

Readings for farmers: agrarian almanacs in Italy from the eighteenth to the twentieth century*

by Manuel Vaquero Piñeiro

Abstract

In this paper we study the evolution of agricultural almanacs in Italy between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. These are shown to have been a powerful vehicle for the transmission of ideas and knowledge at a time when the agriculture of the European continent was undergoing profound transformations. In Italy agricultural almanacs achieved a high level of diversification and sophistication. Over time their contents passed through a number of different phases. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the main goal was to educate the 'good farmer'. Subsequently, in the second half of the nineteenth century, almanacs contributed to the spreading of scientific and technical information (fertilizers, machinery, pesticides) with the help of both advertisements and images. In the twentieth century, especially under Fascism, almanacs became a means of spreading political propaganda. The study identifies the characteristics of publications for the rural working classes, the changes they underwent and the way in which they were also the instruments of change.

In the Italy of the eighteenth century, in the new climate of an Enlightened understanding of the laws of nature,¹ a wealth of agronomic texts were published.² They foreshadowed the flowering of agricultural academies,³ which propagated the belief that landowners and their agents, as well as being personally engaged in agricultural improvement, also had to devote themselves to writing books on agriculture and the education of peasants. The development of Enlightened reform and scientific culture spread a new consciousness: it was no longer enough to have good lands, nor could the landowner rely on sheer randomness in their management. It was imperative to free agriculture from superstition and ignorance.

* This article has been made possible by the Fondazione Barbanera 1762, which generously granted me access to their rich collection of almanacs.

¹ M. Ambrosoli, *Scienziati, contadini e proprietari. Botanica e agricoltura nell'Europa occidentale 1350–1850* (1992) [English edition, *The wild and the sown: botany and agriculture in Western Europe, 1350–1850* (1997)].

² H. Holmes, 'The circulation of Scottish agricultural books during the eighteenth century', *AgHR* 54 (2006), pp. 45–78.

³ D. Brianta, 'I luoghi del sapere agronomico: accademie, società di agricoltura e di arti meccaniche, orti agrari, atenei (1802–1814)', in E. Brambilla,

C. Capra and A. Scotti (eds), *Istituzioni e cultura in età napoleonica* (2008), pp. 62–157; M. Simonetto, 'Accademie agrarie italiane del XVIII secolo. Profili storici dimensione sociale', *Società e storia* 124 (2009), pp. 261–302; 125 (2009), pp. 445–63; M. M. Augello and M. E. L. Guidi (eds), *Associazionismo economico e diffusione dell'economia politica nell'Italia dell'Ottocento. Dalle società economico-agrarie alle associazioni di economisti* (2000).

It goes without saying, however, that the discussions conducted in learned societies, in which it was pleasant and fashionable to discuss discoveries and experiments, took place in a completely different environment from that of the 'class of agricultural workers',⁴ towards whom the innovations being debated were naturally directed. To bring together these two distinct worlds, one highly educated and the other generally illiterate, in order to transmit the basic concepts and changes that were taking place in European agriculture, constituted a key objective.⁵

One of the points of contact between high and low agronomic culture can be traced through the evolution of astronomical tables, which circulated widely in Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶ These evolved into almanacs containing useful information for farmers. By the eighteenth century a theoretical reasoning based on the behaviour of stars and planets had begun to give way to a more practical and utilitarian approach based on an understanding of the growth of crops. If the observation of the universe had earlier been thought crucial to preventing natural disasters and reducing the risk of food scarcity, during the nineteenth century this world view – which had allowed humans only a limited ability to change their circumstances – gave way to scientific knowledge and good agricultural practices. The phases of the moon or reminders of how important it was to invoke the protection of the saints did not disappear from almanacs, but increasingly almanacs propagated the view that the state of the fields and health of the animals depended almost exclusively on the farmer's knowledge and skill. In this way popular beliefs were relegated to the status of curiosities by scientific and academic knowledge.

From the second half of the eighteenth century, thanks to the efforts of 'men led by an almost religious faith in the benefits of scientific progress',⁷ there was the rapid emergence of a popular publishing industry, dedicated to the production and marketing of small, inexpensive books,⁸

⁴ For a useful comparison with the English case see S. Wade Martins, *Farmers, landlords and landscapes: rural Britain, 1720 to 1870* (2004); R. W. Hoyle (ed.), *The farmer in England, 1650–1980* (2013).

⁵ On the transformations which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agriculture underwent, there is an abundant bibliography with regard, especially, to northern Europe. See B. M. S. Campbell and M. Overton (eds), *Land, labour and livestock. Historical studies in European agricultural productivity* (1991); M. Overton, *Agricultural revolution in England. The transformation of the agrarian economy, 1500–1850* (1996); J.-P. Poussou, *La terre et les paysans en France et en Grande-Bretagne du début du XVIIe à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (1999). Amongst classical syntheses of agricultural history in Europe are B. H. Slicher van Bath, *The agrarian history of western Europe* (1963); W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur in Mitteleuropa vom 13. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (1935); D. B. Grigg, *The dynamics of agricultural change: the historical experience* (1983).

⁶ For England and the colonies see J. T. Kelly,

Practical astronomy during the seventeenth century: almanac-makers in America and England (1991); D. Cressy, *Bonfires and bells. National memory and the Protestant calendar in Elizabeth and Stuart England* (1989); M. Perkins, *Visions of the future: almanacs, time and cultural change, 1775–1870* (1996); N. Campion, *Astrology and popular religion in the modern West. Prophecy, cosmology and the New Age Movement* (2012); B. Capp, *Astrology and the popular press; English almanacs, 1500–1800* (1979). For Italy see E. Casali, *Le spie del cielo. Oroscopi, lunari e almanacchi nell'Italia moderna* (2003).

⁷ M. P. Donato, 'Scienza e pubblica utilità', in M. P. Donato and others (eds), *Atlante storico dell'Italia rivoluzionaria e napoleonica* (2013), p. 230.

⁸ At the end of the nineteenth century some of these books, destined for a popular readership, sold for only 25 cents. See G. Bacci, 'Illustrazioni di largo consumo: dinamiche visive e culturali nei romanzi di Carolina Invernizio', *Bollettino del Museo del Risorgimento* 51–2 (2006–7), pp. 251–79, at p. 254.

written in an accessible language and designed to provide practical information and advice to farmers. Within the varied types of popular texts,⁹ almanacs, and in this case agricultural almanacs, made up a category with specific characteristics, designed to meet the needs of a wide range of potential readers.¹⁰ Now the tendency to stereotype them as having little worth has been discarded, almanacs currently enjoy considerable historiographical attention, being deemed a privileged observatory for 'measuring the rhythms of the circulation of ideas, their timing and forms of transmission'.¹¹

The evolution of the almanac genre coincided with two phenomena that characterized the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, the roles and functions of the farmer were distinct from those of the agronomist; second, agriculture distanced itself from pre-industrial agronomy.¹² Within this context, the almanac became a text with pedagogical functions, to consult and to follow in the context of applied agriculture. Clearly it would be naive to think that a few printed pages were enough to induce farmers to change the way they thought and went about their work. In particular, it is very difficult to discover the extent to which the information provided by almanacs was actually implemented and put into practice. This question particularly concerns agronomical pedagogy as it was structured in the early decades of the nineteenth century, a period that saw the first appearance of institutions that were designed to teach the foundations of the new husbandry.¹³

As we seek to highlight in this article, until the first half of the twentieth century Italy was one of the European countries in which agricultural almanacs had considerable importance, in terms of the number of published titles, the number of copies printed and the places they were printed. Although our reflections refer to a European historiographical context that has yet to be fully described, the success of this type of publication in Italy has to be seen in relation to a series of factors that contributed to defining a uniform national framework. It should be remembered that Italy, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had a strong publishing tradition, scattered around a large number of cities. In addition, the printers of the almanacs adopted an Italian language which was grammatically simplified and devoid of

⁹ On the spread of 'books for the people in Europe', see D. Sassoon, *The culture of the Europeans: from 1800 to the present* (2006) [Italian edition *La cultura degli europei. Dal 1800 a oggi* (2006), pp. 349–69]; M. Lyons, 'I nuovi lettori nel XIX secolo: donne, fanciulli, operai', in G. Cavallo and R. Chartier (eds), *Storia della lettura* (1995), pp. 373–410. For the specific Italian case see A. Chemello, 'La letteratura popolare e di consumo', in G. Turi (ed.), *Storia dell'editoria nell'Italia contemporanea* (1997), pp. 165–92.

