# Arundel del Re's Many Exiles

Peter Robb gave the fourth Ray Mathew Lecture at the National Library of Australia on 13 June 2013. This is an edited extract from the lecture *Two Exiles*.

Arundel del Re was born in Florence in 1892, just outside a very particular milieu, the Anglo–Florentine community at the end of the Victorian age. This Florence was where Henry James had set his novel The Portrait of a Lady 11 years earlier. The year del Re was born, the young Bernard Berenson arrived there from Boston, and reluctantly accepted his first commission for the sale of a work by a Florentine Renaissance master.

James and Berenson were eminences of a time and place when British aristocracy, American money and Anglo cultural hungers melded in Tuscany with incomparable art, a needy local aristocracy and low-cost pleasures. A few years later, E.M. Forster recounted in novels and stories the middle-class English experience of Florence, as our own age of tourism got under way.

Arundel del Re grew up outside the ambivalent splendour of Anglo Tuscany, aware of it as a child, and sometimes let in as a young man. He had neither lineage nor money. His father Pietro del Re was a captain in the new Italian army and his mother was the daughter of a canon of Cork Cathedral and chaplain to the English forces in Ireland. One of his earliest memories was of a green parrot:

who liked butter and coffee, and would perch on daddy's shoulder when he was eating, and gently pull his moustache toward him to take a morsel out of his mouth.

His father resigned from the army when he married and began a cycle of speculation, financial failure and more borrowing. He was often away from home. He died early in a fall down a well that Arundel's Italian grandmother thought was a suicide. His mother had some settlement money, perhaps from a previous marriage, and the family lived off this.

They moved around 1900 to an old villa after a financial crash, where:

opposite the outer iron gate to the garden there was a small, built-up terrace on the other side of the road, with a sheer drop down to the fields below. Olives and vines below were covered with climbing capers.

It was the same agricultural landscape and the same rural economy as in the time of the Etruscans two or three thousand years before:

The family of Marquis Antinori lived a little below us in a wonderful fifteenth-century villa. I was invited to go to the fair with them in their bullock cart. I saw the cattle market and outside the church under the portico all sorts of booths, a circus, and rows of spits with chickens roasting over the embers.

All the boy’s friends were girls, all older than he was, and given to teasing him, which was both exciting and humiliating. ‘I seem to have been very attracted by girls much older than myself’, he wrote. While playing on swings he was startled by an early glimpse of a small girl's vulva. Among these girls was:

my first love … a girl … with wonderful corn-coloured hair and blue violet eyes called Daisy, half Italian and half English. I often went to her villa just outside Florence … we used to climb out onto a red-tiled roof and look over Florence and talk by the hour. I … loved dancing with Daisy. She knew how to dress and I still recollect a violet-coloured velvet tight-fitting gown of hers.

As he grew up, people took young Arundel, or Arundello, into the cultural milieux of the grander Florence, and sometimes abroad. He went to Bavaria when he was 14 and, after being mightily struck on seeing Wagner performed there, got himself taken on to Bayreuth. In the summer of 1906, the boy saw Tristan, Parsifal and the Meistersinger on their home ground. Heady stuff at puberty.

In Florence, he attended a grand dinner of the Anglo community held in honour of the visiting Edward Carpenter, the pioneering socialist, gay liberationist, sandal-wearer and friend of Walt Whitman.

I found these memories on two closely typed sheets of semitranslucent paper, pages without date or heading or ending, or any continuity between them. The lower right-hand corner of each had been nibbled away by insects or small animals. The nibbled pages remark that 'all these years were difficult ones financially'. He went to England for study, not to the Oxford or Cambridge of the grandly connected Anglo–Florentines but to University College in London, a working students' university in a metropolis where he probably had no connections at all.

But he soon made his connections. He worked for the poet and editor Harold Monro in the Poetry Bookshop. Poetry in English was making a turbulent transition from Victorian to modernist in these years around the First World War, and del Re met the great poets who were the agents of that transition, Yeats and Pound. He enraged Pound with a sharp review of Pound's version of the poems of Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti.

He went to Paris. In 1914 he spent time with Sylvia Beach, who would publish Joyce's Ulysses there in 1922. He spent at least one evening in Paris à deux with Gabriele D'Annunzio. D'Annunzio had a lot of questions about Rupert Brooke, whom del Re of course knew, and then at the height of his fame and glamour. He would be dead a few months later.

The unknown young man from Florence made himself useful in overlapping worlds—Italian, English and now French; literary, academic and now military—in years of social and cultural crisis. When the war came, he went home to Florence and enlisted in the royal Italian infantry, as his father had. Almost immediately, he was back in London as private secretary to the military attaché at the Italian embassy.

Del Re's wartime work at the embassy required liaison with the British military, and this led to work for British military intelligence. In the service of MI6, he travelled as a King's Messenger between London and Paris during the war and the Versailles treaty negotiations after the war's end, his briefcase of secret documents handcuffed to his wrist. In the 1920s, the Italian del Re received an OBE for services to MI6.

