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**Gould Francis Leckie and the 'insular strategy'
of Great Britain in the Mediterranean, 1800-15**

Foreword

Once the British government decided to intervene against the French expansion in Europe, Great Britain occupied a series of islands in the Mediterranean. With the possession of Corsica (1794-96), Elba (1796), Malta (from 1800) and the Ionian Islands (1809), as well as with that sort of British protectorate over Sicily which sanctioned the 'English Decade' 1806-1815 in the island, Great Britain began to exercise a new political influence and a strong trading power in that crucial area.

These insular positions in the Mediterranean became '*political workshops*', where significant political and constitutional experiences were carried out on the model of British institutions, for example through the Constitution of Anglo-Corsican Kingdom in 1794, the Sicilian Constitution in 1812, the British Crown Colony in Malta in 1813, the Constitution of the United States of the Ionian Islands in 1817.

The insular strategy, which during the First and Second Coalition (1793-1802) had brought Great Britain to occupy for brief periods of time Corsica and Elba, and then to keep firmly the possession of Malta, entered into a new perspective in 1805 when the war led by the Third Coalition against Napoleonic France began.

In 1806, in fact, British government sent out its army and navy to protect Sicily from a possible French invasion and to help the Bourbons to re-conquer their peninsular dominions. From 1806 to 1815, Sicily proved both a military basis and a commercial post of great value for the British in the Mediterranean.

1. The 'Talents: 'a chain of Mediterranean islands'.

The strategic and commercial importance of Sicily for the British policy in the Mediterranean was stressed in 1806 by the Foreign Secretary Charles James Fox who reminded his nephew Lord Holland of "*the great importance of Sicily, which you, young one, very much underrate*". After the failure of the negotiations between Great Britain and France, in fact, the so called Ministry of All the Talents, i.e. the uncommon *whig-tory* coalition ministry led by Lord Grenville, C.J. Fox and Viscount Sidmouth decided on a long-term Sicilian policy. In 1806 Prime Minister Lord Grenville himself considered that Great Britain must continue to protect Sicily and Sardinia even after the peace, "*and*

thus make of all these islands in the Mediterranean an important chain of stations highly useful to us both in war and in commerce”.

As professor Ricotti points out, *“this new policy tended to follow the strategic guidelines drawn up in Malta the year before”* by the Civil Commissioner Sir Alexander Ball and his secretary, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Sicily and Sardinia, with Malta, the Ionian Islands and a few other insular positions were at that time the only places within Mediterranean Europe not to be fallen under the yoke of France. Their defence was then essential and it rested on the basis of that particular *“long-term Sicilian policy”* which Lord Grenville wished to perform. In the mean time, Mr William Windham, the British Secretary of State for War and Colonies, made up a plan of military strategy to counteract the spreading of Napoleonic forces in that crucial region. Napoleon continued to take every measure which he thought calculated to secure the stability of his government and the establishment of his dynasty. Great Britain had to intervene: this was the shared opinion both of the English Ministry and the majority of public opinion.

However, what all this might have led to we cannot say: the necessary instructions drawn up in March 1807 by the new Foreign Secretary Lord Howick for the perusal of the English envoy in Sicily, William Drummond, never reached Palermo. The fall of the Ministry of All the Talents on the 25th of that month stopped them from being sent out. The Mediterranean in general counted very little in the new Portland ministry’s plans. The strategic situation had changed. In 1806, after the battle of Maida in Calabria, the British Government could still think of using Sicily as a springboard for an invasion of Italy. In 1807, and more than ever after the Peace of Tilsit, that hope was, for the moment, as good as vain. Sicily was now of little positive consequence. In 1807-09, when George Canning was Foreign Secretary and Lord Castlereagh Secretary of War, *“Sicily figured very little in Britain’s war plans”*.

This was not the opinion of a consistent part of the British subjects who had the chance either of visiting or residing in the island in that period. More important than many casual references were the writings of one or two publicists, particularly Gould Francis Leckie, who was well aware of the affairs in the Mediterranean. Leckie, as well as Granville Penn had written a couple of years before, looked forward to an expansion of British power all over that sea, such as would simultaneously benefit British trade and prove to the world that *“while France conquers to devastate, Britain conquers to do good”*.

