

OBITUARY

Christopher Duggan 1957-2015

At the time of his death on 2 November 2015, Christopher Duggan had been Chair of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI) for barely one year. In this short time, he engaged in a variety of initiatives, establishing new links with other British and Italian scholarly associations and organising a symposium with colleagues in France. He also organised a conference in Oxford on Italy and the First World War. His tragic loss has been deeply felt by his many students, his colleagues and his friends. Those who had the task of communicating the sad news to the academic world received messages of sympathy which testify to the affection and the esteem with which he was regarded. Many young researchers fondly recalled his generosity in giving them his time and support, often corresponding with them long after meeting them at a conference or summer school and writing references for travel grants and scholarships. One remembered ‘this gentle scholar who, with his simple smile, immediately put me at ease, took time to talk with me about the Risorgimento and invited me to his home.’ Another wrote: ‘To me, he was both a brilliant sounding board for my work and a wonderful human being who went out of his way to encourage a young researcher who was trying to make his way’. His fellow Italianists admired his scholarship and his kindness. A founder member of ASMI, Paul Furlong, remembered Christopher as ‘a gentle, courteous and thoughtful colleague, a rigorous scholar who was devoted to his subject, and a person without “side”, to use an old-fashioned phrase’.

Christopher was born in Petts Wood, a suburb of South East London, on 4 November 1957. His father was a ship broker and his mother a nurse who later trained as a social worker. The second of three siblings, he attended Dulwich College and Westminster before reading History at Merton College, Oxford. His interest in Italy, initially for the Medieval period, began in his teens and he travelled in the country both before and after his undergraduate degree. The encounter with the great Italian historian Denis Mack Smith, who would supervise his Oxford D.Phil, was decisive in shifting his focus to modern history. Mack Smith had authored with Moses Finlay a history of Sicily and Christopher too would develop a keen interest in the island’s chequered past. The topic of his thesis, Fascism’s struggle against the Mafia, made ample use of the papers of Mussolini’s ‘iron prefect’, Cesare Mori. The very first line of the resulting book (published by Rubettino in 1987, two years ahead of the English version, which would be published by Yale with the title *Fascism and the Mafia*) asserted the intensely controversial notion that the Mafia was an idea rather than an organisation. The book was reviewed in the *Corriere della Sera* by the Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia, who employed its central idea to support his idiosyncratic stand against the so-called ‘professionals of anti-Mafia’. Although Duggan’s thesis was later undermined by the revelations of the repentant *mafioso* Tommaso Buscetta, the debate brought him early renown. Rubettino published a new edition of the book, which included Sciascia’s review, in 2007.

Christopher was elected to a prize fellowship at his supervisor’s college, All Souls, in 1985 and the college would remain important to him. In 1987, he and his wife Jennifer were married in the college chapel, where their two children would be baptised and where his memorial service

was also held on 12 December. He would return as a visiting fellow on two occasions, most recently in 2015. Although Oxford would always figure in his life, his entire teaching career was spent at Reading, where he was appointed to a lectureship in history in the Department of Italian Studies in 1987. He would soon rise to Reader and later Professor, before moving to the Department of History in 2013. For many years, Reading was the leading centre of Italian studies in the UK. It boasted a large Italian Studies department, whose members would include the renowned linguist Giulio Lepschy. Two distinguished historians of Italy, Stuart Woolf and Paul Corner, had held Christopher's post before him. Percy Allum was a member of the Politics Department, while Adrian Lyttelton, Richard Bellamy, Richard Bosworth, David Laven and Linda Risso were attached to History for shorter or longer periods. Over the years, Christopher organised numerous seminars and events there, some of them under the auspices of the Centre for the Advanced Study of Italian Society. These included conferences on Italy and the Cold War and on the 1948 elections.

As a historian, Christopher owed much to Mack Smith, with whom he kept in close contact and whose 90th birthday celebrations in 2010 he organised. His work is impregnated with the values of traditional scholarship; it is marked by a preference for interpretation over theory, an interest in the role of the great individual in history and by an ability to write wonderful, engaging prose. Like his maestro, he tackled big questions and engaged in prodigious archival research. He probably also acquired from him the habits of reading very widely and working exceptionally hard.

