

CALATAFIMI

Angus Campbell has lived in Calatafimi for many years, after retiring from a career in the field of advertising in Rome and London. His wife comes from a long-established Calatafimi family. He has made many translations from the Italian.

Calatafimi

BEHIND THE STONE WALLS
OF A SICILIAN TOWN

by
Angus Campbell

dln

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For Caterina

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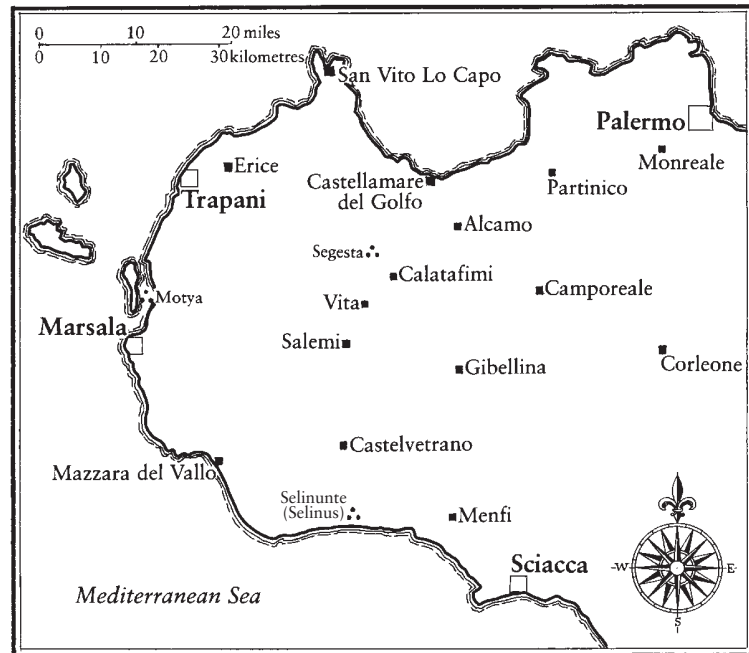
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Introduction



Western Sicily

When I told you recently that I was semi-retiring from Rome to the town of Calatafimi in this solitary corner of western Sicily, you were moved to ask me, from comfortable Kensington and somewhat peremptorily, the equivalent of ‘What the hell do you think you are doing? Perhaps you might consider letting me know.’

Whether I’ll be able to explain it satisfactorily, you will have to judge – as I’m quite sure you will. After stumbling from my normal Roman daylight into this sheltered spot, and my eyes becoming gradually used to the unusual light, I began to pick out some of the details and was more and more intrigued with the place. This attempt at explaining why I like what slowly emerged has generally delighted me, apart from a recurring irritation as it immediately became clear that Calatafimi inspires an utter lack of interest in the vast majority of those who accidentally run across it. Which put my back up. Uninvited, I felt drawn to its defence and I started peeling off some of the camouflage of ordinariness that makes the place seem so unnoteworthy. We share certain interests, so what follows will naturally be tipped in their favour, but you will also have to put up with the odd chunk of my daily life. Your fault: after all, you did ask me what I thought I was doing here.

Chosen from many, here are two bland examples of the complete lack of interest that my new home inspires.

After a very short visit to Sicily in the mid-nineteenth century, pompous old Vicomte de Marcellus, ‘ancien Ministre plénipotentiaire’ (French Ambassador to the Court at St James under George IV, at one point in his fat way through life, though his claim to fame was his part in securing the Venus de Milo for the French nation), dismisses the town and, initially, his generous host the priest Saccaro, too:¹

Calatafimi n’a rien de curieux que son etymologie...

and he goes on to quote Dante with regard to its citizens:

Non raggioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa.

In other words Calatafimi has a quaint name that might intrigue us, but its inhabitants are unworthy of our consideration.²

And in his quite excellent *Companion Guide to Sicily*, Raleigh Trevelyan writes:³

To Italians the name Calatafimi will forever be associated with the first victory of Garibaldi's Thousand over the Bourbons on May 15 1860. In fact the actual battle took place on the height opposite this otherwise rather insignificant little town...

I have now fully convinced myself that Calatafimi is not insignificant and have taken heart from what that exquisite scrutinizer of locality Gilbert White wrote in the Advertisement to his *Natural History & Antiquities of Selborne*:

If stationary men would pay some attention to the districts on which they reside, and would publish their thoughts respecting the objects that surround them, from such materials might be drawn the most complete county histories...

