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**[p.1] The Gabinetto di Lettura
or
Reading Room in 19th Century
Malta (1834-1886)**

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The story told in this paper belongs to the time when the printed word was the only means of communicating knowledge and news in an enduring manner and over long distances in contrast to to-day's information explosion brought about by radio, television, the computer and other audio-visual media. By the beginning of the 19th century, the book and the newspaper were becoming the most potent means in the diffusion of thought and information though their circulation was restricted by the illiteracy of the masses and the censorship of both the state and the church.

Describing the pattern of the intellectual scene in Malta in the late thirties of the last century and the lack of opportunities for cultural activities, the editor of one of the early newspapers to be issued in the island commented on the "terrible gap" that existed in the transmission of intellectual communication and on the absence of the "spirit of association" that separated "citizen from citizen" and "the Maltese from the British" community then living in the island.¹ In an attempt to fill this void, he proposed the formation of an *Associazione per un ateneo* that would promote literature, drama, music and science; stimulate the interest of "nobles, citizens, the business community, scholars and artists" and would bring together the Maltese people and the British civilians and services personnel on the island. This was at a time when the population of Malta was 103,344 individuals of whom 1,270 were British and 3,116 other foreign nationalities.² One of the king-pins [p.2] of the proposed association was to be the setting up of a *Gabinetto di Lettura* or Reading Room.³

Another contemporary newspaper deplored "the destitution of all kinds of literary association in Malta, the little intercourse among the better informed, the entire want of a spirit of enterprise and the almost complete apathy of the better classes regarding the intellectual renovation of the population.... The few noble spirits whose voices have been occasionally raised over this arid waste have been silenced by the din of discordant and miscreant politics which have engaged the public mind and deafened it to every invitation to more worthy and more noble fields of activity."⁴

These exhortations elicited no response so much so that, in September 1839, another periodical made a similar appeal for the establishment of an *accademia*, the absence of which "did us little honour among foreign nations."⁵ In the following year there was a further call — from a different source — for the creation of an *Accademia Letteraria e Scientifica*. It came from a Mr V. Scerri⁶ (a journalist?) and Dr G.B. Pullicino (1815-1901) who was a medical practitioner with a humanistic approach to life and special interest in Italian literature.⁷

¹ *Il Mediterraneo*, 31 October 1838, pp. 83-4.

² *The Malta Government Gazette*, 7 June 1837, p. 207.

³ *Il Mediterraneo*, 7 November 1838, p. 89.

⁴ *The Phosphorus or Anglo Maltese Miscellany*, 13 February 1839, p. 60.

⁵ *Il Filologo*, 18 September 1839, p. 3.

⁶ *L'Amico della Patria*, 20 June 1840, p. 31.

⁷ G.R. Busuttil, *Brevi cenni della vita e degli scritti del Dr. G.B. Pullicino*, Malta, 1901.

A journal published at this period by the University students blamed the “iron” rule of the Order of St. John for this intellectual apathy and lack of cultural associations because during the previous 270 years of the Order’s domination over the Maltese Islands “scholarly and cultured men could not speak openly and write to shake their fellow citizens from the lethargy in which they slumbered” with the consequence of a complete absence of all kinds of progress.⁸ This was not an unjustified assertion for, in fact, the Code de Rohan of 1784, which was still in force at the time of British rule that we are considering, contemplated “the prohibiting, under penalty of imprisonment at (the Grand Master’s) pleasure, of meetings of people and (the Grand Master’s) subjects for any [p.3] purpose, both in the cities and in the villages and in the countryside”; and enjoined the citizens that whenever “they wanted to make representations to (the Grand Master) they were to direct themselves to the Jurats who would then submit the representations (to the Grand Master) on their behalf.”⁹ There were two exceptions to this legal provision: the *Accademia medica* and the *Accademia dei Fervidi*. The former was founded in 1679 and run under the patronage of the Grand Hospitaller of the Order of St John. It came to an end in 1813 due to the disruption caused by the plague epidemic of that year. It was revived under the title of *Società medica d’incoraggiamento di Malta* in 1837 but ceased to exist about 1870.¹⁰ The *Accademia dei Fervidi* was a short-lived literary society founded in 1743 by Dottor Ignazio Saverio Mifsud.¹¹

