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Christopher Seton-Watson, the Second World War and Italian liberalism

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Dunkirk–Alamein–Bologna: Letters and diaries of an artilleryman 1939–1945 (1994) is based on the letters written by Christopher Seton Watson while on active duty as an officer in the Royal Horse Artillery in the Second World War. In this essay, the correspondence provides a platform for exploring first how CSW's wartime experiences coloured his views on Italy and Italian politics, and then the ways in which those views had developed and changed by the time he published his major study of the crisis of Italian liberalism (*Italy from liberalism to fascism 1870–1925* (1967).

Keywords: Christopher Seton-Watson; Second World War; liberalism; Fascism; historiography

Although Christopher Seton-Watson (hereafter CSW) was well into his retirement when *Dunkirk–Alamein–Bologna: Letters and diaries of an artilleryman 1939–1945* (1994, hereafter *DAB*) was published, the letters on which it is based were written during the war and hence 20 years before his major study of the crisis of Italian liberalism, *Italy from liberalism to fascism 1870–1925* (1967, hereafter *ILF*). While the two books are, of course, very different in form and purpose, there are nonetheless many points of connection between them. Since this issue of *Modern Italy* is dedicated to the commemoration of CSW's contribution to the study of modern Italy, it seems an appropriate opportunity to draw attention to what I suspect may still be the least well known of his writings, not least because they throw interesting light on the evolution of CSW's views on modern Italian history and politics.

First, however, *DAB* deserves to be considered in its own right and not simply as a precursor of later studies. CSW's war service began when he enlisted in the Royal Horse Artillery in September 1939 while he was still a student at Oxford. He saw action in northern France and Belgium, before being evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk in May 1940. Five months later he and his regiment sailed to Egypt, before being sent to Greece in March 1941 where CSW won the Military Cross and found himself caught up in another major retreat. After a spell back in Cairo, by the autumn of 1941 he and his battery were fighting in the Western Desert. After Rommel forced the Allied forces to fall back from Tobruk in June 1942, he experienced another major and chaotic retreat from

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which he escaped only narrowly with his life when the tank in which he was travelling received a direct hit: badly wounded, he was the only survivor.

After two months' convalescence in Cairo, CSW was back in the line in time for Montgomery's victory at Alamein. He remained in North Africa until after the final surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia in May 1943, but he was not involved in the Sicilian landings or the first part of the Italian campaign. Instead he returned home to England in December on his first home leave since 1940, and then went to Italy in March 1944 where he took up command of his battery which was now stationed between Naples and Benevento. The battles to break German resistance along the 'Winter Line' and open the road to Rome were well under way, and in early April the battery moved into the line near Cassino where it was soon involved in heavy fighting. When at the end of May the Allied forces at Anzio were finally able to break out from the beach-head and the Germans abandoned Rome, CSW's battery was among the units that pursued the retreating enemy along an itinerary that took the regiment from Rome to Farfa, then Narni, Todi and Perugia – each the theatre of major battles.

From Perugia the Allied advance swung towards Arezzo, where the targets of CSW's battery were the heavily defended German positions on the high ground that dominated the main highway (Route 71) that links Arezzo to Florence along the Arno valley. This beautiful landscape of hills, woods and mountains offered the retreating Germans ideal defensive positions over which seemingly endless battles were fought and often re-fought. But by the end of August the regiment had reached the outskirts of Florence where, on what he called the 'worst day of my life', CSW and his men found themselves trapped on an open hillside with no cover from enemy guns: he had another lucky escape when a shell that fell on his slit trench failed to explode.

Without entering Florence, the battery now moved eastwards to Ancona on the Adriatic coast to join the forces that were being massed for the autumn assault on the eastern flank of the Gothic Line – the system of German defences from Rimini to Pisa whose purpose was to prevent the Allies reaching the Po Valley. The offensive met with some initial success, but CSW's men and fellow officers were sceptical when the commander of the Eighth Army, General Oliver Leese, predicted that they would be in Vienna by Christmas. In fact, the 'gallop to Vienna' degenerated into another slow and agonizing series of battles for every piece of high ground, river crossing and highway. Even when the long, cold winter of 1944–1945 finally ended, progress continued to be very slow down to the final weeks of the war when at the end of April the Polish division of the Fifth Army finally entered Bologna.

Shortly afterwards came the news that Milan had been liberated and Mussolini was dead. The war in Italy was finally over and soon afterwards the Allies were in Berlin. CSW could not hide his disappointment. For the final months of the war his regiment had been in what he called a backwater and his hopes of following the victorious Allies onto German soil were dashed. Nonetheless, he was heartily thankful that his war was now over.

The war formed part of the formative experience of an entire generation, but CSW's war was distinctive in a number of ways. The first was the length and continuity of his active service. With only two bouts of home leave, between September 1939 and May 1945 he took part in four campaigns (France, Greece, the Western Desert, Italy), three major retreats (Dunkirk, Greece, Tobruk) and served in the front line from Cassino to the final German surrender without a break other than a rest posting of six weeks near Ancona in

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January–February 1945. In his Introduction to *DAB*, the distinguished military historian, Michael Howard – who also served in the Italian campaign and played a major part in encouraging CSW to publish his book – comments that 'statistically his chances of surviving those six years with a whole skin must have been very small' (CSW 1994, 11).

