

Books

Italian exiles, lyrical poems and superior human beings

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OLIVER FRIGGIERI: *Storia della Letteratura Maltese: la poesia dalle origini al primo Novecento*, Malta University Press, 391pp.

This is not a new work but a facsimile reprint of the book originally published by the Sicilian house Spes in 1986.

What Spes published then was the author's Italian translation (with an entirely new section on Karmenu Vassallo) of his own *Storja tal-letteratura Maltija*, I published by Paul Mizzi in 1979.

I am not sure why the decision to publish an unrevised edition of the work was taken. Perhaps Friggieri and Malta University Press wished to make this elegantly written history, in Friggieri's admirable Italian prose, available to the increasing number of Italian scholars and students taking an interest in our literature, and a facsimile reprint was clearly the easiest, if not the best, way of doing it.

Readers interested in the development of romanticism in literature will learn much from the author's lucid discussions on the subject, while those interested in that fascinating period of our history - British rule in the first half of the 19th century - will be impressed by Friggieri's sound knowledge of the period and especially of its cultural history.

His discussion of the Italian exiles in Malta from the travails of

the *Risorgimento* and the way in which they fanned the embers both of Maltese nationalism and the early literature born of it is excellent. Along with the essays in *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta* edited by Bonello, Fiorentini and Schiavone (second ed. 1982), it is essential reading for the student.

I am particularly interested in what Friggieri writes about Tommaso Zauli Sajani and his prolific author wife Ifigenia. Sajani angered a number of pro-British Maltese when he wrote that he hoped the day would come when Malta was reunited with its mother country, Italy; and when his tragedy *Lisle Adamo* was performed at the Manoel Theatre in 1842 the poor man was showered with abuse in the newspaper *L'Osservatore Maltese*.

Clearly many authors writing in the early days of the emancipated Maltese press never set themselves any limits to the insults they poured out so freely.

Much of Friggieri's book is devoted to three authors, Ġan Anton Vassallo (1817-1868), Dun Karm (1871-1961) and Karmenu Vassallo (born in 1913 and died the year after the original edition was published).

The first Vassallo, an early lawyer-poet, was not, the author thinks, *per se* a great poet. But he was in some ways an important figure, for he gave fledgling Maltese literature respectability, being a university graduate and professional who ended up as professor of Italian at our University. He wrote a great number of lyrical poems, of which *Int Sabiha Malta Taghna*, with its musicality and vivid expression of sincere love for his country, is surely the most famous.

He wanted the common people and not the lettered ones to read his work, and did his best to achieve a style in which a vocabulary of Semitic origin was mixed with words of Romance origin. He was never of the '*Malti safi*' persuasion.

Vassallo's love of Malta sometimes takes the form of poems about the sufferings of people like poor widows and poor people who



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had to exile themselves by seeking work in other lands.

Friggieri has very little to say about Vassallo's major poetic work, *Il-Ġifen Tork*, a vividly written narrative poem described by earlier critics like Ġużè Aquilina as being of an epic nature.

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He certainly spreads himself in his chapters about Dun Karm, an author he wrote about and whose works he edited for many years of his academic career.

This author continues to occupy a special place in our literature, even after the strong literary movement born not long after his death, which aimed to introduce new styles and especially new attitudes to combat the influence of this remarkable poet who was an arch-conservative in many ways.

He started by making his name as an Italian versifier strongly influenced by Vincenzo Monti and Alessandro Manzoni, but in 1912 he started writing mainly in Maltese and speedily became the most admired writer in what was then a fairly new type of literature.

The elegance of his vocabulary, his metrical skill, and above all his ability to voice the feelings and ambitions of a nation in the making were so remarkable that the label of '*il-poeta nazzjonal*' ('the national poet') was coined for him and has stuck to him.

I imagine he was satisfied that he merited this appellation, as he felt he was a man chosen from above to create works well beyond the capacity of the ordinary man, saying so most notably in his noble poem, *Non omnis moriar*.

His conviction that he was a superior being when writing was surely one of the reasons why the post-war generation of poets felt they had had too much of him.

I would recommend Friggieri's many pages on Dun Karm's celebrated translation of Ugo Foscolo's *I Sepolcri* and on his even more celebrated riposte to the atheist Foscolo in his magnificent long poem *Il-'Jien' u Lilhinn Minnu*. Here we find the young Friggieri at his most perceptive as a critic and as a thinker.

He is also often acute and always readable when writing about Karmenu Vassallo, a poet Friggieri knew personally, whose childhood and early manhood were wrought with sorrows and misfortune.

This made him a great pessimist, his literary idol being the 19th century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, like him a man of sorrows, with whom he was obsessed for many years.

Vassallo's first collection of verse, *Nirien* (Fire) in 1938 made him not just admired for his poetic strength, but also notorious for cursing the father and mother to whom he owed what he saw as his unfortunate birth.

Stylistically he was completely uninfluenced by Dun Karm for whom he did not have much love, feeling that he had been treated somewhat disdainfully at one time by the older poet.

His textbook of Maltese metrics was well known to Maltese schoolchildren of my generation and so was his Maltese grammar from which, as his many students will recall, he could quote at speed by heart.

Much has been published and researched about Maltese literature since the book was originally written, but the book's value still stands and I can recommend it to Italian readers without hesitation.