

# JOHN HOOKHAM FRERE IN MALTA (1821 – 1846) A LINK WITH OUR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PAST \*

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I have often wondered how many of the sick that go to Saint Luke's Hospital and how many of the members of the medical and nursing staffs that minister to the patients' needs associate the site of that ever expanding healing centre with the name of a nineteenth century British scholar resident in Malta – the Right Honourable John Hookham Frere. This gentleman lived in a Villa at Pieta but the extensive gardens of his residence ascended from Pieta Wharf to the summit of Gwardamanga Hill to embellish a substantial part of the area on which the St. Luke's Hospital complex now stands.<sup>(1)</sup>

If my random enquiries among patients and their visitors, professional staff, students and employees are anything to go by, it transpires that the present generation has never heard of John Hookham Frere and his villa though scanty remains of his once famous garden can still be identified in an out of the way section of the hospital grounds.

This paper is an attempt to refresh our failing memories of Frere and of a coterie of distinguished and inquisitive men of intellect who called at the Villa and strolled in its gardens and turned them into a meeting place of culture and exchange of ideas; and to recall his associations, however tenuous they may have been, with the medical events of his time.

## Biographical profile

The Right Honourable John Hookham Frere (1769 – 1846) was a diplomatist, poet and scholar. Born on 21 May 1769 in London, he studied at Eton College and Cambridge University where he gained the M.A. in 1795. He served as Under Secretary of State in the British Foreign Office (1799), was Envoy Extraordinary at Lisbon (1800) and Minister Plenipotentiary in Madrid (1803 and 1808).

At the beginning of the war between the Spanish people and the occupying French Forces in 1808, Frere sympathised with the Spaniards. A British expeditionary force was sent in aid of the Spanish cause under the command of Sir John Moore. Differences arose between Moore and Frere as the latter opposed Moore's hasty retreat which ended disastrously at the Battle of Corunna. Frere was criticised for his interference in the conduct of the military operations of the Peninsular

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1. A street at Gwardamanga is named after him.

campaign. The public expressions of disapproval that followed Moore's failure led to Frere's recall from Spain in 1809.<sup>(2)</sup>

Frere left the diplomatic service in 1810 and declined the offer of the embassy at St. Petersburg and a peerage as he felt he had been unjustly blamed for the friction that had arisen between him and Sir John Moore.<sup>(3)</sup>

He came to Malta in April 1821 in search of a warm climate for his wife, the Dowager Countess of Erroll, who was in a precarious state of health. They had previously tried to settle in Palermo but he finally chose Malta for the added reason that as he drew his pension from England he felt bound to live where it would be spent among British subjects.<sup>(4)</sup>

He soon became "the captive of the enchanting climate and the romantic monuments of the old chivalry" of the Knights of St. John in our island.<sup>(5)</sup> In fact in the opening lines of one of his poems written some time before March 1, 1824, he thus bursts out in an apotheosis of our island:-

Malta, sovereign isle, the destined seat and asylum  
Of chivalry, honour and arms – the nursing mother of heroes,  
Mirror of ancient days, monumental trophy recording  
All that of old was felt or feared or achieved or attempted".<sup>(6)</sup>

Initially Frere lived in Valletta at No. 176, *Casa Correa*, in Old Bakery Street (November 1822)<sup>(7)</sup> but he also rented another house for the summer – "a very good one for £40" – at Pieta where he eventually went to live with his wife and unmarried sister Susan.<sup>(8)</sup> At one time (1825) his household included also a niece of his wife, Miss Blake, afterwards Lady Honoria Hamilton Chichester; and a Greek girl, Statyra Livedestro, whom he had rescued as a baby from Greece during a massacre there.<sup>(9)</sup>

Frere's wife died on the 16 January 1831 and was buried in the Msida Bastion Cemetery in the outworks of Floriana within sight of Frere's residence across the water at Pieta.<sup>(10)</sup> Although her funeral was a private one, it has been said that six thousand indigent Maltese persons went to the cemetery as a mark of respect. Several thousands of these needy men and women received alms on this occasion either in the form of bread or of money "in accordance with the charitable disposition evinced" by her in her lifetime.<sup>(11)</sup> In fact she was as much distinguished for her benevolence as her husband.<sup>(12)</sup>

2. *Edinburgh Review* (April 1872) p. 472. *Annual Register and Gentlemen's Magazine* (March 1846) p. 312. C.E. Norton *Review of Aristophanes and of Theognis Restitutus*, *North American Review* (July 1868) p. 136.

3. B. Frere, *The Works of the Rt. Hon. John Hookham Frere*, London 1874, Vol. I, p. 96. H.D. Wolff, *Rambling Recollections*, London 1908, Vol. I, pp. 1–10.

4. C. Mifsud Bonnici, *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (22 January 1936) pp. 8–9.

5. J.G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, Paris 1842, Vol. 4, p. 288.

6. W.E. Frere, *The Works of the Right Hon. John Hookham Frere*, London 1874, Vol. 2, p. 314.

7. C. Mifsud Bonnici, *loc. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

8. W.E. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

9. H.D. Wolff, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–10.

10. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

11. *The Malta Government Gazette* (26 January 1831) p. 24.

12. J. Wolff, *Journal of the Rev. Joseph Wolff*. London 1839, p. 79.

After his wife's death, Frere lived with his sister Susan who had made her home with him after their mother's death and had accompanied him to Malta. She showed interest in the primary education of Maltese children<sup>(13)</sup> and gained a reputation for her benevolence to "a numerous class of the poor who received consolation from her kindness and charity from her hands". When she died on 18 January 1839, after an eighteen years' residence here, she found a resting place in the same Protestant cemetery at Floriana very close to the spot where her sister-in-law had been buried. On the day of her funeral two thousand loaves of bread were distributed to the indigent families that during her lifetime had been the recipients of her bounty.<sup>(14)</sup>

#### Frere – scholar

In spite of remonstrances from his friends in England, who expected him to return home, Frere spent the last twenty-five years of his life in Malta with the exception of visits to Naples (1823), England (1825) and a few other travels to neighbouring parts of the Mediterranean (1830 and 1840). One of his friends – William Stewart Rose – tried to entice him back to England by satirising some of the less agreeable features of life in Malta

"Where on the sultry wind for ever swells  
The thunder of ten thousand timeless bells

.....

And your waste island seems but one wide quarry"<sup>(15)</sup>

Although, as we have already seen, Frere played a part in the political events of British and European history at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he left his mark as a contributor to the literature of his age.

Interest in the classical world was a hallmark of the intellectual and cultured circles of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century and John Hookham Frere was steeped in these accomplishments. Indeed he was a scholar in Greek and Latin literatures and was, besides, well versed in Italian, French and Spanish. He also enjoyed the high esteem of such figures in the British literary world as Southey, Byron, Scott and Coleridge.<sup>(16)</sup>

At Pieta he "buried himself with his books among the roses and vines" of his garden earning a reputation of being "a man most famous for his erudition and knowledge of various languages and literature"<sup>(17)</sup> and for "a wonderful memory"<sup>(18)</sup>. He spent a good deal of time studying the Maltese and Hebrew languages and translating Greek authors. Among these are the four comedies by the satirical poet Aristophanes (*Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Birds* and *Frogs*); works of the elegiac poet Theognis and passages from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and the Psalms of

13. *The Malta Government Gazette* (1 February 1837) p. 34.

14. *The Malta Government Gazette* (30 January 1839) p. 40.

15. *Edinburgh Review* (April 1872) p. 472. A. Cremona, "John Hookham Frere", *Lehen il Malti*, 35 (1966), No. 11, pp. 11 & 13. *Malta Government Gazette* (July 25, 1823) p. 3592 & (December 19, 1823) p. 3760.

16. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. vii. J.G. Lockhart, *op. cit.*, pp. 252 & 310. G. Festing, *John Hookham Frere and His Friends*, London 1899, p. 235.

