



*Louis Green*  
(1929–2008)

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It is hardly surprising that Louis Green, one of the founders of this country's recent but already substantial reputation in late medieval and Renaissance Italian studies, throughout his life struck Australians as somehow very 'European': as 'an exotic', indeed, in the words of his life-long friend Peter Porter who noted that he was the type of the 'intelligent European, quiet and without either cringe or swagger'. Born in Paris on 4 September 1929 of an English mother and Italian father – his first language was French – he spent eight of his first ten years in Estonia, speaking English to his mother after age five and Estonian to his surrogate family and friends there. The ease and high competence with which he was later to teach himself the languages he needed for his research – German and Italian – surely flowed from this early polyglot European experience. At the outbreak of World War II, mother and son crossed Siberia by slow train to Vladivostok, then embarking via Hong Kong for Brisbane. The complicated circumstances of his birth and early upbringing, of which he himself was to become fully aware only in early adulthood, simply added to that sense of mystery and allure surrounding him.

Louis Green the bohemian European gentleman, or was it the gentlemanly bohemian, was inextricable from the increasingly formidable historian, an unusual combination of qualities in an Australian academic, it must be said; although this was happily less the case in his salad days than it is in these soberer times. For Anaïs Nin, sent a photograph of the young Louis by his mother by way of tempting her to lecture in Estonia, he was 'the most beautiful boy of eight I have ever seen. He seems made of velvet, from the soft light of his enormous eyes, to the softness of his features, the tenderness of the mouth, the pose of the neck, his hands, a soft-focused, a dreaming child'.<sup>1</sup> He continued throughout his life to pursue interests, and seek out friends, in intellectual and cultural circles well beyond his university worlds, starting with a brilliant generation of Brisbane contemporaries which included not only Porter but Lillian Roxon, Barbara Blackman, Barrie Reid, Alan Roberts, Roger Covell and others. An early and entertaining witness to Roxon's precocious rise to local

fame,<sup>2</sup> Louis turns up, glamorously, in Mirka Mora's memoirs for 1955,<sup>3</sup> and in the happy memories Anna Schwartz retains of the friendship she and her sculptor husband Joel Elenberg were to enjoy with him and other visiting Australians in 1977 when they were staying in Arthur Boyd's house near Palaia, in Tuscany.<sup>4</sup>

The 'soft' child apparently made of velvet remained a dreamer all his life but on arrival in Queensland had quickly to show other, more steely, qualities, when his mother's health suffered a series of breakdowns and the young teenager was left to fend for them both. Throughout her long life, Louis was to return regularly to the north during vacations to stay with his mother, and to attend to her affairs. His unpublished memoir is poignantly entitled 'A Loose Child', as someone who knew him at that trying early time had described him. Despite – some might wish to say because of – these difficulties, Louis carved out a very successful secondary school career, first and briefly at Brisbane High School and then as a boarder at All Souls School at Charters Towers, where he read avidly, in French as well as English, in a small history library bequeathed to that Anglican establishment by a former chaplain. A BA with first class honours in History at the University of Queensland followed in 1951 – he found the formal teaching he received unstimulating, which further encouraged him to seek intellectual companionship elsewhere among his very talented Brisbane peers – after which the future historian secured a diplomatic cadetship, working for several years as a research officer and cryptographer in the Department of Defence, in Canberra and then Melbourne, and becoming a specialist on Indonesia and the Viet Minh. Whatever precisely this work entailed Louis would never talk about, even to those closest to him, but he was to retain a deep fascination with espionage.

By now married and with a young daughter, Louis and his family spent the years 1956 and 1957 in England, at which time, although at first continuing his cryptographic work at Cheltenham, he had clearly decided to attempt to pursue academic research. He had indeed begun to learn Italian and German before his departure for Europe – schoolboy Latin would also have been honed around this time – and a summer visit to Tuscany, including Florence and Lucca which were to become the twin foci of his later research, must have made this intention more concrete and purposeful. Far less clear-cut was how to begin an academic career upon his return to Australia, but encouraged by Ken Inglis he applied for and was appointed to a Tutorship in History at the University of Adelaide. Now began a period of intense intellectual excitement and activity for Louis Green, who quickly realised that this new life was indeed the one for him. To remain the least doctrinaire person one could find on the subject of how to teach successfully at tertiary level – he would have loathed the world of KPIs and templates and compliance mechanisms which we now endure – he thought deeply about how to fulfil these new pedagogic responsibilities, as his memoir reveals, and had remarkable early success when entrusted by Hugh Stretton with a term of lectures on European History 1848–1914 in his professor's absence. If he appreciated, as he says in his autobiography, this chance to teach bright older undergraduates such

