



The entrance to the Museo Hemingway e della Grande Guerra.



Villa Ca' Erizzo in Bassano del Grappa, Italy.

## “I’m a Grappa Boy... If you Know What that Means”: A Museum Dedicated to Ernest Hemingway in Bassano del Grappa, Italy

by Martina Mastandrea

*“We were billeted in an old villa in Bassano on the Brenta, on the east bank of the river, up beyond the covered bridge. Big marble thing it was, cypress trees as you come up the drive, statues on either side and all the trimmings.”*

Even the most ardent aficionados of Ernest Hemingway may have a hard time in determining to which of his works this passage belongs—namely, “The Passing of Pickles McCarty,” aka “The Woppian Way.” Composed in Petoskey likely in spring 1919, this short story is part of a group of war tales Hemingway wrote using the first-hand knowledge he had gained during seven months in northern Italy. Rediscovered in 1966 by Carlos Baker, this unpublished and largely unknown text has since then been mostly overlooked. Even the gold mine for Hemingway scholars that is Charles M. Oliver’s *Ernest Hemingway A to Z* does not include an entry for it.

Whereas Hemingway’s classic short stories of men at war such as “A Way You’ll Never Be” and “In Another Country” are set in Fossalta di Piave and Milan, sites that became part of the imaginary of Hemingway and 1910s Italy, “The Passing of Pickles McCarty” takes place in Bassano del Grappa, a city that has been a significant yet understudied location in the author’s direct experience of warfare. In the foothills of the Dolomites, the town was originally called Bassano Veneto and later renamed after the Great War to honor the grievous battles fought on Monte Grappa between 1917 and 1918. In the conflict’s last year, Bassano was animated by the volunteers of Section One of the American Red Cross ambulance units, which were housed in the fifteenth-century Villa Ca’ Erizzo, alongside the Brenta River. Ernest Hemingway was briefly one of them.

“The Passing of Pickles McCarty” remains a minor work in the Hemingway corpus, but it offers invaluable historical and biographical insight such as the excerpt cited above, in which the twenty-year-old writer committed to paper the memory of the “big marble thing” where he stayed in late October 1918. After having found out that the Vittorio-Veneto offensive against the Austrian-Hungarians was about to be launched, Hemingway was eager to take part in it, even if he had not fully recovered from the shrapnel wounds to his legs suffered in Fossalta in July.

Still limping on his cane, he left the American Red Cross hospital in Milan in mid-October and drove to Schio, where he found only a part of Section Four of “the Country Club.” A group of ambulance drivers, including Bill Horne and Emmett Shaw, had been assigned to another ARC section twenty miles away, which had been extremely active following the Caporetto defeat. Hoping to join in the action after three months of hospitalization, Hemingway quickly reached Horne and Shaw at Bassano’s Section One. He arrived in time to witness a massive Italian artillery barrage on the night of October 24 and remained wide awake waiting for orders to carry the wounded. Instead, on the next morning he had to hurry back to Milan because he had contracted jaundice.

Back from the war, Hemingway typically gave the impression that he had himself taken part in the attacks on Monte Grappa together with an assault unit of the Arditi (“the Daring”). Members of this elite special force who were stationed at Villa Ca’ Erizzo immediately entered his repertoire of heroes, inspiring works such as “The Passing of Pickles McCarty,” as well as war-time stories. On March 14, 1919, the young veteran even gave a talk about the Arditi whom he had supposedly seen at Bassano plugging bullet holes in their chest with cigarette ends and went on fighting or using short swords like daggers. The speech was, of course, a huge success.

In addition to the “Daring” and Hemingway, Ca’ Erizzo hosted an impressive array of American literati who drove ambulances for Section One of the ARC: John Dos Passos, John Howard Lawson, Henry Serrano Villard, Sydney Fairbanks, Dudley Poore, and many other students from Harvard University. Given that Dos Passos and Poore, who attended Harvard with Fairbanks, had written the previous year a collection of poems called *The Harvard Poets*, the whole group adopted that name, and baptized their

dormitory in Ca' Erizzo "the poets' corner."

During his stay at the villa between January and June 1918, Dos Passos wrote part of "Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho," an unpublished manuscript partly turned into *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (1920). His impressions of Bassano can also be found in *A Pushcart at the Curb* (1922) and his autobiography *The Best Times* (1966).

To celebrate Hemingway's and the Harvard Poets' stay in Bassano, Ca' Erizzo has been recently turned into the Hemingway and the Great War Museum by its present owner, the Luca family. Fifty-four pictures from that time were found at the villa, among them a portrait of Hemingway accompanied by a note in dubious Italian reading "Nom? Ferite sulla Piave." The photos had been donated by Harry Knapp, an ARC volunteer stationed at Ca' Erizzo, to the previous owner of the villa, Ernesto Azzalin.

This discovery spurred the late historian Giovanni Cecchin's research into Ca' Erizzo's history during World War One and Hemingway's association with Bassano, resulting in the museum's opening in 2014. Five rooms chronicle the author's time in Veneto, with a display of archival documents and photographs narrating his experience as an ARC volunteer and the American presence in Italy, along with a collection of first editions of Hemingway in English and in translation.

