

The Young Consalvi

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Ercole Consalvi was, partly as a result of his upbringing, strongly anglophile all through his life and this was apparent in his role as one of the leading diplomats and statesmen in early-nineteenth-century Europe, particularly as Secretary of State to Pope Pius VII for over 20 years and Plenipotentiary at the Congress of Vienna which re-ordered Europe after the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Consalvi was greatly admired by his contemporaries. Napoleon called him “a lion in sheep’s clothing” and Stendhal “the greatest Statesman in Europe because the only honest one”. He was responsible for restoring the Papal States and the independence of the Papacy, and reforming to some extent their legal and economic systems, and throwing the weight of the Papacy behind the abolition of the Slave Trade which was adopted as one of the Articles of the Congress of Vienna. He established good relations with England, France, Austria and the Catholic states in its aftermath, and used his meetings with Castlereagh and the Prince Regent in London to further Catholic Emancipation.

Ercole Consalvi was born in Rome on 8 June 1757 and baptised in S. Lorenzo in Damaso (tucked into a corner of the Palazzo Cancelleria) . His father the Marchesino Giuseppe Consalvi came from an “ancient and noble house”. His mother Claudia was the daughter of Count Gian Ludovico of Modena. Her family was notable in the Church and produced two cardinals, including her brother Cardinal Filippo Carandini an important financial and judicial administrator in the Curia.

Consalvi's ancestors came from Toscanella. His grandfather, Gregorio, was created a Marchese by Pope Benedict XIV in 1755 (two years before Consalvi was born). His male ancestors were called Brunacci and originally came from Pisa. He could trace his ancestors to the sixteenth century – provincial nobility serving as *gonfalonieri* and military officers. Their rise in the eighteenth century was due to marriages to heiresses and lucky inheritances. His great-grandfather, Francesco Felix Brunacci, married Antonia Consalvi and the death of both her brothers left their son, Gregorio, as heir to the Consalvi name and property. Gregorio established himself in Rome after his rise into the titled nobility and bought a burial vault in the fashionable church of S Marcello in the Corso. Through his wife, Maria Perti, Gregorio Consalvi inherited the Perti estates near Rome. Cardinal Ercole Consalvi was their grandson.

Ercole was the eldest of four brothers. One brother and a sister died as babies, but he and two younger brothers, Gian Domenico and Andrea, survived infancy. Their father, Giuseppe, died in 1763 aged only 25 and was buried in S Marcello in the Corso. Their mother, as was the custom, returned to live with her father and brother in the Carandini household in Rome. Ercole and his two younger brothers were left in the care of their grandfather, the Marchese Consalvi, but he died in 1766. Under the terms of his will, he left the grandsons in the charge of Cardinal Andrea Negroni (1710–1789). Negroni was the Chancellor of the Holy Roman Church, Auditor to the Pope, Secretary of Briefs, and Cardinal Protector of the *Ospizio di S Michaeli a Ripa*. He was therefore a powerful and influential guardian and did his best to choose a good school for them. Not unaturally, his choice fell on his own old school, the college at Urbino run by the Scolopi, the renowned teaching order founded in seventeenth-century Spain: its European-wide alumni have included Pius IX, the Augustinian precursor of Darwin, Fr Gregor Johann Mendel, and, in the arts, the painter Goya, the composer Schubert, and the writer Victor Hugo.

Unfortunately, the college at Urbino was at that time going through a difficult period, with harsh discipline, and the youngest Consalvi boy became ill. Their mother and uncle took the Consalvi boys away from the school, and Gian Domenico died in Rome of a swollen knee. Much mortified, their guardian looked for another school. Good fortune intervened. Negroni had been auditor to Henry Benedict Stuart (1725–1807), Cardinal York, bishop of Frascati who lived there in great state in the Palace of La Rocca with footmen in English royal livery and who kept a musical household. Rich, pious, cultivated, and passionate about music, Henry Benedict Stuart avoided politics and devoted himself to running his diocese, to undertaking his Roman duties as Archpriest of St Peter's and Vice-Chancellor of the Roman Church, and promoting music with his own orchestra and choir.

In 1770, he reopened at Frascati the college which reverted to him after the suppression of the Jesuits by Clement XIV. He wanted it to be the best. He rebuilt it, giving it a magnificent library of books and printing press, creating a theatre and concert hall for masques and oratorios, and attracting the best teachers. Hearing that Cardinal Negroni was looking for a new school for his two surviving charges, Cardinal York asked that they be placed under his own special protection at Frascati.

