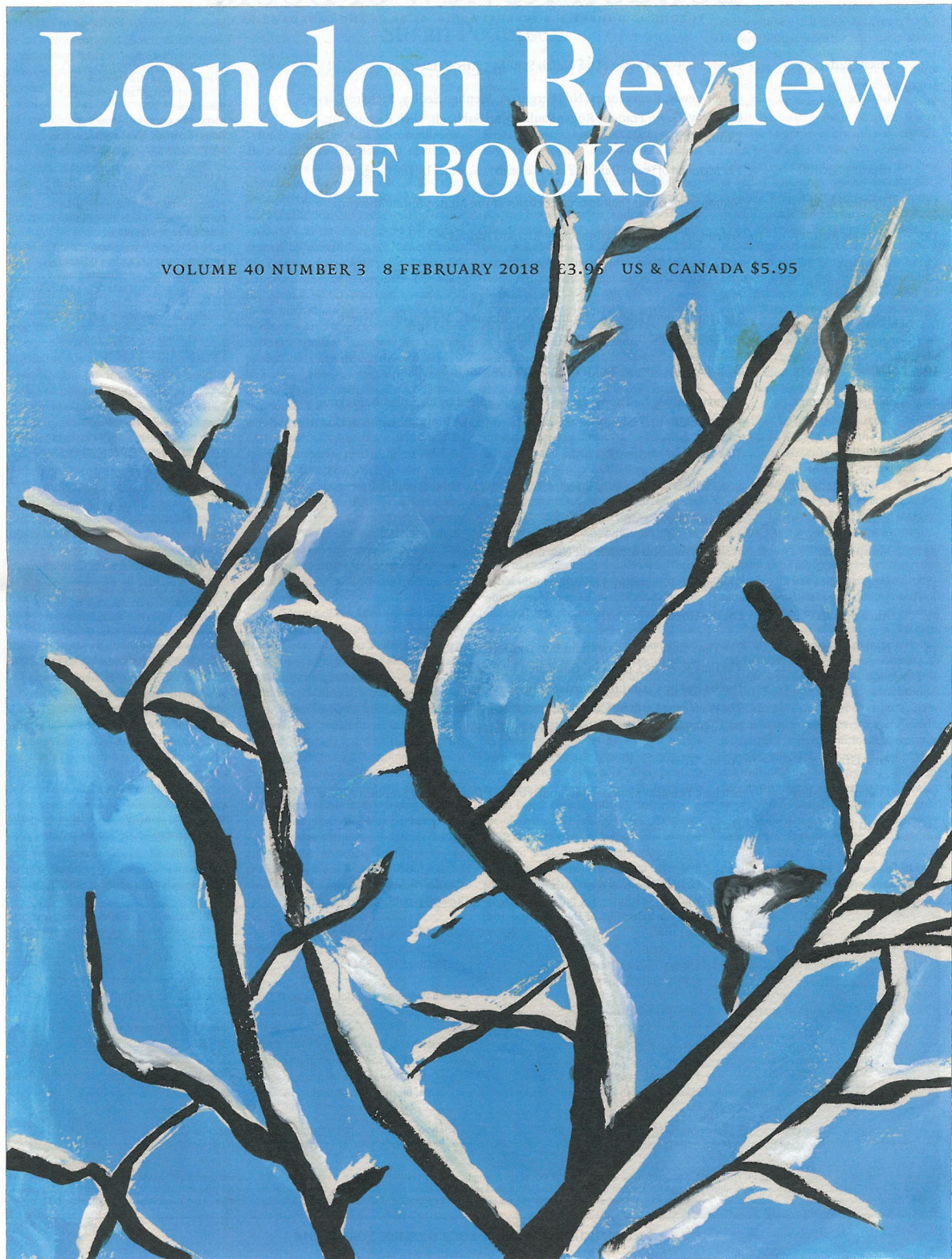


Bee Wilson: Was she respectable?

