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Overland to Malta

Abstract: This essay details a research trip undertaken, by train and ferry, from Scotland to Malta. In doing so, it examines the creative process of writing my third novel dot dot dash and the research supporting the writing of the text. This aspect focuses on the historical and political context of Malta in the 1940s and 60s, as well as the linkages to the contemporary political situation in Scotland, in particular the Independence Referendum of 2014 and the Brexit vote of 2016, making use of examples from the creative narrative. dot dot dash is the story of a Maltese steward in the Royal Navy, Pietru, who has impacted on the lives of the three main characters in the book in various ways: as a father to young Joe; as a wartime husband to Beth; and, it emerges, as the man responsible for the horrific airman's burns suffered by RAF pilot Stuart. It is a historical literary thriller.

Keywords: creative practice, politics, travel

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Introduction

In common with many other Scottish writers, my thoughts in recent years have been occupied by the independence question. Since 2014, I've been seeking ways to engage with and explore what the Independence Referendum meant for us all. But the issue is so polarising, so immediate and so ever-changing that it felt difficult to approach it through anything other than journalism, and nigh-on impossible to incorporate it as the focus of a creative work. So I started to look for other independence narratives from around the world as a way of understanding our own context. At that stage, I wasn't looking for the subject of a novel, so much as a parallel. And I came across Malta.

Malta held its own referendum, in 1956, on the so-called 'integration' question, which would have seen Britain 'accepting three representatives from Malta to Parliament at Westminster' (Dobie 1967:144). The two countries were tied to each other in multiple, complex ways. Malta had been freely ceded to the British in 1800 under *Melitensium Amor*, whereby the Maltese threw out the French and vowed loyalty to the British King in what Mallia-Milanes describes as a 'necessary subordination' (Mallia-Milanes 1988:14). During the Second World War the island was heavily bombed and awarded the George Cross medal 'to bear witness to a heroism that will long be famous in history' (Holland 2003:275). For these, and many other reasons, it had a relationship with the United Kingdom that could be seen as comparable to the historical tie which binds Scotland to the other Home Nations. And, as will be discussed in this paper, similar reasons were given for why it couldn't, why it could never, go independent.

What follows, then, is a reflective travelogue written over the course of my second research trip to Malta during February 2017. It was a journey I made by train and ferry, for reasons detailed below, and one which allowed time and space to consider the above analogy, between the two political situations. The main focus, at the time of the conception of the novel, was the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 but we have suffered through a second referendum since then, the Brexit vote of 2016, and this both complicated the premise and strengthened the reason for seeking such an analogous situation. In the entries below, I am a writer in search of the usual historical and logistical detail that forms the basis of any research trip, but I am also exploring what it is that I want the work-in-progress novel to say about the context of the Maltese experience and, by implication, about the Scottish Independence Referendum.

Glasgow to London, Caledonian Sleeper, 19th February 2017

This isn't the way I usually do my research. A total of six trains, down through Europe, and then a ferry from Sicily to Malta. It's far away from my comfortable, academic, library-bound process and it involves a huge amount of connections which can be missed and journeys which might be delayed or cancelled. It also includes, at one point, a sleeper train being pushed into the belly of a ferry to cross the Strait of Messina – a melding of my two chosen forms of transport – but more of that later.

The first leg of the trip is a different sleeper, though, from Glasgow to London. It's a journey I know well, but I've never done it this way: in a cabin small enough that I can lie on the floor and stretch my legs and arms out, first above my head then to the side, to touch all four

walls. When we get out of Glasgow, we slow and stop in a siding and I lie on my thin mattress wondering when we'll start again. Then, when we're clattering along, I feel the slight bounce of the train on the rails and wonder when we'll slow and stop. My best spell of sleep is just before six-thirty a.m., when I'm woken with a cup of tea and a bacon roll.

The rationale for going overland is quite simple really: the protagonist of the novel travels to Malta by train and ferry so I need to do the same to see how it feels and, crucially, what the sights, smells and sounds are. That sensory detail is vital, even if it ends up being distilled down to only a few lines in the finished novel. There's no better illustration of that than the passage currently in place, in the draft, to describe what happens when that overnight train from Naples is moved onto the ferry to cross to Sicily. It's currently only the paragraph below, and it will probably stay as little more than those lines, but I need to make sure they're the right lines.

