

Australia's Maltese Language Press

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Few non-English newspapers in Australia can be more 'invisible' to the wider community, *prima facie*, than the Maltese ones. Although mainly if not exclusively in the Maltese language, these almost invariably have had English or English-sounding titles. Currently the two main publications - both weeklies, and both published in Sydney's western suburbs - are *The Maltese Herald*,¹ started in 1961, and *The Malta Cross*,² in 1985. Two monthly publications are *The Times of Malta*, published in Melbourne,³ and *Malta*, a political review, started in Sydney in 1982.⁴ Another paper, which has included a literary supplement, and was published intermittently since 1956, is *The Voice of Malta (It-Lehen ta' Malta)*.⁵ Other publications appeared from time to time but were short-lived. Historically, the most important of these is *The Malta News*.⁶ Mainly in English, it was published, in the 1940s, in Melbourne.

Former British subjects, many Maltese came to Australia when Malta was a British colony, and the centuries-old Maltese language was not much studied then other than at a rudimentary level. Consequently these first generation emigrants adopted English titles for all their Maltese publications.

The other reason why, somehow, the Maltese press in Australia is 'invisible' is that, simply enough, little or no reference tends to be made to it in source books and catalogues. In his *Directory of Australian Public Libraries*, Alan L. Bundy, Librarian at South Australia's Institute of Technology, altogether omits Maltese Australian publications.⁷ No entry appears in the index under "Maltese", whereas there are several entries for other languages, from Turkish to Yiddish. Even the union list of *Newspapers in Australian Libraries*, a vital information source for every librarian and student, only refers to an apparently imperfect collection of *The Maltese Herald*, held at the Mitchell Library in New South Wales, and the early *Maltese News* at the Australian National Library. From another source it transpired that, in Victoria, one city library, that in Sunshine where most of the residents are Malta-born, keeps *The Maltese Herald*. The Australian National Library in Canberra holds copies of *The Malta Cross*.

These *lacunæ* in Australian national bibliographical data are only partly attributable to the incomplete state of preparation for existing computer readable catalogues. Explanations have to be sought else-

where. One explanation surely lies in the fact that until quite recently non-English or non-'mainstream' publications were disregarded by the wider community. For instance in South Australia in 1973 the number of Maltese language volumes in public libraries was nil; by 1984 there were 400 titles.⁸ Another no less important explanation has to do directly with the nature of the Maltese Australian press itself, if not with the perceived function of an "ethnic" press here generally. By its very nature, a non-English language press in a predominantly English-speaking country (with a Union Jack in its flag) tends towards an inward-looking approach. In other words, such vision as these publications have tends to be restricted to appealing to those who are most likely to wish or need to read them on a habitual basis. For the most part, readerships would have consisted of migrants caught in at least some degree of ghettoization. None of the editors of the publications mentioned was a professional journalist or had been a working journalist before emigrating: they were self-made, *de facto* journalists, catering for unattended needs in the country of settlement. Hardly any were graduates in any field.

Their publications were of two kinds: those that served a philanthropic community purpose but were 'spare time' efforts, relying entirely on volunteers and helpers; and those that could at least sustain the owner and/or the editor in the nature of a full-time occupation. *The Maltese Herald* and *The Malta Cross* belong to the latter category; so far as is known, none of the others do. Even so, neither one of these weeklies has an audited circulation. The editor of one is best known as a sports commentator, although he has lent a hand in a wide variety of other activities as a result of his job; the other, a more recent emigrant, started as his assistant, then went into the printing business and branched out on his own. As most Maltese emigrating after 1971 were not Malta Labour Party supporters, as most arrivals had been previously, it was felt that another newspaper was now needed and had an untapped market. The two papers are rivals, exposing usually opposed viewpoints so far as Maltese politics are concerned. Neither one has taken care to ensure that it is properly listed and quoted in the country's catalogues and source books, quite possibly because, given the nature of the enterprise, the significance of such institutionalization is not properly understood. The Phillip Institute of Technology in Coburg, Victoria, the only Australian tertiary institution where Maltese studies are taught, neither stocks nor receives these newspapers, nor do the state libraries, with one exception in perhaps the case of one of them.⁹

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The publications depend on subscriptions as well as on sales in newsagencies, often including those in train stations and especially in areas of Maltese concentration in the Western suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney. The leading newspapers usually are or have been members of the Ethnic Press Association of Australia. Both the weeklies currently published from Sydney have correspondents and advertising agents in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth, where there are established Maltese communities - the largest of these being in the Melbourne area (some 28,000 actually *born* in the Maltese Islands), closely followed by the Sydney area.

