

# THE ITALY I SAW IN 1939

JOHN CAMERON

WHEN my wife and I informed our friends that we had decided to visit Italy during the spring of 1939, they considered that we were taking undue risks, in view of the gravity of the international situation. The war of nerves being directed against Albania by the Fascist propagandists was then in full blast. This was regarded on all sides as the prelude to an immediate invasion of that small country. The Nazis had recently invaded Czechoslovakia, and announced its future status to be that of a German Protectorate. Hitler's accomplice, Mussolini, therefore argued that, as the Abyssinian campaign had been successfully concluded, the time was ripe for a further Fascist aggression.

By good fortune, we chanced to be in Rome during the celebrations in honour of the conquest of Albania. One day we noticed that the whole city had been placarded, inviting the populace to assemble at 8.30 that evening on the Piazza in front of the Quirinal Palace. When we arrived, we found the place filled with a noisy, hysterical crowd of demonstrators, many of whom were waving Italian and Albanian flags. It was evident that a large stock of the latter had been collected in anticipation of this event. A number of youths had climbed the ornamental lamp posts in front of the palace, and were waving flags, and shouting excitedly. These antics were evidently meant as an invitation to Their Majesties to make their appearance. The windows of the palace were outlined with fairy lamps, thus providing plenty of illumination to show what was going on. We waited over half an hour in the midst of this din before anything happened. The excitement grew intense as the French windows leading on to the balcony above the main entrance were opened. Two footmen in resplendent uniforms stepped out, and placed a richly embroidered cloth over the edge of the balcony. At the same time, several individuals, evidently secret service men, appeared on the parapet of the palace above the balcony, obviously to safeguard the lives of the King and Queen. Then Their Majesties appeared, to the accompaniment of much cheering, clapping of hands, and swaying of the closely packed crowd, whose enthusiasm was obviously very sincere. Queen Elena, who is an unusually tall woman, made a truly regal figure, and this effect was heightened when the diamonds of her tiara caught

the glint of the illuminations. The King, a man of very short stature, looked insignificant by contrast, as his head did not extend very much above the edge of the balcony. As I could not participate in the celebrations, I was able to watch the reactions of the crowd generally, and was in a position to glean a certain amount of interesting information. For example, many of the people stood stock still and silent during the whole of the proceedings, and in fact displayed no enthusiasm at all. This impression was confirmed by later enquiries, which served to demonstrate the significant fact that a certain proportion of the Italian people were not in sympathy with the aggressive policy of their Fascist leaders.

We spent the remainder of the evening viewing the elaborate illuminations. Probably the most effective was that afforded by the floodlit Coliseum, as seen from the Piazza Venezia along the recently completed Via dell'Impero. The elaborate King Victor Emmanuel II monument was illuminated by hundreds of fairy lamps. The Palazzo Venezia, then official residence of Mussolini, which faces this monument, was aglow with lamps, their lights flickering in the breeze. For a few moments we watched the sentries on duty in front of the Palazzo. As they marched to and fro, they appeared to be adapting themselves to the occasion by aping the German goose-step more than ever. We were informed next day that Mussolini was not in residence there on that historic evening, as he was entertaining Goering, then on a visit to Rome, at his private residence in the outskirts of the city. The visit of this Nazi, "prominent" in more senses than one, had of course to be signalized by wreath laying. When we visited the Pantheon, we detected a jarring note in the solemnity of this sacred building, namely, two huge wreaths several feet in diameter, with very broad ribbons, bearing the name Goering in gilt letters. He had visited the Pantheon the previous day. One wreath was prominently placed in front of the bronze sarcophagus of Victor Emmanuel II, the first King of United Italy, the other was in front of the tombs of King Humbert I, the father of the present King, and Queen Margherita, who was for so long the idol of her people.

The Via Nazionale was thronged with sightseers, a large proportion of whom were in uniform. It excited one's curiosity to notice comparatively young officers sporting at least one row of medal ribbons, evidently gained in Abyssinia or possibly

in Spain. This indiscriminate showering of decorations seemed a cheap way of glorifying war, and had a disturbing effect on us.

The city, and in fact the whole country, was thronged with German visitors, evidently brought south for the occasion. They belonged to various grades of society, if one may judge from the behaviour of some of them, and had no doubt travelled to Italy under Ley's "Strength through Joy" movement. A considerable contingent was housed at our hotel. One evening at dinner my wife said, "Look at that dreadful man." I gazed in the direction indicated, and noticed a German bending over his food, and literally shovelling it into his mouth, to a somewhat noisy accompaniment. The waiters standing on duty along one side of the dining hall were whispering to each other, and surreptitiously directing the attention of their neighbours to this man's antics.