17. G. Festing, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

18. J. Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

David.<sup>(19)</sup> An episode in the political life of Malta at this period is indirectly linked with the publication of the Aristophanes translation. In 1836 the jurist John Austin (1790 – 1859) and Mr. George Cornwall Lewis (1806 – 63) came to Malta to enquire and report upon various aspects of the island's public affairs among which were such outstanding questions as the establishments of representative institutions and the freedom of the press. The two Commissioners were in Malta for more than a year and a half. Frere struck a friendship with the fellow scholar and statesman George Cornwall Lewis. In spite of their differences in age and political outlook, they both shared a common interest in the classics and it was due to Cornwall Lewis that Frere was persuaded to publish his translations from Aristophanes and to print them in Malta at the Government Printing Press. The printing of the text was in fact done in Malta in 1840 but the titlepage was printed in England.<sup>(20)</sup> The translations of Theognis, too, were printed in Malta in 1842. There is a copy of *Theognis Restitutus* at the Malta University Library which is of special interest as it contains a proof sheet of page 12 with corrections in Frere's hand.<sup>(21)</sup>

#### Benefactor of the needy

Though Frere abstained from meddling in local politics, he took a deep interest in Maltese social affairs. In September 1824 he was appointed by the British Governor, the Marquis of Hastings, one of the Presidents of a committee responsible for running the newly established House of Industry at Floriana set up for the relief of the poor and the unemployed. Apart from his official activities in this sphere, he endeavoured to contribute, on his own initiative and from his own financial resources, to the material welfare of the more needy strata of Maltese society.<sup>(22)</sup> Endowed with the gift of sympathy, Frere sustained the indigent in times of individual misfortune and during national calamities by his large hearted liberality and benevolence. In 1834, for instance, he contributed the largest sum subscribed by any single individual – and as much as the Lieutenant Governor – to a fund raised for the relief of the dependents of eleven British and Maltese seamen and labourers who perished in the sinking of the schooner *Meteor* in Valletta Harbour on 15 February of that year.

He was specially mindful of the problems that faced the population when death mowed down many victims during the cholera epidemic of 1837 when he gave financial assistance to thousands of persons. In spite of the strain that these exertions imposed upon him,<sup>(23)</sup> he continued to help many impoverished families after the epidemic, the amount of his charities amounting to over one thousand pounds a year for twenty-five consecutive years.<sup>(24)</sup>

19. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 274 & 278 – 81.

20. *Edinburgh Review* (April 1872) p. 472.

21. Melitensia Collection, MZ 2, University Library, Msida.

22. Ms. 222, fol. 47 Melitensia, University Library, Msida. *Malta Government Gazette*, (8 September 1824) p. 4059.

23. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 278, *Malta Government Gazette* (5 March 1834) p. 80.

24. A.V. Laferla, *British Malta*, Malta 1938, Vol. I, pp. 127 – 8. G. Clinquant, *Biografia del Molt'Onorabile John Hookham Frere*, Malta 1846, pp. 6 – 7 & 13. *Storia della società medica d'incoraggiamento di Malta*, Malta 1945, pp. 56 – 9. *The Malta Government Gazette* (6 March 1839) p. 86.

A crowd of lame, old and blind persons used to gather in the evening at the door of the Villa to beg for alms which were never refused. In fact it has been said that his benevolence was imposed upon by all those who got near him.<sup>(25)</sup> The able-bodied also joined the crowd to ask for his help to get employment. Those were times when the Maltese labourer depended for his livelihood on the expenditure of the British naval and military establishments in Malta and on the commercial activity of our ports so that every diminution in these activities adversely affected the financial condition of many Maltese families.<sup>(26)</sup> To ease this situation, a Ladies Charitable Society was founded in 1822 for the relief of the poor by providing them with clothing and with straw for bedding, paying their house rents to prevent them from "becoming street beggars" and providing them with free medical attention by Dr. Giuseppe Stilon. Persons suffering from serious disabilities, such as blindness, were given financial aid. Spinning wheels and cotton were distributed to women in their homes to enable them to earn a living through their own efforts. The names of both Susan and John Frere appear in the list of subscribers to the funds of the Society.

Another voluntary association, The Ladies of the Committee of the Soup Charity, of which Susan was a member, assisted the poor by providing them with free meals.<sup>(27)</sup>

Resort to emigration, however, was the main remedy against unemployment as was happening in the United Kingdom where emigration to Canada, the USA and Australia was being encouraged to ease the overpopulation problem and the plight of the peasantry.<sup>(28)</sup> The same measures were being adopted in Malta where Maltese labourers had been emigrating to the Crimea and to Gibraltar since at least 1837.<sup>(29)</sup> Frere assisted prospective migrants to Tunis, Tripoli and Alexandria where the Maltese language was readily understood.<sup>(30)</sup>

#### Education in Malta

When Francis Rawden, Marquis of Hastings, was appointed British Governor of Malta in 1824, he set up a Special Commission to inquire into and report on the state of education in the island. As a result of this commission, a General Council was formed for the University with John Hookham Frere as its first Chairman.<sup>(31)</sup> While holding this office Frere substituted the Rector, on a number of occasions, in conferring the doctorate on British non-Catholic physicians who qualified M.D.s in our university.<sup>(32)</sup>

25. The Earl of Ilchester, *The Journal of the Honourable Henry Edward Fox*, London 1923, p. 335.

26. P. Frere, *op. cit.* p. 27.

27. *The Tenth Annual Report of the Ladies' Malta Charitable Society*, Malta 1834, *Malta Government Gazette* (September 19, 1832) p. 291. *The Malta Government Gazette* (11 January 1837) p. 14.

28. G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, London 1948, p. 552.

29. *The Malta Government Gazette* (21 January 1837) p. 26 & (1 February 1837) p. 33.

30. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

31. *Calendar for the Academic Year 1953 - 54, The Royal University of Malta*, Malta 1954, p. 6, *Malta Government Gazette* (13 September 1824) p. 4068.

32. P. Cassar, "Overseas Medical Graduates and Students at the University of Malta in the Nineteenth Century", *Malta Historica*, Vol. 8 (1981) p. 93.

In Frere's view a university has two functions to perform – a practical or utilitarian one which consists in educating youth and qualifying it for the learned professions; and an intellectual one which aims to provide a channel of communication between learned and scientific persons and to contribute towards the general advancement of knowledge and thus establish a reputation of scholarship extending beyond the confines of one's native country.

In applying these principles to our university, Frere was quite aware of the limitations of our institution in undertaking research in the field of science, such as chemistry and astronomy, where the establishment of laboratories and observatories were wholly out of the question; but he held that the Malta University was well placed to foster the knowledge of Oriental languages because of its central position in the Mediterranean and of the advantages that the Maltese language afforded as a medium of instruction for these languages.<sup>(33)</sup> To appreciate Frere's emphasis on linguistic attainments, it is worth noting that up to the mid-nineteenth century, education was humanistically and not scientifically oriented "and that culture was still based on literary scholarship".<sup>(34)</sup>

On 5 February 1833, Frere expressed his wish to be relieved from the duties of his post. His resignation was accepted but the Lieutenant Governor felt that the only way to show his respect "for so distinguished an individual" was to assume the office of President of the Council himself".<sup>(35)</sup>

Among the kindred spirits with whom Frere made friends was the Hebraist, Rev. Serafino Marmara. This learned priest wrote a treatise to show that the Maltese language had "retained more of the old Punic element than any other language" and, in his view, lent itself as a very suitable medium for learning Hebrew". Marmara often dined with Frere on Sundays when the two scholars discussed topics bearing on Semitic languages and on the antiquities of Malta.<sup>(36)</sup>

Frere took it upon himself to encourage the study of Hebrew among the Maltese clergy and for this purpose he provided two Maltese students with the necessary books and dictionaries. He also endeavoured to establish a number of lectures for the teaching of this language at our university. The Rev. Serafino Marmara was recommended for the Chair of Hebrew and Greek and the Sacred (Scripture) Texts in September 1833. Marmara had been appointed by 30 April of the following year and in 1838 drew up a syllabus for a three-year course in Hebrew. In 1840 Frere presented Marmara with a copy of G. Gesenius's *Lexicon Manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum*. This book, bears the bookplate of John Hookham Frere and the inscription, in Frere's hand, "To the Rev. S. Marmara for the use of his scholars. June 1840".<sup>(37)</sup>

33. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 301–5.

34. G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, London 1948, p. 526.

35. *The Malta Government Gazette* (6 February 1833) p. 41.

36. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 266; A. Cremona, *loc. cit.*, p. 16.

37. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 300–1; Letter Book 1825–36, fol. 96, University Archives, Msida; Courses University/Lyceum 1838, no pagination, University Archives, Msida; Letters July 1833 to May 1835, fol. 229, Records Office, The Palace, Valletta; G. Gesenius. *Lexicon Manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum*, Lipsiae, 1833. Melitensia, University of Malta Library, Msida.

Frere likewise had at heart the study of Greek and was instrumental in establishing the teaching of this language at the Lyceum. Furthermore, he strove to promote the knowledge of the Maltese language and succeeded in making its teaching obligatory in the Primary Schools.<sup>(38)</sup> It was at his instance, too, and at his own expense, that the study of Maltese was introduced into the University of Malta with M.A. Vassalli as its first teacher. He also tried to have Vassalli's Maltese translations of the Gospels printed in Cambridge. When this did not prove possible, Frere endeavoured to persuade the British Governor, General Sir Frederick Ponsonby, to encourage the printing of works in Maltese in our island in accordance with Vassalli's alphabet.

