

Nelson versus Bronte: Land, Litigation and Local Politics in Sicily, 1799–1860

I

In 1881, the writer Frances Elliot published an account of her recent trip to Sicily. The book, *The Diary of an Idle Woman in Sicily*, was one of a series including Spain and Constantinople, and features her characteristic style which, whether writing about Empedocles, the Norman kings or Garibaldi, is childishly excitable and enthusiastic.¹ The highlight of Elliot's visit — and the experience for which she reserves her greatest enthusiasm — was a stay at the summer home of an English family in the castle of Maniace near the town of Bronte, on the western slopes of Mount Etna. Her hosts were the Duke and Duchess of Bronte, the descendants of Admiral Horatio Nelson, the first Duke of Bronte. In her description of this charming family, Elliot juxtaposes the familiar and domestic with the strange and exotic: 'all so strangely English, yet so foreign — a comfortable mansion, evolved out of a medieval monastery, with that mountain desolation outside'.² Picnics in the countryside are dominated by the looming shadow of Etna, 'like destiny, dominating the storm-clouds', and by encounters with the dark-eyed and 'swarthy' local peasantry. Dinner-time conversations are interrupted by the news that a murderer has rented the nearby farm.³ So greatly was Elliot stimulated by this visit to the Duke and Duchess of Bronte's home that she dedicated her book to her 'friends at Maniace'.

Elliot was neither the first nor the last writer to be fascinated by Bronte. In an island already overburdened with exotic myths and romantic legends, there are few places to rival Bronte. Part of this fascination is due to its location near Mount Etna, whose

appearance perfectly combines the sinister and the sublime: 'that venerable and respectable father of mountains', in Patrick Brydone's words, which reunites 'every beauty and every horror . . . an immense gulph of fire for ever existing in the midst of snows which it has not the power to melt'.⁴ The name of Bronte, moreover, evokes Sicily's classical past; according to Greek mythology, Brontes was one of the Cyclopes who forged thunderbolts and lightning for Zeus.⁵ But, for the nineteenth-century English traveller, at least, the attraction of Bronte was probably more simple: in an era of 'Great Men' it was associated with the greatest of all English heroes, Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson.

Although Horatio Nelson never visited Bronte, for his admirers it was the Graceland of its day. Nelson received the estate, the title of Duke, and a diamond-hilted sword from King Ferdinand IV of Naples as a reward for rescuing the royal family from the French army in 1798, and for assisting in their restoration in Naples in 1799.⁶ In fact, the estate had been neglected by its previous owners, the *ospedale grande e nuovo* (Grand Hospital) of Palermo, the castle at Maniace had been more or less uninhabitable since an earthquake in 1693, and the relationship between the Grand Hospital and the community of Bronte was so troublesome that the Hospital was delighted to relinquish its responsibilities (in return for an annual income of 5600 onze).⁷ Still, estimates of its annual income were confidently put at £3000 per annum and Nelson was delighted both with the gift and by the title.⁸ Thereafter, he signed all correspondence as 'Nelson and Bronte', made plans for converting the castle at Maniace into a home with an English gardener, John Graefer, as manager⁹ and, whilst writing to his wife that he planned to make the estate 'the happiest in Europe', fantasized about retiring there with Lady Hamilton.¹⁰ Nelson enthusiasts were equally excited: an ambitious Cambridge undergraduate, Patrick Brunty — the future father of Emily, Charlotte and Anne — changed his family name to Brontë as a tribute to Nelson. Further afield, Canadian settlers named a new port on Lake Ontario after the estate of the famous admiral.¹¹

For historians of modern Italy, Bronte has a number of different, but no less striking, associations. Nelson, the hero of Trafalgar in England, is a counter-revolutionary villain in Italy. Seen from the perspective of Italian liberalism rather than

English patriotism, Nelson was the man who helped to repress Republican Naples in 1799 and ordered its liberal leader Caracciolo to be hanged from the flagship of the British fleet in Naples. If Nelson's activities in 1799 cast a long shadow over Ferdinand IV's generosity, a bloody rebellion in Bronte sixty years later, and its equally bloody repression, also put Nelson's estate in a more sombre light. In August 1860, shortly after Garibaldi's successful invasion of Sicily, the peasants of Bronte rebelled over the refusal of the town council to implement the new democratic government's land and tax reforms. The long-term cause of the revolt was said to be a conflict between the Duchy of Bronte and the commune over land, and the resulting division of the town's people into 'ducal' and 'communist' (pro-commune) factions. During the administrative upheaval caused by Garibaldi's arrival, the radical section of the 'communist' party, led by the lawyer Niccolò Lombardo, had been largely excluded from political office. In revenge, Lombardo encouraged local peasants to hold a public demonstration over the land issue. Rapidly, however, Lombardo and his supporters lost control of events. The municipal buildings were looted and burned. Around sixteen property owners were dragged from their homes, tortured and brutally killed in what one historian has called an 'orgy of terror'.¹²

The massacre in Bronte was halted by the arrival of Garibaldi's general, Nino Bixio. Yet, far from supporting the peasants' demands for land reform, both Bixio and the democratic leadership in Palermo were merely alarmed by the threat to law and order. Fearful of alienating Sicily's landowners and perhaps also concerned that an attack on an Englishman's property might alienate their British supporters,¹³ the democrats decided to make an example of the Bronte rebels (and of those in neighbouring villages). In a fateful decision, Bixio ordered the immediate execution of five ringleaders; 'the murderers and thieves of Bronte' as he called them in a later proclamation.¹⁴ Hundreds more were rounded up and sent to trial in Catania.

By virtue of its tragic role in the events of 1860, Bronte has acquired a special status as an emblem of the popular struggle against successive generations of oppressive rulers in Sicily. Giovanni Verga's famous novella *Libertà* is an account of the episode, apparently remembered from stories of his childhood.¹⁵ The first historical account of the events of Bronte in 1860, 'Nino

Bixio a Bronte' by Benedetto Radice, was published in 1910.¹⁶ However, it was not until after World War II that the events acquired the significance which they still have today. During the peasant struggles of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and especially after Sicily's abandonment by the Communist Party and the consolidation of the Christian Democrats' grip on power, the blood-curdling events of 1860 made Bronte into a historical symbol of the contemporary Sicilian tragedy, a poignant example of the betrayal of popular aspirations by an uncaring national leadership. For Leonardo Sciascia, the episode at Bronte was the 'skeleton in the cupboard' of Italian liberalism. He republished Radice's 1910 article on Bixio at Bronte and, accusing historians of a 'silent complicity' in the myth which 'shrouded' Garibaldi,¹⁷ encouraged a series of debates and publications relating to the repression.¹⁸ Sciascia was also a scriptwriter on the film: *Bronte. La cronaca d'un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno raccontato* [Bronte. The story of a massacre ignored by the history books], in which the story of Bronte is retold as a morality tale, complete with stoical peasants, sadistic landowners, cynical politicians and with Niccolò Lombardo, the lawyer who incited the peasants to revolt in 1860, as the martyred hero.¹⁹

Historical interest in Bronte has generally built on Radice's early interpretation which saw the events as a betrayal of the Risorgimento. For postwar historians, the revolt at Bronte was proof of the failure of democratic leadership in the Risorgimento, proof that the democrats in 1860 were incapable of controlling the countryside or of winning the support of the peasantry.²⁰ Bronte, for Denis Mack Smith, was an indication of how 'for all their trust in Garibaldi', Sicilian peasants were to find that the democrats of 1860 'were in no sense levellers'.²¹ Others depicted the revolt as an episode in the class struggle, and found evidence of a revolutionary consciousness in the efforts of Lombardo and other radical agitators in Bronte (Luigi Saitta, Carmelo and Silvestro Minissale) to defend peasant rights during 1860.²² Mario Isnenghi gives the events of Bronte a greater significance still; it is at Bronte, according to Isnenghi, that the underlying, and terrifying, story of political repression can be glimpsed behind the 'harmonious fable' of the Risorgimento.²³

In turn, the size of Nelson's Duchy, its history, and its apparent domination of the landscape and people of Bronte, came to symbolize the unchanging feudal past which weighed

so heavily on present society. Modern Sicily's catalogue of problems — political corruption, social and economic instability — have long been attributed to an inability to shed the burdens of feudalism and embrace the economic, social and political freedoms of the modern age. The system of land tenure and the prevailing distribution of land are generally blamed for this economic 'prostration'.²⁴ According to this analysis, agriculture was dominated by great estates (*latifondi*) owned by a mere handful of absentee landlords living lives of privileged ostentation in the grand *palazzi* of Palermo and Naples. Meanwhile, an impoverished peasantry eked out a meagre existence on tiny lots and as labourers on the great estates. And it was this system which prevented the emergence of an independent middle class who would have acted as the standard-bearers of both liberalism and capitalism in Sicily.²⁵ As one of the largest estates in Sicily, covering in 1860 almost half (47.8 per cent)²⁶ of the whole territory of Bronte, and owned by the descendants of an infamous foreign warlord, the Duchy of Bronte appeared to typify the power of Sicilian *latifondo* and the bitter conflicts it gave rise to. Carlo Levi visited Bronte in the early 1950s and wrote movingly of the the violence and poverty which the Duchy had visited on the inhabitants; of the 'spectacle of the most extreme peasant misery' and of 'the children, [who] with faces as beautiful as angels, have stomachs swollen by malaria'. The Duchy was, as he famously remarked, the 'most absurd historical anachronism'.²⁷ Historians echoed this judgement. Francesco Renda described the Duchy in 1950 as an example of 'feudal *prepotenza*' and corruption;²⁸ for Nino Recupero, the Duchy was simply 'the last of the great feudal estates'.²⁹

Caught between the myths and counter-myths of Nelson, the Risorgimento, and the class struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is perhaps not surprising that — beyond its propensity for 'social unrest at any moment of political disturbance'³⁰ — so little is known about Bronte itself. The only recent study, *Comunità rurali della Sicilia moderna*, a 1969 monograph by Gaetano lo Giudice, is a useful source of statistical information but concentrates primarily on the early modern period and on Bronte's economy. We know very little about the nature and sources of the conflict which gave rise to social unrest in Bronte; we also know next to nothing about Nelson's 'feudal estate', its relationship with Bronte's inhabitants and the

structure of power within Bronte itself. For all its celebrity, in other words, we know very little about either the Duchy or the community of Bronte. We know still less about what happened there in the years between King Ferdinand's gift in 1799 and the notorious events of 1860.

