

Garibaldi's Panoramic Exploits

BY PETER HARRINGTON

Before photography, people flocked to panoramas to gaze at far-flung scenes painted on huge canvases, as moderators dramatized the unfolding events

UNIFICATION and nationalism were the watchwords of the nineteenth century. While nations such as Great Britain and France sought to expand their economic and political power through colonialism, some regions tried to break out from under the yoke of a larger power, or bring dispersed minorities together as one nation. Those living in what they regarded as an Italian-speaking diaspora desired to rid themselves of Austrian, French, and Neapolitan Bourbon rule.

To their north, Germans living in Alsace-Lorraine and Schleswig-Holstein determined to join with the stronger Germanic kingdoms of Saxony, Bavaria, and Prussia. It was Otto von Bismarck's vision of a united Germany, with one capital and one king, as well as the foresight, strength, and determination of others, that resulted in the Wars of Unification, which ended in 1871.

The French-born revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) shared Bismarck's hopes and principles, but dreamed of unifying the Italian peninsula. His crusade took more than a decade to reach fruition. Italy did not emerge as one country until 1861, and only secured its future capital, Rome, after the Franco-Prussian War.

The period from 1848 to 1871 was a time of great conflict in Europe and North America, and people were eager to follow the news of the battles and campaigns being waged. The dramatic events played out to large audiences across both continents through newspapers and the burgeoning pictorial press. Some publications dispatched artists and reporters to the vari-

ous fronts, and their illustrations appeared in the weeklies.

Military events were also the focus for popular entertainment and amusements. Music halls and playhouses presented dramatic performances portraying the conflicts, accompanied by patriotic songs. Eye-catching panoramas, a popular media during the period, particularly in Western Europe, also used music and narration to tell these dramatic stories.

Just as their successor medium, motion pictures, would do in the twentieth century, panoramas sought to entertain as well as inform by familiarizing the paying public with the greater world beyond their neighborhoods. Panorama impresarios competed with each other to present the most dramatic subjects, and timeliness was paramount. Some commissioned artists to travel to the various places in the news, to make sketches so that they could accurately portray landscapes and personages. Others relied on images from the illustrated papers—and their own imagination.

The drawback with such massive canvases was their sheer size and weight. Displaying the 360-degree panoramas required attaching them to the walls of purpose-built structures. Once up, they often stayed displayed, as artists painted fresh scenes from the latest news over the existing canvas. Other enterprising entrepreneurs developed panoramas on rollers that could be moved around more easily and displayed to smaller audiences one scene at a time. Known as "moving panoramas," these were a highly popular art form capable of relaying the latest news in the same dramatic fashion as set panoramas.

Garibaldi's thrilling exploits made his

life and career an ideal panorama subject. His portraits also appeared everywhere, in the press and in cheap prints and paintings. In London, M. Gompertz unveiled a large circular canvas portraying the military events in Italy. One local artist in Nottingham, England, sensed this fascination with the events unfolding in Italy around 1860. John James Story seized the opportunity by parading around a moving panorama of Garibaldi's life and exploits up to that moment.

Story attached several large sheets of thick paper together, resulting in a "canvas" over 270 feet long by four and a half feet tall. In vivid watercolors, he painted dramatic and compelling events from the life of Garibaldi, who may have been the most famous man in the world at the time. One side was not enough to capture all of Garibaldi's exploits, so Story continued his visual narrative on the reverse, eventually ending up with forty-two separate scenes. It was a mammoth task, and it appears that Henry Selsun assisted Story in painting the hundreds of figures and horses set in a variety of landscapes and seascapes.

Events in Italy were still unfolding as the panorama was first displayed. A scene depicting Garibaldi leading a campaign to capture Rome in August 1862 is not included in the sequence, suggesting that the panorama predated this momentous event.

At the outset, Story tried to give his audience a sense that Garibaldi was destined for a life of adventure. The very first scene portrays an incident off Nice when, as a boy of thirteen, Garibaldi saved some friends whose boat was swamped when a storm came up. The first four scenes are the only ones that relate to the patriot's



life outside of Italy. Garibaldi fled to South America after serving with Giuseppe Mazzini's patriotic movement *Giovine Italia* (Young Italy) in an unsuccessful 1833 insurrection. A court subsequently sentenced him to death in absentia.

