

The Novelist, the Fisherman and the Prince

In Rose Macaulay's novel *The World My Wilderness* the ruins of the City of London are the playground of two wild children, Barbary and her young half-brother Raul. One Sunday morning they discover in the rubble of a bombed church the charred pages of a prayer book, opened at the *Dies Irae*. Barbary chants the words in innocence: 'Day of wrath, O Day of Mourning! See fulfilled the prophet's warning, Heaven and earth in ashes burning!' Little Raul grows bored, so his sister places a stolen radio on the altar to listen to jazz. A strange priest stumbles through a window and, silencing the radio, hands the dumb-founded Barbary a censer. With a maddened stare he begins to perform Holy Communion but the words are those of Thomas Browne, 'Hell is where I am, Lucifer and all his legions are in me. Fire creeps on me from all sides . . . I cannot move my limbs, I cannot raise my hands to God. . . . The weight of my sins: they lie across my chest and pin me; I cannot stir. For this is hell, hell, hell.' The priest collapses when a second clergyman runs into the nave. He calms the terrified children, explaining that the priest wanders the ruined churches looking for his own, where for two days he was trapped in flaming wreckage.

For Rose Macaulay the Second World War seemed to

represent the end of civilisation and *The World My Wilderness* (1950) is the most nihilistic of her twenty novels, with quotations from *The Waste Land* inserted as a kind of fractured theme tune. When she read the poem on its publication in 1922 she admired Eliot's technical ability but at that time the words had no personal resonance for her. The world she found in 1945, however, seemed to be a fulfilment of Eliot's prophecies. In the final scene Barbary's elder brother Richie leaves the ruins and walks towards the shining dome of St Paul's. But this is a cynic's path to God, for Richie represents a disillusioned generation, a Cambridge undergraduate and a brave soldier who has become a black marketeer. His final words are Eliot's: 'I think we are in a rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones.'

Rose Macaulay wrote the book in her sixties. A member of Lord Macaulay's dynasty of liberal intellectuals, she was raised as a child of Nature in a beautiful villa on the coast of Italy, playing with the fishermen and learning to swim in the dangerous surf. When she was thirteen and her scholarly father returned to respectable society in Oxford, she horrified relatives with her bare feet, muddy knees and a tomboyish delight in tree-climbing. She never cared much for how she dressed: 'brownish' was the politest summary of her wardrobe. Impossibly thin – 'a jolly skeleton' – and impossibly spritely, she would dive into the Serpentine from the highest board at the age of seventy. In the 1930s her rusty bicycle chained to the railings of the London Library was one of the most familiar sights of literary London.

Without the tragedy of the war, Macaulay would be remembered for the earlier work for which she became

popular: novels with an amusing eye for bossy aunts and shy curates, and accounts of travels in exotic scenery and as a familiar voice, tilted towards a Third Programme audience on tired afternoons. But during the Blitz she drove an ambulance, and night after night waited at the wheel while victims were pulled from burning wreckage. Then in July 1942, in Surrey, Gerald O'Donovan died of cancer. He had been her lover for more than twenty years, and they would have married if he had not been a Catholic and unwilling to leave his wife and three children. Her London flat was bombed, and although she was unharmed his letters perished in the flames. Many years later Macaulay's vigorous reaction was recalled as an inspiration by Natasha Spender, widow of Stephen, when her own house in France was destroyed by fire: 'I remember in the Blitz helping Rose Macaulay search the rubble of her bombed house where, as here, no treasure or mementos had survived. She seemed sensible, aloof from the drama, feelings of devastation in abeyance, a little dazed but taking refuge in activity.'

However detached she seemed, Macaulay wrote the jagged, raw 'Miss Anstruther's Letters', her most moving short story. In a few panicked moments after a bomb falls on her mansion block, its respectability now 'at one with Nineveh and Tyre', Miss Anstruther fills a suitcase with a typewriter, ornaments from the mantelpiece, and 'a walnut shell with tiny Mexicans behind glass'. At the bottom of the burning stairs she realises that she has forgotten her lover's letters – but the stairs are toppling, and the wardens bar her return. When the ashes grow cold all that remains of twenty-two years of love-letters is a single charred fragment, containing a jesting reproach. 'You don't care twopence, he

seemed to say still; if you had cared twopence, you would have saved my letters, not your wireless and your typewriter and your china cow, least of all those little walnut Mexicans, which you know I never liked.' Why did only this reproach survive, not the letters about the steep hills in Devon, the balcony at the inn in Foix, the bedroom at Lisieux?

