

PERDUTO A PIANDISCO' IL PATRIMONIO DELLO SCRITTORE PETER RUSSELL

## In fiamme un prezioso archivio

Distrutti migliaia di libri antichi, quaderni di memorie, olografi di Montale e Ungaretti

### A PIAN DI SCO' A fuoco libri di Russell

SAN GIOVANNI VALDARNO — Un incendio ha distrutto completamente l'archivio personale dello scrittore e poeta inglese Peter Russell. Una perdita enorme, un patrimonio culturale che aveva sollevato l'interesse degli studiosi di tutto il mondo. Il *Times* di Londra avrebbe dedicato uno dei suoi prossimi numeri proprio ai libri e ai diari di Russell. Troppo tardi. Lo scrittore vive da sei anni in Valdarno, in una fattoria vicino a Pian di Sco: una casa colonica con annesso magazzino. E lì era il suo famoso archivio. Tutto è avvenuto durante la notte. Lo scrittore si è svegliato di soprassalto: la sua stanza era piena di fumo e il tetto cominciava a scricchiolare. Ha chiesto aiuto, ma l'incendio è stato domato solo dopo otto ore. L'elenco delle opere distrutte è interminabile. Cinquemila libri di grande pregio, fra cui mille volumi rarissimi, stampati in Russia tra il '700 e l'800; 500 quaderni di memorie, saggi, manoscritti; olografi di Montale, Quasimodo, Ungaretti, Elliot, Pound; tremila libri stampati a Londra tra il 1950 e il '60 e 50mila fogli per il primo numero della rivista «Marginalia».

La probabile causa dell'incendio ha dell'incredibile: alcuni ghiri avrebbero fatto cadere alcuni fogli da uno scaffale fino alla parete della canna fumaria. Una casualità, un'autentica beffa.

[G.G.]

La Nazione  
il 9 marzo '90

I spent all last week putting the finishing touches to MARGINALIA No.1. The last two sheets went to the photocopier. An advertisement is due to appear in the *Times Literary Supplement* offering MARGINALIA and a number of my older publications, notably copies of the *Money Pamphlets* by Ezra Pound. I felt on the crest of the wave. But what wave? Nemesis, it would appear!

Last night, 7th March, midnight, the kitchen where I work in this ancient Tuscan farmhouse began to get a bit chilly, and I took myself off to bed. I read in bed till 12.30 and then put out the light and tried to sleep, difficult undertaking as I was suffering (and still am!) from an acute attack of lumbago. 00.40 about: I hear familiar scratching noises coming from the roof, which I assumed to be the habitual noise made by the family (or families) of dormice which live there, and are just waking up from their hibernation. The (edible) dormouse is a pretty creature about the size of a squirrel and we've had them with us for several years. They make a lot of racket at night under the roof. 00.50 about: the noises become much louder and begin to sound like pebbles falling on the roof, or stones thrown against the walls. Not even dormice do that. I switch on the light, but the electricity is dead, a not uncommon thing here. The noises become even more suspicious and I drag myself out of bed and start dressing, as the noises are getting loud and coming now from the store-room built on to the outside wall of the house, level with my bed. By now I begin to smell smoke.

Very painfully indeed I manoeuvre myself downstairs and out of the front door. FLAMES are pouring out of the magazine window. The entrance to the store-room is in the garden, up a fifty metre slope. There's no water supply up there. I realise there's nothing I can do, and I call the fire brigade, 30 Km away in Montevarchi. Meanwhile the flames have become about three metres high and are threatening the roof of the dwelling part of the building. I somehow manage to drag out gas cylinders and jerrycans of kerosene, and carry out thirty big files of my unpublished writings and litter the garden path with them. By which time my neighbour Stefano, with a hefty Dutch boy of sixteen, arrive having seen the flames from up the mountainside. We get out what valuables we can and then drive a mile down the narrow dirt road to meet the fire brigade and guide them. Mercifully they arrive in double-quick time, but the fire engine is too broad for the road and has to stop 500 metres short of the house. The firemen were brilliant, incredibly efficient and serious in their work. They got a pump and hose down to the river that passes the house, and started dousing the flames. By this time the flames had come in under the roof inside the house and I had really lost all hope. However, with minimal damage they put out the flames licking the roof timbers and saved the house.

BUT the ten tons roughly of books and documents in the storehouses were burnt to the last sheet, the roof collapsed, and the floor was red-hot and we thought it would give in at any moment, and so drop into the ground-floor. The fact remains that the contents of the two store-houses are completely destroyed. Amongst these were:

5,000 books of considerable value lying on newly constructed wooden shelving, including a collection of 1000 Russian language books from the last century, a collection of real rarities. Many first editions and presentation volumes signed by well-known authors. All my Mandelstam & Corbin research & translations.

