

# Goodbye, Beautiful: Iris Origo's *A Chill in the Air and War in Val d'Orcia*

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**F**rom New York Review Books' 2017 catalogue, two titles stand out as having been particularly timely: the first, a reprinting—the eighth, in fact—of *War in Val d'Orcia*, the bestselling part of a diary kept by Iris Origo at her Tuscan estate during World War II; the other, the first ever printing of the preceding part of that diary, now published as *A Chill in the Air*. 'Nowadays', wrote the cultural historian Lucy Hughes-Hallett in her introduction to the latter, 'the word 'fascist' is used as a catch-all pejorative term'; but already, it seems, this is ceasing to be the case. In March 2018, Steve Bannon told *The Spectator* that he was 'fascinated by Mussolini', saying of the Italian dictator: 'He was clearly loved by women. He was a guy's guy. He has all that virility. He also had amazing fashion sense, right, that whole thing with the uniforms.' The comments came on the heels of another made earlier that month when the former White House Strategist told *Corriere Della Sera* that Italy's general election was 'The most important thing happening politically in the world right now'. In this, Bannon was alluding to the turn in Italian political opinion which eventually culminated in Populist parties La Lega and M5S being voted into government. For several commentators, that turn is due to the growing influence of CasaPound—an openly Fascist movement offering (in addition to the usual anti-immigration rhetoric) free shelter, food parcels, and medical check-ups to the Italian public. The Scelba Law of 1952 makes it a jailable offense for anyone 'publicly to celebrate the exponents, principals, actions or methods of Fascism'; hence, CasaPound's followers imagine themselves as victims (not instigators) of a repressive state established (not dismantled) by *la Resistenza*—the Italian fighters who sided with Allied Powers against both German and Italian Fascists. Amid this

rebranding, this attempt to rewrite cultural memory, we find ourselves having to ask a question—one which was already cliché within the English-language press before the war against Fascism was even a year underway, but which has rarely been asked since: where are that war's poets? The First World War yielded legions of Wilfred Owens and Siegfried Sassoon; but who can speak for the Second?

Various answers have been proposed. Perhaps the most high-minded was that of the Anglo-Irish poet Cecil Day-Lewis, whose 1941 poem 'Where are the War Poets?' deemed the conflict 'no subject for immortal verse'. But this overlooked the fact that poetry *was* produced in response to World War II—so much, in fact, that in a *Horizon* editorial of the same year, the English critic Cyril Connolly could give the answer: 'Right under your nose'. In 1942, an attempt was made to rectify the misunderstanding by means of a small anthology, *Poems of This War*, containing work by Keith Douglas, Sydney Keyes, Alan Ross and others. But the response proved unsatisfactory: today, as the late American poet Harvey Shapiro wrote in his introduction to *Poets of World War II* (2003), 'common wisdom has it that the poets of World War I...left us a monument and the poets of World War II did not'.

Part of the problem, as Marina Mackay discusses in *The Cambridge Companion to The Literature of World War II*, lies in the unprecedented scope of the conflict—the fact that the war was, in the phrase of the Anglo-Irish novelist (and ardent reviewer of *War in Val d'Orcia*) Elizabeth Bowen, 'uncontainable'. Unlike its precursor, whose fighting was conducted by trained personnel at clearly delineated theatres, World War II was not confined to any specific group of people or geographic locale. Not only did it span seas, skies, deserts, and jungles, it came rolling through urban and domestic environments as well. Nor could it be 'contained' within any stable time frame. By British reckoning, the War began two days after Hitler invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. By this date, however, aggressions

between Japan and China were nearly two years underway, Austria had been annexed to Germany for nearly eighteen months, and Czechoslovakia occupied for ten. The US, meanwhile, did not enter the conflict until the surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. While 1945 brought the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan, for many nations, this only marked a transition into further violence: civil wars, Soviet oppression, or Cold War hostilities. World War II, then, simply didn't fit into the categories with which we made sense out of organized conflict: civilian and soldier, direct and collateral damage, home and front, beginning and end. No poem, the thinking goes, could properly articulate the confusion, let alone find redemption for such boundless suffering.

