The history and importance of the present Mediterranean Possessions of Great Britain

From the dawn of civilisation, the Maltese islands and Cyprus have been whirlpools into which have been sucked practically every nation struggling for ocean supremacy. But now under the rule of the acknowledged mistress of the waves, they welcome the long-delayed peace. Gibraltar, Britain's other possession, did not become important until civilisation shifted westwards, when it passed continually between the Moors and the Spaniards and finally came into the hands of Great Britain. Being never out of the sea, Gibraltar was a well-known landmark to the ancients, but it was not inhabited until the Moorish invasion of Spain in 711 A.D. But, the Moorish leader, found “Gibraltar” or Gibraltar very useful as a military base, but in 1309, Ferdinand of Castile wrested it from the Moors who did not regain it until twenty-four years later. The efforts of the king of Castile to retrace his fortunes were futile though heroic, and in 1410 it was garrison of Granada who finally expelled the enemy. The new conquerors proved as laughable as the Moors, and in 1435 Henry de Guzman attempted to storm the ‘Rock’, but owing to bad arrangements was defeated and killed. It fell to the lot of
Alonso de Acuña in 1462 to replace the Castilian flag on the rocky heights, and Henry IV was aware of its importance annexed the conquest to his crown.

John de BUGIAN was appointed Governor and he held Gibraltar as a semi-independent fief until it was reclaims by the Crown in 1502.

Spain was left in undisputed possession until 1540 when Algerian pirates made a good attempt to recover the Rock for Mahomet, but were, in the end, unsuccessful to secure the safety of their prey. possession, and the Spaniards had the fortifications extended and modernized from which time it was Gibraltar regarded as impregnable until Sir George Cooke dislodged the long cherished illusion in 1704.

For a century past it had been extensively in English eyes, for half a century at England in had been an admitted end of their endeavours.

Cromwell had stretched out his hand to it......

William III had marked it for his own and had never ceased in peace or war to work for its possession, and now in 1704, Sir George Cooke, commanding a British squadron, captured the prize during the war of Spanish succession. The Prince of Hesse-Darmstadt was left as governor to face the Spanish army, under Villalobos, sent to recover the fortress. But the activities of the British admiral, combined with that of the governor rendered all efforts of the besiegers useless. Marshal Seve replaced Villalobos in command, but with no better
success and in 1705 he lifted the siege. At the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, England stood firm for Gibraltar and gained her first colony fortress.

Spain again fought force up against Gibraltar in 1726, but without success and did not try again until 1779 during the War of American Independence. The war ended finally in 1783. All communications between Spain and the fortress were severed and the blockade lasted from June to December. Spain pushed forward extensive works and kept a close siege resulting in great famine on the 'Rock.' This however was relieved in January 1780 by Sir George Rodney, but throughout the remainder of the year the enemy maintained a rigorous blockade, completely cutting Gibraltar off from the Barbary supplies. For Spain began to make the capture of the fortress, its chief objective in the war.

Once more the garrison was faced with starvation, when in April 1781, a convoy, under Admiral Darby, tried to relieve supplies but at the same time drew on a shattering bombardment. The chief event of the year was General Elliot's daring sortie in November. By one bold stroke the little party destroyed all the magnificent works put up during the past year. In a lime Spain seemed crushed by the blow, but early in 1782 she pulled herself together. Spanish troops and workmen arrived daily and new men-of-war were equipped for an overwhelming attack of combined French and Spanish forces. This attack began in September, accompanied by
a heavy bombardment. France and Spain deemed success certain, "but as the danger thickened around the British here presence of mind rose". After several weeks of fierce assaults the enemy deserted of taking the fortress by force and confined themselves to annoying the garrison by attacks of gun and mortar boats. Meanwhile England was not idle, and in October a fleet arrived under Lord Howe which won through to the garrison and virtually ended the blockade. The siege itself was raised with the signing of the peace preliminaries in February 1783.

