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BOOKS

Martyrdom Without End

The case was called a 'never ending wrong.' It still inspires wrong-headedness.

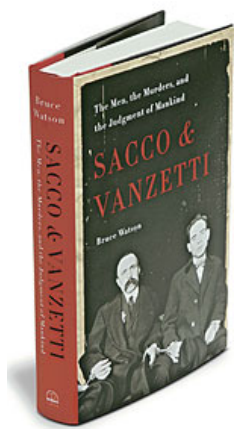
By Robert K. Landers

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Sacco & Vanzetti

By Bruce Watson

Viking, 433 pages, \$25.95



Furious at the indictments of his fellow anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti -- charged with the murder of a shoe-factory paymaster and his guard in South Braintree, Mass. -- Mario Buda headed for New York City in September 1920. When he got there, he obtained a horse and wagon and placed in it a large dynamite bomb filled with cast-iron sash weights and equipped with a timer. On a Thursday morning, he drove to the corner of Wall and Broad Streets, parked across the street from J.P. Morgan and Co. and disappeared. The noontime explosion killed 33 people, injured several hundred and caused millions of dollars in property damage. His philosophical point made, Buda soon returned to Italy, beyond the reach of American law.

William J. Flynn, director of the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation, blamed the Wall Street bombing on the Galleanists, militant followers of the deported anarchist leader Luigi Galleani --

"the same group of terrorists," he said, that was responsible for coordinated bombings on June 2, 1919, in Washington and six other cities. Buda was indeed a Galleanist -- and so were Sacco and Vanzetti. Paul Avrich, the eminent historian of anarchism, wrote in his 1991 book, "Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background," that it was "a virtual certainty" that Sacco and Vanzetti were involved (along with Buda) in the 1919 bombings, though their precise roles were unclear.

In his vivid, smoothly written narrative of the Sacco-Vanzetti case, Bruce Watson concedes that Sacco, a skilled shoe worker, and Vanzetti, a bookish fish peddler, may have been "legally complicit" in the 1919 bomb conspiracy. They were "gentle dreamers whose dream included armed rebellion." But Mr. Watson does his best (without quite succeeding) to overcome his nagging doubts and persuade himself that both men were innocent in the April 1920 Braintree murders.

When the gentle dreamers were first arrested, it was not big news elsewhere. "There's no story in it . . . just a couple of wops in a jam," an editor of a socialist paper in New York decided. But the case turned into a world-wide *cause célèbre* -- America's Dreyfus case. Though they had been armed when arrested and lied extensively to the police, Sacco and Vanzetti came to be seen by liberals and radicals as harmless philosophical anarchists railroaded because of anti-immigrant prejudices and their own radical beliefs. The prosecution had been corrupt, it was said, and the judge narrow-minded. Even the president of Harvard, who headed a committee appointed by the governor to review the case, supposedly betrayed the truth in the interest of the established order. His committee upheld the verdicts against Sacco and Vanzetti, and the governor denied clemency.

As the executions neared -- they took place on Aug. 23, 1927, almost exactly 80 years ago -- sympathizers flocked to Boston to protest. And when the executions were carried out, mass



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London protesters announce a rally to decry the death sentences of Sacco and Vanzetti.

demonstrations erupted in American cities and abroad. The case "stabbed . . . like a knife into the liberal conscience," historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. later wrote. Many liberals, their eyes opened to the apparent reality of class warfare, moved leftward in the late 1920s. Poets, playwrights and novelists devoted works to the two anarchists. Though passions eventually cooled, the legend of Sacco and Vanzetti's martyrdom

remained.

In the early 1960s, however, revisionists such as Francis Russell, the author of "Tragedy in Dedham" (1962), began to appear. Originally setting out to prove the two men innocent, he wound up concluding that Sacco was guilty, Vanzetti innocent. He based his own verdict in part on ballistic evidence tying Sacco's gun to the bullet that killed the guard. Just as important, however, was the disclosure that the anarchist leader Carlo Tresca -- who had been like a guardian angel to Sacco and Vanzetti during their ordeal -- had told the writer Max Eastman (and others) that Sacco was guilty and Vanzetti wasn't. That disclosure had been foreshadowed by another: After the executions, Fred Moore, the anarchists' first lawyer, confided to novelist Upton Sinclair that he believed Sacco to be guilty and Vanzetti, at the least, to have had knowledge of the crimes.



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Nicola Sacco (left) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed at Charlestown State Prison, in Massachusetts, on Aug. 23, 1927.

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was published, further confirmation arrived in the form of a letter to Russell from Ideale Gambera, whose late father, Giovanni, had been a close associate of Sacco and Vanzetti's: "Everyone [in the Boston anarchist circle] knew," Ideale wrote, "that Sacco was guilty and that Vanzetti was innocent as far as the actual participation in the killing. But no one would ever break the code of silence even if it cost Vanzetti's life." Finally, even Mario Buda, according to a friend of his interviewed by Paul Avrich, said in 1955 of the Braintree affair: "'Sacco c'era.'" That is: Sacco was there.

Mr. Watson is not convinced. He misreads the Gambera letter (mistaking the son's decision to disclose the secret for the father's) to cast doubt on its import. And he discounts the confidences of Tresca, Moore and Buda by lumping the three men in with two erratic trial witnesses and three criminals who provided questionable confessions. All eight, he writes, "changed their stories. Who to believe? Who to believe?" It's apparent that, as a historian, Mr. Watson is no Sherlock Holmes.

But did Sacco and Vanzetti get a fair trial? The philosopher Sidney Hook, one of those in whom Tresca confided the apparent truth of Sacco's guilt, said in his 1987 autobiography that it still was "indisputable" that the two men were badly served by the American justice system. But Francis Russell, after his close study of the case, found that, despite "tenaciously held myth," the trial had been "reasonably fair, relatively free from bias and prejudice." Mr. Watson disagrees, maintaining that Sacco and Vanzetti "clearly deserved" a second trial.

Unlike his two comrades, Buda had no trial, for he was never charged in the Wall Street bombing. As Avrich acknowledged in his book, it "cannot be proved" that Buda was the bomber because "documentary evidence is lacking." But, he added, "it fits what we know of him and his movements. I have it, moreover, from a reliable source and believe it to be true."

Mr. Watson readily accepts Buda's guilt. Why, then, is he so reluctant to accept the cumulative evidence of Sacco's? Perhaps because to do so would make the story more complicated and less rousing -- a somber tale in which liberal illusion plays as large a part as liberal conscience.

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter, 2004).

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