¹⁰ L. Braida, 'Metamorfosi ed evoluzione di un genere letterario: l'Almanacco piemontese nel '700', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 102 (1990), pp. 321–51.

¹¹ M. Cuaz, 'Almanacchi e "cultura media" nell'Italia del Settecento', *Studi storici* 25 (1984), pp. 353–61. There is an abundant bibliography on almanacs, A. P. Montanari, 'Gli almanacchi lombardi del XVIII secolo',

Annali della Fondazione L. Einaudi 22 (1988), pp. 43–95; S. Gabriella, *Almanacchi, lunari e calendari toscani tra Settecento e Ottocento* (1988); L. Braida, *Le guide del tempo. Produzione, contenuti e forme degli almanacchi piemontesi nel Settecento* (1989). G. Bollème, *Les almanachs populaires aux XVII and XVIII siècles. Essai d'histoire sociale* (1969). For an international comparison of almanacs and calendars see: H.-J. Lüsebrink, Y.-G. Mix, J.-Y. Mollier and P. Sorel (eds), *Les lectures du peuple en Europe et dans les Amériques du XVIIe au XXe siècle* (2003).

¹² M. Berengo, 'Le origini settecentesche della storia dell'agricoltura italiana', in J. Ajello, E. Cortese and V. Piano Mortari (eds), *L'età dei Lumi. Studi storici sul Settecento in onore di Franco Venturi* (2 vols, 1985), II, pp. 863–90.

¹³ J. Mokyr, *The lever of riches: Technological creativity and economic progress* (1992), p. 58.

dialect expressions,¹⁴ which then lent itself to be understood by a potentially large readership. Towards the end of the period the use of lithography gave the opportunity to produce long print runs. To all of this must be added the desire of the ruling classes to provide the rural lower classes with texts which on the one hand were easily understandable and on the other were bereft of any message that could be interpreted as fomenting change in the dominant socio-productive structures.¹⁵ In this way farmers' almanacs enriched the range of agronomic literature after the last decades of the eighteenth century. The publications promoted new circles and agricultural academies and the publications grew in parallel with the spread of schools and teaching centres, both public and private, so that almanacs helped to transfer advances in agriculture to a much wider and heterogeneous audience.

In writing this paper I have chosen a timeline that starts from the late eighteenth century, when the question of the 'good farmer' came to the fore. Soon, however, this ethical and moral approach underwent a remarkable change, when the emergence of new plant diseases and the development of industry led to stronger links between scientific research and the transformation of the rural world. This connection became even more evident when, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the development of mechanization and the systematic use of chemical fertilizers – innovations that were capable of transforming the life of the countryside – brought about the need for a means of spreading the news about them. If books and newspapers were out of reach for the less educated sectors of the peasant population, the more popular almanacs proved to be an appropriate vehicle for propagating the concept of agriculture adopted by more advanced countries. Later in the course of the twentieth century, almanacs represented powerful tools of political propaganda and social control, as evidenced by the use that was made of them during the period of Fascism and in the years after the Second World War.¹⁶ In short, it is possible to outline the steps that led to the production and marketing of agricultural almanacs, which, despite their 'simple' and 'popular'¹⁷ appearance, were able to adapt to changing needs and contingencies, demonstrating at every juncture a capacity to receive and transmit the changes that were happening in the world of agriculture.¹⁸

¹⁴ T. De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (1984).

¹⁵ S. Zaninelli, 'Evoluzione agricola italiana ed evoluzione delle conoscenze agrarie', in S. Zaninelli (ed.), *Le conoscenze agrarie e la loro diffusione in Italia nell'Ottocento* (1990); D. Ivone, *La 'modernizzazione' dell'agricoltura nell'Italia postunitaria 1861–1910. Associazioni, stampa e cultura agraria* (2004).

¹⁶ S. Misiani, *La via dei 'tecnici': Dalla esi alla ricostituzione: Il caso Di Paolo Albertario* (1998); L. D'Antone, 'La modernizzazione dell'agricoltura italiana negli anni Trenta', *Studi storici* 22 (1981), pp. 604–29; M. Vaquero Piñeiro, *Da fattori a periti agrari. Formazione professionale e modernizzazione dell'agricoltura in Umbria (1884–1929)* (2011).

¹⁷ It is not certain that 'the rural population, without any distinction based on wealth, remained, until the

advent of the radio, at the margins of cultural life', Sassoon, *La cultura degli europei*, p. 88.

¹⁸ For a synthesis see A. Cova, 'La storia dell'agricoltura dell'età contemporanea', in L. de Rosa (ed.), *La storiografia italiana degli ultimi vent'anni III, Età contemporanea* (1989), pp. 145–70; G. Nenci, *Le campagne italiane in età contemporanea. Un bilancio storiografico* (1997); S. Visciola, 'Campagnes et sociétés rurales en Italie aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles: un problème d'historiographie', in J. C. Caron and F. Chauvaud (eds), *Les campagnes dans les sociétés européennes. France, Allemagne, Espagne, Italie (1830–1930)* (2005), pp. 55–75; G. Pécout, 'Les campagnes dans l'évolution socio-politique de l'Europe (1830–fin des années 1920). France, Allemagne, Espagne et Italie', *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales* 23 (2005), pp. 11–65.

Obviously the chronological range adopted in this essay does not exhaust the study of agrarian calendars in Italy. In addition to comparison with other countries (United States, France, Germany, Great Britain), we can identify the individual topics covered by almanacs. They help shed light on, for example, the history of agricultural mechanics, techniques of cultivation, the main crops (wheat, wine, oil), plant propagation and animal breeding, chemical fertilizers, farm administration, the role of women, and a long list of other aspects that can be followed chronologically. All of this confirms that almanacs for farmers, despite their popular form, provide an excellent source through which to follow the great transformations of European agriculture in the nineteenth century. But the analysis of these texts invites one to compare the titles released in the same chronological period in order to determine the differences or points of convergence that exist between the almanacs produced by publishers and newspapers, or given by the trade unions to their members, and those distributed by industry. These are all questions that remain to be dealt with in the future in a more detailed work. Here it was decided to adopt a general approach, which, though having clear limits, allows us to first describe the almanac as a type of literature and then assess its contribution to the modernization of agriculture.

I

Almanacs arrived in North America with the first settlers in the seventeenth century. In transferring a popular literary genre that was firmly rooted in English culture to the opposite Atlantic coast,¹⁹ almanacs represented a fundamental element in the construction of cultural and religious identity.²⁰ In addition to the spiritual support provided by the Bible, the daily reading of almanacs²¹ favoured the birth of a more rational and pragmatic mentality among the settlers, which proved useful when dealing with the uncertainties of a future so tied to the good results of the harvest. Read individually, they offered a vision of life and of nature understood as a manifestation of the divine will,²² and also provided vital information about the ways to perform the cultivation of crops in a continent whose material characteristics were very different from those of the regions they came from.²³ In the New World the characteristics of an editorial product were defined: geared to mass consumption, cheap, useful and above all easy to interpret, a small book that could be read and consulted on a regular basis.²⁴

Almanacs in the European colonies in North America became works conceived with a clear sense and practical application. In Europe the phenomenon of calendars or almanacs for farmers found a way to spread in the second half of the eighteenth century. In Paris the

¹⁹ Capp, *Astrology and the popular press*; A. Lawrence-Mathers, 'Domesticating the calendar. The hours and the almanac in Tudor England', in A. Lawrence-Mathers and P. Hardman (eds), *Women and Writing, c.1340–c.1650: the domestication of print culture in the British Isles* (2010), pp. 34–61.

²⁰ P. Spero, 'The Americanization of the Pennsylvania Almanac', in W. Pencak (ed.), *Pennsylvania's Revolution* (2010), pp. 36–55.

²¹ M. Barber Stowell, *Early American almanacs: The weekday Bible* (1977).

²² B. A. Watson, *Acts of God: The unpredictable guide to weather and natural disasters* (1993).

²³ C. Merchant, *Ecological revolutions: Nature, gender and science in New England* (2010), pp. 133–8.

²⁴ J. E. Chaplin, *Subject matter. Technology, the body and science on the Anglo-American frontier, 1500–1676* (2001).

