

## Sicily's Class Character circa 1900 - Lampedusa vs. Booker Taliaferro Washington

Tom Verso (October 13, 2010)



Lampedusa: "Of our six houses, I loved Casa Lampedusa best...its 1600 square yards was all at my disposal... a real kingdom for a boy...but my mother loved the 100 room Santa Margherita summer house best " Washington: "I saw Sicilian peasant families living in a single room with a no chimney



stone hearth for cooking (when there was food to cook)... one bunk (a heap of straw) upon which the entire family sleeps...the coarseness of such a family existence is beyond description..." - this from a former American slave!

## Preface

Generally, it seems to me, Americans of southern-Italian descent think of their history as beginning at Ellis Island (What kind of a culture is only 100 years old?).

To the extent that they consider their history back to the "old country", their images and thoughts are largely romanticized nostalgia conjured by fragmented oral family histories, media fantasies and the very robust marketing of the northern-Italian tourist industry.

If southern-Italian Americans go to Italy, often they go to the northern Renaissance centers to experience a culture far removed from the reality of their southern-Italian origins.

If they go to the South, they see a new reality far removed from what their ancestors left behind. Today, for example, the town of Campofraco Sicily, on the road from Palermo to Agrigento, is a delightful place not remotely similar to the horrific sulfur mining center described by Booker T. Washington exactly 100 years ago.

The historian seeks knowledge of past societies based on evidence in documents about those social realities. The purpose of this essay is to consider the Sicilian peasant's reality during the great

---



migration circa 1900, based on Lampedusa's autobiographical works *The Leopard* and *The Siren - "Places of my infancy: A Memory"*, and Booker T. Washington's 1910 travelogue *The Man Furthest Down*

Sicilian Wealth - The Have and Have-nots

The Haves





The enormous wealth accumulated by the Sicilian aristocracy up to the early 20th century is well document in fiction (e.g. "The Leopard"), biography (e.g. "A Memory"), art history (e.g. "Palazzi of Sicily", "Sicilian Twilight", "Baroque Architecture of Sicily"), and the many still existing palazzi the aristocrats called 'home'.



For example, Lampedusa writes:

“Of our six houses, I loved Casa Lampedusa best...its 1600 square yards was all at my disposal... a real kingdom for a boy...but my mother loved the 100 room Santa Margherita summer house best.

Lampedusa's famous novel *The Leopard* and his autobiographical essay “A Memory” provide a quintessential description of the Sicilian aristocracy's life style at its height and demise. *The Leopard* is said to be a fictional representation of the events surrounding the life of Lampedusa's grandfather at the time of Garibaldi's 1860 invasion of Sicily. However, his autobiographical essay “A Memory” clearly shows the life style described in the novel perfectly matches the reality of his own incredibly opulent life in the early 1900s.

For example, in the novel there is a detailed description of the arduous late summer journey Don Fabrizio and his family take to their fictional summer home “Donnafugata” and their reception upon arrival. This trip and reception very closely matches Lampedusa's autobiographic description of his family's actual “Santa Margherita” summer sojourn.

In short, both the novel and autobiography are documentary ‘windows’ through which we see the Sicilian aristocracy's profound wealth up to the early 20th century.

Whence the wealth

- if not strong backs and skilled hands

put to the land?

Although Lampedusa provides detailed descriptions of aristocratic life opulence down to the lavatory, there is a conspicuous lack of references to the source of the phenomenal aristocratic wealth.

The source of the wealth is doubly mysterious because in both fiction and biography he provides detailed descriptions of the impoverished Sicilian countryside. In as much as the economic system was essential feudal latifundia (i.e. share cropping), how could such an impoverished countryside support the aristocracy's insatiable consumption?

Again, the summer trip: in his autobiographic essay, Lampedusa describes the land over which his family traveled to and around their Santa Margherita home. It is almost exactly the same as the description of the land Don Fabrizio's family crossed to fictional Donnafugata.

He writes:

"For hours we crossed the desperately sad landscape of western Sicily...the train rails seeming laid on the sand itself; the sun, already hot, was broiling...among stony hills and fields..."

"...Misilbesi is a sunbaked cross-roads marked by...deserted tracks that seemed to be leading to Hades rather than to Sciacca or Sambuca



Again, the question comes to mind:

How does such a “desperately sad landscape” yield the phenomena wealth accumulated by the Lampedusas and the other families of the Sicilian Aristocracy?