This "invasion" was not universally welcomed by the populace, a fact which was brought very forcibly to our minds by an Italian at this hotel. He made the totally unsolicited remark—"We like you Britishers, but we hate these Germans"! This heavy tourist traffic had also an interesting economic explanation. It was an essential part of a plan to help in the liquidation of the large adverse trade balance which Germany possessed against Italy.

In Rome we were fortunate in having the services of a guide who was a lecturer on the staff of the University. Throughout our stay he was on all occasions courteous and obliging, and eager to impart information. He was, moreover, very cautious and diplomatic in his utterances. For example, when we came to the immense maps which Mussolini has had erected on the Via dell'Impero, he refused to make any comments. One of these showed the Ancient Roman Empire, and the other displayed what Mussolini would desire the future Italian Empire to be. Our guide was, however, most anxious to show us the great improvements Mussolini had effected in his policy of beautifying Rome. For instance, the creation of the Via dell'Impero now affords an unobstructed view of the Coliseum from the Piazza Venezia, which might be appropriately termed the hub of the city. To carry out this project, much undesirable property had to be demolished, and the Via will be a noble thoroughfare, when it has been lined with suitable buildings.

The Mussolini Forum and Stadia are other great achievements. One stadium is built entirely of marble, and is surrounded by ninety-four beautiful statues, representing ancient and

modern athletes, gifts from the cities of Italy. With it are associated an immense indoor swimming pool and a school of physical training, the idea being to improve the physical and general well being of Young Italy. Near at hand are the Olympic Stadium and Tennis Courts. The most amazing sight of all is the double row of square shaped marble blocks, each at least two tons in weight. On these Mussolini meant that the history of Fascist Italy should be inscribed. One block already records the fact that in October, 1935, the League of Nations applied sanctions against Italy. Mussolini's motto—"Book and gun, perfect Fascist" expresses one of the ideals of Ancient Rome, namely, that the exercise of the mind and body is necessary for the perfect balance of the human faculties. The new University City and Mussolini's Forum are concrete symbols of this motto.

We had some amusing adventures at Naples and Pompeii. We arranged to visit the island of Capri, and booked seats on the steamer for the following day. We were expressly told not to come to the point of departure until 8.30 a.m. On arrival there, we at once saw the reason. The whole of the promenade deck was closely packed with German tourists, and we had to be content with seats in the smoke room downstairs. We determined to correct this on the return journey in the evening. We arrived at the steamer nearly one hour before the time of departure, and secured seats in the most favourable position to view the subsequent proceedings. We were not disappointed. The crowd came hurrying on board, jostling one another in a none too friendly fashion. There was a rather unseemly scramble for seats, accompanied by unpleasant displays of selfishness. Some of these prosperous looking Germans had forgotten to watch their *avoids*, and as a consequence required more than their due share of seating accommodation. Not content with this, some of them sat with their knees well apart, so as to increase still more their "Lebensraum" or rather their "Sitzraum". As a result, several members of the party never secured a seat at all, and had to stand all the way back to Naples.

At Capri we had, of course, to visit the famous Blue Grotto. Our boatman was in a talkative mood, and said to my wife "Ar you American"? "No," she replied, "we are English." At this he began to regard us with a none too favourable eye. She continued, "We live in England, but we are really Scottish". The man's face brightened at once. He patted her gently on

the shoulder, and said "Ah, good, good"! Poor England, "perfidious Albion", always seems to be regarded as the arch enemy. If he only knew the stupendous effort that little Scotland is making in this war, our Capri boatman would soon change his tune!

At Naples we had a grand view of Italy's squadron of 10,000 ton 8-inch gun cruisers, of which Mussolini was so justly proud. There is now only one survivor up to date. We observed that they were all apparently named after towns in territory ceded to Italy after the last war—Trento, Botzano, Trieste, etc.

When we visited Pompeii we found ourselves absorbed in a party of Germans. The guide gave his descriptions in German. Although we understood what he was saying, we always insisted on his repeating his words in English. During the day we noticed that one German woman was particularly aggressive, and pushed her way rather forcibly, so as to get as near to the guide as possible. At one point she elbowed my wife, who, having been three years at school in Germany, was enabled to give her a brief but effective talk on good manners in her own language. The woman was so taken aback by this sudden and, indeed, rather unexpected attack, that she fled speechless to the rear of the party, and made no further molestations.

Vesuvius was very active during our stay. We ascended the mountain, and had a good view of the flames and the streams of molten lava. The effect by night was of course much more impressive. We are now glad to note, from the R.A.F. reports, that this activity is still being maintained, and that the famous mountain is acting as a friendly beacon to guide our gallant airmen to their objectives at Naples.\*

One day when our steamer called at Sorrento we were greeted by the following slogan, painted in large white letters on the stonework of the pier—CREDERE, OBBEDIRE, COMBATTERE. We are now wondering how many Italians are willing to *believe* in the Fascist philosophy, what proportion of the population is ready to *obey* its edicts, and how many of its young men are ready to *fight* for what they must now recognize to be a lost cause?

