BOOK REVIEWS

Andrea L. Smith, *Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe: Maltese Settlers in Algeria and France*. Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 269.

This book is a very welcome addition to Maltese migration studies although written more from the *pied noir* angle, which continues to characterize the memories and sentiments of thousands of Maltese-descended French residents and citizens (among so many others).

With a surname like Smith the author would seem to be an unlikely Maltese descendant herself but internal evidence in her book reveals that indeed she is. Fluent in French, it is not clear how far she possesses either Arabic or Maltese. In the dust jacket she is simply described as a university college assistant professor and editor of *Europe's Invisible Migrants*. This is an anthology published by Amsterdam University Press which also includes a chapter on *pied-noir* memory by William Cohen of Indiana University. Although Andrea Smith did visit Malta, she has no intimate knowledge of the islands or their people, depending for much of what she writes about on useful, sometimes revealing, sometimes opinionated interviews with former mainly Algerian settlers of Maltese or mixed Maltese descent who never 'repatriated' to Malta. There are very few of these. One whom I have met and interviewed, is Tereza Attard of Xaghra, Gozo, whose family had done well as cattle breeders in Algeria but whose wealth was ultimately confiscated by their former stockman, Houari Boumedienne.

Smith's bibliography oddly makes no reference to any of the books by Pierre Dimech or Lawrence Attard, among others, and only to one of Marc Donato's, although she acknowledges their help in the preface. On the complex discourse bracing language with nationality, there is no reference (at least for some socio-historical background) either to my *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony* or to Hull's *The Language Question*; there is not a single mention of Laurent Ropa in the name index.

Admittedly the bent of the work is more anthropological, but still it is hard to imagine any discussion of Maltese or even of Franco-Maltese ethnicity in North Africa without reference to Ropa's communal militancy, especially in the 1930s, not only through his brilliantly evocative novels but also his journalistic campaigns rallying the Maltese communities throughout North Africa: 'parlez Maltais!'. In January 2007 this was the subject of my keynote address at a conference in Tunis about 'Malta Hanina' (*The Sunday Times*, Valletta, 11 Feb. 2007, 54–55), which is due to be published with the proceedings, but about which there had already been some earlier interest in Malta as well as in North Africa and France. Ropa's writings figured prominently when in 2001 I had hosted Pierre Dimech and Marc Donato in my migration studies course at the University of Malta's Gozo campus.

Smith writes correctly that French of Maltese descent are intrigued by their origins but that they are frustrated when they don't know their exact points of origin so they cannot trace them. Well, in a week's package tour it would not be so easy to do so. When we had our 'pied noir' lectures and seminars what impressed me in my interviews was how much some of the participants knew about their origins, as I showed in an illustrated centre-page spread in *The Sunday Times* (1 July 2001, 48–49). They cherished several photo-

copies of birth certificates, marriage certificates, passports and items of correspondence, even two or three typed family 'autobiographies'.

Very valid is Smith's point about Malta figuring as an ancestral homeland rather than Algeria, but, I would add, also instead of France. Dimech's poem about this in his book of 'Maltese' poems is particularly moving; it reminded me of pre-war if not 19th century Maltese romantic-patriotic poetry in the heyday of English colonialism, except that it was in French not in Italian or, later, in Maltese.

A central feature of the book is what the author calls 'liminality', meaning essentially a caught-in-between marginality ('doublement minoritaires', as one scholar in Tunis put it). The Maltese were seen as being neither fully European nor fully Arab. Carmel Sammut, whose writings find no direct resonance here, has written tellingly precisely about this paradox, as may be gauged from the tendency which he recalled on the part of Maltese to refer to Arabs as 'ras marbouta' or 'laħam bla melħ', a reference in the first instance to the turban or a closed mind, and in the second to their being unbaptized, hence the strong religious dimension in identity. However, at the same time, partly because of language and partly because of socio-economic class and/or occupation, they were closer to them than most other Europeans, such as the generally snobbish or elitist (and atheistic) French, so they got on reasonably well. But they never became Arabs, nor wanted to do so at all, and the Arabs knew it. They served an intermediary role which could be identified, too, from occupational preferences or options—butchers, grocers, horsemen, boatmen, fishermen. When it came to the crunch, as Arab nationalism exploded right across North Africa, including Egypt, Maltese were still regarded as 'the other'.