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**T**HIS LATEST REPRINT of Iris Origo's *The Merchant of Prato* celebrates it as a 'modern classic', though it can't have seemed very modern when it first appeared in 1957. Various books published that year had some kind of finger on the pulse – *On the Road*, *Room at the Top*, *The Uses of Literacy* – but a biography of a medieval Italian businessman written by a scholarly aristocrat living in Tuscany doesn't sound like one of them. *The Merchant of Prato* has, nonetheless, proved a tenacious survivor. It has remained continuously in print for sixty years. In Italy, in Nina Ruffini's translation, it is taught in schools. Its success over the long haul is a victory of quality over fashionableness (and is also good news because, like all Origo's books, its earnings go directly to charity). The key to its longevity is partly her fluent style, the almost chatty erudition, but mostly the sense of total historical immersion. It's as if she has set up camp in the 14th century and is simply reporting what she finds there.

In her essay 'Biography: True and False', Origo offers this sage advice to those embarking on a career in the life-writing trade:

The young biographer who has upon his desk his first intriguing pile of papers, will do well to arm himself with humility, and let them speak for themselves. Later on the time will come to sift, to compare, and to bring to life again; but first he should listen without interrupting. Then, as he deciphers the faded ink, a phrase may stand out which reveals the hand that wrote it. He may see – as suddenly as, at a turn of the passage, one comes upon one's image in a mirror – a living face.

This essay was published in its final form in 1984, four years before her death, but it began as a lecture she gave at Cambridge in 1958, and this particular passage describes her own achievement in the recently published *Merchant of Prato*, where that 'intriguing pile of papers' – in fact, several sackfuls of them – is almost as much the protagonist as the eponymous merchant himself. Her description of that moment of biographical contact carries an echo of Eliot's 'Portrait of a Lady' ('I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark/Suddenly, his expression in a glass'). In *The Merchant of Prato* she borrows a more challenging metaphor. The book's opening words – epigraphic if not actually placed as an epigraph – are by the historian Marc Bloch: 'L'historien ressemble à l'ogre de la fable. Là où il flaire la chair humaine, il sait que là est son gibier.' It is a potent image, at once menacing and playful. The historian is like the 'ogre of fairy tales' because when 'he scents human flesh, he knows he has found his prey.' This comes from Bloch's last book, *Métier d'historien*, left unfinished in 1944 when he was executed by firing squad as a member of the Resistance. Origo's admiration of him may have an ulterior connection with her own wartime experiences in Italy, as chronicled in her celebrated *War in Val d'Orcia* (1947) and later worked over in pen portraits of her anti-fascist friends, 'who bore witness to the truth during those years of oppression', in *A Need to Testify* (1984).

The merchant – her biographical 'prey' – is Francesco di Marco Datini, born in Prato, in the lowlands west of Florence, in about 1335. His father is described as a *tavernaio*, which Origo translates sensibly enough as

# Unliterary, Unpolished, Unromantic

## Charles Nicholl

THE MERCHANT OF PRATO: DAILY LIFE IN A MEDIEVAL ITALIAN CITY  
by Iris Origo.

Penguin, 400 pp., £10.99, May 2017, 978 0 241 29392 8

a taverner or innkeeper, though later historians have pointed out that in medieval Tuscan usage the word more generally meant a shopkeeper, and in particular a butcher, and in the august pages of the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* Francesco is described as a butcher's son. When he was in his early teens he lost both his parents and two of his three brothers in the Black Death. From these ill-starred beginnings he rose by cautious degrees to control an international trading and banking network with branches in Florence, Pisa, Genoa, Avignon, Barcelona, Valencia and Majorca. He anticipated the Florentine big-hitters of the quattrocento: he was in business by the early 1360s, when the first of the Medici bankers – Giovanni, father of Cosimo – was still a toddler. His first ventures were in Avignon, temporarily the seat of the papacy: he imported Milanese armour on muleback across the Alps, and sold it impartially to the papal troops of Innocent VI and the mercenaries they were fighting. Later he moved into the cloth trade, dealing in English and Spanish wool, Venetian silk, French linen, Provencal hemp and Cordovan leather, in dyes such as madder, indigo and woad, and in alum, used as a fixative in the dyeing process. English wool, much in demand, was shipped to him ready-shorn or as 'wool-fells' (sheepskins with the wool still attached) by Italian merchant companies based in London; most of it came from the Cotswolds, splendidly garbled in his ledgers as 'Chondisgualdo'. Foodstuffs were another frequent cargo: wheat and salt primarily, also fruit, rice, spices, oil and wine. But to compartmentalise his commodities belies the opportunism and diversity of the ladings: 'Toledo blades, Valencian soap, ivory tusks and ostrich feathers'; '37 bales of pilgrims' robes, 191 pieces of lead and 80 slaves'; 'raisins, almonds, peacocks, marmosets and porcupines'. For Origo he is a kind of archetype of modern capitalism: 'In his international outlook, in his swift adaptability to the changes of a society in turmoil, as in his own ambition, shrewdness, tenacity, anxiety and greed, he is a forerunner of the businessmen of today.'