When they reached the Strait of Messina, the carriages were shunted onto the ferry to make the crossing to Sicily and the clunks and clangs brought him back to the tight manoeuvring required to get the fighters ready to fly-off from the aircraft carriers. If he closed his eyes, newsreel footage played of planes being guided in by landing signal officers. He opened his eyes again before it skipped on to the crash-landings: the aircraft tipping over onto one wing, or the pilot misjudging and ending up in the sea to the side of the flat-top. (Bell 2017)

As this passage shows, the character, Stuart, is making the journey in this manner because of a wartime trauma, which has left him with severe injuries and a fear of flying. With my other hat on, my teaching one, I often have a discussion with students about what the old adage

‘write what you know’ means. Taken literally, of course, it means to write from experience, but then we’re all in a position of writing (and re-writing) our autobiography. So I’ve always argued that it means write from the emotions you’ve experienced that are most comparable. Colum McCann phrases it better when he says, ‘Don’t write what you know, write towards what you want to know’ (McCann 2017). You might have a character who has lost a spouse and you haven’t, but we’ve all of us suffered the loss of someone close. You might have a character who is locked in a cramped room, held hostage, and you draw on those times when you’ve felt panicked and claustrophobic in a tight-fitting space. Which brings me back to the sleeper compartment – I felt that I needed to spend some nights in one to feel what it was like, what the sounds were, before I could write about it convincingly, maybe even authentically.

The character, I should add, doesn’t travel in the budget way that I’m doing but instead uses the famous Simplon Orient Express. I could also have done this, with a simple re-mortgaging of the house, but it’s become a tourist ‘experience’ rather than the mode of travel it was in the Sixties, when he (fictitiously) made the trip. For me, it is more important to see the landscape out of the window and to feel the rumble of the rails under my back as I lie on my bunk, rather than try to approximate or recreate that luxury.

London to Paris, Eurostar, 20th February 2017

I sit with my arm angled over the page like a kid trying to stop someone copying from their jotter and, in the time it takes us to pass underneath the Channel, edit what I wrote on the sleeper last night. It’s a problem of mine, this impulse to edit – to try to make perfect – rather

than to press on and let the writing flow. There's a balance to be struck, of course there is, but I worry that the writing of this novel has been too pedantic, too finicky, in trying to get each section as I want it before moving on. It's possibly to do with the amount of research required. In drafting the first chapters, set during the war, I was aware that there were large gaps in my knowledge. So I did my reading, my time in the library, and gathered material from historians and academics such as James Holland, ER Mayhew, and Brian Cull, as well as from the diaries of Maltese civilians such as Laurence Mizzi and Michael Galea [1]. This has left me with a huge volume of information and I'm loathe to try to shoehorn it all in, so it's meant rewriting the chapters again and again – first to add detail, then to finesse the flow – and that's made it a laborious process.

I came across an interview with the novelist Sarah Waters in which she states that what she is looking for in her historical research is the 'poignant trivia' of a period or situation (Waters 2006). This ties back to the idea of sensory detail and it's led me to, for instance, seize upon Mizzi's anecdote that the glass from bombed-out windows was replaced by 'coarse white linen' (Mizzi 2007:90) and Cull's portrayal of the practice, after an RAF airman's death, of ensuring that 'some items of his would be auctioned off in the Mess... an alternative method of making a gift to his dependants' (Cull & Galea 2001:51). These nuggets of information worked their way into the narrative as single lines: 'Uncle Gigi covered over the window with stretched linen, to replace the panes they'd lost to the blast up by the tuta trees'; and 'Stuart always ended the auction in possession of something trivial – a fork, or a penknife, or an absinthe spoon – and soon had enough for a full cutlery set' (Bell 2017). Both examples are small details that speak of the wider situation and provide some kind of context for what is happening on Malta at the time, with the former showing that the bombing is intensifying and that the day-to-day life of the civilians is being impacted and the latter providing a means

to show that more and more RAF pilots are losing their lives in the battle taking place in the skies above the island.

I enjoy sourcing these facts and, in spite of my anxieties about getting the balance right, find the critical-creative mix to be a productive and fascinating one. To my mind, the Waters quote can be extrapolated upon, to say that not only should the historical fiction writer be seeking ‘poignant trivia’ but that they should be searching for the one piece of detail that can stand in place of multiple descriptions. What I mean by that is that the linen over the windows allows for the writer to omit the glass on the floor, or the bomb craters by the house; or placing the auction of a pilot’s belongings into the narrative means that it isn’t necessary for the writer to provide a list with names of the deceased or a series of dogfights and plane crashes.

