

CODRINGTON LIBRARY
ALL SOULS COLLEGE

A TRIBUTE GIVEN BY
RICHARD BOSWORTH

IN MEMORY OF

DENIS MACK SMITH

CBE MA DLitt FBA FRSL

Grande Ufficiale dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana

3 March 1920 – 11 July 2017

Senior Research Fellow, 1962–1987, Emeritus Fellow, 1987–2017

Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, 1947–1962

Saturday, 18 November 2017 at 2.30 p.m.

Professor Richard Bosworth

A commemoration is an occasion for sad pleasure. I trust that Denis's ghost enjoys the oxymoron. Denis was, of course, in his generation the greatest and most influential historian of modern Italy, certainly in the English-speaking world and perhaps in any language. He reached that pinnacle through a combination of careful and assiduous research, penetrating argument and a fine writing style. Like Edward Gibbon, he was a historian who ousted the latest novel from the hands of readers, especially Italian readers. In that country, his colleagues and rivals, Rosario Romeo on the Risorgimento and Renzo De Felice on Fascism, wrote painstakingly and with blithe confidence that their task was to report with complete accuracy 'what actually happened'. In doing so, to quite a degree they passed on the pain to their readers. De Felice, for example, can be found crafting a sentence that runs for a page and a half, a chapter for more than 300 pages, while his (unfinished) biography of Mussolini clocks in at well over 6000 pages. Denis was equally loyal to the Rankean pledge that historians must express the truth (in their opinion). But he did so with panache, wit and a wry eye for the crimes, follies and tragedies of humankind and for our warmth, devotion, sacrifice and flawed achievement.

I was not one of his students and I must express my regret that my friend, Christopher Duggan, is no longer here to speak, as would have been most appropriate. But I should dig out two memories, which are my own. The first was in Rome in 1976. I was on study leave from Sydney University, completing the research and starting the writing of *Italy: the least of the Great Powers*. Denis had just published *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (in Italian, *Le guerre del Duce*) and was engaged in heartfelt debate with De Felice whether the Italian people had given their consent to Mussolini's dictatorship. In this regard, Denis spoke at the Teatro Eliseo on the Via Nazionale in Rome, a theatre which must seat a couple of thousand and was filled to the brim. There he lectured vividly in his gentlemanly Italian about Mussolinian violence and aggression. After he finished, his first questioner in halting English asked 'Mr Mack Smith, why do you hate Italy?' It was of course a silly question. Denis loved Italy with the depth

that only critical understanding can give. But the querulous demand was an indication that Mack Smith and his work had penetrated the skins of Italians, irritating and annoying the blinder among them, while stimulating and refreshing those who knew that their nation, like any other, is best viewed in its lights and shadows. As, in the 1980s, he told readers of the establishment journal, *Nuova Antologia*, 'if a writer is not anti-conformist, he might as well keep quiet', and happily ruminated on the paradox that Gladstone had spent far more time reading about the Roman question than Cavour ever did.

My second memory goes back further and has been prompted by a note-taking system that had begun by the time that I was doing my own Cambridge PhD on Liberal Italy after 1966. Around then, earnest little doctoral student, I caught up with what must have been one of Denis's first publications. It appeared in the *Cambridge Historical Journal* in 1949, five years before the book that is often assumed to have made his name *Cavour and Garibaldi in 1860: a study in political conflict* (its Italian translation came out in 1958 with Einaudi). In the CHJ, Mack Smith began with what may be read as his credo, one not so far from that of his teacher Herbert Butterfield and that Peterhouse College which he would serve as a Fellow from 1947 to 1962: 'A good statesman has been defined as one who does not coerce events but cooperates with them. Yet as we watch the relations between a sequence of happenings and the working of men's minds, it frequently appears that such cooperation is just the coercion exercised over men by events, and that statesmanship is really to be found in qualities of passivity and resilience which accept this hard fact and make what they can of it'. In this regard, he continued, 'whichever interpretation of his actions is adopted, Cavour must have been lying to half the people he spoke to'. Moreover, going rather beyond a Butterfieldian hostility to determinism, Denis suggested, a historian must ask whether 'lies were being used less to conceal a policy than to disguise the absence of any policy'. Finally, he added, Cavour believed that 'history is a great improviser', a cynicism maintained by those archivists who were happy to re-write the statesman's letters to enhance his greatness and disguise his error. 'Far from helping Garibaldi [and his Thousand] while cleverly appearing not to (which is the traditional view),

it seems that Cavour gave no help while cleverly appearing that he might do so', Mack Smith concluded with ringing paradox.

