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LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT

ANY living language or dialect and the literature that it creates is an integral part of the society where the language is spoken. It has a national context from which one cannot detach it without shaking its foundation or destroying, if I may say so, its birth certificate. This is true of Literature in the country where it is born. There is also the curious case of a foreign language extensively taught outside the area where it is spoken and used for social inter-communication, such as, to mention one particular case, Italian and English in Maltese society. These two languages were the exclusive media of literary self-expression, and, much as one would like to have had Maltese more extensively used for that purpose in the past, one cannot now reject Italian or English Literature created by Maltese authors without cutting off a limb of Malta's body politic. Mr. G. Cassar Pullicino, our authority on folklore and a historian in his own right (social history being his specialised line) has devoted some of his research time to the cultural and linguistic assessment of Maltese society when Italian was the exclusive language of our culture precisely because of this reason. My Professor of Italian, the late Dr. Vincenzo Laurenza, made an extensive contribution to the study of Italian Literature by Maltese authors and Italian residents in our country who wrote prose and verse when the Italian language monopolized social and cultural prestige. Signor Oreste Ferdinando Tencajoli compiled an anthology (*Poeti Maltesi D'Oggi*, 1932) containing selections from the poetic effusions of Maltese authors who expressed themselves in Italian rather than in Maltese and also of a few who expressed themselves bilingually, such as our national poet, the late Dun Karm, A. Cuschieri and C. Mifsud Bonnici. That is a record not to be despised because it is the product of our fellow countrymen who lived in a different society from ours and wrote at a time when Maltese had not yet captured the status prestige that it now enjoys.

Side by side with the Italian literary heritage, there has been developing, slowly but steadily, an English literary heritage which, if not as

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voluminous as the Italian one, is certainly worth our attention at least as a contemporary document of times which seem to be slipping away but from which we have not yet emerged completely. Though Maltese and English are both Malta's official languages, in the Government departments English is used more extensively than Maltese. Though this is an indifensible practice (or is it policy?) yet it is a fact, and facts produce good or bad effects. The use of English for literary purposes has a fairly long tradition and there is still enough uncollected material for the publication of the English counterpart of Tencajoli's anthology, namely an anthology of Maltese poets and men of letters who expressed themselves in English, amongst whom we find authors with an established name in Maltese Literature, such as Dr. Ġ. Zammit, whose poetic output is trilingual, the Maltese playwright Mr. F. Ebejer, and a few others. The editor of this journal has been working on the compilation of such an anthology, but it takes time and everything is more difficult and time-consuming when there is no co-operation.

The use of English for literary purposes, not only in the U.K. but also throughout the Commonwealth including non-English speaking countries and some independent African States, has created a vast literary material which is worth studying both as literature and as a social document.

The editor of this journal gave a talk on *Malta's Current Contribution to Commonwealth Literature* at a Conference held in the University of Queensland, Australia in 1968, under the sponsorship of 'The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies' which concerns itself with Literature written in English throughout the Commonwealth.

A step in the right direction has been taken by the Department of English, which included a course of lectures on Commonwealth literature in its Honours course divided into two parts, the first of which was taken by Professor Bernard Hickey, lecturer in Australian and Commonwealth Literature in the University of Venice, and the second by living Maltese writers who have used English as one of their media of expression. There is also a wider field for collaboration in the field of comparative linguistics and especially a joint study of language interference, inevitable in countries where the native language must co-exist with, or suffer the impact of, a world language, which, though not national, is yet inevitable as a means of international communication with the outside world at large. One just wonders whether this question is of any interest to the British Council which concerns itself with the diffusion of English throughout the world. Interest in Commonwealth English is a good exercise in a two-way cultural traffic.

THE EDITOR

SOME EARLY ISLAMIC SERMONS

by DAVID R. MARSHALL

The purpose of this article is to look at some of the early sermons of Islam from the point of view of their ethical and historical content, and the light they throw on the various personalities who delivered them. The sermons are taken from Ibn Qutaiba's 'Uyūn al-'Akhbār ('Sources of Information'). Obviously no more than a very small fraction of the sermons delivered is represented in 'Uyūn al-'Akhbār, but the selection given affords an interesting cross-section of the differing forms of content and different historical personalities.

Abu Muḥammad 'Abdullah ibn Muslim ibn Qutaiba lived from 828 to 899, and those who have written biographies of him agree that he was one of the most erudite and cultured Arab scholars. 'Uyūn al-'Akhbār, which is his chief work, is divided into ten books, each dealing with a given subject. Each heading includes quotations from the Tradition, the sayings attributed to and about Muḥammad, and from literary and historical sources. Ibn Qutaiba allowed himself certain liberties with his material, which he at times abridged or altered to gain greater effect: this fact must be borne in mind when remarks are being made about the style of the sermons – certain of the pleasing features may be due not necessarily to the skill of the preacher, but to the editing of Ibn Qutaiba.

As we look at some of the sermons, some historical and biographical information will be given about the principal personalities quoted, as this will often help to put the content of a sermon into a more interesting personal context and perspective.

Before giving the sermons of others, Ibn Qutaiba states that he himself has studied the sermons of the Prophet, Muḥammad.

In the sixth century of the Christian era, Arabia was riddled with idolatry and paganism, although both Judaism and Christianity were known and practised to a certain extent. In the wealthy trading city of Mecca, in about 570, Muḥammad was born. Orphaned early in his life, his childhood passed uneventfully, although it may well have been marked with a certain sense of insecurity, as he tended animals around Mecca. As a young man, he was given a commission to supervise a trading caravan going to Syria, and this occupation would bring him into contact with Christians and Jews, and with the wider ideas of a more civilized society.