

A GREAT COXCOMB...

BY PATRICK MARIONÉ

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All the pictures are from the author collection.

IN NOVEMBER 1783, Nelson visited France with Captain James M'Namara [1] for the avowed purpose of learning the French language. Soon, however, he was far more busy courting Elizabeth Andrews, the daughter of a Devonshire's clergyman [2].

While staying in Saint- Omer in de Pas-de-Calais, on 2 November, he wrote a long letter to his old captain and friend, William Locker, describing his journey so far, his lack of progress in the language of Voltaire, the poor conditions of the roads and hostelries of *la belle France*, and the large number of English people staying in Saint-Omer.

> Two noble Captains are here – Ball and Shepard, you do not know, I believe, either of them; they wear fine epaulettes, for which I think them great coxcombs: they have not visited me, and I shall not, be assured, court their acquaintance [3].

In a letter to his brother William, dated of November, he is again on the subject:

> Here are two Navy Captains, Ball and Shepard, at this place, but we do not visit; they are very fine gentlemen with epaulettes: you may suppose I hold them a little cheap for putting on any part of a Frenchman's uniform [4].

Epaulettes were not part of the British naval uniform until June 1795, but, in fact, the dislike of Nelson for these officers stemmed not so much from the epaulettes as pique that they didn't visit him first, despite the fact that he was senior to them.

In his biography of Alexander Ball, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote:

> Shortly after the general peace was established, Captain Ball, who was now a married man, passed some time with his lady in France [5], and, if I mistake not, at Nantz.
>
> At the same time, and in the same town, among the other English visitors Lord (then Captain) Nelson, happened to be one. In consequence of some punctilio, as to whose business it was to pay the compliment of the first call, they never met, and this trifling affair occasioned a coldness between the two naval commanders, or in truth a mutual prejudice against each other [6].

1 James M'Namara was born ca. 1738. On 4 September 1778, he was appointed 3rd. Lieutenant of the "Bristol" whilst Nelson was 1st. Lieutenant. He was made a Post Captain on 5 February 1781, and died a Superannuated Rear-Admiral, on 1 March 1802, aged 64.

2 Tom Pocock, *Nelson's Women*, 1999, pp. 30-31.

3 Sir Nicholas H. Nicolas, *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, 1844, vol. 1, p. 86. James Keith Shepard was a Commander (1781). He died a Vice-Admiral of the Red, in July 1843.

4 Idem, p. 89.

5 Ball married only in 1785, after his return from the continent.

6 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, vol. 4:1 of the *Collected Works,* 1969, p. 547.

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Early career...

Alexander John Ball was the fourth son of a considerable landowner, Robert Ball, esq., of Ebworth Park near Painswick, co. Gloucester, High Sheriff of Gloucestershire in 1748; his mother Mary, was the only daughter of Marshe Dickinson, Lord Mayor of London in 1756, M.P. for Brackley, Northampton. Alexander was baptized in the parish church in Painswick on 22 July 1756.

An anecdote surviving from his school days at the Market House School, Stroud, then directed by Samuel Purnell, says that after the execution of some thieves at Gloucester, the boys decided to play at hanging in the Shambles. Alexander volunteered for the experience and after being suspended for some time in mid-air, everyone thought his performance very life-like. When an older boy came by and cut him down, he was black in the face.

Alexander Ball entered the Royal Navy from his own choice, serving first in the *Egmont* (74) under Captain John Elphinstone, in consequence of the deep impression and vivid images left on his mind by the perusal of *Robinson Crusoe* [7].

On 7 August 1778, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in the *Atalanta* sloop, and served on the North American and Newfoundland stations [8]. Two years later, on 17 August 1780, he joined the *Santa Monica* frigate, (36) and went to the West Indies. In April 1781, he was moved to the *Sandwich* (90), Sir George Rodney's flag-ship. He followed Rodney in the Gibraltar for a passage to England, then joined the *Formidable* (98) on 6 December 1781. He was first lieutenant of the *Formidable* at the battle of the Saintes on 12 April 1782, and two days later was promoted to the command of the *Germain* (16), a position he held until he was made post on 20 March 1783.

After his return in England, Ball found himself on the beach, like so many of his brother officers, and went to France on a year's leave where he met Captain Horatio Nelson. On 7 July 1785, he married Mary Smith, daughter of John Wilson, esq. of Westminster. His only child, William Keith, was born on 27 October 1791.

In July 1790, on the occasion of the Spanish armament, he received the command of the *Nemesis* frigate (28) which was on the home station for the next three years when he was appointed to the Cleopatra (32). He served for three years on the Newfoundland station under Vice-Admiral Sir Richard King then Rear-Admiral George Murray.

The character of Ball was more patient, cooler, and more thoughtful than the one of many officers of the period. Fitchett [9] called him a *tideless* man.His gentrified background gave him social graces. His wide readings loaned him a philosophical and human turn of mind, which was to made him a great diplomat and colonial administrator.

Alexander Ball was at 16 points of a Thomas Troubridge [10] who in 1799 apologized to Nelson for not sending him the head of a Jacobin, giving the excuse that the weather was very hot he recommended the Italian judge to execute prisoners with no time for confession, so that they should go to hell, and offering to degrade priests by pissing on their damned Jacobin carcasses [11].

Ball transferred to the *Argonaut* (64), and returned in England in August 1796. In January 1797, he was appointed to the *Alexander* (74) [12] and served at the blockade of Brest under Vice-Admiral John Colpoys till the beginning of 1798, when the Alexander was ordered to join the fleet of Lord St. Vincent off Cadiz.

7 *The Friend*, vol. 4:1, p. 539. The book of Daniel Defoe was certainly responsible for more recruits to the fleets of England than any other tale ever.

8 The details of his early career come from the *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 1, pp. 990-992.

9 W. H. Fitchett, *Nelson and his captains*, 1902, p. 178.

10 There could be no greater contrast than Troubridge's and Ball's handwriting, the one sprawling across the page in large ill-formed lettering, often forged in a white heat of anger and impatience, the other neat, legible, considered a model of punctuation and precision., Ludovic Kennedy, *Nelson and his Captains*, 1975, p. 110.

11 Terry Coleman, *Nelson, the man and the legend*, 2001, p. 285.

12 Built in Deptford, launched in 1778. Returning to England from the coast of Spain with the *Canada*, she was captured by a French squadron of five 74's and three large frigates under contre-amiral Neilly, on 6 November 1794. On 22 June 1795, she was with a French fleet when they were discovered off Belle Isle by the Channel fleet under Lord Bridport. Early the following morning, she was taken back into the Royal Navy.

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The Gale...

On 26 April 1797, Nelson joined the fleet on board the *Vanguard* (74) and was ordered to take *Orion* (74), Captain James Saumarez, and *Alexander*, along with three frigates, to cruise off Toulon.

On 4 May, he arrived at Gibraltar in company of *Emerald* (36) to join *Orion*, *Alexander*, with *Terpsichore* (32) and *Bonne Citoyenne* (20), victualling and carrying minor repairs.

Ball – with his then regulation epaulettes – reported himself on board the Vanguard to his new superior. Nelson's welcome was icy: What, are you come to have your bones broken? Ball replied that he certainly had no wish to have his bones broken, unless his duty to his King and country required such a sacrifice, and then they should not be spared. [13]

The squadron proceeded to a position 75 miles south of Toulon to intercept shipping bound into Toulon or Marseilles. On 20 May, the squadron was struck by a furious gust of Mistral. [14]

By 1.30 a.m. on the 21st., the main topmast of the *Vanguard* went over the side. Half an hour later, the fore topmast toppled over the side, the foremast followed and damaged the bowsprit. The *Vanguard* was a perfect wreck, the broken spars and an anchor crashing against the hull.At daylight *Alexander* and *Orion* sighted *Vanguard* heading straight towards the rocky coast of Corsica. The gale continued till 4 a.m. of the 22. when it began to abate. At 6.45 a.m. Nelson hoisted the signal for *Alexander* to take the *Vanguard* in tow. In the afternoon, *Alexander* finally established a tow and slowly set course towards the Gulf of Oristano on the east coast of Sardinia to find a shelter for the three ships.

The wind made it impossible to turn into Oristano then completely dropped leaving the ships drifting toward the coast. You may easily figure to yourself our situation, and the feelings of those who knew the danger, when I tell you I could easily distinguish the surf breaking on the rocky shore... [15]

Nelson, believing the *Vanguard* was doomed, hailed Ball and ordered him to cast the tow. Ball refused and Nelson became impetuous and enforced his demand with passionate threats. Ball replied: I feel confident that I can bring you in safe. I therefore must not and by the help of almighty God will not leave you. [16]

In the morning, the three ships were safely anchored on the lee side of San Pietro, a small island at the extreme south of Sardinia. Nelson lost no time in going on board the Alexander to give his unreserved thanks. Cordially embracing Captain Ball, he exclaimed A friend in need is a friend indeed ! [17]. So started a lifelong friendship.

It had been a close shave, inspiring an uncommon sentiment of humility to Nelson who wrote to St. Vincent on the 31 May:

> My pride was too great for man; but I trust my friends will think that I bore my chastisement like a man. It has pleased God to assist us with his favour, and here I a.m. again off Toulon. [18]

After a hasty refitting over four days in San Pietro (and with the private help of the Governor), the squadron sailed back to inspect the roads of Toulon. Another disaster was awaiting. The harbour was empty. The French armada had escaped.

13 Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 21 n.

14 For a detailed account of the incident see Brian Lavery, *Nelson and the Nile*, 1998, pp. 65-71.

15 Captain Edward Berry to his father-in-law, Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 19 n.

16 As pointed out by Brian Lavery, it's difficult to imagine that such a pompous exchange took really place through speaking trumpets above the crash of the waves but it was the spirit of the exchange.

17 Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 21 n.

18 Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 23.

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Great Balls of Fire...

Some thousand miles later, Nelson, having been reinforced by a considerable squadron under Captain Thomas Troubridge, on August 1 1798, raised the French fleet, lying at anchor in Aboukir Bay.

Alexander and *Swiftsure* (74), Captain Benjamin Hallowell) were some miles away, having been ordered to spy out the harbour of Alexandria.

At 6 p.m., the battle started. *Alexander* and *Swiftsure* followed by *Leander* (50, Captain Thomas Boulden Thompson) which joined the others around 8 p.m. The night was pitch-black, illuminated only by the broadsides in the middle of the smoke. The head of the French line had already surrendered, but some British ships had taken a severe beating. Nelson was seriously wounded.Ball and Hallowell, making no mistakes, went for the center of the French fleet.

