

MALTA IN 1776 : THE IMPRESSIONS OF A FUTURE MINISTER OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

Richard Spiteri *

Though the career of Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière (1734 - 1793) climaxed during the Revolution with two spells as interior minister, from March 23, 1792 till the following June 13 and from August 10 of the same year till January 23, 1793, in fact he had been before and for quite a long time inspector for industry at Amiens. Indeed he was an exponent of the Enlightenment and amongst his numerous publications one cannot fail to mention a dictionary which appeared in three volumes from 1784 to 1790 entitled *Manufactures, Arts et Métiers*.

In the mid-1770s the *intendant des Finances* Trudaine de Montigny entrusted Roland with a mission in Italy.¹ Roland set off on his journey in the summer of 1776 and later on he gave an account of his travels in his *Lettres écrites de Suisse, d'Italie, de Sicile et de Malthe à Mlle *** à Paris*, Amsterdam, 1780, 6 volumes.

The period he spent in Malta must have been a brief one for at the end of Letter 17 the author gives the following indication of place and date: Alicata, November 20 (1776), whilst Letter 18 which deals with Malta is dated November 26.

Roland first presented his credentials to Knight Commander des Pennes who was the chargé d' affaires for France in Malta. Des Pennes was in contact with the rulers of the Barbary states for he conducted negotiations for the exchange or ransoming of slaves. Only a short time before he had used a sum of money sent to him by the Bey of Tunis to release 136 Mohammedan slaves.² The Knight Commander held the dignitaries of Algiers in esteem and commends them for being reliable, righteous and magnanimous. Here Roland draws a telling comparison between the Order and Algiers:

* Richard Spiteri is a doctoral graduate of Sorbonne University and lectures in French at the University of Malta.

1. G Chaussinand - Nogaret, *Madame Roland, une femme en révolution* (Seuil, 1985) p. 42.

2. Roland, *Lettres d'Italie*, vol. 3, p. 61.

' *Alger est une aristocratie dont le gouvernement ressemble beaucoup à celui de Malthe; mais il a un autre nerf.*³

Roland gives his views on the priests' revolt of 1775. The indigenous population had had more than enough of the Order's administration and to add insult to injury the price of wheat had gone up. The author feels the pulse of one of the leading classes of Maltese society: the clergy. It had stirred its flock and then it seized the opportunity to sow discord and plot a conspiracy. Roland speaks with some unease about the leaders of the revolt the more so that, according to him, they had sought the protection of the Empress Catherine of Russia:

'*On voyait les armes de la Russie triomphantes contre les ennemis de la religion; on voulut secouer le joug le plus doux de la terre, pour le soumettre au despotisme de la Russie. Des gens qui ne font jamais mieux leurs affaires, que dans le trouble, se mirent à la tête de cette sourde intrigue, à laquelle, dit-on, des Ministres se prêtaient.*'⁴

When Ximenes died some weeks after the quelling of the revolt, the Maltese clergy saw in his death a punishment meted out by the Lord to a Grand Master who had dared lay hands on his anointed servants.

Roland has also a favourable word to say on country priests. He considered them well educated, dedicated to their religious duties and respected amongst the common folk. He saw them on some occasions dressed like peasants tilling the land.

November 24 happened to be the day of the opening of the Chapter-General. Roland describes the knights who with great pomp accompanied Grand Master de Rohan to Saint John's church. After high mass the knights and their clergy formed a procession which moved towards the Council hall inside the Palace. The author gives us a succinct picture of the procedures that the Chapter-General was going to follow in the next days. High on its agenda was a plan to permit the Maltese hold positions which up to then were filled by the *Servants*.

Roland takes a close look at agriculture in the Maltese islands. He speaks about the trade of crops going on between the two main islands as well as between the country and its neighbours. As regards fruit he is delighted with the watermelons,

3. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 63 - 64.

4. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 30.

Tr. 'They were impressed by the forces of Russia that had triumphed over the enemies of religion; they wanted to overthrow the mildest of administrations in order to bring over here Russian despotism. People, who are able to do their business best when trouble is afoot, were at the back of this intrigue to which, it is said, some prominent knights lent a hand.'

pomegranates and oranges. Malta did not export oranges to French merchants, however supplies were sent regularly to the royal family at Versailles as well as to members of the nobility.