A change in the intellectual climate of Malta occurred in 1839 with the granting of the freedom of the press. We read of pleadings for public instruction, for teaching “the entire population to read and write Maltese, English and Italian and the rudiments of arithmetic”¹²; for the reform of the curricula of the university faculties and for encouraging the use of newspapers as a medium of general education and of the communication of news of world events, of commercial developments and shipping movements and as a platform for discussing and criticising local affairs.

Into this scene moved a hitherto unknown man — a certain Luigi Tonna — who, as far as my researches go, appears to have set up the earliest *Gabinetto di Lettura* or Reading Room in Malta. By this venture Tonna was emulating, on a modest scale, a foreign model launched in Paris and London which, according to a local journal, were “full of similar Reading Rooms that gave origin to splendid and magnificent establishments.”¹³

Luigi Tonna announced the opening of his *Gabinetto di Lettura* at 210 Merchants Street, Valletta, on the 18th August, 1834. Conditions of association were to be had at the Minerva Bookshop [p.4] of 29, *Strada Reale* (now Republic Street) Valletta where subscriptions at 16 *shillings* and 6 *pence* a year were received.

The venue was changed some months later for a newspaper advertisement notified the public that the *Gabinetto di Lettura*, in accordance with a circular of the 23rd August, was being opened on the 2nd January 1835 at No. 24, *Strada Reale* and that the evening hours were being extended from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m.¹⁴

The response from the public was so favourable that “the proprietor, encouraged by the ever increasing number of subscribers after less than a month from its inception, decided to add the following works to its stock of nearly 1300 books.—

⁸ *L’Amico della Patria*, 25 April 1840, p. 12.

⁹ *Del Dritto Municipale di Malta*, Malta 1784, p. 189.

¹⁰ *Storia della Società Medica D’Incoraggiamento di Malta*, Malta 1845, p. iv.

¹¹ V. Laurenza “*Società culturali in Malta*,” *La Brigata*, Anno I, Aprile, 1932, pp. 2-3.

¹² *Il Mediterraneo*, 11 March 1840, p. 675.

¹³ *Il Globo*, 16 March 1841, p. 6.

¹⁴ *The Malta Government Gazette*, 20 August 1834, p. 282; & 31 December 1834, p. 443.

Dizionario geografico universale (Place of publication? Date?)

Dizionario classico di medicina interna ed esterna, Venezia 1833, in 53 volumes.

Analisi delle pandette by Robert Joseph Pothier, Venezia 1833. Pothier (1699-1772) was Professor of French Legislation at the University of Orleans. This work dealt with Roman Legislation.

Repertorio universale e ragionato di giurisprudenza, Venezia, 1834, in 31 volumes by Philippe Antoine Merlin de Donai (1754-1838). Merlin was a French legislator, collaborator with Napoleon in law reforms and whose work inspired, to a large extent, the Code Napoleon.

I have not found out how many were the subscribers to Tonna's Reading Room nor any of their names nor their social standing but from the above works it appears that a number of them belonged to the legal and the medical professions and that these professional people had a significant say in the choice of books to be placed on the shelves of the *Gabinetto*. As Tonna continued to command the support of his clients, he introduced a new feature in the following year, i.e. the supply of at least nine newspapers and periodicals:—

La Gazzetta di Malta (The Malta Government Gazette)

The Penny Magazine

La Gazzetta di Genova

Galignani's Messenger.

[p.5] Atlas.

Le Temps.

Giornale di commercio di Livorno

Giornale dei Letterati di Pisa

Omnibus (from Naples).

