

Saving Everyone: Iris Origo and the lives of others

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The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work . . .

- *W.B. Yeats*

Both.

- *Bernard Malamud*

On June 22, 1944, a middle-aged couple led a large group of women, children, and older people to safety between advancing Allied and retreating German armies in wartime Italy. The man was Antonio Origo, an idealistic landowner and *marchese*; the woman was his wife Iris Origo, Anglo-American by birth, Italian by marriage. The people they guided were their tenant families, twenty-three refugee children, an orphaned baby, and their own daughters aged one and three.

The Origos owned La Foce, a large agricultural estate in southeastern Tuscany. As the war crept north after the Allied landings in southern Italy, La Foce was increasingly at risk. By spring 1944, the front was only a short distance away, and by June 22, with German artillery positioned in the Origos' courtyard and soldiers occupying their home, it was right on top of them. They had no choice but to seek safety in nearby towns, setting out with their long, ragged column along roads mined by the German army and strafed by Allied planes.

The children were the Origos' main concern. Iris and Antonio had taken in refugee boys and girls – many malnourished, grieving, and traumatized – after the Allied bombing of Turin and Milan more than a year earlier. Some could barely speak; others recoiled from touch and tenderness. The Origos were determined to protect these children, but now, directly in the path of war, La Foce seemed lost.

For months the couple had risked retaliation from German and Italian authorities by providing maps, food, clothing, and shelter to escaped Allied prisoners of war, Jewish refugees from Rome and Florence, deserters from the Italian army, and partisans. With the front closing in, Iris spent her days and nights looking after tenant families seeking refuge at the Origos' villa and distracting the children as planes flew overhead and shells exploded nearby. Finally, when it was more dangerous to stay than go, she helped lead them all away. She behaved with extraordinary courage and strength, but, as those who know her story are aware, those last months at wartime La Foce and the final exodus to safety were just two episodes in an extraordinary life.

Iris Origo, born Iris Cutting on August 15, 1902, was the child of Edwardian privilege. Her father, an American diplomat, came from a socially prominent New York family, and her mother, Lady Sybil Cuffe, was the daughter of Lord and Lady Desart, Anglo-Irish nobility. To a remarkable extent, however, the wealth and social position of both families led them not to luxury and display but philanthropy and public service. In Iris's mother's family, the principle of duty was particularly marked in her grandfather, Lord Desart. In her father's case, the Cutting family's social ethos seems to have defined everyone; certainly it did her father Bayard, his three siblings, and their parents. "There was," Caroline Moorehead, Iris's biographer, writes, "a very strong sense of charitable duty; not only in terms of money, but of time and trouble."¹

Bayard, a student of George Santayana's at Harvard and a friend of Edith Wharton's, was driven by a desire to serve and make a difference. Santayana said that he was the "sanest young man" he had ever met, Wharton that he had "the elusive thing called 'character,'" and his sister Justine that he possessed a "flaming fury at any wrong done to someone else, regardless of the person or how remote that person might be from his own life."

When Iris was small, she and her parents moved repeatedly. Bayard and Sybil's love of travel, and his need to dedicate himself to some new task or role, were behind some of this, but there was a third reason as well: Bayard had tuberculosis, and the couple searched for places where he was most likely to recover. Already ill by 1902, he was in a rural sanatorium in England when Sybil gave birth to Iris in a nearby village.

In January 1909, Bayard, then American Vice-Consul in Milan, was strong enough to throw himself into relief efforts after a catastrophic earthquake in southern Italy, but he died little more than a year later, in Egypt, with Sybil and seven-year-old Iris. In a parting letter, he wrote his wife:

I'd like it to be different for Iris . . . Make a home for her and yourself, all this travelling and homelessness is so bad for you and will be bad for her . . . I think you would both be happiest in Italy, . . . But she must live with you always wherever you choose, be your child . . . I want you to be everything to each other.

"I became acquainted then with loneliness and grief," Iris wrote sixty years later. She missed her father pitifully, idolized him, and kept his memory close. Above all, she took on a sense of his scale and values, an afterimage of idealism, courage, and responsibility:

His greatest gift to me was assuredly that he became the personification of a myth. A large part of childhood is spent in a legendary world, peopled by myths and heroes: it is through them that beauty and valour are first apprehended. But it is generally a shadowy, secret domain, wholly cut off from life. When, however, a child can translate his myth into terms of reality and can recollect his hero in flesh and blood, the vision is unified: virtue and valour walk upon the earth.

Bayard, distrusting nationalism and wanting Iris to be cosmopolitan, asked that she be raised somewhere she did not belong by ancestry. As Sybil's daughter, she would be English, he said: "But I'd like her to be a little 'foreign' too so that when she grows up she really will be free to love or marry anyone she likes, of any country, without it being difficult."

In 1911, Sybil bought the fifteenth-century Villa Medici in Fiesole, near Florence, and, as Bayard had wished, kept her daughter near. Iris was schooled privately except for a very short time in London, and grew up surrounded by English-speaking adults in fashionable Florentine expatriate society. Neighbours included Bernard Berenson, the Renaissance art expert and collector, who had a strong influence on Iris's education.

She described her childhood as "not unhappy," and there were some very good times, especially the summers at Westbrook (the Cutting's Long Island estate) and Desart Court (her grandfather's home in Ireland). "Both houses had one thing in common," Iris wrote; "a child felt safe there." And safety, security, and continuity mattered to her. Her first years had been rootless and nomadic, and each relocation, she said, "was followed by a readjustment of my manners, and, to some extent, of my values." She became, Moorehead says, a different child each time and someone who, no matter where she went, felt she never quite belonged. On the positive side, her sympathy for others may have deepened with dislocation and marginality.