For few nations was the war as 'uncontainable' as for Italy. Mussolini came into power in 1922 and had assumed full dictatorial control by 1926. In the following years, Italy sent troops to the Spanish Civil War, then to a colonial war in Ethiopia, before joining Hitler in the Axis Pact of Steel in May 1939. But when the Allies declared war in September of that year, the nation was radically underprepared for combat. Only in June 1940, after the German sweep across Europe made an Axis victory seem imminent, did Italy join the fight, taking part in Greek, Ethiopian, Egyptian, and Libyan theatres, in the Axis' advance on Russia, and in administration roles in France and the Balkans. But nearly all these endeavours were beset with failure, and on 25 July 1943, Mussolini was deposed by his own Fascist council. His successor, Marshal Badoglio, declared armistice with the Allies on 8 September, but even this didn't bring an end to Italy's troubles. In *Una Guerra Civile* (1991) the late Italian historian Claudio Pavone made the influential case that that three overlapping wars were fought in Italy between 1943 and 1945: a patriotic war of national liberation against the Germans; a class war fought by communists and oppressed workers dreaming of a socialist utopia; and a *de facto* civil war between the Italian Partisans—a heterogeneous group in their own right—

and those who had remained loyal to Mussolini and Fascism. Given the complexity of this experience, it seems little wonder that Anglophone literature has tended instead toward caricature and stereotype: in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Louis de Bernières' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, the Italians are simply the lazy cowards of Allied propaganda.

Iris Origo was better placed to observe the Italian experience. The only child of Lady Sybil Cuffe, the daughter of an Irish peer, and William Cutting, a wealthy American diplomat, her identity was divided from birth. 'All this national feeling makes people so unhappy,' wrote her father from his deathbed, requesting that his daughter be raised 'somewhere where she does not belong...so that when she grows up she really will be free to love or marry anyone she likes, of any country, without it being difficult'. Iris settled with her mother in the Villa Medici in Fiesole, but was plagued by what her autobiography, *Images and Shadows* (1970), would call a 'sense of rootlessness and insecurity'. Furthermore, her marriage *was* difficult. Her family was appalled when she fell in love with Antonio Origo—an Italian ten years her senior, the illegitimate son of the Marchese Clemente and a cavalry officer in the First World War. Antonio had worked as a banker and for Mumm champagne, but he was no intellectual, and certainly not one of her circle. Together, they purchased, rejuvenated, and eventually lived upon a stretch of land in the Val d'Orcia called La Foce. After the death of their seven-year-old son, Iris occupied herself with biography writing, doing so until the Allies declared war. 'It was really only then,' says *Images and Shadows*, 'that I fully faced the problem of divided loyalties which confronts every woman whose marriage has placed her in a country at war with her own.' All she could attempt, she would explain, was 'to keep as steady as possible, to close my ears to alarming rumours and my heart to nostalgia and dismay' and 'to foster within myself something that is not merely fear, resentment or bewilderment'. Diary writing offered a solution: 'Perhaps it might be useful,'

she wrote at the outbreak, 'to try to clear my mind by setting down, as truthfully and simply as I can, the tiny facet of the world's events which I myself, in the months ahead, shall encounter at first hand.' The result was an account which, as Alessandro Passeria d'Entrèves, Professor of Italian Studies at Oxford, wrote in *La Stampa*, 'did not play on old stereotypes and present Italy as an *opera buffa*' but rather, as The *Times Literary Supplement* recognised, 'allowed the war to be seen historically instead of nationally'.

