The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

Scott and Malta: A Mediterranean Adventure

Transcript of the talk given on Thursday 11th April 2013 by ***Lt Cdr Dairmid Gunn OBE*** *to members of The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club in Edinburgh.*

It may seem strange to use the word 'adventure' in connection with the most distinguished author, Walter Scott, towards the end of his life. After all, in 1830 he had suffered two strokes, to be followed by yet another in 1831. Although lame from youth, Scott had been an extremely fit and active man as his prolific output of literary works and other activities had shown. He had enjoyed an enviable reputation as a writer throughout Europe and North America; he had distinguished friends in all walks of life, including a particularly friendly relationship with King George IV himself; he had an impressive residence in the Borders, Abbotsford, a home that meant so much to him, providing an ambience in which he liked to live and write. Then came the disaster of 1826, when the London stock market collapsed resulting in Scott being ruined financially mainly because of his close association with the printing firm, Ballantyne. This traumatic experience would have destroyed the career and ambitions of lesser men. Tribulations rarely come singly for shortly after the financial blow Scott's wife, Charlotte, passed away.

Scott, who had started a journal or diary in 1825, had intended that this should be an informal record of his thoughts and aspirations during his declining years. It became instead the revelation of a great man's courage in adversity. By signing a trust deed for his creditors and by selling his house in North Castle Street. he was left to exist on his official salary as Clerk to the Court of Session and have the use of his library and furniture at Abbotsford. The debt, of course had to be paid off by instalments from the sale of his books, a task necessitating the writing of new works. He could, of course, have avoided so much trouble by declaring himself bankrupt – a course that he thought shameful and at variance with his ambitions. Even the offer of enough money to enable him to arrange with his creditors was declined. In Lord Cockburn's *Memorials of his Time* this refusal was couched in a few words of courage and audacity. 'No! This right hand shall work it all off.'

After the disaster, Scott was to write five novels – *Woodstock* (1826)*,The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828), *Anne of Geierstein* (1829), *Count Robert of Paris* (1832),and *Castle Dangerous* (1832), as well as such works as *Tales of a Grandfather* and *A Life of Napoleon.*

He was greatly helped in his endeavours by his new publisher, Robert Cadell, described as a thorough man of business. This was the sort of man Scott needed at this time and with Cadell's encouragement he wrote notes and introductions for new editions of all his novels to create what was to become the most popular edition of his work, the Magnum Edition. Also very important was the new edition's potential as a source of more income, a development as welcome for Scott as it was for Cadell.

In a different and more human way Scott was encouraged and comforted by the warm relationship he had with his family. He greatly admired his elder son, Walter, an officer in a fashionable cavalry regiment. The admiration dwelt more on young Walter's equestrian and military achievements than on any other aspect of his career; sadly, Walter's interest in literature was negligible. Sophia, his favourite child, had married a distinguished man of letters, John Gibson Lockhart, Scott's biographer to be. The younger daughter, Anne, filled the gap in the domestic scene caused by the death of her mother. Her father was, at times, critical of her lack of accountancy skills and her irrepressible penchant for satire. The varied nature of Scott's many admirers and friends gave her plenty of opportunities to exercise this form of wit – so disliked by Scott. The

younger son, Robert, a noticeably indolent young man, had left Oxford after an undistinguished period there to pursue a career in the diplomatic service.

Certain developments gave rise to the idea of Scott's adventure – a voyage to the South to the warmer and more agreeable climate of the Mediterranean. The final two novels on which Scott had embarked, *Castle Dangerous* and *Count Robert of Paris,* had been completed – and had demanded considerable work on the proofs by Lockhart, his son-in-law, and Cadell, his publisher. The Magnum Edition was doing well, but It was clear that Scott was suffering both from exhaustion and the after-effects of the strokes. A break from the routine at Abbotsford was called for and in the form of a restful period in a Southern clime. Fortunately Robert, the younger son, was an attaché at the British embassy in Naples, the capital of the then Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Naples, therefore, became the favoured destination, and the only matter to be decided was how Scott was to reach there. The first plan was for Scott to sail from Leith to Rotterdam, thence up the Rhine and over the Alps. He would be accompanied by young Walter and his wife, Jane, and, of course, Anne. On the way he would have the chance to meet Goethe, the grand old man of European letters and of whom Scott had a great admiration. It appeared to be an excellent plan but there was the serious question of Scott's health being able to withstand the rigours of an overland journey. The idea of a journey by sea began to be studied.

Lockhart, as editor of the Tory *Quarterly Review* and based in London had among his contacts John Croker, who had been First Secretary to the Admiralty; this worthy gentleman strongly advised Lockhart to persuade his father-in-law to make the journey to the Mediterranean by sea. The advice was taken up by Anne and acted on by Cadell, who, through a former naval friend, obtained the blessing of the First Sea Lord, and indeed the King, for Scott to obtain a free passage to the Mediterranean in a man-of–war. It is worth pointing out that the First Sea Lord, Sir James Graham, was a Borderer, although from the English side of the Border. Like the King, Sir James was a great admirer of Scott. The offer of a free passage was extended to include Anne and eventually Walter and his wife, Jane. In the event, Jane, described as rather a dull lady, declined, leaving the composition of the party as Scott, Walter and Anne. The distinguished passengers to be were told that HMS Barham, the ship in which they would be taking passage, would be sailing from Spithead or Portsmouth in mid October. This gave the family plenty of time for preparations for what must have been for Scott a great adventure. After all his previous sorties abroad had only been to the Low Countries, France and Ireland.