As a girl in Fiesole, she had two influential tutors. The first was Signora Signorini, who exemplified the Tuscan virtues of a strong sense of duty, “deep family affection,” and the “dignity of self-effacement.” In retrospect, Iris wrote, the impoverished signora and her two modest and very well-behaved daughters “made the life of luxury [seem] a little thin.”

The second was the kind and learned Professor Solone Monti, who introduced her to a classical education and the love of study. “It was with him,” she wrote, “that I spent the happiest hours of my girlhood – perhaps the happiest I have ever known.” But Monti died of influenza in 1917, and Iris’s girlhood was mostly about “dull, solitary lessons” with governesses and an equally dull, restricted diet and routine dictated by Sybil, who became increasingly neurotic and subject to periods of fatigue and indisposition.

Nor was there much contact with other children. Sybil scheduled brief social encounters for Iris, not enough for real friendships to grow. Instead, Iris had for company her distracted mother and a stream of adults passing through or settling into Villa Medici’s cultural hothouse. Looking back, Iris said that she’d been “a child living in a world too sophisticated for it, too varied, too rich.” By her teens she’d become shy, solitary, and, “in the absence of a stable foundation,” unselfconfident with other teenagers. Socially inept, unsure of herself, and often unhappy, she could be haughty with others and privately, in her own words, “a supercilious and self-satisfied little prig.” She had a profound talent for friendship and intimacy but little chance to act on it. She was lonely and trapped with an endless cast of oversized adult egos and their intrigues. Fiesole, Florence, and her mother’s villa were ideal for her intellectual and literary development but little else.

So she did things on her own. In her teens, she took on a small group of scouts and guides and started a literary, artistic, and dramatic club for girls ten to sixteen. (A magazine was produced and musical performances staged.) At fifteen, in 1917-18, when thousands of civilians fled south from northern Italy because of earthquakes and the war, she helped those who reached Florence by collecting and distributing blankets and clothing and talking her mother into housing

a homeless family. Like her father, she wanted to do the right thing and to act on behalf of refugees and the victims of war and disaster.

In 1918, she began her coming-out, a three-year period she later judged “a considerable waste of time.” She’d have been “happier and nicer,” she wrote, if she’d been allowed to attend Oxford, as she wished. “As a debutante in London and New York I was constantly aware of values which I did not share, and yet was not brave enough . . . to disregard, and spent my time striving for prizes I did not really care to win.” It was a time, she said, of “vanity, pre-occupation, and lack of self-confidence.”

It was also a time of discovery: Iris, though ill at ease, ungainly, “spotty” (in her opinion), and at that stage plump, learned that she was also attractive. One of the men drawn to her was Antonio, a handsome cavalry veteran and minor aristocrat ten years older than her. They met in 1920 and, despite Sybil’s displeasure and resistance, married in March 1924. By then they had bought La Foce, which Iris described as “a large, neglected estate” several kilometres from Chianciano and Montepulciano in the eroded, barren, almost “lunar landscape” of the Val d’Orcia. As she wrote in her 1970 memoir *Images and Shadows*, she and Antonio hoped to find there:

not only our home but the work that we both wanted. Antonio had, deep in his bones, the instinctive love of many Italians for the land, and wanted to farm in a region still undeveloped agriculturally, where there would still be much work to do. I had a strong, though uninformed, interest in social work. We both wanted to get away from city life and to lead what we thought of as a pastoral, Virgilian existence.

They were naïve, of course, and the obstacles they met turned out to be far greater than expected, but they were right about the work itself. Antonio was in his element, labouring with the tenant farmers to reclaim arable land, introduce new farming techniques, reforest wherever feasible, restore homes and outbuildings, and build or improve the roads linking scattered farms with the Origos’ villa and each other. By 1940, the estate was flourishing: “every farmer was able to bring his produce to market, each child to go to school.” In

many respects, the work of innovative landowners like the Origos aligned with Mussolini's vision of land renewal, and this attracted state subsidies from the Bonifica Integrale, a programme designed to reclaim derelict land. For forty years, from 1931 to 1971, Antonio was president of the Consorzio di bonifica della Val d'Orcia, a group of local landowners committed not only to reforestation and better agricultural yields but improved infrastructure and living conditions for local families.

But what Iris and Antonio found when they first arrived in 1924 was sobering. The land hadn't been fertilized for decades, the villa was in bad shape, and many of the tenants' homes were falling apart. As for the tenants themselves, many were desperately poor, superstitious, suspicious, isolated, and resistant to change. Eighty percent were illiterate, and many were underfed and unwell. The estate had only one school, and many children couldn't attend in winter because of harsh weather and inadequate roads.

The Origos started evening classes for adults and built schools, nurseries with playgrounds, a men's club, and a four-bed infirmary. The district nurse lived above the infirmary, where the estate's ill and injured were treated or convalesced, hygiene classes were taught, and childbirth issues were addressed. There was a sterilizer and an operating room, and a doctor from Chianciano visited twice a week. Before she married, Iris had done voluntary practical nursing with the poor of Florence: "I cannot tell you how much I dislike it, or how bad I am at it," she wrote at the time. Now, at La Foce, she and Antonio could create a small society in which the distress she'd seen could be prevented or at least eased.

But it was with the children that she was most herself and most successful. As Moorehead says, she'd wanted to do something with her life and to act on the sense of duty she'd inherited from the Cuttings and Cuffes, especially in relation to children in need. Iris's first efforts to get to know the women on the estate went poorly – she must have seemed impossibly rich, foreign, tall, and patrician – but as mothers saw their children thrive thanks to the nutrition and

stimulation they received at school, they began to warm to her. Iris would never fit in, but some of the women now turned to her for advice and help.