But this didn't make it 'poetry'. It goes without saying that 'popular wisdom' expects its war poets to be, well, poets; but this common-sense requirement overlooks the fact that women's voices are massively underrepresented in the poetry of WWII. Of the hundred-and-three poems collected in *Poems of This War*, for example, a mere nine are by female writers. The deficiency is largely due to the prevailing assumptions around 'war writing': 'Historically', writes Gill Plain of St Andrews University, 'the very idea has been a gendered one, founded on the emphatic cultural distinction between male activity and female passivity, combatant and non-combatant, soldier and mother'. For the same reasons, 'popular wisdom', has often failed to pay attention to the much larger number, and intensely literary nature, of the diaries kept by women throughout World War II, reading them as passive recordings of domestic events rather than authentic engagements with the conflict. This exclusion of female responses is problematic not just in principle; in practice, it ensures a dismissal of one of the most crucial differences between male and female experiences of warfare. There is a tendency in male assessments of the war to categorise rape not as a direct assault on the civilian population but as something akin to collateral damage (although the first recorded use of that phrase didn't occur until 1961): an unfortunate by-product of conflict but, like looting, the inevitable result of armed men re-encountering objects of desire after an extended period of deprivation. 'Where are the war poets?', then, is a loaded question, one which

precludes any meaningful challenge to that view—and this, no doubt, is another reason that no answer has yet proven satisfactory to the popular imagination.

Origo might not be the answer to that question, but she has a habit of disproving the presumptions implicit within it. In her hands, the domestic diary is not some passive exercise, but a means of self-defence, a way of remaining 'steady' and 'useful' rather than, say, helpless. It proves, moreover, the only medium capable of doing justice to the peculiar *homeliness* of the home-front, of properly articulating not only the violence of the war but the everyday humdrum—meals, social visits, affairs of the estate—with which it is punctuated (and from which, once bombing has become a daily occurrence, it becomes strangely inseparable). Furthermore, Origo develops over the course of her diary a more critical examination of the relationship between soldier and mother. At the start of *A Chill in the Air*, military concerns seem to take primacy over maternal feeling. Not until 100 pages in, for example, when Origo's doctor is visiting from Rome, do we even learn that she is pregnant: 'After a second air raid last night,' reads the entry for 15 June 1940, 'he does not recommend it to me as the most restful place for my accouchement'. But by the arrival of her second child, Donata, the traumas visited upon mother and combatant are no longer distinct. 'During the long night before her birth' reads an entry from the beginning of *War in Val d'Orcia*, 'I heard from the next room, through my own pain, the groans for morphine of a young airman whose leg had been amputated'. This mingling of the soldier's and her own anguish, where the one is literally audible *through* the other, sets the tone for the rest of the diary: hereafter, Origo takes on the role, as Lucy Hughes-Hallet has phrased it, 'of a kind of Mother Courage' (albeit, one which, unlike Brecht's, has no intention of profiting off the war), providing maternal protection for legions of refugees, most of them orphaned children. At no point are we in any doubt that she too is engaged in a fight—one which is not in

opposition to a mother's work, but an extension of it. Furthermore, Origo's critical eye does not turn away from the issue of sexual assault. An entry for 3 May 1944 describes the chaos wrought by the German army: 'at San Godenzo, women have been raped and a child killed'. A later entry for 18 June 1944 describes their abuse of local peasants: 'three have had their daughters raped...One of these, a child of twelve'. A subsequent entry for 22 June 1944 completes the picture: 'In the last five days I have seen Radicofani and Contignano destroyed, the countryside and farms studded with shell holes, girls raped, and human beings and cattle killed.' In this list, human casualties and direct gunfire are placed indiscriminately alongside animal slaughter and sexual violence. The implication is clear: that violence has no by-products, only products. An entry for 1 July 1944 confirms the suggestion:

In the lower part of the property, where the French coloured troops of the Fifth Army have passed, the Goums have completed what the Germans begun. They regard loot and rape as the just reward for battle, and have indulged freely in both. Not even girls and young women, but even an old woman of eighty has been raped. Such has been the Val d'Orcia's first introduction to Allied rule—so long, and so eagerly awaited.

The picture poses a serious challenge to the dominant view of wartime sexual violence. Rape is not some inconveniently violent expression of normative sexuality (for it is even wrought, by Allied and Axis soldiers alike, upon children and the elderly); its chief difference from artillery fire and aerial bombing is only that it happens to have enlisted sexuality as its weapon of choice. If World War II is 'uncontainable' because it doesn't fit into our available categories, Origo is qualified as its spokesperson by the very fact that she does not observe them either.

