

Italy

John Hooper in Rome

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Controversial Italian journalist dies



A photograph taken in 1992 of controversial Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. Photograph: Angelo Pistola/AFP/Getty Images

Oriana Fallaci, Italy's best-known journalist, whose diatribes against Islam following the September 11 attacks on America won her global notoriety, has died. She was 77 years old.

Unknown to all but her closest friends and relatives, Ms Fallaci had returned from her home in New York to her native Florence. A statement from the Santa Chiara clinic in Florence said she had been admitted "some days ago" and died in the early hours of this morning. She had been suffering from cancer for more than 10 years.

Italy's popular former president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, added his considerable moral authority to the tributes that poured in, mostly from rightwing politicians. Mr Ciampi said the writer's life was one of courage, struggle "an example for all".

That judgment will not be shared by all his compatriots, many of whom expressed disgust at the obscenity-spattered invectives against immigration and Muslims that made her a bestselling author in the final years of her life.

Courage, nevertheless, was a hallmark of Ms Fallaci's life. She was born the daughter of an anti-fascist cabinet-maker who involved her in the Resistance struggle waged by Italian partisans against German occupation after Italy's withdrawal from the second world war.

At the age of 10, she was already carrying messages and, later, arms. She was honoured for her role at the end of the conflict.

After the war, Oriana Fallaci became a journalist and, in the early 1950s, joined the staff of the magazine L'Europeo. The veteran reporter and commentator, Giorgio Bocca, who also worked for the magazine, remembered her for "a combination of vitality and boorishness".

It was as a roving correspondent for L'Europeo that she covered the Vietnam war and several other conflicts. Yet the closest she came to death was probably in 1968 when, before the start of the Mexico City Summer Olympics of that year, she was caught up in a massacre by security forces of students and other protesters.

Ms Fallaci was shot and left for dead. She would have been put into a morgue had an attendant not noticed she was still breathing.

What won her, first, national, and then international renown, though, was her uniquely aggressive interviewing style. Each savage dissection of a leading public figure only encouraged the next to try to pit his or her wits against the daunting Italian.

Among those who submitted to her questions were Yasser Arafat, the late Shah of Iran, Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Muammar Ghaddafi. Henry Kissinger bitterly regretted having done so after Ms Fallaci lured him into comparing himself with a lone cowboy riding ahead of a wagon train.

Arguably her most famous encounter was with the Ayatollah Khomeini in whose presence she threw off the chador she had been obliged to wear. Though her gesture led to the interview being suspended abruptly, the founder of Iran's Islamic revolution subsequently, and astonishingly, agreed to resume it and, according to Ms Fallaci's account, ended up laughing out loud at her unrepentant effrontery.

Oriana Fallaci never married, but she did have a long and tumultuous affair with the Greek poet and politician, Alexandros Panagoulis, an opponent of the rightwing military junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. His life and death, which Ms Fallaci believed was murder - inspired her 1979 novel Un Uomo (A Man).

As an author, Ms Fallaci consistently enjoyed better sales than critical appreciation. She yearned to be taken seriously as a novelist, but it was a quite different work, her Letter to a child never born, published in 1977 after a miscarriage, that won her the greatest critical praise.

By the time she stopped writing in the early 1990s, after being diagnosed with breast cancer, Oriana Fallaci was widely considered as a left-leaning liberal, albeit one with some idiosyncratic opinions. One was her evident and burning dislike for most of the Muslims she had encountered on her travels.

That prejudice was to come surging to the surface after 9/11 when, on September 29 2001, she broke her long silence with a 14,000 word harangue that appeared on the front page of Italy's bestselling daily, Corriere della Sera. The article became a book, La rabbia e l'orgoglio, that was a runaway bestseller in Italy and was soon put into translation (in English, as The Rage and the Pride).

She subsequently published two further works elaborating on the same basic message that Muslims were bent on imposing their religion on the rest of the world, and that their migration to Europe was gradually but inexorably preparing the way for its transformation into "Eurabia". These ideas made her an idol for the xenophobic, anti-immigrant Northern League, but they also recommended her to many Italians and other Europeans who felt she was articulating their deepest fears.

Her three most recent books sold more than four million copies worldwide. They earned her, among other things, a rare private meeting last year with the Pope.

It is strangely apt that Oriana Fallaci's tempestuous life should have ebbed away just as the Pope himself was becoming embroiled in a passionate controversy over his own views on Islam.

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