Frere was likewise interested in the Medical School to which he donated before his resignation from the Chairmanship of the Council a number of medical books, to the value of one hundred sterling, acquired from abroad and written mostly in English for the use of the students. On the frontispiece of each book he wrote in his own hand:- *In usum iuventutis medicae artis studiosae dedit J.H. Frere.*<sup>(39)</sup> Some of these books are still among the holdings of the National Library of Malta, such as William Pultney Alison's *Outlines of Physiology and Pathology (Edinburgh and London, 1833)*, John Mason Good's *Study of Medicine (London, 1829)*, and David Craigie's *Elements of General and Pathological Anatomy (Edinburgh, 1828)*. W.P. Alison was Professor of the Institutes of Medicine in the University of Edinburgh. John Mason Good's work, in five volumes, was first published in 1817 and was soon adopted as a textbook "in various medical schools of high reputation" in Great Britain and on the continent. David Craigie was a Fellow of the Edinburgh College of Physicians and Physician to the Edinburgh Infirmary and editor of the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*.

The Maltese Medical Association of his days appointed Frere Honorary Member on 2 October 1843 in appreciation of his wide humanistic culture. He was also enrolled as an active member of the Agrarian Society (16 March 1834).<sup>(40)</sup> He was, in addition, Member of the Permanent Committee of the Government Library, between 1 November 1831 and 1838.<sup>(41)</sup> The bust of Frere still greets the visitor to the National Library. It was presented by one of his nephews, the Rev. E.F. Wayne, in 1877 as a memorial of all that Frere had done for Maltese students.<sup>(42)</sup>

38. G. Clinquant, *loc. cit.*, p. 7.

39. A.V. Laferla, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-8; A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times*, Malta 1940, p. 107; G. Clinquant, *loc. cit.*, p. 6. It has been estimated that 100 pounds sterling in 1833 would now be worth 2875 pounds sterling. P. Cassar, *The John Hookham Frere Memorial Medical Library*, Malta, University Press, 1985.

40. *Storia della societa medica ecc.* p. xii; *The Malta Government Gazette* (14 May 1834) p. 161. This society had been set up with the primary object of providing employment for the poor by bringing into cultivation some of the waste lands in the countryside.

41. *The Malta Government Gazette* (2 November 1831) p. 337; J. Cassar Pullicino, "The University Library 1839-42", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Vol. I (1959) p. 223.

42. C. Mifsud Bonnici, *loc. cit.*, pp. 8-9. The bust is by a member of the Fanzoni family, from Carrara, of whom there were no less than seven sculptors active in the 19th century. See E. Benezit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, Paris, 1976, vol. 14, p. 506. The Rev. E.F. Wayne was the incumbent of Trinity Church, Suema. See *Malta Times*, 24 March 1877, p. 3 & 7 April 1877, p. 2.

Frere amassed a private collection of coins and archeological objects besides a vast library, the nucleus of which he had acquired from a suppressed Benedictine convent in Naples.

He died of apoplexy at Villa Frere on 6 January 1846 at the age of 76 years. His body was exposed to the public view for seven days and on the 14 of the month was carried over the shoulders of his own labourers and buried in the same grave as his wife after a funeral that was attended by the prominent persons of the island and a vast mass of people.<sup>(43)</sup>

#### Political views

The twenty-six years that Frere spent in Malta belonged to an era in political thinking that represented a transition period from aristocracy to incipient democracy in the United Kingdom; an era of religious controversy and of a searching analysis of the British social structure with its poverty, child labour and insanitary slums as exposed by Charles Dickens and Edwin Chadwick.<sup>(44)</sup>

Frere followed these political events in the United Kingdom through correspondence with relatives and friends and through discussions with visitors to our island. In fact it is from his letters and from the memoirs of his contemporaries that we can learn what were his political, philosophical and religious views. From these sources we know that he abhorred tyranny and oppression which led to "one nation or class to dominate over others". This frame of mind determined his attitude towards the colonial administration of the time vis-a-vis the political aspirations of the Maltese people. When, following the agitation for constitutional reforms, a Royal Commission of Inquiry was appointed to advise the British Government Frere hastened to get in touch with the Commissioners who were coming to Malta and did his utmost to help them "towards honest and fair findings particularly in connection with the exclusion of the Maltese from some of the higher government posts".<sup>(45)</sup> While thus aiding political reforms he opposed the use of violence to bring about the needed changes in society as he feared that sudden revolution "led, through a period of anarchy, to despotism more severe than that which originally drove the oppressed to seek change". Very probably he had been disgusted by the excesses of the French Revolution and its aftermath which made him distrust all "those who professed themselves mere mouthpieces of numerical majorities". Although he was an aristocrat and well off, he looked "on rank and property as held in trust on the condition that the classes enjoying them should ever be ready to stake all they possessed to secure the freedom and happiness of their fellow countrymen".

One of the aspects of life in Great Britain that was being hotly debated in his time was the liberty of the press. Frere expressed himself in favour of this freedom; however, he would have imposed one restriction – that is that no one should be allowed to write anonymously. He felt the need for this restraint in order to curb "the daily atrocities" one read in the English journals of his days, a situation that one of his contemporaries in public life had qualified as having become "the scourge of

43. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

44. G.M. Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, pp. 526, 533 & 547–9.

45. C. Mifsud Bonnici, *The Daily Malta Chronicle*, 24 January 1936, p. 6; A.V. Laferla, *op. cit.*, pp. 164–8.



England". It may be noted, with regard to Malta, that the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Affairs of Malta had taken up the liberty of the press as their first subject and that the freedom to print was introduced in our island, with safeguards against its abuse, in Frere's time in 1839.<sup>(46)</sup>

### Religious views

Frere was a Christian embracing the Protestant Church. He was also a freemason having been initiated in the lodge of St. John and St. Paul, based in Valletta, on 27 February 1822; but apart from being its Treasurer (1823) he does not seem to have played any major role in its activities though he was still a member until at least 1843.<sup>(47)</sup> In spite of these links with non-Catholic groups, Frere was not swayed by religious fanaticism or by antagonism towards those who embraced other creeds. This is amply shown by his friendships with the Rev. Serafino Marmara, the Jesuit Luigi Maria Rigord, Abate Giuseppe Zammit and Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana. In fact he showed great deference to the Catholic sentiments of the Maltese even at the risk of endangering his very amicable relations with Gabriel Rossetti with whom he was linked by ties of an old friendship. Rossetti had gone to England as a political refugee from Italy. He left the Catholic Church and became a Protestant. He became highly antagonistic towards the Pope, giving vent to his hostility in his *Spirito antipapale* (*Antipapal Spirit*). He sent this book to Frere to read and offered him further copies but Frere's comment was: "In this island, upon so delicate a subject, I do not even venture, nor indeed do I think it fair, to bring such subject into discussion".<sup>(48)</sup>

Frere was in favour of Catholic Emancipation so much so that his reaction to the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act by Wellington's Ministry in 1829 was: "It ought to have passed long before".<sup>(49)</sup> This Act secured, with few exceptions, the admission of Catholics to both houses of Parliament and to all offices, civil and military, in the United Kingdom.<sup>(50)</sup> In short on questions of religious beliefs he was guided by tolerance towards those who differed from him and he firmly acted on his maxim "that a man holding opposite religious views could be as good a Christian as himself".<sup>(51)</sup>

### Visitors

In Frere's days Malta, besides being a health resort for visitors from Great Britain, was also a halting place for travellers to and from the East.<sup>(52)</sup> Men of distinction – political, literary and social – brought letters of introduction to Frere who, in spite of the retired life which he led, took pleasure in meeting them either at his villa or at the Lazzaretto, as in the case of John Henry Newman (later Cardinal), where they underwent their quarantine before they were allowed free *pratique*.<sup>(53)</sup>

46. The Earl of Ilchester, *op., cit.*, p. 333; A. V. Laferla, *op., cit.*, pp. 164 – 8.

47. A.M. Broadley, *The History of Freemasonry in the District of Malta*, London 1880

48. G. Rossètti, *Sullo spirito antipapale che produsse la Riforma*, Londra, 1832.

C. Mifsud Bonnici, *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (23 January 1936) pp. 8 – 9.

49. *Ibidem*, pp. 8 – 9.

50. A. V. Laferla, *op., cit.*, p. 143.

51. B. Frere, *op., cit.*, pp. 340, 343 & 346.

52. G.H. Festing, *op., cit.*, p. 232.

53. B. Frere, *op., cit.*, pp. 232, 238, 242 & 263.

His villa was also ever open to a number of Maltese men of culture and social prominence. Here are some of the major figures to whom Frere was friend and host – men who could be seen beating their way to Villa Frere or strolling along the loggias and pergolas of its garden or pausing, during their discourses, to survey the idyllic scene rich with the scent of orange blossoms.

