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CHAPTER 5

CULTURAL POLICY AND COLONIAL CONQUEST: THE DANTE ALIGHIERI SOCIETY IN ABYSSINIA AND THE BRITISH COUNCIL IN EGYPT

The Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council were closely involved in the imperial ambitions of Italy and Britain around the Mediterranean Sea and its outlets. Italy, with its numerous co-nationals living around the Mediterranean, was trying to establish firmer control over its colonies in Libya and as of 1935 embarked on an ambitious colonial expansion by conquering Abyssinia, nowadays known as Ethiopia. This stood in the way of British interests in the region. Tensions were manifest in the language conflict between the British and the Italians in Malta. Whilst the British rule in Egypt was troubled by national uprisings, Italy's movements in Abyssinia threatened Britain's main concerns in dominating the Mediterranean: access to India and to oil through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Using my research into the Dante Alighieri Society's activities in Abyssinia and those of the British Council in Egypt, this chapter will show how the Dante and the Council operated in the region and put into practice their aims. How did the two organizations use the various instruments at their disposal? What characterizes their way of operating and how successful were they? While looking for answers to these questions, it will be shown how the two organizations dealt with the cultural, political and economic rivalry in the Mediterranean.

The Dante Alighieri Society's imperial dreams in Addis Ababa

The precariousness of the Dante Alighieri Society's position as a well-established institution vis à vis Mussolini's authoritarian government in the 1930s is well illustrated by the setting up of the local Committee of Addis Ababa after May 1936, when the city was pronounced the capital of Italy's new empire: Italian East Africa (*l'Africa Orientale Italiana*, which consisted of Abyssinia, Eritrea and Somaliland). This episode in the history of the Dante Alighieri Society provides a contribution to the still much-neglected study of

Italian colonialism.¹ The establishment of control over Abyssinia by army and administration shows Italian Fascism in its most brutal form, functioning as “a gigantic testing ground for a Fascism that sought to free itself from any constraints.”² After 1935, Fascist dreams of a new society were transposed to the African colonies. Corporatism as a new social system had failed in Italy. Instead the focus came to lie on the creation of a ‘new Fascist man’ as shaped by a more totalitarian and militaristic regime; a creation that could be achieved in the colonies – considered to be a ‘tabula rasa’- and then serve as a model for Italy as well.

Another reason that makes looking into the Dante Alighieri Society’s activity in Addis Ababa particularly worthwhile is the fact that the conquest of Abyssinia meant a turning point in Italy’s image abroad, especially in popular opinion.³ Both countries were members of the League of Nations. Upon Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia on the 5th of October 1935, the League of Nations was obliged to condemn this act of aggression against a League member and in November economic sanctions were imposed. These sanctions, however, were doomed to be ineffective. Vital resources such as oil were exempted and the British did not deny access to the Suez Canal. The British and the French government were keen to maintain good relations with Italy, believing that Italy could be a potential ally in containing Hitler’s power. A deal was made, the Hoare-Laval Plan, which would hand over a major part of Abyssinia to Italy for it to control as a kind of protectorate, provided the war would be ended immediately. When the news of this deal leaked out to the general public in France and Britain, the outrage and the post-Versailles influence of public opinion on diplomacy were so strong that the British Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare and the French Prime Minister Pierre Laval were forced to resign. This coincides with the reputation for moral indignation that the British had acquired. A small but very vociferous minority was said to express such indignation that “the very pacifists among them are almost ready to fly dropping bombs over the tyrants’ domains”.⁴ Eventually, on 4 July 1936, with none of the League members wishing to enter into war, the economic sanctions were lifted.

¹ Angelo del Boca, ‘The Myths, Suppressions, Denials, and Defaults of Italian Colonialism’ in: Patrizia Palumbo ed., *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003) 17-36; Nicola Labanca, ‘Studies and Research on Fascist Colonialism, 1922-1935: Reflections on the State of the Art’ in: *ibidem*, 37-61.

² Alexander de Grand, ‘Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940’ in: *Contemporary European History*, 13, 2 (2004) 127-147, 138.

³ See for example Frank van Vree, ‘In het land van Mussolini. De Nederlandse pers en fascistisch Italië’, in: *Incontri* 6 (1991) 3-26, about the damage to fascist Italy’s positive reputation in the Dutch press following the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

⁴ Rose Macaulay, ‘Moral Indignation’ in: Hugh Kingsmill ed., *The English Genius* (London: The Right Book Club, 1939) 175-190, 176.

The Dante Alighieri's dealings in Addis Ababa provide a significant illustration of the dynamics of the Society's interaction with the local Italian authorities. The cooperation that can be traced back is not such as to suggest a complete submission of the Dante Society to Mussolini's regime. Setting aside for a moment the question of 'fascistization', how did the Dante go about to promote Italian culture in Italy's new imperial territory?

A new Dante Alighieri Committee in Addis Ababa

The Central Council of the Dante Society itself took the initial decision to launch a Committee in Addis Ababa. So far no archive material has been found to determine whether Felicioni, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society, had discussed this beforehand with Mussolini or with someone from his cabinet. What we know is that right away an ambitious plan was made. At a meeting of the Council on 17 May 1936, it was agreed to put fifty thousand lire at disposal for the creation of a big Dante Alighieri library in the new capital of the Italian empire. The local Committee of Venice was prepared to donate ten thousand lire to the budget for the library, as well as three thousand books it had collected for this purpose.⁵ The fact that the Venetian Committee had been collecting books for this purpose, suggests the library had been talked about already for quite a while. A day after the Addis Ababa initiative had been decided upon, Felicioni wrote to Giuseppe Bottai. Bottai had shortly before, on the 5th of May 1936, been named the first Italian Governor of Addis Ababa, a function which he was to retain only until the 27th of that same month.⁶ Felicioni informed him about the Dante's plans and asked if he could name a person in Addis Ababa who would be suitable as a local fiduciary of the Society.⁷ A similar letter was sent to Vezio Orazi, Federal Secretary of the Fascio of Addis Ababa.⁸ Obviously, Felicioni wanted to be sure such a fiduciary would be someone the local (political) authorities could accept, as well as someone the Dante itself could trust.

When over a month later Felicioni had not yet received a reply from either Bottai or Orazi, he wrote to Giuseppe Floriano dall'Armi, Colonial Inspector at the Ministry of Colonies in Rome, to ask him if he knew of a suitable fiduciary. In his letter, Felicioni explained to Floriano dall'Armi that

⁵ AS-SDA, Fascicolo 6, Addis Ababa, President of the Dante Alighieri Society to Bottai, Civil Governor of Addis Ababa, 18 May 1936.

⁶ Was Bottai one of the several *gerarch*i (highly-placed party members) who were 'promoted' to a post in the Italian colonies to be temporarily out of the way on the mainland? (Alexander de Grand, 'Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940' in: *Contemporary European History*, 13, 2 (2004) 127-147, 132.)

⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felice Felicioni to Giuseppe Bottai, Civil Governor of Addis Ababa, 18 May 1936.

⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Vezio Orazi, 20 May 1936.

besides setting up a local Committee with the usual activities to spread language and culture, the fundamental aim of the Dante Alighieri Society in Addis Ababa was to create a large library in the capital of Italian Abyssinia. He mentioned the fifty thousand lire that the Central Council was prepared to invest, as well as the ten thousand lire and the three thousand books being offered by the Dante Committee of Venice. In addition, Felicioni wrote about an extraordinary sum of hundred thousand lire that was being offered by the Committee of Catania for the purpose of building a Casa della Dante, as a proper home for the Addis Ababa Committee. However, Felicioni openly remarked that he hoped the fiduciary in Addis Ababa could arrange with the local Italian authorities for the Dante to obtain a building in reasonable condition for free. That way the money could be spent on refurbishing the building and furnishing it. The donation of the building would be commemorated with a small plaque.⁹

To maximise the chance of getting official support, Felicioni also asked Guido Cortese, recently appointed as the Federal Secretary of the Fasci in Italian East Africa, to react favourably when within days Floriano dall'Armi would meet him together with the Viceroy in Addis Ababa, Rodolfo Graziani, to discuss the issue of a fiduciary for a local Dante Committee. He kindly begged him to do so out of his "ancient affection" for the Dante.¹⁰ Guido Cortese had until recently been the Secretary General of the Ente Nazionale della Mutualità Scolastica. Felicioni had probably made acquaintance with him through the Dante's involvement in the Italian educational system. It is worth noting that Felicioni starts the letter by saying he has tried to call Cortese in Rome but was unable to get hold of him. This is a small piece of evidence that could help substantiate Beatrice Pisa's claim that the relative scarcity of the head office's correspondence kept in the central Dante Alighieri Society archives for the period after 1930 is in part explained by the increased use of telephone.¹¹

At first, Felicioni was given different suggestions as to who could be a suitable candidate for the post. Orazi finally replied at the end of June, suggesting Carlo Milanese, director of the *Giornale di Addis Abeba* and in charge of running the Istituto Fascista di Cultura.¹² The Viceroy of Abyssinia, Graziani, instead suggested Grand'Ufficiale Aurio Carletti.¹³ No decision was made though; a letter from the Viceroy Graziani to Felicioni dated the 30th of October 1936, shows that the issue was then still unresolved. In this letter the Viceroy pointed out that finding a suitable building in Addis Ababa for a future local Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society had proved to be extremely difficult.

⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Giuseppe Floriano dall'Armi, 17 June 1936.

¹⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Guido Cortese, 24 June 1936.

¹¹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 422, footnote 86.

¹² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Vezio Orazi to Felicioni, 30 June 1936, Prot. 504.

¹³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Rodolfo Graziani to Felicioni, 10 July 1936.

The few buildings in viable conditions had to be reserved for the most indispensable public services. Hence the Viceroy had examined the possibility of letting the local Dante Committee establish its office in the headquarters of the *Fasci*. Cortese, the Federal Secretary of the *Fasci*, had agreed to accommodate the Dante and its library. Furthermore, Graziani had reconsidered the question who could be made fiduciary. Floriani dell'Armi, by now transferred to Addis Ababa as head of the Direzione degli Affari Economici e Finanziari of the Vice-Kingdom of Abyssinia, had advised Graziani not to rely on Government personnel as they had not a minute to spare in their task of running the colony. The choice had therefore fallen on someone who was expected to be well capable of combining the delicate task of fiduciary with the ordinary execution of his work: the inspector of education (sovrintendente scolastico) Edmondo Pietrosi.¹⁴ A month later, Pietrosi was appointed.

While the practical details still needed sorting out and nothing tangible had yet been achieved in Addis Ababa, the Italian press in the motherland had already been alerted. An article in the newspaper *La Terra* of August 1936, spoke of the Dante Alighieri Society working alongside the *Fasci all'estero* to contribute to Italy's empire in the Dante Society's specific field of competence: culture. As if all had been arranged, the article announced that the Dante was going to create a library and build a 'Casa della Dante' in Addis Ababa, as well as launch propaganda activities. What kind of propaganda was hereby intended? The most recent and obvious example was what had already been done through the Dante Committees abroad to convince the foreign "educated classes" and the "masses" of the righteousness of Italy's historic, social, political and legal reasons for conquering the Abyssinian territory. For this purpose the foreign Dante Committees had spread more than 110,000 folders and had organized lectures. Munich, Geneva, New York, Paris, Sao Paolo and Tirana distinguished themselves as main centres of propaganda.¹⁵ This would suggest that the negative effect of the Italo-Abyssinian war on the image of Italy abroad had made the Dante particularly aware of the function it could have for the cultural 'education' of foreigners as opposed to their own nationals. Indeed, in many of the newspaper articles dealing with the prospected Dante library in Addis Ababa, it is indicated that the library will be of use for Italians and foreigners.¹⁶

At the same time though, the official news agency Stefani had apparently been instructed to announce what seems to be a competing project. The Florentine newspaper *Il Giornale* of 7 August 1936 contained an article that mentioned an initiative of Federal Secretary Cortese, supported by the Viceroy,

¹⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Rodolfo Graziani to Felicioni, 30 October 1936.

¹⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, 'L'Attività della «Dante Alighieri» per l'Impero' in: *La Terra* (Rome, [1?] August 1936).

¹⁶ 'La prima riunione ad Addis Abeba degli iscritti alla «Dante Alighieri»', *Corriere Adriatico*, Ancona, 1 March 1938.

about which Stefani was spreading the news. The plan was to create a Casa dell'Ospitalità Fascista with reading and writing rooms, a theatre with two-hundred seats, a tennis court, a swimming pool and other modern facilities. This first big construction in the emerging imperial capital, with its majestic appearance in 'Italic' and agrarian style ("...un corpo maestoso di schietto stile italico ed agrario"), was to house the local offices of the Fascist Party, the syndicates, the social services, a room for press conferences, the Club Alpino Italiano, the Colonial Institute and the Dante Alighieri Society. Other amenities that were to be provided would show Italy's technological modernity. Besides a telephone and telegraph service, the plan was to have a radio tower with a film projector to show films in the open air. The latter, the article commented, would no doubt impress the 'indigenous' population.¹⁷ Cortese, it would seem, was trying to keep the honour for himself and for the National Fascist Party.

Initial obstacles

Once Pietrosi had taken on the voluntary function of fiduciary – a task that he seems to have accepted without further delay – Felicioni could finally move on with the establishment of the Committee in Addis Ababa. This was a project Felicioni had described as particularly close to his heart. By creating a library and a reading room with the best Italian periodicals, as well as organising artistic and musical events, the Addis Ababa Committee would provide a vigorous campaign for *italianità*, or so Felicioni claimed.¹⁸ On the 27th of November 1936 he gave instructions to Pietrosi to start recruiting the minimum number of members required for a local Committee of the Dante to be statutorily recognized: twenty-five ordinary members (paying twelve lire per year) or life members (paying every now and then at least two-hundred lire). As soon as this was achieved, Felicioni could officially make Pietrosi President of the Addis Ababa Committee. The funds for a Dante headquarters, with room for its office, a large library and a salon for its cultural and artistic activities, now totalled a hundred and seventy thousand lire, but Felicioni explained that the shortage of suitable buildings in Addis Ababa meant that for the time being such an office and library had to be hosted by the Fascist party headquarters.¹⁹

¹⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Attilio Crepas, 'Un altro implicito riconoscimento dell'impero etiopico' in: *Il Nuovo Giornale* (Florence, 7 August 1936).

