

**GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA**  
(DEC. 23, 1896 - JULY 23, 1957)

*One of the most important Italian writers of the 20th century, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's fame rests on one book published posthumously in 1958, The Leopard (Il Gattopardo). This novel became the top-selling novel in Italian history and is considered one of the most important novels in modern Italian literature. (In 2012, The Observer named it one of "The 10 best historical novels" of all time). I decided to write January's essay for Correnti della Storia about this author and his important work for several reasons. First, the novel depicts the human struggle between mortality and decay on the one hand and abstraction and eternity on the other. These themes are universal in the human condition, and Lampedusa brilliantly sets them in 19th-century Sicily primarily during the Risorgimento period of struggle and conflict for Italian unification. Second, this past December 23, 2015 would have been his 119th birthday.*



Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was born on December 23, 1896 in Palermo to Giulio Maria Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa and Duke of Palma di Montechiaro, and Beatrice Mastrogiovanni Tasca Filangieri di Cutò. He became an only child after the death (from diphtheria) of his sister. He was very close to his mother, who was by most accounts mildly eccentric in that she was more cosmopolitan, more cultivated and more open-minded than most Sicilian aristocrats, and Lampedusa seems to have inherited her sophistication. She had a strong personality and influenced him a great deal, especially because his father was rather cold and detached. As a child, he studied in their grand house in Palermo with a tutor. His education was a classical one in which he learned to read Latin and Greek classics in their original languages. He learned to speak German; his mother taught him French and his grandmother read the Italian novels of Emilio Salgari to him. Most exceptional for an Italian of his era, he studied English and learned

to speak it fluently and to appreciate English literature. (In the little theater of the house in Santa Margherita di Belice, where he spent long vacations during his youth, he first saw a performance of Hamlet, performed by a company of travelling players. This endeared him to the classics of English literature which he treasured all his life).

Beginning in 1911, Lampedusa attended the Liceo Classico in Rome and later in Palermo. He moved to Rome in 1915 where he attended law school briefly until World War I broke out, at which time he was drafted into the army. He was commissioned an officer and took part in some of the bloodiest battles against the Austrians. He fought in the battle of Caporetto, in which the Italians were defeated, and subsequently was taken prisoner by the Austro-Hungarians. He was held in a POW camp in Hungary, but succeeded in escaping and returning to Italy. He continued serving until he was discharged in 1920 with the rank of lieutenant. Though he did not desert from the army, Lampedusa clearly had serious misgivings about the war he was fighting, and saw it as an exercise in futility. Some of his statements and letters imply pacifist views.



Lampedusa returned to Sicily, alternately resting there and travelling with his mother throughout northern Italy and Europe, and continuing his study of foreign literature. It was during this time that he first drafted in his mind the ideas for his future novel, *The Leopard*. (Originally his plan was to have the entire novel occur over the course of one day, similar to the famous modernist novel that he admired, *Ulysses*, by James Joyce). While visiting his uncle, a diplomat in London, during one of his trips, he met the Latvian aristocrat Alexandra Wolff Stomersee “Licy” (1894–1982), then a student of psychoanalysis. The couple married in 1932 in the Orthodox church of the Annunciation of Our Most Holy Lady in Riga, but they did not always live together. They first lived with Lampedusa’s mother in Palermo, but soon the incompatibility between the two women drove Licy back to Riga. Lampedusa’s mother, Beatrice, was a domineering person over him, and Licy was equally formidable. Beatrice made her son choose between the two of them. Lampedusa weakly opted for his mother and settled into a lengthy marriage-by-correspondence (in French) with Licy. (Until Latvia’s re-annexation to the Soviet Union during World War II, Lampedusa spent summers there with his wife).

As much as Lampedusa cherished his sojourns in the Baltic region, his deepest passion was reserved for England, where he and Licy had met. He adored England’s country estates—the woods, the pheasants, the deer—but also London. England made a distinct impression on Lampedusa, and his time there afforded him a rare opportunity to cultivate his love of English culture and literature. It also gave him a convenient respite from the increasingly stifling environment of Fascist Italy. His first-hand, aristocratic, intellectual knowledge of Britain was beyond the experience of most Italians, and he was resented (certainly envied, if not feared) by many of those who were now seizing the reins of power in Italy. However, the Fascist regime’s fanatical suspicion of Italy’s few English-speaking intellectuals (and its prohibition of the study of English) did not seem to have complicated Lampedusa’s life back in Palermo, probably because he was gone much of the time and also because he was not a professor or publisher. He always kept a low profile and rarely made his views known. Politic he may have been, but Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was no politician.