Taking part in a civil war in Brazil, he almost lost his life when Brazilian ships attacked the small vessel he had purchased. He captured the fort of Laguna a few days later, but when the Brazilian fleet suddenly appeared, he was forced to flee with his

Artist John James Story painted a panorama depicting events in the life of Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi. Scenes included the time when, at thirteen, Garibaldi helped friends in a storm-tossed boat, above, and another occasion when his volunteers crossed the Devil's Bridge that spans the Trebbia River, left.

new wife, a local woman named Anita Ribeiro da Silva. A cruiser chased his vessel onto a sandbar, forcing Garibaldi to scuttle his ship, although he and his wife managed to escape in a small boat. Later he organized Italian émigrés, the first Red-shirts, in Uruguay to fight for independence from Argentina.

Thereafter, the panorama is devoted entirely to events in Italy from the late 1840s up to October 1860. After spending twelve years in South America, Garibaldi returned to his native land, where he raised a corps of volunteers in the Piedmont to fight the Austrians in Lombardy. These men had been trained in the Alps, a subject not lost on the artist, whose penchant for dramatic mountain scenery is evident throughout the panorama. Scenes of the volunteers crossing the Devil's Bridge or traversing the mountains in a storm were guaranteed to

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After a popular uprising drove Pope Pius IX from Rome, a provisional government held elections in the Papal States and declared a Roman republic. The ruling triumvirate then invited Garibaldi to defend the city. Here Garibaldists cross the Tiber, with St. Peter's Basilica visible in the background.

excite the provincial English audience, unaccustomed to such visual drama in their daily lives. Story even included an avalanche, and as the audience viewed the impressionistic scene, a narrator described it in suitably colorful dialogue:

"Of all alpine phenomena, the avalanche is the most destructive. Sometimes there is a loud crash like thunder that will attract the ear. The crash is followed by a prolonged rolling noise—high on the mountain a prodigious mass of snow, ice, and rock becomes detached, and it rolls down the mountain with a headlong fury. This mass increases in size as it builds up snow. It then lands with frightful violence into the lower valleys, dragging with it large masses of rock that sometimes overwhelm and destroy whole villages and uproot entire forests."

Early in 1849, a Roman republic was declared in the Papal States. The short-lived republic found itself beset by Catholics from all sides: Austrians and French from the north, Neapolitan and Spanish troops from the south. Mazzini, Garibaldi's old radical comrade, invited him and his volunteers to defend Rome, and Story depicted Garibaldi's troops entering the city with St. Peter's Basilica visible in the distance. Seven subsequent scenes all relate to incidents in Rome's defense.

THE SIEGE OF THE CITY lasted from April 30 until July 2, 1849, when Garibaldi's heavily outnumbered garrison began its retreat to neutral San Marino. The French are seen entering the moonlit city as Garibaldi's men quit Rome under a truce.

Garibaldi hoped to foment a further revolt against the Austrians, the king of Naples, and Pope Pius IX, but was thwarted by events beyond his control. Slowed by an infant son, he and his pregnant wife hid in caves and woods during the day, and continued their journey by night. The final two sections on the first side of the panorama relate to the death of his wife during this difficult period.

Shortly thereafter, he sailed for the United States, where he worked as a candle maker on New York's Staten Island, eventually becoming an American citizen. Later he served as the captain of a commercial ship in Peru, but he returned to Italy in 1854 after reaching an agreement with Sardinia, and lived on the island of Caprera, northeast of Sardinia.

Story did not include this sideline in his

narrative, and the reverse side of the panorama picks up with a view of Lake Como. While Garibaldi still burned with ambition to unite Italy, he now felt the best way to achieve this goal was ultimately through an alliance with Victor Emmanuel II, king of Piedmont, Savoy, and Sardinia.

In 1858, now a major general in the Sardinian army, Garibaldi served in yet another campaign against the Austrians. He left for Turin with thirty-seven hundred men and established his camp at Como, to harass the Austrians through small-scale guerrilla attacks. The Austrians moved against Varese, but after a short battle with Garibaldi's troops, they were forced to flee, leaving their baggage and ammunition to the successful Italians.

