

The Silent Hero of Castel di Sangro



ENEMY OF THE ITALIAN STATE: Bernard Dawson's official internment document, dated July 1940

'Bernardo' was the mysterious Englishman who risked his life to save Italian civilians, reports Austin J Ruddy

Seventy years ago today, a mysterious man from Leicestershire gained a hero's reputation in a small Italian town. Through his brave deeds, he saved the lives of many civilians and helped liberate their town from Nazi rule.

His story reads like something out of a feature film and is one of the most remarkable tales I've told.

I received an e-mail out of the blue, six months ago, from an Italian local historian, Alessandro Teti.

While researching the history of his home town, Castel di Sangro, several elderly residents spoke of a tall, handsome Englishman, known simply as Bernard, who had been interned there during the war.

After a paper and internet chase, Mr Teti traced Bernard's origins back to Leicestershire.

Bernard's mother, Nellie Underwood, was from Leicester and his father, Harry, from Sheffield.

They married in Leicester in 1909 and moved to 20 Rutland Street, Melton Mowbray, where Bernard was born on December 16, 1910.

He had two siblings – a sister, Daisy, born in 1912, and a brother, Ernest, two years later.

It appears that sometime in the 1930s, Bernard went to study in Italy.

Although the nation was part of the fascist alliance with Germany, when the Second World War broke out, Bernard cannot have been too concerned, as Italy stayed out of the initial conflict.

However, all this was to change, when, in June 1940 – after Hitler had done most of the fighting – Mussolini had a pang of courage and declared war on Britain.

Bernard suddenly found himself on "the other side" and, as an enemy of the Italian state, was interned.

"The Police Record Office of L'Aquila reveals Bernard Dawson was sent from Florence to Castel di Sangro, on July 26, 1940," explains Mr Teti.

"This 30-year-old art student was interned as a dangerous person by State Security."

But this was not the internment of Nazi Germany, where undesirables were shipped off to squalid camps and imprisoned behind barbed wire.

In stereotypical Italian fashion, everything was just a little more relaxed.

Along with the town's Jews, Bernard was granted "free internment", requiring his daily signature at the local Carabinieri police headquarters.

He had a night curfew, was not allowed beyond the town's perimeter without permission, nor eat meals in public, possess over 1,000 lire, carry weapons, engage in politics, read newspapers, listen to foreign radio, or send and receive uncensored mail.

Castel di Sangro seemed a million miles away from the war.

Located in the remote Abruzzo region of central Italy, 80 miles east of Rome, the town is surrounded by a picturesque backdrop of hills and mountains, with the River Sangro winding below through a green valley.

"Indeed, internment seemed quite tolerable," says Mr Teti. "Typically, the local population were quite positive. In other towns, local fascists stirred up demonstrations and were openly hostile.

"Bernard spoke Italian perfectly and, during his stay in this town, became liked by everybody."

As a young child, Gentian Powell, née de Luise, was also interned in Castel di Sangro because, although she had an Italian father, her mother was English.

In her wartime recollections, published in 2011 as *War Is Just Another Day*, Gentian recalls meeting a "Bernardo", whom she describes as "well-tanned, with a classic angular face, black hair and thick brows arching over dark eyes. Always the same, with laughing eyes, he dominated the conversation in a loud cheerful voice. I realised he never talked about himself, never gave Mother an opportunity to ask personal questions. I wondered why. I could not help liking this somewhat mysterious but charming man."

Three years on, for the Axis powers, the war had taken a turn for the worse.

On September 3, 1943, the day the Allies invaded southern Italy, the Italian government bowed out of the conflict.

But the Germans would not give up this strategic country so easily and filled the gap.

Churchill believed Italy was Germany's "soft underbelly", but it proved otherwise.

As the Allies tried to slowly roll Hitler's army up out of Italy, each muddy footstep came at a bloody price.

Italy's mountains gave the defending Germans a vantage point to pour down fire on the advancing Allies.

"Castel di Sangro found itself in the middle of the German's defensive Gustav Line and was occupied by the German army in October 1943," says Mr Teti.

"Although a free man since the cancellation of his internment on September 11, strangely, Bernard stayed in the town, probably with false documents."

Why Bernard did not flee is explained by Gentian Powell.

Aged nine, one night she overheard her mother talking about "Bernardo", using the words "partisan" and "underground".

The next morning, Gentian asked her mother what these words meant.

