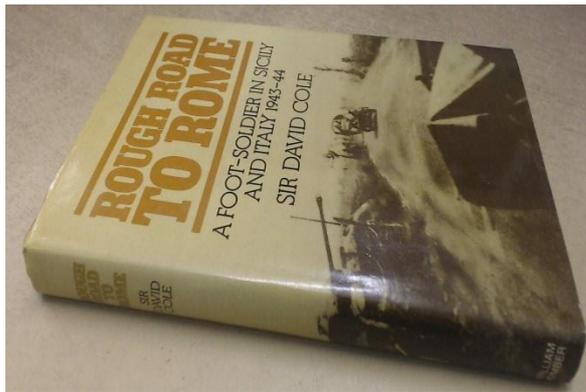


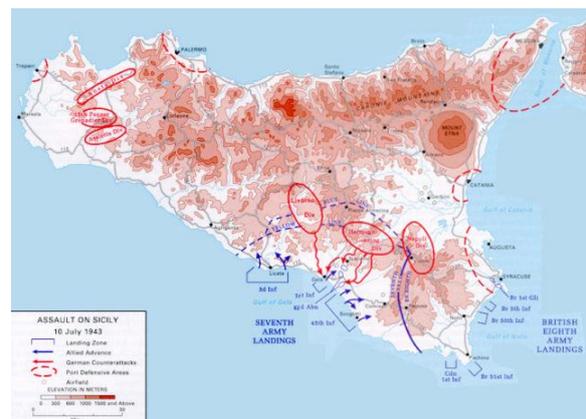
## The In & Out Club Library

9 July 2020 ·

How nice to be back again, with the Library lit up, cheerful, and happy to welcome its readers! There ought to be some very specific book to meet this return to an almost-normal life, but much of the wealth of reading matter in our collection is concentrated under the second of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or War, and doesn't really deal with Pestilence on his white horse.



So here instead is something specific to the date – 9<sup>th</sup> July – and the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Allied invasion of Sicily. We have a book written by a Signals Officer who took part in it, aged 23, and was awarded the Military Cross at 24 – Sir David Cole's *Rough road to Rome: A foot-soldier in Sicily and Italy 1943-44*. He later became a diplomat (High Commissioner in Malawi and Ambassador to Thailand, amongst other things), and wrote the story of his Italian war forty years after it happened, when he was in his sixties. It opens, 'Ninth July 1943. The sea was glittering in the afternoon light...' and there he is, sailing along in a requisitioned liner in company with 1,400 large ships and around 1,800 landing-craft off the south-east of Sicily, in 'what was at that time the largest amphibious invasion force in history...'



He was in a platoon of 35, and they possessed (apart from the field telephone, when they were at rest) six wireless sets, each of which required two men – one to carry and one to operate it. 'In what way my...recent education in the languages, literature and history of Ancient Greece and Rome had qualified me for this sudden dive into technology, I never discovered... [It] never

allowed me to forget, when wrestling in battle with my capricious wireless sets, how well the Athenians had managed at Marathon with only runners.

He is funny, observant, humane and incredibly percipient as to his situation and his own state of mind; he's also able to use his 'recent education' very practically, having just read Thucydides on the defeat of the Athenian invasion of Syracuse: '...an account so vivid and exact that the topography of the area was ... as familiar to me as if I had previously visited it.' They have hardly landed when they take on an Italian column and acquire 100 prisoners; but the next day is disastrously dark, as they're attacked by Italians and Germans combined, along with a lethal 88 mm gun. However, they're also backed up by the 91<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment, which 'consisted largely of stockbrokers, bankers and chartered accountants. Despite this they always did their sums with remarkable speed and accuracy...' which allows them to pick off the German gun.



They travel on towards Lemon Bridge and its battle, passing through a 'landscape studded, in Daliesque fashion, with the weird shapes of wrecked German aircraft... Elsewhere the ground was carpeted, to an extent that might have bankrupted even Liberty's, with real silk – the discarded parachutes...' of both armies. On the way to Messina, they pass Etna, where 'magnificent fruit [grapes]...grow out of nothing more than lava grit'; but they also have to bury their dead as they march. By the 16<sup>th</sup> August Messina has fallen 'and all Sicily was in Allied hands.'

They are less than a third the way to victory, however; they now have to get to Rome via hilly, baking Calabria, full of 'unarmed Italian soldiers yearning for captivity' and villages who turn 'out to greet us with a massive display of friendliness'. The Germans had demolished large chunks of the coastal road, leaving the Allies to climb along rocky gorges and through 'one of the most notoriously malarial death-traps in Europe'. They're visited en route by Monty, rather surreally, who presents awards to two of the troupe, and then they're off again, stopping only for things like obtaining new head-gear – 'caubeens', made from Italian army greatcoats by a local, 'the undiscovered Norman Hartnell of Calabria'.



This is one of the most beautifully-written, cinematically descriptive accounts of an invasion and its aftermath; it is an account of almost unremitting hardship, terror and death, but it's also witty, effortlessly funny, immediate and timeless: the perfect book for uncertain times.