By the end of June 1836 he added the newly-published newspaper *Il veloce, giornale d'industria, di agricoltura e di commercio* which was issued twice weekly in Italian from Marseilles.¹⁵ The addition of this paper may be an indication that membership of the *Gabinetto* among the commercial community had by this year become sufficiently numerous to assert itself.

The number of books in stock had now reached over 1500. I have found no catalogue listing their authors and titles to enable us to determine the type of books which he provided for his customers; however, we may form an idea of the literary tastes of the local readership of the time from a catalogue published by a contemporary Circulating Library in Valletta. The greatest number of works in this catalogue were in the English language and dealt with *Belles Lettres*. William Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, Lord Byron, Washington Irving and Edward Bulwer (Lord Lytton) dominated the list; French literature was represented mainly by Victor Hugo, Eugene Sue, Honoré de Balzac, George Sand, Francois-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Jean Baptiste Moliere, Alexander Dumas (pere) and René de Chateaubriand; Italian works included Dante, Petrarca, Tasso, Goldoni and Manzoni; among Spanish authors there were Cervantes and Pedro Calderon de la Barca.¹⁶

More journals were added three years later (1839) i.e.

Gibraltar Chronicle

Diario di Roma

Notizie del Giorno (Roma)

Bombay Times

Journal de Smyrne

L'Echo de l'Orient

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 29 June 1836, p. 215.

¹⁶ *Catalogue des livres qu'on donne a lire a la librerie Quintana*, No. 27, Strada Stretta, Malta, n.d.

Ape Melitense, Giornale di medicina

[p.6] This last journal was edited by Dr. C.G. Schinas, Professor of Medicine at our university (1833-56).¹⁷ There was, besides, the *Bibliographie Universelle Resume Periodique des Publications Nouvelles de Tous Les Pays*. This monthly journal, published in Paris, listed the titles and authors of works issued “in all languages” with summary reviews of the most important ones “thus placing its readers *au courant* of the progress achieved in the arts and sciences.”¹⁸

In short, Tonna’s *Gabinetto di Lettura* offered its subscribers no less than 22 journals and newspapers—both local and foreign—in Italian, English and French from various centres in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.

On the 1st October 1840 Tonna moved his Reading Rooms, together with his printing establishment, from 24 *Strada Reale* to 72 *Strada Santa Lucia* in the house known as the *Poppa tal-Ġifen*,¹⁹ this transfer being probably dictated by the need for larger premises owing to expansion of his business. In fact, in January of the following year, four new developments emerged. First, a catalogue of the books available for readers at the Reading Room was printed. No copy has yet been traced of this publication but an advertisement of the 25th January gives us an idea of what shaped his choice of literature for it states that his stock “consisted of various works on history, travel, fiction, the theatre and of dictionaries.” Secondly, subscribers were now entitled to borrow books and newspapers to read them at home, the fee charged being *1shilling* and *8pence* a month (roughly nine cents). Thus the *Gabinetto di Lettura* was enlarging its activity by developing into a Lending Library.²⁰ Thirdly, apart from the Reading Rooms, proper other rooms were placed at the convenience of subscribers who wished “to hold conversations or engage in some pastime or a game of billiards in accordance with the rules laid down for this purpose.” [p.7] Fourthly, on the 15th February 1841, the *Gabinetto di Lettura* was the venue of an exhibition of objects of artistic and archaeological interest. The items comprised “several antique specimens excavated from the ruins of Cyrene (in the neighbourhood of Benghazi)” that had been brought to Malta by Luigi Tonna himself and among which were “two marble heads, a small statue of *terracotta*, some beautiful saracenic vases and several gold, silver and copper coins.”²¹

On the 8th February 1841, an anonymous advertisement in a local newspaper announced the opening of Reading Rooms at No. 24 *Strada Reale* which, in fact, were opened on the 23rd March.²² It will be recalled that No. 24 *Strada Reale* had been the premises of Tonna’s *Gabinetto* in 1835. Were these Reading Rooms of 1841 a branch set up by Tonna himself? Or were they a return of Tonna’s *Gabinetto di Lettura* from *Strada Santa Lucia* to its former location in *Strada Reale*? Or were they a new establishment set up by some other entrepreneur in competition with Tonna? Our efforts to find an answer to these questions have not been successful owing to lack of documentation.

