

SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON'S ACCOUNT OF HIS FIRST VISIT TO MALTA

(British Museum Egerton 2635, MSS. 13091, f. 86 et seq.)

by

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William Hamilton's first visit to Malta in 1769 was purely accidental, as his account clearly shows. During his tenure of office as Britain's Envoy Extraordinary in Naples, which began in 1764, he had become greatly interested both in classical antiquities, and in volcanoes, and was already an expert in both fields. His papers on the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius had been acclaimed, and the important *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honourable William Hamilton* (Naples 1766-67) had influenced artistic taste in Britain and elsewhere.

When in the Spring of 1769 his first wife Catherine, whom he had married in 1758, received news of her mother's death, he decided to divert her mind from her sadness and at the same time have the opportunity of climbing another important volcano, Mount Etna, by going on a tour of Sicily. Accompanied by their friend Lord Fortrose, they left Naples in mid-April for Palermo, and after a short stay they set sail for Girgenti (Agrigento) along the western and southern coasts. It was during this stretch of their journey that they were forced by strong winds to put into Valletta.

Hamilton was not to visit Malta again until 1800. By then he had been a Knight of the Bath since 1772, had lost his first wife in 1782, and had remarried in 1791, his second wife being the notorious Emma Hart. Hamilton left no account of his second visit, on which he was accompanied by Lady Hamilton, then already the mistress of Nelson, whose ship, the *Foudroyant*, took them to Malta and brought them back to Palermo, and by the writer Ellis Cornelia Knight, from whose *Autobiography* (London, 1861) an account of the visit is also absent.

For the foregoing information I am chiefly indebted to Brian Fothergill's excellent *Sir William Hamilton* (London, 1969).

Egerton 2635 is one of Hamilton's letter copy-books.

Messina July the 10th 1769

Viscount Weymouth
My Lord

I did not expect that my Tour of Sicily would have been attended with so many delays, and I certainly should have compleated [sic] it in six weeks had not there been uncommonly bad weather for this Season of the Year. On our passage from Palermo to Girgenti we were forced by strong contrary winds to put into the Port of Malta, where we were most graciously received by the Grand Master (1) and most hospitably treated by him and the principal Officers of the Order during ten days that we were kept in their Port. The Grand Master tho' pass'd ninety Years of age enjoys a perfect state of health and neither his understanding of [sic] eyesight have fail'd him in the least. He was pleas'd to order all his Officers to shew every mark of Attention to Mrs. Hamilton Lord Fortrose and me during our stay at Malta and indeed he was punctually obey'd. The Grandmasters [sic] equipages were likewise order'd constantly to attend us. His Conversation is very pleasing and instructive. He took an opportunity more than once of professing his great respect for His Majesty and his regard for Great Britain. I visited with Monsieur du Tigny [sic] the principal Engineer (2) every Fortification round the Port of the Island. They are indeed excellent and perfectly well kept. I found in general at Malta a spirit of Industry and activity seldom seen in these warm Climates. The whole Island tho' in itself a Barren Rock actually produces plentiful Crops of Corn and Cotton besides a Number of Fruit Trees. It contains as I was assured near one hundred thousand inhabitants (3) of which they reckon about eighteen thousand fighting Men. Ten thousand are regularly disciplined, and they have Arms for fifty thousand Men. Their Marine Force consists of two ships of sixty four Guns each and another on the Stocks (4) a Frigate of thirty which is the Grand Master's private property (5) as it was built and fitted out at his own expence, and four Gallies. I was on board the two ships of

(1) Manoel Pinto de Fonseca, Grand Master 1741-73.

(2) René de Tigné, after whom Fort Tigné (completed in 1793) towards the building of which he contributed handsomely, is named. He was in charge of Malta's fortifications for many years, but should not be confused with that other Chevalier René de Tigné who built Fort Manoel during the rule of Vilhena.

(3) According to an estimate made nine years before, the population was 66,800, but it was then in rapid growth and was over 110,000 by 1798. See H. Bowen-Jones *et al.*, *Malta: background for development*. (Durham, 1961), pp. 133-136.

(4) The two ships in commission in June 1769 were the *San Zaccaria* and the *San Giovanni*, a new vessel which had been completed in 1768 (AOM 1832). The *San Gioacchino* was the ship then being built (vide AOM 1832, 1833).

(5) The *Santa Maria*.

Sixty four Guns which were going out upon a Cruize of two Months. They were very fine Ships, the first in command had five hundred Men on board and the other 400. They both sail remarkably well.

I hope to have the honor soon of acquainting Your Lordship of my return to Naples as I have quite completed the tour of this Island (6) and only wait here for a fair Wind. I shall take the first favourable opportunity of transmitting to Your Lordship my remarks upon the Island of Sicily.

I have the honour to be
My Lord
etc etc etc

(6) From Malta Hamilton sailed to Catania, where he went up Mount Etna. Fothergill, *op. cit.* p. 96-99.