To research *The World My Wilderness* Macaulay became an explorer in the rubble of the City of London. Penelope Fitzgerald remembered the 'alarming experience' of scrambling after her, 'and keeping her spare form just in view as she shinned undaunted down a crater, or leaned, waving, through the smashed glass of some perilous window'. Macaulay described a bizarre new world:

the great pits with their dense forests of bracken and bramble, golden ragwort and coltsfoot, fennel and foxglove and vetch, all the wild rambling shrubs that spring from ruin, the vaults and the cellars and caves, the wrecked guildhalls . . . the broken office stairways that spiralled steeply past empty doorways and rubble-d closets into the sky, empty shells of churches with their towers still strangely spiring above the wilderness, their empty window arches where green boughs push in, their broken pavement floors . . . all this scarred and haunted green and stone and brambled wilderness lying under the August sun, a-hum with insects and astir with secret, darting, burrowing life, received the returning traveller into its dwellings with a wrecked, indifferent calm.

When she had explored the jungle of Guatemala for a travel book twenty years before, the Mayan temples slippery with

vegetation had merely been Picturesque scenery. Now this new ruined landscape was the expression of 'an irremediable barbarism coming out of the earth, and of filth flung against the ivory tower'. The gutted City is the reflection of the inner wildness of her heroine Barbary, and of Macaulay's own nihilism. "Where are the roots of that clutch, what branches grow, out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, you cannot say or guess. . . ." But you can say, you can guess, that it is yourself, your own roots, that clutch the stony rubbish, the branches of your own being that grow from it and nowhere else.' As *The Waste Land* had prophesied, below the respectable superstructure of society were 'the ruins of the soul; the shadowy dreams that lurked tenebrously in the cellars of consciousness; in the mysterious arcades and corridors and arcades of dreams, the wilderness that stretches not without but within'. By 1950 the craters and rubble were vanishing under a stratum of concrete, as new blocks of offices and houses rose. But the 'irredeemable barbarism' the ruins represented would rise to the surface elsewhere, for it was a spirit latent inside man.

Macaulay's mentor at this time was Professor Gilbert Murray, a distinguished classicist, who was convinced that Christian-Hellenic civilisation was an island in a 'sea of barbarism' represented by the Russians, Chinese and Arabs. Murray's son-in-law was Arnold Toynbee, who in his *History of the World*, published in ten volumes from 1934–54, analysed the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations. 'No civilisation had lasted for more than 1,000 years; this present one, called western culture, has had its day', says the cynical, well-read Richie in *The World My Wilderness*. But what came next?

What came next for Macaulay, at least, was a religious conversion which restored her faith in the future. An Anglican by birth but an agnostic for many decades, Macaulay converted to Catholicism at the age of seventy. The vigour of her irresistible *The Pleasure of Ruins* (1953) is the consequence of this late revival. For four years she read travellers' accounts of ruins, and became mesmerised by the images she discovered. She wrote to a friend: 'I am living in a ruinous world of crumbling walls, green jungle drowning temples and palaces in Mexico and Ceylon, friezes and broken columns sunk in the blue seas, with crabs scuttling about among them. Such dreams of beauty are haunting, like pleasure.'