#### Gabriele Rossetti

One of the earliest foreign visitors to be welcomed and helped by John Hookham Frere was the Neapolitan man of letters and patriot Gabriele Rossetti (1783 – 1854). The poet had sought safety and refuge in Malta in 1821 after he was condemned to death for taking part in the struggle for Italian independence against Ferdinand the Bourbon, King of the Two Sicilies.

During Rossetti's two-and-a-half years' stay in Malta, Frere "loved him like a brother" and, after Rossetti left Malta, Frere continued to correspond with him.<sup>(54)</sup> On his part, Rossetti never forgot his debt to his British friend. In one of his poems in *La vita mia* he records his deep appreciation of Frere's erudition, generosity, modesty, Christian way of life and "sublime character".<sup>(55)</sup>

#### Angelo de Saavedra

Another poet who was caught up in the political excitement of Europe at the time was the Spanish writer and statesman Angelo de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas (1791 – 1865). He joined the army at seventeen years and fought against the French in the Spanish War of Independence (1808 – 14). He later became a member of the liberal party and was elected to the Spanish Parliament. During the civil war of 1823 against the monarchy he was sentenced to death and had to flee from Spain. He found refuge in Malta in September 1825 and remained here until March 1830.

In Malta he was befriended by Frere who years earlier had translated into English the Spanish medieval epic *Poem of the Cid*.<sup>(56)</sup> Frere placed his rich library at Saavedra's disposal so much so that the latter could study English literature in depth especially the works of William Shakespeare, Walter Scott and George Gordon Byron.

While in our island, the Duke of Rivas composed the poems *El moro esposito*, which he dedicated to Frere, and *El faro de Malta* (*The Malta Lighthouse*, 1827) in which he expressed his profound joy at finding the much sought for security and hospitality on our shores after a stormy crossing from Italy.<sup>(57)</sup> He also took the opportunity to study painting under the Maltese artist Vincenzo Hyzler.

54. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

55. V.M. Pellegrini, "Angelo de Saavedra Duca di Rivas e la sua lirica 'il faro di Malta'", *Il Delfino*, Anno IX, 1979, p. 13.

A. Sautto, "Gabriele Rossetti nell'isola di Malta", *Malta Letteraria* (November 1930), Anno V, p. 321. A. Sautto, "Malta quiete dimora dei patrioti italiani", *Malta Letteraria* (October 1931), Anno VI, p. 289. G. Festing, *op. cit.*, p. 294. G. Rossetti, *La vita mia*, Lanciano 1910, pp. 83 & 334.

56. W.E. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

57. Angelo de Saavedra, *Obras completas* Vol. 2 maoria, 1895, p. 71.

Angelo de Saavedra eventually returned to Spain where he became Head of the Government (1854) and later President of the Council of State (1863). He died in Madrid in 1865.<sup>(58)</sup>

### Sir Walter Scott

An event that highlights Frere's stay in Malta was the visit of Sir Walter Scott (1771 – 1832) to our island from 21 November to 13 December 1831.<sup>(59)</sup> Frere had enjoyed Scott's friendship since at least 1806 and to celebrate Scott's visit, he gave two prizes, out of his own pocket, for the two best Latin poems from university students in honour of Scott. The prizes consisted of "half-a-dozen handsomely bound classics".<sup>(60)</sup>

As England – from where Scott had arrived – was then infected with cholera, the Scottish bard had to spend nine days in quarantine at Fort Manoel, near the Lazzaretto. Frere visited him daily under the prescribed quarantine precautions. There were times, however, when Frere risked being placed in quarantine himself owing to his "habitual absence of mind" and Scott's desire "to shake hands with him at every meeting". In fact it required all the vigilance of the Lazzaretto guards to prevent such manual contacts between the two friends.

When Scott was given *pratique* Frere accompanied him to a sight-seeing tour of Mdina. On their return from the old city they called at the Pieta but Scott did not leave his carriage to enter the villa which was under repair. Frere himself was temporarily living at Sant'Anton Palace, Attard, the country residence of the British Governor of Malta, which was placed at Frere's disposal by the Governor who was away from Malta at the time.<sup>(61)</sup>

Scott had become so enamoured of the exploits of the Knights of St. John that, while undergoing quarantine at Fort Manoel, he set himself to write *The Siege of Malta*. Frere presented him with a set of engravings depicting episodes of the Great Siege of 1565 based on the frescoes painted by Matteo d'Aleccio in the Supreme Council Chamber of the Presidential Palace at Valletta.<sup>(62)</sup>

### Dr. John Davy

Dr. John Davy (1790 – 1868) was the brother of Sir Humphrey Davy, the inventor of the miners' safety lamp. John studied medicine at Edinburgh, joined the Medical Department of the British Army and saw service in Malta for seven years (1828 – 35). During his stay here he treated Sir Walter Scott (1831) and John Henry Newman (later Cardinal) (1833) while they were kept in quarantine on Manoel Island.

58. V.M. Pellegrini, *op., cit.*, p. 12. G. Calabritto, "Il Duca di Rivas". *Malta Letteraria* (November 1931). Anno VI, p. 321. J.J. Sammut, "El faro de Malta by the Duque de Rivas and his Exile in Malta", *Bulletin of the Cultural Institute* (June–July 1955), n. 11.

59. *The Malta Government Gazette* (14 December 1831) p. 202.

60. J.C. Frere, *op., cit.*, pp. 236 & 238.

61. J.C. Lockhart, *op., cit.*, pp. 289, 292–3 & 310. G. Clinquant, *op., cit.*, p. 6 ff. C. Mifsud Bonnici, *Sir Walter Scott in Malta*, Malta 1932. D.E. Sultana, *The Siege of Malta Rediscovered*, Edinburgh 1977, p. 39.

62. D.E. Sultana, *op., cit.*, p. 47.

He wrote on the natural history, geology, agriculture, climate and medical organisation of Malta (1842).<sup>(63)</sup> He was responsible for the establishment in 1832 of the first dispensaries – known in Maltese as *il berga* – in our towns and villages for the treatment of the poor.

At the General Military Hospital at Valletta, where he was stationed, he set up the first ever laboratory for physiological, anatomical and pathological research in Malta, publishing the results of his enquiries in a two-volume work entitled *Researches – Physiological and Anatomical* (London, 1839).

Apart from being close friends, Davy and Frere were both members of the *Società medica d'incoraggiamento di Malta* and of the University Council, in which latter capacity they were involved in the running of the Medical School.<sup>(64)</sup>

Davy's friendship with Frere was kept up after he left Malta in 1835 and he continued to correspond with Frere on the natural history and geology of our island.<sup>(65)</sup>

#### Louis Maria Rigord

Louis Maria Rigord (1737 – 1823), the son of Joseph and of Clotilde Isouard, was born in Malta. After attending the Jesuit College at Valletta, he continued his studies at Palermo and, after living for a number of years in Rome, returned to Malta about 1800.

He is the author of Italian and Latin lyrics and elegies; and also of epigrams satirising contemporary political and ecclesiastical personalities. He translated Catullus in Italian – a work which was originally published in Rome in 1774 but was reprinted in Malta in 1839. This edition was dedicated by the publishers to his "most beloved friend" John Hookham Frere "as a token of their esteem".<sup>(66)</sup>

Frere and Rigord were so well versed in Latin that they greeted each other in distichs and jambics. In one of these exchanges leavened by a fine sense of humour, Rigord, punning on Frere's surname (French word for "brother"), told him that they were brothers not only in their descent from Adam but also in the world of poetry. Frere rejoined that if they were brothers, he (Frere) was the junior of the two not only in age but also in ingenuity.<sup>(67)</sup>

#### Mikiel Anton Vassalli

Among the visitors who crossed the threshold of Villa Frere, Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764 – 1829) takes pride of place. In fact Vassalli's lasting friendship with

63. J. Davy, *Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta*, London 1842.

64. Government Letters 1823 – 32, fol. 172.

Letter Book 1825 – 36, fol. 67, University Archives, Msida.

65. P. Cassar, *Physiological and Pathological Research at the General Military Hospital of Valletta in the Early Nineteenth Century* (In preparation).

66. C. Valerio *Catullo tradotto dal Padre Luigi Rigord*, Malta 1939.

67. W.E. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 310 – 11; A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times*, Malta 1940, p. 97; F.G. Borg, "Luigi Rigord", *Il Veliero*, Marzo 1974, Np. 2, p. 3; F.G. Borg, *L'abate Luigi Rigord e la poesia lirica a Malta nel settecento*, M.A. Thesis, 1972, fols. 77/78, University Library, Msida; G.A. Vassallo, "Luigi Rigord", *L'arte*, 22 June 1964, p. 2; *L'amico della patria*, 19 May 1840, p. 18; Ms. 85, National Malta Library, fol. 91.

