

Impetus to Geography teaching in 19th Century Elementary Schools in Malta.

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In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Elementary School curriculum in Malta was a very narrow one. In 1850 when Canon Paolo Pullicino, the newly appointed Director of Education on his return from Dublin, where he had gone to study the Irish Education system, initiated the first attempts towards reform, he was so disappointed with the existing system of education in Malta, that he devoted a great part of his First Report (1850)¹ to expounding its main defects. He criticised the quality of instruction being imparted in the twelve primary schools in Malta and the two schools in Gozo, and complained that the instruction given was inadequate:

"All teaching reduces itself to.. a little Italian, a smattering of English, the first and most elementary notions of arithmetic, and some very rare exercises in handwriting, and the mechanical repetition of the Religious Catechism of the diocese. To which one can ultimately add some general notions of grammar, and some superficial ideas of geometry and geography"².

Pullicino concerned himself with the broader and more refined aspects of education since he believed that the full development of a child could not be achieved through the restricted teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic but through a more liberal curriculum. Pullicino, took it upon himself to expand the curriculum to include "unimportant" subjects such as history and geography. Indeed, throughout his career as a Director of Primary Schools, Pullicino continually emphasised the importance of geography and endeavoured to improve its teaching. Indeed, in his many articles and books, he provided local teachers with the basis of coherent theory for the subject.

The decision to include geography in the curriculum of Maltese schools seemed to reflect a then generally accepted belief that no man could be called educated if he possessed no knowledge of the position of continents and regions of the earth. For example the text-book *English and Maltese Reading Book For The Use of Government Primary Schools*,³ attributed to Cosolani (1893) considered it a mark of extreme dullness not to desire to know something of those numerous scenes which lie beyond our sight... and still duller

should we be, if we could not help feeling a great desire to know what kind of houses our fellow-beings find in other distant regions... (and) what difficulties or dangers they have to encounter in providing for their wants". In a period when the dark corners of the earth were being explored and annexed, geography was considered a subject of compelling interest.

However, this enlightened view took a long time to permeate into the Maltese system, and it was only very gradually that geography began to be an accepted subject of elementary education. From a prospectus (1852)⁴ showing the branches of instruction, geography was to be considered and organised as a separate subject only in those schools where it could reach a certain required level. In other village schools, referred to as "scuole comuni" by Pullicino in his Third Report⁵ geography was to be considered only as complementary to reading. In this context, the principal scope of geography was to render the reading lessons more intelligible and interesting. At a time when the vast majority of people were illiterate and innumerate priority was given to the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic.

As explained earlier, before Pullicino's time, the teaching of geography consisted in the study of political divisions, the extent and relief of land, the names of mountains, rivers and seas. Pullicino attempted to develop the study of geography further than this, and when programmes of instruction for schools were published in 1856⁶, geography was conceived as being made up of various interdependent branches, namely Descriptive, Physical, Mathematical, Cosmographical and Political. This course was streamlined with the then prevailing paradigm of geography as the study of physical factors influencing human activities. The descriptive and physical aspects of geography were unduly emphasised however, with consequent neglect of, or at least an indifference to, other aspects of the subject. Mathematical geography was a very much neglected branch, as Keenan pointed out in 1878⁷. The reliance on the physical basis of the subject persisted even when a liberal interpretation of geography admitted the possibility of a more human approach. At the same time, Pullicino also

recommended the study of the etymology of geographical words, whereby pupils would endeavour to trace the origin of certain words.

At this time, the study of subjects related to Malta, including the Maltese language did not feature strongly in the local system of public education. Indeed, local geography was left completely out of the picture. So whilst children could flippantly and thoughtlessly repeat the names of all the countries of England and Wales, or of the countries of Europe, their capitals, chief products and names of capes and bays, scarcely anyone could tell the length or breadth, or the population of Malta. When Keenan questioned school children about the Island, they thought he was indulging in a sort of playful surprise to amuse them and they "appeared heartily and innocently to enjoy their own ludicrous guesses".⁷

This almost total ignorance of the geography of Malta was both strange and disappointing since the Second Italian Reading Book, in the first lesson after the description of the continents, contained a short but interesting account of the Maltese islands.