'Destruction and death have visited us,' concludes *War in Val d'Orcia*, 'but now—there is hope in the air'. Origo received countless letters in response to the book, not only from those who had found refuge at La Foce but from readers whom she hadn't known personally, thanking her for that hope, and for the reparations she'd made in Anglo-Italian relations. 'What Iris' book had drawn attention to', writes Origo's biographer Caroline Moorehead, 'was the fact that ordinary Italians had given exceptional help to escaping Allied prisoners of war, at profound risk to themselves and their families'. 'For myself,' added d'Entrèves to his *La Stampa* review, 'I wouldn't hesitate to say that it has done us more good than a battle won by our side'. But the preceding part of the diary is different. Moorehead calls it 'curiously dispassionate, with none of the warmth of *War in Val d'Orcia*, and posits, moreover:

Perhaps the best explanation, not only of the tone of this diary but also of her decision not to publish it, is to be found in something which Iris herself wrote [in *Images and Shadows*]: "I do not believe that one is likely to write a good biography unless one feels some sympathy with one's subjects, so I doubt whether much is to be gained by dwelling on those periods of one's life of which the dominant flavour is distaste. Periods of grief, hardship or danger may be fruitful, but not a reluctant acceptance of what one cannot change."

If, as Moorehead suggests, it has been kept from publication for these reasons, then it is for the same reasons that it needs to be read now: *A Chill in the Air* shows the depths from which hope—even redemption—can emerge, the division from which unity can be wrought.

In recent reception, Origo's diary has been read as a sort of extended anagnorisis, as a sorting-out of truth from the lies and prejudices of fascist propaganda, and a foreshadowing, therefore, of today's struggles with 'fake news'. In *The New Yorker*, for example, Cynthia Zarin writes that *A Chill In the Air*' records the months before Italy's descent into the Second World War, where Mussolini's relationship with Hitler was being presented to the Italian public via a campaign of misinformation, what we would now call 'fake news', adding that 'One of the vital interests of the diary is watching the alert, perspicacious mind of a supremely intelligent person coming alive to the situation around her'. In *The Guardian*, meanwhile, the military historian Antony Beevor discusses how 'Origo analyses the propaganda lies with the piercing intelligence that so impressed Frances Partridge and Virginia Woolf...The fake news regime was so implausible that many were tempted to dismiss all news, however accurate, as no better.' Similarly, in *The New York Times*, Alexander Stille notes that 'the radio, which the Fascist regime used with great skill, plays a large role in Origo's account, and it is hard not to see some parallels with our current situation, with its constant claims of "fake news."' While Origo couldn't have foreseen the media controversies of our own era, she certainly hoped to produce this separation of true from false, stressing, in her introduction to *War in Val d'Orcia*: "I have tried to avoid political bias and national prejudice". For the most part, there is no doubt that she succeeded in this endeavour, casting a critical eye over both sides of the conflict. Even as she becomes increasingly scathing of Fascism, she remains alert to the Allies' faults, chiding them, not only for the Marocchinate, but for their hesitancy—the fact that the Liberation took so long to arrive, and was so destructive when it did. Even where our own times are different from Origo's, moreover, her critical assessments are illuminating. In an entry for 6 April 1939, for example, we are told:

It is clear what form propaganda, in case of war, will take. The whole problem will be presented as an economic one. The “democratic countries”, i.e. the “haves”, will be presented as permanently blocking the way of the “have-nots” to economic expansion...Fascists are thus enabled to see the impending war as a struggle between the poor man and the rich—a genuine revolutionary moment.

Modern-day Fascists continue to present their problem as an economic one—only now things are imagined the other way around: the “have nots” (immigrants, refugees, etc.) blocking the economic freedoms (jobs, housing, healthcare etc.) of the “haves”. Virtually every one of her entries, it seems, can assist in putting our own world into perspective.

Perhaps more interesting is the fact that Origo knew that she would fail in any attempt to present an objective truth. She made this explicit in her introduction to *War in Val d'Orcia*.