But there are other features that distinguish *DAB* from the umpteen accounts of the Italian campaign and the battles fought in Italy. The book offers no general description of the campaign as a whole, but only those parts of it which the author experienced at first hand. Consisting of letters written at the time and some extracts from his war diaries, it is not an after-the-event reconstruction like Eric Newby's *Love and war in the Apennines* (1971), Norman Lewis's *Naples '44* (1978), Stuart Hood's *Carlino* (originally entitled *Pebbles from my skull)* (1963), or the still largely neglected masterpiece by the American John Horne Burns, *The gallery* (1947). These authors were all in Italy, but their war experiences were very different: Newby and Hood were escaped POWs, Lewis served in the Field Security Service while Burns was an intelligence officer whose job included censoring letters from POWs. Newby and Lewis wrote long after the event and all were more concerned with literary effect than factual truths.[1]

Nor was CSW the only wartime soldier whose experiences subsequently led him to take a professional interest in Italy's history. John Day (1987) saw active service and subsequently became a distinguished historian of early modern Italy.[2] Both Michael Howard and E.P. Thompson served in Italy and subsequently became distinguished historians, but not of Italy. The war gave many others who later became well-known postwar historians their first encounters with Italy. Even an approximate list would include amongst them the political scientist Norman Kogan and Charles Delzell who wrote the first Anglophone history of the anti-fascist resistance and had previously held a senior position in the US military administration in Bari in 1943–1944.[3] Maurice Neufeld, the author of a number of studies on the history of the Italian labour movement, had been an assistant to Charles Poletti, the former governor of New York who was the head of AMGOT (Allied Military Administration in Occupied Territories) first in Sicily and then in Rome (Neufeld 1961). H. Stuart Hughes served in US military intelligence in Italy where he acted as a liaison officer with the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) and the British SOE (Special Operations Executive, Hughes 1953). But although these men all subsequently wrote about Italian history and politics, none of them wrote – or at least published – accounts of their war experiences.

Nor can *DAB* be compared with later historical accounts based on personal reminiscences like F.W. Deakin's *The embattled mountain* (1971) or Fitzroy Maclean's *Eastern approaches* (1949).[4] Both are magnificent memoirs, but they were written long after the event and take their personal experience as a starting point for more elaborate and documented historical reconstructions.[5] *DAB*, by contrast, is not a memoir. It was written at the time and consists of the letters CSW wrote to his parents in England, supplemented with occasional extracts from his diaries. This gives the book a feel quite different from a memoir. The correspondence retains a remarkable freshness, evoking a vivid sense of time and place and even suspense since the outcome of the events described in the letters was in most cases unknown at the time they were written. But perhaps their most distinctive and appealing feature derives from the fact that the letters were not written for a general public but exclusively for the eyes of CSW's parents and his immediate family. They have, as a result, an informal and unguarded tone that draws the reader into an extended family conversation.

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This was no ordinary family. CSW's father – R.W. Seton-Watson (1879–1951) – had since before the First World War been acknowledged as one of the foremost authorities on Eastern Europe. In addition to his many publications on Austria-Hungary and its successor states, Robert Seton-Watson had acted as a special adviser at the Paris peace conference after the war and in the 1930s his outspoken denunciations of appeasement – *Britain and the dictators* (May 1938): *Munich and the dictators* (March 1939) – had won him many powerful enemies. However, he was considered as both a hero and a powerful advocate in many of the Habsburg successor states. He was a close friend of the Czechoslovak prime minister Thomas Masaryk, and of Edvard Beneš who would later lead the Czechoslovak Government in exile in England during the war before serving briefly as the first prime minister of the postwar Czechoslovak Republic.[6]

The DNB entry on CSW's father comments on 'the atmosphere of genteel erudition at the Seton-Watson house', to which his mother, Marion Esther (May) Stack contributed in no small part (CSW 1994). The couple had three children: (George) Hugh Nicholas (born in 1916), CSW (born in 1918) and Elizabeth May Rosalie. All three were deeply influenced by their father's writings, his interest in the former Habsburg monarchy and its successor states and his progressive liberal sympathies. CSW was particularly close to his older brother Hugh, who, when war with Germany began was attached to the British Legation in Belgrade and Bucharest. Following the coup against Prince Paul, the Yugoslav Regent, in March 1941 and the German invasion, Hugh was briefly interned but later repatriated and flown to Cairo where CSW was stationed at that time. Their meeting is described in one of CSW's letters. Hugh remained in Cairo until 1944 where he was attached to GHQ Middle East with responsibility for Special Forces Units: during that time he used a spell of leave in Cape Town to write, without access to reference libraries, a study of European politics in Eastern Europe between the wars.[7]

The family debates about national and world politics continue through the letters that CSW wrote while he was on active service. These did not deal just or even primarily with politics and in them he frequently confided his most personal feelings, especially the sense of helplessness and black depression that overtook him when men under his command came to harm. But there is also a great deal of information about more general aspects of the different campaigns and of day-to-day events that will catch the eyes of historians of the war and the Italian campaign in particular.