As I say, though, that editing process is a difficult one to judge because it can interrupt the flow of the prose if undertaken too early. So I resolve that, for the rest of the journey to Malta, I will try to avoid this side of my writing self. I’ll try to stop myself from flicking back three or four pages, as I’ve just done, to score out ‘purpose of’ and replace it with ‘rationale for’.

At the table across from me is a young family – two small girls, a mum, and her boyfriend. They’re having a drawing competition and the youngest girl keeps protesting that the older girl is better at drawing than she is. The mum says that her drawing isn’t better, just that she has more experience. Then, at the end, the boyfriend looks at both pictures and declares that it is a draw (no pun intended). And I find myself thinking that this is vaguely unsatisfactory. Did I want the younger girl to win, in spite of the older girl’s better technique, because she

had more passion and natural skill? Or did I, maybe, want the older girl to win because of her careful lines and the fact that she knew how to get on with it diligently, quietly, without complaining?

Paris to Milan, TGV, 20th February 2017

Walking through the centre of Paris, I begin to speculate about the other motivation for taking this trip. Taking trains down through Europe is something which, I'd presume, will become more difficult in a post-Brexit world. So far I've only had to show my passport once – to get out of the UK – but that may well change.

It's such a cataclysmic waste, this process of extricating ourselves from Europe. Who wouldn't want to travel from Glasgow to Paris, by train, in twelve hours and find themselves in a wee Parisian café eating vegetarian rigatoni while waiting for another train to take them on to another country and then on to yet another? What a wonderful freedom, what a chance to explore and experience different cultures.

I began this book before the Brexit vote but during the build-up to the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014. The later sections of the narrative are set between the 1956 Maltese Integration Referendum which sought, in the words of Edith Dobie, 'union or integration with the United Kingdom on a basis of equality' (Dobie 1967:144) and a second referendum which established Maltese independence in 1964. This was a deliberate choice, a carefully chosen analogy, for the debates around self-determination and nationality that were being held in Scotland at the time, but I hadn't envisaged the reflection being doubled, as it were,

by the second UK-wide referendum on Brexit. It complicates the original intention of the novel. Literature and politics have always been closely intertwined in Scotland. There's always been a sense of the nation looking to its writers not necessarily for guidance, because that's not their role, but for comment and a sense of perspective. In terms of the independence question, that was a task I was motivated to take on, spurred on by the argument that, long before there was political devolution within the United Kingdom, there was a form of 'cultural devolution, both in the radical voices of new Scottish writing... and in the rewriting of Scottish cultural history' (Craig 2003:39). To approach the thorny subject of the Scottish Independence Referendum through a novel was very much in keeping with that tradition and was a way of engaging, at a remove, with a grand debate which wasn't just happening in literary or political circles, but also with taxi drivers and baristas, in pubs and in bars. It was divisive, yes, but also hugely energetic. Brexit, by contrast, felt like a *fait accompli* which originated from, and then was carried by, the South of England. There was support for exiting the European Union in Scotland, of course, but the vote was 62% against 38% in favour of Remain (BBC Website). The nation didn't need its writers to comment or to provide perspective; we all knew that it was the will of the rest of the United Kingdom that had dictated Scotland's position within Europe.

On the train itself, I doze a little and read Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Bookshop* (Fitzgerald 1978). I love her writing style: sparse but precise with every detail. A.S. Byatt described her as someone who wrote 'discreet, brief, perfect tales' (Byatt 1998). There's a tendency in the Creative Writing discipline to go to the Americans for that pared back writing – to Raymond Chandler for showing character in a single gesture, to Ernest Hemingway for historical or political context in just a line of description, to Flannery O'Connor for a sense of place in every snippet of dialogue. But all of that and more is in Fitzgerald. *Innocence* (Fitzgerald

1986) has been a major influence on the writing of this novel, partly due to the period of political turmoil it depicts but more because of the way that she is able to evoke Southern Italy in such exquisite detail. Again, Byatt puts it well: ‘What is remarkable about the tale (told in only 222 paperback pages) is the completeness of its Italianness, political, religious, moral, and physical’ (Byatt 1998).

As well as reading, though, I make sure to stare out of the window. This is the great joy of a train journey – you can look out at the passing countryside, trying to judge the exact moment at which Northern French farm architecture becomes Southern French farm architecture.

