

BOOK REVIEWS

Henry Frendo, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood. A Case Study of Decolonization in the Mediterranean*. Malta: BDL Ltd., 1999; second ed. 2000.

Professor Frendo is perhaps now the leading Maltese historian of modern Malta. This book follows his *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (1979), *Malta's Quest for Independence. Reflections on the course of Maltese History* (1989), *Maltese Political Development, 1798-1964: a Documentary History* (1993) and many other related books and articles. The present book is exceptional, both in his work and in the wider field of publications on European decolonization, in the detail of its treatment. It covers a mere two years, 1962-64, and relates to an island whose population was then under 400,000, about that of a middle-sized British town. On what grounds can one justify a book of this length on so small a place over so short a period? What exceptional features did Malta have?

It must be said at once that some of the space is taken up with pictures of people and events and photographs of relevant documents in the official collections whose function is, presumably, to add a sense of direct contact with primary sources for the benefit of student readers who will never enter the Public Record Office (the most widely quoted and reproduced) or the many other archives used. But there are other special reasons why Maltese independence justifies such detailed treatment. Probably the most important is that it was very rare for a British colony as it approached independence to be split over the terms of its liberation to the extent that Malta was in these years. Virtually all African dependencies were united, if only briefly, behind a single dominant party whose views on the process of decolonization therefore carried great weight with the British: this greatly facilitated agreement on the technicalities of the transfer of power. Possibly only India, deeply split between Congress and League, was as difficult to deal with, and this led to the tragic division of 1947. Although there were huge differences between the two places, they had one thing in common, which largely explains the diffi-

culties Britain faced in decolonizing them. Both had a long experience of representative politics and deeply entrenched political parties which, moreover, were divided not along racial lines but on issues connected with religion. In India it was Islam versus Hinduism (though Congress claimed to be non-denominational); in Malta it was Catholicism versus the secularism of Dom Mintoff's Labour Party. This combination of sophistication in the skills of parliamentary self-government, which in Malta went back to 1887, with recurrent suspensions of the representative constitutions, and a virtually dogmatic division between the two main parties, meant that it would be exceptionally difficult for the British to achieve an agreed basis for decolonization.

The fact that they wished to do so after 1962 was largely the result of a projected run-down of British Defence costs and the decision to cut back on expenditure on the Malta dock facilities. This in turn reflected the view that under changed strategic conditions it was no longer so important to maintain a large naval dockyard and Air Force base in Malta. So for the first time since 1802 there was some chance that the Maltese would achieve their long-stated aim of regaining the largely mythical independence they claimed they had once possessed. On the other hand running down the naval use of the docks over a period of six or so years was likely to cause acute unemployment and economic distress in a community whose balance of payments depended very largely on British defence expenditure. Thus Dr. Borg Olivier, Prime Minister since the reincarnation of something approaching 'responsible government' in 1961 and leader of the badly organised pro-Catholic Nationalist party, had the double opportunity and problem of negotiating full independence coupled with a satisfactory economic deal. The course of these negotiations forms the core of this book. Part one, chapters four to ten, examines the course of the negotiations with Britain and the domestic debate to June 1964, when it still seemed impossible to sort out the vexed question of the entrenched privileges of the Catholic Church, a major target for Mintoff and the Labour Party. Part Two, chapters eleven to fifteen, then goes back over the various factors influencing all protagonists: the prospects for an American base, the possibility of close relations with Italy, economic diversification, the threat of a Labour Party coup, and the fact that in 1964 the British were having second thoughts about giving up Malta as a military and naval base. Part Three, chapters sixteen and seventeen, then winds up the story to the

transfer of power in September 1964.

There Frendo stops: there are no after thoughts and no assessment of the longer-term outcomes: that will presumably have to wait for his later books, though unfortunately he will not for many years have the same access to most of the relevant primary sources that makes this book so compelling. The remarkable fact is that, despite its great length, and some reiteration, it is never boring. The story is skilfully crafted and highly professional. It will be extremely valuable to all students of British history and the wider processes of Decolonization as well as for the Maltese. Since it is bound to go into later editions it is perhaps worth mentioning that there a number of typographical errors to be corrected and at least one misunderstanding of the peculiarities of the British administrative system. Lord Carrington was not, in 1963, as is stated on pp.504 and 522, 'First Sea Lord' (who is always the senior naval serving officer) but First Lord of the Admiralty, a political office. But these are of little significance in a book of this importance based on so much fundamental research.

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Carmelo Vassallo, *The Malta Chamber of Commerce 1848-1979. An Outline History of Maltese Trade*. Malta: The Malta Chamber of Commerce, 1998.

