

Simonetta Soldani

University of Florence

In the name of the alphabet saviour: Anna Celli (1878–1958) and Sibilla Aleramo (1876–1960) work in Roman Campagna

ABSTRACT: The birth of the schools for peasants in the Roman countryside is intertwined with the fight against malaria, which raged in the marshy areas south of the capital, where a multitude of seasonal and nomadic peasants worked and lived, treated as slaves by the great landowners and tenants of the area. It soon became clear that without a serious commitment to provide those workers and their families with at least a minimum basic education, it would have been impossible to convince them to take quinine and to follow some basic hygiene rules.

Thus in 1903 the idea was born to open even modest schools in the poor clusters of huts that rose a few kilometers from Rome. The initiative was taken by the newly formed Roman section of the National Women's Union (UFN), a lay feminist association centered on Milan, and the reins were taken by Anna Fraenkel – the wife of Angelo Celli, engaged in the anti-malarial struggle and socialist deputy – and Sibilla Aleramo, a young writer destined to become famous.

Despite many initial difficulties and the firm aversion of landowners and clergy, they succeeded in opening numerous „schools“, thanks also to a group of tireless collaborators, and to arouse around their initiative the interest of the national press, of public opinion and of local and national institutions. In a short time the schools of the “Roman Agro“, set according to the most modern pedagogical theories, became a model to be „exported“ to other areas of South Italy and Sicily. But at that date, the nucleus of women who had paved the way with effort and passion had already dispersed.

KEYWORDS: Women in adult education; literacy of poor peasants; education in fighting malaria.

The experience spoken about here highlights how in late nineteenth-century Italy, more than the gap between rich and poor – the «two nations theme» brought to the limelight by Thomas Carlyle in the very midst of the

English industrial revolution – concerned the abyss between the culture and civilization of townsfolk and country folk. If no way was being found to make a breakthrough in the lack of communication between the two worlds, it was even difficult to be listened to and create real opportunities for dialogue.

It goes without saying that for the Italian feminist movement – which blossomed at the start of the twentieth century – country women remained a taboo. And this continued to be so even when some association undertook to combine the battles for civil and political rights with more immediately “practical” initiatives concerning work and motherhood, and the diffusion of literacy and the most basic notions of hygiene and childrearing, as happened with the establishment of doctor’s surgeries and Sunday schools for mothers and children in some big cities.

The case examined here, instead, stands out precisely because it was devised and wanted by women belonging to one of the most important feminist associations of the time to bring the civilization of the alphabet and medical cures to the nomadic inhabitants of the countryside around Rome, infested by malaria and therefore almost totally lacking stable settlements.

The Sunday schools (and later evening schools) for the peasants of the Roman Campagna is a great success story, which fuelled similar initiatives not only in the malaria-stricken areas of southern Lazio and Calabria, but in various rural areas in southern Italy and Sicily with incredibly high rates of illiteracy and very poor living conditions. At the same time, however, it is also the story of the rapid marginalization of the female contribution as soon as, in order to gain a stronger foothold, the initiative was forced to look for a less occasional presence of local and national institutions, with everything that this led to in terms of rules to observe and official relations to cultivate. And lastly, it is a story that underlines women’s specific difficulties: both in being accepted in public roles in the presence of personal choices deemed inadmissible by society, and in avoiding the absolute supremacy of marital duties, confirming the immediate public and political repercussions of models of behaviour concerning what was nonetheless described as the private realm *par excellence*.

A network of socially engaged women

The first seeds of the schools for peasants in the countryside around Rome, set to become one of the most successful bottom-up initiatives to promote literacy, were sown during a meeting held in a private home in Rome on 25 May 1903 to create a local section of the *Unione Femminile Nazion-*

ale (National Women's Union). The fiercely secular and democratic association, inspired by a social and practical feminism, had been founded in Milan in 1899 (Buttafuoco, 1986; Imprenti, 2012), against the grave political background of the bloody repressions of 1898 and the reactionary and liberticidal temptations that had inspired them (Canavero, 1998); in 1901 it set up a periodical, the *Unione femminile*, and—shortly after it began to try to gain a national foothold.