Farewells with friends, meetings with Cadell and discussions with his trusted amanuensis, William Laidlaw, filled the time prior to the journey to London, where Lockhart and Sophie awaited him and looked after his literary needs and social programme. Among his engagements was a call on John Murray, the publisher in Albemarle Street. Sophie, Anne and Scott were received in the room in which the famous meeting with Byron had taken place in 1815. At the time of the meeting Murray had just published a humorous poem by a John Hookham Frere on which Byron had modelled the metre for his poem *Beppo.* Hookham Frere*,* an old friend of Scott's, had taken up residence in Malta and was eagerly awaiting Scott's arrival in the Mediterranean. By hand of a friend he had sent Scott a presentation copy of his translation of the Greek comic poet Aristophanes (448-388 BC). Although delighted with the gift and the prospect of seeing his erudite friend again, Scott had other books in mind for his travels. Because of limitations of space he had to choose with great forethought the books to take with him on the voyage. He gave pride of place to five volumes of *The Knights of Malta* by the French historian, the Abbé René d'Aubert de Vertot. His acquaintance with the work of the French historian went back a long way. During a period of ill health as a young boy he had delighted in the study of history, especially history connected with military exploits. To quote from Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, 'I fought my way thus through Vertot's *Knights of Malta* a book, which, as it hovered between history and romance, was exceedingly dear to me'. Vertot indeed had been a companion to him when writing *Ivanhoe,* the Crusader novels (*The Betrothed* and *The Talisman),* and later *Count Robert of Paris.* It was to be a companion to him during the long voyage to Malta en route for Naples.

Scott's party were made thoroughly welcome on board the Barham, a fine frigate classified as a third rate ship of the line, with much service behind it. The term rate referred to the number of guns carried and not to the quality of the ship. The commanding officer, a Captain Pigot, was an agreeable and courteous man, who did everything to ensure that the needs of the Scotts were met. Scott enjoyed his company, and that of the first lieutenant, a Mr Walker, an immensely experienced and well-informed officer. He had also the pleasure of having with him a distinguished medical officer, a Dr John Liddell, the head of the Naval Hospital in Malta. The presence of this medical gentleman was extremely pleasing to Anne, who saw in him an ally in looking after her father's health. Young Walter was thoroughly at home in the company of the officers, and Anne had plenty of handsome young men with whom to while away the time. Members of the crew were all aware that the ship was carrying a very famous man. But the admiration was not all one way. In a letter from the wife of the doctor in charge of the medical services in Malta and quoted in Lockhart's biography of Scott, there is this assessment of the Barham and the attitudes of its officers: 'Before the end of November 1831 a great sensation was produced in Malta, as well it might, by the arrival of Sir Walter Scott. He came here in the Barham, a frigate considered the very beauty of the fleet – a perfect ship and in the highest discipline. In her annals it may now be told that she carried the most gifted, certainly the most popular author in Europe, into the Mediterranean; but it amusing to me that the officers in the ship thought that the great minstrel and romancer must gain more addition to his fame for having been a passenger on board the Barham than they or she would possibly receive having taken on board such a guest.'

After a bumpy passage through the Bay of Biscay, the Barham moved into quieter waters; the morale of the passengers rose although any renewal of appetite had to be satisfied with the usual ship's fare of game, roast beef and ship's biscuits. After rounding the North West tip of Spain the ship skirted Corunna – the scene of a military reverse and the death of the British commander, Sir John Moore, a death commemorated in 1808 in a famous and popular poem by the Irishman Charles Wolfe, '*The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna.'*.
The event had also been covered in Scott's *Life of Napoleon,* in which his friend Frere was mentioned in his capacity as British minister plenipotentiary to the Spanish Central Junta. Also in that work were allusions to capes St Vincent and Trafalgar, both of which Scott viewed from the Barham with excitement and fascination.

On the 14th November 1831, 14 days after leaving Spithead, the Barham entered the Straits of Gibraltar and approached the great fortress of Gibraltar, a British possession since the beginning of the 18th century. Scott's hopes of landing there were dashed after Captain Pigot had been informed that quarantine rules were in force that banned visitors from England because of the cholera epidemic there. He had to satisfy himself with views of the Fortress from the sea, views that brought back memories of his reading about the siege of Gibraltar by the French and Spaniards between 1779 and 1783. The methods used by the British in their successful defence were of particular interest to Scott in the context of the defence of Malta about 200 years earlier against a different but equally formidable foe.

Before the Barham set course for the South to hug the coast of North Africa, Scott was greatly impressed by the wonderful sight of the Spanish mountainous coastline with its fortified towers very much in evidence. The towers were a reminder of the endless conflict waged between Christian Spain and the Moors from North Africa. It brought to his mind the legendary Spanish hero, El Cid, with whose exploits Scott had become familiar through reading Southey's *Chronicle of the Cid* and Lockhart's *Spanish Ballads* (1822). In the context of the visit to Malta, Scott must have known that three of his friend Frere's translations from the Poem of the Cid, had been printed as an appendix to Southey's book. His imagination would have been fired by the thought of the Moorish corsairs sailing from North African ports from Tunis in the West to Tripoli in the East – a stretch of coastline that became known as the Barbary Coast.