Almanach d'agriculture was first published in 1773, aiming to contribute to 'public utility', by mainly focusing on wheat and cereals in general. Agrarian calendars quickly spread to Italy and specifically Florence, where, thanks to the *Accademia dei Georgofili* in the 1770s and 1780s, a series of astronomical tables were provided to farmers.²⁵ We can consider this to be concrete testimony to a cultural environment that was permeable to the nascent science of agronomy. Other cities in the peninsula were not insensitive to the new genre. In 1789 the *Lunario pe' contadini. Della coltivazione degli ulivi*, was published in Milan, while in 1791 the Royal Agricultural Society of Turin promoted the *Calendario reale georgico ossia almanacco d'agricoltura ad uso principalmente degli agronomi*, primarily used by agronomists in Piedmont.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century agricultural almanacs in Italy acquired a new impetus. The French authorities considered them to be a valuable educational tool to reach popular circles and, at least in the kingdom of Naples, they were considered to offer 'useful precepts for agriculture'.²⁶ If, at the end of the eighteenth century, almanacs were still closely linked to a conception of agricultural work in which it was important to keep in mind the phases of the moon and the movements of the stars, with the beginning of the nineteenth century popular beliefs gave way to a technical and scientific approach, which accelerated the rethinking of cultural paradigms. Faced with the death of livestock for instance, it was no longer possible to continue to rely on bizarre and useless home remedies.²⁷ In this context, cattle plagues, which for more than a century had ravaged the European countryside, expanded the issues to be addressed. This was an attempt to spread modern veterinary knowledge among the peasants, to replace the popular knowledge that now seemed devoid of all scientific foundation.

Language and content inherited from tradition mingled with innovations in publications such as *L'agricoltore indovino* (Modena, 1801), *Calendario per gli agricoltori ossia memoriale delle rustiche faccende* (Modena, 1821), *L'amico dell'agricoltore. Almanacco veterinario* (Milan, 1824), *L'agricoltore. Lunario* (Bologna, 1826), *Il buon vecchio contadino* (Florence, 1838), *Il campagnino maestro d'agricoltura ovvero L'amico dei contadini* (Turin, 1846). For example, the *Almanacco veterinario*, whose author was the veterinarian, Professor Roberto Fauvet,²⁸ aimed to provide 'precepts about how to obtain the best possible livestock, to keep it healthy and to cure (in accordance with the progress of the branch of medicine devoted to it), the simplest and most common diseases'. In contrast to this, other almanacs continued to appear in the usual way, as works without the author's name. With regards to their places of publication, in

²⁵ *Lunario per i contadini della Toscana ovvero istruzione d'agricoltura* (1774); *Lunario per i contadini della Toscana per l'anno bisestile* (1788); M. Lastri, *Lunario per i contadini della Toscana per l'anno 1782. Ovvero anno rustico nono* (1782).

²⁶ V. Trombetta, *L'editoria a Napoli nel decennio francese. Produzione libraria e stampa periodica tra Stato e imprenditoria privata (1806–1815)* (2011), p. 133.

²⁷ M. Ferrières, *Histoire des peurs alimentaires. Du Moyen Âge à l'aube du XXe siècle* (2002) [English edn, *Sacred cow, mad cow: a history of food fears* (2006)]; L. H. Curth, *The care of brute beasts: a social and*

cultural study of veterinary medicine in early modern England (2010). For the interaction of almanacs and medicine see T. A. Horrocks, *Popular print and popular medicine. Almanacs and health advice in early America* (2008); L. H. Curth, *English almanacs, astrology and popular medicine, 1550–1700* (2007).

²⁸ Roberto Fauvet, professor of veterinary medicine at the University of Rome in the 1840s. He was the head of the Pontifical army and the author of numerous treatises on animal diseases, especially of horses. See G. Baretta and G. M. Griffini, *Almanacchi dell'Ottocento a Milano* (1987), p. 64.



FIGURE 1: *Almanacco pel 1827. I proverbi del buon contadino* (Milan, 1827).



FIGURE 2: *Almanacco agrario di Trento, Consiglio agrario provinciale* (Trento, 1884).

addition to Florence, Turin and Milan, in the early decades of the nineteenth century agricultural almanacs were printed in Bologna and Modena, the two cities of the Po valley, which at the time was of considerable importance in the agricultural field.

Although it is difficult to link almanacs to a single evolutionary trajectory, starting in the early decades of the nineteenth century, alongside the traditional forecasts of harvests, almanacs increasingly contained more substantial sections of practical advice about agricultural work. One could say that *projections* were replaced by *instructions*. In the almanacs published in Italy there was a section called variously 'Advice for farmers' (*Avvisi agli agricoltori*), 'Information useful to farmers' (*Cognizioni utili agli agricoltori*) or 'Instructions for agriculture' (*Istruzioni d'agricoltura*), which, in most cases, included a diverse compendium of advice, covering a range of topics, from the preservation of flour, to the correct use of manure for the cultivation of clover, to methods of ploughing to prepare the soil for planting. In the texts a moral and pedagogical approach prevailed, which sought to inform to the farmer about his obligations and duties in every circumstance. Nevertheless, they also covered very real aspects of life in the fields; for instance, soil quality, the cleaning of stables, the disinfection of granaries, the

planting of maize, the arrangement of olive trees, the benefits of potatoes as food, and the breeding of silkworms.

In this period, almanacs for farmers or landowners also demonstrate the initiative shown by printers, who were able to grasp the commercial potential of popular publishing and, through their activities, develop areas that had been little explored by the market if at all. The spread of the small volumes was achieved by pedlars and hawkers, who, by taking on the widespread distribution of almanacs in dozens of markets and fairs in Italy, played a major role in the transmission of content.²⁹ Nevertheless, we are faced with the inherent difficulty of reconstructing reliable quantitative data relating to the production of almanacs, which might allow us to calculate, even in principle, the number of potential readers.³⁰ Unfortunately, as we know, this is not easy to overcome, because almanacs, like many other 'minor' works, are not easily catalogued or quantified. In particular, given their nature, they were ephemeral publications, intended to fulfil their function for only one year, after which they were replaced. Generally they were not preserved.³¹

The popularity of almanacs brings us to the question of use. Before education was extended through mass schooling in the twentieth century,³² much of the rural population had access to educational content through these slim volumes, transmitted, among others, by land agents and parish priests, who thereby played a leading role in the circulation of agricultural knowledge.³³

Land stewards, *fattori* or agents were central figures in the management of a farm. They became the subject of a rich crop of publications, which also developed from the late eighteenth century.³⁴ As is clear from an increasing production of manuals and treatises on the management of lands,³⁵ the *fattore* was not only the representative of the master, charged with enforcing the terms of the contract; he also became the person in charge of communicating new agronomic knowledge, inviting people to set aside empiricism to put into practice what was reported in the books. Unlike agronomic publications aimed at a small group of educated readers, the short texts published in almanacs were written in a simple and clear language, and

²⁹ On the role of pedlars in the consolidation of popular reading see R. Chartier, *Culture écrite et société. L'ordre des livres (XIV^e–XVIII^e siècle)* (1996) [English edition, *The order of books: readers, authors and libraries in Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries* (1994)].

³⁰ As an example, some data regarding the presses of Foligno gives an idea of the quantitative dimensions attained by the production of almanacs in Italy over the course of the nineteenth century. In 1878 the *Moti celesti* by Feliciano Campitelli had a print run of 300,000 copies and in 1908 Salvati's *Barbanera* claimed to reach 100,000 readers. M. Vaquero Piñeiro, 'Almanacchi per l'anno nuovo. Produzione e commercio di almanacchi a Foligno', in *Barbanera 1762* (2012), pp. 222–43.

³¹ Chemello, *La letteratura popolare*, p. 167.

³² E. De Fort, *Scuola e analfabetismo nell'Italia del '900* (1995).

³³ *Il Calendario per gli agricoltori ossia memoriale delle rustiche faccende* was addressed to 'landowners, people who rent land, *fattori* and peasants who can read'.

³⁴ On the professional profiles of the *fattore* or land steward from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century see B. Rossi, *Il fattore di campagna: profilo storico-giuridico* (1934); E. Luttazzi Gregari, 'Fattori e fattorie nella pubblicistica toscana fra Settecento e Ottocento', in *Contadini e proprietari nella Toscana moderna. Dall'età moderna all'età contemporanea* (2 vols, 1981), II, pp. 5–83.