The declared purpose of Carmelo Vassallo's book is to provide us with an account of the foundation and development of Malta's Chamber of Commerce on its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. This work is a pictorial and well-compiled historical chronicle, with the finest pieces to be found in the second part of the work, notably chapter IX which deals with 'Transport and Communications.'

Overall, this work is a fine example of what could be described as commemorative historical literature. However, one must ask to what extent will this, smoothly running, well compiled, yet intellectually unprovocative narrative, help us to comprehend the Chamber's important role in Malta's economic development. This question is posed with the understanding that the historical reconstruction of such an outstanding institution as the Chamber of Commerce, requires the employment of the most advanced theories and analytical techniques available.

In the first part of this work, Vassallo has utilised many of the sources, gathered from the well-kept archives of the Chamber to corroborate already made theses on Malta's economic history: 'in the main, periods of armed peace were more beneficial to Malta's trade than outright war' (p.64) or that 'imperial spending had the effect of conditioning local investment habits' (p.65). The author also contributes to the chronicles of Maltese trade by indicating that, during the eighteenth century, commerce with the East and with North Africa was more extensive than previously held.

The book opens with a descriptive account of the development of Malta's 'Trade before the Establishment of the Chamber', taking us from the Phoenicians up to British rule. This first chapter illustrates the whole work, as a traditional historical narrative, which in Vassallo's own words, 'contains occasional flashbacks and peeps into the future not unlike a film script replete with plots within plots' (p.xv). Indeed, this work is characterised by the continuous stitching together of vivid facts and events in a roughly chronological sequence.

More poignantly, this narrative furnishes us with a 'great personalities' type of history. Dramatis personae dominate and direct the major events. For instance, the 1946 split of 'budding industrialists' from the Chamber, to form their own Federation of Industries, is accounted for from this voluntaristic perspective. No real investigation, of the conflicting economic interests producing this breakaway, is provided. Repeatedly, all other great political frictions (such as that between the Labour administration and the Chamber during the 1970s and early 1980s), are explained in terms of personal and institutional clashes, rather than through an in-depth analysis of the complex socio-economic processes generating them.

In one or two instances, Vassallo does assert that the Council of the Chamber of Commerce was traditionally 'oligarchic' and that this would seem to indicate that 'it sometimes was out of touch with its membership.' However, this is where his argument stops. Those of us, expecting to find a profound investigation of the more important issues relating, for instance, to the family connections within the Chamber; the genealogy and the reproduction of native merchant capital; the Maltese merchants' cultural orientation; their group identity and level of class and 'national' consciousness, are very much let down.

Moreover, the historical discourse prevailing in this work is elitist. The employment of contrasting, politically loaded imagery, which depicts in a positive light the protagonist merchants but portrays the Crowd (the 'common people') as the feared Other, sustains this elitist approach. A classy romanticised image of the Golden Age of the Chamber, when the member merchants indulged in respectable forms of leisure, is minutely reconstructed. The author gives a colourful depiction of the parties organised at the Borsa, but without any concern for serious analysis. He stops at the descriptive level, as the account of one of these 'magnificent and brilliant parties ever to be held in Valletta and which lasted until three in the morning' shows:

In a magnificent setting of gaslight playing on mirrors and chandeliers, which can be appreciated to this very day [...] 800 guests present were treated to a superb supper washed down with iced champagne and select French and Spanish wines. It must have been a night to remember. (p.167)

This celebrative vein is encountered now and again throughout this work and eventually culminates in a nostalgic expression:

The magnificent ballroom is now silent and swathed in darkness and only rarely does it resurrect to the sound of music, tinkling champagne glasses, swishing evening gowns and the glitter of light mirrors and chandeliers, but it only takes a bit of imagination to visualise what has been and could be again. (p.171).

However, what I really find irritating, throughout this narrative, is the prejudiced depiction of the crowds in acts of protest. When describing the June 1919 riots, rather than attempting to investigate the social composition and the psychology of the crowds, the author rashly concludes that these people had been manipulated. Both in the June 1919 riots as well as in the militant political protests of the late 1970s and early 1980s (during a Labour government which the author impulsively describes time and again as a 'paranoid administration'), the crowd is represented as a non-intelligent entity with no historical agency of its own (see pp.75-83). This is a typical example of history written from above.

One last comment regarding the use of oral history. The employment of this technique can provide important insights on numerous issues, such as the daily activities and worries of the small traders or the public perceptions of the Chamber of Commerce. However, no direct quotes from oral testimonies and no details on the recordings and the persons interviewed are found in any bibliographical part of the text, contrary to normal practice. Therefore, I find Vassallo's claim that 'this work has involved [...] a second method, less common in Maltese historiography, namely oral history' (p.xv) rather puzzling. Besides, the history from above approach taken by this work, contrasts with the fundamental philosophy inherent in the practice of oral history.

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