While it is easy enough to notice certain amateur characteristics in this type of journalism what is remarkable is that it has survived and battles on. That it does thrive must be as much a statement on the deficiencies of mainstream Australian journalism - its insensibilities, due partly to monolingualism - as it is a feather in the hat for the promoters of the non-English press. Not only are their resources very limited, but a non-English newspaper has peculiar social functions that it is obliged to respond to. Formerly a daily newspaper editor myself, when in 1985 I stood in briefly for the editor of one of the Sydney weeklies while he was away in Malta it became clear to me that his Merrylands office was to some extent a social information centre as well as a newspaper's. People would phone to enquire about anything and everything, occasionally reducing the editor and his staff to journalists-turned-counsellors. Apart from other considerations, pressures from such callers wasted precious time, but characterized the paper's history and could bind on its reputation. Australia has a large Maltese population, consisting of some 58,000 actually *born* in the Maltese Islands, many of these with larger-than-average families; and a few thousand others of direct Maltese descent who however came to Australia from countries such as Egypt or Libya (Tripolitania), Tunisia or Britain.

The content analysis that follows is based on a reading of *The Maltese Herald* and *The Malta Cross* for the period January to December 1986. Almost entirely in Maltese, these papers occasionally publish letters and/or features in English when these concern Malta or the Maltese directly or indirectly.

There is considerable differentiation in the reporting of political news about Australia and that from the mother country. Whereas in reporting the former, the chief criteria determining news value relate to so-called ethnic affairs irrespective of which party is or is not in power, in reporting the latter, partisan criteria or prejudices clearly predominate in both the newspapers although not in the same way.

Although attempts at ensuring some balance and impartiality have been made, the paper is seen as essentially supportive of the Malta Labour Party and the other of the *Partit Nazzjonalista*. Another pertinent difference between the reporting of Australian and Maltese news is that whereas living in Australia permits a certain awareness of changes in this society and in attitudes as these evolve over the years, being away from the country of origin for a long time prevents such an awareness developing about changes there, so old-time memories, prejudices and impressions tend to continue to hold sway - the longer the settler has been in Australia the stauncher the memory. As both newspapers depend for their news on newspapers from Malta which have tended to be intensely polarized, there is little critical or objective assessment "here" as to what is actually going on there from an Australian perspective, other than vague condemnations of violence or indeed of excessive polarization. Although Malta's national daily press dates back - as in Britain and in Europe - to the 1880s, it began:

as a direct consequence of pro-British and anti-British currents. From the very start, that is, we had journalism the main aim of which was propagandistic and partisan. We have never grown out of this. Maltese journalism grew in an unnatural political climate and was more seriously conditioned by colonialism than is generally understood... Nor is the Maltese journalistic tradition as solid as it may seem. This is the inevitable consequence of the havoc caused by successive waves and patterns of assimilation. In the last two centuries this little island changed drastically from being exclusively Italianate in education to being predominantly anglicised in outlook: it is now becoming more and more Maltese. As people are not made of clay, such transfusions of different life-styles resulted in an uneasy metamorphosis; there could be no plastic adjustments.¹⁰

The daily paper in the Maltese vernacular is a comparatively recent development, the first such paper in recent times being the pro-British *Il-Berqa* (1930-1968), followed by the pro-Labour *L-Orizzont* (1962-), the Catholic Church's *Il-Hajja* (1970-1987), and the Nationalists' *In-Nazzjon Taghna* (1970-).¹¹

Ironically, in Australia Maltese voting patterns, by party, need bear no relation to those in Malta. It is not so uncommon to find supporters or sympathizers of the Socialist or "Mintoffian" party of