This article explores some of the background to the famous revolt in 1860. It makes use of newly released documents from the so-called *Archivio Nelson*, the collection of family and estate papers relating to the Duchy which were sold to the Archivio di Stato in Palermo in the 1980s.³¹ The *Archivio Nelson*, together with government papers in the archives in Palermo and Catania,³² offers crucial insights into the activities of the (usually, British) men and women who ran the Duchy of Bronte and into their relationships with the community of Bronte. These papers make it possible to examine the causes, emergence and nature of a series of disputes between the Duchy and local landowning families, and to assess the impact which these disputes had both on the community as a whole and on the prevailing distribution of land. In so doing, we can trace the local reaction to central government initiatives and, in particular, to the political, legal and economic reforms of the early Restoration period (1815–1848) in Sicily.

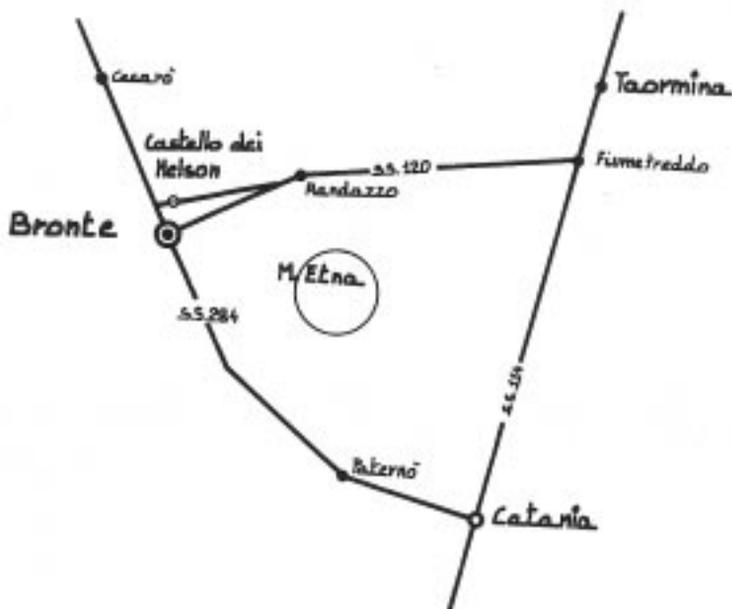
What this study reveals about the experiences of Bronte in the years before Italian unification is perhaps particularly relevant in the light of recent historical research, which offers a different perspective on Italy's 'Southern Question'. This 'new history of the Italian South' challenges perceptions of the South's economic backwardness and stresses instead the varieties of modernization experienced in the lower half of the Italian peninsula and in Sicily.³³ One result has been a shift in emphasis away from images of the South as a single, monolithic entity and towards local studies, towards studies of individual regions, cities and communities. In an attempt to grasp the roots of Southern 'difference' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particular emphasis has been placed on the analysis of conflict within rural communities.³⁴ Arguing against the previous orthodoxy which depicted a society peripheral to, and ignored by, the economic and political transformations of the early nineteenth century, historians have suggested that modernization had a profound impact on Southern rural communities. Indeed, in many communities, the impact of political reform and shifts in the rural economy caused profound tensions, altering the links between

family loyalty, economic ambition and political identity and causing both an upward and a downward mobility which destabilized the power structure in different ways. It was, moreover, in these communities that the reforming efforts of the central government often met their most profound defeat.³⁵ As I will argue in the following pages, it is in this context of community conflict that the events of Bronte in the first half of the nineteenth century can properly be understood.

II

Horatio Nelson's estate at Bronte was certainly large: around 40,000 acres,³⁶ of which 45 per cent was arable land and the rest divided largely between woods and pasture for livestock.³⁷ Incorporating the summit of Mount Etna, 'crater, lava, snows and all',³⁸ these barren lava-fields descended to a high plateau which had not only fertile soil but, as it was drained by the Simeto river, sufficient water for irrigation as well.³⁹ In the northern part of the estate lay the Nebrodi mountain range which, possessing the most extensive forests in Sicily, was a potentially valuable source of timber. At the time of Ferdinand's gift to Nelson, the estate produced grain and livestock. Later in the nineteenth century, it produced wine (marketed under the name 'Nelson and Bronte'), almonds and pistachio nuts. The traditional centre of the estate was the castle (or abbey) at Maniace, reputedly built by the Byzantine General, George Maniace, in the eleventh century to commemorate his defeat of the Saracens. The castle stood in a picturesque spot on a large rock overlooking the Saracena river, a tributary of the Simeto, and with a view of Etna in the distance.⁴⁰

Until the abolition of feudalism by the Sicilian parliament in 1812, the gift to Nelson also included baronial jurisdiction over Bronte, a town of 9000 inhabitants some twelve kilometres from the castle at Maniace.⁴¹ In common with many Sicilian communities of its size in the early nineteenth century, the town of Bronte was run-down and isolated: 'a pile of rude houses surrounded by lava beds', according to one disappointed British traveller in the 1830s.⁴² 'The privations and inconveniences of Bronte', the Duchy's agent Bryant Barrett wrote in 1817, 'are to us even who have seen various foreign countries almost beyond



Map 1
Bronte and the 'castello dei Nelson' (Maniace)

sufferance.⁴³ The immediate road to Catania was 'nothing but lava and frightful precipices'.⁴⁴ Bronte was badly hit by the crisis in Sicilian agriculture and by the fall in agricultural prices after 1815. A series of natural disasters, a cholera outbreak in 1837, regular earthquakes and major volcanic eruptions, notably one in 1832 which came perilously close to the town, also damaged Bronte's economy.⁴⁵ Bronte was the scene of bloody skirmishes between pro- and anti-government forces during the revolution and civil war in 1820.⁴⁶ The region was known to be unhealthy 'at the best of times' with few or no medical facilities.⁴⁷ Malaria, 'pestilence' caused by the rivers, a sparse diet and an extreme climate added to the daily discomfort.⁴⁸

Although Bronte had grown significantly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by the early nineteenth century the most visible sign of population growth was an increase in the pressure on land and a corresponding growth in pauperism, crime and popular unrest. Indeed, what Bryant Barrett found most shocking about Bronte was the poverty of its inhabitants.

‘The filth and misery of the people is beyond description,’ he wrote in July 1817, ‘the peasants all crowd to the town which is a good cause of their poverty and misery . . . and their squalid filth and misery . . . is beyond conception.’⁴⁹ The peasant diet consisted of bad quality bread, a little cheese and a few vegetables; they rarely ate meat or drank wine.⁵⁰ While this poverty was partly the result of what Barrett called the ‘rapacity of corn-dealers’ (i.e. those who controlled the terms of trade in Bronte) and the lack of opportunities for trade, by far the most important single cause was the distribution of land. Lo Giudice estimates that 9.5 per cent of landowners in Bronte possessed over three-quarters of its productive wealth; the remaining quarter was shared by the rest of the population. Small landholdings made up just 26 per cent of the land, most of which was divided (‘pulverized’) into tiny landholdings of little or no commercial value.⁵¹

Lo Giudice divides the well-off in early nineteenth-century Bronte into a ‘provincial’ nobility, the clergy and a ‘Third Estate’ of estate officials, lawyers (of whom there were ‘upwards of 80’, according to Barrett), notaries and doctors.⁵² The nobility and clergy were sometimes substantial landowners in their own right, and all had profited from the previous neglect of the estate by the Grand Hospital.

According to the Duchy’s rent books, some were ‘quit rentiers’ (*censuari*), renting farms (*masserie*) cheaply on long leases. Two men in particular — Don Niccolò Spitalieri and Baron Vincenzo Meli (‘considered the principal person in Bronte’, according to one observer and, by another, an ‘extorter’ who owed money to the estate)⁵³ — had acquired large numbers of lifetime leases during the 1780s and 1790s.⁵⁴ Niccolò Spitalieri and others had also acted as *gabellotti* for the Grand Hospital, renting large areas of the estate in order to let to others.⁵⁵ The same families also rented the larger and often more valuable *feudi* — located on the fertile plateau and on the wooded side of the Saracena river — on six-year leases. For example, at around the time of Ferdinando’s gift to Nelson, another Baron Meli, Giuseppe, took the lease on *feudo* Semantili, two members of the Minissale family (Don Francesco and Don Giuseppe) rented the *feudi* of Petrosino and Grappidà and Pezzo, while another Minissale, Don Gennaro, had obtained (‘fraudulently’ according to John Graefer) part of the lease on the Petrocelli *feudo*.⁵⁶ Although by the early 1820s

heirs took little interest in the place. When Horatio Nelson died in 1805, his elder brother, the Reverend William and First Earl Nelson, inherited the estate at Bronte. Earl Nelson viewed the estate more as an encumbrance than an opportunity and he seemingly investigated the possibility of selling it.⁵⁹ He left the management of the estate in the hands of his agents in Bronte⁶⁰ who mostly corresponded with his lawyer, Mr Hutchinson, in London. Earl Nelson's interest in the estate was largely pecuniary: his letters repeatedly press for more remittances and express his disappointment at the estate's failure to show a profit.⁶¹ He was also keen to secure the succession of his only surviving child, Charlotte, Lady Bridport, to the estate; her inheritance was compromised by Horatio's will endorsing the rival claims of his sisters, Susannah Bolton and Catherine Matcham, who both had sons.⁶² After his death in 1835, Charlotte and her husband did inherit the estate and title at Bronte, while Thomas Bolton became the Second Earl Nelson. Nevertheless, litigation between the Nelson family and Lord and Lady Bridport over Bronte lasted for another ten years and relations between the two families were permanently broken.⁶³ Yet Charlotte took scarcely more interest in the estate than her father. She was the first member of the family to visit Bronte, shortly after her father's death; but she was not impressed, declaring that she would 'never come back to the island unless there was a revolution in England, and even then would probably go elsewhere'.⁶⁴

Due to the absence of the Nelson and Bridport families in England, the series of governor generals, agents and secretaries employed to manage the estate acquired not only considerable practical autonomy but, often, delusions of grandeur as well. One family in particular, the Thovez, came to see the Duchy as their private concern. Philip Thovez, a warrant officer in the British navy, was governor general of the Duchy between 1820 and his death in 1839. He was succeeded by his nephew, William, who made the Duchy his 'hobby' and 'eldest child' until his own death in 1873.⁶⁵ Philip also employed his brother, Henry, as a clerk, as a manager of the estate during Philip's absences and to represent the Duchy's interests at court in Naples and in Palermo.⁶⁶ And although William's brother, Frank, worked for the Ingham family producing wine in Marsala, he seemed to find time not only to look after the Duchy's affairs in Palermo but also to keep the Duchy's rent books and to become involved in

Bronte politics.⁶⁷ At one time or another, most of the Thovez family lived in the castle at Maniace, which Philip had converted into a home.

