

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, AN AMERICAN NAVAL HERO AND A MYSTERIOUS DUELLIST IN MALTA*

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One of the notable literary projects of our time in the English-speaking world has been the publication of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*¹ in some 25 volumes by Princeton University Press in the United States and Routledge in the United Kingdom. The latest two volumes appeared in 1990 in the form of an annotated edition of the *Table Talk* of Coleridge,² which contains quite a number of allusions to Malta. In this publication the editor, Professor Carl Woodring, of Columbia University in New York, surmised, in a biographical note (I, 300 n. 6) on the American naval hero, Stephen Decatur, that Coleridge might possibly have been 'intrigued' by an episode in which 'Decatur had acted as second in 1802 in a duel that resulted in the death of the secretary to the Governor of Malta'. The duel, in fact, had taken place in February 1803, more than a year before Coleridge arrived at Malta in a convoy from Portsmouth during the long war against France under Napoleon. The purpose of his journey was to restore his opium-damaged health and seek temporary employment in Malta or Sicily, which then formed part of the independent Kingdom of the Two Sicilies ruled from Naples by King Ferdinand IV many years before Italy became a united country.

While passing through London on the way to Malta in March 1804 Coleridge, on hearing of the death of a nobleman in a duel, erupted, in a notebook entry, into an indictment of all duellists as 'true Assassins'.³ The following year, shortly after he was appointed Acting Public Secretary of Malta by Sir Alexander Ball, His Majesty's Civil Commissioner as the Governor was officially called, Coleridge, in another notebook entry demonstrated his utter lack of sympathy with 'the feeling of vindictive honor' allegedly motivating duellists (*CN* II, 2630). In his age duelling, although contrary to the law, was still widely practised by the ruling aristocracy and gentry, including naval officers on both sides of the Atlantic, as a legacy of

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¹ Hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as *CC*.

² *CC*, no. 14, ed. C. Woodring: hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as *TT*.

³ *The Notebooks of S.T. Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn, New York & London, 1957-90, vol. II, entry 1971: hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as *CN*.

mediaeval chivalry. Even discounting, however, Coleridge's uncompromising stand against duelling, he could not have been 'intrigued' at all by the duel in which Lt Decatur had acted as second in February 1803, because it had *not* 'resulted in the death of the secretary to the Governor of Malta'.

Professor Woodring, in other words, has resurrected a myth, which must be among the oldest of the many legends connected with Coleridge, for since 1846 it has been repeated by one biographer and editor after another not only of both Decatur and Coleridge but of the leading fellow-officers of Decatur,⁴ who took part in the so-called 'Tripolitan War' of the United States from 1801 to 1805. The myth was even invested with the seal of high authority by its inclusion, at the end of the 19th century, in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (1905, p. 120), on which the late Professor Kathleen Coburn, of the University of Toronto, drew many years later for her own biographical note on Decatur in her edition of the notebooks of Coleridge (CN II, 228n.).

The purpose of the Tripolitan War was to stop the Barbary Regency of Tripoli (nowadays Libya) from making prizes of American merchant ships in the Mediterranean and holding their crews in captivity for very lucrative ransom of the vessels and prisoners. The young American republic, which had only a small, newly formed navy, had refused a demand from the Bashaw of Tripoli for increased payments of tribute in return for exemption from piracy for her ships and nationals.⁵ In consequence the second American squadron to enter the Mediterranean in the Tripolitan War was using Syracuse in Sicily as its base for a blockade of Tripoli, which had no treaty of peace and friendship with the Kingdom of Naples, as the Two Sicilies was commonly known. At the same time the Americans were supplementing their base at Syracuse by Malta as an excellent advance station, thanks to the friendly relations that the commodores of successive squadrons enjoyed with Ball, who was himself one of Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson's captains before his appointment as Civil Commissioner.

⁴ A.S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur*, Boston, 1846, pp. 55-59, 123-24; C.T. Brady, *Stephen Decatur*, Boston, 1900, pp. 16-20; G.W. Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs*, Boston, 1905, p. 120; C.G. Calkins, 'Decatur and Coleridge' in *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, XXXIV, 1908, pp. 923-24, 926-27; C.O. Paullin, 'Duelling in the Old Navy' in *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, 35, Dec. 1909, 4, pp. 1155-97; I. Anthony, *Decatur*, New York, 1931, pp. 80-82; C.L. Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur*, Philadelphia, 1937, pp. 194-97; Helen Nicolay, *Decatur of the Old Navy*, New York, 1942, pp. 79-81; W.O. Stevens, *An Affair of Honor: the Biography of Commodore James Barron, U.S.N.*, Chesapeake, 1969, p. 50.