This represented a miraculous transformation for Ercole and Andrea. They matriculated at Frascati in 1771. They found themselves whisked away from "Dotheboys Hall" to a semi royal Elysium devoted to learning and music. They spent five years there. Consalvi studied Rhetoric, Philosophy, Logic, Metaphysics, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, and Theology. He wrote poetry, joining the *Arcadia*, the Roman academy of poetry, and developing his musical talents by playing the violin. According to Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, it was

his talent as a violinist that especially endeared him to Cardinal York for whom music was so important both at Frascati and in St Peter's basilica. In Consalvi's own words, "From that moment to the last hour of his life Cardinal York showered favour and friendship on me". In due course he became an executor and beneficiary of the cardinal's will.

This good fortune from the *de jure* King of England (the last male Stuart) gave Consalvi his lifelong affection for England.

At the age of nineteen, Consalvi went up to the Pontifical Academy for Ecclesiastics in Rome where he studied Law, and History, under the direction of the brilliant scholar, Francesco Zaccaria, a strong defender of the rights of the Holy See. This experience coloured Consalvi's life work in defending those rights from the French Revolutionaries and Napoleon. He shone at the Academy and was chosen to give the Ascension Day address before Pope Pius VI in 1782. He graduated and received a doctorate in Canon and Civil Law. His excellent education left him fluent in French, an accomplished musician and poet, a lawyer and historian, and prepared him for a career in the papal government.

He was independently rich. His estates with property farms and vineyards at Toscanella and in and around Rome provided an income of between 12,000 and 15,000 *scudi* a year. (There were 4 *scudi* to the English eighteenth-century pound sterling). Like others of his class, his career was in the pope's civil household, the *Prelatura*, as a judge and administrator, not as a priest. He was never ordained. Until the end of the Papal States, half the curia comprised prelates who were non-clergy solely involved in their administration, and not in ecclesiastical matters. Like other clever, educated men in Rome, that is the career that Consalvi pursued after graduation. He began on the lowest rung as *Camerero Segreto*, receiving people in the papal ante-chamber and then became

a Domestic Prelate, entitled to wear violet robes with the title *Monsignor*. When given this title, he relinquished to his brother, Andrea, the title *Marchese*. At first they shared a house in Rome, and Consalvi also kept at Frascati a retreat that he had rented there since his days as a student. In 1785 he received his first legal post as a *Referendum* of the *Signatura*, the Appeal Court, thereby following in the footsteps of his uncle, and his guardian. In 1786 he was appointed secretary to the *Ospizio di S Michele a Ripa*, the principal Roman institution for the destitute. In 1790, he became votant of the *Signatura*, and, in 1792, an Auditor or judge of the *Rota*, the ancient court of the church.

Alongside his legal and administrative career in the Papal government, Ercole Consalvi lived an active social life. He liked travel and one of the advantages of a legal career was that the courts only sat for half of the year, allowing him ample free time. He kept boxes in Rome's two theatres and was a patron of music, especially of the composer, Domenico Cimarosa (1749–1801): as well as owning a violin, he had a German piano by Johann Gottlob Wagner (1741–1789) of Dresden. He also rode and hunted and bought a four-in-hand carriage from Prince Doria Pamphili. He broke his arm hunting which was responsible for his cramped writing in later life. He was a great favourite of the great Roman families, the Ruspoli, the Patrizi, the Chigi- and especially the Giustiniani whose two young daughters were especial friends, but who sadly died young.

This fulfilling life of a successful career and happy social round was violently interrupted by the French Revolutionary eruption into north Italy in 1797. The northern, most prosperous part of the Papal States were taken by the French and the Treaty of Tolentino was imposed on the pope. The following year, the French invaded Rome on the pretext of the shooting of a French soldier, Duphot, and they sent Pope Pius VI into exile. Consalvi as the secretary

of the small papal army was accused of the death of Duphot, and condemned to transportation to Cayenne, but, thanks to the intervention of friends, merely sent into exile in Naples, where he joined Cardinal York and other exiled prelates.

Events suddenly changed again when Austria defeated the French in northern Italy and took Venice. When Pius VI died in 1799, the cardinals gathered there and the Austrian emperor paid for the conclave to be held in S. Giorgio Maggiore. Consalvi joined the cardinals there. When the secretary of the Conclave was unable to reach Venice, Consalvi was appointed Secretary of the Conclave. The emperor wanted a pro-Austrian pope, but the cardinals elected a holy Benedictine monk, Barnaba Niccolò Maria Luigi Chiaramonti (1742–1823) as Pius VII. The Austrians then tried to get the new pope to appoint a pro-Austrian Secretary of State. Pius VII informed them that, as he had no State, he did not need one yet; that he was very happy to continue with the secretary of the Conclave, Monsignor Ercole Consalvi; and that he was leaving for Rome where the French had been evicted by the Neapolitans, with the help of the British navy. The pope's return to Rome led to a triumphal welcome and Consalvi was immediately created a cardinal and Secretary of State and thereby entered on a completely new phase of his life.