

Malta Remembered: Then and Now: A Love Story

Margaret Dexter

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The Mediterranean archipelago of Malta has been strategically important for a succession of powers, from the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans to the Spanish, French, and English. The islands' history and landscape also served as the perfect place to conquer the stresses of modern life for Margaret Dexter and her family in 1969.

By outward appearances, the Dexter family was living the American dream in Santa Barbara, California. The author's husband, Stillman, was a partner in a successful automobile dealership. The family lived in a fine house with four healthy children and a couple of dogs. However, there was a problem. Stillman was bored. So, in 1963, the family moved to England, where they could rejuvenate through cultural enrichment. Things were going as planned, but problems arose back home, where Stillman's business, which he had left in the hands of a partner, failed. They returned to California to pick up the pieces, but it was too late. Stillman took a job as a materials-procurement supervisor with an international building contractor

That led to his assignment to a pipeline project in Libya. In 1969, the family moved to nearby Malta, a proximity that allowed Stillman to make periodic visits home. The stay lasted only one year, but the memory of the islands' sunwashed landscape, ocean views, and festive character sustained the family until Stillman's death in 2003.

Malta Remembered is not a book about the place, but, as Dexter notes, "a story about soul mates written in the stars—from 1923 to 2005—stars in rare alignment."

She depends on her diaries for most of her recollections, and a lot of them—births, school graduations, weddings, dogs dying, grandchildren being born—will appeal mainly to her own family. Those outside the household will be hard pressed to maintain interest because Dexter's failure to weed out uninteresting facts. For example, she quotes, in its entirety, a six-page history of a Malta building owned by the Dexters' landlord during the family's one-year stay that would not likely interest even a native Maltese resident.

It was probably not her intention, but the author emerges as a heroine, a woman who guided her family through good times and bad the old fashioned way: by maintaining a home, delighting in the successes of those around her, and comforting them in times of distress.

Dexter ends on a poignant note. After her husband's death, she returned to Malta, met her former landlord and his family, took nostalgic walks, and, from the deck of a boat called the Sea Cloud, tossed an envelope containing some of Stillman's ashes into the the Mediterranean waters along with a note attesting to the couple's love.

TOM BEVIER (January 29, 2013)

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