

Britain, Ireland
and the
Italian Risorgimento

Nick Carter

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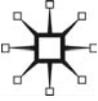
Britain, Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento

Edited by

Nick Carter

Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia

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For Dave
The sun rises and rises again

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Notes on Contributors

Joan Allen is Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at Newcastle University and Director of the North East England History Institute (NEEHI). She has served as a secretary, senior editor and vice-chair of *Labour History Review* and is co-convenor of the annual Chartism conference. She is the author of *Joseph Cowen and Popular Radicalism on Tyneside, 1829–1900* (2007), and is co-editor of *Faith of Our Fathers: Popular Culture and Belief in Post-Reformation England, Ireland and Wales* (2009), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (2010), and *Papers for the People: A History of the Chartist Press* (2005). She is preparing a monograph on the Irish Catholic press in Britain, 1884–1934, and her most recent work is a contribution to Laurence Marley (ed.) *The British Labour Party and Twentieth-Century Ireland: The Cause of Ireland, the Cause of Labour?* (2015).

Raffaella Antinucci is Associate Professor in English Literature at the University of Naples “Parthenope” and former lecturer in Italian at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She took her PhDs in English Studies and Italian Studies at the University “G. d’Annunzio” of Chieti-Pescara, Italy. Her main areas of research include Victorian culture and fiction, literature and cinema, comparative literatures and corpus stylistics. She is the author of a monograph on the literary representations of the Victorian gentleman (*Sulle orme del gentiluomo: percorsi narrativi ed episteme vittoriana*, 2009) and of essays on Dickens, Collins, Gaskell, D. G. Rossetti, Newman, Henry James, E. M. Forster and Joyce. She has co-edited the volume *Migrating Cultures and the Dynamic of Exchange* (2011) and a special number of the academic journal *Rivista di studi vittoriani/Review of Victorian Studies* (2012) on Edward Lear. She is currently completing a study on the English fiction of Giovanni Ruffini.

Elena Bacchin has a PhD in Modern History from the University of Padua, and she is now finishing her second doctorate at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy. She is the author of *Italo filia. Opinione pubblica britannica e Risorgimento italiano, 1847–64* (2014) and of several articles on transnational history, nationalism, political mobilization and the public sphere.

Nick Carter is Associate Professor of Modern History at the Australian Catholic University, Sydney. He has written widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian history. His recent publications include *Modern Italy in Historical Perspective* (2010), and 'Sir James Hudson nella diplomazia inglese della seconda metà dell'Ottocento', in E. Greppi and E. Pagella (eds) *Sir James Hudson nel Risorgimento italiano* (2012). His current research examines the survival, restoration and historicisation of Fascist art and architecture in post-war and contemporary Rome. He is the reviews editor for *Modern Italy* and an executive member of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy.

Chiara Chini has a PhD from the University of Florence. Her dissertation examined Irish–Italian political and diplomatic relations in the inter-war period. Her areas of interest include the history of Fascism (with a particular interest in Fascism in the Anglophone world), international and cross-national dynamics of the inter-war extreme right, international relations, and British and Irish contemporary history.

Michael Huggins is Senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Chester. His doctoral studies at the University of Liverpool focussed on agrarian conflict in pre-famine Ireland and he won the Becket Prize in Irish History (2000) for his work. He has published widely on pre-famine social conflict and political radicalism, including essays on Chartism in Ireland, and a monograph, *Social Conflict in Pre-Famine Ireland* (2007). In recent years, he has been interested in the Young Ireland movement and, in particular, the politics of John Mitchel. He has contributed articles on mid-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism to a range of scholarly journals. More recently, he has returned to the subject of pre-famine conflict in rural Ireland, contributing a chapter to *Crime, Violence and the Irish in the Nineteenth Century* (forthcoming, 2015).

