



Stefano Lecchi: Villa Valentini, Rome (above) and (right) Arancera di Villa Borghese. Part of the first war reportage. Courtesy of Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome.



# Stefano Lecchi tracked down to Malta in 1860s



Giovanni Bonello

A camera artist, one seriously fundamental to the history of photography and of communication, disappears from his native Italy around 1860, presumed dead. But he is not dead at all. He had moved to Malta, established himself on the island and opened a photographic studio here.

Stefano Lecchi was no ordinary photographer. He is the very first person in history to have conceived and made a photo-reportage of a war, the first ever to document, in an organic, cohesive project, the destruction of battle and the grimness of its aftermath. There was no one before him, there were thousands after him.

His Malta connection was completely unknown so far. What I have established is less fleshed out than I would have wanted it to be, but at least we are now aware of a further Malta chapter in Lecchi's life, hitherto unsuspected, and know that this new segment of biographical enquiry is now ajar and has to be explored in depth.

There is one antique photograph in the archives of Palazzo Falson, Mdina, whose front intrigued George Camilleri for his own research interests, but whose back instantly riveted my attention. It is a portrait of Giuseppe Garibaldi in Malta, taken during the hero's lightning stay on the island in March 1864.

The full-length portrait of Garibaldi wearing his distinctive flat biretta and wide mantle has a printed back in English with the imprint in letterpress: S. Lecchi, Photographer, 141, Strada Stretta, Malta. Then, also printed, is the addition: Taken at the Imperial Hotel, March 24, 1864. The negative was signed 'SL' in black ink in the lower part of the photo, and the initials appear as white in reversed mirror image in the right hand side of the print.

This portrait of Garibaldi proves conclusively that Lecchi was active in Malta as a professional photographer in 1864, and had his own photographic studio, not recorded so far. The first floor of the premises of his atelier, 141, Strait Street, Valletta, is large enough to have been his residence too.

Strada Stretta at that time represented Malta's quite disreputable red light district, but was also, as I have shown elsewhere, the hotbed of early photographic studios in Malta. Many, if not most, of the first professional photographers of Malta opened up for business there.

Sometime after Lecchi closed down, his studio premises were taken over by another photographer, Edward Grech Cumbo, who also used them for his business over several years. Today, with the door number recently changed to 167, the premises houses the professional office of Notary Frans Micallef, my good friend and university classmate.

So far, Lecchi was only known for his war scenes and landscape photographs, and not a single portrait attributable to him was known or had been identified. The Palazzo Falson Garibaldi is his first documented portrait, important mostly as a hitherto unsuspected work of Lecchi, but also because the sitter was Garibaldi himself.

The Italian general, not averse to publicity and some vanity too, became the darling of portrait photographers and his images are not lacking, but finding a new one, and taken during his lightning visit to Malta, adds something quite relevant to his iconographic corpus.

It is ironic that this is not the first time the portrait has come to light. The Maltese committee of the *Società Dante Alighieri* had, in 1961, organised a sizeable exhibition in the Aula Magna of the old University, from December 1 to the 15, to commemorate the first centenary of the unification of Italy. Olof Gollcher, of Palazzo Falson (then Norman House), had generously lent this original photo portrait of Garibaldi to the organisers, together with a large number of other precious memorabilia, all related to the struggle for the liberation of Italy.

The irony is that I, a budding lawyer, had actually been very much involved

with the setting up of that exhibition, and I had handled all the exhibits on show, including that unique Garibaldi image. But the importance of the telling inscription on its back had totally eluded me (and everyone else) when I first saw it in 1961. We had valued the front, but disregarded the flipside. The penny dropped only recently, when Camilleri consulted with me in connection with his own historical research.

Stefano Lecchi, son of Antonio, was born in a small urban settlement near Milan in 1804 and grew to be a minor painter and a bold pioneer of photography. His inquisitive mind led him to experiment with original techniques and refinements in the camera.

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He seemed to have started by following the French Daguerre system, in which there was no negative, and so only one, high-quality, positive image could be made. He actually discovered and promoted the first colour tinting of daguerrotypes.

But soon he switched to the British, Fox Talbot, alternative of photography, the calotype, eventually to prevail universally. This was based on a negative from which any number of (lower quality) positive images could be printed. He perfected the calotype

to the point that Calvert Jones and George Bridges, both pioneer British photographers with a strong Malta connection, remained impressed by Lecchi and his work.

