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Building a Civil Society: Associations, Public Life, and the Origins of Modern Italy (Toronto Italian Studies)

Steven C. Soper

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The most passionate advocates of Italy's unification in the nineteenth century possessed an almost limitless faith in the benefits of civic association. They also shared a common concern: once Italian unification was achieved and various freedoms were established, would ordinary Italians naturally become responsible, progressive citizens – especially after centuries of foreign rule, regional division, and economic decline? Most unification advocates doubted that their fellow citizens could form a modern, progressive civil society on their own, or that a vibrant association life would develop from the ground up.

Building a Civil Society is the first book-length English-language study of associational life in nineteenth-century Italy. Drawing on extensive research in published and unpublished documents – including associational records, newspapers, periodicals, government documents, guidebooks, exhibition catalogues, memoirs, and private letters – Steven C. Soper provides a complex account of Italian liberalism during Europe's age of association. His study also raises important questions about the role that associations play in emerging democracies.

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