

Before the Birth of Real Popular Education in British Colonial Malta (1800–1836)

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Abstract: *Before Britain took over the Maltese Islands, the latter did not have any real school structure. Even with the arrival of the British in 1800, little changed for the first three decades. Malta had only some private schools, which were run by a few foreign and local teachers, and a number of normal schools run as semi-charitable institutions. Gozo fared even worse. The local Roman Catholic Church did not help much to promote education along this period and the colonial government did not show any particular verve towards the opening of schools for the populace. Things only began to change when a Royal Commission visited Malta in 1836.*

Keywords: *Education in Malta; British rule; schools and schooling*

With the surrender of the French Republican forces in 1800 the Maltese Islands became part of the great British Empire. This meant that the Maltese population was now to fall within the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and Nordic influence pertaining to these new masters. However, at first, the British were unconcerned with the Islands' internal affairs and did very little to improve or alter specific deficiencies inherent in Maltese society. Their mind was much more concerned with the international scene where the Napoleonic Wars were still raging in Europe.

In the sphere of public education, in 1800 the British found a virtually non-existent national educational structure inherited from an elitist mentality which generally catered only for the few and the select and which was so prevalent during the rule of the Order of St John. Needless to say, the French, even though on paper they proposed some kind of organisation in the field of education, were not given any time or space to do anything solid about it. Thus, in spite of any good intentions that may have existed, little had been done in real terms under these two powers for the educational benefit of the Maltese populace at large.

Due to the absence of a regular national educational organisation, Malta did not have a unified teacher corps. Nor was there any abrupt change in this situation in the first decades of the British occupation of Malta. In fact, up to 1836 the teachers in local education constituted only of a group of local and foreign individuals operating

from distinct small schools with little if any co-ordination between them. If anything, they competed between themselves for the limited number of pupils (or more precisely their parents) willing to avail themselves of their services. Therefore, the period 1800–1836 served to expose the grave educational problems existing in Malta and made known to the local colonial authorities that individual teachers could not be left on their own to manage a system of fully private or partly sponsored education. Teachers themselves could do no better as few had real training and none felt the spirit of belonging, which through unity gets the strength for innovation and organisation.

The situation before 1800

It is not precise to affirm that no element of education and schooling existed in Malta prior to 1800 but the provisions were extremely scanty and highly inadequate.

In the 17th century, the Maltese *Universitas* (local government) run at least three schools, located in Mdina, Valletta and Vittoriosa, each with its own schoolmaster.¹ In 1769 Grandmaster Pinto signed the decree for the foundation of a University and a College of Studies which replaced the abolished Jesuits' College and which had existed from the late 16th century. The new University of Studies and the College had very precise rules governing their procedures. Rules regulated, amongst other things, the limits to which professors and teachers could punish students; the type of teaching they were to give; and, who could practise as a teacher.² Following suit, Grandmaster De Rohan, regulated further the establishment of education. He instituted sanctions against people who endeavoured to set up schools without the government's permission. The Order paid a great deal of attention as to who should and could teach in Malta as the following regulation stipulated: '*Non si permette a veruno di tenere pubblica scuola di leggere e scrivere, o del carattere, di grammatica, o di qualsisia scienza o arte, senza Nostro decreto: ed il contravventore incorrà nella pena di carcere per un mese, o in altra, a Nostro beneplacito.*'³ [No one is permitted to hold a public school for reading and writing, for the development of character, of grammar, or of any science or art, without Our decree: and the offender will be subject to a penalty of a month's imprisonment or some other penalty according to Our consent].

Besides the educational institutions just mentioned, another school was set up in Gozo in 1795. It was under the direction of some ecclesiastics, aided by parents, and had the objective of promoting literary and religious education. However, the

¹ N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta) Libr. 670, f. 9^r & f. 10^r.

² NLM Libr. 1343.

