DENIS MACK SMITH

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 1976

by

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Denis Mack Smith (1920–2017) was the best-known non-Italian historian of modern Italy of his generation. A fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, since 1948, his first book, *Cavour and Garibaldi: a Study in Political Conflict* (1954), traced the origins of fascism to the short comings of Italian Unification and launched Mack Smith's career. *Italy: a Modern History* (1959) quickly became the standard English-language text on modern Italy, leading to his becoming a best-selling author and a major cultural figure. In 1961 he was elected to a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, the position he held until he retired, and in 1976 was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy. In the same year his study of Mussolini's foreign policy was published, followed in 1981 by a biography of the fascist leader. Author of a *History of Sicily* (with M. I. Finley and C. J. Duggan), an anthology of texts (*The Making of Italy 1796–1870*) and numerous essays and articles, Mack Smith also wrote highly acclaimed biographies of Cavour and Giuseppe Mazzini and a history of the Italian monarchy. *Modern Italy: a Political History* (Yale 1997) rounded off his publishing career by bringing his earlier history up to date.

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DENIS MACK SMITH

Denis Mack Smith was the best-known non-Italian historian of modern Italy of his generation. Born in Hampstead in 1920, he attended St Paul's Cathedral Choir School and Haileybury College, and in 1939 was awarded an organ scholarship at Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he read history. After war service attached to the Cabinet Office he returned to Cambridge to complete his degree and in 1947 he became a college tutor and fellow at Peterhouse. In 1962 he was elected to a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, the position he held until his retirement in 1987. An Emeritus Fellow of the college and an Honorary Fellow of both Wolfson College, Oxford, and Peterhouse, after retirement Mack Smith remained in Oxford and continued to publish on Italian history. His scholarship brought him many accolades; as well as Fellowships of the British Academy and the Royal Society for Literature, he was awarded a CBE. In Italy he was especially proud to have been appointed Public Orator of the Republic of San Marino and an Honorary Citizen of the town of Santa Margherita Ligure. In 1984 he received the Italian Presidential Medal and then in 1996 one of Italy's highest honours when he was nominated a Grand Officer of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic.

The first in his family to attend university, Mack Smith's early interest in Italy was an offshoot of his love of music and at Cambridge modern Italy became his principal field of enquiry. With barely 200 students Peterhouse was one of the smallest in the university, but following Mack Smith's election it boasted seven history fellows, more than any other Cambridge college. Four were professors: Michael Postan, Denis Brogan, David Knowles and Mack Smith's former tutor, Herbert Butterfield, who was elected Master of the college in 1955. This heterogeneous fellowship was renowned for its strongly held although widely different and not always very consistent views on what the study of history was or should be about. While Butterfield was renowned for his biting pre-war critique of what he termed the 'Whig interpretation of history', by the time Mack Smith joined the college he had come round to accepting most of the premises that he had once derided and was on good terms with his distinguished colleague, George Macaulay Trevelyan, by any measure the very model of the Whig historians that Butterfield had formerly attacked.[1]

The connection with Trevelyan would have an important albeit indirect part to play in shaping Mack Smith's early career. Regius Professor of History in Cambridge in the inter-war years and then Master of Trinity College, Trevelyan was best known for his work on English history, but he was also the leading English historian of Italy's struggles for political independence and unity in the mid-nineteenth century. He had

[1] See D. Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: a Life in History* (London, 1992); C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield, Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, CT, 2004); M. Bentley, *The Life and Times of Herbert Butterfield* (Cambridge, 2016).

been drawn to Italy in the decade before the First World War by his belief that Italy's achievement of unification after centuries of foreign occupation and division was the most impressive demonstration of the creative and progressive force of liberalism in the nineteenth century. Italians, he believed, had been alone in Europe in understanding the emancipatory force of British liberalism and, written almost half a century after Italy's unification, Trevelyan's widely read studies celebrated Italy's achievement of independence and unification as the only truly heroic moment of Europe's long nineteenth century. At the centre of Trevelyan's epic account was Giuseppe Garibaldi, the heroic leader who won international fame first as the defender of the Roman Republic in 1849 and then as leader of the fabled expedition of the Thousand volunteers to Sicily in May 1860. By precipitating the fall of the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Garibaldi's Expedition made possible the political unification of the 'two Italies', the North and the South. But if Garibaldi was the unalloyed hero of Trevelyan's account, his studies underlined how the different personalities and skills of the Piedmontese politician and prime minister Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, and the Genoese republican and democrat Giuseppe Mazzini, had formed an unlikely but complementary partnership that made possible Italian unification and the establishment of the first constitutional monarchy in southern Europe.

The crisis that overwhelmed Italian democracy after the Great War and the rise of Mussolini's fascism called Trevelyan's glowing account of the liberal origins of the unified Italian nation into question, and the task of rewriting that narrative would now pass to Peterhouse's youngest history fellow. Unlike many other young non-Italian scholars who were led by their wartime experiences to study Italian fascism and its origins, Mack Smith's first encounters with Italy came not during but immediately after the war, in 1946 when a small college travel bursary enabled him to embark on the first of many research expeditions. His quest for documents took him from Turin to Florence, then to Rome, Naples and Palermo, and confronted him with a country in political turmoil. Prostrated by the devastating legacies of Mussolini's wars, and not least a civil war that after 1943 had set fascists, anti-fascists and Nazi occupiers against one another, the country's political future remained uncertain, although its shape was beginning to emerge. In June 1946 an institutional referendum resulted in the abolition of a monarchy that had been irreparably damaged by complicity with Mussolini's regime, following which, in September, a Constituent Assembly was elected. The constitution of the new Republic was approved in January 1948.