Luigi Tonna himself has been an elusive quarry so that no biographical profile of him can be built. His name appears only occasionally in the newspapers of the time and in the title pages of locally-published books as their printer and publisher. Not even an obituary notice

¹⁷ *The Malta Government Gazette*, 16 January 1839, p. 28. *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 12 January 1839, p. 304. P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta*, London 1965, p. 540.

¹⁸ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 14 July, 1838, p. 84; 3 January 1839, p. 296 & 16 December 1839, p. 712.

¹⁹ *The Malta Times*, 10 October 1840, p. 152. *Il-Portafoglio Maltese*, 21 September 1840, p. 1043.

²⁰ *The Malta Times*, 25 January 1841, p. 231.

²¹ *Ibid*, 15 February 1841, p. 247. *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 15 February 1841, p. 1229.

²² *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 8 February 1841, p. 1221 & 29 March 1841, p. 1280.

has been met with so far though that may still await discovery. However, even in the absence of an account of his life and career, his name will stand out as that of a forerunner in setting the pattern of a movement aimed at communicating information and spreading knowledge in mid-nineteenth century Malta. Indeed, he did so in more ways than one for, apart from setting up the first *Gabinetto di Lettura* in 1834, in the following year he submitted a request to Government for the establishment of a printing press in Valletta. As this request was not acceded to, he made a second application but, as he received no satisfactory answer, he addressed a petition to the King in Council in the same year; however, the licence asked for was not granted until the liberty of the press was [p.8] introduced in 1839.²³ He thenceforth became the printer of a few newspapers and a number of books in Italian. At least three newspapers were issued from his printing press: *The Malta Times*,²⁴ *Lo spettatore imparziale*²⁵ and, for some time, *Il filocamo Giornale medico-scientifico e di educazione*.²⁶

Among the books from his press we may mention:—

- (a) *Opere scelte* by Ugo Foscolo in 1839,²⁷
- (b) *Versi* in 1840. A series of poems by Francesco Orioli (1785-1856), an Italian refugee during the turmoil of the Risorgimento who had held the Chair of Physics at the University of Bologna.²⁸
- (c) *Gli ultimi giorni dei Cavalieri di Malta* in 1841, a novel by Ifigenia Zauli Sajani (1810-1883), another refugee from Italy.²⁹
- (d) *Le mie prigioni*, in 1842, by Silvio Pellico (1789-1854). This Malta edition was the one which Pellico preferred among all others.³⁰

Other Reading Rooms

Three other *Gabinetti di Lettura* appear on the scene some years after Tonna's so that it seems that this feature of our intellectual and social life had caught on. They were:—

- (a) Antonio Gerada's at No. 109 *Strada Santa Teresa*, Bormla, opened on the 8th February, 1837.³¹
- (b) Luigi Vidal's, whose premises seem to have been so well-known that no address is given in the announcement notifying the opening in early March 1841. Intending subscribers were assured that this *Gabinetto di Lettura* "was sufficiently stocked with [p.9] the most recent books" in Italian and other languages especially works dealing with historical memoirs, travel and fiction so that, at a small expense, "one could, if not read everything, obtain an idea of what is being published in Malta and elsewhere."³²

²³ J. Austin & G.C. Lewis, *Copies or Extracts of Reports of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Affairs of the Island of Malta*, London 1838, Part I, pp. 7 & 8. Tonna's licence was granted in March 1838. Cf. *The Malta Government Gazette*, 28 March 1838, p. 118.

²⁴ *The Malta Times*, 25 June 1841, p. 336.

