

British Women Folklorists in Post-Unification Italy: Rachel Busk and Evelyn Martinengo-Cesaresco.

In a recent article in this journal, Anne Eriksen and Torunn Selberg (2015) directed readers' attention to Rachel Busk's exceptional collection of urban folktales, *The Folk-Lore of Rome* (1874). This note is, partially, a response to their request for more biographical information. Busk was a traveller and writer on European culture, one of several such women connected to the Folklore Society in its first decades who deserve to be better known. As Vincenzo Ambrogi and Basilio Tinti highlighted in another recent article (2016), in their case on Herbert Morris Bower, British folklorists were important contributors to the development of folklore studies in Italy, as they were in several European countries. This European perspective on the early history of the Folklore Society can be overlooked, squeezed between the domestic and imperial dimensions. If, as Jonathan Roper has argued (2008), William Thoms' intention in proposing the formation of the Folklore Society was to uncover the material for a specifically English mythology, in practice the Society was very international in its early years, with members scattered throughout the British Empire, to the extent that other scholars have argued that it was essentially an 'imperialist' enterprise (Gosden and Wingfield, 2012). Colonial findings made sense of domestic discoveries and vice-versa, as these two perspectives combined to inform the 'British anthropological school' of Sidney Hartland, Edward Clodd, Andrew Lang and the other members of the 'Great Team' of pre-war folklorists (Dorson, 1968). However, the comparative method was never limited to the British Empire; continental European data was provided by the likes of Lucy Garnett (1849-1934) on Greece and Turkey, Edith Durham (1863-1944) on Albania, Violet Alford (1881-1972) on the Pyrenees and Estella Canziani (1887-1964) on the Alps (among other places).

It is no coincidence that those named were women. Women's travel-writing was a recognized literary genre in the Victorian and Edwardian period, and has become a field of scholarly study in the twenty-first century. Garnett, Durham and Canziani have all recently received some attention as travel writers (Mahn 2012; Tanner 2014; Polezzi, 2004). Even those Victorians who were opposed to women's participation in other aspects of public life, saw nothing wrong in women's contribution to letters (unlike, for example, France, where social mores were not so encouraging; some French women folklorists failed to publish in consequence [Sébillot, 1892]). Britain's comparative wealth in this period, coupled with the haphazard but often good education available to upper-class English girls, created a supply of women with the money and the leisure to travel, and the skills to participate in multilingual intellectual debates. Rachel Busk and Evelyn Martinengo-Cesaresco (née Carrington), shared this privileged background. The explosion of monthly magazines providing political, cultural and scientific commentary to the expanding middle classes, created a ready market for writing on contemporary Europe. Travellers also aimed their books at the growing number of British tourists. This was the context in which Busk and Martinengo-Cesaresco published their work on Italian folklore. Although

they sometimes wrote for the specialist folklore journals, usually they had a larger public in mind.

There are parallels in their family backgrounds. The Busk family had arrived in England from Sweden via Russia in the early eighteenth century. They were merchants in the City of London, then lawyers, and then, as was so often the way, the family bought land and became gentry, though without ever giving up their merchant and legal connections. Rachel's father, Hans Busk, was a country squire first in Wales, then in Sussex. Rachel was the youngest of his six surviving children. Several of her siblings achieved some degree of fame in the Victorian era (and so are listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*). His only son, also Hans Busk, was a leading promoter of the Volunteer movement, a patriot militia cum army reserve that grew up in response to fears about Napoleon III's intentions. One sister, Maria Georgina married Robert Loder, a conservative MP and descendant of another Baltic trading family turned Sussex gentry. Another sister, Julia Clara, married William Pitt Byrne, the editor of the ultra-conservative newspaper *The Morning Post*. Julia Byrne was a well-known travel writer and memoirist, and Rachel accompanied her on some of her trips across Europe. However, a very different sort of fame attached to a third sister, Frances Rosalie. In 1845 she married Charles Vansittart, the younger son of a Berkshire landowner and Tory MP Colonel Arthur Vansittart. (The Vansittart family were Dutch merchants in Russia who also settled in England in the early eighteenth-century, becoming gentry.) Charles Vansittart was a Church of England clergyman, and an enthusiast for The Oxford Movement, a trend in the Anglican Church towards liturgy, ritual, and an emphasis on the role of the priest as celebrant of the sacraments. The Oxford Movement saw Anglicanism as a branch of the Catholic Communion, and several of its leading members would convert to Roman Catholicism. Apparently Charles Vansittart encouraged his wife and her sisters in a ritualist direction, and so started a process that would lead to all five of them going over to Rome – much to Vansittart's horror.