Anne O'Connor lectures in Italian in the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, National University of Ireland, Galway. Her research interests include nineteenth-century Italian literature and history, Irish–Italian relations and translation history. She is the author of *Florence: City and Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (published in Italian as *Firenze: La città e la memoria nell'Ottocento*, 2008) and Italian editor and translator of *European Romanticism: A Reader* (2010). She has also co-edited *Nation/Nazione: Irish Nationalism and the Italian Risorgimento* (2013). She has translated the Italian correspondence of Cardinal Paul Cullen for the Irish Manuscripts Commission and is Principal Investigator in the

research project Translation in Nineteenth-Century Ireland (www.translationhistory.ie).

Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe is a postdoctoral fellow at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. Her research has focussed on nineteenth-century British radicalism, transnationalism, the history of co-operation, the history of education and the history of the Italian Risorgimento (with studies on Garibaldi and on the ‘Mazzinian international’). In 2013 she was an award holder at the British School at Rome. She has published articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *Labour History Review* (2012), *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2012, 2013), *Modern Italy* (2010), *History Workshop Journal* (2013) and *History of Education Journal* (2014) as well as chapters in edited books. Her monograph *Victorian Radicals and Italian Democrats* (2014) won the 2012 Scouloudi Historical Award. She is an executive member of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy.

O. J. Wright is Lecturer in International History at the University of Ulster. He teaches across the field of modern European history, and has published articles on various aspects of Britain’s relationship with Italy in *European History Quarterly*, *Historical Journal*, *Crime, History and Societies* and *International History Review*. He has also published in the *In Medias Res* series of interdisciplinary papers on British–Italian cultural transactions. He is currently undertaking a British Academy-funded research project on Britain and the unification of Italy.

Introduction: Britain, Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento

Nick Carter

Britain, Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento brings together scholars working in and across a range of academic disciplines in order to examine British and Irish responses to the Italian national question in the mid-nineteenth century, and the impact of the Risorgimento on mid-century British and Irish politics, society and culture. The book also considers British attitudes towards Italy in the decades immediately following Italian unification, and Italian views of Ireland and Britain during and after the Irish War of Independence, 1919–21. The book focusses on two key themes: nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalism and the construction of national identity (British, Irish and Italian); and the roles of religion, exile, politics and culture in shaping nationalist movements and national identities (both internally and externally perceived). As such, the book not only builds on the now well-established idea of the nation as an ‘imagined community’, but it also extends the methods and approaches of the ‘new cultural historians’ of the Italian Risorgimento such as Lucy Riall, Alberto Banti and Silvana Patriarca to the transnational context. In this respect, the book goes a step further than Riall and Patriarca’s *The Risorgimento Revisited* (2011), which explores how ‘the idea, or better the imaginary, of the nation [was] formulated, represented and expressed’ in Italy.¹ This study examines how, why and to what extent the idea of an Italian nation took root, was popularised and opposed in mid-century Britain and Ireland, and how and why the idea of ‘Italy’ could be (and was) used to construct and reinforce both positive and negative notions of Britishness (specifically Englishness) and Irishness. In this context, the study of Britain and Ireland in relation to the Risorgimento is important. From the Act of Union (1801) until the Anglo–Irish treaty of 1921 establishing the Irish Free State, all Ireland – southern as well as northern – was part of

the United Kingdom. As I argue in this introduction, the way in which the British (or at least British Protestants) viewed Italy was heavily conditioned by the way in which they conceived the 'Irish question' in the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, Ireland's relationship with Britain helped to shape Irish (or at least Catholic Irish) reactions to the Risorgimento. Relations with Britain also influenced Italian views of the Irish national struggle, both during and after the Risorgimento period. For example, Giuseppe Mazzini's rejection of Irish nationalism in the late 1840s – the Irish, he claimed, did not constitute 'a distinct, a separate nationality' – stemmed from his fear of alienating influential British support for Italian independence.² 'We have no Irish in the Council [of the People's International League]', Mazzini confessed in 1847, 'because then the question of Repeal [of the Act of Union] would come into play which would be fatal'.³ Mazzini even suggested the Irish Repeal Movement give its support 'to the Liberal cause in the British parliament',⁴ a good example of Mazzini's 'licking the arse of the English liberal bourgeoisie', as Karl Marx put it.⁵ Conversely, as Chiara Chini demonstrates in her chapter, Britain's refusal to support Italian territorial claims in the Adriatic after the First World War led the Italian nationalist and Fascist press to embrace the Irish War of Independence as an 'Irish Risorgimento' against an oppressive imperial power.