Shortly after rejoining his regiment in Italy in March 1941, for example, CSW described his first encounter with Naples. He gave a memorable description of the scale of the destruction caused by Allied bombing around the port and its surrounding neighbourhoods: 'I had seen nothing like this until I arrived in this country . . . rubble and dust extend over acres, it's not a pretty sight' (CSW 1994, 190). But he was also astonished to find that many parts of the city were not only untouched by the devastation, but positively humming with life and jam-packed with people and shops. Despite the best efforts of AMGOT (Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories) – which CSW was generally quick to defend (CSW 1994, 190) – the black market was booming and commodities that had been absent in Cairo and because of rationing were by now in very short supply back in England too were to be found in abundance in Naples, as he had discovered during his recent leave. The San Carlo opera was in full swing and he recounts an evening spent with three fellow officers enjoying a performance of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, with the opportunity in the interval to wolf down cream cakes and chocolates: 'such cakes as London hasn't seen for many a month and only Messrs Groppi of Cairo

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could surpass' (CSW 1994, 194). But in Naples he also encountered disparities that would become a frequent theme of these letters: the appalling contrast between the situation of the rich and the poor, between those who had profited from the war and those who suffered from it. In Naples, he noted, there were restaurants where 'one can get as good a meal as anywhere in London and Cairo. Yet in the next street there are people starving.'[8]

These reactions became more sharp and angry when later in the year he made his first visit to recently liberated Rome. After the battery had been stationed north of Ancona in November 1944 he took a few days' leave for a sight-seeing trip to the capital to visit the opera, go shopping and enjoy good food, relaxation and the luxury of the comforts of life in a hotel. When he first saw the city he was astonished that there was so little visible sign of damage. Rome had, of course, been the target of only limited Allied bombing raids,[9] but CSW was struck less by the absence of extensive visible damage than by the discovery that the shops were crammed with luxury goods, the restaurants were full, the women were extremely well and expensively dressed and the cinemas were packed. These sights of luxury and conspicuous consumption led him to speculate on 'how little the Italians put their hearts into the war, if right up to 1943 they were producing luxury goods which disappeared in London soon after Dunkirk' (CSW 1994, 252–54).

His sightseeing included visits to the Vatican museum, where he was disappointed to discover that most of the treasures had been stowed away for safe-keeping. He also went to the Palazzo Venezia, where the Army Welfare Services had mounted an exhibition of Mussolini's effects and artworks, and he was astonished by the splendour of the collection of Titians, Tintorettos and Bellinis that had been collected from all over Italy to furnish the Duce's offices and apartments. He made three visits to the opera and enjoyed some excellent meals – but not without feelings of unease. In part this was because eating in black market restaurants was strictly forbidden and if caught he risked serious consequences – even court martial. That risk does not seem to have been especially high, but in any case he had a greater cause for concern: 'It made my blood boil in some of those restaurants to see young Italian men and women well-groomed and well-nourished eating the most luxurious dishes when within a few hundred yards of them ragged children were subsisting on roast chestnuts and a meagre bread ration supplemented by a few oranges. These sleek young men had not lifted a finger to help their country to fight the English nor the Germans' (CSW 1994, 254).

As he walked around the city, his sense that all was far from normal heightened. He saw notices in the street announcing that electricity consumption was to be halved. There were virtually no trams, no taxis, no private cars and although there were abundant luxury goods for sale (whose authenticity CSW did wonder about), he noticed an almost total absence of day-to-day necessities. Conditions in the working-class districts of the city must have been far from good, he concluded. His anger with those who had grown rich under Mussolini was rekindled, and he expressed his disgust with their 'snobbism', their indifference and contempt for the lower classes and especially for those who were referred to as the 'Africans of southern Italy'. But his greatest fear was that these same people would know how to ingratiate themselves with AMGOT officials and that once they had succeeded in making themselves charming to 'young Guards or Cavalry officers' they would start to complain about 'all the good British tanks and machine-guns that had been sent to Russia or to that bandit Tito' (CSW 1994, 254).

The connection between Fascism and a class of unscrupulous and exploitative parasites who had grown fat and rich under the regime recurs frequently in the letters and was one

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of the main reasons that CSW had little optimism about how Italy would fare once the war was over: 'I see little future for this impoverished and demoralized and divided country. But I do pray that whoever comes to power will liquidate the parasites who grew rich under Fascism and now look to protect their ill-gotten gains from the wrath of their own countrymen. There is a tirade for you!' (CSW 1994, 254).

