

A rare publication by Grand Master Hompesch's head of secretariat



In 2011, Joe Scicluna published 'The Doublet Memoirs' and the 'Poussielgue Report' in a book titled *Malta Surrendered - An Eyewitness Account of Napoleon's Invasion in 1798*.

In his introduction, Scicluna wrote that some knights, exiled in Russia after the invasion of Malta by Napoleon, accused a group of several high-ranking knights and other intellectuals, including Pierre-Jean-Louis-Ovide Doublet, with betrayal of the Order of St John.

Doublet, born in France in 1749, had become the head of the Order's secretariat in Malta, having direct access to all official documents, public or private, including the correspondence with all the European potentates. So his memoirs, published in 1883, are a mine of information.

Louis de Boisgelin, a French knight who went into exile after 1798, endorsed the accusation of Doublet's betrayal in his book *Ancient and Modern Malta*, published in London in 1804, and reissued twice with the date 1805, followed by a French translation published in Paris in 1809 by Marquis de Fortia (de Pilles), a member of the Academy of Marseilles.

On the other hand, an opposite view was expressed by Dominique Miège, the French consul in Malta for many years before he started publishing his *Histoire de Malte* in



A copper engraving (183 x237mm) by Jean Duplessi-Berteaux entitled *Capitulation der Insel Malta* (Capitulation of the island of Malta).

1840-1841 both in Brussels and in Paris. Miège categorically rebutted the accusations of Boisgelin and others.

He wrote that many knights adhered to the ideology of the French Revolution and were convinced that the Order could not survive its consequences, in which case they preferred to see Malta falling into the hands of the French rather than any other European power. He added that, nevertheless, none of them were capable of ever betraying their Order, and he examined what he believed were the real causes that led to the Order's downfall.

During his long stay in Malta, Miège endeavoured to obtain as much extensive and accurate information as possible, and, as Mgr Salvatore Cumbo wrote in *Il Filologo* of January 17, 1941, he had gone through various manuscript accounts written by Maltese who had first-hand knowledge of the invasion of Malta.

In his memoirs, Doublet summed up his sentiments very appropriately when he wrote: "My heart was torn between reason, honour and necessity." The same difficult predicament faced most of his French colleagues and compatriots.

Doublet, son of Jean-Louis and Jeanne Desire, was born on August 25, 1749. He arrived in Malta in 1779. He married a Maltese woman, Elizabetta Magri, on April 19, 1784. In 1798 the couple and their six children lived in a small house in Strada Zecca, Valletta, near the Carmelite church. He died, a widower, on February 4, 1824.

Probably in 1805, he started writing his memoirs and completed them in 1820. They remained in manuscript form until 1883 when they were published in Paris by his lifetime friend Count de Pansse-Passis, with the title *Mémoires historique sur l'invasion et occupation de Malte par une Armée Française, en 1798*.

The book is a highly-detailed account consisting of 423 pages. Doublet was sensitive to the widespread and harsh accusations made against him and he therefore felt he should endeavour to lay down the truthful facts in his memoirs.

His book served as the main platform on which all historians based their account of the French interlude in Malta. All bibliographies signal his memoirs as the only work to carry his name. I was under this impression when I wrote the foreword to Scicluna's publication. It seems, however, that during his lifetime, Doublet had published a treatise to justify his conduct, although his name is not given as its author.

I happen to have in my collection a copy of this treatise published without the author's name, which is not available at the National Library of Malta. It is titled *Il trionfo dell'innocenza e della verità o sia confutazione degli errori, e falsità sparsi fin ora senza veruna prova sulla caduta di Malta in mano de'*

An anonymous lithograph (147 x 198mm) entitled 'Taking Malta'. The caption reads: Since the Grand Master had refused to allow the entire fleet to enter the harbour, Bonaparte seized Malta by force. (*Einnahme von Malta. Da der Großmeister die Einfahrt der ganzen Flotte in den Hafen verweigert hatte, so bemächtigte sich Bonaparte Malta's mit Gewalt*).



Francesi, published in Rome in 1816 "nella Stamperia de Romanis".

One should note that this book was not written to give a historical account of Napoleon's invasion, but exclusively to establish the 'truth' about the causes that led to the surrender of the island.

Although the book is anonymous, the copy I possess has on the title page in old ink the identity of the author: "Opera del Signor Doublet".

The book is written in the first person with the writer's declaration on the first page of the introduction that he wanted to disprove various errors that had seen the light of day against Grand Master Ferdinand Hompesch.