Soon the number of children at La Foce had risen to a hundred. Students were picked up in the morning and brought to school by horse and cart or by oxen if the roads were bad. Iris hired teachers, set aside a garden in which the children could grow their own fruit and vegetables, and took an active part in daily classroom activities. As always, her first principle was providing order and stability. What she'd lacked when small, she wished other children to have.

And there were special events. Iris, "at her simplest and most childlike at festivities and celebrations," loved to organize children's parties. In Fiesole she'd set up Easter egg hunts for the little girls she knew, and she carried her love of playfulness and gift-giving to La Foce, planning the right Christmas toy or hand-knitted sweater for each child months in advance.

Recognized for her work at La Foce, Iris was made patroness of the area's schools and was able to take her skills and educational passions beyond the estate. Again, what she had not received – regular socializing with peers, light-hearted play, and a positive classroom education – she wished others to have.

In 1925, she gave birth to her first child, a boy named Gianni. She wrote that she felt a "happiness and peacefulness entirely different from anything" she had known, and, for a time, Moorehead says, she was freed from the restlessness and insecurity that dogged her. Less than eight years later, however, Gianni died of meningitis at the age Iris had been when she lost her father.

I can't pretend that it seems anything but an utterly empty world – but I am trying to struggle back, beyond the weeks of unbearable pain, to the time when Gianni was such a happy little boy . . . it seems most intolerable, most against nature, that he should never feel again.

After several months, she picked up her life, stoical but reduced. As for Antonio, he mourned privately, unable to talk about his loss or to share Iris's. Their relationship had been strained even before Gianni's death, their marriage based

for the most part on social convention, their work at La Foce, and their son. Now they led increasingly separate lives.

Then Lord Desart also died, his passing the third of Iris's great losses after those of her father and son. She had learned restraint, kindness, and patience from her grandfather, and he had shaped her belief in duty and a shared debt to others. Their relationship had been, she wrote in *Images and Shadows*, one of the happiest of their lives: "An unflinching, carefully veiled tenderness warmed and lit our friendship." Now that, too, was lost. Lord Desart had counselled a return to work and duty after Gianni's death, but for Iris the rest of the 1930s passed in restless confusion. She travelled, living less in Italy than England, her friends there her salvation.

The other thing that saved her was writing, something she'd set aside with her engagement: "In 1933, after Gianni's death, in an effort to find some impersonal work which would absorb at least a part of my thoughts – I turned back to writing again." In the mid-to late-1930s she published three biographies, *Leopardi: A Study in Solitude*, *Allegra*, and *Tribune of Rome*. The first was a life of Giacomo Leopardi, the nineteenth-century Italian poet, the second a short volume on Lord Byron's daughter, and the third a biography of Cola di Rienzo, a fourteenth-century revolutionary. Critically acclaimed, her writing attracted Virginia Woolf's attention and introduced her to London's literary circles.

In *Images*, Iris wrote that after *Leopardi* she'd planned a book on the children of great nineteenth-century writers. She intended, she said:

to enquire whether the forcing-house in which they had lived had stimulated their growth or crippled it. . . . This book was never finished. The only story I did write, except for a brief article on Coleridge's son, Hartley, was that of Byron's illegitimate daughter by Clair Clairmont, Allegra, whom . . . when he had tired of her, he packed off to a convent-school in the middle of the Romagna marshes, . . .

Where she died of typhus at the age of five.

Allegra is superb but distressing, a short life written by someone who has lost a child of her own. In *Leopardi* and the several biographies that came after *Allegra*,

Iris's style was restrained, reticent, even a bit distant. *Allegra* came from a different part of her.

But she had found her craft. Reading accounts of Byron's stay in Italy, she had seen that biographical research had, in her words, "the fascination of a crossword puzzle." She was now a serious writer and treated as one. Readers and reviewers "admired her social history, her enthusiasm, her obvious truthfulness, and her humility, . . . At a time when literary biography enjoyed little of the popularity it has today, Iris was carving out a niche very much her own."

. . .

By the late 1930s, however, she had to face the brutal, repellent side of Fascism. As a foreigner in Italy – married to a conservative monarchist and living in rural Tuscany – she had avoided domestic and international politics as long as possible. She regretted this later, recalling the political era and her silence with "distress and distaste" and describing the person she'd been as ill-informed and self-absorbed. "With no real political convictions of her own, beyond the sense of responsibility and duty and the conservatism instilled in her by her grandparents, . . . she had taken refuge, she wrote in her diary, in 'the blank vagueness' of a young woman not interested in public affairs." But by 1939, she said, "Even the most confirmed sleep-walker . . . could hardly fail to wake up." Now, returning from England to Italy and Antonio, she listened to her anti-Fascist friends in Rome, Florence, and Montepulciano and sided with them. Antonio had benefitted from Mussolini's agrarian policies and had never spoken out against Fascism or Italy's military imperialism. "A distinct taint of Fascist complicity" trailed him for the rest of his life, but by the late 1930s he seems to have shared Iris's antipathy to the Fascist regime.

After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Iris volunteered, unsuccessfully, for relief work with the Vatican and the International Red Cross. She then tried to join the American Relief Mission in Poland, again unsuccessfully. Finally, in

the fall of 1940, despite her origins and anti-Fascist views, she found work with the Italian Red Cross in Rome. Her role in the organization's prisoner-of-war office was to trace missing Italian servicemen – captured, wounded, or dead – and connect them if possible with their families. For the next two and a half years she worked weekdays in Rome, returning to La Foce most weekends.

When her father went to Sicily in 1909, he represented not only the U.S. government but the American Red Cross Society. Bringing relief funds (including a thousand dollars from his father), he was struck by the fatalism and passivity of the survivors, as well as the inability of the local authorities to act and the absence of a coordinated and effective response from outside. "I feel that we are doing nothing," he wrote, "that our only useful function would be as a registration and investigation bureau." What he prescribed, in part, was a team that reunited survivors with their families. Thirty years later, though because of war rather than natural disaster, Iris took up her own role with the sort of tracing and reunion service her father had called for.

