

MALTA - AN ISLAND WHERE PAST AND PRESENT GO HAND IN HAND

by OLIVER FRIGGIERI

An introduction to the island

The newcomer can immediately discover the real essence of that stretch of land permanently lurking alone, in apparent oblivion of all, in the middle of the Mediterranean: that rock is equally small and complete. It has consistently attracted the attention of numerous powerful nations, and some of them have also managed to fall in love with her. Eventually they have left their indelible mark on her character, and this has gradually grown into one complex phenomenon; all its layers tell a different story, but lead towards one substantial conclusion: assimilation. That is how history has been equally benevolent and despotic with the place. Since Malta is also a prominent tourist resort in the region, it boasts of its past as it seeks to justify its pretences according to the demands of the present.

A very rich history has contributed to render Malta a significant resort for whoever wants to discover the uniqueness of living on an island and to get the special feeling of going through a country where past and present habitually go hand in hand. The most diverse historical eras do so through conviction as well as convenience, at times peacefully and naturally, at others with difficulty and in defiance of all the other attractions of postmodernism. The perennial dispute between the immobility of the past and the velocity of the present is indeed an aspect which greatly explains what life in Malta implies. Indeed, given the limited space, Malta has to make exceptional efforts to survive as well as to keep in touch with the outer world, much bigger and infinitely indifferent. But that is what makes [Malta a fascinating story to narrate.

Never has the country been self-sufficient, as no other country is, but an innate passion for initiative has kept the world moving, whichever the circumstances. A small national community, which also includes huge thousands of migrants spread throughout the world, has succeeded to build itself into what it is now, a state enjoying all recognition worldwide. Three tiny islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, as well as some islets form the Maltese archipelago, about 100 kilometres from Sicily. The distance from North Africa is 288km. The whole area, known as Malta, is about 246 kilometres. The longest distance is about 27km, and the widest is 14 km. Numerous harbours, low hills and sandy beaches characterise the place.

Valletta is the capital city, as well as an important commercial spot, characterised by a number of harbours, the main one being the Grand Harbour, the site of numerous historical events. The archaeological patrimony is about 7000 years old. Malta is most known for its megalithic temples, the oldest free standing stone buildings in the world. The hypogeum is an early document of the real definition of Malta: the fusion of culture and religion. The cart tracks, commonly assigned to the Bronze Age, are a unique aspect of the historical character of the island.

The identity of early Malta has been shaped by the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, and the Romans. St Paul was shipwrecked in Malta in 60 A.D., as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. This has given birth to the strong Christian tradition of the island. The Arabs ruled Malta between 870 and 1090, succeeded by the Normans and then the Order of St. John. The Knights of Malta have left a rich architectural heritage scattered

throughout the place. In 1798 Napoleon invaded Malta and forced the Order to leave. The uprising of the Maltese against their French occupants led to the British blockade. They asked for the British protection in 1802. Malta was annexed to Britain under the Treaty of Paris in 1814. Malta attained independence from Britain in 1964, and in 1979 became a republic.

The national language of Malta, Maltese, goes back to the Arabic period. It is the only national language in Europe which belongs to the Semitic family, and is written in the Latin script. Maltese and English are the official languages of Malta.

The history of the island closely reflects the historical evolution of Europe. Malta has managed to absorb all influences coming from outside and to mould them according to its own nature. This gave room to the formation of a unique identity equally typical of the region and distinctive. Religion, language and domination have all contributed to the formation of its character. It has managed to survive and eventually to become sovereign.

The discovery of roots

Colonialism has left an indelible mark on Malta. However, political emancipation has provided the people with the full rights enjoyed by any democracy in Malta. The old man still lingers on in the Maltese, but he has to come to task with himself and realize that he is politically new, namely free after so long. Contemporary life demands development of all sorts. Where is national dignity actually to be found, and what is it made up of? Can the past and the present go hand in hand together?

The island's heritage is essentially in stone, and man has to be a builder of some sort. Navigation gave way to construction. Maltese history recognises its prehistorical birth in ritual, and since then it seems that the islander has not changed substantially. His attitude towards his heritage in stone is still ritual. Churches are built with the same facility as villas. A church may resemble a villa, and vice-versa. A church is not only useful but also symbolical; so is a Maltese house. It is equally an abode and a solid image of the inhabitant.

Different cultures have produced specific psychological traits, an unquenchable thirst for the new. The major eras, Phoenician, Carthaginian, Roman, Spanish, Arab, Norman, French, British, illustrate submission to superior forces and the gradual formation of an indigenous identity through assimilation and adaptation. The Maltese character has been moulded by foreign dominations.

The Maltese language is the most characteristic feature of the island. As a mixed medium of expression it exemplifies what Malta has gone through for a very long time. Since the Norman Conquest Maltese has been widely exposed to non-Arabic influences. What happened to the languages is indicative of the complex process pervading the whole of Maltese reality.

Narrating Malta, a boat and a house

All this has strongly influenced me to narrate it in terms of poetry, short stories and novels. For a long number of years I have found it quite intriguing to reflect on the reality of Malta as a sort of image of any other existential situation in Europe.

