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*A Journey of Body, Mind, and Spirit: Four Years in Fascist Italy, 1937–1941* by Martin V. Melosi (review)

Joanna Auerbach

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This book is a tool. A mirror. A challenge. It dares us to collect more boldly, to curate with intention, and to preserve with care. In doing so, it continues the long tradition of Black intellectual work, which has never been solely about preserving the past. Instead, it has always focused on creating a future in which everyone can belong.

Ashley Bouknight, Independent Historian

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*A Journey of Body, Mind, and Spirit: Four Years in Fascist Italy, 1937–1941*, by Martin V. Melosi. Rome, Italy: Tab Edizioni, 2024. 272 pp.; foreword, bibliography, photographs; paperback, \$31.91; eBook, \$19.99.

*A Journey of Body, Mind, and Spirit* documents a short but rather extraordinary period in the life of Elmo Melosi, a Catholic American of Italian extraction, who, at the age of seventeen, traveled from Northern California to Fascist Italy to attend seminary school. Elmo's son, Martin V. Melosi (a distinguished historian of environmental and urban history), constructs his story some eighty years later and many decades after his death.

Melosi brings all his skills as a historian, but this is not a book of history. Rather, it is a deeply personal reckoning of a time and place in his father's life that Melosi had known little of, but which undoubtedly influenced the man he knew. The text is based on Elmo's own writings, namely two contemporaneous diaries and an unpublished manuscript, *My Education*, which essentially was an annotation of the diary entries. Although Melosi has clearly gone to considerable lengths to explore his father's narrative and situate the primary material within its historical context, he is limited by the terse and relatively dispassionate nature of his father's primary accounts. Like so many family historians, Melosi is also restricted by the time that has passed, and regretful of the missed opportunity to interview the protagonist or others who may have shed more light on the story. The primary shortcoming of the work, therefore, is Melosi's failure to satisfactorily address the underlying motivation behind his father's story: Why did he choose the priesthood? Why did he do so in rural Italy? Why was he so intent on persisting despite the (considerable) challenges, and why did he suddenly renounce his calling? The latter, of course, is hardly a spoiler, but the lack of explanation runs like a fissure through the story, threatening to undermine the reader's interest. Melosi is equally frustrated by these gaps but seems reluctant to postulate—his commitment to the historian's code, perhaps, makes him wary of overstepping. Consequently, Melosi often restrains himself from directly addressing such questions, which seems like a missed opportunity for a deeper engagement with the "mentalities" underpinning Elmo's experience. Melosi admits to having considered crafting the story as a novel but feared that such dramatization would "diminish the stories embedded in the heart of the

diaries and blemish [his] own memories of [his] Dad” (25). As a reader, I often found myself wishing he’d given that novel a go!

One of the most interesting premises of the story is its backdrop of Italian fascism, the Spanish Civil War, and an impending World War. While Melosi interweaves thoughtful historical context into his father’s story, the interplay between Elmo’s micro world and its macro geopolitical setting feels disconnected. This is likely because his father had little to say about the broader political context in which he was situated. “If Dad was aware of the deteriorating conditions in Italy and their implications for [the] coming war,” Melosi explains, “he did not acknowledge them” (117). Whether due to his personality, his youth, the challenges he faced, or the cloistered nature of seminary life itself, Elmo’s lack of engagement with the greater political landscape of his time results in a micro-history that has difficulty serving, by Jill Lepore’s definition, “as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole.”<sup>2</sup>

Chapters 1 and 3 provide interesting insight into the early-twentieth century Italian migrant experience in California; supported by Melosi’s own family history, these sections delve into the Italian American commitment to the Catholic Church, immigrants’ pining for “the Old Country,” and the community’s conflicted relationship with Mussolini. These histories provide some clues to Elmo’s determination to join the priesthood in Italy, although the influence of Elmo’s parents is not referenced, nor is their estimation of their son’s life choices.

What the book does exceedingly well is provide a compelling picture of life in a seminary at that time and in that place, which, as Elmo himself exclaims, “couldn’t have [been] a more completely different life from that which I had been used [to]” (112). A series of snapshots, as well as some more detailed vignettes, are scattered throughout the narrative and evocative of Elmo’s milieu; the hiring of a donkey and cart to locate his grandfather’s village; the ruthless demise of bed bugs “popping [and] exploding” from candleflame; a “cone of ice” dramatically crafted by the combined force of a burst waterpipe and the frigid air; the fear-inspiring intensity of Latin oral examinations (112, 105). The treacherous nature of certain work assignments is also telling: an injury sustained by a fellow seminarian collecting wood with “mule and log-wagon” results in the boys prevailing upon the doctor not to amputate their friend’s leg (143). As a depiction of life in a rural seminary of the times, the publication is of high value, and one can envision a filmmaker one day making happy use of the specific and colourful revelations illuminated by Melosi’s text.

Memory, like history, is determined as much by what is left out as what is recalled, and the holder of memory invariably fashions his story in the way he wants it remembered. Elmo’s manuscript, written some twenty years after the events it records, documents his experience in Italy in a predominantly secular

<sup>2</sup> Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 133.

manner, stripped of the religious bedrock which surely underpinned it, and is largely divorced from its broader historical context. In this way, Elmo's memory choices are clear. He wanted his Italian education remembered as formative, rigorous and remarkable, but also as distinct and discrete—a four-year adventure isolated from his past and future life. As Melosi himself admits, the decision to join the priesthood “remains a mystery that pervades this whole story” (146). Frustrating as it is, Elmo is exercising control over his history, and Melosi honors his father's remembering by not guessing. In this manner, the book is an interesting exercise in resolving the challenges of family history and memory and may be instructive for family historians.

The unpublished novel *My Education*, Melosi tells us, is bound by hand—a skill Elmo learned in Italy. As an artifact, it is a moving testament to the education he received there. It is also a testament to the reticence of Elmo's storytelling. The manuscript, we are told, is bound in old road maps of California and the Midwest. “Why road maps?” Melosi asks. His answer: “That's anybody's guess” (20).

Joanna Auerbach, Independent Historian

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*Smithson's Gamble: The Smithsonian Institution in American Life, 1836–1906*,  
by Tom D. Crouch. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2025. 416 pp;  
hardcover, \$31.67; eBook, \$23.99.

What is the relationship between the Smithsonian Institution and the United States federal government? How did this relationship come into existence, and how did it evolve over time? These questions, which were once of interest only to specialists in Smithsonian history and congressional aides, have become urgent ones amidst the Trump administration's campaign to exert censorious executive control over the institution. Curator emeritus Tom D. Crouch reminds readers that, since its founding, oversight of the Smithsonian Institution has been the responsibility of a Board of Regents and the US Congress, not the president. It was created by Congress to “manage the bequest of [English scientist] James Smithson,” and was formed as a “trust instrumentality of the federal government, a term describing an organization responsible for managing a trust accepted by the government” (ix, 28). In constructing the story of the Smithsonian Institution's first seven decades, Crouch builds on the foundational work of the dedicated editors of the multi-volume *Joseph Henry Papers*. An experienced and thorough researcher with many exhibitions and publications to his name, Crouch sifts through the voluminous records of the Smithsonian to assemble a coherent narrative of an institution taking shape, growing exponentially, and shifting direction. *Smithson's Gamble* is no polemic; rather, it is a carefully researched and judicious administrative, intellectual, and cultural history. For readers with the patience to work