governatore ricusa di accordargli la licenza di tenere una scuola in Malta—Giugno 15, 1827. » — Or non è egli chiaro lo intento di tenere il popolo nell'assoluta ignoranza, noi diciamo, di quella disciplina che maltratta la mente e il cuore, ma pur di quelle conoscenze, che sono necessarie per procacciarsi un pane? Tre mesi dopo Vere era stato innanzi al magistrato per aver, contro il divieto, fatto scuola, e veniva condannato ad un mese di prigione. La quale pena però, venendone richiamato dall'allora Capo di Giustizia Standart, fu ridotta a soli 14 giorni. Vere allora pregò il governo di far pervenire un suo memoriale al ministro della Colonia, nel quale domandava la riparazione dei danni. Il governo rispose che avrebbe inviato qualunque reclamo del signor Vere riguardo l'ingiustizia della di lui condanna ad intanto trattarne il memoriale e dopo tre o quattro mesi fece sapere al supplente che non era sua intenzione di spedirlo. Questo fatto è constatato nelle minute del governo imperiale in una delle Sedute di 1836.—Quante persecuzioni, quante ingiustizie, quanti scandali perciò una volta aprì una scuola di lingua inglese! E noi chiamiamo a grumbers, o irri, pietri, disaffezionati!  
Intanto le cose andando di male in peggio, il nostro ottimo cittadino, Camillo e i liberali Scoberras, progettò ad alcuni suoi amici (1839) di fare una petizione al ministro delle Colonie per domandare una riforma dell'amministrazione, un Comitato sanitario indipendente, e diversi altri miglioramenti nel governo. Fu fatta la petizione, presentata al Governatore, ma poi fu ritirata da quelli

che l'avevano presentata, perchè avea loro il Governatore intimato di moderare i termini. Scoberras intanto, sempre costante nei suoi propositi nella mira di sollevare la patria da quel dispotismo, chiamò a radunanza i più liberi ed indipendenti e formulò un'altra petizione, cui mandò direttamente al ministero coloniale (1842.) Si fu allora che il Governatore di Londra istituì un'inchiesta per esaminare lo stato delle colonie, particolarmente rapporto alle rendite e alle spese. Le persone nominate domandarono al sotto-segretario per le colonie se vi erano reclami da parte dei Maltesi; a fu risposto di no. Quando la petizione stava negli scaffali del Ministero, La Commissione cominciò per ridurre il salario dal Governatore a 3000 lire, stabilito da Maitland a 5000; ma il ministero non ci trovava più il suo conto, perchè più alto era il salario e più poteva lucrare dai governatori a prezzo della nomina; onde lo lasciò sul piede di prima.  
Un telegramma da Alessandria, confermato da lettere giunte Mercoledì scorso, ci annunzia che quivi si sono manifestati sette casi di colera; ed intanto i passeggeri arrivati col vapore furono ammessi a libera pratica.  
A capo del Lazzaretto fu messo un guardiano di sanità—di quelli, s'intende, che non hanno altro di guardiano che il collare giallo.  
I passeggeri di Southampton sbarcano dopo tre soli giorni di contumacia—perchè il Colera di Southampton è di tutta l'Inghilterra non è Colera.  
La barba alla Notificazione di Governo che vieta l'importazione del bestiame e dei cani del Regno Unito, si è fatto sbarcare un cane (Malta Times) dopo averlo prima tuonato nell'acqua.  
Evviva il Comitato di Sanità, che gode la fiducia del Governatore! Prevediamo, col permesso dell'Observer, al Portafoglio di mettere mano al deposito dei suggerimenti e dei consigli per far conoscere al governo questi fatti; che noi non vi abbiamo rifiutato col suggerire e col consigliare.