On his death in 1410 Datini left a fortune of 70,000 florins to the poor of Prato, and his house there as the *ceppo* or office of the charity, which it remains to this day. Not long afterwards the town council commissioned a fresco on the building's walls, showing 16 scenes from his life, but this has faded. Only two early portraits of him remain. Neither is contemporary, though the earlier, in a panel by Fra Filippo Lippi completed in 1453, may be a reasonable likeness. It shows a thin, sharp-faced, austere-looking man. He forms part of a small group of Pratese burghers kneeling in de-

votion at the feet of a Madonna. The motto he habitually inscribed at the front of his business ledgers – 'Nel nome di Dio e del guadagno' ('In the name of God and profit') – would make a perfect caption for the group. His own relations with the art world were not always happy. Like many merchants of the day, conscious that God's view of profit margins was less enthusiastic than theirs, he made amends by commissioning religious artworks. In the 1390s he had three painters decorating his house with devotional images, among them the distinguished Florentine artist Agnolo Gaddi, but the atmosphere soured when they presented their bill, and he turned them out of the house unpaid. 'Having found some soft soil they mean to dig their spades in it up to the hilt,' he grumbled. 'When Giotto was alive he was cheaper!' The case went to court. Experts were called in and valued the disputed painting at 60 florins; Francesco said he would rather lose the money at sea than pay up, but after much haggling he handed over 55 florins. The tone of this episode is not untypical: he tended to get crabby when money was at stake, and there were few hours in his waking life when it wasn't.

In the Lippi panel Datini wears a long gown and a round, flat-topped beretta, both

in suitably costly scarlet. The later full-length portrait by Alessandro Allori shows him in the same garb – it is virtually the uniform of a respectable Tuscan citizen-merchant. That 'living face' Origo sought was not to be found in these essentially generic representations but in the more nuanced and largely involuntary self-portraiture of the handwritten page. 'It befits a merchant always to have ink-stained hands,' Leon Battista Alberti wrote in the 1430s, and few exemplified this better than Datini. A born micro-manager, he wrote almost all of his business letters with his own hand. 'They were written on sheets of paper folded in three, closed by a small cord passing through holes in the edges, and sealing it at each end . . . Each bundle of letters was then wrapped in a waterproof canvas and enclosed in a bag or purse called a *scarsella*, sealed by the merchant and worn at the messenger's belt.' In his will Francesco instructed that his letters be preserved in their entirety. In the 16th century they were seen neatly stacked in cupboards in his house, but sometime after that they were bundled into sacks and dumped in a recess under the stairs, and it was here they were found, in 1870, by a scholarly archdeacon, Don Martino Benelli. This period of neglect, Origo drily remarks, was not 'entirely unfortunate': a few pages had been 'nibbled by mice or worms, but at least thieves and fools remained unaware of their existence'. In this great cache were some five hundred ledgers and account books, another five hundred files of business correspondence, and a further scattering of miscellaneous documents such as deeds of partnership, insurance policies, bills of lading, bills of exchange and so on. By the time Origo came on the scene in the 1950s this material had been mined by economic historians such as Enrico Bensa and Federigo

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Melis, but there was also a trove of personal correspondence that the academics had scarcely touched, and these – some 11,000 letters written over a period of thirty years – are the raw data of *The Merchant of Prato*.