Malta voting Liberal here; even less uncommon is it to find paid-up members of the Christian Democratic side in Maltese politics, represented by the Nationalist Party, being simultaneously paid-up members of the ALP. While I have no statistics to back up this evidence I do know it for a fact through participant observation in the few years that I have been involved with the Maltese Australian community. It is also evident from "ethnic" newspaper comment. Neither of the weeklies being surveyed would hesitate to publish prominently full-page promotional material from whichever party. More important is the ethnicity of the politician. John Aquilina, Minister of Youth and Community Services and Assistant Minister for Ethnic Affairs in Barry Unsworth's Cabinet, is respected in the community at large, and is a doyen of the Maltese Australian press, centred as it is in New South Wales rather than in Victoria. Malta-born and conversant in Maltese, and a graduate of Sydney University, Aquilina progressed from being a teacher to becoming Mayor of Blacktown, a largely Maltese area which he then represented in the State Parliament. He first became a Minister in 1984 and earned a reputation for effective, down-to-earth public affairs management, becoming if not the chief "patron" of Maltese in Australian certainly the most successful politician among them. However, a Liberal MP in New South Wales, Paul Zammit, being of Maltese extraction, is also sometimes given publicity, if only as a counterweight to Aquilina, although Zammit has lost the linguistic and cultural connections retained by Aquilina, as has another MP born of Maltese parents in Victoria, Edward Micallef (ALP), whose constituency in Springvale contains a noteworthy Maltese element. Aquilina, Zammit and also Micallef can be seen occasionally at Maltese community functions in their respective States and would thus receive a mention in the Maltese press as being among the "notables" present for the occasion. Prospective candidates for municipal elections make use of the newspapers in electioneering, noting their ethnicity, through advertisements and press releases.

In editorial opinion or news coverage on Australian politics there is no discernible bias against the ALP in *The Malta Cross* - which may even carry the same photograph of Immigration Minister Chris Hurford twice on separate pages in the same issue - or against the Liberal Party in *The Maltese Herald* - which invariably allots space generously to Shadow Minister Alan Cadman. The focus tends to be on immigration matters and ethnic affairs.

Editorial concerns vary enormously and cover the gamut of events, although there is a marked tendency to write about Maltese

affairs locally or overseas, or to try and compare or adduce similarities to situations of interest to Maltese. Since *The Malta Cross* started publication in 1985, a certain rivalry developed with the more established paper, *The Maltese Herald*, and a degree of pettiness, of parochialism even is not always absent from related exchanges, although the two papers carry on not mentioning one another by name, each pretending that the other does not exist or is unworthy.

Commenting editorially on the appointment of the Jupp commission in March 1986, *The Maltese Herald* was cryptic, even cynical, noting that while appeals about consultations with ethnic communities were being made, in fact the number of welfare officers engaged in migrant services was being cut down. Migrants, including the "established" communities, needed real assistance, it added, not "hot air" programmes.¹² However the Jupp review's recommendations were prominently covered, as were comments about these by the Ethnic Communities Council.¹³ *The Malta Cross* campaigned strongly against discrimination in the field of social security, comparing this to *apartheid*. The reciprocal agreements with New Zealand of 15 April 1949 and with the U.K. of 29 January 1958 were held to discriminate against migrants from other countries, including Malta.¹⁴ Interestingly, the paper commented that Malta was a Commonwealth country - an argument reminiscent of earlier Maltese attachment to their British subject status in seeking emigration to or employment in Australia. The paper applauded the extension to three years of an emigrant's re-entry right to Australia.¹⁵

Advertising accurately reflects certain immediate interests and concerns of the community. State or Federal advertising on matters of special concern to migrants - from ESL courses to health warnings - is an important source of revenue for the newspapers. As the family is a core value in Maltese culture as is the Catholic religion, births, marriages and especially deaths feature prominently. Visits by VIP's from Malta - such as political or religious leaders - excite special supplements and many photographs, as happened in 1986 with the visits of President Agatha Barbara and equally of Archbishop Guzeppi Mercieca, and indeed on the occasion of Pope John Paul's visit to Australia. Food always features, too: *pastizzi* ("cheesecakes") which have successfully penetrated the Australian market; the semi-sweet drink *Kinnie* patented by Malta's Simonds - Farsons-Cisk brewery but made in Australia; also various kinds of meats - sausages and related foodstuffs (*zazzett*, *mazzitt*), and the very popular, long-time favourite dairy products known as *gbejniet*

(fresh cream or peppered). Practically all kinds of these "take-away" type foods are available especially in western Sydney and western Melbourne from various competing outlets. The more sophisticated Maltese cuisine is less readily available as Maltese restaurants hardly exist, but these dishes are of course regular fare in Maltese homes as well as occasionally, in Victoria, at the *Centru Malti* in Parkville, and in Sydney at the Phoenician Club.

