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Corsica Bulltinu

March 2009

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SITES FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

Liz Casanova's new site about
Corsica
Renée Blom's website
Terra Corsa - Nino de
Sonneville's Corsica music site
Materia Scritta - publisher of
Caroline Bithell's book
Tempus Fugit - Corsican music
site

-/-

Dear Dermot,



Welcome to the March 2009 edition of Corsica Bulltinu!

Have you ever wondered why Corsica's coastline is so unspoilt? I guess there are a number of reasons, but in her article about Corsica's historic coastal defences below, Liz Casanova (who sent us the lovely picture above) gives us a fresh and interesting perspective.

This issue continues with the second part of Jean Casta's fascinating and controversial article about Corsica's future. It includes a surprising suggestion regarding Corsica's rail network. Next up, we have Nino de Sonneville's review of Caroline Bithell's new book in English about Corsican music.

To end, we have a brief article by Julia Gasper about that intriguing and, some would say, disreputable character King Theodore. Julia's book about him is published in French by Materia Scritta (Calvi) later this year.

Enjoy Corsica Bulltinu!

Mac

Don't shut this door!



Jean-Francois Bernardini's inspirational poem *Ne Fermez pas La Porte* (Don't shut the door), which you can hear on I Muvrini's mould-breaking album *I Muvrini à Bercy* has moved many people, but I wonder if the Corsican author realised its international potential when he first wrote it?

His words now form the focus of a graphic art project that was created in

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The Netherlands last month by Dutch artist [Renée Blom](#). The poem, in French and Dutch, appears on the elegant glass doors (see photo above) of the De Meervaart theatre in Amsterdam, and the text was officially unveiled by Jean-Francois Bernardini himself when he came to the city for a recent concert.

Renée Blom considers Bernardini's words to be an inspiration for people from different cultural and ethnical background to live in harmony with each other. I agree with her. But I bet that lobby gets seriously draughty.

Resisting Invaders through the Centuries

By Liz Casanova*

First time visitors may find the clear turquoise beaches in Corsica not unlike those found in the Caribbean. A quick review of the island's tumultuous past reveals how so many beaches in Corsica and other Mediterranean islands have managed to remain wild and unspoiled to this day.

Pirate Attacks

From the 8th century on, Moors from North Africa terrorized the local population, plundering and even capturing some of the islanders as slaves. The names of the villages Campomoro, Morsiglia and Morosaglia are a testimony to a time when the Moors occupied parts of Corsica, some 500 years before the Saracens began to raid the coastal areas in the 15th century.

Starting in the year 1530, after a period of political struggle for control of Corsica and internal conflicts between peasants and their feudal lords, the Genoese bank of St. George

began to build, all along the coastline and within sight of each other, a chain of watchtowers, in an attempt to protect the population from the attacks that had plagued the island since the beginning of time. The Genoese also built massive fortifications in Bonifacio, Calvi, Bastia, Saint-Florent, Ajaccio and Porto-Vecchio.

Guards stationed inside each tower kept constant vigilance to alert the population of any impending danger. As soon as a pirate ship was spotted in the distance, the watchmen would light a bonfire on the tower platform, allowing the inhabitants to flee inland or prepare for battle. The next closest tower would light a fire as well and in this manner, the towers formed a surveillance system that alerted the entire island in one hour.

Unfortunately, this didn't stop Saracen pirates from landing on the island, destroying villages and killing the inhabitants while taking some of them as prisoners. (The exhibit inside the tower of Porto depicts illustrations of these terrifying attacks).

Fear of the Sea

Corsicans sought protection from these threats by living as far from the ocean as possible, building villages deep in the mountains and rarely near the beach. Due to the island's rugged coastline and mountainous terrain, unless an enemy ship stationed itself directly in front of a settlement, these villages were partially invisible from the sea.