In much humbler vein, I have been paying some attention to the district on which I reside.

Certainly Calatafimi will not wring gasps of astonishment from sophisticated globe-trotters or bowl them over with a savage magnificence, nor will it inspire intricate scholarly study by meticulous academics concerning its vital contribution to Sicily's tightly woven history; and Trevelyan was probably right in describing the outward appearance of the town as little and rather insignificant. But he did not have the time I have to get behind the camouflage and scratch at the apparently uninviting surface...

The place has rapidly metamorphosed me into a chicken. And since chickens scrape the ground at random in the ever-optimistic belief that they will uncover scraps to eat, what follows is the result of episodic scratching in hard though fertile ground that, thanks to its apparent insignificance, has managed to avoid the attention of resident, neighbouring, or passing fowls and has therefore been left alone to do what it had to do for a very long time.

One answer to your question, then, is that I have been scratching and pecking.

I

From Contrada San Giovanni into Calatafimi

You have of course met, either in Rome or London, some of the people who live here in this family hamlet of San Giovanni outside the small Sicilian town of Calatafimi, but you insist you are at a loss to know why I came here or what makes me stay. There is no straightforward answer, though ungoverned circumstances, as always, played a part. So I suppose I do have a task on my hands to explain myself, unless I can stir your settled urban spirit sufficiently to entice you out here to discover for yourself. I had better begin simply by giving you some bearings.

Caterina and I are in the west of Sicily in the Province of Trapani, the proud owners of an unencumbered view of the valley below the large windows of our small house, which is built over the stables of what was once a medium-sized Sicilian country house that was humbled, you may recall, in the earthquake of 1968. It stands halfway up a hill that gives it a commanding view across the valley which divides the family hamlet – resurrected from the ruins of the old building – from the small agricultural town of Calatafimi, which is unknown to the rest of the world though drummed into the minds of all Italian schoolchildren as the theatre of Garibaldi's first victory over the Bourbon troops of Naples in 1860 on his triumphant march to forge the unification of Italy. It is also the nearest town to the superb temple, the dramatic amphitheatre and the urban ruins that constitute all that remains of the forgotten power that was Segesta, a site which has enthralled so many centuries of visitors since it was allegedly founded by the tired remnants of Aeneas' followers during their long flight from the destruction of Troy and on their way towards the founding of Rome. The few outsiders who came to these parts usually did so to see the temple, and they always seemed to be *en route* to their next port of call. That has fortunately left this part of Sicily relatively intact.

Calatafimi looks beautiful from this distance across the valley, pasted onto the hillside about five kilometres away with a Cézanne-like aggregate attractiveness that is not appreciable when you walk its steep narrow streets: I often wonder what Cézanne's villages were really like before he painted their bones in his own image. Calatafimi is not beautiful when you get there, but I react to it instinctively because it does not beckon. It has a certain private dignity, although it does not vaunt the eye-catching architecture of some of its neighbours, and much that is beautiful and interesting has been more or less wilfully neglected or hidden. Like all southern Italian towns it has a rich local history, jealously guarded and viciously defended by a long line of local historians that still flourishes. Also, being the nearest town to the ruins of Segesta, it was for centuries on the agenda of those foreign eminences who occasionally set their well-shod feet in the town: *en passant*, they left revealing glimpses of Segesta, Calatafimi and themselves. I find myself very much in sympathy with the place, partly I suppose because it does not attract attention, as I've said, and so becomes a personal discovery, and partly because a little trowel work is rewarding: you will be surprised at some of the things that turn up.

From these windows, the town is often caught in what Sicilians with their innate sense of poetry call an *occhio di sole*, an 'eye of sunlight'. Since it clings to a hill to the north of here, with taller hills behind, lower ones in front and nothing to the east and west, the sun often gazes at it drowsily in the morning and beams at it benignly in the evening while the surrounding country is in the dark. And it does look beautiful. If dark storms move in and the harsh Sicilian climate concedes some rain, the intervening valley enjoys far more than its fair share of rainbows – often two gory slashes at a time. Which brings painting to mind again: looking around here you realize that the trees outlined on the middle-distance ridges of *quattrocento* paintings are not as naively large as they appear to be: they are actually like that. There is no need for you to point out I could have seen that anywhere. But this undisturbed countryside makes it easier to see when you look. And anyway, that would never occur to you in London, would it?