as Jill Roe (whom he mentions explicitly), they returned the compliment. ‘To that point’, Roe much later recalled of this experience, ‘I had liked history and done well with it [...] but this [a lecture by Louis Green on Viennese cultural life under the later Hapsburgs] lifted me right up, and I realised that historical knowledge was not only interesting and useful but could also be transformative. This is my debt to Louis Green’. This ability to inspire the young, more especially gifted students, he kept until the very end of his teaching career. At the very well attended commemoration of his life and work at Monash University held on 22 October 2008, Clare Monagle, our newly appointed lecturer in medieval history and one of Louis’s last students, remembered being ‘completely transfixed’ by his lectures with their ‘intellectual vitality and enthusiasm. I didn’t know that ideas could live, breathe, resonate in the way that Louis produced them for us. [He] made me want to become an intellectual historian, a historian of ideas [...]’.

In the Barr Smith Library Louis Green found many of the raw materials he needed to begin to equip himself with the research credentials also demanded by his new vocation, the writing of an MA thesis entitled, rather innocuously given its intellectual punch, ‘The Chronicle in Fourteenth Century Florence and Lucca’. For his principal text, the chronicle of Giovanni Villani, however, Louis was able to use the handsome if somewhat battered seven-volume classic edition of Dragomanni (1844), a thoughtful gift apparently given him by Sir Keith Hancock, who perhaps had bought it during the heady Tuscan days he describes in *Country and Calling*. It is pleasant to record that other founders of this Academy also contributed to the creation of this remarkably original master’s thesis: Stretton was its pro forma supervisor, and Max Crawford at Melbourne agreed to read and comment on drafts by mail, although his rather slow (and, one infers, minimalist) responses in fact enabled the young scholar-in-the-making to get on with the task that was consuming him, working independently, almost secretly, as he preferred to do for the rest of his life. Quite quickly submitted in 1960 – one American examiner proposed that the dissertation be awarded the PhD forthwith, but the rules forbade this – a revised version was to be published in 1972 by Cambridge University Press as *Chronicle into History*, a beautiful title that I like to think was perhaps inspired by David Garnett’s *Lady into Fox*.

This quite slim book had an immediate impact, and continues to do so; a paperback reprint appearing in late 2008, just after Louis’s death. These were the days of what was in effect almost a takeover of Italian Renaissance historiography by mainly Anglophone scholars, household names – Nicolai Rubinstein, Philip Jones, Gene Brucker, Hans Baron, Marvin Becker, David Herlihy – from old and famous British and American universities. Where this impressive book, written by what his medieval Tuscan subjects would have disdainfully called a provincial ‘new man’, fitted into this powerful movement was not clear to the many colleagues who, on my first sabbatical to Italy in 1974, demanded to know who had guided Green’s researches, some North Americans in particular finding it hard to conceive that *Chronicle into History* had not emerged under the direct influence of some revered master. But, although

between writing his thesis and publishing the book Louis had corresponded on the subject with two such gurus, Rubinstein in London, and Charles Davis in New Orleans, *Chronicle into History* was above all the work of a Renaissance autodidact, and the first major publication by an Australian scholar in the field. He had no doubt conceived and elaborated his thesis on those long ruminative walks he took alone throughout his life, so lost in thought, his youngest daughter remembered at his commemorative celebration, that sometimes 'he would bump into a tree, apologise to it, and continue walking'. The fruits of this mental labour had made his international colleagues think for the first time about how and why the writing of their own history by late medieval Tuscan chroniclers – men working within a tradition still reliant on transcendental historical explanations – nevertheless paved the way for the early Renaissance historians who, for their part, and not of course without twists and turns, ushered in the proto-modern historiography of the generation of Francesco Guicciardini. His still medieval citizen chroniclers stood 'as well on the threshold of history, in the modern understanding of the term', he wrote in a fine conclusion which already reveals an historian of ideas of the first order, 'by their progressive disengagement of action from the web of total world significance and its resultant isolation in the self-contained field of its own operation' (p.154).