At the time of Mack Smith's first visit the situation was particularly grim, especially in the south. Naples could claim the sad primacy of being Italy's most heavily bombed city during the war, and it had suffered further violence and destructive reprisals following a popular rising against the German occupying forces before the Allied forces reached the city in September 1943. Even after the liberation conditions

remained desperate, and the Allies did little to remedy the plight of those the war had left without housing or work, adequate food, clothing, heating materials or medical supplies and prey to disease and starvation.

Mack Smith's first encounters with the devastated city left him with a deep sympathy for the sufferings that Mussolini's wars had imposed on Italian civilians. His most important intellectual encounter, however, was with the Neapolitan senator Benedetto Croce, post-war Italy's most eminent philosopher, historian, liberal politician, elder statesman and famed anti-fascist. A senator since 1910, Croce twice served as a minister and had played a prominent political role after the fall of Mussolini. His name was frequently mooted as a likely president of the new Republic and his political prominence gave him access to the highest representatives of the post-war Allied administration. His concern to re-establish intellectual contacts with Italy's former enemies ensured the young Cambridge historian access to the senator's entourage and to his rich and ancient private library that was being transformed into an international centre for historical research. Mack Smith later acknowledged that at the time his limited spoken Italian had restricted possibilities of conversation, but his own interpretation of the origins of fascism would take the form of an extended refutation of Croce's writings and ideas. It was not all work, however, and his time in war-scarred Naples yielded a rich repertoire of anecdotes, including a chance encounter in Positano with Norman Douglas, the famed author of *Old Calabria*, whose proposition that they make a road trip together through southern Italy he politely declined.[2]

In Palermo the situation was if anything even worse. The Sicilian cities had also suffered terribly from bombing raids before and after the Allied landings in July 1943 and as on the southern mainland after the fall of fascism older social conflicts had quickly re-emerged. Across the island unemployed and desperate rural workers were organising and demanding work, and tensions escalated when the landowners responded with violence while the authorities looked on passively. As fears of communist infiltration and a possible new civil war mounted, sections of the Sicilian propertied classes began mobilising support for Sicilian independence, a project with a long history. Separatist aspirations had played no small part in the revolt against Bourbon rule in 1860, and many saw parallels with the post-war situation.

One of Mack Smith's early essays explored the background to the rural revolts which had contributed to the collapse of Bourbon rule in Sicily, but he denied that there were similarities between Sicily in 1860 and in 1946. Indeed, his plan had been to write a political biography of Count Cavour and it was only when he discovered that the sources he needed were closed to him that he decided instead to focus on a

[2] N. Douglas, *Old Calabria* (London, 1915).

single year, 1860.[3] This placed Cavour, Garibaldi and Sicily centre stage and personalised the wider conflicts and rivalries that had shaped Italy's unification in the confrontation between the two men.

The outcome was the book that launched his career: *Cavour and Garibaldi: a Study in Political Conflict* (1954).[4] The subtitle was the key. In place of Trevelyan's heroic tale of a partnership of disparate talents, and perhaps echoing Herbert Butterfield's wariness of idealism in politics, Mack Smith underscored instead the bitter political conflicts that from beginning to end had shaped the struggles for Italian independence and their outcome. Despite the growth of nationalist aspirations, he argued that Italian unification and independence had been the largely unintended outcomes not of any common purpose or programme but of the bitter struggles for power that pitted the Piedmontese prime minister against the democrats, the republicans and the federalists and at times even the monarchy. Events in Italy had at every turn been influenced by the external pressures exerted by Great Britain and France, with Britain's indirect support ensuring the success of Garibaldi's expedition to Sicily and the collapse of the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. But the political outcome was determined by Cavour, who skilfully navigated around the political ambitions of the Great Powers to retain the political initiative in Italy. By sending a Piedmontese army through the Papal State to block the attempts of Garibaldi and his supporters to march on Rome, the Piedmontese minister ensured that the conservative solution embodied by King Victor Emanuel would prevail. But for Mack Smith the price of that victory had been too high; Cavour's repeated resort to unethical means to defeat his democratic and republican opponents had made Italy's liberal politics flawed in their origins.

Mack Smith's retelling of the history of Italian unification implicitly rooted the origins of fascism in the outcome of the Italian struggles for independence in the mid-nineteenth century (the *Risorgimento*). His book was well received at home and drew praise from A. J. P. Taylor, who had published on the diplomacy of Italian Unification and had commented extensively on Mussolini and fascism. Taylor noted approvingly that 'with brilliant, though well-founded perversity, Mr Mack Smith turns things upside down'. It was Trevelyan's earlier rosy account of Italian unification that had been overturned and Taylor's *imprimatu*r was a sure sign that Mack Smith's revisionist account had found its mark.

[3] D. Mack Smith, 'The peasants' revolt in Sicily; 1860', in *Studi in Onore di Gino Luzzato* (Milan 1950), and then in D. Mack Smith, *Victor Emanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento* (Oxford, 1971).