²⁵ *Lo Spettatore Imparziale*, 23 April 1838 to 23 November 1838.

²⁶ V. Bonello, B. Fiorentino & L. Schiavone, *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta*, Malta 1963, pp. 30 & 41.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 170.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 150.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 162 & 172. *The Malta Times*, 10 July 1841, p. 367.

³⁰ V. Bonello *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 & 172.

³¹ *The Malta Government Gazette*, 25 January 1837, p. 31.

³² *Il Globo*, 16 March 1841, p. 6.

(c) E.M. Watson's at 214 *Strada Reale*, Valletta, in existence in October 1841.³³ Watson was a Stationer and Bookseller who appears to have catered for readers of French books of which he imported no less than three hundred in November 1837 and who promoted the sale of a one volume edition of Lord Byron's works with an account of the author's life by H.L. Bulwer.³⁴

The Casino or club

When discussing the activities of Tonna's *Gabinetto di Lettura* in the year 1841, we noted the addition of rooms where members could hold conversations or engage in some pastime or a game of billiards.³⁵ With this expansion into the recreational field we see the *Gabinetto* branching out into a new venture — the emergence of the club or *casino*. Tonna may have taken the cue of combining the recreational element with the cultural one from a *casino*, that by mid-November 1839, had been set up “on the parade” with seventy members among whom there were “many of the foreign consuls, several respectable Englishmen and the larger portion of the respectable Maltese merchants.” The premises consisted of “three comfortable elegantly fitted apartments — one devoted to reading the journals and publications of the day; another to conversation and the third to cards, chess and what not.” At this point in time, therefore, the provision of literary material still constituted a pivot round which the activities of the club revolved; so much so that, in conformity with the averred scope of the *casino* “to raise the national character of the Maltese,” it was the members' intention “to adorn (the *casino*) with a handsome library of reference and general reading” in addition to the Reading Rooms already functioning.³⁶

[p.10] With the passage of years the *Gabinetto di Lettura* became overshadowed by other club activities, thus following the trend set by the Union Club established in 1826 for British service officers and “civil employees of the Malta Government and of gentlemen residing in Malta,” and by the *Casino Maltese* set up in 1850.³⁷

This transformation from Reading Room to club is evident in the opening of two other establishments — one at Żebbuġ in 1847 and one at Valletta in 1848.

The one at Żebbuġ was advertised in the press under the title of *Gabinetto di Lettura e Conversazione* and was opened on the 7th November, its prime mover being Baron Sir Vincenzo Azzopardi (1783-1857) a doctor of medicine who was keenly interested in the promotion of education, industry and agriculture.³⁸

The attention of prospective subscribers was directed not so much to literary pursuits as to the advantages of forming civic associations to induce the people “to come out of the ruins of an almost animal existence into the light of the benefits and pleasures of a civilised way of life ... and to overcome the egoistic indifference towards the social needs of the country.”³⁹

This is the only *Gabinetto di Lettura* of which we learn the number of members and the names of some of them. On its foundation it had twenty-two subscribers. Baron Sir

³³ *The Malta Times*, 15 October 1841, p. 397.

³⁴ *The Malta Government Gazette*, 5 December 1827, p. 30 & 1 November 1837, p. 393.

³⁵ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 25 January 1841, p. 1205.

³⁶ *The Harlequin*, 13 November 1839, p. 2.

³⁷ *The Malta Commercial Almanac*, Malta 1885, p. 21-3.

³⁸ *L'Arte*, 22 March 1863, p. 6.

³⁹ *La Rivista*, 1 December 1847, p. 159.