At the same time, isolated as they were in a remote corner of a remote region, the Duchy's agents tended to become emotionally entangled with the community of Bronte and inevitably affected by the friendships, 'prejudices' and 'jealousy' of this small rural town.⁶⁸ Eliza Graefer, the widow of the first manager John Graefer, wrote in 1806 that 'the Brontese in general loves me very much' and their daughter married a Mr Spitalieri, member of the prominent Bronte family.⁶⁹ Those, like the agent Byrant Barrett, who attempted to maintain their distance, were more or less ostracized (as he told Nelson's lawyer, 'no friend to consult with or advise me, all trying to deceive me, without the society of a single soul').⁷⁰ Sometimes the Duchy's employees fell out with each other, as the experience of Byrant's widow, Martha, shows. Having taken over the estate after Byrant's sudden death in 1818, she quarrelled with the Duchy's secretary Joseph di Martino, a liberal with ideas of his own about running the estate.⁷¹ Martha's passionate love-affair with her manservant, Antonio (described by di Martino as an 'indecent inclination' for a 'runaway'), culminated in a public brawl between the two men, where pistols were drawn.⁷² Thereafter, the whole community took sides for and against Mrs Barrett. When Mrs Barrett was dismissed in 1819, her notary, Biagio Gatto, and the local judge frustrated di Martino's attempts to sue Antonio for assault.⁷³ During the violence in Bronte following the 1820 revolution, Joseph di Martino was forced to flee the town in fear of his life.⁷⁴

Earl Nelson's absenteeism also had serious economic consequences for the estate. According to John Goodwin, the British consul in Palermo at this time, landlord absenteeism meant that 'stewards' could make an illicit fortune in renting land out to the local bourgeoisie.⁷⁵ After the death of John Graefer (in c.1804) his widow, Eliza, employed as agents a Sicilian nobleman, the Marchese Antonio Forcella, an English banker based in Palermo, Abraham Gibbs, and a Palermo man, Don Gregorio Biosa. All in their way were eminently corruptible and corrupting. A petition to Nelson written in 1812 describes Biosa as an 'adventurer destitute of merit' capable of 'all manner of excesses and debaucheria imaginable'.⁷⁶ Gibbs used his position in the Duchy to bolster up his rapidly deteriorating business interests

and, when these failed, committed suicide leaving the Duchy liable for his debts.⁷⁷ More important in the long run, a mutually profitable *modus vivendi* prevailed between these men and members of the Bronte gentry over the leasing of land: as Earl Nelson's lawyer put it succinctly to Thovez, 'Forcella did not remit as much as he ought to have done.'⁷⁸ They sold the grain produced by the Duchy largely for their own profit, and at the 'right' price to those they favoured who were registered 'under false names'.⁷⁹ With the assistance of the local notary, Gatto ('a rogue and a thief and . . . a fabricator of mischief'),⁸⁰ Forcella also renewed the leases on the Duchy's farms on strictly personal terms.⁸¹ The short-term leases on the most valuable *feudi* — Semantili, Petrosino, Petrocelli, Pezzo and Grappidà, S. Andrea — were all granted on terms more or less unfavourable to the Duchy. Gibbs rented the Pirato farm to the Graefers' son-in-law, Spitalieri, who then rented it to a third party at a much higher rent.⁸² Biosia left uncollected the quit rents owing from the land let on long leases and tolerated the lucrative market in dividing and sub-letting this land to other parties. The rights of Bronte's peasants to graze their animals and cut wood on Duchy land were recognized by Forcella in a written statement.⁸³

Bryant Barrett, sent by the Earl Nelson from the 'Portuguese islands' (presumably Madeira or the Azores) to clear up the mess created by Forcella et al., was convinced that altering the leases held the key to the viability of the estate as a whole. The Duchy, he wrote to Nelson in 1817, had hitherto been let 'like an Irish estate, the first tenant growing rich, the sub-tenant starving and the Estate wasting'. His aim was to draw up new leases giving more land to the sub-tenants and, as a result, more revenue to the Duchy. In a plan partially carried out by his successors, he also began to plant vines as a commercial crop, harvest the woods and make improvements to the estate buildings and the local infrastructure.⁸⁴ However, although he claimed in 1817 to have broken 'the combination formed against the Duke to prevent the letting of the farms' and was intending to lease Fondaco, Porticelli, and Petrosino at a higher rent,⁸⁵ Nelson's lawyer was still expressing dismay five years later that 'the finest lands belonging to the Estate are let out at mere quit rents'.⁸⁶ The subsequent efforts of Philip Thovez to alter the leasing arrangements in Bronte were scarcely more effective. Legal proceedings to recover the sums embezzled by Forcella, Gibbs and Biosia

lasted some twenty years.⁸⁷ Eviction orders issued against Meli, Minissale and others for failure to pay their rent and for non-compliance with the terms of their lease had a similarly equivocal outcome. Counter-claims for costs, disputes about leases and challenges to expert opinion dragged litigation on indefinitely. If like Baron Meli, the defendant was a wealthy or powerful individual, or if he was connected to those who were, he could raise endless legal objections, thus delaying court proceedings for several decades and, often, involving the family and/or heirs of the original defendant.⁸⁸ Indeed, between the early 1820s and the 1860s, the Duchy's lawyers defended the Duchy against as many counter-claims as they served eviction orders and claims for unpaid rent and other debts. Legal files relating to these cases fill some fifty boxes of the *Archivio Nelson*.⁸⁹

These apparently unending series of lawsuits also brought the Duchy — and Thovez in particular — into direct conflict with Bronte's most important families. As early as 1800, Graefer had described Gennaro Minissale as 'one of the greatest villains existing';⁹⁰ the later attempts of Philip and William Thovez to evict Carmelo and Silvestro Minissale from a place known as Carcere Bovi confirmed the family as dangerous enemies of the Duchy.⁹¹ At the same time, the structure of the rental market combined with kinship relations meant that this hostility spread throughout the community. For instance, the Minissale family was linked by marriage to the Sanfilippo family, also being sued by the Duchy over a rental agreement made with Forcella in 1811, and, through them, to the powerful Spitalieri family.⁹² Similarly, an attempt by Thovez during the 1820s to evict 'Priest Palermo', as he disparagingly called him (Don Emanuele Palermo, the rector of Bronte's prestigious Collegio Capizzi) from the Macchia Stivola farm for having giving it 'in Quit Rent without proper authority from his Grace' earned him the enmity of the clergy, the local judge, Don Mariano Mauro (who had rented part of this farm from Palermo) and their extended families.⁹³ Moreover, both the Duchy and the Brontesi correctly perceived the suit with 'Priest Palermo' to be a test case, a means of recovering and re-letting at market value all of the Duchy land currently on quit rents (or as Thovez put it in a letter to Hutchinson, 'the recovery of the farm . . . will open an easy road to regain very considerable tracts of land, with a very great increase of income to His Grace'). As a result, the outcome of the

case excited the whole community. The Brontesi, in Thovez's words, 'used uncommon exertions' to defend Palermo's farm, arguing that they all stood to lose land 'which their ancestors had held upwards of two centuries'. Some refused to pay any quit rents at all, there were rumours of revolution and threats were made on Thovez's life.⁹⁴ As Thovez wrote to Hutchinson, 'all the Gentry of Bronte . . . secretly united together . . . [and] made a purse to defend this suit as their own'.⁹⁵

From the mid-1820s, relations between Philip Thovez and the community of Bronte deteriorated rapidly. In a single letter in 1824, Thovez referred to Bronte three times as a 'wretched' place where he had 'experienced nothing but disappointments, losses and vexations of every kind'.⁹⁶ All of his letters are littered with disparaging references to the 'Brontesi' as the 'most determined scoundrels in Sicily',⁹⁷ 'half-starved pettifoggers',⁹⁸ 'savages' and 'ruffians'.⁹⁹ 'I firmly believe' he wrote in August 1825, '[that] not one in a thousand would live in so wretched a place and amongst so many villains.'¹⁰⁰ In the mid-1830s, the question of the quit rents was still so bitterly contested that Thovez and many prominent Brontesi were not on speaking terms.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, these tensions were not confined to personal hostility, economic rivalries or the process of litigation. What made these tensions between Philip Thovez and Bronte's gentry much more serious, in fact, was the latter's growing capacity for political power.