Swiftsure anchored, barring the way to the open sea, between *le Franklin* (80) and *l'Orient* (120, ex-*le Sans Culotte*), the flagship of vice-amiral François-Paul de Brueys d'Aigaliers [19]. Spying a gap in the French line in front of *le Tonnant* (80), which had drifted away from the line, Ball broke the French line astern of *l'Orient* and anchored the *Alexander* on her beam. Her raking fire through the stern of the French three-decker caused a carnage in the battery. Between 9 p.m. and 9.30 p.m., the *Leander* anchored in the gap left in the French line by *le Peuple Souverain* (74) casting adrift, in front of *le Franklin*. It was the turning point of the battle. The French rearguard, commanded by contre-amiral Villeneuve [20], stayed on its anchors.

Around 10 p.m., a fire started in the stern cabin of *l'Orient*. It spread rapidly and was soon out of control.Ball ordered the bow cable to be cut. *Alexander* drifted away, and came alongside *le Tonnant*, renewing the combat before having to cut the cable again to avoid to be set on fire by *l'Orient*, which was fully ablaze. About 10.30 p.m., l'*Orient* exploded. The conflagration was heard in Alexandria. A heavy silence fell over the battlefield. Some burning parts of the dead ship had fallen on the *Alexander* and set some sails on fire. The fire was rapidly stopped by cutting the sails. Then the battle recommenced, with *le Tonnant*.

The next morning, the British fleet had taken, sunk or burned eleven out of a total of thirteen ships of the line, and two frigates out of four. The British loss was 218 deaths and 678 wounded. Estimations of losses in the French fleet vary between 3,000 and 5,000 wounded and killed [21]. The casualties [22] on board *Alexander* were 14 killed, including Lieutenant John Collins, and 58 wounded, including Captain Alexander John Ball, William Lawson the Master, Captain Creswell of the Marines and two midships, 8 cases of lemon juice, 8 butts and 6 puncheons, and the stove shot through. Twenty-eight shirts and trousers were issued to French prisoners from *l'Orient*, who came on board naked. In the afternoon, the main topmast went over the side [23].

Coleridge tells two anecdotes about Ball at the Nile:

> One particular I shall add to the known account of the memorable engagement between these ships, and this I received from Sir Alexander Ball himself. He had previously made a combustible preparation, but which, from the nature of the engagement to be expected, he had purposed for the last emergency. But just at the time when, from several symptoms, he had every reason to believe that the enemy would soon strike to him, one of the lieutenants, without his knowledge, threw in the combustible matter; and this it was that occasioned the tremendous explosion of that vessel, which, with the deep silence and interruption of the engagement

19 François-Paul de Brueys d'Aigaliers, born in 1753, entered the Marine Royale in 1766. Lieutenant de vaisseau in April 1780, capitaine de vaisseau in January 1792, chef de division (Commodore) in June 1795, contre-amiral in September 1796, vice-amiral in April 1798. He was cut in two by a cannon ball around 9 pm, on board *l'Orient*. His name is inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile in Paris.

20 Pierre-Charles-Jean-Baptiste-Sylvestre de Villeneuve, born in 1763, entered the Gardes de la Marine in 1778. Promoted lieutenant de vaisseau in 1786, capitaine de vaisseau en 1793, contre-amiral in 1796, vice-amiral in 1804. In command of the Franco-Spanish fleet during the campaign of 1805 ending in the battle of Trafalgar. Exchanged in 1806, he committed suicide (some say he was murdered by Fouché's police) at Rennes in April 1806.

21 Michèle Battesti, *La bataille d'Aboukir, 1798*, 1998, p. 117.

22 Out of 590 men.

23 T. Sturges Jackson, *Logs of great sea fights*, 1900, vol. 2, p. 68.

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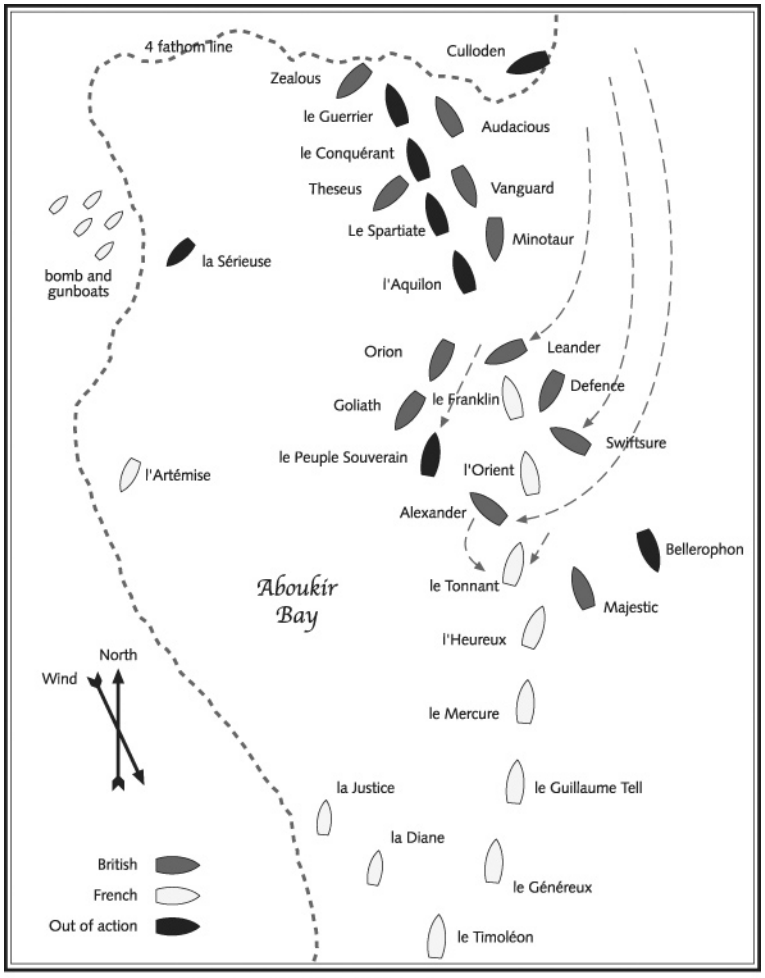

The Battle of the Nile, about 8.30 p.m.

which succeeded to it, has been justly deemed the sublimest war incident recorded in history. Yet the incident which followed, and which has not, I believe, been publicly made known, is scarcely less impressive, though its sublimity is of a different character. At the renewal of the battle Captain Ball, though his ship was then on fire in three different parts, laid her alongside a French eighty-four[24]: and a second longer obstinate contest began. The firing on the part of the French ship having at length for some time slackened, and then altogether ceased, and yet no sign given of surrender, the senior lieutenant came to Captain Ball and informed him, that the hearts of his men were as good as ever, but that they were so completely exhausted, that they were scarcely capable of lifting an arm. He asked, therefore, whether, as the enemy had now ceased firing, the men might be permitted to lie down their guns for a short time. After some reflection, Sir Alexander acceded to the proposal, taking of course the proper precautions to rouse them again at the moment he thought requisite. Accordingly, with the exception of himself, his officers, and the appointed watch, the ship's crew lay down, each in the place to which he was stationed, and slept for twenty minutes. They were then roused; and started up, as Sir Alexander expressed it, more like men out of an ambush than from sleep, so co-instantaneously did they all obey the summons! They recommenced their fire, and in a few minutes the enemy surrendered; and it was soon after discovered, that during that interval, and almost immediately after the French ship had first ceased firing, the crew had sunk down by their guns, almost by the side, as it were, of their sleeping enemy. [25]

24 *le Tonnant.*

25 *The Friend*, vol.4:1, pp. 549 – 550.

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On 14 August, a large part of the fleet under the command of Sir James Saumarez left with 6 prizes for Gibraltar. At 8 a.m. of 19 August, *Vanguard*, in company with *Alexander* and *Culloden*, weighed anchor from Aboukir Bay, en route for Naples and new adventures. The rest of the fleet was left to blockade Alexandria.

Malta under the French rule.

Malta is a small archipelago which lies 60 miles south of Sicily and 180 miles east of Tunisia. Malta, the island, is about 13 miles wide by 9 miles deep. Gozo, the sister island is 9 miles by 7. The other islands are Comino and the uninhabited rocks of Cominetto and Filfla. The population at the period was around 90,000 in Malta, and 12,000 in Gozo.

A British traveler, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, wrote in the late 1770s:

> An extent of country rather hilly than montainous, thousands of stone walls dividing and sustaining little enclosures, formed like terraces; villages so numerous as to bear the appearance of a continued town; and the whole raised on a barren rock, with scarce a tree to enliven the dusky-tinted view. [26]

And Coleridge called it: the dreariest of all dreary islands. The most profitable crop at the time was cotton but the harvest of grain was just sufficient to feed the population for four months a year. Most of the corn and cattle had to be imported from Sicily.

An important export from the overpopulated islands was men. Maltese people enrolled in the French armies and fleets as well as in the British ones. Four hundred fourteen Maltese sailors were loaned to Vice-Admiral Samuel Hood during the occupation of Toulon in 1793. Over 1,000 soldiers from the Maltese regiment and sailors were enroled in the *Légion de Malte* under général Mac Sheedy and taken to Egypt. Most of them perished in the battle of the Pyramids. Many Maltese names have found their way in the muster books of the fleet who fought at the Nile or Trafalgar.

Joseph Cammilleri [27] was the only officer of the period ever to win his epaulette whilst being born a foreigner. He was the son of Signor Gabriel Cammilleri, a Maltese who assisted Captain Alexander John Ball during the blockade .

Besides the manning of their fleet, the only interest of the islands for the European Powers at war was their strategic position in the geographic center of the Mediterranean even if Nelson denied it: To say the truth, the possession of Malta by England would be a useless and enormous expense, yet any expense should be incurred rather than let it remain in the hands of the French.

In 1530, the Emperor Charles V of Spain had granted the islands to the Knights of the Order of St. John who were based in Rhodes till 1522. In case of the Order quitting the islands, the sovereignty was to revert to the King of Naples. The Knights had made of Malta an impregnable fortress. Under the rule of the Grand Master Chevalier Emmanuel de Rohan Polduc (1775–1797), the finances of the Order had flourished. Malta had prospered until 1792, when the French Legislative Assembly had decreed the seizure of the Order's estates, first in France, then in Western Europe as the victorious French army advanced. From £136,417 in 1788, the revenues of the Order had fallen to £34,663 [28]. The new Grand Master, Ferdinand von Hompesh — a German — was facing the financial bankrupt of the Order and he was a weakling.