Frere was the only bright feature of his life during the nine years that preceded his death in 1829. Frere recognised the deep scholarship and integrity of character of Vassalli of whom he thought so highly that he extended his patronage for the man in spite of the social gap between them and the prejudices that existed against Vassalli who was "highly suspected by both the civil and the ecclesiastical authorities"<sup>(68)</sup> on account of his earlier pro-French sympathies and his later associations with Protestants in Malta. Vassalli lived in obscurity and in poverty and Frere helped him financially. Vassalli on his part was grateful to his patron to whom he dedicated his collection of Maltese proverbs<sup>(69)</sup> which he had been gathering since 1783 but which he could only bring to completion in 1828 thanks to the patronage of Frere.

It was probably through his association with Frere that Vassalli met the Rev. W. Jowett of the Church Missionary Society in 1823, an encounter which led to Vassalli's translation of the Gospels and the Acts in Maltese.

Susan also befriended Vassalli and tried to obtain the help of her other brother, Dr. William Frere, Master of Downing College, Cambridge, regarding the printing of Vassalli's grammar and dictionary.<sup>(70)</sup>

When Vassalli died in poverty at Pieta, where he lived, on the 12 January 1829, it was Frere and other Anglican friends of the Maltese writer who subscribed to defray the funeral expenses and to lay him to rest in one of the burial grounds that once lay under the Floriana bastions on the escarpment of Marsamxett. It was they, too, who planned to erect a small monument over his grave with an inscription approved by Frere. It was also Frere and a member of the Church Missionary Society who took care of and educated Vassalli's three teenage sons.<sup>(71)</sup>

#### Vincent Borg

Vincent Borg, nicknamed *Braret* (1767 – 1837) played a significant role at the time of the insurrection of the Maltese in the countryside against the French occupying forces in 1798 – 1800. He was Head of the Battalion of Gharghur and the representative of Birkirkara in the National Congress. He even offered his own house for use as an emergency hospital for the sick and wounded of his village. When the French left Malta he was accorded a post in the administrative life of the island by Sir Alexander Ball in recognition of his services to the national cause and was made a Knight of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in 1833 by the British monarch.<sup>(72)</sup>

Frere had a particular warmth of friendship and admiration for Vincent Borg so much so that when the latter died in August 1837, Frere composed the Latin epitaph over his tomb in the church of Birkirkara recording Borg's active part among the

68. C. Mifsud Bonnici, *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (23 January 1936) p. 8.

69. M.A. Vassalli, *Motti, aforismi e proverbi maltesi*, Malta 1828.

70. G.P. Badger, *A Letter on the Eligibility of the Maltese Dialect as a Written Medium of Instruction in the Government Primary Schools Addressed to H.E. Sir H.F. Bouverie*, Malta 1841; A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times*, pp. 104 – 6 & 224. *Ibidem*, pp. 115, 117 & 223; P. Cassar, *The Quest of Mikiel Anton Vassalli*, Malta 1981, pp. 24 – 5, 46, 52 & 58.

72. A. Cremona, *ibidem*, p. 95.

insurgents against the French and his material contributions in moneys and grain for his starving Maltese compatriots.<sup>(73)</sup>

#### Bishop Francis Xavier Caruana

Monsignor Francis Xavier Caruana (1759–1847) was chosen leader of the Maltese insurgents during the revolt of the country people against the French troops already referred to. On the departure of the French from Malta, Caruana was instrumental in securing the protection of the British monarchy for the Maltese Islands. In 1800 he was appointed Rector of the University – a post which he relinquished in 1822 to become Archdeacon of the Cathedral Church. In 1831 he was raised to the Bishopric of Malta and Gozo dying in this office at the age of eighty-eight years in 1847.

As Rector he promoted the development of Fine Arts by establishing art classes at the university and providing scholarships for promising young Maltese artists to study abroad. Among his proteges was the architect Giorgio Pullicino who designed the Doric entrance gate of the University in St. Paul's Street, Valletta.

Like Vincenzo Borg, Caruana was an intimate friend of Frere.<sup>(74)</sup>

#### Giuseppe Zammit (Brighella)

A literary figure who enjoyed the friendship and esteem of Frere and whose spirit hovers over Villa Frere and its garden was the satirical poet Abate Giuseppe Zammit (Brighella) (1802–90). He had been a pupil of Luigi Maria Rigord, already mentioned, and earned a European fame as a Latin epigrammatist.

When Sir Walter Scott visited Malta, Zammit composed two Latin odes in his honour. He dedicated one of them to Frere, modestly confessing his unworthiness to sing the paeans of such a bard as Scott and entreating Frere to take "the harp and compose a worthier song" himself.

When Frere died in 1846, Zammit expressed his sorrow in a Latin elegy – *In funere Ioannis Hookham Frere viri doctissimi epicedium*.<sup>(75)</sup>

Zammit is also the author of a short Latin poem – *In villa amici* – evocative of the idyllic and serene scene of a luxuriant garden. Very likely the garden is none other than that of Villa Frere.<sup>(76)</sup>

73. G. Clinquant, *op. cit.*, p. 13; B. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 264 & 266; W.E. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

74. A. Cremona, *ibidem*, p. 98; S.M. Zarb, "Commemoration of Mgr. F.X. Caruana", *Scientia*, 1948, Vol. 14, p. 9. R. Bonnici Cali, "Mgr. F.X. Caruana, Maecenas of Fine Arts", *Scientia*, 1948, Vol. 14, p. 9.

75. G. Zammit, *Carmina et Inscriptiones*, Malta 1864, pp. 15 & 27; R. Mifsud Bonnic, *Dizzjunarju Bijo-Bibliografiku nazzjonali*, Malta 1960–68; V. Frenzo Azzopardi, *Abate Giuseppe Zammit, Malta Letteraria*, January 1931, Anno VI, p. 1; V. Frenzo Azzopardi, "In calobiotum epigrammata centum", *Malta Letteraria (nuova serie)*, Anno VII (September 1932) p. 259; V. Frenzo Azzopardi, "Giuseppe Zammit e i suoi cento sonetti giocosi", *Melita* (November 1932) p. 232.

76. G. Zammit, *Carmina et Inscriptiones*, p. 18.

**George Grognet de Vassé**

Another prominent personality in the Maltese artistic sphere who was closely associated with Frere was the architect and engineer George Grognet de Vassé (1774–1862) who designed the domed church of Mosta and wrote an extensive treatise on the sunken continent of Atlantis.

In his meetings with Frere, Grognet de Vasse conversed on such topics as philosophy, archaeology and politics. It was his intention to publish the contents of these conversations under the title of *Dialoghi filosofici, archeologici e politici tra il fu sapiente Lord Occam Freire (sic) inglese e tra l'architetto autore dell'Atlantide*.<sup>(77)</sup> Unfortunately I have found no indication that these *Dialoghi* were ever published nor have I succeeded in locating any manuscript record of them.

**Dr. Giuseppe Maria Stilon**

A prominent physician of the time who was very close to Frere especially in the final years of this scholar's life, was Dr. Giuseppe Maria Stilon (1785–1848). Indeed this doctor was Frere's medical attendant at his death.<sup>(78)</sup>

Dr. Stilon was an Italian. He studied medicine at Naples and was in practice in Calabria at the time when Southern Italy was overrun by French military forces. He was pressed into the French service but at the Battle of Maida he was captured by the British and in due course reached England where he eventually gained his freedom and joined the British naval medical service. After serving at sea he was appointed surgeon to the Dockyard and the Naval Hospital (Bichi) at Malta. In 1827 he obtained the doctorate of the University of Malta and, on retiring from the navy, entered private practice. During the cholera epidemic of 1837 he was senior physician of the emergency hospital set up in Valletta and afterwards published his observations on the outbreak in a booklet entitled *Sul colera morbo* (Malta, 1839).

He died at Valletta in 1848 and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery in the same grave as his wife.<sup>(79)</sup>

**Dr. Cleardo Naudi**

Dr. Cleardo Naudi (1780–1837) was the brother of Dr. Agostino Naudi (1783–1830) who at the beginning of the last century taught medicine and surgery privately to a number of students who qualified from our university in 1819.

Cleardo occupied the Chair of Chemistry between 1805 and 1834 and the Chair of Natural History from 1824 to 1829 at our university. In 1812 he went to London and for twenty-one months attended lectures in medicine, surgery and chemistry at St. Thomas's and at Guy's Hospitals.<sup>(80)</sup>

77. Ms. 1126, fol. 128, National Malta Library.

78. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

79. *Storia della società medica ecc.* p. 222.

