

'Our English visitors' – Some British women in Malta during the nineteenth century

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Abstract: *Recent historiography has challenged an exclusively male reading of empire. In Malta, however, the presence of British women has been generally limited to the philanthropic activities of the wives or widows of visiting dignitaries. While acknowledging the presence of these woman, the present writing concentrates upon the 'others', whether these were the middle class women born of British parents who engaged in a variety of activities, or the anonymous ones for whom the islands were a land of opportunity, or of despair. The elaboration of the subject is carried out in the awareness of the then-current realities which juxtaposed English, colonial mentalities against local, Italianate ones.*

Keywords: *Foreigners, gender, mentalities, religion, prostitution, entertainment.*

The masculine features of empire have generally been taken for granted. Empire meant soldiers and sailors, bureaucrats and officials, both exclusively male. Politics and power, conquest and rule were spelled in the masculine. Imperial migration too has, until recently, conformed to this male-centred perspective. Recent historiography, however, is correcting the imbalance. Both the policies and the politics underlying emigration from Britain as well as actual presence on colonial soil, whether owing to conquest, settlement, or missionary zeal, are now incorporating the gender perspective, one that accounts for the consequences of emigration upon men and women.¹ Missionaries, wives and daughters, domestic servants, entertainers, independent women in search of adventure or of a husband,

¹ See, for example, A.J. Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830–1914*, London, 1979; N. Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Bloomington, 1992; Lisa Chilton, 'The Right Sort of Woman': female emigrants and emigration to the British Empire, 1890–1910', *Women's History Review*, 3:3 (September 1994), pp. 385–409; A. MacClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in a Colonial Contest*, New York, 1995; C. Midgley (ed.) *Gender and Imperialism*, New York, 1998; Julia Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power*, New York, 2000; Philippa Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, Oxford, 2004; Ruth A. Miller, 'The Missionary Narrative as Coercive Interrogation: seduction, confession and self-presentation in women's "letters home".' *Women's History Review*; 15:5 (November 2006), pp. 751–71.

and prostitutes, are now emerging as relevant subjects to be studied within the wider perspective of imperial history.²

Within this general discourse of imperial migration, the Maltese islands – one of Britain’s few European colonies – play a minimal role. The geographical position of the islands, size, and limited resources, and the imperial policies militated against full-scale migration from Britain. At the same time, however, the islands did possess some attractions. The islands were not only military and naval bases; there was also a substantial British presence in the form of commercial agents and other businessmen and entrepreneurs. There were government officials and churchmen who ruled or assisted the British community. Finally, there were those whose stay in Malta was fleeting, those whom today we would call tourists. It was for these latter that George Percy Badger wrote his *Description of Malta and Gozo*. His main purpose he says is that of affording ‘to the numerous English travellers . . . making a longer or shorter stay at Malta’ information about the island. ‘The late facilities offered by steam navigation,’ he continues, ‘. . . have greatly increased the number of strangers in Malta.’³

The principal concern of the present writing is women: those British women who, for a variety of reasons, visited and resided in Malta for some time during the nineteenth century. Renowned and less renowned women, alone or in company, made Malta their home, permanently or temporarily, for a variety of reasons. Of the latter, some were in search of work, others of adventure, and still others of a husband. In any case, the present writing traverses the social scale from top to bottom, and in doing so seeks to redress an imbalance; one that has privileged the male over the female and the famous over the anonymous.

For those at the upper end of the social scale, this is but a revisitation of published historiography: an exercise which is useful for providing a benchmark against which the vicissitudes of those at the lower end can be refracted. Indeed, for their contemporaries, respectable ladies were held as exemplars; and this prejudice is, to some extent, revived in historiography that tends to punish those at the lower end by ignoring them. For those at the lower end, one needs to delve into the primary sources. Since these women were a constant concern, and worry, for the colonial authorities, they can be, at least partially, resuscitated through official correspondence (generally marked ‘private’ and often ‘secret’).

² See, for example, Philippa Levine, ‘“A Multitude of Unchaste Women”: Prostitution in the British Empire’, *Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2004), pp.159–63; Richard Phillips, ‘Unsexy Geographies: Heterosexuality, Respectability and the Travellers’ Aid Society’ *ACM: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 5(2), 2006, pp. 163–90.

³ George Percy Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, Malta, 1839; Facsimile Edition, Malta, 1998; Preface.

The discussion also affords an opportunity to revisit the perennial oppositions so characteristic of British rule of Malta (Catholics versus Protestants; English versus Italian). In the present case, however, there is a twist, in the sense that the acceptable or tolerated becomes the Protestant and English; the repugnant, dangerous, and rejected, the Roman Catholic and Sicilian. This, in turn, is linked to the notion of respectability as perceived by both the rulers of the island (male, British) and the local male middle class. The latter, for example, were critical of government policies that were not tight enough to bar entry to Sicilian prostitutes. The former, however, were certainly conscious of the fact that Sicilian prostitutes were, at least in part, satisfying a need which might otherwise have had to be catered for, to some extent, by indigent or abandoned British girls. One expected a totalizing morality; the other, saving fellow nationals (whereas reality, of course, satisfied none). In any case, there is evidence which shows that the reluctance of bureaucrats to deal publicly with their fellow, female compatriots in Malta, received the sympathy and solidarity of the local press, irrespective of its political leanings, which, too refrained from advertising such misdeeds (but not ones committed by males).

The neat divisions between Italian and English, Protestant and Catholic, which were so much part of late nineteenth-century rhetoric as well as the very political divide which placed the English and their sympathizers on one part, and those Maltese who demanded some form of limited autonomy (and who invariably had Italian sympathies) on the other become blurred. It is gender which takes precedence over the political. The dividing lines are no longer located in the political arena; they now straddle the gender divide: men on the one side and women on the other. Thus, if Italian-language papers are replete with the peccadilloes of British soldiers and sailors, a veil of silence descends upon British female conduct. No such reticence, however, is reserved for Italian (almost always Sicilian) lower-class women. In the case of Italians, the lines seem to be drawn according to social class rather than gender. Thus middle- and upper-class Italians are spoken of in effusive terms while lower-class ones are either usurpers of local labour (males) or immoral persons (females, prostitutes). Religion and politics are pushed aside and notions of respectability tinged with gender difference replace them. As regards the British ruling administration itself, the 1890s reveal how, with a delay of a decade, 'strategies of rule and public sexual norms stiffened in parallel throughout the Empire'.⁴ The symbolic power of womanhood as a civilizing and moralizing figure that strengthens the accoutrements of empire and which transcends the public and the private divide was in direct contrast to the fate or the choices of lower-class

⁴Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Gender in the British Empire' in Judith M. Brown & W.M. Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume IV. The Twentieth Century*, Oxford, 1999, pp. 378–97.