Buonaparte's Great Expedition stopped off Malta on 9 June 1798, on his way to Egypt. On 10 June 1798, the French landed four groups: général Reynier in the island of Gozo; général Baraguay d'Hilliers, with his Genoese squadron, at St. Paul's Bay and Mellieha, in the north-east of Malta; général

26 *A Classical Tour through Italy and Sicily*, 1819, quoted in Gregory Desmond, *Malta, Britain, and the European Powers, 1793–1815*, 1996, p. 21.

27 He entered the Navy in 1806, was promoted Lieutenant on 25 February 1815, Commander on 1 January 1815. He married an Englishwoman and died in England, aged 66, a Retired Captain on 17 September 1860.

28 Dr. Charles J. Boffa, *The Saga of the French Occupation, Malta 1798-1800*, Malta, 1998, p. 1.

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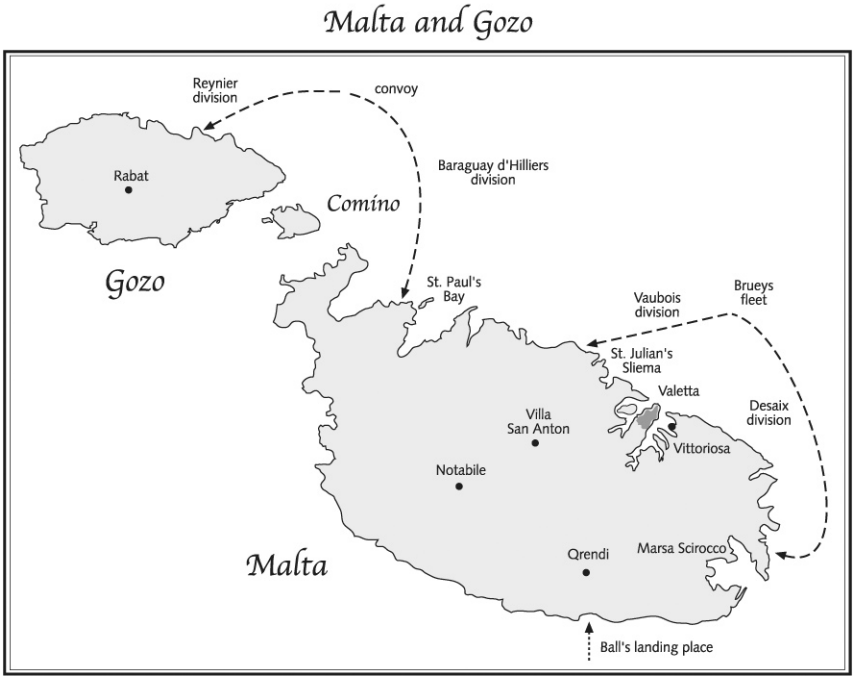
Vaubois in St. Julian's, near Valetta; and général Desaix at Marsa Scirocco, in the south-east.



The Grand Master had 322 knights [29], 2,210 regular soldiers and 10,000 local militia (on paper) to man the impregnable fortifications of the island. Even for 40,000 of the best soldiers in Europe, the siege would have been a formidable challenge, if the troops had been properly motivated [30], and Buonaparte knew that Nelson was at his heels. On 11 June, a truce was proposed by the Maltese and in the night, the capitulation of the Order was signed on board L'Orient. The French losses were three killed.

On 12 June, Buonaparte landed at Grand Harbour, cheered by a Maltese population that was disgusted by old masters who were only able to spend the money which had made the fortune of the islands. He was to write to the Directoire: We have in the center of the Mediterranean, the strongest place in Europe. Général de brigade Caffarelli [31] of the Engineers wrote: We were fortunate that there was someone inside to open the doors to us.

During his one week stay [32], général Buonaparte issued no fewer than 10 Orders or Ordinances embodying 98 Articles, to ensure that Malta now belonged to the French Republic. French was made the official language. The articles included the dismissal of the Order, the mandatory wearing of the tricolour cockade, the abolition of the slavery [33], the liberation of the *buonavogli* [34], the abolition of the University and the creation



The landing place of Napoleon and Nelson in Grand Harbour.

29 Out of a total of 322 knights, 200 were French, 90 Italian, 25 Spanish, 9 German, 8 Portuguese and 1 Austrian. The French knights were taken between their national allegiance and their fidelity to the Order, and Spain was then an ally of the French Republic. Boffa, op. cit., p. 10.

30 von Hompesh has generally been vilified by the historiography as the traitor who surrendered Malta without a fight. He refused to sign the surrender. The real traitors are to be found within his Council: the Treasurer Chevalier Bosredon de Ransijat and the Secretary Jean-Paul-Louis-Ovide Doublet, and in a faction of the Maltese gentry.

31 Louis-Marie-Joseph-Maximilien Caffarelli, born in 1756, he died at Acres, on 27 April 1799, having lost his right arm.

32 On 12 June Buonaparte slept at the Banca Giuratale, Strada San Giacomo (Merchants' Street), and the next day moved to the Palazzo Parisio in the same street.

33 There were thousands of slaves in Malta: 1400 Moors, 500 Turks, Jews, and black Africans.

34 Debtors who had sold themselves to serve in the galleys.

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of a central school, religious freedom for the Orthodox Greeks and the Jews, compulsory schooling, etc. A brand new government was composed of nine Maltese notables and the Chief French Commissary Regnaud de Saint-Jean-d'Angély [35]. The Palace Square became *place de la Liberté*, and streets took the name of *rue de la Félicité Publique*, *rue des Droits de l'Homme* ou *rue Napoléon Bonaparte*.

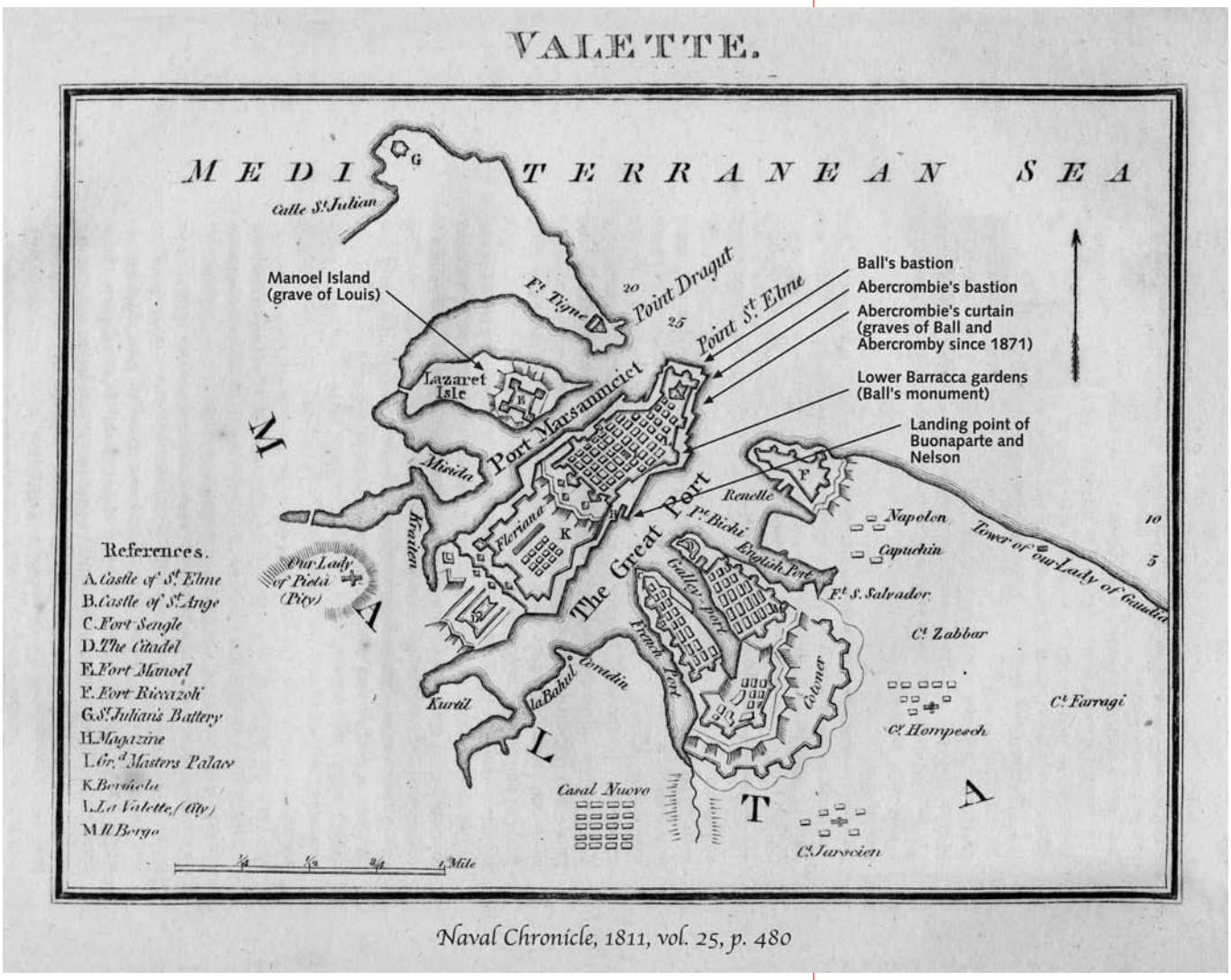
On 18 June, he was on board *l'Orient* with the treasure of the Knights worth five million francs in gold and on million in silver plate. On 19 June, the expedition set sail for Egypt, leaving *général de division* Vaubois [36], appointed *Commandant en chef des Isles de Malte et du Goze*, to defend the islands with 3,053 men, 5 companies of artillery and a medical unit.

At first the French tried to win the support of the Catholic Church, but quickly the Maltese Church found itself nearly abolished: papal jurisdiction abolished, prohibition of the consecration of new priests under the age of thirty, and expulsion of all priests, regular clergy and nuns who were not native of Malta. Additionally, civil marriage was declared to be legal.

The excessively pious Maltese were soon disgusted by their new masters. Outraged by the plundering of their churches, and faced by an unprecedented economic and financial crisis that had been precipitated by the draining

35 Michel-Louis-Etienne de Saint-Jean-d'Angély, born in 1762. A fanatical Jacobin, he took part in the coup d'état of the 18 Brumaire, at the start of a brilliant political career. He was created Comte d'Empire in 1808, and died in 1819.

