

A British Fascist in the Second World War: The Italian War Diary of James Strachey Barnes, 1943-45, edited by Claudia Baldoli and Brendan Fleming, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, 264 pp., £65.00, ISBN 9781472505798

This book, edited by Claudia Baldoli and Brendan Fleming, is a transcription of James Strachey Barnes' war diary, of which the original handwritten copy is held at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome. The diary is a personal report of dramatic events from the beginning of 1943 to the end of 1945. The structure of the book follows the pages of the diary day by day, paying specific attention to reporting Barnes' words and sentences, putting the uncertain ones in square brackets to avoid any possible misunderstanding. A helpful introduction guides the reader through the historical context and, at the same time, allows us a better understanding of Barnes' life and world. The work provides an unusual view of two intensive years, revealed through the ideas and memories of a British man who had moved to Italy and become a committed Fascist.

Born to a British civil servant in India, Barnes moved to Italy following the death of his mother, where he grew up with his English grandparents until he was sent back to boarding school in England. Still, he remained so enchanted by Italian culture that he decided to go back to Italy. The editors highlight Barnes' various points of view, in order to detail the ambiguous position he occupied as a British subject living in an enemy country, suspicious to both the British and the Italians. These pages are interesting because they show a man who aspired throughout his whole life to become an Italian citizen. Unfortunately for him, he only officially obtained this citizenship two years after his death, in 1983.

There are three particularly interesting aspects in this diary. First are the different ways in which Barnes tries to highlight the strengths of Italy, even as the country was clearly about to lose the war. At the same time, he does not miss any opportunity to write against England and 'English turpitude' (53), which he claims led the English to disseminate false information in order to discredit the enemy, and Italians in particular. This aspect is predominant in the first part of the diary, covering the events of 1943.

Second, the diary testifies to Barnes' continuous attempts to obtain Italian citizenship, especially in order to avoid any dangerous situation in the case of an enemy invasion or victory. Barnes also kept contacts with the Vatican, in the hope of protection. Through Barnes' words, it also appears that he was willing to add further materials and documents in order to support his views. Probably, as Baldoli and Fleming argue, it is possible that he hoped to have the diary published in the future, perhaps in case he was captured by the British forces. This could also be the reason why a man who felt so close to Italian culture and chose Italy as his own country decided to use his native language, English, to write a diary. However, neither Baldoli nor Fleming enter into this specific trait of Barnes' personality and thought.

The third point is that this book is essentially a diary of the Second World War. Barnes does not only focus on his personal life, but largely writes about war events, giving his own interpretations and explanations. For example, Italy's great mistake, during the African battles, was, to his eyes, that of not having pushed through to the Suez Canal. In March 1945 he lists many other faults of Mussolini and Hitler. His narration of facts, however, is never objective or detailed, and always biased by his own point of view, which is essentially supportive of Mussolini and Fascism.

As a consequence, when writing about the allied invasion of Sicily or the occupation of Rome, Barnes emphasizes the weakness of Italian propaganda and the way it 'betrayed' Italy. His hope, he writes, is now trusted to Germany, the only country that can save Europe, Italy, and, not least, himself. Nonetheless, after this moment of discouragement he carefully details Mussolini's new

great project of a Social Republic. Moving through the North of Italy, Barnes is actively engaged in propaganda, working at a radio programme from March 1944, which was broadcast from Rome for the English troops in Italy but was heard in England and in the U.S.A as well. As the editors highlight in their introduction, Barnes also played a role during the Salò Republic. Employed by the Ministry of Popular Culture between October 1943 and the end of the war, he remained loyal to Mussolini after his downfall as *duce* of Italy on 25 July 1943.

The diary ends on 3 May 1945, after the news of Mussolini's and Hitler's deaths. The last few sentences are curious and interesting. On the one hand, Barnes continues to believe in Mussolini, hoping that history will avenge him: 'His idea will live & triumph'. On the other, likely remembering he is still a British citizen, he expresses the hope that England might one day 'react' and serve the interest of 'common people'.

Baldoli and Fleming briefly reconstruct elements of Barnes' later life. He managed to elude the British government by remaining sheltered in convents, between Lazio and Piedmont, until 1949.

Providing an unusual perspective on a complex historical phase, the book raises intriguing questions about national loyalties at the most personal and individual level. In order to more extensively assess Barnes' figure and historical relevance, it would doubtless be necessary to access his life and works in the post-war period as well.

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