[4] D. Mack Smith, *Cavour and Garibaldi: a Study in Political Conflict* (Cambridge, 1954, reissued 1985); for a fuller bibliography of Denis Mack Smith's writings see J. A. Davis and P. Ginsborg (eds.), *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento: Essays in Honour of Denis Mack Smith* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 271–3.

Next came *Italy: a Modern History* (1959) in which Mack Smith linked the origins of fascism to the shortcomings of pre-fascist Italian liberalism and the *Risorgimento*.[5] Without underestimating the seriousness of the multiple political crises that had overwhelmed Italian democracy in the years immediately after the Great War, Mack Smith argued that the success of Mussolini's demagoguery and populism drew on the political culture and institutions that had been inherited from the *Risorgimento*. Cavour's willingness to override constitutional and legal constraints, Mack Smith argued, had fatally flawed Italian liberalism from the start, establishing a tradition of illiberal politics that left Italian democracy ill-equipped to confront the later challenges of fascist violence and illegality. After Cavour, successive governments had attempted to hold power at all costs, and the continuation of Cavour's practice of winning over or destroying political opponents had blocked any process of alternation between competing parties along the British model. Constitutional rules were regularly violated and were permanently at risk from the exceptionally wide prerogative powers exercised by the monarchy that were unusual in a parliamentary system. Parliamentary government in liberal Italy had frequently been authoritarian and repressive; the expansion of the press was limited and the right to freedom of speech frequently ignored. Parliamentary politics were heavily focused on factional infighting in ways that caused politicians to lose contact with the wider population, difficulties that were exacerbated by the failure to improve standards of popular education and the lack of social reform.

Mack Smith's claims that fascism was the product of Italy's abnormal and illiberal path to the twentieth century echoed the arguments that Hitler's National Socialism was the consequence of Germany's abnormal (and illiberal) path to the twentieth century, the *Sonderweg* thesis that found much support at the time although it was soon subject to more critical scrutiny.[6] But while Mack Smith blamed fascism squarely on the failings of the Italian political classes, unlike A. J. P. Taylor he avoided blanket condemnation of the Italian people whom he always portrayed as hapless victims of their own politicians.

Mack Smith's conclusions contrasted with those of Trevelyan, but the differences between the two are often overdrawn. Whereas Trevelyan had believed that liberal Italy had been 'made in Britain', Mack Smith instead insisted that Cavour and his successors had never wanted to imitate British liberalism and parliamentary practice. But Trevelyan had long since disavowed his earlier conclusions, and while their

[5] D. Mack Smith, *Italy: a Modern History* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1959; rev. edn 1969; New Haven, CT, 1997 re-titled *Modern Italy: a Political History*).

[6] See, for example, the critical reservations raised by Adrian Lyttelton in the Introduction to his *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919–1929* (London, 1973), pp. 1–14.

assessments of Cavour differed Mack Smith shared Trevelyan's admiration for Garibaldi and was if anything more sympathetic to Mazzini.[7] He also fully shared Trevelyan's insistence on the primary importance of first-hand archival research, and the two were not far apart either when it came to Italy and Britain – like Trevelyan and the greater part of their contemporaries, Mack Smith accepted without question that British liberalism was the measure of all modern democracies.

In any case, it was not Trevelyan but Benedetto Croce who was Mack Smith's real target, as was clear from the three essays 'The politics of Senator Croce' that were published between 1947 and 1949. This academic debut was a provocative attack on the politics and ideas of the man considered by many to be the leading Italian intellectual of his day and a leading opponent of Mussolini's fascism. Mack Smith was by no means alone in challenging Croce's anti-fascism since the Italian communist leader, Palmiro Togliatti, had already drawn attention to Croce's 'privileged position' under the fascist regime, while Gaetano Salvemini had raised even graver questions. A leading figure in the pre-fascist Italian socialist movement, Salvemini had been a political exile since 1926, first in the UK and then in the US where he became the most vocal and influential critic of Mussolini's regime. Returning to Italy after the war, Salvemini repeatedly attacked Croce for supporting the fascist government until well after the assassination of the socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti, in 1924. Compared with those who had joined the militant Resistance or suffered exile like himself, Salvemini claimed that Croce's subsequent anti-fascism had been at best passive, and he rejected the Neapolitan senator's right to speak for the regime's opponents.

Mack Smith went further. He claimed that Croce's own political ideas had not been far removed from the fascist notion of an ethical state, and that Croce's vague and abstract notion of liberalism, his hostility to party politics and political parties and his unbending hostility to all political movements of the Left, as well as his anti-clericalism, embodied the essential weaknesses and ambiguities of Italian liberalism. Mack Smith argued that Croce was not an anti-fascist but a precursor of fascism whose historical writings were deliberately designed to conceal the real roots of Italian fascism. He dismissed Croce's widely esteemed *History of Italy* (1927) as a partisan work written to exculpate retrospectively the author's own earlier sympathies for fascism and to deny that Italy's pre-fascist liberalism bore any responsibility for the collapse of Italian democracy after the First World War. For Mack Smith, Croce's claim that fascism had been a 'parenthesis' in Italian history without roots in the past was 'historically naïve and logically absurd'.[8]

[7] See, for example, G. M. Trevelyan, *The Historical Causes of the Present State of Affairs in Italy* (London, 1923).