36 Claude-Henri Belgrand de Vaubois, born in 1748, he was created Comte de Belgrand de Vaubois in 1808. He died in 1839. His name is inscribed on the *Arc de Triomphe de L'Etoile* in Paris.



Naval Chronicle, 1811, vol. 25, p. 480

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of most of the cash, on 2 September 1798 they rose against the French garrison in Notabile (Città Vecchia or Mdina).

Soon the two islands were in a state of full rebellion, and the Maltese formed a *National Assembly*. They dispatched to a petition to King Ferdinand, their official Suzerain, in Naples, to help them in their struggle against the French. Though Ferdinand promised much, he did little, soon having enough on his own plate to worry much about his loyal Maltese subjects.

On 19 September, a Portuguese squadron of four ships, *Principe Réal* (74), *Rainha de Portugal* (74), *San Sebastian* (74), and *Alfonço Albuquerque* (74), under the command of the Marquis Pinto-Guedes de Nizza Reale, appeared off Malta, and the blockade began. The squadron had been sent by St. Vincent from Cadiz to reinforce Nelson, but had arrived off Alexandria too late to take a part in the battle of the Nile.

On 25 September, the Saumarez's squadron, en route for Gibraltar with the French prizes, became becalmed off Malta and fell with the Marquis de Niza, who has obeyed my order and taken post there. A deputation of the Islanders coming on board, and stating their belief that a Summons to the French would induce them to abandon the Island, Sir James Saumarez sent in a very proper Summons, which was rejected, after three hours' consideration. Sir James very properly supplied the Islander with 1200 stand of arms from the Prizes, ball-cartridges, cartouche-boxes, etc. [37]

On 4 October, Nelson sent his orders to Alexander Ball:

> You are hereby required and directed to proceed in his Majesty's Ship Alexander, under your command, off the Island of Malta, taking with you the Ships named in the margin (*Terpsichore*, *Bonne Citoyenne* and *Incendiary*), whose Captains have my orders to follow your directions, and to use your endeavour to blockade the Ports of that Island, so, as to prevent any supplies getting in them for the French troops, as well as to prevent the escape of the French Ships now in that place... [38]

From then on, the destinies of Alexander Ball and of Malta would be inextricably entangled.

By 12 October, Ball's squadron was stationed off Malta. Soon the French troops were compelled by the Maltese to fortify entrench themselves in Valetta and the Three Cities round Grand Harbour. Meanwhile, a Neapolitan vessel had supplied the Maltese with more ammunitions.

On 24 October, the *Vanguard*, in company with the *Minotaur* (74, Captain Thomas Louis), arrived with Nelson on board. He confirmed his orders to Ball and added the *Audacious* and the *Goliath* to the blockade.

On 28 October, the French commander in Gozo, with his 217 men, surrendered to Captain Ball, who had negotiated the capitulation. Captain Creswell of the Marines of the Alexander took possession of the castle, and the following day, the place was delivered to the deputies of the island and the colours of Ferdinand were hoisted.

On 30 October, Nelson sailed back to Naples.

37 Nelson to Earl Spencer, 29 September 1798, Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 137.

38 Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 141 – 142.

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The New Mediterranean Order.

The military and political situation was soon to become very intricate in Italy and throughout the Mediterranean basin, keeping the French *Directoire* and its armies, Nelson and his fleet very busy.

After the Nile, the Sublime Porte had declared war against the French Republic, sending a fleet to blockade Alexandria alongside the British squadron of Captain Samuel Hood.

Pavel I, the not too well adjusted eldest son of Tsarina Ekaterina II, who had succeeded his mother in November 1796, had taken a sudden fancy to Malta. He was erected *Protector of the Order of St. John*, then acting Grand Master on November 7, 1798. He was seriously claiming that the sovereignty of the islands should be returned to the Knights.

A Russian fleet under the command of Vice-admiral Ouschakow made its way through the Mediterranean.

In October 1798, the Turco-Russian fleet attacked the Ionian Islands [39], taking all of these save Corfu, which maintained its resistance until March 1799. The *Leander* (50) taken by the French squadron escaped from the Nile in 1798, was captured at the fall of Corfu, and eventually returned to the Royal Navy.

The Bey of Tunis was at war with Portugal as he was at war with Naples, Algiers, Tripoli and the French but friendly with England. Nelson had to warn Ball:

> I send you the Benjamin [a Portuguese brig], Captain Thompson, but I beg you will endeavour to keep him out of the way of the Tunisian cruizers; for I should be sorry if any action took place, which might lose our friendship with the Bey. [40]

On 9 November, Commodore John Thomas Duckworth's squadron took Minorca from Spain.

In Italy, the French were to be masters of the Piedmont and Charles Emanuel of Sardinia sent into exile. The Great Duchy of Tuscany fell in 1799.

On 29 November 1798, Ferdinand of Naples and Sicily triumphantly entered Rome. On 15 December, the French repossessed themselves of Rome. By the end of December, Ferdinand had escaped on board Nelson's ships to Palermo, and was left King of only one Sicily.

The Portuguese ships blockading Malta had been recalled to Naples, and replaced by Neapolitan ones. On 15 December, Nelson was writing to Ball, recalling the Goliath: Do not send a Neapolitan Ship: there are traitors in the Marine.

The *Parthenopian Republic* was proclaimed by général Championnet on 23 January 1799 to the cheers of the Neapolitan elite which was to pay dearly their rebellion.

The Portuguese squadron burned the Navy of Ferdinand off Naples, against the orders of Nelson and Ferdinand.

In the meantime, Captain Sir William Sidney Smith was making himself insufferable to Nelson before covering himself of glory at Acres.

In January 1799, only the Alexander and the *Audacious*, with the *Emerald* frigate and *Incendiary* fireship, were blockading Malta.

39 The Ionian Islands, including some fortresses in Albania, had been annexed by the French Republic in the summer of 1797, when Buonaparte has dissolved the Venetian Republic, the main part going to Austria.

40 Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 260 –261.

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On 21 January, Nelson wrote to Ball from Palermo:

> I most heartily pray that your fag is over, and that victory has crowned your exertions and perseverance. When Malta is finished, you shall go down when you please. We have a report here that a Russian ship has paid you a visit, with proclamations for the Island. I hate the Russians, and if she came from their Admiral at Corfu, he is a blackguard.
> Respecting the situation of Malta with the King of Naples, it is this – he is the legitimate Sovereign of the Island: therefore, I a.m. of opinion his Flag should fly. At the same time, a Neapolitan garrison would betray it to the first man who would bribe him. I a.m. sure the King would have no difficulty in giving his Sovereignty to England; and I have lately, with Sir William Hamilton, got a Note that Malta should never be given to any Power without the consent of England. Now, my dear friend, if, happily, Malta falls, and you like it, the regulation as Governor for the King of Naples and our King shall be placed in you...
> P.S. – In case of the Surrender of Malta, I beg you will not do anything which can hurt the feelings of their Majesties. Unite their Flag with England's, if it cannot, from the disposition of the Islanders, fly alone. [41]

41 Nicolas, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 237 –238.

So started the complex diplomatic pas de quatre that would end in the Union Flag floating over Malta for more than 150 years.

In February 1798, the Maltese insurgents, having lost hope in an intervention of King Ferdinand, requested Ball to preside over the National Assembly. He had previously landed near the village of Qrendi on the south of the island.

He changed the name of the assembly to that of *National Congress*, and put himself at work as chief of government. He suggested that the members of the Congress should be elected by the heads of the *casals* . [42]

42 The traditional administrative divisions of the islands, similar to the parishes in Great Britain.

Canon Francesco Caruana was elected at the Head of the Congress. Ball convened the first meeting of the Congress on 11 February 1798. The Congress was to meet regularly once a week at *Villa San Anton* [43] which became Ball's residence in the island.

43 4 miles out of Valetta. Today it's the official residence of the President of the Republic of Malta.

In March, the Congress appealed to King George III to assume sovereignty over Malta. No answer came from Pitt's ministry. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville was still sticking to the previous tri-partite agreement, even if Henry Dundas, the Secretary of War was convinced of the strategic importance of Malta.

To provision the slowly starving French garrison, the *Directoire* sent small vessels from Provence, Liguria, Ancona and even Tripoli.

At the end of January, a schooner from Ancona eluded the blockading squadron, and at the beginning of February, *La Boudeuse* frigate (36) [44], from Toulon, ran the blockade and entered Grand Harbour.

44 The ship Bougainville took round the world.

She was the last ship that year to re-supply Vaubois and his garrison.

On 12 May 1799, the *Espoir* arrived at Palermo with news that a French fleet of 25 men-of-war under the command of vice-amiral Bruix [45], had escaped from Brest on 25 April, by eluding Lord Bridport's fleet. The French had been seen off Oporto on the way to the Mediterranean.

45 Eustache Bruiw, born in 1759, entered the Marine Royale in 1778. Lieutenant de vaisseau in 1786, capitaine de vaisseau in 1793, contre-amiral in May 1797, ministre de la Marine from April 1798 till July 1798, vice-amiral in March 1799, amiral in 1801, he died in March 1805.

The French *Directeurs* had at last decided to make a serious attempt to resupply Malta and the army of Egypt.

Outnumbered, Nelson had to lift the blockade of Malta, and recall the *Alexander* and the *Goliath* to reinforce his fleet.

During the absence of Ball, the presidency of the Congress devolved to Captain John Vivion of the Royal Artillery, the only other British officer serving on shore.

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As soon as the naval blockade had been lifted, three of the French ships bottled up in Grand Harbour emerged, and proceeded to blockade the Maltese positions in St. Paul's Bay and Marsa Scirocco.

Bruix showed his flag as far as Genoa but instead of resupplying Malta and Alexandria as stated in his orders, he made for Toulon, where he arrived on 14 May.

He stayed there a month, when he returned safely to Brest through the Strait of Gibraltar. He had accomplished nothing except giving a dreadful fright from Gibraltar to Istanbul, and having enraged all the British squadrons sent to his pursuit.

On 15 June, Vice-Admiral Lord Keith replaced Lord St. Vincent as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean station. He was not very popular among the *Band of Brothers*, having failed in his pursuit of Bruix's fleet.

Thomas Louis, as well as Ball and Troubridge, asked not to be left behind if Nelson was to return in England. Nelson commented: We of the Nile are not equal to Keith in his estimation and ought to think it an honour to serve under such a clever man.