Most are letters to and from his wife, Margherita di Domenico Bandini. They had married in Avignon in 1376, when she was a 'full-blooded' girl in her late teens and he about forty. They were both part of the city's Florentine community, though she and her family were there as exiles. As Francesco bluntly states, her father 'had his head cut off' for 'wishing to hand over Florence to our Lord' – the pope. For Origo, the very ordinariness of their letters makes them precious. They are 'unliterary, unpolished, unromantic, self-repetitive'; they give us 'the small change of everyday life, the details of domestic intercourse'. To call them unromantic is something of an understatement. Francesco was almost perpetually away on business, and his letters are often just a long bossy list of reminders. 'Remember to wash the mule's feet with hot water, down to her hooves,' to 'have my hose made and then soled', to 'give some of the miller that is left with you to the nag, and see that it is well-mashed', to 'water the orange trees as we used to do, or they will be burned up', to 'keep the kitchen windows shut, so the flour doesn't get hot' – in short, 'remember to do all that you have to do, and ... see to it that I shall not have to scold.' Margherita's patience was understandably tried by this. Referring to his co-sseted mule she says: 'Would God you treated me as well as you do her.' She is sometimes tired and ill, but 'I would bear it all, if only half of what I do was recognised by you.' Their friend, the notary Ser Lapo Mazzei, tried to patch up the sometimes frayed relations in the Datini household. He implores Margherita to be less rebellious and Francesco to be kinder. 'I wish she were as meek as she is shrewd,' he writes to Francesco, but can she be blamed when 'she has had to listen to your blessed sermons for eighteen whole years.' Beneath the superficial frictions of a long marriage lies a deeper resentment: Margherita's failure to produce any children. Francesco addressed this lack by importing an illegitimate daughter, Ginevra, into the household.

This narrative of marital ups and downs is only one thread in the rich material of the letters. Many readers come to the book not as a biography per se but as a compendium of early Italian social customs. There is a mass of detail about the couple's wardrobes, both fashionable and functional: I like the little twist about Margherita's favourite pair of gloves, 'double kid bordered with gold thread', and how she probably gave up wearing them after 1388, when a new Florentine law decreed that prostitutes had to wear gloves. Another favourite topic is health, about which Francesco fretted continuously. Prescriptions are offered by friends as well as physicians. We learn that piles were treated by anointing 'the place' with 'an onion well-cooked and pestled', and that to encourage urination – and hence to lessen the danger of kidney stones – one took a spoonful of 'ginger jam' before dinner. Some of the advice is common sense – what would today come under the rubric of 'healthy lifestyle' – though a 'prayer to



stop the flow of blood' might prove unhelpful in an emergency. There is frequent mention of the popular but mysterious compound known as *theriaca*, or *theriac*: its mystery is probably down to the fact that no two apothecaries used the same secret ingredients for it.

ORIGO was in her mid-fifties when *The Merchant of Prato* was published. She had honed her biographical skills on a Life of the Romantic philosopher-poet Giacomo Leopardi and a short study of Byron's daughter Allegra, both issued in 1935. The latter was published by Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press, which led to her meeting with Virginia Woolf, whose diaries describe her as 'tremulous', 'honest-eyed' and very glamorous: 'I like her bird of paradise flight through the gay world. A long green feather in her hat suggests the image.' But the biographical study which first earned her critical acclaim in England was *The Last Attachment* (1949), a bean-spilling account of Byron's affair with Teresa Guiccioli, the Ravenna-born contessa described in Don Juan as a woman 'headlong, headstrong ... beautiful and daring', who would 'rather whisk/The stars from out the sky than not be free'. As with *The Merchant of Prato* it was a cache of unpublished letters that lit the fuse. In her autobiography, *Images and Shadows* (1970), Origo gives a droll account of her first sight of them:

With some trepidation I set off to Florence to try and persuade Count Carlo Gamba, the great-nephew and heir of Contessa Guiccioli, to allow me to consult the papers of his great-aunt. My fear of meeting with a refusal was not unfounded, since Count Gamba – an old gentleman of much taste, who was both old-fashioned and very deaf – had already refused access to several people, including André Maurois, to the papers of 'poor dear aunt Teresa'. I don't remember how I persuaded him to change his mind, since it is very difficult to be persuasive or reassuring at the top of one's voice, but I suspect that he did so not because of anything I said, but merely because his niece knew me, and he did not think I looked too foreign or unreliable.

