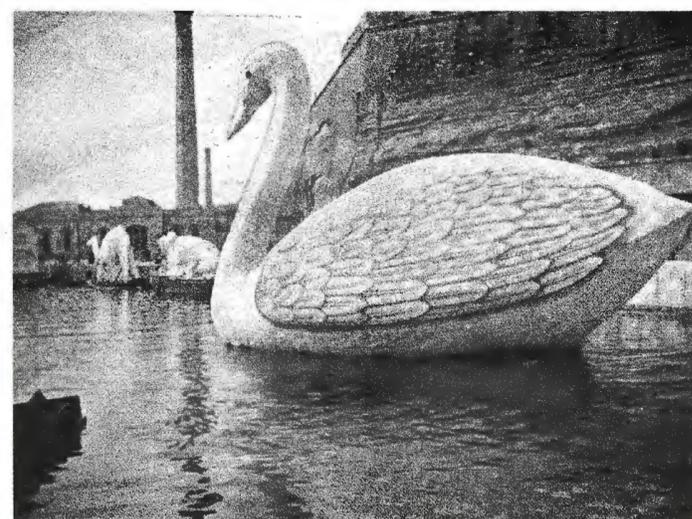




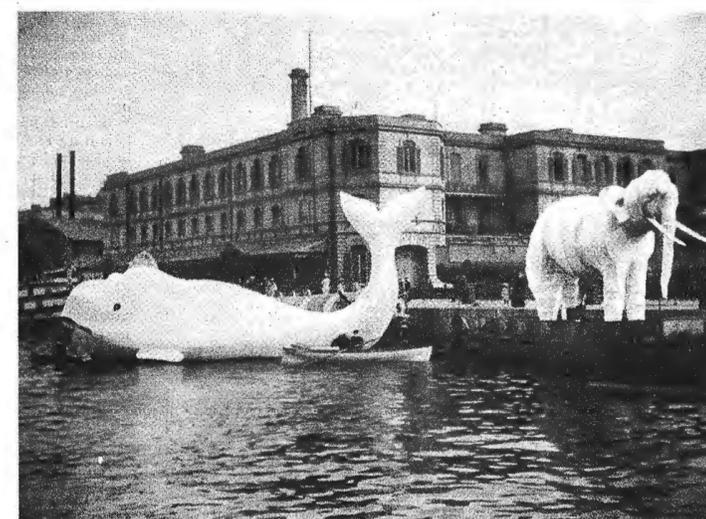
A water carnival float of a lion from HMS Caesar.



A water carnival float of a replica of the Hibernia from HMS Holvernia.



A water carnival float of a swan from HM's Dockyard.



Water carnival floats of a whale from HM's Drydocks, and of an elephant from HMS Canopus.

The 1901 royal pageant in Grand Harbour



GIOVANNI BONELLO

At least one person in Malta was hoping that the forthcoming royal visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York would turn propitious. Vincent Farrugia of Strada Saluto, Valletta, lately an assistant engineer at the Dockyard, had been asked by the crew to of HMS Monkey to write to the Admiralty to request payment for overtime work.

He wrote the letter, he said, because he was the only one around who could write. The Dockyard instantly fired him from his job, the punishment such impudence deserved. He was now begging their Royal Highnesses personally to solicit his re-employment, signing his petition "their obedient and humble and loyal servant", cringe de la cringe. The Admiralty snottily returned his petition, refusing to forward it to the Duke.

An event described by hardened contemporaries as "undoubtedly the finest sight ever seen in the Grand Harbour" deserves to be recollected. "Never," echoed an Italian-language paper, "have we seen a more splendid festival". Even making allowance for some hard-sell extravagance of the press, what we know of the night of Wednesday, March 27, 1901, would truly qualify as over-the-top grandiose. Even the anti-colonialist, nationalist Malta failed to disguise its admiration entirely.

One difference. The anti-Italian press described the pageant as a 'water carnival' while the pro-Italian paper referred to it, understandably, as a 'Venetian carnival'. Whatever the issue, the political lines were always drawn.