[8] D. Mack Smith, 'The politics of Senator Croce 1. Benedetto Croce; history and politics', *The Cambridge Journal*, 1 (1–2: October 1947–January 1948), 28–42; D. Mack Smith, 'The politics of Senator Croce 2:

'The politics of Senator Croce' essays were the premise for Mack Smith's subsequent writings on Italian history. In *Cavour and Garibaldi* he would take on Croce's idealistic portrayal of Cavour, and then in *Italy: a Modern History* he challenged Croce's claim that fascism was a mere 'parenthesis'. These attacks on Croce did not attract much attention among English-speaking readers, but in Italy they provoked a furore. Einaudi, the Turin publishing house of impeccable liberal credentials, published the Italian edition of *Cavour and Garibaldi* in 1958 and a year later (the same date as the English-language edition) the Italian edition of *Italy: a Modern History* was published by Giuseppe Laterza, the publisher of Croce's writings during the years of the fascist dictatorship.

Mack Smith would later claim that the reception of his work in Italy came as a total surprise and was largely because it touched on 'quite extraneous controversies that were raging in which it was given a part to play – unintentionally on my part'.[9] But his publishers certainly knew that they were stepping into one of the most sensitive public debates in post-war Italy, and Mack Smith was too acute an observer not to be aware that in Italy his challenge to Croce would provoke fierce reactions. He was well aware, too, how closely the debates on the origins of fascism were connected with current, post-war Italian politics. Benedetto Croce's claim that fascism had been a 'parenthesis' without roots in Italy's past had a strong attraction for conservatives since it implicitly spared the political establishment from direct responsibility for Mussolini. But their political opponents insisted that fascism did indeed have deep roots in Italy's recent past, even though there was ample room for disagreement over the precise nature of those roots. Social democrats such as Salvemini argued that thanks to the Socialists democracy had been 'in the making' in Italy before 1914, but had then been subverted by fascism. After fascism the task was to revive the earlier democratic process by means of a broad alliance of the political forces that had opposed fascism. But the communists, who had emerged from the anti-fascist Resistance as the most powerful political force on the Italian Left, disagreed and they looked on any alliance with social democrats and other bourgeois political parties with suspicion.

These controversies acquired a new focus following the posthumous post-war publication of the letters and prison writings of the Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento will forever be associated with the notion that Italy's unification was the result of a 'failed or incomplete bourgeois revolution'. The Italian middle classes in the mid-nineteenth century had aspired to

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1915–22 war and revolution', *The Cambridge Journal*, 1 (1–2: October 1947–January 1948), 279–91; D. Mack Smith, 'Croce and fascism', *The Cambridge Journal*, 1 (1–2: October 1947–January 1948), 343–56. See also F. T. Rizi, *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism* (Toronto, 2003).

[9] Introduction to the 1985 edition of *Cavour and Garibaldi: a Study in Political Conflict*.

break with absolutism and lay the basis for a new capitalist order, but lacked the strength to achieve this unaided. As a result, Gramsci argued, their revolution was achieved by means of a curious alliance that embraced, on one hand, Cavour, the representative of the new northern capitalist classes, and, on the other, the militaristic Piedmontese monarchy, aided and abetted by the still feudal landowners of the former Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the south. Gramsci's arguments gave new weight, therefore, to the communists' insistence that after fascism the struggle for democracy in Italy had to start from scratch.

The contending parties in these highly charged debates were eager to recruit the Oxford historian to their cause or to align him with their enemies. But Mack Smith understood very well that his writings and conclusions were distinctive precisely because he could not be identified with any Italian political movement or 'school'. Determined to remain above the fray, he resisted being enlisted even by his admirers and was especially careful to avoid being bracketed with Gramsci. He dismissed Gramsci's 'failed revolution' as a piece of 'pseudo-history' and claimed that the attempts to align him with the Marxist theorist were examples of the wilful misinterpretation of his work by hostile Italian critics.[10]

By now Mack Smith was a familiar and much sought-after participant in press, radio and prime-time television interviews and panels. He easily lived up to Italian images of an English scholar and gentleman, a role enhanced by fluent Italian inflected by an unmistakably Oxbridge delivery. Unruffled and courteous even under provocative questioning, his ability to seize on the weaknesses of his critics' arguments won him many admirers. The most remarkable recognition of the position he had acquired as an authority over and above the world of partisan politics came, however, when the Ministry of Education chose to adopt his books as compulsory texts for schools and universities throughout Italy.

This popularity served only to infuriate his critics, of whom the most outspoken were those closest to Croce, and in particular the Sicilian historian Rosario Romeo. The principal defender of Croce's memory after his mentor's death in 1952, Romeo was a leading intellectual figure in the campaign to limit the political and cultural influence of the communists in post-war Italy. His criticism of Gramsci's ideas and writings won him international attention, but he soon emerged as Mack Smith's principal Italian adversary as well. Romeo well knew that Mack Smith was no Marxist, but he was infuriated by what he considered to be his misrepresentation of Croce's ideas and politics. Above all he rejected the English historian's negative portrayal of Cavour, to whom Romeo would devote his major scholarly work, and his interpretation of fascism as the inevitable outcome of all Italy's previous history. This

[10] Ibid.

interpretation was, Romeo argued, little more than a 'historiography of the victors' that mirrored the attempts to blame 'Stein and Fichte, Bismarck and Hegel for the crimes of Hitler and Rosenberg'.[11]