The most substantial of his books is surely his second monograph, *Francesco Crispi, 1818-1901: From nation to nationalism* (published by Laterza in 2000 and OUP in 2002). This was an enormous piece of research which changed the parameters of the Italian historiography. Surprisingly, there had been no modern, full-length biography of this patriot, reformer and warmonger who was a key architect of Italian unification and who served twice as prime minister in the 1880s and 1890s. Indeed, despite being compared in his lifetime to Bismarck, he was a largely forgotten figure, not least because his career ended in disgrace following charges of bigamy. Duggan brilliantly conveyed Crispi's role and ideas. But he also understood the need, in a 700 page political biography, to capture the personality, to bring colour and vitality to the enterprise. The Sicilian emerges in the book a sort of Italian Disraeli, not so much for his views as for his style. A fastidious dresser who spent two hours each morning making his toilet, Crispi cultivated an oriental-style image in order to give himself greater popular appeal.

For some time after this book, Christopher thought of himself mainly as a nineteenth-century historian. However, Fascism would loom large in his later work. In 2006, he joined Giuliana Pieri and myself as an investigator on an AHRC project on the personality cult of Benito Mussolini. The topic was one that had not previously been tackled systematically, despite the huge literature on Fascism, and all of those who belonged to the project team - which included Simona Storchi, Alessandra Antola, Vanessa Roghi, Sofia Serenelli, Paola Bernasconi and Eugene Pooley - felt we were engaged on something special. It was a fruitful and happy collaboration which involved archival research, oral history, documentaries and the curation of an exhibition at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art. For five years, we shared a spirit of adventure and common purpose.

The question of Italy's unresolved relationship with its Fascist past was a subject about which Christopher came to care deeply and which he approached from a moral as well as a political point of view. His book *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (Bodley Head, 2012) was conceived and mostly written during the Mussolini project. Drawing on the letters people wrote to the dictator over the course of his rule and hundreds of diaries, some of them published, others unpublished texts written by ordinary Italians which had been deposited years later in the national diary archive in Pieve Santo Stefano, Duggan was able to offer a particular insight into the nature

and extent of ordinary Italians' support for Mussolini and his regime. The book won great acclaim and it was honoured with several prizes, notably the Wolfson Prize for History. In his review in the *London Review of Books*, Richard Evans described *Fascist Voices* as 'a magnificent book, a path-breaking study that everyone interested in fascism, or Italy past and present, should read'. What was original about the book, he said, was that it treated fascism not purely as a tyranny or as an oppressive dictatorship but 'as a regime rooted strongly in popular aspirations and desires'.

In Italy, the book was not quite so warmly received, indeed at first it was largely ignored, much to Christopher's consternation since his previous books had won him respect. A number of explanations were possible, which included the familiar nature of some of the published sources on which the book drew, and the implication conveyed in the title formulated by the publisher Laterza – *Il popolo del duce* – that the mass of Italians had been Fascist followers. This point, it should be said, was even further emphasised by the French title chosen by Flammarion: *Ils y ont cru*. Long after the issue of popular consent under Fascism had first been debated by historians, this was still a sensitive issue. Paul Corner's book on the subject, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy*, was also published in 2012 and the two historians undertook a number of joint presentations of their works, including one at the British Academy.

In addition to his three important monographs, Duggan also wrote three more popular books. These works aimed at general readers can be found on the shelves of provincial bookstores and many local libraries. The first, *The History of Sicily* (Chatto & Windus, 1986), was a re-elaboration and extension of the text published earlier by Finlay and Mack Smith. The second, *A Concise History of Italy* (part of the CUP concise history series), was published in several languages and went through two editions. Through it, more than one generation of students and general readers acquired a flavour of the full sweep of Italian history from Roman times to the present.