On 21 June, while Nelson was at Palermo, the Neapolitan republicans surrendered.

On 27 June, Captains Ball and Troubridge landed with 1,300 men, plus 500 Russians and a body of Royalists.

Three days later, the *Alexander* sailed to resume her station off Malta. The three French ships quickly retreated into Grand Harbour.

On 23 August, Buonaparte with some of his generals escaped from Alexandria on board *La Muiron* frigate under the flag of contre-amiral Ganteaume [46], in company of a small squadron, and – The Devil's children have the Devil's luck – avoiding the allied cruisers, disembarked triumphantly at Ajaccio on 30 September. On 9 October, his squadron anchored in Saint-Raphaël. Buonaparte was in France en route to his destiny, meanwhile joining the conspirators of the *coup d'état* of the 18 Brumaire [47].

He was no more the new Alexander the Great, he was to be *Napoléon Premier*.

On 1 November 1799, Nelson was off Valetta on board the *Foudroyant* (80), which was in company with the *Audacious* and *Minotaur*. A new summons to surrender was summarily rejected by a Vaubois who was still hoping for relief from France: Mindful of being worthy of the respect of your country, as you are with our own, we are resolved to defend this fortress to the last.

Nelson ordered Ball to go ashore and take command of the Maltese forces, leaving the *Alexander* in command of her first Lieutenant, William Harrington. At that time, Ball had 2,000 Maltese troops along with about 1,500 irregulars , unpaid, ill equipped and half-starving. A hard pressed King Ferdinand agreed to confirm him as Governor of Malta.

Meanwhile, the Maltese population, running short of essential provisions, was living under the threat of famine. Ball wrote to Nelson: My mind has suffered considerably at beholding so much misery without the power of alleviating it.

The siege was turning into a race of which side would starve first.

On 9 December, the 30th. and 89th. British regiments of Foot – about 1,500 men - under Brigadier-General Graham [48], arrived in Malta from Messina, on the *Northumberland* (74, Captain George Martin) and the *Culloden* (74, Commodore Thomas Troubridge).

46 Honoré-Joseph-Antoine Ganteaume, born in 1755, he was a blue officer during the war of the American Independence. Promoted lieutenant de vaisseau in 1793, capitaine de vaisseau in 1794, wounded in Aboukir, he escaped in a boat before the explosion of *L'Orient*. Promoted contre-amiral in November 1798, vice-amiral in 1804, he was made a Comte d'Empire in 1810. Made a Pair de France in 1815, he voted the death of maréchal Ney, and died in 1818.

47 9 November 1799.

48 Thomas Graham , born in 1748, in Scotland. He was a M.P. for some time. He won a G.C.B. and G.C.M.G., was made Baron Lynedoch of Balgowan in 1814, and died in 1843.

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While entering the harbour, the *Culloden* was damaged by grounding, a bad habit of Troubridge.

A Neapolitan contingent of 1,200 men was ferried later to Malta.

Troubridge took over the command of the blockade and soon it was his turn to beg for money and supplies. On New Year's Eve he wrote to Nelson: I never spent so miserable a day. I am not very tender-hearted but really the distress here would, if you could see it, move a Neapolitan.

Action was soon to follow. On 5 January, two grain ships were seized at Girgentio.

> I have this day saved 30,000 people from dying; [...] I curse the day I ever served the King of Naples. We have characters to lose, my Lord: these people have none. Do not suffer their infamous conduct to fall on us.

The action certainly enraged Maria-Carolina. At that time, the Bristish government had yet to spend a farthing for the relief of the Maltese. [49]

One thousand two hundred Russians were offered by the Czar to be transferred from Messina but then Ouschakow took his fleet and the Russian troops to Corfu where he remained until July 1800. He then sailed back to Sevastopol.

Since August 1799, the French had been planning a large-scale victualling expedition. The preparations dragged until the freshly made *Premier Consul* Bonaparte put his hands in the project and appointed contre-amiral Perrée [50] to the command. The squadron sailed from Toulon on 6 February 1800 comprising *Le Généreux* (74), one of the two escapers from the Nile, three corvettes armed as storeships , and one armed storeship, with 3,000 men, arms, food and ammunitions on board.

Lord Keith was cruising off Malta when on 15 February, the *Success* frigate (Captain Sheldham Peard) arrived with the news of an approaching French squadron. Keith anchored his flagship *Queen Charlotte* (100) near the entrance of Grand Harbour and quickly disposed his squadron to intercept the enemy.

On the morning of 18 February 1800, the *Alexander* (Lieutenant William Harrington in the absence of Captain Ball ashore) gave chase to the small French squadron off Lampedusa [51]. At about 8 a.m. she fired on *Le Commerce de Marseilles* storeship, which struck her colours.

At 1.30 p.m. one the corvettes tacked to the westward. *Le Généreux* could not follow and was soon raked by the *Success*. Nelson's *Foudroyant* (Captain Edward Berry; Nelson was in Palermo) and the *Northumberland* joined in with the Alexander, and Le Généreux soon struck her colours.

Twelve down, one to go.

Contre-amiral Perrée was killed at the start of the action. The rest of the French convoy returned to Toulon. The British ships made for Syracuse with the prize.

The *Culloden* was away under repairs after her grounding. Troubridge was to miss a good fight to the end.

On 1 March, the blockading squadron was back off Malta. During March, the *Foudroyant* returned to charmingPalermo for rest and repairs. At the end of the month, she was en route to her post under the command her Captain Edward Berry who got intelligence that the French ships in Grand Harbour intended to make their escape that very night.

49 Emma Hamilton listed £5000 out of her personal purse for the purchase of corn for the starving Maltese, in her petition for relief from the British Government after Nelson's death. She certainly made a donation of 500 ounces of silver. She got nothing.

50 Jean-Baptiste Perrée, born in 1761, was a captain in the merchant service in 1785. Lieutenant de vaisseau (temporary) in May 1794, capitaine de vaisseau in September 1795, in command of *Le Mercure* (74) taken at the Nile, liberated and promoted contre-amiral in command of Alexandria station in November 1798. He was taken again off Toulon by Keith's fleet on 18 June 1799, and exchanged just in time to meet his fate.

51 A small island 80 miles west of Malta.

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On 30 March, *Le Guillaume Tell* (80) under the command of contre-amiral Decrès [52] slipped out Grand Harbour at 11 p.m. on a pitch-black night, escaping the Alexander anchored three miles from Fort St. Elmo. She was sighted at midnight by the *Penelope* (36, Captain Henry Blackwood). Blackwood kept a running fight, pouring raking broadside after broadside into the big French ship which could only reply with her stern chasers. The following day Le Guillaume Tell was captured by the *Foudroyant*, the *Lion* (64, Captain Manley Dixon) and the *Penelope* after one of the most gallant actions of the war. Out of a crew of 919, Le *Guillaume Tell* had 207 killed and many wounded including contre-amiral Decrès and capitaine Saunier.

Le *Guillaume Tell*, the thirteenth and last survivor of the Nile, was taken into the Royal Navy as *Malta*.

On 3 May 1800, Nelson, on board the *Foudroyant*, rejoined the blockading squadron off Valetta, coming from Syracuse. That night, a stiff breeze blew from the sea and the *Foudroyant* dragged her anchor. At dawn the French garrison opened fire and she had to move her berth, to Nelson's fury.

The Hamiltons were on board and with a little calculation, it is possible to surmise that Horatia was conceived during that cruise.

On 11 May, the *Foudroyant* sailed into Marsa Scirocco, where she stayed for the next nine days. The party, which included Troubridge, stayed at Villa San Anton with Ball, and was entertained several times to dinner at Villa Bettina d'Aurel, Graham's headquarters.

On 13 May, Ball and Nelson were present at the Funeral Mass for Pope Pius VI, who had died in Valence in August 1799.

It was Nelson's farewell to the war theatre of the Mediterranean. All the French men-of-war present at Aboukir Bay had been taken, and the French had not a port of call left in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On 10 June 1800, Maria Carolina, Queen of Naples, sailed from Palermo with Nelson and the Hamiltons, with the Foudroyant and the Alexander, accompanied by four Russian ships and a frigate.

On 14 June, the day of Marengo, the party was at Livorno (Leghorn).

On 13 July Nelson struck his flag.

Soon, the Royal party was accompanying him on his journey to Vienna

In May 1799, Sir Ralph Abercromby had taken command as the new Commander-in-Chief of the British land forces in the Mediterranean.

In June 1800, Graham recruited a Maltese regiment of Light Infantry *I Cacciatori di Malta*, but knew that he still had too few men to storm Valetta.

In April 1800, Major-General Pigot [53] arrived in Minorca with 5,000 men. At once Abercromby sent him to take over the command from Graham. He reached Malta on 18 July along with two additional regiments.

Very little love was to be wasted between Ball and Pigot. Ball found him the most unpopular man to ever command a garrison.

On 24 August, the frigates *La Diane* and *La Justice* were sent by Vaubois to run the blockade to France. They were sighted by the *Success*, chased by the *Northumberland* and ironically the Genereux. *La Diane* was taken. *La Justice* escaped under cover of darkness.

On 3 September, the British landed 1,300 fresh troops.

All the horses, the mules, the dogs, the cats and the rats of Valetta having been eaten by the French garrison at Malta, Vaubois finally, on 4 September 1800, sent a flag of truce to Pigot.

52 Denis Decrès, born in 1761, lieutenant de vaisseau in 1786, capitaine de vaisseau in 1793, contre-amiral in April 1798 and in command of the frigates at the Nile. Quickl exchanged after the loss of *Le Guillaume Tell*, he was préfet maritime at Lorient in 1800 and ministre de la Marine from October 1801 until the end of the French Empire. Vice-amiral in 1804, Duc d'Empire in 1813, he died in Paris in 1820, after being stabbed by his valet.

53 Henry Pigot,born in 1750, was the first son of Admiral Hugh Pigot, and brother of the infamous Captain Hugh Pigot, RN, of the "Hermione" mutiny fame. He entered the army as a Cornet in 1769, Lieutenant-Colonel in 1783, Major-General in 1795, Lieutenant-General in 1802, General in 1812. Made a G.C.M.C. in 1837, he died in 1840.

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The following day, Pigot and Captain George Martin, RN, negotiated surrender with général Vaubois and contre-amiral Villeneuve.

Alexander Ball, as chief of the Maltese, was excluded from the negotiations. Some years afterward, the Duke of Wellington would say in the British Parliament, We might as well give a constitution to a man-of-war.