The creator and then president of the association, which she directed with pragmatic intelligence, was Ersilia Bronzini (1859–1933). She was married to Luigi Majno, a radical lawyer driven to join the socialist party following the Milanese massacres of May 1898 and the resulting surge of repression, who was elected MP in 1900. The political battle waged by the *Unione Femminile* (even against the most egalitarian wing of Italian feminism) to approve the first women's labour protection law (1902) and its initiative to open a re-educational shelter for girls and young women at risk of prostitution and domestic violence – called *Asilo Mariuccia* in memory of Ersilia's deceased daughter (Buttafuoco, 1987) – reaped success.

Nevertheless, memories and commitments were weighing Ersilia down; so, in late autumn 1902, she decided to take a break in Rome where her husband was involved in parliamentary sessions. More importantly, however, it was a period of unusual verve in the city's feminist movement, as shown by the reorganization of the *Associazione per la Donna* (Pro-Women's Association), the launch of the *Cooperativa per le Industrie Femminili Italiane* (Cooperative for Italian Female Industries), the bevy of meetings to establish a *Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane* (National Council of Italian Women) affiliated with the International Council of Women and the battles for the recognition of women's rights conducted by the feisty group of members of the newborn *Unione Magistrale Nazionale* (National Teachers' Union; Gazzetta, 2018).

Besides, more general radical changes were afoot in the country, with a fresh determination to accept the challenges of modernity both on the part of the institutions and governments, open to new ideas and at work with reforming figures and forces, and on the part of “civil society”, bent on making its presence felt and its voice heard on everything to do with the pressing “social question”: and a fundamental part of it was undoubtedly the dreadful hygiene and health conditions and the total illiteracy of a large part of the population, which, it is worth remembering, affected two thirds of the population, plus an additional 15% who were semi-illiterate, their skills amounting to a signature and “drawing” the odd word (De Fort, 1995).

The Majno temporary residence in Rome provided the meeting place for ten or so women of varying ages and estates, all already variously active in the women's movement and interested in Ersilia Majno's plan to create a Roman section of the *Unione femminile* to devote itself specifically to «promoting all those initiatives that can contribute to the education and defence of children and motherhood, and spread literacy» through «urban and rural Sunday schools for young women» (*Unione Femminile, Sezione di Roma*, 1903).¹ These expressions referred to problems and projects that were much more specific than one might think. They were the result of first-hand experiences that the Majnos had-gained in February of that year under the guidance of a couple of their friends – the Cellis – at length involved in a passionate campaign to denounce and intervene to improve-the environmental decay and subhuman living conditions in the Roman Campagna, which have also been the subject of international analysis and condemnation (Sombart, 1888).

Among the women present at the meeting was also a young journalist and aspiring writer from the Marches, Rina Faccio, shortly afterwards to become known by the name of Sibilla Aleramo, who had had the opportunity to come into contact with the *Unione Femminile* and its founder Ersilia – to whom she was bound by shared interests and social, political and feminist leanings – between 1899 and 1901 during trips and periods in Milan to seek a shore for her literary aspirations (Guerricchio, 1974; Scaramuzza, 2004). Rina arrived in the capital in spring 1902, still putting before her maiden name the surname of her husband, Pierangeli, a man whom she had been forced to marry after he had abused her at the age of sixteen and whom – like Ibsen's Nora – she had abandoned after a tempestuous marriage, together with their son. Soon, however, she was to become the long-term companion of Giovanni Cena, a poet of some renown, highly sensitive to the social question and the spiritualist ferment of the period. Indeed, as she had written shortly before in an article in a Milanese periodical, she was convinced that, «in order to be emancipated», women did not only have to «change their ideas, but alter the whole direction of their lives» (Aleramo, 1901, p. 131).

The notes written on the spur of the moment, after the meeting at the Majno home, mark the impression made on Rina-Sibilla by the person and plans of without doubt the leading light that evening, namely the young woman from Berlin, Anna Fräntzel (1878–1958), wife of an important malaria scholar, Angelo Celli, professor in hygiene at the University of Rome and MP

¹ All translations of quotes are my own.

for the Radical Party, untiring proponent and standard bearer, both inside parliament and out, of the fight against malaria, a disease which every year slayed thousands of victims in the semi-marshland areas surrounding the capital and still awaiting a serious law for their reclamation (Alatri, 1998a; 2000).