Pride of place is given to the cotton industry. Roland explains the three year cycle of the cotton plant and says that cotton could only be exported from Malta already spun. The French royal government did not impose taxes on Maltese cotton thread entering that country. At Zurrieq, Roland was admitted inside a house where a man and a group of women of all ages were working at the spinning-wheel.⁵ Recently the Maltese had intended to expand their cotton industry by importing cotton from abroad and having it spun locally by an increased labour force. Des Pennes had blocked such a move because he claimed that Maltese exporting cotton to France already enjoyed an advantage over French cotton traders operating from the Levant. Malta exported annually some 2000 bales of spun cotton to ports like Marseilles, Livorno and Barcelona.⁶

Various attempts had been made to introduce the silk industry in Malta but to no avail, for though the mulberry tree grew well, silkworms could not thrive due to the climate.

Roland toured the Grand Harbour area. A Maltese vessel had just entered port with a cargo of hemp brought over from the Bologna region via Ancona. A knight was inspecting the merchandise before ropemakers and men in charge of sail-lofts. Sails manufactured in Malta were partly or wholly made of cotton which was better than other materials though more costly. Metals were imported from northern Europe: copper from Sweden and iron in bars from Denmark. This latter country also supplied the Order with anchors and cannon. Malta, though, had its own foundry which manufactured bronze cannon.

Roland was impressed by the Maltese divers who worked at the docks. A ship which had leakages could be repaired without the need of its being unloaded. Divers could remain fifteen minutes under water (!) and when they detected the leak they caulked it and fixed upon it an iron plate.

The author had a taste of cultural life when he spent an evening at the Manoel theatre. However unlike the Comte de Borch, who visited Malta in 1777,⁷ he did not warm to plays produced locally:

5. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 57 - 58.

6. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 88.

7. P. Xuereb, *The Manoel Theatre: a short history* (Malta, 1994), p. 19.

'Les Chevaliers jouent la comédie sur un grand théâtre, dans une assez jolie salle (...)

Ils donnent des pièces françaises et d'italiennes: celles-ci réussissent mal, parce qu' il y a peu de bons acteurs pour les bien rendre. Ils font les rôles de femme; mais le menton noir et la voix rauque les décèlent, et leur donnent comme aux acteurs du même genre en Italie, un air de caricature.⁸

Roland became acquainted with members of the Maltese upper middle-class including Isouard de Kerel (sic)⁹ and Poussiègue, the *Capitaine du Port*, who introduced him to their families. As a guest at their homes he saw that they liked drawing-room conversation, played music and enjoyed dancing.

Maltese ladies of the upper middle-class confided to Roland that they disliked local traditional dresses. One of them had been to Corsica from where she brought a dress in the French style; they would have loved to go about the streets of Valletta dressed in that manner but did not dare to. Roland advised them to start going out together wearing French dresses; after a few days, surely, French female fashion would be accepted in Maltese society.

The men of the upper middle-classes who the author got to know had had their education in France. Isouard told his guest that he did not relish the idea of sending his children to France to obtain their education. The French standard of living was so high by comparison to Malta and culture there was so rich that the whole experience could only serve to make his children unhappy. The ladies did not share this view. For them Paris meant paradise and they dreamed of visiting the city at least once in their lifetime.

Roland de la Platière's account of his stay in Malta brings out well the undercurrents of change in society as well as the bustling commercial activity. One reason why the text impresses these ideas in the mind of the reader is that the author himself is a true heir of the Encyclopaedists.

8. Roland, *Lettres d'Italie*, vol. 3, p. 78.

Tr. 'The knights play their parts on a big stage in a rather attractive theatre (...)

They put on French and Italian plays which are disappointing because there are few good actors. They act the roles of female characters but their dark chin and coarse voice give them away lending them, as to similar actors in Italy, an artificial manner.'

9. Kerel is a corruption of Xuereb. Professor Alain Blondy confirmed me in my belief that this Isouard Xuereb is none other than Fortunato, the father of the composer Nicolò. I thank the Professor for giving me his view during a chat I had with him on July 13, 1995.