

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Dundee
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 30 History
<b>Title of case study:</b> Reshaping Debates on the History of Italian Women
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)

*Italiane. Biografia del Novecento* has enhanced public discourse by stimulating widespread and important debates in the Italian media, among politicians and the public about the role of women in twentieth-century Italy. Some of its arguments have been considered controversial, leading many commentators, including the prominent journalist Paolo Mieli in 2012, to call it a 'courageous book' (Section 5:3). As the first scholarly but accessible work of synthesis (in any language) ranging over the history of Italian women in the whole twentieth century it is an important milestone for Italian women's history and for discussions about women's role in contemporary Italy. It has also made a significant contribution to history teaching in Italian universities.

<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)
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Professor Perry Willson (Professor of Modern European History at Dundee since 2007) published *Italiane. Biografia del Novecento* in 2011 and it had immediate impact. The book is a work of synthesis which explores and analyses the history of Italian women over the course of the twentieth century, a path-breaking attempt to map and evaluate some of the changes and continuities in women's lives during this period. The research consisted in wide-ranging reading of secondary sources in both Italian and English. Written in a clear and accessible manner, it nonetheless pays considerable attention to historiographical issues and debates and, as such, is aimed at both scholarly and wider audiences. The way in which it has been received in Italy suggests that it has successfully reached both kinds of readers and that its influence extends far beyond the academy.

It has a great emphasis on the role of politics (and the importance of female agency) in historical change but also looks at social, economic and cultural developments. Some of its arguments, particularly its re-evaluation of 'first-wave feminism' and the role of women in politics in the immediate postwar period (both of which it argues have been underestimated by most previous historiography), its approach to 'second-wave' feminism (which the book argues needs to be more contextualised in the achievements of the previous generation) and its mapping of some of the legacy of the Fascist political mobilisation of women on subsequent political developments, have proved controversial with Italian audiences. The book's wide-ranging approach has also enabled numerous other long-term developments (often neglected in more narrowly focused studies) to be explored such as trends in employment and education.

The research was carried out by Professor Willson alone but discussed widely with other scholars, particularly historians of women in Italy and the UK as well as colleagues in the History Programme in Dundee. Prominent scholars in the field (listed in the acknowledgements) read and commented on chapters before publication. A book of this nature, of course, builds on a life-time of reading and research into the subject area - which Willson has been studying since her PhD - but the quality of the book was greatly enhanced by Willson's move to Dundee which enabled her to join a thriving and vibrant research community of historians.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

#### Output:

The specific output that has generated significant impact is Perry Willson, *Italiane. Biografia del Novecento*, Editori Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2011, which is the culmination of the significant research in Italian women's history undertaken by Willson since her appointment at the University of Dundee.

*Italiane* was also published in an earlier version as *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010. The impact claimed here stems from the Italian edition which is longer and includes additional material in comparison to the English-language version. This output has been submitted to REF.

#### Evidence of the quality of the research.

Some very positive reviews of the book have appeared.

For example, in a 7-page review in the gender history journal *Genesis* (2010/2 but actually published 2011), Rosanna De Longis (former president of the Società Italiana delle Storiche) called it, 'not only an important book, but a courageous challenge' and concluded that: 'this book has presented Italian women's and gender history with a network of questions and hypotheses as well as a weighty legacy of ideas and questions to be explored and I am convinced that the debt that research in this field now owes to Perry Willson is one that will not be extinguished in the foreseeable future'.

The review of the book in the historical journal *Mondo contemporaneo* (no.2, 2011), written by historian and politician Paola Gaiotti de Biase, spoke of 'being grateful to Perry Willson' and noted the book's 'analytical richness'.

The peer reviewers for the manuscript of the English-language version commented:

'...a real pleasure to read: it's pacy, engaging and stylish'

'...manages to offer some complex developments and interpretations in clear and understandable language that at the same time maintains the sophistication of good history discovery.'

'...an important and well-written book... Really great stuff...What an achievement.'

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The excitement that *Italiane: Biografia del Novecento* has generated in Italy has led to a good deal of attention from the media and a number of high-profile public events.

A 25-minute television programme (part of the influential and long-running series *Le Storie Diario italiano*, hosted by veteran broadcaster Corrado Augias) was made about the book interspersing documentary footage with an interview with Willson (Section 5:2). Broadcast on the state Rai Tre channel on 22 April 2011, it attracted audience figures of 932,000 viewers (6.19% of audience share). It is now available on the internet and by September 2013 over 2,000 people had viewed it online. Programmes from this series are frequently used by schoolteachers as a teaching aid in class.

In January 2012, the Fondazione Nilde Iotti (a research foundation on 'women's issues' based in the Italian national parliament and run by parliamentarians with academic advisors) organised a very lively debate on the book in the Parliament Library (Section 5:3). The invitation stemmed from the fact that academics participating in the inaugural session of the foundation the previous year had already referred to issues raised in the final chapter of Willson's book. Participants in this public event were, in addition to the author herself, the well-known journalist Paolo Mieli (head of

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RCS Libri, Italy's most important print journalism media group and former editor of two prominent daily newspapers *La Stampa* and the *Corriere della Sera*, historian Marina d'Amelia, philosopher and former parliamentary deputy Claudia Mancina and parliamentarian and former cabinet minister Senator Livia Turco (Section 5.9). This event attracted a large audience (despite the considerable size of the room many people had to be turned away due to fire regulations) and a column was devoted to it in *L'Unità* newspaper the following day (13 January 2012) (Section 5:4). There were also reports on various websites (e.g. giulia.globalist.it). As the *L'Unità* report noted, 'in the room there were a number of women, who, due to their political commitment, are mentioned in the book' and the audience did indeed include a number of prominent political figures (Section 5: 4).