Although very different, Anna was also somewhat of a maverick: a lot more, indeed, than Sibilla could imagine. Brought up in an upper-middle class family of professionals – both her grandfather on her mother's side and her father, who died before his time, were renowned doctors and academics – at just 17 years old, Anna had abandoned the family home in search of independence. Going to Hamburg to train to become a nurse, here she had met Angelo Celli, to whom she became engaged two years later (Wildner, 2009). It was in this guise that she had joined him in Rome in 1898, actively working alongside him and his team both on the hospital wards and in the exhausting "missions" to the Roman Campagna to explain the causes of malaria, teach «good practices» to reduce the impact of the anopheles mosquito (only recently identified as the cause of malaria), give out quinine and teach how to use it, now that, thanks to the laws promoted by Angelo Celli himself, it could be obtained for free as a preventive medicine for anyone who lived in malaria-stricken areas (Heid, 1944; Alatri, 2006). At the same time in Rome she was trying to found courses and schools for secular nurses, a figure just beginning to emerge in Italy (Bartoloni, 2008), fighting against the trafficking of Italian women to the Middle East and state-controlled prostitution, and writing about these topics in various newspapers, amongst which the newly founded *Unione femminile* (Celli, 1901; Santarelli, 1979).

Discovering «Italian negroes»

What struck Sibilla at the start was Anna's «childlike appearance», and her unusual combination of strictness and flexibility, in her facial features as well as her bodily movements. But immediately after what impressed and involved her was Anna's terse, facts-and-figures description of the subhuman conditions in which the peasants and their families in the Roman countryside lived and worked and the importance that setting up Sunday schools could have in changing this state of affairs. As she saw it, the alphabet could be used as a tool to break down the state of real and mental slavery, moral abjection and lack of any self-consciousness which also led these people to breach the recommendations and prescriptions laid out by the workers at the two anti-malaria clinics that Angelo Celli had just managed to open in the Roman Campagna.

Of this «immense drama», wrote Sibilla immediately afterwards, Anna had spoken «without a quaver and without commotion». Her voice had only gradually become «higher, sharper», echoing something «almost implacable: the reflection of a hatred grown up before the spectacle of brute poverty», leaving them all «dumbstruck and silent» and driving her to immediately volunteer to help in that «work of salvation» (Aleramo, 1903, p. 169). Less than a month later, just after the first drafting of her fictional autobiography, *Una donna* (A Woman), Sibilla followed Anna and Angelo Celli to discover what he, three years earlier, had defined the «tribes of Roman Abyssinia» (Celli, 1900, p. 15): tribes of poor migrant labourers who lived in tufa caves, or in bunks arranged either side of a large cane hut hosting from 100 to 200 people, or grouped in huts «made of straw, maize canes, hay and dried plants», scattered about the area crossed by the great consular roads of ancient Rome (Salaria, Nomentana, Tiburtina, Prenestina, Casilina, Anagnina...), now mainly reduced to ruined cart tracks without any public transport.

Most of the inhabitants lived in the areas marked out by the large estates of Roman aristocratic landowners lodging in huts, built at their expense, with a single, low doorway to enter, no windows, a fire on the bare earth with no way out for the smoke and a few utensils dotted around it. On the ground were a couple of large beds made of trunks covered with corn husks and rags for eight to ten people (Angelo Celli, 1900, pp. 20–21). The labourers, mostly seasonal workers, were hired either by the conductors of large estates whose land was left to pasture or cultivated on a two-yearly rotational basis, or by the increasingly numerous capitalist companies (almost all run by lease-holders and agents from northern Italy) for the intensive production of grain and maize; and almost always they were forced to go on long marches to and from the fields where they worked.

Commonly thought of (and called) not people, but «means» (*opere*) if men, or «half-means» (*mezze opere*) if women and children, according to their working capacities («In the lands around Rome, it was as if the French Revolution had never happened», Sibilla wrote on several occasions), the over 30,000 inhabitants of those desolate lands, frequented almost solely by hunters and artists, spent their whole lives at the total mercy not only of the so-called *caporali*, illegal farm labourer recruiters who hired them in the villages of the interior, but also of the estate owners, renters and active capitalists. While different, all-these kinds of employers were equally interested in keeping the workers in the most brutish degradation, as Anna had already seen when she had tried to open a first school for the illiterate in one of the most “modern” farms in the area, La Cervelletta, just eight kilometres from Rome and the site of one of the first two anti-malaria surgeries opened by Angelo Celli (Heid, 1944).