¹⁸ "[un] Comitato che mi sta particolarmente a cuore ed al quale intendo far svolgere una vigorosa e complessa azione di italianità, sia nel campo culturale, con la formazione di una importante biblioteca e con una sala di lettura, fornita dei migliori periodici italiani, sia con manifestazioni artistiche e musicali, che potranno concretare nel tempo en nella maniera che V.E. mi vorrà gentilmente" (AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Rodolfo Graziani, 3 August 1936).

¹⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Edmondo Pietrosi, 27 November 1936.

That same day, Felicioni wrote to Guido Cortese to inform him about the arrangements with Pietrosi.

In the following weeks, Pietrosi made the necessary agreements with Cortese to have the local Dante Committee temporarily based in the Fascist party building. In order to set up a proper library, Pietrosi asked the central Dante office in Rome to make part of the funds destined for this project available to him right away. Shelves needed to be built along the walls of an entire room, as well as tables and chairs. Carpenters were very expensive in Addis Ababa.²⁰ The investment Pietrosi foresaw evidently alarmed Felicioni, who soon after wrote to remind him that this was to be only a temporary solution, that the aim was to eventually have a '*Casa della Dante*' and that costs for furnishing the library needed to be kept to a minimum. To cover the expenses involved in running the library, Felicioni suggested that a supplementary fee should be asked of Dante members in Addis Ababa for the use of the library and the lending of books. He asked Pietrosi to send an approximate budget overview, after which Felicioni could make sure the necessary sum was transferred.²¹

On the onset of the new year, 1937, several articles appeared across Italy, reporting on the creation of a new Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society in Addis Ababa, by the will of the Viceroy and under the chairmanship of Edmondo Pietrosi, temporarily to be accommodated in the Federal Fascist Party headquarters until a residence worthy of its function in the empire was found.²² Despite these optimistic announcements, the actual establishment of the local Committee progressed slowly. It wasn't until the 10th of February that Pietrosi was able to post a budget overview, having - as he claimed - finally found some carpenters who could commit themselves to completing the work by the end of March. Carpenters being so scarce, Pietrosi had been obliged to right away agree, without consulting the Dante headquarters in Rome first. Half of the twenty thousand lire he budgeted for 1937 would go to the shelves and furniture for the library. Assuming that there would be no further ado about the shelves, Pietrosi recommended Felicioni to immediately start sending books, especially light reading, Italian classics, and books on history, philosophy and politics. These would then probably arrive by the end of

²⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Edmondo Pietrosi to Felicioni, 22 December 1936.

²¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Edmondo Pietrosi, 30 December 1936.

²² Le Colonie, Agenzia Quotidiana di Informazioni Coloniali Mediterranee ed Orientali, Organo dell'Istituto Coloniale Fascista, n. 15, foglio 1 (21 January 1937); 'La «Dante» ad Addis Abeba', Il Gazzettino, Venice, 12 January 1937; 'La costituzione nell'Impero della «Dante»', Il Resto del Carlino, 20 January 1937; 'La costituzione della sezione della «Dante» ad Addis Abeba', Il Veneto della Sera, Padova, 20 January 1937; 'Comitato della «Dante Alighieri» ad Addis Abeba, Il Regime Fascista, Cremona, 21 January 1937; 'Un Comitato della «Dante» costituito ad Addis Abeba', La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, Bari, 21 January 1937.

March.²³ The budget was indeed accepted and Felicioni even mentioned that in the future the Dante might consider creating libraries elsewhere in the empire, in towns such as Harar, Gondar, Dessie and Dire Dawa.²⁴

Thanks to airmail the correspondence between Rome and Addis Ababa was by the mid-1930s rapid and trustworthy. Shipping crates with books was a different matter, or so it proved to be. On 11 March 1937 the central Dante Alighieri Society office in Rome had a first portion of books sent. These were mainly classics, in Italian and Latin (with Italian translation), a collection of Benito Mussolini's and of Alfredo Oriani's writings and speeches, and the most important publications on the Abyssinian war. Among the books was also an artistic edition of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* which Pietrosi was to ceremoniously deliver to the Viceroy. This present was possibly meant to provide some leverage in a task Felicioni hoped Pietrosi could fulfil. For Felicioni had heard that the General Government of Italian East Africa intended to buy four or five copies of the *Enciclopedia Treccani*, with the purpose of giving them to a number of cultural institutions in the empire. Pietrosi was instructed to discretely try to get hold of a copy. The money that would be saved by this move - five or six thousand lire - could then be spent on other books.²⁵ This is a small but revealing example of the manoeuvring and networking that was required, which would not have been the case had the Dante Alighieri Society been a mere puppet of the regime.

On the 1st of April yet another crate of books was shipped. By the 13th of May Felicioni had still not received any news from Addis Ababa confirming the arrival of the first load of books and was so concerned that he wrote to Pietrosi for more information. The long silence on behalf of Pietrosi made him wonder not only about the books, but also about the number of members that had joined the local Dante Committee. In addition there was a complicating factor Felicioni wished to be reassured about. In view of the discussions about moving the capital of Abyssinia away from Addis Ababa, did it make sense to send any more books for the time being?²⁶ His worries about the development of the new Committee were not unwarranted. Things were looking bleak. Because the Committee had not yet officially been launched nor had the library, Pietrosi was having trouble recruiting new members. He was resorting to the pupils of the secondary schools in Addis Ababa by making them all become student members, for the annual price of two lire per person. That would amount to fifty-two new members. As for the books, there was no sign of them yet and they were presumably being held at Djibouti. However, Pietrosi dismissed the plans for a new capital city as no reason for alarm, seeing such a city would

²³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Edmondo Pietrosi to Felicioni, 10 February 1937.

²⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 18 February 1937.

²⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 11 March 1937.

²⁶ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Edmondo Pietrosi, 13 May 1937.

have to be built from scratch and would therefore require at least two or three years before being ready.²⁷

That summer there was little improvement in the situation. Although the Dante office and library shelves were ready for use, nothing could be done because the books still had not arrived and no explanation could be given for this from Djibouti. The Governing Board of the local Committee could not be formed either. A change of Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party was imminent and Cortese had advised Pietrosi to wait with forming such a board until his successor was in place. Even the postage from Rome of membership cards, the flyers and membership registration forms that had been announced with a letter dated the 17th of May, had so far not been received.²⁸ Felicioni found it inconceivable that the books had not reached their destination and hoped to resolve the issue through the Italian courier in charge of the transport.²⁹ The courier, the firm Sicco, was able to show Felicioni a letter from their correspondent in Djibouti confirming that two cases had been carried on to the dockyard and sent on to Addis Ababa by train, whilst a third case had been sent via Massawa.³⁰

At the beginning of October, finally one case of books arrived. It was the third case and some books were missing. After further investigation, the two other cases had been found still waiting in the harbour of Djibouti. The transport by rail was not possible at that moment, probably because of Abyssinian attacks on the railway line, so Pietrosi was obliged to have them brought the ordinary way, presumably by truck or car, even if the fees were high (150 lire per tonne). There were indeed ongoing attacks by Abyssinian rebel forces on the railway line between Addis Ababa and Djibouti. This obliged the Italians to post guards along it at fifty metre intervals.³¹ At least by truck or car it was sure that the cases would arrive on the 20th of that month. The official opening of the local Dante Alighieri Committee had been arranged with the new Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party, Marcello Bofondi, to take place in the second half of November.³² Instead the time schedule proved again to be too optimistic. Pietrosi's next letter came no sooner than the 27th of November. The books from Djibouti had arrived. In future books were to be sent via Asmara, Pietrosi recommended, since this would save time and avoid French obstruction. Whether there really had been a conscious attempt on the part of

²⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 19 May 1937.

²⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, prot. 25, unknown date.

²⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 27 August 1937. Felicioni also mentioned that twenty-five membership cards were on their way to Pietrosi for the members who had so far paid and issues of the bi-monthly *Pagine della Dante* had been posted to the regular members of Addis Ababa.

³⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 15 October 1937.

³¹ John Gooch, 'Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-39' in: *The Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 28, no. 6 (December 2005) 1005-1032, 1023.

³² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, Prot. 46, 6 October 1937.

the French authorities in Djibouti to withhold the two crates, as Pietrosi suggested, remains questionable.

Still, with only a thousand books in the library, Pietrosi doubted whether the lending out of books should begin. Everyone in Addis Ababa – the Italian community, that is to say – was focused on concrete, material problems related to the construction of the new city. Most of them had a modest cultural upbringing, so Pietrosi estimated it would take a few years before Addis Ababa could become the capital of the empire also from a cultural point of view. Hence, he did not believe the local Dante Committee would for the time being have much chance to flourish. Despite the low expectations, he urged Felicioni to send more books to reach the three thousand volumes originally envisaged, preferably novels and easily readable history series (“collane storiche”). Only then could the official opening of the local Committee take place, Pietrosi felt.³³ Another stock of books was sent from Rome and as soon as the new delivery route would prove to be faster, more would be sent. Felicioni recommended starting to lend out books, making sure these were only lent to members of the Dante and after having received a deposit that was worth at least the average value if the books in the collection. He also asked for a copy of the library regulations to be sent to him first.³⁴

Again, changes in the government of Italian East Africa meant that the official opening of the Committee had to be postponed. Pietrosi was able to hand over the special edition of the *Divine Comedy* to the Viceroy Graziani in December, but because of the government transitions it was not possible to ensure that public authorities would be present at an opening of the Dante.³⁵ What Pietrosi did not explicitly mention was that this “transition” was due to the fact that on 11 November Mussolini had informed Graziani that he would be recalled as Viceroy and replaced by the Duke of Aosta, as a consequence of his still too feeble military control of Abyssinia.³⁶ This change of government meant that the opening would have to wait until no sooner than the end of January. Felicioni had made clear earlier in December that he wished this opening to be of a most solemn kind and, if possible, filmed by the cameramen of the Istituto L.U.C.E..³⁷ It was therefore to be expected that Felicioni, referring to all the sacrifices the Central Council had made for the Addis Ababa Committee, would be prepared to postpone the event to a more suitable

³³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 27 November 1937.

³⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 6 December 1937.

³⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 27 November 1937; Pietrosi to Felicioni, 20 December 1937. An article in *Il Messaggero* erroneously reported that this gift had been given on the occasion of the opening of the Dante Alighieri library in Addis Ababa (‘Un dono della «Dante Alighieri» di Addis Ababa al Maresciallo Graziani’, *Il Messaggero*, Rome, 15 December 1937).

³⁶ Gooch, ‘Re-conquest and Suppression’, 1025.

³⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 6 December 1937.

moment.³⁸ But Pietrosi also made a suggestion, which seemed to point towards (potential) tensions that could obstruct the Dante's local Committee. He let Felicioni know he ought to write a letter to Bofondi, the Federal Secretary, asking him to support the local Dante Alighieri Committee and making clear to him that the Dante Alighieri and the Istituto Fascista di Cultura could coexist in Addis Ababa, each of them being involved in different activities anyway. The Dante could limit itself almost entirely to running what was meant to become the most important library of the city.³⁹ This is the only letter that Pietrosi signs with a Fascist greeting ("auguri e saluti fascisti"). It does not have to imply that he felt any particular allegiance to Fascist ideology. The fact that he scarcely uses such a greeting when it was standard jargon, would rather suggest that he was at times conforming to the expectations.

Felicioni followed Pietrosi's advice and was told by Bofondi that he had already made arrangements with Pietrosi for the official opening, now scheduled for the 13th of February 1938.⁴⁰ Subsequently, it was once more postponed, until Sunday the 27th of February.⁴¹ The eagerness to maintain good relations with the local Italian authorities is also demonstrated by the inclusion in the Addis Ababa Committee's Board of a representative of the Gruppo Universitario Fascista and of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio. Both nominees had been approved by the Federal Party Secretary Bofondi before being officially appointed.⁴²

In the meantime, against all the odds, Felicioni's ambitions were not quelled. He was already looking ahead at the formation of other Dante Alighieri Committees in the colony. When Pietrosi confirmed the arrival of the latest case of books, he also wrote that Felicioni's brother-in-law had paid him a visit in Addis Ababa to discuss the planned creation of other propaganda centres of the Dante in Italian East Africa. Pietrosi was willing to investigate the possibilities for expansion and could combine this with a school inspection trip through the Empire that he had scheduled for the coming month. For this purpose he needed to know if there were already some other Committees and who their presidents were. It seems rather curious that he should not have had this information already, given the key position of the Committee in Addis Ababa. This would suggest that the Central Office in Rome wanted to keep the Committees in Abyssinia under its direct control. Or must this be seen as

³⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 30 December 1937.

³⁹ "[...] facendo presente che la Dante Alighieri ed Istituto Fascista di Cultura possono coesistere in Addis Abeba, svolgendo un'attività diversa, in quanto la Dante potrebbe limitarsi quasi completamente a far funzionare la biblioteca che dovrà diventare la più importante della città" (AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 20 December 1937).

⁴⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 30 December 1937; Bofondi to Felicioni, 10 January 1938.

⁴¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 19 February 1938.

