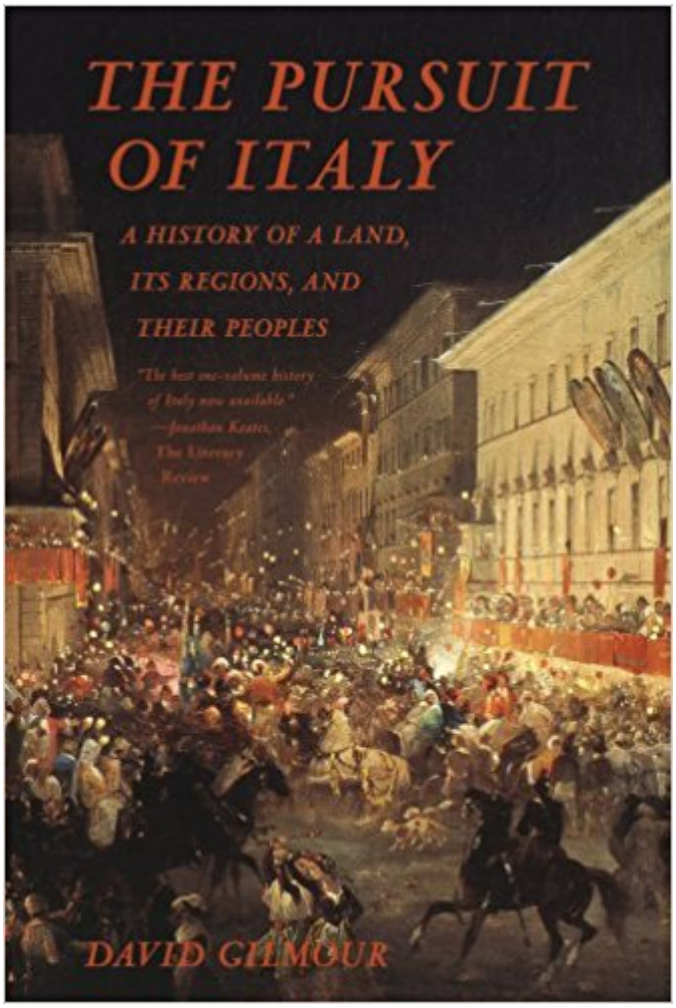
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The Pursuit Of Italy: A History Of A Land, Its Regions, And Their Peoples



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Synopsis

A provocative, entertaining account of Italy's diverse riches, its hopes and dreams, its past and presentDid Garibaldi do Italy a disservice when he helped its disparate parts achieve unity? Was the goal of political unification a mistake? The question is asked and answered in a number of ways in The Pursuit of Italy, an engaging, original consideration of the many histories that contribute to the brillianceÃ¢â ¬â ¢and weaknessÃ¢â ¬â ¢of Italy today. David Gilmour's wonderfully readable exploration of Italian life over the centuries is filled with provocative anecdotes as well as personal observations, and is peopled by the great figures of the Italian pastÃ¢â ¬â ¢from Cicero and Virgil to the controversial politicians of the twentieth century. His wise account of the Risorgimento debunks the nationalistic myths that surround it, though he paints a sympathetic portrait of Giuseppe Verdi, a beloved hero of the era.Gilmour shows that the glory of Italy has always lain in its regions, with their distinctive art, civic cultures, identities, and cuisines. Italy's inhabitants identified themselves not as Italians but as Tuscans and Venetians, Sicilians and Lombards, Neapolitans and Genoese. Italy's strength and culture still come from its regions rather than from its misconceived, mishandled notion of a unified nation.

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Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“Amazingly compendious . . . The best one-volume history of Italy now available . . . [The Pursuit of Italy] has the same tonic, exhilarating impact as the thigh-slapping overture to a Verdi opera.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Jonathan Keates, The Literary ReviewÃ¢â ¬Å“[The Pursuit of Italy has] a freshness and readability often lacking in more laborious histories, an attractiveness reinforced by the quality of the writing, which is versatile and vivid and frequently witty, able to encompass both

densely factual material and complicated narrative without loss of clarity or elegance . . . Compelling to read and highly informative . . . Brilliantly accomplished.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Barry Unsworth, The SpectatorÃ¢â ¬Å“Lucid and elegant, clever and provocative . . . Tracing Italy's history from Romulus and Remus to the misdemeanours of Silvio Berlusconi, Gilmour develops his thesis with wit, style, and a great deal of learning.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Dominic Sandbrook, The Sunday Times (London)Ã¢â ¬Å“[A] well-researched and engaging canter through the peninsula's history.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Peter Popham, The IndependentÃ¢â ¬Å“[Gilmour is] a witty guide with an elegant prose style and a mind delightfully furnished with anecdotes and dictums, sensual impressions and conversations . . . [His] prose smells not of the archive but of a convivial meal eaten beneath a pergola in the Pisan hills.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Lucy Hughes-Hallett, The Daily TelegraphÃ¢â ¬Å“Gilmour's elegantly written book . . . is full of impressive insights . . . A stimulating, up-to-date and reliable guide to modern Italian history.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Tony Barber, Financial TimesÃ¢â ¬Å“In this superb history of Italy and the Italian people, Gilmour celebrates a nation of bewilderingly mixed bloods and ethnicities . . . The Pursuit of Italy offers an enduring tribute to a various and wonderful people.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Ian Thomson, Evening Standard

Sir David Gilmour is one of Britain's most admired and accomplished historical writers and biographers. His previous books include The Last Leopard, The Long Recessional (FSG, 2002), and, most recently, The Ruling Caste (FSG, 2006).