All that is to be seen of the ruins of Segesta from our windows is the suggestion of a tiny mediaeval castle on the top of Monte Barbaro about ten kilometres off, which from here is so small that it tells you nothing of the wealth of Greekness on the other side of the hill.

The temple and the theatre are obscured from view, but you can feel them somehow even from here. Further down in the valley, on the road towards Calatafimi, the temple will draw majestically into view round a corner, only to slip away round the next. However, the theatre will stay hidden.

To the left, on top of a hill well before Monte Barbaro, you cannot help seeing the monument that shelters the remains of those who fell on both sides during Garibaldi's famous battle of Calatafimi in 1860: the Ossario, full of the contenders' bones. It is an obelisk with a squat base designed by the master Sicilian architect Basile,¹ who made Palermo the centre of Italian *art nouveau* together with Turin and Milan, a rare exception to the bleak north/south divide that plagues the united Italy. Garibaldi's battle here was fought to bring into being. Inside the monument the bones of the fallen are no longer visible because they have been demurely bricked-up, and there is a dusty visitors' book that is just occasionally signed by lacklustre schoolchildren. But at night it is lit up and stands out as an incongruous, blazing exclamation mark in the indifferent rural darkness.

On the other side of the valley, to the right, sprawls the unprepossessing Pantano Municipal Water Works. It looks like an untidy medium-sized farmhouse with more than the usual number of shabby outhouses; but it is from here that Calatafimi is supplied with water. It was private property until quite recently, and the presence of water inevitably attracted litigation and attempts at regulation over the centuries. I have some interesting examples going back to the sixteenth century, which I shall almost certainly impose on you later on. Caterina's family, and other local families of long standing, had land here or hereabouts at various times and documentation still turns up or else has been kept. Documents are never thrown away because they can always be useful in an argument, and arguments are often useful and always entertaining. Some of them will make an appearance later, too. As can be expected from the presence of the Water Works, this area is an exception in normally parched Sicily; and, since our water is held to be particularly tasty, some of the locals in the know still beat a track to our hamlet to fill up their bottles because all Sicilians are connoisseurs of water and have their favourite vintages. We do not advertise it for obvious reasons, but we deny nobody. There was a time long ago, I suppose, when the water in Kensington was subtly different from Chelsea's, and barrels rather than bottles were carted from one village to the other.

The town is about five kilometres away, as I have said, and I tend to walk it occasionally, to the dismay of all because they think, or think other people will think, I am weak in the head. Nobody walks for pleasure in Sicily, and anyone seen doing it is at the least a needy foreigner. But I do it, and I'll tell you about some of the things I pass on my way into the village. The road looks just like any other run-down country road with very little traffic, but it is five kilometres of hidden delights, if you did but know.

The driveway from our hamlet down to the road is long, steep and windy, so I usually turn off it near the beginning and take a shortcut to the right, which was created and is maintained by the dogs who use it daily as they roar down to the road to bark wildly, if quite ineffectually, at Nicola, the neighbouring shepherd, and his dogs as he leads his sheep off to pasture, guiding them with little masonic cries that are quite comprehensible to the sheep and his dogs but infuriate ours and intrigue us. Our brave dogs wish us to believe they are defending us, but they really just want a sniff at his ones, many of which are their close relations – although parentage does not seem to be an inhibiting factor in canine aggression or sexuality. All dogs and most people are closely related in this neck of the woods, which gives inspiration to some people with awesome memories and of many winters to dominate conversations about how exactly one family is related to another through the cadet branch of a third, fourth or fifth – who, like the mediaeval chroniclers (and even South Sea Islanders), can and do trace the family histories of the whole community back countless generations almost to the beginning of time. The canine equivalent is barking and sniffing.

This shortcut means I don't go past a burrow, den or sett (which is it?) of a couple of porcupines² further down the driveway. These animals are so shy they don't normally come out at full moon, though often the dogs find them at night and the noise is considerable. When cornered by hostile animals, shyness deserts them: they turn their back on their foes and rattle their quills magnificently as a sign and siren of aggression and, if this does not have the desired effect, they charge their attackers vigorously in reverse and pierce them multiply. That had a devastating effect on one of our dogs recently. Around midnight it scratched wretchedly at the door with its body full of quills. A search party was mounted which had no difficulty in getting to the scene of the encounter as the rattling porcupine was now surrounded by the other baying but completely thwarted

dogs. What could they do against this rattling thing that stuck spears in them if they got too near? I imagine you, who are militarily inclined, might theorize about how a small, well-trained and perfectly equipped force can easily decimate an undisciplined horde – something on the lines of the Roman legions or the British army surrounded by natives – but, be that as it may, the canine horde was no match for the lone rattler. The burrow/den/sett is evident to all, self-confident enough to dispense with camouflage or sentries. And yet they are afraid to come out in the full moon.