The French were not too keen to surrender to the Maltese.

Also excluded was Colonel Fardella who was in command of the Neapolitan troops. Neither was any representative of the Czar or of the Order present.

Pigot had express instructions from Abercromby to hoist the British flag alone on the fortresses. Pigot had also orders forbidding any Russian force to set a foot on Malta.

The French were given fair conditions of capitulation and honors of war including the right to keep their arms and spoils. These had cost nothing to the British. The French garrison was quickly repatriated to Marseilles.

In Grand Harbour, the British found two 64-gun ships and a frigate. Of those, only *L'Athénien* was in a seaworthy state. The old *La Boudeuse* of Bougainville's circumnavigation had been reduced to firewood.

In view of what Vaubois had achieved, one can only speculate on what von Hompesch could have done if he had had a braver heart and stronger mind.

Of the Maltese population no less than 20,000 people – one fifth of the total population - were said to have died from starvation, hardship and the Maltese fever [54].

The Maltese *National Congress* had its last meeting on 18 August 1800 and was finally dissolved after the capitulation of the French. It was the end of Maltese autonomy.

In Vienna, Queen Maria Carolina was incensed at the British duplicity. She wrote to Lady Hamilton on 17 October 1800, that she and the King were highly mortified to see that in the formal capitulation of the French, not one Sicilian representative was present. This after Naples had sent troops, ammunitions and guns to Malta and Notwithstanding the Kingdom's sovereign rights over the island. Only the British flag now flies there. More painful still is that this grave outrage is commited by a friend.

Ball's day finally came on 10 September 1800 when he drove in state from Villa St. Anton to Valetta, accompanied by all the Maltese dignitaries and representatives.

On 14 September, Bishop Albino celebrated a Solemn Mass, intoning the Te Deum at St. John's Church. Ball was present as Civil Governor.

Nelson later wrote:

> The truth will always stand, that La Valetta could not have been taken but by the patience, ability, gallantry, conciliating manners, and goodness of Captain Alexander John Ball. This, I believe, is known to all Europe and shall be repeated.

Soon afterward, Ball again believed himself ill treated by the Military Governor. He wrote to Nelson:

> General Pigot has conducted himself towards me in a manner highly indelicate, and unbecoming. I have been treated and considered as Chief or Governor of this Island by Your Lordship, Lord Keith, and Sir R. Albercromby, but General Pigot in the first standing orders has placed me

54 A disease prevalent of Malta and at Gibraltar, as well as other Mediterranean centres, characterized by prolonged high temperature, with anaemia, pain and swelling in the joints, and neuritis, lasting on an average four months but extending even to two or three years. A specific microorganism, the Micrococcus melitensis, was discovered in 1887, and it was traced to the milk of the Maltese goats..

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> in rank below the Town Major, who is a captain in the army [55]. [...] I am so truly disgusted and am so sensible of the little recompense which I shall get for my anxious labours and loss of prizemoney, that I would have retired to my ship, were I not assured that there could have been a convulsion among the Maltese. [56]

The political situation of Malta had became what the Chinese call *interesting*:

- the legitimate sovereign of the islands was the King of Sicily;
- even if William Pitt was still to be convinced, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, and the Secretary of War, Henry Dundas had decided that England was to keep it for itself with no legitimate claim other than the law of the strongest [57];
- Premier Consul Bonaparte still claimed the islands, his argument being that Vaubois was not authorized to sign the capitulation;
- Czar Paul I had begun to feel an intense admiration for Bonaparte's military genius. Bonaparte, seeing that Malta was soon to be lost, cunningly tricked Paul into an agreement that Malta was to be transferred to Russia.

The Czar appointed one of his generals, Baron Sprengporten, as Governor, and ordered him to sail to Malta in command of some Russian prisoners due to be released from France.

Accordingly the British *de facto* protectorate was taken by Paul I as a personal insult. Furious, he had all the British ships in Russian ports seized and the crews interned.

The Maltese generally disliked the idea of a Russian rule and Turkey was very ill at ease with the idea.

Even in England, Malta was to haunt Nelson. Taking advantage of a previous incident dividing the Danes and the British, in December 1800 Paul I revived the *Armed Neutrality* in conjunction with Denmark, Sweden and Prussia.

On 23 March 1801, he was murdered and on 2 April, Nelson led the British fleet into the roads of Copenhagen.

The new Czar, Aleksandr I, later refused the Grand Mastership of the Order, acknowledging only the title of Protector.

So poor Ball was between the horns of a dilemma, just as Nelson had been during the Neapolitan episode. He was a British military officer in command but acting in the Sicilian interests as representative of King Ferdinand and chief of the Maltese people.

In November 1800, Abercromby arrived in Malta on board the *Diadem* and placed all military authority in the hands of Pigot.

In December, Abercromby sailed to Egypt to fulfill his destiny.

Ball was now Royal Commissioner for Civil Affairs. One of his first acts was to re-open the University that had been abolished by Buonaparte.

Among the Maltese people, there were various factions. One was in support of their legitimate sovereign, King Ferdinand, and another was for the British protection. A third party lobbied for the return of the Order. There was even a small French party remaining.

55 As Captain in the navy, he had the rank of a colonel in the army.

56 Michael Galea, *Sir Alexander Ball and Malta*, 1990, pp. 65 – 66.

57 Ball was officially reprimanded for flying the Sicilian flag over St. Antoine.

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The Short Peace.

In February 1801, Pigot became Civil Commissioner in addition to Military Governor, and on the 19 February, Ball left Malta, to become *Commissioner of the Navy* at Gibraltar.

His career afloat had come to an end. Captain Manley Dixon took command of the old *Alexander*. She arrived in Portsmouth on 13 August 1802, to be put out of commission at Plymouth in 1803.

Ball's services in Malta were rewarded by the *Grand Croix* of *the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*, which Nelson had obtained for him from Paul I. He was created a Commander of the newly created Order of St. Ferdinand and Merit of the Two Sicilies. The *Grand Seigneur* awarded him the *Order of the Crescent*.

He was made a Baronet on 24 June 1801, and granted the trifling sum of £1,000 from the Malta Treasury. That had cost King George nothing.

He also received a Sword of Honour from the Maltese Nation.

On 20 February 1801, the Pitt ministry was replaced by that of Henry Addington. St. Vincent was at the Admiralty. The new ministry decided to start negotiations for peace at all costs with the Premier Consul.

On 14 May 1801, Lord Hobart, the new Secretary for War and Colonies, appointed Charles Cameron [58] as *temporary* Civil Commissioner. Cameron's arrival at Malta in July defused an explosive situation, the Maltese violently resenting a military administration.

A Maltese delegation had been sent to London to petition King George III for the protection of Malta by the British Crown. Ball's hand was probably behind that visit. King George did not give them an audience. Lord Hobart received their complaints and carried on with his plans.

In 1 October 1801, the preliminaries of the peace were signed at Paris. The treaty was signed on 25 March 1802 at Amiens.

Britain had to restore all her conquests but retained Ceylon and Trinidad, ceded by Holland and Spain respectively.

France was to evacuate Egypt and give up Naples and the Papal States.

Article X of the Treaty was entirely concerned with the future of Malta:

- Malta was to revert to the Knights.
- A Maltese Langue [59] was to be established.
- The British forces were to evacuate the islands within three months and the islands were to be garrisoned by Sicilian troops.
- The independence of Malta and its neutrality was warranted by Great Britain, France, Austria, Russia, Spain and Prussia.

On 16 May, the Maidstone frigate reached Grand Harbour with a copy of the definitive treaty. Cameron, in agreement with the principal merchants of the island, declared Malta a free port.

On 15 June 1802, the representatives of the casals signed a "Declaration of Rights" confirming their ancient rights and privileges, and declaring the King of Great Britain as their sovereign.

On 10 July 1802, Ball returned to Malta as *Minister Plenipotentiary* to the Order of St. John. The clock was again ticking. There was one month left for the withdrawal of the British forces from the islands.

58 He was a director of his father's bank and had married Lady Margaret Hay, daughter of James, 14th Earl of Errol. It's not clear why he was chosen, having no previous experience.

59 The Knights were regrouped by nationality or *Langue*. There was no more English Langue since Henry VIII had abolished it during the Reform. Each Langue had it's *Auberge*.

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He had been appointed mainly to arrange the handover of the islands to the Knights, and have the pill swallowed by the Maltese. As Minister, he would have to remain when the Order took over.His instructions from Lord Hawkesbury, Foreign Secretary, included:

> I have, therefore, only to recommend to you, generally, that you endeavour by all means in your power to ensure the attachment of the native inhabitants of Malta to His Majesty's Government, and that you employ your utmost exertions to frustrate the attempts of any Foreign Power, to acquire a predominant influence over the inhabitants or over the Government of the Order. [60]

His French counterpart was général Honoré Vial [61] who arrived on 18 August.

On 15 July, Cameron, the Civil Commissioner left for England, supposedly on leave but in fact never to return. On 17 October 1802, Lord Hobart communicated (most secretly) to Ball:

> Circumstances having recently occurred which, in the consideration of His Majesty's confidential servants, have rendered it advisable to suspend for the present all measures for evacuating the Island of Malta. [62]

The Pope selected Chevalier Ruspoli as *Grand Master*. He was refused and in February 1803, Fra Giovanni Battista Tommasi was appointed Grand Master of the moribund Order of St. John. Bailiff Fra Nicola Buzi was sent as Minister Plenipotentiary to Malta where he was carefully investigated by Ball.

It was too late, the days of the sovereignty of the Order had passed forever.

After only 14 months of peace, on 13 March 1803 at the Tuileries, Consul for life Bonaparte thundered at the British Ambassador:

> If, on receipt of my despatches, orders are not issued for the immediate surrender of Malta, then war is declared. I declare my firm resolution to see the Treaty carried into effect. If England will be the first to draw the sword, then I shall be the last to sheathe it.

On 16 May 1803, Britain chose war and war was once more declared between France and Britain. Malta was the excuse.

In May 1803, Ball succeeded Charles Cameron as *Civil Commissioner* with a salary of £2,000 out of the Maltese revenue.

He soon received orders to get rid of the Sicilian troops which had arrived on 8 October 1802 in compliance with the Treaty, and to return their passports to général Vial and the personnel of the French Mission. He was already seizing all French and Ligurian ships in Grand Harbour.