³ *Del Diritto Municipale di Malta: Nuove Compilazioni con diverse altre costituzioni*, Malta 1784, p. 188.

school closed down in 1798 due to the invasion of the French.⁴ This establishment seems to have been the first public school in Gozo and it was under the headship of Rev. M.A. Lawron.⁵

One Maltese who saw the need and argued for a public educational system was Mikiel Anton Vassalli. In 1796 he published his *Kiŷb Yl Klŷm Mâlti* where he expounded his ideas and plans for a national educational system.⁶ In one instance Vassalli emphasised that, above all, public schools should be established for all the ‘Dominion of Malta and Gozo.’⁷ This observation is then followed by his detailed project which specified types of schools, grades of teachers and the conditions necessary for the project’s success. Vassalli’s main preoccupation was how to teach the Maltese language. Therefore he published a blueprint for an educational structure making it accessible for anyone to note and study. Of interest is his concept of masters, assistant masters, and helpers staffing the schools. The project suggested thirty schools in all. According to Vassalli it was enough to have about thirty masters, from sixteen to eighteen assistant masters, and about twenty helpers. According to him, these would suffice to teach all the school-child population of the Islands. At the time the whole population of Malta and Gozo amounted to about 114,000. Salaries would have been decided on the basis of the grade – the masters would get about 90 *scudi* while the assistant masters would be paid 50 *scudi*. The remuneration of the helpers would be in the form of rewards, reflecting their merits. According to Vassalli’s calculations, this would cost the country 3,500 *scudi* annually. As a closing remark, Vassalli stressed that, ‘*Trattandosi d’uno stabilimento così necessario non dovrei nemmeno additare come si à da provvedere una sì tenue somma, perchè i superiori, quando vogliono, ànno in mano tutte le risorse possibili ed immaginabili.*’⁸ [Being such a necessary establishment it should not even be pointed out how to provide such a small sum, because the authorities, when they want, have in hand all the possible and imaginable resources].

When the French under Napoleon Bonaparte established their rule in Malta in 1798, they sought to prop up the educational structure, which in real fact was quite poor. Indeed the French sought to initiate improvements on a national scale. According to Regnaud De Saint Jean D’Angely, Commissioner of the Government, it was the Knights of St John who were to blame for all this. He stressed that: ‘*Convinti che l’ignoranza è l’appoggio del despotismo, essi aveanvi ricusato ogni mezzo*

⁴ P. Pullicino, *In occasione della inaugurazione delle classi di Secondaria Istruzione nel Rabato del Gozo il 16 Settembre 1851*, Malta 1851, pp. 3–4.

⁵ *Ghawdex*, no. 53, Malta 1947, p. 1.

⁶ M.A. Vassalli, *Kiŷb Yl Klŷm Mâlti*, Rome 1796. See also, J.F. Grima, Vassalli’s Plan for Primary Education in Malta, *Journal of Maltese Studies*, nos. 23–4, Malta 1993, pp. 219–22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xxxix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xl–xli.

*d'istruzione. Delle scuole in tutti i generi saranno aperte e nelle vostre Città, e nelle vostre campagne.*⁹ [Convinced that ignorance is the buttress of despotism, they (the Knights of St John) denied every means of instruction. Schools of all types will be opened in your cities as well as in your countryside].

D'Angely was reflecting what the French Revolution thought about education, crystallised in Talleyrand's 1791 Report on education. As interpreted by Barnard, Talleyrand had stressed: 'education is the chief means of ensuring progress and "perfectibility", both for the individual and for society.'¹⁰ Two Orders issued by Bonaparte, both dated 18 June 1798, established a national education plan that proposed the setting up of fifteen primary schools. Ancillary to this, there was to be the creation of a teacher corps and the provision for a national house as a place of residence for their accommodation. A distinction was proposed in teachers' salaries for those teaching in urban areas as compared to those carrying out duties in rural localities. The former were to be paid 1000 francs and the latter 800 francs.¹¹ Further to this, Bonaparte thought of founding an *école central*, an institution introduced in Revolutionary France in the 1790s by Condorcet.¹² This was to replace the former University of Studies in Valletta.

All these plans went up in smoke however, primarily because of the lack of funds. Later on, when the projects may have had some chance of getting launched, the Maltese Insurrection of September 1798 nipped any innovations in their bud. The French were finally ousted from these islands in 1800.

The British take over Malta

Up to the British take-over of Malta, the development of education was thus rather sporadic and therefore, neither the educational institutions nor the teachers concerned could claim any place of national importance. It was only by the fourth decade of British rule that education and schools began to change and expand.

