

# THE ANTIFASCIST POLITICS OF THE NOVEL *MAD MEG*

by Sally Morrison

*In 1989 Sally Morrison gave up her career as a geneticist with the Melbourne University microbiology department to write and research her first major novel Mad Meg. Set in Milan and Melbourne, the novel traces the history of two Italian families escaping Mussolini's regime in the 1930s. Mad Meg is published by Reed Books Australia, Melbourne, and is available from leading book stores in paperback at \$15.95.*

In the novel *Mad Meg* I set myself the task of constructing a feasible history for a fictitious Italian-born Australian called Henry Coretti. The task was difficult because the story demanded that this young man arrive in Australia in 1936, at the age of twenty. I knew already that he would have had difficulty coming in as an immigrant labourer at that time because Australia was not favouring the immigration of southern Europeans. In the 1930s The Australian government decided to follow the lead of the USA and encourage only migrants of "nordic stock". This policy lasted until after World War II.

Although I took modern history in high school (thirty years ago), I realised when I started to write this book, that my knowledge of Italian history was scanty. I knew of Garibaldi and Mussolini, but nothing of the period between the Risorgimento and the rise of fascism. In fact, although aware that Mussolini was a lesser tyrant than Hitler and had been admired abroad in his day, I had always equated fascism with Nazism. It seemed to me that the great crime of the twentieth century was to have been fascist and that vileness could be equated with people of a crypto-fascist temperament still alive today. But I worried that in this definition, which is probably a wide-spread one amongst Australians of my age (approaching fifty) we were over-concerned with distancing ourselves from the "baddies" of World War II.

It is all too easy, when on the side of the victors, to attribute all evil to the vanquished. After all, there are many incidents involving high-handedness in Australia's history, and one could put a case for the existence in Australia of a long line of people who, for various reasons, have believed themselves 'born to rule', just as Mussolini believed himself to be.

As related in *Mad Meg*, the arrogance behind the 'born to rule' mentality was publicly demonstrated in Australia in 1929, when, during

long-running, widespread and bitter strikes in the coal and timber industries, Stanley Melbourne Bruce had his offices redecorated and went to play golf at Frankston, rather than involve his government in urgently needed industrial arbitration. When he was brought to an election (though not by the Opposition) his side was thrashed, and the ex-secretary of Trades Hall [EJ Holloway], who had been fined fifty pounds for inciting the timber workers, took his seat.

Although fascism has hardly figured in the history of colonial and post-colonial Australia, there are plenty of examples of public behaviour that could have served as fascism's political raw material in our past. However, I believe we are less guilty of fascist tendencies than anyone else. If we want Australia to become a shining example of multi-cultural democracy, then we had better develop an understanding of democracy's limits. Democracy, though broadly tolerant, is not an "anything goes" culture.

I cast Henry Coretti as a thinking man. He is an avant-garde painter, so his history involves the general topic of art and its capacity to reflect politics. This essay is about the politics his art reflects.

## *Following the Thread*

From Gianfranco Cresciani's book, *Fascism, Antifascism and Italians in Australia*<sup>1</sup>, I learned that Henry Coretti's only ways into Australia were through the Italian Consulates and cultural organisations, or through the sponsorship of a relative. Since Henry was a figure through whom anti-fascist sentiments were to be expressed, I found myself searching for a suitable relative who might have sponsored his entry. I found a model for this relative in Omero Schiassi, whose anti-fascist activities in Melbourne will be well known to many, but who was unknown to me at the beginning of my search.

To look briefly at the life of Omero Schiassi: he was born in 1877 in the province of Bologna and graduated in law from the University of Bologna where he was a fellow student with Matteotti. From the age of twenty-two to twenty-four he was First Secretary of the Provincial Federation of the Workers of the Land for the province of Bologna and became a propagandist for them in 1900. That year he organised peasant leagues and strikes all over the country. He then wrote a monograph on his activities for the Humanitarian Society of Milan and worked for them for some time, during which he joined the Italian Socialist Party. He served with the Alpini in World War I and then resumed his socialist activities as a lawyer at Trades Hall in Bologna. In 1921, when Schiassi was in Sorrento convalescing from a serious illness, Bologna Trades Hall was wrecked by fascist *squadristi*. Schiassi received a telegram telling him not to return, as he was on a hit list. Following this, he was beaten up in Sorrento, in his sickbed.

He was in Genoa as a legal counsellor to the Federation of Workers of the Sea in 1922 when *squadristi* attacked Genoa Trades Hall. His papers were burnt and his office wrecked. He decided it was time to emigrate.

