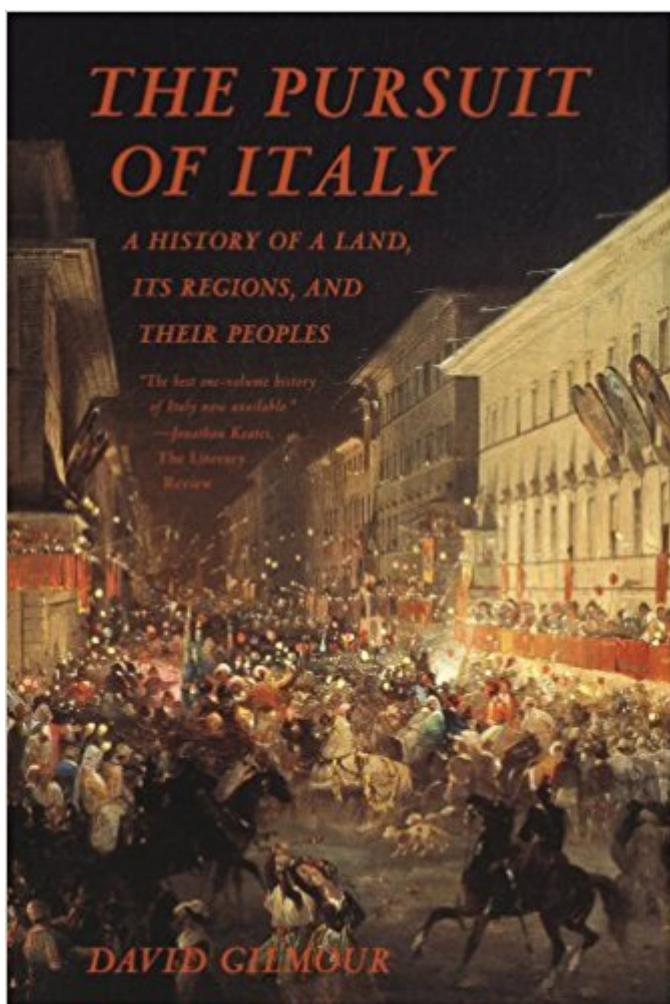


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The Pursuit Of Italy: A History Of A Land, Its Regions, And Their Peoples



Synopsis

A provocative, entertaining account of Italy's diverse riches, its hopes and dreams, its past and present. Did 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 brilliance and weakness 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 past 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

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.

I am not as well read as others in Italian history but this book certainly struck me as a very efficient history of Italy. It begins at the beginning, before Romulus and Remus and goes right up to Berlusconi. It is definitely a history that is filtered through the author's perspective. As the title implies, he sees "Italy" as at best a work in progress which has never achieved the degree of commonality and nationhood that other European states have. And he is skeptical it ever will. His perspective comes through in every chapter. He has a very strong voice; for example, many times he labels an action or decision "insane" or "lunatic". I found this to enhance my experience as a reader, in contrast with a blander, less judgmental voice. I thought I would quote one paragraph to illustrate both the efficiency of the presentation and the distinctive voice (p.185) "The Habsburg government made a more honourable blunder by waiting three days for its ultimatum to expire and thus missing the chance to capture Turin before the French army arrived. The outcome of the campaign was decided by two battles in Lombardy in June, which ended in victories for France but in which its Italian allies played undistinguishable parts. One, Magenta, was so sanguinary that it gave its name to the artists' colour, magenta, but little Piedmontese blood helped inspire the name since the army did not arrive at the battlefield until nightfall, after the struggle was over. At the other, Solferino, the sight of wounded soldiers left to die was so horrifying to one Swiss witness that he went home and founded the International Red Cross." At times that voice can be a little too monotonously disparaging.

This delightfully coherent history of the country that in 1860 became the modern nation of Italy begins with the polyglot migrations into the Italian peninsula many centuries before the Christian era and ends with the chaotic premiership of Silvio Berlusconi. And what a ride it is! The two things that I most enjoyed and admired about this superb overview of Italian history are, first, its coherence. From beginning to end, David Gilmour, the author, makes the case that Metternich, who in the early 19th century declared that Italy was not a nation, but rather a "geographic expression," was profoundly correct. For it is Gilmour's conviction that what we now call the nation of Italy was and continues to be a mistake. Italy, in his persuasive view, ought not to be a single nation, but rather it would have fared far better as four five or six independent yet far more integrated and coherent countries such as Piedmont, Tuscany, Venezia, Sicily, the Southern half of the country, etc. Of course, no one will ever know whether Gilmore is right, but he does make an excellent case that Italy, as it is today, is not a coherently integrated and unified country. Far from it. The second dimension of this fine book that I admire and enjoy is Gilmour's willingness to opine on all of Italy's leading men of the last 200 years. From Garibaldi, to Cavour, to Pius IX, to Verdi, to Victor Emanuel, to Mussolini, to De Gasperi, to Berlusconi - his perspectives and insights into each of these men (as well as many others) are always interesting and usually persuasive. Plus, his perspectives on the country as a whole are similarly engaging.

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