

Fieldwork Report

The 2021 *Estella Canziani Post-Graduate Bursary for Research*

Elena Emma Sottilotta, Ph.D. Candidate – University of Cambridge

In post-Unification Italy, several women writers and folklorists contributed to the preservation of regional customs, legends and folktales. However, despite ongoing efforts to shed light on these figures, their works have often been overlooked and in some cases entirely forgotten. This has been the destiny of Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940), a fervid Neapolitan folklorist who was also a teacher, a novelist and a scholar with wide-ranging cultural interests.

As part of my PhD project at the University of Cambridge on neglected nineteenth-century women folklorists, I was awarded the *2021 Estella Canziani Post-graduate Bursary for Research* by the Folklore Society, which enabled me to dig into the life of Savi-Lopez by carrying out fieldwork in libraries and archives in Italy. This research trip was pivotal in retracing the steps of this scholar, who authored numerous anthologies of legends and popular traditions at the turn of the century. Despite being a prolific and tireless folklorist who entered this burgeoning field at a time when folklore studies were yet to be institutionalised in Italy, today her name has fallen into oblivion. If this is on the one hand part and parcel of the disregard that frequently surrounds the endeavours of lesser-known female figures in the history of Italian folkloristics, on the other hand it can be linked to the specific vicissitudes of Savi-Lopez's troubled life, which I am currently investigating.

Among her most relevant works in the field of folklore are *Le valli di Lanzo: bozzetti e leggende* (1886), *Leggende delle Alpi* (1889), *Leggende del mare* (1894), *Miti e leggende degli indigeni americani* (1894), *Nani e folletti* (1900) and *Leggende e paesaggi della Selva Nera* (1914). However, these works have rarely been studied, and none has delved into the motivations that led her to pursue this scholarly path. Savi-Lopez lived part of her life in Turin, where she married a Piedmontese doctor in 1875 and where her son Paolo was born the year after. Following her husband's death in 1882, she moved back to Naples and raised her son on her own. Notwithstanding the hardships they endured, she remained committed to her scholarly interests and to her vivid passion for folklore studies, which was also a source of income for her.

During my research stay in Naples, I was able to access archival material on Savi-Lopez located in the *Fondazione Biblioteca Benedetto Croce* in Palazzo Filomarino. The library and archives of the *Fondazione* contain manuscripts, letters and rare editions of books that philosopher, historian and literary critic Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) collected during his life, as well as housing thousands of books that were acquired afterwards. There, I consulted and transcribed the letters that Savi-Lopez wrote to Croce from 1893 to 1920, as well as letters written to Croce by her son Paolo Savi-Lopez and her daughter-in-law Emma Proto D'Albaneta. Through analysis of these correspondences and consultation of several autographed books that Maria Savi-Lopez gave to Croce, it becomes clear that they were in close contact with each other, so much so that Croce was the witness for Paolo and Emma's wedding. Several books that belonged to Maria Savi-Lopez are preserved in the *Biblioteca Croce* and reveal the extent of her network of scholarly and human relationships. Among these works, it is worth mentioning two pamphlets containing the translation from English of an Indian folktale and the translation from German of an article on Sicilian popular traditions with a dedication sent to Savi-Lopez by Maria Pitre, daughter of illustrious folklorist Giuseppe Pitre (1841–1916), with whom Savi-Lopez corresponded. Furthermore, I was able to consult other works that were donated to Savi-Lopez by renowned figures such as Italian volcanologist Giuseppe Mercalli (1850–1914) and novelist Antonio Fogazzaro

(1842–1911), with whom she also had a rich exchange of letters. Finally, I consulted and transcribed Savi-Lopez’s letters preserved in the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* in Rome to librarian and literary historian Fortunato Pintor (1877–1960), which allowed me to retrieve previously unknown information on her biography.

After her son’s tragic death in 1919, Savi-Lopez took shelter in the *Casa Centrale Figlie della Carità*, where she became a tertiary nun and resided until her death in 1940. During my stay in Naples, I was able to retrace the steps of the various locations where she lived and to visit the convent where she spent the last decades of her life, writing and researching tirelessly and weaving relationships with many intellectual contemporaries. Her greatest lifelong passion was Alpine folklore, which she collected in the field while she lived in Piedmont, interacting with local shepherds and mountain villagers. She was directly involved in the *Società per le tradizioni popolari italiane*, founded by orientalist and folklorist Angelo De Gubernatis in 1892, another of her eminent correspondents. De Gubernatis, in his autobiography *Fibra. Pagine di Ricordi* (1890), reported a long list of contemporary “valiant women” and commented that when the history of Italian female culture would be written, they would deserve a place of honour. Maria Savi-Lopez is named among these women. Within the cosmopolitan circle of women folklorists of the time, she deserves further scrutiny for her commitment to the discipline, her profound knowledge of popular traditions gained both through research in libraries and archives and through fieldwork, and for her ability to build relationships with illustrious figures at a time when pursuing a scholarly career and interacting in the public sphere was still conceived as unconventional for a woman.

I am very thankful to the Folklore Society for granting me the possibility to carry out this research on this fascinating yet marginalised figure, which I hope may contribute to igniting scholarly interest in her works and in other lesser-known folklorists from the past.

Postcards from the fieldwork:



Picture 1.

Elena Emma Sottilotta, recipient of the *2021 Estella Canziani Post-graduate Bursary for Research*, has been researching the life and works of Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940), a forgotten Neapolitan folklorist, who wrote numerous anthologies of legends and popular traditions in post-Unification Italy. Here, she is consulting archival and bibliographical materials held at the *Fondazione Biblioteca Benedetto Croce*, in Palazzo Filomarino, Naples.

Picture 2.

The frontispiece of Maria Savi-Lopez's *Nani e folletti* [Dwarves and Goblins] (1900), with a dedication to Benedetto Croce.