British women. There is no surprise therefore that such incidents are veiled by discretion. What should occasion surprise is the compliance of those Maltese whose sympathies lay elsewhere.

The size of the islands could never provide sufficient space upon which emigrants from Britain could thrive through the acquisition and cultivation of land. Nor was there the possibility of extraction of raw materials that could serve the empire. The non-existence of any industrial enterprises rendered the chances of finding a rewarding job outside official bureaucracy an unlikely eventuality. Similarly, the relatively small local population rendered the island an unappealing and unprofitable market. In any case, the reasons underlying the occupation of the islands were based upon their strategic position within the defensive and imperial network. It therefore constituted an intermediate, albeit an important one, rather than a 'final' destination. Of course, all the foregoing is susceptible to a number of caveats that nibble away at their absolute rigidity. Thus, although no appreciable migration can be considered to have taken place from Britain to Malta during the late nineteenth century,⁵ there was a constant flow of soldiers and sailors, bureaucrats, officials, entrepreneurs, entertainers, or mere visitors. Even the assertion that the commercial attraction was negligible is weakened by the phenomenon of naval and military presence which by itself constituted a valuable market attracting representatives of the most famous of British commercial enterprises.⁶ Hence, although one cannot speak of imperial migration for the islands, one can still speak of a considerable influx of British people. A list of the more important of such people, whether British or otherwise, has already been made.⁷ This chronicles the biographies and opinions of royal personages, politicians, writers, and entertainers who visited, or in any case had some contact with, Malta.⁸ The two female figures to whom most attention has been devoted in local writings are Queen Adelaide, widow of William IV of England, and Sarah Austin, whose visit dates to the first half of the nineteenth century.

⁵ For David Thompson (*England in the Nineteenth Century: 1815–1914*; London, 1950, pp. 163–64); between 1853 and 1880 there were some 2,466,000 migrants from Britain.

⁶ Eighty per cent of our commercial travellers are foreigners, *Daily Malta Chronicle*. 2 July 1893.

⁷ Petra Bianchi & Peter Serracino Inglott (eds), *Encounters with Malta*, Malta, 2000. For an earlier period, see Thomas Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour*, Malta, 2009.

⁸ Cf., for example, Donald Sultana, *The Journey of Sir Walter Scott to Malta*, Gloucester and New York, 1986; Donald Sultana, *The Journey of William Frere to Malta in 1832, preceded by a sketch of his life and of the Frere Family, with particular reference to John Hookham Frere. A Monograph in Two Parts*, Malta, 1988; D. Mintoff, *Kittieba Magħrufa Ingliži li żaru Malta*, Malta, 1961; Donald Sultana, *Benjamin Disraeli in Spain, Malta and Albania, 1830–32*, London, 1976; Paul Cassar, *The John Hookham Frere Memorial Medical Library and the Origins of the Malta Medical School Library*, Malta, 1985; Paul Cassar, 'John Hookham Frere in Malta (1821–1846). A Link with our Social and Cultural Past' *Melita Historica*, ix/1, 1984; pp. 49–73; Emmanuel Fiorentino, 'Edward Lear in Malta', *Proceedings of History Week*, 1984, pp. 33–9.

The famous

Queen Adelaide, Victoria's aunt, not only spent one particular winter in Malta but also, and more importantly, contributed to the building of a Protestant church on the island.⁹ The circumstances accompanying the building of that church need not be repeated.¹⁰ We are told, however, that after her husband's death, Adelaide's 'frail health obliged her to seek a warmer climate and an attack of bronchitis sent her to Malta, so much in the limelight as a health resort'.¹¹ A.V. Laferla, the Maltese writer who recounts the incident is full of admiration for British royalty:

The island, which had not been honoured by a royal visit since the 15th century, was agog with excitement. As HMS *Hastings*, with Her Majesty on board, sailed into the Grand Harbour, on the 20th November 1838, the scene afloat and ashore was unforgettable and, when the frail little figure of the flaxen-haired queen was seen on deck, the cheering was only drowned by the firing of guns and the clanging of bells.

Popular expectation was not disappointed as the Queen endeared herself to everybody.¹²

Adelaide's visit not only appealed to the simple pleasures of the Maltese but also to subsequent writers, as Laferla's account demonstrates. Nearly twenty years after Laferla's account, another writer, possibly basing himself on the earlier writing, says that 'the inhabitants [of Malta] rejoiced' when news was divulged that the queen would be visiting Malta.¹³ The latter writing is enriched by extracts from the diary of the then chief secretary to the government, who gives an account of all the public events at which the queen participated during her four-month stay. That royal visit, however, apart from its entertainment value and the contribution it made to the religion of Malta's rulers,¹⁴ had only that skin-deep effect one would expect from all mundane events.

More momentous was, apparently, the visit made two years earlier by Sarah Austin, wife of one of the two members of the royal commission sent to report on the state of the island.¹⁵ Once again, Mrs Austin must have charmed, at a distance of

⁹ Cf. Arthur Bonnici, 'Thirty Years to Build a Protestant Church' *Melita Historica*, Vol. VI, No. 2, Malta, 1973, pp. 183–91 and Joseph Galea, 'An Unpublished Diary of Queen Adelaide's Visit to Malta in 1838, *Scientia*; Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (July–September 1963), pp. 97–116.

¹⁰ Bonnici, pp. 183–91.

¹¹ A.V. Laferla, *British Malta*, Volume 1 (1800–1872); Malta, 1946, p. 175.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹³ Galea, pp. 99–116.

¹⁴ The feeling among the Maltese (Catholic) population was that they should have nothing to do with the erection of a church of a religion which was not theirs. A concert organized by military officials to raise funds for this church was totally ignored by the Maltese: '. . . essendo la religione dei Maltesi la Cattolica Romana, non si doveva aspettare [the Chief Secretary] che alcuno di loro [of the Maltese] . . . fosse così pazzo da contribuire, non solo il suo obolo, ma anche la sua presenza, che é quanto a dire il suo appoggio morale ad una Chiesa contraria alla sua credenza', *Risorgimento*, 3 Apr. 1877.