With the death of his father in 1934, Lampedusa inherited the familial titles. He was now Prince of Lampedusa, an island the family had not actually possessed for generations. He did, however, own other estates elsewhere in Sicily. In 1940 he was drafted, but the Italian Army discharged him in 1942, supposedly (and officially) because he owned and administered agricultural estates that were deemed useful to the nation. However, he could very well have been discharged because of his “suspect” foreign connections (especially with Britain).



Unlike the writer, poet, playwright, and Nobel winner in Literature (1934), Luigi Pirandello, Lampedusa viewed Italian Fascism cynically, though he was rarely vocal about this opinion or any other. He passed the war years near the coastal town of Capo d’Orlando with his mother, his cousins, and reunited with his Licy. The family survived the war, but the family’s palace in Palermo was severely damaged; it was virtually destroyed by Allied bombs in the spring of 1943. With the death of Lampedusa’s mother in 1946, Lampedusa and Licy purchased an old family property in Palermo. After a war that changed the

political face of Italy, Lampedusa was now able to openly study English literary criticism, and he frequently met with a group of young intellectuals to discuss the subject (one of these was Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, a cousin and later his heir, with whom he became a very close friend). Several of his critical essays were also

published at this time. In addition, he worked for several years as a director of the Red Cross in Sicily. The Allied Military Government respected him as an anti-Fascist and a competent administrator.



*Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, Lucio Piccolo,  
and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa*

In the early 1950s, Lampedusa was often the guest of his cousin, the poet Lucio Piccolo, with whom he travelled in 1954 to San Pellegrino Terme to attend a literary awards ceremony. There he met, among others, Eugenio Montale and Maria Bellonci. It is said that it was upon returning from this trip that he started to write *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), which was finished in 1956. But, for decades before this he had been thinking about the various themes and issues that are raised in the novel. When it was ready to write on paper, he spent a good part of the decade following the war working on it.

The title of the novel actually refers to a serval, a much smaller animal than the leopard we are familiar with. Although it is uncommon north of the Sahara Desert, one of its few north African ranges is quite close to Lampedusa. So, Lampedusa was familiar with the animal, both its looks and its habits.

Most of the novel is set during the time of the *Risorgimento*, specifically during the period when Giuseppe Garibaldi, the hero of Italian unification, swept through Sicily with his forces, known as *The Thousand*. The plot continues through the fifty years following Garibaldi's victory in Sicily and focuses on the aristocratic Salina family, which is headed by the stoic Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina, a 19th-century Sicilian nobleman, and a consummate womanizer. He foresees the upcoming downfall of his family and the nobility in Italy as a whole, but finds himself unable to change the course of history.

Don Fabrizio is caught in the midst of civil war and revolution. As a result of political upheaval, his position in the island's class system is eroded by newly moneyed peasants and "shabby minor gentry." The old Bourbon aristocracy is being replaced by the new Kingdom of Italy, which enables the grasping, unscrupulous liberal bourgeoisie to come to social and political power beginning in the 1860s. (The title of the novel might be a reference to a wildcat that was hunted to extinction in Italy in the mid-19th century—just as Don Fabrizio was dryly contemplating the indolence and decline of the Sicilian aristocracy. As he says: "We were the Leopards, the Lions, those who'll take our place will be little jackals, hyenas; and the whole lot of us, Leopards, jackals, and sheep, we'll all go on thinking ourselves the salt of the earth").



*Serval*

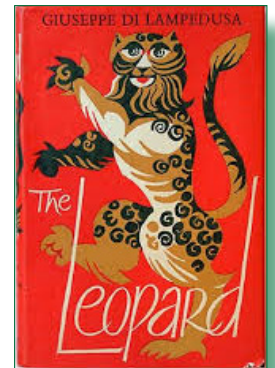
As the novel progresses, Don Fabrizio is forced to choose between upholding the continuity of upper class values, and breaking tradition to secure continuity of his (nephew's) family's influence. (His nephew, Tancredi Falconeri, by contrast, participates opportunistically in the revolution by joining Garibaldi's forces and marries into the new class, thus turning against the old values of his ancestors). As Falconeri says in one famous passage that explains his reasons for so doing: "Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

As I said in the first paragraph of this article, a central theme of the story is the struggle between mortality and decay (death, fading of beauty, fading of memories, change of political system, false relics, etc.), and abstraction and eternity (the prince's love for the stars and calculations, continuity and resilience to change of the Sicilian people). In a letter to a friend, Lampedusa notes: "Be careful: the dog Bencidò, is a very important character and is almost the key to the novel." This heraldic emblem is the key to destruction, in the sense that ruin even comes to the dog.

During his last years, there was a whirlwind of activity around trying to get the novel published. In May 1956, Lampedusa sent the novel to the publishers Mondadori. In December 1956, Mondadori sent him a letter in which the publishers turned it down. During the winter of 1956-7, Lampedusa rewrote parts and finally completed a second version which he submitted to the publisher Einaudi in February of 1957. On July 2, 1957 Einaudi rejected the novel.