⁵ S. Dearden, *A Nest of Corsairs: The Fighting Karamanlis of Tripoli*, London, 1976, pp. 151-55: hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as Dearden.

As it was I who first stated, as far back as 1969 (*Coleridge in Malta and Italy*, Oxford, pp. 160-61), that the prevalent belief that Ball had lost his secretary in a duel involving Decatur as second was a myth, it may be proper to explain that I am returning to the subject not (to quote Coleridge's words again in a more personal context) out of any 'feeling of vindictive honor', in view of the resurrection of the myth by Professor Woodring, but simply because I have come to know of fresh information from various sources, particularly from a naval historian named Dr William Dunne in the course of an extended and cordial exchange of letters and knowledge. Thanks to this range of information, the extraordinary misunderstanding, if not confusion, over the identity, nationality, rank or title of the duellist who was wrongly reported for more than a century and a half to be 'the secretary to the Governor of Malta' can be unravelled.

In my book I explained (p. 161) that Ball had not one, but three secretaries in February 1803, namely, his private secretary, the Rev. Francis Laing, an under-secretary, Edmond Chapman, and the Public Secretary, Alexander Macaulay, all of whom were alive and well at the time of the duel, and continued to be so well after Coleridge's arrival in May 1804. As for Coleridge himself, in February 1803, when the duel took place, he was wandering in various parts of far-away England in the company of his benefactor, Thomas Wedgwood⁶. I also explained that after an extensive examination of all the official and private papers of Ball in London and Malta as well as of the letters, notebooks and table talk of Coleridge I had found absolutely no evidence to confirm that Ball had lost a secretary in a duel.

The author of that mythical loss was an American biographer, Captain Alexander Mackenzie, who published a *Life of Stephen Decatur* (1846), forty-three years after the duel. The book was afterwards described as 'standard' in the bibliography of the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Mackenzie gave no references throughout his narrative, as was not uncommon in 19th-century biography. Mackenzie related (pp. 55-59) that a midshipman named Joseph Bainbridge, while on liberty ashore at Valletta, went to a theatre with one of his messmates. There they were made the subject of sneering remarks from some British officers who sat near them. One of the Englishmen, bearing in mind that the Americans had as yet achieved very little in their war against Tripoli despite earlier boasts of bombarding the Bashaw of that regency into submission, declared that 'those Yankees will never stand the smell of powder'. On going to the lobby with his messmate, Bainbridge was rudely bumped by the Englishman. Bainbridge responded by knocking him down. The individual, although unnamed by Mackenzie, was identified by him as 'no less a personage than

⁶ Cf. *Collected Letters of S.T. Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs, Oxford, II, 918-28: hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as CL.

the secretary of Sir Alexander Ball, the Governor', and as 'a professed duellist', who 'had sought this occasion to practise his art'. Bainbridge, on the contrary, was completely inexperienced in duelling. The next morning a challenge arrived on board Bainbridge's ship, and Lt Decatur, hearing that the challenger was a professed duellist, intervened and offered to act as Bainbridge's second. On meeting the Englishman's second, Decatur chose pistols at four paces instead of the usual ten, feeling sure that Bainbridge, a mere boy, would otherwise be killed. The Englishman's second objected to this proposal, whereupon Decatur offered to take Bainbridge's place and fight at ten paces. The offer was declined and the duel took place on Decatur's terms. Despite the Englishman's alleged expertise, both men missed their first shots. Decatur cautioned Bainbridge to fire low if he wished to live. Again they aimed and fired. The Englishman missed, but Bainbridge's shot struck his brow, killing him instantly.

According to Mackenzie, Ball demanded that Bainbridge and Decatur should be surrendered to stand trial on a charge of murder; but the American squadron sailed away, and on arriving at Gibraltar, both Bainbridge and Decatur were sent home. Decatur, however, returned to the Mediterranean shortly afterwards, in November 1803, and only a few months before Coleridge's arrival at Malta from England, rose to fame on 16th February 1804 in an action which Nelson, who was then blockading the French fleet off Toulon, was reported to have hailed as 'the most bold and daring act of the age'.⁷ For Decatur, having learned that in his absence the American squadron had suffered the humiliating disaster of losing one of their best frigates, the *Philadelphia*, as a prize to the Bashaw of Tripoli, and that her entire crew of 307 men, including her captain, Joseph Bainbridge's elder brother, were in captivity at Tripoli, had succeeded in stealing into the harbour at night with a boarding party, and after deadly hand-to-hand fighting had set fire to the frigate within range of the town's powerful batteries (Dearden, pp. 158-65). The boarding party, besides disguising themselves in Maltese costume, had included a Maltese pilot, Salvatore Catalano, who had played a crucial role in Decatur's exploit with his knowledge of Tripoli's harbour and of Arabic.

