

Childhood Memories and Other Stories

GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA

Foreword by Ian Thomson

from the author of *The Leopard*



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Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

Translated by Stephen Parkin

Foreword by Ian Thomson

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Foreword

Published posthumously in 1958, *The Leopard* is a classic of Italian literature embroidered with reflections on dynastic power and Sicily's age-old burden of injustice and death. The novel chronicles the demise of the Sicilian aristocracy on the eve of the unification of Italy in 1860, and the emergence of a bourgeois class that would evolve into the Mafia.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, a lifelong smoker, died of lung cancer a year before his novel appeared in Italy in 1958. So he was spared knowledge of the controversy it would provoke. The paradox expressed at the heart of *The Leopard* – that “everything must change, so that nothing has to change” – was interpreted by left-leaning critics as a cynical defence of Sicilian conservatism and Sicilian fatalism. The novel was reckoned crushingly old-fashioned – a “success for the Right”, Alberto Moravia complained – as well as ideologically unsound.

Italian publishers rejected the manuscript until it found a home with Feltrinelli Editore in Milan (ironically a *gauchiste* company). Lampedusa was in some ways a deep-dyed conservative and not at first averse to Italian Fascism. “Even if a revolution breaks out,” he wrote from Paris in 1925, “no one will touch a hair on my head or steal one penny from

me because by my side I have... Mussolini!" The youthful Lampedusa saw in the cult of *ducismo* a robust alternative to parliamentary liberalism; indeed, the Duce's attempts to uproot the Mafia were applauded by many Sicilians.

Later, however, Lampedusa became wholly indifferent to Fascism. Political enthusiasm of any sort was tiresome to him; he scorned liberals and monarchists alike. Born a prince, he lived as a prince, and put something of his own personality into *The Leopard's* fictional Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina. Lost in a heat-ridden backwater of western Sicily, Don Fabrizio is the Leopard of the title, a sceptically inclined man drawn to astronomy and the lucid pleasures of abstract thought. Life in the Salina palace moves round him at a seignorial snail's pace; the extinction of his name and lineage is imminent.

The Leopard is, among other things, a meditation on mortality. "While there's death there's hope," says Don Fabrizio axiomatically. His personal tax collector Don Calogero Sedara, a money-grubbing arriviste with an eye on the Salina estates, is the personification of the new and dangerous middle class which sprung up in Sicily following the collapse of the Bourbon regime. The old privilege based on rank and lineage was about to give way to a new privilege based on capital and entrepreneurial cunning. The unstated theme of *The Leopard* is not just the death of an aristocracy or a redundant way of life, but more broadly of Sicily – and of Europe.

By the time Lampedusa died in Sicily at the age of sixty, the Mafia had pervaded entire patrician quarters of the capital of Palermo where he was born. Quick money was to be made out of the city's reconstruction in the wake of the Allied bombings of 1943. Wretchedly, the family's Palermitan residence of the Palazzo Lampedusa was destroyed and pillaged following an American aerial raid. For the rest of his life Lampedusa remained sunk in debt and helpless to resist the demise of his own class. Today the Lampedusa family line is extinct.

The novelist Giorgio Bassani, in his preface to the 1958 first edition of *The Leopard*, spoke of the existence of other writings by Lampedusa. Among these were letters, short stories and notes made by Lampedusa on French and English literature. It was Bassani's hope that one day these writings would be published. Unfortunately Lampedusa's widow, Alexandra Wolff Stomersee ("Licy"), had embargoed publication (as well as consultation) of most of the material. Described by some as a difficult, at times prickly woman, she had her own history of loss and sorrow to contend with. In 1939 Licy had been forced to flee her native Latvia ahead of Stalin's advancing Red Army, while the family estate of Stomersee near Riga was turned by the Soviets into an agricultural school.

Only on Licy's death in 1982 were efforts made to publish Lampedusa's archive in its entirety. The fictional works and fragment of autobiography included in this book

had originally appeared in Italy in different form in 1961. Lampedusa's widow had rearranged some of the material and subjected it to deletions. The cuts were ostensibly made in the interest of tidiness and discretion, but the removal (for example) of amusing anecdotes was less easy to justify. Now at last the four works are properly restored in English, and in a fine new translation by Stephen Parkin.

'Childhood Memories', written in Palermo over the summer of 1955, provides a fascinating glimpse into the background of *The Leopard*. A Proustian elegy to a lost past, it commemorates two dynastic homes whose loss – the one bombed, the other sold – pained Lampedusa tremendously. In conjuring his childhood memories of the Palazzo Lampedusa (the model for the Villa Salina in *The Leopard*) the writer-prince performed an astonishing feat of recollection. Lampedusa only had his memory to go on – there were no other resources for him – yet the writing has an incisive photographic clarity. The ballrooms, balconies and his mother's boudoir with its walls of coloured silk are all exquisitely rendered.