As early as the 1770s, leading Bronte citizens — Baron Meli, Silvestro Politi and Vincenzo Margaglio — had attempted to resist the land enclosures of the Grand Hospital by infiltrating local government.¹⁰² These opportunities were enormously increased by the reforms introduced by the Bourbon government in 1816–17 following their restoration in Naples. Sicily's administrative reorganization, modelled on the Napoleonic provincial and communal system, was meant to give the central government in Naples far greater control than before.¹⁰³ In reality, the effect of this attempt at centralization was, as many studies of both Sicily and the mainland provinces have shown, to place a great deal of practical power in the hands of local élites. Thus, although the provincial intendant in Catania nominally controlled local government in Bronte through the appointment of the mayor, the nominees were invariably local men. For the first time, moreover, local councils were chosen from an albeit restricted list of local propertied males and graduates. Local

government officials enjoyed important responsibilities. They allocated public works contracts and taxes and were responsible for the drawing up of electoral lists, thereby controlling access to political power. They were also in charge of claiming and dividing up common land. In effect, for those members of the rural middle class who, as we have seen in Bronte, were in the process of acquiring land from their old feudal lords, a position in local government offered an opportunity to consolidate and extend their power within and over the community.¹⁰⁴

The first mayor of Bronte in 1818 was Don Giaocchino Spitalieri; the other two nominees for mayor were his younger brother, Don Luigi, and his 74-year-old father, Don Niccolò. The official in charge of drawing up the list of *eligibili* was Baron Vincenzo Meli — by far the richest man on the list with an annual income of 467 onze, almost twice that of the next richest man, Baron Don Francesco Minissale (245 onze). Only a few families dominated the list; prominent among them was Don Gennaro Minissale, his uncle Dr Don Giuseppe Sanfilippo, Giuseppe's brother, Don Vincenzo, and their three nephews.¹⁰⁵ In 1817, there was a sprinkling of medical doctors, notaries (8) and law graduates (13) and, although the list had increased in number from 70 to around 180 names by the mid-1840s, and included some merchants (*commercianti*), artisans and small farmers (*coloni*), the same families maintained control of the council. Don Gennaro Minissale was mayor in the 1820s, and, in 1841, at the age of 71, was the 'royal judge' and a councillor. Also in 1841, one of his sons, Don Carmelo, was the 'first elect' on the council, while another, Don Mariano, was a circuit judge. Baron Meli was mayor on successive occasions in the 1830s and 1840s; his brother Mariano was 'first elect' at the same time. Another Meli, Bernardo, was mayor in the mid-1850s. Official correspondence between Bronte and Catania referred continually to the contravention of administrative regulations by this kind of nepotism.¹⁰⁶ Although, as we shall see in the next section, challenges were made to this political establishment, all the available evidence suggests that after 1815 the commune of Bronte came under the political control of a few prominent landowning families. And it was these same families who developed such a strong and, from one perspective at least, hostile interest in the land nominally belonging to Earl Nelson and his heirs.

III

While many aspects of the growing conflict between the Duchy and the community of Bronte were specific to Bronte, the conflict itself developed in the context of a dispute over land which affected most of rural Sicily. During the mid-1820s, the various personal, economic and political tensions within Bronte found a crucial and a unifying focus in the issue of common land and customary rights (*usi civici*). Under the feudal system in Sicily, common land was land which belonged to an independent (i.e. non-feudal) commune or *università*; this form of property, which was sometimes quite substantial, existed alongside the huge estates belonging to the nobility and/or clergy.¹⁰⁷ Customary rights were rights which peasants exercised over feudal property. Many had been established in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and they varied from rights to collect firewood and water (exercised freely), to privileges such as grazing, tillage, gathering fruit and nuts and cutting wood for tools.¹⁰⁸ Usually a central part of the peasant subsistence economy in Sicily, by the eighteenth century such rights were increasingly seen as 'barbarous customs', a source of confusion and conflict and a brake on economic progress.¹⁰⁹ By the same token, common land had been in decline since the late-medieval period, partly through encroachments by feudal landowners and partly because communes had sold their land to pay taxes. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the government introduced reforms which re-allocated some of this land and attempted to regulate the system of land tenure in Sicily. Touching as it did upon peasant poverty, noble privilege, local autonomy and economic backwardness — all central issues in the increasingly unstable climate of Restoration Sicily — it is not surprising that the question of common land and customary rights became so controversial. Nowhere was this more true than at Bronte.

Bronte's problems should be seen in part as a consequence of the abolition of feudalism, passed by the Sicilian parliament in 1812 and confirmed in additional reforms by the restored Bourbon government between 1816 and 1824. This legislation drastically altered the nature of landownership in Sicily. In little more than a decade, feudal landholdings became the private property of individuals and, as part of this process, customary rights were abolished (in 1812) and, in 1816, the division of

common land into private hands was ordered.¹¹⁰ The results of this reform were as disastrous as they were far-reaching. One immediate problem was the vague and imprecise nature of the legislation itself:¹¹¹ a provision for peasants to be compensated for the loss of common land and customary rights by receiving a quota of this land for their own private use was subject to particular confusion. In repeated attempts between 1817 and 1841, the Bourbon government sought unsuccessfully to establish norms for judging disputes over compensation. Only in 1841 was it firmly established that peasants would receive between one-fifth and two-thirds of the land, to be allocated in each commune by the local administrative authorities. In an effort to settle outstanding conflicts, provincial intendants were also given the power to mediate disputes and order the allocation of lands.¹¹² But in many communities, unscrupulous landowners took advantage of the uncertainty caused by this legislative ambiguity to 'usurp' (claim and illegally enclose) common land for their own private use. This, in turn, increased the conflict about the amount of land available to be redistributed, and to whom.

The notorious factionalism of Sicilian rural communities, such a prominent feature of the revolutions in the countryside during 1820, 1848–9 and 1860, was increasingly the result of conflict over land.¹¹³ There was a basic contradiction in the Bourbon government's land reforms between the desire to promote social justice (and compensate the peasantry) and to secure economic growth (favouring the middle 'gentry' class).¹¹⁴ Unable to reconcile these two opposites, and in a period of acute land hunger caused by rising population and declining yields, the government's well-intended efforts intensified the competition for land, increased tensions between peasants and landowners and generally left peasants worse off than before. At the same time, the reforms produced a series of conflicts between, on one side, the gentry, acting through local government as the guardians of customary rights and common land, and, on the other, the ex-feudal nobility, who feared that the claims of the community threatened the viability of their estates. Last, but by no means least, the scarcity of good land in Sicily also brought the gentry into conflict with each other. This, in turn, intensified political rivalries within communities as both sides sought administrative control over the allocation of common land. Throughout the decades between 1817 and 1860, disputes over territorial

boundaries, customary usage and the opinions of experts were pursued endlessly through the courts and through the provincial commissions on customary rights.¹¹⁵ The question of compensation — involving the proposed transfer of thousands of acres of land — was responsible for administrative chaos, protracted judicial disputes and, frequently, huge injustices.

In Bronte, the commune made claims on the whole of the Duchy estate. While the Duchy's lawyers insisted that Bronte was originally a 'hamlet' under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Grand Hospital and, thus, had never possessed any common land at all, the commune's lawyers argued that the entire territory of Bronte was common land which the Duchy (and previously the Grand Hospital) had illegally 'usurped' from the *università*.¹¹⁶ In compensation, the commune asked for two areas, known as the volcanic lands and the Nave domain, which were adjacent to the town. On the issue of customary rights, the Duchy only admitted a limited right to gather dead wood, while the commune claimed unlimited grazing rights over the entire estate, including the right to cut down fruit and oak trees for commercial purposes, and demanded half the Maniaci and Fragalà woods (in the northern part of the estate, on the slopes of the Nebrodi mountains) as compensation.¹¹⁷ Concurrently, the commune attempted to block the Duchy from harvesting any timber in the woods, and claimed that right for themselves.¹¹⁸

While the dispute over common lands and customary rights caused conflict in many Sicilian rural communities, the tenacity and ferocity displayed by the litigants in Bronte is still striking.¹¹⁹ Characteristically, Philip Thovez saw the issue as a personal one, both as an 'insult' to his position in Bronte and as a chance to 'reduce the Brontesi to proper submission'.¹²⁰ Yet after only one year of litigation, in 1826, he admitted that 'there never was a question ever brought before the magistrates [of Catania] . . . that made half so much noise'.¹²¹ The task alone of defining boundaries and recording customary rights in the territory of Bronte kept experts and surveyors busy for over three decades.¹²² Intimidation was commonplace; as early as 1817, Byrant Barrett believed that the issue of the woods had provoked a conspiracy to kill him and his family.¹²³ For the same reason, Thovez was advised 'not to stray into the country alone when at Bronte nor to be out of the House after dark'.¹²⁴ Both sides also sought to take *de facto* possession of the woods. Philip Thovez employed

'foreigners' (peasants from nearby communes) to make 'a little encroachment' on the woods; i.e. by destroying the trees to make way for arable or grazing land and then claiming it as the exclusive property of the Duchy.¹²⁵ During the 1840s, the commune used its control of part of the woods physically to prevent the Duchy from cutting trees in any part of it. In turn, William Thovez attempted to sue the mayor, Luigi Saitta, for criminal damages to the woods and persuaded the Intendant of Catania to dismiss him.¹²⁶

Litigation between the commune and the Duchy began in 1825, with each side claiming the right to employ guards (*guardaboschi*) to police the woods.¹²⁷ From the very beginning, every aspect of the case was contested, and every avenue of influence and advantage explored. Both sides made exhaustive searches in court archives and the archive of the Grand Hospital and produced hundreds of historical documents dating back to the fifteenth century to prove ownership.¹²⁸ The commune made emotive appeals to the courts, arguing that the case represented a struggle for independence from four centuries of encroachment by 'tyrannical' landlords.¹²⁹ The Duchy lobbied furiously in Naples for government ministers and even the king to influence the outcome of the case.¹³⁰ Although Thovez complained that the judges were 'a pack of hungry thieves who with very few exceptions publicly sell justice to the highest bidder', he too was prepared to bribe experts 'with a douceur' to secure a favourable opinion and 'more boldly than correctly' represent the Duchy's position in court.¹³¹ Not surprisingly, both sides spent a fortune on legal fees. In his correspondence with London, Philip Thovez often pointed to legal costs as the reason why the estate failed to make a profit.¹³² The cost to the commune was equally high. By the 1840s, costs had apparently escalated to the extent that they were unable to pay their lawyers, and the commune was obliged to send begging letters to the intendant's office in Catania.¹³³

The duration of the dispute can in part be explained by the vagaries and ambiguities of government legislation on the land issue, which both sides sought to take advantage of. During the 1820s and 1830s, the dispute was referred back and forth in separate cases to various conflicting authorities: the Board of Woods, the provincial commission for customary rights, the ordinary tribunal in Catania and, finally, the *Gran Corte dei Conti* (Supreme Court) in Palermo all gave judgments on the case.¹³⁴