When Coleridge, therefore, in the summer of 1804, as acting *private* secretary to Ball (before he became acting Public Secretary on Alexander Macaulay's death in January 1805), first heard of Decatur in Malta and shortly after became acquainted and friendly with him on crossing to Sicily (cf. *CN* II, 2228, 2492; *CL* II, 1150), he did so in the newly acquired knowledge that Decatur was a national hero, formally awarded a sword of honour by the Congress of the United States, and

⁷ Cf. Dearden, p. 165. Nelson's eulogy is widely quoted in American biographies of Decatur, but without specific indication of the source.

promoted, at 25 years of age, from lieutenant to captain, and given the temporary command of the flagship of the third squadron, the *Constitution*. But Mackenzie, of course, was wrong in stating, after his account of Bainbridge's duel with the British officer, that Coleridge, at the time of his meeting with Decatur, 'filled the station of secretary to the governor, made vacant in the unfortunate encounter with Joseph Bainbridge' (p. 123). Coleridge was simply called in by Ball in July 1804 on a temporary basis because Francis Laing, his private secretary, was just about to leave Malta with despatches and to escort Ball's son to Glasgow to place him under a tutor (cf. *CL* II, 1135, 1140, 1142). As for Edmond Chapman, the under-secretary, he had been sent by Ball to Odessa on a corn-buying mission (cf. *ibid.*, II, 1141-42 & n.1); while Macaulay, the Public Secretary, was too busy with administrative work to be burdened with Ball's correspondence with the government in London and with writing 'memorials' or long papers to them on Mediterranean politics.

Mackenzie's account of Bainbridge's duel with the British officer, including his misrepresentation of Coleridge as the dead duellist's successor, was followed to the letter in a long article entitled 'Decatur and Coleridge' (*U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* XXXIV (1908), pp. 923-24), which the *Dictionary of American Biography* also listed in its bibliography of Decatur. The article was by Captain Carlos Calkins of the United States navy, who rounded it off with a misrepresentation of Decatur as having engaged in a correspondence with Coleridge from Egypt, which, in fact, Decatur never visited. The letter which Calkins extracted from one of Coleridge's prose works called *The Friend* (*CC*, No. 4, ed. B. Rooke, 1969, I, 254-57), and which he reprinted almost in full in his article (pp. 929, 953-55), had been written not by Decatur to Coleridge but by another American officer named William Eaton to Ball. Coleridge had merely made a copy of it, and after his return to England had published it in *The Friend* without disclosing either Eaton's or Ball's name (Sultana, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-48).

Both Calkins and Mackenzie seem to have been unaware, or perhaps forgetful, of the version of the duel between Bainbridge and the British officer which the famous American novelist, James Fenimore Cooper, had published in 1837 in his travel book called *Gleanings in Europe: England* (ed. J.P. Elliott *et al.*, Albany, 1982, pp. 124-25) many years after he had heard an account of it from the commodore of the second American squadron, Richard Morris, whom Cooper (who had served in the United States navy) had represented as 'my old friend'. Cooper's version provides decisive proof that the duellist shot dead by Bainbridge could not have been Ball's secretary, for Cooper first represented Morris as having had breakfast with Ball at the latter's palace in Valletta on the very day of the duel. Ball had, therefore, explained to Morris, 'with proper expressions of regret', that 'it would be his [Ball's] duty to demand Mr Bainbridge' for trial in a civil court, to

which Morris 'could of course say nothing to the contrary'. But Ball was never represented by Cooper as having told Morris that the dead duellist was his secretary. Ball, moreover, according to Cooper, tactfully allowed Morris to go back to his flagship from the palace, and to pass the word round the American squadron, first through a midshipman, then through a lieutenant, and eventually to Bainbridge himself, that an official demand would shortly be made for Bainbridge's arrest. Accordingly, when, in due time, the official demand appeared, and Morris 'sent orders to the different ships to deliver the delinquent', he 'received answers that he [Bainbridge] was no longer in the squadron. He had, in truth, hurried off to Sicily in a hired felucca [a small coastal vessel driven by oars]'. Ball's seeming tip-off to Morris drew praise from Cooper on the ground that Ball had 'always manifested a seaman's desire that we [the American squadron] should flog the barbarians', meaning, of course, the piratical Barbary Regencies.