Anyway, when I walk into the village, I take this shortcut and as I get onto the road below the house I am immediately faced on the other side by a bee farm, though 'farm' may be too high-sounding a word for a small patch of land with a tool-shed and about twenty hives on it. The land belongs to a family with an agricultural equipment shop in the town, and so we do not see a lot of them except when the demands of this, their secondary calling, dress them in most un-Sicilian masks and white overalls as they look after their crop of insects. It is mooted that some eucalyptus trees nearby may be why the hives were sited there, but bee-keeping is a centuries-old occupation on the island (the Sicilian Hyblea honey is mentioned in Shakespeare³ and has been compared to the legendary Greek Hymettus honey), and a lot of people keep bees in the area. If they were placed there for the eucalyptus, which I doubt, there are many other flowers around in profusion, so the bees have quite enough to keep them busy. They come up to us a lot, mostly just buzzing around for nectar, but occasionally there is a restless young queen who takes off in search of a place of her own. These swarms have been strangely slow and indecisive so far, so that we have had ample time to close the windows in case the young royal takes a liking to one of our rooms. Justinian's *Codex* lays down that bees (and strangely enough peacocks) are *feral*, and if they move terrain they change proprietors; but Sicilian custom has it that they can be claimed back within two days of moving.⁴ (I mentioned peacocks because a fair number of them strut around locally in humble, muddy farmyards.) Fire struck at the bee-farm a couple of years ago and some of the hives were burnt, but nobody knows why. Mystery is common currency here and it is most unlikely that what happened will ever become generally known. Another mystery – at least it is for me – is why those superbly painted birds, the bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) who migrate here in the warm months, do not pay more attention to this area

around the hives. They do sail languidly over us in the mornings and evenings, sometimes floating almost motionless in the contrary breeze a few feet from me if I'm quietly lying on the terrace, but during the day they conceal any sort of excitement about the hives in a most ladylike manner. Do you think that, unlike in the dog/porcupine encounter, the massed proletarian bee-troops confound the highly equipped elitist bee-eaters?

A word about the state of the road into town before I take you further down it. Until fairly recently a car would have found it adventurous to negotiate the track: conveyance was by cart, horse, mule, donkey or on foot, depending on the status and mission of the traveller. An idea of how it was can still be had if, instead of turning right at the end of our drive, you turn to the left, away from Calatafimi, and go up the valley towards the small town of Vita: there are deep water ruts and the occasional boulder in a dirt road that is fringed – depending on the season – with wild orchids, asphodel, daisies, dog-roses, irises and other marvels for quite a bit until bad, but welcome, asphalt is reached after about two kilometres. But when going towards town in the other direction, I walk on a road that has had to undergo three regulation surface changes at various points because in its wisdom the Provincial Government decided to build a Proper Road according to the Dictates of the Law. Coming down my shortcut opposite the bee-farm, I get onto a modern asphalt road hemmed in by concrete walls on one side, to stop water (and, with it, earth) seeping out of the hilly fields above. This first phase lasts for a few hundred smooth metres, until other legal dictates gain sway and the surface turns into dirt – rock-chips compounded with dirt, but dirt none the less. The reason for this essential change is that asphalt cannot by Provincial Law be used in the vicinity of rivers because of the danger of pollution, although this doesn't seem to pose problems elsewhere in the district. The 'river' in question is the Pantano, but, since the historic springs were converted into the Municipal Water Works, there is really no river at all, except perhaps a flash torrent after a rare rainstorm. Doubt about the existence of the river seems to have been registered by the Provincial Government because, after about two hundred metres, the rock-chip/dirt road turns into concrete. Both these surfaces are, of course, legal, but they have different characteristics. The rock-chip/dirt road deteriorates in next to no time (especially as it is on an incline) and becomes very, very bumpy. It requires continuous attention from an excellent road-

mender who will patiently and philosophically discuss his being called out to patch it up all the time. The concrete part, though it works almost like asphalt, is less interesting than the dirt section and unfortunately creates no work for our philosophical road-mender.