The most important single source of advertising revenue for Maltese newspapers in Australia appears to be the travel business, mainly journeys to and from Malta. Estate agents also advertise but not anywhere as frequently as travel agents. One newspaper editor in Melbourne is himself a travel (and estate) agent, as are one or two of the correspondents in other cities. Competition among travel agents, who are themselves Maltese, is rife - each one promising the best and the cheapest - partly because, to the great inconvenience of the Maltese Australian public, direct flights to Malta have been few and far between. Moreover, in spite of the demand that evidently exists, Malta is at present rarely included as a "stop over" in excursion fares to or from Europe.

As I have explained in another context, religion and religious or quasi-religious practices have long been a dominant feature in Maltese culture, and in the past decade there has been a blossoming of these ceremonies, festivities and festivals in Australia.¹⁶ Most central to this unmistakable feature of Malteseness is the "festa" of the patron saint of the town or village of origin, in which the brass band (*il-banda*) plays an active part. As amply illustrated through many references from the Maltese Australian papers, articles on these activities - the outdoor and indoor social gatherings, religious and profane - regularly fill much space. Paid advertising of related functions, such as dinner dancers, is also common. As a generally religious and devout community - unorthodox views rarely feature in the papers in this area - there tends to be a rejection of Australia's "liberation" philosophies. A reading of the Maltese press on the whole confirms the sentiments of its audience as conservative Catholic, if not as threatened by what is perceived as the lack of moral values, with *The Malta Cross* rather more religiously inclined. Throughout August 1986, however, *The Maltese Herald* carried advertisements by an escort girl agency which left little to the imagination; in other words orthodoxy is not always so encapsulated.

Theatrical productions (*tejatrini*) and band club performances also attract attention in the newspaper columns.

SBS is followed - but the radio more so than the television, where Maltese films or films about Malta or the Maltese are few and far between, and not always of the best quality when shown. From 1975 onwards television in Malta became a government monopoly and was supposed to produce "a socialist generation". In view of this politicization, which inevitably encouraged mediocrity, demand for Maltese productions could hardly be met here. Maltese theatre and song and dance, however, could be made accessible easily, if properly filmed for showing on a TV network such as SBS. Any such arrangement would meet a long-standing grievance of Maltese in Australia so far as SBS showings are concerned, since very few Maltese films as such are produced. Complaints about this situation have often been voiced, but the remedies so far are not apparent. The absence of high quality Maltese artistic and cultural programmes on Australian television is clearly a contributory cause to the assimilative tendencies demonstrated by the Maltese migrant community in general, their apparently low self-image in relation to other groups, and the comparatively low rate of retention of the Maltese language from one generation to the next. In a recent report Dr. Maurice Cauchi highlighted these and other disadvantages for which service delivery is inadequate or non-existent.¹⁷ Although the Maltese Community's profile has somewhat changed in recent years, even in 1983, according to an ABS survey, only 45.48 percent of the 93.98 percent who spoke Maltese socially could read the language. Clyne noted this was the greatest discrepancy "between speaking and reading"; moreover only 86 percent of these Maltese speakers could read English.¹⁸

As for the radio, letters do appear every now and again to praise or criticize a particular person or programme; sometimes these are rather personal and pointed. In *The Malta Cross* during 1986 there was a sustained campaign against alleged discrimination by 2EA in Sydney whose director was held not to permit sufficient time to opponents of the then Socialist regime in power in Malta, when news from Valletta was often propagandistic and sometimes unreliable or misleading.