But we are all affected, far more deeply than we know—not by the theories, but by the mental climate of the world in which we live. Even our reactions against it show that we are not immune. I have no doubt that to those living in a different climate and seeing the same events from a different peep-hole, many of my judgements will appear mistaken, prejudiced and even wrong. Most certainly, I have swallowed propaganda without realising it, but may I be permitted to ask my readers—are they quite certain that they have never done so, too?

Of course, we can never possess that certainty; but from our ‘peep-hole’ in the Twenty-First Century, Origo’s prejudice is most obvious in her racism. In her own introduction to *War in Val d'Orcia*, Virginia Nicholson sees the book as a suggestion that

“Relationships can, perhaps, be built between people of different nations, faiths, and colours”; but the final item on this list seems debatable in light of the following entry from 14 June 1944, in which Origo’s disappointment is almost tangible:

An important detail, from our personal point of view, is the news that the troops fighting in the Bolsena area are largely coloured Moroccan troops, and it is these that presumably will be the first to arrive here. After so many months and years of waiting for the Allies, this will be the Val d’Orcia’s first impression of them. There is also, however, a South African division at Bagnoregio, so let us hope that these may turn up instead.

With the power of hindsight, it might be tempting to conclude that Origo was right to fear the Moroccan troops who eventually ‘completed what the Germans begun’. But doing so would overlook the fact that, in this entry, Origo appears to be expecting some such crime because of the very fact that the Fifth Division is ‘largely coloured’ (and not because of, say, the leadership of Alphonse Juin, their French General). But even in prejudice, Origo manages to be enlightening, drawing attention, in this instance, not only to the hypocrisy implicit in the Allies fighting a racist regime with a racially segregated army, but to the ease with which propaganda can make an otherwise free-thinking person blind to such hypocrisy.

The other obstacle which prevents us from reading Origo’s diary as a coming-to-knowledge is its acute sensitivity to what might be termed the *unknowability* of the war. The notion is first introduced in *A Chill in The Air*, when an entry for 23 November 1939 describes the stories of Nazi brutality told by ‘two young poles’ from Warsaw:

The stories they told of their experiences were made convincing by a singular lack of personal animosity; they seemed to have gone beyond it. But, “you can’t imagine, you can never imagine,” the girl went on saying.

“Sometimes even I, when I remember, can’t believe that it’s true” She looked in a dazed way around the Embassy drawing room. “And I certainly can’t believe that I’m here!”

The idea is repeated in *War in Val d’Orcia* when the narrative reaches its cinematic climax on 6 June 1944. Describing how she escorted a gang of refugee children to safety through heavy fire, Origo explains, ‘I remember thinking at that moment...This can’t be real—this isn’t really happening’. Once again, her implication is clear: in modern conflict, it is not just the news which is hard to swallow; even when we stand face to face with the reality of warfare, direct and unmediated, it proves itself completely unbelievable, unimaginable. ‘War poet’, in other words, is an oxymoron: a representor of a trauma so catastrophic that the mind cannot even begin to represent it to itself.

In light of this, an innocuous piece of marginalia acquires a new resonance. In her introduction to *War in Val d’Orcia*, Origo describes her first—and subsequent—encounters with the Tuscan landscape:

At the age of nineteen, my passing familiarity with the iconography of the cypress avenue hadn’t prepared me for the experience of seeing the tangible reality, and though I have been back many times since, its beauty remains as surprising and as heart-stopping as ever.

Today, it seems, one ‘iconography’ is starting to give way to another. The too-simplistic representation of World War II as the archetypal ‘just war’ is being replaced, not by better reference to the archives, but with an even more simplistic rendering—one in which Mussolini is a latent sex symbol, and his legacy one of benevolence and charity. In lieu of the actual poets of World War II, Origo’s diary reminds us that no ‘passing familiarity’ with any representation of warfare can prepare us for an encounter with its ‘tangible reality’, that no

matter how many times we re-enter conflict, its horrors—like the Val d’Orcia’s beauty—will remain as ‘surprising and heart stopping’—that is, as traumatic and incomprehensible to us—‘as ever.

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