I know that I need these periods of quiet, of stasis, in order to recharge and reinvigorate my writing. That, truth be told, is another reason for taking the trip. I’m halfway through the writing of the novel and I need to do this for research, yes, but I also need to have a spell in my own company where I can remind myself what I actually want to write and, indeed, why I want to write it.

As well as the political impetus behind the conception of the book, there was also a personal one. I was evaluating what impending fatherhood meant to me and, indeed, what kind of father I wanted to be. In many ways, then, the narrative morphed into a love letter to my wife and daughter, constructed around the feelings of the child, Joe, in the novel. The passage below is Joe’s nanna reminiscing about the way that his papa, Pietru, was with his pregnant wife and the newborn child:

And in those weeks before you were born she had some pains. She couldn’t lie comfortably. But I heard through the wall, your papa reading softly to her and

asking her to breathe in-and-out. With him matching her breathing, then slowing it. Until both of them were silent and all was still.

Then, once you were born, he would place you against his shoulder and, instead of hushing you, he would just set the pace of his breathing to your own. And slow it down. Until you calmed and slept. (Bell 2017)

Pietru, although absent for most of the text, is cast as a kind, gentle and generous man. He compiles an idiosyncratic dictionary of words he learns during his travels with the Navy and then, on spells of leave, shares these with his son. He is a man who embodies the proverb on the walls of the Scottish Parliament: ‘Say but little and say it well’ (Scottish Parliament Website).

Just South of Lyon, as we approach Chambery, the young lady sitting next to me starts to write in her notebook and I, self-conscious, hold back from doing the same. Of course, what I should do – what should always be done – is turn to her and ask her what she’s writing. We could have a chat, exchange stories and I might get a bit of local colour for the novel. But I’ve never been good at that. It brings me out in hives. The inability to do it is to the detriment of my writing, I’m sure, but I’ll sit and look out at the wonderful view instead.

The mountains here are steep but seem less sweeping than those in Scotland, as if they’re formed of lots of shorter, sharper gradients rather than one long, curved rise. Some of them, against the blue of the sky, look two-dimensional – like stage props or a cardboard cut-out. I think of a line in my novel in which the character looks out at ‘chocolate-box countryside’ (Bell 2017) and I silently congratulate myself that it seems to match the actual, physical landscape.

For the last couple of stops, I've been watching the seasoned smokers, including the guard, stepping out for a quick cigarette. At a small stop, somewhere deep in the Alps, they are out for no more than a minute. Each of them takes no more than two or three drags. Then the guard ushers them on, has another drag himself, signals, has another drag, checks up and down the platform, has another drag, and finally closes the doors.

Milan to Napoli, Trenitalia, 21st February 2017

A friend of mine told me that Milan was no longer recognisable because of the refugees – Syrian and others – who've arrived in the past year or so. When I arrived, late last night, I was looking out for them but saw little other than fly-overs, underpasses and impassable motorways. Much like my native Glasgow. I decide that the claim about the tide of immigrants in Milan is probably similar to the American media claims about parts of Birmingham being no-go areas. Bullshit, in other words.

It did, though, take me forty-five minutes to find the hotel that holds the same name – Garibaldi – as the train station which it is supposedly next to. I asked Italian soldiers who shrugged and said 'maybe', then a lovely family who pointed me in entirely the wrong direction, before finally getting the correct directions from a young man who wore a scarf and asked me why I didn't have a jacket.

The Italians are an important part of this novel. They're the enemy, for much of it, but more than that, they're close neighbours turned enemy. One of the characters in the book, Beth,

tells of her Maltese husband's anger at this sudden switch: 'He'd always bought his hats from an Italian in Floriana – like the flat caps, you know? That was what seemed to annoy him most: that one day this Italian was selling him hats, the next they were sworn enemies' (Bell 2017). And that's a further reason for making the trip in this manner; it allows me to see just how *close* Italy is to Malta. Of course, that means not only geographically – Sicily is sixty miles from Malta – but also culturally. That's a fascination because it will provide an insight into how it felt, for the Maltese, to suddenly find a friend turned foe.