The count duly rang for his manservant and despatched him to fetch 'Contessa Teresa's chest': a carved mahogany box in which she found 'many bundles of letters tied up in ribbon', as well as lockets of hair, a piece of Byron's shirt and a desiccated rose leaf picked from the gardens of Newstead Abbey.

'Iris Origo, like Byron, was soaked in Italy,' said Michael Foot, who cited her

book as the inspiration for his own writings about the poet. The comment is apposite also for *The Merchant of Prato*, which is steeped in the landscape and culture of Tuscany as much as in a particular period of its history. Though she was born in England, and though she spoke (and, one might say, wrote) in a cut-glass English accent, she had few ties there. Her ancestry was mixed. Her father, Bayard Cutting, was American, from a very prosperous family whose wealth came from railroads and sugar beet; her mother, Lady Sybil Cuffe, was a daughter of the 5th earl of Desart, an Anglo-Irish peer with estates in Kilkenny. With Scottish and French blood as well, she was, in her own words, 'a complete mongrel'. Her childhood was peripatetic, but after the early death of her father from tuberculosis she lived almost continuously in Italy. In 1911 Lady Sybil rented, and later bought, the Villa Medici in Fiesole, built by the Renaissance architect Michelozzo. Here Iris Cutting grew up in an idyllic but constricted world of picnics, excursions, loggias and fireflies. She was tutored by a Professor Monti, who knew half of Virgil by heart, and surrounded by a posh, chattering, intellectual circle of Anglo-American expatriates: Harold Acton and his parents at La Pietra; Bernard and Mary Berenson at Villa I Tatti; the authors Janet Ross and Violet Paget (penname Vernon Lee); and streams of summer visitors including Edith Wharton and Vita Sackville-West. Though isolated from other children, and oppressed by a 'long and dreary dynasty' of governesses, her childhood 'was not unhappy; it was merely disconcerting, in its swift alternations between excitement and tedium, between caviare and bread and milk'. Lady Sybil was both possessive and unpredictable: she is summed up by Origo's biographer, Caroline Moorehead, as 'a woman with a will of iron and an all-consuming obsession with her own health'. In Aldous Huxley's caustic satire of expats in Italy, *Those Barren Leaves*, she is caricatured as Mrs Aldwinkle, the rich Englishwoman who thinks of Italy as 'her property': 'she had bought its arts, its music, its melodious language, its literature, its wines and cooking.' This sort of touristic expropriation was not Origo's style, though her later writing career certainly benefited from a range of top-drawer connections. It helped that she was acquainted with Count Gamba's niece, that her godfather was the American ambassador in Rome, that she could call on a

former president, Luigi Einaudi, to write a foreword to the Italian edition of *The Merchant of Prato*.

In 1923, the Bloomsbury diarist Frances Partridge described the 21-year-old Iris as 'very delicate, almost like a Botticelli, with a very quick voice and a mind as quick, running from one thing to another, and alarming because so clever'. In that year she met Antonio Origo, the illegitimate son of an artistic Roman marquis, Clemente Origo, and a Russian singer. They were married in early 1924; some years later Antonio was recognised as Clemente's heir, whereupon Iris became a *marchesa*. To the alarm of her Florentine circle they settled at La Foce in the deep south of Tuscany: a remote, run-down villa with a 3500-acre estate spread over the parched clay slopes of the Orcia valley. It was 'treeless and shrubless but for some tufts of broom ... a lunar landscape, pale and inhuman', Iris wrote. 'Neglect, indigence and suspense are etched on the faces of men and the earth alike,' wrote Antonio. They threw themselves into a Herculean programme of irrigation and restoration, slowly transforming both the land and the harsh lives of their sharecropper tenants, for whom they provided such unheard-of amenities as schools and clinics. Much of this work was assisted by Mussolini's policy of land reclamation – Antonio's relations with fascism were rather more cordial than she later cared to admit. In 1933 their seven-year-old son, Gianni, died of meningitis, a tragedy that shadowed her life, yet which also precipitated her into authorship: 'After Gianni's death, in an effort to find some impersonal work that would absorb at least part of my thoughts, I turned back to writing.'