¹⁵ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Affairs of the Island of Malta*, London, 1838.

a century, the same Maltese writer who had written in so effusive terms of Queen Adelaide. She was, he says ‘. . . a handsome, attractive woman who had made her mark on the world of letters by her numerous classical translations’.¹⁶ Sarah Austin’s one-and-a-half year stay¹⁷ had greater and more beneficial consequences for the Maltese. It is true that she must have enjoyed the benefits that flowed from her husband’s position as royal commissioner. She indulged in the ‘balls, festivities, and other perks that colonial life ensured . . . she rode nearly everyday, bathed in the sea, and explored the exotic flavours and culture . . .’¹⁸ However, it is for her interest in education on the island that she is mostly remembered.

At the time of her husband’s and her own visit, the people were mostly illiterate and the state of education horrible.

The moral and intellectual destitution of the people is dreadful. No schools in the Casals, no tolerable education for the middling classes . . . no press, no place for discussion, no intercourse with the English of an amicable and instructive kind – what wonder if they [the Maltese] are ignorant and childish?¹⁹

This is what she commented. She set to work on the opening of village (primary) schools and her efforts resulted in an increase of government aid for education. Thus, ‘by 1842, nineteen elementary schools had opened their doors to 1296 students’.²⁰ Austin seems to have been as popular with the Maltese as she was unpopular with the British community on the island.²¹ Her work among the Maltese, however, did not encounter that unanimous approval which later historians reserved for the royal personage. One such, P.P. Castagna, writing in 1890, was forthcoming in giving due recognition to Austin in some, but not all, things she proposed. Of course, the opinions of one who in London had moved in the intellectual circles of, and been neighbour to, Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, were not necessarily the same as those of the local writer. What worried Castagna was her suggestion that the older girls at the *Casa d’Industria* – the institution founded early under British rule where girls were taught sewing and lace-making²² – should dispense with the older girls in order to admit younger ones. The result, according to Castagna was that, ‘*dauna dahlu ghall irtir u dauca hargiu ghall isfrattu*’.²³

¹⁶ Laferla, p. 159.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160

¹⁸ Nadya Hayder, *Sarah Austin a Biography* (2000) at <http://womenslegalhistory.stanford.edu/papers/AustinS-Haider2000.pdf>.

¹⁹ Quoted in Laferla, pp. 168–9.

²⁰ Ronald G. Sultana, ‘Technical and Vocational Education in 19th Century Malta’ in Ronald G. Sultana (ed.), *Yesterday’s Schools. Readings in Maltese Educational History*, Malta, 2001, pp. 67–99.

²¹ Bianchi and Serracino Inglott, pp. 253–4.

²² Henry Frendo, *Storja ta’ Malta. Żmien l-Ingliżi. Is-seklu Dsatax*, Malta, 2004, p. 80.

²³ *Lis Storia ta Malta Bil Gzejer Tahha (It Tieni Darba) min P. P. Castaga. Storia Politica, 1890*, Facsimile Edition, Malta, 1985, p. 448.

Apart from Queen Adelaide and Sarah Austin a number of other ladies visited and spent time on the island. Most of these remain without name. Others are encountered in nineteenth century chronicles. For example, John Hookham Frere (1769–1846), diplomat, poet, and scholar arrived in April 1821, 'in search of a warm climate for his wife . . . who was in a precarious state of health'.²⁴ Hookham Frere was accompanied by a coterie of women that included, apart from his wife, his sister, 'a niece of his wife, Miss Blake, afterwards Lady Honoria Hamilton Chichester; and a Greek girl, Statyra Livedestro, whom he had rescued as a baby from Greece during a massacre there'.²⁵ The Countess of Erroll – Hookham Frere's wife – too, must have left some imprint on the Maltese who knew her. She died in 1831 and '[a]lthough her funeral was a private one, it has been said that six thousand indigent Maltese persons went to the cemetery as a mark of respect'.²⁶ The same can be said for the sister, whose fame as a benevolent woman and her interest in the primary education of children were duly recognized on her death in 1839.²⁷

These British ladies, and others like them, spent only a short time in Malta. In some way they all left a trace on the local social or cultural scene but were not part of the social fabric that was nineteenth-century Malta. More involved in that social fabric were the wives of respective governors who ruled the island and of the other high British officials who resided there for longer periods. To these must be added wives and daughters, sometimes born in Malta, of merchants and traders who had established themselves there. These were very often part of that upper and middle class society which, small as it was, involved itself in philanthropic activities and played some role, however minor in the everyday life going on in the island colony.

Lady Grenfell, wife of the governor who served in Malta between 1899 and 1903, was one such lady, who sponsored philanthropic activities during their husbands' stay on the island. A concert organized by the Ladies' Society of St Vincent de Paule was held under her patronage in February 1899.²⁸ Under another governor, a Ladies' Guild distributed clothing and other material to the various private charitable institutions of the island. The guild was formed among 'the better sort of ladies' which included not only the wives of higher-ranking Maltese civil servants and authorities, but also Lady Rundle, the governor's wife and other English ladies resident in Malta whose names – Miss Strainer, Mrs Petch, Mrs Coxon, Mrs Ross, Mrs Gibney, Mrs Wathing²⁹ – remind one of the quintessentially English

²⁴ Paul Cassar, 'John Hookham Frere in Malta (1821–1846) A Link with Our Social and Cultural Past', *Melita Historica*; Vol. IX, No. 1 (1984), pp. 49–73, 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51

²⁸ *La Gazzetta di Malta*, 18 February 1899.

