

## [Sarti on Riall, 'Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero'](#)

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**Lucy Riall.** *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xiv + 482 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11212-2.

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An adventurous life, bravery, a striking physical presence, colorful garb, and a resonant voice are attributes long recognized as having contributed to Giuseppe Garibaldi's popularity. But not every historian would accord them the kind of attention that Lucy Riall does in this intriguing account of the rise of a Garibaldi personality cult in nineteenth-century Italy. The book is something of a cross between a conventional biography and a study of how the Garibaldi image was formed and propagated. The narrative combines conventional biography with an account of how the public perceived Garibaldi, with the emphasis on the latter. Abundant documentation details how politically interested Garibaldi admirers and fellow travelers "invented" the image to satisfy the public craving for heroes and rally public opinion behind the movement for national unification and the newly founded Italian state.

This is one of a growing number of publications whose appearance coincides with the bicentenary of Garibaldi's birth. As one might expect, in the current climate of academia much attention is being paid to the driving role of inventions, images, constructions, and myths. These are catchwords of the new cultural history that sees historical events as driven primarily by media manipulations of symbols and rituals. This is not the place to discuss the role of cultural history, except to note that this study reveals its subversive potential. Riall sets out to expose the chinks in the armor of this revered figure, deploying in the process an array of weapons drawn from the social sciences. In the end, it delivers something of a mixed verdict on Garibaldi. On the one hand, she acknowledges that there was real substance behind the image of the national hero. On the other hand, the hero is stripped of much of his glory. The qualities of humility and self-sacrifice are not much in evidence. What stands out is Garibaldi's gift for self-promotion. He is not denied physical courage and military ability, but Riall is not particularly interested in drawing attention to these qualities, or she discusses them as attributes of the invented character. His private life, particularly the sexual part, elicits some rather harsh comments. Riall argues that the emerging picture of Garibaldi is attuned to our "twenty-first century sensibilities," which she sees as relishing contradictions and ironies (p. 206). The judgment may be premature given that there are still ninety-three years left to go in the century, but it must be admitted that it is refreshing to see someone willing to tread so irreverently on sacred ground and invite the ire that will no doubt come her way.

Riall is not the first historian who has set out to "deconstruct" or "demythologize" Garibaldi. *Giuseppe Garibaldi e il suo mito* (1984) is the title of a volume of papers presented at the fifty-first congress of the Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano, held in Genoa in November 1982, on the centenary of Garibaldi's death. However, the participants treaded cautiously on this mined ground. The French historian Maurice Agulhon contributed a piece on Garibaldi's image in France that was laudatory in the extreme, all but ignoring the many adverse reactions that Garibaldi's name elicited in

France. Still, the desire to investigate the image rather than the person was already evident in 1982. Riall mentions Agulhon, along with Benedict Anderson, François Furet, and George Mosse, all prominent practitioners of the new cultural history, as guides to her work.

Riall's book relates also to another school of thought that has gained momentum in the last quarter of a century. This school is revisionist in a different way in that it questions the fundamental premise of most historical writing on the Risorgimento, namely, that national unification was a desirable outcome. This school is much more critical of the Risorgimento than the old Gramscian-Marxist critics ever were. They found it wanting as a revolutionary movement, but considered it as a phase in the process of bourgeois modernization and therefore as a preliminary step in the direction of genuine revolution. The new revisionists regard national unification as a step in the wrong direction, idealize the pre-unification states as *piccole patrie perdute*, and see them as capable of improvement and progress. They stress the importance of continuity in history, and point to the wrenching changes wrought by national unification, the abuses of power perpetrated by national leaders, and the nationalist temptations to which they succumbed.

Riall is particularly sensitive to the charge that patriots were dangerous nationalists in the making, and this perception reflects on her treatment of Garibaldi. There is therefore more than a whiff of *revisionismo antirisorgimentale* in this work, also present in two of her earlier studies. In *The Italian Risorgimento: State, Society and National Unification* (1994), Riall provided a critical overview of the scholarly literature on the Risorgimento, and deplored that historians had "not developed an alternative means of conceptualizing political action" (p. 9). In *Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy and Local Power, 1859-1866* (1998), she provided a close-up look at the interaction between local interests and state power in Sicily. The book delivered what can only be described as a halfhearted endorsement of what national unification did to Sicily. In it, Risorgimento leaders appear as no better, but also as no worse, than those who preceded and followed them. All worked out convenient power-sharing agreements with local elites, to the detriment of the powerless. None were able to bring the rule of law to the island. The book credits Garibaldi with good and generous intentions toward Sicily when he was responsible for the island in 1860, but sees him as politically inept, not effectively in charge, and easily outmaneuvered by his rivals and opponents in the unification movement.

