

The English Lady

‘As a boy I remember the English lady being driven round in a carriage by Faustino Magri. That would have been in 1930 or thereabouts.’ My informant was Antonio, one of the oldest residents in Bogliaco, a village to the south of Gargnano on the western shore of Lake Garda. The carriage driver Antonio referred to had, by 1930, entered into English literature by way of an essay devoted to him in D.H. Lawrence’s book, *Twilight in Italy*, first published in 1916. Taking its title from Faustino’s nickname, Il Duro, the essay records how he went to America as a young man and returned to Italy with enough money to buy a plot of land in Villavetro, a village less than a kilometre west of Bogliaco. When the Great War broke out in 1914, Italy remained neutral but joined in on the Allies’ side in 1915. Faustino first served locally in munitions work with the 6A Infantry Division. His safe conduct pass for this work, a copy of which was secured for me by his grandson Giacomo Samuelli, is of particular interest in that it contains a good photograph of Faustino taken two years after Lawrence described him. He was soon conscripted into more active military service in the artillery and, having seen action on several parts of the Italian front, including the Carso, ended the war at the battle of Vittorio Veneto, when the last Austro-Hungarian troops were driven out of Italy. After the war he returned to Villavetro, married and became the father of a son and three daughters.

Lawrence had met Faustino when he and his future wife, Frieda von Richthofen, had been staying for a couple of weeks at San Gaudenzio, a farm near the village of Muslone, before leaving Lake Garda in 1913. Muslone is situated an hour’s walk above the town of Gargnano in the opposite direction to Villavetro. At that time San Gaudenzio and Muslone were accessible only by muletrack. (The present road linking them with Gargnano was not built until the 1960s). Faustino had come there as a casual worker to graft the vines. Lawrence was in raptures at his proficiency as he watched him

cutting them back with his sharp bright knife, amazingly swift and sure, like a god. It filled me with a sort of panic to see him crouched flexibly, like some strange animal god, doubled on his haunches, before the young vines, and

swiftly, vividly, without thought, cut, cut, cut at the young budding shoots,...(*Twilight in Italy*, Penguin, 1974 edition, p 115)

Some time in the late 1920s or early 1930s, perhaps prompted by the needs of his growing family, Faustino sought a more regular income to supplement that earned from his small piece of land and his grafting work. His grandson Gianni later explained to me that Faustino would not get paid for his grafting work until the grafted plants were seen to have taken successfully on the rootstocks. This could entail a long wait for payment. The solution to the problem of an irregular income was on his doorstep. The English lady mentioned in the first sentence of this article was living within a stone's throw of his plot of land and she was in need of a gardener and general factotum. He was taken on and served her for many years. He continued to live in Villavetro until he died aged 91 in 1973 and gained a reputation in Gargnano and wider afield as a lover of wine and women.

In the course of my research on D.H. Lawrence's stay in Gargnano, or more specifically Villa di Gargnano, the village nestling between Gargnano proper on the north and Bogliaco in the south, where he stayed for six months in 1912-13, I went to see Faustino Magri's son Luigi (Gino), his daughter Giuseppina (Pina) and her son Giovanni (Gianni), and another of Faustino's grandsons, Giacomo Samuelli, the son of Faustino's deceased daughter Rosa.

Aged 89 when I met him in 2005, Gino spoke mostly about his father's military service in the First World War and his own during the Second World War when he fought in North Africa. He showed me the plot of land his father bought more than a century before, the cultivable area now much reduced in size by the number of houses built around it. He also pointed out the house of the English lady for whom his father had worked. There was a garden but no longer any vines. While Gino was unable to recall which year his father began work for the English lady and in which year he finished, he thought he had worked for her for at least thirty years. He spoke of his father in very positive terms and considered him to have been an excellent father. Faustino's grandsons gave a similarly positive view of their grandfather, Giacomo, for example, remarking that as a boy Faustino had entertained him with many stories of his time in America and his wartime experiences.

