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Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s

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CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE FOR CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN MALTA

In its protectorate Malta, the British government from the early 1920s onwards tried to suppress the Italian nationalists who were asking for greater independence. The embodiment of this hard-line policy was the leader of the pro-British Constitutional Party and Prime Minister in Malta between 1927 and 1932, Lord Gerald Strickland. In 1932 the use of Italian language at Maltese primary schools was banned and in 1934 Italian was even excluded as official language in the public administration and legislation. Whilst Italy was reclaiming the Mediterranean as 'mare nostrum' and strengthening its ties with the Italophile Maltese, the same Strickland sought to demonstrate that the Maltese were descendants of a Phoenician colony and that through the Phoenician presence in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall the Maltese were in fact closer to the British than to the Latin people. The Dante Alighieri Society condemned the British policy and protested through its publications against the unjust treatment of its Italian-speaking brothers. In the meantime the British Council established a British Institute, opened in 1939, with which it could help strengthen the position of British culture on the island. Malta played an emblematic and pivotal role in the battle for cultural hegemony across the Mediterranean. This chapter sheds light on the close involvement of the Dante and the Council.

Malta: a chess-piece in the Mediterranean

Over the centuries the island of Malta, situated between the south-western coast of Sicily and the north-eastern shores of Tunisia, because of its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea witnessed various shifts of power. At the beginning of the twelfth century, after having been part of the Roman and then of the Byzantine Empire, Malta was incorporated by the Norman-ruled Kingdom of Sicily. Subsequently it came into the hands of the Aragon family, whose descendant Charles V in 1530 gave Malta in feudal tenure to the Military Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, known also as the Knights Hospitaller. These knights had fled from their former base, Rhodes, after being defeated by the Ottoman Empire. A miniature, harmonious Europe developed in Malta as Knights of the Order's eight *Langues*, or Tongues, settled there.¹

¹ The Tongues here referred to were comparable with nationalities. They were: Aragon, Auvergne (central France), Castile, England (including Scotland and Ireland), France

Italian soon became the lingua franca between them and among the long-residing elite. The Knights' reign over the island ended in 1798, during the French Revolutionary Wars, when Napoleon seized and plundered Malta on his way to Egypt. French forces were left behind to administer the island but their anti-Catholicism and their mismanagement provoked such anger as to cause a popular insurrection. The Maltese besieged the French troops. With the supplies provided by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and by Great Britain, as well as the blockade the British Royal Navy executed upon Maltese request, in 1800 the French were forced to surrender. It was the express wish of the Maltese to subsequently become a British Dominion. At this point there were other contenders ready to seize Malta. One of these was the Russian Tsar Paul I, who had claims on the island. However, in 1801 his son, upon becoming Tsar Alexander I, renounced these 'rights'.² The Final Act of the Vienna Congress of 1815 declared Malta officially part of the British Empire. It was assured that under British protection, the Maltese laws, customs and religion would be respected. However, with the opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869, Malta became ever more important for the British. Already its central location in the Mediterranean had made it an ideal port for the Royal Navy. Once the Suez Canal was completed, Malta came to be regarded as a vital stop on the way to India. This meant the stakes were higher if Britain were to lose grip on the island, which explains the rigid policy with which the British responded to the upcoming Maltese nationalism among the Italian-speaking population of this highly strategic stronghold.

In the 1880s, under the leadership of Fortunato Mizzi, the pro-Italian, nationalist Anti-Reform Party, later known as the Nationalist Party, in Malta began to oppose British rule. A limited degree of participation in the representative government introduced by the constitution of 1887 did little to diminish the opposition. Instead, the conflict worsened as the British continued to suppress the movement, to enforce unjust taxation and to 'Anglicise' the institutions of the island. A language substitution decree announced in 1899 set a deadline of fifteen years to replace Italian in the Maltese law-courts with English, a deadline which was later withdrawn. Language in schools also became a contentious issue, with the Italian nationalists urging that both English and Italian were taught.³ By 1903 Malta was once again under direct colonial rule, feeding yet more dissatisfaction. The Maltese economy subsequently suffered from the British involvement in the First World War. On 7 June 1919 riots broke out, which like others earlier that year were caused by

(northern France), Germany (including Bohemia, Dacia, Hungary Poland and Sweden), Italy and Provence (southern France).

² P.J. van Kessel and E.M.R. van Kessel-Schulte ed., *Romeinse Bescheiden*, III, 1727-1853 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975) 98.

³ Henry Frendo, 'Italy and Britain in Maltese colonial nationalism' in: *History of European Ideas* Vol. 15, No. 4-6 (1992) 733-739, 734.

discontent about rising food prices and about the insufficient degree of self-government being granted to the Maltese even after a National Assembly had been formed specifically to campaign for this cause. The British troops fired at the protesters, killing four Maltese men and causing widespread outrage. Throughout the year 1921, other nationalist struggles within the British Empire gave fresh hopes to the Maltese striving for greater independence. As autonomy was granted to India, nationalist protests were heard in Egypt and agreements were reached to form an Irish Free State, Malta too was able to obtain a new constitution. Finally the Maltese could elect their own legislative Assembly from which the Ministers making up the government were chosen and could have their own Senate. Significantly though, all decisions related to the treasury and defence remained under British control.

Nevertheless, in the 1920's the cultural and political conflicts in Malta hardened. In 1927 the Nationalist Party lost in the elections against an alliance between the pro-British Constitutional Party and the Labour Party. The Nationalist Party was by now led by Fortunato Mizzi's son, Enrico, and had absorbed the more moderate wing that had detached itself in 1921 to form the Maltese Political Union, led by Monsignor Panzavecchia and Ugo Mifsud. Gerald Strickland, the leader of the Constitutional Party and owner of the first Maltese newspaper *Il-Progress*, became premier and initiated a further, this time aggressive 'Anglicisation' of Malta. Streets and public places were given English instead of Italian names, so that for example *Strada Reale* and *Porta Reale* became Kingsway and Kingsgate. Notarial acts had henceforth to be in English or Maltese and all civil service communication in English only. In education too, parents were allowed to choose for their child just to be taught in English. Lady Strickland founded St. Edward's College, a public school that provided fully-English education. Intervention even took place in religious orders, especially among those that ran schools such as the Jesuits. Here Strickland's government tried to ensure that Italian or French clerics were replaced by English ones.⁴ All the while Strickland exacerbated the tensions and exaggerated the Nationalists' attachment to Italy to make them appear more threatening.

In actual fact, only a small faction surrounding Mizzi was irredentist and wished therefore that Malta were annexed to Italy. The majority of the Maltese, even within the Nationalist Party, preferred remaining with the British Empire, provided that Malta was given some form of self-government, their cultural traditions were respected and Italian continued to be accepted as official language. Even the Italian Consul-General in Malta was fully aware that Italian irredentism was practically non-existent and only made to seem

⁴ Frendo, 'Italy and Britain', 737; Henry Frendo, 'Britain's European Mediterranean: Language, Religion and Politics in Lord Strickland's Malta (1927-1930)' in: *History of European Ideas* Vol. 21, No. 1 (1995) 47-65, 51-52.

widespread by opportunistic anglophile fear-mongers.⁵ The British offered better military protection and economic opportunities than Italy did and it was not viable for Malta to become an entirely independent state. The fact that Italian had for a long time been the language of the higher educated Maltese meant that the political poles partly overlapped a social dualism. The Maltese upper class was divided between a majority that was engaged in commercial activities, whose members spoke English and mixed with the British aristocracy, and an Italian-speaking intellectual minority that supported the pro-Italian nationalists in Malta and had close ties with the Catholic clergy. Through the local clergy, this segment of the nationalist movement could have a disproportionate influence over the larger group of unlettered and devout Maltese labourers.⁶

An additional factor in the relationship between the British and the Maltese were the large numbers of Maltese living and working in other British-governed territories, in particular Egypt. The way in which the Maltese were treated in Malta could therefore have repercussions for the good name the British had in those territories. What in turn made the position of the Maltese awkward was their ambivalence towards belonging to Europe. On the one hand, having a long-standing tradition of emigration to the North-African coast to find work, they felt a sense of allegiance with that part of the world and were inspired by the nationalist, anti-colonial uprisings that took place there. On the other hand, the Maltese attachment to the Catholic Church and their desire to belong to Europe implied a greater loyalty to Britain or Italy, even if these were colonial powers. "Though still colonized at home, the Maltese assertion of a national identity as European Christians forced them into a double bind of being identified with the very European colonialists viewed as oppressors in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya."⁷

After Strickland's polarizing premiership (1927-1930), the general elections of May 1930 occasioned the decision by the Bishops of Malta and nearby Gozo to issue a pastoral forbidding Catholics to vote for Strickland or any of his supporters. Pope Pius XI backed the position of the Maltese clergy. Ever since the anticlerical attacks that broke out in the late 1920s the Pontiff had considered Strickland *persona non grata* and the British authorities co-responsible for the violence.⁸ Elections were suspended and the British Cabinet held Strickland's government in office while in effect the Colonial Office once more ran the country's affairs.

⁵ Frenzo, 'Britain's European Mediterranean', 49.

⁶ Claudia Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator' and the Mare Nostrum: Fascist Italy's 'Cultural War' in Malta' in: *Modern Italy* Vol. 13, No.1 (February 2008) 5-20, 6.

⁷ Stefan Goodwin, *Malta, Mediterranean Bridge* (Westport and London: Bergin & Garvey, 2002) 91.