The words *il duce* were displayed everywhere with exasperating persistence. We saw them on a stretch of railings at least half a mile long at a small town near Genoa. The wording, for obvious reasons, could be read as one approached from either direction. After one had seen half a mile of them, these words became decidedly monotonous, and must have impressed any

\* Written before Italy's capitulation—EDITOR.

right minded person with their utter futility. No farm buildings, as seen from the railways, seemed to be immune from the egoistic self-advertisement of this megalomaniac. My wife made an extensive list of the slogans we saw, and the exigencies of space prevent one from recording them. I will quote only one—"The Creed of the Fascists is heroism, that of the Bourgeoisie is egoism". Comment is needless.

We chanced to be in Sorrento on the day that Count Ciano made a broadcast to the whole nation, announcing officially that Albania had been incorporated in the Italian Empire. A loud speaker on the roof of a building facing the main Piazza was blaring forth the speech to an assembled crowd. We thought we had better pause and listen, as no one else was on the move. We heard one or two voices in the crowd murmuring the word "Inglese", so we considered it advisable to pass on. I wish at this point to place on record the fact that we received nothing but courtesy and kindness from the Italian people during our stay. On no occasion was there ever a single jarring note. One outstanding recollection is the soft speaking voice of the genial monk, who conducted us through the gloomy galleries of the catacombs of Saint Sebastian with appropriate dignity befitting the solemn occasion.

At Venice we had an experience which showed how much Italy was willing to bend the knee to its German masters, even at that time. One evening, on appearing for dinner at the usual time at our hotel, we were informed that our meal would have to be delayed for an hour. The reason given was that a large German contingent, which had been travelling all day, had just arrived, and would have to be served first!

We had an interesting sidelight at Venice on German propaganda regarding the bombing of monuments and other buildings of cultural and artistic value. St. Mark's Cathedral is universally recognized as a gem of Byzantine architecture. Ruskin described it as an "illuminated missal in mosaic". During the last war an enemy raider dropped a bomb which was evidently intended for the cathedral. Fortunately it just missed, and fell on the pavement in front. Apart from damage due to splinters, the building escaped practically unscathed. We have had many examples of Nazi bombs dropped on cultural monuments in Britain and other countries during the present war. The Nazis evidently accept the principle that they are quite at liberty to bomb such buildings in other countries. On the other hand, they appear to argue that it is quite wrong

to bomb cultural monuments when these happen to be situated in Germany itself.

The Fascists tried to conceal their preparations for war as much as possible. One feature, however, they could not hide from public scrutiny, namely, the immense stocks of coal that had been hoarded up. At all important railway centres these were many acres in extent. Apart from a small amount mined in Sardinia, the country is dependent upon importation for this vital war material.

No visit to Italy is complete without a visit to the Italian Lakes. We had a most pleasant time at Stresa on Lake Maggiore. The great attraction there is Isola Bella, the appropriately named *beautiful island*, which is situated a little over a mile from the shore. It is almost entirely occupied by the Borromeo Palace and its wonderful terraced gardens in which the famous white peacocks strut about on the lawns. The Stresa Conference was held in a room in this palace, and the framed treaty still hangs upon the wall. On it we saw the signatures of Ramsay Macdonald, Mussolini, Flandin and Laval, that most despicable of quislings. It provides the moral that it never pays to organize conferences with potential gangsters and traitors. It is interesting to note that Napoleon once lived in this palace during an Italian campaign. His bedroom is still preserved in its original state. It was significant to observe that the two wash hand stands were very low, in order to conform to the short stature of the "little corporal".

During part of our railway journey we had the company of one of Mussolini's bodyguards. He was continually bombarding us with questions, and we were just as eager to be non-committal in our answers. When I told him that I had held a University professorship in Canada, he showered on me many leading questions about the Dominion. Our conversation naturally drifted towards the international situation, and he asked what I thought Canada would do in the event of a European war. My answer was brief and to the point. I said that Canada would do exactly the same as the other Dominions.

A reference to Garibaldi's famous curse will form an appropriate postscript. It was part of a letter, dated April 12, 1854, written to Joseph Cowen, the leader of a deputation which on the previous day had presented to Garibaldi a sword of honour on behalf of "The People of Tyneside, friends of European Freedom". The vital part of the letter is as follows:

England is a great and powerful nation, independent of auxiliary aid, foremost in human progress, enemy to despotism, the only safe refuge for the exile in Europe, friend of the oppressed. But if ever England should be so circumstanced as to require the help of an ally, cursed be that Italian who would not step forward with me in her defence . . . Should England at any time in a just cause need my arm, I am ready to unsheathe in her defence the noble and splendid sword received at your hands.