Faustino's daughter Pina gave quite a different impression. She was aware of her father's philandering and remarked on the pain this caused her mother. He was an extremely strict father to his three daughters, forbidding them, for example, to attend local dances while they were growing up. This did not surprise me much. Sons and daughters often view their fathers' characters differently and, in any case, two previous literary researchers, Paul Eggert and the late Frederick Owen, when they visited the Magri family in the 1970s when Faustino was still alive, had reported similar impressions of the daughters' memories of their father. I had no wish to pursue that subject further and instead asked Pina about the English lady for whom her father had worked. Pina remembered going to help her father weed the lady's garden when she was about six years old and, as she was born in 1925, that meant Faustino was working there from at least 1931 or, as she thought, probably earlier. She could not find the testimonial her father was given by his employer on his retirement, which would have established the number of years he had worked there, nor could she find the photograph of the English lady she was certain she had somewhere, although she searched the house from top to bottom.

On the positive side, Pina could remember several things about the lady, either told to her by her father or remembered from her own meetings with the lady or the lady's daughter, who often accompanied her mother on her trips to Italy. The English lady's name was Mrs Murray. She could not recall the daughter's name, but as she continued to send Christmas cards to the Magri family up until the time of Faustino's death, Pina thought that her son Giacomo might be able to locate one for me. Pina said that she had always believed that Mrs Murray was related to the English royal family, but as this claim was not infrequent among expatriates, I did not pursue it. More fruitful was Pina's recollection that Mrs Murray had a connection with the nearby Bogliaco Golf Club. Finally, either Mrs Murray or her daughter had shown Pina some photographs of her home in England. She recalled that one showed flocks of sheep and another was of mining equipment.

Giacomo, when I went to see him a day or two later at his lakeside home in Villa di Gargnano, was indeed able to show me the last Christmas card sent by Faustino's former employer to the Magri family in 1974. Printed on the card was 'Mrs Murray

Usher, Carstramon House, Gatehouse of Fleet'. Of Pina's four other memories, the only one I could pursue while in Italy was that of the Bogliaco Golf Club. Signora de Paoli, the local librarian in Gargnano, found me a short history of the Club published for its 80th anniversary in 1992. The brief account of its origins recorded how the Club was founded in 1912 by Stefano Billia, proprietor of the Grand Hotel, Bogliaco. Having previously been a hotelier in Val D'Aosta, where he heard his English guests discuss their passion for golf, Billia considered the commercial aspects of making provision for this sport in a part of Italy with a moderate winter climate. His sisters had connections with the local hotel in Bogliaco and it was near there that he found a stretch of land suitable to his purpose. Although near to Bogliaco, the land he transformed into a small golf course (it is not clear if the first course had six holes or nine) was in fact situated within the neighbouring district of Toscolano, with Monte Castello in the background. Among the many illustrations in the booklet, the most prominent one was of the Club's opening day in September 1912, when a lady with a dress reaching to her ankles and a banded hat was shown driving off the first ball on the new course. She was referred to in the caption as '*la scozzese* (i.e. the Scotswoman) Baillie Murray' and was surrounded by local notables, including Contessa Bettoni, whose family's eighteenth century villa stretched (and still stretches) along the lakeside at the northern end of Bogliaco. (*Golf Bogliaco 80 anni*, 1992, pp 7-8) A visit to the Bogliaco Golf Club was unproductive in the sense that I was assured that no lists of original members have survived. Given the subsequent history of the club, briefly outlined in the last paragraph of this article, this is perhaps not surprising.

Contemporary newspapers celebrated the opening of the Club, but, apart from complimenting Billia on his initiative, gave no information on how it was planned or executed or who financed it. *L'Eco del Baldo*, published in Riva del Garda, welcomed it, noting that Golf Club was a facility that would add to the pleasure of the English colony around the lake 'the numbers of which increase each year to spend the winter among us'. (9 Nov 1912) A few days later (14 Nov) the same paper added that the facilities were to include a bar. *La Rivista del Garda*, published in the Saló Riviera, referred to the benefits of playing golf in such favourable climatic conditions and noted that doctors recommended it for health reasons (1 Oct 1912). Six weeks later (15 Dec) it announced that support for the Golf Club was coming from as far away as

Milan and there was even talk of providing an airstrip to accommodate visitors, an extraordinary suggestion at such an early stage in the development of aviation. The same issue published a circular distributed by Billia outlining the advantages of the site and giving the fees for membership, 50 lira for playing and 25 lira for non-playing members. To give an estimate of the value of these fees it may be noted that Lawrence and Frieda were paying 80 lira per month rent on their apartment in Villa di Gargnano at this time. (James T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, vol 1, p 458)