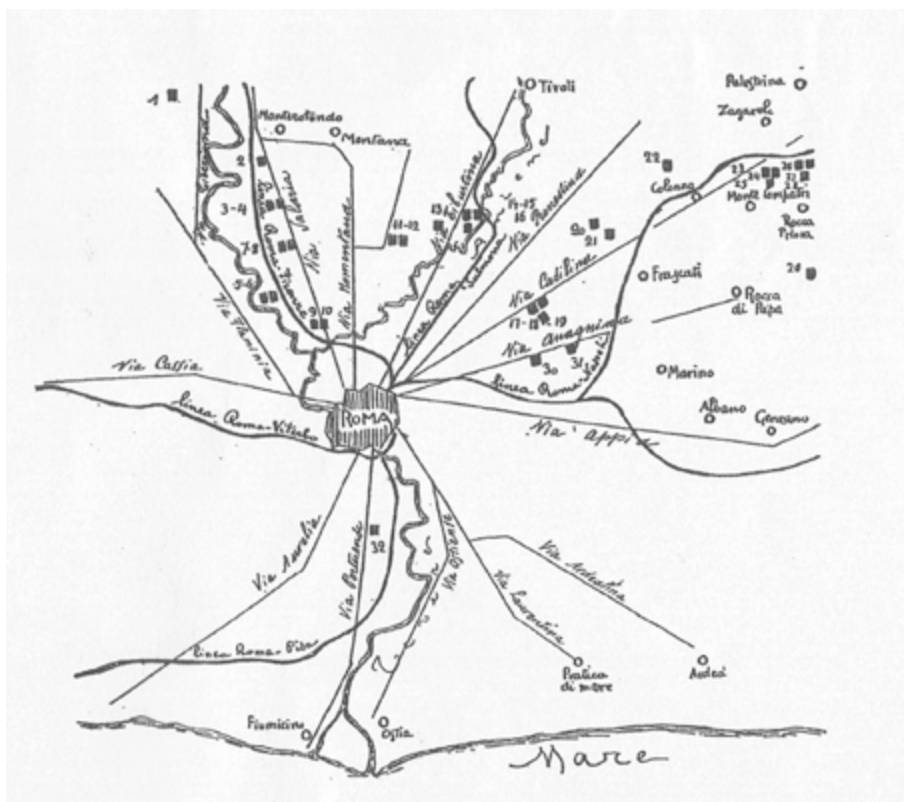


Figure 1. The map of the places in the Roman countryside interested by the opening of adult schools

Many others “trips” followed the first one, whose destination was Lunghezza, near Tivoli, where the first Sunday school would be opened a few months later; and very soon Giovanni Cena started to take part in them too. «For five years, all year round» – remembered Sibilla right in the middle of the Second World War, beset (just like Anna Celli) by memories of that intense period of social engagement – every Sunday was devoted to «exploring the desolate majesty of the Campagna» (Aleramo, 1943, p. 181), reaching new villages, activating contacts that could become stable relationships, making that reality known to school men and women, journalists and pedagogists, clerks, administrators and politicians, and more in general whoever could become an interpreter, propagator and funder of that project for human and civil redemption. It was a plan based on the will to give the world of the *guitti* (as the nomadic labourers of the Campagna were called) – all illiterate, often not registered in the municipal records and not always able to say who their mas-

ter was or even what their surname was – the basic knowledge to be able to acquire dignity as people. What is more, it was, and remained at length, indissolubly linked to the anti-malaria campaign (Alatri, 1998b).