⁴² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 13 January 1938.

evidence of distrust with regard to Pietrosi? He also wished to receive a letter from Felicioni stating that he had been given the task of setting up other Committees.⁴³ What he would subsequently know was that so far only a Committee in Asmara existed and that someone had been asked to set up a committee in Harar or Dire Dawa, without having given any news about it ever since.⁴⁴ Some months later Pietrosi displayed no less optimism than Felicioni, claiming he had sent some propaganda material to Harar and stating that he expected a Committee to be set up there soon, something which in fact didn't happen until many decades later.⁴⁵

The official opening of the Dante library

At last on the 28th of March 1938, after two years of preparation, the Dante Alighieri Committee of Addis Ababa was officially launched. Gathered in the cinema 'Impero' were the members of the Committee, political, ecclesiastical and administrative authorities, and many students. The press coverage that appeared in Italian newspapers on the peninsula and in the Empire a few days later, included the news of the hundred thousand lire being offered by Citelli, the President of the Committee of Catania, and the announced anonymous donation of a precious library, namely a rare collection of the late Severino Ferrari, a famous poet in Bologna specialized in 'Carducciana'. This book collection, together with sixty thousand books that the Dante intended to provide, was proudly described as destined to be the greatest library of the Empire, to be put at the disposal of all Italian and foreign scholars residing in Addis Ababa.⁴⁶

An article in the *Corriere dell'Impero* – published in Addis Ababa – brought this message across more emphatically by referring in its heading to the spiritual expansion of the Dante and to the new library being a cultural centre for Italians and foreigners.⁴⁷ The Federal Secretary, Cortese, gave a

⁴³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 19 February 1938.

⁴⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi 25 February 1938. The committee of Asmara was presided by Giuseppe Rocco di Torrepadula whereas Giambattista Forlivesi had been charged with setting up a committee in Harar or Dire Dawa.

⁴⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 8 May 1938.

⁴⁶ 'La prima riunione ad Addis Abeba degli iscritti alla «Dante Alighieri»', *Corriere Adriatico*, Ancona, 1 March 1938. See also AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 28 February 1938.

⁴⁷ 'La «Dante Alighieri» inizia nell'Impero la sua azione di espansione spirituale. La biblioteca di Addis Abeba centro culturale per gl'italiani e gli stranieri' in: *Corriere dell'Impero*, 1 February 1938. This must have in fact been the issue of the 1st of March, not of February. Pietrosi admitted that due to transport difficulties the library collection so far consisted of only one thousand five hundred volumes but he underlined that Felicioni, who has shown full commitment to the library in Addis Ababa, would ensure that the total of sixty thousand volumes would be reached.

speech, saying he was glad to chair this first meeting. It is not clear whether the author of the article paraphrased something Cortese had said or simply added his own view when mentioning how Mussolini had taught everyone that the spirit dominated matter, and that glory and grandness could only be achieved through the spirit. Next spoke the President of the local Committee of the Dante Alighieri, Edmondo Pietrosi, with a conference on Dante in history, in the world and in the Empire. Pietrosi was quoted as saying that language was not only to be considered from a philological and aesthetic point of view, but especially as a social and political fact, with which a people (“popolo”) manages to expand and affirm its power.

Language must not only be considered from a filological or aesthetical point of view but especially as a social and political fact, through which the power of a people manages to expand and affirm itself.⁴⁸

Internally, according to Pietrosi, the unification of the Italian language had also brought about a spiritual unity. To conclude, he presented the library as a cultural centre for Italians and foreigners in the Empire.

Furthermore, this particular article of the *Corriere dell'Impero* recounted the plans that had been laid out for the Dante Alighieri Society. The Central Presidency of the Dante in Rome would work in tight co-operation with the Fascist Party's on Italy's cultural propaganda (sic), and would welcome the participation of any other organization wishing to support the 'mission of Italianness in the world' (“missione d'italianità nel mondo”). The money donated by Citelli, President of the Committee of Catania, was considered to be a first financial basis for the eventual construction of a Casa della Dante. Once Addis Ababa's new urban plan (“piano regolatore”) was ready, a worthy building was expected to be built, that besides a library would have a meeting room where lectures and artistic events could take place.⁴⁹

In conformity with the style of the Fascist regime in Italy, the launch was enlivened with the band playing the Fascist songs *Giovinezza*, *Roma* and *Giovani Fascisti*. Subsequently, Archbishop Castellani performed a solemn act of legitimisation by invoking a divine blessing for the Dante Alighieri Society. From the cinema, Pietrosi then guided Cortese to the elementary school building where – as it appears – the Dante library was now located, and not in the local office of the National Fascist Party as was negotiated earlier. Again, a typically Fascist-style spectacle was performed, with female students of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio welcoming them, presumably in some well-coordinated and visually pleasing manner. From the newspaper articles it also

⁴⁸ “La lingua non va considerata solo dal punto di vista filologico ed estetico, ma specialmente come fatto sociale e politico, per il quale la potenza di un popolo riesce ad espandersi e ad affermarsi” (ibidem).

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

becomes clear that the library was named after Gigi Maino, a member of both the Fascist Party and the Dante Alighieri Society who was said to have committed suicide as a result of his excessive dedication to the Dante. Maino had been made Secretary General of the Dante at the end of 1931, an event which Felicioni himself in his 'in memoriam' had described as coinciding with the fascistization of the Society or its incorporation in the regime.⁵⁰ Remarkably, the initiative to dedicate the library to this "comrade" did not come from Felicioni but from Cortese, and it was subsequently backed by Achille Starace, the national Secretary of the Fascist Party.⁵¹ This makes one wonder whether Maino's suicide was turned by Fascist Party authorities into the martyrdom of a man exemplarily dedicated to the supreme ideals of the Dante because this dramatic end had in fact been triggered by a conflict in Maino's moral conscience that grew as his career in the regime advanced.

Pietrosi's launching speech

Fortunately the speech held by Pietrosi at the launch of the Committee and library at Addis Ababa has been kept for posterity in the central archives of the Dante Society in Rome. The rhetoric contained in this document is a prime example of the moral superiority the Italians felt in Abyssinia as well as of the high ideals that were typical of the Dante. Pietrosi used the occasion to look back on the past half a century of the organization and its essential involvement in the irredentist battle against the "barbarization of the race" ("imbarbarimento della razza") that the Italians outside the national borders were threatened with. It was a holy battle ("lotta santa") led by the very pure minds ("le tempre purissime") of Dante presidents such as Paolo Boselli. Having played its vital role in the completion of Italy's unification, the merits of the Dante were subsequently recognized by the Duce, who gave it the task of spreading Italian prestige and civilization throughout the world. This linguistic and spiritual conquest reached not only the Italians abroad, but also ever more foreign members of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁵² Pietrosi praised the yet again expanding activity of the organization.

⁵⁰ "Questa nomina rappresenta un'importante data nella vita della benemerita Associazione, in quanto con essa ha inizio quella che è stata definita la fascistizzazione della Dante, ossia l'immissione dell'Istituzione nel Regime fascista" (Felice Felicioni, 'In memoria di Gigi Maino' in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (May-June 1935) 1-3).

⁵¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Starace, 26 February 1937; Felicioni to Pietrosi, 9 March 1937.

⁵² "Così mentre si volevano le ossequie della Dante, questa è risorta a nuova vita; i suoi soci si sono moltiplicati, i suoi Comitati all'estero si sono raddoppiati, le sue scuole hanno visto decuplicata la popolazione scolastica, specie per intervento dell'elemento straniero, e, quello che più è interessante, il numero dei soci stranieri in Italia e all'estero è in continuo aumento e degna di rimarco è la loro attività in seno ai Comitati di una

After a brief reflection on language being not only of philological and aesthetic significance, but also a social and political fact, Pietrosi went on to describe the unified Italian language as one of the few to be suitable for domination of the spiritual relations between civilized countries, thanks to its modernity and universality. The diffusion of Italian language and culture could help convey to the world the extraordinary Italian genius and its contribution to world civilization. A superior concept of justice stood at the centre of this spiritual dominion. So too in the new imperial role of Fascist Italy, it was with justice that an empire of culture and spirit was being established. In complete denial of the ruthless killings that were taking place to establish Italian control over Abyssinia, Pietrosi could declare that Italy's empire hence bore no trace of violence or abuse. Here was the triumph of Fascist civilization over the negation of civilization, wanted by Bolshevik barbarity.⁵³

It seemed only fair to Pietrosi that, given the Society's history, the Dante would seek a special function for itself in the new capital of the empire. The Presidency in Rome had seen this embodied in the plan for an imperial library that would serve as the main cultural centre for both Italians and foreigners residing in Addis Ababa. Pietrosi, after recalling the dedication with which Gigi Maino had engaged himself in the Dante, concluded his speech with an appeal to unite the will of all - Italians and foreigners who loved Italy - so that in the capital of the empire too the Dante could fulfil with dignity the mission assigned to it. This mission would take place in the name of Dante the poet, described as he who knew how to universalize the imperial idea, "unifying in one symbol the eagle and the cross" ("riunendo in un unico simbolo l'aquila e la croce"). This was a reference to Dante's *De Monarchia*, a treatise in which Dante argued in favour of the autonomy of imperial versus papal power, defying the theocratic conception that instead gave supremacy to the Pope. Herein Dante also advocated the establishment of a strong Holy Roman Emperor, who being chosen by God for the defence of temporal power reunited in himself the cross (God) and the eagle (the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire). Clearly Pietrosi's literary reference was meant to underline the legitimacy of the Dante Alighieri Society's activity in the empire.⁵⁴

associazione che ha come suo unico scopo la propaganda dell'italianità nel mondo" (AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi, speech given in Addis Ababa on 27 February 1938, 3).

⁵³ 'La «Dante Alighieri» inizia nell'Impero la sua azione di espansione spirituale. La biblioteca di Addis Abeba centro culturale per gl'italiani e gli stranieri' in: *Corriere dell'Impero*, 1 February 1938.

⁵⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi, speech given in Addis Ababa on 27 February 1938, 11.

Giving body to the library: the books and the building

As had been announced in the press, the Dante Committee in Addis Ababa was due to receive an anonymous donation consisting of the Severino Ferrari library. This was in fact a gift from Stella Cillario, a member of the Dante Committee in Bologna, who had inherited the library from the poet Severino Ferrari. The collection, known as the Biblioteca Carducciana, was especially devoted to the works of the national poet, Giosué Carducci, a co-founder of the Dante Alighieri Society. One may wonder what sense it made to send such a precious collection all the way to Addis Ababa, with the many risks the transportation involved. In addition, these were not the kind of books that the inhabitants of Italian East Africa were particularly interested in. The Viceroy, it appeared, was especially keen on having the library as soon as possible filled with scientific books.⁵⁵ Pietrosi would a month later repeat that request, asking in particular for some treatises on legal issues.⁵⁶ Even Bofondi, the Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party, wrote to Felicioni to tell him about the Viceroy's positive reaction to the Severino Ferrari library. He added though that the Viceroy also wished to see the library filled with technical, scientific, historic, artistic and political works that were otherwise hard to find in Italian East Africa and most missed by the many officials and clerks of the colony. Having heard that the Dante headquarters in Rome intended to provide new books, Bofondi was eager to stress the Viceroy's wishes. What Addis Ababa needed were the most recent studies on commerce, law, politics, history and especially scientific missions, explorations and journeys made by scientists and by national or foreign pioneers, in Africa and in particular in Abyssinia.⁵⁷ These were not the kind of books the Severino Ferrari library contained.

Felicioni found out about the donation of the Severino Ferrari library through the newspaper articles covering the launch of the Dante Alighieri Committee in Addis Ababa. Was there not a slight tone of alarm when he wrote to Pietrosi, asking for more details such as who the unnamed donator was, how many books the collection consisted of and when they were expected to arrive?⁵⁸ His worry would be justified, for shortly afterwards Pietrosi let him know that a lady called Stella Cillario was the generous benefactress and that she expected the Dante's central office in Rome to make arrangements with her for the packing and sending of these nine hundred volumes. The Dante was expected to pay for the sending.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 28 February 1938.

⁵⁶ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 92.

⁵⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Bofondi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 2063/XIV.

⁵⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 8 March 1938.

⁵⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 92. Pietrosi later wrote that the Severino Ferrari library contained some very rare editions from the 16th century (Pietrosi to Felicioni, 6 April 1938, Prot. 108).

Despite the cordial relations that seemed to exist between Pietrosi and the local Italian authorities there were some indications of how the various private and public projects in the new capital of the empire still needed to be coordinated and in fact appeared to be competing with each other. In March 1938, a meeting took place in Addis Ababa between all cultural organizations, chaired by the Federal Secretary of the Fascist Party, Bofondi. According to Pietrosi, the outcome of the meeting was that all Party-controlled bodies agreed to not create any libraries for themselves and to instead lend moral and material support to the Dante Alighieri library, the wish of the Federal Secretary being to ensure a most favourable position for the Dante.⁶⁰ Felicioni could see this confirmed in an article published in Italy the day after the meeting.⁶¹ It reported that the Federal Secretary had met with the directors of the Istituto di Cultura Fascista, of the local Dante Alighieri Society Committee and of the Istituto Fascista dell’Africa Italiana, to coordinate the cultural and propaganda activities. The Federal Secretary was said to have called for a more practical and active propaganda amongst the working-class masses, even in the furthest building-sites, be it through lectures, libraries or the lively reporting of national and international events. Furthermore, he emphasized the need to organize appropriate cultural activities in Addis Ababa on festive days. There is no mention of pooling resources for the Dante Alighieri library, though it is referred to as being the only one in Addis Ababa and recently inaugurated.

Whether the cultural bodies in Addis Ababa indeed helped to establish the importance of the Dante Alighieri library or not, the result was meagre. At the end of March 1938, the local Committee of the Dante had sixty-two members and Pietrosi complained of there being a lot of mobility in the population of Addis Ababa, making it hard to count on long-term members.⁶² By the end of 1938, if the budget overview is to be believed, the number of ordinary members had risen to a hundred and 205 student members had been enrolled, presumably mostly school pupils.⁶³ On 31 December 1939 Pietrosi requested new membership cards for 1940: one hundred for ordinary members, forty for school teachers and 550 for students.⁶⁴

The costs involved in this not yet flourishing Committee were cause for concern on the part of Felicioni. Having seen and approved the Committee’s financial report of 1937, Felicioni complained to Pietrosi about the elevated expenses involved in the employment of a librarian (three-thousand-six-hundred lire), the printing matter for the library and the various events. If these weren’t reduced, Felicioni could no longer guarantee that the Central Council

⁶⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 11 March 1938, Prot. 92.