She lived two lives from late 1940 to early 1943, one in Rome with her work, the other at La Foce with her family. In 1940, she gave birth to a daughter, Benedetta. Three years later, she had a second daughter, Donata, at which point she left Rome and the Red Cross and returned to the Val d'Orcia. With the collapse of the Italian government in September and the immediate German occupation of most of Italy, La Foce, with its rough topography, woods, and distant hill farms became known as a safe haven for refugees, partisans, deserters from the Italian army, and escaped Allied prisoners-of-war. Some were ill, a few were hurt, and all were hungry. The Origos helped everyone:

. . . without inquiring who they were, giving them food and shelter, until they had used up most of their supplies, with little heed for their own safety. For two dangerous years they . . . turned no one away. Across the whole of the Val d'Orcia, and beyond, the name of Origo became known to the escaping prisoners-of-war, so that men in desperate need found their way to La Foce's door. A band of about two hundred partisans eventually made the estate their base, and they were fed largely by La Foce's kitchens.

The infirmary nurse cared for the sick and wounded, and the tenant farmers shared the little they had in spite of threatened reprisals. With their age-old hospitality and sympathy for those on the run, the rural poor risked everything. "A guest was always sacred," Italian novelist Ignazio Silone said about the people in his village, "and for an honourable man the first 'act of mercy' was to help the persecuted."

Despite the danger of arrest, Iris said she was almost never afraid, even as the German army drew near and life sank into chaos. Which was odd, she said, "for I have generally been quite easily frightened":

we were really too busy, and too much interested, to be afraid. This was partly owing to the continuousness and the variety of the demands upon our resourcefulness. Twenty-three refugee children, in the last months, moved into our own house and had to be fed, clothed, instructed and amused; hiding-places and food had to be found, not only for partisans and escaped p.o.w.'s but also for Jews who had fled from the larger cities. German officers who came to sequester cars, tyres, horses and houses, etc. had to be dealt with (this was Antonio's job, sometimes at the same moment as I was giving a map, a compass or a pair of socks to a fugitive Allied soldier on the other side of the house, or up the hill).

A young partisan died in the infirmary, city people came to La Foce begging for food, and there were desperate appeals from the families of hostages taken by the Germans. The problem, Iris said,

arose from a continual necessity to weigh in the balance not courage and cowardice, or right and wrong, but conflicting duties and responsibilities equally urgent. . . . At the end of each day prudence inquired, "Have I done too much?" and enthusiasm or compassion, "Might I not, perhaps, have done more?"

Inevitably, Iris and Antonio were betrayed, denounced in the Fascist press, questioned, and placed under surveillance. The leader of the partisans, concerned for their safety, urged them to join him in the hills: a special room, he said, had been readied for Iris.

She dedicated her wartime diary, *War in Val d'Orcia* (published in 1947), to Antonio, "who shared it all." They were partners risking the same fate, and whatever one achieved, the other made possible. A small suitcase sat by the door that led to the hills, but they never used it. Instead they dealt with whatever came their way: retreating soldiers, nervous partisans, the hungry and distressed, and, increasingly, air strikes and shelling. As the front drew nearer, their world became smaller. On June 17, 1944, a German artillery unit took over their house, and the Origos moved everyone – the children, the baby, and many of La Foce's inhabitants – to the cellars, where Iris and Antonio reassured the fearful and played with the children. The tears were endless, the shelling got louder and closer, and it was terribly hot.

Unable to sleep one night, Iris reviewed the course of events, "wondering if we could have taken the children to safety elsewhere, if we had been more foreseeing. . . . Antonio told me that he had been doing the same. But the sequence of events has been such that I really do not see at what point we could have behaved differently." Soldiers and partisans were fighting in the hills, roads and towns were being shelled or bombed, and fields had been mined.

Suddenly, however, after weeks at or near the front, they simply had to go. Antonio and Iris led the way north from La Foce to a crossroads where the tenants who had family or friends in Chianciano turned and walked east. The remaining sixty carried on to the hill town of Montepulciano along roads mined, shelled, and exposed to attack from the air, forcing them to take cover in ditches or corn fields when Allied planes flew over. They passed German units and corpses by the roadside. When a rest was called, Iris wrote, "the children fell exhausted and thankful on the ground, only to rise again hastily, having sat down on an ant-hill. They made, indeed, much more fuss about the ants than about the shells."

Several hours after setting out, they reached the church of San Biagio below Montepulciano. Spotted from the ramparts above, they were soon embraced by residents and helped up the hill and into the town, with Antonio leading and Donata on his shoulder. "The walk" was over, everyone tired but alive. "The

Montepulcianesi vied with each other in offering accommodation," Iris wrote, and friends found room and bedding in their home not only for the Origo family but the refugee children as well. Iris ended the day's diary entry with: "We have left behind everything that we possess, but never in my life have I felt so rich and so thankful as looking down on all the children as they lay asleep. Whatever may happen tomorrow, tonight they are safe and sound."

On July 1, ten days after the walk, Iris and Antonio returned to La Foce. They found the villa relatively whole, but the interior had been looted and soiled, objects stolen or broken, letters and photos torn and strewn about, filth everywhere except the nurseries. Toys were intentionally broken, "but curiously enough, the English Kate Greenaway alphabet is still upon the wall." Fifteen farmhouses had been destroyed, livestock stolen or slaughtered. And there had been deaths on the estate, and rapes.

