

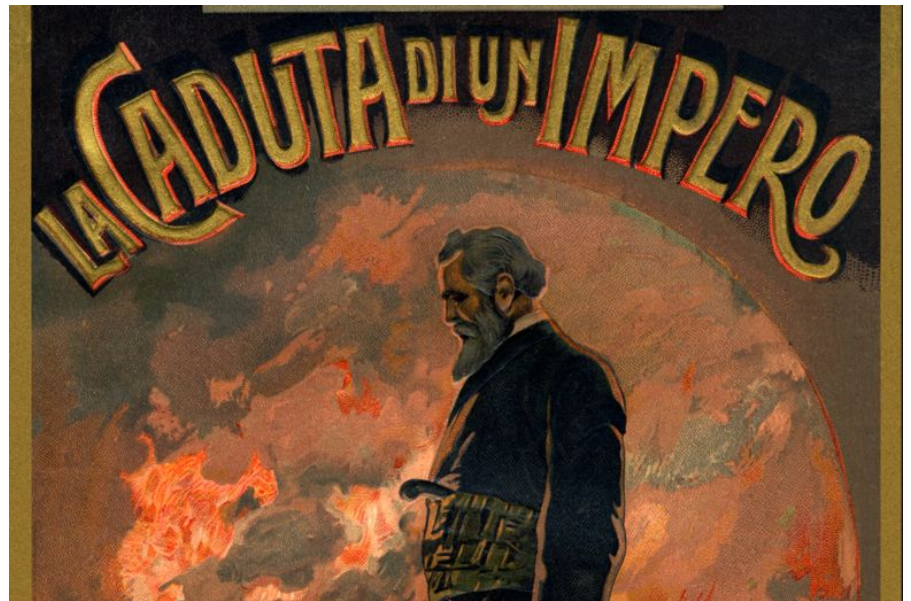
Ann Lawson Lucas

**EMILIO SALGARI**

Una mitologia moderna  
tra letteratura, politica,  
società

I: Fine Secolo 1883–  
1915 – La verità di una  
vita letteraria

II: Fascismo 1916–1943  
– Lo sfruttamento  
personale e politico  
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The cover illustration for Emilio Salgari's *La Caduta di un impero*, 1911

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## **The sea, the sea**

### **The life of an Italian Rider Haggard**

#### DAVID ROBEY

The European adventure romance has a long history. With antecedents in the medieval romances of chivalry and their early modern successors, it gained a new lease of life from the international success of Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels and flourished throughout the nineteenth century. For most of its history, it was typically set at some distance in the past, often a semi-mythical past. In the Middle Ages, that commonly meant the court of King Arthur, in the Italian Renaissance the crusade of the Emperor Charlemagne against the Moors. Scott drew on European history from the Crusades to the eighteenth century, Alexander Dumas on that of France from Louis XIV to Napoleon onwards. But with Europeans' increasing awareness of the wider world reinforced by the accelerating race for colonies, the romance of the later nineteenth century shifted its interest to other continents: the distance became geographical and exotic. Jules Verne's journey romances are an early example, beginning in the 1860s. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* appeared in 1883; *Rider Haggard's African tales* shortly after. *The sea-roving novels of Joseph Conrad* were the most refined literary expression of the trend, though he also wrote a popular adventure story with Ford Madox Ford mostly set in the West Indies, published in 1903 and titled, appropriately, *Romance*.

Emilio Salgari (1862–1911) was no Italian Conrad, but he was something of an Italian Rider Haggard. Italy's most remarkable and popular contributor to the late nineteenth-century romance, he incorporates, in addition to the distant settings, all the other defining features of the genre: heroes of exceptional strength and prowess and heroines of remarkable beauty; idealized passionate love; plots made up of travel, chance events and physical conflict or struggle. He was also a prolific and inventive writer. In his relatively short life, in addition to journalism and short stories he produced some eighty novels, virtually all them adventure tales of one kind or another. The best known were the two pirate series set respectively in the East and West Indies, featuring the pirates of Malaysia, led by the dispossessed prince Sandokhan, and the Corsaro Nero, the black corsair and his descendants – unusually for one of Salgari's heroes, of Italian origin. Others were set in the Arctic and Antarctic, and while the fundamental character of the narrative remained the same throughout, there was remarkable variety in the detail of his subjects and plots, often inspired by newspaper reports of contemporary events. Although he started out writing for adults, Salgari increasingly directed his work at younger readers, but this produced little overall change apart from a reduction in the love element, and a greater focus on educational content in the form of long disquisitions about geography and the natural world.

