

subtle shift in public opinion, particularly with regard to the Conservative Party, and a small but significant group of voters and (perhaps more importantly) political activists had detached themselves from the Tories. They were now in search of a new home, and the Liberals' charismatic new leader was just the man to build one for them. One obvious gain close to home was the decision of Laura Grimond's brother Mark to turn down overtures from the Conservative Party, and stick with the Liberals instead. His narrow victory at the Torrington by-election in 1958 would be come to be seen as a watershed, the first Liberal gain at a by-election for three decades.

With Suez and Carmarthen out of the way, Grimond began in earnest to lead his party on its long march and 1957 became the year in which he made his personal imprint on the Liberal Party, setting out a distinctive political platform on nuclear defence, the economy and Europe.

Suez reared its head again at the end of March 1957, when the French press first leaked word of the Sèvres Protocol, the secret document in which collusion between Britain, France and Israel had been formalised. The Government had explicitly denied in the House of Commons that Britain had any foreknowledge of the Israeli attack on Egypt; so, said Grimond, if these French disclosures were true, they would demonstrate that the Eden Government was 'made up of rogues and their dupes – not to mention incompetents'.<sup>4</sup> Outside the furnace of Westminster twenty years later, Grimond was able to take a more relaxed view – 'while I personally rather welcome the veil which has been drawn over this incident – there may well be occasions when ministers must lie in the national interest – yet the contrast between the treatment of the dissemblers on this occasion and the way that others have been expelled from public life for lesser offences, is strange to say the least of it'.<sup>5</sup>

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What he always knew, however, was that Suez had given the Liberals – and him personally – a crucial lifeline when they were at their weakest. At by-elections in Gloucester, Rochdale and Torrington, the Liberals soon demonstrated that they knew how to campaign – and how to hurt the two big parties. In the wake of Suez, the Liberal Party was back in business.

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- 1 *Guardian*, 20 August 1956.
- 2 *The Times*, 3 November 1956.
- 3 *News Chronicle*, 18 December 1956.
- 4 *The Times*, 1 April 1957.
- 5 Jo Grimond, *Memoirs*, p. 192.

## REVIEWS

### Reformism and the Risorgimento

Derek Beales and Eugenio F. Biagini: *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (Longman, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2002)

Reviewed by **Piers Huggill**

**D**erek Beales (with, in this new edition, additional input from Eugenio Biagini) has set out a knowingly revisionist history of the Italian Risorgimento, at least from the point of view of traditional Italian historiography. In fact, as Beales himself recognises, there have been a number of reassessments of the Risorgimento since the fall of fascism and the consequent historical anti-fascist consensus of the Italian Republic.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this post-fascist revisionist trend, by consciously historicising the process of unification in Italy, has entailed reviewing the concept of 'nation' itself and the very idea of a national unity project ever having existed in Italy in the accepted form of Risorgimento.

Part of this reassessment of the processes that defined and facilitated Italian unification is evident in Beales' decision to go further back in time than is usual and to

trace his chosen narrative from the end of the Austrian War of Succession in 1748. The signing of the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle, which 'inaugurated nearly fifty years of peace in Italy', was first considered the starting point of the Risorgimento by the poet Giosué Carducci (1835–1907). However, it is only comparatively recently that it has been suggested again (the first edition of this book was published in 1971). Previous reckoning began with the Napoleonic invasion of Italy in 1796 (for the left and liberals) or with the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (for conservatives).

Since this book was originally intended to form part of a series of works reassessing historical topics from a contemporary liberal political perspective, it is no surprise perhaps that the origins of the Risorgimento should be sought in the Enlightenment (or the indigenous Italian form of *Iluminismo*) and in the slow