Vincenzo Azzopardi read the inaugural address; the Archpriest of the village, Rev. F. Saverio Vassallo, was its director; and Dr. F.co Saverio Pisani, its vice-director.⁴⁰

By 1853, though still known as *Gabinetto di Lettura*, we find the premises referred to also as *Casino d'incontro* with a bias on the promotion of agricultural pursuits. At this period the British Governor of Malta was Sir William Reid (1851-58) who took pains in advancing the economic condition of the island. He had initiated the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1852; The Agricultural Society in 1854; introduced a new species of cotton [p.11] plant and encouraged the culture of the silkworm⁴¹ It is understandable, therefore, why Reid took a keen interest in the activities of the Żebbuġ *Gabinetto di Lettura*, so much so that he donated to it a number of agricultural and horticultural implements; books on physics and other scientific subjects; and geographical charts as well as a microscope.⁴²

It is to Reid's great credit that, being a non-medical man, he appreciated the potential value of this instrument at a time when microscopy had just begun to be used seriously in biological investigations and when it was still of low magnifying power and when the preparations to be examined were unstained.⁴³ The existence of a microscope in Malta in 1853, outside the medical field, is of particular significance for it must have been one of the first such instruments to be brought to our island. In fact I know of only one other microscope in Malta at an earlier period — that used by Dr John Davy during his stay at the General Military Hospital at Valletta between 1828 and 1835.⁴⁴ Davy used the microscope for the examination of human tissues removed at autopsy and of the solid constituents of the urine. Another early mention of microscopy is by Dr. C.G. Schinas who, in 1838, urged his colleagues to dedicate themselves to the study of microscopy; however, he does not state whether he or any of his colleagues possessed a microscope.⁴⁵ We do not know what the members of the Żebbuġ *Gabinetto di Lettura* used their microscope for, but it is likely that they did so for the examination of parts of plants and for the identification of parasites and solid chemicals.

Reid's gifts were so much appreciated that a deputation from the *Casino*, consisting of Dr. Paolo Vella LL.D., *sindaco* of Żebbuġ and later judge, the Rev. Filippo Grima and Fr. F.M. Torrigiani called on His Excellency at the Palace to thank him for his generosity. Sir William Reid eventually returned the visit when he [p.12] was entertained at the *casino* "with its annexed garden" and later shown round the parish Church.⁴⁶

As late as 1882 the library of the *casino* still figured as one of the features of the premises but equal emphasis was laid on the presence of a machine for the removal of the husks of maize.⁴⁷

At Valletta the foundation of a *Circolo Maltese* with premises at 157 *Strada Mercanti* was announced by its secretary, Dr. G.E. Zarb, on the 1st October 1848.⁴⁸ One of the aims of

⁴⁰ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 25 November 1847, p. 4249. M. Attard, *Haż-Żebbuġ u l-festa ta' San Filep*, Malta 1985, p. 7.

⁴¹ A.V. Laferla, *British Malta*, Vol. I, Malta 1938, p. 232.

⁴² *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 25 May 1853, p. 3. *L'Ordine*, 27 May 1853, p. 4095 & 2 September 1853, p. 4152.

⁴³ W.D. Foster, *A History of Parasitology*, London 1965, pp. 115 & 162.

⁴⁴ P. Cassar, "Physiological and Pathological Research at the General Military Hospital of Valletta in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Medi-Scope*, 9 September 1986, pp. 18-33.

⁴⁵ *L'Ape Melitense*, Vol. I, September 1838, p. 26.

⁴⁶ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 25 May 1853, p. 3. *L'Ordine*, 27 May 1853, p. 4095 & 2 September 1853, p. 4152.

⁴⁷ S. Ciappara, *Storia del Zebbug e sua parrocchia*, Malta 1882, p. 103.

the *Circolo* was to encourage “the improvement of the economic, moral and intellectual needs of the people; keep those who were studiously inclined in touch with the almost daily emergence of discoveries and advances in the arts and sciences; and providing a pleasant relaxation to the mind burdened by the daily cares of life.” With this scope in view members were offered “a select collection of books on literature, philosophy, law, medicine, technology and science of practical utility together with a good number of political, scientific and artistic periodicals.” Dr. G.E. Zarb himself contributed to this educational campaign by translating in Italian a work from the French of Louis Valmain on the Sugar Plant (1854) and of Dr. Clot Bey on plague and quarantine (1856), the latter task being undertaken at the request of Sir William Reid.⁴⁹