Romeo considered Mack Smith's insistence on the divisions and conflicts that had shaped Italy to be dangerously divisive at a time when Italians needed to rally together. There could be no common ground between the two and without pretence of scholarly civility Romeo dismissed the English historian's arguments, cast doubt on his scholarship and claimed that Mack Smith had done little more than repeat uncritically the accusation against Cavour that had been raised first by Mazzini and the radicals, and more recently by Gaetano Salvemini. Responding to these and other criticisms at some length, Mack Smith in turn made few concessions. He agreed that whatever its shortcomings, unification could only have been achieved on the terms shaped by the encounter between Cavour and Garibaldi in 1860. But his own contribution had been, he insisted, to use documentation that previous historians had not thought to explore to counter the 'officially sanctioned mythology' that had disguised the conflicts that had shaped Italy's struggles for unity and independence.[12]

In the meantime Mack Smith's career at home took an important turn in 1962 when he was elected to a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford. His first marriage had ended and in Oxford a year later he married Catherine Stevenson. Freed from teaching responsibilities his scholarly output increased.[13] In 1968 his two-volume *History of Sicily* was published, and provoked further disagreement with Rosario Romeo.[14] His writings on nineteenth-century Italian politics and diplomacy in these years remain fundamental points of reference for subsequent research and many were republished under the title of *Victor Emanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento*. The anthology of historical documents relating to unification (*The Making of Italy 1796–1870*) quickly became the standard text for English-speaking students.[15]

In Italy, meanwhile, the decades that followed Mack Smith's move from Cambridge to Oxford saw dramatic change and upheaval. The post-war 'economic miracle' had

[11] See Romeo's preface to the 1965 edition of K. R. Greenfield, *Economics and Liberalism in the Risorgimento: a Study of Nationalism in Lombardy 1814–1848* (Baltimore. 1934/1965); R. Romeo, 'Interpretazioni del Risorgimento nella nuova storiografia' (1970) reprinted in his, *L'Italia unità e la Prima Guerra Mondiale* (Bari, 1978), pp. 19–20.

[12] See the Preface to the 1985 edition of Mack Smith, *Cavour and Garibaldi*.

[13] In 1965, Denis Mack Smith gave the British Academy's Italian Lecture 'The Latifundia in modern Sicilian history', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 51 (1965), pp. 85–124.

[14] D. Mack Smith, *Medieval Sicily 800–1713* (London, 1968); D. Mack Smith, *Modern Sicily: after 1713* (London, 1968); R. Romeo, *Il Risorgimento in Sicilia* (Napoli 1950).

[15] D. Mack Smith, *Victor Emanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento* (Oxford, 1971); D. Mack Smith, *The Making of Italy 1796–1870* (London, 1968/1988).

run its course and discontents with the lack of welfare reforms, the inadequacies of public services, housing shortages and wage restraints now gave rise to increasingly violent confrontations between organised labour and the police. Combined with the protests of university students, the upheavals and street violence of 1968–9 opened a decade that challenged the political foundations of the Republic. The political and economic situation deteriorated under the pressures of the oil crisis and stagflation, while extra-parliamentary groups on the far right and far left embarked on strategies of violence designed to throw Italian democracy into crisis, culminating in the kidnapping and assassination by the Red Brigades of the Christian Democrat prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978.

Against the background of these new challenges to Italian democracy the study of fascism acquired a new immediacy. For some time, however, research and debate had been moving in directions quite different from Mack Smith's earlier studies. A new generation of historians was seeking to set Italian fascism in its broader contexts and posing new questions to explain why constitutional government in Italy should have proved particularly vulnerable to fascist populism after the First World War. New studies were addressing questions that ranged from the role of powerful interest groups in the rise of Mussolini's movement to what made fascist ideology attractive, the links between the rise of populist nationalism and the insecurities associated with the advent of mass society, to fascism in power and the variety of means by which the fascist regimes orchestrated and retained popular support.[16]

There was no single line of investigation, but the publication in Italy of the first volumes of Renzo De Felice's monumental but deeply contentious study of Mussolini and the fascist regime quickly became the principal focus for international debate on the nature of fascism.[17] Drawing on the work of many other historians, De Felice had challenged Gaetano Salvemini's assertion that fascism was a movement driven by Mussolini's vanity and self-deception. He argued that it had originated instead as a broader movement with a modernising and revolutionary ideology that found strong support in many parts of Italian society. He compared fascism favourably with German Nazism and, in direct contrast to Salvemini, portrayed Mussolini as a pragmatic leader whose objectives had always been to promote Italian interests in Europe and the Mediterranean. If this had proved disastrous, De Felice blamed the

[16] See, for example, Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*; P. Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara (1915–25)* (Oxford, 1976); V. De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, 1981); A. L. Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism: the Province of Bologna (1901–1926)* (Princeton, NJ, 1982); A. A. Kelikian, *Town and Country under Fascism: the Transformation of Brescia (1915–1925)* (Oxford, 1986).

[17] R. De Felice, *Mussolini*, 4 vols (8 parts) (Turin, 1965–97).

intransigence and miscalculations of the British and the French who, he claimed, had forced Mussolini into an alliance with Hitler that he had always wanted to avoid.