The Sicilian garrison was replaced by a Maltese Corps divided in two Regiments of 1,000 men under the Command of Major James Weir and Captain John Vivion, and attached to the British garrison. A few hundred veterans were enrolled to reinforce the police force.

On 1 July 1803, Nelson, on his way to take his new post as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean station, made his second visit to Malta on board the *Amphion* frigate. He was dined by Ball and the island's officials at the Governor's Palace in Valetta. He was to stay 36 hours [63].

He wrote to London: I now declare that I consider Malta as a most important outwork to India, and that it will give us great influence in the Levant, and indeed in all the southern parts of Italy. In this view, I hope we shall never give it up. Nine months earlier, he was pretending just the contrary in an idiotic speech in support of the government in the House of Lords.

60 Michael Galea, op. cit., p. 87.

61 Born in 1766, promoted général de brigade in 1796, made a Baron d'Empire in 1810. He was killed by the wind of a cannon ball at the battle of Leipzig on 18 October 1813. . His name is inscribed on the *Arc de Triomphe de L'Etoile* in Paris. Ball spelled contemptuously his name *Veal*.

62 Michael Galea, op. cit., p. 88.

63 His third and last visit was on 18 February 1805, when he arrived on board the Victory, having chased the elusive Villeneuve's fleet up to Alexandria. Villeneuve had orders to recapture Malta, and if possible to take Sicily. Nelson learned in Malta that the French fleet was safely back in Toulon. It was to be his last meeting with Governor Ball..

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The Dawn of Britannia's Rule.

The Knights of St. John had developed a tradition of paternalistic government. They provided cheap grain and rudimentary welfare services, and the whole economy was dependent upon the foreign income they spent locally.

The British continued this tradition. Alexander Ball made no secret of his belief that the best way to perpetuate the British rule was to keep the population dependent on the authorities. George Whitmore wrote in his journal: It favoured the policy of Great Britain to please and flatter the Maltese to the utmost – their future destiny was not yet sealed and it was a primary object to reconcile them and those who were soon to be their avowed masters. [64]

Ball encouraged the development of a system of self government known as Consiglio Populare, based on the representatives who had formed the former National Congress.

Ball, a military man, had now to show his talents for diplomacy and negotiation. His task was not an easy one.

He had to:

- reorganize the administration left in shambles by his predecessor;
- deal with the import of corn to feed the population and keep the prices low;
- reconstruct a road system fit only for the Maltese donkey;
- maintain the quarantine laws in a Mediterranean port where the plague was still endemic;
- reform a judicial system modeled on the Roman system;
- maintain the public order and discipline the bawdy British sailors;
- regulate navigation;
- deal with public health issues like the slaughtering of cattle in the streets, as well as the storage of refuse and dung in the houses;

He introduced the cultivation of potatoes, which soon became one of the island's principal crop. He promoted the cotton industry.

On Ball's initiative, more than 500,000 trees were planted, but unfortunately he made no plan to protect these from the formidable Maltese goats.

He never managed to instill some order into the chaos that prevailed in the civil administration. To the end of his life he resisted the appointments of British officials who were trying to replace Maltese natives but the pear was too juicy to escape English patronage.

On 18 May 1804, Samuel Taylor Coleridge arrived in Malta on board the Speedwell in search of a mild climate for his failing health [65]. He was to stay for sixteen months. He soon fell into love with Ball – a very extraordinary man... really the abstract idea of a wise and good governor – who in his turn took a liking to the man. In June 1804, Ball appointed Coleridge Private Secretary in place of the Rev. George Francis Leckie, the tutor of his only son. Leckie was to accompany his pupil in England where he was to spend two years with a professor in Glasgow.

The Public Secretary, Alexander Macaulay, died in January the following year, and in the interim Ball offered the post to Coleridge. On September 23, 1805, after the arrival of the new official secretary, Coleridge left Malta. In 1809, he published the *Friend*. The *Third Landing Place* contains the *Sketches of the Life of Sir Alexander Ball*, more an encomium of Coleridge's idea of a great civil servant than a biography. [65]

64 Joan Johnson ed., The General: *The Travel Memoirs of General Sir George Whitmore*, 1987, quoted in Nicholas de Piro, *From Sovereign Principality to Fortress Colony*, 1991, p. 10.

65 Born in 1772, he died in 1834. He was an opium addict. Critic, philosopher and poet, he is one of the very few men to whom, without hesitation, the title of genius may be given. The contrast between his gifts and his failures, his virtues and his faults, is so striking that ordinary judgements seem to be out of place. Here apparently is a tragedy of waste. Geoffrey Treasure, *Who's who in late Hanoverian Britain*, 2nd. ed., 1997, p. 136.

66 In 1819, Coleridge wrote: At least, were it in my power, my works should be confined to the second volume of my *Literary Life*, the Essays of the third volume of the *Friend*, ... and some half-dozen of my poems.

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On 9 November 1805, Sir Alexander Ball was promoted *Rear-Admiral of the Blue*, of the *White* on 28 April 1808 and of the *Red* on 25 October 1809, the very day of his death.

He never hoisted his flag even if he carried out the naval duties of the harbour of Valetta.

On the morning of 18 July 1806, a powder magazine with 390 barrels of gunpowder exploded in the city of Vittoriosa. It caused 180 deaths and 100 wounded, and many houses were destroyed. The damage were estimated at £34,000 which Ball requested from the British Exchequer ,as the accident was caused by the explosion of a Royal Magazine, due to the negligence of persons in the King's employment.

Eighteen months later, Castlereagh argued that persons who inhabit a fortress must be subject to the risks connected with it.

In July 1811, the government finally agreed to pay to the *very poorest sufferers* a compensation of two-thirds of their losses, and a half for the others.

In response to the *Order in Council* of 16 May 1806, declaring blocked the ports between Brest and Hamburg, on 21 November 1806 Napoléon I signed the Decree of Berlin closing the European continent to the import of British goods. This was Malta's economic opportunity. The island rapidly became the warehouse of the Mediterranean. A profitable contraband trade with the blockaded European countries prospered. The exports from Britain rose to £250,000 in 1806, and attained a million pound in 1806.

In 1813, an epidemic of plague killed 10,000 people, and almost closed the port. The islands were placed under quarantine for 14 years, putting an end to its economic boom.

Generally, Ball avoided any interference in Maltese Church affairs and at least any missionary pursuit. On 30 April 1807, Bishop Labini died. Ball, on the King's behalf, had promised the Maltese that the next bishop would be one of their countryman. Technically, the bishopric was in the hands of the King of Naples. On 21 September, King Ferdinand appointed Mgr. Ferdinand Mattei, Bishop of Paphos, a Maltese by nationality. The hand of Ball was behind the nomination. He decided that the annual revenue of the see was to be reduced to £2,000 a year and the new bishop had to comply.

On 7 June 1807, the *Bittern* had deposed the remains of Rear-Admiral Sir Thomas Louis, Bart. in Grand Harbour. He had died on 17 May, aged 48, at Alexandria, in command of the British squadron. He was buried at Manoel Island in the middle of Marmamuscetto (Marsamxett) Harbour, Sliema, the following day. The chief mourner was Sir Alexander Ball. He was an old friend, having been in command of the *Minotaur* (74) at the Nile. In 1805, he was in command of the *Canopus* (74) but missed Trafalgar, being on detachment at Gibraltar.

Ball had English enemies as well as Maltese. The most bitter was William Eton. He had started as *Superintendent of Quarantine* in 1801 but had higher ambitions. Cameron had let him take an active part in the civil administration and he thought himself fit for a governorship. He spoke Maltese and was fluent in Italian.

Ball's arrival cut short his ambitions. Ball thought he had got rid of him when he left on sick leave in October 1802. However, in England, where he remained with the Malta Treasury with a salary of £800 a year till September 1811 when he was finally dismissed, his antagonism persisted.

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In 1806, in response to letters written by some Maltese he accused Ball of maladministration. Ball was depicted as a despot. He was held responsible for the reduction in the weight of bread and its poor quality, the disorganization of justice, the want of sale of cotton, the frequency of robberies and murders, etc.

The accusations reached William Windham, Secretary of War and the Colonies, and Ball was forced to write a long despatch to defend his reputation. In March 1807, the minister lost office and the affair slowly died but it poisoned Ball's life till his death.

On 1 January 1808, Governor Ball's allowance was increased of £1,500 on the Malta Treasury as the King's recognizance of "his long and important services". The judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court drew a salary of £4,000 a year when he had no official entertaining to do. Too, the military commander was making £4,000 a year, with a further £1,500 as a table allowance.

Ball's End.

Ball fell ill on 6 October 1809, at his summer residence of Villa San Anton. At 3.17 p.m. on 25 October 1809, Sir Alexander Ball, aged 53, breathed his last.

> Around 8 p.m. of 27 October, the deceased who had been placed in a leaden coffin enclosed in a wooden casket, was conveyed to Valetta on a mortuary carriage. On the morrow he was laid in state in one of the state rooms of the Governor's Palace. Two sentinels of the Maltese Militia formed the guard at the entrance of the room. The room itself was draped in black velvet with the fringes and festoons of white crepe. Four crystal chandeliers with lighted candles, covered with black crepe, hung from the ceiling. At one end of the room on a base with two steps, covered with black velvet, was placed the coffin of the deceased.
>
> The coffin was also covered with black velvet, fixed with gilt nails, and adorned with eight naval crowns; it was surrounded by eight banners, on which were represented the coat-of-arms and the Orders of the late Sir Alexander Ball. On the coffin's lid were engraved Ball's coats-of-arms, his Orders, and an inscription.
>
> At the head of the coffin were two British sailors: one holding the British Union Jack, the other the White British Standard, half-mast high. Fifty-two flambeaux surrounded the coffin which was guarded by Maltese Militia soldiers with arms reversed. At the foot of the coffin there was a stool shaped like a bier, also covered with black velvet and surrounded by lighted flambeaux and soldiers. On it were arranged the deceased's hat, his Orders and Medals, his naval sword, and the gold sword presented to him by the Maltese – the swords were both unsheathed and crossed.
>
> The room remained open to the public from Saturday to Monday, when English, Maltese, and foreigners went in crowds to pay their tribute. [67]

67 Michael Galea, op. cit., pp. 146 – 148.

On Tuesday 31 October, a funeral cortege proceeded from the palace through Valetta with companies of British, Sicilian and Maltese regiment, naval officers and Royal Marines and all the notables on the island present. During the cortege minute guns were fired by the cavaliers of Valetta, and from the men-of-war in port, until the coffin was finally placed in the tomb in a ravelin facing the sea in Fort St. Elmo. The burial was followed by three volleys repeated eleven times from three guns.