The judicial authorities, and particularly the higher court in Palermo, tended to uphold the Duchy's claims but, after the legislation of 1838 and 1841 giving the Intendant (i.e. the administrative authority) the power to mediate and resolve disputes over land, the Duchy lost a significant portion of the estate (a large part of the Nave domain and volcanic land, all the outstanding rents and tributes and half of the income from the woods) to the commune.¹³⁵ Although the Duchy subsequently persuaded the supreme court partly to reverse the order on the woods,¹³⁶ it took another ten years for both sides to agree grudgingly to a 'definitive and unappealable' arbitration in Palermo. Preliminary hearings began in 1856 but, even then, the commune employed delaying tactics¹³⁷ so that it was not until 1859 that all the evidence was authenticated and new surveys ordered. Finally, fate intervened when the judge's substantive judgments, apparently due to be made in May 1860, were interrupted by the April revolution and the subsequent arrival of Garibaldi in Palermo.¹³⁸

For both sides, the outcome of this litigation represented an opportunity either for huge economic gain or, alternatively, huge losses. The land in question was immensely valuable; as we have seen, land was a source of contention between the Duchy and the prominent families of Bronte even before the legislation abolishing customary rights. The Nave domain and volcanic lands were a vast area and important for pasturage. The Maniace and Fragalà woods were part of the most densely forested area in Sicily and were drained by a series of much-needed rivers (*torrenti*). Wood in this period was still a central raw material for domestic and industrial purposes (an 'indispensable necessity for manufacture, for trade, for agriculture, for the house, for fires, for life'),¹³⁹ but was becoming a scarce and expensive commodity everywhere as the result of deforestation.¹⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, these lands were highly sought after both as a source of timber and as fertile, arable land. In 1817, the normally distant Earl Nelson told his managers to stop what was referred to as the 'plundering', 'devastation' and 'destruction' of the woods by 'carpenters, hoop and corn measure makers' in search of raw materials.¹⁴¹ In turn, the Duchy's agents advertised the woods to Nelson as a source of substantial income which could save the finances of the estate. Byrant Barrett wrote in 1817 that the estate had 'beech and oak enough to build a city'¹⁴² and, in 1825, Thovez confidently predicted the woods would be 'a source of

great wealth' and revenue 'hitherto unknown, or at least shamefully neglected'. Plans were made to sell the timber to the British navy in Malta and to the Bourbon government for road-building.¹⁴³

In many respects, the aims of Bronte's local government with regard to the land in dispute were no different from those of the Duchy. That the mayor and his council saw the process of litigation over compensation as an opportunity to acquire land for themselves, their families and friends, rather than a means of granting land to the peasants, is quite clear. In fact, almost all the land claimed as 'common' in Bronte during the preceding decades was, after the commune gained control of it during the 1840s, rapidly enclosed and rented to a few prominent families, who then increased their income by sub-letting it to others. For example, the *ex-feudo* Pezzo was leased to D. Antonio Spitalieri, the *ex-feudo* Grappidà was leased to D. Niccolò Spitalieri¹⁴⁴ and the *ex-feudo* Petrosino was leased to Antonio Minissale.¹⁴⁵ According to a petition sent to the intendant of Catania in 1850 and signed by some eighty Brontesi, the *ex-feudo* Roccaro had been divided in such a way that they ('the poor farmers') received the worst land and at the highest rent.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the records sent to Catania by the mayor of Bronte, Bernardo Meli, show that the commune quickly abolished all the free grazing and wood rights which peasants had enjoyed on the Nave and volcanic lands. Meli had apparently sold these rights to shepherds from Randazzo and Maletto; presumably by bringing in outsiders to Bronte he hoped to bolster his political popularity and influence. When the new tenants complained that the now dispossessed peasants still 'invaded' this land with their animals, Meli suggested that they sue the offenders for damages.¹⁴⁷

However, as the experience of other Sicilian communities shows, the actions of local councils with regard to common land caused enormous friction and popular resentment. Initially, during the 1820s, the issue had united the whole community. In 1825, Thovez wrote 'the unanimity displayed by the Brontesi is incredible'; he was infuriated in equal turns by the rabble-rousing of the mayor, Gennaro Minissale, who told the people that the Duchy 'wished to prevent the cutting of wood that they might perish with cold during the winter', by the police, who 'did not think proper to arrest any of them' and by the refusal of witnesses to come forward.¹⁴⁸ In 1827, a favourable decision by the Board

of Woods prompted prayers of thanksgiving 'in all the Churches [with] . . . no inconsiderable quantity of wax candles consumed before the images of the Virgin and Saints'.¹⁴⁹ Yet by the 1840s, there was evidence of a political split within the Bronte élite between the older 'establishment' of Meli, Spitalieri, Margaglio and their supporters, and another group of self-proclaimed radicals (Luigi Saitta, Niccolò Lombardo), who generally were excluded from power.

In this new struggle between rival factions in Bronte, everyone used the issue of common land to get ahead. Well before the events of 1860, those in power were using their control of common land as an instrument of patronage, while those excluded tried to stir up popular resentment over the way the land was partitioned. During the 1848 revolutions, Carmelo and Silvestro Minissale encouraged peasants to seize land and property belonging to the Duchy (forcing William Thovez and family to flee to Catania), fell out with the provisional committee — whose members included Vincenzo Meli, Giuseppe and Luigi Spitalieri and Vincenzo Catania — on this issue and tried to seize control of the Carcere Bovi from which their family had been evicted.¹⁵⁰ It is, unfortunately, impossible to gauge the sincerity of the Minissale brothers' sympathy for the peasants' plight.¹⁵¹ However, there is some evidence that Luigi Saitta, a leader with Lombardo and the Minissale brothers of the 1860 revolt, was attempting a more equitable distribution of land when he was dismissed as mayor in 1841, partly at William Thovez's instigation.¹⁵²

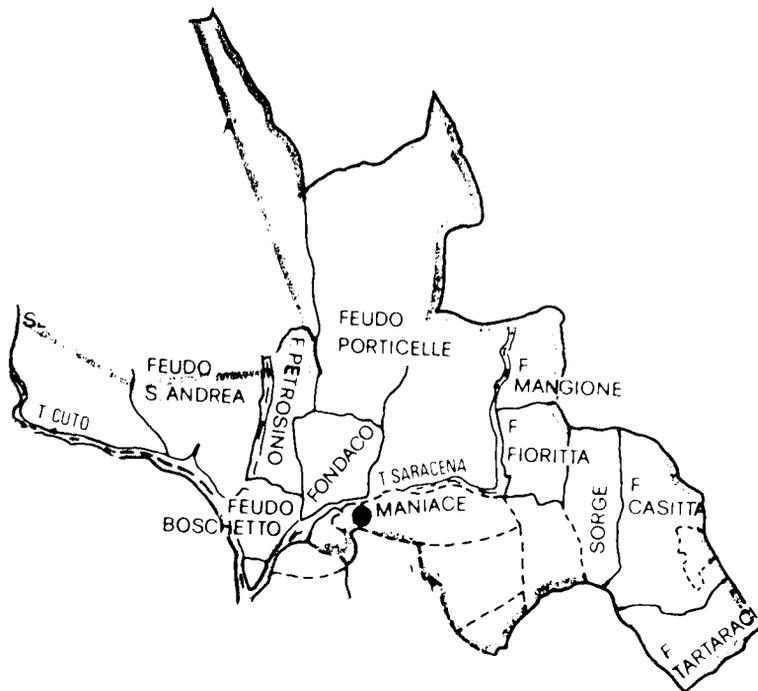
Thus, the conflict over land ended by confusing the political divisions in Bronte, producing new enmities and conflicts of interest within the Bronte élite itself. The explosion of popular violence in 1860 was encouraged by those radicals in Bronte who were excluded by the establishment, and focused precisely on the issue — the division of common land — which, pending the judgment of the supreme court in Palermo, was still up for grabs. More than anything else, in other words, the violence of 1860 revealed the internal divisions within Bronte's middle class. The same issue which had united them against the Duchy ended by dividing them. In so doing, moreover, it came to threaten their control of the community as a whole. As Philip Thovez had noted in 1825, there was 'nothing so dangerous' for all concerned than encouraging 'the poor peasantry' to revolt over land.¹⁵³ But

even he could not anticipate the bizarre consequences which would arise in 1860. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that Frank Thovez — known as a radical and supporter of Garibaldi in 1860 — should have opposed the other radicals in Bronte, Luigi Saitta, Carmelo Minissale et al., who had long been his family's personal enemies. Even his collusion with Bourbon supporters during 1860 in order to repress the revolt and so protect Duchy property is not unusual. But it is, nevertheless, startling to find a Thovez working as a captain of the national guard and in the Bronte government during 1860, alongside a member of the Meli family, the leader of those with whom the Duchy had been in conflict for so long.¹⁵⁴

IV

The importance of Bronte as a symbol of economic backwardness, political repression and peasant struggle against landowners has obscured crucial elements of its history. First, by focusing on the actions of central government and on the Duchy's owners, it greatly overestimates the hold of both over events in Bronte. Whether intent on reform or repression, the central authorities rarely, if ever, enjoyed direct control over Bronte. The Duchy's owners were absent in London and drew little practical benefit from King Ferdinand's generosity. Indeed, from their personal point of view, the estate was little more than 'a back-handed gift' which rarely showed a profit; it was a source of pride but also of anxiety and much ill-feeling, and a 'badly cultivated property' which came to them 'with a heavy burden of litigation'.¹⁵⁵ Reflecting these difficulties, the family agreed to cede approximately half of the estate to the commune of Bronte in 1861.¹⁵⁶

On closer examination, the conflict between peasant and landowner in Bronte was also far from clear-cut. There were more than two competing parties in Bronte; at various moments, the Nelson-Bridport family in London, their agents, members of the local élite and the peasantry all clashed with each other for control of the land. Furthermore, the family went to court over inheritance of the estate, the Duchy's agents quarrelled amongst themselves, the local élite found itself in bitter disagreement and even some peasants did better than others when it came to rent-



Map 3
The Duchy of Bronte in 1861, after the *atto di transazione*
between the commune and the Duchy

ing land. Between the 1820s and early 1840s, the personal hostility between the Duchy's agents and the local élite was reinforced by their economic rivalry over land. By the 1850s, those members of the gentry who had acquired land began slowly to align themselves with the Duchy. Each one of these shifting and complex rivalries had an impact on the protracted struggle for control of the territory of Bronte.