Finally, in 2007, there was *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy Since 1796* (Penguin), another very large book, which considered the project of nation building in historical perspective, beginning with Napoleon and ending with Berlusconi. The approach was inspired by the work of Alberto Banti, who at first, Christopher confided to me, was diffident, unsure whether the book was the work of a friend or a foe. In the English-speaking world, it was widely read by many who wanted to get to know Italy better. Recently, Robert Lumley told me that he gave a copy as gift to his brother, who later wrote: 'I have finished *The Force of Destiny* which is a genuinely good book. After reading it I feel I can begin to understand why Italy is Italy and so unlike England or France.' Christopher would have been pleased with that judgement. Though accessible and enriched with many references to Italian architecture, art and music, the book is not entirely sanguine in tone and its conclusion is infused with melancholy. It argues that the issue of 'how to construct a nation with a shared past and a strong sense of collective destiny and purpose remained almost as pressing in the age of Forza Italia as in the era of the Carbonari and Young Italy'. There is even a suggestion that the whole enterprise of nation-building might have been counter-productive, since 'the very insistence with which the project of "making Italians" had been pursued down to the Second World War had contributed to the scant belief in collective national values'.

Christopher was much in demand as a speaker and he felt the responsibility of the public intellectual. He reviewed widely, notably for the *TLS*, presented books and took part in innumerable events. He took pains to cultivate good relations with the Italian Cultural Institute (especially under the enlightened direction of Caterina Cardona) and the Italian Embassy. He was an exceptionally loyal member of ASMI and he held many positions of responsibility over a period of more than thirty years, including those of newsletter editor, secretary and executive member. He also organised a number of ASMI events, including the 2007 annual conference on the fortune of Garibaldi (organised jointly with Lucy Riall), which is remembered for its

conviviality. His commitment to young scholars was unstinting and he was instrumental in ensuring the successful transformation of the ASMI postgraduate conference into an annual summer school at which established British-based academics provided postgraduate students and recent PhDs from several countries with feedback and advice. The summer school was held twice at Reading, most recently in 2015. As an executive member, he diligently read and made notes on entries to the ASMI postgraduate essay prize and also helped select the winner of the Christopher Seton-Watson prize, named after the association's founder.

Over the twenty-eight years he worked at Reading, Christopher supervised many graduate students, a good number of them Italians. They remember him as an assiduous and caring mentor, who always took the trouble to inquire after their well-being and general happiness. Colleagues who appealed to him for help with personal matters also always found him ready to do what he could, often above and beyond any call of duty. As the sole historian in a department of literary specialists, he sometimes felt like the odd one out, yet he served a term as Head of Italian Studies. More recently, a bruising period as Head of the newly-formed School of Modern Languages chastened him. A gentle and naturally shy man, he was shaken by the extent to which changes he sought to implement aroused bitter opposition. In his final months, he struggled with severe depression and was obliged to withdraw from commitments. Yet he worked indefatigably on a large international project on the legacies of Fascism for which he hoped to secure funding from the AHRC. The bid, which was submitted weeks before his death, bore the special imprint of Christopher's intellectual passion and vision. Typically, he had wanted the bulk of the funds to support several postdoctoral fellows.

In some of the various tributes and obituaries, it was remarked that Christopher was 'very British' or, more specifically, 'very English'. Inevitably perhaps, any British student of a Mediterranean country is at risk of having this label attached to them. But there is in this comment a hint that Christopher was in some way *more* British than some of his Italianist contemporaries. This is due first, probably, to the aura of Oxford which attached to him and, one might say, the particular aura of the rarefied place that is All Souls. Also, despite many years spent studying Italy, he never in any perceptible way went 'native', that is to say he had none of the traits of the Italianised Englishman: he did not drop Italian words into his conversation or emails and he was never spotted with an Italian newspaper under his arm or sticking out of his briefcase, although of course he read them. As far as I am aware, he never expressed the desire to live or work in Italy. Probably for family reasons, his trips there were short. Then there was the look. Christopher had the appearance not of the typical Englishman, but of the ideal Englishman. Although not tall, he was fair-haired, blue-eyed and good looking. Combined with his lightly-worn erudition and quiet charm, these were compelling qualities. There was also something almost boyish about him. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who went grey or put on weight, he remained remarkably ageless. Anyone comparing photographs of him taken twenty-five years ago with more recent ones could be forgiven for seeing very little difference. The tweed jackets of earlier times disappeared though, to be replaced by suits in a flattering shade of blue, almost always worn without a tie.

Christopher will be missed as a friend, as a colleague and as a teacher. His immense knowledge of Italy and his personal kindness will be remembered by all who knew him. Though ASMI mourns his loss, it will honour his memory and treasure the example he gave of personal and professional integrity, and of devoted, humane scholarship.

Stephen Gundle