

THE MALTA UNIVERSITY HISTORY SOCIETY: ACTIVITIES AND PROSPECTS

The Malta University History Society, which used to be so active in Professor Andrew Vella's time, was successfully relaunched two years ago. In 1996 it published *Storja '96*, an update of *Storja '78*. Intended mainly for undergraduates and graduates in history and history-related disciplines, *Storja '96*, a labour of love with no university financial support so far, was well received by students, the press and media, and interested members of the general public. In addition to a set of researched articles it will also serve as a source reference on Melitensia books as well as university dissertations and theses.

The MUHS attracted an intelligent, energetic group of undergraduates who, working closely together over the past two years, held a number of activities. Many of these were featured in the MUHS stand during the University of Malta's 'Open Day', which was set up and coordinated on a shift basis by MUHS committee members. Starting with an unusual debate on the Yugoslavia problem in which members of the different nationalities took part, MUHS has now held the second of the annual Andrew Vella Memorial Lectures. Like the first one, delivered by Dr. Carmel Cassar [on migrant communities in Malta] in 1995, this was held at the Green Lounge of the Phoenicia Hotel, to coincide with the launching of *Storja '96*. In 1996 this lecture was delivered by Professor Henry Frendo and dealt with language, religion and politics mainly during Lord Strickland's tenure of office as prime minister. The 1997 Memorial Lecture was delivered by Dr. Carmelo Vassallo on aspects of Maltese-Spanish relations.

The publication of *Storja '96* led to a one-and-a-half hour informal 'round table' discussion with the prime minister, Dr. Alfred Sant, in his office at the Houses of Parliament, about various research aspects, ideas and prospects with special reference to history and historiography. We explained to the prime minister that the purpose of the Society and its publication was to move away from conventional, detail-ridden, antiquarian-like approaches to historical studies and writings, and to seek instead more critical, contextual and comparative analysis from the sources. History was not simply about records, it was about meanings. The prime minister also took note of complaints about the state of affairs prevailing in some library and archival quarters where documents got lost or risked being put away, and a

climate of indifference and want of professionalism seemed to reign. Professor Frendo and the Public Relations Officer of the Society, Mrs Evelyn Pullicino, were interviewed on television and on radio about *Storja '96*, which was reviewed in all sections of the press and even earned the written commendation of the prime minister, who promised us his support. A public lecture on Russo-Maltese relations was delivered by Ms Elaine Micallef Valenzia, for which several colleagues attended, including a number of Russians resident in Malta. As the Society cannot afford the fees charged by the University of Malta for use of its Aula Magna in Valletta for extra-curricular academic activities of this genre, we had recourse this time to the Junior Common Room in Msida, with drinks and sandwiches courtesy of the Society's members.

We were also pleased to have the opportunity to meet Professor Leontsinis from the University of Athens and to attend her lecture for the MUHS on the intellectual origins of the Greek independence movement in the early nineteenth century. Other activities include lecture tours of the various archives, and the occasional outing.

The Society is concerned that the University Library has been keeping only English language newspapers published in Malta, even now that space should no longer be the problem that it may have been in the past. We strongly believe that Maltese language papers are an indispensable source for a full and comprehensive understanding of what goes on in independent Malta; it is intolerable that these should be regularly discarded by a public-funded higher education body such as the University of Malta Library. And should that splendid collection of the London *Times* not be more readily accessible? The MUHS is also concerned at the Bibliotheca's relatively high price for xeroxing documents for research students and at what seems to be the irregular depositing of theses, including history and history-related theses, in the University Library where these may be listed and consulted in the normal way.

It is no less galling to see the discrimination being practised by the university authorities, presumably as a consequence of government policy, against historians who opt to do a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in the Education Faculty. History is one of the subjects for which, so it had been decreed, no stipend should be given. This leading some of our best history graduates to seek a PGCE in a subject other than history, although their preference naturally would be to teach history, their subject

of specialization. We feel it is important to give due recognition to the historical discipline. Before one gets a pedagogical certificate relating to teaching theories and methodologies, it would be far, far better for the person concerned to have first absorbed and internalised the discipline in question through an Honours degree in the subject.

Without going into the merits of the stipend system controversy, we would hope that equal treatment be given to students from all disciplines and areas of study. A university ought to exist in order to promote the pursuit of academic excellence. What matters most is quality of mind and the respect for it in practice, not the conferment of titles, appointments or a collection of certificates, pertinent though these may be. As Professor Jeremy Boissevain recently noted, undergraduates should not be expected to spend their time madly chasing multifold credits. Should they not have more time to read, to think and to talk over matters with peers, or even [particularly as graduates] to have the opportunity to assist at least their senior professors through tutoring, research work and otherwise, as is common overseas, where tutors and senior tutors assist lecturers and professors alike, while research assistants are habitually attached to the holders of Chairs, or at any rate to the professoriate? And should their academic programmes at Malta not be more stable, coherent and research-based, less exposed to 'optional' chops and changes in the credit-collecting race?