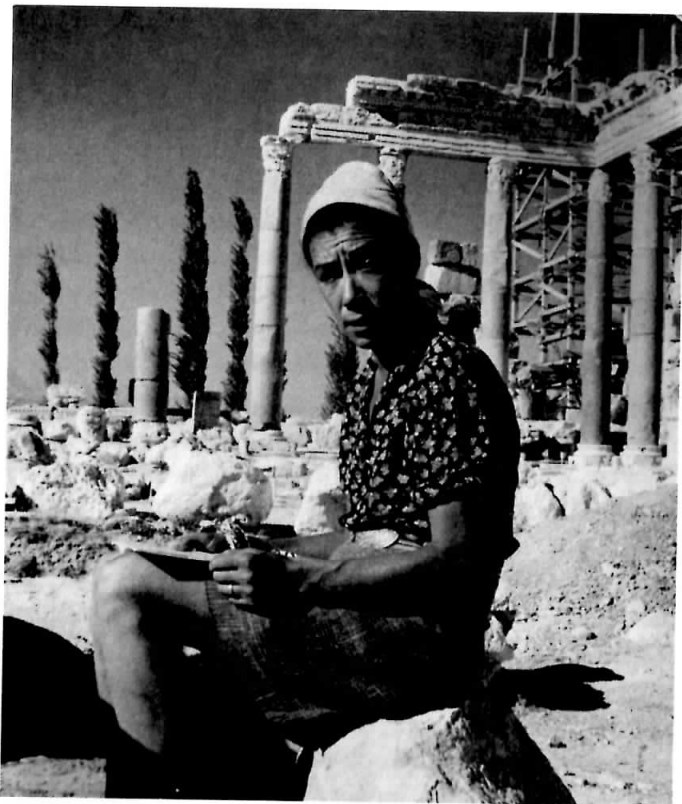
The book is faulted by academics for the superficiality of its broad-brush picture of the cultures of the world. It is true, for example, that contrary to Macaulay's assurance the Romans did not paint ruins – at least to the best of my knowledge – and it is perhaps more interesting to understand this indifference than to assume they shared our enthusiasm. But this is to miss Macaulay's purpose. She wished to demonstrate the ubiquity of ruins in history in order to illustrate how in the eternal cycles of destruction and resurrection the goodness in man would always revive – and thus to reverse her own despondency in the face of the ruins of the Blitz. The final words of the book argued for the reconstruction of wholeness from the fragments of modernity:

But Ruinenlust has come full circle: we have had our fill. . . . Ruin must be a fantasy, veiled by the mind's dark imaginings: in the objects that we see before us, we

get to agree with St Thomas Aquinas, that quae enim diminutae sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt, and to feel that, in beauty, wholeness is all.

The Pleasure of Ruins is with John Harris's *No Voice from the Hall* and Lampedusa's *The Leopard* one of my three great inspirations. In Ladbroke Square, in West London, there is an apartment decorated with fragments of sculpture and ornament – and displayed with the same exhilaration as was shown by Soane – acquired by my friend Peter Hone in three Grand Tours to the sites described in *The Pleasure of Ruins*. In the 1960s he travelled to the Middle East in a Volkswagen van, accompanied by an Abyssinian princess named Marie White who had been a model for Jacob Epstein and now worked in Peter's antique shop in Islington. At Mount Olympus he burned a copy of Macaulay's book as a sacrifice; at Palmyra they parked the Volkswagen for two weeks in the shadow of the colonnades; at Ephesus Marie stayed in the van while Peter slept inside a cave.

One of the most significant journeys to ruins in modern times was John Harris's exploration of Britain in the years after the Second World War. Today Harris has written more academic articles on historic country houses and curated more exhibitions than any architectural historian in Britain. Having him as a guide to the English landscape is like peering at aerial photographs in which patterns below the surface become visible: as he speaks, a vanished England arises, with country houses, canals and garden statues appearing as ghostly, sepia-grey mirages in cornfields, golf-courses and housing estates. But at the end of the war he was



Marie White, pictured in the ruins of Baalbec in the 1960s, on the journey with Peter Hone inspired by Rose Macaulay's *Pleasure of Ruins*.

fifteen years old, a truculent boy who had left his apprenticeship. In 1945 the ornamental canals at country houses were filled with fish fattened after six years without disturbance. He visited them on fishing expeditions with his uncle Sid, who was also a buyer at country house auctions.

The first his nephew attended was at Langley Park, near Slough, which had once belonged to Sir Robert Grenville Harvey, a big-game hunter in India who also spied for Queen Victoria on the Northwest Frontier. Leaving the chatter of the auction Harris found a derelict orangery which, he discovered, contained Harvey's museum of stuffed animal heads: the door had not been opened for many years, and he fainted at the stench of decaying fur. In the garden at Langley Harvey had erected a column in the Anglo-Indian style, from the top of which you could see Windsor Castle. It had survived target practice from Polish soldiers training for D-day, only to be blown up by the Modernist county planning officer a few years later. Only later did Sid and his nephew discover that the lake in which they stopped to fish was filled with discarded phosphorus bombs.