Charles Cameron, the first Civil Commissioner of Malta, in 1801, asserted that 'His [Majesty's] paternal care extends to the hospital and other charitable establishments, to the education of youth, . . . and to all who recur to his beneficence.'¹³ With regards to education this assertion might have been a well-sounding thought, but at least up to a decade later, it had not materialised into anything concrete. W. Domeier, the author of a book about Malta for foreigners, in the first decade of British rule, described the Maltese social environment thus: 'In none of the villages is a public school established, the children grow up like other animals, *i.e.* they eat,

⁹ *Journal De Malte*, no. 1, Malta 1798, p. 5.

¹⁰ H.C. Barnard, *Education and the French Revolution*, London 1969, pp. 69–70.

¹¹ C. Testa, *Maz-Żewġ Nahat tas-Swar*, Vol. I, Malta 1979, pp. 122–4.

¹² W.D. Halls, *Society, Schools & Progress*, Oxford 1965, p. 18.

¹³ A. Slade, *Turkey, Greece and Malta*, Vol. I, London 1837, p. 168.

drink, work and sleep.’¹⁴ Basing one’s impression on this testimony, one gets the notion that there were some schools in the cities but there were none in the countryside.

The colonial government of Malta hesitated to take upon itself the education of the Maltese but, after all, in England it was not much different. In fact, ‘from about 1780 to 1870 was the period when all elementary schools were provided and maintained by voluntary efforts, assisted after 1833 by a progressively increasing amount of government grant.’¹⁵ With the exception of the school in Gozo mentioned earlier, in Malta the process was quite similar.

While this Gozitan school had been closed in 1798 it re-opened in 1802. By 1808 the government had taken it over by financing its operations, thus freeing the parents from forking out any fees. Ultimately, by 1828 it had become an elementary school, which according to Paolo Pullicino, the Director of Elementary Schools (1850–1880), served the Gozitans as the best solution for that time.¹⁶ The school was situated at Rabat and in 1829 was under the direction of the schoolmaster F.S. Muscat. In it there was space for 50 boys, 35 of whom attended free of any charge while the others paid a small fee to the teacher. This school was expected to receive boys from all the villages of Gozo, their number being proportional to the population in each village. In 1829, however, only 33 students were attending (all from Rabat), and all were accommodated free of charge, as they were too poor to pay. Besides this particular school there were at least six private schools in Gozo at about this time. Three were for boys, under the direction of ecclesiastics, and three were for girls, all run by married, often widowed, women.¹⁷

For the poorer section of the population, educating their children at that time proved to be rather difficult both due to their own poverty and because of the lack of a sufficient number of schools open to them. On the other hand, for the Maltese well-to-do families other means were available. From the biography of Dr Don Filippo Amato, Vicar General of the Diocese of Malta, one gets a glimpse at how the upper classes usually educated their sons in those early 19th days. Born in 1804, Don Filippo was introduced to learning practically when he was just 4 to 5 years old. In 1808 he was put under two distinct ecclesiastics of the village of Haż-Żebbuġ (in Malta) to get an elementary education.¹⁸ This practice of engaging private tutors was the method by which Don Filippo was taught all through his life. The teachers at this time were, in their majority, either clergymen or foreigners.

¹⁴ W. Domeier, *Observations on the Climate, Manners and Amusements of Malta; principally intended for the information of Invalids repairing to the Islands for the recovery of health*, London 1810, p. 101.

¹⁵ D. Wardle, *English Popular Education 1780–1970*, London 1970, p. 61.

¹⁶ Pullicino, *In occasione . . .*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁷ *Ghawdex*, p. 1.

¹⁸ [F. Pullicino], *Cenni Biografici del defunto Mons. Dr. Don Filippo Amato Arcidiac. e Vicario Generale della Diocesi di Malta*, Malta 1864, p. 5.