For unknown reasons, since he knew nobody there, he came to Melbourne in 1924 and was actively antifascist during the life of the regime. He made a meagre living as the first tutor in Italian at the University of Melbourne and acted as the Australian correspondent for the Socialist paper *Avanti!*

Schiassi was a Socialist of the Moderate Left, allied to Filippo Turati, Claudio Treves and Emanuele Modigliani. In order to understand where his views came from, I read Renato Monteleone's biography of Turati<sup>2</sup>, which also supplied me with the information I needed to piece together Mussolini's rise to power through the eyes of the moderate socialists. Reading the biography led me to choose Milan as the city from which my character, Henry Coretti, would come.

Milan, of course, was a political hotbed prior to, during, and after World War I, and in some ways had a role in Italy parallel to Melbourne's in Australia. Both were commercial cities where labour organisations had begun and had developed a significant voice.

More specifically, because the Monteleone

**Fascism Exposed!**

To the Australian People and All Political Representatives

Address delivered by Dr. Omero Schiassi at the New Gaiety Theatre, Melbourne, on the 10th June, 1928, under the auspices of the Committee of the Anti-Fascist Concentration of Australasia, in commemoration of the Great Martyr, Giacomo Matteotti; and afterwards translated as an appeal to the people of Australia.

(Issued in English and Italian by the Executive Committee of the Anti-Fascist Concentration of Australasia).

THIRD EDITION. Sold by the Library of the Socialist Party, 182 Exhibition Street, Melbourne.

**CONCENTRAZIONE ANTIFASCISTA**  
Dell' Oceania

140 CLARENDON STREET, E. MELBOURNE, C.2.  
VICTORIA AUSTRALIA

**Il Fascismo Denunziato!**

Al Popolo Australiano e a tutti i Rappresentanti Politici!

Discorso pronunziato dall'avv. Omero Schiassi al New Gaiety Theatre in Melbourne il 10 Giugno, 1928, per incarico del Comitato della Concentrazione Anti-Fascista dell'Oceania, a commemorazione del Grande Martire Giacomo Matteotti, e poscia tradotto in appello al popolo dell'Australia.

(Pubblicato in Italiano e in Inglese, a cura del Comitato Esecutivo della Concentrazione Anti-Fascista dell'Oceania).

TERZA EDIZIONE. In vendita presso la Libreria del Partito Socialista, 182 Exhibition Street, Melbourne.

*Pamphlet printed by Omero Schiassi in 1928 containing the text of his address delivered in Melbourne's New Gaiety Theatre on 10th June, 1928.*

biography is excellently documented, it gave me locations where activity took place and a feel for Milan, without ever having seen it. When I did visit in 1990, I was fascinated by its landmarks and its history, both political and cultural. I felt it was a city where superstition and modernity played tug-o-war across the Piazza del Duomo, where appropriately, the Palace of Reason and the Palace of Clocks were hidden by a huge advertising hoarding. On it, the United Family of Bennetton - a black father, a white madonna-like mother and a yellow baby - confronted, at the other end of the square, the golden madonnina on the Duomo's highest spire. A parallel picture could be drawn of Melbourne as a post-Enlightenment city whose serious history has been forgotten in a decade of greed and unprecedented consumerism.

The Milan socialists were followers of the German Karl Kautsky, who put the case for moderation to the International. If there was a

natural conflict of interest between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the moderates were of the opinion that it could be negotiated without need of a revolution. They were pacifists and anti-interventionists when it came to the First World War.

The Italian socialists had adopted a compromise position which said their proletariat should only fight a defensive war on Italian soil, not an offensive one against the proletariat of another country. When hostilities broke out, however, the German and Austrian proletariat did not oblige the Italians by expressing their solidarity and kindly keeping to their own side of the border. The defeat at Caporetto [in the Friuli region, 24 October 1917 ed.] meant the Italians lost any standing they might have had as non-interventionists in the International.

After the war, the Italian socialists remained split between those who believed in proletarian revolution and those who did not. For those who did not believe in it, there were historical precedents in the Risorgimento. While Mussolini was acceding to power, the non-revolutionary socialists were developing their own brand of opposition to fascism, which had more to do with Mazzini than it did with Marx, though it repudiated Mazzini's religious agenda.