fu messo in contumacia,—però l'ammalato era in via di miglioramento. Il 20 a Trieste si sono constatati 3 casi di colera. Nella Provenza il morbo è scemato, ma non così a Parigi. In Spagna la malattia moltiplicata inferisce, meno nelle province di Valenza e Saragozza è scomparsa. A Beirut è cessata, e trovata la dimora a Tripoli di Siria, a S. Giovanni d'Acri, ad Aleppo a Darbehir, a Damasco e ad Erzerum. Essa inferisce soltanto in alcune città della Turchia europea.  
IL COLERA IN MALTA.  
Da sabato passato sino ieri non si sono constatati che soli 6 casi, morti 4.—Gozo nessun caso.  
Il vapore di sua maestà 'Psyche' giunse il 2 corrente proveniente da Napoli.  
La fregata a vapore di sua maestà 'Terribile' è partita da Portsmouth il 18 passato per Malta.  
Il trasporto a vapore di sua maestà 'Messaggera' partì da Woolwich per il Mediterraneo.  
Per mezzo del vapore postale italiano 'Archimede' giunse qui il 2 corrente da Messina sentiamo che tre legicorazzati, S. Maria 'Loyal Oak', 'Resistance', 'Enterprise' passarono il 1 dal Faro, provenienti da Palermo. Dieci ci erano diretti per la Grecia, dove vi sono dei torbidi. Il vascello di sua maestà 'Gibraltar' e la corvetta a vapore 'Racer' partirono da Napoli per le Isole Jonie.  
I passeggeri fatti da Messina sull' 'Archimede' narrano che le autorità sanitarie di Messina avevano ricusato di ricevere gli arrivi da Napoli. Palermo ha messo 21 giorni di contumacia alle provenienze di Napoli.  
La squadra italiana composta di sei legni da guerra giunse a Corfù il 22 passato, proveniente dalla Sicilia. Dicesi che fra breve verrà in Malta.

Pp. 8 and 9 of *Il Mediterraneo*, N. 1424, 4. xi. 1865

The long and chequered history of Maltese education provides a most versatile and litigious character: Charles Vere, a British resident on the Island from the mid-1820's to the mid-1830's. He made his first impact on the local scene in 1824, when he opened what must be rated as Malta's first department-store at No. 256, Strada Reale - now Republic Street - Valletta. His wares were as varied as they were exotic, and according to advertisements appearing in various issues of *The Malta Government Gazette* published between August 4th, 1824 and March 23rd 1825 included "best London bottled and draught Porter,

fine Devonshire Cyder (sic), fine Old Port Wine in Pints and Quarts, fine Flavoured Sherry, Earthenware, Glass and China, Hardware, Cutlery, Hosiery, Pickles, Sauces, Perfumery, Westphalia Hams, Wiltshire Cheeses." In addition, he sold Pale Ale, London Bottled Cider and Brown Stout, London Porter in Casks, real Cognac Brandy, Fine Old Jamaica Rum, Hollands (sic) Gin, Madeira Wines Faro, Caphaloni, Bordeaux, St Julian and Teneriffe of the best quality, Teas, Sugar, Coffee, Butter, Ladies Cloths (sic) for Pelisses, Carpeting, Marsala, Syracuse and other Wines, Old Hock, Burgundy and

*Duplicate*

*N<sup>o</sup> 90.*

*Malta 20<sup>th</sup> October 1827.*

*Sir,*

*I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your Despatch N<sup>o</sup> 17, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1825, transmitting for my consideration and report a representation from Mr. Charles Vere complaining of certain acts in the administration of Justice in this Island, and of the refusal to grant him a license to keep a school and informing me that a letter communicating the same had been addressed to Mr. Governor, and saying that in due to his obligations he should in the first instance have*

*consulted me and General Sir Poynders*

*in George Murray, Esq. C. B.*

*the enclosed*

*original representation transmitted by you, and a report from me in respect to the allegations contained in that document,*

*I have the honor to be,*

*Sir,*

*Your most obedient,*

*Humble servant,*

*J. Poynders*

*Mr. Poynders  
Mr. Murray  
Mr. Poynders  
Mr. Murray  
Mr. Poynders  
Mr. Murray*

*Mr. Poynders*

*Malta 20<sup>th</sup> October 1827.*

*Duplicate*

*N<sup>o</sup> 90*

Champaign (sic), Hyson and Souchong Teas, (and) real Havana Segars (sic). Even Gunpowder featured on his shelves!

As if this many-faceted business was not enough, he also acted as estate-agent<sup>2</sup>, while his wife managed a shop "well stocked with millinery"<sup>3</sup> and ladies clothes.<sup>4</sup> He considered himself also a 'computista' or book-keeper,<sup>5</sup> and frequently advertised his readiness to undertake book-keeping by double entry on behalf of commercial establishments.

