Sir Adrian Dingli

Patriot - Legislator - Diplomat
(8 October 1817 - 25 November 1900)

Rev. Dr. Joseph Bezzina

Fifty-seven full years had passed since the priests and people of Gozo began striving for the elevation of Gozo and Comino to an autonomous diocese. The obstacles were, however, too numerous and too complicated to overcome. In 1855, the promoters of the project succeeded in gaining the support of two great leaders, the Gozitans Pietro Pace and Adrian Dingli. The former was a young priest then residing in Rome, the latter had just been appointed Crown Counsel of Malta. In less than ten years, this formidable team succeeded in overcoming all opposition and, on 16 September 1864, Gozo and Comino were separated from Malta and established as a separate diocese.

A diligent student

Adrian was born in Valletta on 8 October 1817, the son of the distinguished Gozitan lawyer Sir Paolo Dingli and Marianna Xuereb. His grandfather Michelangelo Dingli lived in a splendid house in Pjazza Savina, Rabat, a house in which Adrian passed several years of his childhood : for this reason the street close by is named after him. At that time, young lawyers, after concluding their studies at the University in Valletta tended to continue residing there for some years, not only as legal work in the city was more rewarding, but also, as in this case, because they married ladies from Valletta, where Adrian was born. Paolo, however, was a frequent visitor to Gozo and he also worked in the Gozo Courts. He was involved in the movement for the erection of the diocese since at least 1836 and he fully passed his love for his island home to his son.

Adrian followed his early education at the Notabile Seminary, the only secondary school worthy of its name at the time. From there, he proceeded to University, where he graduated as a lawyer in 1837 at the age of twenty. It was only afterwards, he once confided to his son, that he began to study law seriously. Up to then it was simply a work of memorisation to obtain a high mark in all tests.

After his graduation, his father conceded him the time and money to proceed abroad to perfect himself in languages and to pursue his legal studies. For six whole years he frequented the principal European centres of learning of the time, particularly in Rome and Bologna, Italy. He also pursued courses in Bonn and Heidelberg, in Paris, and in several centres in the United Kingdom.

People and politics

His stay in London brought him in direct contact with officials of the Colonial Office that at the time ruled supreme over Malta as over all Crown Colonies. Malta and Gozo had become a Crown Colony in 1813, five years before his birth. At the Colonial Office, he must have discussed several problems related to the island and it was during these informal meetings that he recognised an important mission in his life: to do his best to raise the standard of living of his fellow Maltese.

Late in 1843, Dingli returned to settle in Malta and he followed the path of his predecessors. He soon proved himself to be an exceptionally able lawyer in the local italianate tradition. Moreover, he

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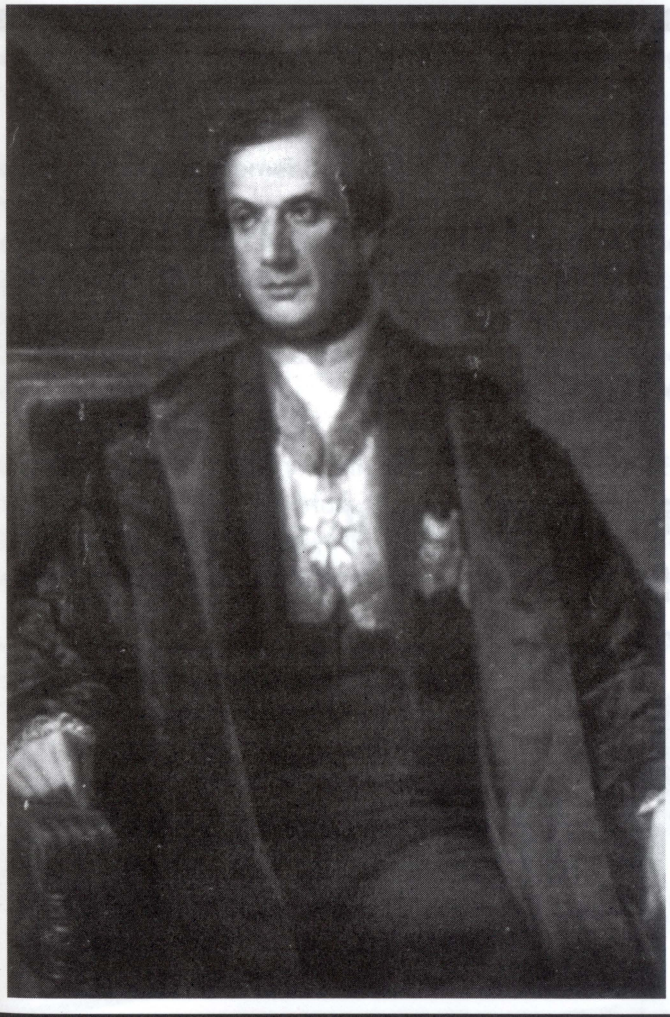
- Sir Luigi Camilleri

had a great advantage over fellow lawyers: he wrote and spoke English very fluently.

Before long, the occasion presented itself to Dingli to enter politics on behalf of the Gozitans. The 1849 Constitution led to the holding of the first political elections in Malta. Dingli decided to stand as a candidate for Gozo and Comino, the eighth electoral district that was to return one candidate. 281 persons were entitled to vote for the Gozo candidate and 259 eventually voted. Adrian Dingli was elected with 117 votes to represent the island of his origins in the Council of Government.

