

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa  
**A BIOGRAPHY  
THROUGH IMAGES**

Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi

Foreword by David Gilmour



A unique insight into the people  
and places that inspired the  
author of *The Leopard*





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# GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA

A BIOGRAPHY THROUGH IMAGES

GIOACCHINO LANZA TOMASI

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Picture research by Nicoletta Polo

with a Foreword by David Gilmour

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ALMA BOOKS



*Foreword*  
*by David Gilmour*

Many of us have books that from time to time we need to reread. Whatever their other merits, for us they have a special quality, an insistence: they demand rereadings because they have entered our souls and will always provoke new responses. And each time readers who return to them do so in the knowledge that they will discover fresh pleasures and wider meanings which will leave them wondering how they managed to miss them before.

*The Leopard* has been pre-eminent among these books for me. By the age of thirty, when I had read it three or four times, I realized I needed to learn about its author, Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa, and discover at least something of the ambience in which he had lived. In the spring of 1985 I was on a brief assignment on Lake Maggiore, just inside the Swiss border, when it suddenly became imperative for me to travel the entire length of Italy by train, to cross the Straits of Messina by boat and to explore the places where Lampedusa had lived and which he had written about in his novel, his short stories and his childhood memoir.



My Sicilian venture was a bleak and melancholy experience. Each family home I tried to see had either been destroyed or else was in a state of advanced dereliction. And the most abject and dismal of all was the writer's birthplace, the Palazzo Lampedusa in Palermo, which was still in ruins forty years after it had been bombed by the American air force in 1943. Sadly I took out my camera and was about to record this unhappy spectacle when a group of *carabinieri* approached, gesticulating and shaking their heads. "*Vietato*," one of them cried. "But why?" I asked, "it's just an old wall." They laughed quite a lot at this. As nobody could wish to photograph a ruined wall, they assumed I was spying on a police station at the far end of the street.

I put my camera away and retreated down the Via Lampedusa, but as I passed the padlocked gates of the wrecked palace, I noticed that one of the planks was loose. The next day I rose early, reached the building before it was light and managed to shift the plank so that I could squeeze through the gate and into the rubble of the courtyard. From Lampedusa's memoirs I remembered the layout of the building and knew where to find the remains of such rooms as his mother's boudoir with its domed ceiling or her dressing room overlooking the Oratory of Santa Zita. The saddest space of all was the ruined library with its splinters of cornice, its tattered shreds of green velvet and, underneath the rubble, the remains of the catalogue, burnt and insect-eaten cards bearing the names of Shakespeare, Dickens and others among the Prince's favourite authors. I hunted and probed for several hours and then squeezed back through the gate, covered in dust, in the afternoon. My appearance startled some passers-by, but fortunately the *carabinieri* were not there; it was a Sunday, and anyway it was siesta time.

My most exhilarating discoveries among the ruins were some photographs of Giuseppe as a child and a series of letters sent by his mother when he was a recruit in the First World War. Two years later in London I met Giuseppe's adopted son, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, and his second wife Nicoletta Polo. We became friends, and on a visit to Palermo I gave them the documents; two of the photographs (p. 20, top right, and p. 27, top left) appear in this book.

Gioacchino, who was then in his early fifties, was an unusual member of the Sicilian aristocracy. He was politically left-wing, and he worked for his living; he always had at least two jobs and usually some others. At the time he was professor of music at Palermo University and artistic director of the RAI orchestra in Rome; later he ran the Taormina festival, the Teatro Comunale in Bologna and eventually the loveliest of all opera houses, the San Carlo in Naples; for several years he was also director of the Italian Institute in New York.

When I first knew him, Gioacchino was a little reluctant to talk about Lampedusa. His adoptive father was long dead, and so was his first wife Mirella, whom the Prince had known and was fond of. They belonged to a past which for him had many melancholy memories. But the curiosity of people such as myself and Caterina Cardona, who edited Lampedusa's correspondence with his wife Licy, helped revive his interest so that in the end, with Nicoletta's assistance, he became perhaps not exactly a keeper of the faith – he is too irreverent for such a role – but a scholar and advocate of the older man's literary genius: writing and speaking about him, holding symposiums, helping me with my biography, publishing Lampedusa's letters and his essays on English literature.

Gioacchino was adopted by Lampedusa in 1956. In this too he was unusual, because he was neither poor nor an orphan. Not only did his parents, the Lanzas di Mazzarino, belong to an even grander family than their Lampedusa cousins; they were also still alive and dwelling in the great Mazzarino palace in Palermo's Via Maqueda. Yet Giuseppe, with his wife's approval, wanted to adopt a son because he was childless, and he wanted to adopt Gioacchino (whom they knew as Giò) because both adored his company and felt rejuvenated by his presence.

After *The Leopard's* publication in 1958, critics debated whether it was a historical novel or an autobiographical work without seeming to realize it could be a combination of the two. Don Fabrizio, its protagonist, was based on the author's great-grandfather Prince Giulio, but much of his character and some of his ideas were Lampedusa's. Similarly Tancredi, Fabrizio's fictional nephew, had an historical model, Corrado Valguarnera di Niscemi, but, as his creator admitted, his charm, his vivacity, his impishness and his sense of humour belonged to Giò. And the relationship between the fictional characters very closely resembled that between the author and his adopted son. When Lampedusa wrote of Don Fabrizio's inability to become angry with Tancredi or the impossibility of being bored in his company, he was in fact describing his own attitude towards Gioacchino. The feelings were reciprocal, and anyone connected with the story will rejoice that now, more than half a century after the Prince's death, the strength of that affection – and its endurance in the heart of the survivor – is celebrated by the publication of this beautiful book.