A challenging and rousing experience

Opening schools gave the opportunity to show that world of outcasts that there were «townsfolk» who wanted to help them without asking for anything in exchange; that the «white women», initially touched in amazement to check that they were real, were «neither witches nor sorcerers»; that to defeat malaria the «spider's webs and mouse liver, lupin powder and live shield bugs» in which everyone blindly believed, as Maria Montessori remembered in 1905 after one of those trips (quoted in Alatri, 2000, p. 48), were not just ineffective, but harmful even; that quinine had to be taken regularly even when there was no fever and that febrile children were not to be put in the warm bread oven; that it was indispensable to reduce contact with mosquitoes, by trying to stay covered and when possible using the nets provided by the health workers, which were mainly thrown away or used to dry out and strain tomatoes...

In order for all this to happen, the most difficult thing was to conquer the trust of the potential pupils, to have them perceive and experience school as a useful investment for the future. But it was also necessary to find the money to buy desks and blackboards, exercise books, textbooks, chalk and pencils. Teachers had to be found who were willing to stay out on Sundays for three hours of lessons in the morning or half a day, ignoring the diffidence and hostility of the ruling classes who had decided to use all their influence and power to discourage schools from opening and to complicate their operations.

This is what immediately happened to the first Sunday school, in the castle of Lunghezza. Opened in March 1904 in the premises of what was supposed to be a municipal school (despite having no furniture whatsoever) (Heid, 1944) it counted 94 enrolments: a really satisfying start, even though most of those enrolled were young people «from the castle» and not *guitti* from the countryside. However, after a few weeks that number fell drastically, above all due to the desertion of the female segment, more sensitive to the tirades against the «anti-Christian» school, source of eternal damnation, made by the local priest, whose opposition went so far as to prolong the Sunday functions in order to reduce the hours of the lessons. Straight away afterwards, the permit to use the premises was withdrawn, and the courses were

forced to close down, only to reopen again the following year in a large hut specially built a little way from the others, with both a large entrance room and some windows to let light in. And this time, «all of the youths» from the peasant village below the castle came, while – as evidenced by various photos of that first experience – a crowd of onlookers stood all around, almost as if to check on the pupils' progress. Indeed, their effort was «betrayed not only by the hand and the sweating forehead but by the whole person, guiding the chalk and tracing the strokes with the same fatigue and attention with which they ploughed a furrow» (Aleramo, 1946, p. 35). When, a few weeks later, one of the brighter pupils managed to read the well-wishing words traced by the teacher on the blackboard – «Friend. Health. Work. Sun» – others (above all conscripts or young men wanting to emigrate) went to ask to attend that poor school which just about managed to hold around 20 lessons a year. As Sibilla commented, they had an obscure inkling of the epoch-making turn prompted by learning «to trace those little signs that linked them to the rest of living beings» (Aleramo, 1946, p. 35).

Between the end of 1905 and the beginning of 1906, among the permanent hostility of prelates and nobles and the odd bit of openness on the part of rare enlightened leaseholders, other schools were opened: in Corcolle, in the room of an old farmhouse; in Marcigliana, in the village and too far from the huts for the school to be frequented with the due constancy; in Pantano, where, instead, as well as a room on the estate, the leaseholder even offered the teachers a free lift on a cart there and back to the nearest railway station. But despite the gratification in seeing the commitment shown – «from the farmer to the most miserable peasant», from the mature man «with greying hair to the youngest children» – to drawing benefit from the lessons (Celli, 1908), the goal of making the alphabet a tool of civilization for the true *guitti* remained an illusion.

Thanks to the activism of the president of the Roman section of the *Unione Femminile*, elementary school director Adele Menghini (who meanwhile had opened a series of popular Sunday courses for girls in Rome), Anna and Sibilla also found some teachers capable of and willing to take on the burden of lessons in those distant and “difficult” schools, in exchange for just a tiny payment as well as a reimbursement of any travel expenses. Indeed, they could even count on a couple of women teachers, which was even harder owing to the impervious nature of the journey that had to be undertaken to reach the schools, and the impossibility of doing it alone, if one was to retain the respect of populations who showed difficulty in even accepting the idea of a female teacher.