And at the same time he was able to graduate with honours from London University in 1917. In 1921 he got a lectureship in Italian at Oxford and, by 1923, he had masters degrees from both Oxford and London. He married Joan Harriot that year. He'd wanted to marry his great love Daisy, but in London:

I introduced her to a young Englishman who was at the Italian front with the Red Cross—she was also a volunteer nurse—and he fell in love with her and swept her off her feet and married her. It was quite a shock.

In 1927, with his OBE and degrees from Oxford and London, del Re went to Tokyo with Joan to take up a professorship in English at Tokyo University. They stayed in Japan for 27 years. He loved Japan, and made friends who, long after he'd left the country, wrote long letters and travelled long distances to visit him, right to the end of his life.

In Tokyo, he was at the same time working as private secretary to the Italian ambassador, Baron Pompeo Aloisi. He assembled for the baron an exhibition of Japanese art that went to Rome, and worked on the baron's 1929 book Ars Nipponica. Aloisi was promoting the Berlin­–Rome–Tokyo axis. He may have been an artlover, but professionally the baron was a diplomat and a secret agent.

When del Re's Tokyo professorship expired in 1930, he easily found another chair in Taiwan, which was then under Japanese control. He stayed there 13 years. He became fascinated by Buddhist culture in Taiwan, and, in 1940, published a slim work called The Happy Otherworld, comparing representations of paradise in early Florentine art—Dante and Giotto—and in Buddhist poetry and painting.

The following year, Japan was at war with the United States and, at some point, del Re was interned with his wife and two daughters. I found no record of this time, but maybe it was when he began the fragment of childhood memories that survives in those two nibbled and disconnected sheets. At least part of it was spent in Tokyo, because after the war he remembered briefly, for Japanese readers, the American firebombing of Tokyo.

The moment the war was over in Japan, del Re was on the payroll of the Americans. He helped the Occupation Forces reorder the educational structures of postwar Japan, and received some emphatic letters of thanks from high American authorities when he was terminated in 1951. One praised him at length for his understanding of the Japanese mind, though, in the 27 years he lived in Japan and its territories, del Re learnt no Japanese at all.

He took up a final university post in Japan, and three years later abruptly left the country. I wonder whether it wasn't a nervous breakdown that decided his move to Sydney, where he was one of the founders of the Australian Oriental Society. In 1960, he went on to Wellington in New Zealand, where he taught English to Asian students, and Dante to a happy few.

In 1966, he and Joan moved to Melbourne. In the early seventies, he corresponded intensely in French with the abbot of a Christian monastery in India on the question of facing one's God. He wrote to old and distant friends and, in 1974, he died in Geelong at 82.

Arundel del Re's life eludes anyone who riffles through the meagre and disordered papers he left behind. There's an impulse to self-effacement perceptible in these notes and letters, variously without beginning or end or middle, a curious lack of self. The lacunae are what we know best about him.

In Tokyo in 1930, del Re published a book of essays in Italian and English literature called The Secret of the Renaissance. It's a hard book to find now, but there is a copy in this library, and in it del Re's slightly opaque prose sometimes quickens with strong feeling. It happens when he writes about John Florio.

Florio was a major figure in the culture and politics of Elizabethan England. He saw himself as the bringer of Italian culture to an uncouth land, and was a major agent of this, through language teaching, translation, criticism. His translation made Montaigne's Essays available to Shakespeare. He mediated the work of his contemporary, the great Italian thinker Giordano Bruno, to the dramatists Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson.

Del Re's Florio was a man who, by hard work and intelligence, rose from poverty, obscurity and lack of formal education to deal with leading figures in England and civilise them. Here del Re is writing about himself. He identifies passionately with Florio as a self-made intellectual and a mediator of cultures.

John Florio was tough, intelligent, energetic—they called him ‘resolute John Florio’. He was also a spy, one of that network of agents, spies and informers that Queen Elizabeth's intelligence chief Walsingham maintained through the tense and dangerous years between the massacre of Protestants in Paris in 1572 and Catholic Spain's attempted invasion of England in 1588. In the two years Bruno lived with the French ambassador in London, Florio was in the embassy too, and visiting Walsingham quite often.

John Florio's Europe of conflicting loyalties was not at all unlike del Re's early twentieth century. But Florio's were the years when modern Europe defined itself, and del Re's were the time when Europe undid itself, and his response was to flee.

A couple of months before del Re died in Australia, he received a letter from Switzerland, from a man called Ludwig. Ludwig tells del Re, ‘I realize you've burnt all of Mummy's letters … it's best so, all things considered … even letters can distort the truth’. He speaks about letters telling their own truth, which may be different from the real world's, and concludes abruptly, ‘Here's a photo of Mummy and one of her tomb, where her father, brother and my English grandmother also lie’.

Stuck to the airmail sheet, itself almost lost among fragments of typing, newspaper clippings, postcards, unidentifiable notes and partial carbon copies, is an old sepia photograph of a young woman in a long skirt, and a splotchy coloured snapshot of a flower-strewn grave.

The human past is understood from the written words we leave behind. How little they explain.

Peter Robb is an author whose internationally acclaimed books include *Midnight in Sicily* (1996), *M* (1998), *A Death in Brazil* (2003) and *Street Fight in Naples* (2010). His most recent book is *Lives* (2012).

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