Although Cooper, like Calkins and Mackenzie, was not in possession of the name of the British antagonist of Bainbridge in the duel, an important development in the search for clues for solving the mystery of the duellist's identity appears to have taken place in the early 20th century, when the naval documents in the archives of Washington connected with the Tripolitan War began to be studied, or became more freely accessible to scholars.⁸ These included the journal of another midshipman named Henry Wadsworth, after whom his nephew, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was named, apparently in affectionate memory by Wadsworth's sister. For the young midshipman, who served in the frigate the *New York*, died in the summer of 1804 in an explosion of a fire-ship during gun-boat attacks on the defences of Tripoli's harbour shortly after the destruction of the *Philadelphia* (C. McKee, *Edward Preble, A Naval Biography*, Annapolis, 1972, p. 305). Wadsworth's journal contained a laconic but intriguing entry about the duel fought by Bainbridge. It was the only contemporary American record of the duel, and read, under the date of February 14, 1803: 'This morning a duel was fought between Mr Bainbridge midshipman of the *New York* and Mr Cochran. An Englishman residing at Valletta: the latter received the ball in his head and instantly died; they fought at four paces distance and exchanged two shots: With pleasure I observe that Mr Bainbridge was clearly in the right, and behav'd honorably throughout the affair' (*Naval Doc. BW*, II, p. 362).

As can be seen, Wadsworth did not describe Cochran as 'a British officer' but as 'an Englishman residing at Valletta', without, at the same time, saying specifically

⁸ Afterwards published in *Naval Documents related to the U.S. Wars with the Barbary Powers*, ed. D.W. Knox, 7 vols, Government Printing Press, Washington, 1939-45: hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as *Naval Docs. BW*.

that he was a civilian. Nor did Wadsworth say that Ball demanded the surrender of Bainbridge and Decatur for trial in a civil court. Above all, he definitely did not describe Cochran as 'secretary to the Governor of Malta'. Nevertheless in the stream of biographies of Decatur that continued to be published after the unearthing of Wadsworth's journal, the biographers, while naming Cochran as Bainbridge's challenger, and as 'a famous duelist' (Brady, pp. 16-20), indeed even as 'the most dangerous duellist of the island' (Anthony, pp. 80-82), all without exception continued to describe Cochran as 'secretary to Sir Alexander Ball, the governor of Malta'. Furthermore, one or two of them, such as Charles Oscar Paullin in 'Dueling in the Old Navy' (pp. 155-97), affirmed that 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet, succeeded Cochran in the office of secretary to the governor of Malta'. Even in the latest and excellent edition of James Fenimore Cooper's *Gleanings in Europe: England*, which came out 13 years after the publication of my book, the editors, Professor Ringe, of the University of Kentucky, and Professor Staggs, of Trinity University, state, in their notes on Cooper's version of the duel incident (p. 316), that the Englishman killed by Bainbridge's shot 'has been identified as a man named Cochran, the secretary of Sir Alexander Ball'. But then Professors Ringe and Staggs credit me with having pointed out not only that none of Ball's three secretaries was killed in the duel but that Ball had no secretary by the name of Cochran. Of course, I had not heard or read of Cochran until a few months ago, although I had certainly read of the celebrated Scottish sea-wolf, Thomas Cochran, the 10th Earl of Dundonald, who had fought a duel in Malta with a French royalist officer after an incident at a fancy-dress ball two years before Bainbridge was challenged to a duel (*Autobiography of a Seaman*, 1860, I, 103-5).

The truth is that Wadsworth, in all innocence, got the name of the dead duellist wrong, and that the Americans were mistaken about the official position of the duellist. Moreover, they confused the name of his office with the official title of Ball, 'the Civil Commissioner', which was intended to distinguish his post from that of the military commander, Major-General William Villetes, with whom he shared power as equals. General Villetes was, in effect, the military governor, so much so that Ball sometimes referred to himself as 'the Civil Governor' (Public Record Office, London, C.O.158/10/f.1, Malta, 3 Jan. 1805), which was also how Coleridge referred to him in his first letter from Malta, precisely after he had paid the usual courtesy calls, first, on Ball, then on Villetes as civil and military governors respectively (*CN* II, 2101-2102). 'I have been waiting day after day', Coleridge wrote to his wife on 5th June 1804, 'for the departure of Mr Laing tutor of the only child of Sir A. Ball our civil governor' (*CL* II, 1135).

In the context of this distinction it might not be inappropriate to point out – before I elucidate the mistakes of identity and nomenclature made by Wadsworth and the

American biographers and editors – that in the chronological tables of all the works of Coleridge except one hitherto published in *The Collected Works of Coleridge* Ball's title does not appear as Civil Commissioner but as 'High Commissioner at Malta'. Moreover, in an unfortunate biographical note in the newly published edition of Coleridge's *Table Talk* (I, 474 n.11), Ball is represented by Professor Woodring as having been 'appointed chief commissioner and in 1801 Governor of Malta', whereas in 1801 he was replaced in the civil administration of Malta by Mr Charles Cameron,⁹ and he rejoined his ship, H.M.S. *Alexander*, after which he served for a short time, also in 1801, as 'Commissioner of the Navy' at Gibraltar at his own request to restore his health (*ibid.*, pp. 338-46; entry on Ball in *DNB*). It was in 1802 that he was sent back to Malta in the double role, and with the double title, of Civil Commissioner and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Order of St John, as I'll explain presently towards the end of the lecture with reference to Coleridge's remarks on Ball's title.

