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Opening Extract from...

Tuscany

Written by Alistair Moffat

Published by Birlinn Ltd

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This edition published in 2011 by
Birlinn Limited
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.birlinn.co.uk

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ISBN: 978 1 84158 860 5
e-book ISBN: 978 0 85790 056 2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Acknowledgements

In the late summer of 1971 I found myself in Rome's main line station very early in the morning looking for the platform for trains to Florence, or Firenze, as I discovered just in time. Almost forty years ago, in what seems like another life, I was an undergraduate at St Andrews University. Astonishing now to relate in these days of student debts and huge tuition fees, the Scottish Education Department paid for everything, all fees and a maintenance grant of £300 a year. And even more astonishing to relate, St Andrews University were about to pay for my trip to Florence, or Firenze, and give me a further grant for six weeks so that I could learn Italian and look at the great buildings, paintings and sculpture of Tuscany. My travel, bed and breakfast were all paid for, there was an immersion course in Italian every weekday morning and I was to receive 1,500 lire a day for subsistence.

Astonishing, but in 1971 education was still going on in Britain – and Italy, for anyone who could pass the exams, and all of that was considered to be not a privilege but an essential part of studying the Italian Renaissance – the ability to go and see its great achievements for yourself, whoever you were. For a young man who had been raised on a council estate, with no money past what could be earned from part-time jobs, it was the only way I could ever have beheld the marvels I discovered that summer long ago. In the Scotland of the 1960s and '70s I was lucky to receive an education for free and it is nothing less than a tragedy that very few from my background can now afford to see what I saw in the galleries, churches and streets of the great cities of Tuscany.

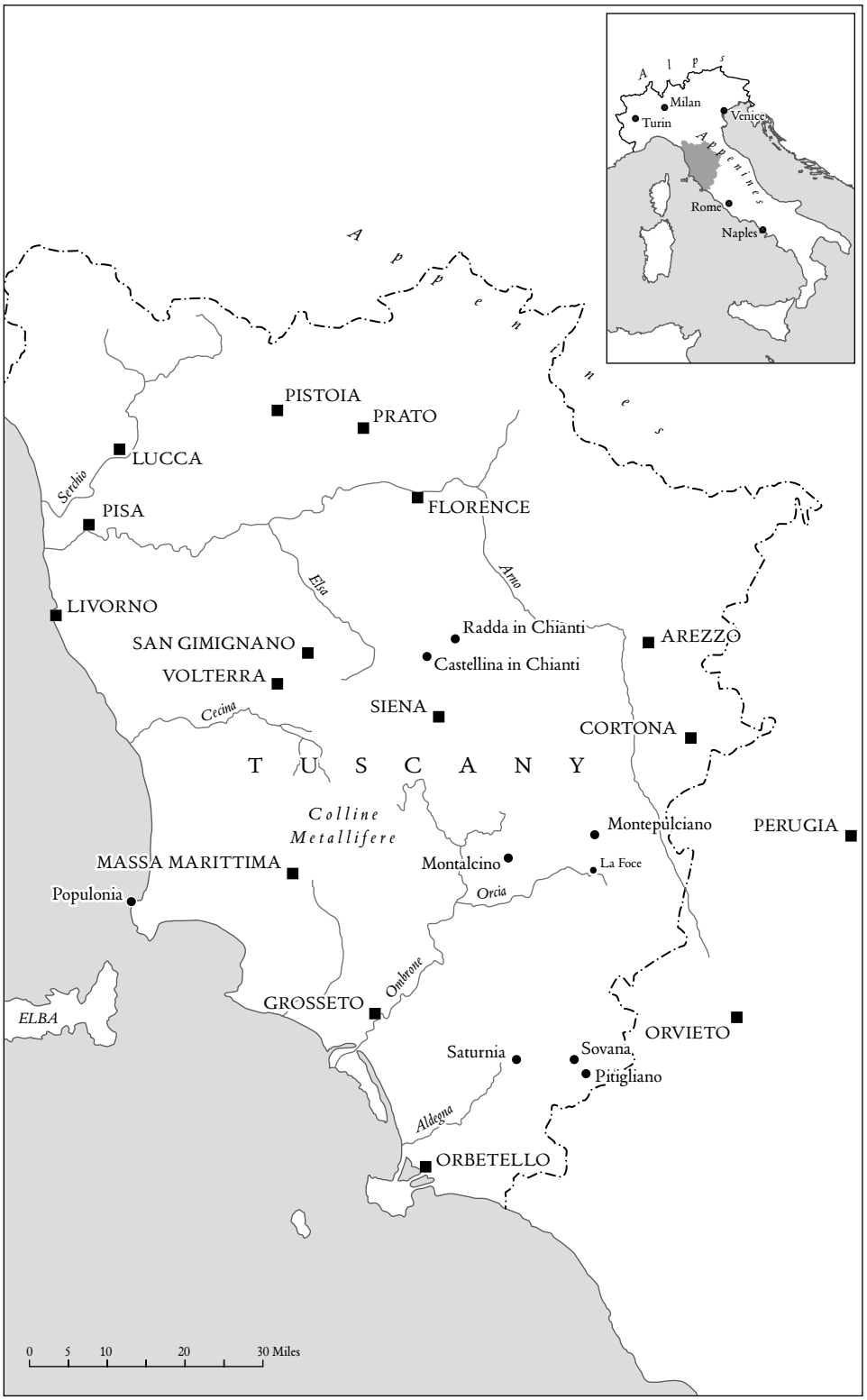
I had company in 1971. My oldest and dearest friend, Tom Pow, was with me and we forged a bond then which has never wavered. This book is dedicated to Tommie with much love and in memory of