Spain attempted to wrest Gibraltar from the British grasp for the last time during the Napoleonic wars, but had no better success. The interval of peace has been devoted to the development of civil law and through the unceasing work of skilled engineers the Rock, practically impregnable from nature, has now been made wholly so by art. The mighty stronghold is one of the strongest links in the chain that binds the British Empire together, in that it controls the commercial highway that ranks second only to the Northern Atlantic in the volume of its trade.

Gibraltar is a tremendously important shipping station on the eastern route from England doubly valuable since the opening of the Suez. Nine million tons of shipping entering and leaving its port annually account for its fame as an entrepot.

Not of minor importance to the splendid
wires and cable communications in all the
important parts of the world.

Though small in extent, Gibraltar is of
partly greater importance than its size suggests,
so without it Britain could not hold her larger
possessions beyond.

The history of Gozo and Comino is
bound up with that of Malta the chief island
of the group. The first conquerors were the
Phoenicians in 800 B.C., who bequeathed to the
inhabitants the legacy of capacity for hard
work, which has made the Maltese mercantile the most
flourishing in the Mediterranean at the present
day.

After an interval of Greek colonization
the Carthaginians in the 6th century resumed
the rule of their Phoenician ancestors, but during
the second Punic War, Malta was overrun by the
Romans in 218 B.C. The high stage of
commercial prosperity attained in Carthaginian
times was continued under the new conquerors
and it was during this period that St. Paul
introduced Christianity to the islands.

Peace lasted until 670 A.D. when the
Arabs, running themselves, poured out of their
country, incidentally capturing Malta in their
westward sweep. Under the Arab dome, the
Christian inhabitants endured terrible persecution
until 1099, when Roger, the Norman, claimed the
islands as his inheritance, and expelled the
Arabs. The cross was uplifted once more

"Malta up above the crescent...... and he priests and people
of St. Roger..."
Between the years 1690 and 1630 Malta was a feudal fief and as such was but a pawn in the game played by the ruling Brunei. In this period, signs of national life began to show themselves. An elected Assembly, the 'Consiglio popolare' is to be found, consisting of nobles, clergy, and commoners. The Maltese soon undertook some wars on their own againstwise and Genoa being successful in both cases.

In 1630 the Emperor Charles V of Spain handed the islands over to the Knights of St John, who tremendously increased the material prosperity of their new stronghold. Shortly after, in 1557, the fame was given to La Balista, Queen Grand Master and his spies quickly discovered that the Emperor Polyphius was preparing an invasion which actually took place in May 1565. The Turks succeeded in obtaining possession of Fort St Elmo, but two other forts, St Angelo and St Michel, were so securely defended that all assaults were vain, and in September, at the arrival of a relieving fleet from Sicily the enemy embarked.

With the end of the danger from Turkey, "the martial spirit of the Order began to wane". Regenerated by wealth it disregarded the national and individual liberties of the Maltese to such an extent, that in 1722 a sharp rebellion broke out headed by the prelates. The rebellious islanders gladly welcomed Napoleon, who, in 1798 expelled the Grand Master and all support by pillaging the church and introducing the ways of the French revolution,
and in September 1798 open rebellion broke out, encouraged by the prospect of English help which arrived very soon.

Nelson landed Captain Hall who after a two years siege of Valletta, held control of Malta until his death in 1809. By the Treaty of Amiens it was decreed that Malta should be given back to the Knights. The British, however, on the urgent wish of the Maltese, remained in possession, causing Napoleon to declare to the British ambassador, "Peace or peace depends on Malta." England decided in favor of war with the results that in 1814 Malta became a British Crown Colony.

The Governor in the early decades of the 19th century were left very much to their own devices by Rowan and Stuart and often earned things with a high hand. Of these, Sir Thomas Wardlaw was a typical example, although he too introduced good reforms. In 1829, legal by jury was instituted and later the Government introduced a free press and a police force on an English footing.

