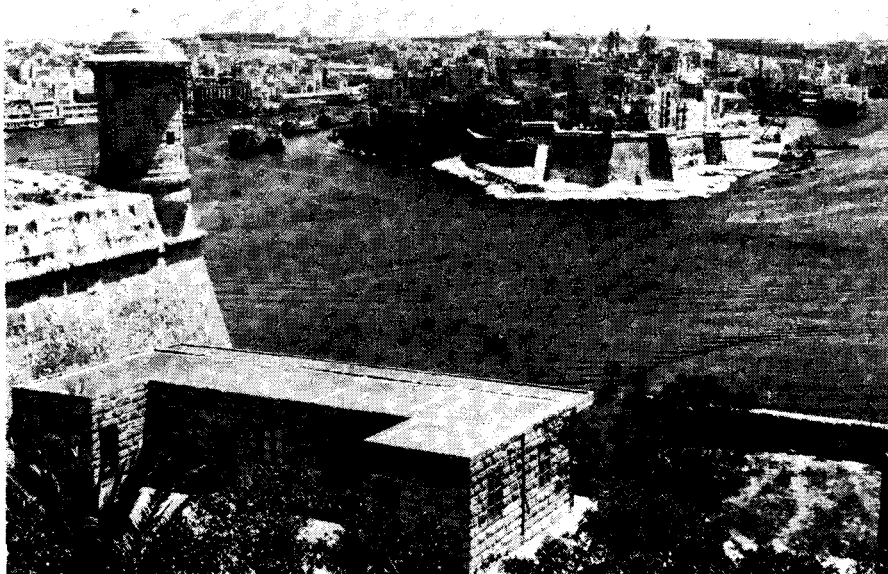


# Booked for Travel

Edited by David Butwin



Valletta Harbour—"None of Malta's overlords has made a greater impact than the British."

—Monkmeier.

## Up from Antiquity

NEARLY TWO MILLENNIUMS ago a Roman vessel was forced aground by one of the most famous storms ever whipped up in the Mediterranean. Directed by a centurion to abandon ship, the 276 passengers made for the nearest piece of land, all hands arriving safely on an island known today as Malta. Among those who came ashore was St. Paul, who during his stay wrought several miraculous cures.

Today, scarcely a week passes between April and October when his statue is not carried shoulder-high through the streets, at *festa* after *festa*. A relic, said to be a splinter from his elbow, recently was flown to Australia and widely venerated there. The sexton of the Maltese church where it is housed told me of plans for it to be flown to England, America, and New Zealand. On February 10, when white narcissi cover the fields and the red clover is beginning to bloom, a public holiday is held to celebrate the apostle's rescue, and all the faithful are commanded to hear mass. In piously Catholic Malta, that means everybody—all 330,000 islanders.

Since criticism of papal authority is considered in the worst possible taste, it was characteristic last year that while the rest of Europe was hotly debating the encyclical on birth control, the Maltese were discussing more provincial matters of church and state. In the

village of Bugibba on St. Paul's Bay, the people rose up against their archbishop because he had tried to impose on them a patron saint of his own choosing. In protest, the local priest conducted a straw poll on behalf of his parishioners and sent in the four names most favored. The priest was forced to resign. The faithful then threatened to boycott any selection of a saint not in accord with their poll.

Air passage for relics? Boycotting an archbishop? Suddenly Malta, the ancient shield of Christendom, has advanced bang into the twentieth century. More than 100,000 visitors are expected this year—a startling figure considering that before independence (September 21, 1964) nobody even bothered to count tourists. Since then, sixty-two hotels have shot up, including a Hilton, a Sheraton, and an Excelsior. The Dragonara Palace Casino on the headland beside St. George's Bay has proved an immediate success. In Marsamuscetto Harbour, a former anchorage for British warships has been turned into a spacious yacht marina, a haven so popular that Easter bookings for berths must be made at least six weeks in advance.

Flying over the five islands that make up the Maltese archipelago (only three are inhabited), one looks first to Malta's golden-colored sandstone buildings, which are honeycombed with secret passages. The island of Gozo, second in size to Malta, appears far greener, more

hilly, much less populated. Calypso's cave, where Ulysses dwelled, lies on Gozo's northern shore. Between Gozo and Malta is Comino, a small outcropping of rock covered with thyme, secreting hidden bays and creeks—and one hotel.

There are no rivers on the islands—only wells—and nowhere is the soil more than a few feet deep. Yet the countryside is not nearly so barren as it looks at first sight. In the Boschetto groves, oranges are ready for picking by Christmas, and by January the barley is turning yellow everywhere. Frost is unknown in any month. The terraced vineyards which sweep down to the sea are protected by stone walls, and in a good year there may be as many as three harvests. At road's edge, pumpkins and prickly pears grow wild.