There is throughout Origo's story a powerful sense of energy and resolve. Her passion for organising people is often mentioned, a trait that is reflected in her marshalling skills as a biographer, but which had its finest hour in the war, when the Origos sheltered orphans, partisans and Allied soldiers at great personal risk. To some she seemed aloof: she had a 'built-in distance'. Susanna Johnston, who worked for Iris's widowed stepfather, Percy Lubbock – Lady Sybil's third husband – in the late 1950s, recalls her visits: 'she was a formidable creature with a gigantic brain and expensive clothes ... She treated us graciously, as she might have done invaluable servants whose notice she wished to avert.' This comes from Johnston's charming memoir of the art historians John Fleming and Hugh Honour, published last year.\* They too were part of the Lubbock household; their own memory of Origo's visits was summed up in a sentence: 'Then this icicle appeared and the whole house pulled itself together.'

Thirty years after her death, the gardens Origo and Cecil Pinsent created at La Foce retain her imprint – a vivid mix of Italian geometric and English herbaceous styles. On a recent visit I was introduced to her daughter, Benedetta, who still lives in part of the house. Arithmetic tells me she's in her mid-seventies, though she could easily be a decade younger. She is tall and elegant,

\* Gibson Square, 288 pp., £20, September 2017, 978 1 78334 111 4.



with a quietly gracious style that might under certain circumstances become a bit chilly – all qualities one hears of in reminiscences of her mother. To stroll through the wisteria bowers and cypress alleys of the garden, to admire the fountains of soft-hued travertine stone, the trompe l'oeil frescoes in the dining room, the library full of d'Annunzio first editions lushly inscribed to his friend Clemente Origo, is to feel a little closer to the spirit of Iris, while at the same time sensing a ghostly reproach for expecting to retrieve her 'living face' so effortlessly. It was here that she wrote *The Merchant of Prato*, in her little study on the first floor, overlooking the box-hedged private garden with the dolphin fountain de-

signed by Pinsent. Benedetta's daughter, Katia Lys, describes Iris's writing habits in an afterword to the recently published edition of her 1939-40 diaries, *A Chill in the Air*: 'In my memories [she] has a pen close to hand, usually a leaky ballpoint that left stains on armchairs, chaise-longues and quilted satin counterpanes, which gave away her favourite writing haunts.'<sup>†</sup> In her study, 'every surface, even the window-seat cushions in leaf-patterned sea-green and white cretonne, was obscured by stacks of books... There barely seemed to be room on her desk for her typewriter.' Her typescripts

<sup>†</sup> Tessa Hadley will write about the diaries in a later issue.

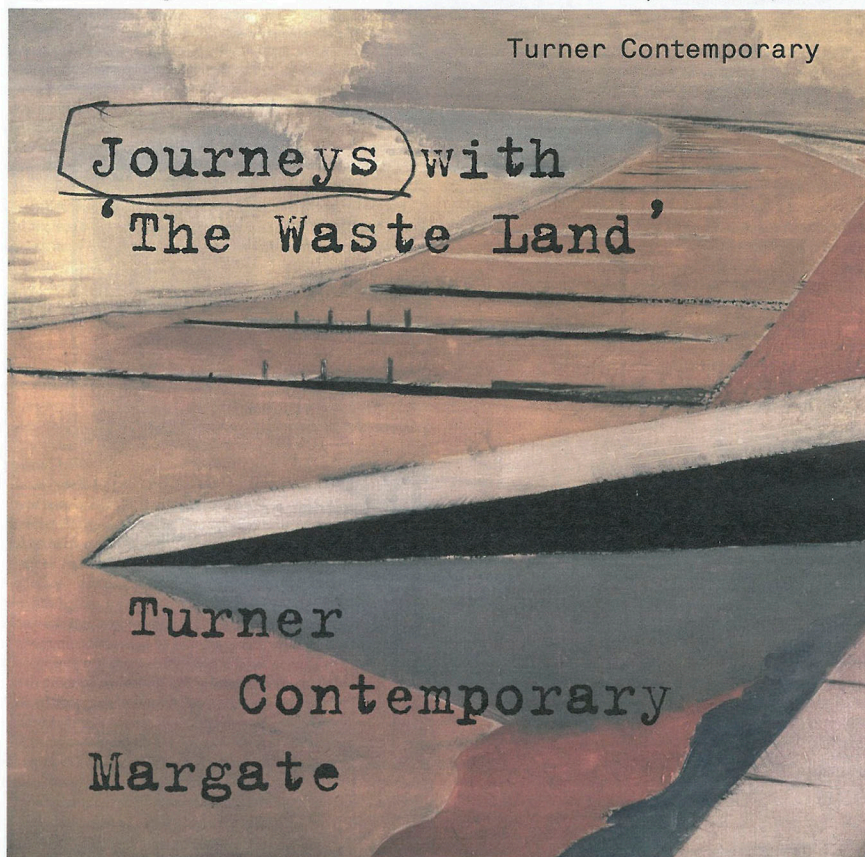
were invariably messy – 'a flurry of scribbles, scratched-out words, and strips of paper ineptly glued-on'. The illegibility of her handwriting was also notorious. Her publisher and friend Jock Murray tells of tackling a passage at the bottom of a letter, which had defeated everyone else, and eventually deciphering the words: 'Dearest Jock, I can't read what I have written. Please type it out and send a copy to me.'

