IN SEARCH OF ARCHIVES HISTORY: EUGENIO CASANOVA AND THE SUSPECT LINCOLN LETTER

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a slice of European archival history which might be of special interest to American archivists. It recounts the circumstances which led to the ouster in 1932 of Italy’s foremost archivist, Eugenio Casanova: the publication of a letter believed to have been written by Abraham Lincoln.

In her recent article, “Outward Visions, Inward Glance: Archives History and Professional Identity,” Barbara Craig argues that the study of archival history will strengthen the professional identity of archivists. “Archives history,” she writes, “actively researched and communicated, will make practical contributions to our future success as a profession.” It is a truism, which nevertheless bears reassessment, that to know who we are and where we are going, we must know where we have been (though whether this knowledge always confers “practical” benefit is debatable).

The next step, I suggest, is to enlarge the concept of “archives history” so that it include not only the history of records and record-keeping and the development of archival theory and practice but also the examination of the political, cultural, and social contexts in which archivists have historically worked. If, according to Craig, our profession currently takes “a broad view outward, to [its] relationship with other professionals, with society, and to the future,” we often lack the wider view when it comes to the study of our profession’s past.

And yet, establishing the closely woven historical relationships between the archival enterprise and the larger cultural sphere will complement our understanding of the body of knowledge we call archival science, just as the history of the book trade or of fifteenth-century Venice complement analytic bibliography. Perhaps the value of approaching archives history as a domain of intellectual history becomes especially evident in the cases of archivists whose careers have been abbreviated or dramatically constrained through the politicization of archival administration under autocratic or totalitarian regimes. The following slice of archival history, drawn from Italian sources of the Fascist period, examines the intricate netting of political ambition and personal feud which finally enveloped one of modern Italy’s leading archivists.
Eugenio Casanova (1867-1951) reached the pinnacle of the archival profession in the years just prior to Benito Mussolini’s seizure of power in 1922. His career ended prematurely with multiple dismissals in 1932, 1933, and 1935, years in which Mussolini was most active in subjugating his opponents. That the Fascists had a hand in Casanova’s fall is not at issue; nor is it surprising. Many suffered reprisals more severe. What intrigues in Casanova’s case are the circumstances surrounding his ouster: the publication by Casanova in a reputable historical journal (of which he was Director) of a letter he believed to have been written by Abraham Lincoln—a letter that could be interpreted as serving Fascist interests. Respected Italian scholars, as well as Casanova’s detractors, held the letter a forgery. Casanova was fired in 1932 for sustaining the letter’s authenticity. Subsequently, he was removed as Superintendent of Rome’s Archivio di Stato and as Director of the Archivio del Regno; in 1935, he was forced from the chair of Archival Studies, which had been created for him in 1925 at the University of Rome. What prompted such treatment of Casanova, an internationally recognized figure in 1932? To what extent was Mussolini involved in engineering Casanova’s downfall? As Minister of the Interior for all but two years of his rule and therefore, at least nominally, in charge of the nation’s archives, did Mussolini have a special interest in ousting Casanova?

What knowledge we have of Casanova’s conflict with the Fascists, and of the fruitful career which preceded it, we owe to the scholarship of two Italian archivists, Armando Lodolini (1888-1966), a younger colleague of Casanova, and his son, Elio Lodolini, currently Professor of Archivistica at the University of Rome, La Sapienza. The Lodolinis reveal Casanova’s career to have been one of uncommon scope, spanning sixty years and encompassing the fields of medieval Tuscan history, the Risorgimento, archival theory and practice, and historical demographics. His manual-cum-treatise, Archivistica (Siena, 1928), established the international dimensions of the archival field as no previous manual had and remains in Italy the discipline’s classic text.