⁸ Goodwin, *Malta*, 92.

The heavy-handed intervention of the British was partly induced by growing concerns about Italy's expansionist ambitions emerging in the 1930s. Mussolini's government eagerly encouraged Italian colonists to settle in Libya and Tunisia. In February 1932, the year in which triumphant celebrations of the Italian Fascist Revolution's tenth anniversary took place, the Italian Government opened an Italian Istituto di Cultura in the capital city Valletta. While not wishing to antagonize the British government, Mussolini was all the same confident that Italy could reinforce its cultural ties with the Maltese and thereby claim the island as belonging to its natural Mediterranean sphere of influence. Local sections of the Fasci all'estero organized activities and as of 1930 ran an Italian bookshop in Valletta.⁹ The Istituto di Cultura was regarded by the British as a lavish building, which according to their own information had cost the Italians nearly 1,200 British pounds. Its library, reading room and social events were viewed with suspicion. The 800 Italian and Italian-oriented Maltese members that the Institute was able to recruit by spring 1932 promised no good for the 'Anglicisation' of Malta. Ever more concerned about the Italian cultural and political infiltration, on the 25th of April 1932 the British Parliament put an end to using Italian in Maltese primary school teaching, allowing only Maltese and English. The Nationalist Party, which in that same year won the re-instated elections, hardly had time to repeal this measure. In November 1933, on the grounds that the Nationalist government's attempts to restore the Italian-language education in schools violated the Constitution, the British Governor of Malta dismissed the government, suspended the Constitution and allowed for a return to full colonial rule.

Though the British could not exert control over Italian nationals on the island, they could in 1933 forbid all British subjects from being members of the local Fascio. At the end of 1933 the British introduced a law ordaining that 25 percent of all teachers had to be British. The majority of the school teachers had until then come from Italy and this influence was also clear in the textbooks used. By December 1934, the use of Italian had been banned in all sectors of administration and legislation as well as at the Faculty of Law of the University of Malta. In 1935 Italy's invasion of Abyssinia seemed to justify Britain's fears concerning Mussolini's expansionist ambitions. Hence, the suspicion that the Istituto di Cultura was involved in Italian espionage deepened. In July 1936 the Istituto was forced to close down.¹⁰

⁹ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator' and the Mare Nostrum', 15.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 11 and 13.

The Dante Alighieri Society in Malta

It has been suggested that under Mussolini's government Italy's policy towards maintaining Italian culture in Malta was essentially a continuation of that upheld during the liberal period, whereby Malta was seen as one of the unredeemed territories (*irredente*) where Italians lived outside Italian national borders. The Italians on Malta as well as the pro-Italian Maltese nationalists were supported by Affari Esteri, the local Fasci and especially the Dante Alighieri Society.¹¹ However, given that there is no traceable archive material left of the Dante Committee in Malta it is hard to determine what exactly the activities of the Dante in Malta were. We know that as of 1890 there was an Italian school on the island that was subsidized by the Dante, although barely sufficiently to keep the institution going. There appears to have been a chronic insufficiency of funds that the appeals of the Italian consul in Malta to the Dante central office in Rome could not resolve.¹² The first local Dante Committee, situated in Valletta, was created in 1900. When in 1899 the British government announced it would begin to introduce a language policy in favour of English, the opinion within the Dante was initially sharply divided. A part of its members was disdained at the British betrayal to its self-professed liberalism and felt that the Dante had an obligation to protect Italian language and culture in Malta. There were also members who preferred not to antagonize Great Britain and to rely on reasonable negotiation. The foremost figure within the organization to defend this peaceful policy was Pasquale Villari, who was President of the Dante precisely in this period (between 1896 and 1901) and was furthermore married to an Englishwoman, Linda White Mazini Villari. Yet enough members were in favour of some form of involvement for a Local Committee to be set up at the turn of the century. Two years later, in 1902, Villari responded to the cry for help that came from the pro-Italian Maltese by entering talks with Prime Minister Chamberlain. As a result the British decision to replace the use of Italian in Maltese courts and schools with English was temporarily withdrawn.¹³

Indignation expressed in Dante publications

The worsening tensions in the 1920s meant that Malta remained an item on the agenda of the Dante Alighieri Society. The importance that the Dante, or at least its central office, attached to the Maltese question is reflected in the occasional articles on the subject that were published in the Society's internal review, the

¹¹ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator'', 6.

¹² Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 193.

¹³ Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, 78; Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 113-114.

Pagine della Dante. For example, in January 1924 a letter that Enrico Mizzi, Fortunato's son, had sent to the Italian newspaper *Idea Nazionale* and that was published on 2 October 1923, was reprinted in its entirety in the *Pagine*. Here Mizzi accused Gerald Strickland of denying the 'italic' lineage ("la nostra stirpe italica") of the Maltese and argued that natural and moral elements of the Maltese people – their geography, race, language, religion, legislation, traditions, history and national consciousness – amply demonstrated that they were a Latin race, and more specifically Italian.¹⁴ However, Enrico Mizzi did not perceive this sense of identity as being incompatible with a loyalty to the British nation, to which the Maltese attributed moral and civic virtues that they admired. It was Gerald Strickland who was damaging the relationship through his anti-Maltese and anti-Italian policy, claiming in spite of all protests and even of plebiscites that the majority of the Maltese did not want the Italian language. Furthermore, Strickland asserted that the law passed by the Maltese parliament regulating the simultaneous teaching of Italian and English at schools was anti-constitutional whereas the law was actually in accordance with the Letters Patent of 1921.¹⁵

A typical example of the resentment Strickland's policy caused among the members of the Dante Alighieri Society is the speech of a member of the Society's Central Council, Domenico Marotta, given on the 34th Annual Congress of the Society held in Pisa and Livorno in autumn 1929. As we can read in the version that was published in the *Pagine* that year, it was argued that not only Malta's geography made the island obviously not English, but also the centuries of history that connected it to the Roman Empire, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and ultimately to Italy. The English, in the *Pagine* rarely referred to as the British, were accused of trying to prove the existence of a Maltese language that, as Marotta and others retorted, didn't really exist. Quoting former Dante Alighieri President Pasquale Villari's speech at the Annual Congress of 1902, Marotta melodramatically asked whether it could be at all right to forbid the Maltese to use the language of their clergy and their lawyers, the language used to pray to God and to ask for justice. Italian was being abolished on notices of the Post Office, on lottery tickets and in street names. The official language at court, where Italian had still been used, was now English, and Italian newspapers were prevented from reaching the island. Strickland was portrayed as a narrow-minded, unjust man: did he really think, Marotta wondered, that when all two-hundred-thousand inhabitants had been forced to speak English, he would be able to prove Malta belonged to the

¹⁴ "Sir Gerald Strickland nega la nostra stirpe italica, ma sta di fatto che tutti gli elementi naturali e morali che costituiscono la nazionalità d'un popolo (vale a dire la Geografia, la Razza, la Lingua, la Religione, la Legislazione, i Costumi, la Storia e la stessa coscienza nazionale) dimostrano con la massima evidenza, che noi siamo latini, e più propriamente italiani" (*Pagine della Dante*, 1 [1924] 29).

¹⁵ "Riprodotta una lettera del on. Enrico Mizzi, capo del Partito italiano di Malta [the National Party - TvK], dall'*Idea Nazionale* di 2 ottobre' in: *Pagine della Dante*, 1 (1924) 29.

British archipelago? For Marotta there was no doubt. Even if all traces of what was Italian on the island were to be destroyed, the Roman heritage would nevertheless resurge. Marotta ended by asking all members of the Dante Alighieri Society to express support for the Maltese in their battle but also to have faith in England, that no doubt would not wish to betray its noble tradition of liberty.¹⁶

The generational change within the Dante Alighieri Society's membership after its first two decades of existence had brought with it a less anticlerical identity. This was in part connected to the better relations between the Italian State and the Roman Catholic Church that Mussolini had realized to consolidate his dictatorship. This reconciliation between State and Church culminated in the Lateran Accords of 1929. Even before this date the image of *italianità* promoted abroad by the Dante began to encompass Christianity and the idea of Rome as the heart of Catholic universalism. Hence, the fraternal bond that the Dante members felt with the Italian-speaking Maltese was enhanced by religious commonality, especially because the clergy was generally speaking Italian. There may also have been a sense of indignation with regards to the British, not so much because the Italian identity of the Maltese was being dismissed but because expressions of high culture were being replaced by a language – Maltese – that had never been more than an informal mode of communication. Like some Italian writers had written, the Dante members could have thought that the British did not think the Maltese worthy enough to require a language with so rich a cultural heritage as Italian.¹⁷ It is hard to determine whether such expressions of solidarity were essentially a moral justification for wanting to keep Italian cultural manifestations in Malta alive. The fact remains that a difference was claimed between the way the Italians sought to elevate the Maltese by sharing with them the benefits of their language and culture, as opposed to Strickland and his British supporters who merely sought to control the island.

Hence there were articles in the *Pagine* summing up the injustice caused by Strickland's rule over Malta. It was also argued that Italian was the written and the literary language of the island, as proven by the fact that the laws set under the government of the Order of Saint John had all been recorded for posterity in Italian. Every Maltese writer had written either in Italian or Latin. The Maltese dialect was only used for informal conversations within the family. Italian was the commercial language across the Mediterranean area, so that Malta's geographical position at the heart of it and its closeness to Sicily made Italian the most useful language for the Maltese to have. This the unnamed author of the article in the *Pagine* stated, without reckoning in any way with the

¹⁶ Relazione del prof. Domenico Marotta su Malta, XXXIV Congresso a Pisa e Livorno in: *Pagine della Dante* 5 (September-October 1929) 136-143.