The Origos set about dealing with mines, burying dead animals to avoid paratyphoid, and repairing and rebuilding. Antonio divided his time between supervising the work at La Foce and administering the *comune* of Chianciano, where he, at the partisans' invitation, was the new mayor.

As soon as possible, Iris brought the refugee children home from Montepulciano and began to restore order and routine. Stolen pots and pans – taken not just from the villa but the farms – had to be replaced, glass and tile found, and wool acquired for the children's winter clothing. Meanwhile, Moorehead writes:

The peasant farmers and their wives now turned gratefully to Iris for help and advice: about how to fill in forms, how to get information about missing sons and husbands. It was the war and what she had been able to do to help them that finally broke down the barriers between Iris and the families of La Foce. From now on she would be accepted and loved in a way she had never believed possible. More strongly than ever before, she knew now where she belonged. Her decision to return to Italy for the war had been the right one.

She was able to visit Rome in July, then Florence in September by army Jeep. In Fiesole, she found the Villa Medici damaged and booby-trapped – her mother had left for Switzerland in 1940 and the villa had been requisitioned by the Germans – and her own small house in the villa’s gardens was in flames.

In the last months of the war, Iris, when not at La Foce, was with the Red Cross again. First she worked with the American organization, taking supplies to devastated villages just liberated, then with the Italian organization, serving as an interpreter. In April 1945, when the British entered Bologna, she travelled north with the Red Cross. The city had descended into the kind of anarchy and bloodletting that tend to conclude a civil war, with widespread and often casual execution of suspected Fascists and collaborators. Iris asked senior British officers to curb the reprisals, but the army was on the move again.

At last, on April 28, partisans north of Milan captured and executed Mussolini. The German command in Italy surrendered a day later, and the war, at least in Italy, was over. Iris and Antonio erected a tablet in memory of everyone who had died in the Val d’Orcia, “soldier, civilian, partisan, friend or enemy”: *“Tu che passi e guardi / La pace di questa valle / Sosta e ricorda / I nostri morti”* (You who pass by and feel the peace of this valley, pause and remember our dead.)

. . .

The liberation of Tuscany brought an end to armed conflict but not to hunger, cold, and fear. This was no pastoral, Virgilian existence, simply a new variation on labour and want. After a while, however, the immediate crises had been resolved and a friend of the Origos remarked on the “amazing building they’ve done – roads and bridges and new houses.” La Foce could have claimed war reparations from the Allies but did not.

With the worst over, Iris and her daughters divided their time between the Val d’Orcia and Rome, where the girls could be educated according to Iris’s stan-

dards, and she herself could leave behind “too many, and too sad, ghosts.” Iris, Benedetta, and Donata stayed in the city during the school year, with Antonio joining them on weekends.

“Close to her daughters,” Moorehead writes, Iris was “very strict about their manners, and the way they were to be brought up.” Many years later, Donata, a tomboy like her older sister, said she’d dreaded her mother’s lectures and the sense of not living up to her expectations. Iris was highly protective and prescriptive, and the relationship between mother and daughters was not “altogether easy.”

Like Antonio, she disliked and avoided large social events but continued to take intense pleasure in close friendships and elaborate family parties. As for post-war Britain, she loved staying with old friends in Wales but was drawn less to London. Moorehead says that it was a while before “any feeling of belonging to the Anglo-Saxon world returned to her – and in some senses it never did.” As her father had wished, she was never really British, American, or Italian, but the war had strengthened her identification with the last.

On the Red Cross assignment in Bologna, Iris had reunited with her friend Elsa Dallolio. Iris and Elsa had worked together in Rome until Iris returned to La Foce in 1943 and Elsa to her father near Bologna. There’d been little contact as the war inched northwards, and they’d worried about each other. Now, back in Rome, their friendship grew even closer. Twelve years older than Iris, Elsa gave the younger woman the unreserved but not uncritical love she’d craved since childhood. She provided not merely reliable affection and companionship but structure and a set of principles, as well as an example of stoic resolve, selflessness, loyalty, and compassion. Because of Elsa, Iris became more aware of social injustice and economic disparity.

With the war’s end, all of La Foce’s children had been reunited with their families, “safe and sound.” Now, with thousands of displaced boys and girls still needing care and protection, Iris and Antonio decided to found a permanent children’s home in the nursery-school that had housed the little refugees:

Like every other country through which the War had passed, Italy at that time had a large number of orphaned, illegitimate or under-nourished children – and it was for these, or for the children of refugees in concentration camps, that the home was then used. My intention was to keep it small enough to be as much like a family and as little like an institution as possible, and for this reason I have never accepted more than twenty children – both boys and girls between the ages of four and twelve.

That was written in 1970, a quarter-century after La Casa dei Bambini opened. By then, hundreds of children had grown up at the home, graduating at age twelve to boarding-schools or training programmes. They had arrived at La Foce hurt, deprived, and apprehensive: some were convalescing from tuberculosis or recovering from institutionalization; a few shrank from an adult's touch. "All had a deep craving for affection," Iris wrote, but some needed years to recover. She and Antonio, striving to create an atmosphere as homelike as possible, assumed the role of La Casa's grandparents, but it was actually run by Signorina Vera Berrettini. "La Tata," as she was known, had directed the school during the war and remained the children's teacher.

As safe, secure, and caring as La Casa was, Iris believed that it would be best for most of its children to have loving parents of their own:

As soon as they were ready, I tried to find adoptive homes for them – at first in the U.S.A. . . . and recently, owing to a change in Italian adoption laws and also in the attitude to adoption in this country, in Italy. This has now become the chief purpose of the Casa dei Bambini, . . .

Iris had written that Byron spoiled his daughter before he tired of her and sent her to the convent school. She believed, however, that in spite of the school's austerity, the nuns had loved the little girl and "it is probable that Allegra was not unhappy. . . . For the first time, she had found what every child needs most of all – a world in which stability and order ruled. For the first time in her life, Allegra was secure." Security, stability, love: the central themes in Iris's own life, and again what she most wanted to give.

