

Warriors, apostles and martyrs: biography and the making of modern Italy

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Biography played a central role in the Italian Risorgimento (the movement of national revival or 'resurrection' that culminated in the unification of Italy between 1859-61) and its long aftermath. It built on existing literary traditions that included the lives of saints, the humanist biographies of the Renaissance and the memoirs of figures as diverse as Cellini and Casanova but, in the early 19th century, the genre acquired great popularity and took a new direction. Its influence is clear in multi-volumed collections of 'great lives' and in the history of Italian families by Pompeo Litta (*Famiglie celebri italiane*, 1819-53), as well as in a growing interest in heroic individuals from Italian history, such as Christopher Columbus and Ettore Fieramosca. Notably in the case of Fieramosca, biography was one element in an approach that used history and fiction to construct the Italian past in an epic key.

In Italy during this period, biography reflected the influence first of the French Revolution, then of Romanticism, and through both it became linked to celebrations of Italian identity. Litta, for example, was inspired to write his *Famiglie celebri* in reaction to the French denigration of Italian achievements; moreover, his concern with 'famous families' derived not from an interest in their nobility or antiquity but from a desire to applaud their individual contributions to Italian history. Equally, for Italian reformers, writing about famous Italians became a way of displacing political discussion onto cultural life, and so avoiding censorship. Thus, Massimo d'Azeglio, the author of *Ettore Fieramosca*, maintained that his book was the 'first step' in an evolving plan 'to influence people through a patriotically inspired literature' and 'to initiate a slow work of regeneration of the [Italian] national character,' and he remembered with particular pride his skill in disguising the political message of *Ettore Fieramosca* – which had 'the object of inciting Italians to attack the foreigner' – from the Austrian censor.

With the work of the Republican leader, Giuseppe Mazzini, biography acquired even stronger political overtones. Mazzini was well aware that his dream of a united Italy lacked any existing rituals or traditions, and he responded by harnessing biography to his nationalist programme and making heroic lives part of a broader strategy of political communication. Perhaps the most novel aspect of this strategy was Mazzini's transformation of living individuals, or those who had recently died, into symbols of Italy; and among the most successful of these individuals were Giuseppe Garibaldi (the warrior), the Bandiera brothers (the martyrs) and Mazzini himself (the apostle). In the writings of Mazzini and his followers, these lives became part of a story of national revival that was meant to inspire and entertain. Their biographies followed an established pattern that owe something to both the nineteenth-century historical novel and the *Bildungsroman*, and whose main themes were love, bravery, sacrifice and revenge.

Mazzini was also aware that the nineteenth-century revolution in mass communications, together with the growth in literacy, allowed him to take his political message to a wide audience via the medium of story telling. Indeed,

from the 1840s onwards, it is possible to talk of a 'craze' for biography in Italy that had nationalist heroes (and notably Garibaldi) at its centre, but whose popularity was such that it spilled over into books, pamphlets and newspaper articles that celebrated the lives of artists, musicians, religious and secular martyrs, King Vittorio Emanuele of Piedmont and his generals, French leaders and Pope Pius XI (who was no friend of Italian nationalism). We can also trace the political importance of the genre in rival versions of heroic lives (most obviously with Garibaldi) and in the battle of opposing biographies, for example, between Garibaldi and Pius XI or between Pius XI and Vittorio Emanuele. Moreover, commemorative histories of the Italian wars were often called '*biografie*' (even when they were nothing of the kind) and/or they featured individual chapters on the lives of the wars' heroic protagonists. To these publications were added autobiographies, memoirs and personal letters of the central characters. Together, they constituted a formidable arsenal of nationalist words and images that 'monumentalized' Italian history and its heroes and, to a considerable extent, endures to this day.

To sum up, during the Italian Risorgimento, biography was part of a nation-building project. By the same token, nationalism, and opposition to nationalism, conditioned the way biography was conceived in Italy, and both powerfully influenced historical approaches to the Risorgimento. For example, modern biographies of Garibaldi still tend to endorse his role as a national hero and treat him as a great man whose life inspires admiration and identification, or they propose to expose the sorry truth about a man whose achievements were negligible and whose appalling activities have been 'hidden from history' for political reasons. In this way, the nationalist struggles of the Risorgimento (specifically, the rhetoric of celebration and denunciation) persist in historical analysis, and this analysis rests on an assumption that the heroic (or anti-heroic) life embodies the broader times in an unproblematic way. Here, instead of being a method for exploring the past relationship between an individual and the collectivity, the biographical approach has become a means of obfuscating it.

One possible solution to this problem is to analyse narratives of the heroic life itself, and to pay close attention to how, when and with what objective the biography was constructed. To go back to Garibaldi: this approach involves adopting an attitude that seeks neither to glorify nor to debunk the myth that surrounds him; rather, it aims to understand the context in which Garibaldi became admired as a hero and explain his own role as part of this process. Thus, we can continue to use the countless popular biographies produced about Garibaldi but for a different purpose; that is, we can learn more about the tastes and aspirations of the radical reading public during the years of his fame and we can make visible the still obscure process by which personal or political 'greatness' is acquired, manipulated and employed. It may be, in other words, that nineteenth-century Italian biography is unreliable as a source for understanding the individual self and personal experience, but it can help us greatly if we want to interrogate the idea and purpose of an exemplary life.