The SBS-ABC merger was generally opposed out of fear that the multi-lingual and multi-cultural component would be swamped and suppressed by an 'Anglo'-dominated set-up. These sentiments were succinctly expressed by Al Grassby in his "pouring a bottle of good wine into the Yarra" analogy. A leader of the campaign to save SBS was Tony Bonnici, Chairman of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. In this he had the undoubted support of the Maltese

community. Although Channel 28 has not competed with the commercial stations, said one editorial, it surely had "opened their eyes to another world which they never bothered to visit."¹⁹ "When they tell you that the change to VHF will be for the better", commented another correspondent, "they will be taking you for a ride (*bellghulkom ir-ross bil-labra*)", adding:

We Maltese have little cause to be satisfied with the service SBS is giving us. We deserve better than such shameful treatment. But if we were to become part of the ABC we might as well give up hope altogether. This corporation's attitude towards the migrant in the past should serve as a mirror for the future.²⁰

So far as leisure is concerned, by far the most important sport is soccer. Maltese soccer teams, with which towns or villages of origin are frequently associated, are keenly reported on in the press and, also by direct transmission, on radio. Equally if not more important are the 'Maltese' soccer clubs, mainly those in Melbourne (Sunshine George Cross and Green Gully) and in Sydney (Melita Eagles). Local sports reporting is consistently the most direct and engaging form of news comment in both the Maltese Australian weeklies, which each devote at least two pages to sport. In sports as in politics, however, ethnicity is of the essence. Horse racing, always a Maltese favourite, becomes most important where Darren Gauci is involved. Boxing, which in Malta has few practitioners, became a box office smash hit thanks to Jeff Fenech. The same applies in other fields - in music, for instance, Jo Jo Zepp, alias Joe Camilleri, can be a focus of attention: if not so much for what it is that he composed, played or sung, because he is Maltese, in this case Malta-born. Such celebrities of Australiana serve many Maltese as ego and morale boosters.

Community-related services are widely publicized - old age homes established in both Sydney and in Melbourne during 1986 received much coverage and support. The New South Wales as well as the Victoria community councils, and other welfare and cultural organisations, regularly have press releases carried in both the weeklies being surveyed here.

In the welfare and cultural field Melbourne's Albert Agius, Australia correspondent of *The Times* in Valletta and an amateur photographer, has been active as a reporter and commentator in recent years. It is to his complete private collection of Maltese

Australian newspapers, in East Doncaster, that I was obliged to turn in order to prepare this brief survey. Other important figures who command a following and whose writings often bear on Maltese language literature, Maltese history and culture and related topics include Gorg Chetcuti, a grandee in the literature columns of both newspapers; Dr. Joe Abela, who although in retirement has continued to be intellectually active in defence of Malteseness; Pauline Curmi, best known perhaps for her children's stories of 'Gogo gurdien' and a teacher of Maltese; Mark Caruana and George Griffiths who have done significant pioneering work especially in the field of oral history with elderly Maltese settlers; and several other correspondents who specialize in a variety of topics. Poetry in Maltese is also published regularly in the newspapers as well as in anthologies.²¹

In conclusion it should be said that although the Maltese-Australian press has neither the professionalism, financial backing or widely-organized distribution of leading non-English papers such as *Neos Kosmos* or *Il Globo*, its persistence and evolution over the years and what appears to be the singular disregard of Malta and of the Maltese community by the 'mainstream' media of Australia auger for some improvement in the future. Its main deficiencies are two: over-dependence on and indeed, frequently enough, reproduction *tale quale* of news reports (sometimes agitated and one-sided) from Valletta newspapers; and in the local content, a certain tendency to propagate narrow partisan views spiced occasionally by insensate *ad hominem* attacks.²² Such traits unfortunately have not been uncharacteristic of Maltese language journalism albeit in varying degrees: in these respects, notwithstanding distance and time, the Australian variant still is not much removed from the Maltese prototype.

NOTES

- ¹ The newspaper's main office is Merrylands Td., Merrylands, N.S.W., 2160. The editor is Mr. Lino Vella. Previous editors were Mr. Lawrence Dimech and Mr. Gorg Chetcuti.
- ² This newspaper's main office is 210, The Boulevarde, Fairfield Heights, N.S.W., 2165. The editor is Mr. George Pace.
- ³ Edited by Mr. Alfred Ciantar, the paper's office is at 511 Sydney Road, Brunswick, Vic., 3056.

Describing itself as 'a monthly bi-lingual Maltese magazine', *Malta* is issued by the Australia Branch of the PN Emigrants' Secretariat (Malta), whose Chairman is Mr. Peter Darmanin. The postal address is Box 403, Mascot, N.S.W., 2020.