There was also a panel debate devoted to the book at the Libri Come book festival held in the Auditorium in Rome in April 2011 in which the book was discussed by leading journalists Chiara Valentini of the weekly news magazine *L'Espresso* and Concetta de Gregorio – editor of the national daily *L'Unità* - as well as the actress, writer and journalist Adele Cambria (Section 5:4).

Willson was also invited to take part in a series of other public debates on the book. An initial round in 2011 was organised by a learned society (the Società delle storiche) in Trieste, Padua, Florence and Rome, with panels of academics and (in Trieste) local politicians from opposite sides of the political spectrum. In Trieste, Elisabetta Vezzosi, President of the Società Italiana delle Storiche (Female Historians Society), opened the debate by emphasising the great importance of the book for the future writing, teaching and debate on the history of Italian women. Although the publisher Laterza was involved in organising the first few debates, various others followed that were the result of spontaneous invitations unrelated to the publisher's promotional interests, including a well-attended day conference in Sassari (Sardinia) in 2011 which was devoted to this book and two other recent publications in Italian women's history, as well as debates in 2012 in Bologna, Naples and Lecce. The debates were mostly held in universities but venues included a town hall (Florence) and a public library (Rome) (Section 5:1).

In addition to scholarly reviews in historical journals, the book has aroused considerable interest in the print media: articles on it have appeared in major daily newspapers like *La Stampa*, *Il Mattino*, *Il Manifesto* and *L'Unità*. It has also been featured on a good number of Italian websites and blogs (e.g. Il paese delle donne; in genere; giulia.globalist.it; donnedellarealta.wordpress.com) (Section 5: 5, 6 and 7).

The book has also cropped up more off the beaten track. In 2011 it was chosen by a local library in Rubano (Padua) as one of 150 books that symbolised the 150 years of Italian history since unification.

Book sales have been brisk with about 2,400 sold to date (which is very good for a scholarly historical work in a country like Italy with a fairly small reading public and virtually no export market for books) and is now about to be reprinted (Section 5:1).

*Italiane* has also had an impact on the higher education teaching of women's and gender history in Italy. Universities where the book has been adopted as a set text include Genoa, Florence, Macerata, Rome (La Sapienza), Rome (RomaTre), Bologna, Naples (Federico II), Salento, Milan and Trieste.

'Pathways to impact' have been further fostered by a second project stemming from, and closely linked to, this one. Willson's (jointly with Glasgow University) AHRC-funded interdisciplinary research network 'La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype' further explores some of the issues raised by *Italiane* (Section 5:8). The project, which explores representations of maternity (both past and present) in Italy and in the Italian diaspora, includes engagement with Italian politicians, with the Italian-Scottish community and with the public in both Italy and the UK. Two workshops have been held in Scotland as well as a public event in the Parliament Library in Rome which brought together academics, politicians and journalists and attracted good attendance from the general public. The project has also included a public lecture in Dundee and a further public lecture in Edinburgh is planned for 2014.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Commissioning Editor, Editori Laterza (to confirm book sales), Rome, Italy.
2. Link to online version of television programme, screened on state channel Rai Tre to confirm political impact <http://www.rai.tv/dl/RaiTV/programmi/media/ContentItem-1a7b6b7d-6a81-4d11-8afe-244e97bf47e8.html>. Viewing figures were provided by "Redazione Lestorie" ([lestorie@rai.it](mailto:lestorie@rai.it)).
3. Fondazione Nilde Iotti. <http://www.fondazioneildeiotti.it/index.php>. To confirm cultural and political impact. The website also includes an account of the debate on the book held by the Fondazione. [http://www.fondazioneildeiotti.it/iniziativa\\_1.php?eventi\\_id=63](http://www.fondazioneildeiotti.it/iniziativa_1.php?eventi_id=63).
4. Weblink to Unità article in online edition: to confirm cultural and political impact <http://cerca.unita.it/ARCHIVE/xml/2365000/2363321.xml?key=massa&first=231&orderby=1>.
5. Weblink reviews and articles on Laterza website. To confirm cultural and political impact. [http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com\\_laterza&Itemid=97&task=schedalibro&isbn=9788842092933](http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com_laterza&Itemid=97&task=schedalibro&isbn=9788842092933).
6. Weblink to Il Manifesto article in online edition to confirm political and cultural impact: <http://micciacorta.it/home/naviga-tra-le-categorie/25-libri/5028-nel-900-delle-italiane-il-fil-rouger-dellistruzione-.html>.
7. [http://giulia.globalist.it/Detail\\_News\\_Display?ID=6329](http://giulia.globalist.it/Detail_News_Display?ID=6329). Blogsite run by journalists with account of debate on the book in the Parliament Library. To confirm impact on policy debate in Italy.
8. Website of La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype AHRC-funded Research Network to confirm continuing cultural impact <http://lamammaitaliana.wordpress.com/>
9. Member of the Senate, Parliament of Italy (corroboration of the impact of the book on public debate on the role of women in Italian society).