Unfortunately, the reports and financial statements of those years have been lost. From indirect documents we know that every school cost around 700 lire per year, and that finding the indispensable money took up no little time or energy both of Anna Celli, who had to look after a good part of the actual organization of the schools, and Sibilla Aleramo, who instead took care of relations with the *intelligentsia* and current affairs press, aided in this by Giovanni Cena, chief editor of the most influential and widespread periodical of the time, the *Nuova Antologia*. But naturally, for her too, there were the frequent organizational meetings and trips to check on the initiatives underway which on no rare occasion also involved helping to guide «the children and old people's hands to trace first the strokes and then the letters» (Aleramo, 1943, p. 181). Also on her agenda were twice-weekly shifts to provide hygiene and health assistance in a Roman dispensary for childhood in the Testaccio neighbourhood and periodical visits in company of a doctor to the communal hovels of the Roman Campagna, confirming the intrinsic link between educating in literacy and health for the heads of the Roman section of the Unione Femminile.

A mix of success and tensions

Nevertheless, in the meantime, many things were changing, from all points of view. In December 1903 a law had finally been approved to reclaim the Roman Campagna: a law that favoured investments in production (and therefore the year-round cultivation of crops and a more stable labour force), and that, upon the initiative of Angelo Celli, obliged teachers employed in the area to hold school on Sundays and in the evenings (Celli, 1906). In July 1904 another law strongly desired by the most progressist circles reorganized and strengthened primary and popular schools, including evening and Sunday schools, leading to a sizeable increase in the funding allocated to them and a greater interest in their functioning by the institutions. As a result, some thousands of schools of varying sizes were opened (at times effectively, at times little more than in name alone) above all, but not only, in the rural areas of central and southern Italy (Ravà, 1906). Finally, in 1906, as part of a series of special provisions for the Mezzogiorno (also extended to Lazio) – which among other things saw primary school spending passing from municipalities to the state in order to more effectually combat the extremely high rate of illiteracy in those regions – a law was issued (no. 383/1906) that reorganized and extended the state's commitment in promoting evening schools for adults.

Besides, it seemed more and more indispensable to be guaranteed public support if a plan for schools worthy of this name was really to be developed in the Campagna. It was all the more necessary because in the meantime the *Unione Femminile* had fallen upon hard times at national level, as confirmed by the closure of the association's periodical and worsened by the new, grave loss to Ersilia Majno, whose second daughter died in 1905. Not only that, her Roman section had not managed to take off, either numerically or politically. Even in the mobilization for votes for women at the same conditions as men which developed between 1905 and 1907, and whose epicentre lay in Roman feminist circles, the Roman section of the *Unione* remained almost silent. Meanwhile, it was beset by tension and ill-humour on the part of the majority of its members, who considered the concentration of energy and resources on the schools of the Campagna excessive and to the detriment of all other enterprises and projects.

Towards the end of 1906, convinced that, once the public opinion's interest had been aroused about the schooling problems in the Campagna, it was the task of the municipality and state to take on the problem, the hardworking president of the Roman section of the *Unione Femminile*, Adele Menghini, resigned. She was replaced by Anna Celli, who, despite trying to defuse the situation as far as possible, did not hide the difficulties in taking the project further. Indeed, precisely at that time, the crusade against the Sunday schools was revived by the *Opera di Assistenza Religiosa* (Religious Aid Organization) responsible for pastoral activities in the Roman Campagna. So much so, in spring 1907 the *Opera* managed to get Prince Barberini Colonna to close down a hut-school that had just been opened on his land: a victory facilitated by the impassioned and imprudent words written in a well-known newspaper by Sibilla Aleramo in praise of the functions of the schools that they were trying to establish, which she called «centres of light, redemption and, if necessary, rebellion» (Aleramo, 1907).

It was obviously the word «rebellion» that rang alarm bells among those able to follow the public debate, also because the hand that had written it was now associated with the author of the novel-provocation of the year, *Una donna*. This largely autobiographical and highly transgressive “story”, whose publication had been energetically advised against since 1903 by Ersilia Majno (who had even broken off her relations with Sibilla because of this), was met with disapproval by a large part of her “friends” and the feminist literati, starting from Ellen Key (Åkerström, 2012). Accompanied by a slew of reviews, it became a real literary phenomenon (Conti, 1981), and not just in Italy, seeing as in a couple of years the novel was translated in six European countries, even as far away as Sweden and the distant empire of the tsars. On the

other hand, this wave of popularity served Sibilla as a springboard to become even more engaged in the precarious fate of the schools («How many letters I wrote at that time to ask help from rich people, at home and abroad!»: Aleramo [1946], p. 35), along with the three other components of the newly established Comitato per le Scuole dei Contadini (Peasants' Schools Committee), who were writing and having articles written in newspapers in half of Italy, and above all using each one's network of acquaintances – but above all those of Giovanni Cena and Angelo Celli, particularly functional for the purpose – to obtain financial aid and advice on which paths to follow to expand the schools and make the available resources less uncertain.