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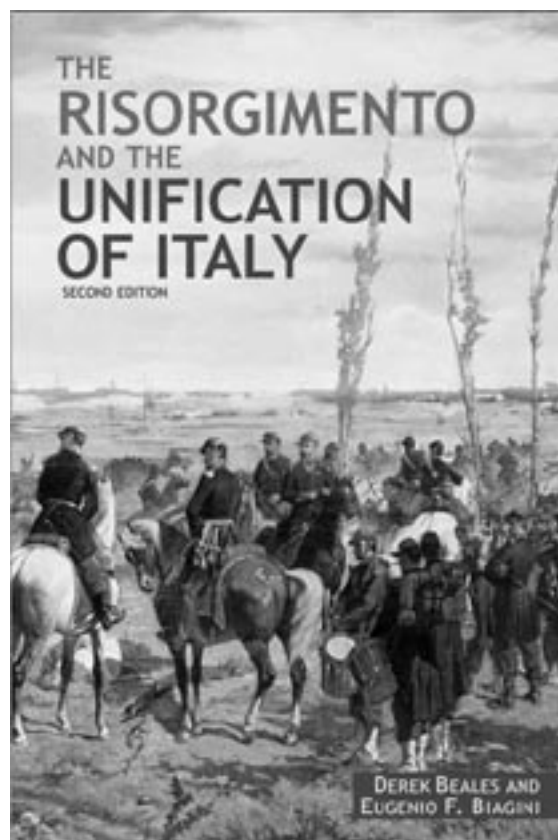
development of both democratic political institutions and free-market economic forms by the Italian bourgeoisie. A theme running throughout is the distinction between radical and revolutionary activity and progressive liberal democratic trends, usually consisting of upper-middle-class and aristocratic Italian elements, which fought more for free trade and greater economic rights than for consistent democratic or political ends.

Beales is keen to show that the real solutions to Italian bourgeois problems, which comprise the real history of the Risorgimento and unification, were to be found in 'progressive' politics – i.e. reformism. This countered the potentially more dangerous elements of *Carbonarism*<sup>2</sup> which brought with it only repression and failed constitutional reforms. The steadier approach of the reformist tendency meanwhile, especially as exemplified by Cavour's period as Prime Minister of Piedmont, was infinitely more successful in achieving lasting ends in terms of constitution-building, national unification and economic progress. The underlying theme that Beales develops is the progressive nature of cross-class unity, in contradistinction to the socialist instinct for class conflict and the divergence of political and economic interest. Nevertheless, the narrative offered by this volume doesn't always seem to bear these conclusions out.

Real conflicts of interest certainly were manifest throughout the period covered by the book. For instance, attitudes towards the clergy varied enormously across classes, but for very different reasons. In this context it is interesting to see how Beales traces the neo-Guelph and pro-clerical moderates' change in attitude towards the Papacy after 1848, when it became obvious how reactionary the Church really was. It is also clear that a significant underlying causal factor in the process leading to

unification was the necessity to open up markets and constitute Italy not only as a geographical expression but as an economic one too. The enormously complicated and burdensome tariff system operating in pre-revolutionary Italy, in addition to the lack of navigable rivers or other forms of transport across the Appenines, meant that anything like a national trading network was impossible before unification. The urgency of Italian unity, when it came, was therefore in no small way prompted by the need to develop such an infrastructure, enabling Italy to operate as a single and coherent economic entity. However, while bourgeois factory owners and financiers acted in a revolutionary manner in 1848–49 in the Veneto, Lombardy and Piedmont, because of the urgency of reducing tariffs and opening markets, the burgeoning northern Italian proletariat were equally intent on reducing working hours, unionising their factories and protecting industries that would lose precious jobs if opened to free trade.

Cavour had no sympathy for such objections to his economic policies, and instead initiated reforms to the law that scrapped many of the older traditional fairs and holidays to ensure greater productivity in the nascent manufacturing industries. Beales is very open about the degree of bourgeois self-interest manifest in the democratic and radical politics of the time, although he would also have us believe that cross-class action was central to the success of these endeavours. There is a danger in making these assumptions without acknowledging the very limited sympathy that existed between social classes at the time. Those moments when cross-class action did seem to have real impact were the revolutionary moments of 1821, 1830 and 1848–49 when very complicated social and political processes were establishing



themselves as elements of modern life.

If 1848–51 was a death knell for the 'old' Europe, initiating the era of high capitalism, the immediate post-unification period in Italy demonstrated some very stark differences in social interests. At this time capitalism was a genuinely progressive force, and part of the 'miracle' of the Italian Risorgimento lies in the way in which the liberal conception of an outward-looking open nationhood so quickly came into being.<sup>3</sup> In any case, an important aim of the Congress of Vienna was to crush both Jacobinism and nationalism at the same time, since the victors of the Napoleonic wars considered them to be two sides of the same French expansionist coin. Whilst the poison of fascist nationalism was a much later development it is instructive to see how Beales rehearses the differences between these two attitudes towards nationhood. One was open, secular, liberal and democratic, embracing and supporting all nations' right to self-determination and equality.