As for the mistakes of identity and nomenclature made by Henry Wadsworth and the American biographers and editors, these have come to light very recently from an examination of an unpublished typescript by the late Mr Harry Formosa entitled *Burial Sites and Cemeteries in Malta*, and which is now to be found in the Melitensia Collection of the University of Malta.¹⁰ Formosa drew on the earliest register of burials kept by an Anglican chaplain named David Cosserat in the first years of British rule in Malta. The register used to lie in the archives of the Anglican Cathedral at Valletta.¹¹ Although it is even more laconic than Wadsworth's journal entry, it provides just enough information to resolve the mystery of the dead duellist. It reads: 'John Corcoran – a clerk in the Commissariat Department. N.B. Shot in a duel by an American officer. Feb. 14, 1803. Buried Feb. 15, 1803'. Further research by Formosa, this time based on an article by Guze Gatt in the periodical *Il Malti*, yielded the additional information that Corcoran was an Irishman (or Anglo-Irishman), aged twenty-three, in the employ of the Commissary Mr A. Fernandes as a clerk.¹² Corcoran's second in the duel with Bainbridge was a man named Mill, another clerk in the Commissariat under Fernandes, who is nowadays perhaps best known from the travels of the celebrated Lady Hester Stanhope (Ch. Meryon, *Memoir of Lady Hester Stanhope*, 1845, I, 6), a niece of the Prime Minister, William Pitt, to whose patronage Fernandes was indebted for his post in Malta (Joan Haslip, *Lady Hester Stanhope*, 1945, p. 76). When Lady Stanhope called at Malta on the way to the East, she was the guest of Fernandes in his stately house at Valletta,

⁹ W. Hardman, *A History of Malta during the Period of the French and British Occupations, 1798-1815*, London, 1909, pp. 338, 344-46; hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as Hardman.

¹⁰ MS. 262/3, Part V, Gathering Z1: 'The Old English Cemeteries of Malta', pp. 236-37.

¹¹ My latest information about it is that parts of it seem to have disappeared.

¹² *Il Malti*, issue 2, June 1932, pp. 37-40, cited by Formosa in his unpublished typescript, p. 237.

formerly the Auberge de France in Strada Mezzodì (South Street), which of course was destroyed by German bombs in the Second World War.

As for John Corcoran, he was buried by the Rev. David Cosserat in the so-called Rock Gate Cemetery outside Valletta, close to the bastions of Floriana overlooking Marsamussetto. It is not clear if the same cemetery was the burial ground of another victim of a duel, who, only a fortnight before John Corcoran's death at the hands of Joseph Bainbridge, had been mortally wounded by a pistol shot. He was another American officer named Lt Henry Vandyke, who had fallen out with a fellow-officer in a trivial dispute during a game of billiards, which had almost certainly occurred in what is now the *Bibliotheca* or National Library at Valletta. For that building, which the Knights of St John had only recently completed, had been used, on the surrender and expulsion of the French in September 1800, as a coffee-room and reading-room for British officers, with a billiard-room erected in a side-room,¹³ to which apparently the American officers had been given access.

Although John Corcoran's challenge to Joseph Bainbridge to a duel had originated from an exchange of words and blows in a public theatre that remained unnamed in all the American accounts of the duel, the precipitating incident had not taken place on the same day as, or on the eve of, the duel but several days before it – towards the end of January 1803 – during a ball in a small theatre which is no longer extant. It lay in Strada San Marco (St Mark Street) and was apparently a converted warehouse, named, after its location, *it-teatrin ta' Marsamxett* (the little Marsamussetto theatre). The exchange of blows had been followed up, a fortnight later, at the Teatro Manuel (Manoel Theatre), again involving both Corcoran and Mill, Bainbridge having struck first the former, then the latter, presumably in retaliation for provocative remarks, as in the original account of the duel by Alexander Mackenzie. After the first incident Corcoran had been seen by his Maltese landlady in the act of being incited by Mill to send Bainbridge a challenge, after which he had changed his lodgings. There, according to his second landlady's evidence, he had been joined, on the evening after the incident at the Teatro Manuel, by an English naval surgeon and had given his Maltese servant instructions to wake him up next morning at four. Accordingly, shortly after that hour, he had gone out to the house of Mill, where they had breakfasted together with the English naval surgeon on the day of the duel (Gatt, *op.cit.*, pp. 37-38).

