

Intriguing stories behind John Wilson Carmichael's *The Grand Harbour of Malta from the Corradino Point*



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A few months ago, I had the good fortune to view an oil painting that had just been cleaned and conserved. The painting, in its ornate carved and gilded frame, is splendid; it depicts an early morning view of the Grand Harbour; however, in addition to the skilful rendering of the familiar bastions, one's eye is immediately drawn to the bustle and activity of the goings-on in the harbour.

The painting is signed J. W. Carmichael and dated 1854. Apparently, the owner knew very little about this recently-acquired painting. That such an engrossing and dramatic painting lacked a context seemed a pity so I could not resist the challenge to start researching.

The painting shows a view of the Grand Harbour from Marsa; to the left is Valletta with the arcades of the two Barrakka gardens providing familiar landmarks. Fort Ricasoli defines the eastern edge of the harbour mouth and working round to the right is the familiar skyline of the Three Cities. The viewpoint is taken close to the water's edge, with dock buildings framing the right edge of the picture.

So much for the setting, however. The most dramatic element of the painting is the intense activity taking place in practically every corner of the canvas; the detail with which the artist has invested this scene inevitably draws the viewer into the bustling harbour. In the foreground, the quayside is thronged

John Wilson Carmichael's 1854 painting *The Grand Harbour of Malta from the Corradino Point*.



by a colourful collection of people. Beyond we see a British man-of-war taking on stores and boatloads of redcoats. Another line-of-battle ship is shown to the left, together with a steam tug and a large quantity of lateen-sailed boats.

If one looks closely, the buildings and bastions are teeming with viewers waving and cheering the activities unfolding in the harbour. What exactly is going on? Is this an idealised allegory or is it the depiction

of reality, of a specific event? The date below the artist's signature gives us the best starting point.

The Crimean War ran from approximately October 1853 to February 1856. This conflict took its name from the military actions that took place primarily on the Crimean Peninsula in the Black Sea.

In this war, the Allied forces, consisting of Ottoman, French, Sardinian and British armies, fought against the Russians.

The origins of the conflict stemmed from the defence of the rights of Roman Catholics versus those of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Holy Land; however, in reality, the Allies sought to prevent Russian expansionism in the Balkans.

As a result of the war, French and British forces used Malta as a convenient staging post on the way to the Black Sea. These activities brought an immense amount of

trade to Malta and the economy thrived for many years.

The scene appears to illustrate the embarkation of red-coated British troops. The position of the sun to the east, over the mouth of the harbour, indicating early morning, reinforces the assumption that the troops are boarding soon after dawn for an early start on their way to the Crimea.

The crowds lining the bastions and buildings surely include a few

Wilson Carmichael's *The Corradino Point* painting

apprehensive relatives; but the majority must be interested locals whose livelihood depended on the custom brought by the garrulous troops.

We are fortunate that William Russell, the Irish reporter with *The Times* of London (considered to have been one of the first modern war correspondents), gives us a written account, in his work *The British Expedition to the Crimea*, of his own experiences in Malta, which mirror the artist's rendering of the scene:

"The embarkation of troops for Gallipoli was carried on with unremitting assiduity and the excitement produced in the island was indescribable. Crowds of people assembled on the shores of the harbours and lined the quays and public landing-places, the crash of military music being almost drowned in the enthusiastic cheers of the soldiers; the leave-taking by the officers and men of their wives and families formed a painful contrast to the joy which otherwise so generally prevailed. As the vessels moved slowly from their buoys, dense masses of people lined the batteries and yet denser crowds of soldiers the forts - cheering their comrades as the vessels glided along, the cheers from one fort being taken up by the troops in the others, and as joyously responded to from those on board."

The artist has managed to give us an almost photographic record of the events that took place in early 1854. In this respect the painting is truly remarkable; the capture of this level of detail renders this a significant painting from a local historical perspective.

Who was the artist? John Wilson Carmichael (1799-1868) was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in June 1799 and developed his remarkable skills for drawing as a boy while at sea during the Napoleonic Wars. Some time



Detail

later, when training to be a ship's carpenter, he was given his first box of watercolours and from that moment his artistic career took flight and he became one of the most talented and prolific British marine and landscape painters of the 19th century.

Many of his paintings can be found in regional collections around the United Kingdom and this itself bears witness to the esteem with which he was held as patrons commissioned him to depict each locality's finest views.

We know that Carmichael had direct experience of the Crimean War because he travelled to the Baltic Sea to paint the equally magnificent *The Bombardment of Sweaborg*, now at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, but did he travel to Malta to paint such a convincing view of the Grand Harbour?

Surprisingly, it seems unlikely. My research has not brought to light any visits Carmichael may have made to Malta; furthermore, there is evidence to suggest Carmichael was 'assisted' by another artist.

