

Brief biographical and historical background for *The Leopard*

The author, Giuseppe Tomasi, Duke of Palma (1896-1957), became the last Prince of Lampedusa on the death of his father in 1934. He was mostly self-educated and read literature and conversed in five languages. His family, ancient in even Sicilian terms, founded Palma, a dukedom, on the southwest coast in the 17th century. The "Saint-Duke," first of the line, was very religious as were his two children. His daughter founded the convent in Palma, which the author visited in 1955. Although he was born, raised and died in Sicily, di Lampedusa travelled extensively, preferring European society to that of the island.

In the last few years of his life, filled with nostalgia for the lost world of his youth, the author worked on this novel, circulating the episodic chapters (each with month and year) among friends but finding no publisher. In 1958, the year following his death, more chapters, a manuscript and a typescript were found, put together and published. *Il Gattopardo* created much controversy and received much praise. It is often called the first Italian best seller.

The novel is autobiographical in that the characters, events and settings are drawn from the author's family and Italian history. Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina, is modelled on the author's great-grandfather, Don Giulio Maria Fabrizio, mathematician and astronomer (d. 1885.) The Prince also has some of the author's characteristics although the Prince's physique and sexual appetite are not among them.

The south of Italy and Sicily did not participate in the cultural and artistic activity of the north and were considered backward, impoverished and corrupt. The abolishment of feudalism in 1812 took power from the nobility and led eventually to the rise of the middle class. While the novel is critical of Sicily and the author's own aristocratic class, it is also loving and conveys the sensual beauty and harshness of the country.

The Leopard opens in May 1860, with the arrival of the popular hero Garibaldi and his army to liberate Sicily from the Bourbons, and closes 50 years later in 1910. (See the "Historical Note" at the beginning of the book.) For centuries Italy was mainly under the control of France (the Bourbons) or Austria (the Hapsburgs.) In the 19th century, revolutionary ideas from France spread across Europe, inspiring many writings and uprisings. The "liberals," or republicans, were those working to liberate Italy from the domination of foreign powers, unify the peninsula, and establish individual rights. Influential among them were Mazzini and Crispi, the latter Garibaldi's political advisor and later Prime Minister. Revolutionary activity, aimed at creating a republic, continued even after Victor Emmanuel became King

of Italy and a parliament was formed (1861.) For the following 5 or 6 years, pro-Bourbon soldiers carried on guerilla warfare in the country side. The Church denounced the “godless” government and ordered Catholics not to vote. The new government struggled to establish itself and initially imposed austerity measures and crushing taxes on the poor. More insurrections followed.

Amid this political ferment, Prince Fabrizio dies (1888), so he does not have to hear about the riots in Milan (1898), the assassination of the monarch (1900), and a General Strike (1904.) The monarchy in Italy ended when it was declared a republic in 1946, long after many who had worked so hard for it were dead.