There is, of course, nothing remarkable about the relentless acquisitiveness of Bronte's gentry during this period: in much of Restoration Europe, land ownership provided the key to upward mobility for the rural middle classes. Much more unusual was the fact that competition for land in Bronte focused almost entirely

on the commune and the courts. It is not difficult to see why this occurred. The opportunities to acquire land were provided largely by government reforms which, in effect, allowed the existing landowner's property rights to be challenged. As a result, the acquisition of land was made possible not so much by economic capacity as by legal acumen. Since, moreover, the immediate beneficiary of this process was the commune, the commune became the focus of intense economic rivalry. Not surprisingly perhaps, since upward mobility in Bronte was primarily a function of political, not economic, gain, the whole political life of the community was affected. In Bronte, as elsewhere in Sicily, 'the *comune* was . . . transformed into an instrument of power and gain for ever broader social groups'.¹⁵⁷ Especially after the administrative reforms of 1817, a few Bronte families used their control of local government to increase their personal hold over the community. As a result, politics in Bronte became dominated by clientele networks and, increasingly, disrupted by factional disagreements.

Clientelism has long been associated with traditional societies; especially in the Mediterranean, clientelism and political factionalism are seen as a 'symptom' of backwardness and an 'obstacle' to political modernization.¹⁵⁸ It is, thus, worth pointing out that clientelism in Bronte confirms the suggestions of recent research which explores the ways in which clientelism can adapt to political modernization.¹⁵⁹ In fact, both the domination of Bronte by a few powerful families and the various conflicts which developed in the community were the consequence of political and legal innovation. No-one in Bronte seemed remotely trapped by their feudal past. It was the Duchy's attempts to introduce new management, to draw up new leases and to commercialize farming, rather than a desire to remain the same, which gave rise to conflict with the community. It was also the opportunity which Bronte's gentry saw to get ahead — to establish themselves politically, to take advantage of the land reforms and acquire private property — which led to friction with the Duchy, to factional rivalries and, increasingly, to tension with the dispossessed peasantry as well. Unlike the peasants who stood to lose everything from this process of modernization, both commune and Duchy seemed only too eager to embrace, rather than resist, the opportunities presented by the land, legal and political reforms of the Restoration period.

One of the most striking aspects of the conflict in Bronte

between 1815 and 1860 was the rejection of traditional practices by the local élite. The terrible events of 1860 notwithstanding, violence was used more as a threat than a reality. Even when pursuing pre-existing personal hostilities against the Duchy, recourse to the courts (and to a friendly judge) was far more common than violence. Arguably, for the Bronte gentry — many of whom had trained as lawyers — litigation became an alternative, and non-violent, means of ‘taking revenge’ on the Duchy and its agents.¹⁶⁰ When seeking to acquire disputed land or to defend their existing gains, the gentry relied happily on the slower weapons of arbitration and adjudication. Government attempts at mediation were also used as new opportunities to challenge and overturn the Duchy’s legal position. Even the Duchy’s feudal past was largely a rhetorical device, a means of evoking past oppression and injustices so as to reinforce the commune’s claim to compensation. And the language of radicalism was used primarily as a means of manipulating popular pressure for the purposes of political gain. Only the peasants were (economically, politically and intellectually) excluded from this process, and it is this exclusion which explains the desperate, but otherwise uncharacteristic, violence of 1848 and 1860.

What happened in Bronte, therefore, reflects not so much feudal ‘backwardness’ as the emergence of an independent and assertive middle class which succeeded in dominating the community. Yet, crucially, this new middle class did not rely on liberalism, social stability or economic development for its livelihood. Instead, the Bronte gentry sought power through the simple monopolization of political influence, subordinating ideology and identity in order to achieve this end. Between 1817 and 1860, the gentry resisted the commercialization of agriculture, welcomed political upheaval, sought out legal uncertainty and encouraged peasant unrest. But however successful in the short term, these tactics had consequences which, in the longer term, were highly destructive to all property owners. The domination of local government by clientelism and factionalism severely weakened the solidarity among Bronte’s powerful families. The way in which they went about acquiring land then destroyed the vertical ties of patronage. It was in this way that, having established their position in the community by successfully challenging the Duchy’s right to private property, Bronte’s new élite also undermined their own wealth, status and power.

Notes

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1. F. Elliot, *The Diary of an Idle Woman in Sicily* (London 1881); *The Diary of an Idle Woman in Italy* (London 1871); *The Diary of an Idle Woman in Spain* (London 1884); *The Diary of an Idle Woman in Constantinople* (London 1893).

2. *The Diary of an Idle Woman in Sicily*, 151.

3. *Ibid.*, 159, 181.

4. P. Brydone, *A Tour through Sicily and Malta*, 2 vols (London 1775), 166, 186–7.

5. For an attempt to link Bronte with Sicily's classical heritage, see B. Radice, 'Origine di Bronte', and 'Epoca greco-romana' in B. Radice, *Memorie Storiche di Bronte* (Adrano 1984).

6. B. Radice, 'L'apoteosi dell'Ammiraglio Nelson in Palermo e la Duca di Bronte', *ibid.*, 339–43; C. Hibbert, *Nelson: A Personal History* (London 1994), 194–5.

7. *Ibid.*, 349; G. Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali della Sicilia moderna: Bronte (1747–1853)* (Catania 1969) 65–80, 96.

8. Hibbert, *Nelson*, 194.

9. See Graefer's letter of 16 May 1800 to Horatio Nelson about the improvements to the house at Maniace, Archivio di Stato di Palermo, *Archivio Nelson*, b.581, f.correspondenza varie. Graefer had been the head gardener at the Bourbon palace of Caserta; D. Mack Smith, 'The Latifundia in Modern Sicilian History', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 51, 1965, 91.

10. Hibbert, *Nelson*, 195; T. Pocock, 'In Nelson's Footprints' in C. White, ed., *The Nelson Companion* (Stroud 1995), 120.

11. On Patrick Brontë, see F. Fraser, *Charlotte Brontë* (London, 1988), 9; a plaque by the harbour in Bronte, Ontario, commemorates its association with Nelson.

12. D. Mack Smith, 'The Peasants' Revolt in Sicily, 1860' in D. Mack Smith, *Victor Emmanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento* (London 1972), 214.

13. This argument is made by M. S. Messina Virga, *Bronte 1860* (Caltanissetta/Rome 1990).

14. Proclamation to the 'Abitanti della provincia di Catania', 12 Aug. 1860, reproduced in *Il processo di Bronte* (Caltanissetta/Rome 1985), 82.

15. In G. Verga, *Tutte le novelle*, i (Milan 1942; 1983 edn).

16. *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale*, 7 (1910); reprinted in B. Radice, *Memorie Storiche*.

17. 'Introduction' to 'Nino Bixio a Bronte', *ibid.*, 414.

18. See E. Bertini, *Rapporto sui fatti di Bronte del 1860* (Palermo 1985), and *Il processo di Bronte*.

19. Florestano Vancini, *Italy–Yugoslavia*, 1972.

20. For a discussion see L. Riall, *The Italian Risorgimento: State, Society and National Unification* (London 1994), 1–10, 30–2, 64.

21. Mack Smith, 'The Peasants' Revolt in Sicily', 219.
22. S. F. Romano, 'I contadini nella rivoluzione del 1860', in *Momenti del Risorgimento in Sicilia* (Messina/Florence 1952), 156–70. R. del Carria, *Proletari senza rivoluzione* (Milan 1966), 52–6.
23. M. Isnenghi, *L'Italia in piazza. I luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai nostri giorni* (Milan 1994), 66.
24. A. Scifo, 'La proprietà della terra nella Sicilia preunitaria', *Nuovi Quaderni del Meridione*, 54 (1976), 130.
25. The classic interpretation of the Sicilian *latifondo*, which is central to broader understandings of the 'Southern Question', can be found in S. Sonnino, 'I contadini in Sicilia', in L. Franchetti and S. Sonnino, *Inchiesta in Sicilia* (Florence 1974; first pub. 1876). See also C. Bauer, 'Il latifondo in Sicilia', *Nuova Antologia*, 68 (15 April 1883), 635–70. Among postwar historians, Rosario Romeo's discussion of the *latifondo* in *Il Risorgimento in Sicilia* (Bari 1950) is the most important. For a more detailed analysis, see L. Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy and Local Power* (Oxford 1998), esp. 16–18.
26. Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 236.
27. C. Levi, *Le parole sono pietre. Tre giornate in Sicilia* (Turin 1957), 109, 113.
28. 'La Duca di Nelson', in *Il Siciliano nuovo*, a.1, n.23, 1 July 1950, 7.
29. N. Recupero, 'Introduzione' in N. Galati, *Maniace: l'ex duca di Nelson* (Catania 1988), 8.
30. Mack Smith, 'The Peasants' Revolt in Sicily', 212.
31. At the same time as the *Archivio Nelson* was sold, the Seventh Duke of Bronte sold the castle at Maniace and the by now much reduced estate to the commune of Bronte. Some early nineteenth-century correspondence relating to Bronte (duplicated in the *Archivio Nelson*) can also be found in the Bridport papers in the British Library manuscript collection.
32. The relevant papers from the intendant's office are in *Archivio di Stato di Catania* (henceforth ASC), 'Intendenza di Catania (1818–60)' and 'Miscellanea Risorgimentale', and in *Archivio di Stato di Palermo* (henceforth ASP), 'Intendenza di Catania (1822–80), atti relativi allo scioglimento dei diritti promiscui'.
33. R. Lumley and J. Morris, eds, *The New History of the Italian South: the Mezzogiorno Revisited* (Exeter 1997).
34. The pathbreaking work in Sicily was on the neighbouring community to Bronte, Biancavilla, by G. Giarizzo, *Un comune rurale nella Sicilia etnea (Biancavilla, 1810–1860)* (Catania 1963) but see also the more recent work by P. Pezzino, 'Monarchia amministrativa ed élites locali: Naro nella prima metà dell'ottocento', in P. Pezzino, *Il paradiso abitato dai diavoli: società, élites, istituzioni nel Mezzogiorno contemporaneo* (Milan 1992), A. de Francesco, *La guerra di Sicilia: il distretto di Caltagirone nella rivoluzione del 1820–21* (Catania 1992) and E. Iachello, 'Potere locale e mobilità delle élites a Risposto nella prima metà dell'Ottocento' in A. Massafra, ed., *Il Mezzogiorno preunitario: economia, società, istituzioni* (Bari 1988).
35. Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy*, 30–61, 138–55.
36. Estimates of the size of the estate vary considerably: Mack Smith quotes the (apparently misleading) figure of 60,000 acres given by Viscount Bridport in 1891 ('The Latifundia in Modern Sicilian History', 91), while Bridport's great-grandson puts the original figure at 40,000 ('The Duchy Booklet: a memorandum written for his family in 1965 by the Viscount Bridport', unpublished ms., 19). Hibbert writes

that the estate was around 30,000 acres (Nelson, 194).