³⁵ M. Vaquero Piñeiro, 'Le temps de travail dans l'agriculture italienne: les traités agricoles (XVI^e–XIX^e siècles)', in C. Maitte and D. Terrier (eds), *Les temps du travail. Normes, pratiques, évolutions (XIV^e–XIX^e siècle)* (2014), pp. 195–212.

often resorted to the use of dialogue in the form of direct speech. In addition, their small size made them inexpensive and transportable. These features made it possible for *fattori* to use the almanacs in a stable, in a country house, or under a tree, where they would instruct farmers by providing them with new agricultural knowledge.³⁶

It is true that there was a current of thought that was hostile to this type of popular publication, which it saw as a simple collation of eccentricities and superstitions divorced from true science.³⁷ But if there is any doubt that the early nineteenth century was consumed by a clash between low and high 'knowledge', the fact that the administrators of the farms were able to pass on new developments increased the power and prestige they enjoyed amongst illiterate or semi-literate peasants.

Parish priests played an equally important role to that of the *fattori* in the dissemination of the new agrarian thinking: many were authors of agronomic catechisms.³⁸ Already, at the end of the eighteenth century, works had begun to circulate that emphasized how important it was that country priests knew the 'best rules of agriculture' and 'rural economy'.³⁹ In the early nineteenth century the teaching of subjects related to agriculture was introduced in Italian seminaries. Well before the unification of Italy, a familiar figure was the diligent pastor who, in addition to the salvation of souls, took care of the health of the fields; teaching cultivation methods, concepts of chemistry and the importance of domestic hygiene, by practical example in some garden or farm personally run by him.

The agrarian catechism became another rich genre that was addressed to the working classes.⁴⁰ By adopting the traditional form of the dialogue and a pedagogical approach that placed even more importance on establishing a direct link between the natural (that is, conservative) order of society and that of the fields, the catechisms were able to convey the new concepts to peasants using simple language. Agriculture was to be improved without subverting the rules that governed the social equilibrium. By proclaiming that country estates were like a family, and that the owners would benefit by raising the social and moral condition of the peasants, these texts were intended to guide the life of the peasants. They were to dedicate themselves to their work without leisure, to live happily without evil thoughts, to remain content with their condition, far from 'violent desires' and attentive to the prosperity of their 'small fields', knowing how to accept, with 'virtuous resignation' the many reversals that are wont to happen in human life.⁴¹ Without abandoning a paternalistic vision that excluded any criticism of social arrangements or the actual conditions of peasant life, the need was to advise

³⁶ For a telling example of the reading of agricultural books to peasants on the part of *fattori*, see *Archivio del proprietario e dell'agricoltura ossia collezione periodica di memorie e di osservazioni sopra le parti tutte dell'economia domestica e rurale*, VI (1834), p. 233.

³⁷ *Il giornale agrario toscano*, IX (1835), pp. 456–62.

³⁸ L. Allegra, 'Il parroco: un mediatore fra alta e bassa cultura', in C. Vivanti (ed.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali* 4. *Intelletuali e potere* (1981), pp. 895–950; F. Landi, 'Il parroco maestro dei contadini: modelli di controllo sociale e di informazione agronomica nella pubblicistica

del Settecento', *Proposte e ricerche*, 24 (1990), pp. 133–52.

³⁹ P. Brunello, *Acquasanta e verderame. Parroci agronomi in Veneto e in Friuli nel periodo austriaco (1814–1866)* (1996), p. 57.

⁴⁰ For an allusion to three works which had considerable success see: G. B. Gagliardi, *Catechismo agrario per uso de' curati di campagna e de' fattori delle ville* (1793); I. Ricci, *Il Catechismo agrario per uso dei contadini e dei giovani agenti di campagna* (1832); C. Pollini, *Catechismo agrario* (1856).

⁴¹ Brunello, *Acquasanta e verderame*, p. 94.

the 'good peasants' in order to eradicate archaic methods of cultivation. Through their example and teaching, parish priests were extremely important in spreading agricultural knowledge.⁴²

However, the *fattori* and parish priests were not the only the potential readership of agricultural almanacs. The success met by these works during the nineteenth century suggests that the readers included a vast galaxy of agronomists, surveyors, veterinarians, merchants and small landowners of the countryside and the city. They could find in the almanacs a point of reference for planning economic activity, and a current vision of a rapidly changing society. The extent to which the almanacs were part of a movement to overcome local cultural practices in favour of a uniform agrarian culture regardless of geographic area remains to be ascertained. However, it is clear that, as they circulated with ease, almanacs helped to spread the idea that it was necessary to suppress traditional agricultural practices. At least in theory, this type of publication, together with other agricultural works, represented a stage in the construction of a national agriculture.

II

The popularity of agricultural almanacs intensified around the middle of the century, a moment when agricultural practices underwent a decisive change. The spread of phylloxera, powdery mildew, grape downy mildew and *pébrine* (a disease of silkworms), which occurred almost simultaneously in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, forced Italian viticulture and sericulture to find – in a relatively short time – remedies to avert the contraction of two economic sectors of strategic importance. In the face of large-scale losses and the proven futility of traditional ways of combating disease, the world of agriculture had to rely on the results of theoretical studies and laboratory experiments. Therefore it is not surprising that, at this moment, there was a further multiplication of agricultural almanacs, designed to appeal to specialized audiences, and directed to meet the needs of particular production areas. Like their predecessors, the new almanacs also arose from the assumption that it was pointless to provide peasants with complex books, which they would neither read nor understand. It seemed much better to provide a few, clear explanations, using a genre that had already shown itself to be very useful in conveying theoretical and practical knowledge.

A quick overview of the titles and places they were published gives an idea of the scope of the popularity of agricultural almanacs during the period of Italian Unity: *L'amico del contadino ad uso degli agricoltori* (Milan, 1849); *La flora* (Portoferraio, 1855); *Almanacco del coltivatore* (Cuneo, 1863); *Almanacco del coltivare* (Casale, 1863); *Il maestro del villaggio almanacco dei campagnoli* (Modena, 1868); *Il buon contadino* (Lucca, 1868); *Almanacco agrario* (Milan, 1868); *Almanacco del frutticoltore* (Turin, 1869); *Almanacco del vignaiuolo contenente tutte le operazioni che riguardano la coltivazione delle vite coll'indicazione dei lavori mensili da farsi nella vigna* (Turin, 1870); *Almanacco dei vini o istruzioni sulle cure da eseguirsi mensilmente* (Venice, 1870); *Il mentore degli agricoltori* (1872); *Almanacco del coltivatore* (Milan, 1872);

⁴² C. Gaboriaux, 'Entre innovations agronomiques et pratiques paysannes. La figure de l'agriculteur pratique au XIXe siècle', in C. Bonneuil, G. Denis and J. L. Mayaud (eds), *Sciences, chercheurs et agriculture. Pour une histoire de la recherche agronomique*, (2008), pp. 45–60.

L'amico del contadino (Casale Monferrato, 1873); *Almanacco del coltivatore e del vignaiuolo* (Milan, 1876); *Almanacco delle campagne* (1880); *Almanacco per i campagnoli* (Florence, 1887); *Almanacco per l'apicoltore* (Padua, 1872).⁴³ A study of the data on place of publication collected so far suggests the limited output of publishers in the southern cities of the peninsula, which confirms that Italian agronomic thought was mainly rooted in the central and northern regions. One could speak of a direct relationship between the level of modernization of agriculture and the multiplication of tools for the dissemination of agricultural innovations. Such a mechanism of cause and effect did not take hold in the cities of the south because of the backward structure of production, which did little to stimulate change.