¹⁷ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator'', 7, referring to Guido Puccio, *Il conflitto anglo-maltese* (Milan: Treves-Treccani-Tuminelli, 1933).

British counter-argument that knowledge of English enabled many Maltese to work in other countries of the Commonwealth.¹⁸ The defence of the Italian language and culture in Malta was indeed taken so much at heart by the Dante that at a meeting of the Central Council presided by Senator Celesia di Vegliasco, on 21 March 1932, it was decided to issue an official statement on behalf of the Dante Alighieri Society. In this statement the Society regretted the decision of the British Government to ban the teaching of Italian at Maltese schools and sympathized with the Maltese who, having always been loyal to the British Crown, merely asked for the “language of Dante”, so closely connected to their history and life, not to be disparaged. To make the Maltese feel the fraternal solidarity that tied the Italian nation to their cause, the Dante Committee in Rome organized an event a month later whereby Giulio Quirino Giglioli spoke of the glories of the Italian language in Malta. Giglioli was an active Dante member and an eminent Italian archaeologist, involved in many of the state-sponsored excavations of the 1930s. Various political and academic authorities attended the event, giving extra weight to the message conveyed.¹⁹

Annibale Scicluna Sorge: the intermediary

In summer of that same year, 1932, Annibale Scicluna Sorge, who frequently published pamphlets on Maltese history as well as on current affairs and who was connected to the Ministero della Propaganda all’Estero, wrote about Malta in the *Pagine*. He reiterated the familiar arguments in support of the Italian character of Malta. Then he described how the English had refused to leave Malta once they had been called for to help the Maltese in their revolt against French rule. He stated that the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies had never been consulted about the final settlement which gave Malta an English governor. The Maltese were portrayed as a repressed people, deprived of their spiritual freedom, which nevertheless was proving to be grand and morally noble for holding on to its *italianità*. Furthermore, to make the Anglican English rulers seem even more foreign and lacking in legitimacy, Scicluna Sorge underlined the very Catholic character of the Maltese.²⁰ Recommending Italian publications about Malta was another way in which the Dante through its review gave voice to its support for the Maltese nationalists. In its book review, the *Pagine* recommended reading an illustrated introduction into contemporary Maltese poetry, with the comment that this poetry was proof to the contrary of what

¹⁸ ‘L’Italofobia di Lord Strickland’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 4 (July-August 1930) 84; ‘La lingua italiana a Malta – dalla relazione della Reale Commissione nominata per Malta nel 1836 dal Governo Britannico’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (May-June 1931) 63.

¹⁹ ‘Per la lingua italiana a Malta’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 2 (March-April 1932) 49-50, 49.

²⁰ Annibale Scicluna Sorge, ‘Il dominio francese e l’origine della sovranità britannica su Malta’ in: *Pagine della Dante*, 3 (May-June 1932) 78-81.

Strickland and his supporters claimed: that the Italian language was foreign to the Maltese and that their true language was Phoenician. So too a brief history of Malta was described as being written by a Maltese who had been nobly educated in the cult of the small and the large Fatherland, meaning Malta and Italy (“nobilmente educato nel culto della piccola e della grande Patria”). The purpose of this history was evidently to demonstrate the enduring italianità of Malta throughout the centuries.²¹

Remarkably enough, the *Pagine* of July/August 1934 had a pink sheet of paper placed just before the opening page. Following the news that the Governor of Malta had banned the use of the Italian language in all public offices and court rooms of Malta, the editors of the *Dante* had decided for the extra a page to immediately express their indignation. In its statement the *Dante* joined what were said to be all the Maltese, the Italian public opinion and a fair number of authoritative papers belonging to the English press in condemning a measure that was regarded as unfitting for a great Nation such as the British. A number of local *Dante* Committees had sent expressions of solidarity with the Maltese to the Central Office. The Central Office in turn made a public statement. The President of the *Dante* on behalf of its members protested against the recent attack on the Italian language in Malta launched by the Governor. By elevating the Maltese dialect (“gergo maltese”) to the status of language, the Governor tried to uproot the traditional use of Italian also in the offices and courtrooms of the island. The *Dante* President sent a greeting of solidarity to all on Malta who upheld unabatedly the sentiment and the religion of the culture and the language of *Dante* (“il sentimento e la religione della cultura e della lingua di *Dante*”).²²

The aforementioned Annibale Scicluna Sorge appears to have been one of the key figures in the cooperation between Enrico Mizzi’s Democratic Nationalist Party, the *Dante* Alighieri Society and the Italian government. To be able to publish the Nationalist Party’s organ, *Malta*, Mizzi needed advertisers. It is known that in 1937 and 1938 the Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo (Enit) paid Mizzi 70 British pounds for advertisements of Italian tourist attractions to appear in *Malta*. Private companies also advertised in this newspaper, such as the National Institute of Insurances (Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni), the Banco di Roma and Fiat, Mizzi often asked Scicluna Sorge to help him in finding suitable advertisers and subscribers. There have been suspicions on the basis of Galeazzo Ciano’s published diaries that Mizzi received funding from the Ministero degli Affari Esteri for his party. Ciano, who was Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1936 to 1943, mentions in his diaries of the period 1937-

²¹ Oreste Ferdinando Tencajoli, *Poeti Maltesi d’Oggi* (Roma: Angelo Signorelli Editore, 1932) and Annibale Scicluna Sorge, *Malta. Visione storica. Sintesi politica* (Livorno: Raffaele Giusti Editore, 1932), announced in the section ‘Fra libri e opuscoli’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 4 (July-August 1932) 140.

²² *Pagine della Dante* 4 (July-August 1934).

1943 that he authorized the Italian Consul in Malta to subsidize the Nationalist Party. Mizzi after the Second World War, in 1948, had the Consul confirm that this subsidy was never given because he, the Consul himself, knew how attached Mizzi was to his party's independence.²³ On the other hand, the Consul's statement still does not entirely exclude the possibility that Scicluna Sorge, working for the Ministero per la Propaganda Estera, may have secured covert Italian government funding for the Nationalist Party by letting this run through the Italian private companies that advertised in the *Malta* or by putting pressure on these companies to advertise. Furthermore, in 1938, the *Malta* had seventy-two subscribers in Italy, among which twelve Dante Alighieri Committees and thirty-six Fascist organizations such as the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, the Istituti di Cultura Fascista and the Fasci di Combattimento of various towns across the country.²⁴

Evidence of Italian civilization in Malta

Finally, a typical illustration of how the Dante Alighieri Society presented the Maltese case by the end of the 1930s is provided by a book published in 1940 as part of the series *Civiltà italiana nel mondo* (Italian civilization in the world): Scicluna Sorge's *La civiltà italiana di Malta*.²⁵ To Dante members Scicluna Sorge was already known as writer on Maltese matters.²⁶ In his pocket-size monograph of 1940, Scicluna Sorge once more showed through the history of Malta how the current inhabitants of the island were ethnically, culturally, linguistically and emotionally predominantly Italian. His arguments are seemingly scientific and his account of the various issues does not at first sight betray bias. Mussolini or the achievements of Italian Fascism are barely mentioned. In explicit terms, Scicluna Sorge only once described a person as being "clever and very Fascist" ("bravo e fascistissimo"), when referring to Don Giuseppe Jaccarini who as a Maltese priest had served the Italian parish of Rocca Sinibalda. For the rest he mentioned Mussolini having given a speech to a group of Maltese students when they visited Rome in 1930 and his own role in welcoming them as head of the Universitari Fascisti di Roma.²⁷ There is no doubt that Scicluna Sorge felt an allegiance to the Fascist Party and because of that it seems likely that his treatment of the issue of italianità in Malta acquired a political colour.

²³ Joseph M. Pirota, 'Enrico Mizzi's Political Integrity: Fact or Fiction?' in: *Proceedings of History Week* (Malta: The Malta Historical Society, 1986) 93-113, 106-107.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 106.

²⁵ Annibale Scicluna Sorge, *La civiltà italiana di Malta* (Rome: Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, 1940).

²⁶ Annuncio del libro di A. Scicluna Sorge, *Malta sotto il dominio britannico* – Fra Libri e Opuscoli, in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1935) 49; Annibale Scicluna-Sorge, 'Isole Mediterranee: Malta' in: *Pagine 3* (May-June 1937) 18-19.

²⁷ Scicluna Sorge, *La civiltà italiana*, 93 and 106.