The event also earned major resonance in the international press. The *British Navy and Army Illustrated* featured it over two issues, once with a two-page spread, and so did the *French Armée et Marine*, both picture journals that targeted the armed forces – interestingly, in the French paper, the army comes before the navy, while in hearts-of-oak Britain, the navy takes precedence.

Petty Officer Harry Price, present throughout, described and even recorded the event in water colour, in his chronicle of *The Royal Tour, 1901*, which remained manuscript but

can be read in printed facsimile form. I have a number of images related to that event, which, I believe, have never been published again since 1901.

The royal visit to Malta marked the second stop in a long tour of the empire undertaken by the son of Edward VII, his Royal Highness the Duke of Cornwall and York and his wife, in 10 years' time to be crowned King George V and Queen Mary. This grand royal tour evidenced a political thank you from London for the support the empire had lavished on Great Britain in the Boer War.

The royals stopped at Gibraltar, Malta, Port Said, Aden, Ceylon, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Mauritius, South Africa, Canada and Newfoundland. Everywhere they met spectacular welcomes, in an empire-building propaganda exercise that cost millions in entertainment, decorations, pageants, security, presents – at a time when many native colonials were suffering severe hardships.

"Lights inside the floats switched on, turning them into bright fluorescent creatures gliding in the darkness around them"

In Malta it had an added message. The island was then in the throes of the distressing 'language question', with the British pressing to suffocate Italian, the language traditionally used for centuries, to introduce English instead. They spared no effort and expense to dazzle the natives with the unchallenged power, wealth and munificence of the British empire.

The Duke arrived in Malta on the *Ophir*, a refurbished liner, on March 25, three months after his grandmother, Queen Victoria, died and his father became King Edward VII. Numerous public and private engagements crowded the royals' stay in Malta, among others, an official visit to the naval dockyard, a grand children's rally at the Floriana granaries, to which boys and girls were carted from all over Malta (from Mellieha, on ambulances) to ensure that 6,000 young colonial throats warbled *God Save The King* in unison at the dip of

View of Grand Harbour with the liner *Ophir*, March 1901, by the court painter Edoardo de Martino.

an imperial baton. Artillery and gymnastics displays held sway at Corradino.

Curiously, one minor cultural event organised for the delectation of the royals left far more lasting consequences: the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce put together a 'Maltese Antiquity' exhibition in the grand hall of Palazzo Xara, opposite St John Co-Cathedral, in honour of the royals. That exhibition turned into the germ of the first national museum in Malta, inaugurated four years later on May 24, 1905, with Temi Zammit as founding curator. Enemy action destroyed Palazzo Xara in World War II, and its footprint has now been taken over by post-war St John's Square.

The highlight of the royal visit was to be a naval spectacle in Grand Harbour, to coincide with the departure of the *Ophir* at midnight. The organisers spared no efforts, pared no costs. Massive promotion ensured that "all Malta" turned out to watch it. For once, the government levied a fee on spectators who wanted a good viewpoint and guaranteed seating. At the Upper Barakka, admission cost 1s. 6d, at the Lower Barakka the entrance ticket set you back one third of that. Other vantage points were free, first-come, first-served.

Immense crowds turned out, lining all the bastions overlooking Grand Harbour, medal-wearing overlords and natives elbowing for the frontline. According to the *Malta* "from 8pm, huge crowds overflowed to the bastions overlooking the harbour, the Upper and Lower Barakkas, on the waterfront, and there was no

window, roof or balcony facing the harbour that was not crammed with people coming from all over the island to admire and enjoy the beautiful Venetian festival organised by Vice-Admiral Fisher". The *Chronicle* stated that "practically all Malta assembled... the walls, bastions, curtains, Baraccas, forts and approaches were simply crowded with happy sightseers".

And Malta added "notwithstanding the dangerous overcrowding on the bastions, no accidents were reported and public order was not minimally disturbed". But then some criticism of the police: why didn't they ban vehicles from passing through the crowds squeezed on the harbour waterfront? It was a miracle that no one was hurt by the vehicles (not cars) that arrogantly forced their way through the crowds, to the indignation of the public.

