

Tuesday, 21st October 2008

More than a century on, is Dun Karm still relevant?

Lisa Gwen Baldacchino

Dun Karm Psaila grew up in an era of Italian Romanticism which was amply portrayed in his writings. Although he was a learned man, he sought to lead a simple life, often seeking solitude as his poetic muse.

That era now seems discordantly distant from today's world, which appears to have little time for Dun Karm's brand of romanticism. On Saturday, the 137th anniversary since the national poet's birth was commemorated, but is the national poet still relevant in today's Malta?

Maltese literature academic and writer Oliver Friggieri, who has published 11 books and numerous articles on the poet believes so. Dun Karm is one of the very few people who has managed to mould the Maltese people's way of thinking, he says.

"The simplicity of his verse has grown into an expression of what the complexity of contemporary life makes people yearn for," he says of the poet who was born on October 18, 1871.

His younger colleague, Adrian Grima agrees on this point: "Many probably find Dun Karm's clear and unambiguous vision both easy to understand as well as reassuring, because he identifies the Maltese identity with being (staunchly) Catholic, conservative, rather inward looking, Maltese-speaking, embracing of rural life and rejecting the 'impurities' of the city where people of different cultures and sets of values meet."

However, the academics differ when asked whether Malta's national anthem is still relevant today. Dr Grima feels Dun Karm's *Innu Malti* is a product of its time, and must not be read uncritically or with a closed mind. The challenge is to read the works of Dun Karm, as well as those of other poets, with the sensibilities of the 21st century.

Prof. Friggieri, on the other hand, feels that "a national anthem gains weight and significance as it gets older, by means of (its) growing connotation." The Maltese anthem is luckily old enough to bear an international comparison and it "has long withstood the test of time".

According to Prof. Friggieri, Dun Karm is primarily a poet resembling man as voyager in search of significance and justification. In this respect, he is a national poet of a much more relevant dimension, because he is looking for a patria which is not restricted by the confines of a specific time and place.

Although Dr Grima agrees that many still see Dun Karm as a symbol of national identity, he feels this is probably because his conservative vision of the world seems authentic to schools, the Church, politicians and also in popular literature and song.

Dun Karm created a neat worldview, which people continue to identify with even though they might acknowledge that it may be passé, he said.

Nevertheless, he influenced both the romantic poets of his time and the post-independence poets who reacted fiercely against his "literary authority".

Although the writers of the 1960s revolutionised Maltese poetry and literature in general, some teachers, Church people and politicians still find their literature unsettling and somewhat "revolutionary", and therefore resort to more reassuring models.

And the writers of the new generation are even further removed from the puritan romantic worldview of Dun Karm.

On the other hand, Prof. Friggieri feels the influence Dun Karm exerted on the literary activity of his times is perhaps only a part of the spiritual legacy he left behind.

The National Feast Committee last week decorated the monument dedicated to Dun Karm Psaila in Floriana to mark his birth on October 18. This was followed by a number of activities led by students from different schools.

Comments

Joe Borg Camilleri (8 hours, 38 minutes ago)

There are those who want to alter our national flag by removing the George Cross, maybe now we have a new group who want us to change the national anthem.....what's next?



Dear Dun Karm Psaila,

THANK YOU for enriching our identity by giving Malta a national anthem, by enriching our country's literature and for the other thousands things that you have done during your lifetime which would be impossible to list here.

GRAZZI.

D. Borg (9 hours, 6 minutes ago)

Our national anthem is a lovely poem and prayer. However, maybe the line 'rodd il-hniena lis-sid' should be changed to reflect more the modern concept of an employer.

Robert Cassar (1 day, 6 hours ago)

Well I happen to disagree here.. For me the national anthem needs to be changed.. Its depressing as if you are at a funeral. Listen to France or Italy National autumns.. they are joyful and give you energy.. however the Maltese make you sleep.. maybe that is why we never get any decent result!

William P Flynn (1 day, 7 hours ago)

I believe "Innu Malti" is far and away the best national anthem I've ever heard. It is short, sweet, uplifting, thankful, patriotic, hopeful and a prayer suitable for any country, any size anywhere. I can never read it without getting a lump in my throat. It is a great and hopefully perpetual gift from our own Dun Karm.

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