In his foreword, Scicluna Sorge thanked Felice Felicioni, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society, for having offered him the opportunity to close the series *Civiltà italiana nel mondo* with an overview of the Maltese civilization at a time when Malta “is bound to become once more a beacon of Italy in a sea that will return under the legitimate rule of Rome”. He wrote that his intent was not to demonstrate the Italianness of Malta, which to him was an obvious fact. Instead he wished to show how through the ages Malta had been inextricably linked with the ethnic, historical, cultural and artistic development of Italy and having been unable to participate in the Italian Reunification in the nineteenth century now deserved to become a province of Italy. Though mentioning the “Civiltà di Roma” to which Malta belonged and the fresh impulse to reunification which the new Italy of Mussolini had given, the rest of the foreword was mainly framed in the discourse of irredentismo which was so much part of the early, pre-Fascist history of the Dante Alighieri Society. Scicluna Sorge saw in the Dante Alighieri Society an essential continuity between the mission of the Risorgimento and new universal role of Italy in the world envisioned by the Fascist Revolution.²⁸

Scicluna Sorge outrightly dismissed the Phoenician origins that the British, with Strickland first and foremost, ascribed to the Maltese with the following statements. Serious archaeological evidence to support the Phoenician presence was non-existent. Of the current population of Malta more than ninety percent was purely Italian of origin (“di schietta origine italiana”) and the rest had mostly ‘Latinising’ elements (“elementi latinizzanti”). Despite almost a century and a half of British domination, the predominance of the Italian racial characteristics among the Maltese was still reflected by the family names in use, of which a near ninety percent derived from Italian names. Here Scicluna Sorge illustrated his point with a three-page list of such Maltese names, ranging from Abela to Zimelli. In the Palaeolithic period Malta had belonged to what Scicluna Sorge described as the unconscious primordial unity of the Mediterranean race (“l’inconscia unità primordiale della razza mediterranea”). To today’s reader this ‘Mediterranean race’ is as disputable a notion as the suggestion that the Maltese descended from Phoenicians, but to Scicluna Sorge it was an unquestionable given. Subsequently the Roman settlement in Malta had laid a first basis of Latin ethnic presence. Then, after 1091, when the Normans had freed the Maltese from their Saracen occupiers, the immigration to Malta from the Italian peninsula and especially Sicily had been ongoing, creating long-lasting blood ties.²⁹

Since this was after all a publication of the Dante Alighieri Society, it is no surprise that the greatest significance was given to language as identifier of of the Maltese soul. In the words of Scicluna Sorge:

²⁸ Scicluna Sorge, *La civiltà italiana*, 7-10.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 39-42, 53-54, 60 and 62-65.

Language is of the spiritual heritage of a people, of the constituent elements of their nationality, certainly the most important, precious, sacred element. It is the language that defines and faithfully reflects the typology and the maturity of a civilization; it is what expresses the soul of a people.³⁰

As the Tuscan Italian, the language of Dante, came to prevail on the Italian mainland, so too in Malta. Even under the rule of the Order of the Knights of Saint John, which consisted of several 'langues' or cultural groups, Italian was used as the official language. Scicluna Sorge portrayed the Maltese dialect as mistakenly raised to a language by the British, when it was just an Arabic-Sicilian dialect. The most tender and intimate feelings of the Maltese, such as those between mother and child, were rendered with words of Italian origin. All words regarding moral, intellectual, economic-scientific, artistic and civic matters were Italian. Even if the British had tried to suppress any trace of *italianità*, the majority of the books that were being read in Malta were Italian as were those being written by Maltese writers. Holding on to the Italian language was for the Maltese a matter of preventing their 'denationalisation' (*snazionalizzazione*) and of asserting their belonging to the race and civilization of Rome ("alla razza e alla Civiltà di Roma").³¹

Faith also united the Maltese with the Italians, Scicluna Sorge asserted. In his view Malta was the first part of Italian territory to have been evangelized. He referred to the Acts of the Apostles written by Saint Luke where it was described how following a shipwreck the apostle Paul set foot on Malta and Christianised the island. Italian was still the language of the Church in Malta and therefore also the language connected to education, explaining why the University of Malta had been so active in defending the use of Italian. Maltese poetry and literature were proof of the enduring cultural ties with Sicily and Genoa. There had been an array of Italian newspapers before they were banned. The works of art in Malta had also been inspired and created by Italian engineers, architects, painters, sculptors and craftsmen, which was abundantly visible in the capital city Valletta, designed by the Italian architect Francesco Laparelli and a typical example of Italian Baroque architecture. Yet what Scicluna Sorge saw as the most evident sign of *italianità* in Malta was the dominant influence of the Italian theatrical and musical tradition, and especially the Maltese love of opera.³²

³⁰ "Del patrimonio spirituale di un popolo, degli elementi costituivi della sua nazionalità, la lingua è certamente il più importante, prezioso, sacro elemento. È la lingua che definisce e rispecchia fedelmente il tipo e la maturità di una civiltà; è essa che esprime l'anima di un popolo" (ibidem, 67).

³¹ Ibidem, 68-71, 75, 80-84 and 86.

³² Ibidem, on Catholicism: 87-89, 96-97, 104-107; on literature, poetry and press: 146-147; on art and architecture: 157-161; on theatre and music: 165-173.

Against this background, Scicluna Sorge made it seem only natural that the Italian government should put some effort into defending the Italian language and culture in Malta. The Italian consuls in Malta had worked quietly and factually to this end: Scicluna Sorge wrote of their “*opera silenziosa ma fattiva*”. The Italian school of Umberto I appeared in his account to have been eventually closed down by the British because of its success whereas the Istituto di Cultura Italiana was portrayed as having been an oasis of spiritual comfort during the anti-Italian persecutions.³³ By contrast, the British government’s course of action was depicted as brutal and unjust. Bemoaning how during 1932 and 1933 the Italian language was abolished completely in all areas except in the teaching of Italian language and literature at university and at the *liceo*, Scicluna Sorge wrote of an “unprecedented spiritual rape of a people” (“*inaudita violentazione spirituale di un popolo*”) to whom the British had promised full respect for their spiritual, civic and political rights. Elsewhere Scicluna Sorge lamented an “illegal total ban” (“*delittuoso bando totale*”) and “a dogged battle” (“*lotta accanita*”) against any expression of *italianità*.³⁴ The blame was not only attributed to the British government. Scicluna Sorge described how the Maltese language first developed a written form upon the suggestion of English civil servants and Protestant missionaries.³⁵ The most emblematic detail that stood for the British disrespectful way of dealing with culture concerned Malta’s Roman heritage. In the past, the marble and stone found among the ruins of Roman villas had been used to decorate churches and palaces or to build fortifications. Nowadays British speculators were using Ancient Roman ruins, not to construct any works of art or architecture but as a source of calcium for their factories of soda-water.³⁶

Scicluna Sorge was not only concerned about the *italianità* of Malta. He connected the Italian roots of Malta to its recognition as a part of Europe. Ironically, he saw this connection as being related to a British Act of Parliament passed on 2 July 1801, just after Malta had been occupied. With this Act the Maltese archipelago was declared to be geographically part of Europe. At a time that Malta was not yet a threat to British imperial interests such a decision must have seemed fairly trivial to the parliamentarians, Scicluna Sorge pointed out. But the seed of doubt about Malta must have remained, he conjectured, for with time Malta was treated not as a noble part of European civilization and territory but rather like some obscure African settlement (“*non lembo nobilissimo di terra e civiltà europea, ma pari ed [sic] oscuro anonimo stabilimento africano.*”).³⁷ Scicluna Sorge even went as far as to speculate that if some Members of Parliament had been able to foresee the changes in imperial

³³ *Ibidem*, 108-110.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 75-78.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 80.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 151.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 25.

politics, they would have proclaimed Malta part of Africa to thereby provide a justification for the actions of the future “denationalizers” (“snazionalizzatori”), meaning Strickland and his supporters.³⁸ The British had only accepted the Europeanness and the Italianità of Malta as long as the island was of little significance for the imperialists. This, according to Scicluna Sorge, explained why until the mid-nineteenth century the British had fully respected the Italian language, culture and traditions in Malta. The Italian unification gave a new course to events, making the British Parliament revise their consideration of Malta. Unable to remove the Maltese archipelago from the geographical map of Europe, the British had instead tried to take Malta away from European civilization. It was European civilization, Scicluna Sorge explained, that had provided the island with the “Faith of Rome” (“Fede di Roma”) and the language of Dante. Similarly he quoted Ignazio Bonavia, one of the first Maltese to be Head of the Magistrates, as having written in his unpublished private diary from the mid-nineteenth century that depriving Malta of the Italian language and of Roman Law would have given rise to the humiliating question whether Malta was an African region rather than a European one. Taking away that clear link with European identity that the Italian language and legislation represented, Bonavia allegedly wrote, would have made Malta seem like a non-descript, isolated British possession, subject to any conquest.³⁹

For a moment Scicluna Sorge imagined how Malta could have been a fruitful point of encounter between two different cultures, how Dante and Shakespeare could have serenely and peacefully coexisted there. But the withdrawal of constitutional liberties and the introduction of anti-Italian measures by the British between 1933 and 1939 had made this impossible, he felt.⁴⁰ From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century Malta had been:

[...] an unconquerable stronghold of heroic Christianity, the surviving bastion of Europe’s crusader aristocracy” and also “a serene and flourishing centre of Latin, Italian civilization; a splendid Court of princes adorned and enlivened by the Italian genius in Literature and in Art.⁴¹

Now, Scicluna Sorge seemed to suggest, the island that had once held back the Muslims had succumbed to an imperial British domination that relegated Malta to the African continent, away from the benefits of European civilization.

Altogether Scicluna Sorge’s emphasis on the Italian genius, on the peaceful and beneficial Italian dominance in the Mediterranean and on the

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 23-25.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 28-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 37-38.

