



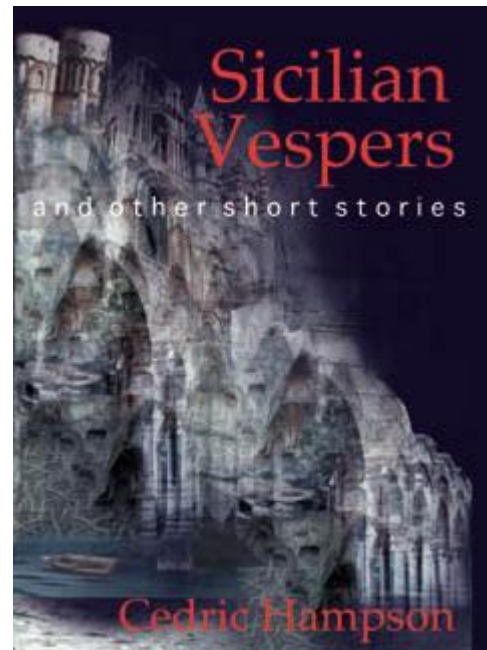
Cedric Hampson AO, QC

Vespertine Vignettes

a review of *Sicilian Vespers* by Cedric Hampson

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The legend of the Sicilian Vespers has formed an important part of Italian history and culture. On Easter Monday of 1282, the citizens of Palermo rose up against their Angevin (French) rulers, ultimately gaining independence for the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. One legend has it that the insurrection began on the stroke of the vesper bell, when a French sergeant molested a Sicilian woman and was fatally stabbed by her husband, and a bloody massacre of the French followed. According to another legend, the Sicilians would hold up a chick-pea and asked anyone whom they suspected of being French, “tell us what this is”; if the suspect could not pronounce *cicirri* in the Sicilian manner, he was slaughtered where he stood.

The historical facts are somewhat more mundane. Rather than a spontaneous uprising sparked off by a random act of vengeance, the insurrection was provoked and funded by the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII, to avert an anticipated Angevin crusade to Constantinople. Yet the Sicilians strongly supported the patriotic uprising against an oppressive French regime, and the legend of the Sicilian Vespers took on a new significance in the mid-19th Century as a calling-cry for Italian nationalism in the lead-up to reunification of the Italian state.

In 1854, Italy’s leading composer, Giuseppe Verdi, wrote the score for the opera *Ivespri Siciliani*, to a libretto based on the legend of the Sicilian Vespers. Italy’s national anthem, composed in 1847 by Michele Novaro to words by the poet Goffredo Maneli, contains the lyrics:

Every trumpet blast
Sounds the Sicilian Vespers.
Let us gather in legions,
Ready to die!
Italy has called!

It is entirely fitting that Cedric Hampson has taken this legend as the name for his most recent publication, an anthology of short stories, following the success of his two novels *Shifting Shadows* and *Cat’s Eye*. The legend of the Sicilian Vespers - a legend based largely in fact, although embellished to create a more compelling narrative - is not unlike the process of authorship which Hampson describes as taking “an irregular piece from the jigsaw of experience and ... fashion[ing] a mosaic into which it smoothly fits”. At the same time, the cultural heritage which has sprung from the legend of the Sicilian Vespers is entirely appropriate to a work of high literary quality.

If Hampson had set out merely to write a book of diverting yarns, the collection which he has produced would easily have satisfied such a modest ambition. Nobody who buys this book as bedtime reading risks the slightest disappointment. The stories are uniformly engaging and entertaining, each of them carrying an unpredictable twist in the tail.

But Hampson, being Hampson, placed no such limit on his aspirations. Whilst many others would have been

satisfied - indeed proud - to have produced such a lively and enjoyable collection of stories, Hampson has done much more than that. *Sicilian Vespers* is literature of the first order. Three features, in particular, stand out.

First, there is the extraordinary diversity of themes and subject-matter. Geographically, the collection moves from small communities in Western and Coastal parts of Queensland, to Brisbane, Melbourne, Paris and Italy; from the farmhouse to the courtroom, from the docks to the racecourse, from a restaurant in Northern Italy to a brothel in Auckland. Stories of murder, fraud, arson, blackmail and race-fixing are interspersed with tales of the supernatural, and narratives which serve as a gentle commentary on domestic life and interpersonal relations.

A second striking feature of Hampson's writing is the wonderful characterisations which he achieves, although deliberately painting on such a small canvass. The sinister Kevin of *On the Road*, the dogged Vic Stanley of *Vic's Last Bet*, the tragic Françoise of *Paris, 1990*, the saintly Father John Caffery of *The Brick*, and the unrepentant trickster Cesare Berlone of *The Joker*, are all rich three-dimensional characters who would grace the pages of any full-scale novel.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, Hampson's literary style demonstrates use of the English language at its very best. Hampson writes with a clarity and precision reminiscent of Alexander Pope, Charles Lamb or G.K. Chesterton, yet in an entirely contemporary vocabulary perfectly attuned both to his own descriptive passages and to the dialogue which he attributes to characters of various types and backgrounds.

The discipline required to write short stories is a rigorous one - the prose equivalent of writing sonnets, or the literary equivalent of engraving cameos. In Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, the Emperor Joseph II says, "Too many notes, my dear Mozart", to which the maestro replies, "It has as many notes as it requires - neither more nor less". Similarly, Hampson's compositions are just as long as they need to be; there is not a word out of place. Take, for example, Hampson's concise description of a police interview in *The Brick*:

"After two hours of exigent exploration Kenzel turned on a tape recorder and with the aid of his notes conducted a business-like question and answer interview in which Rudkin seemed unprompted to bring forth treasures from the reconditory of his mind. Next afternoon Rudkin returned and signed the statement Kenzel had prepared from the taped interview. Only then did Kenzel telephone Father John Caffery who agreed to call at the police station to help with inquiries the police were making into a complaint about events at the college some time back."

There is a temptation amongst lawyers to write about the law, and especially amongst barristers to write about court proceedings. It is a temptation which Hampson largely resists. Of 14 stories, only two are set (wholly or in part) in a courtroom, and those two are cleverly narrated from a very different perspective than the author's. Especially convincing is Hampson's description of a criminal trial, in the story from which the anthology takes its name, *Sicilian Vespers*. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of Maria, an Italian immigrant, through whose eyes it is explained that:

"His [the prisoner's] *avvocato* trundled in: large and fat and red-faced, his black coat and robe tinged green. His goat-hair headdress was an ancient actor's uskin and his smile, as he spoke with [the prisoner], was as false and vile as the *mafioso* he was."

and:

"Only the high priest who was to preside over the ancient ceremony was missing. [Maria] scrutinised his bench and chair set high at one end. A wooden canopy stretched over it. The high altar. ...

"Someone called out and Maria joined the others in standing as a man in a red robe followed a black robed woman through a door behind the altar and took the highest seat. His goat-hair was of a different pattern and his robe was trimmed with white fur; rabbit, perhaps? His narrow face, angular and thrusting with a beak-like nose and long chin, reminded her of a Sicilian puppet."

Cedric Hampson has produced a delightful anthology of stories, which are sure to hold the attention of even the most intransigent devotee of pulp fiction, whilst satisfying the most discriminating reader's yearn for literary quality. Once again, Hampson has demonstrated that his talents as a wordsmith are just as effective in writing fiction as in the courtroom.