

Iris Origo: Marchesa of Val d'Orcia

Caroline Moorehead

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“There are just two things you have to do when you are very unhappy, and you must do one or the other. Get down to work, or do something for someone else.” This was writer Iris Origo’s take on life, as explained to her youngest daughter, Donata. Although her unhappy times were few—the early deaths of her father and her young son, the excessive ravages of World War II—they were life-altering events, and Origo, a world-class biographer and literary critic, believed and enacted her philosophy.

The author, who has written several other biographies, traces Origo’s life as she tries to relate to family in three countries: America, England, and Italy. Origo was an only child born in 1902 to parents from socially prominent families. Her English mother, Sybil, was a “charming” hypochondriac; her American father, Bayard, oldest son of the Cutting family of New York City, died of tuberculosis when Iris was not yet eight. Her early years were spent traveling with her parents in search of the best climate for Bayard’s failing health. Moorehead examines Origo’s privileged childhood, surrounded by wealthy British expatriates who called Florence, Italy home and opened their residences to such literary luminaries as American Edith Wharton.

When she was twenty-two, Iris married landowner and sportsman Antonio Origo, ten years her senior. Antonio was a “marchese,” the term for a nobleman ranking above a count but below a prince. As his wife, Iris was Marchesa Origo. After their marriage, the couple bought land in Tuscany; a “place with enough work to fill our lifetime,” named LaFoce. Presided over by a sixteenth-century brick house that hadn’t been occupied for years, the land was likened to a “moonscape.”

Throughout the 1920s and ‘30s LaFoce underwent tremendous changes. So, too, did the Italian government. Mussolini and the Fascist movement were at first welcomed by a country and a people still hurting from the first World War, but vague feelings of discontent were mounting. Iris kept detailed diaries of the period, while she was also building a school for the children whose parents worked the LaFoce lands, and working on her beloved gardens. The events of World War II take up a good portion of this biography and are the most interesting. Origo’s war diaries were later published to great acclaim; her autobiography is titled *Images and Shadows*. Readers will benefit from Moorehead’s following Origo’s exhortation to “get down to work.”

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