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Italy: a Short History

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One of the most difficult, and under-rated, jobs undertaken by the historian is that of the *synthesis*. Text books covering long periods of historical time demand the exclusion of vast quantities of material. Traditional text books were also always intended to be readable, to be chronological and to go beyond the interest of the specialist, although there is now a trend away from this kind of approach towards the use of assorted sources which ask questions of the student, and do not give definitive versions of historical moments. Accomplished syntheses can only really be done by historians who know the whole, inevitably complicated, story of the period they are dealing with. They are aware of what they can leave out, and what they must leave in. Normally, this is also a task made easier by long experience of teaching in specific areas.

In the sphere of Italian history, there is a great tradition of fine text books by British historians, which have, in many cases, become standard works in Italy. Denis Mack Smith's classic *Italy: a Modern History* (University of Michigan Press Ann Arbor, new edn, 1968), recently revised and updated and re-issued as *Modern Italy: a Political History* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1997) remains a standard work in Italy and the UK and is still to be found on numerous Italian bookshelves. Christopher Seton-Watson's *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, 1870-1925* (Methuen: London, 1967) is probably still the best general account of the first fifty years of the history of unified Italy. More recently, we have seen Martin Clark's popular history (*Modern Italy, 1871-1995* (2nd edn, Longman: London, 1996)), the excellent volume by Christopher Duggan (*A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994)) and

two collections of useful, synthesis-type essays, edited by John Davis (*Italy in the Nineteenth Century, 1796-1900* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000)) and Patrick McCarthy (*Italy since 1945* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000)), as well as the high quality Oxford illustrated history, edited by George Holmes (*An Illustrated History of Italy* (pbk, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001)). For the post-1945 period, Paul Ginsborg's two monumental studies, and in particular his *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (Penguin: London: 1990) have become set texts in numerous schools and universities both in the English-speaking and Italian-speaking world.

Harry Hearder's elegant book first appeared in 1990, the product of a long teaching and research career in Italian history, and is now revised and updated by Jonathan Morris, with a completely new chapter on the events of the 1990s. This volume, however, fits somewhat uneasily into the tradition of textbooks on Italy cited above. In the first place, Hearder has covered an extraordinarily long period of time - from 'the ice age to the present day' - in 276 pages. This ambitious (and unorthodox) time span leads necessarily to an extremely rushed view of certain periods. All the previous histories have taken specific historical periods - 'early modern Italy', '*Risorgimento* Italy', 'Liberal Italy', 'Fascist Italy', 'Republican Italy'. Hearder chooses the period that covers the *whole history* of the land mass which later became known as 'Italy'. Yet, the time and space devoted to the various historical periods is clearly, and probably inevitably, unbalanced. Fewer than one hundred pages cover the thousand years from 600 to 1600 AD, whilst the successive four hundred years get over 120 pages for their story. It is clear that, for the historian, nothing new will come out of such a volume. But this is to take the wrong approach to this kind of book, clearly based on secondary sources and not intended as a guide to extensive further reading.

How then can we judge the success of such an enterprise? Perhaps by stepping back from our position as historians, if such a move is possible. The blurb for the book notes that it is aimed at 'both students of Italian history and culture, and . the general reader, whether tourist, business person and traveller, with an interest in Italian affairs'. From this point of view, as a *first* introduction (or even an *only* introduction) to Italian history, the volume is admirably clear, readable and succinct. Hearder and Morris are often exemplary in their ability to summarise or evoke long periods of history in brief paragraphs, descriptions and examples. Both authors are not afraid to put their opinions concerning various phases of Italian history on paper, and are fond of the elegant phrase. Cavour 'loved moderation immoderately' (p. 179), Crispi's 'exuberant oratory and ... imperial ambitions ... anticipated Mussolini' (p. 207). For Morris, Spadolini was 'the rotund leader of the diminutive Republican Party' (p. 264).

Yet, we can also begin to introduce sharper critical methods to our analysis. First, this is clearly and unambiguously 'history from above'. The masses make few, if any, appearances. Ordinary people are all but ignored, unless they form part of categories such as 'rioters', 'unions', or 'peasants'. This is a history of Kings and Queens, Prime Ministers and Dictators, Great Moments and Great Events. As such, this is a work of very *traditional* history (with the exception of the new chapter on the 1990s), which for students can be seen only as a first, tentative step into Italian history. Very few nods are made to any kind of new historical method - be it social, cultural, micro or anthropological. There is also little idea of the huge debates over history which have marked the telling of Italy's story - we get very few hints at the work of other historians on the peninsula, or of disagreements between them. More specifically, Hearder's praise of Giolitti leads him to leave out any mention of the numerous 'proletarian massacres' which saw hundreds of peasants shot dead by the Italian army in the early twentieth century. The anarchists, extremely strong in parts of Italy, such as eastern Tuscany, are reduced to a few assassins. Italy is described as a 'full democracy' in 1913 (the small matter of women not voting is more or less ignored!). The Communist Bordiga is described, rather strangely, as a 'wild man of the left' (p. 220), whilst his image has always been one of a rather grey functionary. The section on the post-1945 period is quite inadequate, and is rescued by Morris's more analytical and detailed postscript chapter. Hearder, for example, makes no mention of the most important social and cultural phenomenon of the post-1945 period - the mass migration of Italians from the countries to the towns and, more broadly, from the south to the north. The Piazza Fontana bomb massacre of 1969, which changed Italian history, is ignored. 1968's movements are minimalised and political violence in general is reduced to a few lines of prose. Of course, all these quibbles are, as I have already stated, unfair in relation to the *type*

of book this is, and its intended audience.

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