⁶¹ ‘Attività di enti culturali nell’Impero’ in: *Il Mattino*, Naples, 11 March 1938, to be found in the AS-SDA.

⁶² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni 31 March 1938.

⁶³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 13 April 1939.

⁶⁴ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, printed form completed by Pietrosi and sent to the central office in Rome on 31 December 1939, prot. 30.

would be able to compensate the Committee's deficit. He therefore admonished Pietrosi to bear in mind that the key activity of his Dante Committee for the coming year would remain the library and that this should be run in such a way that the income generated by the membership and the book-lending fees would cover all the normal expenses. The Central Council was only prepared to invest in the extra expenses, such as the buying of books and shelves. Felicioni also encouraged Pietrosi to try to obtain additional funding from the local government or major institutions. Nevertheless, for 1938 the Council had granted the Addis Ababa Committee a sum of one thousand lire.⁶⁵ Free and disinterested involvement of Dante members in the running of the library as suggested by Felicioni was according to Pietrosi quite impossible in Addis Ababa, where everyone was working hard on the rise of this new city. If he was able to find someone prepared to be the librarian for three hundred lire a month, it was only thanks to the fact that the man in question was one of the primary school teachers working under Pietrosi's supervision. Attempts to receive financial support from the Governor of Addis Ababa had so far been in vain.⁶⁶ When Pietrosi went to Italy on leave in July 1938 and came to see Felicioni in Rome, this matter must have been further discussed.⁶⁷ However, we have no report of that conversation.

Whatever may have been discussed, great confidence remained in what the Dante Alighieri Society could achieve in Addis Ababa. During an official audience in January 1939, Pietrosi discussed the future of the Dante library with the Governor. If Pietrosi is to be believed, the Governor intended to have a large library and office built for the Dante Committee in the 'city of studies' ("città degli studi") that was included in the new urban plan of the imperial capital. This urban plan ("piano regolatore") would remove the old city centre, deemed of no historical value. In its place would come a functional and ordered space - something which the Abyssinians were judged to be incapable of creating - in which the supremacy of the Italians would be expressed and the 'natives' segregated. Like the EUR, the 'new Rome' planned outside the Italian capital to host a world fair in 1942, the urban plan for Addis Ababa was all about asserting the 'new Italy' through visual self-representation and by putting it on par with other colonizing nations.⁶⁸

The new Casa della Dante was expected to be a richly designed and expensive building that would certainly cost more than a million lire. Pietrosi seems to suggest that these were the Viceroy's wishes but it's more likely that these were his own. He himself showed the Viceroy the plan of the projected

⁶⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 2 April 1938.

⁶⁶ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 8 May 1938.

⁶⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 21 June 1938.

⁶⁸ For a fascinating comparison between the urban planning of Addis Ababa and EUR '42, see: Mia Fuller, 'Wherever You Go, There You Are: Fascist Plans for the Colonial City of Addis Ababa and the Colonizing Suburb of EUR '42'in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, 2 (April 1996) 397-418.

library; a building of considerable dimensions (forty by sixty metres) that included a central hall (of ten square metres) and six reading rooms divided by subject matter. It would be located on the main square of the “città degli studi” and would be worthy of the Dante’s lordly reputation (“degnà delle tradizioni di signorilità”). Without prior consent from Felicioni, Pietrosi had guaranteed at this meeting that the Dante would contribute two hundred thousand lire to the construction of the building. Thereafter, far from showing any doubt regarding the financial commitment he had made, Pietrosi asked Felicioni to thank the Viceroy in writing for the interest he had shown in the Dante’s initiative to build the biggest library of the Italian Empire.⁶⁹

Felicioni followed up Pietrosi’s advice to thank the Viceroy, but was also clear in voicing his concern.⁷⁰ Although the projected building seemed to him indeed in style with Dante Alighieri’s significance in the new Italian Empire, the cost of over a million lire was problematic. As appears from this letter, the plans were discussed face-to-face between Felicioni and Pietrosi during the latter’s visit to Rome back in July or August 1938. Now, rather bluntly, Felicioni wrote to Pietrosi that over the past months the Central Council of the Dante had been forced to take on a number of weighty financial obligations to face the urgent needs of some Committees abroad, and that the situation had in the meantime changed considerably. The two hundred thousand lire that Pietrosi had guaranteed as a contribution to the building project on behalf of the Dante Alighieri Society, even if only a fifth of the total construction cost were still a sacrifice that the Central Council could no longer afford to make. It could not be difficult for the Government of Italian East Africa to find those two hundred thousand lire elsewhere, whereas the Dante preferred to concentrate its resources on providing books for the library, making sure it could be generous in this matter instead.

Strangely, no evidence remains of any further correspondence on the building plans. Any discord that may have been caused by Felicioni curbing Pietrosi’s ambitious ideas for a new Dante building, may have been placated by the Central Council’s decision at the beginning of 1939 to award a diploma (“diploma di benemerenzà”) and a bronze medal to Pietrosi in recognition of his fruitful activity for the Committee of Addis Ababa in 1938.⁷¹ It is important to note that Felicioni hereby wrote that the Dante Council hoped this would encourage Pietrosi to continue his propaganda for their “glorious Society” (“per il nostro glorioso Sodalizio”), without referring to this as also being propaganda for the Fascist regime or Italy’s empire. This I believe is a significant detail, showing that even for a Fascist sympathizer as Felicioni was, the prime interest was to promote the position of the Dante Alighieri Society.

⁶⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 12 January 1939, prot. 2.

⁷⁰ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 6 February 1939.

⁷¹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 7 February 1939.

Rumours regarding neglect

The necessity to distinguish between the different interests involved, becomes even more evident when the following is revealed. In November 1939, Angelo Manaresi, President of the Dante Committee in Bologna, enquired about the Severino Ferrari library.⁷² He wrote to Felicioni on headed paper of the Chamber of the Fasci and of Corporations (Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni), that replaced the Chamber of Deputies in January 1939. This gives us reason to believe that Manaresi was a member of the said Chamber. Manaresi's letter concerned the Severino Ferrari library – in Manaresi's description grown to the size of twelve hundred volumes – that had been sent to the Dante Committee of Addis Ababa. As explained by Manaresi, Stella Cillario, the heiress who had donated the books, happened to be the aunt of the Commissario di Governo of Addis Ababa, Franco Roversi. She had not long ago been able to visit her nephew in Addis Ababa and had stayed there for a while. Without saying explicitly that she had relayed the rumour, Manaresi observed that it appeared to be the case that the Severino Ferrari library – a donation that was meant to form the core of this greatest library of the Empire that the Dante Society had planned – was left abandoned and considered totally useless by the local fiduciary of the Dante, Pietrosi. It was not even sure whether all the books had arrived and were in good condition. Manaresi had heard that it was being said that Pietrosi was not at all interested in the Dante Alighieri Society and that he didn't hesitate to communicate his indifference in the presence of others. For this reason, Manaresi claimed, the Dante Society in Addis Ababa practically didn't exist and remained unknown. His solution was to ask Felicioni to at least make sure that the library was sent to the Fascist Federation and to put someone who was genuinely engaged in charge of the local Committee. Realising that he was possibly intruding in a delicate matter, Manaresi closed his letter with his apologies for writing on a subject that was in fact remote to him and with his hope that Felicioni would see this as an expression of his affection Manaresi felt for the Dante Society and for him personally.

Felicioni's reply to Manaresi, dated 29 November 1939, gives a different impression of what he thought the Dante Committee could achieve in Abyssinia than what he wrote in his correspondence with Pietrosi.⁷³ In the letter to Manaresi, Felicioni appears to confess that the Central Office had long given up its initial ambitions regarding Addis Ababa. Felicioni thanked Manaresi for his warning and wrote that he was not at all affected by what Manaresi had informed him about, maintaining that the Dante Office was well aware of the situation of the Committee of Addis Ababa. He admitted that the head office of

⁷² AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Angelo Manaresi (Bologna) to Felicioni (Rome), 22 November 1939.

⁷³ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, RISERVATA, Felicioni (Rome) to Angelo Manaresi (Bologna), 29 November 1939.

the Dante Alighieri Society had originally envisioned a wide-ranging plan for the Dante in Addis Ababa, i.e. a *Casa della Dante* and a library that would mark the Dante's position in the capital of the new empire of Italian East Africa. However, while the Dante Society sought the means and ways of realising such a project, other institutions more directly involved with the spreading of Fascist culture and colonial propaganda within the empire had ensured that the question of cultural policy in the empire was given a different orientation.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Felicioni confessed that the Central Council had hoped to receive more help on the ground from the local representatives of the Italian government, especially in resolving the problem of accommodation for the Dante offices, in Addis Ababa and in other cities. This lack of support had slowly created a situation whereby the Dante Alighieri Society would have had to make considerable investments for a project that was not being sufficiently appreciated. Such investments were out of reach, according to Felicioni, now that the existing Committees abroad and the traditional tasks of the Society were demanding exponentially more resources each year. Having drawn this conclusion, Felicioni had then decided to maintain the Addis Ababa Committee within more modest margins, so that it could operate alongside the Istituto di Cultura Fascista and the Istituto dell'Africa Italiana. The focus for the Dante there would be on the library that would be further expanded as soon as the Central Council had some more funds available to do so. Although Felicioni wrote to Manaresi as if all this were a settled matter, he did find it necessary to add that he would write to Pietrosi immediately to ask how he could best proceed along those lines. In conclusion, he assured Manaresi that the conjoined efforts of the Central Council, of the Committee of Bologna, that through its connection with Stella Cillario had provided the Severino Ferrari library, and of other Committees, would not be in vain.

We do not know what Felicioni subsequently wrote to Pietrosi on 6 December 1939, but the result was a positive-sounding end-of-year report from Addis Ababa.⁷⁵ The library now consisted of 2837 volumes, excluding magazines and pamphlets of little value and most probably including the Severino Ferrari collection. A total of 539 books had been lent by 149 readers, which included students. Sixty of these readers had made use of the reading room. From these figures, Pietrosi drew the optimistic conclusion that the library was regularly being used and that it was beginning to become one of the major cultural centres of Addis Ababa. Meanwhile, the Italian Government had given the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana the task of constructing a large building at the centre of the Città degli Studi, which would also house the Dante Committee's library. Pietrosi warned Felicioni that more books were needed to

⁷⁴ “[...] altri Enti, certo più direttamente impegnati nella diffusione della cultura fascista e nella propaganda coloniale entro i confini dell’Impero, fecero orientare il complessivo problema culturale nell’Impero diversamente” (ibidem).

⁷⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Pietrosi to Felicioni, 31 December 1939, Prot. 29.

manifest the importance of their library at the moment of its transfer to the new building. Presumably the actual size of the library's collection would serve as leverage for claiming a bigger portion of space in the building.

However, it was not all good news. Due to a shortage of funds, Pietrosi saw himself obliged to reduce the librarian's remuneration to two thousand lire per year.⁷⁶ For the time being, he had been able to cover the Committee's expenses with the first transfer of money that the Dante Alighieri Society's head office had made. For the following year though, he demanded a contribution of at least three thousand lire, without which the library would not function properly. Despite the questions raised around Pietrosi's genuine commitment to the cause, there is evidence that the head office agreed to concede him an extraordinary contribution of three thousand lire for 1940.⁷⁷

Competition in view

The next obstacle appeared in the form of a proposal by the firm Principato to set up a circulating library in Italian East Africa, a business for which it wished to claim exclusive rights. As the President of the Dante Alighieri Committee of Addis Ababa, Pietrosi felt obliged to protest against this initiative. He pointed out in a letter to the department of Civil Affairs of the General Government of Italian East Africa that it would be unfair to grant such a firm exclusive rights when already a number of libraries existed and the head office of the Dante Alighieri Society had provided for a library in Addis Ababa. Secondly, he argued, the Dante had absolute priority in Addis Ababa's cultural field. Furthermore, the Society had already invested 100,000 lire in the construction of a new building that the Viceroy had agreed to locate in the rising Città degli Studi. Being such an important motor of culture and *italianità*, the Dante could not be obstructed in its activity by a private enterprise of mere commercial interest. Besides, there were already some good bookshops in the most important centres of the empire. Moreover, Pietrosi was eager to stress, the Dante Alighieri Society already had a long experience running such library services abroad and may as well take on such a task for Italian East Africa. Pietrosi proposed a system whereby subscribers would pay thirty lire (ten lire as irretrievable deposit and twenty as guarantee for the maximum of two books that could be borrowed) and the Government would finance the tax fees, postage and transportation. This would be a cheaper option for both the subscribers and the government. Books on loan would not be sent to the single subscriber but to the Reale Residente or the Comandante di Presidio, two times

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, note for the Administrative Office, 15 January 1940, signed by the Vice President, giving order to transfer the sum.

per month. Sufficient books would be sent so that in the fifteen days between the new arrivals the books could circulate among the local subscribers.⁷⁸

A copy of this letter to the General Government was sent by Pietrosi to Felicioni, accompanied by a letter in which he explained that the urgency of the matter had made him decide it was better to act immediately without prior consent from Rome. He asked Felicioni to give him response and possible suggestions on how to deal with the issue. Thereafter, the President of the Dante simply agreed with the course of action already taken.⁷⁹

This small incident is an example of the business interests that could also play a part in the daily management of the Dante Alighieri Society, both at central level and in Local Committees. Enormous state investments were being made in Abyssinia to develop its infrastructure and to create a modern economy. These projects were managed by state umbrella organizations like the Hotel Real Estate Office for East Africa, or parastatal agencies such as the Agenzia Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP). It seems highly likely that an “intense traffic in government contracts and concessions” took place throughout the empire.⁸⁰ No doubt Pietrosi and Felicioni, each in his own way, tried to seize the opportunities that colonized Abyssinia could offer the Dante Alighieri Society and – not to forget – themselves.

