**Changing things so everything stays the same**

**Condemned as backward when it came out 40 years ago, “The Leopard” in fact foresaw rampant corruption in Italy and the rise of the Mafia**

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SICILY, an Italian journalist and author, Luigi Barzini, once said, “is like one of those concave shaving mirrors in which we in the rest of Italy see our image pitilessly enlarged, both faults and virtues.” Of no Sicilian book is this more accurate than Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s slim epic, “The Leopard”, which was published in November 1958 (translated by Archibald Colquhoun, Harvill £5.99; Pantheon $12).

On the surface a portrait of an aristocratic Sicilian family set against the historical pivot of Garibaldi’s unification conquest in 1860, “The Leopard” is also the distillation of an age. Domestic details fill the foreground while great events that mark the passing of feudalism and the advent of the republic take place off-page. Yet Lampedusa’s deftness with words is so fine that, although nothing much appears to happen in the book—a move to the country, a dinner, a rabbit shoot, a ball, some conversations—to many readers “The Leopard” is the greatest Italian novel this century, perhaps the greatest ever, and uniquely relevant to modern Italy.

It was, however, loudly denounced when it was published. Looking back, this was to its credit. Critics fell broadly into four categories. Sicilians hated Lampedusa’s portrait of the islanders as violent and irrational while stricter Italian Marxists saw his aristocrat heroes as evidence that the novel was right-wing and its author a man with no sense of progress. (That did not stop Luchino Visconti, a Communist supporter, from making “The Leopard” into one of his greatest films.)

Much of the literary Left condemned the novel as worthless because it was neither progressive nor avant-garde. Traditional Catholics interpreted the pessimism of “The Leopard” as a sign of Lampedusa’s apostasy and, in particular, Don Fabrizio’s crushing attitude towards his prelate, Father Pirrone, as disrespectful. A cardinal of Palermo described “The Leopard” as one of the three factors which contributed to the dishonour of Sicily, the others being the Mafia and Danilo Dolci, a prominent social reformer.

Forty years on, these voices—so loud and so self-satisfied at the time—have gradually died down, while that of “The Leopard” grows more powerful every year. Lampedusa was in effect only a gifted amateur author, but an astonishing range of professional writers, from Italo Calvino to Isabel Allende, owe a debt to the writings of this shy and portly Sicilian prince. In “The House of the Spirits”, just as in “The Leopard”, there is a young couple roaming through a house with many rooms, and a big black dog whose name begins with a ‘B’ who bounds in in the first chapter only to end up as a rug some time later.

The Lampedusas, as David Gilmour explains in his biography, “The Last Leopard” (Harvill £8.99; Pantheon; $22), were never great workers. Pale, fat and bad at outdoor games, the author-prince reluctantly enrolled, when he was 21, as a law student with a view to becoming a diplomat. Military service in the first world war interrupted his studies and he never resumed them. Nor did he ever take a real job. Instead he lived quietly with his parents until his marriage at the age of 35, and intermittently thereafter whenever his wife, Italy’s first practising psychoanalyst, was travelling. He devoted most of his day to reading and never moved anywhere without a book; volumes of Proust secreted among the courgettes in his shopping bag; a copy of Shakespeare, his widow said, “to console himself when he saw something disagreeable”; and “The Pickwick Papers” by his bed to comfort him during sleepless nights.

Fluent in several languages, Lampedusa nonetheless had a particularly soft spot for English writing. “The Leopard” is saturated with the influence of Keats and Shakespeare. But Lampedusa was equally fond of minor writers, and once calculated it to be a statistical certainty that he was the only Italian familiar with the works of Martin Tupper, a 19th-century novelist and versifier.

In his mid-50s, Lampedusa began to regret that he had read almost everything and he envied younger friends who still had so much left to discover. His wife suggested he give an informal course on English literature to his nephew Gioacchino Lanza, whom the childless Lampedusa and his wife later adopted as their son, and to a friend, Francesco Orlando. The 1,000 pages of notes he wrote on the English greats from Bede to Graham Greene in preparation for the year-long course are the most important source for understanding the literary inspiration of “The Leopard”.