The attention received by a recent article in the *Washington Post* by James McGrath Morris, the scholar who identified Fedele Temperini as the name of the soldier who unknowingly saved Hemingway's life by taking the brunt of the explosion that wounded him in Fossalta, testifies to the lively interest in Papa's first wartime experience among the general public. Parading his knowledge of the region to the Venetian Renata and perhaps betraying his author's lifelong interest in the area, Colonel Cantwell tells her, "I'm a Basso Piave boy and a Grappa boy straight here from Pertica. I'm a Pasubio boy too, if you know what that means."

Prompted by these words from *Across the River and Into the Trees*, the goal of the Bassano museum is to



Villa Ca' Erizzo in 1918.



Lungobrenta Hemingway.

become a place devoted to study Hemingway's biographical and literary connections with the Veneto. In addition, a complete renovation of the five rooms, along with an expansion of the collection and library, are planned in the immediate future.

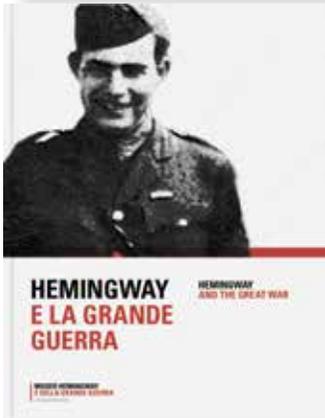
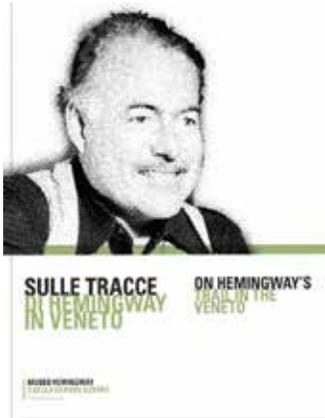
"Did you ever see a sunrise from Mount Grappa or know the feel of a June twilight in the Dolomites?" asks the narrator of "Pickles McCarty," adding, "There's a lot to war beside fighting you know." For Hemingway there has always been a lot to war beside fighting: love, friendship, food, drink, and, most of all, sources of creative inspiration. Villa Ca' Erizzo opened its doors to the public to commemorate the many ways in which his participation in the Great War influenced his writing, as well as his incurable fascination for the Veneto.

A NOTE ABOUT MARTINA: "Since December 2018, I have served as Curator and International Relations Officer of the Hemingway and the Great War Museum. The museum's director and owner of Villa Ca' Erizzo, Alberto Luca, contacted



Martina Mastandrea with Troy University students, June 2019.

me while I was finishing my Ph.D. in London saying they needed a researcher to write a book on the time Hemingway's ARC 'colleagues' John Dos Passos, John Howard Lawson, and other volunteers from Harvard known as 'The Harvard Poets' spent at the ARC Section One in Bassano in 1918. Additionally, the family Luca wants to revolutionize the museum, acquire new materials, and attract a more international audience in order to turn Villa Ca' Erizzo in a cultural and research center dedicated to the study of the time Hemingway spent in Italy and the Italians he met in his many visits to the peninsula." If you are traveling to Italy—no matter what part—we encourage you to visit the museum! ■



Winners who can help answer this question about a possible Hemingway/MacLeish trip to Bassano del Grappa in 1925 will win these intriguing books!

## Hemingway Sleuths: We Need Your Help!

This is a call to all true Hemingway buffs out there. The question is very simple: did Ernest Hemingway and Archibald MacLeish ever travel to Bassano del Grappa together?

On October 15, 1958, Hemingway responded to a letter by MacLeish to defend himself from the accusation of having “loused up” some information about him in an interview recently given to *The Paris Review*.

“You dope,” wrote Hem to Archie. “Did you think I had forgotten Rue du Bac, Juan les Pins, Zaragoza, Chartres,” showing he still remembered all the places they visited together. After the unsolicited request “don’t ask me to name them all,” Hemingway added, “Bassano and ‘A Pursuit Race’” (*Selected Letters* 884-85), associating the name of the Italian city with his 1927 short story that MacLeish had criticized back in the Jazz Age days when they were hanging out in Paris. A year after that story, Archibald and his wife, Ada, decided to finish their five-year expats’ experience and return to the United States, which means the trip in question might have happened between the summer 1924—when Hemingway met MacLeish at the Closeries des Lilas—and 1928.

The Hemingway Society member who can come up with an answer to this question will win the two books published by the Bassano Museum, *On Hemingway’s Trail* (2017) and *Hemingway and the Great War* (2018), together with the not-to-be-missed opportunity to brag about his/her knowledge of Hemingway’s anecdotes!

If you know the answer to this mystery, contact Martina at martinamastandrea (AT) gmail.com. ■



## Tim O'Brien's Forthcoming Book to Include 2016 Hemingway Society Keynote

by Alex Vernon

Many of us recall Tim O'Brien’s keynote lecture in Oak Park, “Timmy and Tad and Papa and Me,” as a 2016 conference highlight. Afterward, O'Brien spent several months reworking the essay as part of a new project. *Dad’s Maybe Book* is scheduled for release this October (it is already available for pre-order). It is his second book of nonfiction, a memoir of sorts that rounds out a career that began with the war memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973). Much like the conference essay that inspired it, the new book is about fatherhood, literature, and America’s wars. I’ve had the honor and pleasure to read it in advance of publication. I promise: you will laugh, you will cry. For those who prefer audio books, it is the only one of O'Brien’s books that he reads himself—the next best thing to being able to time-travel back to that magical night in Lund Auditorium at Dominican University. ■