Great expectations: ideal and real power

It has been observed that Mussolini during the course of his regime had to give in to the “bourgeois power centres” that he had once hoped to surpass, despite his Fascist ideology, his intention to apply corporative theory and his desire to establish new leadership through totalitarian rule. The power and economic interests of these ‘bourgeois’ groups were simply too deeply rooted and politically advantageous for Mussolini to do without.⁸¹ This view on Italy’s Fascist regime may well be applied to the way in which the Dante functioned in the colonial context. In Abyssinia, the rivalling position between the Dante Alighieri Society and various Fascist organizations, and the way in which relations with the Italian Fascist authorities required constant negotiation, is one that puts into question the claim that Dante was ‘fascistized’, without clearly specifying what is meant by it.⁸² To say that the organization had become an instrument of the regime to spread political propaganda, is to reduce

⁷⁸ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, copy of Pietrosi’s letter to the General Government of the AOI, Direzione Superiore degli Affari Civili, 16 February 1940.

⁷⁹ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Felicioni to Pietrosi, 24 February 1940.

⁸⁰ De Grand, ‘Mussolini’s Follies’, 133-134.

⁸¹ De Grand, ‘Mussolini’s Follies’, 145.

⁸² Compare with Claudia Baldoli: “By the early 1930s, the Dante Alighieri Society appeared completely fascistized, and served thereafter as an instrument in the hands of the *Fasci* Abroad” (*Exporting fascism*, 15).

the complex interplay of economic, political, ideological and emotional interests to the convenient top-down model that is generally made of authoritarian regimes. It remains to be further investigated what promises had been done to Felicioni by officials of the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana or by Mussolini's entourage. What is so far clear is that high-fledged ideals were proclaimed to set in motion the creation of a Dante Committee and a library in Addis Ababa. This initiative, realistically speaking, was far from the minds of the many Italians pouring into Abyssinia to grab their chance, either on construction sites, in mining fields, in the army or administering the infrastructure of a country constantly at war with Abyssinian rebels. Also, the local representatives of the National Fascist Party, like those of other Fascist organizations, were competing with the Dante to be the main cultural institution in the Italian colonies. Precarious negotiations were needed for everyone to get a piece of the pie.

The way in which the Dante envisioned Italian East Africa did not entirely match Mussolini's vision of the Empire. However, the Dante did help to feed the idea of a better civilisation being brought to the areas that Italy conquered. Although it is not named in any of the primary sources, upon reading about the Dante Alighieri Society's plans for the biggest library in Italian East Africa it is hard not to think of the Ancient Library of Alexandria (Egypt), founded in the third century B.C. and for a number of centuries the largest library in the world. The Library of Alexandria was said by Plutarch to have been burnt down by Caesar during the Alexandrian War of 48 B.C., though other possible explanations for its destruction exist as well. What is clear is that through time this Alexandrian 'temple of knowlegde' gained mythic importance and is until today iconic for any grand library.⁸³ Tragically, thinking in superlatives was not enough to realize Felicioni's dream.

The British Council in Egypt: using the word instead of the sword

Whereas the Dante Alighieri Society tried hard to have its activities in Abyssinia officially recognized as part of Italy's effort to establish itself as a new colonial power, the origins of the British Council were directly connected to the British government's need to reinforce the grip it had on its existing colonial empire. In Egypt, the British came to realize that influence on the local population could be increased by actively engaging in the promotion of British culture. This would have to counter the pervasiveness of French culture and – if not halted – that of Italian culture as well. Although formally the British had granted Egypt a greater degree of self-rule through the treaties of 1922 and 1936, they had no intention of losing control over the vital route to India: the

⁸³ Roger S. Bagnall, 'Alexandria: Library of Dreams' in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 146, No. 4 (December 2002) 348-362.

Suez Canal. But nationalist uprisings in Egypt were brewing, making it harder for the British Council to devise ways of presenting British culture that would not here and there raise animosity or suspicion among the Egyptians. What was the connection between British concern over Egypt and the creation of the British Council? And how did the Council set up its activities in Egypt?

Alarm about Latin rivalry

A report prepared by Kenneth Johnstone at the News Department of the Foreign Office on 10 October 1936 gives a fascinating glance into the British Council's tentative strategy for the Mediterranean.⁸⁴ The report dealt with British cultural propaganda in the Mediterranean region, an area viewed by Johnstone as a historically important meeting-place between cultures that had contributed to the formation of Western civilization. Johnstone regretted that the rise of the national state had now turned national culture into a political weapon. National culture "like every other asset of the nation" had been "pressed into political service, and cultural propaganda, exceeding its legitimate and useful function of interpreting one people to another", had "become a weapon of aggression".⁸⁵ According to Johnstone this development was particularly noticeable around the Mediterranean and hence he intended to show how other governments' cultural propaganda was affecting British interests in the area as well as how Britain could counter this in an effective and inexpensive way. In his view, the main area of cultural conflict was the eastern half of the Mediterranean. We must bear in mind the strategic importance of this area for the British control of its Empire: the Suez Canal was the vital passage to India and since the Navy started replacing the use of coal for its ships by oil, access to the oil fields in the Middle East was also deemed vital. Hence the control over the Mediterranean waters that the British Navy wished to exert from the islands of Malta and Cyprus.

Johnstone was unequivocal in his treatment of France's cultural policy. France was:

[...] the original home of cultural propaganda, both in its better and in its worse aspects, and of all modern nations the French have come nearest to realising the national propagandist's dream of intellectual domination.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ TNA, BW 2/90, 'British Cultural Propaganda in the Mediterranean' by K.R. Johnstone, 10 October 1936, Cultural Report No. 63: correspondence and papers (1919-1935) (old file name: British Cultural Propaganda Abroad).

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 2.

This verdict was no doubt sharpened by the Johnstone's assumption that the French were still the most successful in promoting their national culture abroad. He attributed this success to their long experience, their "national genius" which was "pre-eminently lucid and accessible" and their belief in the power of culture, especially their own. The French government's spending in this field was noted as evidence of the importance attached to such policy. According to Johnstone's sources for 1936 a budgetary estimate of 82.5 million francs was reserved for foreign cultural policy, of which over two thirds was allocated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The budget went to all kinds of initiatives, from French schools outside France to archaeological missions, from tourist propaganda to subventions to French Chambers of Commerce abroad. Even the Alliance Française, a private association, was being supported by considerable public financing, be it from the Government or from the city of Paris, to Johnstone's knowledge totalling around 380 thousand francs a year. The Alliance was a solidly established and widespread organization. Johnstone had no latest figures but was informed that at the end 1933 the Alliance's assets were just under 5 million francs and during 1935 more than 6 million francs were distributed to its sections abroad.⁸⁷ However, as of late the supremacy of public and private French cultural politics abroad was seriously under threat. In the Mediterranean, these French initiatives were increasingly aimed at defending the French cultural influence against the Italian and German rivalling aspirations.

The German cultural propaganda in the Mediterranean was "not as troublesome" as the Italian, Johnstone commented, but he warned that it could become so. German commercial and cultural penetration, two aspects that Johnstone automatically coupled, was especially noticeable in Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, but altogether it engaged in "more discreet and more thorough" methods than those adopted by the Italians. Though Johnstone had no information on how much the German government invested in culture abroad, he thought it could not be much less than what the French and Italian governments currently spent per year, estimated to be around 1,000,000 British pounds.⁸⁸

The Italian approach to cultural policy abroad was according to Johnstone "generally based on the French example, though pursued with a lavishness which occasionally defeats its aim by causing satiety and even ridicule."⁸⁹ In his analysis Johnstone identified the establishment of the Fascist regime as the reason for the large scale upon which the Italian cultural propaganda took place, criticizing it as "the most ostentatious, and consequently the most expensive, scale possible."⁹⁰ Johnstone's sources

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 3-4.

indicated that the propaganda estimates for 1935-6 made for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Education amounted to 69,229,130 lire (something over 1,000,000 British pounds) and included expenditure on Italian colonies in foreign countries (11,265,000 lire). Herein Johnstone made a distinction between the justified "feeling that Italy has a magnificent cultural tradition as worthy of publicity as that of any other country" and the Mussolini government's "appreciation of the political advertisement value of cultural activity abroad."⁹¹ The main principle of that menacing political advertisement was recognised by Johnstone as being the Roman imperial past and the current revival of this empire. Furthermore the Italian cultural propaganda was characterized by its efforts to disparage the already existing imperial power of the British. Johnstone also mentioned that a modest government grant went to the Dante Alighieri Society but made no further observations about the function of this Society.

Great Britain was instead described by Johnstone as "an unwilling participant in the cultural struggle."⁹² The British, or interchangeably the English, were conscious of their national tradition and outlook but saw no need to define or explain it to foreigners. Considering as a failure all foreign imitations of the British parliamentary or public school system - to mention these two institutions seems typical - the British were convinced that their culture "does not travel". Johnstone ascribed this attitude to "mental indolence and pride". Just as the First World War had compelled the British to use propaganda, so too the widespread use of cultural propaganda by foreign governments now forced the British government to use this tool as well.⁹³ However, this was done on what Johnstone judged "a very modest scale". He subsequently pointed out that the year in which he was writing (1936) the total sum the treasury assigned to the British Council, the Travel Association and British schools in Egypt would altogether not exceed 30,000 British pounds. Even if the Treasury assumed that a considerable amount of private funding would be given too and although Johnstone did not wish to suggest "that His Majesty's Government should contribute to the same extravagant extent as the three foreign Governments in question", he thought a slightly higher government grant would more adequately convey the political importance of cultural propaganda. There was little doubt that Italy was striving for "cultural ascendancy" in Egypt, Palestine and Malta, just as the Germans were in Greece. Johnstone urged the British government to counteract in order to protect its interests in the Mediterranean.⁹⁴

Johnstone's concern about the British lagging behind in the battle for cultural ascendancy around the Mediterranean echoes similar worries

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 4.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 5.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 6.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, 6-7.

expressed in 1933 that had in fact served as an argument in favour of creating the British Council. Since 1882 the British had occupied Egypt. Constant revolts led by the Egyptian nationalist movement had forced the British to declare the country independent in 1922, though British control and the ensuing political unrest continued. It is against this background that on 9 November 1933 the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Percy Loraine, communicated in a despatch to the Foreign Office his grave concern about Britain's diminishing cultural influence in Egypt. Loraine's paper has been described as "one of the most important and famous papers in the history of cultural relations."⁹⁵ However, the significance of this paper for the Council's strategy has not been elucidated and the role Italian rivalry in Egypt played in mobilizing the British cultural intervention is frequently understated. The fact that almost two years after it was written, in March 1935, an extract of Loraine's despatch was sent to all staff members of the British Council proves the documents key significance.⁹⁶

In this despatch on 'British cultural propaganda in Egypt', Loraine made clear that the role of English education and culture in Egypt, as well as in the rest of the Arabic world and in Persia, needed serious re-examination if the British political and economic future was not to be "irremediably compromised" in these regions. The British cultural initiatives in Egypt were private, sporadic, insufficiently financed and co-ordinated, and not adapted to local circumstances, whereas the "Latin cultural enterprise" was supported by "Latin" governments and rich Catholic congregations. This "Latin" cultural ascendancy in Egypt, in particular that of the French, persisted while forty years of British rule had hardly done anything to change the situation. Loraine wrote about the ever-growing French expenditure on schools, as well as on cinema, radio and press. But he remarked that the number of Egyptian children going to Italian schools was increasing at a higher rate. Loraine pointed out that since 1922 the number of French private schools in Egypt had grown and that between 1928 and 1931 French expenditure for culture in the Orient (meaning Turkey, Palestine, Persia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Egypt) had doubled.⁹⁷ Italy too had increased spending in that area. All the while, the number of Egyptian children going to British schools was decreasing. The French made use of other instruments as well, such as cinema, radio and the press agency Havas, which now rivalled with Reuters.

⁹⁵ TNA, FO 371/17034, J 2790/2790/16, Sir Percy Loraine to Sir John Simon, 9 November 1933.

⁹⁶ TNA, BW 29/3, FO 141/624/4, Extract from Loraine's despatch, Charles Bridge to Rex Leeper, 5 March 1935.

⁹⁷ The French in 1928 had spent 47,800 pounds and three years later 94,100 pounds. In Cairo France subsidised seven secular, two Jewish, and thirty-one religious schools and in Alexandria one secular, three Jewish and sixteen religious schools. Furthermore, the French School of Archaeology in Cairo received 3,988 pounds in 1928 and as much as 21,572 pounds in 1931 (*ibidem*).

Influence on the education of the local inhabitants of the Near and Middle East was considered by Loraine to be of such vital importance for the British Empire, that he recommended establishing some form of direction in London to be put in charge of cultural policy abroad. He suggested “[...] that it might be more advantageous if the direction were rested in some unofficial body, similar to the Dante Alighieri Society, with, however, Government representation on the Managing Board.”⁹⁸ His further recommendations included measures such as encouraging Egyptian students to study at British universities and adapting entry requirements for them; making sure that British lecturers remained prevalent in the Egyptian university faculties of Medicine and Sciences and that as many as possible were retained in the Humanities, considered the “nursery of amateur politicians”⁹⁹; supporting a Boy Scouts movement in Egypt, adapted to be more like the Balilla, the Italian Fascist youth organization. Loraine also thought that if, like their French colleagues, British teachers would not lose years of service by working abroad and would be certain to find a job upon return to their home-country, there would also be less difficulty securing staff in Egypt. The whole idea of having so far missed an opportunity is encapsulated in Loraine’s quotation from a study on the conflict between French and English educational philosophies in Egypt: “In Egypt, England had an army, France an idea. England had an educational control – France a clear educational philosophy. Because the French did have such an organized philosophy and the English did not, the French pen has proved mightier than the English sword.”¹⁰⁰ The battle was not yet over though. Egypt was one of the foremost regions that the British Council would concentrate on.¹⁰¹

The danger of a “Latin cultural supremacy” in Egypt was felt also in the preferences of the Egyptian King Fuad I. In 1925 Fuad I, known to have a “pro-Latin attitude”, had ensured that French professors were appointed at the University of Cairo. Thus the entire faculty of humanities had become “Latinised”.¹⁰² This went against the agreement that all Chairs would go to Egyptians or British men, except if the area of studies required knowledge of a language that could not be found among either of them. Where no suitable British professor could be found, the Chair would have to be filled by someone from a smaller, non-Latin country, preferably one of the northern countries. Lord Lloyd, then High Commissioner in Egypt, reported this to Foreign Minister Austen Chamberlain, complaining that four years of persistent effort

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Russell Galt, *The Conflict of French and English Educational Philosophies in Egypt* (Cairo: American University at Cairo, 1933).