Edited by Mr. J.J. Briffa, the editorial office was for a long time 462 Cheltenham, Vic., 3192; Briffa moved to Phillip Island. In *The Maltese in Australia* (Melbourne, 1987), B. York mentions only two of these five publications (pp. 135-136).

Starting in 1944, *The Malta News* was edited and published monthly for The Maltese Social Society, Melbourne, by Mr. Paul Paris, who became the first President of the Maltese Community Council of Victoria after the war. Its postal address was Box 4571, G.P.O., Spencer St., Melbourne, and the annual subscription fee was six shillings.

See A.L. Bundy: *Directory of Australian Public Libraries* (Footscray Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 1982).

Margaret Bell: "South Australia", in D. Whitehead and A. Holmes: *Directions for Diversity* (Melbourne, 1986), p. 41.

The Phillip Institute did receive some copies of *The Voice of Malta* and occasionally some other Maltese publications of this nature; it also received two reviews from Malta. Of late the library at the Centru Malti, at 477 Royal Parade, Parkville, Vic., has been keeping newspapers, including those from Malta itself.

Henry Frendo, "Milestones in the Development of Mass Communications in Malta", in Gunther von Lojewski: *Manipulation of the Mass Media* (Academy for the Development of a Democratic Environment, Sliema, 1978), pp. 23-24.

Ibid., p. 21.

"Ghajnuna Posittiva", *MH*, 11 March 1986, p. 6.

Ibid., e.g. 28 January 1986, p. 8; 2 December 1986, p. 7.

"L-Apartheid fl-Awstralja", *MC*, 7 August 1986, p. 6.

"L-Emigrant u l-Gvern", *ibid.*, 29 May 1986, p. 6.

See my chapter on "Religion and Ethnic Identity in the Maltese Australian Community" in Abe Ata (Ed.): *The Ethnic Churches in Australia*, Melbourne, Spectrum, 1988.

Dr. Cauchi became President of the Maltese Community Council of Victoria in 1986; his report, which was circulated to government ministries and departments in 1987, shows how services

for Maltese language and culture bear no relation to the *number* of Maltese residents. I have offered an additional historical explanation for certain traits of national character: "Most Maltese emigrated before Independence (1964) and its aftermath: 'British' Malta was all they themselves knew. In some respects these people were colonized twice over in the far-flung corners of the British 'Empire' without as much as realising it. Their standards and aspirations, their loves and hates were fixed at the moment of nostalgia. Ironically, this kind of a reaction could be compared to that of a different class of Maltese, back home, when in the face of a dominant political culture seeking to enforce a different set of interests and values, they had turned naturally to conserving and enforcing a patriotic consensus under the banner of Maltese *italianità*. In the history of Maltese culture, Independence is a watershed. Malteseness came of age..." See Henry Frendo: "The Maltese: Who Are They?", *The Democrat*, Valletta, 13 December 1986-3 January 1987, reproduced in *MC*, 29 January-19 February 1987. See also my articles "X" Futur Ghandha l-Kultura Maltija fl-Awstralija?", *MH*, 10-24 September 1985.

- 18 Michael Clyne: "Multilingual Australia: Implications for Libraries", in Whitehead & Homes, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.
- 19 "L-SBS se tigi mibdula", *MH*, 15 April 1986, p. 6. See also "Il-Multikulturalizmu il-weghda tal-Gvern Awstraljan", *ibid.*, 9 October 1986, p. 7.
- 20 Albert W. Agius: "Iridu Jahtfu l-SBS", *MC*, 25 October 1985, and other later articles harping on this theme, also in *The Times of Malta*, e.g. "Multiculturalism dealt two severe blows" (20 September 1986); "Political Parties and Ethnic Support" (18 July 1987).
- 21 A recently published anthology is *Irjieh* (Melbourne, 1987).
- 22 An outstanding embarrassment in this vein is one John Farrugia, who usually contributes diatribes to *The Maltese Herald*. See for example his "L-Emigrant... u issa d-dissident", 26 August 1986, p. 7, and subsequent contributions treating of even the torture of Maltese detainees with the crudest levity.