On his various travels, Carmichael is recorded as having executed numerous sketches 'on the spot', which he would later use as preparatory sketches for his oil paintings; however, he also used preparatory sketches by other artists. In what must be the most authoritative account of Carmichael's life and work written by his great-great-granddaughter Diana Villar, published in 1995, we are informed that:

"In a sale of his [Carmichael's] works after his death there were drawings of the Danube and the Rhine, Malta and Capri, but it is impossible to say how many of these drawings were done from other people's sketches. Captain Hotham (later Admiral Sir William Hotham, KCB) provided his own sketches for

two views that Carmichael painted in later years; one, *The Great Harbour of Malta, from the Corradino Point*, was exhibited at the British Institution in 1855, and another, *Moro Castle - Cuba*, were based on these."

Therefore, incredible as it may seem, the painting in question was painted from preparatory sketches by another artist, Admiral Hotham. The online catalogue of the British National Maritime Museum at Greenwich lists 15 sketches by Hotham; all are of naval vessels.

"The detail with which the artist has invested this scene inevitably draws the viewer into the bustling harbour"

As previously stated, the painting was put on public exhibition in London in 1855 and it proved to be such a popular painting with the public that the *Illustrated London News* published a large double-page engraved reproduction of it in their issue of March 8, 1856, where they also commented that the painting: "from a sketch by Captain Hotham, merits to be named for the skilful manner in which the artist has embodied the rude outlines of an amateur and put before us a scene that... the crews of all Her Majesty's ships that ever touched Malta would declare at once was painted on the spot".

This commentary confirms Hotham's sketches as the origin of Carmichael's work.

With a painting of this nature there is the inevitable tendency to zoom in and pore over the details with which the artist has invested his work. One can only admire the fine scale and intricacy of figures and objects shown. One such detail caught my eye: just to the right of the centre one sees a group of men standing beside some crates. On the top face of the largest crate the artist has inscribed the words "Capt. Taylor, RHA". In these circumstances the abbreviation can only refer to Royal Horse Artillery.

To my surprise and satisfaction, research indicates that around this time a Captain Taylor was in command of 'A' Troop of the Royal Horse Artillery. His troop was the third to be sent to Crimea in May 1854. The following month, Taylor was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and took command of the artillery batteries of the First (British) Division. This must surely be the same Taylor.

Particulars like this indicate that Carmichael's painting included a vast amount of detail that must have been based on fact. We will probably never know who recorded these details; however, some nagging questions remain: what induced Carmichael to paint Taylor's name on that crate? Was Taylor an acquaintance of Admiral Hotham's or Carmichael's?

This fine rendering of the Grand Harbour from Corradino Point can be read on a number of levels: from a superficial reading of the naval and military architecture portrayed to a closer reading of the details depicted. Like all fine works, this painting engages the viewer: it delights the eye and teases the intellect.

Acknowledgements

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Fifty years ago
February 18, 1968

CARNIVAL-BUS STRIKE

The General Transport Union on Friday decided to call on all buses to go on strike next Saturday until a decision by the government over their claim for an increase of 1d on all bus fares. Next weekend is carnival weekend in Malta. It is understood that the police have made preparations to keep the public transport service going.

TOWN PLANNING BILL

"At long last, Malta is to have up-to-date legislation on town and country planning. The relevant Bill was published last Friday, based on advice by UN expert Desmond Heap. The day-to-day control of development plans will be entrusted to a nine-member Town Planning Commission with the right of appeal to a five-member Town Appeals tribunal. This will remove matters of development, as far as possible, from party, political and other 'inner circle' pressures." Excerpt from the editorial.

ESSO TANKERS FOR DRYDOCKS

Esso International Ltd has awarded a contract to Malta Drydocks for repairs to three tankers. The first vessel is expected to arrive in April. Total deadweight of the vessels will be in excess of 180,000 tons.

FILM TO BE SHOT IN GOZO

Gozo has been chosen for location shooting *Can Heironymus Merkin Ever Forget Mercy Humppe and Find True Happiness?*. The film is produced by Anthony Newley, the well-known actor, composer and singer.

Ten years ago

February 18, 2008

BIRD-RINGERS' CARS TORCHED

Three vehicles belonging to Birdlife volunteers were found ablaze in Buskett by the police early yesterday morning. The cars were destroyed but no one was hurt. Birdlife Malta executive director Tolga Temuge said two of the cars belonged to Birdlife council members and the third belonged to an American, who started voluntary work a few months ago. The three were carrying out scientific ringing studies in Buskett. Mr Temuge said that he was informed by the police that it was probably a criminal act.

SANT ON MLP POLICIES

Speaking on One TV, Labour leader Alfred Sant said that under a Labour government, the health service would be free for everyone while waiting lists (for surgical interventions) would be cut by 15 per cent. The concept of a caring community would be applied to enable elderly people to be 'adopted' by families in their community. More day and night centres would be set up for the elderly through the cooperation of local councils and voluntary organisations. The Labour government would adopt a zero tolerance policy and would not accept conflicts of interest that could lead to abuse. Whoever was not disciplined, transparent or accountable did not have a place in the MLP, he insisted.



Detail



The *Illustrated London News* published a large double-page engraved reproduction of Carmichael's painting in their issue of March 8, 1856. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