all the splendours we first saw together in the Tuscan sunshine. The Italian classes were a waste of time for T.P., but the Masaccios made an indelible impression.

When I left St Andrews I was extremely fortunate to be given a place as a postgraduate at London University's Warburg Institute. Its focus was the study of the Italian Renaissance and I had the privilege of listening to and sometimes working with very great scholars such as Michael Baxandall and Frances Yates. But most of all my tutor, Sir Ernst Gombrich, taught me how to look at works of art and not to fuss too much. 'Simplify, Mr Moffat, you must always seek to simplify.' All the time I was writing this book, I could hear his quiet voice. I hope I listened.

Other voices require ready acknowledgement. The *Insight Guide to Tuscany* edited by Barbara Balletto is excellent, even enclyclopaedic, and I leaned heavily not only on the information in it but also on the keen observations. Dame Iris Origo wrote two very different accounts of Tuscan lives, *The Merchant of Prato*, about the fourteenth-century Francesco Datini, and her account of the Second World War as it swirled around her house and estate. *War in the Val d'Orcia* is a superb piece of reporting and I am grateful to Allison & Busby for permission to quote from it extensively. I acknowledge substantial debts to all the authors listed in the bibliography and recommend all the books to those interested in reading further.

My agent, David Godwin, has been steadfast and sensible as ever, and he managed to persuade my publisher, Birlinn, to do something different by taking on this project. Hugh Andrew, Jan Rutherford, Andrew Simmons and Nancy Norman have all been wonderfully helpful and supportive. Visits to West Newington House are always a pleasure. Liz Hanson has once again adorned one of my books with beautiful photographs and Jim Hutcheson has conjured an atmospheric cover. Many thanks to all.


Alps
Milan
Turin
Venice
Apennines
Rome
Naples
Apennines
PISTOIA
PRATO
LUCCA
Serchio
PISA
FLORENCE
Elsa
Arno
LIVORNO
Radda in Chianti
AREZZO
SAN GIMIGNANO
Castellina in Chianti
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SIENA
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Montepulciano
PERUGIA
MASSA MARITTIMA
Montalcino
La Foce
Populonia
Orcia
Ombrone
GROSSETO
ELBA
ORVIETO
Saturnia
Sovana
Pitigliano
Albegna
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The Dream of Tuscany

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the British began to fall in love with Tuscany, its faded glories and half-forgotten heroes. At first a few pilgrims and artists bound for Rome lingered in Lucca, Florence or Siena, cities which lay on the Via Francigena, the old north road to the holy places and the shrine of St Peter. The famously reluctant traveller, Dr Samuel Johnson, was moved to remark that 'a man who has not been to Italy is always conscious of inferiority'.

By the early nineteenth century the romance had begun to blossom. So many came that by the 1830s *inglesi* had become a generic term for all foreigners. A hotel porter in Livorno might tell a maid that 'some inglesi have arrived this morning but I can't tell if they are French or Russian'. Byron, Shelley, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Goethe, Stendhal, the Brownings, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster all spent time in Tuscany. After he had seen the Giotto fresco cycle of the life of St Francis in Florence, Lord Byron declared himself dazzled, drunk with beauty. Other pleasures beckoned and his torrid affair with the Contessa Teresa Guiccioli led him into aristocratic Tuscan society so that he moved 'amongst all classes, from the *conti* to the *contadini*'. No-one can be absolutely sure how much of a play on words the hot-blooded lord intended.