Many of the comments about Italians reflect the time and circumstances in which these letters were written, but if CSW's views on the military capacity of the Italians were far from flattering, they were rather less slighting than those expressed by his men and fellow officers who could not find printable language to describe their recent foe now turned ally. His assessment of the partisans, with whom he came into contact increasingly frequently as the Allies advanced along the Apennine chain into central Italy, was cautious, but not ungenerous. In military terms he considered their contribution limited, even minimal, but he acknowledged that the information and advice they supplied invariably proved to be accurate. Nor did he have any doubt that the horrifying cruelty and the atrocities against civilians committed by the retreating German troops were the main reason for the high numbers of partisans. The horribly mutilated bodies of civilians that were constantly discovered in places recently abandoned by the enemy explained why 'the methods used by the partisans did not have much resemblance to those laid down by the Geneva conventions' (CSW 1994, 219).

Like many others who served in the Italian campaigns, CSW was moved above all by the poverty and stoicism of the peasants. He frequently and admiringly commented on their dignity in the face of the hardships and sufferings of which he had first-hand experience since he and his men moved from one peasant farmhouse to another as they pursued the enemy. An incident that took place in Bari in October 1944 – which he recounted in full to his parents – suggests that his good opinion of the Italian civilian population was not widely shared among his fellow officers, although he was afraid to express his views. Bari at that time was the principal base for SOE operations and for contacts with Tito's forces in Yugoslavia, and CSW had made the journey in the hope of meeting his brother. As it turned out, Hugh had returned to Cairo before he arrived, making the trip a waste of time. To make matters worse he found himself increasingly irritated by the views and opinions of the people he met. Bari was far from the front line, and the military personnel there seemed to have little comprehension of what things were really like in the battle zones. When he heard an RAF squadron leader (an administrator and 'not a pilot') holding forth that Italians were all 'thieves and scoundrels, no better than Arabs, never having lifted a finger to help the Allied cause', CSW could not remain silent. 'I told him that he ought to visit the front line for a fortnight before making wild generalisations about the Italians. He was furious and I was a bit ashamed of myself afterwards' (CSW 1994, 245).

The letters give a clear indication of his interest in political developments in Italy and where his own political sympathies lay. In the first letter from Italy he commented that although his spoken Italian was still very limited, he had found many Italians who spoke English. From the earlier letters, we know that while he had been in Cairo he had worked intensively on his Italian and read the local Italian newspapers regularly. He was well informed about pre-war Italian politics, for example telling his parents of his amazement to find an article by one of the men who had assassinated Giacomo Matteotti published in the Cairo *Corriere d'Italia* (CSW 1994, 88).

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Once in Italy, whenever the occasion arose he took the opportunity to read local Italian newspapers and was keenly interested in deciphering the political orientation of the local populations. Without declaring open support, he made no secret of the fact that his sympathies lay with the Communists. He noted with evident satisfaction, for example, that in all the villages around Naples the walls were covered with the sign of the hammer and sickle, and the most prominent slogans was 'Abasso il Re'. His favourite was 'Se volete pane, cacciate il re', but he also enjoyed the first one he saw after landing: 'VV Churchill Roosevelt Stalin, Tito' (CSW 1994, 192).

Again and again he vented his ire at the Fascists, noting as he made his way up the Tiber valley towards Narni in mid-June that they were easy to identify since theirs were the only houses that the retreating Germans had not ransacked before leaving. Their large and ostentatious properties left no doubt about where the Fascists stood in the social order, and that knowledge eased CSW's conscience about using their houses as billets. Nor could he conceal his delight when his unit entered the little town of Orticoli (near Perugia) to discover that virtually every house carried a freshly printed poster declaring 'VV gli alleati, VV gli Stati Uniti, VV gli inglesi' but also 'big praise too for the Red Army' (CSW 1994, 221).

CSW's admiration for Russia, for Uncle Joe and Tito was not new and the tone of his letters suggest that it was fully shared by his family – and, indeed, at that time more widely. When in Cairo he had given lectures on the war situation to the men of his battery under the watchful but not disapproving eye of his Colonel, he had insisted that the Red Army was the key to defeating Hitler. When news of the Normandy landings reached him in Italy in June 1944, he at once wrote to his parents that the beneficiaries would be Tito and Russia. He also believed that after the invasion of France the main reason for continuing the campaign in Italy was to force Hitler to divert more divisions to the peninsula – 'which will directly help the second front or Tito or the Russians or all of them' – or else cause the Germans to risk losing the whole peninsula (CSW 1994, 212).

Similar views emerge in his accounts of contacts with units from other countries that formed the United Nations (i.e. the wartime allies). At different points in the campaign CSW's regiment came under a number of different allied commands, and his letters as a result include many asides on relations between the wartime allies. When the regiment first moved into the line at Cassino, it was initially under the command of the 8th Indian Division but when in May it was transferred to the French Expeditionary Force CSW was appointed artillery liaison officer with the First French Infantry Division that was stationed immediately to the left of his battery. The regiment remained under the French command during the fiercest part of the final battle in the Cassino sector, in which the success of the French in gaining command of the Aurunci mountains – generally considered to be impassable – played a critical role in finally breaking German control of the Liri valley and opening the road to Rome.

