



# CROSSING OVER

MALTESE  
POETS  
IN  
AUSTRALIA



## Through a sensitive examination of Maltese poetry, Barry York evokes a sense of the abiding poetry of Maltese culture—as it is expressed through the writing and literary activity of Maltese migrants in Australia today

### CROSSING OVER

One last step in Malta,  
one first step in Australia;  
two steps that changed me  
from an emigrant  
into immigrant,  
as I took the plunge  
and crossed the Rubicon  
of an unchartered destiny.

Can a migrant  
change his identity  
the way he changes  
his nationality?

This is the question  
that seeks your answer.

### MINN NAHA GHAL OHRA

L-ahhar pass f'Malta,  
l-ewwel pass fl-Awstralja;  
żewġ passi li bidluni  
minn emigrant  
ghal immigrant,  
xhin qtajta li mmur  
'il hinn mir-Rubikon  
ta' dad-destin mistur.

Jista' l-immigrant  
jibdel l-identità  
l-istess kif jista' jibdel  
in-nazzjonalità?

Din hija l-mistoqsija  
li tftitx it-tweġiba.

Manwel Nicholas-Borg

of immigration, about 90,000 Maltese made the move, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s, and about 56,000 are still here. They mainly settled in industrial suburbs around Melbourne and Sydney.

Manwel Nicholas-Borg, who settled at Pascoe Vale in Melbourne, is a case in point. Born at Sliema, Malta in 1918, Manwel was educated at Stella Maris College before working as a composer and later as a member of the editorial staff of the Maltese newspaper *Il-Berqa* and its English counterpart, *The Times of Malta*. He emigrated to Australia, on the *Asturias* in 1949. Manwel is one of eight Maltese poets to have been recorded by the Library's Oral History Section. The others are Valentin (Joe) Barbara, Roderick (Rigu) Bovingdon, Josephine Cassar, Manwel Cassar, Albert Marshall, Joe Saliba and Frank Zammit. In a unique bilingual move, it was decided that each poet be asked to select samples of his or her work for reading in the language in which they were written, usually Maltese. The selections were then discussed in English in terms of each

**'M**ISKINA DIK it-tajra li titrabba f'art hażina' is a saying among the 350,000 inhabitants of the Mediterranean archipelago of Malta. Loosely translated, it means 'Pity the bird that is reared in a barren land'. It is an old saying which stresses the problem of cultural dislocation. Perhaps it was said during the last century when the first group of Maltese migrants to Australia arrived in North Queensland to cut cane.

From those beginnings, the Maltese associated Australia with dense scrub, vivid tropical colours and poisonous reptiles; a landscape very different from the barren rocky fields and yellow-white limestone of Malta. Some early emigrants carried with them powdered stone from St Paul's Bay where, in the year 60 AD, Paul had been shipwrecked. In gratitude for the hospitality displayed by the indigenes, he miraculously rid the local snakes of their venom. The powder from St Paul's Bay was regarded as an antidote to snakebite in such hostile environments as Australia.



*Manoel Theatre, Malta. The Manoel Theatre, originally built as a court theatre by Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena in 1731, is one of the oldest remaining theatres in Europe*

Photograph courtesy of the High Commission of the Republic of Malta

poet's background in Malta and the emigration-settlement process.

Manwel Nicholas-Borg has written about 2,000 poems and has had several collections published here and in Malta. The National Library holds seventeen of his works. For Manwel and his generation, images of Australia were not so much dominated by life-threatening reptiles as by symbols of 'escape'; as Manwel put it, 'escape from a ravaged and worried life of uncertainty in Malta'. Malta had been devastated by German and Italian bombardment during the Second World War and, with the downgrading of British naval facilities after the War, the Maltese working people were faced with an insecure future. 'I lost my house in Malta five times during the air-raids,' Manwel told me, 'So, when I came here everything looked heavenly... In Malta, unemployment was rampant, there was hardly anything to eat. I was in a hurry to leave!'

The 'escape', however, was not joyful but deeply painful. The emigrants still loved their homeland but felt compelled to uproot themselves for the sake of their children's futures. As most migrants

from non-English-speaking backgrounds found, the initial years in Australia were tough. However, the postwar Maltese settlers, unlike their predecessors whose numbers were never great, eventually had the advantage of group solidarity.

By the late 1950s, Maltese communities were organising themselves as never before and in 1959 the first literary organisation, the Literary Society for the Maltese, was established with Manwel Cassar as President and Manwel Nicholas-Borg as Vice-President. A decade or so later, Dr Ġużè Abela (who sadly passed away in 1991), founded the Maltese Literature Group, which is still going strong.