²⁹ *D[aily] M[alta] C[hronicle]* 2 September 1903.

vicarage committees of married women who distribute charity among the local poor. That same Mrs Rundle, like her predecessors and successors, organized balls and ‘at homes’ on a regular basis. These were generally appreciated by both the British community as well as the local elites who were regularly invited to such activities. ‘Her Ladyship has a way all her own to make her guests appreciative of their interest in them and her thoughtfulness of them.’³⁰ When these activities brought with them the added bonus of visiting royalty they assumed much greater importance for those who attended.³¹ It was not only the governor’s wife who interested herself, and got involved in local affairs. Lady Luisa Fielding, for example, condescended to distribute prizes at a Plant and Flower Show.³² Of course, these ladies not only participated in activities aimed at alleviating the plight of their poorer inferiors but indulged in various pursuits which were intended for their own community rather than for a wider, local section of the population. A ‘Malta Drawing Club’ attracted both Maltese and British women,³³ and similar organizations and clubs were to be found in some number during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The known

Apart from charitable and general philanthropic or social activities, there was a good number of women, whether single or married, who lived on the island more or less permanently, if not as migrants, certainly as long-term settlers. Ascertaining the exact number of such residents may prove an impossible task. One indication is given in so far as members of the military establishments are concerned. According to the 1891 census, out of a military force of 9,336 persons, 813 were women.³⁴ Ten years later there were 1,089 females compared to a military garrison of 9,784 men.³⁵ As to the civilian British presence on the island, no figures are available since both Maltese born as well as all British born persons were considered as British subjects and hence not distinguishable.³⁶ One indication may perhaps be the census of 1891 which shows that there were 781 males and 710 females born in the United Kingdom and resident in the islands.³⁷

³⁰ Ibid., 7 December 1911.

³¹ For example, *Risorgimento*, 23 February 1887, reports that the Carnival ball at the Governor’s Palace was a great success: ‘*circostanza dovuta principalmente alla presenza al ballo delle LL.AA.RR il Duca e la Duchessa di Edinburgo e la Principessa Luisa*’.

³² *Risorgimento*, 8 May 1880.

³³ *M[alta] T[imes] and U[nited] S[ervices] G[azette]* 9 February 1870.

³⁴ *Census of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 1892); Table I; p. 1.

³⁵ *Census of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 1903); Table I; p. 1.

³⁶ The problem of ascertaining the actual numbers of migrants and settlers within the British empire is not limited to Malta; figures are ‘fundamentally flawed’ says Stephen Constantine, ‘Migrants and Settlers’ in *Oxford History of the British Empire*. Volume IV, pp. 63–78.

³⁷ *Census*, 1892.; Table XLIX; p. 84.

Whatever their number, some British women involved themselves also in trading and other activities. Possibly, the most renowned was Laura Emma Blackley.³⁸ The firm 'F. Blackley' – bakers and confectioners – originally operated from Strada Reale in Valletta but with expanding business transferred its operations to a bakery in Pietà in 1907.³⁹ At the time of that enlargement, it was no longer in the hands of the founder or of his daughter. Laura Emma Blackley, born and residing in Valletta, was the only daughter of Fredrick, the founder of the firm. In 1892 Miss Blackley admitted as partner in the business Edwin Herbert Morris, an Englishman resident in Valletta, against a payment of £500. The life-term of the partnership was established at seven years, renewable for similar periods. However, Blackley reserved in her favour the return of the whole partnership should Morris die within three years, the only obligation being that of returning the £500 paid at the time of the constitution of the partnership.⁴⁰ By 1905, when Morris was in the process of building his establishment in Pietà, Emma Blackley had established herself in Cornwall, presumably the county of origin of her family.⁴¹ In that year she transferred all her interest in the firm to her former partner for £6,500. That price (which did not include the value of the land acquired by Morris) indicates the healthy state of the firm at the time of her departure.⁴²

Other British women ran private schools, helped their husbands in their trading activities, or simply lived as widows or spinsters often in seaside centres like Sliema or St Julian's, rather than in Valletta. Marie Susannah Reichelmann, possibly the widow of a German gentleman, but born in Davenport, Kent not only ran 'The High School' but also accommodated paying guests. She was to bequeath the furniture and the goodwill of the enterprise to those of her unmarried daughters who 'may be at the time of her death assisting her in the maintenance of her establishment.'⁴³ Another English lady who ran a private school was Caroline Ethel Yabeley, 'principal of Chiswick House School'. Miss Yabeley was a spinster and apparently had no family in Malta since she was to appoint as sole beneficiary of her estate a Maltese friend.⁴⁴ Others, like the children of Thomas and Mary Corlett, were part of a substantial commercial enterprise which at one time comprised the

³⁸ But there were also others, including Eliza Jane Reynolds who dealt in groceries, wines, and spirits (*The Malta Observer* 6 January 1870).

³⁹ Allister Macmillan (compiler and editor), *Malta and Gibraltar Illustrated*, London, 1915, pp. 333–34.

⁴⁰ Deed Not. Alfredo Carbone 8 July 1893. Partnership was renewed by another deed, Not. Alfredo Carbone, 29 May 1899.

⁴¹ Laura Emma Blackley, aged 43, was already resident in Marazion, Cornwall at the time of the UK Census of 1901. There she is indicated as 'living on her own means'. (<http://www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk>).

⁴² Deed Not. Alfredo Carbone, 11 November 1905.

⁴³ Deed Not. George Alfred Page, 10 May 1905.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 June 1911.

steam grain mills,⁴⁵ subsequently sold to Maltese entrepreneurs. These children – all female except one – were the wives of their father’s business partners and it was one of these in-laws who, after the death of the Corletts, was appointed as testamentary executor.⁴⁶

It was those who lived in retirement on the island – widows and spinsters particularly – who were generally involved in philanthropic activities. Even in death, they remembered both friends and social and philanthropic institutions. For example, Dublin-born Catherine Alicia Dillon who was well known in aristocratic circles, died during one of the periodic visits of cholera that afflicted the islands. The Italian language press objected that the health authorities discriminated between English and Maltese, because Miss Dillon’s corpse was not immediately removed from the house. ‘When shall we see the end of the system of two weights and two measures in this country?’,⁴⁷ asked one newspaper.

Miss Dillon’s family was scattered throughout Europe. And yet her thoughts were of them when she came to dispose of her estate. She bequeathed various legacies to nephews and nieces. Her will is representative of so many wills drawn up by British ladies in her same predicament during the period. Relatives, primarily, and servants, secondarily, were the preferred beneficiaries. What is not representative is, however, the extent of the estate, even if Alicia Dillon was by no means alone in being wealthy. She bequeathed, for example, £1,000 to her niece Edith who lived in Lausanne, Switzerland and another £400 to her other niece Eliza in Ireland. She also recognized the services provided by her male and female servants, Lorenzo Vassallo and Concetta Mizzi, to each of whom she bequeathed a life annuity of £18. Interestingly enough, she conditioned Vassallo’s legacy to the obligation of not entering into the service of persons by the name of Baynes.⁴⁸ Such conditional legacies were not confined to women. Harry Francis Hughes Hallett, vice-Admiral on the retired list, commander of the Royal Victoria Order, born and residing in Sliema, appointed his sister as his sole heir but then went on to ‘express his desire to his sister that in no account is any of his property of whatever kind to go to any of the descendants of his late uncle Henry Hughes Hallet nor to Charles Montreen Hughes Hallet, son of his late uncle James Hughes Hallet, Clerk in Holy Orders in Higham, Kent nor to any of his heirs and descendants; nor to Henry Hughes Hallett (commonly called Pat) also a son of the said Reverend James Hughes Hallet, nor to

⁴⁵ *M[alta] G[overnment] G[azette]* 11 June 1888; No. 3257.