She confided to Gentian that Bernardo was in charge of a small group of courageous people in the town, quietly helping the Allies. For her part, Gentian's mother hid a radio under a tree.

At 11am, on November 10, 1943, three RAF aircraft suddenly attacked the Prince of Santo Buono's palace, in Castel di Sangro, home to the German headquarters.

Mr Teti believes Bernard had radioed the co-ordinates to the Allies: "There is no other way to explain the perfect knowledge of the objective and the bombing's absolute surgical precision, which hit the target exactly, sparing the nearby civil hospital.

"The same Allied planes also bombed the neighbouring town of Roccaraso where, it was believed, there was an important meeting of German military leaders, although they had left the previous night, escaping unhurt."

The Allies drew ever closer and, 70 years ago today, the Canadian West Nova Scotia Regiment launched their assault to liberate Castel di Sangro.

They faced fearsome opposition: German paratroopers of the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Fallschirmjäger Division, the infamous Green Devils.

It is here that Mr Teti believes Bernard gained his hero reputation among the townsfolk:

"Bernard radioed the English artillery headquarters in Rionero Sannitico, five miles to the south, to change the co-ordinates of their bombardment, as they were erroneously firing on Castel di Sangro's civilian areas. Bernard risked his life in doing this action.

"Although Castel di Sangro was liberated within three days, the town became subjected to continuous bombardments by German artillery."

Resident Dino D'Amico, then 16, recalled at one stage, Bernard had stayed at his home and become "one of the family".

The town became garrisoned by the 38th (Irish) Brigade. After a period of 'inaction', Mr D'Amico was surprised to see Bernard reappear on January 10, 1944, dressed in the uniform of a British officer.

"Temperamentally, he had changed a lot and was not as friendly as before. Mr D'Amico claims Bernard asked him and his friends, some of whom are alive today, to help look for important documents buried in the rubble of an old building, where Bernard had previously hidden when the Germans occupied the town.

"When the documents were recovered, Bernard disappeared and since then, no one has ever seen or heard of him," says Mr Teti.

"This is, in short, Bernard's story from 1940 to 1944. It seems evident, I think and believe, Bernard Dawson was an English intelligence officer."

Mr Teti adds: "The people I have interviewed, who are now at least 85-years-old, remember Bernard with affection and esteem. He was their 'silent hero'."

I managed to trace one of Bernard's relatives in Wigston and told him this remarkable wartime tale.

After some initial reluctance, the relative replied: "I knew Bernard quite well, but this story is all new to me. Then again, Bernard never talked about his wartime life."

However, the relative was able to complete Bernard's story and add further intriguing pieces to the puzzle.

"After the war, Bernard went to Germany to help refugees," said the relative. "I know he spoke five or six languages, including fluent German and Italian.

"Bernard worked as a translator at the Nuremberg Trials in 1945 and later taught English to German actors and film stars.

"He met his partner, a famous German dancer, and lived near Munich for the rest of his life, occasionally returning to Italy and visiting relatives in Leicester."

Sadly, Bernard's brother, Ernie, was estranged. Ernie had fought with the Leicestershire Regiment in Holland and thought Bernard had been having it easy, swanning about in sunny Italy. Little did he know.

Detailing a bit more of Bernard's character, the relative said:

“Bernard didn’t like fools and held intelligent conversations. Although his first name was actually Harry, he preferred to be known by his middle name, Bernard, as it sounded more dignified. But he also had a wicked sense of humour, with a twinkle in his eye, and was a flamboyant dresser.”

The relative inherited several items from Bernard, including a 1940 copy of Hitler’s Mein Kampf, signed and presented to him by an American general during the Nuremberg Trials.

More intriguingly, he was also left a presentation photograph of Pope Pius XII, dated 1943, stating Bernard had an audience at the Vatican with the pontiff.

The relative recalled Bernard was not religious so, noting the date, was this audience an official appreciation of Bernard’s deeds in Castel di Sangro?

Despite spending most of his life on the Continent, Bernard’s last request was to be buried in his home town of Melton Mowbray.

His wish was granted in 1999, when he died aged 89. It is the place where he lies today – along with the full facts about his war service.

As in life, Bernard Dawson remains an enigma. But 1,000 miles away, in a small Italian town, he remains their ‘silent hero’.

Did you know Bernard Dawson? Please contact me on 0116 222 4253 or e-mail me at:

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