Orrore! In 1949, *the* English-language historian of the Risorgimento was George Macaulay Trevelyan, Regius Professor 1927-43, Master of Trinity 1940-51. Before the outbreak of the First World War, he had written a trilogy on Garibaldi and the making of Italy where he promised to tell a story that was 'very dear to rich and poor, learned and ignorant [in Italy], in a progressive and a free country conscious that it owes its progress and freedom' to the 'heroes' of those times. National unification had ensured that modern Italy 'is not dead but risen, that she contains not only ruins but men, that she is not the home of ghosts, but the land which the living share with their immortal ancestors'.

In between Trevelyan's effusions and Mack Smith's impiety had come Mussolini's dictatorship, totalitarian Fascism, bloody murder in Libya and Ethiopia (where the shameful national tally was probably around half a million), Italian participation in the Holocaust, the nation's joining of the Axis as Hitler's 'ignoble second' in all the Second World Wars and the resultant military, economic and social demonstration by 1945 that Italy was not even the least of the Great Powers. It was a history difficult to ascribe to the Christ-figure of Trevelyan's imagination and of patriotic Italian historiography.

And over the next decades, Denis duly became the master historian of the Risorgimento and its limitations. He followed up his careful monograph, *Cavour and Garibaldi in 1860*, with biographies of Garibaldi (1956), Cavour (1985), Mazzini (1994) and Victor Emmanuel II (1972). All automatically appeared in Italian, in the case of the King only in that language. These studies generally resulted in multiple editions and there were documentary collections separately published. Each book furthered Mack Smith's initial concern about the meaning and purpose of 'power' and therefore of the role of so-called Great Men in the historical process. He similarly remained alert to documentary fiddling, in a brief but trenchant Italian-language account, entitled *La storia manipolata* (2000), he highlighted cases where the historical record was by no means pure.

During the previous decade, he himself had fallen victim to the falsified Mussolini diaries, as he now somewhat reluctantly admitted, while urging that the *Duce* certainly had kept such a record and that it must exist somewhere. But there were many other cases across the nation's history where upstanding Rankean academics altered and disguised the record. Catharine Mack Smith told me that Denis was gleeful as he recounted their hypocrisy.

But the book which entrenched Denis into Italians' minds was his *Italy: a modern history*, first published with the University of Michigan Press in 1959 and many times revised and extended. Its Italian edition appeared with Laterza. The paperback *Storia d'Italia* sold 200000 copies and became a fixture in bookshops and *edicole* throughout the country; in 1982 it was in its 15th edition. It sells still. The last edition has a postscript dealing with the Prodi government that fell in May 2008 and can be acquired on your Kindle for 10 euros. It may be the most influential book published in Italian since 1945.

A grandiose claim for a foreigner! Perhaps Denis' ghost will chuckle if I add that the book's first triumph was based on the author's lucidity and panache but also on its meshing with the theoretics, then much favoured by the Italian communist party and its associates and drawn from the 'martyred' Antonio Gramsci, averring that Italian unification had been a 'rivoluzione mancata', a time of political change when social change was prevented. In the celebrated phrase given to a character in the novel, *Il Gattopardo* (1958), whose author was also no communist, during the Risorgimento 'things changed to remain the same'. There is no evidence that Mack Smith (or Lampedusa) had read Gramsci but the *Storia d'Italia* told of a nation vitiated by an original sin and likely therefore organically, as it were, to debouch into Fascism. Such argument fitted the spirit of the times during the 1960s for Italians unconvinced by post-war Christian Democrat government (Denis then and regularly thereafter made what might be read as an Anglo-Saxon complaint that Italy's real problem was its lack of a genuine conservative party). Mack Smith equally appealed to Italians troubled by the widespread lingering popular nostalgia for Mussolini's dictatorship or by the exculpatory argument of Croce and

others than the regime had been a parenthesis in an otherwise positive national history.