⁴⁶ NAM (Mdina), ‘*Ricorso del Negoziante Henry Lord Jackson, nato in Londra domiciliato in Valletta, Malta, figlio del fu George John*’; filed in the Registry of the Courts of Voluntary Jurisdiction, 7 Feb. 1880 (*Ricorsi 1880 Volume I*, ff. 462–82).

⁴⁷ *Risorgimento*, 7 November 1887 (*Ma quando vedremo cessare in questo paese quell’odioso sistema dei due pesi e delle due misure?*).

⁴⁸ Deed, Not George Alfred Page, 3 July 1913.

any of his children or descendants'.⁴⁹ Such instances must be testimony to the squabbles, prejudices, and, presumably, petty quarrels that were as much part of island life among the British community as they were among the Maltese. Even a friend, Elizabeth, wife of the governor's chaplain, was beneficiary to the tune of £20. The bulk of Dillon's estate, however, went to her brother Colonel Robert Dillon.⁵⁰

A few of these ladies were Roman Catholic, whether converts or born in that religion is not known. In drawing up their wills, these women followed the general practice of the local population by bequeathing money for the celebration of masses for the repose of their souls. One example is that of the two spinster sisters, Rosina and Eliza Matilda Stevens, both resident in Sliema, presumably together. Their wills stipulated that following the death of the last of them, their estate was to be sold, with two-thirds of the proceeds going to nephews and nieces and the remaining share – after deduction of expenses – to be utilized in the celebration of masses.⁵¹ Charitable and philanthropic bequests by non-Catholics usually preferred as recipients such organizations as catered for the British community, the Union Club, and the Malta Sports Club being the most popular.⁵²

The women mentioned so far, whether those who ran a business like Laura Blackley, or a school like Miss Yabeley, or lived on the strength of what must have been inherited wealth like Catherine Dillon, had one primary characteristic in common: all of them were respectable members of the British middle-class community transposed on Mediterranean soil. Their activities, and whatever evidence remains of their social life show that they practised those tricky rules of gentility which Linda Young takes to 'refer to the entire cultural system of the late eighteenth-early nineteenth-century middle class, the ideology that characterized, identified, and solidified it'.⁵³ The practice of gentility included the performance of social duties like charitable and philanthropic activities. At the same time, gentility also required the application of rules of exclusion for those whose standards of behaviour, as well as what may have been perceived as racial differences placed beyond these self-erected barriers. It was ladies of the former kind who were usually invited to the 'at homes' organized by the governor's wife; only a few of the middle- and upper-class Maltese ladies penetrated that barrier. Whether these admittances were prompted by genuine feelings of inclusion or a token deferment to political exigencies cannot be ascertained. The British ladies knew each other well (as the various bequests to friends

⁴⁹ Deed, Not. George Domenico Pace, 1 December 1897.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Deed, Not. George Domenico Page, 17 February 1897.

⁵² For example, see deed, Not. George Alfred Page, 3 July 1913.

⁵³ Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century. America, Australia and Britain*, Basingstoke, 2003, p. 15.

and the appointment of testamentary executors on the one part and their antipathies towards each other – as Miss Dillon’s injunction to her male servant – on the other, show). It was put forward by one commentator that British presence in Malta was limited to the military and employees with the imperial government, including the dockyard. These, for most of the year, ‘remains segregated behind the impenetrable walls of its usages and customs – strange, refined, and superficial – disdainful of mixing with Maltese society – averse to being considered on the same level with other non-native subjects’.⁵⁴ That comment was exaggerated both as regards inclusion (since the statement ignored other British residents on the island) as well as regards applicability (since some contact with the local and upper classes existed). Nonetheless it is indicative of an underlying feeling of separation between the representatives of the ruling power and the local population.

The (British) men, but not the women, were attractive to local society because of their potential as future husbands for the daughters of the middle and upper classes. Whether it was wealth or grade, there seems to have been a general feeling among these classes that these qualified as eligible husbands. In a society where forms of ‘respectable’ entertainment was scarce, the festivities organized at Maltese clubs, the Casino Maltese being the foremost, the British seem to have assiduously attended: ‘The English enjoy taking part at the balls organized seasonally by the Casino Maltese, sometimes also asking to be invited.’⁵⁵

The willingness of Maltese families to entertain British officers was not reciprocated. The controversy regarding membership to the Union Club does not pertain to this writing.⁵⁶ Yet, it is relevant to mention that the ‘tacit rule’ in terms of which the Maltese were refused membership did not meet with retaliatory exclusion of the British from ‘Maltese’ clubs. For those Maltese who enthusiastically embraced all things British, the veto was no deterrent to invite or consort with their blonder colleagues. Marriage seems to have been the long-term plan but the possibility of financial benefits was, no doubt, equally present. Some commentators, whose sympathies lay with the nearby peninsula rather than Britain, scorned those Maltese girls who dreamt of dancing, and eventually falling in love, with an Englishman as ‘hysterical frivolous ladies’.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Malta*, 23 May 1884 (*si tiene da se, separata, chiusa . . . nello involucro impenetrabile dei suoi usi e costumi, delle aristocrazie vaporose, raffinate e strane – sdegnata di mischiarsi con la società maltese – si schifa chiamare uguale, anche in sudditanza non native – maltese*).

⁵⁵ *Malta e le sue Dipendenze*, 8 January 1906 (*Agli Inglesi piace assai il prendere parte a questi balli, che si danno ogni stagione per cura dei soci del Casino Maltese, non mancano delle volte di chiedere di essere invitati*).

⁵⁶ See the various articles and correspondence in the local papers which criticise this undeclared regulation (e.g. *Risorgimento*, 12 December 1881, 23 December 1881, 20 January 1887, 1 October 1903).

⁵⁷ *Malta*, 8 January 1906 (*damine isteriche*).