Casanova began his archival career in Torino, his birthplace, by taking his university degree in jurisprudence, the field traditionally mastered by aspiring Italian archivists. In 1886, he moved to Florence where he undertook formal archival studies at the Scuola di Paleografia e Diplomatica at the Istituto di Studi Superiori, remaining in Florence after his graduation to collaborate in the editing of the Archivio Storico Italiano, a periodical devoted to publishing national documentary sources. In 1907, after several years at the state archives of Siena and Torino, the forty-year-old Casanova assumed the directorship of the Grande Archivio in Naples, the archives of the formerly autonomous Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

For Casanova, as for many who have sojourned in that city, Naples proved a punto di riferimento, a turning point. In nine years at the Grande Archivio, Casanova completed a survey of the archives, reorganized the department of document restoration, and battled numerous technical difficulties associated with the archive’s location in a fifteenth-century convent never intended for the permanent storage of parchment. While in Naples, his national reputation increased as did his involvement in European archival circles. In 1910, Casanova was invited by the Brussels Permanent Commission on International Congresses of Archivists and Librarians to plan the second International
Congress on Archives, slated for Milan in the summer of 1915. Italy’s entry into World War I in May of that year interrupted these preparations, but other projects continued to claim his attention. In 1914, Casanova had founded the bimonthly review, Gli Archivi Italiani, the first national professional journal to promote the concept of archivistica as an autonomous science, dependent upon the related disciplines of paleography and diplomatics but equipped with its own rules.⁵ Publication of the journal was transferred from Naples to Rome in 1916 when Casanova was appointed to the most prestigious archival posts in Italy, Superintendent of the Archivio di Stato and Director of the Archivio del Regno. Although Gli Archivi Italiani had enjoyed the full backing of the Undersecretary of the Interior from its inception, that support vanished with the government’s prohibition in 1919 and 1920 of the first meeting of a newly constituted national archival association.⁶ Thus prevented from realizing one of its aspirations for the profession, Gli Archivi suspended publication in 1921. Casanova remained bitter about the episode, later attributing the journal’s demise to “the ignorance of those who ought to have supported it, administratively if not politically.”⁷ Unfortunately, this was not the last time Casanova would have reason to inveigh against the decisions of government ministers.

Casanova had been in Rome for six years when Benito Mussolini arrived on October 30, 1922 and presented himself to King Victor Emmanuel III, who made him Prime Minister. The Fascist squads, led in their March on Rome by Michele Bianchi, Italo Balbo, Emilio De Bono, and Cesare Maria De Vecchi, had already accomplished the military intimidation of the country and of Luigi Facta’s feeble government. Mussolini’s political strategy would culminate with the proclamation of his dictatorship in 1925. After 1925, and increasingly throughout the nineteen-thirties, Mussolini sought to control the nation’s cultural life.⁸ One of his chief aims was the redirection along Fascist lines of the study of the Risorgimento, the nineteenth-century movement for national autonomy which had resulted in Italy’s unification in 1861. Mussolini viewed the social revolutions of the Risorgimento in pseudo-historical terms, as preliminary to the historically inevitable rise of Fascism and the fulfillment of his own political destiny. The Risorgimento, Mussolini declared, “gave in the last century the nation’s unity and...will give to it in the twentieth century its power.”⁹ To influence the practice of Risorgimento scholarship, he advocated removing Risorgimento studies from what he called the “Sanhedrin of professional old beards” and entrusting them to historians who would bring the Risorgimento “into more direct contact with the Italian people and [who would] see it through Fascist eyes.”¹⁰

An important skirmish in the struggle for control of Risorgimento studies took place in the pages of the field’s leading historical journal, the Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento. The Rassegna’s editor from 1926 until 1932 was Eugenio Casanova. Representing Mussolini’s interests and hoping to advance himself in the historical profession was Cesare Maria De Vecchi (1884-1959), Commissioner Extraordinary of the Archivi del Regno. De Vecchi, a World War I hero and one of the leaders of the March on Rome, had recently returned from a tour (1923-28) as Governor of Somalia. Appointment to the distant post had come as the result of a series of political gaffes, in which De Vecchi had publicly approved Fascist violence in Turin. Restored to favor, De Vecchi now transferred his knack for bombast from the military to the cultural domain. On
assuming his duties as Commissioner, he announced the “need to review the ordinances, the regulations, the staff [of the archives] and to give to archives the Fascist chrim.”