⁴¹ “[...] fu inespugnabile rocca di cristianesimo eroico, la superstite bastiglia dell’aristocrazia crociata di Europa” e anche “un sereno e fiorente centro di civiltà latina, italiana; una splendida Corte di principi abbellita e animata dal genio italiano delle Lettere e delle Arti” (*Ibidem*, 20-21).

accomplishments of the Risorgimento fitted in the habitual rhetoric of the Dante. This can barely be identified as a Fascist stance. Studying the cartography produced in Italy before the rise of Fascism reveals that maps showing evident patriotic and expansionist interests – for example by depicting the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum* or by indicating where Italians abroad lived – frequently appeared in atlases already then.⁴² Furthermore, the Italian historian Pietro Silva, who never supported Italian Fascism, showed a view on Italy's position in the Mediterranean similar to Scicluna Sorge's. Silva's *Il Mediterraneo dall'unità di Roma all'unità d'Italia* (The Mediterranean from the Unity of Rome to the Unity of Italy) was widely read in the years following its publication in 1927. Silva also viewed with concern the shift in the British Royal Navy's focus after the First World War from the North Sea to the Mediterranean.

Silva described in a fairly factual manner the interests that led the British to choose Malta as their main naval base, such as the safeguarding of the access to the Suez Canal and to the acquired territories in the Near East. Yet there was a clear sense of threat in his mention of the naval manoeuvres the British had reintroduced. As of 1924, each year in March the Home Fleet – passing through the British-controlled Straights of Gibraltar – joined the Mediterranean Fleet to practice naval manoeuvres in the Eastern waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The event represented in Silva's view the most impressive gathering of naval forces that had ever been seen (“il più imponente raggruppamento di forze navali che mai si sia visto”).⁴³ The reaction to British aggressive expansionism coming from Kemalist Turkey and Leninist Russia, as well as the anti-British sentiments arising in Persia, Aghanistan, India, Egypt and Sudan, appeared understandable in Silva's account.⁴⁴ There is a trace of discontent in his observation that Britain and France were impeding Italy's expansion in the Mediterranean by encouraging the ambitions of the Yugoslavs, the Albanians and the Greeks. Britain's instrumental use of Greece's feudal dependence on the “City” (“[...] infeudata finanziariamente alla ‘City’”) in order to curb Turkish and Italian moves in the Eastern Mediterranean, apparently met with little approval on the part of Silva.⁴⁵ To him Italy was destined to play a civilizing role in the Mediterranean, through a rule not based on violence but on intellectual and economic exchange. Here Silva suggested a parallel with the glorious role the Italian Risorgimento had played in helping nationalist movements across Europe to triumph. Whenever the Mediterranean had been at the centre of civilization, Italy had benefited, be it during the Roman Empire

⁴² Edoardo Boria, ‘Geopolitical Maps: A Sketch History of a Neglected Trend in Cartography’ in: *Geopolitics* 13, 2 (2008) 278-308, 294.

⁴³ Pietro Silva, *Il Mediterraneo dall'unità di Roma all'unità d'Italia* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1927) 412.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 411-416.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 420.

or in the medieval period. The wellbeing of the Italian nation meant good for the world around it and vice-versa. Hence, inspired by those same Mazzinian ideals that had driven many members of the Dante Alighieri Society, Silva could proudly claim: "This re-awakening of Mediterranean life has been accompanied by the re-awakening of Italy, resurrecting to the unity and grandness of a Nation." ("A questo risveglio di vita mediterranea si è accompagnato il risveglio dell' Italia risorgente ad unità e a grandezza di Nazione.")⁴⁶

The British Council in Malta

How did the British Council react to the cultural conflict that took place in Malta? In the summer of 1938, two years after the Istituto di Cultura had been forced to close down, the British Council decided to establish a Cultural Institute in Malta. Already the Council financially supported a number of cultural initiatives on the island, including school essay prizes, school journeys to England, teachers' bursaries, the Boy Scouts, university scholarships and the English public school, St Edward's College, which had been opened in 1930.⁴⁷ Initially the plan for an Institute took the form of appointing someone who could fulfil the combined post of Professor of Archaeology at the University of Malta and of Director of the Institute. That the Council prospected a Chair of Archaeology was likely to be inspired by the desire on the part of the British in Malta to prove that the Maltese had Phoenician origins. This would imply a common ancestry with part of the British population, such as the Scottish and the Welsh, rather than with the Italians. In 1921, Gerald Strickland, then leader of the pro-British Constitutional Party, had given a lecture in La Valletta to argue that the Maltese were descendants of the Phoenicians. Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall shared the same Phoenician origin, so that the Maltese were according to Strickland closer to the British than to the Latin peoples.⁴⁸ One of the supporting arguments was a genetic one. That the increase of intermarriage between Maltese and English people did not lead to physical deterioration was in his view evidence of a common racial ancestry. Other prominent figures shared this idea, such as Augustus Bartolo, Minister of Education and Emigration.⁴⁹ It also fitted in the general trend towards 'scientific racism', which could just as well provide arguments to prove the opposite. For example, the anthropologist Robert Noël Bradley, demonstrated that the Maltese were essentially descendants of the dolichocephalic (long-headed)

⁴⁶ Ibidem 411-416, 427 and 432-440; citation from page 435.

⁴⁷ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, William Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, 20 December 1938, enclosed copy of the Memorandum Wickham sent to Ramage.

⁴⁸ Gerald Strickland, *Malta and the Phoenicians* (Valletta: Progress Press, 1950).

⁴⁹ Baldoli, 'The 'Northern Dominator'', 10.

Eurafrican or Mediterranean race, which in other European countries such as England had intermixed with the 'superior' brachycephalic (short-headed) Aryan race.⁵⁰

However, candidates for the planned Chair of Archaeology were required to be experts on the pre-historical period, familiar with important archaeological sites in Europe and the Near East and able to make a comparative study of the local sites. If the candidate could also lecture on Ancient History, an expertise that was so far missing at the University of Malta, that would be welcome but was not essential. Since the Professor was not expected to have many hours of lecturing, it was thought that he could combine his academic tasks with running the British Institute. This Institute was meant to offer a reading room and clubroom, where British newspapers and periodicals would be available, a small library with modern British literature, and various social events as well as lectures.⁵¹

By mid-August the Chairman of the Council, Lord Lloyd, had decided to no longer combine the position of Director of the Institute with that of Professor at the University. It is not clear for what reason. Possibly it was a result of the applications that were received after advertising the post in *The Times*. The Chair of Archaeology was offered to John Bryan Ward-Perkins.⁵² Ward-Perkins had graduated from New College, Oxford, in 1934 and had been working since 1936 at the London Museum as assistant of the renowned British archaeologist Robert Wheeler. In October, William Reginald Wickham was asked to transfer from Egypt to Malta where he was to become the Director of the British Institute. He seems to have been a close friend of Henry Croom-Johnson, who since 1935 had been the British Council's Regional Officer for the Balkans and the Middle East, as well as Director of Lecturers and Teaching Appointments. The thirty-year-old Wickham had been teaching English at the Fuad al-Awal University in Giza since October 1936. The Professor of English Literature for whom Wickham worked there occupied a Chair that had also been created and financed by the British Council.⁵³ In any case, Wickham's work-experience in Egypt clearly made him a suitable man for the British

⁵⁰ Robert Noël Bradley, *Malta and the Mediterranean Race* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1912); Goodwin, *Malta*, 84-85.

⁵¹ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential: Memorandum to the Assistant to the Lieutenant-Governor, concerning the British Institute at Malta, by Charles Wickham, 20 December 1938, No. MGG/1/1; Governor's Memorandum 'Establishment of a Cultural Institute and a Chair of Archaeology in Malta', 13 July 1938, N. 520/1938/17; Copy of letter British Council to Mr Mayhew (with copy to Colonial Office), 13 June 1938, MALTA/5/2.

⁵² TNA, BW 43/1, Advertisement of vacancy sent by the British Council to the Advertisement Editor of *The Times* on 18 July 1938; BW 43/1 - Memorandum, Secretary-General to [unknown], 13 August 1938, ML/5/4.

⁵³ TNA, BW 43/1 - Wickham to Colonel Charles Bridge, Cairo, 11 October 1938; Colonel Charles Bridge to Professor Robert Allason Furness at The Anglo-Egyptian Union, 12 October 1938, ML/2/1; Details of career of Mr. W.R.L. Wickham, attached to copy of Council to Lieutenant-Governor, 21 October 1938, ML/2/1.

Institute in Malta. Thousands of Maltese resided in Egypt, many of them working in the harbours of Alexandria and Port Said, and the British were keen to instil a pro-British attitude in these British subjects.⁵⁴

Establishing a British Institute

After consultation with the Government of Malta, the British Council chose to house the British Institute in the Auberge d'Aragon. This in itself was a delicate matter. During the twelve years of Maltese Self-Government, before the Constitution of 1921 had been suspended in 1933, the Auberge d'Aragon had been the office of the Prime Minister. Any redeployment of the building was bound to lead to malicious rumours.⁵⁵ Hence the Government was clear in limiting its financial involvement in paying for the renovation of the building, the structural maintenance and the lighting. Indeed, the Director of the British Institute was an employee of the British Council but in the case of the Professor of Archaeology, the University of Malta as a government institution could not have staff members that were not responsible to the Government itself. Arranging for the Government to pay the necessary costs on re-imburement from the Council made it possible to circumvent this rule.⁵⁶ However, in the case of all other expenses, it was agreed "solely for reasons of local politics" that all bills would be directly paid from an Institute account. On an island like Malta, it would otherwise very soon be known that bills were going to the Government, which would give substance to the accusation that the Institute was in actual fact merely a propaganda machine.⁵⁷

Modern media were considered essential. An His Master's Voice radio-gramophone was needed so that concerts of records could be given, British music could be received via radio and even dance events could be organized.