Harris had discovered a world in limbo. In Britain two thousand country houses – almost every one of any architectural value – had been requisitioned by the military six years before. Now the soldiers had gone, and their owners returned to find Nissen huts rusting on the lawn, avenues of trees felled, family portraits used as dart-boards and garden temples as targets for mortar practice. It was a dispiriting sight, and many families threw in their hand in despair. Harris could soon spot the tell-tale signs of an abandoned estate:

Estate care has been abandoned within the park perimeter, the hedgerows are unkempt. A clear divide is discernible at the gate or lodge between the public road and the drive across the park: on one side maintenance,

on the other decay. The lodge might be shut up, the gates locked. The drive is crumbling, often weeded over. A decayed park in late spring or summer, the parkland ungrazed, colourful with wild flowers, the lawns unmown and garden divisions returned to nature: so many of my houses appear to me in this floral frame. . . . Watch for broken windows, scattering of rubbish: both are good signs for the country-house prowler. At this juncture the house always seems to be cocooned in a pressing silence. There is a blankness in its glassy stare.

These houses were in a state of suspension, awaiting either a reprieve or an execution by owners who did not have the resources, or the inclination, to repair them. On the dole, Harris travelled to more than two hundred derelict mansions. He slept in youth hostels – indeed, he was awarded the prize for the most hostels visited in one year – and in barns when necessary, and once in a deserted church lying wrapped in scented cassocks. Of the mansions he visited personally, three-quarters were subsequently demolished. In 1955, at the height of the destruction, two country houses were demolished each week. This was the greatest loss to British architecture since the Dissolution of the monasteries, far greater in aesthetic value than the damage caused by German bombs.

Saddest of all was Burwell in Lincolnshire, a perfect Georgian doll's house. Harris visited it in 1957, by which time he travelled on a Lambretta as a paid fieldworker for Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series. A knock at the entrance met with a strange shuffling inside; opening the door, he was tumbled off his feet by a flock of sheep. They



Sacks of potatoes in the drawing-room at Burwell in Lincolnshire, as discovered by John Harris in 1957. The following year the mansion was demolished.

had been penned in the staircase hall, below cobwebbed portraits of the family, by the local farmer. Amid Burwell's interiors of rococo plasterwork, not updated since the house was built in the 1760s, were sacks of potatoes in the drawing-room, and heaps of grain in the saloon. The following year he received a telephone call announcing Burwell's demolition, and the rush to the scene of destruction reminds us of Piper's journeys during the Blitz. The roof and walls were gone, and clouds of soft, powdering plaster rose as men hacked at the decorations with pickaxes. Black with rage and despair, all Harris could do was to rescue six plaster heads from the debris – like William Stukeley collecting fragments of stained glass and sculpture

all those years before. The preservation of country houses in the 1950s seemed as futile as the protection of medieval architecture had been in the 1720s, but Harris's journey was to be as significant as the rediscovery of the neglected castles and abbeys by the generation of Stukeley and Dyer.

The photograph on the cover of Harris's memoir, *No Voice from the Hall* (1998) shows a hand touching an ivy-mantled portico; peer closely, and you will see that the cuff and buttons have been removed. He tears away all his shirt-collars too, unable to bear constriction, and a full-length photograph would show eyebrows as stiff as horse-hair, and a red face so vital with the promise of discovery that it is easy to understand why so many strangers opened their doors to the boy.

While the war was still in progress, Osbert Sitwell had employed John Piper to paint views of his family mansion, Renishaw Hall in Derbyshire, in the conviction that the end of the country house was inevitable. In visits over the three years 1942–4 Piper painted more than fifty views of the gaunt Georgian house and its desolate temples, lodges and woodland. Sitwell's commission was integral to the writing of his autobiography, *Left Hand, Right Hand*: Piper's paintings were stacked three-deep in his study, an inspirational version of a writer's card-index. When the series was exhibited in January 1945, Sitwell introduced the catalogue:

At the very moment when the great English houses, the chief architectural expression of their country, are passing, being wrecked by happy and eager planners, or becoming the sterilised and scionless possessions of the

National Trust, a painter has appeared to hand them on to future ages, as Canaletto or Guardi handed on the dying Venice of their day, and with an equally inimitable art. And so it was to this painter, Mr John Piper, that I turned when I began my autobiography for in that book I was trying to record a way of life, as well as my own adventures, in my own medium.

Harris was more vigorous than Sitwell, however, and over the next decades was the leading figure in the nascent movement to rescue our country houses. The turn in the tide of public opinion and of government action did not come until 1974, when Harris and Marcus Binney organised the *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The whole exhibition was designed as a ruin, with photographs of demolished houses pasted on to cubes of rubble. In the spot-lit darkness the gruff voice of Harris recounted their names, as if a litany of the fallen: Gopsall, Stratton, Kempshott, Slindon, Richings, Burwell, Willingham, Iver, Staunton. . . . Today the good cause has triumphed, thanks in large part to the truant fisherman who fell under the spell of this magical kingdom of ruins. But as with the abbeys and the antiquaries, brutal destruction was the necessary prelude to appreciation.