Traditionally, Corsican families bequeathed land and property located in the interior of the island to their sons while parcels of land near the ocean, considered less desirable and of lesser value, were given to their daughters. (An interesting reversal took place around the 1960s as Corsica became a popular tourist destination and many women suddenly found themselves owners of valuable oceanfront property in a modern world). In Corsica, many of the homes and buildings that are now located near the ocean were built after the Second World War.

il corno marino

In addition to the smoke signals from the watchtowers, those who lived near the ocean blew on conch shells to quickly alert their neighbours of any potential threats. At the first sign of danger, a watchman would sound the alarm and while women and children escaped to the mountains, the men would prepare for battle. The "sea horn" was also used by Corsicans as a call to battle and a symbol of national pride and defiance against Genoa and Pisa.

This fact is illustrated by an incident that took place in 1729 while Corsica was still under Genoa's control and some angry peasants protested against excessive taxes imposed by the Genoese. A group of Genoese soldiers were disarmed, undressed and sent walking to the city of Bastia while Corsican shepherds proudly sounded bells and blew their sea horns calling for a revolt.

To this day, some Corsican families still keep a large sea shell in their home (and know how to blow on it) as evidence of this common ancient practice. (The corno marino was also used in Sardinia, Sicily and mainland Italy).

Fight for Independence

In later years, the sea horn was used to gather combatants from every village, during the time of Pascal Paoli, when Corsica fought for its independence from France. The sound of the sea shell and the church bells was a signal to gather all the peasants from the forests and the mountains and prepare them for battle.

From Cap Corse to Bonifacio a single cry was heard: "*fuori i barbari, fuori i francesi!*" ("Out with the Barbarians", "Out with the French"). This is how a Corsican priest admonished his followers to prepare them to fight against the French prior to the battle of Ponte Novo in 1769, Corsica's final defeat against the French:

"Dear brothers, God is with us! To arms to arms oh Corsicans, let us all be ready to die for Corsica and for the religion of Rome. The French are our enemy who want to take our freedom. Death, death to the French. Exterminate them all! Be brave Corsicans, the king of Sardinia will not abandon us! Stand up! He who kills a Frenchman goes to Paradise!"

Genoese Towers in Modern History

In the 18th century, the Genoese towers were once again used for the military defense of strategic ports as in the case of the Mortella tower of Saint-Florent. In 1794, Horatio Nelson's fleet pummeled the tower with cannon fire from the sea for several days. This battle took place when Pascal Paoli sought assistance from England to free the island from the French. So impressed was Horatio Nelson by the strength of the tower that the British navy ordered the construction of 74 Martello towers (renamed by the British) along the southern coast of England. Martello towers were later installed in other parts of the British Empire as well as in Canada and the United States.

Enduring Legacy

Corsicans' passion and zeal for defending their homeland through the centuries is deeply ingrained in their tradition and national identity. This fact is reflected even in their national anthem, a prayer to the Virgin Mary asking for victory over their enemies.

Their unwavering spirit, coupled with Corsica's secluded beaches, enabled them to overcome an even greater challenge in the 20th century, as we will see in a future article.

Of the 85 towers built by the Genoese only 60 of them remain standing today adorning the landscape of Corsica and reminding us of a glorious and turbulent past.

* Liz Casanova is the author and webmaster of [Corsica Journeys](http://CorsicaJourneys.com), an exciting new website about Corsica

What's the future for Corsica in the Mediterranean region?- Part II



By Jean Casta President of the Association Euro-Méditerranéa(*1)

In the last issue (Corsica Bulltinu - Dec 08) I explained



how Corsica, already cut off from the industrial, commercial and cultural backbone of Northern Europe, has become increasingly marginalised following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Eastwards expansion of the EU. I explained how the island was becoming further isolated because of its unique geography and lack of transport infrastructure.

There is another factor that has been ignored for a long time. Corsica forms a natural part of an extended "backbone of Europe" (as illustrated in the last article) because it is part of southern Europe and the Mediterranean - that's to say it is at the hinge of the continents of Africa and Europe. The island is today at the geo-strategic, geo-economic and human crossroads which will affect its future for the next 20 years. The island

has in its hands the opportunity to equip itself with a true European and Mediterranean ambition which can confer on itself a determinant role in the construction of the Western Mediterranean region.

This ambition, if taken forward, represents a powerful symbol of the will of rapprochement between Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa already shown at the highest level by France's (and Europe's) President, Nicholas Sarkozy.

