

PENGUIN BOOKS

A HISTORY OF VENICE

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For nearly thirty years Lord Norwich was chairman of the Venice in Peril Fund. He is now chairman of the World Monuments Fund in Britain. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Geographical Society and the Society of Antiquaries, a Companion of the Royal Victorian Order and a Commendatore of the Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana. He was made a CVO in 1993.

JOHN JULIUS NORWICH

A History of

VENICE



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For Jason

and in memory of the grandfather

he never knew who loved Venice

and should have written this book

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Almost every word in the pages which follow was written in the Reading Room of the London Library, my debt to which – as to every member of its superb staff – can only be recorded, never measured.

Introduction

First experiences should be short and intense. When my parents took me to Venice in the summer of 1946, we stayed only a few hours; but I can still feel – not remember, *feel* – the impact it made on my sixteen-year-old brain. With his usual blend of firmness and commonsense, my father limited to two the buildings we actually entered: the Basilica of St Mark and Harry's Bar. For the rest of the time, wandering on foot or drifting gently in a gondola, I subconsciously absorbed the first essential Venetian lesson – a lesson, incidentally, that poor Ruskin, beavering away at his crockets and cusps round the Doges Palace, never learnt: that in Venice, more than anywhere else, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. However majestic the churches, however magnificent the *palazzi*, however dazzling the pictures, the ultimate masterpiece remains Venice itself. Interiors, even the great golden mystery of St Mark's, are but details. The relation of Piazza and Piazzetta, the sublime setting of S. Giorgio Maggiore at precisely the right angle to the Molo, the play of light at a canal's curve, the slap of water against the hull of a gondola, the all-pervading smell of the sea – for let there be no mistake about it, except when the wind is blowing across from Mestre and Marghera, Venice is the sweetest-smelling city in Europe – these are the first things to be experienced and understood. There will be time for Titian and Tintoretto later. Even Carpaccio must wait his turn.

As we wandered and drifted, my father talked about Venetian history, and I learned that Venice was not just the most beautiful city that I had ever seen; she had also been an independent republic for over 1,000 years – longer than the period separating us from the Norman Conquest – during much of which she had been mistress of the Mediterranean, the principal crossroads between East and West, the richest and most prosperous commercial centre of the civilized world. He told me how the sea had protected her, not only in her first stormy beginnings but all through her history, making her the only city in Italy never to have been invaded, ravaged or destroyed – never, that is,

until Napoleon, the self-styled ‘Attila of the Venetian State’, in a single sustained outburst of vindictive malice, put an end to the Most Serene Republic forever. Her unique system of government, my father admitted, was stern, occasionally even harsh; but he believed that it had a better record of fairness and justice than any other in Europe, and that it had been much maligned by historians. For that very reason, one of these days, he intended to write a history of Venice himself and set the record straight.

We departed, that first day, just as dusk was falling and the lights were coming on along the Grand Canal; I have never left any city with such bitter regret. But the next year we were back again, for longer; I began to explore on my own, and discovered what I now know to be one of the major pleasures of life: that of walking through Venice at night. By eleven, the streets are virtually deserted by all but the cats; the lighting, limited to the occasional ordinary electric bulb, is perfect; the silence is broken only by one’s own footsteps and the occasional ripple of unseen water. On those walks, now nearly thirty years ago, I fell in love with the city. I have walked it, and loved it, ever since.

My father died on New Year’s Day, 1954. Although he left a considerable collection of books on Venice and a few pages of notes, his long-projected history remained unwritten. The need for it, however, seems to me to be greater now even than it was in his day. More and more publicity is rightly given to the city’s desperate struggle for survival; and yet, despite a plethora of admirable guide-books, descriptive essays, surveys of art and architecture and historical studies of individual periods, I know of only one (and that all too short) consecutive general history of the Republic written in English in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth, admittedly, there were several; but all of these, to my possibly jaundiced eye, tend to veer between the inaccurate and the unreadable – or, indeed, as often as not, to combine the two.

This book, then, is an attempt to fill the gap – to tell the whole story of Venice, from her misty beginnings to that sad day for Europe when Doge Lodovico Manin slowly removed his ducal cap and gave it to his secretary, murmuring that he would not be needing it again. The task has not been easy.

One of the most intractable problems with which the historian of Venice has to contend is that which stems from the instinctive horror, amounting at times to a phobia, shown by the Republic to the faintest suggestion of the cult of personality. Sooner or later, anyone tackling the subject finds himself looking wistfully across to the *terra firma* and that superb, swaggering pageant of Medici and Malatesta, Visconti and della Scala, Sforza and Borgia and Gonzaga. The echoing names of Venice, by contrast, evoke *palazzi* more often than people, and it is hard to find much human interest in the decrees and deliberations of the faceless Council of Ten.

Another difficulty has been the constant temptation to digress; to talk more about painting and sculpture, music and architecture, costumes, customs and social life – particularly the social life of the eighteenth century, which attained a level of sophisticated artificiality equalled only, perhaps, by the military life of three hundred years before. (Casanova and Carmagnola – who was more out of touch with reality? Which figure was the more tragic – or, for that matter, the more ultimately ridiculous?) This temptation I have tried so far as possible to resist – though I am conscious of having been less than entirely successful, particularly where architecture is concerned. Books on such subjects are plentiful nowadays, expertly written and profusely illustrated; and the present work is quite long enough as it is.