Domeier listed a number of private schools that existed in Malta around 1810. He mentioned a school for English ladies under a Mrs O'Brian. The government had helped this teacher by granting her the same house in which the school was situated. Students attending paid 10 shillings monthly to learn spelling, reading, and needlework. However, a pupil could also learn dancing, writing, and other subjects for an extra fee. The school hours were: three in the morning and two in the afternoon.¹⁹ The same author also points out 'an intelligent and respectable merchant' named Mr Noble, who established a school for English boys 'which is a good one, and therefore frequented'. Once again, the government gave a helping hand by granting him a floor in the building housing Mrs O'Brian's school. With similar fees to those of the girl's school, 'the disciples of the last [Noble's school] learn much more. . . .' The school curriculum included English, French, Italian, Mathematics, Geography, and there was also the intention to offer Latin. Domeier pointed out that: 'All lessons are given with great attention.'²⁰

The author rounded up his list of existing establishments by mentioning two schools in Cospicua, a Latin school (probably run by the Church or an ecclesiastic), and an English school kept by a sergeant. Lastly, he pointed out the Church Seminary in Mdina where sciences and languages were taught in Italian.²¹

Whatever education and schooling offered in Malta at this time, Domeier was not impressed. He stated that: 'For Maltese children both boys and girls exist a number of schools in Valletta, in convents, and there are private teachers; but it is not worth any foreigner's while to send his children there. . ..'²² There was only one school which, in his opinion, was fit for foreign students, and by elimination, only a small group of teachers worthy of his esteem. This establishment was the preparatory school for the University (the forerunner of the Lyceum).

E. Blaquiere, who was in Malta at about the same time as Domeier, confirms the dearth of school facilities and teachers. Blaquiere stressed that: 'it will no doubt excite surprise when I assert, that there is not a single Public establishment for the education of children throughout the island. . . .' With regards to the seminary (or Lyceum) in Valletta, in contrast to Domeier's view, he observed that its '. . . total inefficiency . . . to fulfil the object at first intended, is one of the most general causes of complaint amongst the natives. . ..'²³

¹⁹ Domeier, p. 103.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 102.

²³ E. Blaquiere, *Letters from the Mediterranean; containing a Civil and Political Account of Sicily, Tripoly, Tunis, and Malta; . . .*, London 1813, pp. 292–3.

Good public education in Malta was lacking and the government was expected to help towards the solution to this problem. Blaquiere suggested that, ‘. . . should the British Government, impressed with a due sense of its importance, give to a system of public instruction that encouragement it deserves . . .’ there would be a gradual decrease in the ‘jealousy and distrust so evident between us and the natives at present. . . .’²⁴ The writer was reflecting similar views to those of his contemporaries in England at that time. Here education was held as having a social value beneficial to all. Education was being given a national dimension. In the *Quarterly Review* and *The Gentleman’s Magazine* of 1812, comments to this effect appeared. Thus, ‘National education is the first thing necessary. Lay but this foundation and the superstructure of prosperity and happiness which may be erected will rest upon a rock. . . .’²⁵

The Gozitans seemed to emphasise, even more intensely, the social value of education. The grave lack of educational establishments on that island was much more in evidence. In a petition to the Royal Commission about 1813, the islanders stressed that, though there was a government-administered school or ‘*Colleggio*’ with four teachers, this was quite limited. They observed that after ending his course, passing from one teacher to the next, the Gozitan student would have done nothing except the study of Italian and Latin.²⁶ Following this phase, the parents could either send their sons to the Seminary of Mdina or to the University of Valletta. Yet these establishments were both in Malta and thus it proved too expensive to send them there. Alternatively the parents could put their offspring to work in the fields. The citizens of Gozo suggested that what was needed was ‘*un collegio formale, abile a poter formare un giovane per il corso perfetto di studjo*’ [a formal college, equipped to give a young man the formation for a real course of study]. This college would offer sciences, the liberal arts and the languages, especially the English language, which according to the petitioners, would be advantageous to society and commerce. In this way, they concluded, Gozitan parents would save on expenses and would be happier having their sons close to home under their care.²⁷

The local government, albeit quite sparingly, did finance a few educational establishments. One such case was the charity school for girls with a staff consisting of a principal teacher and at least one assistant.²⁸ There was, however, quite a lack of public schools. A list of establishments under the *Universitas* of Valletta for 1816

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

²⁵ *Quarterly Review*, Vol. VIII (1812), p. 154, quoted in E.E. Cowie, *Education*, London 1973, p. 2.

²⁶ NLM Libr. 788, ff. 2^v–3^f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 3^f.