So Corsica has a choice, not only to promote this ambition in the context of the *Project d'Union pour la Méditerranée*, launched on 13th July last in Paris, but also by placing itself and writing itself into the heart of the *Plan d'Aménagement et de Développement Durable de la Corse (PADDUC)*. This strategic document is currently being debated at the heart of Corsican society to form a backbone, a line of force, a permanent reference point and an indispensable guide to conceive and establish a global policy for the future development of the island.

Looking at them close up, all the big questions which affect the development of the island (the economy, democratic institutions, means of production, agriculture and livestock industries, tourism, transport, energy, environment, protection of the coasts, training and research, cultural identity etc) are also at the heart of the problems facing the future of the Mediterranean. It's essential to consider these in the current and future geopolitical and cultural context of the Western Mediterranean area - our history, geography and economics demands it.

Current events also demand a more Western Mediterranean view. The crisis that we are experiencing today isn't just a financial crisis with all its consequences, and the disastrous economic and social consequences, especially for the less well-off. It is first, and fundamentally, a crisis of moral conscience and human values which are collapsing under the weight of racketeering, speculation and the irresistible temptation to bring in huge profits. We are faced with a kind of crisis of civilisation.

To open up to the Mediterranean, on the other hand, is to try and regain the classical peak of brotherhood and solidarity. It's the universal role of the Mediterranean, the *Mare Nostrum*, this engine for making civilisation. It's the only force that can oppose the current deluge of problems. The Mediterranean possesses this communicating force, this capacity for meeting, for dialogue, for bringing about exchanges for more favourable development through cultural closeness.

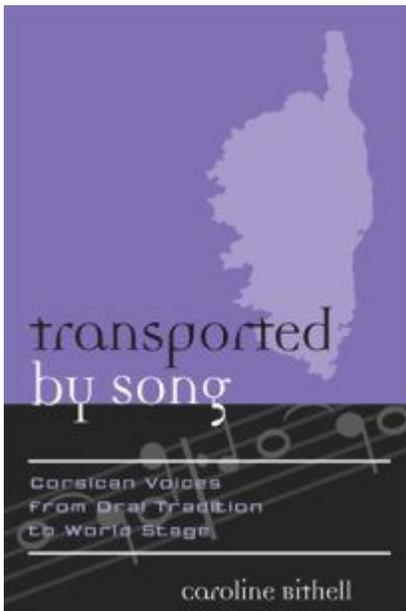
The Corsica of tomorrow must build itself within this widening of the political spectrum. It won't find peace and stability unless it becomes a participant in this movement, that's to say in renouncing its isolation but without losing its roots and its identity. This is a priority. It should get on with it immediately and translate this, using PADDUC, into structural, concrete and symbolic projects for bringing together the north and south banks of the Mediterranean as proposed by the Association euro-méditerranéa¹ thanks largely to a north-south combined transport axis (sea and rail) across Corsica and Sardinia and destined to assure one more connection to the south with Tunisia (see map).

It's a vital necessity for the future of the island. A Corsica that is withdrawn into itself will be a Corsica that's harder, less human, poorer, weaker and older. A Corsica that is open will be a Corsica that is more just, richer, stronger, younger, more modern and more tolerant.

It is down to the political forces of Corsica, the non-Government organisations and to everyone amongst us to promote this new vision of the future of the island in order to build together a new place of democracy, citizenship, tolerance and solidarity. In other words, new hope.

*1 The Association euro-Méditerranéa is a member of the non-Governmental Organisation Euromed, and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures.

New Book: Transported by song - by Caroline Bithell



Review by Nino de Sonnevile

I have often wondered why Corsican music can evoke so much emotion in the hearts of non-Corsicans. This book, *Transported by Song*, has given me some answers.

Caroline Bithell has investigated Corsican society and music in depth; focusing particularly on the evolution of musical activity and discourse since 1970.

In this review I will try to give you an impression on this book.

Caroline Bithell has researched the most important Corsican groups and their evolution from tiny Corsican villages to the world stage.

