

When not in Rome

ADRIAN LYTTLETON

Adriano Viarengo

CAVOUR
506pp, Salerno Editrice, €28,
978 88 8402 682 8

appears in a series aimed at a public wider than the purely academic. Previous volumes in the series have been dedicated to Mussarella, Mother Teresa, Atatürk, and even Bettino Craxi, the Socialist Prime Minister of Italy from 1983 to 1987. Viarengo meets scholarly standards, however, and draws on an impressive range of recent research, both in Italy and abroad, with an especially commendable knowledge of the literature in English. He disclaims any ambition to compete with the classic biography in three volumes written by Rosario Romeo (1969-84). But he suggests that Romeo's one-volume abridgement is not altogether successful in conveying the mastery of the larger work. He also takes issue with Romeo on a question of inter-

to be essential for Cavour's success, even though he had little love for them. At the same time, he is careful to point out that Piedmont was only one of the regions (or "states") of the Kingdom of Sardinia, a "composite monarchy" formed by the agglomeration of disparate territories, which preserved their own particular traditions, culture and even languages. This was true of Savoy, Sardinia and even the Valle d'Aosta; but the greatest problem for the House of Savoy lay in the assimilation of its most recent acquisition, Genoa. The Genoese, with their great republican history, bitterly resisted their surrender by the Congress of Vienna to a monarchy that they regarded as a hereditary enemy. Viarengo suggests that the pursuit of an Italian national policy was almost a necessity if the Savoy monarchy was to survive, let alone expand. In the new age of nationalism, the traditional balancing act between its over-nighly neighbours, France and Austria, might not be sufficient.

Cavour himself can hardly be called an Italian by upbringing. His first language was

Mazzini. Cavour later repudiated what he regarded as his youthful follies, but he admitted that during his Genoese days he had held "extreme opinions".

In later life Cavour kept his personal and political life firmly separate. Although he was not physically impressive, his vigorous intelligence, charm and honour made him attractive to women, and he had a number of affairs. He seems, however, to have been wary of any long-term emotional commitment, and never to have considered marriage seriously. In his last years he fell in love with a twenty-eight-year-old ballerina, and they had a happy relationship that had the great advantage of not involving the social obligations which marriage with a woman of his own class would have entailed. Cavour was not a cold or inhuman personality, though he could be very brusque in breaking off the love affair, but once launched on his public career he would not allow his personal life to distract him in any way from politics.

It would have been hard to predict a political future for the young Cavour. Certainly, his intelligence, wide reading and knowledge of the social issues of the day had been noticed; but he seemed almost more cut out for success in the new world of financial speculation and railway promotion. After an early disastrous gamble when he speculated against the Burs, he became a very competent businessman. Love of gambling – at cards as well as on the stock exchange – however, was a trait that persisted. He was one of the founders of the Turin Whist club, which was one of the few clubs where debles and bourgeois could mix freely. Denis Mack Smith has suggested, and Viarengo agrees, that Cavour remained a gambler when he took up politics. Without this reckless streak, he would not have been capable of achieving what he did. However, as in his financial speculations, he learnt from his mistakes and became better at calculating the odds.

Cavour's financial fortunes were soundly based on his activity as an aggressive improving landlord, well informed on the latest innovations, such as the use of guano for fertilizer. It is true that in societies where open political activity was not allowed, the pursuit of agricultural or technical improvement, which had a collective dimension, was an important substitute. It is not by chance that the leaders of moderate liberalism elsewhere in Italy were often improving landlords, like Bettino Rissotto in Tuscany or Marco Minghetti in Bologna. When Charles Albert allowed the formation of an Agrarian Association in 1842, Cavour seemed well cut out to play a leading role, and it was clear to everyone that in the absence of a parliament or other representative institutions, the Association would be a testing ground for political opinion and influence. But here his aristocratic tastes, his father's position and his lack of knowledge of the provincial society of Piedmont, where middle-class nobles, small-town lawyers and publicists were contesting the leadership of the nobility with increasing success, all combined to ensure a humiliating defeat. He was outvoted and outmanoeuvred, and when it came to the point, in spite of his nervousness about the increasing boldness of the middle-class democrats, Charles Albert preferred to deal with Valerio than with Cavour, who had given him personal offence and whom he thought arrogant. The