The weather during this part of the voyage was remarkably favourable and conducive to relaxing on deck and giving Scott the rest he so sorely needed. He derived much pleasure from watching the drills exercised by the ship's company, ranging from simulated attacks from the rigging and the firing of the 35 pounders to remarkably realistic cutlass duels. In Scott's mind on these occasions the Barham could have been a war galley of the Knights of St John. Already he had imagined his principal character for the book he was determined to write. He would be a Spanish knight of mature years from Andalucia, a man used to fighting against the Moors and even engaging in combat against the famous Moorish leader and corsair, Dragut, one of the best known protagonists in Vertot's account of the Siege of Malta.

For the benefit of his distinguished guest, Captain Pigot sailed close to Algiers where the French were busy colonising the port and its environs. The mole there had been constructed by the famous corsair, Barbarossa, who had been a formidable adversary for the galleys of the Knights of St John. Views of the town fascinated Scott and led to this entry in his Journal: 'Algiers has at first an air of diminutiveness inferior to its fame in ancient and modern times. It runs up from the shore like a wedge, composed of a large mass of close packed white houses piled as thick to each other as they can stand. Even from the distance we view it, the place has a singular oriental look very dear to the imagination'. The word imagination has a familiar ring to it, perhaps a reminder that Scott was able to describe scenes from the Holy Land in the *Talisman* (1825) without ever having been there.

A call at Tunis to the east of Algiers had to be abandoned because of the ravages of the plague there. It had been Scott's wish to visit the ruins of Carthage. From his Classical education, he would have remembered the famous exhortation by the Romans during the 2nd Punic war (218-201BC): ' Delenda est Carthago' – Carthage must be destroyed. There seems to have no interest on Scott's part in Dido, the luckless queen who had to be parted from her lover, Aeneas, when he left her to found Rome, a separation so eloquently put in *The Merchant of Venice* in a dialogue between Lorenzo and Jessica. Her eloquent and moving plea for her lover's return would have been made in a Phoenician language, spoken widely in the Mediterranean by trading people from the Levant. Many words and roots from that language found their way into the language spoken by the indigenous inhabitants of Malta.

Scott had been disappointed with Tunis in terms of what he had expected. He had learnt that there had been much speculation over the exact site of Carthage and the ancient lake of La Goletta which had adjoined the city. He had read in Vertot that Charles V had besieged and taken the fort of La Golleta before the siege of Malta had taken place. Scott had envisaged his fictitious Spanish knight participating in the siege of La Goletta and even engaging in hand to hand combat with the great Dragut. The idea was very much in his mind when the Barham set course for Malta.

To make the voyage more of an Odyssey in the traditional sense, the Barham paid a short visit to a volcanic island that had literally risen from the sea earlier in the year. The island, situated between Tunis and Sicily and to the north west of Malta, was quickly called by the British Graham Island after the First Sea Lord, Sir James Graham, the same man who had sanctioned the provision of HMS Barham for Scott. The sovereignty of the island was to be contested by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and France, but the inevitable diplomatic dispute was averted when the island disappeared under the waves later in 1831. Scott went ashore to make a few notes for the benefit of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, of which he was president. For part of the visit Scott was conveyed to a high spot on the island on the back of a strong and willing seaman from the Barham. Anne who had accompanied him had the misfortune to have her shoes burnt through with the heat of the rocks and described the island in a letter to her sister, Sophie, as a place where you might expect to meet the devil. Scott, on the other hand, sensed in the atmosphere the magic of Prospero's island from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Clearly, a family difference in temperaments.

On the 21st November, the day after the visit to Graham Island, the Barham approached the Maltese archipelago, which comprised Malta (the largest island), Gozo and Comino (the smallest.) Gozo was the first island to be seen from the approach from the north west. Scott was to see the rocky entrance to

Calypso's cave, the spot where the sea nymph was reputed to have kept the adventurer, Odysseus, or to use his Latin name, Ulysses, in pleasant if not voluntary captivity for seven years. Views of Gozo, which reminded Scott of those he had enjoyed of Shetland during his northern cruise of 1814, gave way to those of Malta and the inlet where St Paul was shipwrecked on his final journey to Rome in 60 AD – a reminder of the strong north easterly wind prevalent during the winter months, called the Gregale or Greek wind. Scott was spared any experience of this wind and was in relatively good physical shape when the Barham prepared itself for entry into one on the two great harbours of Malta – Marsa Mxett.

Thanks to his thorough study if the works of Vertot, Scott could not have been better equipped to be the perfect and well informed tourist. The association of the Knights of the Order of St John and the indigenous inhabitants was deep and complex; it had lasted for about two and a half centuries (1530 to 1788); it ended rather ignominiously with the seizure of the island by the French under Napoleon without any real resistance by the Knights of the Order. Malta's history had taken another turn.

Before the arrival of the Order to its shores, Malta had had its own distinct history dating back to the time of the Phoenicians and Carthage. After the defeat of Carthage by the Romans, Malta came under Roman jurisdiction for several centuries. After the fall of Rome in 410 AD the islands were ruled by the Arabs until the arrival of Roger the Norman, Count of Sicily in 1090, who took Christian Malta into the European political sphere. The islands then passed by inheritance or war to several dynasties who ruled in Sicily – including those of Anjou and Aragon, before becoming the property of Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. By blood and inheritance Charles united the dynasties of Hapsburg, Castile, Aragon and Burgundy; he brought under one rule all Spain, the Austrian possessions of the House of Hapsburg, the Netherlands, Sardinia, Sicily and the greater part of the Spanish conquests in North Africa and the New World. This was the ruler who in 1530 was to present the Maltese islands as a gift to the Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem.