¹⁰¹ TNA, FO 141/624/4, Rex Leeper to Miles Lampson, High Commissioner for Egypt and the Sudan, 28 February 1935.

¹⁰² TNA, FO 141/624/7, Copy of a letter by Lord Lloyd to Austen Chamberlain, 15 March 1929.

had been needed “to undo part of the evil done by this Latinisation of the University” and he still saw this achievement threatened by some of the appointments the King wanted to make.¹⁰³ It could therefore not have been reassuring for the British that Fuad I had spent part of his youth in Italy. Warm ties between the two Mediterranean countries had been established when during the Risorgimento a number of Italian radicals fled from persecution to Egypt. There they supported the plight of the Egyptian nationalists, including the Khedive, in their opposition to British and French colonial rule.¹⁰⁴ In 1879, following the outbreak of revolution in Egypt, Fuad’s father Ismail Pasha was deposed as Khedive and sought refuge in Italy, where he was welcomed by King Victor Emmanuel III. The years Ismail Pasha and his family spent in the company of the House of Savoy, Italy’s royal family, nurtured a long-lasting friendship between the two lineages. Fuad grew up in Naples and went to the military academy in Turin. He spoke Italian fluently.

Looming in the background during the 1930s was also Italy’s military presence in Libya, in Somalia and as of October 1935 in Abyssinia. In June 1935 the British Foreign Office was informed about two Italians that had recently been touring across Egypt to spread the rumour that the Italian government would invade Abyssinia. Their message was accompanied by the threat that if the British tried to obstruct the attack Malta would be destroyed within twenty-four hours. What would then still remain of the British Mediterranean fleet would be forced to flee.¹⁰⁵ The British Government had so far tried to remain on good terms with Mussolini, not wanting to drive him into a coalition with Nazi Germany. However, from the early 1930s onwards Mussolini’s imperial ambitions began to take on a concrete form, posing a threat to the stability of the British Empire. There were numerous instances of Italian anti-British propaganda being spread in Northern Africa and in the Middle East by means of the local press and of Arab-language emissions from Radio Bari.¹⁰⁶ One must bear in mind at this point that the British Broadcasting Corporation only started transmitting programmes in Arabic as of January 1938.¹⁰⁷ Besides having a technical advantage in communications, the Italians had a growing national air force: the Regia Aeronautica. Though the British Army and Navy generally did not consider Italy a serious military threat, the Italian aircraft industry’s pumping out heavy bombers alarmed some among them. With air bases in Libya, Sicily and the Dodecanese Islands, it was not unthinkable that the Aeronautica would try to control the entire Mediterranean. Once Abyssinia was

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ Saho Matsumoto-Best, ‘British and Italian Imperial Rivalry in the Mediterranean, 1912-1914: The Case of Egypt’ in: *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 18 (2007) 297-314, 299.

¹⁰⁵ Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935-1940: Conflict and Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Oxon and New York: Frank Cass, 2005) 27-37.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, FO 141/659/6 and FO/659/47. The latter file includes correspondence regarding secret R.A.F. attempts to jam Radio Bari by emitting interfering waves.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, FO 141/645/1, News Department file of 1937 on transmissions in Arabic.

conquered, air attacks on the outer regions of Egypt were equally not to be ruled out. All the while Britain was only just recovering from the material losses it had suffered during the First World War.¹⁰⁸

In July 1936, several months before Johnstone wrote his report on cultural propaganda in the Mediterranean, he received a letter from Frank K. Roberts, Private Secretary to the High Commissioner in Egypt, based in Cairo.¹⁰⁹ Roberts argued for the creation of a British Institute in Cairo, warning that it would have to compete in outward appeal with other foreign institutes as in Egypt “more than in most countries, appearance counts for a great deal.”¹¹⁰ He suggested giving this institute a social function, to make it a club for Egyptians with a British education. There could be some evening classes of English but by no means was it to arouse the already strong suspicions of the Egyptians, for example by serving too blatantly as an instrumental information centre. Roberts, declaring himself aware of the fact that Johnstone must be weary of comparisons with Italy, emphatically added:

[...] we cannot help but remarking that the total grants allocated by the British Council not only for Egypt but for the whole world, i.e. some 24,000 British pounds, are smaller than the sums spent by Italy on propaganda in Egypt alone.

He admitted that exact figures were hard to calculate. Italian cultural propaganda included a wide array of activities such as financial assistance to the press, the remission of school fees and free trips to Italy for Italian children. What Roberts described as “the main Italian propaganda agency in Cairo” – referring most probably to the Istituto Italiano di Cultura – spent about 9,000 British pounds a year on its ordinary running expenses. The Fascio, or local branch of the Italian National Fascist Party, had yearly administrative costs of nearly 2,000 British pounds and the Italian schools in Egypt were being subsidized. Was Roberts exaggerating the Italian expenditure to put pressure on the Foreign Office and thereby help the British Council obtain a higher grant? Seeing he had no direct interest in the Council, this does not seem likely.

Given the concerns that the Foreign Office was dealing with, it is not surprising that Johnstone in his report ‘British Cultural Propaganda in the Mediterranean’ of October 1936 advocated strong measures in Egypt to counter the active cultural propaganda of the French and especially that of the upcoming Italians. Since the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 almost nothing

¹⁰⁸ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, ad passim; Claudia Baldoli, ‘The ‘Northern Dominator’ and the Mare Nostrum: Fascist Italy’s ‘Cultural War’ in Malta’ in: *Modern Italy* 13, 1 (2008) 5-20, 8.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, BW 29/1, Frank K. Roberts, Private Secretary to the High Commissioner in Egypt, Miles Lampson, to Kenneth Johnstone, News Department, Foreign Office, 30 July 1936.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

had been done “to make Great Britain the chief educational and cultural, as well as the chief political, force in that country”, with the exception of Lord Lloyd’s period as High Commissioner (1925-1929).¹¹¹

French culture remained the dominant foreign culture in Egypt. This by means of Francophile associations and institutions headed by the Institut de France in Cairo, through French professors and teachers at Egyptian universities and schools as well as at independent French schools, both secular and religious. However, the French influence was being: “[...] vigorously contested by Italian cultural propaganda and less vigorously, though in certain spheres effectively by our own [the British cultural propaganda].”¹¹² The Italian government was spending “immense sums” on building and running Italian schools in the main Egyptian cities and non-Italian children were being allowed to receive education there virtually free of charge. Through lack of British schools there was the risk that even children of the Maltese and Cypriot communities in Egypt, whose primary allegiance was now still towards Britain, would eventually go to French “or even more competing Italian schools.”¹¹³ Johnstone believed that the suspicion which the “blatant manner” and the “obvious political intention” of Italian cultural propaganda aroused, to some extent defeated its purpose. Nevertheless, if allowed to continue over time he expected the Italians to gain a considerable cultural grip on the rising generation of Egyptians. This could then be translated into political advantage. There is in fact some ambivalence in Johnstone’s dismissal of Italian cultural politics being too extravagant, as if the British could continue to claim superiority by looking down on the methods used even if the threat was undeniable.

As for the adult Egyptians, Britain had nothing comparable to an Alliance Française or Dante Alighieri Society with which to spread British ways of thinking, nor an Institut de France or an Istituto di Cultura. The budget that the British Council had at its disposal to set up a British Institute was derisory if it was to compete with the Latin counterparts. Rather exasperated, Johnstone concluded that without the Treasury’s willingness to secure adequate grants - more specifically, a capital grant of about 30,000 British pounds and 3,000 British pounds per year - it was hopeless to even consider setting up an institute. There is an echo of Roberts’ remark from his letter of 30 July 1936 in Johnstone’s final warning that with a total budget which equalled what Italy spent annually on Egypt alone, the British Council could not create an institute that would stand up to the competition and that anything on a lesser scale would generate “contemptuous comparison” and fail.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Johnstone, ‘British Cultural Propaganda’, 7.

¹¹² Johnstone, ‘British Cultural Propaganda’, 8.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 10.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 11.

Keeping teachers and children British

What actually happened on the ground in Egypt? How did the British Council go about tackling the competition British culture encountered in a country so crucial to British imperial interests? In early 1935 the British Council was still waiting for the 5,000 British pounds it was expecting from the Treasury. How much it would spend on Egypt would depend on how many private funds it was able to raise. At this point 5,000 British pounds was also the full sum it intended to spend on Egypt.¹¹⁵ Charles Bridge, the Secretary General of the Council, had a clear idea of what the priorities would have to be. He proposed to improve the position of English teachers at Egyptian schools as well as the education of British subjects, including the Maltese and the Cypriots, throughout the Near and Middle East. More than Leeper it seems, Bridge attached importance to the creation of a British Institute in Cairo, an idea that had already been put forward in the speech that the Prince of Wales had held at the official launch of the British Council.¹¹⁶

By granting the Egyptians a limited independence in 1922, the British had managed to keep some degree of control over the country, primarily in terms of guarding free access to the Suez Canal. After the new arrangements in Egypt a large part of the British army was to retreat from the country as also the majority of the civil servants, leaving it to the Egyptians to take over a greater part of the country's administration. The Chief Inspector of English Language at the Egyptian Ministry of Education, M.F. Simpson, at first hoped to convince the Egyptian Ministry of Education to increase the time devoted at Egyptian schools to English language teaching, at the expense of French. Instead, the Ministry chose to reserve an equal amount of time for the two languages. What Simpson did obtain was a salary rise for English schoolmasters and schoolmistresses as of 1937.¹¹⁷ By then in government schools only the teachers of English in class 4 and 5 were still obliged to be British and so were the lecturers of English at university. Although the Egyptian parliament tried to push through an entire Egyptianisation of the teaching staff, for as long as this could be held back some two hundred British teachers would remain necessary in Egyptian schools. Furthermore, there were still forty British teachers of English employed in classes below 4 and 5, despite the growing number of Egyptians who could replace them. The British Ambassador at the time stoically observed that in the long run the British teachers of English would be

¹¹⁵ TNA, FO 141/624/4, Letter from Leeper to Sir Miles Lampson in Cairo, 28 February 1935.

¹¹⁶ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Charles Bridge to Rex Leeper, 7 September 1935.

¹¹⁷ TNA, BW 29/3, Lampson to Sir John Simon, 31 May 1935; M.F. Simpson, Chief Inspector English Language at the Egyptian Ministry of Education to the British Ambassador in Cairo, 31 December 1936.

the only British civil servants paid by the Egyptian government.¹¹⁸ In the spring of 1938 the British could indeed still count on a notable presence of British teaching staff, the Association of British Schoolmasters in Egypt still consisting of a hundred and eighty men and seventy women.¹¹⁹ In absolute terms this was a tiny part of the country's total teaching staff, but if just looking at the main cities this was a potentially influential group.

One of the ways in which the Council sought to strengthen British cultural influence in Egypt was by ensuring that enough British teachers would continue to work in Egypt. To make this career-path more attractive, the position of British teachers needed to be improved by arranging two important benefits: the guarantee that teachers could find a post upon their return to Britain and the continuation of service years even while teaching abroad so that these would equally contribute to building up a pension.¹²⁰ As the Secretary General of the Council reported from Cairo in 1938, British teachers could only work until the age of sixty and thereafter received no pension from the Egyptian government. Their salaries were not sufficiently high for them to be able to save a pension for themselves or to send their own children to school in England, which – one presumes – would enable them to rely on income-earning offspring to take care of them.¹²¹ By comparison, the French teachers that taught at the Egyptian government schools were seconded by the French state's department of public education. Upon return in France, they were reintegrated in the French civil service and where possible given a teaching post. Though the Egyptian government provided their salaries, the French government continued to build up opportunities for promotion within the French civil service and by paying a regular contribution to the French Treasury these French teachers abroad could maintain their pension rights and receive their pension in France once they reached the eligible age.¹²²

The British Council's educational concerns did not restrict themselves to the British teachers but also included the children. For British children in Egypt there were a number of schools to choose from; English schools subsidized by the British government, such as the Victoria College founded in Alexandria in 1902, and missionary schools, either Protestant or Roman

¹¹⁸ Copy Lampson to Eden, 13 August 1937, BW 29/3.

¹¹⁹ TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938.

¹²⁰ TNA, BW 29/3, Lampson's accompanying letter to the Preliminary Report of the Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt, 20 April 1935; TNA, BW 29/4, Charles Bridge, Cairo, to A.J.S. White, London, 12 March 1938.

¹²¹ TNA, BW 29/4, Carbon copy from Bridge from Embassy in Cairo to A.J.S. White, British Council in London, 12 March 1938.

¹²² TNA, BW 29/4, Note concernant la situation des professeurs français détachés des cadres de la Métropole, Bureau de l'inspection de l'Enseignement Français, 15 December 1938.

