

Percy Allum and Italy – First Encounters

John Foot

To cite this article: John Foot (20 Jun 2024): Percy Allum and Italy – First Encounters, Journal of Modern Italian Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2024.2366126](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2024.2366126)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2024.2366126>



Published online: 20 Jun 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

TRIBUTE

Percy Allum and Italy – First Encounters

P. A. Allum, *Dear All. Letters from Europe. An Englishman in Naples, Perugia and Marseille (1956–1958)*, edited by M. P. Allum and Felia Allum, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli, 2024.

Percy Allum was one of the most important figures in Italian studies and Italian history to have worked in the UK, and in Italy (and in France) over the last fifty years. His 1973 book on Naples (*Politics and Society in Post-war Naples*, published in Italy in 1975) was a incendiary masterpiece, unpicking the power structures in that city, citing actual political figures working at the time there, and causing a storm. Magistrates who took on the camorra and its links with political parties later said they were inspired by his book. It was also beautifully written, theoretically sophisticated and based on deep empirical research. But Allum also went on to write some of the most penetrating studies of how Christian Democracy worked in the north of the country – in its other heartland in the Veneto region. Moreover, he published a highly influential and magisterial comparative textbook which remains a reference point for those studying comparative politics.

The way that historians become historians is rarely studied, and often is due to chance factors. It might be a holiday, or a book, or an influential professor or the award of a small grant. The great British historian of Italy Denis Mack Smith was inspired by a trip to Italy just after World War Two, where he was able to buy up vast libraries of books which people were virtually giving away and was given hospitality by none other than Benedetto Croce. In the case of Percy Allum, this beautiful volume, produced by his family, gives us a fascinating insight into the origins of his career path, his first encounters with Italy, and his private struggles and achievements. It consists of a series of letters Allum wrote to his family in Cornwall, mainly from Italy and France, in 1956–7, accompanied by extraordinary sketches – Allum was a highly talented artist. These letters turned up recently and have been transcribed and edited by the family. Apart from anything else, this book is a beautiful aesthetic object. The copies of the originals of Allum's letters are exceptional objects in themselves, with his perfect handwriting and the images which accompany them.

These letters – especially seen with hindsight – show us somebody on their way to becoming somebody else. First, there is a long-distance and polite battle with his own family over his future. Allum's family owned and ran a laundry business, and it was expected that he become part of this. He was doing an accountancy course after graduating from Cambridge. But you can see that his heart isn't in it – and finally, after a number of clues – he announces in one letter

that he is looking for another pathway in his life. As he finally admits in a dramatic letter in April 1957: 'I see no point in a life which has as its sole *raison d'être* earning money to live.'

A second journey we can see here is towards an understanding of Italy. By complete chance, Allum ends up in Naples – teaching in a Liceo. This experience will inform and mark the rest of his life. We can note in the letters his ability to unpick – already – Neapolitan life, politics and landscape. For example, he writes about the Monarchist Mayor of Naples at the time, Achille Lauro – someone he will later study in detail. He also looks at political crises, and how institutions work. Moreover, there are encounters with the beauty of the city, its dark side, its corruptions and bureaucracies, its hierarchies (often expressed through language and titles) and also its food, its wine, its football. It is a kind of the beginning of a love story – with a city – and something that will mark Allum deeply. What is extraordinary here is that we can see this process emerging – we can understand where those later books and studies will come from. Allum is learning the language – he picks it up with rapidity – and starts to use Italian phrases in his letters. He is encountering, and trying to understand, a different culture, a place undergoing dramatic change (on the edge of the economic miracle which would transform Italy) but also a place with complicated and rich historic roots. For someone interested in beauty, and art, where else would one want to be apart from Italy?

In addition, these letters are already beautifully written and constructed – something else that will be seen in later works by Allum. Another little clue lies in the seeds of radical politics which Allum will later embrace, the signs of which can be seen in many of the letters. There are also some amusing vignettes – his meeting with his Cambridge Director of Studies, an accident on a Vespa, numerous discussions about money (a constant preoccupation for Allum), battles with the bureaucracy and a fine sense of self-deprecation and irony. There is also a strong sense of family ties, and affection, which comes across in all the letters – despite the obvious tensions (we don't see the other letters in reply) over the abandonment of the family business and the chosen career for a 'leap in the dark'. Finally, we get a glimpse into some of the self-censorship in these letters with the inclusion of another letter to a friend which is far more outwardly political (all this is also happening at a time of dramatic political change in the UK – with the Suez crisis and the end of an era). These ego documents are an elegant glimpse into a long-lost world, where communication was so much more difficult but also more meaningful – and an intriguing and delicate look into a snatch of life of 'an historian (who was not yet an historian) as a young man'.

John Foot
University of Bristol