⁵⁴ Wickham would be reminded of this on Malta by one of Gerald Strickland's daughters: "Miss Strickland asked me yesterday whether the Council had prepared a detailed statement of its work in Malta and for Maltese abroad, especially in Egypt and Turkey. She had discussed this with Lord Lloyd in the summer and I agree that a press notice of this kind would do good, for it is incredible how few people here have ever heard of the work of the Council either in the island or elsewhere. The Maltese are apt to think themselves neglected, and it would be pleasant for them to know you are helping them. I enclose a list of papers to which such a notice should be sent [...]." (TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, 28 December 1938, BCP/1/3.)

⁵⁵ See for example the request by the Overseas League to use the Institute's premises for its Empire Day Dinner in: TNA, BW 43/1 - Confidential, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, undated but received on 27 February 1939; Croom-Johnson to the the Chairman, ML/2/1, 1 March 1939.

⁵⁶ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Assistant Lieutenant-Governor of Malta, Richard Ogilvy Ramage to the Deputy Secretary-General of the British Council, Kenneth Johnstone, Malta, 20 October 1938, Conf. 559/38; Johnstone to Ramage, 23 November 1938, ML/2/1.

⁵⁷ TNA, BW 43/1, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, 7 March 1939, BCF/1/4.

As Wickham argued, the Maltese were largely unaware of the best British music, “partly, no doubt, because the local Opera is devoted solely to Italian singing.” The radio-gramophone together with a full collection of records of British music would help to change the situation. However, as had been made clear to Wickham, the “best means of propaganda is visual”. Hence he was confident that proving the British Institute with a film projector would significantly increase its popularity.

The films Wickham had in mind were documentaries such as *Drifters* and *Man of Arran*, no doubt because of their emphatically British character and because Wickham thought the maritime themes in these films would interest the Maltese. Wickham referred to these films as being made by the Imperial Institute with government funding, when in fact neither of the two examples were. *Drifters* is a documentary film about the North Sea herring fisheries, produced by the New Era Studios for the Empire Marketing Board. The film’s director, John Grierson, subsequently established the iconic ‘British documentary film movement’ at the Empire Marketing Board, which in 1933 was turned into the General Post Office Film Unit (also known as GPO Unit). In the film Grierson portrayed the tension between tradition and modernity, tending however to praise the latter. There is a clear influence of Sergei Eisenstein’s work, in particular *The Battleship Potemkin* (USSR, 1925), although the style was less dramatic. *Man of Aran* (1934) is a fictional documentary film on the hard, traditional life on the Aran Islands, off the western coast of Ireland.⁵⁸

Another option was for the British Council to provide free copies of the films for distribution among local cinemas but Wickham feared this would be less effective. If the Institute was to do without a projector, Wickham suggested an epidiascope were bought instead so that lecturers could “appeal to the eyes as well as to the ears of their audience.” Other requested equipment included a “British-made ‘Imperial’ typewriter” and a duplicating machine. It is worth noting how the use of modern media was simultaneously an occasion to promote technology produced in Britain. “It is, of course, essential that the machine be British”, Croom-Johnson remarked in one of his letters.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the Board of Trade was represented in the British Council’s Board and played a significant part in the setting up of the

⁵⁸ *Man of Aran* (1934) was directed by Robert J. Flaherty and produced by the Gaumont - British Picture Corporation.

⁵⁹ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Memorandum to the Assistant to the Lieutenant-Governor concerning proposed increases in the grants made by the British Council to the British Institute, Malta, during the financial year 1938-39, by Wickham, dated 24 December 1938, MGG/1/2; Copy of Croom-Johnson to Wickham, ML/2/1, 16 February 1939.

Council, even if curtailed by Leeper's opposition to giving too much importance to commercial interests.

The visiting lecturers would be paid from the British Council's block grant for Lecturers at the disposal of the office in London. Arrangements would be made so that English lecturers going to Egypt and other countries east of Malta could stop there on the way, reducing the Council's overall travel expenses.⁶⁰ The library grant for the British Institute was modest (250 pounds). However, the Council had signed a book agreement and could buy the books Wickham wished to order at trade rates. Film projection material could be paid for from the budget of the Council's Joint Committee on Films. Similarly, the British gramophone records would fall under the Music Committee's block grant. Posters, lanternslides and other visual propaganda would also be covered – if finances allowed – and on demand the Council could send out lecture records for use during classes or other occasions. A Union Jack and two portraits of Their Majesties, the King and the Queen, were sent to Malta.⁶¹ Wickham had earlier suggested asking the Fine Arts Committee for the loan of pictures. As example, he referred to the French Embassy in Cairo, where "intelligent use" was made of the nation's artistic objects. British works of art were better off in Malta than getting "damaged every time the cellars of the Tate are flooded."⁶²

Wickham warned the Council that revenue from subscriptions could not be expected to be high. The activities of the now suppressed Italian Istituto di Cultura had been free, which meant that certainly not more than five pounds per year could be asked as membership fee for the British Institute. Furthermore, the already "converted" were mostly the better-off inhabitants of Malta, whereas the people the Institute intended to reach out to were "the apathetic imbibers of more active propaganda" who generally could not afford high membership fees.⁶³ Interestingly, in summing up the three main principles that ought to guide the British Institute in Malta, the first and foremost was that "the equipment and amenities of the British Institute must be superior, or at least equal, to those of the former Italian Istituto [sic] di Cultura." The second principle must be seen as following from the first: that what the British Institute offered would be regarded "as the best that the British Council and the Government of Malta can provide and, therefore, should be worthy of these

⁶⁰ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Ramage to Kenneth Johnstone, Malta, 20 October 1938, Conf. 559/38; Johnstone to R.O. Ramage, 23 November 1938, ML/2/1.

⁶¹ TNA, BW 43/1, Copy of Croom-Johnson to Wickham, ML/2/1, 16 February 1939.

⁶² Extracts from private letter dated 28th October from Wickham, Cairo, to Croom-Johnson, London, in: TNA, BW 43/1, Memorandum from Croom-Johnson to Lance [?] Everett, 28 November 1938, ML/2/1.

⁶³ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, Valletta, 20 December 1938, BCP/1/2, with enclosed a copy of the Memorandum Wickham wrote to Ramage; Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, Valletta, 20 December 1938, BCP/1/2, with enclosed a copy of the Memorandum Wickham wrote to Ramage.

god-fathers.” Thirdly, he believed it was not usual, certainly not at the beginning, to “expect proselytes to pay for their conversion” and that subscription revenue must be considered a gift from the people of Malta and not be expected to pay more than five to ten percent of the total running costs of the British Institute.⁶⁴ Godfathers, conversion and proselytes: these words give the impression Wickham was seeing his mission as one regarding a cultural ‘faith’.

Advance in the renovation of the Auberge d’Aragon was slow, especially because of the low priority it received now the Government of Malta had to deal with financial difficulties. Nevertheless, Wickham hoped Croom-Johnson could remind the Government that the building needed to be ready by 15 March and would urge the Government to agree with the estimates for the Auberge d’Aragon that Wickham had pressed for (2,500 to 3,000 British pounds at the most). From the phrasing, it is evident that Wickham took personal pride in making the most of what he was already considering ‘his’ Institute:

It is so essential that fittings be of good quality that I am very reluctant to lower estimates and I propose, unless you instruct me otherwise, to resist all attempts to make my lighting installation look like Milan railway station or a public lavatory and, similarly, to oppose the economy mania which threatens to make the Institute furniture ugly and not very durable. You will have noticed the cheapness of the carpets and curtains, a result of economy which I must leave you to judge.⁶⁵

The first Council lecture

In January 1939 plans were made to send a first British Council lecturer to Malta, even if the Institute was not yet ready to host such an event. The lecturer was Harry Snell, at that time leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords. Snell, a son of agricultural workers, had worked his way up the political ladder as a convinced socialist. He disapproved of the British Government’s refusal to intervene in the Spanish Civil War and like many in the British Council was against the appeasement policy towards Hitler’s government. The lecture that Snell gave on the 17th of January 1939 in the Aula Magna of the Royal University of Malta was entitled: ‘The British Heritage: its past and its future’. The themes he touched upon are typical for the image of ‘Britishness’ that the British Council divulged. The Governor introduced him as a man who after

⁶⁴ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Memorandum to the Assistant to the Lieutenant-Governor concerning proposed increases in the grants made by the British Council to the British Institute, Malta, during the financial year 1938-39, by Wickham, dated 24 December 1938, MGG/1/2.

⁶⁵ TNA, BW 43/1, Confidential, Wickham to Henry Croom-Johnson, 28 December 1938, BCP/1/3.

many years of hard work was still spending his life in service of the countries of the British Empire. On this same patriotic note, Snell began by saying that whoever would have held a lecture on 'The British Heritage; its past and its future' would have presented it in the same way, no matter what his personal political convictions would have been. All people shared the same natural pride in Britain's history and traditions. The "conception of the British heritage of civilization" was summarized by Snell as being: live and let live. Praising the achievements of British civilization was not meant as criticism towards other nations, for if others are

[...] satisfied with their form of government, it is no business of ours, we feel sure that ours is the best, but each nation has its special qualities and each has contributed to world civilization.