Garibaldi felt ready to march on Rome. When Victor Emmanuel ruled against it, he resigned his commission and led a group of volunteers from Genoa in April 1860 to join a popular uprising in Sicily against the absolutist king of Naples. His roughly one thousand volunteers were known as *i Mille*, or the Redshirts.

The remaining twenty sections of the panorama are devoted entirely to the campaigns of 1860. Each scene is described in the surviving lecture manuscript titled "Heroic life and career of Garibaldi" that Story wrote to accompany the panorama exhibition. In this, he listed his sources, which included various national British newspapers and books on Garibaldi. The inspiration behind many of the scenes was apparently the *Illustrated London News*, and the engravings therein provided the panorama artist with most of the information he relied on.

Garibaldi's "Thousand" embarked from Faro, near Genoa, in two hijacked ships. After landing at Calabria, where he declared himself dictator of Sicily, they waged a campaign between May and August 1860 to conquer the island and set up a provisional government. Their greatest success was the capture of the capital, Palermo, on May 30, following three days of street fighting, some of the heaviest action of the short



When the pope called on Catholic powers for help, France sent an army to crush the republic. Outnumbered and outgunned, Garibaldi's Redshirts, including artillerymen, top, fought bravely but were expelled on July 2, 1849. Nearly ten years later, Garibaldi led a different volunteer contingent against Austrian troops (foreground) at Varese, above, and soundly defeated them.

war. Garibaldi benefited when some of the city's royal troops switched sides. Story depicted the subsequent demolition of the fortress, and as the panorama was rolled to the next scene, the narrator read more flowery script to accompany this vignette:

"Other towns in Sicily rose soon after the capture of Palermo, the inhabitants everywhere shouting 'Italy forever, Victor Emmanuel forever!' The Pretoria gave orders

to destroy the face of Palermo fortress—hundreds of volunteers assembled from all quarters, with crow-bars, pick-axes and spades, rushed eagerly to the work of revenge and pent-up hatred. During the entire day, crowds of spectators encouraged the work with applause."

Following the fall of Palermo, the Neapolitans fled into the northeastern part of Sicily and dug in around the seaport of



After defeating Neapolitans on Sicily, Garibaldi's volunteers crossed to the peninsula but were too few to assail the king's army on the Volturno River until Victor Emmanuel led Piedmont forces south. Garibaldi greeted him as the king of Italy, and an enthusiastic crowd welcomed the two to Naples.

Milazzo. Here on July 20, 1860, Garibaldi's Redshirts stormed the position and routed the enemy, who then retreated to Messina. This victory provided the artist with themes for three panels, one of which depicted Garibaldi himself attacking a Neapolitan captain, while another showed the red-shirted English Battalion at the foot of one of Milazzo's fortified towers. The narrator described this scene:

"When the Neapolitan troops were beaten off the field of battle into the town, they made for the upper portion, firing down the street as they retreated. The English Battalion followed them close to the fortress, and got one of the most advanced posts, throwing up a barricade at the top of the narrow thoroughfare, which leads immediately to the citadel; they maintained a hot fire against the Neapolitans until a stop was put to hostilities by the truce."

Besides providing vivid impressions of the fighting, the artist shared a landscape

backdrop and travelogue. As the next scene, titled "Farewell to Sicily," unfolded, the audience glimpsed the crescent-shaped city of Messina with Mount Etna to the right and in the distance the little Stromboli volcano. For many middle-class Britons living in the provinces, without the means or the opportunity to take a "grand tour," views of such famous places were refreshingly new and exciting.

THE NEXT FEW SCENES are somewhat peripheral to the narrative.

They included views of the island of Magdalena, Garibaldi's house, Neapolitan boats, and Bear Rock. Story next turned his attention to a darker and more sinister subject: prisons and torture. In an image of the interior of the Monreale prison on Sicily, he shows us a "chamber of horrors," with various forms of torture being administered to the poor victims.

