

## Editorial

### STORJA'S 30<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

'*Qisha holma*' – it's like a dream – our parents used to say of life. Initially, when one is still young, this seems rather meaningless but, with the passage of time, its profound if transient significance begins to hit you.

When I first told the late Professor Andrew Vella OP about my plan to start a Maltese History journal (after coming down from Oxford in 1976) he was fully supportive. He was the first head of the University's History Department, which he effectively set up, encouraging research in Maltese history, even offering incentives to students who wished to embark voluntarily on a History dissertation in the BA (General) degree (mine was on '*A Social Background to the Maltese Labour Movement*'). Professor Vella attended *Storja*'s launch at a press conference held in my then office, together with George Attard, MA, the assistant editor.

*Thirty years have passed since then.*

Our first edition included an interview we prepared with the late Archbishop Gonzi – perhaps the best one ever. We went together to conduct it at the Palace in what used to be known as Strada Vescovo (Archbishop Street), Valletta. This 1,000 print-run of *Storja*, the frontispiece of which we are reproducing in this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, quickly sold out, which was encouraging – a feat which it may be more difficult to repeat today, when the means of communication have multiplied. 1978 was a short-lived experiment. In 1979 the Faculties of Arts and of Science were abolished by the then (Maltese) government through an Education Act, just as the Polytechnic staff suddenly moved up the hill in several cases to occupy what until then had been the University's offices and lecture rooms, including our History Lecture Room, which became a Polytechnic lecturer's office. History degrees ceased to be possible in Malta. Even using the words 'Malta' and 'Maltese' in a book or in the name of a shop came to require special permission!

Various colleagues packed their bags and left, as I did. I remember an announcement from Geneva, published in *The Times of Malta* and other sections of the press, notifying the public that *Storja* had wound up. Little did I know or imagine at that time that ten years later I would be offered re-

<sup>1</sup> In History our first two students after 1988 were Charles Dalli and Simon Mercieca, both of whom went on to become distinguished colleagues in our *Airra Mater*.

instatement; History would be rehabilitated as a discipline in its own right, with students again able to obtain degrees in it at Malta;<sup>1</sup> or that I myself would repatriate from the emigration; and that I would be in a position somehow to resume the publication of *Storja* on behalf of the Malta University Historical Society, which Professor Vella had set up, and on whose committee I had sat as an undergraduate with other fellow students in the mid-1960s!

The fight for academic freedoms in an appreciative, unhindered intellectual environment, where free inquiry and open encounter are encouraged, was – and is – worth every sacrifice. This is what every self-respecting University of Studies exists for; it is what an academic corps and an academic community mean, as every author and indeed every bright student will tell you. The moment that any regime sought misguidedly, insensitively and self-defeatingly to reduce that uplifting creative inspiration, drive and professional expertise in self-fulfilling careers simply to a utilitarian-functionalist 'product', riding roughshod over the travail of internationally-recognised thinkers and scholars which allows an institution to obtain its recognition as a seat of learning (or otherwise), the very *raison d'être* of a University of Studies would be lost. This understanding is all the more telling in Malta where unfortunately so far there has only been such seat of learning.

After the 1988 Education Act, which 'refounded' the institution at the same time as it abolished Chairs and professorial norms from our University, Professor Godfrey Wettinger, a former teacher of mine at the Lyceum and the only colleague left in Malta from Professor Vella's original department,<sup>2</sup> had acted as a kind of custodian of the Historical Society's minutes and papers. He eventually passed these on to us.

Vella may have had his limitations – don't we all – but he was a pioneer in seeking to divulgate Maltese History in Maltese, also for schools, in addition to which he wrote the first two volumes in an intended *Storja ta' Malta* series (which I have been striving with some difficulty to complete). Like him and other colleagues, I sought to encourage greater under-graduate and graduate participation in the affairs of the History Society and particularly in its journal, the editorship of which I resumed, with indispensable student assistance and support from one or two fellow travellers.