Most contentious of all was De Felice's claim that between 1929 and 1934 Mussolini's regime had enjoyed the 'consensus' of the vast majority of Italians. This was a direct challenge to the assumption that, except for a small minority of committed fascists, the majority of Italians had been united in their hostility, spoken or unspoken, to fascism and to Mussolini's regime. Hence De Felice directly challenged the belief that the Resistance, not fascism, represented the Italian nation, the central premise of post-war Italian politics. These conclusions were roundly dismissed by the Left, but warmly greeted by those on the political Right, and for that reason quickly attracted international attention.[18]

Up to this point Mack Smith's writings had not touched directly on the regime in power, except for a short piece on Mussolini as an artist in propaganda published in *History Today* in April 1959.[19] Through the 1960s his work continued to focus on the Risorgimento, although in a harsh review of the study of the rise of fascism by his Oxford colleague Christopher Seton Watson he took the author to task not only for defending pre-fascist Italian liberalism but also for failing to take his analysis beyond 1925, the year in which the fascist seizure of power was consolidated.[20]

When Mack Smith finally did enter the lists, however, De Felice was his target. The opening shots were fired in an extended review essay in which he claimed that the Italian historian was deliberately attempting to build 'a monument to the Duce' with the clear aim of rehabilitating fascism.[21] The fuller response came a year later in *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, in which Mack Smith chose foreign policy as the specific ground on which to test De Felice's claims. Far from following objectives that were coherent and rational, as De Felice claimed, Mack Smith argued that Mussolini had conducted fascist foreign policy almost single-handedly and with no aims more coherent than capricious opportunism and aggression. The Duce's capacity for self-delusion and his desire for glory were all that counted, and a political class and the military long accustomed to compliance and collusion simply went along with this: 'Mussolini had got used to living in a cloud-cuckoo land where words and not facts mattered … It was an essentially unserious world where propaganda and public

[18] For example, M. Ledeen, 'Renzo De Felice and the controversy over Italian fascism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11 (1976), 269–83; see also S. Corrado Azzi, 'The historiography of fascist foreign policy', *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 187–203.

[19] D. Mack Smith, 'Mussolini, artist in propaganda. The downfall of fascism', *History Today*, 9 (1959), 223–32.

[20] D. Mack Smith, 'Why Mussolini made it', *New York Review of Books*, 24 October 1968.

[21] D. Mack Smith, 'A monument to the Duce', *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 October 1975.

statements were what counted; and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was the central message and the real soft core at the heart of Italian fascism.'[22]

Commentators saw Mack Smith's Mussolini as a restatement of Salvemini's earlier depiction of a vainglorious 'sawdust Caesar' and the Italian historian Roberto Vivarelli argued that the English historian had drawn on significant new sources to reinforce the accuracy of Salvemini's portrait and convincingly demonstrate that Mussolini had personally conducted crucial foreign policy decisions without consultation. But while agreeing that 'deceit and falsehood' were the essence of Italian fascism, Vivarelli suggested that Mack Smith had not really answered the bigger question posed by De Felice: why and how could a regime based on propaganda, lies and deceit have lasted as long as it did?[23]

Nor were those questions addressed more fully in the biography of the Duce that followed in 1981. In his Preface, Mack Smith acknowledged that De Felice was in the process of writing the 'most substantial study of fascism' to date and had done more than anyone to open up the subject for research in the archives. He also accepted that De Felice's judgement on Mussolini was 'balanced' and 'critical', although 'not always critical enough', but while he agreed that 'Italian fascism was more than just Mussolini' he went on to argue that 'the quirks of character in this one man were a crucial factor in both its successes and failures'.[24]

As in his previous book, Mussolini's vanity and obsession with propaganda are centre stage from the early days of the fascist movement to the disasters of war and defeat. These were made unstoppable, the author again insisted, by the incompetence, corruption and stupidity of the fascist hierarchs and administrators, although he was careful to exclude the Italian people from these strictures. Indeed, at times he seemed ready to exculpate the elites no less than the masses and in the introduction to the 1984 edition of the moving diary of events in the Val d'Orcia in the year after the fall of Mussolini written by Iris Origo, the wife of a wealthy Tuscan landowner, he commented that families like hers had been cut off by a 'barrier of privilege' from 'learning about the cruelties of fascism, its oppression of minorities, its inefficiency and other less attractive aspects of the regime'.[25] Some critics felt that Mack Smith's biography had not answered the most serious questions posed by Salvemini's critics, while the author's aim of focusing 'on the public life of one man, with only enough of the wider context and general background to make his career intelligible' seemed too

[22] D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London, 1976), p. 252.
[23] R. Vivarelli, 'Review of D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*', *Journal of Modern History*, 50 (1978), 156–9; see also J. Joll, 'Mussolini's Roman Empire', *New York Times*, 20 June 1976.
[24] D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London, 1981); see also *Mussolini and Italian Fascism: an Analysis by John A Davis & Denis Mack Smith* (Warwick History Videos, 1991).
[25] Introduction to I. Origo, *War in the Val D'Orcia 1943–6* (Boston, MA, 1984).

narrow to take account of the new directions that had been driving scholarship on fascism and the inter-war totalitarian regimes for some time.[26]