In the course of my research for the novel, I've read about the Maltese who, before the war, felt an affinity with the Italians rather than the British. Indeed, in the years before the war this faction could be seen to be in the ascendency, as Ann Williams states: 'Italian irredentists, who had for some time viewed Malta as part of Italy, were strengthened by the Fascists who spoke of a new Roman empire in the Mediterranean, the *mare nostrum*' (Williams 1988:40). Many of those with Italian connections were interned during the war and, indeed, several of them were shipped to Africa during the worst of the fighting. As I continued writing and reading, this strand of rebellion against the British presence in Malta began to weave itself into the plot and I saw the potential for an Italian sympathiser to act against the British forces on the island. This was then strengthened by the discovery of the historical figure of Carmelo Borg Pisani who was, according to Laurence Mizzi:

an idealist who... had been apprehended after a clandestine landing in Malta on a mission to obtain and relay to the Fascist Government certain military intelligence ahead of the projected invasion by Italian and German forces. (Mizzi 2007:116)

Pisani was a Maltese national who had left for Italy and joined the notorious blackshirts and, after being discovered parachuting back onto Malta to try to prepare the ground for invasion, was hanged for treason. Here, then, was the perfect template for the antagonist of my novel.

All of this is not just plot, though. It is that, of course, but it also serves another function. It provides a way for me to again reflect upon Scotland's relationship with her own closest neighbour, England. I've lived in the South of England and there are huge convergences in the way we view the world – football, socialising, even literature – but there is also this strand of identity in Scotland which marks itself in opposition to much of the South. There's an argument to be made that we're, politically, more inclined to the left. There's also, much more importantly, a difference in our humour. I remember asking my wife, who is from Northern Ireland, what she found most difficult about living on the South coast of England. And she told me that it was the reaction she got when she said 'I'm not too bad', in response to the obligatory 'how are you?' question. In England that got her something close to an intervention – a hand on the shoulder, a quiet chat about her troubles. In Scotland and Northern Ireland it's the mandatory tongue-in-cheek response you give to avoid the charge of hubris.

The discussions in advance of the Independence Referendum of 2014 were often focused on the limitations of our nation – or our, as the novelist James Robertson put it, 'poverty, remoteness, smallness, lack of economic or military or intellectual clout' (Robertson in Hames 2012:167). And this holds an obvious parallel with the soul-searching the Maltese did in the years prior to their own independence, the years depicted in my novel, with Austin summarising the argument against independence as being that the 'islands were too small;

they had too few people; they were poor... And, more particularly, they were unable to defend themselves' (Austin 1971:67).

There are several ways of countering this stance, which can be seen either as self-deprecating or downright negative, but the most compelling one for me was always that it held short of what the poet Kathleen Jamie described as 'dreaming a nation' (Jamie in Hames 2012:116) or what the novelist James Kelman, less idealistically, posited as the choice to either 'leave home and live as self-determining adults or stay home and enjoy the comforts provided by mum and dad' (Kelman in Hames 121). Again, these debates about national identity found their way into the novel as an exploration of the relationship between the Maltese and the British, through the character of Joe, who is born and bred in Malta. Perhaps it is the protagonist, Stuart, who sums it up best, though, when he states: 'I think the sense of sentiment is waning on both sides... time to cut the apron strings, maybe' (Bell 2017).

Anyway, the parallel is not exact and is complicated by the fact that Scotland is part of the Britain that Malta was negotiating independence from and, indeed, that Malta is now a member of the European Union that Britain is in the process of extricating itself from. Rather than tie my apron string theory in knots, then, I turn to look out of the window. The countryside, now between Rome and Naples, is beautiful. It does Fitzgerald justice. There are small farms in the foreground, towns on the rise of the hills, then snow-capped mountains. We speed through a tunnel and then I catch sight of Vesuvius. The guy at the table across from me is muttering darkly and tapping his fist against the table, impatient to arrive.

Napoli to Catania, Excelsior Sleeper, 21st February 2017

I don't want to sound like a teenage diarist, but this sleeper was everything I wanted it to be. True, I felt more than a bit of trepidation in Naples because the city seemed a chaos of tight, winding streets and my train didn't leave until two minutes to midnight, but I found the longest, straightest street I could – Umberto I – and walked down it until the stiffness in my legs was gone. Then I stopped at a pizzeria and had a massive pizza, a massive salad, and a normal-sized beer. Once done, I went out onto my long, straight street and walked back to the train station.