So it was thanks to a one-off subsidiary granted by the Ministry of Public Education that in spring 1908 the financial deficits created by doubling the number of schools (from four to eight, one of which for the first time was an evening school) could be patched up. This result was achieved thanks to the good work of one of the most open minded and able officials of the Ministry, Camillo Corradini, then involved in a large inquest into the state of primary and popular education in Italy, and the favourable report of a ministerial inspector on the results obtained by those poor little schools forced to operate «in huts, churches of sorts, rooms in inns and, weather permitting, the open air» (*Le Scuole festive*, 1908, pp. 8–9). And in the meantime, the entrance in December 1907 of the progressists, headed by the Mazzinian (and freemason) Ernesto Nathan, to the Municipality of Rome raised hopes of further economic support and real collaboration in the near future, also owing to the appointment of two friends of the schools, republican Gustavo Canti and socialist Tullio Rossi Doria, to the posts of councillors for health and education. But there was no doubt that if the schools wanted to guarantee themselves freedom of organization and teaching, they would have to receive significantly more private donations, or they would soon fall into the hands of the institutions, also due to the marked pressure put on them by the increasingly important male group linked to Giovanni Cena.

On the crest of the wave, but in a male light

For some time, in fact, Giovanni Cena, who attributed an almost mystical value to the spread of the alphabet, experienced as a «redemptive mission» (Strozza, 1992), had been able to count on the unconditional activism of Alessandro Marcucci – a friend of Cena's artist friends Duilio Cambellotti and Giacomo Balla – who, a born organizer, in little time had made himself almost indispensable (Alatri, 2006).

In the meticulous leaflet published in summer 1908 – whose heading still spoke of «schools established by the Roman section of the Unione Femminile Nazionale» – the school-by-school report on the situation was the work of Anna and Sibilla; but the proposals for the year after were put forward by Alessandro Marcucci, who had compiled them in virtue of his recent appointment as «director of schools» as part of the committee's transformation into a legally constituted institution. His proposals included the commitment not only to greatly increase the number of schools (even going so far as to say 25), but also to make them into evening schools (not easy, owing to the almost total lack of means of transport), in order to achieve the number of lessons requested by the state to subsidize them. In addition, he also hoped for two-year courses with final and «completion exams» which could give diplomas with a legal value (*Le Scuole festive*, 2008, pp. 28–31).

What dangers that expansion could entail except enjoying fixed and consolidated subsidies was clearly seen when, in February 1909, with the courses already started and the new schools – 12 in all – open, the State Auditors' Department rejected the decree for the ministerial contribution and the committee found itself having to deal with a sudden and unexpected “hole” in the balance sheets. The minutes of the meetings from those months, fortunately available (*Libro delle deliberazioni 1908–1913*), give a full idea of the climate of tension and dismay caused by that stalemate, which, however, stimulated a last great crowdfunding effort, managing in a few months to collect a sum five times higher than the average of the previous years. All of this made it plain for all to see that the project was held in great favour by important and varied (but all secular) segments of “civil society”.

The lists include senators, MPs, high officials, intellectuals, literati and leading university professors, masonic lodges and various popular clubs sporting significant names of the radical tradition (Spartaco, Minerva, Romagnosi, Pisacane, Giovanni Bovio...), but also a smattering of donors wanting to take sides in what appeared an emblematic «battle of civilization» (Marcucci, 1913), as Sibilla, in words only published many years later, had sustained with impassioned conviction at a greatly admired fundraising conference which she held in Milan and Turin in March of that year (Aleramo, 1931). As can be read in an anonymous report prepared for the congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance held in Stockholm in 1911, «the year 1909–1910 marked a new era for our schools», because «thanks to the propaganda in their favour spread all over Italy by Giovanni Cena and Sibilla Aleramo we have no lack of means» (*Relazione* 1911).