– David Gilmour, 2013

*Introduction*  
*by Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi*

From towards the end of 1942 up to May 1943 the historic centre of Palermo was subjected to a series of bombing raids by successive waves of Flying Fortresses in massed formation. The damage, which was serious but not irreparable – except in the area round the port – was at first (here as in the rest of Italy) tackled by the relevant authorities for historic preservation and conservation. It is to the local authorities in Palermo that we owe the reconstruction of the main public monuments and their refurbishment, from the Martorana to San Giuseppe dei Teatini and San Francesco d’Assisi, from the three surviving oratories decorated by Serpotta – San Lorenzo, Santa Zita, the Rosario di San Domenico – to the former National Museum in the Oratory of San Filippo Neri in the Olivella quarter. This first wave of restoration, which was generally carried out by competent experts, trailed off towards the middle of the 1970s. The most ambitious reconstruction project, the establishment of the National Gallery of Sicily in the Palazzo Abatellis, was entrusted to the architect Carlo Scarpa.

From the beginning of the Fifties Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa lived in Via Butera, not far from Via Alloro and the Palazzo Abatellis. This was then one of the most ghostly districts in the devastated historic centre. Giuseppe Tomasi would only see a glimmer of the new post-war city (the expansion towards the Ranchibile area and later the whole Piana dei Colli was just beginning at that time), even if he did realize that Palermo would be different from the drowsy city of the first fifty years of the century, from the golden sunset of the Florio family to the wartime ravages of 1943.

In 1954 Giuseppe Tomasi also had a chance to be directly in contact with the new generation. This relationship between a Sicilian who had been acquainted with Europe, both through books and in his travels, and a young audience (the collective moniker he used during his “Lectures”, though the term was hardly appropriate: it was just one student, Francesco Orlando, representing an entire generation) was a testimony to an age of transition. The thousands of pages he wrote furiously between 1954 and 1957, his two series of lectures on literature, his novel and tales in fact turn out to be driven by a civic passion to bear witness, and contain a didactic message, more or less implied, for the coming generations – as if the author was convinced that his *Welt von Gestern*, his world of yesterday, deserved to be handed down and become an object of reflection for young people.

Giuseppe Tomasi had the masterful qualities of the true educator: the ability to play cat and mouse with a pupil, an affectionate tolerance for a student’s shortcomings and a touch of irony – more rarely sarcasm – with which to disguise the bitterness of reprimand. But encounters between generations, as we know from Freud, are troubled by a tendency towards father substitution, and even this encounter

turned out to be difficult, with death snatching away the writer at the very moment when his one pupil was feeling an overwhelming need to get free – a temporary setback, however, since it was Francesco Orlando who, in his *Ricordo di Lampedusa* [*Memory of Lampedusa*], provided the first and unsurpassed description of Giuseppe Tomasi as a thinker and as a teacher.

By that time, in 1963, *The Leopard* had already become part of the political debate in Italy. From its publication, the novel – with its remarks on the shifting loyalties and inertia of the South which are still part of our idiom today, and with all the stylistic exuberance and passion allowed in fiction – had revealed the necessity of addressing Italy’s “southern question” and reinterpreting its sociology from a point of view opposed to the official one of the Risorgimento. And on the strength of this novel the new generation – whose patriotism was weakened by the shock of military defeat and the collapse of a regime which had not been disliked and which, for good or for bad, proposed itself as the natural continuation of the Risorgimento – tried to get rid of their fathers and their legacy. So due to a strange twist of fate, an old and isolated aristocrat – isolated even in his own city – found himself at the centre of a debate on the unification of his country and on the lessons that might be learnt a century later. Apart from its importance as a novel, *The Leopard* from its first appearance became the new text to read when trying to understand the southern question.

The book’s journey to success was accompanied, from the beginning of 1959 (a few months after its posthumous publication), by some angry reactions: from those based on moral grounds by the ageing professor of Philosophy in Palermo, Santino Caramella, who saw in the novel an amorality worthy of the Marquis de Sade, to those based

on historical and ideological grounds by the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia, who resented (and rightly so) the lack of any consideration for popular movements such as the Fasci Siciliani (Sicilian Workers Leagues) which run right through the process of unification of the new state, summarily sketched by Lampedusa as the rise to power of unprincipled mafia entrepreneurship. The novel raised some important questions – which are still unresolved – for all the Italians involved, and has been a bitter pill to swallow for many of them.

The process of political legitimization of *The Leopard* in a world divided into two blocs soon broke down. The two essays on the novel by Louis Aragon published in *Lettres Françaises* – ‘Un grand fauve se lève sur la littérature: *Le Guépard*’ (‘A Great Beast Appears on the Horizon of Literature: *The Leopard*’, 17th–23rd December 1959) and ‘Le Guépard et la Chartreuse’ (‘The Leopard and the Charterhouse’, 18th–24th February 1960) destroyed the united front of the left-wing intelligentsia against the novel. In 1960, the Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti supported the publication of the Stendhalian essay in *Rinascita*, the literary magazine of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), despite the fact that Mario Alicata, then the cultural head of the Party, had at first joined the ranks of the hostile commentators. The ideological debate became subdued, and the historical controversy raised by Sciascia was also put to rest. The politicians, who are the most pragmatic of people, sensed immediately that any confrontation with popular opinion would be unwise, and from then on they tended to make the work their own and assimilate it with a view to create a unified version of the truth in which any deviation could be accommodated.

In the eyes of society at large nothing seems more dangerous than argument, and so Lampedusa’s argumentative message had to