It was also the intention of the *Circolo* to organise frequent meetings to discuss matters concerning “the state of the island and that would encourage the bringing together the various classes of citizens which is so necessary for the public good ... and to provide game rooms for an honest pastime.” In May 1853 a vocal and instrumental concert was organised with the collaboration of Maltese amateurs and of the professional performers of the Royal Theatre company.⁵⁰

By the beginning of December 1862, a *Gabinetto di Lettura Anglo Maltese*, known also as the Anglo Maltese Institution, was [p.13] founded by a number of Maltese and British men at Senglea (no address given) with the aim of fostering the continual “instruction which many people required after finishing courses of studies.” The new Institution endeavoured to achieve this goal by organising classes for the teaching of languages and of drawing and by holding lectures as “done in England and elsewhere.” Its library had on its shelves books and periodicals on history, science and literature. Political and religious discussions were prohibited. Games, too, were barred “not to foster among youth the pursuit of games.”⁵¹

By the end of January 1863 two lectures had been delivered. In his inaugural talk on the 1st December 1862, Dr. Gavino Gulia set forth the means by which the members of the Institution could achieve their aims and ensure a productive and long life for their society.⁵² The second talk was given by a “Mr. Farrugia,” teacher in the Government Primary School, who dealt with the history of music and the impact of this art on human emotions. On the 24th February 1863 Mr. Sigismondo Savona, who was renowned for his “terse diction and complete mastery of the English Language,” delivered a lecture on the Life of John Milton and *Paradise Lost*.⁵³

The last Reading Room (*Camera di Lettura*) I have been able to trace was set up on the 31st December 1886 in Bormla at 54 *Strada Nuova* at a yearly subscription of £1.

Its principal aim was to provide its members with all the local and some foreign newspapers and with the books that members lent or donated to the *Camera*. This Reading Room was directed by a Committee made up of a President, Dr. Baldassare Camenzuli M.D., LL.D., a Vice-President, a Secretary, three Directors, a Librarian and a Treasurer.⁵⁴

As the century advanced, the *Gabinetto di Lettura* lost ground and gave place to the formally constituted club catering, not for literary and intellectual enlightenment, but for

⁴⁸ *Il Mediterraneo*, 4 October 1848, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Clot Bey, *Su la peste e le quarantene*, Malta 1856. L. Valmain, *Ricerche sul sorgo zuccherino*, Malta 1854.

⁵⁰ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 18 May 1853.

⁵¹ *L'Arte*, 7 December 1862, p. 6.

⁵² G. Gulia, *Discorso inaugurale letto li 1 dicembre 1862 nell'Istituto Letterario della Senglea*, Malta 1863.

⁵³ *L'Ordine*, 30 January 1863, p. 4. *L'Arte*, 7 March 1863, p. 6.

⁵⁴ *Il compagno per tutti durante l'anno 1887*, Malta 1886, p. 142.

purely recreational activities, relaxation and companionship. The initiators of the *Gabinetto di Lettura* are now shadowy figures on the frieze of the [p.14] pageant of the story of Maltese culture; and the *Gabinetti di Lettura* themselves with their contribution to the cultivation of the intellect in Malta have faded out of memory, so much so that one does not find them recorded in our history books. Perhaps this is because, in contrast with to-day's easy availability of books and the communication media, the *Gabinetto di Lettura* appears as a mere short-lived spark; but it must be recalled that, when it first came into existence one hundred and fifty years ago, it marked a turning away in our intellectual climate from the long-standing stasis of previous centuries and highlighted a new venture in the circulation of knowledge and information and in the promotion of social communication. For this reason, therefore, the *Gabinetto di Lettura* and its promoters deserve to be inserted as an integral part of the texture of our cultural growth and intellectual development.