. . .

Iris continued to write. While Antonio rededicated himself to La Foce after losing many of his tenant farmers to factory jobs in northern Italy, she published several works of non-fiction. In 1949, two years after *War in Val d'Orcia*, *The Last Attachment* appeared. A study of Byron's time in Italy and his relationship with Contessa Teresa Guiccioli, it was well-received by critics and readers:

What all her reviewers remarked on was that Iris had a gift for making the scholarly readable. It was a time when a mixture of scholarship and readability was rare in serious non-fiction; long before many writers and publishers, Iris seems to have understood that it is not necessary to be an academic historian to produce accurate and enjoyable history.

The following year, she published a children's book entitled *Giovanna and Jane*, and in 1957 two new works came out. The first – *The Merchant of Prato* – was a study of late medieval Italy and the life of Francesco Datini, a wealthy Tuscan businessman. The second, *A Measure of Love*, was a collection of essays, including pieces on Thomas Carlyle and Giuseppe Mazzini, the nineteenth-century Italian nationalist. Throughout, her voice tended to be professional and restrained, but the clarity of her style let her sympathy, warmth, and sensitivity radiate through time and text.

In 1963, she published *The World of San Bernardino*, a study of the fifteenth-century saint, and seven years later *Images*. Three more books appeared in the last fifteen years of her life: *The Vagabond Path* (an anthology of favourite poems and bits of prose), *L'amica* (a biography of Elsa, written in Italian, which appeared in 1982), and *A Need to Testify* (four short biographies of notable anti-Fascists and a long essay on the art of biography, published in 1984).

The biographer's role, Iris wrote, "is to bring the dead to life." To succeed, she said, they must deal with three temptations: "to suppress, to invent, and to sit in judgement." When writing about historical or literary figures, she herself resisted all three temptations rigorously. When writing about those close to

her, however, suppression was routine. It wasn't a lack of candour – she could be painfully hard on herself – but respect for the privacy and feelings of others. Revelations were selective and few in number.

She researched tenaciously, rewrote endlessly. Her publishers loved her, but their affection was tempered by exasperation. She could, Moorehead says, be imperious, exacting, and stubborn: “There was no detail she was prepared to leave to anyone else, and over the years to come her many alterations, additions and deletions drove her publishers to the very edge of despair.” No part of the publishing process was safe: she expressed strong views on typography, art, binding, and everything else that went into making and marketing a book. But then: “She never took money for the books herself but earmarked all advances and profits to charities, which caused her to press all the harder for good sales.”

She worked on *Images*, her sole attempt at autobiography, for a decade, encouraged by her publishers and driven by her own desire to tell her story but plagued by the fear of display, insincerity, and indiscretion:

No book ever cost Iris so much to write, in terms of anxiety and uncertainty, as her autobiography. Yet it is possibly her finest book, a remarkable portrait of a way of life now long past, by a deeply moral woman who thought ceaselessly about the times she lived in, who took note of the distress and tragedies around her, who believed most of all in compassion, and whose endless questioning of herself and others made inevitably for unhappiness, broken by moments of pleasure.

In the end, *Images* was, as its subtitle says, only “part of a life,” fragmentary and careful. But how brilliant it was, how beautiful, and how well-received. It was a bestseller in Britain, sold well in the United States, and was named Book of the Year by four newspapers.

In the 1970s, Iris was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire “for services to British cultural interests in Italy and to Anglo-Italian

relations.” Forever insecure about her craft and modest about her achievements, she was recognized as one of the finest non-fiction writers of her time.

. . .

Simultaneously, her sense of social responsibility continued to define her. And if she doubted her value as a writer, she was utterly self-confident when working for the welfare of others.

La Casa dei Bambini’s origins lay in Iris’s friendship with Elsa, then director of the Rome office of International Social Service (ISS)², an organization that reunited and resettled refugees. Talking with Elsa at the war’s end, Iris realized that the ISS could refer children to La Casa while efforts were made to locate their families. Initial funding came from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Later, Iris said she had come to believe that “every child (in fact every one of God’s creatures) should be taken as he is. We can help, but only rarely can we transform.” This conviction was at the heart of La Casa’s goal of supporting rather than reshaping children, even those most damaged by war or parental abuse. Some could not be reunited with their families or adopted by others, but only one child, she said, failed to make his way as an adult.

Soon she was being asked to take in children above the twenty she’d set as La Casa’s limit.³ She refused but took on a new role, that of coordinating the adoption of children outside La Casa. Requests, mostly from the United States, “were processed by the ISS and vetted by Iris. Once a child had left to be adopted by an American family, a social worker and the local Italian Consul would keep an eye on them.”

Some adoptive parents found Iris daunting. She spoke very rapidly (and, if irritated, sternly), and she could seem aloof. “Yet what everyone who visited La Casa dei Bambini remarked on was how affectionate and tender she was with the children, and how good at soothing the disturbed ones.”

Iris had always been generous. As school patroness in the 1920s, she had paid for medical care needed by children and their mothers if money was an issue. But it was after the war, Moorehead writes, that she “really began to reveal her innate generosity and charitable spirit.” Influenced by people like Elsa, Umberto Morra (a left-wing Catholic) and Umberto Zanotti Bianco (head of the wartime Italian Red Cross), her social work took up more and more of her time:

Iris’s papers are full of letters of thanks typed, handwritten, in pencil. They come from all over Italy, the United States, and England, where her adoption plans eventually spread. They thank her for a course, a mortgage, an operation, for financial help for the refugees of the Hungarian Revolution; for help after a flood, an epidemic, an earthquake.

