

BOOK REVIEWS

Claretta: Mussolini's Last Lover, by Richard Bosworth, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2017, vii + 311 pp., £18.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-300-21427-7

Richard Bosworth's latest book builds on his biography of Mussolini to explore what he sees as the emotional side of the Duce's life. It tells the story of his relationship with Claretta Petacci, perhaps the best-known of Mussolini's various lovers, particularly notorious for her death alongside him and the humiliating exposure of her corpse beside his in Piazzale Loreto in 1945.

Bosworth starts by comparing the huge amount of popular interest in Mussolini's private life, which has fuelled an appetite for biographies and magazine articles, with its neglect by more serious academic historians. He also traces the story of Mussolini's (fake) diaries in order to introduce the (genuine) ones by Claretta Petacci, used in this book.

The first two chapters focus on Mussolini's extramarital affairs before Petacci, beginning with an attempt to debunk the myth of him as particularly unusual in his sexual profligacy. Bosworth argues that Mussolini probably had fewer sexual partners than is popularly believed and makes the point that sexual infidelity was extremely common among Fascist hierarchs. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the overall picture of Mussolini's lovers is less their sheer numbers, but more the fact that, although admittedly a diverse group, many were quite intellectual, artistic, or at least intelligent, women. Quite a few, moreover, were of similar age or older than him and of a higher social class. Far from casting them off after the sexual liaison was over, he often remained fairly protective towards them, particularly the mothers of his (estimated) nine illegitimate children. None of this means that he did not treat women with great contempt on many occasions (something which Bosworth does discuss but perhaps underplays) and he reserved the right to have more than one lover whilst demanding their fidelity.

Claretta Petacci was somewhat different from many of Mussolini's other conquests. He first met this young middle-class woman at the seaside in 1932 when she was 20 and he almost 50. Initially it was she who pursued him with impassioned letters, rather than the other way around, and 'Ben' and 'Clara' (as they called each other) probably did not become actual lovers until 1936, by which time she was (unhappily) married.

Bosworth deftly mines the wealth of information contained in her diaries and correspondence to explore the course of their affair. This material offers many fascinating insights into the mind of the dictator, as the couple's pre- or post-coital conversations ranged over all manner of things, including his family, affairs of state and his state of mind. At times, their relationship was a torrid affair with innumerable telephone calls (on one occasion he phoned 13 times in a single day). Bosworth does portray Claretta as a woman really in love with Mussolini, not just an adventuress, albeit one happy enough to milk her connection with the Duce to win advantages and financial rewards for herself and other members of her social-climbing family. Mussolini seems to have reciprocated her passion but that did not mean fidelity, and jealousy of her various love rivals, who 'Ben' persisted in seeing throughout their relationship, and of his wife Rachele and the rest of his legitimate family, occupied a good deal of Claretta's energies. Nonetheless, theirs was clearly a real relationship, based on mutual love and passion but also companionship of sorts, the latter becoming increasingly true during the war years.

When the regime fell in 1943, Claretta was imprisoned in Novara where, usefully for the historian, she continued to keep a diary. Even then, after his fall from power, her diary's pages were full of outpourings of love for Mussolini. Once both were freed from their respective prisons, Claretta was installed in a villa not far from his new residence on Lake Garda. They were unable, however, to meet often and much of their relationship was conducted by post. Claretta's letters from the period had increasingly political as well as personal themes and included plenty of simplistic and extremist political advice. Her obsession with Mussolini's other lovers (and his legitimate family) and her attempts to promote her own relatives' interests did not, however, abate. During the final winter of their lives their correspondence took on an increasingly tempestuous tone as Claretta railed against his family and his failure to give her the attention she felt she deserved.

Bosworth concludes the story with an attempt to separate fact from fiction about her and her lover's death, about which many contradictory accounts exist.

Written in his usual witty, well-crafted and very readable style, Bosworth's latest book is an engrossing read. It is very thoroughly researched and based on a lifetime of reading on the Fascist period. It is also, at times, very funny. Dense with interesting details and embellished by some excellent photographs, it draws extensively on Claretta's own copious diaries and the correspondence between the two lovers, as well as from members of her family. Claretta's diaries enable us to enter into 'Ben' and 'Clara's' bedroom. There is not a great deal of graphic detail, beyond fairly coy mentions of whether they had sex, but numerous conversations are meticulously recorded. Many of them shed light on the Duce's changing thinking and feelings over time.

In many ways this book tells us more about Mussolini than about Claretta herself. She is there on most of the pages, and we certainly read a vast number of her words, but she never really emerges as a fully rounded character. We learn that she was a practising Catholic who attended mass, who liked to lie in bed eating chocolates, who sometimes sketched cartoons and who was loyal to her family and its interests. But we learn virtually nothing of her childhood (and what might have led to her political views) and her adult life beyond the Sala dello Zodiaco in Palazzo Venezia (where most of their trysts took place) remains obscure. In this respect the last sections of the book are the best. Based on correspondence rather than diaries, in this section Claretta emerges as a more defined, if far from appealing, character, one with unpleasantly radical (albeit simplistic and naïve) fascist political convictions and an intense hatred of her enemies. Most of her vitriol is aimed not at the communist partisans – who would shortly execute her – or the invading Allies but at 'Ben's' other lovers and his family.

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1977. Quando il femminismo entrò in TV, by Loredana Cornero, Rome, HARPO, 2017, 219 pp., €15 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-99857-16-5

Scholarly research on the visual representation of women in Italian media has grown considerably in recent years, in particular during the last years of Silvio Berlusconi's government. Writing from a feminist perspective, Alessandra Gribaldo and Giovanna Zapperi have observed – in *Lo schermo*