Rosalie Vansittart's conversion fed an estrangement between the couple, but there is also evidence that Charles Vansittart was an unstable and violent character. He threatened and abused his wife, emotionally, verbally and physically. He introduced other women into their house, and finally he threw his wife out and went abroad taking their children (as was his right in law at the time). All of this became public knowledge in an unusual way. Mrs Vansittart took lodgings with a Mr Hay, who, in 1856, brought an action against Charles Vansittart for recovery of the rent. As the Busk family undoubtedly could have supported Rosalie, the action was really a ploy engineered by the Busks to bring the details of Vansittart's behaviour towards his wife into the public arena. And the ploy worked: the national and regional papers all reported the facts of the case, pouring abuse on the wife-beater Vansittart. Rachel Busk was one of the people called as a witness (*Hay v. Vansittart*, Guildford Assizes, 6 August 1858). The case was significant because it helped establish a precedent in law that a husband was responsible for the maintenance of his wife, even after they were separated. This was one of that series of

mid/late Victorian legal developments which enabled women to take an active part in public life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Charles Vansittart became a leading anti-Catholic campaigner in the 1860s (Paz 1992, 293-4).

The Vansittart story is relevant because it explains how Rachel Busk came to Italy. She shared a house with her sister Mrs Vansittart, who had moved to Rome (along with her children, whom she had recovered as part of the separation settlement with her husband). As Eriksen and Selberg mention in their article (2015, 303), Rachel Busk was correspondent for British newspapers on Italian and Papal affairs, in which she revealed herself a ‘fervent defender of Catholicism and the Papal State’. The latter was challenged by the process of Italian Unification which would culminate with the occupation of Rome and the deposition of the Pope as its sovereign in 1870. Not just Rachel, but the wider Busk-Vansittart family were active opponents of Italian unification. One of the Vansittart sons, Arthur, became a Papal Zouave who fought with Garibaldi’s volunteers at Mentana in 1867 in an earlier, unofficial attempt by Italian patriots to capture the city; another, Cyril, was Chamberlain to Pius IX (the Pope who instituted Papal Infallibility as a dogma of the Catholic Church).¹ In the aftermath of the conquest of Rome, the Busks and Vansittarts were involved in several violent encounters with Italian policemen and troops. Seemingly they deliberately engineered these confrontations in order to try and create an international incident and a newspaper outcry against the mistreatment of British citizens by the Italian state. However, they were unsuccessful in this attempt: the British papers were too well aware that the individuals concerned were known partisans of Papal government.²

Rachel Busk had long been enthusiast for folklore. Before the foundation of the Folklore Society she had been a regular contributor to the de facto folkloric journal in Britain, *Notes and Queries*, to which she continued to write on folklore through the 1880s and 90s. She was a faithful member of the Society in the 1880s which, despite the materialist and anticlerical reputation of the ‘anthropological school’ was also home to a number of other Catholic propagandists (for instance, Gertrude M. Godden [Pasi, 2014, 124-6]). However, Busk’s books on Spain and the Tyrol, though inspired by her travels, did not depend on collecting in the field. She introduced a putative oral storyteller, a travelling Andalusian player, in *Patrañas* (1870) but the stories that follow mostly derive from existing printed sources. The same is true of her first book on the Tyrol, *Household Tales from the Land of Hofer* (1871). A second book on *The Valleys of the Tirol* (1874) was really a guidebook, though it contains a fair amount of local folklore garnered from guides, hotel-keepers and coach-drivers encountered along the way. It also offered Busk an opportunity to display her religious and political sentiments, for instance in her defence of the expulsion of Tyrolean Protestants, and her criticism of Garibaldi who had led another band of volunteers into the southern Tyrol during the Third War of Italian Independence in 1866. Her book on *The Folk-Songs of Italy* (1887), which includes a long chapter by Giuseppe Pitré, remains a useful introduction, but her most valuable work, as a folklorist, is *The Folklore of Rome*. In the introduction Busk explains that she had set out to follow her

usual method, translating from existing materials. It was the absence of an 'Italian Grimm' which obliged her to undertake her own collecting project. She often introduced the stories with elements of the conversation that had led up to the narration, so one gets a much stronger feel for the occasion when stories would be told, and how. Although many of these texts belong to the international canon of folktales, others are more anecdotal and reflect the imaginative life of an urban neighbourhood: for example a series of stories about a rich Englishman marrying a beautiful but poor Roman girl and "carrying her off to that unknown land bright with gold but devoid of sun", and in the end fogs and Protestantism lead to the girl's death. Busk explains that for most of her Roman informants, it was a natural assumption that all Englishmen were rich: "io pensava che in Inghilterra tutti erano ricchi – tutti ricchi" (308) says one of her female acquaintances.