Catholic.¹²³ Yet there was concern about British children in Egypt losing their British identity. For example, it was pointed out in an educational report of 1938 that about half of the children at the English School in Cairo were from families of policemen who had been discharged from the British Army around 1919. Many of these men had married Maltese, Italian or Greek women, which meant that their children grew up speaking French, Italian or Greek. As was reported to the Council's Chairman in 1938, it was feared that if these children went to Italian, French or Greek schools they would lose every chance of knowing the English language, and would "cease to be British in anything but name."¹²⁴ Although not explicitly referred to as such, this problem was also seen as one of racial degeneration. The children of these marriages were reported as having little intelligence and it was thought that their development was impaired by language problems. Hence, they were actually not suitable for a normal school but the English School in Cairo did what it could. Experience had shown that a free lunch had more effect than the teaching, at least in the first two years. Nevertheless, the result of this concern was that English soldiers were strongly discouraged from marriage with "Levantine women".¹²⁵ Lord Lloyd, the Chairman of the British Council, believed it was crucial that every British child of United Kingdom parents, however poor, should have English education and that it was one of the first concerns of the Council in Egypt to keep English schools running.¹²⁶

As High Commissioner of Egypt, Lord Lloyd had already played an important part in setting up a British Boys' School in Alexandria for British and other non-Egyptian children of lower classes as well as the English school in Cairo for British pupils. This attention to schools was part of Lloyd's general effort to hold back the influence of "Latin culture" at schools and at university. His successors, High Commissioner Percy Loraine and the Ambassador Miles Lampson, continued this strategy by improving the position of British staff at the Cairo University and by helping to set up the British Girls' school in Alexandria. Lampson also created a permanent Educational Advisory Committee to assist the Embassy in this policy area.¹²⁷

However, there was another category of children the Council was obliged to focus on: the Cypriot and especially the many Maltese children living

¹²³ Sahar Hamouda and Colin Clement ed., *Victoria College: a history revealed*, 2nd print (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

¹²⁴ TNA, BW 29/4, Report by C.B. Owen, on Educational Problems in Cairo, sent with a short note of 20 July 1938 from Villa Lagariva, Trentino, to Lord Lloyd.

¹²⁵ TNA, BW 29/4, Report by C.B. Owen, on Educational Problems in Cairo, sent with a short note of 20 July 1938 from Villa Lagariva, Trentino, to Lord Lloyd; James Whidden, 'Expatriates in cosmopolitan Egypt: 1864-1956' in: Robert Bickers ed., *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 45-73, 57-59.

¹²⁶ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of Meeting in the British Embassy of the Advisory Committee, 11 May 1939.

¹²⁷ TNA, BW 29/3, Foreign Office Memorandum circulated to members of the Near East Sub-Committee, 12 November 1935.

in Egypt, both regarded as British subjects. In his period as High Commissioner, Lloyd had promoted the foundation of a school in Suez aimed at educating the numerous Maltese children residing there.¹²⁸ In 1935 Lampson pointed out that there was concern about the generally poor Maltese community. The few Maltese who could afford it, sent their children to the British school in Cairo or to the one in Alexandria. Most of the children though were educated at French or Italian schools. Lampson therefore recommended subsidizing some of the British Catholic educational institutes, which were most likely to appeal to the generally Roman Catholic Maltese anyway.¹²⁹ In his accompanying letter, Lampson referred to Percy Loraine's despatch of 9 November 1933 with which the examination of the matter began, saying he agreed with Loraine's advice to put British education and culture in a position to compete on more even terms with the Latin rival. For this same purpose more English schools needed to be opened in other provinces as well.¹³⁰ Though the British Council did embark in subsidies for Maltese schools such as that in Port Said, in part also sponsored by the Suez Canal Company, on the whole its budget was too small to provide British education for all the Maltese. Bridge in 1938 reported a presence of thirteen thousand Maltese in Alexandria alone.¹³¹

During a visit to Egypt in April 1937, Lord Lloyd told Lampson that if not enough funds could be collected to set up a secular Maltese school in Cairo to exist alongside the English School he was prepared to make use of the existing Catholic schools and even to assist them financially. On his return to London, Lloyd would consult the Foreign Office about their experience with the activities run by the "African Fathers", British Roman Catholic missionaries, elsewhere on the continent. Caution was required when engaging with Roman Catholic organizations. Lloyd himself had warned for the danger of these schools falling in anti-British hands. Lampson saw need for suspicion confirmed by what was being indicated in some recent police reports; namely, that the Italian priests in Egypt and even the Apostolic Delegate himself were now co-operating with the Italian Legation and other Italian organizations suspected of fostering Fascist propaganda. At the Roman Catholic cathedral in the Egyptian town of Damanhur, a loudspeaker attracted passers-by with Radio Bari broadcasts in Arabic. This seemed to Lampson in contradiction with the assurance given by the Apostolic Delegate a year before that the Vatican's

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁹ TNA, BW 29/3, Lampson to the British Council, 20 April 1935, accompanying the printed preliminary report of the Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt, by Sir M. Lampson, 25 March 1935.

¹³⁰ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford, sent to Lord Riverdale, 4 July 1935.

¹³¹ TNA, FO 141/624/4, The Report of the High Commissioner's Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt, 1935[?]; TNA, BW 29/4, Carbon copy of Bridge's letter No. 9 from Alexandria to [?], 15 March 1938; Bridge to the Council, letter no. 10 from Alexandria, 15 March 1938.

policy was to keep clear of international politics. Amidst this caution, Lampson still thought there was no sign that British or Irish priests were affected by the propaganda and "if Italian priests put their country first, I see no reason to suppose that English and Irish priests will be less patriotic." Administratively though the Vatican was represented in Egypt by Italians. Indirectly, through the advice given by an English priest running a Catholic Presbytery in Kerac to a member of the Council's Near East Committee during his journey in Transjordan, Lampson had been given to understand that the difficulty was that English priests did not like serving under Italian bishops or apostolic vicars and that the British Legation at the Vatican ought to press for English clergymen to be appointed for offices such as the Catholic bishopric of Wan in Southern-Sudan or the apostolic vicar in Jerusalem.¹³²

The caution, it seems, led to a lengthy process. More than a year later the idea of setting up a British school for the Maltese in Alexandria under the auspices of a British member of a Roman Catholic teaching Order, either the African Fathers or the Marist Brothers in Egypt, was still in the phase of consideration and negotiation.¹³³ Existing schools run by British Catholic missionaries were willing to take on more Maltese students but only if extra funding was provided.¹³⁴ In the meantime, the competition with the Italians was increasingly felt. Because of the great success that the Casa d'Italia in Port Said was having among Maltese youngsters, it became desirable to set up a Maltese Community Centre.¹³⁵ The British Council attached importance to safeguarding the secular character of the British school in Alexandria to be run by Roman Catholic fathers. To this end, Lloyd had the idea of retaining the ownership of the school premises and equipment in the hands of the Council and of employing the Fathers as teachers, while making sure that the governing body was also predominantly secular. The desirability of keeping these schools secular was presumably also connected to the fear of them being potentially influenced by the Fascist tendencies that Italian Roman Catholic prelates in Africa risked spreading. There would still be room for religious lessons. This is shown by the opinion that if Cypriots were to be accepted as pupils, they should then have Greek-Orthodox religious lessons.¹³⁶

In the case of the Maltese and the Cypriot children, there appears to have been a practical reason to offer them education besides the desire to keep

¹³² TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Lampson to Leeper, 27 April 1937, 29/3; Copy of Miles Lampson from the British Embassy in Cairo to Leeper, 30 April 1937.

¹³³ TNA, BW 29/3, Message from the British Council to the Ambassador in Cairo, 2 June 1938.

¹³⁴ TNA, BW 2/233, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938.

¹³⁵ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹³⁶ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of the Meeting of H.M. Ambassador's Advisory Committee on Education of 20 November 1939, chair Sir Robert Greg, secretary B.A.B. Burrows, Dundas also invited.

them “British”. This emerges from the fact that Cypriot children were less of a concern for the Council, even if most of them went to Greek or to French schools, the reason being that they were deemed more intelligent and with better future prospects than the Maltese. These Cypriots would by themselves see that learning English would give them the advantage of working for British organizations such as the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI).¹³⁷ Considering the education to be offered to Maltese boys in Alexandria, the Advisory Committee on Education connected to the British Embassy recommended aiming for a moderate technical training sufficient to make them useful for the British Services in Egypt.¹³⁸

New effort to reach out to Egyptian children as well

During his visit to Egypt in March 1938, Bridge wrote to the Council in London that even as the worst riots – referring to the nationalist riots against British domination – had raged there had been no incidents between Egyptian pupils and English teachers.¹³⁹ This might have confirmed to him and others connected to the Council that teachers had a surprisingly good diplomatic function. Apart from aiming to keep within the fold the British subjects such as the Maltese and the Cypriots, the British Council was also aiming to increase the appeal of British education for Egyptian pupils. In 1935, the English School in Cairo had more than four hundred pupils, of British and other nationalities, but none of them Egyptian. Unlike in Alexandria, where the Victoria College offered tuition to both British and Egyptian boys, not many British children whose parents lived in Cairo were sent to England for education.¹⁴⁰ The English School in Cairo was founded during the Great War, with the guarantee – thanks to a bursary system – that all children of British parents could receive education here.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ TNA, BW 29/4, John Lupton, St George’s English College in Shoubra, to Dundas, 19 July 1939.

¹³⁸ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of the Meeting of H.M. Ambassador’s Advisory Committee on Education of 20 November 1939, chair Sir Robert Greg, secretary B.A.B. Burrows, Dundas also invited. The dependence of the Maltese-Cypriot community on the metropolitan British was evident in the 1950s, when many of the Maltese and Cypriots left Egypt as a consequence of the small number of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ British still there (Whidden, ‘Expatriates in cosmopolitan Egypt: 1864-1956’, 71).

¹³⁹ TNA, BW 29/4, Carbon copy from Bridge from Embassy in Cairo to A.J.S. White, British Council in London, 12 March 1938.

¹⁴⁰ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt, written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford, sent to Lord Riverdale, 4 July 1935.

¹⁴¹ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

In 1935 there was talk of a plan to build a new edifice for the English school in Cairo. A considerable gift had reduced the costs of purchase of the grounds (from 4,700 British pounds to 1,950 British pounds) and the British Council had given 1,000 British pounds.¹⁴² The existing school was in an old and crowded area of the city, providing insufficient space for extra amenities. Among the aspired additions was a school chapel, certainly deemed quite essential by Lloyd given the importance he attached to giving school children at least some kind of religious instruction.¹⁴³ The new school was to be built in Modern Heliopolis, a luxurious new suburb of Cairo created in 1907. Because most of the inhabitants of this area were wealthy Egyptians, at first glance this plan would seem to fit in a more active British educational policy towards the Egyptian children. Instead, the main incentive appears to have been a financial one. The school wished to attract Egyptian children as well as pupils from other countries in the Middle East (mentioning Palestine, Syria, Cyprus and Sudan) because contrary to the children of British subjects they had to pay the full tuition fee.¹⁴⁴ Yet even then the newly housed English School in Cairo would only allow up to twenty percent of its pupils to be Egyptian so as to maintain the English character of the school. Very soon, the school had six hundred pupils of which only three percent were Egyptian.¹⁴⁵ It was then already running into a growing deficit despite cuts on salaries. Yet there was reluctance to attract too many Egyptian pupils and a tendency to prioritize the accessibility for British pupils, to maintain the undiluted British character of the school.¹⁴⁶

A British Institute or an Anglo-Egyptian Society

From the point of view of the Foreign Office, the creation of a British Institute was felt to be the most important instrument for British cultural propaganda,

¹⁴² Ibidem.

¹⁴³ Ibidem; TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938.

¹⁴⁴ TNA, BW 29/3, Copy of 'Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt', written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford and sent to Lord Riverdale, 4 July 1935. Since 1931 the English School in Cairo was making loss partly because of the rise in the number of pupils not paying the full fee. (In 1937/38 30% of the pupils were paying 60% of the fees, and 25% less than 5%.) Forty percent of the pupils were children of British Army Personnel or civilians working for the Army. This meant that the planned moving of troops to Ismaïlia, a move probably connected to the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the retreat of British troops to control the Suez only, would bring serious financial problems. Although the colony of British subjects in Cairo was on the whole growing, it was also becoming poorer. (TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.)

¹⁴⁵ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹⁴⁶ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of Meeting at the British Embassy of the Advisory Committee for Education, 11 May 1939.

more important than other projects such as education of Maltese children in Egypt.¹⁴⁷ In the crucial despatch that Percy Loraine had written in 1933, he had suggested creating an Anglo-Egyptian Society. In July 1936, Lloyd asked the High Commissioner Lampson to plan what he instead called a British Institute in Cairo on the basis of the considerable sum of 1000 British pounds per year.¹⁴⁸ Attempts to create an Anglo-Egyptian society had so far failed because of the strong divisions among Egyptians. Therefore the Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt that Lampson had created preferred the option of a purely British society rather like the Alliance Française or the British Institute in Florence. The Embassy in Cairo had however indicated that the primary importance of the institute would be to keep Egyptians with a British education in touch with the British way of thinking. The Foreign Office agreed that this was politically of highest importance. Too much of the Egyptian sympathy for Britain risked going lost with all the efforts other countries put in gaining cultural influence in Egypt. To properly function as a social and cultural meeting place for British and anglophile Egyptians, the British Institute in Cairo would ideally have a library with English daily, weekly and monthly reviews and would organize lectures of high quality in cooperation with the university.¹⁴⁹ Courses, mainly evening classes of English for business, could also be offered. In serving as an information point about Britain, the Institute would however have to be careful given the suspicion that could easily arise among Egyptians.¹⁵⁰ On 15 October 1936 a meeting took place between Rex Leeper, Kenneth Johnstone, Alexander Keown-Boyd of the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, Henry Hopkinson of the Council's Near East Committee and William Houston-Boswall of the Foreign Office's Egyptian Department on the proposal for a British Institute in Cairo. Though the importance of teaching English remained at the forefront, the creation of some form of club was considered possibly even more important. As Hopkinson is said to have commented, this seemed "the most crying necessity so far as our propaganda among Egyptians was concerned".¹⁵¹ Although it is nowhere explicitly referred to in the Council correspondence, the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty that year had been accompanied by much protest from Egyptian nationalists and all British involved must have felt the precariousness of the situation.