What follows comes from the newspapers and periodicals mentioned above. I must remark on the standard of Maltese journalism of the times. The reporters, both in English and Italian, wrote almost impeccable prose, with unconcealed literary ambitions. Nothing routine or let's get it over with; on the contrary, a good command of idiomatic turns of phrase. It's as if the reporters were entering an essay competition, daunted by the threat of fastidious judges. Of course, the prose may today seem emphatic or rhetorical. Better emphasis than sloppiness, methinks.

The organisers planned the whole pageant around the British fleet, the mightiest war machine the world had ever seen. In Grand

Harbour were the awe-inspiring warships HMS *Renown*, *Ramillies*, *Andromeda*, *Diana*, *Caesar*, *Canopus*, *Emperor of India* and many others, as the main actors. Spectacular fireworks, music, waltzing searchlights contributed, but an original water carnival added the most strikingly memorable note to the evening.

Vice-Admiral John Fischer (who many consider the greatest British admiral since Nelson), on appointing the organising committee on March 12, had invited the ships and the public in Malta to contribute water floats to the planned carnival, offering lavish prizes for the best-decorated. The British Mediterranean fleet, the Dockyard and the British-owned yacht *White Lady* took up the invitation enthusiastically, but not a single Maltese chipped in. Passive resistance by boycott.

The committee set a general theme for the water carnival – Noah's Ark. Two 'arks' took part, the proper Ark from HMS *Illustrious*, and a smaller replica of the *Hibernia*, from the depot-ship herself, on which a military band played martial music while it glided around the harbour. The other floats, built around very large boats or barges, represented animals from the Ark – a swan and a whale from the Dockyards, a camel from the *Royal Oak*, the extinct dodo from the *Victorious*, the British heraldic lion from the *Caesar*, the Welsh Dragon from the *Gladiator*, an elephant from the *Canopus*. And a crocodile, an owl, an animal that started as a bulldog but then grew into a rhino, a sea-serpent, a kangaroo, sheep and more from other ships.

The owners of the *White Lady* decorated and illuminated her 'splendidly'. The boat had previously belonged to Lillie Langtry, the most talked-about actress of her times, mistress of Edward VII when he was Prince of Wales, and later of Prince Louis of Battenberg. Her boat eventually went to Lawson Johnston, the millionaire inventor of Bovril. It was only fair that Langtry, who for years had amused the Prince of Wales, should now see her former boat amuse his son. If it was any comfort to him, the Duke of Cornwall's father had not cheated on his mother on that boat.

Get a taste of the *Chronicle's* prose: the strange glowing monsters, aquatic and terrestrial and amphibious which glided noiselessly, in and out, through the great ships, seeming to gaze at them with wonder and to sail away from them in astonishment. There were great leviathans with upcast, gleaming, threatening

flukes, there were crocodiles with moving, flaming jaws, ready to devour, there were swans of the mammoth age and of antediluvian size, there were huge and innocent-looking sheep, sea serpents, colossal elephants, owls, camels, dromedaries, Noah's arks, lions, miniature *Hibernias*, dragons and whales and we know not what else. What a scene of the real and the unreal, the serious and the ludicrous, the serene and the imperious and the simple and submissive! End of quote.

Novel and striking for Malta in this water carnival was the use of floats. Over a metal or wooden armature shaping the desired animal, the carpenters stretched translucent cloth. Strong electric lights were placed inside the armature. When, at a signal, the other illuminations dimmed, the lights inside the floats switched on, turning them into bright fluorescent creatures gliding in the darkness around them.

