

Texts and Documents

EDWARD JENNER AND THE INTRODUCTION OF VACCINATION IN MALTA

by

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IN THE mid-eighteenth century smallpox was prevalent in Malta. Variolation had been tried as a preventive measure but was found disappointing and dangerous in its results, so much so that its practice was prohibited in 1769 by the Grand Master of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, which then ruled over the Island.¹

At the time of Jenner's discovery of vaccination in 1798, Malta was occupied by Napoleon, but by 1800 it was under British protection. In the meantime the British government had taken steps to introduce vaccination to its naval and military forces abroad and to its possessions overseas. Malta was thus among the first British territories to benefit from this policy.

Dr. Joseph Marshall and Dr. John Walker were sent as vaccinators to the British fleet in the Mediterranean. They left England in the early days of July 1800 on the *Endymion*. After calling at Gibraltar, where they vaccinated both servicemen and civilians, they proceeded to Minorca on the *Florentine*.² They subsequently came to Malta, most probably on the same ship, as the *Florentine* was, in those days, a visitor to Maltese waters.³ Captain Alexander Ball, the President of the Provisional Government of Malta, ordered all men in the British fleet based on Malta to be vaccinated.⁴

It has been said that 'Jenner's book' was distributed in the island.⁵ Was this book the *Inquiry* or *A Continuation of Facts and Observations*? A prolonged search in private and public archives in the Maltese Islands has not revealed any copies of the *Inquiry* but I have succeeded in finding three copies of *A Continuation etc.* at the Royal Malta Library at Valletta. This booklet, however, is not the English original but an Italian translation which must have escaped the attention of W. R. LeFanu as he makes no reference to it in his admirable bio-bibliography of Jenner.⁶ This booklet (8vo, 32 pages) is entitled *Continuazione di fatti e d'osservazioni intorno al vajuolo della vacca fatte da Odoardo Jenner*. It was translated by the 'Abate Bellet D.S.' and published in Malta in 1801. Though it bears no indication as to the identity of the printer and publisher it was probably produced by the Government Printing Office which was then the only press in the island. It is very likely, too, that it was issued as a form of health propaganda to persuade Maltese parents to vaccinate their children against smallpox. It is a faithful rendering of the original except for minor mistakes such as 'fourth' instead of 'fifth day'; 'three or four' instead of 'two and three'; two misprints of English surnames and the omission of inverted commas and of two footnotes.⁷

The translator added a preface and an epilogue. The former consists of a brief

Texts and Documents

history of the spread of smallpox from early times to Jenner's day. Its concluding paragraph is a eulogy of Jenner and of the British authorities in Malta:

Cowpox inoculation is an infallible preservative against smallpox and never endangers life. How can one hesitate to practice it without loss of time? And if Rome and Athens have raised statues to victorious generals for their destruction of human beings, what do we owe to Jenner for having found the means to preserve life? What monument mustn't public gratitude raise in these Islands to the government that is endeavouring with so much effort to establish in Malta this beneficial practice? The year 1746 was for London the time of the foundation of a House of Charity for inoculating the poor with natural smallpox and thus lessen the devastation which this malady causes among human beings; and 1801 will be in Malta the year of the formation of a similar institution for the inoculation of cowpox [Translation].

The epilogue deals with the introduction of vaccination among Maltese civilians:

As soon as Dr. Edward Jenner had discovered in England an illness known as cowpox, which when passed on to human beings never fails to protect against smallpox, everyone endeavoured to avail themselves of this useful discovery. The writings of medical men made it known to all Europe and various practitioners applied to Dr. Jenner to provide them with the (cowpox) matter. It was sent to some of them; others went to England and after studying the nature of the illness went back (to their respective countries). Thus at the present moment nearly all Europe enjoys the benefit of this most excellent discovery; and the Island of Malta has not been the last to benefit from it. Ever since the middle of last July, Drs. Marshall and Walker left England expressly charged by the (British) Government to propagate and practice Jenner's method in the army and navy; in fact during the stay here of Lord Keith, with whom Dr. Walker has departed, they were engaged in vaccinating the soldiers and sailors of the expedition who had not yet had smallpox [Translation].

This expedition was directed to Egypt which had been occupied by Napoleon in 1798. Ships and men had arrived in Malta on 30 November 1800 under Sir Ralph Abercromby who was joined by Lord Keith on 14 December. They left for Egypt on the 20th and 21st of the same month.⁸

The translator continues:

Dr. Marshall has remained here to afford the opportunity to the Island's physicians to instruct themselves how to treat the illness and also to enable the inhabitants to avail themselves of the occasion of vaccinating their children if they so wish. Since the arrival of Drs. Marshall and Walker several children have been inoculated in the presence of Dr. Cassar and of Dr. Caruana who together with Dr. Marshall have visited the patients during the development of the illness; and they are ready to confirm that the illness of these children has been so slight that had they not known beforehand they would not have noticed that the children had been inoculated. They are convinced and prepared to testify that cowpox is a safe and infallible preservative against smallpox. Two persons who had been previously vaccinated were, in their presence, inoculated with the smallpox virus taken from an infant suffering from this disease; then the same persons were also exposed to smallpox infection but they were not attacked. This experiment, therefore, and the whole Island must remain convinced, shows that cowpox protects against smallpox. If there are still any doubts on this score they will certainly be dispelled when the two illnesses are compared and the advantages of the one over the other are demonstrated [Translation].