While in my novel my socialist characters decamped to Paris, along with Modigliani, Treves and eventually Turati, my research led me to the historian Gaetano Salvemini and his group of young Florentines who began to publish the clandestine *Non Mollare!* Among this group were the Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, who were to figure prominently in the antifascist fight. First of all, however, I examined the situation in Paris through Turati's biography and constructed a feasible set of activities for my characters to be involved in.

My character, Henry Coretti was only a boy at the time his family fled to Paris, but this did not prevent him from being a messenger liaising between his home base and the places where the antifascists lived and where their activities took place. Once again, it was due to the excellent documentation of the Turati biography, that I was able to track down relevant places in Paris in 1990.

I do not know how much work has been done on the Italian refugees in Paris, but the Turati biography provides solid implications of what it must have been like, from both the point of view

of the refugees and the point of view of the French. It suggests that the Parisians were tolerant and sympathetic hosts. This aspect of the situation interested me as it is very evident that France was in an economic shambles at the time and governments were only lasting a matter of months in power.<sup>3</sup> Though the French Left were popularly elected time after time, they could not get a grasp on power because they were continually being brought down by the Bank of France not allowing them their money bills. Whatever the privations of the refugees - crowding, poor food and outbreaks of vermin, as well as infirmity, disease and insecurity - there is no mention of French hostility to them.



Filippo Turati (centre) with (from left to right): Alberto Tarchiani, Claudio Treves and Carlo Rosselli. (Source: 1870/1945 *Scrivere Libero Fuori d'Italia*, Ediesse, Rome: June 1985.

The leadership of the refugees was able to carry on a program of activities, both social and political, right up to the outbreak of war in Spain in 1936. The writing and dissemination of anti-fascist propaganda was essential to them to maintain their focus and justify their position as refugees, but while they developed a large

network of sympathisers, there was hardly any return for effort. It was often reported back to the refugees that reaction in other countries was apathetic. Other nations were too preoccupied with their own problems, the Depression being paramount among these.

When Turati died in 1932, Carlo Rosselli, who had made a flamboyant escape from imprisonment on Lipari in 1929, had established himself as his natural successor. Although he respected Turati - indeed, had "rescued" him in 1926 so the exiles would have a tireless and literate socialist to represent them - his style was quite different. In place of Turati's pacifistic, legalistic Antifascist Concentration, he formed a group called *Giustizia e Libertà*, which held that should the internal defeat of the fascists in Italy demand illegal action, then such action would be taken. Furthermore, if it were necessary for civilians to carry arms, then arms would be carried.

contemporaneously in Italy. I came across some of Nello Rosselli's writings in the library of La Trobe University<sup>5</sup> and found them lucid and free from the influence of Hegel, whose ideas of "immanence" and "actualisation" were made much of by fascist historians when they claimed that Italy was destined to become the self-perfecting state, embodied in Mussolini, the ideal leader.

Salvemini and Nello Rosselli were quite clear about democratic philosophy and how it clashed with the idea of political predestination. In addition, Nello wrote that the idea that fascism was the final expression of the reactionary bourgeoisie was nonsense. To the contrary, he advocated that the best defence against fascist dictatorship was a united and articulate bourgeoisie. This attitude made an anti-Marxist of him and earned him criticism from the exiles in Paris, who claimed he was setting himself up to be used as an apologist for fascism within Italy. Nello Rosselli's fight, however, was more intelligent than that criticism implied.

Imprisoned when Carlo had himself publicly thrown into prison for rescuing Turati, and again when Carlo escaped to Paris, Nello Rosselli did his best to make use of the few intelligent channels that remained within Italy to open an internal critique on fascism and to found an international journal on the same topic, to be published in Switzerland. Though his efforts were unsuccessful, the record of them remains and serves as a reminder that the youth of the day, though the generation before them had lived in a liberal democracy, knew of no system of government other than fascism. Since fascism was supposed to be self-perfecting, they had no need to learn anything else. Throughout his life, Nello championed the idea that history does not write itself according to the views of one or another political group. Events always transcend philosophy, irrespective of its aims. That is not to say that philosophy is useless, only that history cannot be foretold, and politics should never pretend that it can. If there are lessons to be learned from the past, then the most outstanding lesson is that our control over the future is limited by the unforeseen and we must reject the idea that we live in the best of all possible worlds, or the only possible world.

I thought the story of the Rossellis was too rich in scholarship, not to mention drama, to let it pass without telling, and so I involved Henry Coretti in the activities of *Giustizia e Libertà*. I had him take the train to Bagnoles de l'Orne in



*Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Freedom) was the "voice" of the anti-fascist group formed by Carlo Rosselli after Turati's death in 1932. (Source: 1870/1945 *Scrivere Libero Fuori d'Italia*, Ediesse, Rome: June 1985.)