Both this duel and that fought the fortnight before by Lt Henry Vandyke appear to have constituted far from the only incidents involving the officers of the

¹³ A. Anderson, *A Journal of the Forces which sailed from the Downs in April 1800 ... with a Particular Account of Malta ...*, London, 1802, p. 137; hereafter referred to in brackets in the text as Anderson.

American navy in duels in Malta, judging by the evidence of one William Mark, who served as purser to Nelson and other senior British naval commanders, and who was himself challenged to a duel at the time of the American war with Tripoli. Mark kept a journal which was afterwards published under the title of *At Sea with Nelson*. In it he wrote (p. 113) that the spot fixed for his own duel was 'half a mile from the bathing place where the officers of the American squadron used to settle similar business almost every day'.

The bathing place had been constructed by Sir Alexander Ball for the public at La Pietà at one end of Marsamuschetto Harbour (cf. Th. MacGill, *A Handbook to Malta and Gozo*, 1839, p. 115). It was afterwards used by Lord Byron during his own call at Malta on his journey to Greece (cf. L.A. Marchand, *Byron*, London, 1957, I, 198-99), which, however memorable it proved to him personally and in the way of poetic production, was very nearly aborted in Malta, also by a duel. For Byron, having taken offence at some comment about him in public company by a Captain Cary, who was aide-de-camp to Ball's successor as Civil Commissioner, namely, Lt-General Sir Hildebrand Oakes, sent Cary a challenge to a duel on the eve of his departure for Greece. Fortunately Byron's second and fellow-traveller, John Cam Hobhouse (later Lord Broughton), managed to effect a reconciliation (*ibid.*, pp. 198, 200-1; Ld Broughton, *Recollections of a Long Life*, 1909, I, 14).

As for the bathing place at La Pietà, it lay at the foot of an uphill road leading to Portes-des-Bombes, which was precisely the site chosen by John Corcoran and Joseph Bainbridge for their duel, but in a deep ditch outside a narrow, arched gateway. The ditch, which was surmounted by a drawbridge (cf. Anderson, p. 127), like that of the old Porta Reale at the entrance to Valletta, no longer exists, while the single, narrow archway was enlarged, many years later, by the addition of a second arch. The original structure, complete with a double set of stone stairs leading down to the ditch, survives in old prints and even in vignettes on old headed writing paper supplied by the Brocktorff family of artists to British officers and foreign residents. Portes-des-Bombes itself was then completely connected to the bastions of Floriana, even at its sides, and was therefore impenetrable except for the narrow archway. In other words, it formed part of the outermost fortifications of Valletta, marking the dividing line between the city and the country, and might well have also been the site where Thomas Cochrane, the Earl of Dundonald, had fought his duel with the French royalist officer two years before Bainbridge's encounter with Corcoran. For Dundonald wrote in his *Autobiography of a Seaman* (I, 105) that he and the royalist officer had exchanged shots 'behind the ramparts' – happily without fatal consequences.

The onset of British rule, therefore, in Malta, following the expulsion of the Knights of St John by the French, marked a departure in the choice of sites for duels,

bearing in mind that the young knights, who had fought duels just as frequently as the British and Americans, had commonly done so in the centre of Valletta, namely, in Strada Stretta (Strait Street), as directed by their superiors, who had hoped that in a populated area, within quick reach of the senior knights or bailiffs and guards of the Order, the hot-tempered young knights might be restrained from killing each other (cf. D. Sultana, *The Journey of Sir Walter Scott to Malta*, 1986, p. 104).

In the case of the duel fought by Bainbridge and Corcoran, although the remote site and early hour fixed for it might have made them think that they could go about their business unobserved by passers-by, they were, in fact, watched from a hiding place overlooking the ditch by a Maltese sergeant named Salvatore Piott. He belonged to the Maltese Provincial Battalions newly raised by Sir Alexander Ball on British pay as successors of the two earliest Maltese regiments raised by the British, namely, the Maltese Light Infantry and the Maltese Militia. Piott's suspicion that a duel was impending had been aroused when, after walking out of Portes-des-Bombes on the way to Qormi, he had, on looking down the ditch, observed a group of five men, one of them wearing an American officer's uniform. Another also seemed to be a naval officer; the other three wore civilian dress. None of them was known to Piott; but the distinctly American officer was Decatur, and his fellow-officer was Bainbridge. The other three were Corcoran, Mill and the English naval surgeon. Within minutes two of them – Corcoran and Bainbridge – had armed themselves with pistols, loaded and tested them, and moved away from each other to the agreed distance of paces. Decatur then ordered them, in a loud voice, to take aim and fire, but neither was injured. Again the two duellists came together, back to back, then paced forward to a distance a little shorter than before, turned, faced each other, and, at Decatur's second command, aimed and fired. Immediately Piott saw one of them – Corcoran – fall to the ground, hit in the face, with blood flowing from his mouth. Two of the group then left in the direction of Valletta, as did Decatur, while one of the civilians remained with Corcoran. On Piott's emerging from his hiding place, this civilian hailed him and asked him to stay with Corcoran while he looked for a *calesse*, but before the *calesse* arrived Corcoran was dead (Gatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40).