From an educational point of view, this neglect of the geography of Malta was the more strange at a time when Malta was an important maritime centre of the British colonial world and a vast proportion of the ships in the Grand Harbour were bound for, or returning from the British dependencies in India, China, and Australia. On their return voyages, the ships freighted the treasures of the East and the South. One would have expected the voyages of these ships to serve as excellent material of geographical instruction. Reference to Malta's role in this aspect would have rendered the study of the location and geography of Malta to Maltese children one of great attraction, relevance and practical value.

In view of the above, it is not surprising therefore that the 1865 Storks Commission of Inquiry was extremely critical about the teaching of Geography in Maltese Schools. Members of the Commission complained that in certain schools there was no trace whatsoever of geography teaching. The bad results attained by children in the schools, implied that the complete geography course, as specified in the programmes of instruction, was inserted chiefly to show what Pullicino would have wished to be taught rather than what was actually done. With this view in mind, the Commissioners recommended that "no instruction in the country Primary Schools is to be extended beyond reading, writing, spelling and the elements of arithmetic and geography".⁸

Although attempts to improve the teaching of geography continued, progress was extremely slow. In 1878 there were traces of teaching the

physical geography course prescribed by Pullicino in every school, but in the unskilful hands of many teachers the well-designed course had generally degenerated into a mere system of rote learning. Geography was taught in too detailed, factual and piecemeal a fashion for it to be effective. According to Keenan each teacher had the "same set of questions and each put his question in the same phraseology as every other teacher".⁹ The pupils, it was repeated, sang out a string of identical replies. It is evident that the major aim of the teachers was to impart the geographical "where" with the neglect of the "what" and the "why".

The scope was to make children acquainted with all the different parts of the earth. Geography became a litany and catalogue of products, lists of rivers, mountains, towns and villages, which could be more satisfactorily termed "catalogue geography".

Resources

Prior to 1850, schools lacked even the most necessary and elementary equipment, and even the scanty apparatus available, was found to be in a very bad state. It was only in the Boys' Schools of Valletta and Zejtun that maps were found, and these were mainly inadequate and unsuitable to pupils' needs.¹⁰ Pullicino, who was convinced of the need for aids to improve the teaching of geography, recommended the purchase and supply of maps and other visual aids. Maps and diagrams, printed for use in Irish Schools, were eventually introduced in Malta. These maps had clearly marked features which made them suitable for use in the Elementary schools; later, cardboard maps in relief were added. By 1878, there was a fair supply of maps in most schools, although a few had hardly any for the teaching of geography, among them.

Several attempts were made to improve the resources for the teaching of geography, among them a small collection of minerals used in physical geography.¹¹ At one time, Pullicino requested the National School Society of London to send him catalogues of apparatus and the list of prices.¹² On another occasion he requested the colonial government for the sum of £21. 4s. 8d. to buy maps and geography books for the Valletta Primary Schools.¹³

It is not certain, however, that teachers made much use of these resources. Pullicino advised teachers that as far as possible they were to illustrate geography lessons by charts, diagrams, specimens and demonstrations. They were to end the lessons with the method already tried with success in Germany, whereby pupils, without the aid of the textbook, delineated different parts of the world on the blackboard. In spite of Pullicino's

FIFTEENTH

READING LESSON.

ON GEOGRAPHY.

If we suddenly found ourselves placed, by some circumstance,¹ in a large and noble mansion, the first desire we should feel would be to run through its various apartments, and inspect² as closely as we could the rich furniture, the various curiosities, and antiquities, which we might suppose it to contain: or if, some bright day in Summer, we obtained³ admission⁴ into an extensive pleasure ground, where we might see, through the openings⁵ of the trees, glimpses, of beautiful gardens, of lofty hills, and foamy⁶ sparkling⁷ cascades,⁸ we should naturally feel eager to fly⁹ across the space between, and explore¹¹ the whole range of glade,¹² hill, and valley.