Why the gift and why Malta? The gift was offered to the Order in recognition of the role it was playing in combating the aggressive activities of the Muslims in the Mediterranean and North Africa. It was a left-handed gift; the responsibility for defending the Christian enclave round Tripoli was an obligation foisted on the Order and one which Charles V was delighted to abandon. At least the rent levied on the Order was light; it took the form of the presentation by the Knights of a falcon annually on All Saints Day to Charles's viceroy in Sicily. Falconry was popular in Malta at that time, and there was no shortage of falcons.

Malta itself, as a geographical entity, did not seem to be a great prize. Malta, the largest island of one of the smallest archipelagos in the world, only 17 miles long and a mere 9 miles at its widest point, occupied, a position of strategic importance in terms of naval power. Halfway between Europe and North Africa and between the eastern and western extremities of the Mediterranean Sea, it was little wonder that the Phoenicians regarded it as a vital trading post for their mercantile activities. In addition to its unique position, it offered two fine deep water harbours to accommodate vessels of considerable size. The attitude of the Order to the gift of Malta was far from being enthusiastic. The report of a commission sent by the Order to survey the archipelago had been unfavourable. According to it, Malta was described as being little more than a barren rock without vegetation, with scanty soil and little water. Scattered about this rock were about 12,000 inhabitants speaking a sort of Moorish language and eking out a miserable existence from their naked lands and being exposed to periodic raids by the Barbary corsairs. The only saving grace associated with the offer was the existence of the harbours with their safe anchorages – and this made the Order accept the offer, albeit with bad grace. But beggars could not be choosers. The Order had been deprived by the Turks of its base in the island of Rhodes, which it had held for over 200 years. There had been no other offers of suitable lands, and there was an urgent need to renew the Order's fight for the Faith.

The Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem was an unusual organisation in that it managed to reconcile its role of looking after the sick with that of its martial activities. Its patron saint was

not St John the Evangelist of the Gospels but St John the Baptist; its eight-pointed cross that came to be called the Maltese Cross symbolised the eight beatitudes preached by Christ in his famous Sermon on the Mount. (Mathew 4, Ch 5).
'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven; Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' – and so on.

The Order arrived in Malta in 1530 under the leadership of the French grand master, Philippe Villiers de LIsle Adam. The knights under his command were grouped on the basis of nationality under eight 'langues' or languages. The grouping bears no resemblance to what is now the European Union although in one sense it was an early experiment in harnessing the potential of Europe for collective defence. At that time such contemporary countries as Italy and Germany existed only as geographical entities. Represented in this Christian union were: Auvergne, Provence, France, Aragon, Castile, England until overtaken by the Reformation, and truncated versions of Italy and Germany. Language was the expression of identity and by some observers the Knights represented an organised Tower of Babel. Latin as the lingua franca, of course, was always there. It was an international organisation welded together under the authority of an elected grand master.

Each country represented had a residence or headquarters called an auberge, and these were built on the south eastern side of the principal harbour or Grand Harbour. They were built within the existing Maltese settlements of Birgu and Bormla, renamed after the great siege of 1565 as Vitoriosa and Cospicua respectively. A third town, L'Isla, later to be called Senglea after the distinguished grand master, Claude de La Sengle (1553-1557), was built on a peninsula jutting out into Grand Harbour; it was to share with the principal fort, Fort St Angelo, massive fortifications and graceful but challenging stone vedettes or vantage points overlooking the harbour.

Separating Grand Harbour from its sister harbour, Marsa Mxett (Quarantine Harbour), was the long Sceberras Peninsula with a fort, Fort St Elmo, at its seaward end. It occupied a strategic position as it guarded the entrance to Grand Harbour; it was to be the scene of the bloodiest encounters during the Great Siege. The peninsula itself was to wait until the end of the Siege before being developed to accommodate a city.

In 1551 the Christian enclave at Tripoli in North Africa, part of Charles V's gift to the Order, was over-run; the great Sultan at Constantinople, Suleiman the Magnificent, now eyed Malta as the last impediment to his total control of the Mediterranean. The scene was set for the great siege of Malta in 1565, the siege so well described by Vertot and the focus of Walter Scott's interest in the Maltese islands.

Scott would have been fully aware of the status of Malta, a British colony, which had been under British protection since the French under Napoleon had been ousted after two years of occupation. In 1798 Napoleon on his way to Egypt had left a garrison of 4000 troops on the island under the command of a worthy and experienced general, General Vaubois. Despite the general's attempt to rule fairly and justly, the French in Malta were unpopular. Their organised looting of silver and golden artefacts from the churches and their contemptuous attitude to Catholicism were deeply resented by the Maltese. The Knights of Malta, despite their faults, including a haughty attitude to the Maltese, were staunch Catholics whose raison d'être was to protect the Faith from the dangers inherent in the possible domination by the Muslims of the Mediterranean area. But after 200 years of ruling Malta, they had weakly capitulated to Revolutionary France and its militant atheism. The Maltese with British support had besieged Valetta, the city built on the Sceberras peninsula after the Siege in the late 16th century, with remarkable success. Colonel Thomas Graham, who had commanded the joint Anglo-Maltese force was to proclaim, 'Brave Maltese, you have rendered yourselves interesting and conspicuous to the world. History affords no more striking example.'