80. P. Cassar, "Medicine in Malta in 1800–1850", *The St. Luke's Hospital Gazette*, 1971, Vol. 6, p. 3.

In 1824 he left the Catholic Church and collaborated with the Anglican Church Missionary Society in the dissemination of the Bible in the Mediterranean. He was the first Maltese to suggest the translation of the Bible in Maltese and actually began doing so himself with the Gospel of St. John sometime before 1811. He died on 30 July 1837 having fallen a victim to his professional zeal and humanitarian feelings during the cholera epidemic of that year.<sup>(81)</sup>

#### Dr. Giuseppe Clinquant

Dr. Giuseppe Clinquant (1812 – 68) came to know Frere in the last years of the latter's life. Clinquant had a varied medical career. After qualifying he visited Italy, France and England for post-graduate studies. He then served for eleven years on the staff of the Civil Hospital of Valletta, then the general hospital of the island, before passing on as Assistant to the Physician of the Mental Hospital. During the cholera epidemic of 1837 he ministered to the needs of well over seven hundred elderly persons isolated at Fort Ricasoli. He was later transferred to the Central Hospital at Floriana where he dedicated himself to the practice of obstetrics until 1875 when he was appointed Medical Superintendent at Santo Spirito Hospital, at Rabat, in which post he died in 1868.

Like Frere he was a member of the *Società medica d'incoraggiamento di Malta*. In 1853 he joined the National Society of Medicine of Marseilles. The following year he was appointed member of the Malta University Council and Examiner in medicine.

He has left us an informative biography of John Hookham Frere which he read at a meeting of the *Società medica d'incoraggiamento di Malta* on 2 February 1846 in commemoration of Frere's death a month earlier.<sup>(82)</sup>

#### Villa Frere and Garden

Villa Frere has been described as having been outwardly "an unpretentious" building and as having consisted originally of two or three separate houses thrown into one. It faced the waters of Marsamxett Harbour extending for some distance along the road that formed part of the quay. It was a two-storey structure. On the ground floor was a large hall with an arched roof supported by caryatids of giants and titans at the angles. On the upper or principal storey were the sitting room and bedrooms. The floors were of polished stone stained in various patterns.<sup>(83)</sup>

Behind the house, Frere created a garden from the bare rock by digging out terraces and filling them with soil spending thousands of pounds in the process. It is said that the project was begun partly to provide work for a number of unemployed labourers at a time when work was scarce and poverty widespread.

While laying down the garden, a large funnel shaped fissure containing clay was opened up accidentally at the top of the hill near where the Temple now stands. It was excavated to a depth of 63 feet (19 metres) but as the sea level was reached,

81. *The Malta Government Gazette* (2 August 1837) p. 277. K. Sant, *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti 1810–1850*, Malta 1975, pp. 3, 23 & 45. C. Sant, *The Translation of the Bible and the Maltese Language*, Malta 1975, p. 25.

82. N. Zammit, *In morte del Dr. Giuseppe Clinquant avvenuta il 26 Aprile 1868*, Malta 1868. G. Clinquant, *Biografia del Molt'Onorabile John Hookham Frere*, Malta 1846.

83. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 258.



further digging had to be given up as salt water rushed in.<sup>(84)</sup> This "discovery" made a great stir at the time. Frere wrote an account of it in a letter to Dr. John Davy which was published, with an Italian translation, in the *Malta Government Gazette*. Frere invited "scientific strangers" who happened to be passing through Malta to visit the spot "while the traces and everything are fresh and distinct". The public, too, were offered the opportunity to visit the villa to see the fissure on Sundays and festas by applying to his gardener, Giovanni Moretti, *Vicolo Secondo, No. 2, Molo della Pieta*, at the rear of the Villa.<sup>(85)</sup>

A close friend of Frere – Giorgio Grognet de Vassé – had propounded the theory that the Maltese Islands were the remains of the submerged continent of Atlantis through which flowed the river of the Elysian Fields. The Grand Harbour was supposed to receive the waters of the rivers Acheron and Phlegeton while the spring discovered in Frere's garden was, in Grognet's view, an outlet of the river Styx.

Frere also thought it fit to commemorate his "discovery" by a Latin inscription near the opening of the fissure.<sup>(86)</sup> This inscription is no longer extant and the garden – or what remains of it – is now derelict; but it takes little effort of the imagination to visualise it in its original glory when one reads its description recorded in 1930 when this "garden of delight" was still in its hey-day.

The garden rose from a courtyard at the back of the villa in a series of terraces at varying levels to its highest point on the crest of Gwardamanga Hill where the Nursing School and other adjacent buildings of the St. Luke's Hospital complex now stand. This summit was reached from the rear of the villa by shallow flights of steps and pathways that climbed upwards along the natural contours of the terrain. The steps were flanked by elegant balustrades and by large pots with flowering plants.

There were ornate stone benches and seats and rows of columns supporting trellises covered with creepers. Water was plentiful enough to irrigate the flower beds and to fill ponds and supply fountains. Carved heads stood over water cisterns dug out of the rock, the carvings being of "flowering patterns and in excellent taste" from the hands of the Maltese craftsman who "is born a builder and carver in stone".<sup>(86)</sup>

Among the luxuriant vegetation were, besides ragged pines, carob, cypress, olive and fig trees. To the westward was an orange grove. Geraniums, arum lillies and roses filled the flower beds scattered here and there on the level areas of the terraces.

The highest point of the garden was crowned by a Doric-styled stone structure known as the Temple. Thankfully this dominant and strikingly elegant feature is among the few well-preserved architectural elements that still stand. Beyond and behind the Temple were squares and walks with pergolas supported on long lines of stone columns; and paths shaded by climbing vines and by the spreading green foliage of olive, oak and pine trees. From these high terraces, one of which was known as the Turret, one's eyes roamed over Pieta, Msida, Manoel Island and

84. C. Congreve, "The Villa Frere, Malta", *Country Life*, 5 July 1930, p. 12.

85. *The Malta Government Gazette* (27 July 1836) p. 249.

86. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 258 – 60; Appendix I with tree translation. G. Grognet, *Epilogo dell'Atlantiae*, Malta 1854, p. 28.

Marsamxett Harbour with Valletta and its fortifications and the open sea as a background. If you turned your back to this scene, you were regaled with an extensive view of the countryside as far away as distant Mdina perched on its high hill and silhouetted against the skyline.

Following Frere's death the villa and garden passed into the ownership of his wife's niece Lady Honoria Chichester, the wife of Lord Hamilton Chichester, who since the death of Susan had been seeing to John Hookham Frere's comfort during his subsequently lonely life and advancing years.<sup>(87)</sup> After Lord Hamilton Chichester's demise in 1854, his widow continued to reside in the villa which in time became the rendezvous for all distinguished visitors to the island. In 1860 the "magnificent house with garden and stabling complete" was advertised for letting but it appears that it remained untenanted for a long time so that the garden became "almost a wilderness" until 1876 when the property passed into the hands of Count Rosario Messina who "brought some order out of chaos" in the grounds of the villa.<sup>(88)</sup>

In 1886 the premises and garden were occupied by Captain Edward Noble Price R.N. who married the Count's daughter Josephine. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the grounds of Villa Frere figured among a number of large private gardens that were renowned for their "very extensive collections of plants rivalling those of a botanic garden". Among its various kinds of trees the villa had a fine specimen of *Dracena drago* or Dragon's Blood Tree, a native of the Canary Islands. It rose to a height of about eight metres with a girth of three metres and was estimated to have been about hundred years old in 1926. A resin obtained from cracks in its stem formed part of the old *materia medica*, under the name of *Sanguis draconis*, and was used as an astringent.<sup>(89)</sup>

A visitor in 1933 wrote of the villa as having "an alluring setting" and was struck by the beauty of a horizontal sundial of stone borne on a sculptured pedestal. The garden was still maintained in a flourishing state by three gardeners in full-time employment until at least 1939.<sup>(90)</sup>

In the meantime, on 5th April 1930, the foundation stone of a new general hospital – the present St. Luke's Hospital – was laid on a site acquired from various owners and adjoining the grounds of Villa Frere.<sup>(91)</sup> Three years later, at the sitting of the Legislative Assembly of the 28th April 1933, the Hon. Prof. R.V. Galea, Professor of Engineering and Architecture at the University and former Minister of Health, suggested that "both from the historical point of view and from the point of the interests of the patients, it would be an excellent idea if the

87. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 258, 270 & 326.

88. *The Malta Observer* (8 October 1860) p. 4; E.N. Price, "Villa Frere", *Studies* (Cairo), 1924, Vol. 11, p. 87.

89. A. Macmillan (ed.), *Malta and Gibraltar*, London 1915, p. 237. E.N. Price, "Our Public Gardens", *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (29 April 1926).