The author added that he had suffered in silence libellous accusations spread throughout Europe against himself personally, but he could not tolerate the slanders being directed against the Grand Master, although by nature, Hompesch was no hero.

Internal evidence leaves no doubt that the attribution to Doublet is correct. In a footnote on page 48, while mentioning Chevalier Anthony O'Hara, the Russian ambassador of the Order, the author referred to "le istoriche mie memorie" (my historical memoirs), which corresponds exactly to the title of the Doublet book published in 1883: *Mémoires historique*.

On page 56, the author started giving a few of his own biographical details. He wrote that he was

in the Secretariat of State since 1781 working incessantly with complete dedication to the interests of the Order under two Grand Masters, the last one having passed away in 1797 (Francisco Ximenes de Texada). The said secretary (Doublet), now erroneously counted as one of the conspirators, never failed to keep the Grand Master well informed about the fortress and to stress that it was up to him to take all the necessary measures in its defence.

What is even more captivating is the assertion that when Hompesch signed the suspension of hostilities, the said secretary was the only one to utter a voice against the deputies sent to Napoleon to draft the instrument of capitulation. He lamented that their appointment and departure to meet Napoleon had been done at reckless speed and that certain written conditions should have been laid down for this deputation to be later approved by the Grand Master in Council to render them valid.

Furthermore, the author wrote that, on the night of June 10-11, at the sound of gun-shots from the Order's French area, and in the midst of terror and panic in the streets, he had gone to the Palace and was really taken aback to hear the deputation of barons, jurats and other vili forsennati (cowardly, frenzied people), consisting of five individuals, stressing the urgency of the capitulation.

He had advised (a mio parere) the Grand Master to convene a meeting of the Order's Council to inform the members of the armistice and to deliberate on the terms of the reply to be sent to Bonaparte and the choice and appointment of the deputation to meet him (p. 51).

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After this statement, the author gave a lengthy account of what the secretary of Hompesch did in the interest of the Order when faced with the sudden end of the existence of the Order in Malta. He summed up asserting that all he had done and written clearly proved that "the said Secretary Doublet" had been unjustly painted

by his detractors. Instead, he was the unfortunate and honourable victim of those happenings, having lost his employment, prosperity, and one-half of his family. He lacked the necessities of life and had to maintain two daughters when he was over 60 years of age. This is the first time in the book that the name Doublet occurs; in 1816 Doublet was 65 years of age.

On June 17, 1798, the humiliated Hompesch left Malta for Trieste. On the eve of his departure, he sent a message to his secretary to inform him that he had appointed Chevalier de Saint Priest as his secretary-in-chief. Extremely surprised, the secretary went to the Grand Master in his private chamber, who told him that, although he had not given credence to his prudent and disinterested advice, he had now realised he had been hearing the truth.

After indicating his state of mind, he turned to the secretary addressing him as follows: "Caro Doublet, verrete voi meco?" (Dear Doublet, would you come with me?). He added that Doublet knew how sensitive he was; he felt pilloried by everyone, and he implored Doublet to accompany him (p. 61).

Doublet rejoined that he would gladly comply, provided the Grand Master allowed him to take with him his wife and their six children. Hompesch explained that this would be too embarrassing, confessing in tears that he was very

weak, and imploring Doublet to defend his honour and to seek the truth at all times.

It seems that Doublet heeded this last request of Hompesch, who died of asthma on May 12, 1805, in the French town of Montpellier. It was then that Doublet started writing his memoirs with the main purpose to clear not only his own name, but also the memory of Hompesch. This, he claimed, had induced him to publish the 1816 book.

Although various reports of the French capitulation included the name of Doublet as one of the conspirators, a manuscript account extant among the Trieste papers sheds a different light as it fails to mention him as one of the 'traitors'.

The account, entitled *Precis historique de la prise de Malte par les Français*, follows a protest of Hompesch against the capture of Malta. It provides the names of the veritable auteurs of the trahison (the true authors of treason), namely, the Knights Ransijat, de Fay, de Bardonnanche, the servant-at-arms Fousart, abbé Breuvar, abbé Santilleau and abbé Beaufort. The Knights Dolomieu, Picot and Baras (sic) could reasonably be included among the traitors. Doublet's name is absent. A copy of this account, attributed to Knight-Commander Muller, exists at the National Library.

It would be a useful exercise to compare the contents of this book with those of the *Mémoires*.



Wood engraving of Pierre-Jean-Louis-Ovide Doublet by Jules Jean Marie Huyot, 1883. Right: Title page of *Il Trionfo dell'innocenza e della verità...*