In neither work (“Leopard” or “Memory”) does Lempedusa address the question of the source of wealth. To answer the question of the source of the wealth one has to seek other sources.

For example, the historian Fernand Braudel wrote:

“It was no accident then that the feudal estates bought up by the Doria family in Sicily were wheat-growing lands laying on the vital axis linking Palermo and Agrigento...

“From early on...Sicily had its caricatori near the ports – huge warehouses where grain was piled...

“Florence had the means to buy grain from Sicily, and was able to reserve her own land for more rewarding crops.”



The “wheat growing...vital axis linking Palermo and Agrigento” matches exactly the route traveled by Lampedusa to Santa Margherita.

While the land was as he described it during his late August journey; he fails to mention, in the prior months it was a rich agricultural expanse. Indeed, Lampedusa does give a hint of its richness. He alludes to “fields of mown corn”.

Clearly, he is traveling after the harvest and in the hottest part of the summer; leaving the impression that this late summer post-harvested “desperately sad landscape” was typical!

Lampedusa seems to be going out of his way to denigrate the Sicilian countryside - the same countryside that supports his lavish life style. (Is there no end to the insults Sicily must endure?)

In short, given the historian's texts, and the absence of any other explanation, it seems reasonable to conclude: the wealth of the Sicilian aristocracy was based on Sicily's prodigious agricultural production.

Which brings up the question of who did the actual producing - certainly not the members of the Lampedusa family?



The Have-Nots - Sharecroppers (but, oh so little share!)

The absence of any reference to the source of Sicilian aristocratic wealth is complimented by the virtual absence of any reference to the Sicilian peasantry, with the exception of a couple of shorts in the novel meant to create the illusion of Don Fabrizio's magnanimity.

Lampedusa ignores the peasants for obvious reasons; they were the source of the aristocracy's wealth! The peasants were the people who created the wealth through their skill and labor. They grew and harvested the crops sold to Europe and North Africa, and the Aristocracy spent the money garnered from the sales. ("Such a deal!")

Booker T. Washington, a former American slave described Sicily's agricultural economy in the very years that Lampedusa was romping in his 1600 square yard boyhood "kingdom", and his mother delighting in her 100 room summer house. He writes:

"I refer to the great landowners, who in Sicily do not live on the land, but make their homes in the cities and support themselves from the rents...of their properties.

Ostensibly the "rents" must have been pretty substantial to support the Lampedusa-esque garish life style. In turn, the money for the rent must have come from selling the crops grown on land owned by the aristocracy.



How the system works; Washington writes (paraphrased text for emphasis):

“This is the way the crop is divided. Tenants get what’s left after the landlord takes his due:

-he takes double or triple the measure of seed he

had advanced

-he takes a portion for the cost of guarding the

field while the grain is ripening

-he takes another portion for the saints

-he takes something for using

the threshing floor and the storehouse

-he takes a portion for his loans and interest

-he takes for anything else that occurs to him

-he takes half of what’s left and

the farmer gets the balance.



He takes...He takes...He takes... from the poor man

- who has watered the soil with his sweat
- who does not sleep more than two hours at harvest
- who sleeps in the open field at night
- who finds shelters of straw, nest in rock,  
holes in ground
- who lives for days or months eating raw greens
- who is happy...

if he receives as much as a third or a quarter  
of the grain he has harvested.

After the harvest the sharecropper returns home where...

“ At night all his family crowd into a one room cave...in which the air is thick with smoke, because there is no chimney...In the corner there is frequently only one bunk, upon which the entire family sleeps, and for the most part it consists of nothing more than a heap of straw...



"...the coarseness of such a family existence is beyond description..." - this from a former American slave!

Sicilian work ethic

Washington has one final point that should be savored by Americans of Sicilian descent (indeed, all southern-Italians):

"I have often heard it said that people who are born under the soft southern skies are habitually indolent, and never learn to work there, as they do in more northern latitudes.

This is certainly not true of Sicily, for, so far as my experience goes, there is no other country in Europe where incessant labour is so largely the lot of the masses of the people.

Certainly there is no other country where so much of the labour of all kinds, the skilled labour of the artisan as well as the rough labour of digging and carrying on the streets and in the mines, is performed by children, especially boys."



Such is the historic reality of southern-Italian American origins.

**Source URL:** <http://108.61.128.93/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/sicilys-class-character-circa-1900-lampedusa-vs-booker-taliaferro>

**Links**

[1] <http://108.61.128.93/files/15780arist-and-peasnts1286807825png>