Mussolini was Mack Smith's final salvo in the debates on the fascist regime; despite its critics it was another publishing success that revealed the author's exceptional gifts as a biographer, qualities which would be put to good effect in the biographies of Cavour and Mazzini and his study of Italy's rulers from 1860 to 1946 that followed. *Cavour* was the biography Mack Smith had originally planned to write in 1946.[27] Published in 1985, it reaffirmed his earlier portrayal of the Piedmontese statesman, while developing a vivid portrait of a man caught between conflicting passions, insecurities and addictions, and at heart an often reckless gambler. Not by chance the biography was published just a year after his old adversary, Rosario Romeo, had published the final volume of his own massive three-volume study of the Piedmontese statesman.[28] Like De Felice's volumes on Mussolini, Romeo's multi-volume study was as much a history of Italy and Europe in his time as a biography of Cavour. In his preface, Mack Smith acknowledged that 'Romeo's work … is likely to remain the most exhaustive study we shall possess on this subject for some time to come', but his text contested nearly all of Romeo's conclusions. Mack Smith again insisted that Cavour's methods had left a legacy of underhand political practice that had undermined the political life of liberal Italy, but he also acknowledged that no one else could have unified Italy: 'No politician of the century – certainly not Bismarck – made so much out of so little.' He also conceded that had Cavour not died suddenly before unification was completed things might well have turned out differently.[29]

Few noticed that Mack Smith's conclusions were not far from the pessimistic tones in which Rosario Romeo depicted Italian politics after Cavour in the concluding sections of his own biography, and critics were struck instead by the contrasts between the two portrayals of the Piedmontese statesman. For the Italian diplomat and historian Sergio Romano the contrasts reflected profoundly different historical approaches that were coloured by more subjective factors. Albeit in different ways, Romeo and De Felice both refused to accept that since unification Italian history had been determined by fundamental 'original sins'. Like Croce, they rejected the thesis of continuity, arguing instead that the politics of Cavour and Mussolini had to be judged in the context of the specific circumstances and constraints of historical time and place. But Mack Smith, Romano argued, worked instead from a set of moral criteria that made his histories inseparable from the histories of 'great men' in which the

[26] See, for example, *Mussolini and Italian Fascism: an Analysis by John A Davis & Denis Mack Smith*.
[27] D. Mack Smith, *Cavour* (London, 1985).
[28] R. Romeo, *Cavour e il Suo Tempo* (Bari, 1969–84).
[29] Mack Smith, *Cavour*, p. xii.

history of Italy since unification became a sequence of moral failures. In Mack Smith's Machiavellian Cavour, Romano also detected echoes of the stereotypes of villainous Italians that were deeply rooted in British culture, although he acknowledged that Mack Smith's Italian critics had been guilty of an excess of nationalist sensitivity and corporate defensiveness in their responses to the British historian.[30] But English and American critics were generally better disposed and Charles Delzell, for example, noted that Mack Smith's elegant and accessible biography had significantly revised his more negative earlier assessment of the Piedmontese statesman, while Romeo's massive scholarly work was much less accessible and designed more for specialist readers alone.[31]

With M. I. Finley and C. J. Duggan, Mack Smith published a shortened version of the two-volume *History of Sicily* (London, 1986) that had first appeared twenty years earlier. This was followed three years later by *Italy and its Monarchy* (New Haven, CT, 1989), a relentless critique of the role played by Italy's successive rulers in undermining its pre-fascist democracy, abetting Mussolini's seizure of power and colluding with the fascist regime. The book's strength lay in the vivid if damning biographical vignettes of the members of the House of Savoy who had ruled Italy since unification, but its conclusions again underlined the corruption, deceit and underhand dealings that pervaded the highest levels of Italian politics before, during and, in this case, after fascism. One critic compared Mack Smith to Suetonius who had railed relentlessly against the follies and corruption of ancient Rome, although others wondered why such inept rulers had kept their thrones for so long.[32]

In Giuseppe Mazzini Mack Smith finally found a subject to whom he really warmed. He made no secret of his admiration for Mazzini's unbending moral rectitude, his humanity and his single-minded focus on achieving a nation that would enable Italians to realise their full potential. Mazzini, he argued, was a patriot but not a nationalist. Nationalists advocated everything that Mazzini abhorred, whereas his patriotism was grounded in his belief in the capacity of free and independent national communities to live together in harmony. Despite his intransigent insistence on the need for unification, Mack Smith insisted too that Mazzini was no admirer of Piedmontese centralisation but an advocate of regional self-government, which won him the admiration of federalists such as Alberto Mario and Carlo Cattaneo.

Acknowledging that Mazzini's vision of a world of fraternal and cooperative independent nation-states overlooked many practical problems, Mack Smith argued

[30] S. Romano, 'Cavour and the Risorgimento', *Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986), 669–72.
[31] C. Delzell, 'Reviews', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 144–6.
[32] R. J. Bosworth, 'Denis Mack Smith and the Third Italy', *International History Review*, 13 (1990), 782–92.

that it proved to be a major inspiration for politicians across Europe, the United States and India, and made Mazzini a prophet of the European Union no less than a united Italy. And Mazzini's dismay that the Italy that had taken shape from the Risorgimento was no more than the corpse of the nation that he had hoped to bring into being was close to the conclusions of Mack Smith's own reflections on Italy. It was another irony that Mack Smith's arch adversary, Rosario Romeo, should also have been a great admirer of Mazzini's ideas, but the Sicilian historian's early death in 1987 precluded further dialogue.[33]