This civil engineering cocktail must surely have been the result of a Provincial Cabinet split and a hastily arrived at compromise. It is no exaggeration to say that politics and controversy worm themselves into every fibre of Italian life and especially into highly unimportant local issues in the south. Perhaps the road-mender was a relation of one of the leaders of the dirt faction and the other side had cousins in cement? After another hundred metres or so, however, the dried-up river-bed recedes to a safe distance, and the road reverts to asphalt that continues, albeit full of holes, right up to Calatafimi. A point of minor interest: all along this variegated road runs a major conduit carrying fibre-optical cable across the island. But although we in the hamlet are only metres away, we have no telephone land-lines and we have to use mobiles – *pazienza!* This, then, is how the road is constructed that takes me to the town – with its bees, mules, sheep, laws, cabinet splits, philosophy, water, it also rouses a fine sense of astonishment in me at all the plants and flowers that push up through the fertile soil that flanks it and the nonchalant birds that flutter, float and flash overhead.

To continue with my walk: a little further down the road from the bee-farm, and early in the rock-chip/dirt section, there is the establishment of Nicola, our nearest shepherd. Your romantic pastoral thoughts would be somewhat blunted by the absolutely genuine smell of the place, and the wrecks of cars and discarded washing-machines that always seem to accumulate in the countryside. There must be a niche market for these wrecks if Caterina's brother Paolo, as you know a respected lawyer, can exert such energy in searching out motors from old washing-machines for the contraptions he makes for slicing the quartz and jasper pebbles that he finds on the shores to the south of here, or if Caterina's father, retired judge that he is, can buy up any old Citroën of a given type and strip it of its spare parts to succour his own much-loved but ailing automobile. The countryside is beautiful despite these occasional wrecks, which anyway soon disappear under the exuberant vegetation. The shepherding business flourishes and Nicola, the heir to a long line of shepherds, is a daily part of our lives. He takes a lot of our puppies, which regularly get killed chasing the wheels of the few cars that

pass. Those that survive are working animals, and that can make it a noisy affair to walk past; a pseudo-aggressive stance, however, induces cringing – something that has been noted by local politicians. In the morning the sheep, hundreds of them, have to be milked: they congregate outside a large shed and enter one by one; one by one they come out of a small hole in the wall at the other end, hopefully feeling lighter and happier; and when they have all been harvested of their milk (which is collected later by an outlandish milk-tanker) they are taken off to the daily grind of munching any greenish vegetation that can be found on the lands they are allowed to visit. From a distance they look like a scattering of white rocks because munching is a slow, almost stationary business. People who work the land look on shepherding as a life sentence, as sheep have to munch every day, come what may.

On Sundays, if the vegetation at the time of the year is green enough, if Nicola has the urge and if the sheep have given up good milk, ricotta or cottage-cheese is made. The operation would curdle the insides of any committed EU bureaucrat because Nicola, like his peers, does not comply with endlessly-debated compromise-ridden edicts but bows to tradition and makes something genuine. The making is almost by invitation and takes place on a Sunday morning. He does not make a lot, so you have to order and, as there is no telephone, the interested parties will gather in due time for an intense chat while the milk is being heated in a cauldron over a wood fire. It is stirred with a reed broom tied half-way up with an obviously old piece of string while the curds begin to separate from the whey; and at just the right temperature, determined by the shepherd plunging his hand into the concoction (stifled *oooh là là's!* can be heard all the way from Brussels), the steaming result is ladled out into a kitchen sieve and is best eaten immediately. Absolutely edict-proof. I suppose Fortnum and Mason might sell you a mild imitation in London if it were expensive enough.

Some sort of modernity has crept into the pastoral life, though: Nicola follows his sheep as far as he can on a motor scooter while listening to music on his walkman. But he still guides them by calling to them, and he counts them in the evening and will spend hours finding strays if any get lost, like good shepherds are supposed to.