Another important factor leading to the expulsion of the French was the successful blockade of Malta by the Royal Navy. The French, after their catastrophic naval defeat in 1798 by Nelson at Aboukir Bay, better known as the battle of the Nile, had surrendered complete control of the Mediterranean to the British. The naval connection with Malta was developed by the appointment of Captain Alexander Ball (1799-1810), one of the protagonists in the campaign to expel the French, to the post of Civil Commissioner to Malta. It is interesting to note that from 1804 to 1805 the private secretary to this seasoned naval officer was the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The poet had come to Malta for the benefit of his health. The two men got on remarkably well and Coleridge was to mention the relationship in a letter home. 'Sir Alexander Ball had told a gentleman that were he a man of fortune, he would gladly give me £500 a year to dine with him twice a week for the mere advantage he received from my conversation.' They were to remain firm friends.

After the Treaty of Amiens, which was an interlude in what had become to be known as the Napoleonic Wars, there was a period of uncertainty for the Maltese, who did not wish to return to being ruled by the Knights Their fears on this issue were not realised as after the Treaty of Versailles in 1814 Malta came firmly under the protection of the British as a colony under a British governor. It proved to be a happy relationship between a growing empire and a small archipelago of Mediterranean islands.

Throughout Scott's voyage the plague, in one form or another, had been an impediment to the benefit Scott could have derived from certain places of interest. It had been impossible to land at Gibraltar because of the risk of spreading the plague from England and to disembark at Tunis because of a local outbreak there. The curse of having left England in the grip of an epidemic also affected the beginning of Scott's visit to Malta. The Barham was forbidden to enter main harbour, Grand Harbour, and had to use the sister harbour, Marsa Xmett or Quarantine Harbour. Scott's and his party had to submit to a quarantine period of 10 days. The isolation of incomers who may have been in contact with any form of plague was taken very seriously in Malta. Memories were still fresh of the plague that had raged in Malta from May 1813 to January 1814 and carried off 5000 inhabitants; it had also severely disrupted trade. Scott and his family were spared the discomfort of having to spend their period of isolation in the Lazaretto buildings on an island in the harbour, Manoel Island, and were accommodated in the spacious apartments of Fort Manoel on the same island. Scott's imagination was fired by the name Manoel, whom he wrongly took to be a Spanish knight from the early days of the Order's arrival. He had in mind the hero he would be introducing to the plot of his novel, an idea that had come to him when the Barham was skirting the coast of Andalucia. The fact that Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) was a Portuguese grand master did not alter the nationality of his hero in the novel. Spanish he would be.

From the moment of his arrival Scott could truly be said to be under siege. Well-wishers from the British community flocked to see him but pride of place had to be given to such dignitaries as the acting governor, Colonel Bathurst, Lady Hotham (the wife of the Commander-in-chief, Mediterranean Fleet), and Sir John Stoddart (the Chief Justice) and his wife. Stoddart was an old friend of Scott and had been a brother advocate; he was quick to offer Scott the use of his attractive house in Valletta overlooking Fort Manoel and his country house in nearby St Julian's Bay. Perhaps the most interesting caller – and certainly the most welcome - was Frere, a tall distinguished looking man, older than Scott, but in much better health. A former diplomat and a gentleman of letters, whom Scott had mentioned in his *Life of Napoleon* as British minister to Spain at the time of the Peninsular War. In the Governor's absence from Malta, Frere was occupying his residence at St Antonio better known as San Anton, a few miles to the west of Valletta. Scott declined an offer to stay at San Anton for several reasons including the need to have ready access to medical attention and to be closely in touch with the mail service.

Admiral Hotham had put a boat at Scott's disposal to be rowed round the two harbours – certainly the best way of appreciating the magnificence of Grand Harbour and the wonder of the city of Valletta, which occupied the peninsula between the two harbours. Scott would have appreciated that the waters round Manoel Island, where he was in quarantine, was the location from which some of the Turkish Fleet

bombarded the luckless Fort St Elmo at the tip of the Sceberras. He would have admired the impressive battlements of Fort St Angelo and Senglea in Grand Harbour, both successfully held by the knights. Although Valletta was to be built after the Siege, its name was a reminder of the courageous grand master who had headed the knights at that crucial time in their history, Jean Parisot de La Valette (1552-1568). It was a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen, a place with a special charm of its own as Scott was to find out when his period of quarantine came to an end.

After a slightly abbreviated period of quarantine confinement, Scott took up residence at Beverley's Hotel, a former private house on the Marsa Mxett side of Valletta. Ten days earlier, he had written, 'I have fairly taken up my old trade after which want of a vocation set me hankering, and I have made a little progress on the *Knights of Malta*, a tale which I will either bring to a good conclusion or give up forever'. Scott had certainly set himself a task. To tackle it he had to imbibe the atmosphere of Malta, meet appropriate people, visit places of interest and find comfortable surroundings for writing the book he had in mind. Factors militating against the attainment of this aim were his deteriorating health and his fame and popularity. He was fortunate in having two excellent doctors on call, Dr Liddell, who had accompanied him in the Barham, and a Dr John Davy, an Edinburgh-trained doctor and head of the medical services in Malta, whose house in Valleta was opposite Beverley's Hotel. By coincidence, Dr Davy was the younger brother of the distinguished chemist and inventor, Sir Humphry Davy, whom Scott knew as a walking companion with Wordsworth in the Lake District.