The Italian text then lays down the differences between cowpox and smallpox and emphasizes the benefits to be derived from *variolae vaccinae*.

Dr. Lorenzo Cassar and Dr. Aloysius Caruana referred to in the text were the Palace Physician (the personal physician of His Excellency the British Civil Commissioner) and the *Protomedicus* or Chief Government Medical Officer of the island respectively.⁹

Texts and Documents

Drs. Marshall and Walker are said to have obtained the lymph directly from Jenner but it is not clear how they succeeded in preserving its activity during the voyage to Malta. In those days the trip from Plymouth to Malta, with a halt at Minorca, took about forty-five days.¹⁰ It is known that when long distances were involved recourse was had to the serial vaccination of a number of boys carried on board for this purpose.¹¹ Attempts to elucidate how the lymph was transported to Malta have not been rewarding so far.¹²

It has not yet been possible to identify the translator. The title of 'Abate' shows that he belonged to the church. A John Bellet was in Malta in 1795 when he was admitted into the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in the Priory of Auvergne to pursue a course of studies in theology at the College (University) of Valletta and eventually join the Conventual Chaplains of the Order.¹³ It is known that following the expulsion of the Knights of St. John from Malta by Napoleon in 1798, some of the members of the Order remained in the island during the succeeding French occupation and the British domination of Malta. In fact in July 1801 the name of 'Abate Bellet' appears in a list of persons in receipt of 'secret pensions' granted by the British Civil Commissioner in Malta.¹⁴ It seems that Bellet was in government employment, for among the petitions submitted to the British Civil Commissioner there is one from Bellet dated 24 October 1801 requesting the payment of his salary during the two years that he had spent in Valletta when that city was blockaded by Maltese and British forces during its occupation by the French in 1798–1800.¹⁵

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I am very grateful to both of them for their help.
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CONTINUAZIONE
DI
FATTI E D'OSSERVAZIONI,
INTORNO AL
VAGUOLO DELLA VACCA,
FATTE DA
ODOARDO JENNER,

TRADOTTO DALL'INGLESE IN ITALIANO DALL'ABATE
BELLET D. S.

Con una Prefazione fatta dal medesimo Traduttore.

MALTA.

1801.

Figure 1.

e colla società, d'aver scoperto, nell'innesto della vaccina, uno antidoto capace d'estirpar dalla terra un male, di cui, a qualunque momento, tanti caddono vittime, e che è stato sempre considerato come il più terribile flagello del genere umano.

A Ppena il Dr. Odoardo Jenner ebbe scoperto in Inghilterra una malattia chiamata il vajuolo della vacca, il quale, quando viene comunicato alla specie umana, come si deve, non manca mai di preservar dall'infezione del vajuolo naturale, ciascuno, a gara, volle godere il frutto d'una sì utile scoperta; gli scritti de' medici la fecero presto conoscere a tutta l'Europa; e diversi professori ricorsero al Dr. Jenner per averne della materia; ad alcuni di essi ne fu inviata; ed altri, dopo aver bene studiato la natura della malattia in Inghilterra, andarono via.

Così nel presente momento quasi tutta l'Europa gode il beneficio di questa eccellentissima scoperta; e l'Isola di Malta non è stata l'ultima a provarlo. Fin dalla metà del mese di Luglio passato i Dottori Marshall e Walker partirono dall'Inghilterra, espressamente incaricati dal Governo di propagare e di praticare il metodo di Jenner nelle guarnizioni e sopra le flotte. Perciò essi furono occupati tutto il tempo che qui si trattene Lord Keith, col quale il Dr. Walker è partito, all'effetto d'innestar i marinari e soldati della spedizione, i quali non avrebbero ancor avuto il vajuolo.

P. il Dr. Marshall è restato qui, affinché non solamente i medici dell'Isola avessero l'opportunità d'istruirsi del modo di trattare la malattia, ma ancor affinché gli abitanti potessero, se piacesse loro, approfittarsi dell'occasione d'inocular i loro figli. Dall'arrivo de' Dottori Marshall e Walker parecchi ragazzi sono stati innestati in presenza del Dr. Cas-

Figure 2.

The Italian translation of Jenner's *A Continuation of Facts and Observations*, Malta, 1801, p. 30.