CSW was fulsome in his praise of the French forces, the youth and *élan* of their officers and generals, and their sheer toughness. The Division was one of the original Free French divisions that had fought at Bir Hakeim, but although they had been re-equipped with American weaponry they were profoundly hostile to the Americans because of lingering resentments over the Darlan affair and their opposition to American plans for post-war Europe (CSW 1994, 202). CSW was clearly impressed by the military intelligence reports that indicated that the Germans had a particular fear of the French and great respect for their speed and effectiveness, qualities they did not ascribe to either the British or

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the Americans. 'The way those Frenchmen scaled precipitous mountains and fought on and marched on in spite of the complete inability of their supplies to keep up with them was really inspiring' (CSW 1994, 202).

The fear that the French inspired among the enemy was enhanced by the presence of French colonial troops, including brigades of Senegalese and Algerian infantry and the Moroccan *Goumiers*. Writing on 14 May, just after the French had taken the Aurunci ridge, CSW included in his letter a report that a Senegalese soldier who had fallen into the hands of the Germans had been decapitated. In retaliation, the Senegalese cut off the heads of some 50 German prisoners. When shortly afterwards he met the French general in command, CSW asked whether the story was true. To which the general responded: 'You English you are all too soft, you forgive too much, but of course you haven't suffered.' 'And', CSW added, 'no doubt they are right'. However, there is no reference to the notorious cases of mass rape in the same sector after the fall of Cassino, allegedly carried out by the Moroccan *Goumiers*. These atrocities attracted wide attention at the time (not least because of their scale), and were later described in luridly sensational terms by Norman Lewis (in *Naples '44*). But the incidents were not mentioned in CSW's letters, perhaps for reasons of delicacy or perhaps more simply because by the time these events came to light his regiment had moved forward and ended its links with the French command.[10]

The next close encounter with a foreign ally came in the closing months of the war when in March 1945 the regiment was placed under the command of the 5th Polish Kresova Division. At that time the battery was stationed in the foothills near Forlì waiting for the final push into the Po Valley, and under the new command it was also now responsible for providing artillery cover for two Italian infantry and an artillery regiment known as the Friuli Group that had joined the Allies to fight the Germans and their Fascist Italian comrades.[11] Reactions against serving alongside the Italians were quite strong in the regiment (CSW wrote 'unprintable'), and matters were not improved by the knowledge that many of the Italians had been fighting on the enemy side in the Western Desert. But the Italians proved to be very charming and relations became amicable, if wary. CSW conceded that 'the rank and file were brave fighters and had a great hatred for the Germans and wanted to finish off the war and liberate the rest of the country'. Like his fellow British officers he agreed that the training of the Italians was very poor, but the junior officers 'were the worst' (CSW 1994, 265).

The great ambition of the Italian regiments was to do battle with the Fascist Barbarigo battalion stationed on the other side of the Senio River, but that encounter never took place (CSW 1994, 268). The only other reference in the letters to supporters of the deposed dictator (who was now head of the Nazi puppet state – the Italian Social Republic – based at Salò on Lake Garda) came in the previous November when CSW suspected that Fascists were behind the appearance of posters under the signature 'Nembo' threatening public humiliation for girls and women who accepted invitations to attend the social functions that were regularly organised by the liberating forces. As a result it proved very difficult to persuade local girls to come to the company dances, and those that did were carefully surrounded by elderly female chaperones with voracious appetites. After devouring whatever food was provided they would whisk their charges off home, so bringing everything to a premature halt. Although there was no proof, CSW was pretty sure that 'Nembo' originated from the families of the crews of the Italy Navy Torpedo

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units that were based in the town of Senigallia who were famed for their devotion to the Fascist regime (CSW 1994, 250).

It was in his contact with the Poles, however, that CSW's sympathies with Russia and Uncle Joe became most explicit. The Poles had been companions in arms throughout the campaign and had played major and often heroic roles in the battles along the Winter Line and at Cassino. But when CSW's regiment was placed under Polish command in March 1945 and then in April under the command of the Polish Armoured Brigade they found themselves in very close contact. Initially relations were strained by the fact that almost immediately after the new command structure began the Brigade went into action to secure the Medicina Canal along the road from Rimini to Bologna. The shortage of translators made it impossible for the Polish and British officers to communicate, causing considerable chaos. But CSW was soon as deeply impressed by the Polish soldiers and officers as he had been by the French, with whom they had much in common. As with the French, he felt that their deep hatred of the Germans justified their willingness to use extreme measures. In revenge for the killing of a Polish infantry officer, for example, the Polish Divisional commander gave the order that no more German prisoners were to be taken except for interrogation, after which they were to be shot. Although CSW was taken aback by the openness of the order, he acknowledged that the Poles' 'hatred of Germany was indeed so deep and bitter that they could not easily express it in words' (CSW 1994, 273).