2. Leckie: ‘an insular empire’.

Gould Francis Leckie was an English landowner who resided from 1800 to 1807 in Sicily, where he established a typical British farm in the neighbourhoods of Syracuse. He was decidedly interested in the political life of the island and

was well acquainted both with its most progressive minds (such as Abate Balsamo and Prince Belmonte) and the best British characters in the Mediterranean, such as Sir Alexander Ball, the Civil Commissioner of Malta, and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who acted as Ball's secretary from 1804 to 1806; Sir Charles Pasley, a Royal Engineer in Malta who served in Sicily in 1806; and the Officers of the British Navy in Messina, especially Gen. Sir John Moore and Gen. Henry Fox. For a certain period of time he was even a sort of councillor to the British envoy William Drummond in Palermo.

When Leckie left Sicily and came back to London, in the summer of 1807, compelled by a negative political situation, he published his first book and masterpiece, *An Historical Survey of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, with a view to explain the causes of the disasters of the late and present wars*. This was a collection of several works written during his Sicilian stay, and whose aim was to alert British government and public opinion about the particular conjuncture in Sicily and the Mediterranean.

His analysis of the British Foreign Policy during the years of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars coincided with Pasley's and started with a simple axiom. France had totally destroyed the balance of power in Europe and, while her influence was spreading over the old continent, as a consequence of the Continental Blockade European ports were shut against Great Britain and against her trade. *"Thus as the war continues our commerce daily decreases, and the means of supporting our expenses are diminished in proportion to the increased necessity of that expenditure"*. So, while the French were consolidating a great part of continental Europe into one vast empire, appropriating the revenues of the countries they overran, and applying them *"to convert the youth of each into efficient combatants in their cause"*, Britain followed a very opposite and chimerical system, a system of mere defence. *"If we reduce our share of it [the war] to a fatiguing exertion confined to defence alone, we must not blame the war for any sinister result, but attribute it to our own neglect of the advantages it offered"*.

But while Pasley insisted on the need of a British aggrandisement aiming at greater territorial acquisitions, such as Sicily, which could represent a fundamental military station in the Mediterranean, Leckie found the solution to that evident stall in the making of a British insular empire. *"We must therefore sometimes conquer, and if we are excluded for a time from the continent of Europe, form for ourselves an insular empire, complete in its parts, and sufficient to itself"*.

It was, in other words, necessary to increase Britain's internal power, in order to find that counterpoise in vain sought on the continent and to extend, as well as to perpetuate that commerce, on which the British system was founded, as well as on territorial revenues: all this could be done simply by adopting a new plan, an insular strategy based, most of all, on the annexation of some crucial Mediterranean islands.

"The British Isles are the head and centre of our power, and as we have no frontier, our domestic empire can never be extended". Opposite was the situation of France. *"France is a continental, Britain a maritime power"*. The British empire extended over many and distant provinces, very far from each other. Its force therefore could never be concentrated except by sea; and the dominion of the sea was a band of union to the whole empire.

Leckie was convinced that the power of Britain was the dominion of the seas, and so the legitimate object of her conquests should be the islands. *"By the conquest of these, she opens new fields of commerce, colonization and riches to her own subjects"*. Therefore, this was the right policy to be adopted.

Until the present crisis, England had placed her own political tranquillity in the equal balance of power in the continent, following the theories of Grotius and Vattel. But that balance was now vanished and it was useless to try and re-establish it. The continent of Europe would be prospectively characterized by the simple balance of two great powers, France and Russia, so there was no alternative to that of elevating to a counterpoise with these. History had shown that Bonaparte had brought under French influence all the western part of Europe, that Russia extended over the greater part of the remainder and threatened the falling empire of the Turks.

The only plausible system was to *Britannize* every part of insular Europe which suited best that purpose and, in order to give permanency to the same, to establish, as much as lied in Britain's power, her laws and government.