A great event in the early days of British rule was the three months visit of the young Queen Adelaide in 1832, when she thoroughly endeared herself to the native population, which, in spite of several instances of friction with the English, has remained staunchly loyal to Imperial interests.

During the Crimean War, Malta, as a base for troops was governed by Sir W. Reed who introduced elaborate schemes for agriculture and the commercial development of the colony.
The success in 1958, Sir Edward L. Beilharz, improved social conditions and raised the "House of the Mediterranean" to the position of one of the world's strongest fortresses. Sir A. Viggla gave Malta her Code of Law, her Gerald Strickland carried through long-delayed reforms and to the great joy of the Maltese, responsible self-government was introduced in 1921.

Social and racial problems still confront the British in Malta, but the Government has done all in its power "to bridge the dream which still divides the two nationalities."

Ryan's "little military haven" in the heart of the Mediterranean, has long been acknowledged one of the greatest strongholds in the world. Here, situated halfway between Gibraltar and Egypt, and at the point in the Mediterranean where it narrows between Libya and Africa, is the valuable base of the British Mediterranean Fleet.

Planted as it is on the highway to India and containing always a considerable garrison of first class troops, very important measures have been made of Malta, to supply at short notice large contingents for service. The grand harbour, the dockyard and the garrison of 1,000 men make good its claim to be described as "the key to the 'Empire in the East.'"

But Malta is chiefly important as a coaling station on the main stream of Mediterranean traffic, and now a free port with an ever-increasing cahpitol trade. The little island is one of the most important ports of call in the world having over five million tons of shipping in the five
harbour of Valletta each year.

Finally Malta has a great imperial
significance in that she is a station for
the most important links of the British Empire
namely wireless and cables.

Cyprus under

The early history of Cyprus is lost in the
mists of antiquity, but the island attained a
celebrity all its own in the annals of mythology.
By the 15th century B.C. Cyprus was known
to civilization as a coasts of the Egyptian
dynasties. Having its value, Egypt tightened
her hold, but under the Twentieth dynasty the
Phoenician influence spread rapidly, to be
overshadowed in the 7th century B.C. by the
Ashyrians to whom Cyprus became tributary.

Within a century Aegyptus fell before the
Babylomene, who in turn, in 588 B.C., lost
Cyprus to the Macedonians of Egypt. In a brief
period Prechadragyar held the prize of
sea-power soon to be retaken by Egypt. The
latter's rule in Cyprus lasted until 525 B.C. when
Ptolemy of Pharos added the island to his empire.

Since then it had seen many empires rise and wane around her,
merely playing the role of a bystander, but now
she was to take an active part in expelling the
Persians from the Mediterranean. As an ally of
Greece, Cyprus sided with the Greeks in the
rebellion of 502 B.C. but could not get throw off
Persia's iron yoke.

The island was divided from earliest times
into a number of semi-independent principalities
owing a shadowy allegiance to the important
kingdom of Salamis. In 410 B.C. the Thracian
of Salamas, which had been occupied for over a hundred years by a Phoenician dynasty, was seized by Egypt, whose successors had been supplanted by the Phoenicians.

Ptolemy is one of the most famous characters in the history of Cyprus. After establishing his rule, he reorganized trade between Greece and his island and greatly improved shipping. While cultivating a strong friendship with Athens, he remained a Persian ally until 356 B.C. when he revolted unsuccessfully against Artaxerxes. A few years later, Ptolemy, one of the finest of Cypriot heroes, was assassinated.

Cyprus gladly welcomed Alexander the Great after his conquest of Pergamum in 383 B.C. But at his death ten years later the island was seized by Ptolemy I of Egypt continuing under his dynasty until 69 B.C. The timber, minerals, and agricultural products supplied Egypt with much needed materials and for two hundred and fifty years Cyprus enjoyed a period of comparative peace and prosperity as it had scarcely before known in its

About 60 B.C. in the time of Ptolemy, Rome confiscated the island as the result of an insult offered to a Roman Prefect. In 69 B.C. the Governor proved tyrannical, but the Cypriots enjoyed a brief and semi-independence when Julius Caesar presented the island to Cleopatra, but it reverted to Rome at her death.