Anne, who had instigated the move to the hotel, was to air her fears regarding her father's health in a letter to sister Sophie: 'What I dread is his going out to dinner - which he will do. His arrival has caused such a sensation here, and we have so many visitors; I thought we had seen, and "heard", every lady in Malta through the quarantine barriers, and there is such a lot of people we must still see.' Anne's fears about her father's health were exacerbated by the invitations that came flooding in. On the first night out of quarantine the Scotts dined in the wardroom or officers' mess of the Barham. Worse (in terms of Scott's health) was to follow. The Garrison invited the Scott and his family to a ball in his honour in the great room of the Auberge de Provence. It was to have a Scottish flavour to it with pipes and Scottish dances – an inappropriate event for a man who was lame and trying to recover his health. Scott, however, accepted the invitation and spent three hours at the ball. The sister and companion of the widowed Frere was to write,' He had the good nature to stay three hours and leave a general persuasion that he was very much amused.' Scott liked the company of naval and army officers but at his age and state of health preferred to enjoy it in smaller and more intimate gatherings. His admiration for his soldier son, Walter, has already been mentioned but during the visit to Malta it was certainly not shared by Anne. To Sophie she writes, 'I can't say, my dear Sophie, I found Walter any comfort to me. I wrote to you that Papa has given up all dinner parties. Of course, I never left him, but Walter who was out all day long and all night dining in messes, and swearing at waiters and bills in the morning, was too much for one's patience – you can have no idea what it is to travel with him. Street and Nicholson have both nearly given up their places.' (Celia Street and John Nicholson were the servants travelling with the Scotts.) It was quite clear that young Walter was conducting himself to his own satisfaction.

If Anne was the watchdog with regard to Scott's well-being and health, other ladies were to the fore to act as guides to the St John's co-cathedral in Valletta and to the Governor's residence of Saint Antonio or San Anton a few miles to the west of Valletta. Scott's companion for his first visit to St John's was the wife of the Acting Governor, a Mrs Bathurst. The exterior of St Johns's was as plain as the interior was elaborate. On entering the cathedral Scott was to declare, 'The most striking interior I have ever seen'. Scott's reaction was to be repeated by many art historians in the 19th and 20th centuries. The frescos on the barrel vaulted ceilings were described as one of the finest decorative exploits of Baroque painting to be found anywhere in Europe. But what interested Scott more than the work of the Baroque fresco painter, the Italian Mattia Preti, was the way in which the Order of the Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem remembered the grand masters and the eight principal langues of the Order. The patron saint of the Order

was also remembered by the magnificent Caravaggio (1671-1710) painting of the beheading of St John the Baptist.

Scott was to return to the co-cathedral later in his stay in the company of some of the officers from the Barham, who helped him to descend to the crypt to view the sepulchre of Jean Parisot de Valette, the grand master in whose honour the city of Valletta was named. De Vallette was, of course, to be one the principal characters in the book, *The Siege of Malta*. Scott would have observed that the inscription on de Vallette's tomb was composed by Sir Oliver Starkey, one of the few English knights serving the Order after the suppression of the English langue by Henry VIII. An inscription in Latin on the tomb read: 'Here lies Vallette, worthy of eternal honour, he who was formerly the terror of Asia and Africa and the shield of Europe, whence by his holy arms he expelled the barbarians, the first to be buried in this beloved city of which he was the founder.'

His drives through Valletta, a city designed by the Italian Francesco Laparelli , an assistant to Michelangelo, made a great impression on Scott in terms of lay-out; they also gave him ideas about some innovatory work at Abbotsford. He saw this in terms of finishing his residence by a screen on the west side of the old barn with a fanciful wall decorated with towers to enclose the bleaching green ornamented by watch towers in the Maltese style; he was confident he could obtain the drawings during his stay. His drives took him to two libraries, a lending library and one that belonged to the Order. He was impressed by the value of the books in the Order's Library but felt that the whole place was underfunded. In his Journal he makes the comment, 'I may do the last some good'. Possibly he had in mind that the success of his book on the Siege could indirectly do some good. The libraries themselves were of immense help to Scott for research and as places to write and think in comparative peace.

At all times Scott was made fully aware of the strongly Catholic ambience of Malta, an ambience that could be associated not only with the Knights but also with the Maltese people themselves. The frequent tolling of bells, the holy images in the niches in the walls of houses and the flamboyant architecture of the churches – the Catholic architectural response to the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. For Scott the whole place was like a dream.

An exchange of calls was arranged by the Deputy Governor to enable Scott to meet the Catholic Archbishop of Malta, His holiness Xavier Canova. What had fascinated Scott about this prelate was the important role he had played in the struggle to rid the island of the French invaders at the end of the 18th century. Indeed, he wished to obtain a copy of the journal kept by the Maltese of the blockade of Valletta, held by the French as their final stronghold. Although he did not obtain the journal, Scott was pleased to have the opportunity of meeting the warrior priest. This meeting and other contacts with the Maltese had given Scott an impression of the Maltese that was to colour the way they were to be portrayed in his book on the Great Siege.

