

Under the Volcano: Revolution in a Sicilian Town, by Lucy Riall, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 296 pp., £37.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-964649-4

The town of Bronte lies on the western slopes of Mount Etna in eastern Sicily. Although also famed for its excellent pistachio nuts, Bronte's claim to notoriety is forever linked to what took place there in the summer of 1860. Shortly after the landing of the Thousand at Marsala in May, Garibaldi issued a proclamation that was designed to end the longstanding conflicts over the division of former feudal and common lands that for half a century had divided local communities in violent factional struggles throughout Sicily. The initiative backfired, inflaming rather than resolving existing disputes and provoking new ones. By the summer the spreading rural violence was threatening the success of Garibaldi's expedition and the general's energetic aide, Nino Bixio, was given the task of restoring order.

Bixio's first destination was Bronte. When he reached the town on 6 August the 'revolution' of Lucy Riall's title had resulted in 17 deaths. A hastily installed military tribunal sentenced four peasants and a lawyer deemed to be their leader to summary execution. Some 37 others were subsequently convicted in the Catania Assize Court in 1863, of whom 25 received life sentences. Similar events were repeated in neighbouring towns, including Biancavilla and Alcala Li Fusi where the military firing squads were busy in the weeks before Garibaldi crossed the Straits of Messina. Yet it was Bronte alone that became synonymous with what many considered to be a turning point in the Risorgimento and the moment when the emptiness of the democratic pretensions of the nationalist project was exposed. The guilt of Bixio's victims was far from clear and their deaths became the centrepiece of the 'massacre' at Bronte that quickly became a fixed reference for all those who denounce unification as a cover for the Piedmontese conquest of the south. Subsequently the story has acquired a firm place in Italian literature, cinema and historiography and continues to attract attention. In 1985 a symbolic retrospective public trial of Bixio was staged in Bronte, and the recent 150th anniversary of Italian unification reaffirmed Bronte's status as an emotive symbol of the historical injustices perpetrated on the south by the north.

There have been many attempts to find out what 'really happened' at Bronte, but Lucy Riall's new book offers the fullest and most balanced account to date. Unlike previous studies her account draws on the archive of the English owners of the principal estate in Bronte, a connection that had important bearings on what followed. In 1799 the King of Naples had bestowed the feudal Duchy of Bronte and its revenues on Horatio Nelson in recognition of his part in the downfall of the Neapolitan Republic. Thereafter the Duchy was run by local administrators on behalf of Nelson's absentee descendants, and in 1860 that connection exercised fatal attraction. Garibaldi was particularly sensitive to the disorders at Bronte because he feared that news of the true scale of rural unrest in Sicily might seriously jeopardise British support for his expedition. Hence the need to restore order before the English press picked up the story.

The role of English public opinion in 1860 raises broader questions about the interplay between Britain's often-neglected imperial designs in the Mediterranean and the politics of the Risorgimento. At that time Sicily, as Lucy Riall argues, was a significant 'bridgehead' of Britain's commercial imperialism in the Mediterranean. Since the late eighteenth century British merchants had been a major presence in the ports of Palermo and Messina, and for a short while they held a near monopoly over the export of Sicilian wine (Marsala) and sulphur. But well before unification they were being challenged by local rivals like the Florio family, and survived by joining forces with their competitors and marrying into the Sicilian aristocracy. These were very different from the trajectory of the Nelson-Bridport family and despite its chance imperial

origins the Bronte estate looks more like an outpost than a bridgehead of empire. But the archive provides many fascinating glimpses of the changing tastes of the British gentry that Lucy Riall uses to good effect. In the late nineteenth century the family finally became resident when a new heir decided to transform the estate into a fashionable Mediterranean 'pleasure park', but by the time that the estate was sold after the Second World War it was little more than a costly encumbrance.

The archive's most important contributions come in the form of the detailed reconstruction of the background to the conflicts that flared up in Bronte (not for the first time) in 1860. Tracing the roots of endemic rural violence and factional struggles back to the impact of earlier Bourbon attempts to abolish feudalism in Sicily, Lucy Riall's findings are in line with those of the micro-studies of other rural communities that are a distinctive feature of recent Sicilian historiography. Nor was Bronte exceptional in the strategies adopted by its administrators, whose attempts to expand commercial production frequently conflicted with established communal rights and drew them into complex local disputes that they were much less well equipped to understand than their Sicilian counterparts.

The English owners and their local administrators emerge as bemused onlookers rather than protagonists of the violence that exploded in the summer of 1860. Nino Bixio was no better and Lucy Riall endorses what has always been the most plausible explanation of what befell in August 1860 when she concludes that Bixio 'marched into a factional struggle that had raged out of control' (p. 139).

Those conclusions establish the platform from which Riall mounts a forceful critique of recent revisionist 'anti-histories' which, she argues, 'rely on a deeply distorted understanding of the history of Italian unification' (p. 200). What happened at Bronte was 'a tragedy, but this was the fault of neither Bixio nor the British' (p. 143). It was not the 'first stage in a deliberate policy of military conquest by the north against the south. Still less did it reflect the triumph of feudal power or British imperialism' (p. 144). On the contrary, the background to the events at Bronte in 1860 demonstrates clearly that many of the deep problems that faced the south after unification had been present before. In short, Bronte disproves the revisionist claim that unification was the sole cause of the south's subsequent misfortunes.

Against the populist attacks on unification, Riall plays the classical defence of the democratic Risorgimento. Garibaldi's attempts to mobilise popular support in Sicily proved to be an 'impossible mandate' (p. 139), but the blame lay mainly with the moderates, whose success in destroying the political base of the democrats was, she claims, the new government's biggest mistake. Whether the weak and divided democrats could have played a more effective political role in the south in 1860 raises questions that tap into much older debates which will not be of much concern to the diehard revisionists to whom Riall's comments are primarily directed. It is anyone's guess how heavily her defence of the democratic Risorgimento will weigh with those who do not prize historical accuracy highly. Less partisan readers, however, will certainly find a great deal to enjoy and admire in this engaging, carefully researched and skilfully balanced reconstruction of the events that took place in Bronte in August 1860, as well as their subsequent representations and misrepresentations.

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