The historiographical context

Since the time of G. M. Trevelyan, successive generations of British historians of Italy have explored the British response(s) to the Risorgimento.⁶ Indeed, the list reads like a 'who's who' of leading British Italianists: Trevelyan, Denis Mack Smith, Derek Beales, Harry Hearder, John Davis, Paul Ginsborg, Christopher Duggan and Lucy Riall have all tackled the topic, either in general terms (notably Trevelyan, Mack Smith, Beales, and, more recently, Ginsborg, Duggan and Riall) or in relation to particular periods, events, issues and individuals.⁷ Other historians writing in English (but not necessarily British themselves) have also made important contributions to our understanding of the period. Among older works, those by Miriam Urban (1938) on the English press and the Risorgimento and Harry W. Rudman (1940) on the relations between Italian exiles in England (primarily Mazzini) and Victorian writers stand out for the depth and breadth of their research and analysis.⁸ (Both studies also had a contemporary political relevance, their publications coinciding with the rapid deterioration in relations between Britain and Fascist Italy in the late 1930s, which culminated in Mussolini's

declaration of war on Britain and France in June 1940.) English language studies of a more recent vintage have covered a wide range of subjects. Nick Carter, Owain Wright and Danilo Raponi have examined aspects of British policy in Italy before and after unification.⁹ C. T. McIntire and Saho Matsumoto-Best have written in-depth monographs on British diplomacy and the 'Roman question'.¹⁰ The 'linguistic turn' in the last couple of decades has given rise to several innovative studies on Italy and the Risorgimento in the English political and cultural imagination (see, for example, those by Maura O'Connor, Annemarie McAllister and Lucy Turner Voakes).¹¹ Historians meanwhile continue to discuss the influence of Italian exiles – notably Mazzini – on English politics and society (see in this regard the works by Gregory Claeys, David Laven, Maurizio Isabella and Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe), as well as the importance of the Garibaldi 'myth' in England (Sutcliffe the most recent example).¹² Similarly, many Italian historians have written in Italian on the subject, including Adolfo Colombo, Alfredo Signoretti, Emilia Morelli, Ottavio Barie, Giuseppe Giarrizzo, Carlo de Cugis, Massimo de Leonardis, Franco Valsecchi, and more recently Pietro Pastorelli and Elena Bacchin.¹³ Of the historians listed above, Carter, Wright, Sutcliffe and Bacchin all contribute to this volume.

In contrast to the long-standing and substantial historiography on Britain and the Italian Risorgimento, historians have traditionally shown very little interest in Irish responses to Italian nationalism. Indeed, at the end of the twentieth century the 'serious' academic literature on the subject did not extend much beyond *Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento*, a collection of essays edited by R. Dudley Edwards and published in 1960.¹⁴ Much has changed in the last decade or so. Thanks to the work of historians such as Michele Finelli, Jennifer O'Brien, Colin Barr and Anne O'Connor, we are now much more aware of the complex and important 'interactions and intersections'¹⁵ that existed between Irish and Italian nationalisms in the mid-nineteenth century, and of the Risorgimento's impact in Ireland. *Nation/Nazione: Irish Nationalism and the Italian Risorgimento* (2013), edited by Finelli, Barr and O'Connor, represents the current 'state of the art' in this regard.¹⁶ O'Connor also contributes to the present volume.

The contrasts between the two historiographies (Britain and the Risorgimento; Ireland and the Risorgimento) are in part a reflection of the very different positions that Britain and Ireland occupied internationally in the nineteenth century. Britain was a great European power, its interests and history enmeshed with those of the continent. The same could not be said for poor, underdeveloped, peripheral, oppressed Ireland.

