

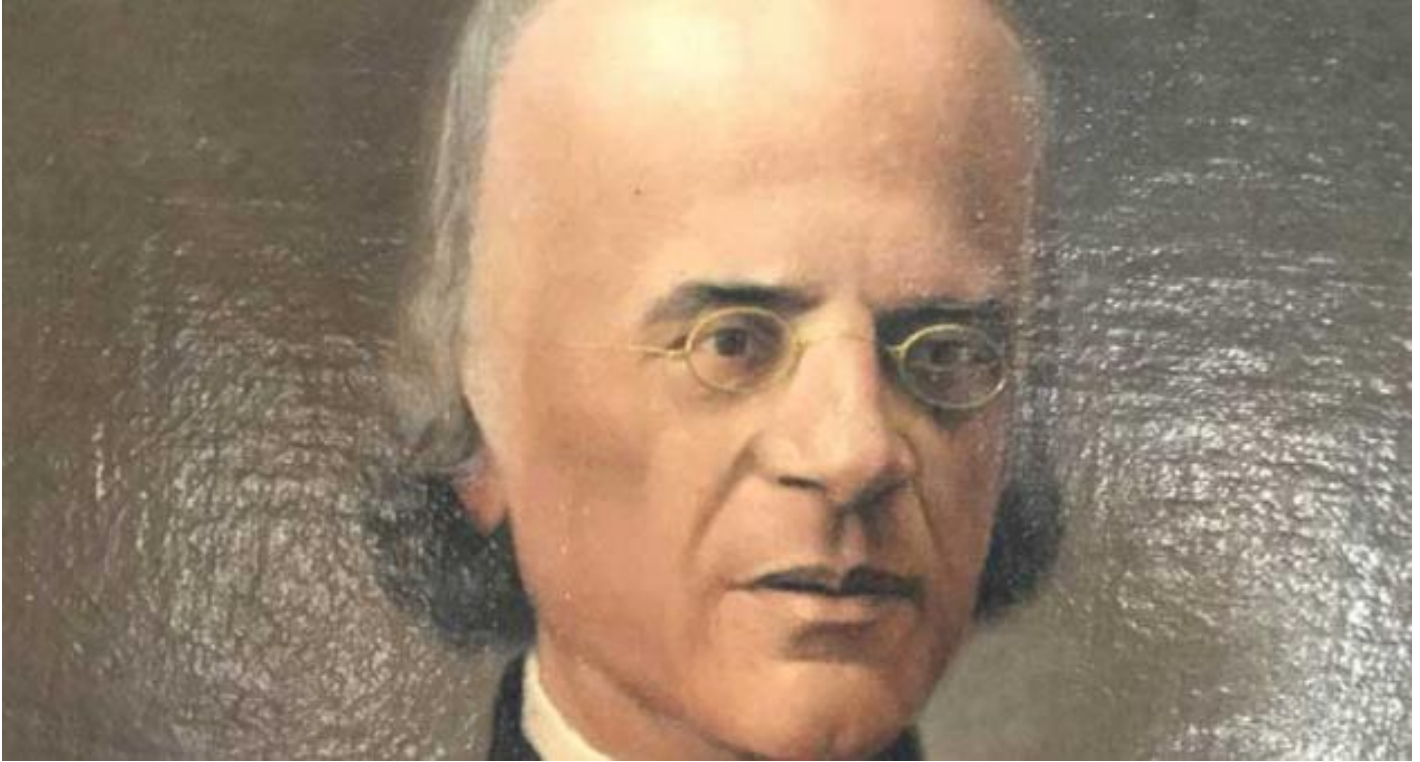
[Home](#) > [Newspaper](#) > [Lifestyle & Culture](#) > The Father of Maltese education

The Father of Maltese education

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Paolo Pullicino (15.8.1815-13.5.1890) Buried in the Mdina Cathedral, 200th anniversary of his birth on 15 August



Mark Pullicino

Adult schooling, available for all, would not be introduced in Malta for another 50 years after the French education reforms were defeated, along with Napoleon's forces, in 1800. This unacceptably long delay was not so much because the British administrators (who took over from the French) didn't bother, but more because of indecision due to the unresolved conflict between the language fronts of Italian, English and Maltese. This 50-year delay, during the early 1800s also marked one of the worst periods of poverty in Malta, when many people had no jobs, little food and only the pavements to sleep on.

Paolo Pullicino, elder brother of Judge Filippo, was the Maltese credited with breaking this deadlock, becoming the eventual Father of Maltese Education. He was a highly educated man, having gained a degree at the University of Malta, then attended the La Sapienza University in Rome and finally studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. It was probably the influence of the Sorbonne that ignited the French dream of *Égalité des genres dans l'éducation et par l'éducation* in him, and education for all. It is interesting that it took the studies of an academic at the French seat of learning in Paris to establish the educational ideals of the revolution in Malta, rather than the dictate of Napoleon's conquering forces. Though an ordained priest, who became a Monsignor and a Canon, he was appointed by the British administration to be the Minister of Education and pushed through these ideas.

In 1850, Paolo Pullicino set up the first Scuola Serale or evening school for adults, in Zabbar. This educational strategy appeared to be a joint effort between the Church and the British Administration, who shared a common goal of education: the Church educating in religion and the government in the English language. The first lessons began in arithmetic, reading and writing. Canon Pullicino, with his belief in education for all and his ability to communicate with both the British administrators, the Church and the Italian grouping, was well placed. He also used his Church connections to announce the benefits of these evening classes at Sunday services in all the parishes.