I manage a decent sleep in my little cabin, and then the key moment comes at around five a.m. I've already woken several times before then and checked out of my tiny window, but they are all false alarms: voices outside at a station, the change in pressure as we enter a tunnel. But then, at five, we clang and shunt for a good few minutes and, when I look out of the window, I see the darkness of night change to the stark whiteness of the inside of the ferry. It is as I imagined, both in terms of the noises and the sense of claustrophobia, but there's another detail I hadn't thought of: the rattling of the rails has changed to the thrum of a ship's engine and it's an entirely different movement underneath me. It is a more restful, soporific movement and I fall back asleep with the thought that I'll need to work this new detail into the existing prose.

It's lovely, in the morning, to open my wee curtain to a sea view and then, as we round the coast, a view of a town by the Sicilian shore. Stunningly beautiful. And then the attendant on the train brings me an espresso and a croissant; the Italian equivalent of the tea and bacon roll I got on my first sleeper.

Catania to Pozzallo (via Syracuse), Trenitalia, 22nd February 2017

Having finished Fitzgerald last night whilst waiting for my train, I've moved on to read Garrett Carr's *Rule of the Land* (Carr 2017). It's a non-fiction account of the author travelling the North-South border in Ireland, with many of his reflections coloured by the Brexit vote. More than that, it's about a writer venturing forth and embracing experience as the prelude, even the material, to writing.

My spell in Catania is brief and mostly taken up by a double meeting with a kindly old man who was, I think, offering me a taxi ride. By way of awkward hand gestures, I told him I wanted to walk and explore, but then found out that this wasn't so easy. The sea is obviously used industrially in Catania, towards the centre at least, because I found it hard to get a clear pathway to the coast. After a spell, I found a park with a sea-view, but I only sat there for ten minutes because two or three inquisitive dogs were sniffing my legs and a cloud of flies had gathered over my notebook page. It was a dog park.

On the train to Syracuse (Siracusa) I return to the Carr book. Rather than the Brexit vote, it sets me thinking about my doctoral research, undertaken in support of my debut novel *So It Is* (Bell 2012). The narrative was set in Northern Ireland and dealt with the Troubles. Back then, I read Colm Toibin's *Bad Blood*, which charted a similar endeavour to walk along the Irish border and collect opinions (not least his own) about the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 (Toibin 1987). It was a remarkably direct approach to trying to write about a complex and divisive issue, whereas the majority of Northern Irish writers in the period seemed to be seeking a way of examining the politics from a remove. Most famously, the poet Seamus

Heaney in his Bog Poems found a way of using the ‘sacrificial and ritual killings’ of the Iron Age as ‘analogues for various atavisms, including those of the Irish republican tradition’ (Corcoran 1997:145). Heaney, then, choose to approach condemnation of the violence through a historical parallel rather than with a statement or polemical poem. On the prose side, the novel I most admire for attempting something similar is Ronan Bennett’s *The Catastrophist*, which uses Civil War in the Congo as an analogy for Twentieth-Century Irish politics, with the character Stipe even making that parallel explicit: ‘How can you be from Ireland and not take a side? You look and look away’ (Bennett 2004:177)

This all swings back around to my work-in-progress. I want to look at the politics of contemporary Scotland, and in particular the two votes in 2014 and 2016, but it’s difficult to write about them directly; mostly because the debates surrounding them are still a moving target, still in flux. So I’ve approached through an examination of Malta instead, where over fifty years have passed since independence was the divisive issue. The novel embraces the contradiction of a Maltese politics that saw a swing from possible integration with the United Kingdom to independence in just eight years; 1956 to 1964. When Joe replies to a question, from Stuart, about the likelihood of independence for the island, he is equivocal in his answer:

Joe smiled. ‘We’ve always struggled with the contradictions: the Catholicism of the people against the need to have whores by a Naval base; the reliance on the Admiralty against the fact that the Maltese never rise through the ranks. The need for that benevolence, but a stirring for some control,’ he shrugged. ‘We’ll negotiate something. It’ll be called independence.’ (Bell 2017)

This approach, from a remove, allowed me to write about our own political reality without needing to make a statement or take a position about matters that are still in process. In the words of Seamus Heaney, writing in the context above, it ‘would wrench the rhythms of my writing procedures to start squaring up to contemporary events with more will than ways to deal with them’ (Heaney 1980:34), so I found a historical situation that I could examine in depth, gather my thoughts on, and then write about. In this way, through the novel, I hope to contribute something more thoughtful, more considered, to the debate on what place Scotland has in the United Kingdom and, indeed, what place the United Kingdom has in the European Union.