The colours of the Palace and on the different forts were hoisted at half mast.

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Governor Sir Alexander John Ball, Bart., had done well, better perhaps than his own government deserved. To this day, his memory is revered in Malta, unusually for a colonial governor.

The *Naval Chronicle*'s obituary tells another story:

> He was rather devoted to the Maltese interest, but he was certainly in the right. We, British, are too apt to despise foreigners; he found it to protect them as he did. They, however, are un ungrateful set of wretches; their bigotry would not permit that their bells should be rung at his funerals; even his leniency seemed to make them disrespect him.

His widow died on 27 September 1832. His only child, William Keith, succeeded to the Baronetcy. He married Louisa, a daughter of Commander John Samuel Yeats, RN, who was 45 years his junior. He had no issue and when he died, aged 82, on 9 March 1874, the title became extinct.

When Collingwood heard that Ball was seriously ill, he wrote: He cannot be replaced in Malta, nor is there a man in England qualified to govern the Maltese but himself. They are all too little or too great.

Ball was succeeded by Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Godwin Keats, but ill health prevented him from taking up the appointment.

On 14 April 1810, the commander of the local land forces, Lieutenant-General Hildebrand Oakes was appointed Civil Commissioner in his stead.

The *Consiglio Populare* was abolished under the pretence that it never had any legislative authority. Lord Bathurst wrote in 1812:

So firmly are we persuaded of the mischievous effects that would result from entrusting any portion of political power to a people so singularly unfitted to enjoy it, that with a view to the real happiness of the Maltese we have no hesitation in saying that, were the pretensions to a former existence of a deliberative legislative assembly as clear and incontestable as they really are obscure and groundless, we should still feel in our duty to recommend most earnestly a positive refusal of its reestablishment... [68]

The Treaty of Paris in 1814 included the clause that "the Island of Malta and its dependencies shall belong in full right and sovereignty to his Britannic Majesty". No Maltese representative was present at the table of negotiation, nor was any representative of the King of Naples or of the Knights of St. John. The United Kingdom had acquired for peanuts a major strategic place in the Mediterranean.

An inscription in bronze was placed over the Main Guard in Valetta:

MAGNAE ET INVICTAE BRITANNIAE
MELITENSIUM AMOR ET EUROPAE VOX
HAS INSULAS CONFIRMAT A.D. 1814 [69]

During the Second World War, the Maltese people won the George Cross for indomitable conduct during the siege and bombardment of the islands by the Forces of the Axe.

Malta finally achieved independence in 1964. In 1974, the islands became a republic and in 1979 the last British forces sailed out of Malta for good.

68 Nicholas de Piro, op. cit., p. 9.

69 To Great and Unconquered Britain / the Love of the Maltese and the Voice of Europe / Confirms these Islands A.D. 1814.

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Ball's in Malta today.

Today, Fort St. Elmo is the seat of the Maltese Police Academy and is open to the public only the Saturday afternoon and Sunday. A live historical re-enactment of a military parade is staged every other Sunday. Unfortunately, the graves of Ball and Abercromby are not accessible to the public.

The remains of Sir Alexander Ball were disinterred in 1871 and moved were they lie today, near the tomb of Sir Ralph Abercromby in a traverse of Abercromby's bastion. The original bastion still keep his name.

The inscription at the entrance of the tomb reads:

HIC SITUS EST
ALEXANDER JOANNES BALL,
EQ. BARONETTUS EQ. ORDINIS S. FERDINANDI
INTER PRAEFECTOS CLASSIS REGIAE BRITANNORUM
AD TERTIUM GRADUM EVECTUS
QUI
SUPREMA POTESTATE IN HANC INSULAM LEGATUS
UT POPULO DOMINATIONE FRANCORUM OPPRESSO
AC PRO PATRI MILITANTI
SUCCURRERET
MODERATOR CAUTISSIMUS
CONSILIO LABORE ET CONSTANTIA
QUO MELITENSES
IN GALLICA SERVITUTE REPELLENDA
ADIUVERENTUR
OMNEM OPERAM ET UTILEM POSUIT
OPTIMEQUE MERITUS
REGIUS PRAEFECTUS MELITUS ET GAULI DICTUS
JUSTITIA BENEFICENTIA ET LENITATE
REM CIVILEM SIBI COMISSAM CUM LAUDE GESSIT
IDEM BONARUM ARTIUM COMMERCI
ET REI AGRARIAE STUDIOSISSIMUS
HAS INSULAS QUIBUS
PRO DIGNITATE SERENISSIMI REGIS GEORGI III
PREFUIT ANNOS DECEM
NOVIS OPERIBUS EDIFICIIS, VIIS, HORTISQUE
OPULENTIORES REDDIDIT ATQUE EXHILARAVIT
VIXIT ANNOS LII
DECESSIT DIE XXV OCTOBRIS MENS. ANNO MDCCCIX
DOLOR ET LUCTUS BONORUM OMNIUM
ELATUS EST FUNERE PUBLICA
TOTA EFFUSA OB VIAM CIVITATE.



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In a different bastion were interred the remains of General Sir Ralph Abercromby, Bart.

He was born at Menstry, near Tullibody, in Clackmannanshire, in Scotland, in October 1734. He joined the 3rd. Dragoons in 1756, and served in Europe in the Seven Years' War (1756 – 1763).

He was an M.P. from 1774 to 1780, and rejoined the army in 1793. After various commands, he was appointed to succeed Sir Charles Stuart as Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean to deal with the remains of the French army under général Menou, stranded in Egypt.

He was who recommended Ball's recall in 1801. He led the successful amphibious operation of the Anglo-Turkish forces at Aboukir Bay on 8 March 1801. He was mortally wounded when on 21 March, the French made a violent attack. He was carried on board the Foudroyant (80, Admiral Lord Keith) where he died on 28 March. His remains were conveyed to Malta on board the frigate "Flora". His funeral took place in Malta on 29 April, General Pigot being the chief mourner.He was buried in a bastion in Fort St. Elmo which wears his name.

His wife was made Baroness Abercromby of Tullybody and Aboukir Bay.

His remains and the tablet were moved in 1871 and are now some feet from Ball's tomb.



Another interesting feature in Fort St. Elmo is the interior courtyard (also not accessible) which was used as the scenery of the Turkish prison in *Midnight Express*.



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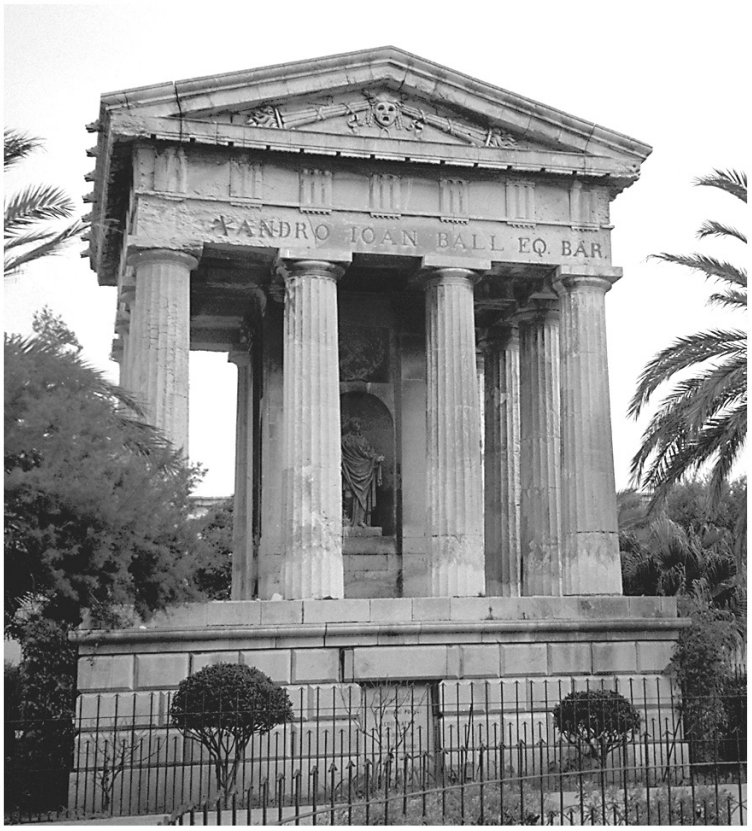



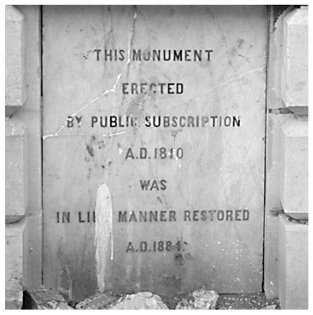

In November 1809, the Maltese Deputies submitted a request for the purpose of erecting a monument to their deceased governor. This was granted and a general subscription was opened. The monument in the form of a small Greek temple with two appropriate allegorical sculpture representing *Prudence* and *Immortality*, was erected in a small park, Lower Barraca Garden, overhanging Grand Harbour. The monument made in the yellow sandstone characteristic of all the constructions in Malta, was restored in 1884, again by public subscription. Today, it is again in need of some repair..

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Ball's coat of arms.



Alexander John Ball was made a Baronet on 24 June 1801, for his services.

Arms: Ermine, a lion rampant, sable, between 2 torteaux in chief, and in base a hand grenade, bursting, proper.

Crest: Out of a naval coronet, a cubit arm erect, in naval uniform, grasping a hand grenade, bursting, proper.

In his notice of Ball in the Dictionary of National Biography (vol. 1, pp. 990 –992), John Knox Laughton wrote about the anecdote on the Nile and the fire on board *L'Orient* told by Coleridge and quoted before :

> it was probably from misunderstanding Captain Ball's description of this that Coleridge framed the extraordinary story of the ship having been set on fire by some inflammable composition which Ball invented, and which was thrown on board from the Alexander. In this there is certainly not one word of truth; for at that time the whole feeling of the English navy was intensely opposed to all such devices.

It didn't happen because JKL didn't like it. In answer, we can quote Bertrand Russell : war is not about who is right, but about who is left, but the two *hand grenade, bursting, proper* in Ball's arms speak by themselves.

Another version is that the rapid spreading of the fire was due to the presence of a large quantity of paint on board *L'Orient* as the crew was painting her hull just before the arrival of the British fleet. The question then is why did they store that paint in the great cabin where the fire started.

Brussels, July 2002.

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