But suppose we found that the only room in the great mansion left open to us was that to which we had been admitted; or that to go over the apartments not immediately around us, would take a longer time than we had to spare; or that there was some cause which would render it dangerous for us to

1 *ḥaṭ* ح 2 *ḥaṭ* ح 3 *ḡala* غالا 4 *madḡala* ماذالا 5 *fetḡat* فتات
6 *lem* لم 7 *ḡawin* غاوين 8 *jero* جرو 9 *wa* وا 10 *naturu* ناتورو
11 *netett* نعتت 12 *ḡa* غا

penetrate¹³ through the winding¹⁴ passages¹⁵ and galleries of the building; what should we then do? We should not be less anxious¹⁶ to learn what the building contained; our curiosity¹⁷ would rather be increased; and we should no doubt be pleased, if we heard that there was some one in the house who knew every thing it contained; all that had happened in it; how its rooms were furnished; what curiosities were stored¹⁸ in its innermost¹⁹ recesses;²⁰ and that this person would willingly²¹ come and satisfy²² us on whatever point we might like to question him. Suppose in the same mansion, that the pleasure-ground were far too extensive to allow of our traversing²³ them, but to a small degree; that the hills and waterfalls²⁴ lay²⁵ at a considerable distance from us; it would, no doubt, be very agreeable, if some one well acquainted with the windings of the paths, could take us to a point of rising²⁶ ground, whence the whole scene might be contemplated²⁷ with ease²⁸, and at leisure.

Now the world is like this magnificent mansion or these vast plantations;³⁰ we can see but a very small portion of it; the wonders³¹ of its different climates are hidden³² by distance. Oceans³³ and deserts³⁴ must be crossed,³⁵ if we would view with our eyes

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17 reha 18 maczunin 19 el-aktar gewewin 20 dawda-
munfarida 21 lila 22 shehba-na 23 noforu
24 wacget-el-ma 25 jo-godu 26 alia 27 macsuba
28 mestra 29 fada 30 mu-awalcin 31 eginbiet 32 mu-
bijn 33 chra 34 harriet 35 maddijn



A. FERRIS.

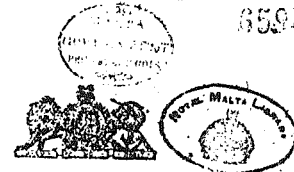
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MALTA.

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1886.

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efforts, however, Keenan was not impressed by the local teachers. In 1878, he commented on the lack of good display of maps on the walls and urged teachers to refer to the outlines of Malta when introducing map reading to children.¹⁴

Textbooks

For many years local education relied on reading books for Maltese and English to impart geographical knowledge. Again on being appointed Director of Education, Pullicino felt that more suitable textbooks were required. He travelled wide to see what textbooks were being used abroad. His choice was eventually that of H. Reid's "Physical Geography" and a "Compendium of Geography" published by the Irish National Schools.¹⁵ Later, Pullicino enlisted the help of two experienced local teachers, Annibale Preca and Achille Ferris to write badly needed textbooks.

The majority of the nineteenth-century Maltese textbooks contained lessons in political and descriptive geography. The language generally used, and often the content too, appears to have been difficult for young children. Keenan reported that "At the Zebbug Boys' School and indeed at many other schools, I found that the children were quite bewildered by the hardness of the words, and the difficulty of the matter".¹⁶ To make matters worse, the format of the textbooks was most unstimulating; consequently learning was reduced to the routine where the class as a whole was required to read a chapter, paraphrase it, add a map in illustration. As many textbooks included a list of exercises at the end of each chapter, homework or classwork was based on these.

In spite of all the difficulties and shortcomings, however, the teaching of geography in Elementary Schools was given an impetus, mainly through the efforts of Can. P. Pullicino, the Director of Education at the time.

References

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PROGRAMMA D'ISTRUZIONE		
Corso Primo		
Classe Prima	Rami d'Insegnamento	Libri
Geografia	Nozioni elementari di Cosmografia Forma Movimenti del Globo Rapporto del Globo col Sole. colla Luna. con altri Astri	Physical Geography by H. Reid
Corso Secondo		
Geografia.	Descrittiva. Descrizione delle parti del Globo. Esercizio di delineare mape sul Tabellone	
Corso Terzo		
Geografia	Fisica. Natura delle parti del Globo. Descrizione delle Terre. Descrizione deglie Esseri viventi. Fenomeni naturali. Esercizio di delineare. Circoli della Sfera. Gradi del Globo. Mappe sulla Carta.	Physical Geography by H. Reid
Corso Quarto.		
Geografia	Politica. Divisione dei Paesi. Leggi. Statistiche. Costruzione sulla carta. Mappe generali con gradi	Comp- endium of Geography

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