By the time of the book's publication, Louis had been established at Monash University as Senior Lecturer since 1967, a post for which he had been invited to apply by A G L Shaw with the warm backing of Inglis and Stretton. Between 1960 and 1966 he had held a Lectureship at the University of Tasmania, where he took his usual pains with the preparation of his undergraduate classes and, apart from starting to prepare his MA thesis for publication (and as ever making some enduring extra-mural friendships), wrote his one contribution to Australian history: a brief portrait for the popular series 'Australian Explorers' of *Ernest Giles* (1963) which gave a crisp and sympathetic account of a sensitive and psychologically intriguing man. He also found time to write a long and extremely helpful letter to a Melbourne undergraduate who in late 1962 had asked his advice on the feasibility of his writing an honours thesis on the obscure fourteenth-century Florentine chronicler Donato Velluti. This was to be my first, and very felicitous, contact with a colleague and friend with whom I was later to teach and work for almost a quarter of a century. Shaw had made it clear to Louis Green that his first task at Monash was to help cope with the rapidly growing numbers in the first year Medieval/Renaissance/Reformation course, a foundation subject of the new department which, much altered to be sure, continues to this day as a staple in its offerings. Louis continued to teach it throughout his career, but quickly expanded his horizons to more advanced courses, including several in the history of ideas, which remained one of his great passions. In 1971 he and I started team-teaching 'Renaissance Florence', which has trained a number of established scholars in our field and goes on, in the hands of several of them, to attract good student numbers; not least because for some years it has also been offered 'on site' in Florence and Prato. On one occasion Louis, by then in retirement, came to teach it, as usual stunning students with his erudition and his ability to talk at once

freely and utterly coherently without reference to a single note. He also entertained his young charges, joining in their amusement with that at times slightly manic laugh of his own, which anyone who ever knew him well remembers. Whether in a tutorial room in Clayton, or in a Tuscan piazza, Louis's classes seemed to be having more fun than academic decorum demanded.

Monash's founding history professors surely had a shrewd sense that with Louis Green they were acquiring rather more than a committed and gifted undergraduate teacher, for the new department needed quickly to establish its academic and intellectual credentials in addition to dealing with rapidly expanding student numbers. As well as being 'a lucid and patient teacher', one of his referees for the Monash post had written, Green was 'a scholar with a remarkably wide range of serious intellectual interests, some of them unusual in Australia'. This catholicity of interests and skills he very quickly put to work, turning in the early 1970s to the research that would preoccupy him for the next two decades: writing in two volumes the political history of Lucca from the late-thirteenth into the mid-fourteenth centuries. This small and proud city-state, despite its turbulent late medieval history told so well by Green and by a group of his friends and colleagues, including several non-Italian historians such as Christine Meek of Trinity College, Dublin, managed to remain independent of more powerful neighbours, including granducal Florence, until Napoleonic times. In choosing this small city and its rich but patchy archives as his focus, Louis was almost self-consciously resisting the lemming-like rush to the superabundant archives of Florence in which a swollen generation of mainly Anglophone scholars was engaged at this time. It was as if to immerse himself in the history of this beautiful walled town, in the best sense still provincial and in some sense aloof from both medieval and modern Italy, satisfied some deeply independent and private academic and personal impulses of his own. Whatever the case, the results were the opposite of antiquarian, although achieved by years of painstaking archival grubbing, requiring considerable linguistic and palaeographical skills, to which Meek has recently paid tribute in her expert discussion of his Lucchese scholarship.<sup>5</sup> His academic versatility is made clear by his success at writing intricate and subtle political and institutional narratives that might seem to have required talents very different from those he had brought to the writing of his first, elegant, history of ideas, based entirely on the interpretation of printed texts.

First came *Castruccio Castracani: the Origins and Career of a Fourteenth-Century Italian Despotism* (1986), which made an original contribution not only to the history of Castracani's Lucca but to the whole field of late medieval Italian studies during the period when communal republics were everywhere falling to bellicose *signori* ('despots' as English historiography has traditionally described them), not least because of the book's close attention to the unfashionable subject of warfare and military tactics. According to one influential reviewer, '[t]his is, in short, as close to a definitive book on its subject as we are ever going to get'.<sup>6</sup> It is amusing that he added that one of the book's virtues was its jargon-free prose 'nowhere tricked out with the latest Parisian