In *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero*, Riall sets out to explain how Garibaldi morphed from a largely unknown entity in Italy before 1848 into the national hero that he became in 1859-60 and later. The title is somewhat misleading because, as mentioned earlier, the book does not deal solely with the invented image, but seeks instead to relate invention to reality and to see how politically motivated mystification connects with conventional biography. Her stated intent is not to debunk Garibaldi, but to see how the legend relates to the reality, to compare what Garibaldi actually was with what the legend made him out to be. In pursuit of that goal, Riall strikes off in unconventional directions, looks at unusual sources, and borrows generously from the methodologies of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communication studies. She looks at political tracts, pamphlets, contemporary biographies, all sorts of ephemera, folk tales, and works of art, music, and fiction. The narrative shifts repeatedly back and forth between biography and image building, setting up an inner tension that begs to be resolved. It is resolved eventually, as Riall allows Garibaldi the performer to trump Garibaldi the doer.

How does Riall construct this rather theatrical Garibaldi? She credits Giuseppe Mazzini with setting the ball in motion in the 1840s, when he was looking for a hero to help him revive the flagging fortunes of his republican movement. Reports received from South America, where Garibaldi was making a name for himself as a freedom fighter, convinced him that he had found the man he needed, and publicized his exploits with publications, correspondence, and public subscriptions. Mazzini made Garibaldi a big name in the small world of radical politics well before 1848, when Garibaldi returned to Italy to fight against Austria and for Mazzini's short-lived Roman Republic. For the first time in Italy, we notice that Garibaldi's reputation bore little relationship to the outcome of the battles he fought. While his operations against the Austrians had little effect on the course of the war and the Roman Republic went down in defeat, Garibaldi's reputation as a fighter grew, in spite of well-founded criticisms of his military tactics by military experts. Republican publicists saw to it that what was remembered was not the defeats or the questionable tactics, but the heroism and self-sacrifice of the republican freedom fighters, the lukewarm patriotism of the more moderate rivals, the wiles of diplomats, and the dynastic selfishness of monarchs.

Riall goes into a lengthy discussion of the technological innovations in publishing that made such propaganda possible. The issue is not entirely relevant in this case because, as she points out, the age of mass culture was late in coming to Italy, where the production and circulation of printed materials was hampered by backward technology, low levels of literacy, and political censorship. Still, Riall must be commended for unearthing a plethora of material that speaks to the determination and resourcefulness of the propagandists. One cannot help but admire her resolve, and perhaps commiserate with her for the time and effort spent sifting through mountains of documents of mind-numbing banality. That is the kind of fortitude it takes to carry off a project of this nature, and anyone who pulls it off as well as Riall deserves to be congratulated. The catch is that, as important as such work is, it may leave us somewhat dissatisfied in the end, for the audiences for which it was intended remain elusive and we do not know who actually read or saw this material. There were no public opinion polls in nineteenth-century Italy.

Riall's work traverses the different phases of Garibaldi's life chapter by chapter, much as a conventional biography might do, flanked by chapters that deal with image making. No short summary can do justice to Riall's nuanced approach, but thanks to her efforts we can now see how and by what means Garibaldi's reputation grew as the propaganda machine seized on and magnified his exploits and character traits. The South American phase (1836-48) served to build up his image as a brave, honest, and selfless liberator. Even though few Europeans could have understood just what Garibaldi was fighting for in Brazil and Uruguay, it was enough for Italians that he was fighting, for in so doing he challenged the stereotype that Italians would not fight. That he was fighting for a republican cause was icing on the cake as far as Mazzini was concerned. Mazzini also pointed out that Garibaldi stood alone in refusing material compensation for his services, a testimony to his disinterested idealism. His actions in Italy in 1848 to 1849 provided more fodder for the propaganda machine. Not only was his gallantry now in evidence at home, but also his fortitude in the face of defeat. The death of his Brazilian wife Anita at his side in 1849 attached to both of them the auras of sacrifice and martyrdom. The menial occupations of candle maker and merchant seaman that he pursued during his second exile (1849-54) served to bring out his humility, forbearance, and attachment to the family that he was forced to leave behind.

The spectacular achievements of 1859 to 1860 sealed Garibaldi's image as the national hero. Fighting

in the war of 1859 as a general in the Piedmontese army, he was praised for his soldierly sense of duty as well as his élan. The spectacularly successful expedition of the Thousand to Sicily and the subsequent liberation of the southern mainland laid the groundwork for the cult of Garibaldi as the personification of the Italian nation. It was not only democrats and other radicals who lionized him now. His willingness to turn over his territorial conquest to Victor Emmanuel II, the king of Piedmont-Sardinia, made him a hero in the eyes of those who distrusted republicans as loose-cannon radicals. That was an important turning point in the development of Garibaldi's image, for he became a hero acceptable to all true Italians, regardless of political orientation. Not even the disasters of Apromonte (1862) and Mentana (1867) could dim the image. Those two encounters did not show Garibaldi at his political or military best, but it made no difference. They made him the victim of coldhearted diplomats, insensitive generals, spineless politicians, and a corrupt clergy, and therefore all the more admirable. According to Riall, Garibaldi was fully complicit in the making of the myth at every step of the way, witness his assiduous courting of journalists and writers, his catering to popular religious beliefs that he intimately scorned, the encouragements given to friendly biographers, and the slanted account of his life in the published autobiography.