Her desire to help never changed. When Florence flooded in 1966, she travelled to the United States to raise money for relief and restoration. She founded a hospital for children with tuberculosis, and there were always the boys and girls at La Casa and former residents returning to mark special events in their lives: a marriage, birthday, or new baby. As for her ongoing acts of private philanthropy, it wasn’t just the money, Moorehead writes: “it was her interest and encouragement that counted.” She disclosed little of this to friends, however, and even those closest to her never knew the range of her social causes or the extent of what she did for others.

But age brought loss. Elsa, who for more than twenty years had strengthened, inspired, and oriented Iris, died in 1965. For Iris, Moorehead writes, their friendship had “filled the deep black hole in her nature, the hunger for closeness she experienced all her life.” Moreover, as friend to both Iris and Antonio – of whom she said “he is compassionate simply because he is good” – she helped strengthen a difficult marriage. “You have brought me close to Antonio again,” Iris wrote her. “You pushed me into writing my books, you helped me with the girls. Your judgment – always clear, always humane, and when necessary, severe – saved me.”

For Iris, whose story is a crucible of loss, Elsa’s death was felt as keenly as her father’s and grandfather’s. The end of this unconditional friendship was devas-

tating, and though Iris's final years saw the deaths of many old friends, one by one, a long march past, Elsa's was probably the hardest to bear.

Then there was Gianni, the supreme loss. Not only did Iris never get over his death, she seems to have mourned him more as she aged. Reserved and private in other ways, she would talk to near-strangers about him, and the girls were always aware of a brother both absent and forever present.

She carried on, of course:

Just as no one has written better than Iris Origo about the art of biography, so few have painted a more painful and honest portrait of old age and solitude. Iris never did write the book on compassion that she had discussed so often with Elsa, but something of its spirit entered almost everything she wrote. She was more humorous in life than on the page, and she had a rare gift for listening to and understanding the meaning behind people's words and, in her clear, even cool style, writing it down. The rawness and loneliness of old age brought out her great sympathy for others and her own dread of what would happen to her. But she was never self-pitying. 'Old age is very merciless,' she wrote. 'How terrifyingly short life is, and also how unbearably long.'

After Elsa's death, Iris's happiest times were with Antonio and their daughters and grandchildren. But Antonio died of a cerebral haemorrhage in 1976, and Iris, in her mid-seventies, was bereft. Shortly before his death, afraid that she herself might not survive an operation, she had written him about their "shared youthful dream . . . to turn the Val d'Orcia green again . . . What a fine long journey we have travelled together!"

But in the end, as she said to a friend, "we could not even say goodbye." "I feel very rudderless and purposeless . . . I have nothing to say and no one to say it to. . . . All my life has been bound up with my affections, and now there seems very little left." Antonio was buried in La Foce's small graveyard, "beside Gianni, where I shall follow him. When I join them, I shall be close to all the people I have loved best." Elsa, too, was buried there, with other old friends, workers from the estate, and the young partisan from the war.

Iris's health declined, and toward the end of her life she grew less spirited and more afraid of solitude, loneliness, and dying. She still delighted in her family and the gardens at La Foce, but perhaps the internationalism her father had wanted for her ultimately cost her a sense of rootedness and its solace.

She was also afraid of what would happen to La Foce after she died. A solution was found: Benedetta and Donata would sell much of the estate, using the revenue to keep the villa and some of the land.⁴ More intractable was the passage of time. Iris wanted the past back. Not to live longer, she said, but to have "time in which to comfort, to complete and to repair."

On June 28, 1988, at the age of eighty-five, she died suddenly at La Foce and was buried beside her husband and son. Her gravestone reads:

IRIS ORIGO

15 AGOSTO 1902

28 GIUGNO 1988

Sposa di Antonio per 52 anni

Chi più conosce più ama
più amando più gusta

S. Caterina da Siena

*[The more you know, the more you love,
and by loving more, the more you enjoy.]*

As a friend said, the readers and admirers she left behind were legion, "worldwide and in every walk of life." A writer of lucid, compelling non-fiction that was both scholarly and popular, she is still in print and read with pleasure.⁵ And as a woman who led a fine and brave life that did not always come easily, she remains accessible to us. Resolute and at the same time uncertain and vulnerable, there is nothing remote about her.

She valued the best in others: the practicality, intelligence, and unassuming dignity of people like her tutor Signora Signorini, and the virtues of honesty, civility, courage, and openness. Her final major work, *A Need to Testify*, is a tribute to four people who typified these virtues. Published in her early eighties, *Testify* tells the story of Lauro de Bosis, Ruth Draper (Lauro's lover and Iris's friend), and the authors Gaetano Salvemini and Ignazio Silone, who felt, the latter said, an "absolute need to bear witness" and a "duty to testify." All suffered because of Fascism – de Bosis died in a *beau geste* defiance of Mussolini's authoritarian state – and stood for Iris as exemplars, like Elsa, of "an unusual sense of moral integrity."

Iris recognized that she had led, and often enjoyed, an unusually full and fortunate life:

But I am also aware, with a discomfort which increases as I get older, how much it has been a life of privilege, . . . [with] unfair advantages of birth, education, money, environment, and opportunity. . . . I also feel very strongly, now, that over the years I could and should have made more use of my 'privileges', spent more of my money and used more of my energy and imagination for the relief of poverty and suffering.

Though Elsa made Iris more aware of social issues, she'd long been alert to inequality and unfairness. Working with the women at La Foce had left her, she said, "distressed by a sense of injustice," and even earlier there had been the refugees and very poor in Florence. With the war and its aftermath, her social conscience, allied with her native patience, energy, and sense of duty, made her especially sensitive to the suffering of those unprotected by money and position. Lord Desart had seen in her the sympathy that would enable her "to understand the views of others." In time, this sympathy evolved into social awareness, compassion, and selfless, altruistic action.