But the greatest example of the perverse fertility of ruin, and of how genius germinates in architectural decay, was the Prince of Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*. His ancestral palace in Palermo was destroyed by American bombs in the invasion of Sicily in 1943. The last prince, in a line of many centuries, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, had been born

in the palace in 1896, and slept in the same room almost up to '5th April 1943, the day on which bombs brought from beyond the Atlantic searched her out and destroyed her'. After Lampedusa discovered the 'repugnant ruins', he walked in a state of shock 8 miles to a friend's house where he sat without speaking, and covered in dust, for three days. When he died in 1957, to contemporaries in Palermo his life seemed to have been as gilded, dusty and idle as an elegant old wardrobe – but no one knew that the wardrobe contained the manuscript of what is the finest Italian novel of the twentieth century, and perhaps the finest in post-war Europe.

Lampedusa wrote *The Leopard* in the last two years of his life, during which time he also wrote a memoir, *Places of My Infancy*, which was never intended for publication but as an exercise to neutralise his nostalgia. His childhood had been paradise, he recalled. The only son, he was the ruler of three courtyards, staircases and stables. The façade of the Baroque palace ran along the street for 70 yards, and its destruction revealed in rubble a floor area 1,600 square yards in extent. This home was a 'Beloved':

I loved [it] with utter abandon, and still love it now when for the last twelve years it has been no more than a memory. Until a few months before its destruction I used to sleep in the room where my mother's bed had stood when she gave me birth. And in that house, in that very room maybe, I was glad to feel a certainty of dying.

The intense sunlight of Sicily streamed into the row of

drawing-rooms behind the façade, diluted by the silk blinds on the nine balconies, or reflected on gilt furniture; when the shutters were closed at the height of summer, a single ray was

populated with myriads of dust particles, and going to vivify the colours of carpets, uniformly ruby-red throughout all the drawing-rooms: a real sorcery of illumination and colour which entranced my mind for ever. Sometimes I rediscover this luminous quality in some old palace or church, and it would wrench at my heart were I not ready to brush it aside with some 'wicked joke'.

At the turn of the century Palermo was a fashionable resort for European royalty, and his earliest memories were of being presented to the Empress Eugénie of France, or of eating ice-creams inside a liveried carriage parked outside a café; it was considered vulgar to sit at a table. Later, Lampedusa realised that such elegance was the final indulgence of an aristocracy which had been in decline since the abolition of feudalism in Sicily in 1812. Only 20 of the 200 aristocratic palaces in Palermo were in use, and his family were particularly short of money; by the 1920s they were forced to let a wing of the palace to the municipal gas board. Giuseppe's great-grandfather had died suddenly of cholera in 1885 without leaving a will, and the inheritance was disputed by nine children and their squabbling descendants. Giuseppe was heir to the title but to only one-fiftieth of the patrimony.

The idleness of the family is astonishing to northerners, as

described in David Gilmour's superlative biography of the writer. His father was dilatory and self-indulgent, as were three of Lampedusa's four paternal uncles; the fourth was a distinguished diplomat and boasted of being the first Lampedusa in a thousand years to have a job. He was also the last, Gilmour observes. After fighting bravely in the First World War, Giuseppe decided not to pursue a profession or to earn a living, or indeed to take any action to reverse the family's decline into ruin. In the 1920s he travelled and after marrying a German baroness in 1932 divided his time between her castle in Latvia and his palace in Palermo; Licy refused to sleep in a room next to his mother, but Giuseppe would not leave his mother's side. After the American bombing of Palermo the majority of displaced aristocrats moved into new apartments outside the centre but Giuseppe and Licy – unable to return home, her castle seized by the Soviets – moved deeper into the bomb-damaged historic core. From the balcony of No. 42 Via Butera they were entertained by the sight of prostitutes enticing clients into the debris. In No. 42's library Giuseppe installed a mantel-piece rescued from the palace, and doors and windows salvaged from ruined buildings in the neighbourhood.