On a separate page following this editorial we are listing the authors and titles of all the articles appearing in editions of *Storja* that have been published since 1978. These are self-explanatory. We are including, too, the names of all those serving on its committees. Publication has been intermittent for

<sup>2</sup> The others had been Mr Roger Vella Bonavita, who remained in Australia; Mr J. T. McPartin, who returned to Britain; Professor Vella who suffered a stroke and was confined to his room in the Dominican Priory at the sea-front 'Nazzarenu' in Sliema; and myself who left in 1978. I found out about Professor Vella's death on a plane during a research trip to Europe from Australia in 1988 and wrote an obituary there and then (carried immediately by *The Times*), just missing his funeral by a twist of fate.

many reasons, including financial ones. I am indeed pleased and honoured today however to see a resumption of interest in the Society's endeavours, including this 30th edition of the journal. I trust that in the interest of History and of student *camaraderie*, this torch will continue to burn, linking disciplines and passing on from one generation to another as has happened in the past. This endeavour has been simply a labour of love, but it has permitted a closeness to those younger at heart who look can look forwards rather than backwards! From the earlier beginnings, with successive crops of History graduates a history-instructed school (or rather schools) of thought have indeed come into being, as originally desired. That was not a given. In 1969 the finalists in a secondary school quiz on MTV had never as much as heard of the *Sette Giungo*.

One hopes that such a formative heritage will be able in future the better to penetrate not only scholarship but also the educational institutions and the mass media, by way of professionally educating the public in our own past, in its meanings, and in the realisation that there can be no appreciation of real change outside of a modicum of continuity. One of the lessons of History – and of life – surely is that any 're-inventing of the wheel' may denote arrogance and ignorance rather than beckon innovation or endear respect, much as plagiarism reduces the perpetrator. I just hope that a premonition once expressed in these columns that a consciousness of Maltese self-identity would not be swamped by membership in a larger whole and through its attendant consequences, such as the EU, will never come to pass. On the contrary, if resources are well directed and managed, the opposite might ensue, in spite of - or perhaps because of - globalization. I hope too that the Maltese language will continue to thrive as a literary medium without undue 'Americanization' phonetically rendered, without italics, least of all when current Maltese words exist to express the sense intended or conveyed. Thus, 'ippresieda' need not be 'iççerja', 'televiżjoni' need not read 'televixin', and 'meraq tal-laring' or 'laring magħsur' tastes so much sweeter than 'orenġjus', nor for that matter does 'Austria' need a 'j' because vowels in Maltese are pronounced. Professor Aquilina, our foremost lexicographer (and a personal friend of Andrew Vella) must be turning in his grave as even his dictionaries became outdated for normal Maltese words and idioms to the explanation of which he prodigiously dedicated a life-time. As for the pedagogical repercussions, one hesitates to hazard a guess.

I would like to thank especially Charles Dalli, who remained a close and cherished confidante, and the MUHS presidents and committee members

over the past years, who have helped sustain and indeed revive the Society, and whose names are being listed in this souvenir edition. In particular I would like to thank the members of my Editorial Board whose names too are being duly listed in this edition, as have been those of their predecessors in earlier editions. The same goes for those students who have helped compile the lists of dissertations and of Melitensia publications spanning over the past four years, even if abstracts were not so readily available. Last but not least, I thank all the contributors, without whose articles it would not have been possible for *Storja* to exist and to last. Given the death of similar publications at Malta, this appreciation is by no means a perfunctory one.

As MUHS seems geared to come increasingly into its own as a student society I hope, too, that in the years ahead its committees and leaderships will have the required drive, sobriety and maturity to take direction more and more into their own hands, living up to the Society's good name, doing justice to its scope and mission in the pursuit of historical discipline, in University life, and in Maltese society.

#### THE EDITOR

18<sup>th</sup> November 2008

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