In the April-September issue of the Rassegna for 1931, Casanova authorized the publication of a document entitled, “The Entire Message of Abraham Lincoln to Macedonio Melloni, Translated and Disseminated by Giuseppe Mazzini.” An introductory note reports that in 1853, while a lawyer in Springfield, Abraham Lincoln had been asked by the Italian physicist, Macedonio Melloni (1798-1854), to present his opinions on the political restructuring then occurring in Europe. In the letter which followed, Lincoln replied to Melloni in great detail, exhibiting an intimate knowledge of Italian foreign affairs and expressing his warm support for the formation of a United States of Europe based upon “the absolute political independence of...Italy, a nation indispensable to the stable equilibrium of the civilized world.” Lincoln went on to specify the process by which such independence should be achieved: through the return to Italy of territories held by Austria since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, namely the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom (restored through wars in 1859 and 1866), and the Adriatic coast from the city of Fiume south, including part of Dalmatia and all of Albania. “The only Italian unity one can admit is this,” Lincoln declared, adding that the ethnic groups in Dalmatia, which threaten the native Italianità of the region, “are constituted...of the most barbarous and savage peoples of the earth...which have the need to be well cleansed by nations of superior civilization...”

As the prefatory note emphasized, Lincoln embraced the territorial claims for which Italy had gone to war in 1915, claims guaranteed by the secret Treaty of Paris but denied in 1919 by President Woodrow Wilson at Versailles. National bitterness over Wilson’s perceived betrayal of Italian interests fueled the rise of Mussolini, who continued to press for the fulfillment of Italy’s irredentist claims. Underscoring the letter’s continuing relevance, a Rassegna contributor wrote in the preface to the published document: “[It] was an error not to counterpose the great authority of Lincoln to the pro-Yugoslav leanings of Wilson and his disavowal of the just claims of Italy.”

Given the letter’s content, then, the Fascists presumably should have supported its publication; their condemnation, however, was swift. C.M. De Vecchi, in an unusual alliance with the respected historians Gioaccino Volpe (1876-1971) and Francesco Salata (b. 1876), led the attack on Casanova, claiming the letter a forgery. Critics charged that the letter’s style was utterly foreign to Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), the Italian revolutionist and the letter’s purported translator. Further, they judged the letter’s contents to be “false”: that Melloni had never existed; and that the document had been forged for “indefinable and damaging ends, and brought to light by the Rassegna’s director...with carelessness and ignorance, without regard for the dignity of Italy...” At the Congress of the National Society for the History of the Risorgimento in 1932, opposition to Casanova solidified, and he was forced from the Director’s post. His replacement at the Rassegna was C.M. De Vecchi. Mussolini’s hand in the appointment seems clear. Writing to De Vecchi on 12 May 1933, the Duce expressed his pleasure that the Rassegna “[was] to be entrusted to [De Vecchi’s] care,” explaining that it had been “necessary to remove the history of the Risorgimento from an atmosphere too strictly professional,” and place it under
the guidance of one who displayed an "ardor for war and for the Fascist revolution."

In 1941, the Mazzini scholar, Mario Menghini, declared the Lincoln letter a fake after determining that its hand did not belong to Mazzini. Continuing the debate over the letter's authenticity, the historian Alberto M. Ghisalberti raised the question in 1954 why anyone in Italy would have thought of asking an obscure American lawyer, two years in the U. S. House of Representatives notwithstanding, for his assessment of events on the continent. From an American standpoint, it is perhaps not unlikely that Lincoln interested himself in the Italian movement for unification; Americans everywhere followed with great interest the campaigns of Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-82) in the pages of Harper's. What does seem unlikely, however, is that Lincoln would have communicated his thoughts in writing—in an inflated rhetorical style—to an Italian scientist as obscure to him as no doubt Lincoln would have been to Melloni. Yet, for obvious reasons, the idea of such a document proved irresistible to the forger, who harnessed the immense popularity of Lincoln the President to the task of buttressing Italian territorial ambitions. Even in 1931, Casanova would not have been alone in his attraction to the letter's content; yet in retrospect, it appears Casanova failed to detect the letter's inauthenticity.

Casanova was not the first to publish the infamous letter. On 2 April 1920, the following banner headlines blared from the front page of a Milan daily: "A Message From Lincoln Translated by Giuseppe Mazzini: A Historical Document." The subhead, occupying three lines of type running the width of the page, proclaimed: "The ancient lagoon of Venice, from Fiume to the mouth of Cattaro, without interruption, through all Dalmatia, should belong to Italy. Not to allow full annexation to Italy, without any exceptions, would cry out for vengeance to the Nemesis of history." The newspaper in question was Il Popolo d'Italia; its editor, from 1914 to 1922, Benito Mussolini. The entire text of the Lincoln letter, touted as "the most honest page of all contemporary history," appeared beneath the headlines. Juxtaposed was an article reporting on the forced occupation of the Adriatic city of Fiume by the novelist and adventurer Gabriele D'Annunzio (1865-1938), then in its seventh month.