Although Scott was fortunate to have the attentions of the Lieutenant Governor and his wife lavished upon him, he was also blessed by the friendship of Dr John Davy's wife, who was his neighbour in a house across the narrow street from Beverley's Hotel. This erudite and gifted lady, the daughter of a Scottish advocate and an intellectual blue stocking mother, had been a neighbour of Scott's at the time when Scott was living in North Castle Street, Edinburgh. Scott's son-in-law and biographer, John Lockhart, paid her a great compliment when he wrote in his *Life of Scott:* 'This lady has been so good as to entrust me with a few pages of her "family journal", and I am sure that the reader will value a copy of them more than anything that I could produce with respect to Sir Walter's brief residence in Malta.' One of the most charming extracts from the lady's journal was a description of a drive to the residence of the Governor at San Anton, a few miles west of Valletta to call on Frere, who was living temporarily there. At that time Frere's beautiful house at Pieta, at the landward end of Marsa Xmett, was undergoing repair.

Mrs Davy modestly explains that she was chosen in preference to her husband to accompany Scott as she felt that men generally preferred the company of womenkind when ill or depressed. She writes,' I was pleased to see how refreshing the air was to Sir Walter; - and perhaps this made him go back, as he did, to the days of long walks, over moss and moor, which he told me he had traversed at the rate of five and twenty miles a day, with a gun on his shoulder. He snuffed with great delight the perfume of the new oranges which hung thickly on either side as we drove up the long avenue to the courtyard or stable-yard rather, of San Anton – and was amused at the Maltese untidiness of two or three pigs running at large among the trees.' 'That is just like my friend Frere', he said, 'Quite content to let his pigs run about in his orange groves.' Unfortunately for the couple, Frere was not at home, but Mrs Davy's description of the journey back was fascinating in its revelation of Scott's assessment of his fellow writers, past and present. He enthused about the work of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, although a little confused in recalling the name of the latter.

Mrs Davy was to see Scott twice more – at the co-cathedral in Mdina, where his guide had been her husband, Dr John Davy, and at a street in Valletta , Strada Stretta, where the knights used to fight their duels. On leaving the street she overheard Scott say, 'It will be hard if I cannot make something of this'.

Scott was certainly fortunate in having the company of Mrs Davy, such a valuable contributor to Lockhart's *Life of Scott*. He was also more than fortunate to enjoy the almost constant company of Frere during his visit. Anne was amused at the warmth of her father's attachment to Frere – encapsulated in her phrase 'with whom he swears eternal friendship'. Scott himself was to write, 'My only occupation has been driving around with Frere'. The company of Frere not only added to the enjoyment of Scott's sojourn in Malta but also was a source of information crucial to the enlargement of his understanding of the island and the great siege of 1565.

Frere was the epitome of a cultivated English gentleman. Eton, Cambridge, contributor to serious literary journals, member of Parliament, member of the Privy Council, close friend of George Canning, diplomat on important missions to Lisbon and Madrid would hint at a successful career in public life. It was, until 1808 when as British minister in Spain he was accused by the British Government of giving bad advice to Sir John Moore in regard to the route for a retreat from the advancing forces of Napoleon. The rebuke was tempered by controversy and dispute. Nevertheless, on his return to Britain Frere declined an embassy in St Petersburg and twice an elevation to the peerage. He turned his back firmly on an active career in diplomacy and sought, in his own eyes, the more rewarding life of scholarship and writing. In 1816 he married Elizabeth Jemima, dowager countess of Erroll; his wife's poor state of health necessitated a move to warmer climes and in 1820 the Freres settled in Malta. He was popular with the British and Maltese alike and was appreciated more as a distinguished gentleman of letters rather than a former prominent diplomat and politician. He endeared himself to the Maltese by studying their language. His profound knowledge of the classics was evident through his translation of Aristophanes; his ability to translate ancient ballads both Spanish and English and give a contemporary flavour to them without any loss of their intrinsic meaning was greatly appreciated in literary circles. Indeed, it was this ability that had drawn Scott into friendship with Frere. On reading one of Frere's translations Scott was to declare that it was the only poem he had met with, which, if it had been produced as ancient, could not have been detected on internal evidence (*Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad*).

Scott and Frere had not seen each other for ten years but they simply took up where they had left off. Knowing of Scott's intention to write *The Siege of Malta* Frere was to use his profound knowledge of the rule of the Knights in Malta and the Maltese to give his friend plenty of background for his book. Through Frere and possibly other well informed friends Scott became acquainted with the work of the official painter for the Order during its early days in Malta, Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, an Italian of possible Spanish origin. This painter's magnum opus in Malta was his representation of the siege of Malta in the frescoes on the walls of the Grand Master's Palace in Valletta. In 1582, one year after his departure from Malta, Perez published in Rome a collection of etchings reproducing his paintings of the Siege. The collection comprised

15 plates. Frere was delighted to present Scott with prints of the Siege, an appropriate and generous gift. It has to be said that Scott admitted they were difficult to understand. (Thanks to the help from Lindsay Levy of the Advocates' Library, for making some of these available to accompany the present talk.)

The couple of months that Scott hoped to spend in Malta were not to be. For various reasons, including young Walter's desire to return to his regiment and Captain Pigot's concern about the Barham's lack of activity and her future deployment, Scott and his party had to leave Malta for Naples on the 13th December 1831 – only three weeks after their arrival. This early departure caused Scott's medical advisors considerable concern. The period in Malta had been too short for any significant improvement in the writer's health.