Just after Nicola's establishment, the road cuts through what has remained of a *regia trazzera*, literally a royal sheep-track. These quasi-roads were cleared and guaranteed by centuries of so-called

government so that animals could have legal passage through private property, and to this day they cannot be cultivated, even though many landowners try hard to believe they do not exist. The beginning of this one on the left still looks like a road, although it peters out now and then into a narrow path. I often use it, walking back from the town, as another short cut because it leads up to Paolo's house further along the road after the bee-farm. It is not now used by man or beast except perhaps by the odd hunter and it is flanked by large crystalline gypsum rocks that gleam in the sun.⁵ I recently found some beautiful mandrakes growing there and transplanted them to our small garden. Shades of Donne's

Go, and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me, where all past years are,
Or who cleft the Devil's foot.⁶

The Sicilian countryside has that timeless, silent, shrieking mystery about it.

Walking a little bit further down on the rock-chip/dirt section of the road there is, or rather was till very recently, a somewhat bizarre form of alternative agriculture. It was all very secretive because I never saw anybody working the piece of land, which is squeezed between an orange grove and a vineyard. It was a snail farm. The fact that foreigners eat snails has always intrigued but disgusted Anglo-Saxons. However, snail-eating is a normal part of country life. It was a smallish field criss-crossed with black rubber irrigation-tubes that watered lines of vegetation enclosed by protective netting. The water was needed because snails react to rain; the netting was to keep the snails in and gourmet birds out. It was apparent that a fair amount of money had been spent on the scheme, but it does not seem to have worked as the land was ploughed up this year – destined for yet another field of grapes. Perhaps there had been a love affair with a European Union subsidy that was sadly broken off. Who knows? A pity, though no doubt success would have filled the local supermarket with plastic bags of snails, as they still buy some things locally. So people carry on searching for snails in their usual way with their plastic pails, prising the surprised gastropods from the wet vegetation. You can always tell when there has been an autumn shower from the number of abandoned cars along the roadsides.

I seem to remember you liked snails, but *escargots* not these small country ones. They are very good, you know.

Behind the snails, overlooked by rocky cliffs there is a *zubbia*, the name for those deep chasms or craters that are unexpectedly dotted over this part of Sicily. Some of them make you think of falling meteors, but probably their origins are simply volcanic. They are holes, big or small, that do not seem to have been formed by water, although if it rains hard they can become rather dangerous since they collect water very rapidly for later distribution underground. They are usually densely thicketed and a natural haven for birds and rabbits, and therefore attract men with guns, another source of danger. This one has been fenced off recently, presumably for safety reasons, and inside there is thick undergrowth and a tunnel at the bottom, which, so the locals say, leads to the *stazione* bridge over the *fume freddo* (that is the part of the river Crimissus, of classical fame, before it gets to the hot springs and becomes the *fume caldo*, the hot river), on the provincial road to Trapani some kilometres away. When much younger, Caterina's father went down it for about 100 metres, but he stopped when it began to get uncomfortably narrow. I always have a sense of awe when faced by these deep ravines. Strangely enough they are not looked on with any superstition by the country people, though the tunnels are supposed to link up with each other underground.

After the dirt section the road turns into concrete and about half-way into town, scarcely visible on the right and cocooned by palms and cypress trees, stands the house of Margi (which in Arabic means 'full of water'). It is a medium-sized country house and is where Caterina's grandmother was born and where she remembers playing as a child. It is now semi-abandoned and emblematic of what has been happening to almost all the houses and most of the land in the area since the laws of primogeniture were dismantled in 1861 and inheritance became governed by the *legittima*. Under that, all children have equal rights to half of the property, while legacies can discriminate on the other half, the *disponibile*, when – rarely – it may be deemed necessary. Each death in the family means that houses and land are cut up into ever smaller parcels, with abandonment and non-cultivation the inevitable result.⁷ I do not know how many owners Margi has now. Nobody lives in the main house because it belongs to too many people, but one of the owners has built a pre-fabricated chalet on his small bit of the land where he spends week-

ends singing. One of the families that used to sharecrop there has bought out, or come to an agreement with, a few of the heirs and uses nearly all the land for market gardening under plastic greenhouses, producing, among other things, giant strawberries that really taste like strawberries. Nobody in Caterina's extended family takes any interest in the place because it is too complicated and would not be worth the trouble, so it is falling to pieces. Clearly the best solution would be for somebody to buy up all the parcels, but it is an almost impossible feat to get everybody to agree.⁸ Thus, as always in Sicily, the situation is put into a 'wait-and-see' gear while more bits of masonry tumble down. I know you have always been taken by Garibaldi, so you might be interested to know that the litter that carried Garibaldi into Calatafimi in triumph after the battle, which took place just a couple of hundred yards or so away, came from this very house. Not so long ago even this disappeared.

