

A MYSTERIOUS BOOK BY MIKIEL ANTON VASSALLI?

An important book on Malta, published anonymously in Paris in 1798, may be the work of Mikiel Anton Vassalli, the father of Maltese nationhood.

Shortly after Napoleon captured Malta in June 1798, a French editor, C.F. Cramer, printed a historical and political 'Michelin' of Malta: *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur Malte par****. There was a pressing need for such a publication, as very little about Malta was currently available in French at that time.

The author, who was definitely Maltese, wanted with his book to demonstrate his "devotion and admiration for France, and his affection for his native land"¹. Although Malta had not been legally incorporated into the French jurisdiction, he believed that, "in the common interest of the two nations, the Maltese would soon clamour for union with France"².

The identity of the anonymous author of these *Recherches* has remained shrouded in mystery. Charles Wilkinson, an intelligent visitor to Malta, writing in 1804, obviously admired the book and translated into English large portions of it, without hazarding a guess as to its authorship³. So did many other authors⁴.

Attributed to Onorato Bres

As far as I have been able to establish, it was only in 1885 that Ferdinand De Hellwald's *Bibliographie*⁵ first attributed the *Recherches* to Onorato Bres⁶. Hellwald, an erudite bookworm, refers to no authority in support of his attribution to Bres. Though Hellwald's bibliography is certainly invaluable, it is hardly always infallible.

This attribution of the *Recherches* to Bres is very suspect. None of the biographies or bibliographies of Bres before Hellwald mention the *Recherches* or include them in his bibliography⁷.

Hellwald himself seems to have been uncomfortable with this attribution to Bres, and resorts to some light-handed cheating. It was a well established (though by no means invariable) literary convention that, in anonymous works, when the author substitutes his name by asterisks, the number of asterisks corresponded to the number of initials, or letters, omitted. The author of the *Recherches* hid his name behind *** (three asterisks=three initials).

To overcome this difficulty, Hellwald, who elsewhere⁸ invariably refers to this worthy author as Onorato Bres when listing his other publications, in this particular case resorted to a little stratagem. He changed the author's name to 'Honoré de Bres'.

Unlikely author

Onorato Bres seems an unlikely candidate for the authorship of the *Recherches*. A close examination of the book yields the following internal evidence.

1. The Maltese author is a rabid francophile, of marked republican sentiments, jubilant at the recent expulsion of the Order of St John from Malta.

2. The author is worried about Russian and British ambitions on the future of the island.

3. He shows an excellent command of the French language.

4. He demonstrates a special expertise about cotton growing and the cotton industry.

5. Malta is, to him, not only his *patrie* but a nation.

6. The Maltese language merits a long sub-chapter on its own⁹. Maltese is a key to the interpretation of Phoenician. The anonymous author admires "le citoyen Vassallo" for his work on the Maltese language, and undertakes to publish, in the future, a study about the Phoenician language¹⁰.

How does Onorato Bres (1753–1818) fit in with this internal evidence? Quite uneasily, I believe, Bres was a devout clergyman, an able jurist and a persevering antiquarian. He was engrossed in the pursuit of his law career, worked hard at his promotion as a prelate in the Order of St John and, after its expulsion from Malta, settled in Italy in the service of the Pope.

Bres, the French-hater

His monumental masterpiece *Malta Antica Illustrata*¹¹ shows him to be a man of keen critical judgement and erudition. Bres was, at least later, aggressively and demonstrably anti-French. In fact, he interrupted his established career in Rome in 1809 when the temporal power of the Pope was abolished by Napoleon, which events he described as "infelicissimi avvenimenti" and "tanto calamitosi tempi"¹². The presence of the French turned the Eternal City from his preferred residence to "il più disgustoso soggiorno"¹³.

Bres abandoned Rome to distance himself from the loathed French, and gloats over their defeat at the hands of Britain "always great, now the greatest, having with its perseverance and the valour of the Hero of the century, the Immortal Wellington, and of his invincible troops, contributed to free Europe from the (French) Revolution that inflicted on it the greatest carnage and lethal desolation"¹⁴.

It must be underlined that his fanatical anti-Republican passion, his fulsome dedication of this volume to George IV, then Prince Regent of Great Britain, his obvious delight at Malta belonging to the British Empire, do not make Bres less of a patriot. In fact, his manuscript political letters reveal him as one of the earliest champions of political reform and franchise.¹⁵ His patriotic merits have, to date, only been marginally recognised by current Maltese historiography.

Onorato Bres deserves to be better known, and not solely for his antiquarian erudition. Without detracting anything from the patriotic greatness of George Mitrovich and Camillo Sceberras, it is grossly unfair that Bres's contribution to the political enfranchisement of Malta has been so persistently undervalued.