Literature has been my earliest choice, and it is still my latest. I have been dedicating my life to writing since I was about ten or eleven. My earliest preference was poetry, which I wrote avidly, and with an ever increasing desire to attain technical and logical coherence. As in all other instances, in writing a narrative work one evasively narrates a specific reality and eventually reaches out for much more. One's own perspective is what really matters in trying to shapen life, namely to put it into a functional structure

called 'novel'. In this case I have always hoped I could narrate the character of the Maltese people, and then, once that departing point is identified, move ahead towards an interpretation of man on the real island, the planet of all, wherever one may be. In that sense a novel has become to me a way of establishing that constants do exist, and that literature can only be contemporary if it identifies them.

It would be very difficult for me to recall how each of my six novels has come through. A thought, an incident, a recollection, a meeting with a friend, anything could have prompted a novel to come to the fore. But from where? Where does a novel start from? Was it conceived in Malta or abroad? Any answer is incomplete. What can be safely said is that the life of a novelist is best lived through wilful loyalty to that choice: meaningful narration. Thus one thinks in terms of plots, people, actions, characterisation, and above anything else universal truths. My novels intentionally look provincial, historical, tied to a specific time and place, and ideally insert life in a sort of time warp. That is how the sense of what is contemporary can be described. All this can constitute what may be defined as a Mediterranean novel. Mediterraneanity is an attitude, and then a method of writing.

The existential islander

The precariousness of an islander is the fundamental theme from which all variations may emanate. To me that is the source of inspiration in all its forms. My islander has always lived on the cutting edge and his nature has been moulded by a persistent accumulation of civilisations. In a character there has to be a fusion of influences, all contributing towards the formation of a specific Mediterranean type. The inhabitant of Malta is born on a tiny land and takes pride in being a stubborn survivor, defying time, absorbing the lessons of time. That makes him /her equally resolute and undecided. Invasions and occupations have indeed moulded such an islander into a crusader in search of a promised land which must ultimately must be somewhere within. In my novel *Fil-Parlament ma Jikbrux Fjuri* (In Parliament no flowers bloom, 1986), the protagonist is an average worker, ironically called Karlu Manju, who wearily plods his way towards self-recognition in terms of political belonging and philosophical enquiry. He ultimately understands that both dimensions converge within his conscience. He is a Maltese pilgrim.

The question regarding what it really means to be the end-result of so many diverse civilisations is perennially intriguing, and answers can be provided both scholarly and literarily. I have sought both over a period of more than thirty years. It is safe to conclude that both are components of one selfsame interpretation. The awareness of Malta forming part of the Southernmost end of a continent, facing the Northern frontier of another, and the fact that diverse cultures meet within the Maltese spirit: that to me has been a continuous source of inspiration in both my poems and novels. In *Stejjer għal Qabel Jidlam (Koranta and other Short Stories from Malta*, Mireva Publications, Malta, 1994) the warmth and the complexity of the South are hopefully conveyed through people who painfully or otherwise illustrate the sociality of individual life.

History and timelessness

An island like Malta primarily embodies antiquity. It has to be that in a modern way. A paradox is thus meant to be lived, and transcended. A novel may suggest how. The dualism is inherent in all this, and various parallel manifestations of it can be identified: God is timeless, and history conveys that sense through the transience of time; the land, which is limited, faces the sea, which looks infinite; the self is supposedly known, whereas otherness (what lies beyond the visible ocean) is unpredictable. My sort of

outsider may not be existential, but he is definitely political, historical, deeply rooted somewhere in the middle of the Mediterranean where Malta stands as a sort of meeting place, a spiritual hub, a timeless roundabout. The protagonist of *Il-Gidba* (The Lie, 1978) strives to attain freedom as he almost instinctively falls in love with chains.

Such a frontier country cannot be understood if not in terms of what is a sort of precariousness. An ex-colony which managed to outwit history and to emerge as a fully fledged nation state, a country on its own, sufficiently strong to form part of the European assembly of nations: that is indeed a novel with a happy ending. Both *Ġizimin li Qatt ma Jiftah* (Jasmins that never open, 1998) and *It-Tfal jiġu bil-Vapuri* (Children come by Ship, 2000) depict life in the past, eventually transforming memory into fantasy, history into a fable. That to me is an interpretation of life in both local and universal terms. The present unfolds itself mysteriously in the process. My island stands midway between isolation and integration, representing the condition of the average inhabitant of the place as well as that of any human being.

Such a situation is then transformed into a metaphor of an existential nature. The postmodern era has its specific preoccupations, disguised in various ways. Communication with the outer world is what the islander as well as any person anywhere is seeking. The setting is a constant: the South of Europe, an island in the centre of the Mediterranean, a country which has to strike a middle course between tradition and modernisation. A paradigm of the universal condition: that is how I hope to have provided an interpretation of being Maltese in terms which are common to all else, equally though differently islanders. Smallness is thus seen as a condition, not as a limitation.



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