After Margi the road regains its asphaltic respectability and climbs slowly up through orange groves, vineyards and prickly pears, past the sandstone cliff where the brilliantly coloured bee-eaters drill their dirty little burrow-nests, round the corner which momentarily brings the temple of Segesta into astonishing view, only to be obscured again at the next corner by the hill on which the Qal'at or Castle of Calatafimi rests. One has to be careful about the castle: the crenellations that spring to view have nothing to do with the castle itself, but are another manifestation of the Municipal Water Works that I have told you about – the high ground being useful for creating water-distributing pressure.

Before climbing up to the town, one goes over what was intended to be a railway bridge. The narrow-gauge track never carried trains: its building was part of a doggedly firm policy of Mussolini's to keep the idle young of the time in employment. It is in use today, though not as had been planned. The bridge now carries not rails but the road into the town, and nearby another bridge and piece of ex-railway track have become the impressive driveway to an unimpressive farmhouse on the left-hand side of the valley; and there is a tunnel, a hundred metres or so further on to the west, that now houses a flourishing mushroom business. There is also a station house, outwardly in good repair, which, as far as I know, has never been inhabited, no doubt for a myriad of bureaucratic reasons. Although Mussolini's railway never carried trains destined to arrive on time, he might have been mollified to know that much of it is in use.

On the other side, under the bridge that carries the road, there is one of those attractive watering places with animal drinking-troughs that are found in the most unexpected places all over Sicily. This one was used in the past by the women, before the Municipal Water Works got going, for washing and drawing water: they came down the hill from the old part of town under the castle with their washing and their ewers. In the early mornings and late evenings it was also used by the men to water their animals as they went to or came back from the country. Back on the ex-railway bridge, the road now begins to climb up towards the town and in the spring it is lined with intensely blue dwarf irises.⁹ Way up to the left are what remains of the twelfth-century city walls: that is, very little. The locals call them the ‘Saracen walls’ and they enclose what was the oldest part of the town, the Borgo Vecchio, still sometimes called the Arab quarter.

There, you have had some glimpses of the road from our house into Calatafimi. It takes you through fragments of the past, the present and the future, and skirts scenes of stories, some of which sink from memory as quickly as the seasons; but at first sight it is just a rather ill-kempt lane of no particular note except for what fringes it. The country is, to use much-bruised words, startlingly beautiful. It changes colour with the seasons. In the early spring, after the orchids and asphodel, it is mainly yellow with wood sorrel, but it can also be white with four-centimetre-wide white daisies containing intensely yellow centres, which make them look like fried quails’ eggs, interspersed with concentrations of intensely orange-coloured flowers and blotches of blue borage. Guarded by the tall fennel flowers, clumps of all these plants gather together naturally into formal arrays that would conjure a smile from the most demanding of gardeners. In the summer and early autumn, after the corn has been cut and safely stowed away, the colour is brown or burnt yellow as the earth’s rib-cage takes the sun: only the vineyards and olives are left to stagger on in the heat. In winter, green and yellow take over, to be gashed at intervals where the tractor and plough have painted it red-brown – for a few days before it stubbornly reverts to green. You do get to know the dogs along the way: they lead such a boring life that they give you a rapturous welcome, particularly if they are chained. While you walk along, buzzards and swallows, bee-eaters and magpies, and finches and hawks, as well as the odd jay

and hoopoe, peer down on you. Perhaps they also think I am mad to walk, as I am sure you do.

The first times I did the walk, I had a series of encounters, which are now things of the past. One of the earliest was with an elderly man on a mule with his son, two goats (they keep the mule company and anyway cannot be left alone in the country or they would be stolen) and a dog, who stopped me and earnestly enquired about what had happened to my car and whether he could help in any way. Wonderful. I was also often asked whom I ‘belonged to’ and, that established, whether the questioner could be of any help. Sadly, this sort of thing does not happen any more because people now know whom I belong to and that also I have not suffered a breakdown, except perhaps mentally. What is unchanged, however, and involves everyone, whether they use the road on foot, on a mule or in a car, is that everybody always hails everybody else with a wave. Even if they have no idea whom they belong to.

When were you last asked in London whom you belonged to?