The point I am trying to make is that this devout clergyman, proud of his elevated membership within the aristocratic Order, a strong supporter of the temporal power of the Pope and, later, of British rule, this raging Francophobe and enemy of the blood-stained Revolution, can hardly have been the author of the *Recherches*, who

was a supporter of the revolutionary and godless Jacobins of the Directorate, and who, on the conquest of Malta by the French, could write in ringing prose: "Maltese, you are now citizens of the Great Nation; you will soon receive the lustre of the times of the Phoenicians and Romans. Your interest is to second the operations of your new government. Be persuaded that its interests are yours: favour with zeal the salutary reforms which authority prepares, in respecting your religion and your opinions; recollect that courage and virtue characterise true republicans. These are the sentiments expressed to you by a fellow-citizen who is guided by the sole love of his country".¹⁶

Whoever first attributed the *Recherches* to Bres must have been influenced by the fact that some of the engraved plates are reprinted in his *Malta Antica Illustrata* and that, in the historical section, certain views are strikingly similar. Though due weight has to be given to these elements, I do not believe they are sufficient to negate all the other internal contradictions. Unless, that is, Onorato Bres is seen as a contemptible turncoat who pulled himself inside out with every change of the political wind.

Whatever Bres's merits, and they are conspicuous, I cannot see Hellwald's, or whoever's, attribution of the *Recherches* to him as standing on secure ground.

The Vassalli identikit

If we take the book away from Bres, whom do we give it to?

We must look for a native Maltese with strong sense of nationhood, who nurtured a superlative grudge against the government of the Order, who subscribed fervently to the Jacobin ideals of the French Revolution, who had an opportunity of being in France in 1798, who was an expert in the cotton industry and who had a passion for the Maltese language coupled with an irrational prejudice about its Phoenician origins.

There is only one person who fits this identikit: Mikiel Anton Vassalli. Perhaps the three asterisks on the frontispiece stand for M.A.V., not the fictional Honoré de Bres.

So little is known about the life of this great man, rightly considered as the guiding spirit of Maltese nationhood. Were it not for the intelligent perseverance of such as Ninu Cremona, Frans Ciappara, Mgr. Karm Sant, J. Azzopardi, Guzè Cassar Pullicino and a few other unrelenting scholars, the life of Vassalli would be practically uncharted.

I will not repeat Mikiel Anton Vassalli's (1764–1829) biographical details at any length. In 1791 he published in Rome his *Mylsen Phaeneci – Punicum*, a grammar of the Maltese language. Five years later, his monumental *Kryb yl Klaym Malti* which he dedicated "to the Maltese Nation".

In 1797 he led an unsuccessful revolt against the Order of St. John. Arrested on May 11 for his participation, he was condemned to life imprisonment. It has not clearly established whether he escaped from jail before Napoleon invaded Malta,

or whether he was set free by the French conquerors in 1798. Nor is it known whether he spent all his time in Malta until he was banished by the British on January 15, 1801. He returned from his exile 19 years later, on June 19, 1820.

If my surmise is correct, it is possible to envisage a Vassalli presence in France just after Napoleon's conquest of Malta. The *Recherches* must have been produced at top speed, being written and printed in 1798, a few months after the June invasion. It is certainly more likely that the Jacobin Vassalli would have found easy access to the Paris printing presses than the high ecclesiastic of a hostile aristocratic order.

The cotton expert

Guzè Cassar Pullicino has recently established that during his years of banishment by the British, Vassalli was active in France organising the cultivation of cotton in Corsica and Marseilles, where he also published, in February 1810, a handbook in French on the cultivation of cotton and where he secured the official appointment of "Agent of the Government for the said Cultivation".¹⁷ In his handbook he discloses that he had devoted time to specialise in cotton when he was still in Malta.

Incidentally, the anonymous author of the *Recerces* writes at length on the production by the Maltese of unspun cotton, which yielded six million *livres*, "but, if it were manufactured, they would export to the value of sixty million. What an enormous advantage that would be to Malta and the national finances! and what a loss to the British manufactories!"¹⁸

The author then goes on about Gaspard Zarp who had started a factory for the manufacture of cotton but who, through lack of encouragement, died in the greatest distress. He advocates the introduction of spinning machines in Malta and expects the Maltese, "though they are not initiated in the mysteries of the manufactures of Manchester, may still succeed in the art of spinning".¹⁹ The introduction of industrial spinning machines, the author believes, would be the beginning of a new prosperity for Malta and "once introduced, it would be very easy to instil into the Maltese a taste and genius for other manufactories of wool, silk and thread".²⁰

"To the Maltese Nation"

Two sidetrackings about Vassalli.