It would have been a good deal longer still but for the fact that in the history of Venice there always seems to be too much happening or too little. The early years, when the primary sources are few and all too often contradictory, can be quickly covered; but, as the Republic increases in importance, so the picture becomes more and more complex. The period extending from the thirteenth century, which began with the Latin capture of Constantinople and the foundation of Venice's commercial Empire, to the sixteenth with its long and miserable story of French intervention in Italy, leading to that agonizing moment when Venice saw virtually the whole of civilized Europe ranged against her – that period is so packed with incident, so crammed with complication, that there were moments when I doubted whether my work would ever be done, or whether anyone would read it if it

were. Then, suddenly, the pace slackens. To readers who may raise their eyebrows when they find fewer pages given to a century in the later part of this book than were allotted to a decade in the central section, and who thereby deduce with relief that the author is running out of steam, I can only point out that all political historians of the Republic, of whatever nationality and at whatever period they were writing, have been suspected of the same. The simple fact is that in the seventeenth century, by comparison with its predecessors, relatively little happened in the political life of the Republic, and in the eighteenth – at least until the end – even less; but for which happy circumstance I should have several more years' work still ahead of me.

And yet, though the problems have been great, far greater have been the compensations. The sheer individuality of the place, for one thing. For Venice, alone of all the still-great cities of Italy, was born and brought up Greek. It is no accident that she possesses the greatest Byzantine church in the world that is still used for Christian worship, and a Patriarch to preside in it. Long after she shed her dependence on Constantinople, she continued to turn her back on Italy and to look resolutely eastward; the nightmare tangle of medieval Italian politics, of Guelf and Ghibelline, Emperor and Pope, feudal baron and civic commune – none of this was for her. And by the time she did at last condescend to carve out a mainland empire, her character was fixed in its own unique and quirkish mould.

Secondly, there is the unchanging quality of the city itself. Protected by the waters of her lagoon throughout her independent history from all foreign invaders except the last – and, in the present century, from the more insidious menace of the motor car – Venice still maintains essentially the same appearance that she presented to the world not only in the days of Canaletto but even in those of Carpaccio and Gentile Bellini. This apparent triumph over time would be an extraordinary phenomenon in any city; when the city happens to be the most beautiful in the world, the phenomenon becomes a miracle. It is also a particular blessing for the historian since it enables him to conjure up, in his own imagination at any rate, a far clearer and livelier vision of his subject at earlier periods than would have been possible anywhere else

in Europe.

But this is not a work of imagination, and I have tried to keep mine firmly in check. Nor, on the other hand, is it a work of profound scholarship; the sheer time span has forced me to keep the narrative moving ahead at all costs, and there has been little opportunity for detailed analysis. The one luxury I have allowed myself has been the occasional reference to buildings and monuments still standing in Venice today which have a direct bearing on the events described. For the rest, my only aim has been to tell the story as concisely and coherently as possible; my only regret that the task of doing so has fallen to me rather than to my father, who would have done it so much more brilliantly, a quarter of a century ago.

Il n'est pas rare de voir de grandes émigrations de peuples inonder un pays, en changer la face et ouvrir pour l'histoire une ère nouvelle; mais qu'une poignée de fugitifs, jetée sur un banc de sable de quelques cents toises de largeur, y fonde un état sans territoire; qu'une nombreuse population vienne couvrir cette flaque mouvante, où il ne se trouve ni végétation, ni eau potable, ni matériaux, ni même de l'espace pour bâtir; que de l'industrie nécessaire pour subsister, et pour affermir le sol sous leurs pas, ils arrivent jusqu'à présenter aux nations modernes le premier exemple d'un gouvernement régulier, jusqu'à faire sortir d'un marais des flottes sans cesse renaissantes, pour aller renverser un grand empire, et recueillir les richesses de l'Orient; qu'on voit ces fugitifs tenir la balance politique de l'Italie, dominer sur les mers, réduire toutes les nations à la condition de tributaires, enfin rendre impuissants tous les efforts de l'Europe liguée contre eux: c'est là sans doute un développement de l'intelligence humaine qui mérite d'être observé.

DARU, *Histoire de la République de Venise*

PART ONE



The Barbarian Invasions to the Fourth Crusade

QUESTION: *Quid est mare?*

ANSWER: *Refugium in periculis.*

Alcuin's Catechism

1

Beginnings

[to 727]

A few in fear
Flying away from him, whose boast it was
That the grass grew not where his horse had trod,
Gave birth to Venice. Like the water-fowl,
They built their nests above the ocean waves;
And where the sands were shifting, as the wind
Blew from the north or south – where they that came
Had to make sure the ground they stood upon,
Rose, like an exhalation from the deep,
A vast metropolis, with glistening spires,
With theatres, basilicas adorned;
A scene of light and glory, a dominion,
That has endured the longest among men.

Samuel Rogers

The origins of Venice encircle her still. No great city has managed to preserve, in its immediate surroundings, so much of the atmosphere and environment which gave it birth. The traveller approaching Venice, whether by sea as she should be approached, or by land across the causeway, or even by air, gazes out on the same flat, desolate expanse of water and reed and marsh that the first Venetians chose for their own; and is struck, more forcibly every time, not just by the improbability but by the sheer foolhardiness of their enterprise. It is a curious world, this world of the Venetian lagoon; some 200 square miles of salt water, much of it shallow enough for a man to wade through waist-deep, but criss-crossed with deeper channels along which Venetian shipping has for centuries made its way to the open sea; studded with shoals formed by the silt which the Brenta, Sile and other, grander streams like the Po and the Adige have brought down from the Alps; scored with endless lines of posts and piles driven into its sandy bed to mark invisible but important features – lobster pots and fishing-grounds, wrecks and cables, moorings, shallows, and recommended routes to be followed by