

BOOK REVIEW

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, Naples, Editoriale Scientifica, 2024, 218 pp., €18 (paperback), ISBN 9791259768483

Ash Amin

University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
Email: aha29@cam.ac.uk

(Received 26 April 2024; accepted 26 April 2024)

Percy Allum was a polymath who knew a lot beyond his expertise in Italian politics. I got to know Percy during my doctoral studies at Reading University in the early 1980s. Sometimes, he would wander unexpectedly across to Geography from Politics, where he taught, just to have a chat, sometimes to vocalise something on his mind. Just as unexpectedly, he would dash off to another meeting or to meet the deadline for an article for the *New Statesman* or *New Society*. He took an interest, once quick to tell me that to write anything half decent on my thesis on the Italian South, I should spend at least a year in Naples. I spent only a few weeks. He would invite me home, where in the right season, Marie-Pierrette would dish out a mountain of asparagus with the most delicious garlic butter dressing. He was easy company – curious, enthusiastic and erudite all in one, never grandstanding his formidable academic reputation.

All this came back to me while reading his fortnightly letters home from Naples, Perugia and Marseille between 1956 and 1958, expertly curated by Marie-Pierrette and Felia Allum. These are 57 letters of a newly graduated 23-year-old trying his hand as an English-language assistant, while brushing up on his Italian and French. Some letters give a glimpse of a possible academic or diplomatic career, and certainly not one in accountancy. But by and large, they express a need to bide time, not without a tinge of self-doubt. In one, Allum writes, ‘I sometimes wonder if I will ever find a way of life, worth the belief, an occupation which will absorb all my interest’ (p. 83). In another, ‘I just feel that I must go on in a certain general direction ... I must also apologise for my lack of reality – my complete failure to understand the meaning and necessity of life – my flight from the world into the ivory tower of self-made fantasy’ (p. 87).

It is generative to come across such flashes of doubt, with the hindsight that taking a ‘general direction’ for a few years probably played its part in fostering a brilliant academic career. Allum taught at Reading for many years, took on Toni Negri’s teaching at Padova University, and ended up at the Università Orientale in Naples. He wrote ten books and countless articles in serious newspapers and magazines in Britain, France and Italy, becoming the authoritative voice on the evolution of state–society relations in Europe, the machinery of clientelist power in Naples, the vicissitudes of Italy as a postwar democracy, the manoeuvres of the Italian Christian Democrats to stay in power, and the impediments of political culture hobbling the communist party and its successors. There is not

much in the letters hinting at a future in political science. In fact, the commentary on politics is light, sometimes relating to hardship in Britain during the mid-1950s, sometimes to union militancy in France, sometimes to Naples's public funds shortages overseen by Mayor Lauro. It is an irony that, two decades later, Allum would write his influential tome on how Lauro – with all his hands in real estate speculation – perfected the model of clientelist power politics in Naples that skewed the city's development. The book's influence in Italy and in Italian studies was profound.

If there is no sign of an academic future in the letters, there certainly is of Allum's intellectual curiosity, compelling writing, compulsive energy and breadth of knowledge. Just out of Cambridge, at the mere age of 23 he impressively opines on the Greek columns at Paestum, the general state of affairs back home, the ancient wonders of Sicily, historical sites around Naples, art and architecture in Perugia, and a lot more. He writes with authority and confidence, eager to grasp Italian cultural history, often captured in captivating sketches of what he has seen. He wastes no time in fitting in cultural activity around his albeit light teaching duties: visits to the cinema, theatre, opera, museums and art galleries; copious amounts of reading; attending lectures, including one by Heidegger in Aix-en-Provence (whose face Allum captures in a comical sketch). He does not list what he has seen and heard, but offers insight, telling his mother, for instance, that Racine's tragedy *Britannicus*, 'reasonably well acted' in a French he just about got, 'is to French literature what Shakespeare is to English. The French classical tradition was more purely classical than the English. They respected the Greek rules more and used more purely classical subjects than the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists' (p. 159). There is no precociousness here (after all, he is only writing home), only a keenness showing that the 23-year-old actually knows quite a lot.

But that is the age he is. And it is illuminating to see what the famous professor got up to after graduating. His casual conversations with people he met on the street, his chronicle of daily life in 1950s Naples, his visits to Capri to see an elderly new friend, his jaunts to parties, jazz clubs and cafés, his frequent trips to Rome to see his friends, his late nights, long mornings and days out swimming, his long bus rides, train journeys and hitchhikes, his calculations of how much money he needs and can get, his thoughts on colleagues and students at school, his ease with an open future. The letters are full of the *joie de vivre* and sense of possibility that many people in their twenties have, but with Allum, they lingered into late life. The letters also show his care for a family left behind, expressed in sympathy for their small trials and tribulations, questions about his siblings, reassurances about the recent house move, and, of course, the regularity of correspondence. The care is not touchy feely or gushing, but that of proximity and connectedness – the kind you encountered in later life.

These are letters well worth reading, as a chronicle of the postwar, and as an insight into the mind of a renowned Italianist and public intellectual. They reminded me of why it was a pleasure to be in Percy Allum's company.