The agricultural almanacs of the second half of the nineteenth century brought with them some significant changes, starting with the price, clearly visible on the cover: some cost a few cents and others one or two pounds. Publishers such as the Unione tipografico-editrice of Turin, which foresaw the commercial potential inherent in these volumes, priced their almanacs competitively to achieve a large circulation. In the same vein new newspapers such as the *Giornale d'agricoltura del Regno d'Italia*, *Gazzetta delle campagne*, *L'Amico del contadino*, *L'agricoltore* and *Il coltivatore*, also produced almanacs which were intended to broaden the scope of their buyers by offering a winning combination of daily and instructive reading.⁴⁴

In Italy farmers' almanacs allowed many people to participate in the dissemination of agronomic knowledge. Among the contributors to almanacs were Prof. Ettore Celi, Camillo Zucchi the expert in agriculture and director of a farm in the Bologna area, the Marcellino brothers and Giuseppe Roda, authoritative experts on fruit trees and gardens, owners of an orchard in Turin,⁴⁵ the doctor-agronomist Gaetano Cantoni, first director of the Higher School of Agriculture of Milan,⁴⁶ and Ottavio Ottavi, author of numerous works on wine. Enrico Barbero, the owner of a farm and publisher of the newspaper the *Gazzetta delle campagne*, was particularly careful, for obvious market-related reasons (he was selling farm machinery and equipment), to provide news of machinery and equipment. The multi-faceted cultural reality that can be seen in the panorama of the many editorial initiatives suggests that, beyond the conventional definition of 'minor press', agricultural almanacs looked in a plurality of directions. Cantoni argued that, given that they were 'plain in shape and practical in tone', almanacs were very helpful as they were addressed to farmers and landowners.⁴⁷ The texts, therefore, represented an additional element in a vigorous agricultural debate. These were the decades in which Italy began to operate higher schools of agriculture (Pisa, Portici, Milan, Perugia) and the royal schools of practical agriculture, while in the towns and villages courses,

⁴³ The catalogues of the libraries of the Accademia dei Georgofili (www.georgofili.it/biblioteca/ric.asp), the Centro di cultura e civiltà contadina, Biblioteca internazionale 'La Vigna' (www.lavigna.it/it/biblioteca) were consulted.

⁴⁴ For France see *Almanach du cultivateur et du vigneron*, a supplement of the *Journal d'agriculture pratique et de jardinage* (Paris, 1846)

⁴⁵ M. Macera (ed.), *Marcellino e Giuseppe Roda: un viaggio nella cultura del giardino e del paesaggio* (4 vols, 2009–10).

⁴⁶ The author, among other works, of the *Enciclopedia agraria italiana*; on Gaetano Cantone, see A. Mantegazza, 'Laboratori di chimica, campi sperimentali e gabinetti di zoologia. La Scuola superiore di agricoltura', in E. Canadelli (ed.), *Milano scientifica, 1875–1924. I, La rete del grande Politecnico* (2008), pp. 185–209 (at p. 191).

⁴⁷ F. Della Peruta and E. Cantarella (eds), *Bibliografia dei periodici economici lombardi: 1815–1914, I*, (2005), p. 56.

lectures and practical exercises were organized, promoted by agricultural rallies by itinerant teachers, rural schools and a number of bodies involved in the debate on agrarian issues.⁴⁸

Within this framework, the contents of the almanacs mirrored the popularity of figures and places linked to research: 'the scientist as a special professional, the laboratory as a place of knowledge and conjunction of progress'.⁴⁹ The scheme that saw the almanacs as a means for the dissemination of knowledge developed from on 'high', in places that were scientifically sanctioned. The gradual transition from a solid framework of popular beliefs to a scientific climate, progressive and confident, can be seen in the almanacs of the late nineteenth century, which gave advice on such matters as the depth of ploughing, the care of trees attacked by insects, the use of grafts, the management of irrigated meadows, the preparation of forage and so on, always following the directions provided by 'experienced farmers' or the 'writings of the best agronomists'.

It was increasingly necessary to deal with agricultural issues in a systematic way, to deepen knowledge of them, especially highlighting the following main elements: (1) farming jobs; (2) pruning and viticulture; (3) plantations; (4) sowing in fields; (5) horticulture, floriculture and fertilization; (6) mowing and harvesting; (7) silkworm farming; (8) ploughing and irrigation; (9) fruit, hemp and flax; (10) the harvesting of maize; (11) fertilizing and harvesting of olives and (12) fodder and repairs. The landlord, rural manager, or head of the family farm, had to learn – just as in a modern farm – to organize people's activities over the working day. In particular, he had to permit more young people to attend school, because basic education was increasingly felt to be important in the practice of agriculture. Albeit in a very embryonic way, some of the issues would be echoed strongly in the next century by bodies such as the Ente nazionale italiano per l'organizzazione scientifica (Italian national scientific organization), which was founded in 1926 by Confindustria (the Italian national trade union) with the aim of encouraging companies to apply the principles of Fordism and the scientific organization of production to agriculture.⁵⁰ The farms, following the model of the new factory, had to be directed effectively and organized for maximum economic benefit.

The texts for 'good country folk' – the outdated *Avvisi agli agricoltori*, 'Advice to farmers' – tended to give way to scholarly articles on individual topics. In the early 1880s, before the widespread use of chemical fertilizers, there are frequent references in the almanacs to the importance of organic fertilizers, an issue that was presented under the symbolic title 'Nothing is to be wasted', and which went hand-in-hand with recommendations to ensure that every farm used manure pits in an efficient way. Almanacs contained long expositions on collecting and using urban organic waste, something that was achieved by establishing companies to

⁴⁸ O. Failla and G. Fumi (eds), *Gli agronomi in Lombardia: dalle cattedre ambulanti a oggi* (2006). See N. Goddard, 'Agricultural institutions: societies, association and the press', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 vols, 2000), (i), pp. 672–77.

⁴⁹ P. Govoni, *Unpubblico per la scienza. La divulgazione scientifica nell'Italia in formazione* (2002); C. L. Lacaita, 'La cultura tecnico-scientifica nell'Ottocento: problemi e percorsi di ricerca', in M. L. Betri (ed.), *Rileggere*

l'Ottocento. Risorgimento e nazione (2010), pp. 441–56. For popularization of science and technology in the nineteenth century see J. Bowler, *Science for all. The popularization of science in early twentieth-century Britain* (2009); F. Papaneloupoulou, A. Nieto-Galan, and E. Perdiguerro (eds), *Popularizing science and technology in the European periphery, 1800–2000* (2009).

⁵⁰ G. Murro, *La cipolla del signor Taylor. Fascismo, propaganda, organizzazione scientifica del lavoro agricolo (1926–1935)* (2009).

use slaughterhouse waste. In addition to making the city more hygienic,⁵¹ the procurement of urban refuse enabled farmers to improve soil quality.

Of course, we cannot use the content of almanacs as the sole criterion to measure the intensity and nature of the changes that European agriculture underwent during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it is clear that, from the first half of the century onwards, almanacs played an important role in technical communication through drawings and explanations.⁵² For example, special attention was paid to the 'American-type cylinder' plough as having great beauty and perfection because, it was said, it allowed for uniform ploughing. Other ploughs examined included the 'Eagle'. Attention was also paid to tillers, harrows and to the revolutionary steam threshers whose cost was between 9000 and 16,000 liras. Machines like these, from English and German factories, were elevated to the rank of emblems of much-sought-after progress. From even the briefest of information about the new innovations, the 'slow and uneven process of the diffusion of innovations in mechanical agriculture' was pursued.⁵³ The use of agrarian technology was encouraged by the inclusion in the almanacs of pages and even sections of advertising that provided essential technical information about the machines in question (weight, sizes, prices), enabling readers to become familiar with their form and complexity. The transfer of technical knowledge to the rural working classes⁵⁴ was supported by drawings, which were gradually supplanted by photographic images.

In the hope of advancing national agriculture and detaching it from the practices of the past, the texts of almanacs encouraged the cultivation of sugar beet, as its production offered many economic benefits.⁵⁵ In an effort to overcome the resistance of the peasants to the introduction of a new crop that required more work and expense, they insisted that the Italian sugar industry would be able to pay fair prices. The cultivation of sugar beet, it was claimed, was especially advantageous because, by requiring repeated deep ploughing and weeding, it would substantially increase the fertility of the fields. The fact that it was possible to obtain a significant increase of livestock and obtain a better manuring of the land was not overlooked. After the beet was crushed and the sugar extracted, the crushed pulp of the beets was returned to the farmers as animal feed. In presenting the strengths of a new crop, the almanacs argued that excellent results could be achieved by adopting strategies to reduce the costs of cultivation, using high-quality seeds and collaborating with the sugar industry. In short, it was hoped that all would accept, without hesitation, the replacement of wheat with a crop that, in some provinces, had already profoundly changed the economic conditions of the farmer.

Both agricultural newspapers and popular almanacs stressed the benefits to farmers of abandoning behaviour such as the atavistic tendency to work alone. On the threshold

⁵¹ P. Bevilacqua, *La mucca è savia. Ragioni storiche della crisi alimentare europea* (2002), pp. 12–14; E. Sori, *Il rovescio della produzione. I rifiuti in età-preindustriale e paleotecnica* (1999).

⁵² On the role of publicity as a vehicle of communication and also as a stimulus to the debate on technical progress, see P. Bret, K. Chatzis and L. Pérez, *La presse et les périodiques techniques en Europe (1750–1950)* (2008).

