

particular aspects of his career, he is the subject of no published biography in any language – a gap in our knowledge which has recently been criticized as “incredible”.<sup>3</sup> This is a glaring omission, for one overriding reason. From the publication of his first political tract in 1870<sup>4</sup> till his death in November, 1922, less than a month after Mussolini’s advent to power, he dedicated himself, with unparalleled devotion, to the cause of Liberal Italy. He was, in one leading historian’s view, the conscience of the Risorgimento in the Liberal era.<sup>5</sup> That his efforts finally came to naught makes him an important, even vital, failure. Simply put, to see the period through Sonnino’s eyes is not only to recount the story of a significant life, but also to trace the history of Liberal Italy from its hopeful beginnings through to its eventual demise.

Sonnino provides an illuminating view on Liberal Italy for another reason. He was an Outsider, doubly so. Scion of a British Protestant mother and a Jewish Italian father, he possessed the Outsider’s ability to see his own society with a frank dispassion. This was especially valuable to the new Liberal regime, embattled as it was by powerful enemies on left and right, and confronted by grave problems which mocked its pretensions to national greatness. Sonnino gazed, unblinking, at Liberal Italy’s dilemmas and quickly saw that only radical reforms would consolidate its grip on power. In Antonio Gramsci’s estimation, he was “one of the few intelligent” Liberals to devise a program of “bourgeois hegemony” for the new regime.<sup>6</sup>

Nor was Sonnino’s cultural eccentricity merely a question of personal

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<sup>3</sup> N. Tranfaglia, *La prima guerra mondiale e il fascismo*, p. 43, footnote 1, in *Storia d’Italia*, Turin 1995. Ironically, Tranfaglia’s listing of Sonnino in the index, p. 688, as “Sonnino Giorgio Sidney” (a confusion with his elder brother, common in the literature) symbolizes the need for an accurate, comprehensive account of Sonnino’s life and career. (His full name was Sidney Costantino Sonnino). For other calls for a biography of Sonnino, see: R. Vivarelli, “L’eredità liberale del Risorgimento dopo l’unità”, *Rivista storica italiana*, CVI, fasc. I, January 1994, p. 127; A. A. Mola, “Giolitti e giolittismo”, p. 52 in *Storia della società italiana*, Parte quinta XX: *L’Italia di Giolitti*, Teti, Milan 1981. A recent conference devoted to “Sidney Sonnino and His Times” (26-27 September 1997, San Casciano in Val di Pesa), under the aegis of the *Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano* and the *Società Toscana per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano* demonstrated the substantial interest in Sonnino’s career among scholars of modern Italian history. For a brief description of the conference’s proceedings, see: P. Carlucci, “Sidney Sonnino e il suo tempo”, *Contemporanea*, I, 2, April 1998, pp. 381-83.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Sonnino, *Il suffragio universale in Italia*, Florence 1870, now in Sonnino, *Scritti e discorsi extra-parlamentari, 1870-1902*, I (hereafter *Scritti*, I) Bari 1972, pp. 3-29.

<sup>5</sup> A. C. Jemolo, *Chiesa e stato negli ultimi cento anni*, Turin 1955, pp. 551, 567.

<sup>6</sup> A. Gramsci, “Alcuni temi della questione meridionale”, *Lo Stato operaio*, January 1930 (Paris), now in *Scritti politici*, (ed.) P. Spriano, Rome 1967.