

## **Alessandra Panzanelli** interviews **Stephen Parkin**

Stephen Parkin was born in London in 1954; he holds degrees from the University of Cambridge and University College London. Between 1981 and 1991 he taught as a lector at the Istituto Universitario Orientale (now Università degli Studi L'Orientale) and the Università degli Studi Federico II in Naples. He worked from 1992 to 1994 in the Royal Library in Windsor Castle. He is also a literary translator (recent translations include *Ricordi di Londra* by Edmondo De Amicis, *Ricordi d'infanzia e racconti* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and Massimo Gramellini's *Fai bei sogni*).

Stephen Parkin is curator of the early printed Italian collections at the British Library, where he has been working since 1994. Yet, before starting this career in the United Kingdom, where he was born and grew up, Stephen spent quite a long time in Italy, in Naples, where he worked as teacher of English. In some way Stephen felt in love with Italy, the Italian language, culture, life-style and he's regularly coming back to our country, that he likely knows far more than many Italians do. This and his position at the British Library offers to Stephen the particular perspective from which he looks at the two countries and their library systems.

*Stephen, could you tell us how you developed your interest for Italy?*

My first encounter with Italy was, like most people's I suppose, through getting to know its art in London galleries and museums – I remember being taken while still a schoolboy to see the exhibition of Florentine frescoes which came to London after the 1966 floods, for example - and then later visiting the country as a tourist. At university, where I studied English literature, I became interested in Dante and took an exam paper on him; my college sent me to study a beginner's course in Italian at the Università degli Stranieri in Perugia during one summer vacation. However, my real interest in Italy – an interest which has never really left me, for finding out more about all aspects of the country, and understanding its culture, in the broadest sense, beyond the clichés of the place tourists see – came about only when I lived in Italy and started to learn the language properly (it seems to me that knowing a country's language is the only real key to knowing the country). I think this would have happened wherever I went to live but I also believe that going to live in Naples was particularly significant in this respect: it was my first ever visit to the South of Italy and Naples, then going through one of the more difficult periods in its recent history following the 1980 earthquake, jolted and upset all the images I had acquired of Italy on previous visits to the classic 'città d'arte' like Florence, Venice or Perugia. In Naples I became interested in Italians – the people - as well as in Italian art and literature. I suppose the country was no longer a museum I visited but now part of me. There's a wonderful remark by Montale, written just after the end of the war when there must have been great concerns about the image of Italy in the world, about who might be regarded as the true friends of Italy. Montale writes that they are those for whom "l'Italia è stata il fatto centrale, cardinale della loro vita: coloro che senza il nostro Paese sarebbero stati diversi, avrebbero pensato, sentito, intuito i valori dell'esistenza in un altro modo, non importa quale". That certainly echoes what I feel.

*Are you an Italianist?*

No, I studied English literature at university and I would never describe myself as an Italianist if by that one means someone trained in an academic specialisation. There are disadvantages in not having done this, of course. I've read widely over the years in Italian literature and history but not systematically and therefore there are embarrassing gaps in my knowledge which perhaps wouldn't exist – or be so bad – if I'd formally studied Italian for a university degree. But what knowledge I have has all been acquired through personal experience, so to speak, and therefore perhaps means more to me, feels more a part of my own self-identity, than it would if I have 'just' studied Italian.

*How did you decide to become a Librarian?*

I've always felt at home in libraries, from the moment of being taken as a child to my local public library and as a student I always enjoyed studying in libraries even if the end-result wasn't very good (I've always enjoyed the

process of study – of reading, accumulating notes, seeing a subject develop and gather mass – rather than writing up research – that’s laziness too of course but it also reflects a feeling that libraries are somehow ends in themselves not just factories for research output). So it seemed normal to want to become a librarian (even though I always enjoyed teaching). I first thought seriously about becoming a librarian in Italy: I did the part-time diploma course at the Vatican Library School and was for some years a member of AIB. I hoped to find work as a librarian in Italy but that proved much more difficult than I thought would be the case (even after six years living in Italy there were many things I didn’t understand about the country...). So I ended up coming back to London to do another librarianship course – this time a full-time postgraduate degree - and at the end of the course I was offered a job in the UK and decided to stay

*How did you start working in the section of Italian collections?*

My first job was working largely with early printed books but had no connections with Italian. After three years a friend of mine told me she’d seen an advertisement in *The Guardian* for a post in the Italian section of the British Library. When I decided to stay and work as a librarian in the UK I never thought that I would be able to use, so to speak, my experience of Italy in my professional life. I applied and got the job. In a sense working with the Italian collections in the BL has been like an extension of my time living in Italy. It’s deepened and intensified that experience by enabling me to go on learning about the country and maintaining contacts with people there.

