

Lucia: A Venetian Life in the Age of Napoleon

Author interview : Andrea di Robilant

Q. A discovery of letters between a young beauty, Giustiniana Wynne, and your ancestor, the Venetian nobleman Andrea Memmo, inspired your first work *A Venetian Affair*. What led to the discovery of Lucia's letters and what inspired you to tell her story in your new book, *Lucia: A Venetian Life in the Age of Napoleon*?

It was only after finishing *A Venetian Affair* that I realized there was another box of letters among my father's papers which I had not yet opened. They turned out to be by Andrea Memmo's daughter, Lucia, to her future husband, Alvise Mocenigo. These letters, written when Lucia was only sixteen, were so vivid and immediate and provided such a fascinating insight into the complex negotiations leading to an arranged marriage in Venice in the late 18th century, that they seemed to be the perfect starting point for a narrative on that period. In the course of researching Lucia's life I was lucky to find several more collections of her correspondence in the archives in Venice and other cities of northern Italy, which, taken together, covered her entire life time. The sheer quality of her correspondence throughout her life — her observations, her descriptions, her wonderful habit of transcribing dialogues, the precise information about her personal life and the world around her - compelled me to write her story.

Q. How did the experience of writing *Lucia* differ from that of *A Venetian Affair*?

In writing *A Venetian Affair* I was entirely absorbed by the intensity of the love story between Andrea and Giustiniana. Lucia, instead, is more like a rich family saga. Whereas I had something of a crush on Giustiniana, the relationship I developed with Lucia was at once deeper and more complex. I grew to love and admire her. She was a strong, courageous, passionate woman. But she also irritated me at times, and disappointed me and even exasperated me.

Q. Who was Colonel Plunkett and what role did he play in Lucia's life?

After the fall of the Venetian Republic, Colonel Plunkett, a dashing officer with the occupying Austrian troops, became Lucia's secret lover. He fathered her only surviving child, Alvisetto, before being killed in action while fighting the French in Switzerland. All traces of this love affair were carefully erased by Lucia. Alvisetto was passed off as Alvise's son, thereby ensuring the survival of the Mocenigo line.

Q. While we know that Lucia did have an affair, she was very selective about what she wrote in her letters, even to her sister. Do you think these letters were destroyed, or do you believe Lucia never wrote to anyone about these matters? If not, why?

Lucia's letters could be very intimate, and that is part of their enduring charm. But she was too careful a person to write about her love affair in letters that might fall in the wrong hands. And the love letters she received by Colonel Plunkett she must have destroyed. In this she was far more discreet than her husband, who seldom burnt the letters he received from his numerous lovers — much to their annoyance.

Q. Like Giustiniana in *A Venetian Affair*, Lucia has a child in secret as the result of her affair. How common was the practice of bearing children outside of marriage during the 18th and 19th centuries?

The practice, though by no means frequent, was fairly common, especially in the eighteenth century, when arranged marriages were still the norm. It was not unusual for a pregnant woman to enter a convent to deliver a child out of wedlock. These children were usually brought up by women of modest means in exchange for a small stipend.

Q. During the Napoleonic reign in Europe, Lucia had seemingly conflicting alliances as a close friend of the Napoleon's wife, the Empress Josephine, while also bearing papers of Austrian nobility and having many friends at the Hapsburg court. How did she sort out this tangled associations?

Lucia was a Venetian at heart and even after the fall of the Republic she continued to consider Venice as her only fatherland. Even though she bore patents of Austrian and French nobility, and even though she had to maneuver carefully between conflicting alliances, she never felt an allegiance to Vienna or Paris — something which became a source of tension within her marriage (her husband Alvise was at first pro French, then pro Austrian and finally pro French again).

Q. Lucia returns to Italy from Paris after the fall of the Empire. How had Venice changed?

At the fall of the Napoleonic Empire in 1814 Venice had barely survived a six month siege by the Austrians. When Lucia returned to Venice from Paris she found a ghost of the city she had known — crippled by poverty, disease and hunger. A mournful Grand Canal was lined with abandoned and crumbling palazzos. Venice entered a period of steep decline which lasted two decades — into the 1830s.

Q. Lucia's husband, Alvise, founded a utopian town aptly named Alvisopoli in the Italian countryside. What were his original goals for the town and how was Alvisopoli affected by Napoleon's reign?

Alvisopoli was a self-sufficient agricultural and manufacturing community built on reclaimed marshes on the mainland facing Venice. The estate was notable for the modern housing facilities built for workers and their families, the technical schools and the health facilities. In recognition for his work in founding and developing Alvisopoli, Napoleon awarded Alvise the Iron Cross, the highest civilian decoration. But the land taxes levied to finance Napoleon's campaigns in Europe eventually crippled Alvisopoli even as its young farm-hands were conscripted into Napoleon's army. After Alvise's premature death, Lucia managed Alvisopoli with great skill for thirty years before she handed control over to her son, Alvisetto.

Q. Lucia is often referred to as one of the last grandes dames of Venetian society. However, she seems progressive and independent throughout the book - she lived mostly on her own, made her own small business plans, and eventually took over all of her late husband's financial affairs. Do you think she represented Venice's past or its future?

One of the reasons why Lucia is such an appealing character is precisely because she seems to be such a modern woman. Highly resilient, very practical, fiercely independent, she often feels like a contemporary of ours, not someone who lived two hundred years ago. In her old age she came to be viewed as a grande dame; Effie, wife of John Ruskin, described her as the last of the Venetian grandes dames. She certainly played the part. To many foreign travelers who went to see her, she was a living link to the fabled Republic of old. In my view she is much more than that: Lucia brings to life that mysterious and dramatic transition from the eighteenth century Venice of Goldoni and Casanova (the setting of *A Venetian Affair*) to the Romantic Venice of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Q. How does Lord Byron play a role in Lucia's story?

Lord Byron came into Lucia's life in 1818 when he rented from her an entire floor of Palazzo Mocenigo for the princely sum of 200 pounds. Their landlord-tenant relationship was fraught with animosity and turned quite vicious at the end. But there is no doubt that Byron's infusion of cash at a time of great economic distress allowed Lucia to keep Palazzo Mocenigo.