Much later, Dylan Thomas was also dazzled: 'The pine hills are endless, the cypresses at the hilltop tell one all about the length of death, and the woods are deep as love.' But like Byron and most of the others he spent his time in a miasma of indulgence: strawberries and mascarpone, asparagus and olive oil and Chianti at 20 lire a glass. Few writers managed to do much work in Tuscany as they bathed in its warmth and sensuality, strolling around the great churches and galleries and dozing, sated, in the long afternoons.

What was and remains the hypnotic attraction? The art, the sheer antiquity, the food and drink, the fact that the climate and the landscape appear to be so perfectly in harmony – sunshine over a green and undulating landscape. Lying between the sheltering Apennines to the north and east and bounded by the shimmer of the Mediterranean to the west, Tuscany seems magical. And it looks old, and very beautiful, and very detailed. Punctuated by tall cypress trees, patterned by fields, olive groves and vineyards of every shape and size, crossed by dusty, winding roads and tracks, the landscape bears the marks of the men and women who have worked every corner of it for millennia. Perhaps more intensively than anywhere else in Europe, it has been cultivated and cared for. Between the rows of vines leading the eye into the distance, lavender is often planted, subtle purple beside pale green in the brick-dust soil. Ancient rose bushes sometimes flower at the end of the rows, climbing up the iron endposts. And yet, in the hazy sun the green, pillowy hills seem drowsy under the press of an immense past, even now closely resembling the still landscapes which peep out from behind the blue mantle of a Florentine Madonna or a martyred saint. But of course they are alive, made vivid with the memory of uncountable generations of *contadini*, the farm-workers who made them, the landowners who fought over them and the fire and smoke of war as armies and history rumbled across Tuscany.

The hilltop towns and riverside cities also seem old. Despite the suburban sprawl of shiny factories and freight depots, their hearts have often remained unchanged since the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Parasol-shaded piazzas show off the enclosing and imposing palazzos, and down narrow streets and lanes, 21st-century shopfronts are crammed into crumbling façades once used by apothecaries or cobblers. Often these warm, comfortable and human-scale townscapes are no more than the result of conservation by default. Many Tuscan cities, including Florence, Siena, Arezzo and Pisa, slid into obscurity after the Renaissance, surviving only as torpid backwaters while Europe's attention wandered elsewhere. But then the British began to come and to fall in love with it all, even if they did not clearly understand why. Amongst the dusty roads, the shaded groves and the narrow streets, a dream of Tuscany grew.

In E.M. Forster's A *Room With a View*, the heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, visits the great Franciscan church in Florence, Santa

Croce, but having forgotten to bring her guidebook, begins to panic. She would become lost, not understand anything of the frescoes, the strange, frozen episodes in the story of the Franciscans and their great saint. And then, 'the pernicious charm of Italy worked on her, and, instead of acquiring information, she began to be happy'.

1

Pitigliano

The town is asleep, fast asleep under the dark blanket of the night. It is long past midnight and in the Piazza Petruccioli only a handful of yellow streetlights twinkle. No-one is about and the silence seems deepened by the fluttering of umbrellas outside the shuttered cafés. Over the parapet by the arched entrance to the town, the ravines plunge down into fathomless blackness. And the high ramparts of the massive bastion disappear into the night sky. On the gentle breeze the warmth of the day still lingers, and there is no need to hurry, head down, through the silent streets. History waits in the shadows of Pitigliano, the story of Tuscany waits to whisper its secrets.

Many of them are to be found in Pitigliano, a spectacular hill-town built on a tongue of rock with sheer cliffs on three sides. In the southernmost quarter of Tuscany, only 140 kilometres north of Rome, it is one of the oldest continuously occupied settlements anywhere in Italy. The cliffs of tufa, a soft volcanic rock, make Pitigliano easy to defend and the fertile countryside around it has nourished its people for a thousand generations and more. The stones of its streets and houses are steeped in Tuscany's history, and on dark, silent nights the ghosts of an immense past murmur in the gloaming.

