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THE DEPARTMENT OF MALTESE

UNIVERSITIES, like the societies they serve, can only give what lies within their own resources. Our University, which is the oldest in the Commonwealth, naturally with the exception of those older ones in the United Kingdom, has been serving the needs of Maltese Society for several centuries by providing professional training in the traditional Faculties.

For many years, the least developed Faculty was that of Science, and naturally with the shift of emphasis to the Sciences, more money is now being spent on the purchase of expensive equipment for Laboratory work. The Arts' share of the funds is still very meagre.

Far from grudging the money that is being spent on the Sciences, we welcome the new trend, but we do so with a significant proviso. The prospects of the Faculty of Science in our University are inevitably limited by our limited financial resources and geographical dimensions. We can never compete with the Universities of larger countries which undertake expensive research beyond our possibilities. Whatever progress we shall make in the Sciences, Malta's chance to lead, or even run a neck and neck race with the Universities overseas will never be such as to impress foreign scholars. Our best, hopelessly limited by our financial resources, will never reach the higher research levels of other Universities. The fact that the teaching staff of the Faculty of Science is made up of 18 expatriates and 12 Maltese shows the limitations that we have to accept. This is not a plea for a diminution of the importance that we are attaching to the Sciences. It is only a plea for common sense, and acknowledgement of inevitable limitations - a plea for a sense of proportion and intellectual modesty. The University should spend more money on those Faculties, or branches thereof, which do not exist elsewhere and are therefore a completely Maltese heritage and also part of our Mediterranean Civilisation. The Faculty of Medicine is a Faculty

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part that deserves continued financial support because it deals with the health of the nation and as such it is a Faculty with a primary, social importance. We have in mind such Arts subjects as Maltese, Archaeology (our Neolithic temples are one of the world's wonders!), Maltese History, Ethnography, Maltese Linguistics, folklore and kindred subjects. This can be done partly by strengthening the teaching staff of the Department of History and the Department of Maltese and Oriental Languages which has given so much with so few tools. This is the one Department that is more characteristically Maltese than any other, which, being unique in the world, has attracted the attention of distinguished linguists and Orientalists.

Whatever is Maltese is an exportable original heritage of our University; something other scholars want to know more about because it is new to them. It is here more than anywhere else that we can shine by our own light. It is indeed very strange and deplorable that it is precisely the Torch of National Light, that has not been trimmed well enough to enable Maltese scholarship to make a larger impact and contribution abroad, and this in spite of the fact that, as I have already pointed out in a previous editorial, the subject-matter of the Maltese Department and kindred subjects can form a unique bridge between Europe and Africa, both academically and economically.

THE EDITOR

A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON 'THE DIALOGUES' OF DE SOLDANIS

By DAVID R. MARSHALL

CANON Gian Francesco Agius Sultana lived from 1712 to 1770. Known today as De Soldanis, this was in fact the name which he himself used in his own day. A native of Gozo, De Soldanis is one of the most famous early Maltese writers, although by no means the only one. He is, however, perhaps better known for his Grammar (1750) and for his unpublished Dictionary than for his Dialogues, the subject of the present study.

The Dialogues may be regarded as being of vital importance for several reasons, some of them linguistic, some of them socio-historical. From a linguistic point of view, the Dialogues are one of the earliest examples of Maltese prose writing, the only other such prose writing deserving of mention being the Maltese Doctrine of the priest Francesco Wzzino: but even this is indebted to De Soldanis, since it was he who designed an alphabet for use in his Grammar, and it was thanks to this alphabet that the Maltese Doctrine could be written in the language of the people. Also from a linguistic point of view, the importance of the Dialogues lies in their being written in idiomatic Maltese (although they had an Italian translation beside them), thus throwing valuable light on the way in which Maltese was spoken in the middle of the eighteenth century: because spoken languages are constantly changing, the Dialogues thus give a first-hand picture of the language of an earlier age. Closely connected with this aspect is the fact that they also show a number of words which, though in common use at that time, have now either fallen into disuse or changed their meaning.

The importance of the Dialogues from a socio-historical point of view is no less great, because they illustrate clearly, and again at first-hand, aspects of the manner of life and work of the eighteenth century Maltese people. It is from this latter point of view that the present study is concerned. The Dialogues have been translated into as close an equivalent idiomatic English version as possible, and various factors emerging from them are commented upon, explained or illustrated.

Before we look at them, however, something must be said in general