### A Venture in Education

He regarded himself as educationist as well and in 1827, reports *Il Mediterraneo - Gazzetta di Malta* asked Lieutenant Governor Ponsonby for permission to open a school in which English would be taught. *Il Mediterraneo* recounts that in accordance with current regulations, Vere's application was referred to the University authorities to test the applicant's academic abilities and pedagogic potential. The University Council, after duly examining him, declared that Vere was certainly competent to undertake the proposed venture. Quite incredibly, however, the Government is reputed to have issued the following statement: "Nonostante il rapporto del Consiglio della Universita', il quale ha detto che il supplicante e' versato nelle lingue italiana ed inglese, e nell'aritmetica commerciale, tuttavia il governatore ricusa di accordargli la licenza di tenere una scuola in Malta - Giugno 15, 1827."<sup>7</sup> *Il Mediterraneo* was notoriously anti-British,<sup>8</sup> and the purpose of recounting the above episode together with its editorial comments and conclusions must be seen in the light of this knowledge. It therefore, imputed the Governor's refusal to the British policy of keeping the Maltese ignorant and illiterate.

Completely undeterred by the unexpected set-back, Vere flouted the law and opened his school - very imprudently fixing a board above his door to announce the event, and, perhaps, to emphasize his utter disregard of the local laws. Thereupon he was taken to Court and sentenced to one month imprisonment but after an appeal the Chief Justice, Sir John Stoddart, reduced the punishment to 14 days.

Vere immediately sent a petition for redress to Ponsonby for onward transmission to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The Governor, after the lapse of some months, informed Vere that he had no intention of acceding to his wish. Undaunted, Vere sent his petition to London directly.<sup>9</sup>

The first and last parts of the letter showing Ponsonby's signature.

*Il Mediterraneo's* version, however, differs substantially from Ponsonby's official report. In a dispatch dated 20th October 1828, he informed the Rt. Hon. Sir George Murray, the Colonial Secretary, that Vere's complaint was the latest in a series of sixteen similarly vexatious representations by which he and his predecessor, the Marquis of Hastings had been pestered. He points out that despite the fact that full investigations had proved Vere's complaints groundless, the Government had invariably answered all these petitions. He further points out that other letters by Vere contained no new facts, and therefore had been ignored. Ponsonby concedes that he shared the general view that Vere was either "of deranged intellects" or "a most litigious, turbulent individual, professing great effrontery and presumption".<sup>10</sup>

Ponsonby reports that, about a year after opening his shop, Vere had gone to Corfu, taking all the merchandise with him, including many articles he had received on credit in Malta. He returned in 1826 but, as he could not repay his debts, was arrested and sent to prison, where he caused considerable trouble.

The Government sent a number of magistrates to inquire into the cause of the troubles and declared Vere at fault, in spite of his insistence that he had been unjustly treated. Ponsonby alleged that only his restraint prevented the magistrates from taking libel action against Vere.

Ponsonby explained, that on the basis of Vere's previous actions the Government did not consider him "a proper person to keep a school within the Island"<sup>11</sup>, still Vere had defied the law. Consequently, he had been sentenced to imprisonment for one month.

Ponsonby considered himself quite generous

to Vere; he explains that he had remitted half the sentence and, some time later, granted Vere permission to deliver lectures on book-keeping. He also instructed the Government printing press to publish, free of charge, some booklets, entitled *Tables of Exchange*, compiled by Vere thus enabling the author to make a decent living.

Kind and generous treatment did not diminish Vere's pugnacious tendencies in any way for, according to Ponsonby, not long afterwards, he took several persons to court for slander. All were exonerated because Vere could not substantiate his charges. Vere was again imprisoned for a "violent interference with the officers of the Executive Police in the execution of their duty in a matter (in which Ponsonby) was neither directly nor indirectly concerned."<sup>12</sup>

The Governor's version has a more truthful ring about it. Vere was certainly a meddler. He opened and shut business several times, for example in the August 16th 1826 issue of *The Government Gazzette* he advertised that he was once more opening business in Strada Reale. He borrowed and lent money or sold merchandize on credit, for in the same issue of *The Government Gazzette*, he informs one and all that he had revoked the Power of Attorney issued to Mr Emanuel Costa, Legal Procurator, and to Mr Antonio Zarb, his agent; and that, therefore, these two persons were no longer authorized either to collect money owing to him or to treat any business matter involving him: those who had paid any sums of money to Costa and Zarb were asked "di conto delle somme pagate" to Notary William Stevens, in the Commercial Hall.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the serious charges mentioned in his dispatch, Ponsonby seems to have suddenly