37. As a total of the land cultivated in 1815, Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 227–8.

38. 'Bronte on Mount Etna' by Mrs E. Lynn Linton, in *Temple Bar*, 1884; copy in ASP, Nelson, b.616.

39. See the detailed description of the estate sent to Admiral Nelson from his manager, John Graefer, *ibid.*, b.308, f.1.

40. Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 59–62; Radice, 'Maniaci', in *Memorie Storiche*, 89–110; S.G. Virzì, *Il castello della Ducea di Maniace* (Catania 1992), 23–9.

41. 'Bronte. La storia: aspetti sociali e politici', in *Un itinerario lungo la valle del fiume saracena: guida ai beni culturali di Bronte, Maniace, Maletto* (Biancavilla 1988), 60.

42. Quoted in R. Trevelyan, *Princes under the Volcano* (London 1972), 56.

43. 11 Dec. 1817, to Hutchinson, ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.corr. varie.

44. 27 July 1825, P. Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.

45. Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 213–16.

46. B. Radice, 'Bronte nella rivoluzione del 1820', in *Memorie storiche*.

47. 30 July 1824, P. Thovez to Earl Nelson, ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.

48. 11 Dec. 1817, Barrett to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie.

49. 26 July 1817, draft of a letter to Earl Nelson, *ibid.*, b.330.

50. Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 218.

51. *Ibid.*, 239–41.

52. *Ibid.*, 83–5; Barrett's comment is in a draft letter of 26 July 1817, ASP, Nelson, b.330.

53. Notes on a letter of 22 April 1818 from Martha Barrett, *ibid.*, f.1; 28 Jan. 1819, from Joseph di Martino (describing Meli's friendship with Mrs Barrett), *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie.

54. 'Piano delle concessioni *ad vitam* di diversi masserie e terre esistenti nel territorio dello Stato di Bronte coll'obbligo di corrispondere il cenzo lo maggior parte in frumenti, ed alcune altre in orzi, denari constanti, ed in decime', *ibid.*, b.335, f.7.

55. On the system of *gabellazione* in Bronte before the gift to Nelson, see the analysis in Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 123–64. For some leases, the rent was payable in kind, approximately two-thirds of the produce going to the landlord. J. Goodwin, 'An Essay on Sicilian Industry' (1836), British Library MS 42152, 13–18.

56. 'An account of the Duchy and Estate of Bronte by Mr. Graefer the late Governor furnished in the lifetime of the late Duke', Nelson, b.308, f.1

57. See the account books for 1819–22 and 1825–8 *ibid.*, b.350, f.1–2.

58. Notes on a letter of 22 April 1818 *ibid.*, b.330, f.1

59. Earl Nelson was worried about the possibility of a French invasion and about Bourbon legislation confiscating the property of absentee landlords. In an enigmatic letter of 30 September 1807 to Commander d'Aceto, Nelson denied any intention of wishing to sell the Bronte estate while entreating him 'to desire your Brothers to be as discreet as possible respecting their inquiries about Bronte, and not to give the most distant hint about my alienating it, which possibly *may never happen* . . .' *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie.

60. Earl Nelson to Bryant Barrett, 18 June 1817, 'I leave everything to your judgement and discretion to remove and appoint whoever you think fit', ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.corr.varie.

61. See, for example, the correspondence in the letter book between Philip Thovez and Mr Hutchinson/Earl Nelson, 1825–7, and that relating to the Duchy's accounts in 1826, *ibid.*, b.585.

62. *Ibid.*, b.284, f.5. Testamento della famiglia Nelson, a.1803–1925.

63. See 'The Duchy Booklet . . . by the Viscount Bridport', appendix f.

64. Quoted in A. Nelson Hood, *The Duchy of Bronte (A memorandum written for his family in 1924)* (Weston-super-Mare 1924), 5.

65. 1 June 1870, from William Thovez to General Viscount Bridport[?], ASP, Nelson, b.584, f.2.

66. 24 Aug. 1825, P. Thovez to Mr Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese. See also the correspondence between Philip and Henry Thovez, *ibid.*, b.588, f.1–2.

67. See the correspondence *ibid.*, f.3. General Viscount Bridport, who visited the estate in 1870, complained about 'irregularities' in Frank's management of the rent books, 'Several remarks on my visit to Maniaci', *ibid.*, b.616. On Frank's political activities in Bronte, see Radice, 'Il '48 ed il '49 a Bronte', and 'Nino Bixio a Bronte', in *Memorie Storiche*, 388, 249.

68. 25 March 1818, Mrs Barrett to Earl Nelson, ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.corr.varie.

69. 31 Oct. 1806; see also 25 Sept. 1818, Hutchinson to Mrs Barrett, both *ibid.*

70. 11 Dec. 1817, *ibid.*

71. See 19 Jan. 1819, Mrs Barrett to di Martino, complaining of his 'insufferable pride' and 'pretensions' and arguing that 'to prevent disputes I have remained silent hoping time might bring things about, you have most certainly avoided all occasions of speaking upon business for if any has arisen you have walked off', *ibid.*, f.corr. Thovez & di Martino. In a letter of 1 Mar. 1820, Thovez complained of di Martino 'being led away with an idea that he is to be independent of me' and of his 'self-sufficiency . . . [which] if not checked in time may occasion much mischief'. *Ibid.*, f.lettere in inglese.

72. J. di Martino to Earl Nelson, 28 Jan. 1819, *ibid.*

73. 8 Mar. 1819, Rosario di Martino to the Earl Nelson, *ibid.*, b.349, f.1; 3 April 1819, Joseph di Martino to the same, *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. Thovez and di Martino.

74. See 8 Oct. 1820, Joseph di Martino to Thovez, and 19 Nov. 1820, Thovez to Rosario di Martino, *ibid.* Radice suggests that the di Martino brothers were leading conspirators in the 1820 revolution, 'Bronte nella rivoluzione di 1820' in *Memorie Storiche*, 361.

75. Goodwin, 'An Essay on Sicilian Industry', 13.

76. 11 Mar. 1812, from 'your respectful and obsequious Brontese subjects', in ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.corr.varie.

77. Gibbs was a particular friend of Eliza Graefer and, in turn, of Emma Hamilton (to whom the Duchy paid an annual remittance until her death in 1814). See 7 June 1806, Gibbs to the Earl Nelson, *ibid.*, b.580, f.corr. a.1806 Gibbs, and b.635 ('Nelson contro Forcella'). For more details on Gibbs, see Trevelyan, *Princes under the Volcano*, 26, 479.

78. 21 Mar. 1826, ASP, Nelson, b.585.

79. 1 June 1818, Mrs Barrett to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie.
80. According to Joseph di Martino, 28 Jan 1819, *ibid.*
81. See the memo about Gatto's role, *ibid.*, f.corr. Thovez and di Martino.
82. See the rental contracts and the document entitled 'List of persons being or having been in some way connected with the Duke of Bronte or the affairs of the Duchy with observations relating to them', *ibid.*, b.330, f.1.
83. On these activities in general, see 18 June 1817, Earl Nelson to Barrett; 11 Dec. 1817, Barrett to Hutchinson; 2 Mar. 1818, R. di Martino to Nelson; 13 May 1818, Mrs Barrett to Nelson, all *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie; Hutchinson to P. Thovez, 21 Mar. 1826, b.585.
84. Draft letter of 25 July 1817, *ibid.*, b.330.
85. 11 Dec. 1817, *ibid.*, b.581, f. corr. varie.
86. 19 Mar. 1822, Hutchinson to P. Thovez, *ibid.*, b.349, f.1.
87. On 'Nelson contro Forcella' see *ibid.*, bb.243-4 and b.635.
88. On Meli, see *ibid.*, b.211, f.1 and bb.262-6. A letter from William Thovez to Alexander Hood of May 1865 summarizes the fourteen lawsuits still pending: three involve Vincenzo Meli's heirs, *ibid.*, b.588, f.6.
89. See *ibid.*, 'Produzione legali diverse', bb.235-93.
90. 22 April 1800, to Horatio Nelson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie.
91. 'Nelson contro Minissale e Leanza' (1838-59), *ibid.*, b.284, f.2, b.298, f.9.
92. According to the '*Lista degli eligibili per la carica pubblica, 1817*' Dr Don Giuseppe Sanfilippo was the uncle of Don Gennaro Minissale (ASC, Intendenza, cat.1, b.11). A case between Earl Nelson and the family Sanfilippo (over a failure to pay rent in kind) involved Giuseppe Sanfilippo, the priest Don Francesco Sanfilippo, Don Vincenzo Sanfilippo (all brothers) and other members of the family including the notary Don Ignazio Spitalieri and his wife Donna Maria Spitalieri née Sanfilippo and their children. ASP, Nelson, b.210, f.1.
93. On 'Priest Palermo' see 4 Mar. & 30 April 1826, P. Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.585. Palermo was related by marriage to the Saitta and Cimbali families who were to become prominent in local politics; see the '*lista degli eligibili*', ASC, Intendenza, cat.1, b.11.
94. 14 Aug. and 17 Sept. 1826, ASP, Nelson, b.585.
95. 4 Mar. 1826, *ibid.*
96. 30 July 1824, to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.
97. 29 Sept. 1825, to Hutchinson, *ibid.*
98. 30 July 1824, to Hutchinson, *ibid.*
99. 11 Sept. 1826, *ibid.*, b.585.
100. 24 Aug. 1825, to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.
101. 7 July 1834, P. Thovez to Viscount Bridport, *ibid.*, b.349, f.1.
102. Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 96.
103. E. Iachello, 'La trasformazione degli apparati periferici dello stato nel XIX secolo: la riforma amministrativa del 1817', in F. Benigno and C. Torrisi, eds, *Élites e potere in Sicilia dal medioevo ad oggi* (Rome 1995) and, for a general discussion, A. Spagnoletti, *Storia del regno delle Due Sicilie* (Bologna 1997), 123-71.
104. There is a large literature on the nature of local power in Sicily and the mainland South. For an overview, see P. Pezzino, 'Local Power in Southern Italy', in Lumley and Morris, *The New History of the Italian South*, 42-58. On Sicily, see in particular E. Iachello, 'Centralisation étatique e pouvoir local en Sicilie au XIX siècle', *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 1, 1994, 241-66; G. Barone, 'Dai

nobili ai notabili: note sul sistema politica in Sicilia in età contemporanea' in Benigno and Torrìs, eds, *Élites e potere in Sicilia*, and Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy* 47–61, 138–55. On the mainland, E. di Ciommo, 'Élites provinciali e potere borbonico: note per una ricerca comparata' and P. Macry, 'Le élites urbane: stratificazione e mobilità sociale, le forme del potere locale e la cultura dei ceti emergenti'; both in Massafra, ed., *Il Mezzogiorno preunitario*, are useful.