Less remarked in Italy, over the next decade Denis reiterated his case all the more readily by approaching Italy from the South rather than the more familiar North. In 1965 he lectured the British Academy on the damaging effect of Sicilian *latifundia*, underlining that, for all the cheap talk about Liberal Italy being a 'democracy', 'up to the First World War, there were many Sicilians who had never seen a wheeled cart'. Such research eventually led to a three volume history of the island since classical times, where Denis was joined in authorship by Moses Finley (1966) and, in a revised version two decades later, by Christopher Duggan.

Despite this special southern slant on Italian history, in a fashion that complicated Denis's more innocent claims that he merely aimed 'to understand and report the past', Mussolini and Fascism kept intruding into his work. Already in 1959 he had written a sardonic piece in *History Today*, arguing that the *Duce* was 'an artist in propaganda', a journalistic bluffer who was at heart timid and weak, even while he contemptuously dismissed the Italian people as a 'race of sheep'. Mussolini was not alone in such superficiality. As Denis jovially recalled a journal presided over by major intellectual, Curzio Malaparte, deemed *1066 and All That* a case study of the 'Oxford school' of historiography, while another propagandist maintained that tonsillectomy explained the inferiority of British soldiers.

But it was the personality of the dictator and his management of power that drew Denis to greater commentary in two books, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (1976), a study of foreign policy, and then the biography, *Mussolini* (1981). It was typical of Mack Smith that, when Rizzoli, this last work's Italian publishers, went bankrupt in 1983, he was listed by *L'Espresso* as owed 65 million lire, second behind celebrity writer, Oriana Fallaci. Perhaps, by now, these studies were growing a little old-fashioned in methodology. At times, in his exploration of the Risorgimento, Mack Smith had deviated from political history into the social, notably in his

awareness of the 'absent' peasantry, then the majority of Italians. But he remained in essence a political historian, giving little place to the 1970s fashion for social history 'from below', let alone to the later complications of culturalism or the massive theoretical literature on the 'nature of fascism'. His Mussolini was still a journalist and a guilty man who 'deliberately and even carefully steered his fascist movement into imperialism and into a succession of wars that eventually left Italy prostrate'.

Academic questions about the work may surface, and, in regard to Fascism if not the Risorgimento, Mack Smith relied largely on published evidence for his accounts. But his disdainful view of Mussolini made him ever more famous in Italy. Such renown led him not merely into at times angry debate with De Felice, whose own methodological preference for political history was even more conventional than Mack Smith's, but also into almost becoming a sort of supernumerary British cultural attaché. He was ready to be interviewed, for example, on the fate of Princess Diana, as her marriage turned sour, predicting in 1992, in one of his lesser efforts at punditry, that she would 'pass into history as one of the grandest Queens of England'. Resuming an old theme and ignoring the complications of ever more hegemonic neoliberalism, he also hoped that Berlusconi and the 'post-fascist' Gianfranco Fini might somehow combine at last to forge Italy its missing conservative party. Nonetheless Mack Smith determinedly urged that 'the antithesis between Fascism and Anti-Fascism is still today historically valid' and therefore firmly rejected what was becoming the fashionable cause of 'anti-anti-Fascism'.

Yet, there were plenty of other moments when controversy could be stilled and Mack Smith could be his genial self. My favourite is a speech he gave in 1982 on the centenary of Garibaldi's death as appointed Orator to the Republic of San Marino. That year he further spoke on the hero at Paris, Jerusalem, Florence, Rome, Montreal, Philadelphia, Pescara, Cesenatico and Prague. But at San Marino, he wryly hailed a place that was 'the most ancient State in the world, ... synonymous with independence, self-determination and, if you like, democracy'. Its fate was guaranteed by its connection with Garibaldi, a man who had

'combined patriotism with a love for humankind, especially the weak and the oppressed'. On such occasion, the historian and his subject meshed. It should not be forgotten that Denis could speak just as graciously about Renaissance art (and cooking), music and wine and all that constitutes the best of human sociability. There are thus very many reasons this afternoon in the splendidly neoclassical surrounds of the Codrington to celebrate our own connections with a long term Fellow of this college, who graced my discipline and the humanities more generally, cast piercing light on Italian history, and never forgot to burnish hope in those processes that connect every one of us to past, future and present.