In the years after the war he would leave Via Butera for breakfast at Pasticceria del Massimo, where he would eat pastries and read for four hours – enough time for a Balzac novel. Then he visited the bookseller Flaccovio. His bulky leather bag, full of books and cream cakes, was always at his side. He never left the house without a copy of Shakespeare, noted Licy, and Flaccovio once glimpsed Proust nestling in courgettes. In the afternoon he joined a table of local intellectuals at Café Cafilisch, silent but for the occasional

monosyllabic retort. A shabby but distinctive figure, he was 'tall, stout, and silent, a pale face – that greyish pallor of dark-skinned southerners', remembered the novelist Giorgio Bassani.

After many years of this routine Lampedusa was overweight, pale and one of the best-read men in Europe. In 1955 he abandoned the Cafilisch circle for the Café Mazzara where, at the base of a modern tower block, he wrote in blue biro every afternoon for the last thirty months of his life. There were two triggers for such a sudden change after a lifetime of passive inactivity. First, he had accompanied his cousin Lucio Piccolo to collect a prize for his poetry at a literary festival – where Bassani had encountered him – and realised he could do better than any of the literati assembled there. Second, he agreed to teach some young students English literature, and therefore began to analyse and synthesise a lifetime of reading. These were only catalysts, however. The destruction of the palace had made him realise that a world was vanishing without any record. As the novel's hero reflects on his death-bed, facing the same marine drive as did No. 42 Via Butera: 'the significance of a noble family lies entirely in its traditions, that is in its vital memories; and he was the last to have any unusual memories, anything different from those of other families'.

The novel began as twenty-four hours in the life of the Prince of Salina during Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily in 1860. Like the Prince of Lampedusa in 1860 – the great-grandfather who never made a will – Salina is an astronomer and the father of many children. His physical impressiveness is Giuseppe's romantic projection, however, and as he describes his hero shaving and dressing he seems to be

infatuated by his own creation: ‘*Mio Principone*,’ whispers Salina’s grateful mistress, while the family and the retainers are in awe of the graceful giant who bends coins with his fingers. What the writer gave the Prince was his own intelligence and introspection. And like Lampedusa the Leopard scorns his own decadent class, but sees no virtue in the new government. His only consolation is in the eternal certainties of the stars.

What is so compelling to the reader from the north is the passive resignation of the virile, perceptive Prince to a process of destructive change; it is the same puzzle as why for decades Lucio Piccolo did not bother to send his poems to a publisher, or why the Palazzo Lampedusa is still a bomb site today. It is the mentality of an island in which the shadow of the past stultifies the activity of the present.

The apparent subject of the novel was the Risorgimento, and how the hopes of reform raised by Garibaldi’s red-shirts were frustrated by the cynical politicians of the united Italy. But this was only the repetition of a pattern which had been recurring for two millennia, in which Sicily had been invaded and conquered by Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Goths, Arabs, Normans and Spaniards. Each time the islanders’ hopes had been disappointed, and now they had no faith in promises of future improvement. Salina explains to an envoy from the new government in Turin:

For over twenty-five centuries we’ve been bearing the weight of superb and heterogenous civilisations, all from outside, none made by ourselves, none that we could call our own. . . . Sleep, my dear Chevalley, sleep, that is what Sicilians want, and they will always hate anyone

who tries to wake them, even in order to bring them the most wonderful of gifts.

Lampedusa believed that modern Sicily was irredeemable – and yet he loved a romantic idea of the island which is explained in a short story, ‘The Professor and the Siren’, also written in those final months. In a café in Milan a young libertine befriends a fellow *émigré* from Sicily, the great scholar of the Hellenistic world Professor La Ciura. The Professor is persuaded to reveal his deepest secret by their shared memories of Sicily – memories of ‘eternal Sicily, nature’s Sicily; about the scent of rosemary on the Nebrodi hills, the taste of Melilli, the waving corn seen from Etna on a windy day in May, of the solitudes around Syracuse, the gusts of scent from orange and lemon groves pouring over Palermo, it’s said, during some sunsets in June’. As a young student fifty years before, in a rocky bay of the sea which had not changed since it was sighted by Grecian mariners, La Ciura was seduced by a mermaid. The romance combined the primitiveness of a satyr with the eternity of the stars, for the Siren had loved Greeks, and Romans, and Normans, and Spaniards in the twenty-five centuries of her existence. When, at sea, the Professor disappears overboard, the young man understands that he has returned to the Siren. In the Professor’s will he receives a Greek vase painted with Siren figures, but during the war it is destroyed by a bomb. If the Siren is Sicily in her tanned, languid, laughing-eyed and immortal beauty, the scornful but intense old man is Lampedusa.