Mass migration from Ireland to the New World appeared to take Ireland even further away from Europe. For historians of nineteenth-century Britain, it was impossible to ignore the European (and by extension, the Italian) dimensions of that history. For historians of nineteenth-century Ireland it was all too easy to do so; as Barr and O'Connor note, the chief characteristic of the historiography of nineteenth-century Ireland is its insularity.¹⁷

There is, though, perhaps another reason for the great disparity between the coverage of British and Irish attitudes towards Italian nationalism. The Italian 'struggle' for independence generated enormous enthusiasm in Britain (although, as we shall see, it was not as deep, widespread or as constant as historians have sometimes assumed). In Ireland, the Catholic majority sided with the papacy against the nationalist movement; loyalty to the pope outweighed any sympathy for the Italian national 'cause'. The British backed the winners – the nationalists – who were widely considered at the time (and subsequently) to represent the forces of 'modernity'. British sympathies, in other words, appeared to have been 'wisely directed', and official British policy in Italy had been a marked success, 'in an epoch when our other dealings with the outer world were a series of well-meant blunders'.¹⁸ This was an attractive story for historians to tell.¹⁹ Catholic Ireland, on the other hand, backed the losers, the opponents of Italian 'freedom': not just the pope, whose once extensive temporal authority across central Italy was reduced to the Vatican and its immediate surrounds, but by extension the Austrians (who lost Lombardy [1859] and Venetia [1866]) and the Bourbon monarchy in southern Italy (effectively ousted by Garibaldi in 1860). History is rarely interested in losers. Moreover, to oppose the nationalist cause was to support (intentionally or not) absolutist, repressive and (in the case of Austria) foreign rule in Italy. Irish opposition, then, looked like a straightforward case of reaction and historians have been far quicker to dismiss than to study such attitudes.

Britain and the Italian Risorgimento

There is abundant evidence of widespread sympathy, support and enthusiasm for the Italian national cause in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Among the political elite, the Italian proclivities of Lord John Russell and Lord Palmerston were such that Queen Victoria referred to them as her 'Old Italian Masters'.²⁰ Gladstone's long journey from conservatism to liberalism received a decisive push in mid-1859 when he joined Palmerston's Whig government – a decision taken by Gladstone based

on the new administration's pro-Italian stance. At the end of 1860, Gladstone felt so moved by recent events in Italy that he wrote to his friend Antonio Panizzi that 'She (Italy) has been to me for the past 18 months, a principal cause not only of joy and satisfaction but even of the desire for political existence'.²¹ The noted social reformer and evangelist (and Palmerston's son-in-law), Lord Shaftesbury, was equally effusive, judging Garibaldi in 1860 to be the 'noblest hero and champion since the days of Gideon, or the Maccabees'.²² Some in the diplomatic corps, notably Sir James Hudson, the influential British minister at Turin (1852–63), were also strong advocates of Italian 'freedom'. In 1851, Hudson had replied to Palmerston's offer of a post in Italy thus:

At Florence, or at Milan, Venice, Bologna, or Naples, I was made to study Italy: I was taught how the soul and body of poor Italia was bound in fetters – and it was pointed out to me that it would be a crowning work to deliver her from bondage.²³

This was not the usual language of diplomacy. (Such was Hudson's dedication to the Italian nationalist cause that following his death in Florence in 1885, the Florentine *comune* erected in his honour a plaque on the house in which he had lived for much of his retirement. In late 2010, the Turin authorities erected a similar plaque on the building that had housed the British legation in Hudson's time.)

Support or sympathy 'for Italy' stretched well beyond the confines of politics and diplomacy. Among the British *litterati*, we find many Italian enthusiasts. The poet Walter Savage Landor, for example, announced in an open letter published in 1856 that he was contributing £100 to the Italian republican cause, £5 of which was to go towards the purchase of muskets, with the remaining £95 reserved 'for the family of the first patriot who asserts by action the dignity of tyrannicide'.²⁴ (Landor did not say which Italian ruler(s) he wanted dead; but it certainly landed him in trouble.) In 1860, and by then virtually penniless, Landor donated his watch to a subscription fund set up in Florence in support of Garibaldi's Sicilian expedition.²⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning was another devotee. 'If ever there was a holy cause it is this; if ever there was a war on which we may lawfully ask God's blessing, it is this', she enthused to her father in the spring of 1859 as war raged in northern Italy between Piedmont-France and Austria.²⁶ (Barrett Browning collapsed when she heard of the Franco–Austrian armistice of Villafranca [8 July 1859], which left Austria still in control of the Veneto. 'Dizzy with grief' at the news, Barrett Browning's ever-fragile health gave way and she was confined