Christianity was early introduced into Cyprus by St. Paul and Barnabas, who suffered martyrdom at Salamas, his native town.
On the partition of the Roman Empire in 395 AD, Cyprus passed under the Byzantine rule. The inhabitants enjoyed much prosperity until the rise of Mohammedan power subjected them to cruel rule, which continued intermittently for over two hundred years.

The peace that followed was broken in 1184 by the great Crusade Conveners of Venice who held the island for seven years. Richard I of England ended his cruel reign by capturing Cyprus on his way to the Crusades and selling it to Guy de Lusignan in 1192, with whose dynasty it remained until it fell into the hands of the Venetians in 1576, and the Venetians in 1798. The latter held it during eighty-two years, using it merely as a naval and military station, making little or no attempt at civil administration. Despite the elaborate fortifications made by the Venetians, the Cypriotes did not long resist the Turkish invaders under Selim II, with the fall of Famagusta in 1571 the whole island passed to the Turks under whom it steadily declined.

In 1878 Great Britain rented Cyprus from Turkey to safeguard her Eastern interests, particularly the Suez Canal. The new rulers eliminated much of the waste in political life and introduced an excellent judicial system based on the Code Napoleon. All classes made shipping and communications were improved. Education was helped and a number of promising Cypriotes were sent at Government expense to attend Agricultural courses in the chief European countries.
At the outbreak of war with Turkey in 1914 Great Britain annexed Cyprus and carried on the good work she had begun.

By introducing impartial administration and reducing the taxation the British have Cyprus under greatly accelerated the lot of the people generally. British rule and rendered material progress possible.

Cyprus is one of those places held by Great Britain not so much for their present value as for their possible use in time of war.

However, Cyprus is still a useful coaling station at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, guarding the entrance to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean terminus of the Baghdad railway, two important routes to British India. Now that Egypt is to be evacuated there will be an added need for a watchtower at this end of the Mediterranean.

The prosperity and importance of the island increases with the communications with Egypt, which, from earliest times has formed a splendid market, close at hand, for her agricultural produce.

The present importance of these three possessions is seen to be great, but their future importance depends on three factors, firstly the use of oil as a substitute. When oil replaces coal, ships will be able to carry much more fuel and go farther without refuelling. This will remove the need for coaling stations near to Great Britain. Another point to be considered is the development of air traffic. There is always the possibility that ships will be replaced by
was planned for trade purposes, and in the war of the future these great strongholds will have no defence against attack from the air.

Lastly, if the League of Nations develops sufficiently, the entrance to the Mediterranean will always be open and need no key; the 'nurse' will be nurse only in name and the 'watchtower' in the fact will be deserted.
Books consulted in preparation of the Essay

The British Empire — Pollard
Whittaker Almanack
The Story of the Empire — E. Lucas
The Economic Geography of the British Empire — Thirteenth
England in the Mediterranean — J. L. Corkett
Gibraltar and its Stations
Cyprus under British Rule — Captain C. W. Orr
Geography of the World — E. C. Wallis
Cambridge Geographical Readers
The Statist's Year Book 1929.

Malta — J. W. Ryan
The British Colonial Library
The History of Gibraltar — Captain Sayer
The Cambridge Modern History
The Near East — D. G. Hogarth
The Political History of England — G. L. Reidieck
+ G. H. Hartshorne
Handbook of Commercial Geography — G. Richardson
The Times Survey Atlas of the World
The International Geography by Henry & Bonds
A Regional Geography of Europe — Macmunn and Sons
The Children's Encyclopedia
Encyclopedia Britannica
The Standard Encyclopedia
The Wonder Book of Empire.