Syracuse seems smaller than Catania, and set up for tourists in a way that Catania wasn’t: Roman ruins, American accents, open-top bus tours. I sit in a harbour area with many small footbridges and feel like I’m in the North of Europe, Amsterdam or Copenhagen maybe, but with Sicilian sunshine. Fortified by a plate of gnocchi with brown shrimps and a glass of white wine, I again feel a passing sadness that we’ve chosen to detach ourselves from this little haven (and from Amsterdam and Copenhagen). Maybe it’s the wine, but my sense of melancholy deepens at the thought that Heaney and Bennett might not be the last to have to try to find a way of writing about the violence in Northern Ireland. The Brexit vote was a source of disappointment for myself and other Remain voters in Scotland, but it could spell much more than that for those in Northern Ireland; it could put the foundation of the peace process, the Good Friday Agreement, in jeopardy.

In the spirit of embracing my European-ness, I try out my Italian as I get on the train to Pozzallo. The train waiting at the platform is unprepossessing – a single, graffitied carriage belching out diesel fumes – so as I clamber on-board I approach a group of women and ask

them ‘quanto treno si ferma a Pozzallo?’ They nod and smile and say ‘si’. I sit, feeling very satisfied with myself. They either understood or – like the nice family in Milan – they’ve cheerily sent me off in the wrong direction.

Pozzallo to Valletta, Virtu Ferries, 22nd February 2017

After being overland, on the rails, all the way from Glasgow to the tip of Sicily, the last leg of my journey is as a foot passenger on the ferry. Pozzallo itself seems an unlikely place for a ferry terminal. It’s tiny and there only seems to be one stretch of seafront with any shops or restaurants. Then again, the ferry from Scotland to Northern Ireland goes from the town of Stranraer which is as ugly as the Gaelic derivation of its name – ‘The Fat Nose’.

The countryside on the journey into Pozzallo was notable for its similarity with rural Malta: carob trees, houses with corrugated iron roofs held down by precariously balanced stones. The difference is space – where in Malta the trees and crops are cramped together into something the size of an allotment, in Sicily they’re stretched out over field after field.

This is only my second time in Malta and, I have to admit, I’ve not really focused on that aspect of the trip at all. Yes, I’ve set up meetings at the Aviation Museum and with a linguist at the University, but mainly I’ve been fretting about the logistics of getting there.

I remember the first time I visited Malta. On the flight in, I began to feel quite anxious. Because, for the book, I needed it to be a certain way; for there to be the cultural identity which I’d read about but not yet seen up close. And Malta didn’t disappoint – in fact she

exceeded expectations, with the rich depth of her history and the light way she wore her British colonial past.

In terms of the first sight of the island, though, I know there will be a difference between approaching from the sea at night rather than from the air in the daytime. Compare, for instance, these two descriptions of Malta, the first from T.F. Neil and the second from Francis Gerard: 'ochre-coloured sandstone, glaringly bright, tiny brown stone-fringed fields the size of pocket-handkerchiefs, everything hot and lumpy and harsh to the eye' (Neil 1994:101-2); 'there were lights on the ships, lights on the busy dghaisas scuttering backwards and forwards between the great troop-transports and the quays, lights in the famous lift, lights up the bastions and the towering walls' (Gerard 1943:22). Neil's description is from flying in, as an RAF pilot, and seeing the island as small, rock-hard and, above all, difficult to land on. Gerard's account is closer to the way a sailor would view the Grand Harbour, slowly emerging from the dark as a string of lights that signify sanctuary. It's all about perspective.

And I see Valletta, from the ferry, as that gradual emergence from nothing. The first lights on the horizon could be ships, but then they begin to connect one to the other, and then deepen so that you can see that this one is further forward than the others, is brighter. The forts on either side of the breakwater are lit up and the bastion walls are too.

It's strange to think that it's been almost two years since I was last here, because the place has been so omnipresent in my mind, in my imagination, since then. Slowly approaching the berth down by the Pinto Wharf, then, feels curiously like a home-coming. I'm excited and impatient, tapping my fist against the window of the ferry in the same manner as the man on the train to Naples.