⁵³ G. Della Valentina, 'Meccanica agraria e motor-

izzazione dell'agricoltura italiana', in P. P. D'Attorre and A. De Bernardi (eds), *Studi sull'agricoltura italiana* (1994), pp. 403–38 at p. 405.

⁵⁴ P. Govoni, 'Scienza per tutti', in L. Braidà and M. Infelise (eds), *Libri per tutti: generi editoriali di lunga circolazione tra antico regime ed età contemporanea* (2010), pp. 181–200.

⁵⁵ M. E. Tonizzi, *L'industria dello zucchero. La produzione saccarifera in Italia e in Europa, 1800–2000* (2001).



FIGURE 3: *Agenda Caffaro. Prontuario pel viticoltore e frutticoltore, Società Caffaro* (Varese, 1923).

of the twentieth century it was essential to encourage the formation of productive collective entities that facilitated collaboration and the sharing of risks. Hence there were numerous texts published in almanacs arguing for the establishment of cooperative wineries and dairies. Specifically, the solutions that had been adopted in the United States, where the development of dairies had strengthened the position of farmers, were presented as models. A leap in quality could be achieved only if Italian farmers learned to use milk correctly. To this end, it was hoped to develop a network of dairy schools evenly distributed throughout the national territory, in which it was possible to learn 'the correct properties of milk, ... how [to] handle it in different ways and obtain those products that are the most sought after and profitable according to different circumstances'.⁵⁶ Another theme frequently dealt with by agricultural almanacs was the production of wine not only for American markets (United States, Brazil, Argentina), but also for other markets, even more distant and exotic, such as Japan.⁵⁷ The opportunities for the sale of table grapes abroad, starting with Germany, which appeared particularly receptive to fresh food products from the Mediterranean countries, were not neglected either.

The numerous almanacs devoted to the field of viticulture⁵⁸ urged the construction of

⁵⁶ In 1860 the experimental dairy farm in Lodi began to function and in 1874 the school of husbandry and the dairy farm of Reggio Emilia was established. A. Galbani, 'Il caseificio lombardo e la Stazione sperimentale di caseificio di Lodi (1860-1880)', *Storia in Lombardia*, XIV (3) (1995), pp. 5-31; L. Cavazzoli, 'La stazione sperimentale di caseificio di Lodi, 1871-1900', in E. Decleva, C. G. Lacaita and A. Ventura (eds), *Innovazione e modernizzazione in Italia fra Otto e Novecento* (1995), pp. 123-66.

⁵⁷ Editions of guides to facilitate the sale of Italian wines for export are also to be considered. See P. Trentin, *Manuale del negoziante di vini italiani nell'Argentina:*

esportatore dall'Italia, importatore nell'Argentina, rivenditore all'ingrosso e al minuto (1895).

⁵⁸ F. Lebeuf, *Calendario dei vini o istruzioni sulle cure da eseguirsi mensilmente per conservare, migliorare i vini vecchi o nuovi e risanare quegli che sono ammalati. Ad uso dei proprietari di vigne, dei negozianti, degli assaggiatori di vini, di bottai e cantieri* (1864); M. Roda, *Almanacco del vignaiuolo contenente tutte le operazioni che riguardano la coltivazione della vite coll'indicazione dei lavori mensili da farsi nella vigna* (1869); *L'amico del cantiniere. Almanacco del Giornale vinicolo italiano*, I (1891).

modern wine cellars because 'the cellar is the mother of wine'. High standards of cleanliness and hygiene were insisted upon. The procedures to be followed to obtain good red and white wines through the use of enzymes on the basis of the studies of Louis Pasteur were explained.⁵⁹ A great deal of attention was given to the fight against the diseases that damaged vineyards. The recommendations essentially concerned downy mildew, against which remedies made from copper were effective, while for many other diseases such as phylloxera, the choice was between the managed destruction of the vineyards or watching helplessly as the plants died. With the prospect of averting huge losses while, at the same time, giving the sense of modernization of oenology, wine almanacs of the second half of the nineteenth century were widely used to spread the idea that it was possible to fight parasitic diseases by spraying the plants with substances which were hitherto unknown: that regular sulphuring of vineyards with the aid of special equipment was essential. This was depicted using advertising images of the equipment, with associated explanations of its function. These operations were carried out without any fear that the grapes, and therefore wine, would take on the taste of sulphur, although this had been a common anxiety from the 1860s onwards.

The third turning point in the history of agricultural almanacs took place in the early years of the twentieth century. While not supplanting the format and content of nineteenth-century almanacs, in the years before the First World War new titles flourished, providing a glimpse of the emergence of new themes and new sensibilities, both in the subjects treated and in the language used, as well as in advertising. The *Almanacco del giornale l'industria lattiera e zootecnica* (Reggio Emilia, 1910), the *Almanacco delle scorie Thomas* (Genoa, 1914), and the *Almanacco della società degli agricoltori italiani* among other titles anticipate some of the issues and communicative mechanisms that Fascism, in its search for consensus among the rural population, would subsequently exploit.

III

In the early twenties the communicative style used by the agricultural almanacs underwent a radical renewal. The start of the agricultural policy promoted by Fascism, aimed at increasing grain production in the country, changed the purpose of the texts made available to farmers. Almanacs now had to be faithful executors of the objectives of the regime. The books that had arrived annually for decades in the homes of hundreds of families now had a new function, becoming one of the tools to achieve national progress, technical-scientific standardization and, more generally, the inculcation of Fascist principles among the peasant masses.⁶⁰

The texts contained by the almanacs display traces of a frantic search for consensus. This came to monopolize the space available, including the captions about the tasks to be performed each month. We often come across sentences such as:

⁵⁹ On the close relation between scientific progress and agricultural development see M. Cassier, 'L'invention et la diffusion du vaccin charbonneux. Pasteur, entre science, agriculture et nouvelle industrie biologique', in Bonneuil, Denis and Mayaud (eds),

Sciences, chercheurs et agriculture, pp. 61–84.

⁶⁰ On the disciplining of peasants, see G. Cangulhem, *Il fascismo e i contadini* (2006). On corporativism in general in Fascist Italy, see A. Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista* (2010).

Our Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, who cares so much about the development of Italian agriculture, has waged the battle of the grain. Each farmer must respond to the appeal of the Duce and continually enhance his production to liberate Italy from foreign imports of grain that weigh so hard on the national economic equilibrium.

or

... he who has fought with faith by following good cultural practices will surely get high yields. Fields abundantly fertilized with chemical fertilizers will produce the best results. He who has not lavished all the care possible on the grain is to be regarded as a deserter of the good fortune of Italy.⁶¹

It was a clear attempt to engage the rural classes: 'Every farmer must contribute his work to increasing the prosperity of the nation and to achieve the independence of Italy, freeing it from the slavery of foreign markets'.⁶² With the advent of Fascism, the almanacs came to acquire a national dimension and to incorporate messages about and statements of the government's economic policy: they became instruments of political propaganda.

During the '20s and '30s, new types of promoters of almanacs appeared. If the market had previously been served by a series of small printers, during the Fascist era, almanacs such as the *Agenda del nitrato di Chile* (Rome, 1929), the *Agenda Caffaro* (Genoa, 1923), the *Agenda agricola della Montecatini* (Milan, 1924) and the *Agenda agricola* of the National Confederation of Fascist Farmers began to circulate. They also produced booklets and notebooks with space to write and keep weekly accounts. Receiving contributions from business groups, trade unions, newspapers and sellers of seeds and plants, almanacs and calendars included pictures and tables with statistics to show objective evidence of progress and figures from the national economy in terms of quintals of wheat produced or tons of fertilizer used. In this way, blending commercial advertising and political propaganda, the usual columns containing recommendations and practical guidance on the crops were reconfigured and now acquired the status of a real vehicle of modernization, also visible in the colour photographs and images that accompanied the texts. The traditional weather predictions, proverbs, astronomical tables, calendar information remained, but in the '30s, when glossy magazines became widespread, even the modest agrarian almanacs had to adapt their figurative language.⁶³

As soldiers ready to fight a tough war in the name of national food self-sufficiency, all Italian agricultural workers – without distinction of rank or social status – had to keep their attention focused on the massive use of chemical fertilizers, which the texts presented as the true panacea of national redemption. Not surprisingly, around 1930 advertisements began to appear in the almanacs for calcium cyanamide manufactured in Terni and the range of products offered for sale by the influential Montecatini Company. At the same time, information became more and more specific about the types of chemical fertilizers⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbarera* (1927), pp. 12 and 24.