Nothing could stop the Redshirts' mo-

mentum. Following his crossing of the Strait of Messina and the capture of Reggio, Garibaldi moved northward toward Naples, marching into the city on September 7. The autocratic Bourbon king, Francis II, and his loyal army lay waiting north of the Volturno River. The Redshirts, now numbering about twenty thousand, faced a Neapolitan force twice their size. Attempting to thwart Garibaldi's attempt to capture Capua, the Neapolitans attacked his position in front of the town on October 1, but were pushed back across the river. The violent combat left more than two thousand Garibaldists killed or wounded, and while the enemy lost far fewer men, they suffered the indignity of having many of their troops captured. Capua was taken and Garibaldi's troops withdrew within their lines at Santa Maria before marching on to St. Angelo, where the retreating Bourbon force planned to make a stand.

Garibaldi ordered his artillery to open up with canister shells, which had a devastating effect on the Neapolitans. They attempted a cavalry assault, but the Redshirts drove them back. On horseback, Garibaldi galloped forward at the head of between three hundred and four hundred men shouting, "*Covagio, Avanti!*" ("Company, charge!"). They cleared the field before them, achieving a remarkable victory.

As the end of the second side of the panorama approaches, the artist devotes no less than three panels to this battle on the banks of the Volturno. In the first scene, Neapolitan troops are burning the wounded Redshirts. This is followed by the arrival of soldiers from Piedmont under Victor Emmanuel, who has joined the cause for independence. The penultimate section is titled "Volturno. Grand charge and final repulse of the Neapolitans."

The text continued: "This brilliant incident, which occurred at the foot of Monte St. Angelo, decided the fortunes of the day. All honour to Garibaldi and the cause of freedom! We have now seen in the short space of time allowed us some of the most startling, some of the most pleasing, and the most mournful events in the life of General Garibaldi."

Leading their troops back to Naples, Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel were received as conquering heroes. It was a grand spectacle as the Italian patriot, seated in an open-topped landau with Victor Emmanuel, paraded at the head of the Redshirts down the Strada di Toledo and around the flag-draped piazza in front of the cathedral on November 7, 1860. The crowd cheered, waving handkerchiefs and applauding, and the king was almost crushed by the pressing populace. Following a celebration Mass, the two heroes emerged to the cries of "Viva, Victor Emmanuel!" The narrator described Garibaldi as "gentle as a lamb in demeanour. Bold as a lion in action, truthful and transparent as crystal, he carries it all in his face, and to see him no one can wonder at the influence he acquires over the masses."



Heading an army of twenty thousand near Capua in southern Italy, Garibaldi was attacked by a Neapolitan force twice that size at the Volturno River, but defeated the king's demoralized troops. Here Neapolitans burn the bodies of slain Garibaldists, and force wounded back into the flames.

There the panorama ends, but events continued to move briskly on the peninsula. Late in 1861, Victor Emmanuel declared Italy a kingdom, with himself as king. Rome, a papal possession and still garrisoned by French troops, as well as some regions to the north occupied by the Austrians, lay outside the new country. To Garibaldi, the country was still not completely unified, so in 1862 he raised yet another small force of volunteers, intending to capture the Eternal City.

IRONICALLY, THIS TIME he was opposed by his old ally, Victor Emmanuel, who defeated him at the battle of Aspromonte in Calabria on August 29, 1862. Garibaldi, wounded in the foot and captured, was pardoned shortly thereafter. This was a significant development in his life, and it moved the artist to attach an additional length of paper to depict the battle.

By this time, Story may have lost interest in Garibaldi, perhaps reflecting an overall growing disinterest among the British public. At any rate, he did not add any additional panels to cover events from the remaining years of Garibaldi's strug-

gle, such as his unsuccessful attempt at annexing the Papal States in 1866, his capture in 1867, his service with the French in the war against Prussia, and his death on Caprera in June 1882.

The skill of John James Story, who is remembered today simply as a minor provincial artist who exhibited occasionally in Nottingham and died in 1900, is demonstrated by the manner in which each panorama scene flows into the next. He achieved this seamless continuity of events by attaching small pieces of red cloth to the lower edge of the panorama. These gave cues to the narrator, and to the men operating the rollers.

Grace Burford, a member of the great family of panorama impresarios, obtained the Story panorama in the late nineteenth century and brought it to the United States. Whether it was exhibited in America is unknown, but it was passed down through the family. The late Dr. James Smith of Connecticut donated it to Brown University Library in 2005. Since then, it has been fully digitized and can be viewed at: <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/garibaldi/>.

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