*Those collections, as is well known, have been the main source for many Italianists. One thinks of Carlo Dionisotti, but of course many others can be mentioned. Would you explain why it happened to Italians to study their own literature abroad.*

There’s more than one factor here I think. I can really only speak about the UK but I think actually this country is the outstanding example of Italians studying Italian literature outside Italy. First of all, there’s the long history of what you might call the Italian diaspora – of people coming to this country for religious, political and economic reasons. This has gone through various phases over the centuries, with notable peaks – during the Reformation, in the eighteenth century, again during the Risorgimento and under Fascism (the reason Dionisotti left); the latest influx is taking place today, as a result of the continuing fallout from the financial crisis of 2008. But the second factor, as far as Italian studies are concerned, is the existence of Italian resources here and that reflects the centuries-old cultural prestige of Italy among the British. Put simplistically, this explains why the collections of Italian books in the British Library are so comprehensive as almost to constitute an Italian library on a par with the great libraries in Italy (Florence, Rome, Milan, etc. It’s just not in Italy... This has meant that scholars like Dionisotti and others, who were perhaps forced to leave Italy and abandon their careers there, have been able to pursue their studies as intensively and fruitfully as they ever could have done in Italy.

*Have things changed today?*

As I say, there’s a new and different phase today - when for example you find many young Italian scholars on the staff of Italian departments in British universities (indeed they now far outnumber ‘native’ Italianists) – but it still can be seen as a continuation of a long-standing historical tradition, which thrives because of the resources here. The British Library has remained a standard point of reference for scholars of Italian, whether they work in Italy or elsewhere. I would like to think that I’ve done a little to promote and maintain that presence and that importance within Italy.

*While we were preparing this interview, you told me something that really impressed me: you told that in Italian libraries this job has been done more seriously. Is it right? Can you better explain this judgment that for me, and I'm sure for many others, is pretty striking?*

Outsiders can get many things wrong, of course, but they can sometimes also see things more easily than people working within a system can. I don’t underestimate the serious problems which all Italian libraries have

faced for many years – problems of financial and staff resources, with organising an efficient public service, with conservation, etc. – but I can truthfully say that in all my experience of Italian librarians over the years I've worked in the British Library I've been impressed by what I'd call, perhaps over-simplistically their 'seriousness'. I think – I'm talking specifically about librarians who work with early printed and special collections - I mean by this a sense of the importance of their cultural role (for example, in the cultural standards of exhibitions), and a dedication to the professionalism of their work (for example, in standards of cataloguing – the standards of antiquarian cataloguing in Italian libraries are among the highest in the world). This isn't confined to the world of libraries; in my view it's a reflection of the sense of 'high' culture which I think still exists in Italy generally and the Italian capacity to make culture accessible without having to 'dumb down' or run scared of being seen as 'elitist'. But this may be changing...

*Yesterday (2014, December 4<sup>th</sup>) we were both attending the speech given by Roly Keating, the chief executive of the British Library, about the future of the Library - looking at the forthcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation: in 1973 the British Library became independent from the British Museum. Mr Keating speech - Living Knowledge: The British Library 2015-2023 - has been recently presented to the wider public through the BBC and is now available on the BL website. I must tell that I was very impressed by the vision the Mr Keating expressed about the future of the Library. What was your impression?*

I too was quite impressed. Change- and having to keep pace with change in the outside world – is inevitable and there have already been huge changes in the way the British Library operates and is perceived over the last decade, perhaps more so than in all the previous decades since it was set up at the beginning of the 1970s. I think the challenge is to maintain traditional virtues (e.g curatorial expertise, the fruit of long immersion in the collections, which my predecessors were able to acquire, by creating specialised catalogues of the collections for example) alongside the new challenges of communicating to an ever wider public and remaining relevant to the contemporary scene.