²⁸ NLM Libr. 624, f. 12^r.

included only the above-mentioned charity school comprising its mistress, Michela Casha²⁹ and the University of Literature.³⁰

This scarcity of educational establishments was hardly remedied by the government in these first decades of the 19th century thus causing children to occupy themselves in activities outside school. The shortcomings of the educational system along with no compulsion for children to attend school resulted in parents putting their sons to various types of work, as illustrated by the above-mentioned Gozitan petition. Indeed, some youths worked for the local government itself, as testified by entries in the Register of Letters of the Jurats to the Government. In 1815, the jurats asked the governor to approve the payment of monthly contingent charges for, amongst others, pay of boys employed in cleaning the streets.³¹

One cannot put all of the blame of this situation on the hesitancy of the British administration to set up a strong educational structure in these early days of colonisation. One has also to consider the effects resulting from the suspicions of the Maltese Roman Catholic Church. Bonnici in his *History of the Church in Malta*, reflects that, ‘. . . She [the Church] may have felt that, though not plausible in itself, illiteracy kept the doors closed to erroneous doctrines and dangerous innovations.’³² The British were aware of this stance, and writing to Secretary of State Lord Stanley, the Governor of Malta, Major General Ponsonby, stated that, ‘the Clergy considered education as another word for “conversion” . . .’ but the Church would co-operate with the government in education if this did not interfere with the Established Religion.³³ Considering the problem created by the establishment of a Protestant administration in a staunchly Roman Catholic country, not much progress could be expected if the British and the local Church opposed each other too rigidly. Eventually the British rulers conceded that the Church in Malta was strongly entrenched in Maltese society and they never tried to take education completely from under the scrutiny of the clergy. Due to this policy, later on in the century, education began to flourish, as compared to these early days of British rule.

The fear and opposition of the Church pointed out earlier by Ponsonby, featured prominently in an Address directed to the Royal Commission of 1836. In their ‘*Reclami*’ the Clergy stated in *Gravame II* that: ‘*Perchè non tutt’ i Professori delle scienze, ed i Precettori delle scuole sono Cattolici; possono insegnare agli scolari Maltesi delle massime contrarie alla Religione Cattolica.*’ [As not all the professors of the sciences and the teachers of the schools are Catholic, they can teach the Maltese

²⁹ NLM Univ. 438, f. 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ff. 21–30.

³¹ NLM Univ. 436, n.p.

³² A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, Vol. III, Malta 1975, p. 158.

³³ *Ibid.*

students principles contrary to the Catholic Religion]. As a remedy they suggested that, ‘*Non si permetta a veruno di dare istruzione letteraria di alcuna sorta, qualor precedentemente non faccia professione della Fede Cattolica.*’³⁴ [No one should be permitted to give any literary instruction, if he does not give proof of his Catholic Faith]. This indicated the stringent outlook on the teachers held by the local Church. R. Martin in the *History of the British Colonies* confirmed the Church’s intervention in the educational sphere. He observed that, ‘there was, [in Malta] for a considerable time, much jealousy on the part of the Catholic clergy on the subject of education, as it was feared that it might be made use of as the means of conversion.’³⁵

A school about which there seemed to be no conflicting opinions between Church and State was the Normal School of Valletta set up in 1819. This school was originally opened through the work of a benevolent society and it was expected to function by means of donations. Yet such contributions do not seem to have been as forthcoming as it had been hoped for. Financially, this Valletta school was a failure even though its educational successes seemed to counter balance this deficiency. Therefore the government intervened to support the school to supplement the shortcomings created by the lack of benefactors. The Maltese government refurbished the premises at its own expense³⁶ and Lieutenant Governor and Lady Emily Ponsonby became the patrons of the institution.³⁷

The committee of this school, in its report of 1829, announced also the progress achieved by another school under its auspices which was located at Casal Zejtun. Rev. Dr Luigi Camilleri directed this enterprise and it was believed that his school was ‘answering the expectations formed on that head, and it was augured that this example may, in the progress of time lead to other detached schools throughout the Island.’³⁸ From this report it is revealed that the method of teaching used was ‘mutual’ instruction. This meant that the Normal School in Malta was using the monitorial system promoted in England by Bell and Lancaster. As a system of instruction it was encouraged since it was promised that the system would provide cheap education for a large number of pupils – 500 or more to one teacher according to Lancaster.³⁹ The committee of the Normal School Society reported that the government took up this system already used in the normal school and applied it to the Gozo school under its care.⁴⁰ In conclusion of a reportage about this school report, *The Malta Government*

³⁴ NLM Libr. 1241, f. 3.