90. C. Congreve, *Loc. cit.*, p. 12. W.H. Hamer, "The Miracle of the Sun Dial", *Journal of the Malta Univ. Literary Society* (April 1933) p. 189; Mrs. T. Crabtree, personal communication, 1984.

91. "Report of the Comptroller of Charitable Institutions for 1929-30", *Malta Government Gazette Supplement* (14 November 1930) p. 1285; *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (7 April 1930) pp. 3 & 7.

government were to take (Villa Frere) in hand and at some future date ... incorporate it in the lands of the hospital for the use of the patients" without, however, changing "the features of that garden"; on the contrary, he continued, "its present features will be protected and the government will be able to make that use of it which it will consider proper." This suggestion was well received by the Assembly and especially by the Hon. Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici LL.D., Minister for the Treasury, who favoured the acquisition of Villa Frere – known also as the "house of Captain Price" – for its historical associations; and by the Hon. Dr. Giovanni Adami LL.D., Minister for Public Works, who informed the Assembly that the matter had already been taken into consideration. The villa was acquired towards the end of 1936 but it was only on the 1st January 1940 that it finally came into the possession of government following the death of Mrs. J. Price, widow of Capt. Edward Noble Price.<sup>(92)</sup> It was intended to use the villa as residence for the Medical Superintendent when the new hospital was opened but the proposal fell through.

The villa and garden suffered extensive damage during the war years 1940 – 45, so much so that when in 1947 it was suggested to turn the place into Nurses Quarters for St. Luke's Hospital, the idea was dropped for various reasons amongst which was the state of dilapidation of the premises.

In May 1948 the villa was given in lease for use as a clothing factory and by April 1957 a Government School was being erected in a part of the garden.

In early 1959 there was an idea of demolishing the villa and building a block of flats on the site but this plan was not proceeded with. In December of the same year a short annotation in a local newspaper drew attention to the state of "advanced destruction" of the garden and appealed to the Colonial Government of the time to save "at least the villa for the Maltese nation".<sup>(93)</sup> The Antiquities Committee reacted to this appeal by strongly recommending to government "the restoration and preservation of Villa Frere and the annexed garden" in view of their historical significance;<sup>(94)</sup> however no action was taken apart from the erection of a boundary wall across that part of the garden behind the Nursing School so that the rest of the grounds and the villa came to lie outside the bounds of St. Luke's Hospital.

Villa Frere again engaged the attention of the Antiquities Committee on June 24, 1968 when an application was submitted to government for the demolition of the Villa and the erection of a hotel in its place. The Committee again expressed its unanimous opposition to "any interference with the building in view of its architectural and historical importance". The Minister of Education, Culture and Tourism of the time not only concurred with the decision of the Antiquities Committee but suggested that steps "be taken to renovate the building or prevent further deterioration"<sup>(95)</sup> but this reinstatement proposed by the Minister appears not to have been proceeded with any further.

92. *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 22, pp. 1187 & 1191. *Senate and Legislative Assembly Debates*, Vol. 5, Sittings of 23 & 27 March 1933, p. 2. Notarial Deed of 14 November 1936; *Times of Malta* (8 July 1939) p. 10; *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (8 July 1939) p. 4; Mrs. T. Crabtree, personal communication 1984.

93. *Malta Tagħna* (5 December 1959).

94. Minutes of Meeting of 18 December 1959.

95. Minutes of Meeting of 27 June 1968.

Three years later there was a revival of interest in the villa when a request was made to government to convert the site into a block of flats, but this time, too, the scheme came to naught.<sup>(96)</sup>

#### **The Villa and garden to-day**

The external facade of the villa has been recently redecorated but the previously gracious and idyllic garden of the 1930s now presents a sight of dereliction. Weeds have obliterated and obstructed past passages, steps and ponds. The fountains are now dry and fragments of stones and fallen branches clutter the site. The only neat stretch of soil that catches the eye lies on the highest part of the grounds – on the upper terrace – at the back of the Nursing School from where a narrow passage runs in a straight line from a small iron gate to the back of the Temple. The rest of the grounds – now in private hands – slide down from the boundary wall already mentioned to a disused farmhouse and a narrow passage that leads to the wharf at Pieta near the Villa.

#### **The Temple**

This is a columnar structure of pale honey-coloured stone built in the Greek neo-classical manner. It is erected on a 2 metres high foundation wall or base of huge blocks of stones fitted together without mortar. It is of an ellipsoidal shape, the longest axis of the floor measuring about 5.8 metres. Its frontage faces Pieta and its rear looks towards the back of the Nursing School building.

The roof consists of an entablature made up of a plain architrave, a frieze decorated with tryglyphs and a cornice crowning the whole. Internally the ceiling is bordered with an intertwined strip. The roof is supported by rows of columns and pillars, the ones at the back forming a portico of a double row of six plain and unfluted columns without a base.

We have already referred to the role that classical literature played in education and culture in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This classical bias was also mirrored in the architectural style of that period as inspired by ancient Greek temple designs that had influenced Europe since at least 1750. This reversion to Hellenistic forms was stimulated by publications about the antiquities of Greece, Palmyra and Baalbek and lasted until the middle of the 19th century. A few public buildings in Valletta reflect this trend as accomplished by the architect Giorgio Pullicino (1780 – 1852) such as Sir Alexander Ball's Monument at the Lower Barracca (1810), the portico of the Main Guard (1814) and the Doric entrance gate to the Valletta University (1824) with a Greek inscription on the entablature.<sup>(97)</sup> It is to be noted that these structures, except the University Gate, preceded Frere's coming to Malta. Frere's Temple, which was being erected by 1835<sup>(98)</sup> appears to have been one of the very late, if not the last, examples of this neo-classicist influence on Maltese architecture. Frere alludes to the construction of the Temple in a letter to his brother

96. Minutes of Meeting of 10 November 1971.

97. M. Buhagiar, "Neo-classicist Architecture of the Early British Period", *Heritage*, No. 26 (August 1979) p. 509. M. Ellul, *Heritage of an Island: Malta*, Malta 1975, p. 75.

98. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, pp. 258 & 270.

Edward of April 9, 1835 in which he writes that he was runing himself with the building expenses of the villa and garden and that his architect had persuaded him to erect a "small Doric temple" the cost of which, according to the architect's estimate, was not to be less than fifteen pounds.<sup>(99)</sup> He does not say who was the architect. The Temple and its designer have so far eluded the scholars who have studied the neo-classic period in Maltese architecture. Was it by Giorgio Grognet de Vassè, who was an intimate friend of Frere and who had prepared a project for a country house with "all delightful features" for its garden?<sup>(100)</sup> Or was it by Giorgio Pullicino to whom various architectural works in the Doric style have been attributed? Or was it by Col. Whitmore, Royal Engineers, who was a friend of, and belonged to the same masonic lodge, as, Frere?

The Temple is approached by two flights of steps, one on each side of its massive base in the centre of which is an arched low opening leading into a blind passage beneath the floor.

In its pristine state this exedra-like structure provided a cool shady shelter on sunny summer days for those who cherished solitude and shunned the intrusion of the world; a retreat for relaxation at sunset enlivened only by the evensong of the many birds that found sanctuary in the surrounding trees. It must have been utterly enchanting on moonlit nights for giving free reins to one's fancies and reveries.

By the side of the Temple is a deep chasm hewn out of the rock of a roughly rectangular shape and measuring about 4.3 by 9.8 metres at its opening. Some 13 metres away is a circular opening surrounded by a low wall filled with stones and rubbish. Its internal diameter is 4.3 metres.

Among other surviving architectural features that still retain their nineteenth century flavour is a long straight wall built of accurately placed ashlar stone fragments. This wall ends in a massive tower-like octagonal structure capped by a platform which originally formed an elevated belvedere. It was reached by a narrow passage running along the top of the wall. Originally this passage was flanked, on each side, by a balustrade which also encircled the platform. Parallel to this wall, and at some distance from it, is another wall consisting of a series of arched recesses neatly filled with ashlar. Along the top of this wall is a cornice supported on small brackets.

Photographs of the garden and belvedere taken in the thirties show a number of carved stone benches. None of them are to be seen on the site to-day but I have traced fragments of them in the public garden behind *Casa Leoni* at Santa Vennera.

#### **Plea for Restoration**

What remains of the garden and its structural features, in government hands, merits restoration and preservation. It should not prove difficult to clear the area of debris and weeds and replant it. The restoration and repair of its few architectural elements should entail no great effort or expense. A few replicas of the original stone benches can be easily reproduced from photographs and placed in the garden as they formed an integral feature of its layout. Apart from the importance of the site itself,

99. B. Frere, *op. cit.*, p. 270. It is estimated that 15 pounds sterling in 1835 would be equivalent to 435 pounds sterling to-day.

we have all become conscious of the role that open spaces of greenery and trees play in the maintenance of a healthy and beautiful environment. The provision of bird sanctuaries is also very much in the public eye. There is no doubt that the restoration and preservation of the Frere garden will meet these needs besides enlivening what is now a dreary and ugly area in the grounds of the St. Luke's Hospital complex and turning it into a picturesque and charming site.