My thoughts begin to turn to the research I will do on my five days on Malta. I will visit Fort St Angelo and Fort St Elmo, which was closed for renovation on my previous visit. I will talk to Marie, my linguist at the university, about the usage of Maltese in the narrative – just occasional words or expressions that give a flavour of the language – and to Victor at the Aviation Museum about the airfield at Ta'Qali and the use of dust-filters on the engines of the Hawker Hurricane fighter-planes. I will walk up to Corradino Prison in Paola so that I can describe the approach to it and then wander in Valletta during the carnival to get a feel for the chaotic way that the Maltese embrace any excuse for a festival. I will eat rabbit stew – fenkata – and pastizzi filled with ricotta and with spiced peas.

Then I will return to my desk, to my books, and I'll get back to the process of adding in the 'poignant trivia' and then refining the flow of the narrative. I'll read about Brexit in the newspapers and return to my notes on the Maltese referendum of 1956. Perhaps I'll add in some clever line to tie the two together, then think better of it and remove it. Most of all, though, I'll pine for this time in Malta and the journey undertaken to get here; this island whose conflicted national identity I initially only researched for context but which became the subject of my third novel.

Conclusion

In the build-up to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, novelist James Robertson proposed that we should take the opportunity to 'build your ideal – your *realistically* ideal – country... debate whether that country can be better achieved through independence or

through remaining part of the Union' (Robertson in Hames 2012:166). My own view of a 'realistically ideal' Scotland was predicated on independence but, in spite of the vote not going that way, I found the process of the referendum to be invigorating and productive in terms of debating what kind of society we wanted to be. It also fed organically into the writing of the novel; we could take heart from the experience of the Maltese, who followed the integration referendum of 1956 with eight years of questioning and political manoeuvring before a second referendum, this time for independence, in 1964. The Brexit vote, however, punctured this sense of buoyancy. For me, and others of my persuasion, we'd maintained a place in the union we were uncertain about and decided to leave the one we were certain of.

Writing a novel with a political dimension was never going to be a straightforward task and neither was the analogy between the two political situations ever intended to be a perfect fit. Referendums throw up fascinating historical moments precisely because they're based on a binary decision, but writing creatively about such situations always demonstrates that they cannot be reduced to a yes-no binary. The use of the Maltese experience, then, was intended as something akin to an allegory, which would allow the novel to examine what 'nation' means without being drawn to the bugle-call of Nationalism. The choice of setting allowed some literal and metaphorical distance from the Scottish context. Scott Hames has argued, in a piece for the *Irish Pages*, that writers:

feature heavily in the accepted backstory of the 2014 referendum, but the endless hangover of the vote has side-lined and dismayed many of its literary trail-blazers. Overtaken by a mass movement they were once flattered to lead, the literati are half-drowned in the backwash of snivelling dreichism. (Hames, 2017)

Hames here uses the Scots word 'dreich', meaning bleak or dreary, to emphasize that this narrowing of focus, in Scottish Literature, has been tied to the politicised use (or non-use) of Scots in creative texts. The decision to side-step some of the factionalism by writing about Malta has emerged as a very sage choice, because I'd imagine that I would by now have abandoned any attempt to look at the aftermath of the referendum more directly.

The train journey itself, detailed above, became something close to a liminal space, allowing exploration not only of the various referendums but also the process of researching and writing the novel. It became, as much as anything, an opportunity to remind myself that the writing of the novel need-not be a political act or, at least, not solely a political act. Fiction allows us to express uncertainty in a way that a straight, journalistic style often doesn't. The Maltese experience doesn't exactly parallel the Scottish one, no, but it has something useful to say about it. Perhaps all of this is best summed up by a character in Ronan Bennett's novel, a fiction editor called Alan, who knew writers:

who when it came to their fiction, found that no matter how hard they tried they could not fly the flag for the cause. The reason was simple: politics of that sort demands conviction, fiction demands doubt. (Bennett 2004: 198-9)

That was, essentially, how I felt about the Scottish political context which had initially sparked the idea for the novel: I wanted to speak about it, to write about it, to engage with it. But I also wanted perspective, doubt, slippage. That was what shifting focus from Scotland to Malta gave me; along with an imperfect analogy and an enjoyable journey.

Notes

[1] The books referred to are Cull & Galea 2001, *Hurricanes Over Malta*; Galea 1992, *Malta: Diary of a War*; Holland 2003, *Fortress Malta: An Island Under Siege*; Mayhew 2004, *The Reconstruction of Warriors*; Mizzi 1998, *The People's War: Malta 1940/43*

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