An inquest was then held by two Maltese doctors, followed by a judicial inquiry ordered by Ball. Mill was brought before a Maltese judge for interrogation, and several witnesses were interviewed, including Corcoran's landladies, servants, and sergeant Piott. Mill, however, denied all knowledge of the matter, admitting only that Corcoran and his English friend had had a drink at his house on the day of the duel, but declaring that they had afterwards parted from him. Mill even managed to renege on making a statement in writing for submission by the judge in his report to Ball. The judge, for his part, was inclined to throw all the blame for this

unfortunate affair on Mill, particularly for having allegedly incited Corcoran to challenge Bainbridge to a duel after the exchange of blows at the *Teatrin ta' Marsamxett*. Ball, however, decided that no action should be taken against Mill (*ibid.*, pp. 39-40).

Whether Mill consulted his superior, the Commissary Mr Fernandes, over his policy of non-cooperation with the judicial inquiry, and whether Fernandes, who appears to have been well acquainted with Ball (cf. M. Galea, *Sir Alexander Ball and Malta*, 1990, p. 153 n. 13), intervened on Mill's behalf, are questions that must remain unanswered in the absence of documentary evidence. Although it could never have crossed Fernandes's mind that the title of his official position was to create so persistent a myth in the American accounts of the duel between Joseph Bainbridge and John Corcoran, it was certainly far from uncommon for the designation 'the Commissary', which of course denoted a civilian official responsible for military supplies and equipment, to be confused with Ball's title, 'the Civil Commissioner'. Indeed it can be proved from Ball's own despatches that the confusion was compounded by a third title, namely, that of the senior naval officer in Malta in 1803, who, not being of flag officer rank (in other words, neither an admiral nor vice-admiral nor rear-admiral), was designated simply 'the Commissioner', followed by his surname, as, for example, 'the Commissioner Otway' to whom Coleridge referred in a letter to his wife on 12th December 1804 shortly after returning to Malta from Sicily (*CL II*, 1158). 'In my absence', he informed her, 'my old rooms' in Ball's palace 'were given to Commissioner Otway.' Ball, for his part, spelt out the confusion in a despatch of 27th August 1806 to the War and Colonial Minister. 'It may not be improper to notice', he wrote, 'that as the designation itself has been frequently confounded with that of the Commissary, and sometimes of the Naval Commissioner, I have occasionally been subjected to unpleasant explanations.' Accordingly Ball, sensitive to the susceptibilities of General Villettes over the delicate division of powers between them as equals, suggested to the Minister that 'the inconvenience' Ball suffered from his unsatisfactory title 'might be obviated by substituting the appellation of Civil Governor without extending or altering in any degree the powers vested in the Civil Commissioner' (C.O.158/12/f.153).

Ball's long-standing grievance over his title was taken up by Coleridge after his return to England from Malta, first, in *The Friend* (I, 544n.) and then, many years later, in his table talk (I, 475). He blamed 'the timid and unsteady policy' of the British government as well as 'petty jealousies' for preventing 'Sir Alexander Ball from having the title of Governor', even though 'such Sir Alex. Ball was in reality, and such was his general appellation in the Mediterranean'. By 'petty jealousies' Coleridge meant, of course, the usual inter-service rivalry between the navy and

army, the latter represented by General Villettes, who was not subordinate to Ball in matters outside the civil administration of Malta. Such subordination might have been implied if Ball's title had been changed from 'Civil Commissioner' to 'Governor'. Villettes, besides enjoying a higher salary than Ball because he had a large table allowance denied to Ball (cf. C.O.158/12/f.153), could appeal above Ball's head direct to the Commander-in-Chief of the British army in London, who was the Duke of York, a son of King George III, as Coleridge himself hinted in one of his letters after his return to England from Malta (*CL III*, 265). On the other hand, Ball himself must have recognised that the security of Malta as a garrison town and naval station was paramount so soon after its surrender to Britain by the French. Furthermore, the future of Malta was then still a subject of dispute among the Great Powers, particularly as Russia, who was Britain's principal ally, with Austria, in the Third Coalition against France, was determined to restore Malta to its former rulers, namely, the Order of St John. In the circumstances Britain was reluctant to offend and alienate Russia and Austria from the Coalition by doing anything – such as changing Ball's title from Civil Commissioner to Governor – which might have given the impression, or raised suspicions, internationally that Britain was shutting the door against negotiation over the future sovereignty of Malta if and when Napoleon would be defeated. For these and other reasons, of which the most important was undoubtedly the pretensions of the King of Naples to the ownership of Malta as the ancient suzerain of the island, Coleridge's accusation of 'a timid and unsteady policy' on the part of the British cabinet was rather one-sided and smacked of partisanship.