Paolo Pullicino was the first Maltese to encourage the masses to pursue education. P. J. Keenan, in his commission report of 1878 wrote: "The achievement in the space of 30 years goes to the credit of one man, Pullicino. In the whole of my experience, at home and abroad, of men whose lives have been dedicated to education, I have not met, or heard of, any man who combined in so interesting a degree the qualities of incessant devotedness to duty and of an earnest and enthusiastic pursuit of his own ideal of what is best. No man could review, as I have done, the official life of Dr Pullicino without entertaining an almost inexpressible admiration of his patient industry and of his enormous ability." (a)

The schools Paolo Pullicino set up grew, and in one form or another still exist today. As well as opening the schools, he set the curriculum and personally trained the teachers. Hence the English and the Maltese languages received more exposure under this new system.

Many people in Malta had suffered disadvantage and oppression due to the lack of education, which had been so difficult to get started. It was a hot potato of high politics, which is still something of an issue today. Two cultural factions were working to win the minds of the people. On the one hand, open were the anti-reformists who promoted Italian: this was the traditional language of the elite and of civil society, or the network of dominant

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debate was further complicated by the fact that the Church still wrote and spoke and held its religious services in Latin. There were also the indigenous Maltese, who had very little say at all: Maltese was, according to some administrators at the time, only "a language fit for the kitchen".

It was against this complex political background that Paolo Pullicino pushed through the establishment of the first common schools. He pacified the Italian lobby, gave the Church's needs their due, added English, and spoke to Maltese interests by also including their language, which was written with the Italian alphabet. The factions having been thus brought together, an educational support base could be established. This stage marked the beginning of the ascendancy of English to the detriment of Italian and eventually gave the Maltese the many advantages that this world language offered - more so than if Italian had been retained as the dominant tongue. It was also due to Paolo Pullicino that Maltese began to be used in a teaching context, as most courses had some basics in Maltese. This kickstarted the beginning of Maltese as a seriously taught, written and read language that was used in education. The Maltese language also slowly began to replace Italian in the law courts and later in the ministries. Maltese would eventually, in 1924, change its alphabet from the Italian to its own, but the main thing was that people were being taught in the Maltese they understood.

Paolo Pullicino came from a family that had the pursuit of civic welfare ingrained in its values, eventually claiming 400 years of continuous civic duty. The author J. B. Cassar wrote: "The family is the hallmark of tradition in public and national duty, upholding the sacred rights of their country in their capacity as representatives of the people". (b)

Pullicino could never have anticipated that his educational endeavours would result in one of his descendants becoming the first female representative of the Nationalist Party just three generations later. Two generation after Paolo, we also had the Attorney General Sir Philip Pullicino.

It was staunch, dependable people like this who, however slowly, were instrumental in setting up the educational and societal infrastructure. Although progress was made in education, health and wealth, the established power structures were protected by those they served. A radical shift towards equality in the society's balance would not come until political democracy was established on top of this educational base. That would not be until nearly a century later.

Malta's education system is the foundation for our social, economic and political development today.

The article is an extract from *James Martin, The Maltese Adventurer*, a biography by Mark Pullicino, 2014. Available in ebook from Amazon Kindle, or local bookshops (BDL).

a) P. J. Keenan, art. 48, para. VI, p.48. Commission Report 1878

b) Cassar, J. B. *A Brief Account of the Works of Mons. Paolo Pullicino*, University of Malta Thesis 1953

Dr Mark Pullicino, born in Mdina, has degrees from the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Wayne State (in USA) and a PhD from the Technische Universitaet in Berlin (the first German PhD to be granted to a Maltese). He has published four books and a collection of contemporary Maltese folk music scores.

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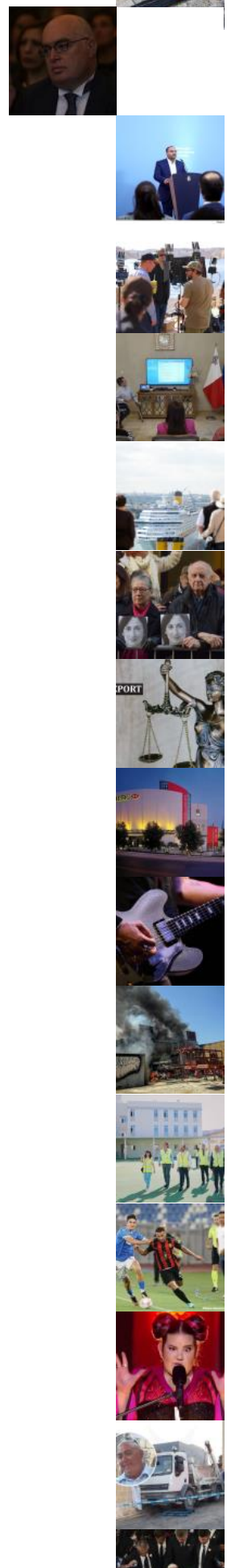
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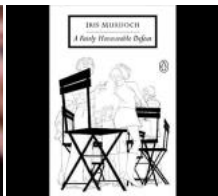
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