
Reviewed by Stella Fletcher

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This relatively slim but attractively presented paperback is a translation of Stefano Dall’Aglio’s 2005 volume *Savonarola e il savonarolismo*. Five of its chapters are devoted to the life of Girolamo Savonarola and its immediate contexts; the remaining seven cover his posthumous cult and the fate of his followers in the eras of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The story tends to proceed from pamphlet to pamphlet, and Dall’Aglio makes a clear effort to distinguish between the careers and individual contributions of each author, whether Savonarolan or anti-Savonarolan. The book is intended as an introductory work, an intention borne out by the substantial bibliography, which occupies approximately one-sixth of the volume. As the author explains, it is only here that he has taken the opportunity to develop his original work, the augmented bibliography indicating the sheer vitality of this field of study in recent years.

Dall’Aglio’s target readership is an undergraduate one. If anything, that places greater responsibility on an author than does writing for any other group, for the specialist is often under greater pressure to publish than to dwell on the publications of others and the general reader quickly moves on to something else entirely. It is in students’ essays that an academic author can acquire some sort of celebrity status, not least in a culture that allows knowledge to be neatly compartmentalized, module by module, essay topic by essay topic, each with its dedicated bibliography, a culture that can, when taken to excess, reduce the study of history to nothing more than identifying slight differences of emphasis between authors. It is in such essays that a throwaway remark can gain unintended significance and the convenient generalizations of an introductory text can be treated as gospel. As long as students are encouraged to use a book such as *Savonarola and Savonarolism* as nothing more than an introduction and a guide to the specialist literature, then it can serve a useful function, but it is not a substitute for specialist works, in this case those of Donald Weinstein, Lorenzo Polizzotto, and others.
As Dall'Aglio’s expertise lies in the sixteenth-century portion of the story—in *Savonarolismo*, rather than Savonarola himself—most of the generalizations that students should treat with caution are to be found in the earlier chapters. Thus, although Florence experienced constitutional changes in 1494 and 1512, this did not mean that the republic lasted only eighteen years (p. 19): it continued in some shape or form throughout the six decades of Medicean dominance (not exactly “rule,” p. 32) up to 1494 and was not finally abolished until the creation of the principate in 1532, however much had been abused, assaulted, and deformed in the meantime. Consequently, there was nothing new about the election of the *Gonfaloniere di giustizia* (Gonfalonier of justice) and eight priors in the winter of 1494–95, as the wording on page 20 might be taken to imply: that practice carried on regardless, even in the early 1520s, when the organs of republican government were treated with particular contempt. In a number of places, the reader is presented with black-and-white alternatives, between periods of “Medicean” and “republican” governments, with Florentines identified as “Mediceans” and “republicans” as though they formed clearly defined parties in the modern style. It makes one itch to set an essay on the politics of Francesco Guicciardini, in the hope of encouraging more subtle thinking about these things. Turning to Florence’s relations with other states, the impression is created of a “pro-Spanish, pro-Imperial” Medicean policy giving way to a pro-French Savonarolan one in 1494 (p. 18). That certainly looks like a case of projecting Charles V’s role in the creation of the principate back on to an earlier generation. Although Piero de’ Medici’s Neapolitan connections were exceptionally unfortunate when Charles VIII was seeking to make good his claim to the Regno, Piero’s great-grandfather Cosimo had known that there was money to be made in France and his father Lorenzo had known that there were wealthy benefices to be acquired there too. Savonarola’s understanding of Florence’s foreign policy was pro-French precisely because it was conditioned by his earlier experience as a client of Lorenzo.

Beneath the level of generalizations about Florentine politics and diplomacy, there are a few awkward translations dotted throughout the text; a few erroneous ones (Master of the Holy Palace instead of Master of the Sacred Palace); a small number of inconsistencies (if Margaret of Austria, why François I?); and occasional American idioms that are not familiar on this side of the Atlantic. One image that may well remain with me for some time is that of a preacher “climbing on a pulpit,” rather than ascending into it: muscular Christianity indeed.
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