to bed for three weeks.)²⁷ The list goes on. Meredith, Tennyson, Clough, Swinburne, George Eliot, Dickens, the Carlyles, all embraced in one way or another the concept of an Italian Risorgimento – as did Florence Nightingale (named after the city of her birth), who in 1848 was already writing of the ‘glory’ of the Italian ‘cause’ and who in 1860 gave money in support of Garibaldi’s Sicily expedition.²⁸

Pro-Italian sentiment was evident, too, beyond elite (that is, middle- and upper-class) circles. In 1854, hundreds of workers in Newcastle contributed to a penny subscription fund set up to purchase a sword and telescope in honour of Garibaldi when the Italian revolutionary visited the city. A list of contributors to a later Emancipation of Italy Fund (1856) in the Newcastle area, which called on the ‘workmen of England’ to assist the cause of Italian freedom, shows donations from potters, bakers, tailors and printers, while workers from the small town of Hawick raised £37 (roughly equivalent to £1600 today), again mainly through penny subscriptions.²⁹ Pro-Mazzinian British radicals were more often than not involved in these initiatives. Among these was the secularist George Holyoake, best known for his championing of the co-operative movement in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Holyoake is an interesting, if extreme, example of how far some British radicals were prepared to go in support of Italian nationalism. In 1856, he was involved in early tests of the bombs later used by Felice Orsini in his attempted assassination of Napoleon III. In 1857, he agreed to hide an Italian ‘patriot’ following the stabbing of four French agents in London. In 1860, he was instrumental in raising a British volunteer force of between 600 and 1000 men to fight alongside Garibaldi in southern Italy.³⁰ Joan Allen and Elena Bacchin examine the connections between British radicalism and (Mazzinian) Italian nationalism in Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume.

Garibaldi’s conquest of Sicily in 1860 saw British political and popular enthusiasm for Italian nationalism reach new heights. Besides the British Garibaldi Legion, public meetings and subscriptions in support of the *Mille* sprang up across the country, while newspapers compared Garibaldi to (among others) Caesar, Cincinnatus, Oliver Cromwell, Hannibal, Napoleon, St George, William of Orange, William Wallace and George Washington. Meanwhile, moving panoramas showing Garibaldi’s Sicilian achievements toured provincial theatres from September 1860, attracting ‘large audiences’; a stage play simply entitled ‘Garibaldi’ opened in London as early as August 1860.³¹

Garibaldi remained an extraordinarily popular figure in Britain in the years following the formal unification of Italy in 1861. Indeed, as John

Davis has written, 'the reception he received on his visit to London in 1864 was probably without precedent'.³² So large was the crowd that met Garibaldi on his arrival in the capital that it took him five and a half hours to travel the three miles to his destination.³³ During his 12 days in London, men and women of all classes and rank clamoured to meet, honour, hear, touch, or simply glimpse the Italian hero. Some literally sang his praises: 'No lordling knight this chieftain / No blood-born Prince is he / but Europe's noble mentor / Saviour of I-ta-ly', went one popular song of the time.³⁴ Paul Ginsborg has described the welcome given to Garibaldi in 1864 as the 'most dramatic expression' and 'culminating celebration' of the 'propulsive myth' of the Risorgimento in Britain.³⁵

Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento

In her groundbreaking 2005 article on 'Irish Public Opinion and the Risorgimento, 1859–60', Jennifer O'Brien demonstrated how events in Italy in these crucial years of the Risorgimento were followed in Ireland with 'intense interest, largely because of the papacy's involvement'.³⁶ Irish public opinion split along sectarian lines. On the one hand, many within the minority Protestant community in Ireland supported the Italian nationalist movement, in large measure because of its anti-Catholic/anti-papal character. This was particularly the case within Irish evangelical Protestantism, which 'dominated mainstream Presbyterianism and formed an influential minority in the Church of Ireland'. To evangelicals, the papacy was the Antichrist, and the Risorgimento 'part of the eternal struggle between true religion and the powers of darkness'.³⁷ As Anne O'Connor shows in her contribution to this volume, this explains the extremely warm reception given by Irish Protestants to the itinerant Italian nationalist preacher Alessandro Gavazzi, who made frequent lecture tours of the country in the 1850s and 1860s inveighing against the evils of Catholicism. Gavazzi's declaration that 'all true Italians swear to destroy the papacy' because the pope was the enemy of Italian freedom, exerted a powerful hold over the Irish Protestant imagination.³⁸

From an Irish Catholic perspective, Italian nationalism posed an unacceptable threat to the temporal and spiritual authority of the pope. Hence, Irish Catholics rallied to the papal cause *against* the Risorgimento.³⁹ In the 1859 general election, enfranchised Irish Catholics voted in large numbers for the traditionally anti-Catholic Tories because of the Whigs' pro-Italian stance. In late 1859, as revolution threatened papal rule across central Italy, huge crowds, mobilised by the clergy, gathered in 'monster meetings' in Irish towns and cities to demonstrate their support for the

pope.⁴⁰ In the space of just a few months in 1860, Irish Catholics donated £80,000 through 'Peter's Pence' collections towards the defence of the papacy, an enormous amount given the general poverty of the population. At the same time, 1300 Irish volunteers made their way to Italy to defend papal temporal rule in central Italy against national encroachment. The so-called 'Battalion of St Patrick' or 'Irish Brigade' would have been much larger but for a cap imposed by Church authorities.⁴¹

Colin Barr has examined the role of the head of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Paul Cullen, in mobilising Irish Catholic opinion against the Risorgimento in the 1850s and 1860s. Cullen had left Ireland to study in Rome in 1820, where he remained until 1850 when he returned to Ireland as the new Archbishop of Armagh. He became Archbishop of Dublin two years later. Cullen dominated the Irish Catholic Church for the next quarter of a century, bringing it into line with Roman orthodoxy while at the same time greatly expanding its 'power, reach, size and uniformity (devotional, political, administrative)'.⁴²

Cullen's hostility towards Italian nationalism had deep roots, dating back to his early years in Rome. However, it was his first-hand experience of revolution in Rome in 1848 that, in Barr's view, 'confirmed all of Cullen's prejudices and fears'.⁴³ Italian nationalism, which Cullen took to mean Mazzinian nationalism, was an 'evil' to be resisted and opposed at all costs. Not only was it revolutionary, democratic and republican – all of which were, of course, anathema to Cullen – but, as the murder of the pope's interior minister and the subsequent flight of Pius IX from Rome in November 1848 demonstrated, it was also anti-papal, if not actually atheistic. Mazzini himself was, in Cullen's opinion, 'the arch-enemy of the Church of God'.⁴⁴ Cullen's antipathy towards Italian nationalism did not lessen during the 1850s, despite the growing influence of moderate, monarchical 'liberal nationalism': Italian nationalism in whatever guise was antithetical to papal temporal (and by extension, spiritual) rule.

As Barr shows, Cullen's almost pathological fear/hatred of Italian nationalism not only fed and sharpened Irish Catholic opposition to the Risorgimento but it also affected the development of Irish nationalism after the collapse of the 'Young Ireland' movement in 1848. Cullen opposed the national-liberal Independent Irish Party (IIP, 1852–58) because he considered one of its leaders, Charles Gavan Duffy, to be 'an Irish Mazzini', despite ample evidence to the contrary.⁴⁵ 'The young Irishers', Cullen observed in late 1853 with Duffy clearly in mind, 'act just as the Mazzinians did in Italy – Evviva Pio Nono just as they are going to crucify him'.⁴⁶ According to Barr, Cullen's pursuit of Duffy effectively killed the IIP.⁴⁷