Count Camillo Besso di Cavour, c.1860

pretation, accusing the older historians of a certain intolerance and impatience towards Cavour's opinions. While he cannot be accused of neglecting the European dimension of Cavour's career, Viarengo's most original contribution to the study of Cavour and of the Risorgimento comes from his strong emphasis on Piedmontese politics. He has previously edited the correspondence of Lorenzo Valerio (1810-65), the most important leader of the "legal opposition" of Piedmontese democrats. He argues convincingly that Valerio and other democrats were indispensable in the creation of a liberal public opinion and political class, which was later

French, and his Italian, though effective, was never entirely fluent. In many ways he contrasted to have much stronger ties with the French-speaking world (including Geneva) than with the rest of Italy. He never visited Rome or the South, and spent only a few days in Florence. However, his stay in Genoa in 1830-31 does seem to have been important for the development of his liberal patriotism. He became the lover of Anna Giustiniani, the young wife of a Genoese noble who kept a brilliant salon and was known for her advanced political opinions, and made friends with the Milanese noble Bianca Milesi Mojon, who sympathized with Giuseppe

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Kingdom of Italy. It is also the 150th anniversary of the death of Count Camillo Besso di Cavour, who survived by just a few months the official birth of the state that his policies had made possible. He died at the age of only fifty, and although his death can probably be attributed to an attack of malaria, aggravated by distressing medical care, his health had been undermined through continuous overwork. Two years previously, he had confessed that he felt himself prematurely aged. Admittedly he attributed his state of mind to his temporary political discouragement and loss of power, and he showed no lack of energy during the next eighteen months. But observers close to him noted the physical symptoms of extreme stress.

Cavour was a man of immense personal ambition and, with reason, confident of his superior abilities. As the youngest son of a noble family, he felt intensely the suffocating constraints imposed by the regime of absolute monarchy restored in 1815, which was aristocratic and reactionary even by the standards of other restored dynasties. It was a stark contrast to the prospects under the Napoleonic Empire of a career open to talent. Although the Cavourns were a family of ancient nobility, they had done very well out of the new Napoleonic regime, when Piedmont was annexed to France. Napoleon's sister, the famous beauty Pauline, Princess Borghese, was Camillo's godmother, and Cavour's father, the Marquis Michele, greatly increased his wealth by the purchase of church lands. When Charles Albert, who had played an ambiguous role in the failed liberal revolution of 1821, succeeded to the throne, he chose Michele as Vicar of Turin, a post more or less equivalent to that of minister of police. It was a position of great influence but not altogether auspicious for Camillo's career in liberal politics. In fact, his family background and his own aristocratic hauteur combined to make him an object of deep suspicion to the spokesmen of the middle classes, who began to make their influence felt around 1840, exploiting the opportunities opened up by Charles Albert's cautious relaxation of censorship and the restrictions on associations.

Camillo's family had destined him for a military career; but he was both unrepresentative and politically unskilled to a life of discipline and obedience with scarce prospects for glory. As the son of a powerful father, he was granted the favour of becoming one of the pages of Charles Albert, then heir to the throne. But this was a role that he particularly disliked. When his service at court came to an end, he exclaimed how glad he was not to have to wear livery like a lackey any more, a remark which earned him the lasting antipathy of Charles Albert. It is not the least proof of Cavour's talents that he made his political career under two kings who both detested him. Ironically, Cavour's aristocratic goals as well as his intelligence and ambition made him susceptible to the new liberal ideals.

Adriano Viarengo's biography of Cavour