Through the arch under the bastion is the Piazza Garibaldi and the Municipio, the Town Hall. They cower below the brutal mass of the Orsini Fortress, its hundred-foot walls pierced only by a scatter of tiny windows. The citadel sits astride the eastern approach to Pitigliano, the only one not guarded by the sheer tufa cliffs. Recognising its ancient strength, a division of the Wehrmacht set up its headquarters in the fortress in 1944. Part of the Gothic Line, the brilliant fighting retreat which slowed the Allied advance up through Italy, Pitigliano became a key centre of operations. The grey uniforms of German grenadiers were seen patrolling the ramparts, their binoculars

searching the horizon for enemy movement, and below them armoured cars rumbled through the archway under the bastion, past the Medici aqueduct and into the Piazza della Repubblica. Blood-red banners bearing the black swastika were tumbled out of the high windows above the gateway to the fortress, and Pitigliano waited for the attack that would surely come.

On the morning of 7 June 1944 the townspeople heard the fighters before anyone saw them. Screaming out of the cloudless sky, they strafed the walls of the fortress and the buildings close by. Circled stars on their wings, American bombers droned over the summer countryside, the engine noise growing ever louder, and they scored direct and devastating hits on Pitigliano. They completely missed the Orsini Fortress and the German headquarters but destroyed most of the houses on the western side of the Piazza della Repubblica. Eighty-eight were killed, many of them women and children. Even in the darkness and silence after midnight, the only modern buildings in the town loom up across the deserted piazza like new tombstones in an old graveyard.

Piercing them like a sunken road, the Via Roma burrows into the maze of medieval lanes, narrow and shadowy, winding its way back into the past. Stray cats sidle warily along the street – and suddenly swim under the ancient oak doorways of storehouses and stairways. On each side dark alleyways open, running away downhill towards the houses which perch on Pitigliano's cliffs. Five hundred years ago all of Tuscany's towns were like this. In Florence, Pisa, Lucca and Siena people lived piled on top of each other, densely packed, constantly in contact. Gossip, news, argument and laughter left only the wealthy and the pious with anything like privacy or quiet. And unobserved under the cover of the night conspirators met and muttered behind their hands.

Just as the canyon of the Via Roma seems to crowd in overhead, it suddenly opens upon an apparition. The ghostly white marble façade of a cathedral rears up, and an ancient medieval bell-tower soars away into the night above it. St Peter and St Paul look down from their niches, the pillars of Holy Mother Church, its rock and its founding theologian. But the telling dedication, what explains this startling building, is to be found on a discreet street sign. Beyond the shadows of the Via Roma is the Piazza San Gregorio VII and it commemorates the greatest of medieval popes. Born into the Aldobrandeschi family,

the lords of Pitigliano, and known as Ildebrando before he was crowned with the tiara, Gregory VII achieved political miracles.

Elected in 1073 by the College of Cardinals, he promulgated a remarkable document, the *Dictatus Papae*, the 'Supremacy of the Pope'. For the first time it elevated the doctrines of papal infallibility, of the right of popes to nominate all bishops and established that God's Vicar on Earth was supreme over all other rulers. And despite the fact that Gregory had no army to back his huge claims, he forced their adoption.

After Charlemagne had been crowned Emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day 800, and had revived and reinvented the Holy Roman Empire, the ancient title had been held by a succession of powerful German kings. When the challenge of Gregory VII's *Dictatus Papae* became clear, the Emperor Henry IV threatened war, mustered armies and planned an invasion of Italy. The impertinent pope would be deposed. But what became known as the Investiture Contest eventually degenerated into a humiliating defeat for the German emperor.

When Gregory VII excommunicated him, casting Henry and his family out of the Church, denying them the sacraments and condemning them to eternal damnation, the emperor's authority began to crumble. The winter of 1077 was more severe than anyone could remember, but Henry and a small imperial party were forced to make a dangerous journey across the Alps. At the end of January they reached the castle at Canossa in the mountains on the northern borders of Tuscany. There Pope Gregory was under the protection of the powerful Countess Matilda, and when news of the Holy Roman Emperor's journey to Italy became known, an attack on the fortress was expected. But behind its walls the Holy Father would be safe.

To the astonishment of Gregory and his supporters, no attack came and instead an extraordinary sequence of events took place. Without attendants, having put aside his royal robes, Henry IV walked barefoot through the snow, and below the gates of Canossa he begged the pope for forgiveness. For three days, dressed in rags, the greatest prince in Europe stood alone and pleaded to be taken back into the arms of Holy Mother Church. And on the fourth day, triumphant, Gregory relented. Absolving the emperor of his sins, accepting his penitence, he received Henry once more into communion with the Church. The amazing story of Canossa spread like wildfire. The papacy was now

a European power, able to humiliate emperors and bend them to its will and the will of God.

