

## OBITUARY

### Denis Mack Smith (1920–2017)

As this issue of *Modern Italy* was going into press, we heard the sad news that our honorary President, Denis Mack Smith, had died at the age of 97. Born in London and educated at St Paul's School and Peterhouse, Cambridge, Mack Smith pioneered a new approach to the history of modern Italy in the post-Fascist, post-war era. His reputation as the leading historian of Italy working in English was established at the very beginning of his career, with a series of articles on the events that lead to the unification of Italy and, above all, with the publication of his first book, *Cavour and Garibaldi 1860: A Study in Political Conflict* (1954). As a number of reviewers remarked at the time, the history of modern Italy was never to look the same again. Based on painstaking research into recently released documents and letters, Mack Smith's achievement was, in the words of A. J. P. Taylor, to turn 'things upside down': far from being a harmonious, if fortuitous, meeting of personalities and circumstances, he showed the unification of Italy to be the result of bitter conflict and its main architect, Cavour, to be an unscrupulous opportunist who pursued his own short-term interests.

For many in Italy and elsewhere, Mack Smith came to incarnate the British way of writing narrative history. In the course of his long career, spanning almost five decades, he produced a number of general books that were aimed at a wider public and are still read today. Among them were *Italy: A Modern History* (1959); *A History of Sicily* (1968); *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (1976) and *Italy and its Monarchy* (1989), as well as a trilogy of biographies featuring the main figures in Risorgimento history: *Garibaldi: A Great Life in Brief* (1957); *Cavour* (1985) and *Mazzini* (1994). All his work was translated into Italian and indeed it was in Italy that Mack Smith met with his greatest success, thanks partly to a creative relationship with the publisher Vito Laterza (and later with Vito's son Giuseppe). Mack Smith appeared regularly on Italian television and radio and was pictured memorably, cigarette in hand, on the cover of *L'Espresso*.

'There is no necessary reason,' Mack Smith wrote in *Victor Emmanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento* (1971) 'why truth should be beautiful or simple.' Much of his career was spent following that maxim, meticulously unpicking established narratives and challenging accepted interpretations. If the history of modern Italy had been written hitherto in a heroic form, Mack Smith's gaze was ironic and his heroes were deeply flawed or fatally thwarted. His determination to take on the myths of Italian nationalism led Mack Smith to dismiss Mazzini and mock the Savoy kings. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, many Italian historians were hostile to him, and either denounced his critical approach or scorned his considerable fame: he had a famous spat with Renzo de Felice (whose view of Mussolini Mack Smith dismissed as 'nonsense') and Rosario Romeo refused to shake his hand.

In reality, however, Mack Smith's disagreement with Italian historians was based more on misunderstanding than deliberate spite. By his own testimony, he stepped unwittingly into a conflict raging in Italy during the 1950s and 1960s between defenders of the liberal tradition and their Marxist opponents: Mack Smith's interpretation appeared to support the Marxists even though, as he candidly admitted, he had not at the time read Gramsci. Moreover, it is arguable that

Mack Smith's real target was not primarily Italian apologists for the Risorgimento but their British equivalents: it was G. M. Trevelyan and the Whig view of history as the story of progress that the young Mack Smith set out to challenge. He was part of a new generation that had seen the Second World War and had lost faith in the liberal certainties and nationalist narratives that inspired Trevelyan to embrace Italy's Risorgimento some 50 years earlier.

In the end, it is hard to exaggerate Mack Smith's immense talent as a historian and his profound influence on the work of subsequent generations. Among his PhD students, we remember our former Chair, the late Christopher Duggan: the two remained close friends and Christopher dedicated his first book, *Fascism and the Mafia* (1989) to Denis. Furthermore, all of us who study Italy have been influenced in different ways by Denis's passion for the subject, his distinctive narrative style and his desire to reject scholarly orthodoxies. In the 1960s, Denis's academic success made him fully a part of the British establishment: he took up a Research Fellowship at All Souls, Oxford, became a member of the British Academy and was the recipient of numerous awards and accolades for his work. Yet, he remained ever kind and approachable and he was unfailingly generous to younger scholars, even those with very different views from his own. He understood that history was a dialogue, not a set of beliefs. He was a man of wit, charm and intelligence, strikingly tall and handsome even in his 90s: we feel his loss keenly and deeply mourn his passing.

Lucy Riall  
*Chair, Association for the Study of Modern Italy*