Francesco De Sanctis, the literary critic and politician who had been a fierce but unheeded critic of the failings of Italian politics in the decades after unification, was another Italian political figure that Mack Smith greatly admired.[34] But his greatest admiration was for Gaetano Salvemini. In a brief encomium written twenty years after Salvemini's death, Mack Smith hailed him as 'one of the great Italians of his time'. Mack Smith shared Salvemini's key beliefs and his admiration for Mazzini, and they had the same opponents. Too much of a nonconformist and individualist to receive the acclaim he merited, Salvemini had made powerful enemies after he returned to Italy from exile because he was one of the few who had dared to oppose the fascists, the communists and the Catholic church, and to challenge Croce for misleading 'several generations of intellectuals with rhetorical abstractions far removed from the urgent question of how to make Italy a truly liberal and civilized country'. Mack Smith believed that Salvemini had been right to argue that the Italians' preference for debating 'general theories rather than practical problems' was a cause of 'Italy's backwardness' and the 'perilous threat of revolution'. He admired Salvemini's forthright denunciations of the Italian obsession with greatness and his claim that 'if the resources had gone to building schools instead of an empire, Italy might have become a front rank rather than a third class nation'. He agreed, too, when Salvemini argued that fascism had been forced on the Italians whose civic qualities he defended, even if he conceded that 'they possessed little political sense'.

Above all, Mack Smith endorsed Salvemini's insistence on the devastating legacy of 'fraudulent legends' and the 'conventionally accepted myths about the Risorgimento (that) had led people into one disaster after another'. Exposing those falsehoods was the task that Mack Smith had set himself, and it is not surprising that he should have urged that Salvemini be remembered as 'a scholar and also as a great liberal, an enemy of all totalitarianisms whether of the Right or the Left. He was at once a patriot and

[33] D. Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (New Haven, CT, 1994). See also R. Romeo, 'L'influsso rivoluzionario di Mazzini in Europa', *Nuova Antologia*, 550 (1987), 98–113.

[34] Introduction to F. De Sanctis, *Un viaggio elettorale* (Florence, 1983); D. Mack Smith, 'Francesco De Sanctis; the politics of a literary critic', in J. A. Davis and P. Ginsborg (eds.), *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento: Essays in Honour of Denis Mack Smith* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 251–70.

an internationalist, an enemy of hypocrisy and above all a great educator. It is not only Italians who have much to learn from him.'[35]

Mack Smith's admiration for Salvemini shone through the biography of Mazzini that was published just as Italy was entering a new period of crisis. After the apparent prosperity and political stability of the 1980s, Italy had fallen victim to the after-shocks of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Without the Cold War the Italian Communist Party became redundant, but once deprived of the communist threat the Christian Democrats fared no better. The final blow came when the magistrates embarked on a national investigation into political corruption that resulted in the collapse of the political parties and politicians that had dominated Italian political life since 1946.[36]

Against this background Mack Smith's evocation of the scrupulously incorruptible Mazzini was timely, and his initial reactions to the new crisis in Italy were positive. In 1997 his publisher, Yale University Press, invited him to update the earlier editions of his *Italy: a Modern History* to include the decades since the founding of the Republic. He took the opportunity once again to emphasise the insidious and destructive force of corruption in political life, the weakness of the Italian political party system and the gap that separated ordinary Italians from their politicians. But he saw in the corruption trials and the crisis of Italy's established political parties after 1992 grounds for believing that Italy and its politics might finally be heading in new and better directions. 1860 and 1945 had both been moments when opportunities for real change had been missed, but he believed that the early 1990s offered similar opportunities for a new start.

Those expectations proved to be short-lived, and the emergence of Silvio Berlusconi and his followers brought many former neo-fascists into government and launched a broader onslaught on the long-standing political and cultural premises of the post-war Republic. The new ruling groups claimed to represent the Italians who had been excluded from the post-war Republic, and Mussolini's regime was openly rehabilitated while both the Resistance and the Risorgimento became targets of sustained revisionist attack. Like the post-war Republic, it was now claimed that unification had been imposed on an unwilling people by narrow and self-interested elites. As the older Crocean liberal view of the Risorgimento that Romeo had defended, and against which Mack Smith had devoted his scholarly life, came under attack many of his criticisms were misappropriated by those with whose politics he had no sympathy.

The new edition of *Italy: a Modern History* proved to be unduly optimistic about what lay ahead, but it illustrated once more the remarkable consistency of Mack Smith's views over a writing career that spanned five decades. Neither his views nor his

[35] D. Mack Smith, 'Gaetano Salvemini', *Encounter*, April 1978, 53–5.
[36] D. Mack Smith, 'Italy's dirty linen', *New York Review of Books*, 30 November 1995.

ways of writing history had changed much over time, but although they never rivalled the successes enjoyed in Italy by his first books the biographies he wrote at the end of his career were major literary works as well as historical accounts. No other non-Italian writer could claim to have done more to promote interest in modern Italy and make its history accessible.

Despite his battles with academic opponents, in person Denis Mack Smith was an entertaining, congenial and hospitable man whose rooms at All Souls were open to anyone interested in Italy past or present. He supervised only a small group of graduate students, among them Christopher Duggan, with whom he often worked closely and who sadly predeceased him at the height of his career. But Mack Smith willingly gave advice and encouragement to younger scholars, many of whom will retain fond memories of a stiff *aperitivo* in his room before lunch in the All Souls' dining room and lively discussion of the latest books and news from Italy. After his retirement, he and his wife Catherine entertained scholars, students and journalists from all over the world at their home in Headington, and he remained a widely respected commentator on Italian affairs whose views were frequently cited in the media at home and abroad. He died on 11 July 2017 and is survived by his wife, their two daughters and four grandchildren.

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