Critics in newspapers and elsewhere had said that the British statesmen had lost their former grip on the Empire and were not as capable as their ancestors in governing it. Snell dismissed this as merely judging by the past instead of the present. He described the British Commonwealth of Nations as a great fellowship of freedom, whereby England wished each part of the Empire to achieve self-government and liberty. The British Empire was perhaps no longer the stabilising factor in the world that it had formerly been, but the world had "never seen an empire so democratic and so united [...]." This unison, Snell claimed, was not enforced in any way but sprang from the desire to live within the British Commonwealth of Nations.⁶⁶

Snell gave the "great experiment of self-government" in India, with its population of 350 million people, as an example of the growth of freedom that was secured within the Commonwealth. In Malta too, he pointed out, representative institutions were being restored.

The Mother of Parliaments is proud to see her children grow up in other parts of the world in the practice of individual political freedom to which gradual stages in evolution have brought them.

As he saw it, small dissensions accompanied this progress just as a combustion engine was propelled by a series of small explosions. Snell was not too concerned about the troubles on the way, as long as the value of British heritage remained recognized. Modern civilization depended on it. Britain was in an advantageous position to protect this civilization. Geographically it was a central island, naturally defended by the sea, never too large a territory for "the least gifted of its kings to comprehend" and one of the best climates in the

⁶⁶ TNA, BW 43/1, account entitled 'Lecture delivered by the Rt. Hon. Lord Snell of Plumstead', dated 18 January 1939.

world. Still according to Snell, the character of the Englishman was also part of the British heritage.

The comic Englishman who used to travel abroad was really not typical of life at home and he does not exist any longer. He was the man who would descend in the hotel in the morning, want all windows thrown wide open and demand *The Times*. If these things were not forthcoming, he would ask what could one expect from foreigners.

The modern Englishman was different. Nor did he resemble John Bull. Snell instead saw the inheritance of self-control, improvisation and a quick way of checking things which was due to their lack of logic. Inherent respect for law and for the will of the Parliament had for centuries ensured the continuity of institutions and traditions. This latter element of British heritage was deeply rooted in Ancient Greek and Judaeo-Christian tradition. In the words of Snell, the British had “fed from crumbs that have fallen from the Athenian table some two thousand years ago.”⁶⁷

The crux of Snell’s lecture was Churchill’s statement that freedom and the rights of man were enjoyed wherever the Union Jack flew and that it was the duty and responsibility of the English to keep it flying. Neither revolutions nor dictatorships, Snell added, were to prevent modern England from guarding this heritage. The current times required a new kind of adhesion to what Snell saw as the central purpose of the Commonwealth of Nations: maintaining freedom together with a personal sense of responsibility. Therefore, Britain was investigating the possibility of increased independence for all the “continents in different stages of social development” that were part of the Commonwealth. Britain itself was a democracy in the making. Though all empires known from the past had passed away, there was no law in nature determining that all empires came to an end. Snell ended in triumphant tone, suggesting that Britain would learn from the past and face the future with responsibility. The British heritage of democracy and freedom was as always in good hands, and would remain so in future. Such praise on the part of a British Council lecturer could have no other goal than to convince the Maltese public of the benefits Malta enjoyed by being under British rule and that British policy was shaped by only the highest values.⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, Wickham could afterwards report that the English-speaking press had been friendly, though admittedly critical letters were sent to the editors too. It was Wickham’s policy not to react to the attacks. Altogether, Wickham was pleased with this first lecture: “[...] the waters have

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

been stirred and, despite the mud therein, the result seems to me not unsatisfactory.”⁶⁹

Snell was agnostic and a member of the National Secular Society. Alluding to a controversial statement that had appeared in *Lehen is-Seuua*, the Maltese organ of Catholic Action that in the 1930s cooperated with the Nationalist party, Wickham wrote to Croom-Johnson that the island was “fanatically Catholic” and that its leaders’ bias was anti-British. The next lecturer to be sent over by the Council would preferably have to be an eminent Catholic so that the Church in Malta would have no objections to make. Rumours about the Institute’s alleged Masonic and Protestant propaganda had to be dispelled.⁷⁰ Apart from asking for Catholic lecturers to be sent, Wickham confided to Croom-Johnson that he was making private enquiries in Rome to obtain a Papal blessing for the Institute and its work. He expected this to require a donation of about ten pounds, a sum well worth paying for mitigating the attacks. If his own attempts failed, he counted on the Council to take this up semi-officially. Croom-Johnson, apparently a little anxious about such a Papal blessing, urged Wickham to keep the Governor closely involved, since he could judge the political implications best. Croom-Johnson himself would ask the Colonial Office for advice as well. However, the Lieutenant-Governor had no concerns, providing the Institute would be asking the blessing on its own, standing well apart from government circles. Furthermore, Wickham felt some messages of goodwill from authorities in England ought to be conveyed at the official opening, for the British Institute in Malta was the first the Council had established within the British Empire. Such a gesture gave added prestige to the opening and would help “to show the Maltese that they are not quite as forgotten and forlorn as they like to imagine”.⁷¹

Dispelling suspicions of anti-Catholicism

What Wickham also understood about the Maltese situation was that there would have been no grievance about removing Italian as official language, except for among the Maltese lawyers and clergy, had the measure not also been applied to schools. He himself saw no reason why Italian could not be

⁶⁹ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/[unreadable number], 28 January 1939, folio 10. With translations of articles that appeared in the *Malta* of 3 January 1939, in the *Lehen is-Seuua* of 24 January 1939 and in the *Il-Berka* (Maltese organ of Lord Strickland) of 24, 25 and 26 January 1939.

⁷⁰ TNA, 43/1, BCL/1/5, W.L.R. Wickham Esq., Osborne Hotel, Valletta, Malta, to Mr. Croom-Johnson, dated 2nd January 1939; BCP/1/12, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, 3 March 1939.

⁷¹ TNA, 43/13, ML/2/1, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, Confidential, 7 February 1939, folio 12; Reply to Wickham from Croom-Johnson, 16 February 1939, folio 14; Confidential, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, undated but received on 27 February 1939.

taught after the age of thirteen, in addition to the English and Maltese that school children would first learn to fully master. Had the Government of Malta opted for this compromise, eighty percent of the current Nationalist Party supporters would have accepted the situation, Wickham believed. This coincides with the fact that only a very small minority of the Maltese, even within the Nationalist Party, was irredentist and wanted Malta to be part of Italy.⁷² The majority of the population was satisfied with the constitution of 1921, which allowed for self-government whilst keeping the security and economic advantages of belonging to the British Empire. The difficulties the language issue created in Wickham's view mainly took the form of attacks on the British Institute as a supposed instrument for Protestant propaganda. In addition to Catholic lecturers, Wickham recommended enquiring about the possibility for an English Bishop or Monsignor to come to Malta for the Diocesan Eucharistic Conference being organized there and to bless the Institute's premises as well as give a lecture there. This blessing would be in addition to the papal blessing that Wickham was already trying to arrange.⁷³

Wickham's suggestion to ensure that an English Catholic clergyman was present at the Diocesan Eucharistic Conference in Malta was picked up on. A letter from Lloyd was sent to the Archbishop of Westminster. Here it was presented as if the British Institute reported that the Maltese themselves had expressed the desire to see Roman Catholic representatives from Great Britain attending the conference. The Conference was now expected to take place in April, but Lloyd was informed that it might for a second time be postponed because of the internal disputes that were taking place. The conflicts centred on who was to be the Papal Legate at the conference. While many of the most influential clergy in Malta wanted a Legate of Italian nationality, the Bishop appeared to prefer an Englishman. Lloyd asked the Archbishop of Westminster what his view was on sending prominent members of the English Catholic clergy to the Eucharistic Conference, how they could be encouraged and whether he thought any of them might accept to give a lecture at the British Institute. Just over a month later Croom-Johnson let Wickham know that the Council had decided to take no further action regarding the Diocesan Eucharistic Congress, explaining that he was "afraid that our efforts to be of assistance only resulted in our putting our foot in it very heavily." The Council had been warned to stay out of this "purely spiritual matter".⁷⁴

⁷² Henry Frenco, 'Britain's European Mediterranean: Language, Religion and Politics in Lord Strickland's Malta, 1927-1930' in: *History of European Ideas* (1995), 47-65, 49.

⁷³ TNA, BW 43/1, Extracts from a private letter from Mr. W.R.L. Wickham to Mr. Croom-Johnson dated 25th of January, 1939 (Extract made 17 February 1939).

⁷⁴ TNA, BW 43/1, copy of Lord Lloyd to His Eminence The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, GB/29/3, 14th March 1939; Confidential, Croom-Johnson to Wickham, GB/29/3, 19 April 1939, folio 51.

