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978-0-521-10387-9 - The House that Giacomo Built: History of an Italian Family,
1898-1978

Donald S. Pitkin

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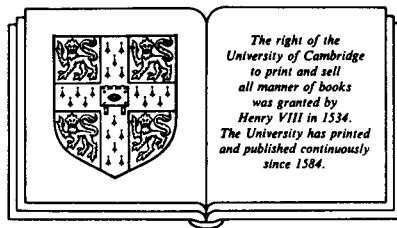
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Amherst College



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For Steve and Roxie

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Foreword

There are many Italies. There is the Italy of proud cities and provincial towns, surveyed by church towers and guarded by ancient battlements. There is the Italy of the senses discovered by the grand travelers of the Augustan Age and the Italy of the flowering lemon trees beloved of the German Romantics. There is the Italy of the Renaissance celebrated by Jacob Burckhardt and the somber Italy of the Counter-Reformation, the young Italy of the springtide of nations, the Italy of operatic passions. There is also the Italy of Gramsci's "failed revolution," the "cursed Italy" of the embittered emigrants, the "proletarian nation" of the Fascists, and the Italy of the Resistance with its 44,720 partisan dead. And there is the Italy of the "Economic Miracle" after the Second World War.

But there is still another and very different Italy, the Italy of the anthropologists, most of them working in small towns and villages after World War II. Donald Pitkin has been in the forefront of this band of researchers, writing his doctoral thesis on a village in the Pontine Marshes in 1954. He has since returned many times. His work, together with that of his colleagues, set the agenda of anthropology in Italy: the interplay of land tenure and family structure; the construction of gender and the sexual division of labor; the significance of dowry; the coding of honor and shame; the interaction of kinsmen and strangers, of patrons and clients; the counterpoint of formal Catholicism and popular religiosity; the antagonistic relationship of gentry and notables with people on the land; the conduct of local politics. This was not the grand Italy of poetic or political vision but an Italy of humbler folk, engaged in the actions and reactions of daily life, evaluating their own behavior and that of others, enacting cultural forms to create the dense network of reciprocities that lies at the base of those other Italies of art and history, power and wealth.

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Foreword

These agenda and themes are sounded again in Donald Pitkin's present book, but with a difference—for this is a different anthropological account. It is a tale of generations: Giovanni and Giulia, their daughter Maria and her husband Giacomo, and their friends and descendants. We are invited to witness their fierce and heroic struggles against grinding poverty, as well as their laborious ascent toward conditions of greater ease. We are shown how time and again they marshaled economic resources and social relationships to maintain the values of family within the orbit of the household, and to win dignity and respect in the public arena without.

In telling the story of these simple yet extraordinary people, and in having them tell it to us in their own words, Pitkin also speaks to three enduring anthropological issues. First, he addresses the issue of how the world of meaning and value is related to the sphere of material determinants. He shows us in detail how the extended family of the Rossis served them as a resource to enlarge and stabilize opportunities and yet also constituted for them a set of human relations valued in their own right. Unremitting labor was needed to sustain these values and goals. Second, he speaks to the issue of gender relations, an old concern given new prominence by feminist critique in recent decades. He shows us how much of the material provisioning of households and the marshaling of their social energy depends upon the labor of women. This labor is at once a site of exploitation and pain, a labor of commitment and love, and a source of personal reward and merit. And, third, he returns to the important question of whether different kinds of society and culture do not demand different distributions and organization of psychic energy within people. This was an important concern in American anthropology until the 1950s, when culture-and-personality studies fell into disfavor because their theories and methods could not fulfill the overly ambitious claims made for them. Yet the queries about the possible cultural channeling of emotion and cognition remain some of the most interesting questions that anthropology has asked. Pitkin has returned to some of these concerns in exploring the role of mutual dependency within extended Italian families and in asking what dependence training or independence training may do for the shaping of personalities. Thus Donald Pitkin's book shows us how Giacomo's house was put together with cement and love; but it also demonstrates how anthropology, a discipline devoted to observing and understanding "the imponderabilia of actual life," uncovers new and unsuspected chains of causation and implication in the shaping of human life.

Eric R. Wolf

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Acknowledgments

I first wish to give thanks within my own circle of family for this book about another family: to my late wife Emily, whose love of Italy and the people of Valmonte helped make our field experience there the revelation that it was; to my mother, author Dorothy Pitkin, who taught me an appreciation for observation; and to my maternal grandfather, George Horton, whose writings on Greece provoked a fascination with the Mediterranean. I wish to recognize too the formative experience of the Noble and Greenough School, which kindled a respect for learning and a sense for a familial community as well. My principal mentors in anthropology were Clyde Kluckhohn, who taught his students the importance of seeing connections, and Conrad Arensberg, who insisted upon the ethnological importance of Europe.

I am especially indebted to Manlio Rossi-Doria, scholar of the Italian south, ardent fighter of Fascism, and exemplar of all that is most worthy in the Italian character. I also wish to thank Renata and Eugenio Gaddini, who have always provided me with every encouragement from 1951 to the present. And thanks too for the gentle but wise advice of the eminent Italian anthropologist Tullio Tentori.

I wish, also, to recognize one book that made all the difference, Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. I read it for the first time in 1948. It drew me like a magnet to that Italy which he described so beautifully.

In the final preparation of the manuscript I found perceptive the comments of my colleagues at Amherst College, Peter Czap, Jan Dizard, Robert May, Rose Olver and Kim Townsend, as well as my friend Ruth Backes. I owe much to Susan Urquhart, who adroitly transformed the manuscript from its earliest to final manifestation, and I am profoundly grateful to my prescient editor at Cambridge University Press, Sue Allen-Mills.

But finally it is to those people I have written about here to whom I

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Acknowledgments

am most deeply indebted. I count our friendship as one of the treasures of my life. Out of respect for their actual historical identities I have changed all family names and most Christian names. Valmonte, as well as several other places mentioned, are known by other appellations.