For all these lofty antecedents, two particular events served to free Lampedusa’s imagination and allow him to begin writing his masterpiece. The first was the bombing, in April 1943, of Palazzo Lampedusa, the family home in Palermo. The prince was so shocked by the destruction he witnessed that day, that he walked 13 km to the home of a family friend, arriving dusty and unrecognisable and refused to speak for several days. The second was watching his cousin, Lucio Piccolo, being awarded a prize for his collection of poems, “Canti barocchi”, at a literary conference to which the two men had been invited by the future Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale in 1954. Some time later, Lampedusa wrote to a friend in Brazil that if his cousin Lucio could win a prize, “. . . certainly I was no more foolish, I sat down and wrote a novel.”

For nearly two years, Lampedusa would go each day to his favourite café, the Mazzara, and write using a Biro and a cheap notebook. Sensuous recall, for Lampedusa as for Proust, was a route to understanding, not consolation. The more he hunted for a particular word to evoke a smell, a sauce, a whiff of incense, the more sensuously he recalled a vanished past until the novel transformed itself into a Baroque evocation of life and death.

Death is in the first line of the book, of course, and Lampedusa was deeply aware of his own mortality. He died before the book was published. It was his only novel. Childless, impoverished and unrecognised, he wasn’t to know it would win the prestigious Strega prize and that 40 years later it would still be in print and selling more than 100,000 copies a year.

Nor would he know quite how prescient he was about Italy. “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”—the most famous line in the book—is as true of modern Italy, and the *Mani Pulite* investigations into political corruption, as it was nearly a century and a half ago.

It was in the Mafia “maxi-trials” of the late 1980s—with their detailed evidence of crooked deals, sumptuous meals and votes falsely won—that one saw the final efflorescence of one of Lampedusa’s best-known characters, Don Calogero Sedara, the despised man-on-the-make and father of the glorious Angelica. “This little head of cunning, ill-cut clothes, money and ignorance,” is how Lampedusa described him, “all munching and grease stains.”

Leonardo Siascia, another Sicilian writer, claimed for many years that he was the first novelist to portray a *Mafioso* in fiction. He was wrong. Lampedusa’s Don Calogero preceded any Sciascia creation by nearly a decade, and still remains one of the truest portrayals of the genre, a “*Mafioso avant la lettre*,” as Norman Lewis once wrote.

“We were the Leopards and Lions,” Lampedusa’s *alter ego* Don Fabrizio reflects: “those who’ll take our place will be little jackals, hyenas.” In his attempt to scale the social and political ladder, Don Calogero seeks to grab church property and the common land using fair means and foul, mostly foul. As a type, he is instantly recognisable. But it took an Australian writer to see the intimate connection between “The Leopard” of 1958 and the maxi-trials that started more than three decades later. Peter Robb attended each day of the hearings in preparation for his “Midnight in Sicily” (Harvill £12; Faber $25.95), one of the finest books on the Italian south. And his analysis is as riveting in its commentary on modern Sicilian life as “The Leopard” was to an earlier generation.

Two spectacular banquets mark Don Calogero’s rise; the dinner where he introduces his daughter to the Salina family, and the wedding feast celebrating her marriage to Don Fabrizio’s nephew. To close the circle, Mr Robb recalls, it was a grand meal in Palermo that cemented the alliance between the Mafia (represented by an American mob boss, John Gambino), the Italian Christian Democrat prime minister Giulio Andreotti and Michele Sindona, a banker. The venue for the dinner was a restaurant called The Charleston, previously the Caffe Mazzara where Lampedusa wrote “The Leopard.” The secret deal over which the three men shook hands that day coloured Sicily’s political landscape for decades to come. Lampedusa once said London would never be forgotten because Dickens had immortalised it; many would say the shy and awkward prince did much the same for Sicily.