In other ways Scott had benefited from being in Malta, an island so steeped in history and a unique repository of knowledge of the Order of St John. He had also benefited from the company of Frere. But there had been difficulties and problems. Communication with Britain at that time was reliable but slow – only a monthly visit by a steam packet from Falmouth. This had led to worries about the success of the novels *Castle Dangerous* and *Count Robert of Paris*, a success on which Scott depended to ease his financial worries. His ambitions regarding the *Siege of Malta* were beginning to outrun his physical capacity to achieve them, and this takes one back to the book itself.

Scott was deeply indebted to Vertot for the essential structure of his book on the Siege. Through the introduction of such characters as the Knight Don Manuel de Vilheyna, his nephew Francisco, his niece Angelica and her Moorish governess Morayma, and the Maltese boatman Boniface, the plot is enriched and enlivened – at least at the beginning of the story, and reflects Scott's imaginative thinking as the Barham sailed along the coast of Andalucia . The historical figures such as, on the Christian side, La Vallette and on the Muslim side, Mustapha (the Turkish general), Piali (the Turkish admiral), and Dragut (the corsair and Viceroy of Algiers), are made more human and accessible in terms of strengths and weaknesses. Vertot's account is altered on several occasions to introduce incidents that add interest to the narrative and prevent the book from becoming a simple historical account of the Siege. The Siege itself was an extremely brutal and bloody affair; the invading forces comprised 180 ships and 31,000 men. In purely military terms the attack took the form of two distinct phases. There was the assault on Fort St Elmo at the tip of the Sceberras peninsula and its eventual capture and the final unsuccessful Turkish attack on the positions around Fort St Angelo. The barbarity of the engagements by both sides was very much in evidence although Scott naturally was to act as a propagandist for the Christian cause. One instance illustrates the nature of the struggle. After St Elmo had fallen to the Turks Mustapha, the Turkish commander, ordered the disembowelled bodies of the knights to be fastened to planks of wood and floated across Grand Harbour in the direction of Fort St Angelo. In response, in an action that Scott describes as not quite worthy of La Vallette, the Christian leader ordered all Turkish prisoners to be decapitated and their heads fired from the guns into the lines and batteries of the enemy. The images from the plates presented to Scott by Frere give a vivid indication of the intensity of the struggle.

This brings to mind an amusing anecdote regarding Vertot's struggle with his version of the Siege. Whilst his book was yet in manuscript he was asked to amend his account as fresh information had come to light. Vertot's response was short and final. *Mon SIège est fait* – my siege is finished.

With Vertot in mind, it would be unfair to accuse Scott of indulging in too much plagiarism as he does select , rearrange and condense the material most effectively. He fascinates by underlining the jealousies of the Muslim leaders, the heroic death of Dragut (to whom Vertot pays scant attention) and the bravery of the Maltese collectively and in the person of Boniface, the boatman. Where the accusation of plagiarism is most valid is in the final chapters of the book. The fictitious characters fade away without farewell mention and the historical protagonists become less human and more stereotyped. The point at which this departure from the fictitious to the historical can be identified in a dialogue between the old pacha, Mustapha, and his courageous wife, Zulma. Mustapha meditates and says sadly: 'It is an unhappy state, my

Zulma, in which we slaves stand with our masters, for we give them our youth, strength and vigour, but when we can supply talent no longer as quick as it is called for, from the voice of the Sultan, who envies us, to the viziers, who hate us, it is to the devil with the old man, who is no longer worth the bread he eats.' Is this a veiled recognition by Scott that his illness was encroaching on his creative abilities? It does seem a sort of goodbye to all that. It is certainly goodbye to many of the characters whom he had so enticingly created. But there is another factor that has to be considered – the need to meet deadlines. He had promised that the book should reach his publisher by May 1832. He kept his promise but at the expense of not completing the book in the way he would have wished had circumstances been different.

What Scott gained from his all too short visit to Malta is a matter of speculation, but he must have been thrilled to visit the places associated with the Order although much of what he saw had been built or developed since the Siege. The sheer magnificence of Grand Harbour and to a lesser extent Marsa Xmett, would have impressed him and the Catholic ambience of Malta have reminded him of the significance of the Siege for not only Christian Europe but also the citizens of Malta.

Yet, against all this speculation of what the visit to Malta had to offer was the love of Scott for the account of the Siege by Vertot. He had read this as a child and childhood memories are potent in terms of firing the imagination. It is a comment that Scot made in Rome after his visits to Malta and Naples that hints at this. On being asked by his guide, Mr Cheney, whether he wished to see the procession of the Corpus Domini, and to hear the Pope, Scott smiled and said that those things were more poetical in description than in reality, and it was all for the better for him not to have seen it before he wrote about it – that any attempt to make these scenes more exact, injured the effect without conveying a clearer image to the mind of the reader – as the Utopian scenes and manners of Mrs Radcliffe's novels captivated the imagination more than the most laboured descriptions, or the greatest historical accuracy.

So there were lots of forces at play when Scott tackled his *Siege of Malta*. Thanks to Vertot he had plenty of time to imbibe the atmosphere of the Siege before his arrival in Malta . The brief stop on the volcanic Graham Island on the way to Malta tells much. Scott thought of Prospero the supreme creator of tales and at the same time kept the Royal Society of Edinburgh in mind by collecting pieces of lava and shells. A friendly clash in the mind between imagination and fact and perhaps an unintentional pointer to the understanding of *The Siege of Malta.*