

# Maurice Rowdon : Author and Philosopher

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## Lorenzo the Magnificent

### Excerpt

Lorenzo de Medici was twenty-one when he took over the government of Florence in December 1469. He was none too anxious to inherit from his father a 'throne' which was no throne at all, nor even an official position. The Florentines were an ungrateful lot, and it seemed much easier to remain a rich, popular and astonishingly gifted young man, known to every prince in Europe as the inheritor of the Medici millions and the most princely patron of thought and art in Christendom. It was a touch decision, and one he had to make within a day of his father Piero's death. He knew too that most likely he himself would one day die of the same hereditary disease, gout, and that hard work and worry would make an early death probably. And he did die, worn out and crippled, at the age of forty-three.

He preferred the family's country villas at Careggi, Fiesole, Cafaggiolo, Castello and many other places to the newly-built one in town. He enjoyed riding and hawking in the Pisan hills. He preferred peasants to politicians, and would spend hours talking to them and going round the various family farms. Above all, he loved to sit and write---songs and ballads, sonnets and perhaps the first drama, in our sense, ever written. His brilliant friend Pico della Mirandola thought him the equal of Dante and Petrarch: that might well have been true had he ever been allowed the necessary solitude. Certainly, without him the Italian language might have fallen into a long decay, swamped by an artificial Latin which every snob aspired to write without always writing it well. He could write both consummately. He was versatile---the most versatile of all the artists and thinkers, scholars and musicians, who sat round his dinner-table informally throughout his life. Yes he succeeded in escaping diletantism.

His education, mainly under Genile Becchi, was thorough without unnecessary pain and discipline. Italians were then, as now, most tolerant and sympathetic towards young people, and never pressed them too hard, or excluded them from adult company and adult pleasures. The result was remarkably mature children: Lorenzo was already an able diplomat at the age of sixteen, and a shrewd party-chief. He was the soul of courtest. What the Italians call *simpatia* poured out of him, touched with authority and sometimes harshness. He could even joust, though without much enthusiasm: like most Florentines he was no fighter, and did not deliberately court danger. He could be vulgarly cutting when he thought it right, but was unpretentious and natural in his behaviour, which put him all right with the common people, an important asset if one had to govern the virtually ungovernable, as he did. Even his horse Morello stamped and neighed with pleasure when he came near the stables, and if sick refused his oats until his master served him.

Lorenzo was no beauty, despite Benozzo Gozzoli's portrait of him when he was ten in the Magi frescoes at the Medici town-house. He had a large nose, rather flattened at the bridge and curling to a bulbous end, yet no sense of smell. His chin was powerful to the point of suggesting brutality, though a less vindictive or repressive ruler (at least until the attempt on his life in Florence's cathedral) could hardly be imagined. It was a chin of a determined and infinitely patient man.