Clearly, the political uses of forgeries are myriad and depend upon the climate in which they surface. In 1920, with D'Annunzio holding Fiume in direct challenge to President Wilson, the question of the Lincoln letter's authenticity would have been most inconvenient to address. In 1932, its fakery became decisive, providing a needed excuse to expel Casanova, a long-respected professional, from positions of influence and prestige.

Why did De Vecchi wish to remove Casanova, not only from the Directorship of the Rassegna, but also from the high administrative positions he then held? What was the nature of Casanova's transgression, apart from the unknowing publication of a forgery? Was it political? Or was it personal, rooted in some now obscure but once passionate enmity? We know the conflict cannot have been strictly factional intrigue between Fascist and Anti-Fascist loyalists. In the first place, opposition to Casanova included members of both camps. In the second place, Casanova himself was a member of the National Fascist Party, which, however, availed him little. Finally, Casanova's successor at the Archivio di Stato, Emilio Re, was not a party member.
Perhaps the key to Casanova's downfall lies in his statement of political neutrality, offered in defense of his editorial policy at the Rassegna. Lashing out at his accusers in a published rebuttal to their charges, he announced that "the Rassegna does not occupy itself with politics, nor with political affairs; it does not, nor will it ever."22 If a declaration of political neutrality within the intellectual sphere were not damaging enough, Casanova's open identification with Lincoln, and particularly with Mazzini, almost certainly marked him out as a traditionalist, uninterested in cooperating with De Vecchi's vaunted "Fascist reclamation of culture."23

Although Casanova blundered in his capacity as an editor, his ouster resulted in a great loss to the Italian archival profession. One year after Casanova's dismissal from the Rassegna, he was removed from the posts of Superintendent of the Archivio di Stato and Archivio del Regno, posts he had occupied jointly for seventeen years. In 1935, when De Vecchi was serving as Minister of Education, Casanova was fired from his post at the University of Rome. Undaunted but embittered, Casanova resumed teaching and writing in the field of sociology from 1940 to 1942, and his editorial work continued with the reissue, after a twelve-year lapse, of the periodical Gli Archivi Italiani, under the new title, Gli Archivi d'Italia.

In his introduction to the special issue of American Archivist, "European Archives in an Era of Change," Jean Favier, Director General of the Archives of France, describes the "weight of the centuries" shouldered by the archivists of Europe.24 It was the weight of the early twentieth century that finally brought Casanova's career to a premature close. Casanova's tragedy lies in the fact that his professional abilities had nothing to do with his ultimate fate; Mussolini's criticism of the tenor of Risorgimento scholarship under Casanova's direction as "too strictly professional" is telling. Casanova was simply a victim of a regime bent on exacting intellectual conformity. In Fascist Italy, albeit to a far lesser degree than in the Germany of Goebbels, the political threads were woven tightly through every artistic and scholarly endeavor. Casanova's crime, expressed in his acceptance of the Lincoln letter, was to step outside of the prescribed historical tradition at an inopportune moment. His fate allows us to appreciate one of the freedoms we, as American archivists, often take for granted: the freedom to be judged solely on our merits as practitioners, rather than on our historical interpretations or political allegiances. We can hope that out of the social, political, and economic upheaval now underway in Central and Eastern Europe, in Russia, and in the other post-Soviet republics, where constitutional states are struggling to emerge, autonomous archival communities will develop, with resources to assist in the establishment of national identities and democratic ideals. Surely this is an outcome Eugenio Casanova, as a dedicated professional and believer in collaborative endeavor, would have warmly supported.

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NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 113.


10. Benito Mussolini to C.M. De Vecchi, 12 May 1933, 14 July 1933, in Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, XXV, 261; XXVI, 27.


13. Ibid., 465.

14. Ibid.


21. Elio Lodolini, “La Scuola Archivistica Romana dal 1870 al 1985” in Archivi per la Storia 2 (1989), 136-37. I am indebted to Prof. Elio Lodolini for pointing out that Emilio Re was not a member of the Fascist party.