The cathedral at Pitigliano is an unexpected monument to the events of the winter of 1077, almost buried amongst the jumble of medieval houses and winding lanes, but it is no more unexpected than Ildebrando's invention of the modern papacy. In a gloriously Italian version of respect, his name is often seen in the trattorias of the town, on the labels of an excellent local white wine.

Beyond the Piazza San Gregorio VII runs the street named after his family, the Via Aldobrandeschi. It descends to the oldest part of Pitigliano, the Capisotto, which lies at the very tip of the tongue of tufa rock. The lanes on either side are wider and tumbling out of terracotta pots and tin pails, small flower gardens line the walls and in the balmy summer night their scents float in the soft air. Below the steps up to the church of San Rocco, a spout spills ice-cold water into an ancient cistern. At the end of the street is an open space, the Piazza Becherini, but it is no larger than a courtyard. In the darkness the drop below its parapet can only be guessed at.

The sheer cliffs conceal more secrets. They are hollow with tunnels, old passageways chiselled out of the soft tufa rock which honeycomb under the streets. Sometimes entered from the base of the cliffs, often from openings under Pitigliano's houses, this cool subterranean maze is now used to store wine, cheeses and hams. But once it had another, darker purpose. Some of the oldest tunnels were originally sepulchres, the last resting-places of a mysterious people.

Two thousand years ago the brilliant civilisation of the Etruscans was slowly flickering to a close. For seven or eight centuries this rich and gorgeous society had extended all over Tuscany. It gave the place its name. *Etruschi* is derived from *Tusci* and it is cognate to the Latin *turris*, and it seems that the Etruscans were first known as the tower-builders. Versions of them still stand. Famously in San Gimignano, in Florence, soaring in Siena, in Volterra and most appropriately at Tuscania and Tarquinia, not far north of Rome, the towers of the old cities punctuate the horizon. And on the Capisotto, at the western tip of Pitigliano, there was an Etruscan citadel. Built from massive blocks of tufa, it serves as the foundations of the medieval houses and some of its lower walls still stand at the foot of the cliffs below the parapet at the Piazza Becherini.

Around Pitigliano and the nearby village of Sovana many Etruscan tombs, temples and sunken ceremonial roads have been found. Eighty kilometres to the north-west, near the Tuscan coast, a discovery was made which brought history full circle. Etruscan tombs can be fatally obvious in the landscape. Around the sleepy town of Vetulonia, north of Grosseto, the largest grave-mounds were robbed out very early, in the fourth century BC, when Rome began to gain mastery over the Italian peninsula. Other tombs remained hidden from sight. In secluded, wooded groves, large sepulchres were easily cut out of the tufa, and their small entrances blocked and quickly overgrown.

Close to the centre of Vetulonia one such forgotten tomb accidentally came to light in the 1980s. Gold grave-goods, beautiful miniature sculptures of chariots and horses dating to the sixth century BC and gorgeous ceramics were found. Amongst the floor debris, one of the excavators picked up a small, double-headed axe, too small to be practical. Beside it lay a bundle of bronze rods. At first appearing insignificant, it turned out to be the most remarkable of all the finds. This was the fasces, the quintessential symbol of Roman power, the means to punish and execute – also the symbol of Mussolini and his vile regime. Soon afterwards another example, another bundle of whipping rods and axe, was recognised on a piece of Etruscan tomb sculpture. Fascism, it turned out, had one of its poisonous roots in the Tuscan soil.

When dawn breaks over Pitigliano and the warmth of the butter-coloured sun washes down the houses on the tufa cliffs, the town wakes and quickly begins to bustle. The sharp twang of two-stroke engines rents the stillness and the bars at the Piazza della Repubblica fill with coffee-drinkers who grab a pastry in a paper napkin. No-one sits or stays longer than a few minutes. Metal shutters rattle up as shops and offices open at eight or sometimes earlier and the medieval streets and lanes clatter with footsteps. The occasional car noses impatiently along the narrow Via Roma.

Pitigliano is no museum, but a working town where people live and die. But not in ignorance. Tuscans are everywhere aware of their past, and in countless otherwise inconsequential cultural habits and many colourful public festivals, they celebrate its ancient glories. And the past is not something apart, categorised as history, something separated from the everyday business of living and making a future. It is an indivisible part of life. This seamlessness is very attractive – and

immediate. For those who come to Tuscany simply for its beauty, to the place where everyone in the world would like to live, according to one writer, this book is intended as a way of understanding something of that seamlessness, of how it all came about.