Armed with a name and address for mother and daughter, I returned to England. The Edwardian lady wielding the golf club would obviously no longer be alive and her daughter, from Pina Magri's account of her, suggested she might have been born sometime before her mother's first visit to Bogliaco, and certainly before the First World War. She was most unlikely, therefore, to be still living. Rather than write letters, I telephoned the Gatehouse of Fleet Tourist Information Service and was provided with the contact details for local historian John Russell. On informing John of what I knew, he was able to identify *la Scozzese* Baillie Murray as Mrs Alexandra Murray Baillie. (The reversal is confusing, but understandable. Italian names are usually recorded with the surname first and it is clear that in this case, knowing Murray to have been a surname, it was thought that Baillie must have been the Christian name, hence Baillie Murray, an attempt to record it in the 'English manner'). Born Alexandra Cavan Irwing in England, she had in 1900 married Colonel Murray Baillie, heir to the Broughton and Cally estates in Galloway. They had a daughter Elizabeth, born in 1903. Because of an entailment in the will of an earlier owner of the property, the estate, by this time managed by a trust, was to pass to Colonel Baillie Murray's daughter Elizabeth rather than to his wife Alexandra, when Colonel Murray Baillie died in 1924. Elizabeth became Mrs Murray Usher on her marriage to Neil Usher in 1929 and ran the estate for a total of 60 years.

If the blessing of retirement is that we can wholeheartedly pursue our interests without the distraction of work, its curse is that afflictions to the ageing body can mount obstacles in the way of our doing so. So it was that nearly two years had passed before I was able to fully resume the pursuit of my interest in Mrs Murray Baillie. In the interim I was able to read John's detailed study, (J.E. Russell,

Gatehouse and District, Dumfries and Galloway Libraries, 2003). Reading it, I found, among other things, that Pina Magri's memories of what she saw in the two photographs were verified as authentic. The family effects of the owner of the estate in 1904 were put on sale, for example, and these included 150 sheep (Russell, *Gatehouse*, vol 1, p 278), which would confirm that sheep were bred on the estate in the early years of the last century. The second picture Pina remembered was of mining. Copper ore was discovered by Irish labourers, retained on the estate when they were unable to return to the Murray estates in Donegal after the harvest because of conditions of impoverishment in their homeland. Employed in improving the Broughton and Cally estate, their discovery was made while they had been 'digging ditches in the wood that stands above Enrick farm' (Russell, *Gatehouse*, vol 1, p 207). In 1910 Colonel Murray Baillie formed a Syndicate to reopen the Enrick copper mines and in 1912 the Syndicate began work on a new mine 'above the Little Water of Fleet on the side opposite Drumruck' (vol 1, p 282). Which of the two mining projects Pina saw in a photograph between 70 and 80 years ago is not certain, but it is almost certain to have been one of them. In any event, neither mine was a goldmine, so to speak. James Murray Usher, Elizabeth Murray's son, with whom I had been in correspondence at the early stages of this investigation but who has since died, told me that his grandfather Colonel Murray Baillie had indeed 'opened and lost a lot of money down two copper mines'.

I remained curious about why Alexandra should have been such a prominent a figure on the opening day of the golf course as to upstage local gentry in taking the first drive off. Was she perhaps involved with Billia in its foundation? Or maybe she was an outstanding player? A letter from John Russell confirmed that Mrs Baillie Murray's husband, or maybe even she herself, had a 9-hole golf course built behind Calley House before the First World War. James Murray, while not sure about Mrs Baillie Murray's interest in golf, was certain that his great grandmother, Alexandra's mother, was indeed a keen golfer. Nobody I met in Gargnano had ever mentioned Alexandra's mother. This is not surprising, as I subsequently learned that she was born in 1854 and unlikely to have been encountered by any people in Gargnano still living today. But I was shortly to come into contact with her, if only on paper. Searching for background materials to Lawrence's stay in Gargnano in the town's history archives in the company of Professor Domenico Baldini, we came across a

form used for the registration of immigrants to the town in 1912. I was surprised (and disappointed) that the names of Lawrence and Frieda did not appear. Neither did that of Alexandra Murray Baillie, but that of Alexandra's mother, Marion Cavan Irving, did. As Lawrence and Frieda were in the town for six months (approximately three months of 1912 and three of 1913) and their names were not recorded, it was reasonable to assume that Mrs Cavan Irving's residence there must have been even longer, if she had to register and they did not. This at least would have established her as more than a passing visitor, perhaps permanent enough a tourist for her daughter to be asked to drive off the first ball. But I was still no nearer establishing any direct connection with the foundation of Bogliaco Golf Club