Busk, and all her generation, lived in the shadow of the great epochal conflict which defined the nineteenth century: the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire. That is implied, for example, by the title of Busk's collection of Tyrolean tales. Who was Hofer that he could lay claim to the Tyrol? Andreas Hofer was a Tyrolean innkeeper who, in 1809, led an initially successful popular uprising against the French and their Bavarian allies in the name of the Austrian Emperor and the Catholic faith. After the Emperor himself surrendered, Hofer was captured and executed in Mantua. But his fame in Britain remained enormous through the nineteenth century so that, even sixty years later, it is not surprising that an Englishwoman would invoke his name when trying to sell books. During those wars Britain had been an ally of the Austrian Empire which, after 1815, would be the mainstay of anti-revolutionary, anti-democratic and anti-national forces in Italy and beyond. It will come as no surprise that Busk, an apologist for autocratic and clerical government, was also an enthusiast for the Habsburgs. However, other British commentators on continental politics felt that, while it may have been necessary to defeat Napoleon and end French hegemony over Europe, somehow in the process Britain had ended up on the wrong side of history. To rectify the situation, Britons should support nationalist and liberal causes, particularly in southern Europe. They were inspired by the romance of first Greek and then Italian independence. Evelyn Lillian Haseldine Carrington, countess Martinengo-Cesaresco, is an example of this group.

In terms of social and political outlook the Carrington family resembled the Busk family, with its mixture of mercantile, landed, legal, military, clerical and political connections. Evelyn's grandfather, Edmund Carrington, was the first chief justice of Ceylon during the Napoleonic wars before returning to purchase a landed estate and become a conservative MP. A slave plantation in Barbados explains how the countess was able to publish in *Folklore* on 'Negro Songs' (1887). Her maternal grandfather was a naval officer and brother of George Lyall, chairman of the East India Company, himself a conservative MP (and also covered by the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). Her father was a scholar, a translator of French poetry, and a clergyman, a follower of the Oxford Movement (with the result that one of his daughters converted to Rome), but even more

influenced by his wife, Juanita Lyall, who was supposedly the model for the domineering Mrs Proudie, bishop in all but name, in Trollope's *Barchester Chronicles* (Dewey 1991, 94). Despite her High Church Tory background, the youthful Evelyn had been inspired by the process of Italian Unification which she followed in the newspapers. She wrote later, 'Never did a series of political events evoke a sympathy so wide and so disinterested [in England]... Italy rising from the grave was the living romance of myriads of young hearts that were lifted from the common level of trivial interests and selfish ends... by a sustained enthusiasm that can hardly be imagined now' (1895, 71). Her study of the five Cairoli brothers, four of whom died in the wars of liberation, had already been published (1879) in Italian before she married Count Eugenio Martinengo-Cesaresco in a civil ceremony in Rome in 1882: that was a very pointed political gesture at the time and place.³ Evelyn was resolutely anticlerical in her politics, calling the Pope's rule over the Papal States (for which Rachel Busk's nephew was prepared to die) as 'a government fit for the middle ages' (1895, 185).

The Martinengo family were patriotic aristocrats from Lombardy; her father-in-law had led was one of the leaders of the revolution in Brescia in 1849. When Piedmont invaded Austrian-occupied Lombardy (for a second time, leading to a second defeat), Brescia was almost the only Lombard town to respond to Piedmontese appeals for a popular uprising. The city held out for ten days of vicious street-fighting. After the revolt was crushed by Austrian troops, Count Giuseppe Martinengo-Cesaresco fled to Piedmont while his property was sequestered. The family was only able to return with Italian victory in 1859 (Correnti, 1899). Through the family's connections Evelyn was brought into direct contact with the heroes of the Risorgimento, as well as the political life of the now united Italy.

Evelyn Martinengo-Cesaresco is better known as a historian of Risorgimento Italy than as a folklorist. Her collection of portraits (1890) of leading figures in the Unification is still occasionally cited as a source, because it was partly based on conversations with the participants themselves. Her biography of Cavour (1898) was reprinted for use in schools and universities until the 1970s. However, most of her early publications were in the field of folklore. Her *Essays in the Study of Folksongs* (1886) collected a series of articles that had appeared in the English periodical press such as *Cornhill Magazine* and *Fraser's Magazine* in the preceding decades. Although written for a broad public, these were well documented studies, drawing on the latest research in numerous languages. And at the end of her publishing life she returned to the topic with her translation of *A Sheaf of Greek Folk Songs, Gleaned by an Old Philhellene* (1922). As the subheading implies, this was not an unpolitical act: it was a small protest against the Italian occupation of the Greek Dodecanese Islands. For the Countess, Italy and Greece, both born from national struggles in the nineteenth century, should be allies bonded by the shared experience and moral purpose of liberation. In the introduction she quoted the Italian patriot Mazzini on the independence of Greece 'whose epopoeia is still awaiting its last chant' (78). And this perhaps illustrates a key element of her interest in folk-song: it was the voice of the people

not so much in a social sense, but in a national sense. A nation was united by the songs it shared, and which evoked its national epic. In practice she was a careful scholar, and well aware that songs were not distributed according to ethnicity; nor did she attempt to assert that Italian folk-song possessed anything like the heroic repertoire encountered in the Balkans and Greece. But her heart was with Herder.