Jones and Bridges were in constant correspondence with the inventor of the calotype, William Fox Talbot, and both frequented Malta for a considerable time; theirs are the very first calotype images of Malta recorded so far. They both knew Lecchi and his work which they admired.

Bridges wrote to Fox Talbot that Lecchi was highly esteemed by his contemporaries both for his ability to obtain a clear sky without spotting and for the short exposure times that he favoured. He "obtained excellent results, even using poor quality paper. I myself have seen him making 14 photographs in a single morning in Pompeii without a single error".

Lecchi travelled quite extensively – to Paris, to the south of France, to Rome and to Naples, where he was commissioned by King Ferdinand II of the Two Sicilies to photograph the spectacular ruins of Pompeii.

He is best known for his extensive and absolutely pioneer war reportage of 1849, which records through a large number of images (44 known so far) the landscape of the deadly struggle between the Papal and French forces on the one hand, and the supporters of the failed Roman Republic on the other. They constitute the very first photographic documentation in history of the devastation of war, with shelled palaces, destroyed landmarks, shrapnel-pockmarked buildings and a general air of desolation.

Very few copies of his pioneering war albums are known to have survived, purchased mostly by the defeated supporters of a united Italy. Though Lecchi's original photographs seem to be extremely rare, various lithographic images derived from them circulated in large numbers.

The photographer married Maria Anna Rizzo and the couple had four children: Achille, Mario, Antonio and Adelaide, who entered a convent in 1858. In Rome the family lived in Via del Corso, and then in Via del Babuino, Via dei Greci and Via Mario dei Fiori, all roads favoured by the extensive native and foreign art colony settled in Rome.

He is known to have been an assiduous client of that magnet for artists, faux artists and artists manqué in Rome, the Caffè Greco in Via dei Condotti, still thriving today as a primordial tourist trap.

At some point, something dreadful happened to Lecchi. What it was exactly was not known so far. In a contemporary biographical note, Augusto Castellani says: "The misfortunes which hit him prevented him from perfecting further his method which is not devoid of merits in some results". I believe I know now what this unexplained misfortune was.

After 1860, Lecchi disappears completely from the radar, and those who studied his life believed he had died.

The historic and controversial visit of Garibaldi to Malta in March 1864 on his way to London, inevitably split the factions of the island in two. The British generally, and a sizeable section of the Maltese liberals, welcomed him with emotion and enthusiasm. The majority, the more Church-oriented, opposed him – he was the freemason and the revolutionary who had taken up arms against the Pope in his campaigns to unite the various states of a fractured country, including the Papal States.

In Malta, the intelligentsia generally favoured the emancipation of Italy, but at the same time had a strong traditional allegiance to the papacy. Hence the conflict, acrimonious and verbally violent, between those who took sides openly and without ambiguity.

Numerically, the supporters in Malta of Pius IX, the *Papa-Re*, probably outnumbered those who favoured the unification of Italy. The British, in the UK and in Malta, had an unqualified hero worship for Garibaldi, with the exception of the ultra-conservatives in the Catholic ranks.

When news of Garibaldi's landing in Malta on March, 23, 1864, spread among the inhabitants, his Maltese and Italian supporters on the island organised a loud welcome, with speeches and courtesy visits.

Baroness Angelica Testaferata Abela presented him with an Address signed by over 300 well-wishers (others say 190 only). The rest of the population observed a glacial, hostile silence, broken by the occasional hiss and *abbasso*.

The general and his two sons, Menotti and Ricciotti, lodged at the Imperial Hotel in 134, St Lucia Street, corner with Strait Street, Valletta, only a few doors up the road from Lecchi's studio. They only left the hotel the following day to board the evening steamer that was to take them to London.

The hotel's owners, the Gabaretta family, put up a marble plaque in its entrance to commemorate Garibaldi's visit. They changed its name to St James Hotel in 1917.

A German parachute mine destroyed the building in March 1941, and the Embassy Cinema (now the Embassy Complex) later replaced it. No other memorial today commemorates Garibaldi's visit to Malta.

Lecchi obviously obtained permission to photograph Garibaldi inside the hotel on the second day of his stay, and had the backs of his studio's photo-mounts overprinted with a special imprint to record the date and the place the photo was taken. That fact that this imprint was, quite exceptionally, in English rather than in Italian, shows that Lecchi believed that his main market for those Garibaldi portraits would be the sympathetic British in Malta rather than the hostile Maltese.

Garibaldi's surprise visit to Malta, not unexpectedly, split the island in two. Those who held the hero in reverential awe, exalted; the others demeaned the significance of the event.