*In the Prison he made  
great disturbances and great complaints  
were made against him by the factors—  
on the other hand Mr. Vere represented  
that he was treated in a harsh manner*

*with the general opinion that he  
is of deranged intellect; if not  
he certainly is a most litigious  
turbulent individual, proposing  
great affronts and presumptions  
only a few days ago he was sentenced*

suffered a major change of heart for, early in 1829, an advertisement appeared in *The Malta Government Gazette* announcing that Vere was about to open a school at No 141, Strada Forni - now Old Bakery Street, Valletta. Besides Writing and Arithmetic, "the Art of Book-Keeping" would be taught by Vere himself, "through the medium of the English or Italian". The morning lessons were to be delivered between 9 and 10, the evening ones from 6 to 8. Somewhat ambiguously, readers were informed that Vere was ready to give private tuition "at home or abroad"<sup>14</sup>. The school, apparently, soon made considerable headway for, in 1830, it was transferred to more prestigious surroundings - at 101, Strada Reale. French was now added to the curriculum. Fees were described as "moderate"<sup>15</sup>.

### Official Sanction

In May 1831, after eighteen months of instructional activity, Vere offers us yet another twist when he informs the public that "having obtained the Permission of Government", he had opened a school for "the Instruction of Youth in the English Language, Writing and Arithmetic". The fees were 2 dollars per month, however, gentleman wanting to learn English through Italian, would be charged one dollar per month. In the latter case, the lessons were in the morning only, either from 6 to 7, or from 7 to 8.<sup>16</sup>

Does this mean that Vere had been again flouting the law all the time and his previous 'schools' were illegal? One can only wonder

especially since a series of advertisements for the school<sup>17</sup> sounds very much like Vere's vindictive proclamation that he had won his way at last.

In September of the same year, the curriculum becomes more ambitious when he informs the public that he intended giving "Lectures On the Principles of The British Constitution and The Laws of England", between 7 and 8.15 in the evenings, every Tuesday and Thursday. The involvement of the participants was to be ensured by allocating fifteen minutes "to conversation on subjects connected with the Lecture." For a whole course of 36 lectures, the fee was 3 dollars,<sup>18</sup> but one ticket would admit two ladies!<sup>19</sup>

In November of the same year, Vere began describing his school as a "Commercial and Finishing Academy" with the curriculum now comprising Writing, English Language, Arithmetic, Book-keeping and Geography - all taught "with every requisite to enable a person to fill any department in a Merchant's Counting House".

Tuition times were "from 1/2 past 8 to 11 a.m. and from 2 to 4 p.m.". Students paid two dollars per month, but those taking Book-keeping had to pay one dollar extra.<sup>20</sup>

The frequent changes in the curriculum and the time-table make one presume that, despite the public fanfares, the school was not, perhaps, attracting enough students. Certainly, in March 1832, it moved to No. 5, Strait Street, Valletta, where Vere intended to open an evening school for young ladies "from 2 to 4 every Wednesday and

Saturday".<sup>21</sup> Schooling for girls was extended a year later when Mrs Vere opened a Girls' School for the teaching of Dressmaking, English, Writing and Arithmetic.<sup>22</sup> To allay any moral or religious suspicions, assurance was solemnly given that "Non si avrà nessuna ingerenza in materia di Religione".<sup>23</sup> A few days later Vere informed the public of more ambitious educational activities and within "una scuola, Lunedì 1<sup>mo</sup> dell' entrante Aprile sarà aperta in Valletta". English, Italian, French and the elements of Latin Grammar were to be taught through the most approved methods. Besides these languages, Writing, Arithmetic, History, Geography and Astronomy were also to be offered.

In order to cope with the expanded curriculum, other teachers were roped in, thus giving the institution a more tangible aspect of a formal school. The time-table, too, once again underwent a change. Mr Vere still taught English, on Mondays and Thursdays, while the Italian Giacomo Silvestro Fior taught Italian on Tuesdays and Fridays. The French language, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, was the responsibility of Mr Antide Joume. Private lessons were also available in the three languages, as well as in the elements of Greek and German Grammar, and in Geometry and Navigation. Once more, moral consciences and denominational suspicions were calmed by a promise that no lesson would be delivered that could, in any way, offend the religious sentiments of the students.<sup>24</sup> The repetition of this religious safeguard makes one wonder whether Mr Vere's notoriously turbulent character had not, perhaps, seriously jeopardized the success of his educational ventures!