Riall finds the autobiography badly written, which is surely a matter of opinion, but is surprising nevertheless given her talent for teasing meaning out of sources. Literary grace may not be much in evidence in Garibaldi's memoirs, but he tells the story of his life rather well and accurately in the parts that he covers (there are telling omissions that Riall is quick to point out). The final version of the autobiography was written late in life, partly because he needed money, but also for other and more compelling reasons. Its explicit language, proclivity for seeing issues in black and white, scathing condemnations of real or imagined opponents, rabid anticlericalism, and even its overblown rhetorical flourishes do serve a purpose. It is a work meant to inflame political passions, rescue his legacy, and keep the democratic movement on course. It is a reliable guide to the inner person and to the politics of the democratic movement, and not just an exercise in popularization.

The concept of popularity needs to be examined closely in a work of this kind. Riall acknowledges that Garibaldi's popularity was mostly posthumous, and what she sets out to examine, and examines very well, is the laying of the foundations for this posthumous phenomenon. But in life Garibaldi was more controversial than popular. His name was indeed a powerful magnet for thousands of Italians who responded to his call and were ready to follow him wherever he might lead. He was the only man in his time who could summon a sizable private army on demand. But it was a relative and limited popularity. Garibaldi himself was disappointed that vast strata of the population, particularly the peasantry, remained indifferent or hostile to his summons, and Italy at the time was a nation mostly of peasants. If one looks beyond the patriotic minority, Garibaldi was far from being a popular figure. Dare one say it? The most popular public figure in Italy in Garibaldi's time was beyond any doubt Pope Pius IX, who was Garibaldi's staunch enemy. Only the pope had a propaganda machine that reached deep into the country. In every parish where there was a priest there was a propagandist for the pope. Some rulers who had native roots, or had gone native in the course of time, like the Bourbons of Naples, were also popular. Victor Emmanuel II was popular in ways that Garibaldi understood better than Mazzini could appreciate. Was Garibaldi's loyalty to Victor Emmanuel a kind of peasant awe of authority, as Mazzini alleged, or a sign of political awareness?

Back to image building. Garibaldi's image building project was conceived in the heat of battle, against opponents who had their own bases of popular support. Realizing that Garibaldi's popularity

was limited to an enterprising but numerically small minority should help us make better sense of his behavior. Riall is not alone in taking Garibaldi to task for not standing his ground more forcefully in 1860 against Victor Emmanuel, Camillo Benso di Cavour, and the moderates, and all who wanted to get him out of the way as quickly as possible. Garibaldi's actions make more sense if we realize that his antagonist in this case, Victor Emmanuel, had much going for him in the south and elsewhere in the country. Cavour, probably the most influential among the major Risorgimento figures, was also the least popular (let us see what revisionist historians make of his "image" when his bicentenary comes up in 2010), but as the king's prime minister Cavour rode on the coattails of Victor Emmanuel's popularity. Garibaldi had personal charisma, but Victor Emmanuel had a regular army and the support of international diplomacy, and he promised order, reliable administration, and security for people and property. The alliance with his royal partner Napoleon III in 1859 reassured the timid that Italians would not be fighting the Austrians alone. That awareness, perhaps more than anything else, is what brought out the crowds in 1859. Let us consider, then, that Garibaldi's alleged political indecisiveness in 1860, when he is said to have surrendered a kingdom to Victor Emmanuel and given up on republicans, may have been due to his awareness of the limits of his own popularity (and certainly of the republicans' popularity), and of the king's greater acceptability in the eyes of millions of his countrymen. This is not to diminish the role of republicans, who are even more admirable for sticking to their guns in the face of their minority status, which was their fate and their glory until nearly everyone turned republican after 1946 when Italy became a republic. Garibaldi and garibaldinismo were too radical to exert appeal beyond the ranks of true believers in his time. We need to be aware of the limits of Garibaldi's appeal not only to make sense of his behavior, but also to understand the radical nature of his message. A study of how Garibaldi's memory was contested and his image manipulated after his death would be a logical sequel to Riall's work. But to see how it all started, how the process began of transforming Garibaldi the gadfly into Garibaldi the peacemaker, Riall's current study is indispensable.

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