500 or more of my old notebooks with my research notes, drafts of many poems I have never got round to copying, and sketches for essays and other prose pieces. CORRESPONDENCE and other documents and holographs or manuscripts of many well-known authors, amongst them Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Kathleen Quine (very many letters), Montale, Quasimodo, Ungaretti, Vittorio Sereni and others. Fifty years of records, plus copies of all my occasional publications, reviews of my books, interviews and so on.

About 10,000 addresses of friends and old clients from 20 years back, and all the old stock of my publications from the 'fifties and 'sixties. Including the few remaining copies of the *Money Pamphlets* by Pound and of my review "NINE" (174-56).

Perhaps the thing that hurts most is the loss of innumerable photographs of my three children between 1974 and the present. Including the negatives. AND ON TOP OF THAT, 50,000 large sheets of high quality paper for the new review "MARGINALIA". Now there is no paper for it, and no money to buy new paper. The irony is that tomorrow an advertisement for these things should appear in the TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT.

SMALL THINGS like all my garden tools, my equipment for painting, furniture, an electric duplicator and a lot of stationery and many stereo records, don't really matter much. I am not insured, and I now just have to get used to the fact that all this material no longer exists. I had looked forward to going through all the old notebooks and transcribing poems never copied, and developing many unfinished prose pieces. At least, I shan't have that trouble now!

Amongst the victims were all the unsold copies of a number of my books of poetry. Now I can proudly say "All my books are out of print"!

AH WELL! Next week, I start editing MARGINALIA No 2. Even if I only send out 100 copies, or even less, it will be worth doing. It's a "miracle" that the part of the house I live in was not burnt down too.

Avanti! Avanti!

PETER RUSSELL

THIS IS THE TENTH MAJOR DISASTER I have undergone since a fire destroyed my house, books and mss in 1951 in Sussex! In the month since the fire living and working have been difficult as scaffolding has had to be erected inside the house to support the roof. The rain pours in through the cracked cement floor of the burnt storehouses (the roof above them collapsed) into my kitchen and living-room-study. A new floor can't be laid down till a permit is given by the bureaucrats. Ash and dust blow into the rooms under the now-open eaves and roof-ridge.

I am having a hard time preparing and typing out six lectures to be given in Tuscany (in Italian) and six more (in English) for the National Congress of Swiss High School Teachers of English at Locarno, all before the end of April. Cold, wet and bedraggled I'm trying to get used to the fact that my archives of fifty years no longer exist. I keep remembering more books, mss and records which have perished. The mountainside is littered with sheets of burnt paper. This note is being sent out with the second hundred copies of MARGINALIA No I. The first one hundred were posted on March 9th. So far, only one recipient has replied. My large display advertisement in the TLS of 9th March, offering No I gratis, after a whole month, has not brought even one request for it. (You can't even give it away!) A few dozen people, including some from North America, have asked for my lists of books for sale, but alas! the books are all burnt!

If the readership of the TLS represented the poetry reading public, I would do well to take the hint that there is no interest in my work. In fact, the enthusiasm shown by audiences at my poetry readings in U.S.A, Canada, France, England, Germany, Italy and Jugoslavia, (and the extensive sales of my books after the readings), assure me beyond a shadow of doubt that there is a serious public for my kind of poetry. MARGINALIA will continue even if the circulation is only 25. Each third issue will be entirely in Italian.

READERS MAY LIKE TO KNOW that just before the fire I was awarded the International prize for Lyric Poetry "Le Muse" of the City of Florence, previous winners including Montale, Rafael Alberti, Ezra Pound, Chagall, Manzh, Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Evtushenko and Henry Moore. A bronze shield, award of the prize in the Sala cinquecentesca of the Palazzo Vecchio and a dinner for 250 V.I.Ps afterwards, but not a lira in cash! What was it that Aeschylus and Horace did with their shields? (or was it their spears?) At least both of them ran away. I am not going to run away.

TO MAKE ENDS MEET after this calamity, I start work tomorrow in our local Public Library. 24 hours a week at £3 an hour. As the Director of the British Institute in Florence said to me last week: "Poetry is not a profession."

Just another weekend hobby, like breeding canaries? support I've just heard that the Arts Council have refused any for production costs of the ENitharmon Press. They have offered £4000 on condition that ENitharmon buys a computer. They like to keep the money in the hands of their friends the wealth-makers, it would seem. More of that later!!!

April 9th, 1990

Peter Russell.