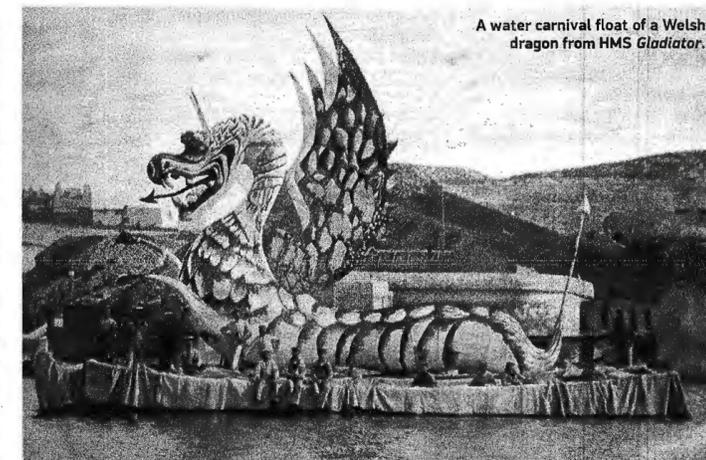
Special effects enhanced the drama: the mouths of dragons spewed flames and crocodiles devoured lesser animals. These effects do not show in the photographs taken in daytime, but Harry Price's watercolour of the event captures the dramatic contrast between the floating transparencies and the surrounding darkness.

The use of huge public transparencies dated from the times of the Knights: large allegorical paintings in transparent colours on translucent cloth, at night illuminated from the back. What the 1901 pageant added to the concept was the newly discovered wonder of electric light, only introduced in Malta in December 1896, and the fact that the tableaux were moveable.

The mini-*Hibernia* carried off the coveted Admiral's award. Second prize went to the Malta Dockyard's huge swan.

The festival proper started at 8pm with the simultaneous firing of 500 'star rockets' from various points surrounding the harbour, but mainly from Corradino Hill. Hundreds of other fireworks later "soared to a not insignificant height and then exploded noisily, returning to earth in a dazzling rain of fire and stars... to these were added the bangs of the petards that sounded like cannon fire and the hurrahs of the soldiers who lined the bastions".

By all accounts, the fireworks for this occasion proved impressive and extravagant. The press does not disclose who supplied them: Maltese artisans or British factories? A previous royal visit to Malta, that of the Prince of Wales in 1867, should have taught the



A water carnival float of a Welsh dragon from HMS Gladiator.

organisers an expensive lesson. Maltese craftsmen had offered to provide an unforgettable display for £100, but the authorities had spurned their offer and awarded the contract to the old London firm Messrs James Pain for five times that cost.

A fiddle and a disappointment. What Pain delivered was "a veritable mockery, all the more bitter because it cost the trifle of 500 gold sovereigns. The country was fooled." The matter ended in court. Had lessons been learnt?

At 11pm the regiments, with their respective bands, marched to prearranged points on the bastions to witness the *Ophir* leave – 350 of the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers, 250 of the 3rd, 300 of the Royal Malta Artillery, 500 of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers, 350 of the Royal Garrison Artillery (Central) and 300 of the same artillery (Oriental). Another 100 of the RMA were deployed on St Angelo's point.

Every man had a Bengal flare which he was to ignite at a prearranged signal – a blue rocket fired from HMS *Renown*, where the royal couple were dining with high dignitaries from the services and from Malta, before returning to the *Ophir*. Another 500 rockets were let off from Corradino Hill, concurrently with the personal Bengal flares which each of the over-2,000 soldiers ignited.

What was the moment of departure like? "As the *Ophir*, still in a state of brilliance,

proceeded out of the harbour, showers of bright light ascended, the whole effect being too beautiful and brilliant to describe, guns thundered forth a parting salute and their God speed, the enthusiastic onlookers cheered themselves hoarse, whilst the boys in blue on the forecastles, on the riggings, on the sides, in every place like ants; and the gentlemen in khaki cheered and cheered while the sirens of the merchant vessels in the harbour effectively assisted in a farewell such as was never accorded to anyone leaving Malta's shores before".

And, to round off, a maudlin bout of imperial sentimentality: "all experienced the peculiar sensation, natural to us, when we are about to part from those we love and reverence". Did "all" include the Maltese population? If it did, the feeling must have been entirely one-sided.

On leaving Grand Harbour the royal couple sent a telegram of thanks: "We appreciate profoundly the splendid welcome accorded to us by the Mediterranean Fleet". No mention of Malta and of the Maltese. Those did not count, now, did they?

Acknowledgements

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