

DIARIES & LITERATURE

# A need to testify

## Rediscovering the work of a remarkable Italian writer

CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

Iris Origo

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Iris Origo died in 1988, aged eighty-five. Almost thirty years later, Pushkin Press are printing a hitherto unpublished diary, together with a selection of her other Italian books, some no longer in print. They are a reminder of what an intelligent, scholarly and perceptive writer she was, and of the deep affection she felt for her adopted country. She had no illusions about its shortcomings, but she understood them in a way few foreigners ever have done.

*A Chill in the Air* covers just two years, 1939 and 1940. It opens on a train, with Origo observing a group of *squadristi*, Mussolini's ardent early supporters, as they travel home,

brash and posturing, from the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the birth of Fascism. It ends when Italy, after many months of vacillation, joins the war on the side of the Axis powers. In between, in the lucid, unsentimental, sometimes almost clipped sentences that were the hallmark of her style, is a shrewd portrait of a nation which had spent fifteen years being "taught not to think". It now found itself propelled towards a war for which it was totally unprepared and which the great majority of its citizens, devastated by their losses in Abyssinia and the Spanish Civil War, did not want. "A good Italian's duty", a young fascist woman tells her, "is to have no opinion."

These two years were spent largely on the estate that Origo and her husband Antonio had created on a waterless hillside in Tuscany facing Monte Amiata, and in Rome, where her godfather, William Phillips, was the American ambassador. Much of their war news came from the hours she and Antonio spent listening to foreign broadcasts on the radio, but wherever she went, on her journeys up and down Italy, in the American embassy and among her well-connected friends, she listened and took note. "The juggernaut approach to war" appalled everyone except the fascist *gerarchi*, but by the spring of 1940, Italians felt they had nothing to hope for from the Allies; indeed, they felt a deep resentment towards the weak and treacherous English. When Mussolini declared war, they were "passive and fatalist", filled with "a strange melancholy acquiescence". Looking out across the peaceful landscape, with the grapes ripening and the oxen ploughing, she wrote: "only man is mad".

Among the Origos' friends were both Fascists and anti-Fascists, and she offers no apology for having in the early days of his dictatorship felt considerable admiration for



Mussolini. What makes *A Chill in the Air* so interesting – and pertinent today – is the picture it gives of a country swayed and made biddable by years of lies and corrupting propaganda. (But it would have benefited from footnotes, necessary to all but historians of modern Italy.) There is little that is personal in this diary. The reader learns almost nothing about Origo’s own feelings, or the events of her own life. The fact that she was pregnant with her daughter Benedetta is mentioned only in passing. But then, what obligation is there on a writer to bare her soul? What you learn is a very great deal about the sounds, smells, inhabitants, landscape and political upheavals of Italy, which is exactly what you get from Origo’s two other autobiographical books, *Images and Shadows* (1970) and *War in Val d’Orcia* (1947). The new subtitle of the first is telling: *part of a life*. It is a part in every sense, effectively stopping not long after the war when she was in her late forties, and touching only fleetingly on inner concerns. But it is certainly one of the great memoirs of the twentieth century, a precise, vivid portrait of a group of people for whom the art and culture of Europe was a source of endless fascination and infinite pleasure. In writing it, Origo had no wish, she said, “to convert, to reveal or to confess”, but only to describe a world in which she was a spectator. As Virginia Woolf memorably wrote, Origo was “clean and picks her feet up”.

Origo’s father, Bayard Cutting, was a diplomat from a rich New England family; her mother, Lady Sybil Cuffe, was Anglo-Irish. Cutting, to whom she was especially close, died when she was seven, and Lady Sybil, mindful of her husband’s wish that Iris should grow up “somewhere she does not belong” in order to keep her free from any taint of nationalism, drifted to Florence, where she bought a villa in Fiesole designed by Michelozzo for Cosimo de’ Medici. It was the heyday of Anglo-Florentine literary and artistic life. Among their friends were Bernard Berenson, Harold Acton and Jane Ross, and the “avalanche” of foreign writers and painters who descended on Tuscany in the springtime. “I

was tipped”, she observed, “with fairy gold”, though she would say later that it had also cut her off from making the kinds of friends she might otherwise have enjoyed.

By the time she was eighteen, Origo was formidably well educated, an excellent tutor having schooled her in Greek and Latin, and she was fluent and widely read in Italian, German and French. Tall, slightly plump and shy, she found the coming-out parties to which her mother subjected her excruciating. When she was at last able to flee the demanding and hypochondriacal Lady Sybil, she married Antonio, the illegitimate son of an aristocratic cavalry officer. Together, helped by some of her American money, they set about turning La Foce, an estate of 3500 arid hectares and twenty-three crumbling farms, into a flourishing agricultural community with a school, health centre, grain silo, olive press and above all with water, made further possible by grants from the fascist state.

They also restored the derelict sixteenth-century manor house and, with the help of the landscape architect Cecil Pinsent, planted a garden of box hedges, lawns, wisteria, cypress walks and spring flowers, with views across to Monte Amiata. Their son Gianni was born in 1925, and his death at the age of seven is described with a spareness made all the more poignant by its brevity. This death, Origo wrote, like that of her father, was the defining moment of her life, and son and father remained as real to her as the people she saw every day; it conditioned for ever more her attitude “both to death and to human affections”. In a postscript to *A Chill in the Air*, her granddaughter Katia Lysy writes that one of the rites of passage of her childhood was when Origo pulled out her “Gianni book”, complete with photographs, including one of his deathbed, surrounded by lilies.