Notions of respectability and, no doubt, feelings of superiority, fitted well with the organization of philanthropic activities. British ladies together with some Maltese women – the wives of senior civil servants in particular – were at the forefront in organizing these activities. This does not necessarily imply that the Maltese were freely admitted into the home of the exponents of the British 'better' classes. Excepted, of course, were those occasions where British society was out to enjoy itself. Bar this exception, and within the parameters of correct social contact, there were clear markers upon the social scale beyond which there was no inclination to descend. Thus, despite the belonging of the Maltese to the European continent and the lack of that pigmented skin that has had, and still has, such a bearing on human relations in general and social intercourse in particular, there still existed in the eyes of the colonial masters and their representatives, a distinction between the olive coloured Mediterranean Maltese and themselves. Race, like gender, is a social construct that determines relations between individuals. These are further complicated by issues of gender. As Catherine Hall observes in another context, '[t]he lives of men and women . . . remind us of the complexities of thinking about race and empire.'⁵⁸ The apparently clear-cut distinctions of race may easily become blurred in the colonial context. Ireland and the Irish probably provide the most obvious example,⁵⁹ but in the small island colony of Malta we also encounter these 'complexities'.

From the Maltese perspective, the British community, whether in its social or commercial role, provided an opportunity of enhancement of social status as well commercial potential. And yet, there still existed a sharp divide between those whose sympathies lay with the British and the others whose sentiments were directed towards Italy and the Italian language. The latter were critical of those who sought the company of the British; they asserted an identity which had little or nothing in common with the British at the level of social intercourse, as indeed of language. Of course, this was but an extension of their political sentiments. When the discussion is carried down the social ladder, however, these binary oppositions tend to dilute. In some cases, to be examined below, they are reversed.

The anonymous

Below this stratum of respectable British ladies, there was another which included both wives of soldiers as well as single women; the former accompanying their husbands, the latter in search of employment or adventure. As has already been

⁵⁸ Catherine Hall, 'Imperial careering at home: Harriet Martineau on empire' in David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 335–59.

⁵⁹ Cf. for example, Michael de Nie, 'British Conceptions of Ireland and Irishness in the Nineteenth Century', *History Compass*, 3 (2005) BI153, pp. 1–6.

said, Malta did not possess those attractions so as to make it the fertile ground for migratory influx. And yet it did possess other attractions which, if not stimulating the aspiration for settlement, provided opportunities for securing some sort of employment, or marriage. It has been observed that during the late nineteenth century 'leaving England may be said to have been a trend, a national condition, and a state of mind that pertained most significantly to the lower classes',⁶⁰ and considering the large number of men and women who left Britain, it is no surprise that even tiny islands would welcome some of them. Furthermore, the considerable number of British soldiers and sailors and the presence of government officials and businessmen were inducements for some to seek either companionship or, perhaps, employment as domestic staff. The impression one obtains from the sources is that the number of such women was not great, but neither was the number of women from other countries, particularly Sicily, as great as their frequent appearance in the local press makes them out to be.⁶¹ And yet the latter acquired considerable notoriety, while the former remain submerged. It is therefore necessary to examine in some detail the general attitude of the local population towards foreigners in order to be able to appreciate this dichotomous attitude.

This is rendered necessary because opinion about foreigners depended upon nationality, but class connotations also coloured it. Gender issues complicate the analysis. Furthermore, there was the recurring discourse concerning over-population: the Maltese islands were already heavily and densely populated. To allow unregulated entry of foreigners into the islands spelled disaster: the local artisans are out of work because foreigners are taking their place. General opinion about the subject thus incorporated Malthusian fears, country of origin, social class, and gender, in such a way as to reveal not only the personal prejudices of the literate population but also notions of respectability that distinguished on the basis of all these considerations. What is perhaps equally interesting is that, in so far as concerns particular segments of migrants, these triple considerations were placed in a hierarchy that privileged at times one and at other times the other. In this way, and in accordance with what may have perhaps been unconscious categorizations, political, as well as religious, some of these considerations were relegated to a secondary position to the advantage of notions of correct conduct, of respectability.

The problems caused by influx of foreigners into Malta was a constant worry of the local press. Early in the twentieth century, one Maltese-language paper reiterated a view which had been current for at least forty years: the unregulated influx of

⁶⁰ Rita S. Kranidis, *Imperial Objects: Essays on Victorian Women's Emigration and the Unauthorized Imperial Experience*, New York, 1998, p. 2.

⁶¹ Answering a question in the Council of Government, the governor said that there were 15 foreign (presumably all Sicilian) prostitutes (the number of Maltese prostitutes was 72). *Debates of the Council of Government*, Sitting 22, 5 December 1888.

foreigners was one of those major problems that affected the livelihood of the Maltese. However, it was not *any* foreigner who came under the critical lens of local writers. It was Italians, particularly those from the south – Sicilians – who prompted such comments as 'the refuse of other nations',⁶² or '*feccia Siciliana*'.⁶³ However, one needed to make certain distinctions. In the case of the Maltese-language newspaper, the author of the article, a legal professional, squarely placed the blame for the precarious economic state of local tradesmen on those foreigners who considered Malta a Garden of Eden. 'Wherever you go [in Italy],' the author said, 'you hear those who say that there is wealth in Malta, that any foreigner who goes there, makes his fortune.'⁶⁴ Couched in strong language, the article called for strict regulation in allowing entry. The article prompted a clarification by the editor in the sense that there were many foreigners – Italian, German, or Greek – who were respectable. The article, the editor clarified, did not refer to those who were 'respectable and having a high social status'.⁶⁵ An Italian-language paper made a distinction on the basis of social class. There was a class of educated Italian on the one hand, and, on the other, those, 'for whom life is a mystery, enemy of all that is good, always ready to associate itself with all sorts of crimes which circumstances provide, considering Malta – erroneously called Italian England – its refuge, a safe haven for all types of men, and perhaps, also giving it the opportunity to escape long prison sentences or even life sentences.'⁶⁶

The former are named: Marquis Drago, Doctor Stilon, Professors Crescimanno and San Filippo, and a host of '*industriali onorati ed onesti*' whose intelligence made sure that they would be aware that the insults levelled at their lower-class compatriots did not include them. The latter, of course, remain individually anonymous but collectively indicated by derogatory, or negative, terms.

