Micaela Mata

The historian Micaela Mata, in her book: British Minorca Volume I – Queen Anne and George I, 1712-1727, in reference to the King’s Island

King’s Island, where the Aragonese monarchy took land five centuries ago, became the “bloody Island” of the navy to be transformed into a naval hospital barracks or huts, already existing at the arrival of General Stanhope. Admiral Jennings contributed the first money for their construction in 1711 from his private account, which he claimed back in 1714, and paid £468.3s.6d. Despite his timely generosity, the first work was of such poor quality that it soon threatened to ruin the place and the sick had to be moved to the convent of San Francisco, just outside the walls of Mahón (where twenty of the twenty-five resident monks had been evicted), until the constant demands of Vice Admiral John Baker to his superior at the Admiralty, Mr. Burchett, resulted in the reconstruction of the building in 1715.

The hospital, built in the centre and the highest part of King’s Island, was a harmonious group on one level, not without some beauty. Oriented to the southeast, the three wings formed a “U” around a square; the chapel at its centre was the work that stood out the most and the one which lent architectural balance to the building and which characterized it. Four stylized columns on its roof supported the dome, all this, although simplified, close to the Wren-style of the time. On each side of the chapel the solid arches that traced long covered galleries, through which the sick rooms communicated, were left leaving the remaining buildings topped by a row of pilasters.

The unevenness of the terrain allowed, or demanded, two floors at the ends of the lateral wings and access to them was made by an atrium adorned by two columns, on which a balcony was outlined; the roof was also crowned by small columns of stone.

Whoever had been its designer had the double merit of having created a building which was both pleasing and practical. The interior of the hospital had been designed with thought and coherence, and was much more comfortable than the heartless sanatoriums of that time. Its fourteen rooms, about 28 feet by 35 feet each (8.5m x 10.6m) had high vaulted ceiings and good ventilation, and in all of them the twenty-four patients occupied individual beds, an uncommon luxury then.

In addition to the three hundred and thirty-six seamen who could be housed in the hospital, apart from of the blocks for patients, the building included rooms for naval officers, guards, and sailors who linked the island with land.

The surgeon’s room and the practitioner’s room were close to the dormitories and in front of the part which served as an office for the administrative staff on the other side of the square. The nurses and assistants occupied the western corner, and the kitchens and ovens the western corner. In some semi-basements to the north, provisions were stored, and those in the east and west were reserved for the needs of the surgeon and the director of the hospital. Best use was made of the islet: the latrines were behind the main construction; the well was in front of the chapel, but outside the square; and a natural cave on the side of Cala Llonga was used to store tar, tar and other naval equipment.

On this same coast a pier had been built (and still stands), and on the opposite side of the island, facing Fonduco, another shallower jetty with a little beach.

The “Bloody Island” did not deserve this alarming name at all and it can only be inferred that it was a derivation of “Hospital de Sangre” or a first-line healing post.

With few modifications, the appearance of the hospital would last for more than one hundred years, well past the British dominations. The works were given to Antonio Seguí for a budget of 800 pieces of eight payable in three instalments in a document signed on August 4, 1715, the contractor undertook to complete the repairs before October, with a guarantee of one year, as was customary on the island. In the fixed price neither the transport of the material nor the bringing of water or the deepening of the well were included (would it be the same spring discovered so opportunely by Alfonso when invading Menorca in 1287?). Instead, the admiral offered to provide sailors for the quick completion of hospital restoration. Baker had a special interest in seeing the works finished because it seemed that on King’s Island the sick people healed more quickly than in Mahón, giving as a reason for this as their convenient distance from the abundant and indigestible wine of the country, as well as the good air of the islet, something that, as he would write after the recent transfer of the sick to the “Bloody Island”, it was fully demonstrated in that winter of great cold and rain.

Baker seems to have been an officer especially attentive to the needs of his men, getting unusual conditions for the hospital inmates. Thirteen pence a day would be used for the provision and care of each person, requiring of the assistant, William Corbett, that they should be provided with water, plates, dishes, spoons and a diet approved by the surgeon-in-chief; they would also be provided with fire and candles, and some competent and, more precisely, pleasing nurses, who would watch over the hygiene of those hospitalized.

The admiral, a practical but frugal man, considered the hospital area sufficiently large to store valuable supplies, which he estimated would save the government 40 dollars per year disbursed at that time to pay the rent of several houses and yards, and protect it from bad weather, “and also of other things” he would declare, making clear reference to the defects that he disliked of the Menorcans.

At three years, the work of John Baker (who had died in Mahon in November 1716) was justified by the hospital being occupied by the wounded sailors of the Battle of Passaro. Many, notwithstanding the recent improvements, would die there, among a hundred other men of Captain Mathews, and of Grafton, Kent, and Rupert, another sixty who arrived seriously ill.

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