

Book Review:

Guze Muscat Azzopardi - Studji ta' Guze Cassar Pullicino,

PIN Publication, Malta 1991, pp. xiv + 146, illus.

One of the new books launched at the October 1991 International Book Fair of Malta was this latest work about Guze' Muscat Azzopardi, also known as the "Father of Modern Maltese Literature". The author, the well-known Guze' Cassar Pullicino, courageously set about to try and make his readers understand the complex character of GMA who was poet, novelist, journalist, playwright, translator, legal practitioner, politician and who is also regarded as a pioneer in the translation into Maltese of religious works.

The author tries to make GMA explain himself by the expedient of quoting what he had to say for himself with regards to the many literary problems and polemics he faced during his 74-year long life. GMA was a prolific writer and, with painstaking patience, Mr Cassar Pullicino has read and collected what GMA had to say to justify his actions in the face of disagreement with foe and friend at a time when Maltese as a nationally-written language was only just beginning to really assert itself.

The author makes it clear in his introduction that there has been an appreciable number of writings whose aim was to interpret and appreciate GMA's prose and poetry. This is what pushed Mr Cassar Pullicino to make GMA 'defend' himself because it is the best way by which the reader can judge his motives, reactions, criteria and also his consistency. Personally, I think that Mr Cassar Pullicino has succeeded in his aims and what emerges from this book is the picture of a human being who does what he thinks is right.

Divisions

The book is divided into thirteen chapters, each of which is a study on its own and deals with a different aspect. As one expects, the first chapter is biographical where the author points out the salient parts of GMA's life and career. Various unnecessary details have been omitted but perhaps this is intentional because they do not contribute to our understanding of GMA as a person and as an author. However, one cannot but appreciate the second chapter which deals with the effect GMA's home village, Qormi, had on his formation. It is a fact that GMA, even after he went to live elsewhere, never forsook his birth-place but continued to take much more than a passing interest in it and its inhabitants, even becoming President of the Pinto Band Club and contributing an annual poem dedicated to St. George, its patron saint. (In those days, there was only one parish in Qormi). In fact, Qormi features prominently in a number of his novels.

Every person is influenced, to an appreciable degree, by other people. The author knows this and so, in three chapters, he tries to account for GMA's contacts in various fields: religion, law, politics, literature and journalism. His many and varied contacts included Ramiro Barbara, Fortunato Mizzi, Clement and Peter Paul Mifsud Bonnici, GanAnton Vassallo, Ludovico Mifsud Tommasi, Anton Muscat Fenech, Napoleone Tagliaferro, Alfons Maria Galea, Agostino Levanzin and Manwel Dimech. All left their mark in some way or other and, here, probably for the first time ever, we note the relationships between GMA and these people, including his antagonism to Manwel Dimech.

GMA had his own views about how Maltese should be written and about literary criticism. This, of course, led him into some polemics with others who did not share his views with some quite heated arguments sometimes ensuing in the columns of the newspapers which the antagonists directed. GMA was also a playwright of some merit and so a further chapter outlines his thoughts about this form of literary expression.

GMA is perhaps remembered more for his prose than for his poetry but, actually, his poetical output was very extensive. In a separate study, Mr Cassar Pullicino painstakingly draws up a list of all GMA's poems which have never been published in book form, together with the dates when they were written and the newspaper or magazine where they were published. GMA was a prominent member of all those societies which promoted the study and writing of Maltese culminating in his being elected the first President of the *Għaqda tal-Malti* in 1920 and which started publishing *Il-Malti* in 1925. All the vicissitudes, heartaches and polemics which came to the fore in these societies, or when they were being formed, are treated in Chapter 9.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 deal with GMA's political activities which are neatly divided into the three main divisions of his political life: representative of the people in the Council of Government; his contribution in the 1919 National Assembly with particular reference to the place of the Maltese language in Parliament; and the controversy whether the new constitution, which duly came into being in 1921, should have a Senate or not. The last chapter deals with GMA's demise and the tributes showered on him after his death.

In the appendix there are also two lists, ten pages long, of all GMA's works including manuscript writings which have never been published.

As is quite evident from what I have listed, Mr Cassar Pullicino deals exhaustively, not least by the inclusion of relevant footnotes and references, with all aspects of

GMA's life except his translations of the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. This omission is due, according to the author, to their having been dealt with exhaustively elsewhere by Prof K. Sant. The whole work is painstakingly researched and written and I believe that the author does succeed in presenting the reader with a picture of GMA, first and foremost, as a man who worked untiringly and unceasingly to forward his convictions but who remained a gentleman to the end. Mr Cassar Pullicino enjoys a well-deserved reputation for all his writings be they folkloristic, historical or literary. I firmly believe that this latest offering further enhances his reputation not least because of his scholarly approach. It's a pity that the interesting illustrative section is slightly marred by the mixing-up of captions of Ganni Vassallo and Napoleone Tagliaferro.

Such a book should find a place on everyone's bookshelf.

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