Davalos²¹ in 1818 still refers to Vassalli as l'Abbé Vassallo. As his ordination to the priesthood is controversial, this designation may help to throw another flicker of light to further the considerable research that has already been undertaken on the subject.

Secondly, a note on Vassalli's dedication of his famous dictionary to "the Maltese Nation" in 1796. Quite often it is repeated that this is the first time that anyone has referred to 'the Maltese Nation'. Without detracting anything from Vassalli's stature, this assertion is demonstrably wrong. In 1783, two books were published which refer repeatedly to "*La nazione Maltese*". Both were written by Maltese lawyers²².

Gio Nicola Muscat had his work, *Apologia a favore dell'inclita Nazione Maltese*, published in Rome, while his brother jurist, Baron Gaetano Pisani, printed his *Lettera di un Maltese* in Vercelli the same year; in the text both nearly always refer not to Malta, but to *la Nazione Maltese*.²³

To conclude. I am sceptical about the Bres authorship of the *Recherches*. I suggest that this important work should be given, at least temporarily, to Vassalli, enemy to the Order and, at that time, of the British, fired by French revolutionary ideals, scholar and cotton farmer, moulder of Maltese nationhood, champion of its language.

I am suggesting Vassalli's authorship of the *Recherches* as a working hypothesis, definitely not as dogma. Wrong or right, it is my way of paying homage to the father of my spirit and of my nation.

1. *Recherches*, p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. *Epitomy of the History of Malta & Gozo*, London, 1804.
4. Louis de Boisgelin made extensive use of the *Recherches* in his monumental compilation, and a particular foot-note (English edition 1805, Vol. I, p. 137) gives one to understand that he was aware of the identity of the author.
Fredrick Lacriox's *Histoire et Description de l'Isle de Malte et de Gozo* (1814) mystifies the enigma unduly. The undated Italian annotated translation claims that the *Recherches* are by Bonnier (pp. 7 and 69). These references are obviously confusing our *Recherches* with another wholly different *Recherches* about Malta also published in Paris in 1798! These latter were written by A. Bonnier, Minister Plenipotentiary for the French Republic to Lille, and deal mainly with the juridical status of French members of the Order after Napoleon's invasion.
F.A. de Christoforo Davalos, in his accurate and informative volume on Malta published in London in 1818, also refers to the *Recherches*, but gives no clue as to who their mysterious author may be (*Tableau Historique et Politique de Malte et de ses Habitants* p. 75). Villeneuve-Barsemont in his *Monuments des Grand-Maitres* Paris 1829, also refers to the *Recherches* written by 'X' (Vol. 1, p. XIX).
5. *Bibliographie Méthodique de l'Ordre Souv. de St. Jean de Jerusalem*, Rome, 1885.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
7. E.g. *Squarci di Storia e Ragionamenti sull'Isola di Malta*, Malta, 1839, by *Un Maltese*, almost certainly Baron Sir Guiseppe Maria De Piro, p. 90; *Notizie di alcuni Cavalieri del S. Ordine Gerosolimitano*, by the Marchese di Villarosa, Naples, 1840, p. 67; Ramiro Barbaro, *L'Arte*, Year III, No. 57, March 22, 1865. The standard bibliography of Maltese authors before Hellwald, *Selva di Autori e Traduttori Maltesi*, Malta, 1855, by Antonio Schembri, does not attribute the *Recherches* to Onorate Bres.
8. E.g. pp. 251–254, 256, 288.
9. p. 124.
10. p. 127.
11. *Del Prelato Onorato Bres, Votante di Signatura di Giustizia di Sua Santità, Commendatore dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano e Socio di varie Accademie*, Rome, 1816.
12. *Malta Antica Illustrata*, p. IV.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
15. Library Ms 385.
16. Translation by Wilkinson, 1804, p. 193.
17. "Two unknown writings by M. A. Vassalli" in *Melita Historica*, Vol. X, No. 3, 1991, pp. 293–314.
18. Wilkinson's translation, p. 182.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

21. *Op. cit.*, pp. 41, 64.

22. Both these works, together with a third one, *Prospectus*, by Antonio Micallef, published in Lucca 1782 (which I have not seen), were written in reply to Giadonato Rogadeo's libel on the Maltese, *Ragionamenti sul Regolamento della Giustizia e sulle Pene*, Lucca, 1780.

23. Library Ms 20. Entry for August 8, 1734, "*Pietro Testaferrata... di nazione maltese*". Dr Maurice Aguis Vadalà has shown that Maltese nationals had referred to Malta by the cognate, but less politically charged, description of *patria* since the 16th century (*The Democrat*, May 13, 1989).