Lampedusa finished *The Leopard* in August 1956, but received rejections from a series of publishers who believed

that all modern Italian novels should be 'progressive' and 'committed to the future'. The final rejection was on 17 July when he was in a clinic suffering from lung cancer; six days later he was dead. The exercise book in blue biro was filed away by his widow.

On 3 March 1958 she received a call from Giorgio Bassani, who advised the publisher Feltrinelli and was later to write *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, a novel which – in part inspired by the gardens of Ninfa – also showed how the past can be a more vivid presence than the future. Bassani had received a spare typescript of the manuscript which had been posted to a friend in Rome more than twelve months before. The friend had left the package on the shelf of a porter's lodge, before passing it to Bassani. From the very first pages, he now told Licy, he recognised the hand of a great writer. Unfortunately, Licy told him, the writer had recently died. *The Leopard* was published in November 1958, and by the following March – just five months later – had been reprinted fifty-two times. 'One of the great novels of this century,' wrote the French intellectual Louis Aragon in his review, 'one of the great novels of all time.'

One summer I retraced the Leopard's steps, and at the end of this journey I realised that although Lampedusa intended his novel to be a memorial to a world which had vanished he had inadvertently created a new and vivid world in its ruins. It was a lesson all the more compelling in an island which is littered by the ruins of fallen civilisations.

Palazzo Lampedusa in Palermo remains in rubble, and amid the debris of the city centre the many palaces which do still survive resemble the ruins of Rome in the Dark Ages: washing lines are strung between marble columns in their

courtyards, and families crowd into cellars and ballrooms partitioned by corrugated iron. Lampedusa's family also owned four palaces in the Sicilian countryside, and today every one is derelict, crumbling, or destroyed. In 1955 Lampedusa travelled south in search of 'vital memories' to the palaces of Sta Margherita la Belice and Palma di Montechiaro, which in the novel became fused into the 'Donnafugata' where Tancredi meets the exquisite Angelica – they were played in Visconti's film of 1966 by Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale. I followed his route over the 'lovely and desperately sad landscape' of central Sicily, with a growing sense of the timelessness – of progress suspended, of the dead outnumbering the living – which is so disconcerting yet liberating to an Englishman. At Agrigento are the colossal Doric temples whose ruins warned the young John Soane of the futility of trying to rival the ancients; between their columns you now see the tower blocks of the poorest city in Italy and a motorway raised on concrete stilts. Almond trees fill the valley between the two. When the Greeks erected the temples in the fifth century BC, when the Siren was already old, the city had a population of two hundred thousand and its walls contained an inhabited area larger than that of the deserted valley.

Palma di Montechiaro also seems to illustrate Lampedusa's conclusion that Sicily was irredeemable, whatever the possibilities of technological progress. The town was founded by a pious Saint-Duke of Lampedusa in 1637 as a 'New Jerusalem', with a cathedral and palace on a central piazza. The vast palace is a derelict, barred shell today, surrounded by modern concrete houses, many of

which are half-built; it is a custom for each generation to build one storey and when a house terminates in a frame of rusty steel rods it is a sign that the children have moved away. The piazza was deserted, except for a priest walking his dog – until a tall, bare-shouldered man loped across the square. ‘Get away,’ whispered the priest to me, ‘this man is dangerous.’ As we returned to the car the thug loomed over Anna and me, muttering obscenities in dialect as we refused to accept his invitation of a guided tour; rarely have I been so grateful for the sound of an ignition key. We fled the New Jerusalem, and a menace which was all the more terrifying because it seemed to have no spectators. Not a soul had stirred in the sleeping, dead-eyed town.

Sta Margherita la Belice was a happier place, a town on a hilltop with a faint but welcome breeze; there is even a little neo-classical rotunda built during the Napoleonic Wars so that English officers could enjoy the prospect. Until debts forced the sale of the palace in 1921 Giuseppe came here for summer holidays. After a journey of twelve parched, dusty hours the family would be greeted by the mayor and the municipal band playing a polka.

Sta Margherita was shattered by the 1968 earthquake – the same earthquake which destroyed Ghibellina – but there was a vivacity in the newly built streets, with children skipping to the café in the piazza for ice-cream. Its name ‘Il Gattopardo’ is the town’s only dedication to Lampedusa, and the palace is in ruins. Only the Baroque façade withstood the earthquake, and the attached church was split in two as perfectly as an anatomical section. This is Sicily, and it is as if the earthquake happened yesterday: the

hoardings declaring IN RESTORATION are covered with dust, and no mould or moss grows in the dry heat.