Britain, in fact, did decide, in 1802, in the short-lived Peace of Amiens, to withdraw from Malta and restore the island to the Order of St John. That was precisely why Ball, after having been removed as head of the government of Malta towards the end of 1800 by General Sir Ralph Abercromby, the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, with the approval of Henry Dundas (later Lord Melville), the War and Colonial Minister (Hardman, pp. 338, 341-46), was sent back to Malta with the title of 'Civil Commissioner for the Affairs of Malta and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Order of St John' (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 468, 445). His title, therefore, reflected quite properly his instructions in compliance with the Treaty of Amiens, namely, to continue to administer temporarily the civil government of Malta and to arrange for the withdrawal of the British garrison, who were to be replaced by the Maltese Provincial Battalions and by a Neapolitan contingent, pending the election and arrival of the Grand Master of the Order of St John, to whom Ball was to hand over the government in a smooth transition of power (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 443-45). In these circumstances, therefore, and in the historical context, there was no 'confusion of ideas' about Ball's title, contrary to what Coleridge alleged in *The Friend* (I, 554n). But shortly after Ball began to carry out his

instructions, the British government, provoked by certain actions of Bonaparte's on the continent, and alarmed at the intrigues and insinuations of one of his agents in the Levant, which were interpreted as a potential threat to British India, for which the possession of Malta was strategically crucial, changed their minds about withdrawing from Malta (Hardman, pp. 443, 450-51, 454, 456-57, 464-65 & n.1, 466). Accordingly they sent Ball and Villetes secret instructions to suspend the British evacuation and refuse admittance to the Grand Master of the Order of St John into Malta (*ibid.*, pp. 449-50, 467-73). Consequently, after prolonged and acrimonious discussions, the war between Britain and France was resumed in May 1803. In those circumstances the first part of Ball's title continued to be that of 'Civil Commissioner', but the second part, namely, 'Minister Plenipotentiary to the Order of St John', was dropped from 1803 onwards – indeed, in the event, permanently. No one could have known better than Coleridge that this was the case, even if his information about this subject in *The Friend* for English readers may have been intended to convey the opposite meaning. For, although as soon as he became Acting Public Secretary of Malta in January 1805 until his departure for England in September of the same year, he signed himself, in Italian 'some 50 times a day' (cf. *CL II*, 1163), *Segretario Pubblico di Sua Eccellenza il Regio Civile Commissionario* (Public Secretary of His Excellency His Majesty's Civil Commissioner), he never resurrected the additional designation of Ball as 'Minister Plenipotentiary to the Order of St John'.

When Coleridge revived this subject in his table talk in April 1834 (I, 475), three months before his death at Highgate in London, he alleged that 'the government at home – Dundas – disliked him [Ball] and never allowed him any other title than that of Civil Commissioner'. This time Coleridge attributed the government's alleged 'dislike' to Ball to the latter's determination 'to prevent Malta being made a nest of home patronage' at the expense of the Maltese who expected the British administration to continue the policy of the Order of St John of reserving all but a few of the civil government posts for the Maltese nobility and gentry. Although it is certainly true that Ball, in his private correspondence with Granville Penn, an under-secretary at the War and Colonial Departments, urged him to impress upon the Minister's mind 'the impolicy of appointing more Englishmen to the civil government of this island', as otherwise it would 'disgust the Maltese' (Br. Lib., London, Add. MSS. 37268, ff. 80, 82), there is no evidence that the government, including Henry Dundas, 'disliked' Ball personally, or that it was for any other reasons than those already explained – namely, the disputed future sovereignty of Malta and the delicate relationship between the official positions of Ball and Villetes – that Ball's title was not changed from that of Civil Commissioner to Governor. His successor in the same office, Lt-General Sir Hildebrand Oakes, continued to be officially called 'Civil Commissioner' (cf. Hardman, pp. 508-9, 514), and neither he nor his Public Secretary alleged any dislike to him on the part of the cabinet in London. It was only

at the approach of Napoleon's defeat and abdication in 1814, and after the Great Powers and their allies, including Russia and the Kingdom of Naples, had agreed to confirm British sovereignty over Malta (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 528-9, 533), that the title of Civil Commissioner was dropped, and Lt-General Sir Thomas Maitland, as successor to General Oakes, assumed the designation of Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Malta (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 525, 530, 533-4).