If for no other reason what has survived of Frere's garden deserves to be rehabilitated in order to conserve a rare aspect of our nineteenth century cultural and social life that has now receded into history. In fact the villa and the garden recall a web of literary patronage and intellectual links forged between the Right Hon. John Hookham Frere and a host of famous contemporary Maltese and foreign personalities at the centre of whom was none other than that national figure Mikiel Anton Vassalli.

### **The Msida Bastion Cemetery**

The Msida Bastion Cemetery overlooks Marsamxett Harbour along that part of the fortifications of Floriana that extends from the Hotel Excelsior to the old *Ospizio* building. This Protestant graveyard was the only British cemetery in Malta up to 1886, the earliest burial taking place in 1806.<sup>(101)</sup>

It has been described thus by a visitor in 1840: It "is situated on the north-western declivity between Valletta and Floriana ... Numerous and some well-executed monuments embellish the place and many shrubs and trees connected with the silence generally prevailing along the Quarantine Harbour have rendered it an attractive promenade to the mind anxious to retire for a moment from the great bustle of earthly cares and anxieties". The orderly and well-cared for appearance of this cemetery is well shown in a litograph accompanying this description.<sup>(102)</sup>

To day the graveyard offers a vivid contrast to its former neat upkeep by the widespread devastation and wild aspect that strike the visitor as soon as he enters the place. The erosion from the weather and the deterioration from neglect of the stone monuments, that once graced this burial ground, had already reduced it to a desolate state of disrepair by the third decade of the present century, the process of decay having commenced during the course of the previous fifty years.<sup>(103)</sup> However the majority of the inscriptions were still legible until 1911,<sup>(104)</sup> but by 1930 they had become undecipherable. The damage was augmented by the blasting effects of explosive bombs that hit the area during the Second World War. Urns, obelisks and columns have been overturned; tombstones have been broken and uprooted; monuments have been flattened and what remains of them is partially hidden by wildly growing shrubs and tall grasses. Clumps of cypress trees still keep sentinel over this resting place which despite its dereliction and desolation is still an oasis of serenity and reverent silence.

101. C. Zammit, *Survey and Report. Msida Bastion Cemetery, 1930*, Typescript, Museum Department, pp. 2 & 17.

102. *The Malta Penny Magazine* (31 October 1840) p. 237.

103. A.V. Laferla, "Malta a Hundred Years Ago", *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (14 February 1931).

104. *The Daily Malta Chronicle* (13 April 1911) p. 1.

To the visitor to-day what arrests the eye is the presence and size of two well preserved tombs of white marble enclosed by iron railings – that of Susan Frere as soon as you step inside the cemetery and that of her brother John and his wife Elizabeth at a short distance from Susan's grave to your left. These tombs have stood up remarkably well to the ravages of time, weather and war. Both tombs have simple but elegant carved panels of leaves and rosettes and bear inscriptions in deeply incised lettering which testify to the skilful workmanship of the craftsmen of a century ago.

There are two inscriptions on the tomb of Susan, one in English and another in Latin both composed by her brother John.<sup>(105)</sup>

The inscriptions on the tomb of John and Elizabeth are in Latin. That of Elizabeth extols the virtues of this lady. The epitaph of John, acknowledges his literary merits, humanity and generosity.<sup>(106)</sup>

These two monuments deserve careful preservation for they are of great artistic value the like of which we are not likely to see elsewhere in Malta. Their inscriptions are the only perfectly legible memorials that have survived in this graveyard – all written records of the burials at the Msida Bastion Cemetery having been destroyed many years ago.<sup>(107)</sup>

It is not improbable that Mikiel Anton Vassalli is buried in this cemetery.

## HOOKHAM FRERE IN MALTA

## APPENDIX I

INGREDERE HOSPES  
 SUMMUM NATURAE MIRACULUM VISURUS!  
 VORAGINEM ASPICES  
 DENSISSIMA DUDUM ARGILLA OPPLETAM  
 QUA EXHAUSTA  
 MANIFESTA TORRENTIS AQUAE VESTIGIA  
 DETECTA SUNT.

AB HAC BOREALI PARTE IRRUENTIS  
 UBI NUNC SCILICET SINUS MARIS EST  
 OLIM CONTINENS TERRA EXTITERAT:

QUO MAGIS MIRARE  
 IN TENACI ILLA ARGILLA  
 INTER SAXA

ROTANTIBUS AQUIS,  
 TRITA ET ROTUNDATA  
 AD PROFUNDITATEM XV PEDUM  
 DURIOR LAPIS INVENTUS EST  
 OPIFICIO HUMANO, PROCUL DUBIO,  
 ELABORATUS!

HOC TE NESCIRE NOLUIT  
 QUI HUNC LABOREM EXANTLAVIT,  
 COMODUMQUE TIBI INGRESSUM,

EXCISA RUPE,  
 PATEFECIT

J.H. FRERE

NATIONE ANGLUS HUISCE INSULAE  
 PER COMPLURES ANNOS INCOLA  
 MDCCCXXXIX

(B. Frere. *The Works of the Rt. Hon. John Hookham Frere*, London, 1874, Vol. I, p. 258).

*Free translation.*

ENTER GUEST  
 TO BEHOLD A VERY GREAT WONDER OF NATURE!  
 YOU WILL SEE A CHASM  
 FORMERLY FILLED WITH VERY DENSE CLAY  
 WHICH, WHEN REMOVED, REVEALED  
 EVIDENT VESTIGES OF A STREAM OF WATER  
 RUSHING IN FROM THIS NORTHERN SIDE  
 THAT IS WHERE ONCE WAS AN EXTENTION  
 BUT NOW IS THE INLET OF THE SEA.  
 EVEN MORE ASTONISHING IS THE FACT  
 THAT, AMONG THE STONES THAT HAD BEEN RUBBED  
 AND ROUNDED BY THE WHIRLING WATERS,  
 A HARDER PIECE OF STONE,  
 UNDOUBTEDLY WORKED BY HUMAN CRAFTSMANSHIP,  
 WAS FOUND AT A DEPTH OF FIFTEEN FEET.



JOHN HOOKHAM FRERE  
 AN ENGLISHMAN WHO HAS LIVED ON THIS ISLAND  
 FOR MANY YEARS  
 WISHES YOU TO KNOW  
 THAT HE UNDERTOOK THE EXCAVATION OF THE SITE  
 AND CUT THE ROCK  
 TO OPEN UP  
 THIS EASY ACCESS FOR YOU  
 1839

## APPENDIX II

WORKS BY JOHN HOOKHAM FRERE IN THE MALTA NATIONAL  
 LIBRARY AND THE MALTA UNIVERSITY  
 LIBRARY.

**Malta National Library, Valletta.**

1. *The Acharnians, The Knights, The Birds*,  
 Malta, Printed at the Government Press, 1839.  
 Presented by Chev. Han. P. Scicluna, 1941. BD.4.57.
2. *The Frogs*,  
 Printed by W. Nicol, 60, Pall Mall, 1839.  
 Bound with *The Acharnians, The Knights and The Birds*. BM.B.56.  
 The title page of *The Acharnians* is inscribed in Frere's hand: "Respectfully presented to the  
 Public Library of Malta, 1840".  
 The title page of *The Frogs* is inscribed in Frere's hand: "Printed for private distribution and  
 respectfully presented to the Public Library of Malta by J.H. Frere May 1840".
3. *Theognis Restitutus. The Personal History of the Poet Theognis*.  
 Malta, 1842, BM.B.59.  
 The title page does not bear the name of the author in print; the authorship being added in  
 manuscript in ink, though not in Frere's hand, as "By the Right Hon.ble John H. Frere".
4. *Plays of Aristophanes, Sophocles and Euripides. Translated by John Hookham Frere*, London, 1886.  
 Lm.2.4.
5. *The Acharnians and Other Plays of Aristophanes Translated by J. Hookham Frere*, Vol. I. London,  
 Everyman's Library, 1917. PE.5.68.
6. *The Frogs and Three Other Plays of Aristophanes Translated by Frere*, Hickie, Mitchell and  
 Cumberland, Vol. II, London, Everyman's Library, 1922. SI.6.104.

**University Library, Msida, Melitensia Collection. MZ2.**

1. *Aristophanes. A Metrical Version of The Acharnians, The Knights and The Birds*, London, William  
 Pickering, 1840.
2. *Theognis Restitutus. The Personal History of the Poet Theognis*, Malta, 1842.  
 Page 12 contains corrections of the text in Frere's hand.