¹⁴⁷ TNA, BW 29/1, Frank K. Roberts, the Residency in Cairo, to K. R. Johnstone, The News Department, Foreign Office, 30 July 1936.

¹⁴⁸ TNA, BW 29/1, Extract from Minutes of the 18th meeting of the Executive Committee, 14 July 1936.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, FO 141/624/4, The Report of the High Commissioner's Advisory Committee on British Education and Culture in Egypt; TNA, BW 29/1, Leeper to Bridge, 15 October 1936.

¹⁵⁰ TNA, BW 29/1, Frank K. Roberts, the Residency in Cairo, to K. R. Johnstone, The News Department, Foreign Office, 30 July 1936.

¹⁵¹ TNA, BW 29/1, Leeper to Bridge, 15 October 1936.

Whether for financial or tactical reasons, it was eventually decided that instead of setting up an Institute the Council would establish what would be called an Anglo-Egyptian Union. Probably the Council and the Foreign Office feared that an organization bearing the name "British Institute" would too easily raise suspicion among the Egyptians, whereas "Anglo-Egyptian Union" suggested more reciprocity. The Council put 2,000 British pounds at the disposal of the new Anglo-Egyptian Union launched in February 1937 and the Egyptian Government made a one-time donation of 3,000 British pounds, plus around 1,100 British pounds were collected from member subscriptions. None of the funding was earmarked for a specific purpose with the exception of 700 British pounds intended for books that the Council itself would purchase, seeing it had special price arrangements with publishers. Part of the initial grant was spent on furnishing the library, the reading room and the social accommodation. In the summer of 1937 the Anglo-Egyptian Union had three hundred and seventy members, a figure that was still largely insufficient for the membership fee to cover the costs of running the club.¹⁵²

There is scarce evidence left of the activities organized by the Anglo-Egyptian Union. We do know what lectures were organized for the year 1937/38: The Spirit of English Poetry; English Drama and Theatre; The English Film; Teamwork, its inevitability and weakness; The Place of Parliament in British History; Youth Movements; T.E. Lawrence; The Application of the English Public School Method in Egypt; and a course of six lectures giving a review of English Government of the Commonwealth.¹⁵³ There is no reason to assume that in other years a less broad range of topics was dealt with. British institutions such as the Parliament and the educational system were key to the British Council's concept of 'Britishness' and as for the arts the emphasis was usually on British literature.

British Evening Institutes

The shift in focus in the cultural policy from British subjects to Egyptians also occurred in adult education. There were meant to be evening classes of English for Egyptians in Cairo, both a course in elementary English as a University extension course that would lead to matriculation. The English School did not have the capacity to support this. Instead the Council sought a location to hire.

¹⁵² TNA, BW 29/3, Carbon copy of letter from F.K. Roberts, private secretary, British Embassy Cairo, to the secretary of the Anglo-Egyptian Union in Cairo, 15 July 1937; Ibidem, Carbon copy of W.H. Wilson and M. Sharif, Honorary Secretaries of the Council of the Anglo-Egyptian Union, to Frank Roberts, date unclear, 1937.

¹⁵³ TNA, BW 29/4, Report by the Sub-Committee of the Anglo-Egyptian Union appointed to organize cultural activities, for the meeting of the Advisory Committee on Education and Culture on 14 January 1938.

It also considered combining it with a Library of Information, or with the Anglo-Egyptian Union to form a British Institute after all.¹⁵⁴ Eventually it set up what became known as Evening Institutes for English language courses.

In September 1938 C.A.F. Dundas was chosen to become the Council's Representative in the Near East. As the Council got involved in the funding of English schools in Egypt, it became more important to have someone on the ground who could supervise the schools' use of Council grants. Because Dundas was until then Principal of the Government Matriculation School in Baghdad, he had the right qualifications to oversee the Council's activities in the Egypt as well as in Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan, Turkey, Cyprus and Sudan. Furthermore, he seemed a suitable person to organize the evening classes in Cairo and Alexandria.¹⁵⁵ There is evidence that Dundas was also capable of acting with the degree of tact that the function required. The English schools in Egypt received the Council's grants with some reserve, for they were not particularly keen on the control from outside that they entailed. A solution was found by making Dundas ex-officio Governor of the schools that the Council invested most in: the English School in Cairo, the British Boys' School in Alexandria, the British School in Alexandria and that at Port Said. Reporting on this arrangement, Croom-Johnson significantly commented:

Mr Dundas has obviously made a very firm position for himself in Egypt; he appears liked and respected by everybody and at no time did I hear the smallest criticism of his attitude or activities either from British or Egyptians; surely rather a triumph in Egypt. [underlining TvK]

This is evidence of the suspicion or animosity with which Council or Foreign Office representatives were often received, not only by the Egyptians but also by the local British community.¹⁵⁶

By May 1939 Dundas' other triumph would be apparent: that the Evening Institutes for English language classes in Cairo and Alexandria were a remarkable success. The Institute in Cairo was being doubled and the one in Alexandria also expanded. There were twice as many evening classes at the British schools in Port Said and Suez, and plans were being made for the opening of new Institutes in Asyut, Tanta, Zagazig and Mansoura. Initially the British Ambassador in Egypt had shown little confidence in this instrument and had seen no need to create other Institutes elsewhere in Egypt. In the spring of

¹⁵⁴ TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April 1938.

¹⁵⁵ TNA, BW 29/4, K.B. Johnstone, British Council, to Charles Bateman, British Embassy in Alexandria, 5 September 1938.

¹⁵⁶ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939; Roger Bowen, *"Many Histories Deep" The Personal Landscapes Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (Cranbury, London & Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 1995) 42-43.

1939 he changed his mind, in part because of the increased propaganda activity of Germany and Italy (especially in the Delta area, where there was in fact little demand for English) and in part because they were touching the class of Egyptians that was not directly affected by any other British activity. He now recommended that the rising demand should be met as far as possible, plus new institutes to be created, and soon directors for the provincial institutes were being selected and sent out to Egypt. The relatively high expenses held neither the Council nor the Ambassador back. The Institute in Cairo had more than 600 pupils and mainly Egyptian teachers. The classes could be no larger than fifteen pupils, the experience being that Egyptians expected more personal guidance and otherwise left the course. This made the Institute a lot more expensive than similar Institutes in Athens, Malta and Bucharest, where classes comprised about twenty-five pupils. An intriguing detail in the plans laid out in May 1939 is that Croom-Johnson noted that there were already several private Coptic schools in Asyut, a city with a high concentration of Copts, admitting that to teach English there “might seem like carrying coals to Newcastle”.

Calling for the use of new media

Unquestionably the British Council in London was well aware of the anti-British radio propaganda that was being spread throughout the Middle East, including Egypt, by the Italian broadcasting station Radio Bari.¹⁵⁷ In November 1935 there were some successful attempts by the British military to jam Radio Bari using damp waves, a technique that made it possible to neutralize airwaves, even though this was in contravention with international agreements. A similar strategy was used by the Italians to disturb British radio channels whenever news bulletins were broadcast.¹⁵⁸ The British reticence to broadcast in any other language than English was due to the suspicion of propaganda attached to broadcasts in local languages, precisely because of the obvious propagandistic use by other countries, as had been stated in a strictly confidential memorandum of the British Broadcasting Corporation.¹⁵⁹ While the British Council knew that other European countries were actively using long-distance short-wave radio broadcasts in other languages than their own to reach foreign populations, it was only in January 1938 the British Broadcasting Corporation started broadcasting news bulletins in Arabic from the British

¹⁵⁷ TNA, BW 2/222, *Memorandum. Proposals for expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the financial year 1937/38* [printed matter], K.R. Johnstone, Foreign Office, 11 May 1937.

¹⁵⁸ TNA, FO 141/624/4, Letter from Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief R.A.F. Middle East to the Chancery at the British Residency in Cairo, 16 November 1935. This method was in contravention with the Madrid Convention of 1932.

¹⁵⁹ TNA, FO 141/613/8, Strictly confidential, Memorandum The Use of Languages, other than English, in the Empire Broadcasting Service, BBC, June 1936.

radio station at Daventry. Even then the British Council's task of promoting British life and thought in Egypt was not made easier. The BBC transmissions in Arabic were considered dull and "too Egyptian", and the more cultivated Egyptians were critical about the kind of music that was chosen.¹⁶⁰ A far more enthusiastic response was obtained with the broadcasting of English lessons in Arabic.¹⁶¹

The insufficiently used potential of film was another matter of concern for the British Council operations in Egypt. According to British observers the Egyptians loved theatre, cinema and amusement, and so far the American films were dominating the market.¹⁶² Film screenings were occasionally organized by the Anglo-Egyptian Union but according to the report made by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson after a tour of the Near East in the spring of 1939, the most important problem was that there were not enough high-quality British documentary films. Dundas could only sparsely deal with films and it was felt that to undertake large-scale activity in Egypt would require appointing a special film officer who could co-ordinate the supply of films to the Egyptian Ministry of Education, the British schools, the Anglo-Egyptian Union and the Evening Institutes, as well as the commercial distribution to cinema theatres. There was already a suitable candidate in mind: Mr F. H. Taylor, currently in Palestine, who for seven years had been the representative in Egypt of the Gaumont-British film theatre chain. He had offered his services to the Council and the Embassy was positive about him. Croom Johnson's suggestion was to provide for the budget for 1940/41 to have a salary and costs for him taken into account.¹⁶³ More films with Arabic subtitles were needed as well as newsreels. It was suggested that British films could be sent around with touring "tea vans". The companies concerned were to be approached to see whether they would be willing to do this.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ TNA, BW 2/223, Report on the tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East by the Chairman and Secretary General of the British Council, March-April, 1938; TNA, BW 29/4, Report by C.B. Owen, on Educational Problems in Cairo, sent with a short note of 20 July 1938 from Villa Lagariva, Trentino, to Lord Lloyd.

¹⁶¹ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹⁶² TNA, BW 29/3, 4 July 1935, Copy of Suggestions for the development of British Education, Culture etc. in Egypt, written by R. Clare Martin Whinfield in Guildford and sent to Lord Riverdale.

¹⁶³ TNA, BW 2/225, Report on the Tour of the Near East by Lord Lloyd and Croom-Johnson during April and May 1939.

¹⁶⁴ TNA, BW 29/4, Report of Meeting in the British Embassy of the Advisory Committee, 11 May 1939.

Conclusion

The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and the subsequent efforts by the British government to halt Italian expansion through the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations, brought to the fore a conflict of interest between Italy and Britain. Even if the Foreign Office was in favour of maintaining good relations with Mussolini to isolate Hitler, frictions between the British and the Italians had been simmering for a number of years. If we take the example of Egypt, it is clear that since the early 1930s Italy's active cultural policy was being perceived as a threat to British control over the country, all the more so in combination with the anti-British propaganda being sent from Radio Bari. The activities of the British Council in Egypt can be identified as part of the Foreign Office's effort to improve cultural relations with the local Egyptian elite and thereby maintain its economic interests in the Nile valley and its strategic military strongholds along the Suez Canal. In a fresh attempt to save what could be saved of British rule over Egypt, the Council offered an alternative instrument with which to secure power and counter foreign interference.

By contrast, the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society in the capital of newly proclaimed Italian East Africa, Addis Ababa, seemed out of synchrony with the plans made by Italian government officials sent there. The Dante was obviously trying to claim a central role for itself in the colonial project. But whereas cultural propaganda had in this period gained importance on the Italian peninsula, as part Mussolini's engineering of consensus, in Addis Ababa culture was for a long time not one of the regime's pressing concerns. Establishing military domination of the areas beyond Addis Ababa remained problematic and in the city itself an entire urban infrastructure needed to be built. As far as there were plans for cultural initiatives, these did not match those of the Dante that rested on old tools for the diffusion of Italian language and culture. Creating a large library was not what would effectively shape the minds of the many Italian fortune-seekers arriving in Abyssinia to help build a thriving colony, nor was it likely to impress the local Abyssinian population, or so the Fascist organizations and authorities thought. It is typical that when in 1936 the Federal Secretary of the National Fascist Party announced via the news agency Stefani the plan to build a Fascist Hospitality Centre (*Casa dell'Ospitalità Fascista*), the emphasis was on modern technologies: the new modes of communication that could reach the masses, with as highlight the radio tower with film-projector to project films in the open air.¹⁶⁵

During the Dante's cruises across the Mediterranean described in Chapter Three, the participants were repeatedly inspired by visions of a

¹⁶⁵ AS-SDA, Fasc. 6, Addis Ababa, Attilio Crepas, 'Un altro implicito riconoscimento dell'impero etiopico' in: *Il Nuovo Giornale* (Florence, 7 August 1936).

renewed Roman Empire, wherein their reinforced 'Mediterranean consciousness' would enable them to once more spiritually guide the region. Speeches at the Dante's Annual Congresses and articles in the internal review, the *Pagine della Dante*, referred to Italy's primacy in the Mediterranean area and to the export of Italian 'genius', of which there was an age-old abundance. But in practice the Dante was not fully equipped for the imperial project. Its plans for Addis Ababa demonstrate that the Dante had not translated its ideals into activities for a mass audience and also seemed unaware of the raw brutality that was part and parcel of Italy's difficult conquest of Abyssinia, one of the few 'native' people never to be entirely colonized. The British Council, while by the 1930s eager to show that it had inherited an Athenian, democratic concept of empire rather than the aggressive Roman model, displayed a more strategic approach to its mission in Egypt. In part, this was the benefit of the Council's close ties with the Foreign Office. But it also had Mussolini's more innovative propaganda institutions, the Third Reich's propaganda techniques and – not to forget – the success of the American film industry to counter and learn from. Britain of course had a long experience as a colonial ruler to draw lessons from. However, the creation of the Council indicates the recognition that changing times called for a difference in approach. Now it was not just a double-edged sword that was needed, one that subjected its people while allegedly protecting their rights as citizens of the Empire. Sharpened words and images were required to defend the universal values thought to be contained in 'Britishness'.