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Mussolini's Downfall

Arthur Mitchell Fraas

University of Pennsylvania, fraas@upenn.edu

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Mussolini's Downfall

Abstract

Contextual essay on a copy of Mussolini's *Diuturna* [the Lasting] (Milan: Casa Editrice Imperia, 1924) held in the University of Pennsylvania libraries and annotated in 1945 using phrases from Victor Cousin by way of Cesare Cantù's *Storia Universale*.

Keywords

Mussolini, Book History, World War II

Disciplines

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24 *Mussolini's Downfall*

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Since this blog aims to not only showcase items from our special collections division but also unique materials from the library as a whole, I thought it would be fitting to follow up the series of posts on the Orphan's Asylum with one on a completely different kind of text. I am especially interested in the signs of reading, ownership, and use that appear throughout our collection. In one of my trips to the stacks I came across a [book](#) that in and of itself is quite common, a legacy of the first fascist dictatorship in Europe:



— [Diuturna \[the Lasting\]](#) (Milan: Casa Editrice Imperia, 1924).

Forty or more libraries [own copies of the volume](#), published in Milan in 1924, which includes 120 essays, proclamations, and speeches by Mussolini dating from 1914 to 1922. Rather than the book itself, what makes it unique to me are the stories of the volume's prior owners as revealed in its first few pages.

WELCOME

Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense "unique" - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside.

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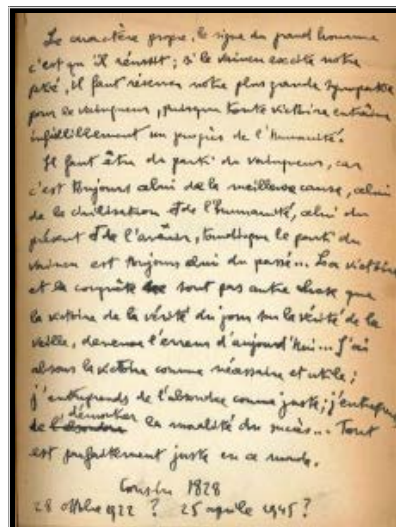
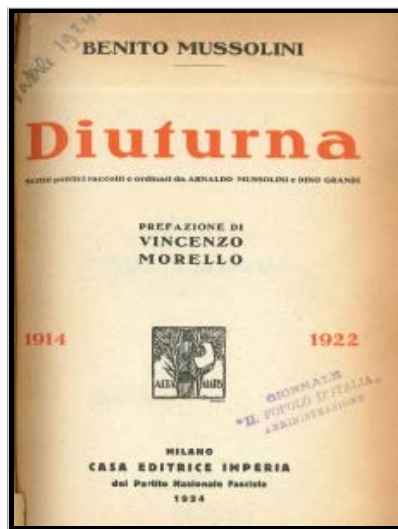
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I noticed right away that the title page featured an ink stamp marking the book as the property of the the newspaper [Il Popolo D'Italia](#). The newspaper, published out of Milan, had been founded by Mussolini in 1914 and was one of the primary propaganda organs of Italian fascism. After Mussolini was toppled for the first time in July 1943 the new Italian state prohibited the publication of the newspaper. The paper did not resume publication after Mussolini's reinstatement and German occupation and I can't find any evidence for what happened to its library. Where the Penn copy went next is unclear though it seems to have ended up in the hands of an Italian reader with a knowledge of French sometime before it was accessioned into the library here in 1947:



- Handwritten note in French and Italian (c. 1945-47). Click [here](#) for a transcription.

This unidentified manuscript note seems to have been inserted sometime after 1945 but before the book came to Penn in 1947. Underneath the long quotation the writer has identified two dates in Italian rather than French: 28 October 1922 and 25 April 1945. The first is the date when Mussolini and his blackshirts marched on Rome and were given control of the government; the second represents Liberation Day when Mussolini's Italian Social Republic collapsed

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(Mussolini was executed a few days later). The long quotation is taken from the work of the French philosopher [Victor Cousin \(1792-1867\)](#) and represents an assemblage of lines from the ninth lecture in his 1828 [Course of the History of Modern Philosophy](#):

“The proper character, the sign of a great man is, that he succeeds...Our greatest sympathy must be reserved for the vanquisher, since every victory infallibly draws after it a progress of humanity...We must be on the side of the victor, for that is always the side of civilization, the side of the present and of the future, while the side of the conquered is always that of the past...Victory is nothing else than the victory of the truth of today over the truth of yesterday, which has become the error of the following day...I have vindicated victory as necessary and useful; I undertake, nevertheless, to vindicate it as just...In general, everything is just in this world.”[\[1\]](#)

Based on the form of quotation (which draws from multiple pages of Cousin's original) I think the writer is quoting from the 19th c. Italian historian [Cesare Cantù's](#) *Storia Universale* (1st pub. Turin: 1838-46), as in the [twelfth volume](#) of that text, Cantù quotes the exact French lines above.

I can't begin to guess at the identity of the unnamed owner of the book who decided to offer these reflections on the downfall of Mussolini, possibly shortly after the fact. I would welcome interpretations from readers here. It seems to me a kind of ironic condemnation of Mussolini (perhaps from a former Milanese follower?) using the language of victory and triumph so familiar in his own rhetoric.

Penn has an amazing collection of WWII-era materials, many with unique histories, and I hope this story as well as others over the coming months will help spark an interest in the ways in which texts circulated around mid-20th c. Europe.

[1]

Instead of attempting my own translation, I have used [O.W. Wight's 1852 English translation of Cousin's Cours](#) (drawn from pp. 184-210). Original French text below:

Le caractère propre, le signe du grand homme, c'est qu'il réussit...Il faut réserver notre plus grande sympathie pour le vainqueur, puisque toute victoire entraîne infailliblement un progrès de l'humanité....Il faut être du parti du vainqueur, car

c'est toujours celui de la meilleure cause, celui de la civilisation et de l'humanité, celui du présent et de l'avenir, tandis que le parti du vaincu est toujours celui du passé...la victoire et la conquête ne sont pas autre chose que la victoire de la vérité du jour sur la vérité de la veille devenue l'erreur'aujourd'hui...J'ai absous la victoire comme nécessaire et utile; j'entreprends maintenant de l'absoudre comme juste, dans le sens le plus étroit du mot; j'entreprends de démontrer la moralité du succès...tout est parfaitement juste en ce monde.

Cousin 1828

28 octobre 1922 ? 25 aprile 1945 ?

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About Mitch Fraas

Mitch Fraas is the Bollinger Fellow for Library Innovation at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. At Penn, Mitch works on a variety of projects cutting across general and special collections, with a special focus on digital humanities. He holds doctoral and master's degrees in history from Duke University and earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College. His doctoral dissertation examined the legal culture of British India in the 17th and 18th centuries, arguing for the existence of a unified early modern British imperial legal culture whether in Philadelphia, Bombay, or London.

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