³⁵ R. Martin, *History of the British Colonies*, Vol. V, London 1835, p. 216.

³⁶ Normal School Society of Valletta, *The Sixth Report of the Normal School Society of Valletta*, Malta 1829, p. 8.

³⁷ *The Malta Government Gazette*, no. 935, Malta 1829, p. 1829.

³⁸ Normal School Society of Valletta, p. 9.

³⁹ Wardle, p. 63.

⁴⁰ Normal School Society of Valletta, p. 9.

Gazette stressed that: ‘It was hoped that perusal of this report may draw the attention of the Public to a system of education in the best devised, as now proved all over the world, for the advancement of the human race.’⁴¹

Compared to twenty years earlier, and as the British were now resolved to make their stay in Malta a permanent one, it becomes evident that, as from the late 1820s there was a greater aptitude for the setting up of schools, at least in the private sector. The schools varied, and a quick browse through advertisements in the most informative paper of the time, *The Malta Government Gazette*, would indicate this at once. The adverts show teachers coming from abroad and others, natives of Malta, setting up an array of educational establishments. For example, Sig. D.A. Floriani, an Italian, received permission from the lieutenant governor and the sanction of the University of Malta to open ‘a Writing Academy, on a superior American System never till now introduced into Europe.’⁴² There was a Mr Maturin who, ‘being about to leave the island, has resigned his School to Mr Howard’. The teaching in this school included Greek, Latin, French, and English.⁴³ A little later, Charles Vere obtained the official permission to open a school to teach English, character, arithmetic and book keeping.⁴⁴ We also learn that Mr G.A. Michallef moved his school from where it had been situated to another location, but continued to teach Latin, Italian, French, and English among other subjects. One notes that, as Mr Michallef ‘has for his assistant in the English an Englishman of good education the scholars will have the opportunity of acquiring a correct pronunciation of that language in particular.’⁴⁵ There were also others, like the grammar school of Mr Horn B.A. ‘assisted by able Professors’⁴⁶ and an academy teaching a variety of subjects. This academy had a selection of teachers for the different subjects such as Charles Vere for English, Sig. G.S. Fior for Italian, and Mons. A. Jaume for French. It was announced that: ‘One uniform system will be adopted by the several Masters, and especial care will be taken not to interfere with the religious Tenets of the pupils.’⁴⁷

Among other schools there was one established in Valletta by Rev. J. Keeling, a Wesleyan missionary. It was open to both boys and girls and they were taught in Maltese. ‘This school succeeded very well, for in a short time, the children acquired the art of reading and writing their own language with care. . . .’⁴⁸ There were also

⁴¹ *The Malta Government Gazette*, no. 935, p. 1829.

⁴² *Ibid.*, no. 922, Malta 1828, p. 327.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no. 1018, Malta 1830, p. 263.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 1069, Malta 1831, p. 234.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1127, Malta 1832, p. 275.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 1152, Malta 1833, p. 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1158, Malta 1833, p. 123.

⁴⁸ C.F. Schlienzy, *Views of the improvement of the Maltese Language and its use for the purpose of Education and Literature*, Malta 1838, p. 39.

schools solely for girls such as that of Mrs Thompson at Cospicua⁴⁹ and that of Miss Beverley at Valletta.⁵⁰ Yet another was a seminary under Mrs Weisbecker, which, besides the usual subjects, rhetoric, logic, and physical astronomy were also taught.⁵¹ On the other hand, that of Miss Atkinson was channelled towards ‘the general instruction of young Ladies in useful and ornamental branches of Education.’⁵²

Though the number of schools was increasing, such educational outlets catered for a limited number of students. Only a small minority of the child population could go to school. This was because few could pay the required fees set by private educational institutions. If on the other hand poor parents opted to send their children to schools supported by the government, though cheap or free, these were few in number and were situated only in urban areas. In the 1830s Miegè noted that, out of 100 individuals, 69 could neither read nor write, 22 could read and write but had no other knowledge, while a mere 9 had skills considered to be above the basic levels.⁵³ This seems highly credible when one considers that the census for Malta of 1842 found that only 3,833 students were frequenting a school at the time.⁵⁴ This was quite low considering that the local population amounted to 114,499.⁵⁵

Those who had education at heart could not bypass this situation. It was too stark a reality and, if it were not for private individuals, the government was doing quite little on its own initiative. By the late 1830s England was moving towards better education for the masses and teacher training was also being improved, but in Malta the situation remained rather static. The *Malta Penny Magazine* in 1839 stated

⁴⁹ *The Malta Government Gazette*, no. 1163, Malta 1833, p. 164.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1229, Malta 1834, p. 261.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1286, Malta 1835, p. 292.