Malta's ancient tongue, a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew, is said to be the same language the Holy Family spoke. In the National Museum in Valletta, there is an impressive collection of vases, terra-cotta birds, and figurines dating back to the Bronze and Copper Ages. There are also stone altars, beautifully decorated with spirals carved in relief, from the Neolithic temple at Hagar Qim, and idols and cinerary urns from the Neolithic cremation cemetery at Tarxien. Archeology has been taken seriously in the islands only during the past century, and many of the finds have been brought to light by pure chance. At Paola in 1902, a workman was engaged in hewing out the basement water tank of a house when his axe slipped and he broke through to what he believed was an abandoned cellar. Later, excavations found the cellar to be an ancient ritual chamber, which opened into several others. In some, one still can see red pigment on wall decorations which were painted 4,000 years ago. In the Oracle Room, there are egg-shaped niches in which the priests sat and intoned. The Hal-Saffieni Hypogeum is probably the best surviving example of an underground temple in the Mediterranean.

Valletta, a walled city of high Renaissance splendor, is laid out on the grid pattern and now serves as capital to the islands. It takes its name from its founder, Jean Parisot de la Valette, the sixteenth-century Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. At its entrance, guarded by a deep moat and the massive bastions of St. James, stands the main bus terminal. The colors of the buses denote their different destinations, a reminder of the days when few Maltese were able to read: blue for Mdina, the silent city and capital until 1530; brown for Mosta, whose parish church has the third largest dome in the world; and orange for Luqa, the modern airport. Malta's cabbies pilot four-wheel *karozzins* drawn

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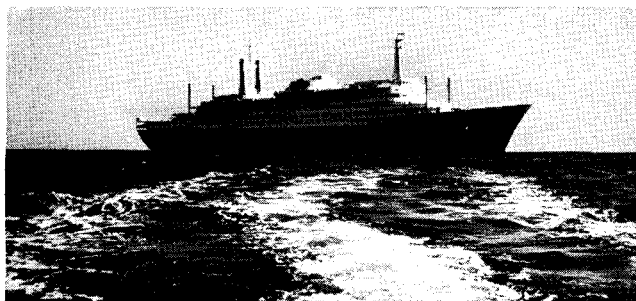
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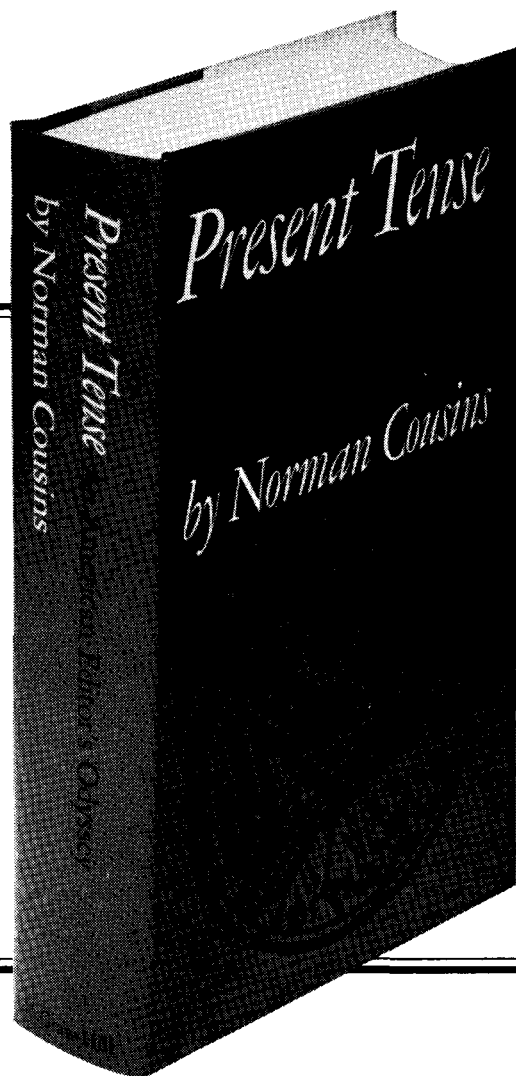
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by horses in feather headdress—a sight that reminded me of the plumes once worn by the Janissaries, crack troops of Soliman the Magnificent, who gave no quarter during the Great Siege of Malta.