**I**N A CHAPTER of her autobiography simply titled 'Writing', Origo says: 'The biographer who puts his wit above his subject will end by writing about one person only – himself.' Rereading Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, a book she had

once admired, she complains 'not that it is inaccurate, but that it is thin, and that its thinness springs from condensation. If you wish to see a person you must not start by seeing through him.' It is one of the paradoxes of this refined and very privileged bluestocking that her books were so egalitarian in outlook, so dedicated to an ideal of empathy, the end of her researches being neither to trumpet nor to denigrate, but to discover 'what life "felt like" to [her] subject'. In this she was closer to Strachey's friend Virginia Woolf, who (perhaps apocryphally) questioned a stallholder in a London market: 'Tell me, what does it feel like to stand in the fog on a dark evening selling apples?'

That Francesco Datini was not a very likeable person did not escape her notice, but she admires him for what he achieved and tenaciously protected, and for his career carved out against the odds of his lowly origins (his 'self-fashioning', one might say, though this new historicist term came into fashion too late for her to use it). In this context empathy and sympathy are distinct: the latter she reserves for the much put-upon Margherita. But the one she really loves, the one whose letters positively twinkle out of these pages, is the notary Ser Lapo, their confidant and counsellor, a mellow, proverb-mongering character who seems to her the best kind of provincial Italian. His frequently proffered advice is 'always on the side of moderation, kindness and patience'. Part solicitor and part business adviser, the notary was – and still is – an indispensable part of Italian life: the oiler of the wheels of commerce, the drafter of contracts, the mitigator of tax burdens, the knower of loopholes. Though he never quite tells Francesco that the world is his lobster, Ser Lapo has the chipper air of a medieval Arthur Daley. He delivers a gift of Francesco's wine to an influential client and retails the recipient's enjoyment of it: 'it seemed as if roses were blooming in his face.' He oversees every stage of the construction of Francesco's house, delivering an eloquent mock-grumpy synopsis of the tribulations involved: 'maestri, manovali, opere, galcine, rena, pietre, grida e disperamenti' ('bosses, workmen, labour, lime, sand, stone, shouts and despairs'). He tells him which medicines to take, which books to read, which horses to buy, which eligible bachelor to choose for his daughter, Ginevra. And, with quiet insistence, as the years flow by, he reproaches Francesco for his worldliness and arrogance: 'your rough soul and your frozen heart'. His own philosophy was simple: 'I am for going slowly, and I trim my sails, but the wind must be sent by Messer Domineddio [Mr Lord God].'

Origo revels in the blunt aphoristic vernacular of these letters, their scattering of witty 'Toscanisms' – 'Ha più corta la fede che la lepre la coda' ('His faith is shorter than a hare's tail'); 'Arrivederci, come le volpi in pellicceria' ('Till we meet again, as the foxes say at the furrier's' – i.e. they will meet in the next life). Her characters talk the Tuscan of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, written in the early 1350s when they were young men with their lives ahead of them. Their voices carry clearly across the centuries. □



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