A year later, Mr Vere's school seems to have ceased operations. Certainly, its Italian teacher, Mr Fior, had opened a school himself at No 257, Strada Reale, Valletta.<sup>25</sup> But Mrs Vere was still giving instruction in English, Italian, Arithmetic, Needlework and Dancing "helped by able masters".<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the school does not seem to have lasted more than a year for, throughout 1835, there was not a single advertisement either extolling its amenities or announcing some addition to the curriculum - and it was not typical of Vere to remain silent for any length of time! He suddenly fades out of the picture.

2. G.G., No. 936, 21.1.1829, p. 20.
3. G.G., No. 1103, 21.3.1832, p. 88.
4. G.G., No. 882, 9.1.1828, p. 12. Cfr.: G.G., No. 885, of 30.1.1828, p. 36.
5. G.G., No. 1093, 11.1.1832, p. 16.
6. *Il Mediterraneo - Gazzetta di Malta*, No. 1424, 4.11.1865, p.8.
7. *Ibid.* "Notwithstanding the University Council's conclusions that the applicant was versed in the Italian and English languages as well as in Commercial Arithmetic, the governor declined to issue him the permit to open a school in Malta-June 15, 1827".
8. Bianca Fiorentini, *Malta Rifugio di Esuli e Focolare Ardente di Cospirazione durante il Risorgimento Italiano*, Malta, 1866, p. 62 *et passim.*, Cfr. also *L'ordine - Giornale Politico Letterario Religioso*, No. 9, Anno I, 18.8.1849, p. 37.
9. *Il Mediterraneo ...*, No. 1424, *et supra*, *loc. cit.*
10. National Library of Malta; Dispatch: Ponsonby to Murray, dated 20th October, 1828.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. G.G., No. 805, 16.8.1826, p. 243.
14. G.G., No. 936, 21.1.1829, p.20. Cfr. also G.G., no. 957, 10.6.1829, p. 182, and G.G., no. 968, 1829, p. 270.  
The fees charged were far from moderate, when one considers that, at the time, the daily wages were very low, e.g. a male weaver - 3d, a spinner - 2d, a tanner - 1d, and a policeman - 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. *Vide*: Charles Price, *Malta and the Maltese - A Study in Nineteenth Century Migration*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1954, Appendix A, p. 215.
15. G.G., No. 1030 3.11.1830, p. 364. Cfr. also G.G., No. 1035 1.12.1830, p. 400.
16. G.G., No. 1066, 6.7.1831, p. 210.
17. G.G., No. 1067, 13.7.1831, p. 218. Cfr. also G.G., No. 1068, 20.7.1831, p.226, and G.G., No. 1069, 27.7.1831, p. 234.
18. G.G., No. 1075, 7.9.1831, p. 234.
19. G.G., No. 1077, 21.9.1831, p. 298.
20. G.G., No. 1084, 9.11.1831, p. 350.
21. G.G., No. 1103, 21.3.1832, p. 88.
22. G.G., No. 1155, 20.3.1833, p. 100.
23. *Ibid.*
24. G.G., No. 1156, 27.3.1833, p. 108.
25. G.G. No. 1202, 5.2.1834, p. 48.
26. G.G., No. 1210, 26.3.1834, p. 106.

## PICTURE CREDITS

G. Mallia pp. 6, 13.  
National Library of Malta pp. 7,8,9,10.  
M. Camilleri p. 15.  
C. Cassar p. 19.  
The University p. 27

1. (*The Malta Government Gazette*), No. 697, 4.9.1824, p. 4024. Cfr: G.G., No. 699, 11.8.1824, p. 4034; G.G., No. 701, 25.8.1824, p.4050; G.G., No.705, 22.9.1824, p. 4082; G.G., No. 706, 29.9.1824, p. 4090; G.G., No. 715, 1824, p. 4160; No. 706, 29.9.1824, p. 4090; G.G., No. 715, 1.12.1824, p. 4160; G.G. No. 727, 23.2.1825, p. 59; G.G., No. 731, 23.3.1825, p. 87; G.G., No. 738, 11.5.1825, p. 151.