

ISOLA BELLA

By George Plohn - This presentation based on my longtime reminiscence of this place, is dedicated to the special lady who was my inspiration to write it.

Why Isola Bella?

Because here at Esplanade we have a beautiful large poster by this name on the southern wall of our Auditorium. Have you ever wondered what this poster is all about? Well... I did. Not only because of my own intellectual curiosity, but because Margot, my late wife, and I, have visited that phantasmagoric - looking place many years ago, and we returned with unforgettable memories.



Isola Bella (Italian for 'beautiful island') is one of the Borromean Islands of Lago Maggiore, a very big lake in north Italy, adjacent to Switzerland. This island is situated only 1300 ft from the lakeside town of Stresa. It is only 1200 ft long by 1300 ft wide and includes the Palace, its Italianate garden, and a small fishing village.

Until 1632, the island was a rocky crag occupied by a tiny fishing village, but that year Carlo III of the influential House of Borromeo, began the construction of a palazzo dedicated to his wife, Isabella D'Adda, from whom the island took its name. The aristocratic **Borromeo** family, rich merchants and bankers in Milan in the XIVth century, played an important role in the politics of the Duchy of Milan and as cardinals in the Catholic Church. It took more than 200 years and the work of many a

hundred men, qualified architects, engineers, stucco workers, painters and cabinet-makers to transform Isola Bella from a barren rock to a place of sheer delight.

The works were interrupted around middle of the century when the Duchy of Milan was struck by a devastating outbreak of plague.

Construction resumed when the island passed to Carlo's sons, Cardinal Giberto III (1615-1672) and Vitaliano VI (1620-1690), and turned the villa into a place of sumptuous parties and theatrical events for the nobility of Europe. The completion of the gardens, however, was left to his nephew Carlo IV (1657-1734). These were inaugurated finally in 1671.



The island achieved its highest level of social success during the period of Giberto V Borromeo (1751-1837) when visiting guests included Edward Gibbon (the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), Napoleon and his wife Joséphine de Beauharnais, and Caroline of Brunswick,

the Princess of Wales, the wife of the not yet King George IV. Let's mention here in passing that the same Caroline and her husband, shortly after their daughter's birth, have separated. By 1806, rumors that Caroline had taken lovers and had an illegitimate child led to an investigation into her private life. In 1814, Caroline moved to Italy, where she employed a certain Bartolomeo Pergami as a servant. Pergami soon became Caroline's closest companion, and it was widely assumed that they were lovers. In 1820, George became king of the United Kingdom. He hated her so much, that he vowed she would never be his queen, and insisted on a divorce, which she refused. A legal divorce was possible, but difficult to obtain. Caroline returned to Britain to assert her position as queen. She was wildly popular with the British populace, who sympathized with her and who despised the new king for his own immoral behavior. Caroline was barred from the coronation on the orders of her husband. Following that, she fell ill in London and died three weeks later.

From here fast forward to XXth century. On July 28, 1914 following the assassination in Sarajevo, Serbia of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, Europe broke out in a total conflagration ultimately resulting in a new world order and a decline of aristocracy. And with it, the peaceful, idyllic and very aristocratic atmosphere of Isola Bella was also shattered. Germany, struggling to find its way out of the misery of the loser's fate, in January 1933 fell in the hands of an unscrupulous Machiavellian dictator and started to rearm.

Ominous clouds were amassing on the sky of Europe. Something, anything, had to be done. And Isola Bella was that place again. In April 1935, a conference of the highest representatives of Italy, France and the United Kingdom was held in the palace at Isola Bella, resulting in the agreement known as 'The Stresa Front'.

The **Stresa Front** was an agreement between the French PM Pierre Laval, British PM Ramsay MacDonald, and Italian PM Benito Mussolini, declaring that the independence of Austria "would continue to inspire their common policy". The signatories also agreed to resist any future attempt by Germany, by now under the rule of Adolf Hitler, to change the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 in any shape or form. The Stresa Front, was short lived, however, it broke down pretty soon after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (October 1935), only a couple of months following this agreement. From now on, the events in Europe were precipitating; Hitler openly became more and more aggressive in words and deeds. On March 12, 1938 he invaded Austria, achieving "Anschluss", the *de facto* annexation of Austria. On September 30, 1938, the British PM Neville Chamberlain flew to Munich to meet with the *Führer* and in order to achieve "peace in our time" agreed that Hitler take over a chunk of Czechoslovakia.

And by September 1, 1939, entire Europe was on war...

Sic transit gloria mundi

(Latin for "Thus passes the glory of the world.")

Photos taken in 2014 by Getta Neumann