fashions'. Louis had indeed chosen to write an austere book on a 'traditional' subject, but very few historians could have done what I heard him do around that time: that is, to give an audience of somewhat baffled colleagues a cogent, thoroughly informed and by no means unsympathetic analysis of what continental theorists had been saying for several decades. With his second monograph, *Lucca under Many Masters: a Fourteenth-Century Italian Commune in Crisis (1328–1342)*, (1995), Green had become a master of his field, only one of whose achievements was, in the words of Meek, 'setting the history of fourteenth-century Lucca on a firm footing'.<sup>7</sup> This was acknowledged by his being commissioned to write the two chapters on Florentine history in the late medieval period for the *New Cambridge Medieval History*, vols. 5 (1999) and 6 (2000), an accolade that dozens of well-known scholars around the world might well have felt entitled to but could hardly reasonably have resented Louis Green receiving.

More a long-haul book writer than an easy essayist by temperament, Louis nevertheless also published a number of articles during the later 1980s and 1990s. Particularly influential was an essay on the revival of the classical theory of magnificence,<sup>8</sup> which compelled scholars to look earlier than had been the case, and in an unexpected place, for that supposedly Quattrocento Florentine and Medici-inspired phenomenon. This very deliberate and unshowy pace at which he worked over decades counted against Louis Green in worldly terms for, despite very warm and increasingly insistent support from his department, his applications for promotion beyond Senior Lecturer were overlooked until 1993, when he was appointed Reader in History. On his merits and given his international reputation, election to the Academy might well have come rather earlier than 1994, but one gathers that the argument that his own university had not yet seen fit to single him out had held sway. Monash was at last persuaded by his sheer and mounting achievement – in 1991 an English *éminence grise* of Renaissance studies had written that 'if [Green] were working in Great Britain, he should certainly be expected to be at the professorial level' – and, one hopes, by the point made by a Monash senior colleague that 'we should continue to support scholars who choose to work towards major works, rather than through an apparently steadier flow of less significant articles'. This argument is ever more relevant and forceful today in an environment in which it is demanded of very busy young lecturers in some institutions that they solemnly undertake to publish two or more articles a year.

Louis Green's pioneering work, his self-taught achievements in late medieval and early Renaissance Italian studies at the highest international level, helped to usher in a period of increased Australian professionalism in the discipline, as Roslyn Pesman Cooper at the University of Sydney embarked upon original research with Rubinstein at the University of London on early sixteenth-century Florentine politics and Ian Robertson at the University of Melbourne and his students, most of whom also undertook their postgraduate work in London, took up research in a number of different areas of the wider field. Home-grown PhDs were soon to follow, and the

reputation this group of Australian scholars now enjoys owes a good deal to Green's early example. He himself continued to work systematically late into retirement, seeking to fuse the two great themes of his previous research – the tracking and explanation of fundamental changes from late medieval to early Renaissance culture, and the political and social transformations that were occurring at the same time – into one powerful synthesis. He had completed before his death a manuscript entitled 'Towards the Renaissance: a Study of the Relationship between Literary Culture in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Italy and its Political and Social Background', publication of which his many admirers are sure will posthumously crown his already remarkable intellectual and academic achievement.

*F. W. Kent*

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- 1 *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, ed. by G. Stuhlmann, vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966–80), p. 168.
  - 2 See Robert Milliken, *Mother of Rock: The Lillian Roxon Story*, rev. ed., (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010), where somehow characteristically his name appears in the index jammed between the rock band 'Grateful Dead' and 'Greer, Germaine'.
  - 3 Mirka Mora, *Wicked but Virtuous: My Life* (Camberwell: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 108.
  - 4 *Australians in Italy: Contemporary Lives and Impressions*, ed. by F. W. Kent, R. Pesman and C. Troup (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2008), pp. 10.1–10.2.
  - 5 F. W. Kent and C. Meek, 'Louis Ferdinand Green (1929–2008)', *Renaissance Studies*, 23 (2009), 758–62.
  - 6 W. Gundersheimer, 'Green, Louis, *Castruccio Castracani: A Study on the Origins and Character of a Fourteenth-Century Italian Despotism*', *Speculum*, 64 (1989), pp. 171–72.
  - 7 Kent and Meek, p. 762.
  - 8 Louis Green, 'Galvano Fiamma, Azzone Visconti and the Revival of the Classical Theory of Magnificence', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 53 (1990), 98–113.