Standing on the battlements of the star-shaped fortress of St. Elmo at the tip of Valletta, one gets a perfect view of the three cities on the other side of Grand Harbour—Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua. When I hired a *dhaisa* water taxi to ferry me across to Vittoriosa, only two large P&O liners lay at anchor. In the summer of 1565 the Turks had brought over by galley all their armament for a final onslaught on the three cities. They fired more than 70,000 cannonballs; the Knights did not surrender. In despair the enemy withdrew. Thus began the myth of Malta as the impregnable fortress, furthered in our time when the Luftwaffe dropped more than 7,000 tons of bombs on the islands in one month but failed to subdue the Maltese. Their valor was recognized by the King of England who honored Malta with the George Cross, and by General Eisenhower, who maintained that the resistance shortened the war by a year.

Since Independence Day in 1964, Malta has ceased to be a garrison fortress. The transition from British naval base to popular tourist destination is almost complete. In the past Malta catered to only two classes—officers and other ranks. The signs are still to be seen. At Tony's Bar in Sliema, a Jack Tar's drinking record is preserved in print: "On January 19th, 1947, J. Goldsmith of *H.M.S. Brissenden* drank forty-six bottles of Blue Label Beer between 1:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m." At the Phoenicia Hotel in Floriana, a Gentlemen's Laundry List hangs on the back of each bathroom door, including such items as jodhpurs and service caps. The Ladies' List includes silk stockings and camiknickers.

Yet none of Malta's overlords has made a greater impact than the British. They left an Anglican cathedral with a spire, and pillar boxes throughout the islands are painted royal red. The currency remains sterling. A statue of Queen Victoria dominates the principal square in Valletta, and in one village to the south there is a café called The Smiling Prince, named for one of their English heroes, Edward VIII, when he was Prince of Wales.

The truth is that the islanders are masters at adapting, a trait forced on them by history. Foreign domination has enriched both their culture and their religion, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Greeks all having left their trace. Wayside shrines to local saints compete with older ones to Roman regimental deities. Persian water wheels are used on most of the farms. Mattia Preti, their greatest painter, whose ceiling is the pride of St.

John's Co-Cathedral, was born in 1613 and came from Calabria. Norman arches and Sicilian baroque recall past occupations. In the larger towns, the Moorish influence hangs heavily over certain districts; in others, there is the mark of Arab invasions. The auberges of Auvergne, Aragon, Castile, Bavaria, and Italy built by the Knights, reflect the cosmopolitan spirit which they introduced. In fact, everyone who arrives in the islands brings his own set of loyalties, and in no time they seem absorbed into the local life. To find a house outside the hilltop capital of Gozo called "God Bless America" comes as no surprise. On my first day in Malta, I noticed four in a row called "England," "Ireland," "Scotland," and "Lourdes."

It was the Punic traders who gave Malta the name of Maleth, later corrupted by the Greeks to Melita. The first means "a haven"; the second, "honey." At the moment, both names have a particular significance. The islands have no heavy industry, and their chief exports remain honey, wine, and lace. To balance the books, and to attract investment from abroad, the islands must develop as tax havens as well as tourist centers. Economists put the chances of success at 50-50. The Maltese are born gamblers.

On my last evening in the islands, I went to a *festa* at St. George's Bay. Outside, the local church was garlanded with colored lights, while inside, rich velvet panels draped the black marble columns. The clergy, as they formed a procession in the sanctuary, seemed weighed down with their chains of office. Yet there was an easy informality about everything. In the square, sweet-vendors stood behind their stalls selling special *festa* cakes made of dates and spiced with aniseed and cloves. I thought of Tunisia's markets, less than half an hour's flight away. Some of the altar boys stopped to talk with the crowd, even to indulge in friendly cuffing with their school companions. There was no sense of regimentation. The life-size statues needed eight men to carry them, a task that caused them to pause often and swig from a wine bottle passing from hand to hand. Last came the figure of St. Paul, his arms outstretched in welcome. As the procession moved along the narrow street by the sea's edge, Chinese crackers and fireworks were set off, and from the balconies and upper windows, rose petals floated gently down. I stooped to pick one up. Perhaps better than anything it crystallized the present mood of the Maltese. It was a numbered lottery ticket, bearing the date of the month past.

—NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE.

Neville Braybrooke, a free-lance writer living in London, frequently contributes to *SR*.