⁶² *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbarera* (1938), p. 32.

⁶³ D. Forgacs and S. Gundle, *Mass culture and Italian society from Fascism to the Cold War* (2007) [Italian edition, *Cultura di massa e società italiana* (2007)].

⁶⁴ On chemical fertilizers in Italy see M. Pezzati,

and the amount that it was necessary to use. The issue of chemical fertilizers was one of the flagships of the official publications that aimed to encourage the development of domestic agriculture. The space given to this issue attests that the almanacs, alongside the itinerant teaching of agriculture and agrarian rallies, represented a powerful channel of indoctrination. For instance:

chemical fertilizers should be used by all the farmers who want to increase their products and earn a lot. Chemical fertilizers (superphosphate, potash and nitrogen fertilizers) will also intensify the forage production and thus increase the livestock and manure accordingly. This in turn is a major source of fertility.⁶⁵

The message circulated was also clear in its extremely direct formulation:

the diligent, intelligent and hard-working farmer will always receive a well-merited reward of abundant harvests and the satisfaction of having helped to increase the prosperity of the nation that is based on the agricultural industry.⁶⁶

Superphosphate, calcium cyanamide and sulphate, all became new watchwords of national agriculture, substances that the farmer, choosing the Italian brand that cost less and performed the same, had to learn to use, respecting the proportions and the dictates of agricultural engineering.

The problem of the technical training of farmers was hotly debated during the Fascist period. The readers of the almanacs were reminded of the importance of attending conferences and training courses organized by the itinerant agricultural organizers. Contributing to the training of the obedient and disciplined 'Fascist peasant',⁶⁷ the almanacs of the Fascist era provided essential information on a type of agriculture that was based not on the 'to do'



FIGURE 4: *Agenda dell'agricoltore*, Confederazione fascista degli agricoltori (Rome, 1938).

Note 64 *continued*

'La Federazione dei consorzi agrari ed il mercato dei concimi chimici (1892-1932)', in S. Fontana (ed.), *La Federconsorzi tra Stato Liberale e fascismo* (1995) pp. 133-63; id., 'Industria e agricoltura: i concimi chimici', in D'Attorre and De Bernardi (eds), *Studi sull'agricoltura italiana*, pp. 373-402.

⁶⁵ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbera* (1927) p. 28.

⁶⁶ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbera* (1925), p. 35.

⁶⁷ On Fascist rhetoric see S. Lanaro, *Retorica e politica. Alle origini dell'Italia contemporanea* (2011), pp. 140-42.

but on 'know-how' and this required knowledge that could only come from education. Such knowledge is also used in the selection of the strains of wheat to be sown, which were selected to suit the conditions of each area. In addition to absolute faith in the new weapons supplied by industry and science,⁶⁸ the peasant had to obtain, therefore, good iron ploughs since 'careful and profound work ensure the effectiveness of chemical fertilizers'.⁶⁹ To encourage the purchase of new mechanical devices, preferably transported by Fiat tractors, almanacs resorted to the political icon *par excellence*, the figure of Il Duce, whose photographs while harvesting wheat or driving the tractor were often reproduced in their pages.

In a nutshell, the texts promoted the massive use of chemical and mechanical aids in a persuasive way. It must be said, however, that with respect to the effort spent in the name of modernization, many of the images chosen to illustrate the various months of the year used a traditional way of representing the countryside, in which machines were completely absent. The agricultural work of the year continued to be largely represented, even in an almanac of 1935, by men and women reaping and threshing using scythes, sickles and flails – and a plough pulled by oxen. In its static ahistorical image, this model of agriculture, tied almost exclusively to the labour force of humans and animals, ended up relating to one of the most widely disseminated slogans of the regime: 'The weapons of the farmer? The spade, hoe, muscle and patience'.⁷⁰

In addition to messages aimed at strengthening productive power, in the same years the texts were dedicated to the theme of saving, as well as the importance of domestic production. In this case the chosen target were rural housewives,⁷¹ for whom there were specific calendars and almanacs (*Agenda della massaia rurale*, *Almanacco del contadino e delle massaie*) all advocating national self-sufficiency in the consumption of goods and groceries. Suggestions were made that every home should not only be endowed with gardens and cocooneries but also rabbit hutches, chicken coops and pigsties, all of which were to be supplied with feed manufactured by domestic companies, beginning with Phosphorus Ph which was presented as a true panacea to achieve robust and fast growth of chicks. The buildings for the raising of small animals had to be modern and rational, that is, built with asbestos cement. They were to be cleaned regularly but were not fitted with electric lighting.

The autarchic orientation imposed by the Fascist regime on the country's economy is amply evinced in the almanacs. For example, in 1935, the *Agenda dell'agricoltore*, published by the Fascist Confederation of Farmers, addressed the issue of farmer participation in the construction of the corporate state while in 1938 the meanings of terms such as 'self-sufficient consciousness' or 'autarchic mysticism', were explained, adding to explanatory texts photographs of the Duce and senior leaders of the party engaged in inspections of fields and farms. In particular, self-sufficiency in livestock production was advocated using a dialogue based on a series of questions and answers, which explained the need for Italy to catch up, in order to obtain 'independence from others'. This was objective was to be secured through the competition of

⁶⁸ T. Saraiva, 'Costruire il fascismo: autarchia e produzione di organismi standardizzati', in *Storia d'Italia. Annali* 26, pp. 203–39.

⁶⁹ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbera* (1926) p. 23.

⁷⁰ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbera* (1933), unnumbered pages.

⁷¹ On female peasants and the regime see P. Willson, *Peasant women and politics in Fascist Italy: the Massaie Rurali* (2002).

large and small farmers who first had to learn the best practices of farming, starting with the use of modern silos to conserve fodder.

The almanacs of organizations and business groups linked to the agricultural sector touted ruralist rhetoric and the value of the countryside as the cradle of Italian civilization.⁷² A concrete case was represented in the illustration of the procedures for land improvement. The Pontine Marshes were depicted as a joyful land with:

ploughed fields, modern, attractive houses, churches, schools and ploughed and fruitful land everywhere filled with crops and harvests. Littoria and Sabaudia are the first rural towns of the Fascist era and others will follow.⁷³

Similarly, the rural villages of the Sicilian latifundia were described, on the basis of designs, as material evidence of a new model of rural society built around the post office, the school, the church, the local Fascist centre and the tavern. Texts and drawings were supplemented by short captions, which reminded the readers of the revolutionary nature of the changes made, starting with the provision of running water in rural houses.

IV

The rhetoric of the achievements expected of agriculture disappeared from the almanacs after the end of World War II. Given the dramatic situation the country was in, the editors of almanacs changed their tune, urging readers to engage in reconstruction. Their pages were now marked by an atmosphere of peace and harmony among all Italians, who were called upon to work together in order not to miss the opportunities for social progress that would be opened up by the new Republican government. Aid received from the 'American friends' was explicitly mentioned as the basis of well-being that would surely come if a revival of the primary sector of the economy were to be implemented. Agriculture continued to be described as the main source of wealth in the country.

In terms of technical considerations, after 1945 almanacs continued to insist on the use of chemical fertilizers, the need for cleanliness and the care of plants, all of which were to be achieved with products easily available in the market. There were, however, problematic elements, such as references to the obligatory delivery of grain and oil to the 'barns and olive presses of the people'. Having been imposed by Fascism, these obligations became the source of heated controversy among political forces and unions. More attention was devoted to the presentation of the agricultural policy promoted by the government. Without departing from an ideological approach opposed to violent changes, the almanacs of the early '50s mirrored the general principles of the government. Echoing the usual patronizing tone and invoking the importance of the technical advice of agricultural inspectors, the rural classes of the post-war period were specifically invited to put their trust in men who occupied positions of responsibility, who were presented as the most competent and reliable and able to propose the best technical solutions to the problems of the country in general and agriculture in particular.

⁷² V. De Grazia, *Consenso e cultura di massa nell'Italia fascista* (1981), pp. 109–45.

⁷³ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barba-nella* (1936), p. 5.

Any political opposition was condemned and readers were urged to seize the opportunity of economic progress and social improvement that the new national and international situation seemed to guarantee.