The other was inward, messianic, authoritarian and absolute, unable to see the validity or worth in other peoples or ethnicities. The differences between Mazzini's and Mussolini's attitude towards the Italian nation could not be greater.

While Garibaldi and his 'Thousand' were welcomed with open arms in Sicily when it was first liberated from the decaying Bourbon regime, it was not long before the real significance of the unification process hit home for the island's peasantry. This was not altogether Garibaldi's fault. Nevertheless, very soon the burden of taxation under Cavour was far greater even than it had been under the Bourbons and Gramsci's 'agrarian revolution *manqué*' was as much in evidence post-unification as before.<sup>4</sup> Garibaldi, the supreme pragmatist, was even put in the position of a counter-revolutionary to regain order on the island. An opportunity for genuinely egalitarian land redistribution had been missed and decades of rural disquiet were to follow.

And it wasn't just the countryside. The fiscal policy of the new Italian state was soon causing ordinary Italians major problems too. The *tassa sul macinato* (grist tax), for instance, meant that millions of Italians could no longer afford to feed themselves adequately. The increasing tax burden on the Italian middle classes, land reform that favoured only the largest owners, and the effective suppression of demand in the new Italy all meant that the hopes of both the liberal petit-bourgeois and the working classes were dashed. The hope of an egalitarian 'nation' of Italians came to an end and, with the rise of fascism after the chaos of the First World War, a very different sense of nationality arose.

Fascinating in this respect is the chapter on 'Women and the Risorgimento'. Beales very clearly demonstrates the important part that women played, as well as the extreme difficulty

that they faced in gaining, and maintaining, a voice. It is also interesting that a significant proportion of the women described were from abroad – coming to Italy, marrying Italians and, subsequently, getting involved in Italian politics. Such, for example, were the cases of Anita Garibaldi, Rosalie Montmasson Crispi, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, or Jessie White Mario. All of these women, whether Italian or not, were either highborn or from independently wealthy backgrounds. What is clear is that working-class women were effectively invisible in this struggle, once again demonstrating the stark class divisions in Italian society and their relation both to political and social activity and to people's own interests. The Calabrian peasantry, for instance, was quite clearly indifferent to the entire process of unification and not much concerned who oppressed them. That they had absolutely no stake in the new Italy must have been perfectly self-evident.

The book is very well written and beautifully presented, although the indexing seems incomplete somehow: I would have preferred entries on more general issues, such as the southern question, that are dealt with extensively in the book but which are not covered by the index. However, while the index may leave something to be desired, there is a magnificent selection of documents, constituting more than a third of the whole length of the book. This is an excellent approach to the subject, allowing those with a special interest in any particular area to refer straight to the original sources relating to it. These annexes are one of the best features of the book.

Given the significance the authors attach to the cultural life of Italy, and to the importance poets, writers and painters had to the development of a sense of nation, a fuller picture of those individuals responsible,

such as Manzoni and Foscolo, could have improved the book. In addition, the chapter on the Italian language was weakened by insufficient attention given to the very special linguistic situation there. At the time of the unification, not only were there innumerable dialects in existence (many of them mutually incomprehensible) but also substantial communities of Greek and Albanian speakers in the south as well as Slavonic, French and German speakers in the north. It was these communities in the south especially, with their own independent traditions and interests, that in some significant way have led to those peculiar and characteristic problems now known infamously as *il problema del Sud*. Even with Berlusconi at the helm, the Italian mass media have still failed to overcome that cultural barrier to nation-building.

Despite these small shortcomings, however, this is an excellent introduction to a fascinating period of Italian history and as such is to be highly recommended.

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- 1 Denis Mack Smith's *Italy: A Modern History* is a good example of English revisionism in this tradition and, from Italy, Paul Ginsbourg's *Italy and its Discontents*.
- 2 A form of indigenous Jacobinism with much influence from the Italian tradition of freemasonry espoused by Giuseppe Mazzini and Filippo Buonarroti, a descendent of Michelangelo who was the nearest early nineteenth century Italy had to a communist.
- 3 Thus giving the lie to Prince Metternich's famous dictum that Italy was nothing more than a 'geographical expression'.
- 4 Beales argues that the old Italian Communist Party's official version of events was only really applicable to Sicily.

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