

TOWARDS A NATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

*(Address delivered by the President, Professor Mgr. A. Bonnici, D.D., B.A.,
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With this meeting we are inaugurating the fourth year of our Society.

It is my aim, this evening, to draw up a programme for the current year. First of all, the Society should continue the work already initiated, namely the drawing up of a catalogue, by author and by subject, of all published articles concerning Malta, the publication of the bulletin "Melita Historica" and the campaign to arouse popular interest in local history. In the second place, we should start, as soon as possible, a two-fold activity: one based on a short term policy and another on a long term policy. All the civilized nations have already gone far ahead in this line: we have been all the time loitering behind. Let us therefore work hard so that we may in the not too distant future feel that we are second to none in the study of our national history.

History is the faithful record of past events. As the Architect examines the remains of old monuments and tries to reconstruct these edifices of antiquity in his mind and on paper, so the Historian examines the extant documents of the past and strives to write the history of their times, with its diverse shades and colours. History, wrote Michelet, is the resurrection of past ages.

The documents of the past make up a variety of sources of History: chronicles and diaries, correspondence and memoranda, laws and inscriptions, official instructions and deeds, inquiries and speeches, treatises and literary works, myths and legends, folklore and customs, arts and traditions and so on. All these sources form the basis for the writing of History. No writer can ever compose a true and original history, of a general or particular character, without utilizing such sources. Hence the importance of research work and of the critical study of the documents in hand.

This is a boring and difficult task, sometimes extremely tedious, but always necessary, nay indispensable. The value of History depends entirely upon it.

Since the beginning, this work has been the goal of our activities; it figures in the Society's Statute. We are endeavouring to attain our aim; and slowly but steadily we are proceeding towards it.

We encourage the reading of papers and the writing of historical articles: but we are much more keen on having a full historical bibliography. We should strive to be the pioneers, in order to pave the way for our future historians.

Do not forget that we Maltese are not the first in this field. Long ago Governments and learned associations in Europe and in the United States started the publication of the sources of their National History.

Since the XVIIth century, collections of sources have been edited — real colossal works — such as the *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, the *Receuil des Historiens de France*, the *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, the *Regesta Romanorum Pontificum*, the *España Sagrada*, the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum et Graecarum*, the *Patrologiae cursus completus*, and many others.

Through these collections, and thanks to their compilers whom we must profoundly revere, the records of the past have been secured to the future generations against fire and war, ignorance and ill-will, the vandalism of man and the devastation of time. If it is highly praiseworthy for one to ensure his property in his own, and in his family's interest, it is much worthier of praise to ensure the historical patrimony in the interest of a whole nation, nay of all mankind.

These collections have as their complement the bibliographies, either of a general or of a particular character, and even the bibliographies of bibliographies. Among these we mention those by Vallée, Petzholdt, Stein, Langlois, Monod, Dahlman, Gross, Pirenne and the Catalogues published by the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris* and by the British Museum.

These bibliographies are being kept up to date by means of several reviews, published in different countries, such as the *The Bookseller*, *Il Bollettino delle Pubblicazioni Italiane*, *La Revue Historique*, *The English Historical-Review*, *Historische Zeitschrift*.

Like other civilized European peoples, we have a most precious heritage, and we are proud to claim that we are a small people with a great history. But this great history has been insufficiently studied, and a considerable part of it has been written by foreigners, who have carried out more extensive researches than our own scholars.

It is a pity that only a small part of our intelligentsia finds time to study our history. Let us leave apart those who foster unreasonable dislike for all things that are old and past. History is never stale for those trained to study it and teach it. Would that everyone of us understood properly Cicero's famous saying: *Historia magistra vitae!*

If we were really proud of our History, a Chair of Maltese History would have been set up long ago in our *Alma Mater*, the study of our history would have been made compulsory for all students of secondary schools, there would have been an inventory of all the local Archives, the National Museum would have been re-arranged by now, and some sort of national bibliography, indicating source material, would have been

circulating. But there is no sign of this historical development. It is, therefore, up to our Society, that is to say up to us all, to give a start.

Time is not yet ripe for the publication of a collection of, let us style it, the "Monumenta Melitae Historica" on a large scale. We lack the necessary funds and we have not sufficient personnel to cope with the work. Let us therefore for the time being set the ball rolling by means of the publication of some important unpublished documents, such as Duzina's Apostolic Visit in 1575, the Report of the Royal Commission of 1812, the manuscript documents of the XVth century relating to our country. What a boon would that be to the future writers of Maltese History!

As to the historical bibliography, we are proud to say that we have already started this work and so far we have almost completed a card-index, by authors, of articles of historical interest which appeared in Maltese and some foreign periodicals, and it is hoped that a subject-index to these periodicals will be completed in the current year. The Society has also published the short but very comprehensive bibliography on "Malta and the Second World War" by Dr. J. Galea.

Another matter for consideration is the card-indexing of all books about Malta written by Maltese, or by foreign authors, or published in Malta. This effort will pave the way for a standard Maltese National Bibliography, which will be surely welcomed by all scholars.

A third item devised by the Committee of the Society is the holding of a Summer School, or a study week for the popularization of the study of local history.

It is my wish that a photo-collection be started this year. This collection will contain photos of prominent Maltese people, of men who are closely linked with our history, of paintings recording the outstanding events that happened in this Island, of the monuments of Malta, of the most renowned paintings and illuminations found here, of which once belonged to us: in a word everything that would interest the lover of our history and that would help anybody wishing to illustrate his talks by slides.

And now it is time to conclude. I have briefly traced the programme of our Society for this year. It is now the duty of each one of us to help towards its implementation.

With the help of God, with the aid of Government, with the encouragement of well-wishing friends of the Society, but above all, with the strenuous efforts of myself and yourselves, we will succeed. Looking some time ahead, I foresee the future generations of Malta blessing us and the work we have started, by which they will reap the benefits in an abundant harvest of bibliographical wealth.