It will be seen here how elements of (un)respectability become intermeshed with class connotations. What is also interesting is that the foregoing quote makes subtle allusions to political arguments that were the bread and butter issues of the professional middle classes; that is, the classes which constituted the mainstay of the newspaper-reading public. And this is not an isolated example. Political considerations were never far from the argumentations of the local professional

⁶² *Is-Salib*, 20 February 1908.

⁶³ *Risorgimento*, 21 August 1880.

⁶⁴ *Is-Salib* 20 February 1908. But see also the 18 December 1909 and 25 March 1911 issues of the same newspaper. Similar sentiments had been expressed earlier: 'the Sicilian considers Malta to be a land flowing with milk and honey . . .', *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 2 July 1893.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (*puliti u ta' pozizioni distinta*).

⁶⁶ *Risorgimento* 21 August 1880 (*la cui vita è un mistero, nemica di ogni bene, pronta ad associarsi in qualunque sorta di delitti, ove vedesse un'opportunità di darsi tempone, guardando su Malta, che essa molto male chiama l'Italia Inglese, come il suo punto di rifugio, come il ricettacolo sicuro di gente d'ogni conio, e forse per isfuggire ad una lunga prigionia od agli ergastoli*).

class in particular, but not solely. Furthermore, the issue of respectability provided fertile ground upon which criticism could be made: political issues (language being the more common) were often subtly injected into the private sphere in such a way as to involve the reading public.

Sicilian prostitutes and other lower-class migrants aroused the ire of local public opinion. These were often brought over to Malta by dubious Maltese characters who stood surety for them, and then lived off their earnings. But it was not only them. The last decade of the nineteenth century, a period of economic depression in Malta, is marked by recurrent criticism of government policies that allowed entry whether to prostitutes or others. This, sometimes, assumed xenophobic proportions, with the press speaking of foreigners who daily flood this island⁶⁷ or, the constant invasion of Malta by foreigners, particularly Sicilians and the refuse of Tunis.⁶⁸ There had been a lot of talk about the proposed amendment to the law but nothing came of it; it was useless to criticise; concrete proposals leading to a solution of the problem must be found. One such was to request a certificate of conduct signed by a police official of the place of residence before allowing entry into Malta.⁶⁹ At the same time, a court judgement which allowed a troupe of performers to remain on the island until the end of the season, despite the lack of surety, was applauded by the same newspaper.⁷⁰

It may be concluded that attitudes toward non-British foreigners were coloured not only by the country of origin but also by gender and social class factors. For example, lower-class immigrants were considered a threat to the already precarious economic position of their local counterparts, but middle-class educated persons were welcomed as enriching local society. Similarly, Sicilian prostitutes were a constant worry to polite society; British errant women, as will be seen below, hardly ever were.

Having reviewed the attitudes towards non-British residents prevalent during the late nineteenth century, we must go back to those British women whose stay in Malta was coloured by adventure and misadventure. These did not attract the attention of the newspapers. However, the governor and other officials were constantly on the lookout for incidents which could dent the image of the empire in general and of womanhood in particular.

'Mrs Richards will be watched by the Police.'⁷¹ This statement by the superintendent of the police addressed to the acting lieutenant governor neatly synthesizes the attitude which becomes apparent in Malta from the last decade of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12 June 1897

⁶⁸ Ibid., 28 July 1908 (*della continua invasione di Malta dai forestieri, e particolarmente dai Siciliani e dai rifiuti di Tunisi*).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 12 June 1897.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 14 July 1897.

⁷¹ N[ational] A[rchives of] M[alta], CSG01/3877/1908.

the nineteenth century onwards in respect of British women resident on the island. Many of those women who arrived on the island to work, as well as those whose marriage broke down, fell under the watchful eyes of the police who reported their misadventures to superior authorities. These were careful to ensure that no scandal was caused by British women; as a last resort, they would be sent back home.

Generally speaking it is possible to divide such 'problematic' residents (all lower-middle or lower class) into three categories, namely women (and very often girls) who left their home in search of employment; those who were induced to go to Malta under the pretext of employment (which could be a disguised form of enticement to prostitution); and relatives, more often wives, of British soldiers, who encountered problems on the island. Examples of all three can be quoted in good numbers.

It is well to start with the last group because their residence in Malta was often the consequence of their husbands' service. Women whose husbands or sons were engaged in military duties on the island constituted the largest group. The rules of residence for them – as indeed for any British subject – were not the same applicable to Italians and other 'aliens'. Their permanence was not dependent upon toleration of the civil authorities. Consequently, when familial problems arose, expulsion from the island – the neatest of solutions – was not always available. Solutions had to be found either within the familial unit itself or by pressuring the offending lady to depart voluntarily. The case of Mrs Richards is an example of familial problems which could arise. Mrs Richards had refused to accompany her husband back to England; she had made known her intention of remaining on the island and seeking employment in an 'Eating-House'. Matters were complicated because the eldest of Richards' three children was 'seen by the police promenading with young soldiers . . . I consider that she has taken the first step towards something worse'. Fortunately for the daughter (as well as for the police and the civil authorities), the daughter seemed to have found, within less than two months, an English husband who would take her to England. The mother, however, now part of the civil population remained a headache to the superintendent of police and the governor.⁷²

Wives were not the only protagonists in the recordings of the local police and the attention of the governor. Sometimes, a mother, perhaps grown too old and apparently fond of alcohol, found that her son's wife was no longer willing to maintain her. Although the son was reported to be 'of quiet disposition', there was no way the mother could stay any longer with his family. In any case, it seems that the old Mrs Smith was anxious to return to England where a Mr Charles Dean, 'a blind man with whom she was in intimate relation' awaited her.⁷³

⁷² Ibid., CSG01/4431/1911.

⁷³ Ibid., CSG01/2315/1909.

Whether it was wives, daughters, or mothers, these British women found that when problems arose their only options were those of finding some sort of work or leaving the island. On their part, the civil authorities did their best to entice them towards the latter option. If that solution was not forthcoming, the news that the woman had found respectable employment or, better still, a husband, was received with equanimity, if not joy. Thus, when Mrs Craib, a widow who had been in domestic service in Malta, informed the civil authorities that she intended to get married to a soldier, but that the chaplain to the Forces had refused to celebrate the marriage, the governor intervened. The woman 'between 35 and 40 years of age, and not of attractive appearance', was of 'good character' and hence, he felt, the marriage should be celebrated. Indeed, there was the awareness that marriage would solve a potential problem.⁷⁴ Even when married, but abandoned by the husband 'on the day after their marriage' because he believed that she had been unfaithful, pressure was exerted upon the husband, who in the meantime had returned home, to support her and provide the money necessary for her return home.⁷⁵ Married women and mothers whose residence in Malta was blighted by misadventure may not have been many. Despite the fair number of such instances, they remain a small minority. However, they still preoccupied the civil authorities who took prompt and effective action in order to minimize the scandal. In doing so they were not only protecting the reputation of the British in Malta but also trying to safeguard, and to enforce, the perceived duties and obligations arising out of family ties, particularly the marriage bond.