In *Images and Shadows*, perhaps more than in any other of her books, there comes across Origo’s particular voice, moral, sensitive to others, alert to the times she lived through and to the frailties of people. Like Samuel Johnson, she maintained that the unadorned truth “keeps mankind from despair”. That she sounds so



candid sometimes obscures the fact that she left so much out. (In his review in the *Irish Times*, Terence de Vere White complained that she had refused “to lift even her veil”.)

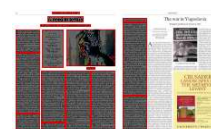
Her only other foray into autobiography, and perhaps her best-loved book, is the diary she kept for the last eighteen months of the war in her valley in Tuscany. Again, she avoids any attempt at facile condemnation of Fascism, saying that during the Mussolini years she “learned to hold my tongue and preserve my own convictions”. But when, in January 1943, she and Antonio decided to offer a refuge to children made homeless by the Allied bombing of Genoa, she set herself the task of recording daily life at La Foce, first in their struggles to feed the refugees and later to prevent escaped Allied prisoners of war from falling into German hands. It would be, she resolved, an immediate, first-hand report, without political bias, and she would not touch it up later.

As in *A Chill in the Air*, the diary’s portrait of Italy, after the craven King Victor Emmanuel III and his indecisive prime minister, Marshal Badoglio, delivered the Italians to civil war, and Germans, Fascists, Allies and Partisans fought for control of the country, is immediate and fascinating. There is a scene of danger and drama, when she and Antonio, under heavy bombing, lead twenty-three children, four of them babies, to safety in Montepulciano. At first, before the Germans occupied Tuscany, she kept the diary on the nursery bookshelf. When La Foce turned out to be in the path of the retreating German troops, she buried it in a tin box in the garden. The narrative ends as the Origos go home, past the unburied corpses of men and animals, to rebuild their estate.

Long before the war, however, Origo had begun to write the biographies that made her name. As a girl she had loved the poetry of the nineteenth-century patriot from Recanati in the Marshes, Giacomo Leopardi. What interested her was not so much the idea of literary criticism as the challenge of bringing alive the “querulous, tortured invalid, mistrustful of his fellow men”, whose poetry about nostalgia, loneliness

and grief was in itself a “merciless and tragic self portrait”. The apparent simplicity of his verse, she wrote, was deceptive, for it was “founded upon riches”, and she explored them to the full. Leopardi was the perfect subject for her. It involved an immense amount of scholarly research: his notebooks, the *Zibaldone*, alone run to 4,526 pages, and his letters and papers were scattered in archives all over Italy. It also enabled her to describe, in all its colours and textures, life in nineteenth-century Italy, with its pageants, smells, uniforms, clothes, food, poverty, political chicaneries and literary rivalries. And as she worked, so she fashioned a set of rules about the nature of biography itself, which later became a memorable essay and was printed in a collection called *A Need To Testify* (1984). Although it was never a favourite among her readers, its portraits of four people now largely forgotten – the poet and doomed resistance fighter Lauro de Bosis, the actress Ruth Draper and the two historians and writers, Gaetano Salvemini and Ignazio Silone – are important to the history of Italy. Always tell the truth, she wrote, never sit in judgement and never invent. Like Lytton Strachey, she decided that biography was the “most delicate and humane of all branches of the art of writing”; and like Leopardi in his verse she painted her pages with intense visual imagination.

After the war, Origo turned her attention to one of Leopardi’s contemporaries, Byron, and his tormented relationship with the young Teresa Guiccioli. She had written on Byron before, in a short and charming book about his doomed small daughter Allegra (1935), but Guiccioli’s hidden papers and her own *Life of the poet* had recently come to light, and with them a great many letters. These, together with the “gossip of observant contemporaries”, provided Origo with material with which to look with fresh eyes on the poet’s Italian years. Once again, what she was drawn to was the broader picture, the story of the revolutionary Carbonari and Byron’s role in their plots, and for this she turned to the police reports of the day, in archives in Venice, Bologna, Forli, Pisa and the Vatican. It was a feast of research. As was her later discovery of a great cache of



papers belonging to a medieval banker and dealer in wool, sacred pictures and spices, which she turned into the highly enjoyable *The Merchant of Prato* (1957).

In 1963, Origo was asked to write an introduction to the last volume of Berenson's diaries, *Sunset and Twilight*. She had revered Berenson as a girl, when he persuaded her mother to give her a classical education, but here her tone was cool, not altogether admiring. She said that it was one of the hardest things she had ever had to write, but it remains one of her finest essays, and one of the best things ever written on old age and the approach of death. Berenson, she wrote, was a "man haunted, like the rest of us, by a nagging sense of failure, by remorse, fear and loneliness". If these reissued books, and the new diary, prove anything, it is how profoundly misplaced was any sense of personal failure. Origo was a remarkable writer, with a clear, engaging style, a mind steeped in history and scholarship, but alive always to the nuances and subtleties of human relationships. The hope is that they bring her a new generation of readers.





Iris Origo, 1936