Lampedusa's mother, Beatrice Filangeri di Cutò, seems to have been a fretful woman forever worrying about her son's whereabouts. His marriage to the Baltic-born baroness was a source of anxiety to her – and perhaps also to Lampedusa. "It would torture me to have to be contested between her and you," he wrote to his mother from Latvia on 29th August 1932, adding: "You are the two people I hold most

dear in the world.” In his mother’s dressing room, amid the hairbrushes and violet-scented perfumes, Lampedusa as a boy had been pampered like a pasha. His relationship with his mother went beyond mere filial devotion.

‘The Siren’, an exquisite story of which Lampedusa was justly proud, reads like a caprice from the *Arabian Nights* overlaid with Hellenic myth. In Fascist-era Turin, a Sicilian professor confides to a young journalist his love for a silver-tailed siren. The siren is a marine temptress from the pages of Homer. “Sweets should taste of sugar and nothing else,” the professor says, wary perhaps of his story’s fragile, fine-spun strangeness. Written in 1956–57, ‘The Siren’ is the most elaborately wrought of Lampedusa’s fictions. The writing is as languorous and melancholy-tinged as in *The Leopard*, particularly in the descriptions of Sicily’s wine-dark sea and its Hellenic temple-city landscapes, yet it has a fabulous undertow not found elsewhere in Lampedusa.

‘Joy and the Law’, completed over Christmas 1956, could not be a more different fiction. It tells of a poor clerk and his family in Palermo, and their windfall gift of a giant panettone and what to do with it. Neo-realist in tone, the story bears the influence of the newsreel school of documentary *verismo* as exemplified by the cinema of De Sica and Rossellini.

Lampedusa’s knowledge of European film and literature was wide-ranging. Before visiting England in 1926, he had read all of Shakespeare, and was surely one of the first

Italians to fathom the obscurities of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. English literature was by no means popular in Sicily (or, for that matter, in mainland Italy) prior to the Second World War. Yet it afforded Lampedusa an escape from the sorry reality, as he saw it, of the times. Among his English idols was the seventeenth-century scholar-sportsman Izaak Walton, whose humour and gift for understatement clearly appealed. ("Hitler and Mussolini," Lampedusa judged, "had obviously not read Izaak Walton.") In the republican Sicily of the postwar years, Lampedusa must have cut a strange and lonely figure. During the dead hours of the Palermo afternoons he liked to discuss literature in a café with a circle of adoring cousins. With his briefcase full of poetry and marzipan pastries, this portly, sallow man was an aristocratic survivor.

Even today, northern Italians speak of Sicily as an African darkness – the place where Europe finally ends. The Arabs invaded Sicily in the ninth century, leaving behind mosques and pink-domed cupolas, and many Sicilians have a tincture of ancestral Arab blood. The Saracen influence remains strongest in the Mafia-infiltrated west of the island, where the Lampedusa properties were situated and where the sirocco blows in hot from Africa. Sicily, Lampedusa believed, was an island wounded both by its climate and history. 'The Blind Kittens', the opening chapter of an unfinished novel he begun in March 1957, was to chart the rise in turn-of-the-century Sicily of the Ibba family, prototype

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Mafiosi who covet aristocratic estates and extort loans. Sicily emerges here as a comfortless landscape sweltering under a near-African heat. The Sicilian tendency to violence (in Lampedusa's estimation) was aggravated by the island's grudging sun and arid geography. Others have divined an antique beauty in this part of the Mezzogiorno. In 1963 Luchino Visconti, impressed by *The Leopard's* exploration of love and political ambition, turned the novel into a sumptuous film starring Burt Lancaster as the beleaguered Sicilian Prince. Lampedusa would have been astonished to find himself mirrored in Lancaster; but also, perhaps, vindicated. His work, a marvel of poise and the high classical style, is with us still.

— Ian Thomson

Note on the Texts

The four pieces included in this volume were first published in Italy by Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore in 1961, edited and with a preface by Giorgio Bassani. The 1961 Italian edition was based on typescripts of texts dictated by Lampedusa's widow, Alexandra Wolff Stomersee. The only extant manuscripts are those of 'Childhood Memories' (including the recently rediscovered piece 'Torretta') and a fragment of a first draft of 'The Siren'. There is also a tape recording of Lampedusa reading 'The Siren', covering around eighty per cent of the story.