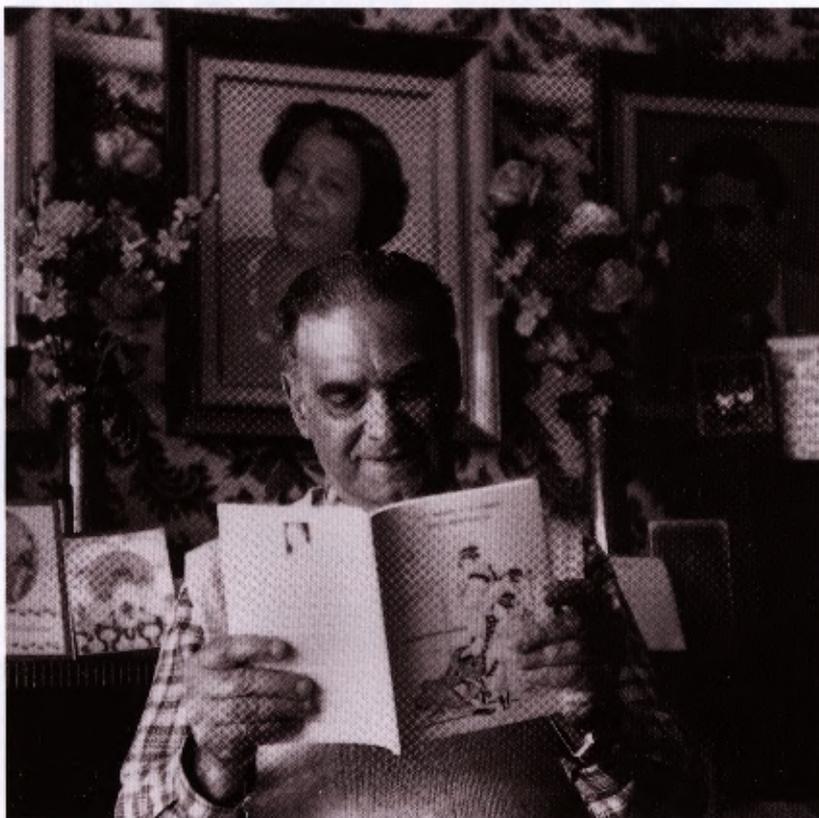
Manwel Nicholas-Borg's poems about Australia reflect his continuing sense of awe with a place so magnificently large and diverse. As a long-term employee with the Victorian Railways' Printing Works, he took full advantage of his annual rail pass to travel thousands of kilometres around the continent. 'To explain the distances,' Manwel told me, 'you have to draw a picture with words through such expressions as "there is more land than you can see."'

Manwel was particularly struck by the existence of the outback Flying Doctor Service which he encountered during a visit to Gin Gin, North Queensland in 1972. 'In Malta,' he laughed, 'there has never been a flying doctor and there never will be. It's quicker to walk!' Further allusions to Maltese experience are implicit in Manwel's description of the flying doctor descending from the sky not as a fighter pilot unloading bombs of destruction but as a 'guardian angel' answering a call for help.

The reference to the guardian angel reflects the religiosity inherent in much Maltese poetry. Malta is a strict Catholic society and there is one church for every thousand people there. Manwel's free verse poem 'If He was born in Australia', hypothesised the first Christmas occurring in Australia. The 'frightened couple' would have sought shelter from 'the scorching sun', but would have been made welcome by the Aborigines. The crib would have been set up in a shed 'surrounded by goannas and kangaroos'. Unlike the Bethlehem skies, ours would have revealed the Southern Cross 'as a sign that one day the baby will grow to die on a cross'.

It is perhaps fitting that much of Manwel's inspiration comes while in transit, be it on a train or bus or tram, because in a sense the 'migrant' never stops travelling; the dialectic tension between settlement and adaptation on the one hand and the lure of a past remembered with nostalgia on the other is constantly moving the poet to respond, to think and to write. It is precisely as a result of this tension that Maltese poetry in Australia has, for Manwel, taken a different stylistic direction to that in Malta. The Maltese writers in Australia, he says, have been far more willing to incorporate English words, albeit with a Maltese spelling, where no suitable Maltese word exists—'bush' (*buxx*) is but one example.