Although it is rather academically written, for me it also has an almost encyclopaedic value. She has investigated the various Corsican groups, their beginnings, their ideas and how they rediscovered traditional verses and worked with that material.

She explains - in depth - the differences between the Paghjella and the Terzettu: the paghjella has a certain freedom in stanzas, while the textual stanza used for the terzettu comprises three lines of eleven syllables.

Also, she investigates the subject of 'authentic' versus 'commercial', a discussion that is going on in Corsica as well as in the Netherlands on Internet Forums, some artists being accused of falling into the murky waters of 'betrayal'. Patrizia Gattaceca said in an interview in 1994 "a language evolves, but it is still a language. Song evolves, but it's still the song of a country".

Jean-Francois Bernardini of the Corsican group *I Muvrini*, commented "a song is not born as a traditional song, it becomes traditional in time. Today we are in the process of creating the traditional Corsican music of tomorrow, of three hundred years from now".

The leitmotiv through the book is the power of music to transport. Caroline Bithell tells us about singers who speak about the bodily, emotional and metaphysical dimensions of the experience of polyphonic singing. Jean Sicuarani, member of *A Filetta* speaks of 'the feeling of being transported' while singing polyphony on stage. The audience also experiences a feeling of being transported; an effect of the intense interaction between the singers and the power of the harmonies with the result that you feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

The Riacquistu

In the 1960s, traditional Corsican music seemed doomed to fade away. The 1970s however, brought revival and retraditionalisation, not only in Corsica, but throughout Europe.

In Corsica, the "riacquistu" was closely allied to the nationalist movement. The youth of Corsica felt a sort of renewal in the air, like the spirit of Bob Dylan's *Blowing in the Wind*. Many young people, studying or making a living for themselves on the continent, decided to return, and became active in the revivalist movement.

Canta u Populu Corsu

Canta u Populu Corsu (which translates as "the Corsican people sing") was one of the first groups who shared its dedication to "defending and promoting Corsican language and culture by means of song".

Natale Luciani, one of the original members of *Canta*, speaks of the passion of the group; it felt almost like "a priestly mission". Part of that mission was to return to the rural source of songs.

The group's nationalist allegiances were (and still are) quite obvious on stage. The result was that it became increasingly difficult for them to perform; the mayors of several villages forbade their concerts, accusing the group of 'attempting to impose a political ideology on the audience' or 'disrupting the public order'. A few years later, when I Muvrini started to tour the island, they had the same problems.

The traditional song

Caroline Bithell gives a very detailed description of the various traditional songs of Corsica. Here's a short summary.

The monodic songs: · Voceru - lament for the dead, usually sung by women · Nanne - lullabies · Tribbiera - muleteer's songs · Diparti - songs of departure · Chjam'è rispondi - improvised poetic debate

the polyphonic songs: · Paghjelle · Terzetti · Madrigali

Many of the polyphonic songs have an oral tradition and were never noted. Sometimes a monodic song becomes a Paghjella. During the Victoire de la Musique in 1995 the disc "Tribbiera" by Petru Guelfucci won the award for the best album of the year in the section Traditional Music. Guelfucci describes that the title song "Tribbiera" was originally a monodic song, but he arranged it for polyphonic singing. His idea to do this was that he wanted the music itself to convey the idea of working together.

The Corsican Sound

Polyphonic singing has become emblematic of the Corsican identity. Its intensity seems to vibrate in someone's body and has a direct effect on body and soul.

Dorothy Carrington said, after hearing a paghjella for the first time: "I found a trio of youngish, husky men standing together by the bar, and their song held the noisy drinkers spellbound. The sound was like none I had ever heard before; yet I recognised it as one I had always longed to hear. The three strong voices rose and fell in a sequence of deliberate discords; this rich harsh clashing music was more poignant, by far, than any wailing solos I had heard, even the voceru, so remote and rending that it seemed to issue from the birthpangs of the world".

The ultimate feeling of being transported

I would like to end with a quote from an English gentleman after hearing the popular Corsican group [Tempus Fugit](#). I think this gentleman had experienced the ultimate feeling of being transported by music. He said "I felt transported by whatever it was that they were doing. Very soon after opening their mouths they had taken me to another world, another realm, a place where our ancestors lived, a place of spirit".