A few years before, Edmund Burke had found an ideal justification for the British intervention in the war with France, claiming that Europe was a commonwealth, which enabled the Roman private law of vicinage to apply between individual states. Leckie seemed to echo Burke's thought: *"If the ruin of my neighbour's house threaten my own, and he neither can nor will repair it, I have a right to interfere"*. At the same time, his reasonings seemed to rest more on the basis of Thomas Hobbes' natural law when he went on and said: *"but if he [my neighbour] cannot prevent my enemy from getting into it, I have a right to occupy it first, lest my enemy by that means set a fire to mine; for such would be the reasoning, were there no superior power to recur to. But there is no tribunal between nations"*. Self-defence was the first law of nature, and the conqueror who civilized those nations which fell under his yoke, *"amply [compensated] for the imaginary evil, while human nature in general [was] highly benefited"*.

3. 'Britannizing' the Mediterranean islands.

As for the means by which this strategy could be put into practice Leckie followed what Granville Penn, Pitt's Secretary of State, had urged in 1804: it was necessary not to trust to mere force, but to recur to the power of eloquence and the influence of the press. *"Our hope of success must in a great measure depend*

on the doctrine which we support by our arms". The French revolutionists had extended their power by affecting to assimilate the government of other countries to their own, while Britain, *"by propagating among mankind the principles of freedom and justice"* in other parts of Europe could hope to counteract the *"military and revolutionary code"* of France. Primary was the influence they could obtain *"over the mind and affection of the people"* whose energies they needed to wield.

To create a maritime and insular empire as the obvious counterpoise to the continental power of France by means of the British possession of Gibraltar, Sicily and Malta, Crete and Cyprus should be Great Britain's central aim.

Sicily, which belonged to the Bourbons, whose continental dominions were fallen under the French armies for the second time at the end of 1805, was to Great Britain *"a necessary point"*. Laying aside its fertility, its various products and all the other advantages afforded by its eventual possession, that to cede it to France would have been *"to ensure to her the absolute and impregnable possession of all Italy"*. So far, Sicily and Malta, which the British had occupied from 1800, were the only friendly ports they had in the Mediterranean, unless the precarious tenure of Alexandria in Egypt could be an exemption; therefore, if Great Britain had lost those two fundamental positions, the Mediterranean would be effectually closed to her, and the frontiers of the French empire would *"be not the coasts of Europe alone, but the Euphrates and the Atlantic ocean"*.

Sicily was then the *"boundary"* at which to stop the triumphs of France. Even not manifestly overrunning the king of the island, the British government had, in Leckie's opinion, to hold it firm *"until such opportunities occur as to justify the enlargement of our views"*. It was necessary to interfere in the political balance of Sicily and operate a reform in the Sicilian government, so that Britain could strengthen her position in the Mediterranean. *"The revenues of that island will then probably pay the expense of its maintenance and defence, while the population may be useful to serve either by sea or land; the measure will increase the number of our partisans in Italy, while the Greeks islanders will wait in anxious expectation for us as deliverers"*. This measure could prevent French influence in Asia Minor.

In fact, the Eastern conjuncture needed attention. European Turkey was in decline and about to cede to the blows it could receive either from France or Russia. A partition treaty was an event to be shortly expected. Therefore, to prevent France from getting a footing in Turkey, a partition treaty of the European part of it between Austria and Russia should be encouraged, while Britain should follow up the strategy of the insular empire, leaving the continent to her allies. In the circumstances in which Europe was involved, *"no other line of conduct therefore is left to us but that of occupying those insulated points as we have above hinted"*.

In order to pursue the plan of an insular empire, as Leckie explained to his friend John Moore in a letter dated Gibraltar, August 1807, fundamental was the role to be played by the island of Crete. This, as well as Sicily, was a point of highest importance to Great Britain: it shut in the Aegean Sea on the south, and covered the approaches to Egypt. The soil was fertile and well cultivated; and *“though under the yoke of Turkey, the superior activity of the people makes the state of the country less languishing than that of Sicily”*. Moreover, as the property and person of every individual would be secured, and a strict distributive justice established, Crete would have created a model to the Greeks from every quarter, who would have increased its population. The richer Greeks from Smyrna, Salonika and Constantinople would have brought their capital and their ships. *“Crete, well administered, would probably pay its own expenses; it would be a depot of commerce for Egypt and Syria, and as its population would increase with its prosperity, it would not only put at our disposal a number of seamen, [...], but the people by degrees might be induced to enter into our service, [...]. The island might in a short time be able to furnish about twelve thousand men”*.