Gilmour's pursuit is ambitious both in scope and intent, covering Italy's land, regions and people from Ancient Rome to the Berlusconi administrations in a tightly written 400 pages. He cautions that since this is not an academic work (although 376 source books are cited in the text), he has allowed himself "to be quirkily subjective in (his) selection of topics."The author begins with a discussion of Italy's defining geographic features: too long; easily invaded; divided from north to south and from east to west; lacking in timber, fish, fishermen, sailors and navigable rivers; malaria prone and multi-racial. Gimour proceeds to review almost every important era of the peninsula's history from Imperial Rome through the Risorgimento and ending with a review of today's economic, social and political challenges. His approach is to analyze the country's centrifugal tendencies, arguing that more traditional histories "had been written from a centripetal view, as if Italian unity had been pre-ordained." Questioning whether unification had been either necessary or inevitable, Gilmour asks: "Were there not just too many Italies for a successful unity?"Early portions of the text can be a bit challenging as the author weaves together the varied and complex historical threads of the Holy

Roman Empire. The book takes off, however, in an extended and lucid description of the Risorgimento. Gilmour sees the latter resulting from a war of expansion conducted by the Piedmontese. "Annexation (of the Papal States and the Kingdom of The Two Sicilies) plainly meant 'piedmontization', the imposition of northern laws, customs and institutions on distant regions with no experience of their workings." The Kingdom of Italy was formally proclaimed in 1861 but, constitutionally, was a greatly expanded Piedmont with a new name. Venice and Rome fell into Italy's hands in 1866 and 1870 respectively more as the result of machinations between Austria, Prussia and France than through Italian military or political victories. In Gilmour's view, nationalist Italy was more imposition than evolution."Nearly a century and a half after unification - and more than sixty years after Mussolini's death - Italian politics had still been unable to settle into any kind of rhythm or consistency," concludes the author. Italy's birth rate, economic growth and EU compliance are at low points while its Corruption Index (according to Transparency International ranking) rises. The sense of national unity, Gilmour argues, has disappeared as Italians increasingly question the legitimacy of the state.Countries such as Britain and France, observe Gilmour, are more important than the sum of their parts. Communal Italy, however, represented in its cities and regions, is the strength of the country and receives the true allegiance of its citizenry. The author quotes Luigi Barzini who stated that Italy "has never been as good as the sum of all her people." The reader is left to conclude that Gilmour agrees with Giustino Fortunato who declared in 1899 "that the unification of Italy was a sin against history and geography."The Pursuit of Italy ends in a question about its efficacy as a unified nation, one thought to have been settled in the affirmative long ago. As a result, this book is entertaining and truly thought-provoking, which can't help but be a good combination.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the formal proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. I have long had a fascination with Italy, which was only whetted by my two too-short trips there. Art, architecture, history, food, wine, warmly hospitable people, and (often) glorious weather and landscapes. But at the same time Italy is such a dysfunctional country - crime, corruption, bloated and inefficient bureaucracy, Berlusconi, and a burgeoning debt crisis. (I realize, of course, that the same problems - minus "Berlusconi" - loom large in the United States.) In THE PURSUIT OF ITALY, David Gilmour does a good job of explaining why in its 150 years Italy, the nation, has had such a star-crossed existence and why it still has an uncertain future.In Gilmour's view, geography and the vicissitudes of history over millennia have worked against a unified Italian nation. For centuries, the peoples of the peninsula existed -- even thrived, at least in comparison to many others in Europe --

in various city-states (such as Venice, Genoa, Savoy, Florence, Siena, and Naples). Even today, "the city-states remain embedded in Italy's psyche, the crucial component of its people's identity and of their social and cultural inheritance." When the tide of 19th-Century nationalism swept over Italy, there were no inherent ties or associations that predisposed those city-states to unite in a peninsular nation, and the founding fathers - Cavour, Garibaldi, Mazzini, and Victor Emanuel - who brought about that nation-state did so without the support or approval of the majority of the citizenry. Italy as a nation was flawed in conception, and the nation-building since has been badly flawed in execution.In arguing for his thesis - which I find quite plausible - Gilmour supplies the reader with a one-volume history of Italy (or, perhaps more accurately, history of its many and varied constituent parts). That history is a little tedious at times and the book occasionally takes on the feel of a textbook -- albeit, better written than most textbooks. But on the whole I found THE PURSUIT OF ITALY both engaging and educational. I learned more about Italy than I have from any other single source in my reading career. The book certainly should be considered by anyone looking for a one-volume historical overview of Italy before travelling there.

Italy is a country with a rich and diverse history. Which is partly why this book was a little overwhelming to read. There was so much information that it was hard to follow/absorb all the facts that were being thrown at me. It was an ambitious ask to put the entire history of Italy in one 400 page book. And I think attempting that made it so I felt at times like I was reading a list of facts instead of a story. Certain chapters provided more in-depth coverage (notably the opera chapter, specifically the information on Verdi) which made me wish that the author had decided to do this more often. Instead of getting into everything, I would have love him to pick and choose his spots to focus on.Overall, this is an informative book that provides insight in why the unification of Italy wasn't greeted with enthusiasm by its own citizens.

Very interesting "behind the scenes" look at Italy, its history, culture and political development. Having visited Italy several times in the last 10 years, this was quite an eye-opener for the casual traveler. Unfortunately, the ending is somewhat pessimistic regarding the future for this otherwise wonderful country. And events in Italy that have occurred since the book was published do nothing to contradict the conclusions of the author. Now I understand why my Italian language teacher left his homeland 19 years ago and says he's not interested in every returning there to live.

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