

OBITUARY

Stuart J. Woolf

The news of the death of Stuart Woolf – from covid on 1 May 2021 – was a shock to many of us. Although partially withdrawn from public life in recent years because of poor health, Stuart was still very much *una presenza* among historians both in Italy and at the international level. His stature was marked immediately after his death by the many tributes paid to him, by colleagues, by former students, by publishers, and by friends. In a sensitive evaluation of his achievement, *La Repubblica* wrote of ‘the English historian who has played a fundamental role in the relationship between British and Italian culture’, recognising that in much of what he did and wrote there was also a very clear political dimension.

As a historian, Stuart stood out because of the breadth of his knowledge. At a time when trends in research push people towards ever increasing specialisation, Stuart was able to span centuries without difficulty. Although he became known through his work on fascism, his early interests lay in the *settecento* in Piedmont. At Oxford he was a research student of Hugh Trevor-Roper, who sent him to do research in Turin in the late 1950s. It was in Turin that he met not only his wife, Anna Debenedetti, but also many distinguished members of the Resistance generation whose friendship would influence him greatly. And it was at this time that he came into close contact with Primo Levi – a contact that resulted in Stuart producing the first English translation of *Se questo è un uomo*.

After a brief period as a research fellow at Cambridge, Stuart moved to the University of Reading, where Luigi Meneghello was in the process of building up the new Department of Italian Studies. It was here, in 1966, that he set up – together with Percy Allum – the Centre for the Advanced Study of Italian Society with the intention of creating a hub for historians and political scientists studying contemporary Italy. It was a vindication of his vision that the Centre proved very rapidly to fill a gap; it became a point of reference for British researchers leaving for Italy and for the many Italian scholars who wished to spend a period of study in Britain. The seminars at the Centre were of the highest level. Some of the papers given at these seminars would subsequently form the two edited volumes for which, for a time, Stuart was best known – *The Nature of Fascism* and *European Fascism* – and it was in other seminars and occasional lectures that many distinguished Italian scholars, politicians, and journalists would often get their first taste of Britain – Giorgio Napolitano, Umberto Eco, Vittorio Foa, Claudio Pavone, Enzo Cheli, Luciana Castellina to name but a few. It is no exaggeration to say that, at that time, the Italian Embassy in London mobilized when there was a seminar in Reading.

All this was clear evidence of Stuart’s undoubted enthusiasm for academic life and also of his great capacity for organization. There was always a very practical side to what Stuart was doing; sometimes it was attempting to raise money for research projects, sometimes it was a question of convening conferences, sometimes of putting papers together for publication. There was a determination and clear sightedness that marked him out from many of his colleagues. These were qualities that came to the fore, first in the University of Essex, where he moved to a chair from Reading, then in his eleven years at the European University in Fiesole, and finally in his period in Venice at Ca’ Foscari, where he was responsible for the doctoral programme. During these years he moved

backwards and forwards in his studies, again showing a remarkable versatility, producing works on poverty in western Europe, on family strategies, on Italian economic development, on nationalism, on social and political change in 19th century Italy, on Napoleon, but also on the Resistance and post-war reconstruction. While many of these studies were centred on Italy, almost all were distinguished by attention to the wider European dimension.

As will be evident from the above, Stuart did not lack energy. His energy and his enthusiasm for the matter at hand were his characteristics, whether it was delving into the fascist economic 'system' (as he put it, questioning its existence), singing in a choir in Santa Croce, or - his other great passion - tending his garden in Settignano. His certainty about the road ahead and his immense commitment did not always make him an easy person to work with. He did not suffer fools gladly and he would sometimes make this clear: his comments were always incisive; they could also be abrasive. Yet he never persisted in animosities (it was almost as if he never had time for this) and he was always very generous in his dealings with students and colleagues. As his organisation of many collective research projects demonstrated, he was working not for himself but in synergy with others in order to stimulate historical understanding. Stuart will certainly be missed. His energy, enthusiasm, and generosity will be remembered for a long time, as will his great contribution to Italian studies over the last sixty years. He was, among so many other things, a founder member of ASMI.

Paul Corner