While some modern poets in Malta criticise their Australian compatriots for excessive nostalgia and obsessive patriotism for

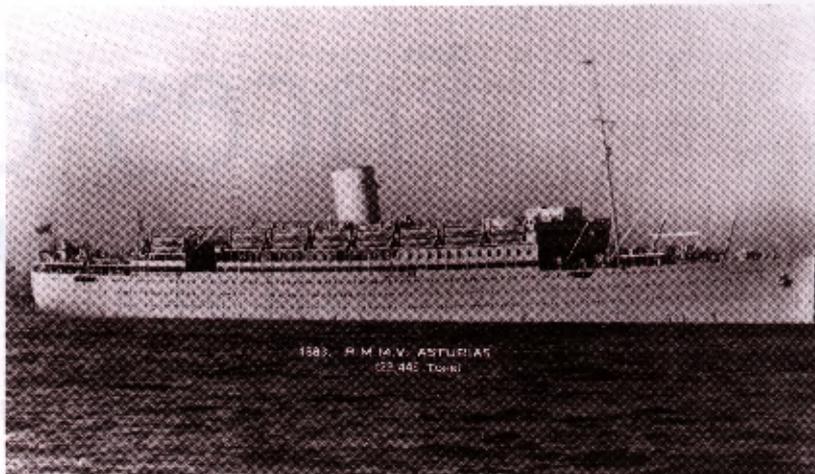


Manwel Nicholas-Borg reading poetry at his home in 1991  
Photograph courtesy of Barry York and Manwel Nicholas-Borg

Malta, Manwel believes simply that 'in order to appreciate something you must first lose it'. Roderick Bovingdon, a prominent Maltese literary figure in Sydney, whose first collection was aptly titled *Bejn Haltejn* or *Between Two Waves*, has described the Maltese–Australian traditionalist trend as 'symptomatic of a psychological umbilical tie to the motherland whilst living in an alien environment'.

If it is true that the Maltese poets in Australia experience a heightened appreciation for things Maltese as a result of 'losing' them, then it is equally true that they bring new ways of seeing Australia to Australian society. There is a recurring interest in Aboriginal Australians, for example. Manwel's 'Journey into Dreamtime', one of his few poems written in English, sees the Aborigine as 'treated like a foreigner in his own country'. While in a totally different objective situation, the Maltese of Manwel's generation nonetheless know only too well what it means to be a foreigner in one's own country. Malta declared its independence from Britain in 1964 and became a republic in 1974.

The Maltese who came to Australia in the 1950s also learned what it meant to be a foreigner in someone else's country. Any sad feelings in regards to the early years, however, are displaced by the positive changes since the 1970s when Australia officially embraced multiculturalism. The old conformists, though not entirely beaten, seem quaint relics today. Manwel's poem 'I Saw Australia Change', celebrates the positive ways in which Australian society has been changed by ethnic diversity. It opens with a question: 'What has happened to that time when the immigrant was guilty of not knowing how to speak in English?' Today, he observes, 'No longer do the people laugh at the way the immigrant clothes himself, no more do they joke about the way we cook... Today, with a curious accent, even they are putting a foreign word here and there.'



*The ship Asturias on which Manwel Nicholas-Borg travelled to Australia in 1949. It was a migrant ship on which many (British migrants included) travelled to Australia*  
Photograph courtesy of Barry York and Manwel Nicholas-Borg

The question of language is, of course, inseparable from questions of identity and cultural expression. The Maltese are intensely proud of their language, Maltese, or *Malti*. It is one of the marvels of human history that such a small population, based on three tiny islands—Malta, Gozo and Comino—has been able to maintain and preserve a distinctive language for more than two thousand years, despite the encroachments of whichever economic or military power happened to have the upper hand in the central Mediterranean at a given point in time. In its Semitic linguistic structure, Maltese is similar to Hebrew and Arabic. Until the nineteenth century, Maltese was a spoken language with little literature. In 1920, the *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* (Association of Writers of Maltese) was established in Malta and Maltese literature has flourished, with poetry as a vital and popular component.

To the observer, the Maltese seem a poetic people. Why is that so? Pride in the Maltese language is part of the explanation. The people had to struggle to assert their own language against those with vested interests in Malta, who earlier this century promoted either Italian or English over *Malti*. A language won through struggle is more valued than one taken for granted. Moreover, the pervasive Maltese folk music tradition is itself poetic. The *għana*, as it is known in Malta, has been around for about six centuries. The *għannejja* are like poets at street level, singing their

emotions rather than writing them down. The Library's Oral History Collection holds a recording of Joe Galea, of Sydney, discussing and performing the Maltese *għana* which he learned from his mother as a boy in Malta. Few Maltese did not grow up with some contact with the rhymes and clever spontaneous lyrics of the *għana*. At the same time, few did not attend church regularly and develop a sense for the rhythmic flow of prayer.

When all is said and done, however, the Maltese poets in Australia are responding to the unique experience of migration and settlement, of crossing over from one self-contained cultural world to another albeit less contained. The migrant's journey has its share of sacrifice, alienation, resistance, happiness and fulfilment. The Maltese poets in Australia share the journey but are perhaps more sensitive than most to the falterings and surges along the way. In constantly reminding themselves of who *they* are, the Maltese–Australian poets play a valuable social role in reminding Australians as a whole of our own diverse origins.

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