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# SR Goes to the Movies

Arthur Knight

## "G" as in Good Entertainment

WHILE HOLLYWOOD continues to play the rating game in lieu of outright censorship, it becomes increasingly apparent that the studios are falling into a trap of their own devising. Since a film is rated "X" specifically "because of the treatment of sex, violence, crime or profanity," an "X" rating would seem to be the surest way to attract to the movie houses those audiences whose primary interest is titillation and shock—and yet the recently "X"-rated *If . . .* [see SR GOES TO THE MOVIES, Feb. 15], irrespective of a few nude shots and discussions of homosexuality, is as mature, sensitive, and imaginative a study of youth in revolt as we are liable to see.

On the other hand, *mirabile dictu*, an English-made adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, starring Christopher Plummer and Lilli Palmer, arrives with a "G"! Incest, regicide, and self-mutilation are apparently "accept-

able for all audiences, without consideration of age"—so long as they take place off screen and there are no nude scenes.

Although the aims of the Motion Picture Association's new, self-regulatory code are unquestionably worthy and well intended, some basic fallacies are already emerging. If the "X" is given automatically to any picture that contains nudity, profanity, or violence, regardless of treatment or context, it can hardly "encourage artistic expression by expanding creative freedom"—a stated objective of the code. And if a film is automatically awarded a "G" simply for avoiding sex, violence, and profanity, the category must inevitably be looked upon as a refuge for the bland and the beautiful, the safe and the sanitary. Consistency is not necessarily a virtue, but the inconsistency of lumping together *Oedipus the King* and, say, Robert B. Radnitz's production of *My Side of the Mountain* is sheer insanity.

Mr. Radnitz, whose previous films

include *A Dog of Flanders*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and *Misty*, might be called the "the mature Disney." Like Disney, he aims for the family audience—or what he likes to call "the total audience." Unlike Disney, however, there is never any scaling down to what is presumed to be the child's mentality. Quite the contrary, although Radnitz likes to work from children's classics, or from books that have earned prestigious awards in the juvenile field, he feels it imperative never to talk down or oversimplify. And because his pictures are not sweetened, or cutened, adults can enjoy them without feeling self-conscious about it.

*My Side of the Mountain*, based on a short novel by Jean George that had won a Hans Christian Andersen Award, is definitely such a picture. Translated from the Catskills to the wildly beautiful mountains and forests of eastern Canada, captured in all four seasons, it is always marvelous to look at. But its story is fresh and stimulating as well. Its hero is a boy about twelve, Sam Gibley, who, imbued by the spirit of Thoreau, determines to live off the land completely on his own for an entire year. Alone except for occasional visits from an itinerant folksinger named Bando and a pet raccoon, he makes a home for himself in the hollow trunk of a dead tree, attempts to grow algae for food, and raises a falcon which he trains to hunt for him. It is an almost idyllic existence, although tragedy strikes when hunters accidentally bring down his bird, and near-tragedy when winter snows seal him into his tree home and almost suffocate him. Not precisely Sophoclean tragedy, of course, but enough to earn Radnitz his "G".

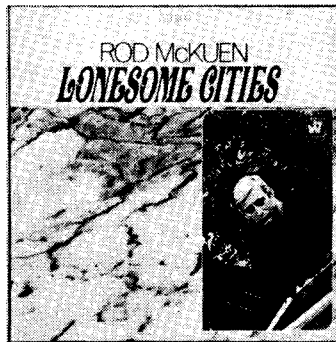
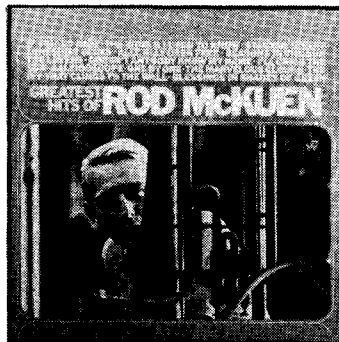
Ted Eccles is fine as young Sam, and Theodore Bikel properly sympathetic as the wandering minstrel; but the real star of *My Side of the Mountain* is cameraman Denys Coop, who not only captures the changing foliage in exquisite color, but seems able to anticipate the flight of a bird or the sudden darting of a wild creature from the heart of the forest. At times, especially when explaining Thoreau's philosophy, the script seems a bit too on the nose; and it could certainly use more humor. I would, nevertheless, like to nominate it for a new "G" category—good entertainment. It is Radnitz's best picture to date.

While on the subject of ratings, also misleading is the "M" category—"suggested for mature audiences." Especially when a recent "M" went to *Riot*—a particularly bloodthirsty prison picture starring Jim Brown and Gene Hackman. Dealing with a "bust out" from Arizona State Prison, the film offers for our delectation mindless violence on both sides of the law—plus a tasteless bit of homosexuality. Perhaps there should also be an "I" category—"suggested for immature audiences."

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