

Pietro di Donato, author of *Christ in Concrete*, the outstanding novel on the Italian-American experience.

As my train pulled into the Stony Brook station, Pietro di Donato stood waiting. He was wearing a small workingman's cap and talking to a cab driver. Di Donato likes working stiffs. He talks their language. "I'm not interested in the middle classes or the rich," he told me later in his home. "What they have to say doesn't matter, because they're not the producers."

Like his Abruzzi-born father, di Donato is a bricklayer by trade. He also is a 65-year-old radical humanist and the author of *Christ in Concrete*, a small classic of the 1930s and, in the judgement of many, the outstanding novel on the Italian-American immigrant experience. Out of print for many years, the novel was re-issued recently by Bobbs-Merrill and will shortly be available in a mass paperback edition from Pocket Books. The author has published several other books over the years, but none has achieved success.

In 1937, at the age of 25, di Donato was on relief. "God, relief was a god-send to me," he recalled. "I was supporting my seven brothers and sisters in Northport, not far from here. There was a building strike, and for the first time in my life I was free and didn't have to work." With the government paying the rent, di Donato swiped food from nearby farms and began to spend time in the town library.

"I devoured a book a day. What treasures the library had: Balzac, de Maupassant, Flaubert, Zola, Pushkin. I was in heaven! I discovered reading at the age of 25."

Di Donato might never have written a line had a friend not insisted that he read the Clifford Odets play *Awake and Sing*. Di Donato's reaction to the play was "You call him a genius? I'm not a writer, but I could do better if I

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simply told you, on paper, about my father, who loved life, and who only wanted to live and work for his family and was deprived of that. I'll call it *Christ in Concrete*."

The resulting book, which di Donato calls "simply the truth about my family," tells the story of his father, a bricklayer, who was crushed under a ton of mortar when a building he was working on collapsed on Good Friday, 1923. In the story, Paul, 12, the oldest of eight children (and actually Pietro), goes to work himself as a bricklayer to support his mother and brothers and sisters.

The first chapter of *Christ in Concrete* appeared as a short story in *Esquire*, whose editor, Arnold Gingrich, declared the young author an important literary discovery. In 1939 the book was published to immediate critical acclaim. Quite suddenly the young bricklayer from Hoboken, N.J., became the darling of New York's *literati*. His fame was such that when he married some years later, the ceremony was performed by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in New York's City Hall.

Unlike most authors of highly autobiographical first novels, di Donato, using language that is at once crude and poetic, had portrayed in unsentimental words the reality of his family's life. At the time, it was a reality about which most literate Americans knew little. "I was simply recording the language and the ways and the drama of my people and the tragedy of my family," di Donato explained.

"My mother saw me coming home from the job at the age of 12 with

cement on my shoes. I weighed 72 pounds. As I came up the stairway that night, she looked at me and said in Italian, 'Good Friday, the 30th of March.' My father was *killed* on Good Friday, do you see what I mean? Where's the equivalent of that? In what opera? Maybe in Sophocles."

Few readers were not touched by di Donato's highly lyrical rendering of his characters' tenement lives. When the excitement died, di Donato found himself with a lot of money and no ideas for another book. "The question is, after a person becomes a writer that way, what does he do? I got a taste of honey, and I despised myself. I'm an idealist, that's all there is to it. But I became an experimenter and a sensualist. Maybe it was easier to be in the constraint that made me a saint than in the wilderness of freedom." Squandering most of his money, di Donato was soon "back at the bricks and back on the booze."

A pacifist, he spent World War II in a camp for conscientious objectors in Cooperstown, N.Y., where he met the former showgirl whom he later married. He was soon back on Long Island, raising a family, and unable to write. So he went back into construction work. In the early 1960s he began writing articles and short stories for *Playboy* and other magazines. He stopped doing that just recently to work on *Havana*, a new book about the adventures of two writers, a derelict Jesuit, and some gangsters in Cuba. He is well along in the book, and very excited about it.

These are not the best of times for di Donato. He has had to mortgage his home to pay bail for the youngest of his two sons who accidentally got into trouble over possession of narcotics. And then there are some health problems. He has recently recovered from a bout with pneu-

monia. But he remains confident of the future, and still has dreams of retiring in Abruzzi. "I am Italian through and through. No one is more Italian than I," he said. Indeed, di Donato has traveled to Italy on magazine assignments, and he still keeps in touch with some of the men who worked on the job with his father.

Before his recent illness, di Donato had just completed a six-month trip across the United States. There were visits with Jack Anderson and I.F. Stone (an old friend) in Washington, D.C., and with John Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese, and many others in Hollywood. But di Donato was really after more common men. For all his Italian-ness, he is perhaps more American than he knows. The trip itself was inspired by his concern over America's loss of values, and by a book—Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*.

"That book contains some of the greatest prose I've ever read," he said. "Like the poet, I have always felt that the strength of our nation is in the people. In the sense that they produce, they break their backs, they sweat, they put up the buildings, they dig the coal, they die in accidents, they fight the wars, and they pay for all the charlatans and prostitutes—all the evil people."

For the moment, he is so involved in his *Havana* project that we will have to wait for di Donato's findings on the values that remain in post-Watergate America. His reports, when they come, are certain to be blunt and direct. A thinking man with an eighth-grade education, whose university was the streets, the scaffolds and a wide range of personal reading, di Donato doesn't hedge in his talk or his writing. His background has made di Donato not only his own man, but one of the most brutally honest writers around. □

Joseph Barbato free-lances for *identity* while working for the university relations department of New York University.