Tragically, in the meantime, in April, 1957, Lampedusa was diagnosed with lung cancer. He died in Rome on July 23, 1957, three weeks after Einaudi had rejected the novel. Following a requiem Mass in the Basilica del Sacro Cuore di Gesù in Rome, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was buried in the Capuchin cemetery of his native Palermo.

*The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)* was finally published the year after his death (1958). Elena Croce had sent it to the writer Giorgio Bassani, who brought it to the attention of the Feltrinelli publishing house. It was quickly recognized as a great work of Italian literature. In 1959 Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was posthumously awarded the prestigious Strega Prize for the novel.



In 2015, with the participation of Lampedusa's heir and nephew, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, the Arion Press right here in San Francisco published a limited edition fine art printing of the novel. Printed traditionally by letterpress, the edition is accompanied by 32 color photographs by Giovan Battista Poletto, taken on the set of the 1963 famous film adaptation which was directed by Lucchino Visconti.

#### CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

When it was first published in Italy, *The Leopard* was condemned by Communists as reactionary and conservative because of its decidedly non-Marxist depiction of the Sicilian working class. Other leftist elements attacked it for its criticism of Italian unification and criticism of the destruction of the nobility. The Catholic Church condemned it for its anti-clericalism.

These were actually parochial and ephemeral criticisms that were paid little attention outside Lampedusa's native country, and for the most part they were thoroughly disregarded by 1970. The Prince of Lampedusa accurately described the decline of the "old" Sicilian aristocracy and its evolution into a vulgar, superficial parody of its former self, alongside the emergence of equally vulgar, materialistic "new classes." Despite a seemingly conservative point of view, it would be wrong to identify Lampedusa as a snob. More than anything else, he was a passionate observer, and *The Leopard*, more than any other Sicilian novel ever published, has come to define Sicily. In death, the eccentric anti-hero, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, has become a sage.

Lampedusa's integrity and creativity were beyond doubt; he himself fell into that nebulous realm defined by the esoteric convergence of philosophy, politics, great literature and intellectual courage. Whether Lampedusa was a true pacifist is debated; perhaps even he did not know for certain. His psyche was, at the very least, complex, even to his psychoanalyst wife. Nevertheless, his defiance of Italian social conformity was very real, if often subtle. In the 1930s, few Italians were prepared to risk Lampedusa's "unconventional" choices: questioning the underpinnings of Italy's *Risorgimento* movement, choosing (perhaps creating) a philosophical path independent of either Fascism or Communism, becoming an Anglophile when it was unfashionable (even dangerous) to do so, marrying a brilliant woman in a "foreign" Church rather than the "Italian" Roman Catholic one. Worldly, ecumenical, cosmopolitan, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was an aristocratic twentieth-century personification of Sicily's medieval multicultural heritage.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from the following sources: an article by Michele Parisi in the online edition of Best of Sicily Magazine (<http://www.bestofsicily.com/mag/art63.htm>); the online edition of Encyclopedia Britannica; a review by Julian Barnes of David Gilmour's 1988 biography of Tomasi (*The Last Leopard*) and a book of Tomasi's letters, published in 2010 (*Letters from London and Europe 1925-30*), in the online edition of *The Guardian*, Nov. 12, 2010; Gautam Pingle's letter to online edition of *Financial Times*, October 23, 2010; and Wikipedia. Quotes from the novel are from Archibald Colquhoun's English translation, which is available in several English editions.*

#### **THE LEOPARD PUBLISHED BY ARION PRESS**

*Arion Press, 1802 Hays Street, The Presidio, San Francisco, California 94129*

The Arion Press in San Francisco is one of the nation's leading publishers of fine-press books. Founded in 1974, it has published, at the rate of only 2-3 per year, just over a hundred limited-edition books, most printed by letterpress, often illustrated with original prints by notable artists. In January 2015, it published *The Leopard*. It is on view in their gallery through March 2016.

CATALOG ENTRY: *The Leopard*, the novel by Giuseppe di Lampedusa, translated from the Italian by Archibald Colquhoun, with a foreword and appendix by Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, translated from the Italian by Guido Waldman, and with 32 photographs in color by Giovan Battista Poletto taken on the set of the 1963 motion picture directed by Lucchino Visconti, published January 2015.

The book is large octavo, 288 pages. The paper is Mohawk Superfine. The text type is Monotype Neo Didot, with handset Narciss for display. The type was printed by letterpress in two colors. The color photographs were printed by offset lithography. The binding shows a coat of arms from Lampedusa's ancestors with a leaping leopard. The edition is limited to 300 copies for sale. The price is \$750. See more at: <http://www.arionpress.com/catalog/102.htm>



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