In reality, that result was not just an undertaking only of the «poet and the woman writer», as the two were called in the Campagna. Suffice it to think of the propagandistic skills of Alessandro Marcucci, who organized the first great «schools festival» in Pantano in July 1909, with processions of thousands of peasants from camps and villages all over the area. And there is no doubt that this success changed the attitude of the authorities and institutions towards the Committee's schools. Starting from 1910–1911 much more generous public funding rained down on the schools than in the past, enabling many improvements: a rapid increase in the number of schools and their pupils (340 in 1908–1909; 777 in 1908–1909; 890 in 1919–1910; 1129 in 1910–1911...); a first intervention in the Pontine Marshes; the purchase of furniture and less spartan teaching materials, specially designed and built for the mobile and rural schools; collective car transport for teachers to the more accessible areas... And in the meantime the visits and praise of politicians and pedagogists, social reformers, intellectuals, Italian and international philanthropists were multiplying, making the initiatives known far and wide.

The year 1911 was a true triumph for the Committee, with its promotion of an exhibition of the Roman Campagna schools as part of the Kingdom of Italy fifty-year anniversary festivities and the opening of its first brick-and-mortar school in Colle di Fuori: a school arising from a new, specific «fundraising effort» and built tellingly like a church, even with a bell tower. But, notwithstanding the «our schools» appellation used in the Stockholm congress report, the guide could now be said to have passed into other hands.

Anna Celli continued indomitably to cover the role of president, despite her growing commitment to get the schools for secular nurses off the ground (Celli, 1908); but by now her role was little more than a formality, all the more so when Angelo's poor health prompted the couple to move to Frascati. Despite the gold medal awarded to her in 1913 by the King «for special merit in the fight against illiteracy», her renown was rapidly fading. Giovanni Cena tried to keep active, but life in Rome had become painful for him since Sibilla had first briefly and tempestuously fallen in love with a woman in summer 1908, and two years later had left him to go to Florence with another poet: a move that made Sibilla quite unpopular in feminist circles as well as with those who had worked with her on the Roman Campagna adventure and now resolutely turned their backs on her forever.

So it was that, especially after the death of the «martyr» Cena in 1917, for everyone the Campagna schools became his and his friend Marcucci's: «everyone always and only speaks of the same old Cena, the same old Marcucci», wrote Anna to her friend Ersilia a few years later (Celli, 1925). The

layers of the first foundation stones had been forgotten (Celli, 1933), despite remarks in reports of the time on the Campagna schools' progress and despite Sibilla's decision to publish the proceedings of her 1909 conference to remind all those singing others' praise about *L'origine delle scuole contadinesche dell'Agro romano* (The Origin of the Roman Campagna Peasant Schools). In those pages Sibilla seems anxious to reiterate that the «first impulse for the work» had come from «a delicate woman with a tenacious will» (Aleramo, 1931, p. 18): namely Anna, who, in turn, in her third-person autobiography from 1944, did not fail to recognize the role of the «victorious writer [] among the pioneers in the civilization of the Roman Campagna» and her work as a «fascinating speaker and untiring propagandist» that had enabled them to obtain «the necessary means for the benevolent initiative, before the governing, bureaucratic or municipal authorities were ready to subsidize the institution» (Heid, 1944, p. 89).

The two women had not met since that distant year of 1910, before the Great War and Fascism made the world in which their adventure had come to pass disappear, nor would they meet again. But they knew, and they wanted the world to know, how much they owed to each other in the initiative that now went under other, male names: practically the only ones recalled by the promoters and leading figures in the numerous initiatives that arose immediately afterwards in southern Italy, as well as in studies on the subject, almost to the present day. To restore the rightful place to the women who wanted and ran this «mission of civilization» for years, both as single individuals and as members of the first feminist associations, is not only a precise historical duty: it is also a way to fully exploit the knowledge of a short, crucial period in which a still fragile “civil society” of Italian men and women strongly felt they had to contribute to the nation-building underway through initiatives that could modernize and secularize, with the lower classes, the whole country.

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