The Institute opening its doors

The opening of the Institute was a public event that required careful preparation if it was to win the sympathy of as many Maltese as possible. The ceremony would take place at four o' clock in the afternoon and – one could not have expected otherwise at that hour among British – would be followed by tea for the approximately 750 guests. Wickham found the Archbishop of Malta, Monsignor Dom Mauris Caruana, willing to bless the premises of the Institute on the same occasion, provided that Wickham would give a written guarantee that nothing would be said or done at the Institute that was contrary to Catholic principles. The Council authorized him to do so.⁷⁵ The Chairman was meant to come to Malta in early May but was obliged to postpone his visit due to the “European situation”, meaning presumably Hitler’s intervention in Czechoslovakia, Germany’s renouncement of the non-aggression pact with Poland, Italy’s invasion of Albania and the inter-Allied missions initiated to prepare for a possible war. Wickham underlined the need to open the Institute by mid-May at the latest and suggested that if necessary an eminent person such as the British Ambassador in Rome could replace the Chairman at the ceremony. Consultation with some of his Maltese acquaintances had made it clear to Wickham that it was better not to start recruiting members before the Institute was officially opened and especially not before it was blessed. To start recruiting later than end May, just before the long summer break started, would make it hard to find enough members before starting the new social season in October.⁷⁶

The opening indeed took place at the beginning of May, in the presence of Council Chairman Lloyd. It was instead Wickham who was unable to be at the ceremony, because of illness. He reported that a large crowd had turned up at the opening, in great part motivated by the curiosity of seeing what had been done to the former Prime Minister’s office. This curiosity was fed by

[...] rumours, spread with skill, that undesirable changes had been made and that the former luxurious furniture of the place had been sent to England. I was able to scotch these with the kind help of the Governor, parts of whose speech were devoted to such canards.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ TNA, BW 43/13, telegram, Director of the British Institute in Malta to British Council, 4 April 1939, folio 40; Telegram, British Council to the Director of the British Institute in Malta, 6 April 1939, folio 42.

⁷⁶ TNA, BW 43/1, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/17, 26 March 1939; TNA, BW 43/13, telegram, Director of the British Institute in Malta to the British Council, 4 April 1939, folio 40; telegram, the British Council to the Director of the British Institute in Malta, 6 April 1939, folio 42; TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/21, 13 April 1939, folio 45.

⁷⁷ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/25, 11 May 1939, folio 58.

Since then Wickham had been able to recruit 110 members; a figure he judged not unsatisfactory though he was caustic about the many Maltese who were pro-British in words only and not in deeds. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about the future. Much depended, according to Wickham, on whether the Council was able to send him a lecturer each month. Music had been one of the greatest attractions of the Italian Istituto di Cultura and generally the Maltese scarcely believed that there were any good English musicians. Therefore sending a concert player every month Wickham thought was essential too. Wickham himself planned to start giving a lecture course as of October. He also thought some "simple lectures about England, illustrated with lantern slides" in the villages could be useful. By 17 May the number of members had already risen to 258, the library was proving popular and he and the Secretary were working 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. to keep things going.⁷⁸

The clerical attacks directed towards the Institute continued to trouble Wickham. While the usual criticism in the press kept appearing, after the local Diocesan Eucharistic Congress the Archbishop had also issued a Pastoral wherein he proposed to establish an Institute of Religious Culture. This, Wickham had no doubts, was a direct reply to the establishment of the British Institute. Such an Institute of Religious Culture would have the advantage of being supported by the Catholic Church in Malta, which was supposed to own about a third of the total landed property in the island. Besides material wealth, the organization would have spiritual power. Spiritual penalties, veiled or direct, against members of the British Institute, which was not Roman Catholic or Italian, were not to be excluded. The "truly mediaeval position and mentality" of the Catholic Church in Malta meant it was a very strong force to reckon with.⁷⁹ Wickham concluded:

You [the British Council] have to face here something which, perhaps, you have not had to face before, a fully-established previous competitor on a grand scale, backed by a strong local party and by the influence of the Catholic Church in Malta: exceptional and continued efforts are needed to erase the impression made by it.⁸⁰

The "previous competitor" was the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, which for only five pounds a year had offered lectures and concerts, even to non-members. From the high quality of the lecturers and artists to the free refreshments, all elements showed that these Italian cultural events had been "most lavishly conducted". The majority of its members would not have known about its

⁷⁸ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/25, 11 May 1939, folio 58; Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/27, 17 May 1939, folio 60; Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/28, 23 May 1939, folio 61.

⁷⁹ TNA, BW 43/13, Wickham to Croom-Johnson, BCP/1/28, 23 May 1939, folio 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

“other and more dubious activities”, namely the espionage that the British had suspected the Istituto di Cultura to be involved in.

Having in mind only the impression the Italian Institute had made, the average Maltese would think that if a poor country like Italy could afford to spend so much on promoting its culture in Malta, then surely the far wealthier Britain could and would rival these Italian efforts. Wickham’s concern about the competition with Italy would later transpire in a personal letter that Lord Lloyd sent to Governor Bonham-Carter, on the 26th of December 1939. Wickham had sent Lord Lloyd the leading articles in *The Malta* of 5 and 9 December and warned him about the danger that as a result of the recent inauguration of the British Institute in Rome, the Italian government might demand for the re-opening of the Italian Institute in Malta. Lloyd informed Bonham-Carter of the Council’s strong opposition to allowing the Italian Institute to re-open, mentioning also his enquiries confirming that the Colonial and Foreign Offices would back this position. Though he was confident that Bonham-Carter would also object, he let him know that he saw no grounds for analogy, given that “the history of the Italian Institute has been one of political rather than cultural activity.” Lloyd obviously did not wish to recognize that the Council’s own activities were more than just cultural.⁸¹

A final illustrative detail of how the British Council reacted to the competition with the foreign cultural politics of other countries is the way radio was used by the British Institute in Malta and the disadvantages felt in comparison with the Italians. The British Council had given the Institute a wireless radio and this was often used by the members. With the exception of the British News Bulletin at 7 p.m., Wickham left it up to the members to chose the programmes, partly out of policy and partly because he and his staff had no time to control the radio settings. From listening to the radio while members handled it, Wickham noticed that people were right in complaining that British short-wave radio stations faded badly and much more so than the French or the German broadcasts.⁸² Furthermore, the programmes that were aired between about 5.30 and 8 p.m., which was when most members listened to the wireless, were not suitable for the audience. “English comedians have a peculiar technique, and accent, which non-English people find both puzzling and not very funny [...]”, he remarked. Instead of broadcasting various forms of vaudeville, the British station according to Wickham should offer music of all kinds, with latest news interspersed between items. Maltese radio-listeners did not deliberately seek broadcasts from Rome or Zeesen, but were driven to do so because “non-British stations do, at critical hours of the day, provide what the

⁸¹ TNA, BW 43/13, Private and Personal, Lord Lloyd to Governor Bonham-Carter, 26 December 1939, folio 138.

⁸² Wickham refers to the Zeesen short-wave radio transmitter located in the German village of Zeesen as of 1931. This wooden structure was one of Germany’s first short-wave broadcasting transmitters. In 1939 it was replaced by a steel construction.

average person here considers better entertainment.” The popularity of the British short-wave could be increased by merely programming more music and transmitting the current dance-music programmes earlier than was now being done.⁸³

Conclusion

From what can be reconstructed of the Dante Alighieri Society’s intervention in the case of Malta, it is clear that the arguments used to defend the *italianità* of the island were draped in the rhetoric of nation-building and of giving each people the right to self-determination as well as freedom to maintain their own organically developed cultural tradition. Language was regarded as an essential part of the national soul. Although Scicluna Sorge took into consideration not only the role of Italian in forms of elite culture – literature, academic studies and legal documents – but also its more intimate use in the communication between mother and child, generally the Dante focussed on what Italian had meant for Maltese high culture. Removing the Italian language and the cultural influences the Maltese people had benefitted from ever since the Romans had dominated Malta meant depriving them of their connection with the larger European civilization. Being part of the Roman ‘cradle of civilization’ was deemed essential to Malta. Similarly it was treated as a matter of self-evident historical destiny that Italy should lead the way in the Mediterranean. This idea was not exclusively linked to a Fascist world-view.

The British Council equally felt it had a civilizing mission to fulfil in the Mediterranean and in Malta, but as part of a world-wide contribution it could make in expanding and defending the British “democratic Empire”. At the centre of this idea was a concept of national culture and tradition that had mainly to do with political and social institutions. The Mother of Parliaments was there to help the world forward. Needless to say, the Council was also aware of the desire to protect British political and commercial interests abroad, hence also the attention for the promotion of British-manufactured goods, such as the film-projector and other technical instruments. Theirs was a carefully considered course of action. On the one hand Wickham and the other Council members involved in Malta were self-conscious about their meagre financial resources. On the other hand, there was a detectable sense of pride in not wasting these on outward luxury with which to appeal to the Maltese, like the Istituto di Cultura had done. The tools invested in had to be effective and Wickham was well aware of the importance modern media played in shaping

⁸³ TNA, BW 43/13, Copy Wickham to Miss Pamela Henn-Collins, BCP/1/64, 16 January 1940, folio 142. A copy of the letter was sent on to the Secretary-General of the BBC, Duncan Fyfe, see: British Council to Wickham, ML/24/1, 6 February 1940, folio 163.

the ideas of the general public. There was also an attempt to win sympathy among the Maltese by using religion. Given that the island's history was closely connected to that of the Christian Crusades, Christianity had a particularly symbolic significance in Maltese society. It was hoped that inviting British Roman-Catholic speakers would make the inhabitants less distrustful of what was easily seen as a Protestant culture.

In Malta, the British repression of the Italian language and of the Maltese desire for greater self-government revealed a treacherous Mother of all Parliaments. She unblushingly set aside her principles of freedom and democracy for the sake of her strategic interests in the Mediterranean. The British Council waited on her needs, while the Dante Alighieri Society - appealing to Italy's re-emerging role as guiding light in the region - unmasked her.