105. 'Lista degli eligibili', 1817, ASC, Intendenza, cat. 1, b.11.

106. See the 'lista degli eligibili' for 1841–4 and 1845–8 *ibid.*

107. O. Cancila, 'Dal feudo alla proprietà borghese: la distribuzione della terra', in O. Cancila, *L'economia della Sicilia: aspetti storici* (Palermo 1992), 63–78.

108. J. Goodwin, 'Sicily: Social and Political' (1848), British Library MS 42150, 14.

109. According to the Sicilian reformer, the Baron Tommaso Natale. Cancila, 'Dal feudo alla proprietà borghese', 81–2.

110. Mack Smith, 'The Latifundia in Modern Sicilian History', 93.

111. As Goodwin remarks, 'equally just was the plan for commuting civic uses and equally capricious was the mode of procedure'. 'Sicily: Social and Political', 39.

112. Cancila, 'Dal feudo alla proprietà borghese', 120–2; Scifo, 'La proprietà della terra', 134–6. On the general aims of government policy see A. Scirocco, 'Ferdinando II e la Sicilia: gli anni della speranza e della delusione (1830–1837)', in S. Russo, ed., *I moti del 1837 a Siracusa degli anni trenta* (Caltanissetta 1987).

113. G. Fiume, *La crisi sociale del 1848 in Sicilia* (Messina 1982), esp. 99–100, 118–29; Giarrizzo, *Un comune rurale*, esp. 163–229; Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy*, 50–8.

114. Giarrizzo, *Un comune rurale*, 97.

115. The records for these disputes are in ASP, 'Intendenza di Catania (1822–80), atti relativi allo scioglimento dei diritti promiscui' and ASP, 'Intendenza di Palermo (1819–1866), atti relativi allo scioglimento dei diritti promiscui'.

116. See 'Produzione per le cause in linea d'arbitramento (vol. 14), elenco degli atti', vol. 1, in ASP, Nelson, b.157, and 'Bronte contro Nelson' (1844) in Collegio Capizzi Bronte, *Miscellanea Brontesi*.

117. 'Bronte contro Nelson' (1844). There is a useful and (relatively) brief summary of the Duchy's position in 'Difesa per la duchessa di Bronte contro la comune di Bronte' (1838), ASP, Nelson, b.294, f.2.

118. According to the forestry law of 1824, landowners were allowed to cut down an eightieth of the forest every year. See 16 Mar. 1827, from Hutchinson to P. Thovez, *ibid.*, b.585.

119. The vast documentation is in *ibid.*, bb.141–81, 208–27.

120. 7 July 1825, to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.

121. 30 April 1826, *ibid.*, b.585.

122. On the activities of the commune's experts, see the correspondence during the early 1830s between the mayor and the intendant of Catania, ASP, Catania, *diritti promiscui*, bb.27–8, 61 and for the 1850s, *ibid.*, b.3. On the Duchy's experts, see ASP, Nelson, b.171. The questions which the experts were asked to decide on are summarized by the Duchy's lawyer, Antonio Battaglia in 'Difesa per la duchessa di Bronte contro la comune di Bronte' (1838), *ibid.*, b.294, f.2.

123. 11 Dec. 1817, Barrett to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.corr. varie.

124. 24 Aug. 1825, P. Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, f.lettere in inglese.
125. 19 Oct. 1825, P. Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*; letters from the mayor of Bronte, Sept. to Oct. 1832 and 23 Aug. 1834, ASP, Catania, *diritti promiscui*, b.61.
126. See the correspondence and reports, 1850–2, ASP, Nelson, b.210, f.2.
127. See the correspondence between Thovez and the provincial authorities, May to July 1825 and June to July 1832, *ibid.*, b.294, f.3 and between Hutchinson and Thovez, Aug. to Sept. 1825, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.
128. 10 Dec. 1825, P. Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese. The Grand Hospital showed great reluctance in relinquishing the documents. Henry Thovez wrote to his brother from Naples on 14 June 1826 complaining about the ‘imbecility or negligence’ of a Mr Tracuzzi [?] who was supposed to get the documents released; ‘the Duke’s affairs’ he wrote, ‘must be entirely ruined if the Hospital continues in the possession of the papers belonging to the estate’, *ibid.*, b.588, f.1.
129. See the memorial ‘Bronte contro Nelson, 1844’.
130. See the correspondence between Philip Thovez and Henry Thovez in Naples during 1825 and 1826, ASP, Nelson, b.588, f.1 and f.2.; and 12 Oct. 1826, P. Thovez to Nelson, *ibid.*, b.585.
131. 4 Mar. and 19 Nov. 1826, to Hutchinson, *ibid.*
132. For example, in letters to the Earl Nelson, 30 June 1827, *ibid.*, and 24 Apr. 1833, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.
133. 8 March 1841, letter from the mayor of Bronte to the intendant, 13 June 1845 from the commune’s legal expert, and March 1848, the correspondence relating to the lawyer, Francesco Minissale, ASC, Intendenza, cat. V, b.776.
134. See the correspondence between the commune and the intendant’s office in 1825–6 and the early 1830s in ASP, Catania, *diritti promiscui*, bb.28 and 61, and on the Duchy’s side, in ASP, Nelson, bb.210–11, 294. The judicial and administrative decisions during this period are in b.153, and summarized *ibid.*, b.157 (index to vols. 9 and 10).
135. According to Lo Giudice, the intendant’s decrees ‘posed a serious threat to a large part of the Duchy’s possessions’, *Comunità rurali*, 265.
136. *Ibid.*, 265–7; ASP, Nelson, bb.153–4, 157.
137. See the series of complaints made by judge Martorana between 1857 and 1860 and the various replies of the commune’s lawyers, ASP, Catania, *diritti promiscui*, b.28.
138. The case for the commune and relevant correspondence, *ibid.*, bb.3 & 28, for the Duchy (mostly printed ‘memorials’) in ASP, Nelson, bb.294–5, 635, 637–9.
139. 22 Sept. 1832, from the mayor of Bronte to the president of the commission for customary rights, ASP, Catania, *diritti promiscui*, b.61.
140. Elsewhere in the province of Catania, for example on the southern and western slopes of Etna, disputes over land ownership were often focused on the woods. See M. Gaudio, *La questione demaniale in Catania nei casali del bosco-etneo: il vescovo-barone* (Catania 1971), esp. 101–3. For a discussion of similar disputes in rural Germany, see J. Mooser, ‘Property and Wood Theft: Agrarian Capitalism and Social Conflict in Rural Society, 1800–50. A Westphalian Case Study’, in R.G. Moeller (ed.) *Peasants and Lords in Modern Germany* (London 1986).

141. 17 Dec. 1817, Earl Nelson to Mr Barrett, 7 Mar. 1818, Mrs Barrett to Earl Nelson. Both in ASP, Nelson, b.581, f. corr. varie.
142. Draft letter of 26 July 1817, *ibid.*, b.330, f.1.
143. 7 July 1825, P. Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.581, f.lettere in inglese; 10 Mar. 1827, *ibid.*, b.585.
144. ASC, Intendenza, cat.II, b.253.
145. *Ibid.*, cat.V, b.776; Lo Giudice, *Comunità rurali*, 269.
146. 15 Sept. 1850, ASC, Intendenza, cat.II, b.253.
147. Sept–Oct. 1856, correspondence between the mayor and the intendant, *ibid.*
148. 7 July 1825, ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.
149. 31 Jan. 1827, Thovez to Hutchinson, *ibid.*, b.585.
150. See the correspondence *ibid.*, b.215, f.2 and in ASC, Miscellanea Risorgimentale, b.23, n.9. See also Romano, 'I contadini', 152–4.
151. Radice describes them as 'fanatici e ignoranti', 'Il '48 ed il '49 a Bronte', 397.
152. On the dismissal of Luigi Saitta in 1843, see ASC, Intendenza, cat.1, b.127: on 28 January 1851, Thovez wrote to the intendant protesting about Saitta's reappointment as mayor and reminding him of the problems in the early 1840s when Saitta was sacked for 'exceeding his powers' and preventing the collection of rents and dues.
153. 7 July 1825, ASP, Nelson, b.581, f.lettere in inglese.
154. Radice, 'Nino Bixio a Bronte', 429–32.
155. 'The Duchy Booklet . . . by the Viscount Bridport'.
156. 'Transazione tra il Comune di Bronte e Lady Carlotta Nelson' (Catania 1861), *ibid.*, b.378; English translation in manuscript in b.358, f.'trasferimenti dei beni del comune di Bronte alla famiglia Nelson' a.1861.
157. Pezzino, 'Local Power in Southern Italy', 50.
158. The classic statement is E. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York 1958).
159. See especially the argument of J. L. Briquet, 'Clientelismo e processi politici', *Quaderni Storici*, 97 (1998), 9–30.
160. S. Wilson, *Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-century Corsica* (Cambridge 1988), 265.

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