The *Portafoglio Maltese*, a conservative paper which had for some time been edited by Tito Vespasiano Micciarelli, a double-agent and spy on the payroll of the Austrian, Neapolitan and Russian secret services, promoted papal supremacy in both temporal and spiritual matters, and had an account of Garibaldi's visit which is nothing less than scathing.

I am reproducing parts of a translation into English from the *Portafoglio* that appeared in the London Catholic periodical *The Tablet*. "Early in the morning of the 23rd [March] several persons showed a curiosity to see this man [Garibaldi], and gathered accordingly about the hotel, while others introduced themselves to him; but most of these were English and Italian residents here, and some were officers of the garrison and of the navy as well as a few English ladies, and about half a dozen Maltese heroines."

The paper highlighted "the antipathy and aversion which the people profess for this man". Respectable people from all parties had to strive their utmost to calm down the people "so as to prevent the storm which was about to burst".

The journalist noted that Garibaldi "did not disturb the public peace, did not show himself in the street, but remained shut up in the hotel as if he was a prisoner, and went on board the *Ripon*, on which he was to leave when the steamer had hardly entered into the port at an hour when the people could not be aware of his hurried departure from the hotel, three hours before the hour at which it had purposely been reported that he was to leave, after two hours of vain search to find a carriage, which nobody would hire out to him".

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The 'Address of the Maltese' presented to Garibaldi by Testaferata Abela was, in reality signed by "Maltese, English and foreigners, put together with much trouble".

The *Portafoglio* adds that "40 of the same youths went on board the *Bulldog* to await his leaving the port, to express their sympathy with him, and were hissed both on going out and their returning".

Commenting editorially, the newspaper protested strongly against the sentiment expressed in the address, calling it "abusive, false and scandalous, because it is opposed to the

feelings of the Maltese people, who profess only antipathy and aversion for the calumniator and defamer of the Papacy". This, of course, represents the slanted view of the 'Bourbon-clerical' press. Other media waxed ecstatic over their idol's stop in Malta.

But Lecchi's presence in Malta is also manifested in another petition, signed by a large number of Italian residents on the island, the original of which is held in a private collection and which has been researched and will soon be published by Camilleri, who very graciously allowed me to examine it.

A short while before the Garibaldi photograph, Achille Lecchi and Stefano Lecchi had put their signatures to this document. Their presence there confirms, firstly, that accompanying Lecchi in Malta with his eldest son Achille, and secondly, that both were actively involved in *Risorgimento* politics on the side of the liberal, pro-Italian-unity face of the divide.

But most of all, Stefano Lecchi's signature tells us what the 'misfortune' that had befallen him was. It is an almost illegible, spidery, trembling, disjointed scrawl, in every way different from the bold, assertive signatures on the backs of his Roman photographs. My youthful studies in comparative graphology leave me with very little doubt that the person who drew it up was suffering from a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system, like Parkinson's, or, more likely, a crippling stroke.

I have not, so far, been able to establish when Stefano and Achille Lecchi arrived in Malta, or when they left, after setting up the photographic studio in Strait Street, Valletta, though a more intense trawl through the National Archives may yet reveal those dates. What is certain is that Stefano Lecchi did not die in Malta. An exhaustive search at the Public Registry has confirmed that. Where did he go from here?

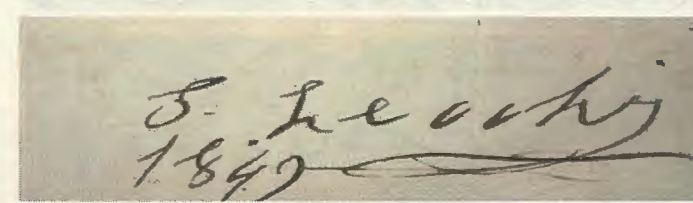
The best works on Lecchi are by Maria Pia Critelli and Silvia Paoli.

#### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Francesca Balzan, Leonard Callus, George Camilleri, Maria Pia Critelli, Sharon Micallef and Theresa Vella.



Portrait of Giuseppe Garibaldi taken in 1864 in Valletta by Stefano Lecchi, and (below) back of the portrait, showing imprint and address of Lecchi's photographic studio in Valletta. Courtesy of Palazzo Falson, Mdina.



Signature of Stefano Lecchi in 1849. Courtesy of Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome. Below: Scrawled signature of Stefano Lecchi in Malta in 1864, under that of his son Achille Lecchi. Courtesy of George Camilleri.



Stefano Lecchi's photographic studio at 141, Strait Street, Valletta.