A letter from James Murray Usher shortly before he died telling me of hotels used by his great grandmother (Mrs Cavan Irving) during her periods living abroad brought me a little closer. As I would have expected, the list included the Grand Hotel Bogliaco. But it also included the Hotel Billia at Saint Vincent in the Val d'Aosta, north of Turin. Obviously this was the hotel where Billia first heard his English guests expatiate on the joys of golf. Was Mrs Cavan Irving among them? The letters from Alexandra to her mother, from which James Murray Usher secured the hotel addresses, were all dated later than 1923, so we cannot be sure if Mrs Cavan Irving was among his pre-1912 guests or began to patronise his Saint Vincent establishment (assuming it was still his in reality and not just in name) after staying with him at his Bogliaco Hotel. But the fact that she and her daughter seem to have had connections with the Bogliaco Golf Club right from its first day suggests that knowing him before that was a real possibility. I have been unable to get any closer.

A few final notes tying up loose ends may be of interest.

Alexandra Murray Baillie died from an asthma attack in 1946. Her daughter, Elizabeth Murray Usher, lived until 1990 and for the many good causes she espoused in her lifetime, both in relation to Gatehouse and the National Trust, she was awarded an OBE. (Russell, *Gatehouse*, vol 1, p 104) Of particular relevance in the present context is the fact that she was President of Gatehouse Golf Club and 'had two plans to build a championship golf course for Gatehouse, neither of which came to fruition'. (Russell, *Gatehouse*, vol 1, p 103). It might be some consolation in the light of these

two failures to be able to prove the full extent of the input of her mother and grandmother in the foundation of the Bogliaco Golf Club. I do not have the evidence to do this at present, but I have not despaired of finding it in the future. Perhaps a reader might give me a new lead? On Elizabeth Murray Usher's death, the Gatehouse property passed to James Murray Usher, her son, and his son, Peter Murray Usher, runs the estate today.

Social and sporting life in England, like in Italy, was greatly disrupted in the First World War, although the actual fighting on the Italian Front stopped short a few miles to the north of Bogliaco. British tourists began to return to Italy in the early 1920s and golf was resumed at the Bogliaco Golf Club in 1922. In 1927 it appeared on a list of Italian golf venues under the name of The Lake Garda Golf Club. Billia is named as the founder but does not appear under the management. (*Golfing in the South of England and on the Continent* (Southern Railway, 1927, p 91). In the following decade, despite the close connection between Fascism and sport (see, for example Simon Martin, *Football and Fascism: The National Game under Mussolini*, Berg, 2004), the Bogliaco Golf Club land was needed for Mussolini's programme to increase grain production and was ploughed up for agricultural use. The Grand Hotel Bogliaco was used as a prison for Serbian officers during the Second World War. The odious Republic of Saló, where the remnants of Italian Fascism were propped up by German troops, saw Gargnano become the centre of Mussolini's operations (he lived in the Villa Feltrinelli to the north of the town) and part of the golf course became his private airport. Another part was used for machinegun practice and the clubhouse became an infirmary for the German Hospital in Gargnano. (*Golf Bogliaco 80 anni*, p 19.) It was used as a sports ground again by American troops after the war and eventually returned to its use as a golf course, and as such still thrives today. Now an 18-hole course, a great number of its users come from outside Italy, mainly Germany. (*En Piasa*, Summer 2004, reprinted from *Giornale di Brescia*). It might be a colourful exaggeration to say that the history of twentieth-century international alliances is engraved on every fairway under Monte Castello, but it can truthfully be claimed that few golf courses can have seen so much since the day the English lady from Gatehouse set the ball rolling in September 1912.

Colm Kerrigan