Unlike Rachel Busk in Rome, the Countess was not really a field-collector; most of her material she drew from existing published collections. Nonetheless, she did have many interesting observations to make about the practice of singing which she had witnessed it on her travels: in the fields, in market-squares, at funerals. For example, she described her difficulties in trying to discover patriotic songs in Naples two decades after the Garibaldian revolution of 1860, an acknowledgment which, given her patriot politics must have hurt her (1886, 172). If Garibaldi was Busk's *bête noire* he was the epitome of the epic hero as far as Countess Martinengo-Cesaresco was concerned: his 'true place is not in the aggregation of facts which we call history, but in the apotheosis of character which we call the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Edda*, the cycles of Arthur and of Roland, and the *Romancero del Cid*' (1895, 122). She even attempted, slightly tongue-in-cheek, to portray him as 'a solar myth, nevertheless certified to be alive in the nineteenth century' (1895, 299: a reference to Max Müller's theories on the origins of folktales).

'The padrona', as she styled herself, was particularly keen on the intersection of the popular with more canonical literary and artistic traditions. She had an acute ear for the occasions on which poets like Goethe or dramatists like Webster borrowed from folk literature. Contemporaries noted that she did not really embrace Müller's mythological school nor the rival anthropological school of folklore, rather her approach was literary. And of course, if the drama and passion of Italy's political struggles were one reason why the British were attracted to the peninsula, the passion and drama of its artistic connections were another. I refer here less to the classical inheritance nor the Renaissance sites visited on the Grand Tour (by no means dead as an essential part of upper class education in the nineteenth century... and increasingly available to the middle classes too), though Martinesco-Cesaresco was fully versed on these. Rather I refer to a particular British romantic tradition: the country where Keats and Shelley died, the haven to which Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning eloped, the homeland of the Rosettis and the inspiration of Swinburne. Italy was an essential element in the British cultural imagination throughout the nineteenth century.

Rachel Busk and Countess Martinengo-Cesaresco were on opposing sides over Italian Unification, but in both cases their politics fed their engagement with folklore. However, that does not mean that we should now dismiss their work as partisan. Risorgimento and post-Risorgimento Italy was the context in which they wrote, but they were responsible and thorough scholars, who did not let their own aspirations dictate their findings. They were both familiar with, and participants in, the developing 'science of folklore'; they read the works of scholars in many languages, and contributed to folklore journals in both

Britain and Italy. They corresponded with, and were acknowledged as authorities by, leading figures in the field in Italy, in Britain and further afield. If Giuseppe Pitrè, a Garibaldian volunteer (Zipes 2009, 2), provided the introduction to Busk's collection of folk-songs, it was the countess who wrote his obituary for *Folklore*. Given these shared interests, and shared networks, as well as their similar upbringing, it is perhaps not so surprising that Rachel Busk referred to the countess as 'my friend.'

There were other anglophone women who studied folklore in their second home — Italy — before the First World War, including Francesca Alexander (1884-5), Louise Hamilton Caico (1910) Estella Canziani (1913, 1928) and Tony Cyriax (1919). A question raised in recent studies of travel literature is whether women's experiences of being abroad (in terms of class interactions as well as geographically speaking), and the themes they chose to address in their writings, were fundamentally distinct to those of their male counterparts. One could certainly make the case, after reading Busk and Martinengo-Cesaresco, that their access to sources of information and their set of concerns were qualitatively different to those of male British folklorists of the period... for instance they both displayed a certain scepticism towards contemporary grand theorizing about folklore. Perhaps further research might reveal a European gender alternative to the male dominance of Dorson's 'Great Team'.

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¹ Obituary: Frances Rosalie Busk, *The Tablet* 10 June 1899, p. 903.

² 'Outrages in Rome', *London Evening Standard* 16 March 1871, p. 6; 'Disturbances at Rome', *Bell's Weekly Messenger* 18 March 1871, p. 1; 'Disturbances in Rome', *Kings County Chronicle* 22 March, 1871, p. 4; 'The Case of Mr Vansittart', *London Daily News* 10 May, 1873, p. 3; 'The Attack on Mr Vansittart', *London Evening Standard* 26 May 1873, p. 3.

³³ *Morning Post* 21 February 1882, p. 5.