With *Places of My Infancy* in my hand – and with the Prince, Tancredi and Angelica in mind – I walked under the Baroque portico into a wilderness where there had once been a hundred rooms around three courtyards. Only two or three rooms survived. Its chambers were ‘a kind of 18th-century Pompeii . . . I was a boy who loved solitude, who liked the company of things more than people. . . . I would wander through the vast ornate house as in an enchanted wood.’ Each new room was like a sunlit clearing, light



Sta Margherita La Belice before the earthquake. Prince Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa spent his childhood summers in the palace of Sta Margherita La Belice in Sicily, and it inspired Donnafugata in his novel, *The Leopard*.

flickering on the portraits of ancestors, silk hangings, and with monkeys and flowers weaving through the tapestries. The rooms led into a private balcony overlooking the altar of the church, where the family sat for Mass, and the boy peered through the flowering gilt railing. Astonishingly, the balcony he described survives, clinging to the high wall of the ruin as a precarious, rusted relic of the little prince.

Lampedusa once remarked that if Europe was destroyed by a hydrogen bomb, London would be immortal in the novels of Dickens but Palermo would disappear because not a single good writer had recorded the city on paper. That was before he began to write. Sta Margherita, I realised – and indeed I began to smile – is more vivid as a ruin which can be explored with Lampedusa's writings to hand than if it had survived intact. In the garden which had been a 'paradise of parched scents' palm-trees stand tilted by the earthquake and surrounded by thistles. The flight of stairs is there; there, the thicket of bamboo; the fountain in which a nude goddess was courted by tritons and nereids spurting water. The statues have gone, as have the dolls' house, and the monkey cage. But spring-water still gurgles into the basin of the siren's fountain, and with the scent of ragged flowers, and the dusty rays of sunlight streaming through the ruined walls, Sta Margherita is tenderly but ecstatically alive. I had finished the journey.

Anna is sitting by the fountain, eating an ice-cream. 'Let's go to the beach,' she says, without urgency. 'It would be nice to have a swim.' It was time to leave the ruins.

X Dust in the Air Suspended

The story of the Millennium Cross for Dresden was told by Christopher Kenworthy in the *Telegraph*, 28 November 1998. Michael McMahon's visit to Oradour is in the *Telegraph*, 3 June 2000.

David Fraser Jenkins explains Piper's war in his superb catalogue to the exhibition at the Imperial War Museum: *John Piper: The Forties* (2000). Fraser Jenkins also wrote the catalogue to the 1984 exhibition on Piper at the Tate. Piper's essay 'Pleasing Decay' was in *Buildings and Prospects* (1948).

The final chapter of *Ruins* by Michael Felmingham and Rigby Graham (1972) has very good material on the wartime and post-war period.

Dennis Creffield's paintings of Orford Ness were published in a catalogue to the Connaught Brown exhibition in 1995, with an introduction by Jeremy Musson.

XI The Novelist, the Fisherman and the Prince

There are two biographies of Rose Macaulay, by her relation Constance Babington Smith (1972) and by Jane Emery (1991). Babington Smith printed the short story 'Miss Anstruther's Letters' for the first time, and chose extracts from *Pleasure of Ruins* for a book of photographs by Roloff Beny (1964).

David Gilmour has written a biography of Lampedusa which is intelligent, witty, and quite perfect (*The Last Leopard*, 1988). *The Siren* and *Places of My Infancy*, translated by Archibald Colquhoun, were published in *Two Stories and a Memory* (1962).

For Michael and Isabel Briggs

In Ruins

Christopher Woodward



Pantheon Books, New York

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Contents

I	Who Killed Daisy Miller?	1
II	A Perverse Pleasure	32
III	Haunted Houses	45
IV	Ephesus without an Umbrella	63
V	An Exemplary Frailty	88
VI	Time's Shipwreck	108
VII	Serious Follies	136
VIII	Self-portrait in Ruins	160
IX	The Ozymandias Complex	177
X	Dust in the Air Suspended	205
XI	The Novelist, the Fisherman and the Prince	227
	Acknowledgements	251
	Illustrations	254
	Notes	257
	Index	269

For I know some will say, why does he treat us
to descriptions of weeds, and make us hobble
after him over broken stones, decayed buildings,
and old rubbish?

Preface to *A Journey into Greece*
by George Wheeler (1682)

In Ruins