Cyprus was rather larger than Crete, less mountainous, more fertile, it had no good ports, but several bays with anchorage, and its vicinity to the coasts of Syria rendered it of the highest consequence for British communications overland with Bussora. Most of all, the consequences of its falling in the hands of France would have doubtless been severely felt by the East India Company.

Therefore, to sum up, these were the advantages resulting from *Britannizing* Crete and Cyprus: *“1st. The position of them, on which depends the destiny of Egypt; 2nd. A population inclined both to commerce and war, hence a disposable force in these seas; 3rd. A barrier to France and Russia in those points where we are most jealous or vulnerable; 4th. Resources in the above countries, sufficient for the disbursements of their respective governments”*.

Furthermore, erecting the Greeks into a free state, under the British protection, was a necessary measure. Since the French were so powerful in Europe and would have tried to expand their influence in the East, this step of forming a secondary maritime and military power between the two continents could be able to interrupt the continuity of French influence from Europe into Asia. *“The existence of such a state would disturb their machinations in Asia Minor, and prevent them from laying the foundation of a power, which, by extending gradually to Persia, may fully obviate all the difficulties [...] in their intended march to India”*.

4. From ‘chimerical theories’ to ‘political workshops’.

What comes out from Leckie’s planning of an insular strategy, to be adopted by British government in the Mediterranean, is the crucial role of that sea, considered as a middle area between the British political and economic

interests in the southern and insular part of Europe and in the eastern provinces of the empire.

“In the present condition of the world”, Leckie wrote, “two distinct figures are to be observed; the northern and western parts of the old continent are evidently under the influence of the enemy, while the southern and all islands may be considered as under that of Britain”. The only field of contention was therefore in the islands of Mediterranean, in Persia, and on the frontiers of India. The possession of Mediterranean islands would have checked the French power in Asia, the coast of Syria would have been under Britain’s eye, “and the desert of Gaza impassable to the French armies. We should raise a power in opposition to France in that part of the world, and should save Egypt and Africa from a Vandal invasion”.

Even before he submitted his plans to British ministers, Leckie seemed already well aware of the objections which could naturally be made to their adoptions. However, British government rejected both Leckie’s plan on Sicily and that regarding the Greek islands, and their instrumental role aiming at the protection of the eastern colonies. Leckie seemed always well aware of the objections which could naturally be made to their adoptions.

The main argument was that the British Isles, for their extent and population, could not furnish troops sufficient to cover a great territorial increase, which would have also created a huge addition to British expenses. Nonetheless, though Britain had already a great demand for men to defend her East and West Indian territories, to equip her navy, and an additional drain was necessary for the Cape of Good Hope and her enterprises at Buenos Aires, Leckie was confident that the new insular provinces would have also furnished more men than was necessary for their defence. Another primary objection to the project of occupying these islands was founded on the real or supposed jealousy of Russia. However, in Leckie’s opinion, this great but declining power was not in the situation to oppose Great Britain and her insular aggrandizement, first of all from an economic point of view.

However, in those years, British ministers continued to ignore Leckie’s analysis that islands were the only basis to their power and to make their natural maritime superiority only a means of pursuing their manoeuvres in Europe, calling the insular strategy theoretical and Leckie himself a chimerical theorist.

Yet, these theories found a renewed echo by 1811. At the beginning of that year, Lord Wellesley, the Foreign Secretary of Perceval ministry, offered to Lord William C. Bentinck a special Sicilian mission. His arrival at Palermo, in that summer, as Commander-in-chief and Plenipotentiary Minister, sanctioned for Sicily the beginning of a new phase, which in 1812 led to the Sicilian Constitution, based on the British model. Mediterranean islands (Sicily, Malta, the Ionian Islands) gradually entered a new perspective within Great Britain’s

foreign policy, which focused on them as real and fundamental 'constitutional workshops' where British government could try out their future colonial system.

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