As one would expect from the genre, the characterization is elementary and the representation of inner life minimal: the focus is all on dialogue, setting and events. The narrative is lively and full of action but, for the modern reader, both dialogue and description are not only hyperbolic but also antiquated; Rider Haggard's seem quite modern in comparison. Salgari was writing in an Italian which remained detached from the language of everyday usage until well into the twentieth century, since the great majority of his readers as well as he himself would have been dialectspeakers. For popular as well as more sophisticated narrative, the written language remained highly literary, even when it sought to represent dialogue. Yet none of this detracted from Salgari's success. His books continued to be read and reprinted well after his death, and still seemed to be enjoyed by young readers as late as the middle of the past century if not beyond – just as schoolboys were still reading Rider Haggard in the 1950s. He was translated into a number of European languages but never apparently into English, perhaps because of his language.

Volumes I and II of Ann Lawson Lucas's monumental four-volume work cover, in the first, Salgari's life and, in the second, his publication history and reception from shortly after his death until the end of the Fascist period. The remaining two will continue to cover the publication history

and reception up to the present. In fact the first volume also concentrates mainly on publication history; apart from this there is little about Salgari's life, mainly because not much information is available, and also because there is not that much to say. In contrast to his novels, Salgari's life was wholly sedentary, as he did little else but write. Unlike Conrad, he never went to sea, indeed he never travelled, though he studied as a naval cadet in Venice and later in life allowed himself, for publicity purposes, the fictitious title of captain. Born and brought up in Verona, he earned his living as a writer from an early age, and spent all his life in Northern Italy. Partly owing to the serious psychiatric problems of his wife, he was constantly beset by financial problems. By the standards of his time he was not badly paid by his publishers, but was disadvantaged by the relatively small size of the Italian reading public and by the common practice of taking a fixed remuneration for each book, later for a set number of books per year, rather than royalties. There is some evidence that he suffered from alcoholism, and may also have been addicted to gambling, though there is not much to go on in this regard. A combination of depression and family and financial problems led to his suicide, by *hara-kiri*, before he reached fifty.

Salgari's continued popularity is not only evident in the number of novels reprinted after his death, including several originally written under pseudonyms; a considerable number of new novels also appeared purportedly based on notes that he left behind, written up in many cases with the support of his sons. This posthumous success was helped by, if not dependent on, the advent of Fascism after the First World War. Salgari was a loyal monarchist but otherwise not particularly political. However, his novels, although written at the time of Italian expansion into Africa, are remarkable for their sympathy for the underdogs of colonialism; the pirate protagonists of his two main narrative cycles are a good example. Fascism, which was to renew African expansion in the 1930s, could not thus claim him as a colonial apologist. What its supporters celebrated was Salgari's spirit of action, heroism and adventure, very much in line with the type of new Italian man that the movement sought to create. Interestingly, Salgari's novels also included several strong, resourceful and determined female protagonists, somewhat in advance of his time, and certainly not in accordance with the Fascist celebration of home-making and motherhood.

Salgari may not deserve much attention from literary critics, but he certainly deserves that of the cultural historian. Ann Lawson Lucas's very substantial study comes from a leading Italian academic publisher, and provides an enormous wealth of documentation about Salgari's publication history and, in the second volume, about his reception

particularly by Fascist literary critics. This is supported by a large selection of illustrations, mostly of the novels, including some very good ones by one of his main illustrators, G. G. Bruno, who was himself, somewhat ironically, a real sea captain. The biographical truth referred to in the subtitle of the first volume – *La verità di una vita letteraria* – partly concerns the spurious title of captain that Salgari sometimes assumed, as well as the widespread though mistaken belief that he lived much of his life and died in poverty. Lawson Lucas provides detailed and conclusive evidence that he was relatively well remunerated, at least in the later part of his career, once the limits of the book market in Italy and contemporary commercial practices are taken into account. A notable episode in the second volume concerns the campaign launched against his (Jewish) publisher Bemporad by a short-lived Fascist writers' journal, *Il Raduno*, with the claim that the publisher's rapacity was the cause of Salgari's suicide; the claim was eventually rejected by a commission set up by the industry.

In these two volumes there is only limited information about the narrative content and technique of Salgari's novels, a subject covered extensively in an earlier book by Lawson Lucas. This aspect is briefly recapitulated in the introduction to the present work, which makes an energetic case for the literary and cultural interest of Salgari's work. On the other hand the wealth of documentation that follows can make for somewhat heavy reading. The approach adopted is deliberately narrow, and one sometimes wishes for a broader perspective and a greater degree of synthesis. Nevertheless, there is an enormous amount of material that future historians will be able to use, including the illustrations. It will be interesting to see whether this will be true to the same extent in the two volumes still to appear. On the face of it, it is hard to attach quite as much significance to Salgari's fortunes once the Fascist period was over.

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