On 27 December 1854, Dingli became Crown Counsel. One Governor after another had sought his advice; now he became their official advisor. His word was, slowly but surely, to become the law. Sir Luigi Camilleri, the Gozitan Chief Justice of Malta, wrote many years later: "He was practically the master-mind that governed the destiny of Malta and Gozo during his period of office both as Crown Counsel and as Chief Justice. He was so highly respected for his knowledge and ability that the Governors under whom he served generally took his advice unquestioningly."



In 1856, Adrian married Catherine Mamo, and they had one son who died in his teen years. His wife died soon afterwards. He remained a widower until 1879, when he married Amy Mildred Charlton, an English lady from Hestleside, Northumberland who was extraordinarily knowledgeable, and who contributed regularly to the literary journals of the time. They had a son, Adrian, who followed his father in the legal profession and worked as a barrister with the Italian embassy in London.

This short biography cannot do justice to a person who shaped the destiny of Malta and Gozo in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was directly or indirectly involved in all that was going on, but a glance at three different aspects of his manifold activities will suffice to demonstrate the greatness of the man: his endeavours for the advancement of Gozo, his achievements in the legal field, and his engagement in international diplomacy.

The advancement of Gozo

The appointment of Dingli as Crown Counsel meant that he could not represent Gozo in the Council of Government. However he remained member of the Council in his new official capacity. In the Council, he never lost a chance to advance his island home.

It has already been hinted that were it not for him, the question of the establishment of the diocese of Gozo would have probably been postponed indefinitely. It was he who on 25 October 1860, wrote and despatched under the Governor's signature the all-important letter that changed the course of events. The letter, 32 pages of a foolscap in length with 17 enclosures appended, demonstrates his exceptional ability in diplomatic relationships and his wide knowledge of both civil and ecclesiastical law.

Paging through his voluminous correspondence preserved at the National Library of Malta, it becomes clear that he clearly understood the problems and special needs of Gozo. Whether it were the goatherds, who were asking for cheap fodder in years of drought, or the organisers of *Il-Wirja* of Santa Marija, the Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition held on 14-15 August, seeking an increase in prize money; or the farmers in dire need for the better upkeep of country roads; or the lace-workers, who needed promotion of their products abroad; or the chief inhabitants of Rabat petitioning the status of city for their town, Dingli was always ready to listen and offer his help.

Together with his already mentioned life-long friend, Dun Pietro Pace, who was elected bishop of Gozo in 1877, he began pressing the Colonial Office to subsidise a steamship service between the islands, a service that, until then, was

dependent on the Gozo boats that carried passengers along with the cargo with no comforts whatsoever. Dingli and Pace had personally spoken to several entrepreneurs to introduce a reliable ferry service between the islands, but none wanted to take the risk without a Government subsidy. Dingli finally succeeded, and on 13 June 1885, the brand new steamship, the *Gleneagles,* began plying regularly between Malta and Gozo.

Legislation

On his appointment as Crown Counsel, he inherited the onerous task from his predecessor, Dr Antonio Micallef, who was elevated to the Bench, to carry out the modernisation of the laws of Malta, that had hardly been amended since the publication of the *Del Dritto Municipale di Malta,* the so-called *Codice De Rohan,* in 1774.

Fully respecting the civil tradition of Maltese laws and customs, he succeeded in integrating them with the developments that had taken place in continental Europe during the previous hundred years. Taking the Roman Code of Law as a basis, he included all new structures introduced by the French Code of Laws, the so-called *Code Napoleon* and other codices that had developed as a result of the liberty brought about by the French Revolution, especially the Codes of Austria, the Two Sicilies, and Parma. The end result, reflected in Ordinances VII (1868) and I (1873) is an organic group of excellent civil laws that notwithstanding their basis and extraction is essentially Maltese.

International achievements

In his long public career, Adrian Dingli was entrusted with several important missions. In 1862, the Foreign Office appointed Dingli, who happened to be in London, to carry out the negotiations between the British Government and the Kingdom of Piedmont on an extradition treaty between the two countries.

Another important mission was that entrusted to him in 1878. In June of that year, by virtue of the convention between Great Britain and Turkey, the Sultan agreed to the occupation and administration of Cyprus by England. The British Government appointed Sir Adrian as the legal councillor of the New High Commissioner of the island, General Sir Garnet Wolseley, the future Viscount Wolseley, to help him form a Government, organise a new administrative system, and launch a large-scale scheme of legal reforms.

The British Foreign Office also requested his advice on problems related to countries on the North African coast, and the British Consul in Tunis sought his services regularly. In 1880, the Foreign Office sent him to Tunis as president of an international arbitration that was to settle a question of huge debts between a British subject and the Bey of Tunis. While there, the Foreign Office also asked him to write a report on the juridical system of that country, then a colony of Constantinople. For this confidential report, he was praised "for the very able, complete and satisfactory manner in which you have performed the delicate and laborious duties which you consented to undertake."

Conclusion

In 1880, he was appointed President of the Court of Appeal and, in recognition of his many services to the Government, he was also given the title of Chief Justice. He retained the post until his retirement in 1894 at the age of seventy seven.

For the many services rendered to Malta and the British Empire, Adrian Dingli was knighted by Queen Victoria. He died at his home in Valletta on 25 November 1900 and was given a state funeral.

King Edward VII, during the unveiling of his monument at Il-Mall, Floriana, in April 1907, recognised in this son of Gozo: "a great and talented jurist who had done all his best for the welfare of the Maltese."

Select bibliography:

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