'Transported by Song', by Caroline Bithell is published by ScarecrowPress and can be purchased through the [Corsicaholiday.com books page](#).

Stranger Than Fiction - at last, the truth about Corsica's King Theodore

by Julia Gasper

Most of Corsica's visitors will have heard about Pascal Paoli but few know much about King Theodore of Corsica. There are novels about him, none of which can compete with the sheer incredibility of his actual life story.

The first surprising thing about the one and only King that Corsica ever had is that he was not, by birth, a Corsican.

In 1736, when Corsica was fighting for its independence from Genoa, a mysterious person of distinguished appearance landed on its shores at Aleria, bringing supplies and weapons of war for the rebels. He was Theodore, Baron Neuhoff, a German nobleman who had come to Italy a few years earlier using a pseudonym. In April 1736 he was elected and crowned King of Corsica by the rebel leaders. But before the year was out, he had departed and was never to return. Historians have long argued about who exactly Theodore was and where he came from. Why did they choose him? What had he been doing for the past twenty years before he hit the headlines by getting himself elected King?

King Theodore had been a soldier, a spy, an alchemist, and archetypal adventurer, all over Europe, before he became a

revolutionary. He was mixed up with the Jacobites, the Rosicrucians and the freemasons, and had been involved in the great Mississippi financial crash in France in 1720. He was brought up at Versailles and worked with some of the leading ministers of France, Spain and Sweden. His career took him all around the principalities of Germany and Italy, and to Constantinople. Despite his chequered career as an adventurer, he was a very astute observer and analyst of the political scene. His plan for Corsica was not the wild scheme it looked at a glance, but one that was carefully thought out: one in fact that had taken both strategy and economics into account.

Theodore had a complicated family history, and spent his early career in the French and Bavarian armies and his activities included being a spy. His mysterious "lost years" were spent travelling Europe under a series of assumed names, and at one stage he was pursued by the Inquisition.

Eventually, Theodore became involved with the Corsican rebels, and contributed to their struggle. Before Theodore came along, the rebellion had actually failed, and the rebels were on the point of surrendering. After he brought them investment and strategy, their war of independence revived and lasted for another thirty-three years. Neuhoff actually had a genius for getting investment into his schemes and when he became King he tried to put a lot of enlightened ideas into practice: religious toleration, abolition of slavery, government by consent.

While most places in Europe were treating Jews like lepers, Theodore actually invited them to come to Corsica. The real reason his bold experiment failed was that some of the Corsican rebels did not like his avant-garde ideas, nor did they like being ruled by a foreigner. It was not Theodore's fault if the campaign of 1736 failed.

King Theodore died, as he was born, penniless, but although he spent many years in a debtor's prison, his old age was not nearly so gloomy as has been made out. He organized the inmates of the prison to protest about their conditions, and as a result a whole new prison was built. To the last, he went on having adventures, meeting extraordinary people and sailing on expeditions to the Mediterranean. Many of the myths about him are false, and the truth in every case is surprising.

Theodore von Neuhoff, Roi de Corse, by Julia Gasper, is being published in French by the publisher [Materia Scritta \(Calvi\)](#) later this year.

I hope as always that you have enjoyed this Bulltinu. Many thanks to Liz Casanova, Nino de Sonnevile, Jean Casta and Julia Gasper for their excellent contributions.

If you have any comments to make regarding any of the issues raised in this newsletter, don't forget that you can air your views on our popular discussion forum [Corsica Lista](#).

As always, I am always looking for interesting articles and pictures about Corsica. So if you have an idea, a photo, or even a poem that you think would appeal to Corsica Bulltinu's readers (1834 of them last time I counted), do please contact me (mac @ corsicaholiday.com). The next edition of Corsica Bulltinu will appear on March 15th - when I will be in Corsica. I hope to meet some of you then.

Till then, I hope the global financial problems haven't been biting you too hard - let's hope for a better 2009.

Kind Regards,

Mac

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