Standards of respectability were as applicable to women with family problems as they were with those who came in search of work. The type of employments which these usually sought, and for which there was an apparent demand, were domestic service with British families and/or employment in the entertainment business. Information about the former is hard to come by. This fell within the strictures and constraints of the particular family with which these girls were employed and any digression to the rules of respectability were remedied within the family, by the paternal advice of the head of the employer family or a quiet return home.⁷⁶ In the case of the latter, these were usually girls on their own. Hence, the attention of the civil authorities was focused with greater force upon them. Furthermore, the nature of their employment fell within the more general one connected with drinking-shops and entertainment in general, which had their own fair share of control. For those women who voluntarily sought employment in

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, CSG01/4431/1911.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, CSG01/5618/1910.

⁷⁶ In one instance, Lady Merewether's maid was accused of having entertained men in her employer's house. The accusation turned out to be false and the police who reported the incident were punished (cf. *ibid.*, CSG01/457A/1909).

Malta, the need to protect the standards of respectability was a constant worry of the civil authorities. When the woman happened to be young, particularly if under age, matters tended to get complicated.

From the last decade of the nineteenth century, but also earlier, albeit with less force, the superintendent of police reported regularly to the chief secretary to the government and sometimes also to the governor himself about the establishments which employed British girls. Two reports, coming late in the period reviewed here, reveal the level of interest of the civil authorities in places where alcohol was consumed generally and those which employed British girls in particular. In the former, the lieutenant governor wanted to know the names of those who had applied for a licence to sell wines and spirits together with the name and age of the barmaids employed there.⁷⁷ The superintendent of police seemed to have no objection to the employment of these girls, whose age ranged from 18 to 28 and of whom four (out of 15) have English-sounding surnames. The second report concerned exclusively British girls.⁷⁸ It shows that there were seven outlets, all situated in Valletta and its suburb Floriana, hosting British artistes. Both police and governor were careful not to label all 'artistes' indiscriminately as disreputable women, possibly prostitutes. 'No doubt, the class of women employed as artistes is superior by far to that of barmaids,' was the view of the police.⁷⁹ The list mentioned 14 British women of whom at least two were married who worked either as pianists and/or singers. The concern of the civil authorities was not directed only at these women during their employment; once the engagement was terminated or if a licence was refused, then the plight of the women remained within the purview of the governor's watchful eyes. 'What are they doing in Malta?' asked the governor in relation to two British women who were no longer in employment. About one, the police replied that 'nothing against her character can be said,' and she would be applying once again for permission to work. As to the other, a Mrs Russell, she 'has written to her husband in Australia requesting him to send her money for her passage home . . . her former employer is providing her with food and lodging. She was lately seen in the company of sailors.'⁸⁰

When it was British underage girls who found employment in Malta, then the thin line between legitimate employment and the danger of white slave traffic arose. Two girls from Manchester, aged respectively sixteen and seventeen and a half, were 'imported . . . by [a] Maltese publican' to work as barmaids in Floriana.⁸¹ In these cases, and no doubt others of the same type, the paternal anxieties of the

⁷⁷ Ibid., CSG01/1879/1911.

⁷⁸ Ibid., CSG01/833/1912.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., CSG01/4078/1909.

⁸¹ Ibid., CSG01/3778/1905.

governor gave way; responsibility was passed on to the parents even if these were living in Britain. This notwithstanding, the civil authorities would not rest until these girls were sent back home, as indeed occurred in the case quoted here. When British girls were engaged as prostitutes, the need to protect both the girls and the reputation of the British community on the island assumed much greater relevance. This is not the place to discuss the plight of prostitutes, of whatever nationality, in the Maltese port area. And yet, it is important to highlight the alacrity with which both the police and the Governor pursued such instances. Maltese persons who went to England to engage such girls were investigated by the Criminal Investigation Department on the prompting of the Maltese authorities. Once in Malta, immediate steps were taken for the repatriation of the girls and, where enticement to prostitution was proven, adequate punishment on the guilty party was inflicted.⁸²

It has already been said that errant British women in Malta do not appear to have been many. However, it is interesting to note that not only were the civil authorities anxious to prevent scandal and sort matters in as quiet way as was possible, local public opinion, including that which was vociferously hostile to the British, hardly ever made any reference to misadventures that befell British women. There was no such reticence in the case of British men or for non-British individuals, whether male or female. The fact that these incidents were hardly advertised by the civil authorities, of course, does not by itself account for the lack of publicity given to them. In a small place like Malta, with such activity circumscribed within that small geographical extension which was Valletta and its immediate suburb, Floriana, news, particularly if salacious or sensational, quickly spread. Furthermore, local papers of that period never showed any reticence in reporting such matters as suicides, adulteries, and prostitution. It was not prudence – nor prudery – that held them back.

Conclusion

The image of womanhood took precedence over other considerations, including the political. What is interesting, however, is that the local literate section of the population, whatever its political sympathies, admitted within that image British females as well. Of course, this view was not only approved but also abetted by the colonial authorities who kept a constant vigil upon those British women who could potentially infringe the norms of respectability. In protecting the image of women, the rulers of the island were also protecting the image of empire.

This short study set itself the task of giving some attention to the female presence in Malta during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For most of the period of British rule, the island has been considered as a male preserve.

⁸² In this connection, see, for example, *ibid.*, CSG01/1298/1914.

Soldiers and sailors, traders and bureaucrats are ever present in most writings on the period. One should not, however, neglect those women who may have been few but played a role in the social relations of the period. Furthermore, the fine distinctions on the basis of gender, of race, and of social class made by local society are illustrative of the complicated nature of historical analysis. The nineteenth-century political history of the island has been anchored to the well-known binaries of religion and language. However, the social aspect needs to embrace a wider assortment of dichotomies. Gender and nationality are but two.