⁵² *Ibid.*, no. 1325, Malta 1836, p. 167.

⁵³ M. Miegè, *Histoire de Malte*, Vol. I, Paris 1840, p. 161.

Population according to levels of instruction			
	Malta	Gozo	Total
Those who do not know how to read or write	69,320	9,705	79,025
Those who know how to read or write but have no other knowledge	22,002	3,081	25,083
Those whose level of instruction is above that of the basic skills	8,884	1,244	10,128
Total	100,206	14,030	114,236

⁵⁴ A. Giglio, *Comments and Tables in illustration of the Statistical Abstracts of the Census of the Population of Malta for the Year 1851*, Malta 1853, §1, p. 29.

⁵⁵ P. Pullicino, *Statistica Scolastica Malta e Gozo 1858*, Malta 1859, p. 5. Paolo Pullicino calculated that the number of students in schools as a ratio of the whole population worked out at 1:30. Considering the 5–15 age group as being a fifth of the whole population, Pullicino calculated the ratio of the children attending school in 1842 as being 1:6 of the 5–15 cohort.

that: 'Here education is left to the philanthropy of individuals or to the accidental wisdom of parents. Abroad it is deemed an element of government, essential to the comprehension of and obedience to the laws, and requisite alike to the interest of the state and to the welfare of the recipient.'⁵⁶

Some sought to blame the Catholic Church and excuse the government. *The Harlequin*⁵⁷ held that, 'Were the clergy all educated they might become instructors of youth and teachers of poor children in the casals and cities. And in this way, . . . aid the government and diminish its expenditure. . . .'⁵⁸ To some extent, those who held that the clergy were also guilty for the stunting of educational progress were not completely off the mark. It has to be asserted however, that the clergy could not all be lumped into the category of 'suppressers' of education. A government notice of 1834 reinforces this reality. It announced that the lieutenant governor 'has been pleased to nominate the Reverend Canon Dr Don Fortunato Panzavecchia to be the President of the Normal School to be set up to serve the Three Cities. . . .'⁵⁹ Ten years later he was appointed director of the primary schools. And as a priest he was not alone. Later on, Can. Paolo Pullicino would emerge as another champion of education for the masses.

Education in Malta, in the first three to four decades of British rule was too haphazardly constituted. A trickle of government-supported schools, a number of private establishments, and some convent classes, could not hope to satisfy the needs of so many people who were so educationally backward as to be of detriment to themselves and to their country. The British were slow to pick up the pace for better schooling. The Church did not help much either. According to one Maltese source, at this time the culture of youth had been highly neglected. This source emphasised that schooling generally remained within the exclusive office and charity of the clergy. These ran a few private classes where nothing more than the rudiments of the Italian and Latin languages were taught.⁶⁰

With a situation like this, no one could speak of any real educational and school structure, and this in turn led to an absence of any real teaching body in Malta in the first decades of British colonial rule. For this state of fact to change, someone had to set the ball rolling. For this to happen it needed the intervention of a Royal Commission which visited Malta in 1836 and caused what may arguably be termed as a revolution in the educational system of the Maltese islands and started what later on would become popular education for all.

⁵⁶ *Malta Penny Magazine*, no. 8, Malta 1839, p. 31.

⁵⁷ *The Harlequin* was a mouthpiece of British interests in Malta.

⁵⁸ *The Harlequin or Anglo-Maltese Miscellany*, no. 25, Malta 1838, p. 98.

⁵⁹ *The Malta Government Gazette*, no. 1214, Malta 1834, p. 131.

⁶⁰ N.Z., *In Morte del Dottor Giuseppe Clinquant*, Malta 1868, pp. 12–3.