Nonetheless, he was concerned about the ways the Poles interfered in internal Italian affairs, and in particular their fierce hostility to the Communists. As they entered each liberated town and village, the Poles immediately removed the hammer and sickle graffiti, tore down posters put up by Italian Communists and anything else that praised the Red Army. There were even armed clashes with groups carrying Communist insignia – resulting, for example, in the killing of two Cypriot muleteers near Faenza. While CSW expressed his great sympathy for the Polish soldiers and admired them for their bravery and the sacrifices they had made in the Italian campaign, he felt that 'their hatred of the Russians is beyond reasoning' (CSW 1994, 276). That opinion was confirmed again at the end of April when he was a guest at a dinner hosted by the Polish Armoured Brigade. During the evening news arrived that Mussolini's body had been hung up in the Piazzale Loreto in Milan. It was not this but the news that in San Francisco Eden and Stettinius had broken off negations with Molotov on the Polish Question that had the Poles cheering.[12]

CSW thought the Polish hatred of the Russians was exaggerated, yet he remained uncertain about how the Polish question could be resolved. In a letter written in January 1945 to his sister, who was about to join the staff of the British embassy in Moscow, he told her that he had recently spent an evening with a group of Polish officers. Despite his efforts to keep off politics (he knew that they would never agree with his views and he did not want to upset them) they had spent the whole evening discussing the Polish question, leaving him wondering how a solution could be found and 'how the world will look from Moscow' (CSW 1994, 256).

CSW's answer to that question can be found in *Italy from liberalism to fascism* (hereafter *ILF*), which appeared 20 years after he had left the army to return to Oxford where he had taken up the life of college don and lecturer in political science. When it was first published in 1967, *ILF* was widely greeted as the first detailed study in English of the crisis of Italian liberalism and the origins of Mussolini's dictatorship. In the decades that

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followed, so much would be written on these subjects that it is easy to forget the extent to which, at the time when it appeared, *ILF* was in many respects a path-breaking and original analysis. But it also reveals how the views of the CSW of *ILF* differed from those of the young regimental officer whose letters appeared in *DAB*.

The most obvious difference was, of course, his loss of faith in Soviet communism. If that was again the experience of a whole generation, it was one that CSW and his family had experienced in very personal and direct terms. The Soviet takeover of the Eastern European states came as a deep and personal blow to them all. CSW's father had been one of the leading champions of the inter-war Habsburg successor states in Central and Eastern Europe, many of whose leaders had been familiar visitors to the family home. He had been an especially close friend to the father of Jan Masaryk, the causes of whose death in March 1948 are still debated, and of Edvard Beneš, the post-war leader of the Czechoslovak Republic who was ousted by pro-Stalinist factions and soon after died of natural causes.

These events were followed at first hand by Hugh Seton-Watson, who in 1945 and 1946 was filing reports from Eastern Europe for *The Times* and *The Economist*. In the light of these events, Hugh's own previously pro-Russian sympathies rapidly gave way to the conviction that Communist Russia represented the biggest threat to Europe and world peace. CSW's views followed a similar trajectory and both brothers came to question many of the opinions they had formerly shared with their father.[13]

In CSW's case, this shift found expression in *ILF*. In the preface, he told his readers that the book's origins went back to the autumn of 1943 when he had purchased a copy of Cecil Sprigge's *Development of modern Italy* from Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford before leaving to rejoin his regiment in Italy in March 1944. Sprigge's book travelled with him from Cassino to Bologna during the final 15 months of the Italian campaign, although he confessed that he had not found it very helpful in explaining the connections between pre-fascist Italy and the 'prostrate and devastated Italy that confronted the wartime British soldier' (CSW 1967, ix).

This was the central issue that he addressed in the book that he carefully insisted was a 'political' history. It focused on the two themes that had most engaged the Seton-Watson brothers since the end of the war: the relationship between liberalism and nationalism, and the politics of the Left since the Russian revolution. For CSW, Italian Fascism underlined the doubts that now attached to the assumption that had been central to his father's work on Austria-Hungary – that liberalism and nationalism were natural allies and that the force of nationalism was therefore progressive.[14] Both the success of the inter-war dictators and his own encounters with Mussolini's Italy had forced him to reconsider those beliefs, while in Italy he had found a major but still largely uncharted historical case for reconsidering the relationship between liberalism and nationalism.

English historians – foremost G.M. Trevelyan – had been amongst the most effusive admirers of the liberal values that they believed had inspired the nineteenth-century struggles for Italian unification. But their glorification of the Risorgimento had left them ill-equipped to explain the crisis of Italian liberalism after the Great War and the rise of Fascism. In *Italy: A modern history* (1958), Denis Mack Smith had already – in the words of A.J.P. Taylor – turned Trevelyan's Risorgimento on its head. For Mack Smith, the origins of Mussolini's Fascism derived not from a failure of Italian liberalism but rather from the failure of the Risorgimento to establish stable government grounded in liberal

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principles. Italian Fascism, in other words, was the result not of a crisis of liberalism but of the illiberal outcome of the Risorgimento.