Responding in large measure to the vision of rural development promoted by Catholic spokesmen, almanacs presented the laws on land reform and the formation of small farmer ownership in detail. They insisted on the necessity of state aid, providing guidance on how to access to loans for the purchase of agricultural machinery, the construction of irrigation systems and the modernization of farm buildings. Aid was given not only to renewing the country's agriculture, but also to curbing the loss of population from the countryside. The rapid and tumultuous transformation of the rural world, brought about by the economic boom, was interpreted in apocalyptic tones, which emphasized the dangers of 'urbanism', presented as a source of a 'moral abyss'. In this framework direct reference to the crisis of metayage (share cropping) – which for centuries had regulated the economic and social relations in the countryside of central Italy and which, in the middle of the twentieth century, was questioned – could not be avoided.⁷⁴

Always faithful expressions of the conservative mentality of the agrarian elite, in the 1950s almanacs tried to oppose the radical changes that were destroying the traditional order of the agricultural world. Reformulating, with a new emphasis, themes dear to the agrarian elite of the late nineteenth century, they became supporters of a system that mediated the instances of a better life, enhanced by peasants, with the continuation of a form of contract that was still considered valid, if only it were updated to meet the needs of the country. Some of these needs were occasioned by bad weather, such as the terrible frost of 1956, which caused huge losses, especially in the oil sector, but others were related to news of a political-institutional nature, such as the birth of the European Union, which took place in 1957. The almanacs presented the signing of the Treaties of Rome in a positive light, as an opportunity to usher in a profound agricultural revolution, since direct competition with other European countries required a change of pace and mentality on the part of Italian farmers. As a result it seemed urgent to proceed decisively in the direction of productivity growth, the technological modernization of production, specialization and the increase in livestock quality, all measures deemed essential to achieving a substantial increase in the income and standard of living of the rural population and thus avoiding the depopulation of the countryside.

It was a moment of great excitement and popular enthusiasm. There was, for example, the first *Piano verde* (green plan), a measure publicized by the almanacs, which succinctly made it comprehensible. The plan is described as a law of the state, which would last for five years, and which was intended to stabilize the prices of agricultural products, to allow family farm enterprises to be established along modern lines, increase productivity and employment and ultimately boost farmers' incomes, as well as build power lines, rural roads and irrigation systems. The detailed analysis of the measure stressed how funds were available to allow farmers to become owners of the land they worked. The most important message was that the law intended to bring about a major improvement 'in the conditions of the people of the

⁷⁴ Z. Ciuffoletti and G. Contini, 'Il destino sociale dei contadini toscani dopo la fine della mezzadria', in D'Atorre and De Bernardi (eds), *Studi sull'agricoltura italiana*, pp. 267–82.

fields'.⁷⁵ Despite making no direct allusions to the positions of individual parties, in the way in which the almanacs of the post-Second World War period presented the agrarian laws one can see how the Catholic and government forces deliberately used them to secure electoral consent for their policies. Even in the middle of the twentieth century, almanacs were the means by which government could convey its policies to rural society.

V

The agricultural almanac genre proved to be receptive to the many rapid changes that, from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, took European and particularly Italian agriculture along the road of industrial transformation. With regards to social issues, elements of criticism appear only occasionally in the agricultural almanacs published in Italy, which constantly pursued the goal of preserving the conservative *status quo*. In this way, the causes of backwardness and the limits of expansion disappear behind the mirror of a rhetoric that promoted modernization regardless of the actual living conditions of rural families. Almanacs provide us with a distorted vision of rural life, but, examining them in depth, we find they shed light on one of the major preoccupations of the historiography, the relationship between agricultural progress and economic development.⁷⁶ As we have seen, they presented the idea of progress shared by the dominant groups, and yet occupied a crucial space for communication, qualifying themselves, along with other vehicles of technical and cultural dissemination (exhibitions, agricultural colleges, printing⁷⁷) as a useful instrument for the transmission of knowledge as well as a stimulus to the practice of modern agriculture.

Extending the field of observation, the story of the agrarian almanacs should be placed in the broader and more complex context of the relationship between the increase in literacy among the working classes, the formation of human capital and economic development.⁷⁸ The theme of popular education is connected, in turn, to another problem, namely their effectiveness in contributing to the adoption of new techniques and economic models. Unfortunately, information on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the almanacs is, for the moment, very scarce. Moreover, the official statistics concerning reading in Italy, such as those produced at the beginning of the twentieth century, took into consideration the reading of books only, and did not give any weight to other types of printed material deemed to be of lesser cultural value.⁷⁹ It is difficult, therefore, to understand – quantitatively or qualitatively

⁷⁵ *Moti celesti dell'astronomo degli Appennini Barbanera* (1963), p. 7.

⁷⁶ T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds), *The Brenner debate. Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe* (1985). For the Italian case see B. Farolfi and M. Fornasari, 'Agricoltura e sviluppo economico: il caso italiano (secoli XVIII–XX)', in M. Canali, G. Di Sandro, B. Farolfi, M. Fornasari (eds), *L'agricoltura e gli economisti agrari in Italia dall'Ottocento al Novecento* (2011), pp. 13–70.

⁷⁷ On the role of exhibitions as a vehicle of agricultural progress see G. Fumi, 'Emulazione o profitto?

L'avvio delle esposizioni agricole nell'Italia preunitaria', in G. Bigatti and S. Onger (eds), *Arti. Tecnologia. Progetto. Le esposizioni d'industria in Italia prima dell'Unità* (2007), pp. 197–240.

⁷⁸ For a recent overview of the question see C. Ó Gráda, 'Fame e capitale umano in Inghilterra prima della rivoluzione industriale', in M. Vaquero Piñeiro and M. L. Ferrari (eds), *Moia la carestia. Le conseguenze socio-economiche e demografiche della scarsità in età preindustriale* (2015), pp. 92–126.

⁷⁹ Forgacs and Gundle, *Cultura di massa*, p. 67.

– the actual extent of the use of almanacs. Some information about it can be found, however, in the investigations that were conducted in the 1920s and 1930s by the Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria (National Institute of Agricultural Economics). These attest to the fact that it was not unusual to find families of Lombard peasants who claimed to dedicate some of their spare time to reading the *La domenica dell'agricoltore* (*The Farmer's Sunday*) or *La gazzeta del contadino* (*The Farmer's Journal*) as well as school books, catechism booklets and calendars.⁸⁰

The study of agrarian almanacs obliges us to question to what extent this type of publication was able to modernize the practices of Italian farmers. It would be naive to think that the advice provided by the volumes was enough, by itself, to overturn the cultural knowledge that had been handed down from generation to generation. No doubt this is a complex issue that needs to be investigated further. Ideally we would have diaries and other personal sources to show almanacs being used as a guide, a reference text. For the time being, we can find partial confirmation that the works had the ability to penetrate deeply into the lives of people through the examination of those surviving almanacs that contain annotations on food prices or quantities of crops gathered. Given the importance of the issue, future research will have to be dedicated to this specific aspect, which will also determine the extent to which farms were equipped with the machines and tools advertised in almanacs.

Although in many ways this research is in its infancy and many questions remain unanswered, the lively Italian tradition of agricultural almanacs represents a significant chapter in the contemporary history of Italian agriculture. As communication tools, the assertion of this specific sector of popular publishing invites questions about the different ways in which information on agriculture circulated in Italy and the effectiveness of forms of dissemination among the rural public.⁸¹ The terms of a dialectical relationship between theory and practice can now be articulated as one of the keys to understanding the process of modernization in the Italian countryside from the early nineteenth century onwards.

However, as is shown by the case of the rapid general acceptance of threshing machines, it is clear that Italian agriculture, while following its own path of development, finally overcame the dominance of local elite groups, albeit slowly.⁸² In this context, almanacs, in view of their content and their marketing, must be counted among the factors that, over the long term, contributed to the formation of a uniform national agrarian culture.

⁸⁰ De Fort, *Scuola e analfabetismo*, p. 267. The surveys conducted by the Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria had the objective of gathering information on living conditions of peasant families. The result was the publication of a series of regional monographs of great value on account of their intrinsic quality and of their data, including photographs.

⁸¹ A. Saltini, 'Il sapere agronomico. L'agronomia

italiana tra Ottocento e Novecento: dal divorzio all'aggiornamento ai modelli europei', in R. Cianferoni, Z. Ciuffoletti and L. Rombai, *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*. III. *L'età contemporanea*. 1. *Dalle 'rivoluzioni agronomiche' alle trasformazioni del Novecento* (2002), pp. 333–67.

⁸² Della Valentina, *Meccanica agraria*, pp. 409–13.