Still inside Italy was Carlo Rosselli's younger brother, Nello, an historian who had studied under Salvemini. Salvemini had fled Italy in 1925, after he was dobbed in by a type-setter, and tried for his part in *Non Mollare!* He went eventually to Harvard, where he was offered a permanent chair. Salvemini's *The Origins of Fascism in Italy*<sup>4</sup> argues that the proletariat in Italy was never inclined to revolution and that the Catholic Church and the Crown had more to answer for in the rise of fascism than did the economy, which was buoyant at the time, in spite of the continuing chaos in the House of Deputies. Salvemini's work is scholarly when compared with the official version of Italian History that was being churned out

Normandy on business for the Rossellis on the day before the brothers were murdered there in June, 1937, and I was rewarded for going there myself in 1992, by discovering that Nello Rosselli's grandson had visited the week before to lay wreaths on the monument at the site of the assassination. The whole story was written up in the local paper.

In 1936, Carlo was furious with Leon Blum, then the premier of France, for not sending aid to the Spanish government in Madrid, when they faced the right-wing insurrection that brought Franco to power. Accordingly, *Giustizia e Libertà* organised a column to go to Madrid with Carlo at its head. He was in the trenches for about nine months and had had leg ulcers for quite some time when it became necessary for him to go back to France to have treatment. The ulcers were due to a disorder of the veins, for which the cure was the taking of thermal baths. Bagnoles, as I learnt to my own amazement, was a spa - a bizarre place to visit in winter as I did, because it was all boarded up.

Nello Rosselli had already been granted two passports by Mussolini, one to study in England and the other for an international conference in Warsaw. In spite of periods of imprisonment, the fascist authorities were sometimes surprisingly lenient with him (unless, through their lenience they were able to keep tabs on Carlo and other anti-fascists in Italy, such as Giorgio Amendola). Seemingly on a whim, when Carlo's mother found herself unable to go to Bagnoles to look after him, Mussolini allowed Nello to go.

In a hotel opposite the one the Rossellis were staying in was a group of fascist French who had them under surveillance with the understanding that if they assassinated the brothers, Mussolini would reward them with a cache of arms to stage their own coup in Paris.

On June 9th, 1937, the Rossellis went to visit a neighbouring town to have morning coffee, and were on their way back when they came across a Peugeot blocking the road with its bonnet up. They got out to see if they could help and were gunned down. It took two of three days for the police of Bagnoles to learn what had happened. A hairdresser, who had been riding her bike past the spot soon after the murder, reported seeing a pool of blood on the road by a parked car. Then a man stumbled on the bodies when he took to the side of the road to answer a call of nature.

ALCUNI DI COLORO CHE  
per ordine di **MUSSOLINI**  
assassinarono  
**Carlo e Nello ROSSELLI**  
ARRESTATI IN FRANCIA E CONFESSI



In reporting the arrest of the assassins of the Rosselli brothers, *Giustizia e Libertà* (14/1/1938) also denounces Mussolini's responsibility for their death. (Source: 1870/1945 *Scrivere Libero Fuori d'Italia*, Ediesse, Rome: June 1985.

Although the arms cache was delivered, the fascist coup planned for Paris fell through because there was insufficient support for it within the French army. The assassins were caught and sentenced to gaol terms, but they were free men not long after the outbreak of the war, because they volunteered. After the invasion of France, some of the assassins fought on the side of Vichy, and at least one went to Spain, where he set up a famous cosmetics company which would serve as a bolt hole for those who had to escape once the Germans were defeated.

One may ask what relevance this story has to Australia. Salvemini and his group were serious students of democracy and the cause for a republic in Italy. Their ideas demonstrate the type of freedom it is possible to have in a democratic country; historically, they constantly encountered the boundaries of democracy, and thus helped to define them.

ENDNOTES

1. Gianfranco Cresciani *Fascism, Antifascism and Italians in Australia, 1922-1945*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1980.
2. Renato Monteleone, *Filippo Turati*, Utet, Torino, 1987.
3. William L. Shirer, *The collapse of the Third Republic*, Heinemann/Secker and Warburg, 1969.
4. Gaetano Salvemini, *The Origin of Fascism in Italy*, Harper and Row, New York. First published in 1972 from a lecture course prepared in 1942 at Harvard.
5. Giovanni Belardelli, *Nello Rosselli - uno storico antifascista*, Passigli, Firenze, 1982.