

BIOGRAPHY

A party of one

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Marcello Staglieno

MONTANELLI
Novant'anni controcorrente
495pp. Milan: Mondadori. 18.59euros.
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Indro Montanelli, journalist, writer and all-round *rafano*, or gadfly, lived through most of the last century. When he died on July 22, 2001, the outpouring of praise in the Italian peninsula was remarkable: the following day, plaudits filled nearly 600 pages of newsprint. In all but a few instances, however, the tributes seemed manufactured – more the result of the need to affirm Montanelli's standing as the doyen of Italian journalism, rather than genuine affection.

Montanelli himself was aware of being out of step with prevailing opinion. Near the end of his life, he described Italy as a country which no longer belonged to him and in which he felt he no longer belonged ("un Paese che non mi appartiene più e a cui sento di non più appartenere"). But had it ever been otherwise?

Montanelli was born in Fucecchio, Tuscany (Machiavelli's birthplace), on April 22, 1909. Named by his father, a grammar-school teacher and amateur student of Sanskrit, after Indra, the Vedic deity of thunder (with the final vowel altered to prevent confusion with a girl's name), he grew up in a middle-class environment where the secular ideals of the Risorgimento blended with the newer creeds of socialism and revolution.

Italy was engulfed in violence during the so-called Red Years (1919–21). Tuscany was home to a significant number of Fascist shock troops, the *squadristi*. One gleams a sense of the atmosphere when Marcello Staglieno recounts how children grew up playing at being Fascists and Communists; young Indro and his friends all wanted to wear blackshirts.

Montanelli had thought of becoming a diplomat. But after he had gained degrees in law and political science, Berto Ricci recruited him to write for his Florentine magazine, *Universale*, and he discovered that his true vocation lay in journalism. *Universale* was part of the so-called *fascismo di sinistra* which aimed to have Mussolini make good his promise to revolutionize society. Progressively disenchanted, as the regime aligned itself to reactionary interests and made peace with the Vatican, the journal cultivated a direct, caustic style that left a lasting imprint on Montanelli's writing.

By the mid-1930s, Montanelli was already reporting on international events. He travelled first to Paris where he worked briefly as a reporter for *Paris-Soir*, then to Canada and New York, under contract with United Press. When Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, he returned home, volunteered for service, and participated in the offensive against Addis Ababa in May 1936. His reputation as one of Italian journalism's rising stars was solidified that same year when the noted literary critic Ugo Ojetti heaped praise on a collection of his wartime dispatches.

The conquest of Ethiopia marked the apogee of Fascist popularity. But disillusioned by what he had seen of "imperial greatness", Montanelli decided to distance himself from the regime and its hangers-on, whom he disparaged as "gente dalla moralità elastica". Demobbed, Montanelli worked as a foreign correspondent for several Italian publications, including, eventually, Italy's leading daily, the *Corriere della*

ing the German occupation of Northern Italy, Montanelli was classified as an anti-Fascist, arrested and sentenced to death. But thanks to the intervention of the Cardinal of Milan, as well as to the enlightened self-interest of his jailers who were eager to cooperate with the winning side, he was allowed to escape to Switzerland in 1944.

Switzerland was teeming with Italian anti-Fascist refugees. However, the reception Montanelli received was anything but welcoming. These exiles were of a previous generation, which had opposed the rise of Fascism and been driven abroad during the 1920s. They had no idea of what it was like to grow up under Fascism and considered anyone who had compromised with it tarnished for life. When he returned to Italy, Montanelli discovered the same intransigent attitude among the new holders of power. "They wanted", he wrote, "to purge an entire generation – my generation – [which was] guilty of having been born during

an embarrassing time and having embraced a type of anti-Fascism different from theirs."

Returning to work at the *Corriere*, where he shared an office with Eugenio Montale, Montanelli's sharp reporting on foreign affairs soon established him as the paper's most read journalist. Ever the Stakhanovite, Montanelli even used his spare time to co-author a twenty-four-volume history of Italy, in addition to pro-

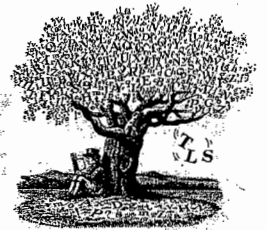
ducing seven volumes' worth of his *incontri* with the rich and famous.

Montanelli resigned from the *Corriere* in 1974 when he thought it had swung too far to the Left. That same year, he founded his own paper, *Il Giornale*, to defend middle-class values from the assaults of radical-chic intellectuals. In 1994, when Silvio Berlusconi, his main financial backer, entered the political arena and attempted to pressure the paper to back him, Montanelli, aged eighty-six, again jumped ship. He started up a new paper, *La Voce*, and when it folded after a year, returned to the *Corriere*, all the while inveighing against the marketing of sham democracy by a New Right without morals or memory. And so, much like Ignazio Silone, whom he honourably defended from charges of Fascist collaboration which surfaced in the late 1990s, Montanelli ended up becoming "a party of one", a *lupo solitario*, viewed with suspicion by Right and Left alike. A leitmotiv of Staglieno's very readable book is that, as a Tuscan, Montanelli was born with an innate compulsion *fare stecco al coro*, to sing off key.

Marcello Staglieno can be repetitive, and, since he doesn't always link important events to the dates on which they occurred, his *Montanelli* would have benefited from the inclusion of a summary chronology of events. That said, his account is highly informative. Unlike so many Anglo-American biographers he does not weigh the reader down with minutiae. Most welcome of all, he focuses on his subject's public *prises de position*, thereby leaving most of Montanelli's private life properly private.

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