Some of the observations on Maltese occupations in Algeria as, for example, their roles as market gardeners, bear strong resemblance to what happened elsewhere in the Maltese *diaspora* and fit into a much broader typology, from Louisiana in the second half of the 18th century to Australia in the first half of the 20th, and later.

The content is wrapped up in a poignant 'postcolonial' title and approach which do justice to the work's theoretical thesis-like posture. This seeks to place the Maltese migrant experience and its aftermath, especially in France, in a post-Algerian and therefore post-colonial context. How true this is, when most *pieds noirs* remain almost to this day traumatized by the Algerian civil war, and their rude transfer by the thousand from a near-homeland, Algeria, to a comparatively alien one, France, where they were not exactly welcomed with open arms either. The discrimination which they may have faced as Maltese in North Africa found an echo in France where as *pieds noirs* they were regarded as being neither properly Algerian nor properly French. I remember how even Edgar Pisani, a fourth-generation 'Franco-Maltese' who from Bab el-Khadra outside the Medina of Tunis rose to serve as a Minister under De Gaulle and Mitterand, confided to me when I interviewed him (*The Sunday Times*, 26 Nov. 1995, 32–33) how he had been reluctant to talk about his Maltese origins in Tunisia and how he very occasionally was the but of some snide 'ethnic' remark even in the parliament; but on this occasion, as he walked down Valletta's main street with me and then talking to my migration history students, he opened up and said things which he had not uttered publicly in a lifetime.

Smith has much to say about this through her interlocutors, who also speak about prejudices relating to class as much as to ethnic origin, for instance when it came to mixed marriages, a point which Donato among others had already stressed on the strength of printed sources, whereas here oral history and theory predominate.

The book should be read; this short, hurried review does not do justice to it. Smith's paths and mine unfortunately never crossed, not even when I was a Visiting Professor in Indiana. Her paper at our World Migrants' Convention in Valletta at the start of the millennium was circulated *in absentia*. She has a potential and motivation which deserve to be further developed, in particular perhaps by greater and more systematic focus on the lingering Maltese presence in France, so many clubs and 'mixwi' encounters, as well as many types of publications, foremost among them probably the well-produced quaterly *l'Algerianiste*, which certainly cannot be said to be lacking in a profound touch of nostalgia, a strange but unique potion of Arab, Mediterranean and European, infused with memories and practices of a Maltese ancestry.

In her very interesting but all too succinct section entitled 'The Changing Valence of Malteseness' she begins to have a go at this. In their assimilationist if not self-deprecating mentality, her informants are invariably products of the post-war period, by which time cultural *survivance*, to the extent that it had thrived during the inter-war period, seems to have run out of steam. It probably was still strong in Egypt until the early 1950s; in Australia there are hundreds of third and fourth generation Maltese, who still know Maltese, from Egypt and Libya. 'In the process', she writes, 'they submerged as much of their ethnic identity as possible, even changing their last names.' Arabic-sounding Maltese surnames could be awkward but this 'frencification' was not a phenomenon limited to French North Africa, *vide* for example the changing of the surname to the English 'York' from 'Meilaq' in Victoria, Australia. Equally, however, Malta meant something different (rather better apparently thanks to the *chevaliers de Malte*) in France than it did in Algeria.

While menial labour in the lower socio-economic strata was commonplace —although certainly not only among the Maltese but also among other minority and poorer nationalities such as the Portugese or the Sicilians—one should not be so dismissive towards those among the Maltese-descended communities throughout northern Africa who made good, excelling as professionals or businessmen and occasionally in letters. These were a minority, an elite, but there were indeed several such people too, as may be clearly surmised from a scan of the ethnic press. The Maltese moral code in the family and society on the whole remained pretty intact, irrespective of class or station. If the French looked down upon a religious sentiment and its manifestations, that was their problem.

What is useful too, at least for an 'anglicized' audience today, is that this book is in English, although it really should be translated into French. I can say that it has already found its dutiful place in the recommended reading list for my migration history classes—we even dedicated part of a seminar to it—while its author, I hope, will one day come and talk to us at the Institute of Maltese Studies.

Henry Frendo
Professor of History
Director, Institute of Maltese Studies
University of Malta