While Italian liberalism had found its defenders after the fall of Fascism, British and American critics were not deeply impressed by Benedetto Croce's claims that Fascism was best understood as an irrational 'parenthesis' in Italian history. In *ILF*, however, CSW adopted a position that differed both from those who claimed that Italian liberalism had no responsibility for the rise of Fascism and those like Mack Smith who questioned whether Italy had ever been liberal in the first place. Events since the war had shattered CSW's earlier admiration for the Left, but they had left his respect for liberal values in general and for Italian liberalism in particular unshaken. He did not accept Mack Smith's premise that Italian liberalism was born with inherent flaws that made its later demise a death foretold. Indeed, he did not hide his admiration for Cavour's moderate liberalism, or for what he considered to be the progress achieved under Giovanni Giolitti before the First World War.

As critics noted at the time, in his assessment of the strength of Italian liberalism CSW carefully avoided invoking abstract models or comparisons. Instead, the study measures Italy's political development after Unification within the specific contexts and constraints imposed by the new state's relative poverty and its dangerously subordinate and exposed position within the prevailing system of Great Power diplomacy. The two, he insisted, were closely interrelated. Because the country's subordinate role in European politics reflected its poverty and military weakness, the foreign policies pursued by successive Italian governments after Unification were not simply a means for defending perceived national interests but above all for safeguarding the country's newly won integrity and hence survival.

Italy's dangerously subordinate and exposed international situation, CSW argued, gave rise to the tensions and contradictions that he believed had posed the most serious threats to liberal values. Even after its 'international servitude' was over, Italy continued to be treated as an 'intruder' by France and Austria-Hungary, its resentful and powerful neighbours. As a result, the pragmatic pursuit of Italy's vital strategic interests too often disappointed the aspirations of those who had expected Unification to bring national greatness, giving rise to a sense of disappointment and frustration that exacerbated the nationalist aspirations that he identified as the most serious threats to Italian liberalism (CSW 1967, 29–37). If Crispi had clearly revealed the dangers inherent in following those aspirations, CSW nonetheless believed that Giolitti had shown that it had still been possible to return to a path of liberal reform and progress before the Great War.

Although he did blame the revolutionary Left for a lack of patience and a sense of political reality, CSW saw a much graver threat to Italian liberalism in the pre-war nationalist Right. Despite the disillusionment that had ended his wartime sympathies with communism, he was willing to defend the progressive features of the pre-war Italian socialist and labour movements. When it came to the post-war crisis, however, CSW was more critical of the Left – and specifically because of what he considered to be the disastrous impact of the myth of the Russian revolution on the revolutionary Left in Italy. But he still held back from blaming the revolutionary Socialists for the collapse of Italian liberalism. The maximalist programme of the Socialist Party had failed totally by the summer of 1920, he argued, in other words before the Fascist threat became a serious menace. What changed the situation and brought about the success of Mussolini's followers and the collapse of the Liberal state was the support that Fascist violence now

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received from the landowners and factory masters. Exploiting the deep divisions within the other political parties, the tensions between the Vatican and the new Popular Party, the vacillations and weaknesses of the king, and the failure of state institutions to check them, the Fascists were able to take political violence to the extreme: in the words of the Socialist leader Filippo Turati, the contest between the Left and the Fascists had become a 'war of words against a war of blood' (CSW 1967, 560).

For CSW, the crisis of 1922 was not brought about by the failure of a system, but by the misjudgements and political miscalculations of individuals. Because they failed to understand the seriousness of the Fascist threat, liberal politicians were overwhelmed by it. It was only when he turned to the events in which he had been personally involved that his disillusionment with the Left became more pronounced. He registered his disappointment that after the defeat of Germany the Resistance had failed to carry through that Second Risorgimento to which the Action Party and its leaders aspired, and he believed that the fall of Feruccio Parri's government after only five months in government made it inevitable that the transition from Fascism to the new Republic would occur with only minimal change. The very people who had so filled CSW with disgust when he encountered them in Naples, Rome and Bari during the war – those who had made careers and fortunes under Mussolini – stayed on too, and the politicians who returned from exile 'had to accept as colleagues men who had never opposed Fascism. The old Italy once again showed its power of survival' (CSW 1967, 709).

For this, he now held the Left and its subservience to Moscow largely responsible. 'The Italian Left was as mesmerized and divided as the previous socialist generation under the impact of the Russian revolution. After their ejection from power in 1948, the Communists set out systematically to undermine democratic institutions' (CSW 1967, 711). The Communists – who with the Socialists commanded a third of the electorate – perpetuated the separation of the masses from the Italian state, while their extremism provided the monarchists and neo-Fascists with an unjustified new lease of life. 'For almost a decade Italian democracy was in great danger' (CSW 1967, 711).

The weakness of the Left also heightened the danger of what many liberals feared would be the consequence once the Lateran Accords had been incorporated fully into the constitution of the new Republic: 'without a king in the Quirinal the Vatican had resumed its ancient sway in Rome' (CSW 1967, 710). If that did not happen, the credit – CSW argued – went to De Gasperi who had proved to be a 'democrat and not a clerical reactionary'. Indeed, by shifting the axis of Italian politics back toward the Centre, De Gasperi had in CSW's view become the post-war successor of Cavour and the Cavourian *connubio* (CSW 1967, 714).

