

BOOKS
REVIEWS

Chronicle of *fearful* times

A Chill In The Air: An Italian War Diary 1939-1940
BY IRIS ORIGO
Pushkin Press, £14.99

Review by Malcolm Forbes

IRIS Origo's life (1902-1988) contained two significant changes in direction. She was born in England, but after falling in love with an Italian marchese she settled in Italy. When her adopted homeland was engulfed by war she refocused her writing, turning from biographies of other people (Byron's daughter Allegra, Giacomo Leopardi) to an account about herself and those around her.

That book was *War In Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary 1943-1944*. Published to acclaim in 1947, it stands as a vivid chronicle of how a rural Tuscan community showed courage under fire during what Origo called "years of tension and expectation, of destruction and sorrow". Today it remains her best-loved work. However, Origo's greatest achievement isn't so much what she wrote as what she did. Putting her life at great risk, she gave sanctuary at her estate of La Foce to soldiers and civilians, including Allied prisoners of war and deserters from Mussolini's army, hungry partisans and needy townspeople, plus 28 refugee

children. These selfless deeds were bravely carried out yet are only modestly documented in the diary.

Keeping a diary was itself a heroic act. In her preface to the book, Origo explains how she would first hide it among her children's picture-books and later, as the Germans closed in, bury it in tin boxes in the garden. Some passages were scribbled while under pressure, in a room crammed with children; others were written while in danger, in the cellar during bouts of shelling. Whatever the situation, she put down each day's events as they occurred, diligently, lucidly, and above all, truthfully.

NOW, almost 30 years after Origo's death, comes another war diary – newly discovered, previously unpublished – which once again shines a clear light on a tumultuous period. *War In Val d'Orcia* ended on an upbeat note: "Destruction and death have visited us, but now – there

In *A Chill In The Air: An Italian War Diary*, Iris Origo highlights the

is hope in the air." The ominous title of the latest diary – *A Chill In The Air: An Italian War Diary 1939-1940* – foretells a story in which hope is in short supply. Spanning 16 fraught months, Origo's compelling and illuminating journal is a potent blend of sifted news reports, collected rumours and collated views. In and around this, Origo sprinkles her own shrewd reflections, keen-eyed

observations and ever-increasing doubts.

The book's eponymous chill crops up in an early diary entry. On March 28, 1939, Origo is in Rome, where hordes of Fascist squadristi are assembling to hear the Duce's speech. It is cold and wet but Origo senses "another chill in the air: the universal distaste for Germany as an ally". Rampant anti-German and anti-war

madness of the war

sentiment rears up elsewhere. In Assisi, Mussolini and Hitler are referred to as murderers. A young pregnant woman on Origo's estate prays daily that she will have a girl: "What's the use of having boys if they'll take them away from me and kill them?"

When Hitler invades Poland, a stunned Origo notes the defiantly pro-German stance of the Italian press and its

condemnation of Polish "aggressiveness". Then in 1940, as more countries topple, the Italian propaganda machine is cranked up: loudspeakers blare out in streets and squares, posters on public buildings proclaim "the collapse of the democracies", and radio stations play patriotic marches. The fake news that is peddled ranges from trumped-up stories about Allied atrocities to puff pieces

exalting the Duce to party-line medical articles informing Italians they are better off without coffee: "wine is far less harmful."

Though a prequel of sorts, this diary is markedly different from its successor. *War In Val d'Orcia* was as much a personal diary as it was a war diary, from the arrival of the evacuated children at the beginning to Origo's dramatic great escape at

the end. In contrast, in *A Chill In The Air*, Origo discloses next to nothing about her private life. No secret self is laid bare.

We catch only a fleeting glimpse in the last recorded months. On June 30, 1940, Origo casually mentions being afflicted by labour pains. She departs for Rome, to the house of her godfather William Phillips, the American ambassador. A month later, the diary concludes somewhat abruptly. A brief, almost cursory endnote explains the birth of a daughter, the employment of a Swiss nanny, and the commencement of duties for the Italian Red Cross.

ORIGO may keep herself under wraps, but her descriptions of, and notes on, the

escalating chaos around her proves consistently fascinating. We come away with a better awareness of both the mood of queasy uncertainty and patriotic fervour that pervaded Italy in the run-up to war. Origo listens to Roman aristocrats, Tuscan peasants and various outsiders: a 10-year-old boy incorporates Fascist ideology in an essay, not because he believes it but because "it is the only way to get good marks"; a Swedish woman is expelled from the country for "imprudent speaking". Origo weighs up attitudes and opinions, cuts through bluster and speaks her own mind.

When one paper praises Hitler for a speech that displayed his "deep humanity", Origo offers a necessary corrective, highlighting how "the hysterical paroxysm of anger" gives way to "the actor's sob in the throat".

In one diary entry on the eve of war, the English marchesa sums up the calm before the storm with characteristic clarity and verve: "A still, lovely summer's evening; the grapes ripening, the oxen ploughing. Only man is mad."