The four pieces were written in the following order: 'Childhood Memories' (summer 1955), 'Joy and the Law' (autumn 1956), 'The Siren' (winter 1956–57), 'The Blind Kittens' (winter-spring 1957).

The manuscript of 'Childhood Memories', consisting of a mid-sized notebook of squared paper, is in the possession of Giuseppe Biancheri, son of Olga Wolff Stomersee, Licy's sister. The text is often broken up by blank sheets of paper and occasionally crossed out. Many of these deletions are by the author himself, but some are certainly by Licy. The struck-out text is indicated in our edition in bold font, whenever it is legible.

The first complete and unexpurgated edition of the four pieces was published in the Meridiani edition of the works of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (Milano: Mondadori, 2004), edited by Nicoletta Polo, with introductions to the various works by Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi. With only a few emendations (and the reinstatement of a struck-out sentence that had been overlooked) based on further consultation of the ‘Childhood Memories’ manuscript, these are the texts on which our translation is based. Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi’s *Premessa* to the four pieces in the Meridiani edition (grouped under the collective title *I racconti*) provides a fascinating insight into the emotional and biographical background to these texts, as well as further details about their composition and their significance in relation to Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*.

The notes to the present volume – the first complete and unexpurgated English edition of Lampedusa’s uncollected fiction – have been prepared by Alessandro Gallenzi with the invaluable help of Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi.

Childhood Memories

INTRODUCTION

I have very recently (mid-June 1955) reread *Henri Brulard** for the first time since the long-gone year of 1922. At that time I was still obsessed by the ideas of “clear beauty” and “subjective interest”, and I remember that I didn’t like the book.

Now I am ready to agree with those who think it almost ranks as Stendhal’s masterpiece. There is an immediacy of feeling, an evident sincerity and a wonderful determination to dig through the accumulated strata of memory in order to reach what lies beneath. And what lucidity of style! How many impressions stream by, quite ordinary and yet so precious!

I should like to try and achieve the same effect. I actually feel duty-bound to do so. When the decline of life has set in, it becomes imperative to gather up as much as we can all the sensations that have passed through this body of ours. If it’s true that only a very few (Rousseau, Stendhal, Proust) can make a masterpiece of it, most people should at least be able to preserve, in this way, what would otherwise, without this slight effort, be lost for ever. Keeping a diary or writing one’s memoirs when one has reached a certain age should be an obligation imposed on us by the State: the material which would then accumulate over three or

four generations would have inestimable value: many of the psychological and historical problems afflicting humanity would be solved. All written memoirs, even those of seemingly insignificant people, are of outstanding social value and rich in colour.

The extraordinary fascination we feel for Defoe's novels lies in the fact that they are almost like diaries – quite brilliantly so, even though invented. Think, then, what genuine diaries would be like! Just imagine the real diary of some courtesan in Regency Paris, or the memoirs of Byron's valet during his period in Venice!

So I will try to follow as closely as possible the method adopted in *Henri Brulard* – even to the point of including “maps” of the main locations.

But where I part company with Stendhal is over the “quality” of the memories which are evoked. He looks back on his childhood as a time when he was subjected to tyranny and abuse. I see my childhood as a lost paradise. Everyone was kind to me, I was treated like a king. Even those who later became hostile to me were, when I was a child, *aux petits soins*.*

Therefore, my readers – though there won't be any – can expect to be taken on a stroll through a now lost Garden of Eden. If they get bored, I don't really care.

I plan to divide these ‘Memoirs’ into three parts. The first part, ‘Childhood’, will describe the period of my life up to my going to secondary school. The second, ‘Youth’, will take

us up to 1925. The third, 'Maturity', will continue to the present time, which I regard as the beginning of my old age.

Memories of childhood – for everyone I think – consist in a series of visual impressions, many of them still sharply focused, but lacking any kind of temporal sequence. To write a chronology of one's childhood is, in my view, impossible: even with the best will in the world, the result would only be a false representation based on terrible anachronisms. I will therefore adopt the method of grouping memories by topic, and in this way give an overall idea of them through spatial ordering rather than temporal succession. I will speak of the places where my childhood was spent, of the people who surrounded me and of my feelings (whose development I will not necessarily seek to trace).

I undertake to say nothing which is untrue. But I do not wish to write down *everything*: I reserve the right to lie by omission.

Unless I change my mind, of course.

MEMORIES

One of the earliest memories I can date with some precision, as it involves a verifiable historical event, goes back to 30th July 1900, when I was just a few days older than three and a half.*