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Iris Origo: Marchesa Of Val D'Orcia



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Synopsis

Iris Origo was one of those rare characters who, despite being born with a platinum spoon in her mouth, went on to accomplish great things. In Origo's case, she managed to add light and color to everything she touched and left for posterity a legacy of work, biography, autobiography, and literary criticism, that have become recognized as classics of their kind.She was born into a wealthy and long-established Long Island family, the Cuttings, but her talented and beloved father (who resembled, more than a little, a character right out of Henry James) died of consumption when she was only nine. She spent the following years traveling the world with her mother and an extensive entourage, settling finally at the Villa Medici at Fiesole and entering into the privileged world of wealthy Anglo-Florentine expatriates whose likes included the Berensons, Harold Acton, Janet Ross, and Edith Wharton, and whose petty bickering, and pettier politics, had a profound influence on how she spent her life.Her marriage to Antonio Origo, a wealthy landowner and sportsman, was as much a reaction to this insular world as it was a surprise to her family and friends. Together they purchased, and single-handedly revived, an extensive, arid valley in Tuscany called Val d'Orcia, rebuilding the farmsteads and the manor house. Although clearly sympathetic to Mussolini's land use policies, they sided firmly with the Allies during World War II, taking considerable risks in protecting children, sheltering partisans, and repatriating Allied prisoners-of-war to their units.Caroline Moorehead has made extensive use of unpublished letters, diaries, and papers to write what will surely be considered the definitive biography of this remarkable woman. She has limned a figure who was brave, industrious, and fiercely independent, but hardly saintly. What emerges is a portrait of one of the more intriguing, attractive, and intelligent women of the last century.

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Customer Reviews

An affectionate history of the writer and charmer Origo (1902-1988), this biography offers lush descriptions of Italian landscapes and the social intrigues of expatriate life in Florence between the wars. But Moorehead (Bertrand Russell: A Life) ultimately fails to make the reader care about her subject, in part because she neglects to firmly establish her subject's place in modern literature at the outset. Origo (nee Cutting and later married to an Italian nobleman) was an aristocratic Anglo-American reared in Italy. Though an early acquaintance of such luminaries as Edith Wharton and Somerset Maugham, Origo did not launch her writing career until later in life; she had been sidetracked by family tribulations, her conversion of an arid Tuscan valley into a thriving agricultural community, her work with destitute children, the rise of Mussolini and WWII. And while Origo was certainly more than the sum of her literary contributions, it was primarily through her biographies, memoirs and criticism that she gained renown. Moorehead waits too long to bring the full force of Origo's literary ambitions and achievements to bear. Moreover, Origo's presence, admittedly reserved at times, is undermined by excessive scene-setting and a parade of lesser characters. In the end, the reader may depart with the sense of having visited Italy and the forgotten worlds of the idle rich and interwar intelligentsia, but not necessarily of having been permitted a dance with the remarkable marchesa herself. B&w illus. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Starred Review Eagerly exchanging an existence of idle privilege and social intrigue for one of hard work and literary distinction, Origo led a life characterized by vitality and commitment. Born in 1902 into a wealthy American family, she and her British mother permanently left the U.S. after the untimely death of her father in 1910. Traveling extensively throughout Europe, they eventually settled outside of Florence, becoming prominent members of the stuffy Anglo-Florentine community of expatriates. Asserting her trademark independence, she married Antonio Origo, the illegitimate son of a cavalry officer-sculptor. Together Antonio and Iris purchased and totally revitalized an arid Tuscan valley and renovated a crumbling estate. With virtually no experience and few practical skills, they transformed themselves into agrarian pioneers and their extensive acreage into a prosperous working community supporting more than 200 people. During the war years, they quietly supported the Allies, offering refuge to countless numbers of partisans and prisoners of war. In addition to these accomplishments, Iris also buried one child and raised two more, conducted

several heart-wrenching extramarital affairs, and distinguished herself as both a biographer and a literary critic. Moorehead has exquisitely captured the energy and the essence of an aristocrat resolutely committed to her land, her craft, and her nontraditional lifestyle. A magnificent biography, so absorbing and so full of fascinating characters and descriptive details that it reads like fiction. Margaret FlanaganCopyright Ã Â© American Library Association. All rights reserved

I found the book interesting and it certainly added a lot to the story of Iris Origo - a completely larger person to her own image portrayed in War in the Val d'Orcia and I would like to read a little more of Iris Origo's own writings as a result of reading this book. But something about the book frustrated me - every now and again I found myself wondering - where is Iris Origio?

This biography filled in a lot of spaces that were in the autobiography. Iris became much more human in Moorehead's book.

Such a moving study, of a family using there wealth and position to improve the life's of others. During one of Italy's darkest times the Italians showed there humanity, at great cost sometimes.

A very interesting read of the life of an English/American woman in Italy during the Second World War.

The autor has mainly repeated the content of Iris Origo's autobiografie.Nor is This book written in a god style. Altogether disappointing.

Fascinating life. I read iris Origo's memoir first and was interested in reading this account of her life that filled in some questions I had.

I love the area of Florence, Italy and discovered Iris Origo by way of an article on the gardens at La Foce. I really enjoyed reading this book. I thought it was wonderfully paced and gave good detailed descriptions of the different phases of Iris's life. She must have been a very interesting person. I highly recommend.

Among the finest examples of the biographic art. An always excellent portrait of a great woman seen against the background of World War II in Northern Italy.

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