



The beloved face of the country: the first movement for nature protection in Italy, 1880–1934

by Luigi Piccioni, Winwick, Cambridgeshire, The White Horse Press, 2020, 352 pp., £30.00 (pbk), ISBN 978 1 912186 15 0

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BOOK REVIEWS

The beloved face of the country: the first movement for nature protection in Italy, 1880–1934, by Luigi Piccioni, Winwick, Cambridgeshire, The White Horse Press, 2020, 352 pp., £30.00 (pbk), ISBN 978 1 912186 15 0

Luigi Piccioni, Professor at the University of Calabria, is a renowned expert on environmental history and on the history of environmentalism in Italy in particular. The first Italian version of this book, *Il volto amato della patria*, has become the standard work about the history of nature conservation in Italy since its publication in 1999. The White Horse Press has now made this important work accessible to the international scientific community with this English translation. The book makes for a great read and provides a detailed overview of the history of the Italian nature conservation movement around 1900.

For readers interested in the international history of the nature conservation movement, the sections of the book with a clear transnational perspective will be extremely appealing. Piccioni pays a lot of attention to the different movements, developments and legislation in France, Germany and Switzerland, their reception in Italy, and the resulting international entanglements. He distinguishes between three different ‘cosmopolitan currents’ in the international networks of nature conservation in Europe around 1900: the aesthetic-patriotic element around nationalist *Heimatschutz* ideas, the scientific protection of flora and fauna, and the aesthetic-artistic-literary movement for the preservation of landscapes and picturesque sites (p. 156). The latter current, with a strong background in the emerging tourism and automobile associations, was especially strong in France and very influential as a model around 1900, but has now all but disappeared from conservationist discourse and historiography. The famous National Parks in the United States, which take centre stage in the historiography on nature conservation since the 1960s, were actually not very relevant and did not become a point of discussion in Italy until 1907 (pp. 203–205). Important for following these debates, James Sievert’s very readable English translation applies a consistent set of translated central concepts such as ‘patrimoine’ or ‘defence of natural beauties’, many of which are no longer in common use today. ‘Protectionism’ and ‘protection of nature’ are consistently used throughout the book, following the Italian terms.

Piccioni’s book follows a roughly chronological narrative from the early beginnings of the conservationist movement from the 1880s, a major turning point with an explosion of activities and momentum around 1906, and ending in a ‘slow agony’ (p. 16) after 1925. It tells a fascinating story of a panoply of personalities, associations, reports and publications after 1904. The development culminated in the formation of two (!) umbrella organisations in 1913: the National League for the Protection of Natural Monuments (Lega nazionale per la protezione dei monumenti naturali), representing scientific conservationism, and the National Committee for the Defence of the Italian Landscape and Monuments (Comitato nazionale per la difesa del paesaggio e dei monumenti italici), which was more interested in tourism, national awareness of the Italian landscape, and the preservation of historical-artistic heritage. The two organisations were affiliated and had overlapping memberships, but pursued very different understandings of what should be protected and how.

Nature conservation and the protection of landscapes became state affairs in Italy after the First World War: the undersecretariat for Antiquities and Fine Arts within the Ministry of Education started to monopolise the field of nature conservation. Piccioni’s narrative gives an

excellent overview of the different ways in which private associations, civil servants and politicians co-operated in new projects such as the first national parks and the 1922 law for the protection of natural beauties and historical buildings. His overall assessment, however, is a negative one: state involvement coincided with the slow decline of the movement and resulted in its eventual dismantling under the fascist regime. With a view to the literature about other countries, this seems surprising. In the United Kingdom, for example, non-involvement of the state was a factor in the emergence of a vibrant network of private conservationist organisations, many of which tried to solicit active state support and legislation in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the book's last sections, Piccioni laments that traditions of nature conservation were not passed on to future generations in the 'years of darkness' (p. 283). He suggests that this may explain the late emergence of Italian environmentalism in the second half of the twentieth century (pp. 289–297). For all its justifiable focus on civil society actors in the field of nature conservation, this view seems needlessly negative about any involvement or support by the state in conservationist affairs. Moreover, the narrative does not fit in with more recent works about nature conservation and the environmental history of Italy under the fascist regime, which look beyond the demise of the conservationist movement. Even though the fascist regime's actions were not usually a success story or even a disaster on the ground, it is valuable to look into what happened and how scientific ideas of nature conservation, local and national traditions, personal continuities, and fascism's political ideology resulted in these actions. Piccioni did not amend his central state-critical narrative in this updated edition despite the alternative approaches offered by recent works, although these are duly referred to in the footnotes and bibliography. In a similar way, the book does not fully acknowledge recent research on nature conservation under various political regimes elsewhere in Europe in the inter-war period, or on the efforts of international conservationist networks to gain a platform in the League of Nations. Instead, it repeats the assumption that the international movement dwindled with the death of its first founders and the 'end of cosmopolitanism' in the 1920s (pp. 220–222).

The book is and remains an excellent overview of the history of the first movement for nature protection in Italy. It is great that it can now reach the international audience it certainly deserves. Only for the political aspects after 1919, the audience should note that historiography has taken new directions since the book's original publication.

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Colonial internationalism and the governmentality of empire, 1893–1982, by Florian Wagner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, xii + 421 pp., £90 (hbk), ISBN 9781316512838

Florian Wagner's book is a detailed investigation into the global intellectual and political networks of colonial internationalism, tracing almost a century of geopolitical transformations, the rise and fall of fascism, and the collapse of European colonialism across much of the