The themes of friendship, connection, and goodness appear repeatedly in her later work. She said that she had known remarkable men and women in Florence, London, New York, and Rome, but having reached her "end game," she no longer dwelt on them or their brilliance. Instead:

The figures that still stand out . . . are the people to whom, in different ways and in different degrees, I have been bound by affection. Not only are they the people whom I most vividly remember, but I realise that it is only through them that I have learned anything about life at all. . . . All that is left to me of my past life that has not faded into mist has passed through the filter, not of my mind, but of my affections. What was not warmed by them is now for me as if it had never been.

She wrote a friend about something they had in common: “the *need* to be needed, more than anything we may give up to meet that need.” From start to finish, she lived for relationships, she said, and as absorbing as she found her work as a writer, it could not be the big thing: “I feel life itself, day by day, to be such a creative process – one’s relations to other human beings, and to oneself, and to God – that any other achievement, any art, is only at best an expression of this.” “Look after Antonio,” Elsa had written in a farewell letter, “Look after them all.” And, because of an instinctive kindness *and* her need to be needed, she did just that.

She prized, above all, the attributes that enable people to behave well, singling out one trait in particular. She wrote about her friends, the Meades, that there was “something in their essential character . . . that has overcome misfortune, straitened means and the passage of time. I think we can only call it goodness.”

I have seen and believe in goodness: the indefinable quality which is immediately and unhesitatingly recognised by the most different kinds of men: the simple goodness of an old nurse or the mother of a large family; the more complex and costly goodness of a priest, a doctor or a teacher. . . . When such people are also believers, their beliefs are apt to be catching – or so I myself, at least, have found. It is the Eastern principle of the guru and his disciples: goodness and faith conveyed (or perhaps evil and disbelief dispelled) by an actual, living presence. . . . I believe in the dependence of people upon each other. I believe in the light and warmth of human affection, and in the disinterested acts of kindness and compassion of complete strangers.

And this is what she aspired to, at first through religion as a very young woman in Fiesole: "I wanted, I desperately wanted, to believe in the divinity of Christ; I wanted to reconcile the world as I knew it to the life of faith and prayer; I wanted to be helped to 'be good'." What she received instead was dry Church of England instruction from an elderly canon she described as snobbish, hypocritical, and insincere, a misfortune that choked off for decades the notion that goodness might be sought in religion.

In the 1960s, partly because of Elsa – a devout if non-practicing Catholic – Iris's search for religious faith returned and she converted to Roman Catholicism. She soon realized, however, that there were doctrines she could not accept. Rather it was through love that she retained a sense of spiritual possibility – "faint 'intimations of immortality', a foretaste, perhaps, . . . of another, transcendental love." Conventional certainty eluded her, but personal experience had left, she wrote, a "vivid sense of the continuity of love, even after death":

Not only are we not alone, but we are not living only in a bare and chilly now. We are irrevocably bound to the past – and no less irrevocably, though the picture is less clear to us, to the future. It is this feeling that has made death seem to me not less painful, never that – for there is no greater grief than that of parting – but not, perhaps, so very important, and has caused affection, in its various forms, to be the guiding thread of my life. . . . I believe – even when I am myself being blind and deaf, or even indifferent – in the existence of mystery. . . . Beyond this, I still do not know . . . Yet I derive comfort, at times, from a passage in one of Dom John Chapman's letters. 'There is a worry and anxiety and trouble and bewilderment, and there is also an unfeared, yet real acquiescence in being anxious, troubled, and bewildered, and a consciousness that the real self is at peace, while the anxiety and worry are unreal. It is like a peaceful lake, whose surface reflects all sorts of changes, because it is calm.'



Recommended:

War in Val d'Orcia, Iris Origo, 1947. Available from David R. Godine, Publisher.

Images and Shadows: Part of a Life, Iris Origo, 1970. Also available from Godine.

Iris Origo: Marchesa of Val d'Orcia, Caroline Moorehead, 2000. Published by John Murray.

Endnotes:

¹ *Iris Origo: Marchesa of Val d'Orcia*, Caroline Moorehead's excellent biography. All unattributed quotes, except those clearly Iris's, are Moorehead's.

² International Social Service (ISS) is an NGO founded in 1924. A global network active in more than 120 countries, it helps "children and families confronted with complex social problems as a result of migration" and promotes child protection and welfare. See <http://www.iss-ssi.org/index.php/en/>.

³ In 2003, Sandra Rosini published a book entitled *Iris Origo e la sua opera di assistenza all'infanzia (Iris Origo and her work in childcare)*.

⁴ After Iris's death, Benedetta and Donata divided the remaining land into two properties, La Foce and Chiarentana. Both offer vacation accommodation: see <http://www.lafoce.com/> and www.chiarentana.com/.

The gardens Iris created at La Foce with the renowned designer-architect Cecil Pinsent are said to be among the finest in Italy, and a chamber music festival founded by the cellist Antonio Lysy – Benedetta's son – is held in the Origo's memory at and near La Foce every summer. For more about the festival, see *Incontri in Terra di Siena*: <http://www.itslafoce.org/>. For photos of Iris, Antonio,

and their family, as well as the land, gardens, and buildings past and present, search for Iris Origo in Google Images or see the La Foce and Chiarentana sites.

⁵ As of spring 2017, Pushkin Press in London is re-issuing Iris's books on Byron and Leopardi and has announced that in October it will bring out *A Chill in the Air: An Italian War Diary 1939-1940*, Iris's recently-discovered account of Italy on the brink of global conflict. Pushkin's catalogue also includes *War in Val d'Orcia* and *Images and Shadows*.