

Sir IGNAZIO GAVINO BONAVIDA (1792-1865)

Ignazio Gavino Bonavita was born on 31 October 1792 to Gavino Bonavita Champion at number 30 Strada Vescovo, Valletta. Graduated LL.D. on 29 January 1812, warrant 23 September 1812. Appointed after seven weeks Procurator of the Poor and the Prisons, and Secretary to the Inspector General of Police on 21 May 1814. Assistant Crown Advocate on 26 January 1818, together with duties as Acting Magistrate of Judicial Police as from 9 November 1819. Magistrate of Judicial Police for the First District on 8 March 1820.

Quite exceptionally for a Maltese lawyer, he was able to write the English language and speak it fluently when the foreign language in general use was Italian. When the eminent English Judge Sir John Richardson came to Malta and submitted a report on the reform of the legal system, Bonavita assisted him constantly in his work and drew up lengthy memoranda for him. He was appointed Judge on 1 October 1827 at the young age of thirty-five!

In 1831 he was one of five members forming part of a commission charged with the drafting of five new codes of law. Three years later it was dissolved and Bonavita was once more a member on the new commission. He was invited to London in 1836 to furnish elucidations on the draft Criminal Code. On 28 April 1836 at the Court of St James's he was invested by King William IV with the Ensigns of a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and Saint George (KCMG).

The Royal Commissioners of 1836 referred to Sir Ignatius as a gentleman "of excellent sense and a sound and able man". When the Chief Justiceship was suppressed, it was substituted by the office of President of Her Majesty's Court of Appeal, to which post Sir Ignatius was appointed on 2 January 1839. He was only *primus inter pares*, but, like the other

Judges, he occupied the office *quamdiu se bene gesserit* and not, like Stoddart, “during the Royal pleasure”.

In 1848 he was appointed First Commissioner for the drawing up of a Code of Civil Procedure, and on 8 January 1850, in virtue of his office as President of the Court of Appeal he administered the oath, under the 1849 Constitution, to the Governor and all the members of the new Council of Government, both nominated and elected. He ended his judicial career on 27 December 1853, after spending over fourteen years as President of the Court of Appeal. On 15 November 1854 he was elected to the Council of Government, but he resigned on 26 February 1855 for reasons of health. Nominated Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George (GCMG) on 28 January 1856. He was a member of several societies, including the *Institut d’Afrique* in Paris. His activities included the drawing up of the Fundamental Statute of the Royal University of Malta published in 1838, and a seat on the Committee of the Biblioteca, as member from 1842, as president from 1852.

His publications include these books: *Raccolta delle leggi di procedura delle Corti superiori Ordinarie di Malta pubblicate dal 1814 al 1840 come sono attualmente in vigore* (1841); *Saggio sulla prova giudiziaria considerata in rapporto all’attuale legislazione maltese* (1844, revised second edn. 1849); literature published in 1814 (*Eroidi*) and 1816. He was the first to encourage the publication in 1858 of the *Collezione di Decisioni dei Tribunali di Malta*. He left a large number of manuscripts, mostly in his own hand, on the formation of the Criminal Code, but also on the Code of Civil Procedure. Some of his manuscripts are at the National Library in Valletta, a good number were in the possession of the late Judge Roberto F. Ganado, now in the collection of Dr Albert Ganado, and two private notebooks are in another private collection.

Sir Ignatius resided at 30 Strada Vescovo, Valletta, a house belonging to his family, but he died of gout at his villa at St Julians on 1 August 1865. He was buried in Valletta at the Church “ta’ Ġiezu” of the Franciscan Friars Minor. A large commemorative tablet opposite the main entrance of the Addolorata Cemetery is distinguished by the family coat of arms with the motto *Auspicium Melioris Aevi*.

(Biographical note compiled by Dr Albert Ganado B.A., LL.D., M.O.M.)