Looking more generally at what had been accomplished in Italy two decades after the end of the war, CSW took heart from the fact that the death of Stalin had made it possible for the Socialists to move to the Right, while the pontificate of John XXIII had consolidated the Christian Democrats' move to the Left. The worst of Italy's post-war dangers were over, he concluded. Taking a longer perspective, CSW reasserted his belief in the soundness of Risorgimento liberalism and the underlying solidity of the Liberal state that had emerged from the Risorgimento. He insisted that the Liberal state had shown a capacity for overcoming massive challenges, many of which derived from the country's poverty and its geo-political insecurity. Some of these challenges had been caused by 'generations of impatient democrats and perfectionists' (CSW 1967, 713). He was still in no doubt that those primarily responsible for the success of the Fascists had been

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'the multifarious enemies of liberalism', yet he remained convinced that Italy's liberal foundation had been strong enough to survive the hurricane of Fascism and in the post-war decades had succeeded in sustaining the 'new democratic superstructure of De Gasperi and his successors. The makers of Italy had built well' (CSW 1967, 713).

It was this staunch defence of Italian liberalism – and liberal values in general – that won *ILF* high acclaim when it first appeared.[15] Anglophone reviewers hailed it as the first closely documented study that asserted the achievements of Italian liberalism without invoking the abstract principles of Benedetto Croce and the Italian liberal historians. CSW's treatment was praised for its clarity, impartiality, lack of ideological partisanship and not least for the remarkable command of Italian sources and historiography on which it was grounded. *ILF* was not, and made no pretence to be, a history of Italian Fascism, and in any case it has to be remembered that it appeared as the post-war study of the Fascism was only just beginning and before the publication of the second volume of Renzo de Felice's biography of Mussolini (1965) and Roberto Vivarelli's study of the post-war crisis (1967). Indeed, one of its perhaps unintended consequences was to direct a younger generation of young British historians towards the study of Fascism.

Above all *ILF* was an attempt to answer the questions about liberalism and nationalism with which the war had confronted CSW and for which Cecil Sprigge's slim history offered (not surprisingly) few if any answers. Referring explicitly in his conclusion to the recent celebrations of the first centenary of the Italian state, CSW concluded that it was thanks to the strength of the values and institutions of nineteenth-century liberalism that Italy had survived Fascism and the Second World War and found its way back on the path of liberal, democratic politics. Even those who would question those conclusions would probably acknowledge that they serve to focus attention on modern Italy's remarkable institutional resilience – a resilience that is no more easily explained today, half a century later and at a moment when Italians ponder with great uncertainty how to acknowledge the 150th anniversary of the founding of their state.

Notes

1. On Burns see Vidal (1972) and Gatt Rutter (1997).
2. See also Day and Day (1997).
3. Kogan (1956, 1966); Delzell (1961).
4. Deakin (1962, 1971); MacLean (1949).
5. Another example would be Richard Lamb who served in the Eighth Army in Italy in 1944–1945 and was a liaison officer attached to the Italian royalist regiments that fought against the Germans. See Lamb (1994).
6. Hanak, Harry. R.H. Seton-Watson. In *Dictionary of National Biography*.
7. Hanak, Harry. R.H. Seton-Watson. In *Dictionary of National Biography*.
8. CSW (1994, 193). For other contemporary accounts see Lewis (1978), Burns (1947) and Gatt Rutter (1997).
9. Although civilian casualties had nonetheless been high. See Gentiloni Silveri (2007).
10. Lewis (1978, 143–44). Outside Italy the incident is best known through Alberto Moravia's novel *La Ciociara*, which was subsequently the basis for Vittorio de Sica's 1960 film *Two Women* starring Sofia Loren. There is no agreement over the figures but it is claimed that between 12,000 and 60,000 women (the *Marrochinate*) were raped in the period immediately after the battle of Cassino. In response, the French authorities made some small financial compensation to the victims whose desperate plight – many of the survivors were suffering from crippling venereal diseases – was taken up in the Constituent Assembly in 1946 and then twice raised in

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the Italian Parliament (April 7–8, 1952). Despite repeated demands there was no public inquiry. See also Blimberg (1999).
11. The Friuli Group was formed from units of the Italian Army that volunteered to fight for the king after the armistice of September 8, 1943: the group was in action against the Germans in the assault on the Gothic Line. See Lamb (1994, 176–201).
12. CSW 1994, 276. Curiously CSW does not mention the Poles' reactions to the division of Poland agreed shortly before by the Allied leaders at Yalta.
13. See Seton-Watson and Seton-Watson (1981).
14. See *DNB* entry on R.H. Seton-Watson (notes 7 and 8).
15. See Delzell (1968); Grindrod (1968); Roberts (1969); Bosworth (1969); Coppa (1971).

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