Introduction

In novella 181 of his *Trecentonovelle,* the fourteenth-century storyteller Franco Sacchetti has John Hawkwood encounter two Franciscan monks near his fortress at Montecchio. The monks greet the Englishman.

> "Monsignore, God grant you peace," said the monks.
>
> "And may God take away your alms," Hawkwood responded immediately.
>
> "Lord, why do you speak to us this way?" asked the frightened monks.
>
> "Indeed, because you spoke thus to me," replied John.
>
> "We thought we spoke well," said the monks.
>
> "How can you think you spoke well," said Hawkwood, "when you approach me and say that God should let me die of hunger? Don't you know that I live from war and peace would destroy me? And as I live by war, you live by alms. So that the answer I gave you is the same as your greeting."[1]

John Hawkwood indeed lived by war, and no one was more successful at it. From modest roots in England, he rose to become the premier mercenary captain of his day, achieving fame on the battlefields of Italy, where he served for more than thirty years of his career. "He managed his affairs so well," Sacchetti wrote in a postscript to the above novella, "that there was little peace in Italy in his times." The nineteenth-century English writer James Granger ranked Hawkwood alongside the great Scottish patriot William Wallace ("Brave Heart") as a model of medieval military prowess.[2]

Hawkwood learned his craft as a minor player in the battles of the Hundred Years' War in France, crossed into Italy with the famed White Company in 1361, and became a full-fledged captain in 1363. From that time until his death in 1394, he rode with local armies in legitimate service and at the head of marauding companies when unemployed. Italian states alternately sought to hire him and to protect themselves from him. When he died, the Florentines, his last employer, buried him with great ceremony in their cathedral. His likeness, painted by Paolo Uccello, remains there on the west wall. The historian Ferdinand Gregorovius could not help but point out the irony that Florence had denied its greatest citizen, Dante, a final resting spot in the city but afforded a place of honor to that "robber of a Hawkwood."[3]

Hawkwood achieved an international fame during his lifetime. He served as ambassador alongside Geoffrey Chaucer, received angry letters from Saint Catherine of Siena, and sat in the company of the Flemish chronicler Jean Froissart and the Italian humanist Francis Petrarch at a lavish wedding feast for King Edward III's son Clarence. Contemporaries both admired and reviled him. Tommaso, the Marquis of Saluzzo in Piedmont, described him as "the most brave and wise captain Italy has seen in the last hundred years."[4] The anonymous English author of the *Westminster Chronicle* said his deeds in Italy were "so marvelous that his like had never been found there."[5] But the Tuscan poet Antonio Pucci called him an "English serpent."[6] And the popular Italian proverb "un inglese italianato è un diavolo incarnato" (an "italianized" Englishman is a devil incarnate) is said to have derived directly from Hawkwood's activities.

Hawkwood's notoriety has extended well beyond his lifetime. His name appears in the works of the Renaissance humanists Niccolò Machiavelli, Poggio Bracciolini, Leonardo Bruni, and Paolo Giovio, as well as those of the great modern historians Jacob Burkhardt and Edward Gibbon. On the eve of the English Civil War (1640), Lord John Maurice, grandson of King James I, assembled the materials to write Hawkwood's biography (including, curiously, a copy of Nostradamus's prophecies) but never completed the work.[7] Thirty-seven years later, Lord William Winstanley published a short romance (*The Honour of the Taylors or the Famous and Renowned History of Sir John Hawkwood*) placing Hawkwood in a tailor's shop and at various military and amorous adventures.[8] In 1776, the Society of Antiquaries in England commissioned from Richard Gough an account of Hawkwood's life, *The Memoirs of Sir John Hawkwood*, which was then read, "for want of something better," before the assembled members.[9] The nineteenth-century art historian and social critic John Ruskin frequently referred to Hawkwood in his lectures and letters.

For all his fame, however, Hawkwood has long presented an enigma for historians. His modest background and itinerant lifestyle do not lend themselves easily to biography. Lords and merchants leave obvious traces; mercenaries do not. A recent scholar spoke of the "immensity of the research" involved in reconstructing the lives and careers of such men.[10] Hawkwood's case is, ironically, made more difficult by its spectacular nature. His feats of arms over the years have drawn the attention of legions of amateur historians and fiction writers, who, rather than undertake new research, have chosen to trumpet more loudly and creatively the existing information—hoping to render the Englishman's deeds all the greater by means of purple prose. It is instructive that there have been more fictional accounts of Hawkwood than nonfictional ones. The greatest of the genre is Arthur Conan Doyle's classic *The White Company*, a sweeping adventure in which Hawkwood appears as a minor character. This was followed by William Beck's *Hawkwood the Brave* (1911) and Hubert Cole's trilogy: *Hawkwood* (1967), *Hawkwood in Paris* (1969), and *Hawkwood and the Towers of Pisa* (1973).[11] In 1989, Andrew P. O'Rourke published *Hawkwood*, the story of a Vietnam veteran who was nearly killed in a plane crash, developed amnesia, changed his name to Hawkwood—whom he had heard about in a Renaissance history class—and then traveled to Argentina to fight as a soldier of fortune in the Falkland Islands War.[12]

The nonfiction works are few. The standard full-length biography is John Temple-Leader and Giuseppe Marcotti's *Sir John Hawkwood*, published originally in Italian in 1888 and then translated into English in 1889.[13] Temple-Leader planned and wrote it; Giuseppe Marcotti did the fact gathering in local archives. Temple-Leader was not a professional historian but an Englishman of the lordly class, who, like the subject of his book, passed many years of his life in Italy. He made excellent use of Tuscan archival sources and relied on a short Italian biography written a century earlier by Domenico Maria Manni (*Commentario della vita del famoso capitano Giovanni Aguto Inglese, General condottiere d'armi fiorentini*) and the above-mentioned *Memoirs* by Gough, written at about the same time. Temple-Leader's work has served as the starting point for subsequent studies, most of which follow closely the lines of his research.[14] Kenneth Fowler's recent article is an exception. It extends, amplifies, and refines some of earlier writer's conclusions, using an impressive array of archival sources.[15]

In the absence of adequate scholarship, John Hawkwood has emerged as more of a cartoon figure than a human one. Fiction writers have idealized him into a romantic, swashbuckling knight-errant. Doyle's John Hawkwood is a jolly miscreant who laughs into his long beard. Hubert Cole's Hawkwood moves coolly from battlefield to amorous affair and back again. More scholarly-minded writers have portrayed Hawkwood as a virtuous, "honest" man, an exception in an otherwise dishonorable profession. John Ruskin's Hawkwood is a "decorous" thief comparable to Robin Hood and Sir Francis Drake.[16] Temple-Leader fashioned Hawkwood in his own image, as an adoptive Florentine, whose public funeral capped a lifelong love affair with that city. Others have seen Hawkwood as a precursor of fifteenth-century developments. The nineteenth-century Italian historians Ercole Ricotti and Giuseppe Canestrini argued that Hawkwood represented a precocious instance of the trend whereby individual captains emerged from their bands and ultimately took over the states they served. Hawkwood's attainment of landed estates and his long-term service to Florence are interpreted as a precursor to the careers of later Italian captains such as Braccio da Montone, who assumed control of Perugia, or the Sforza, who ruled Milan.[17]

This book takes a fresh look at John Hawkwood's life, relying almost wholly on documentary sources. It draws on material from archives in Italy and England, including diplomatic dispatches, personal letters, budgets, contracts, wills, and chronicles. The archival apparatus mirrors Hawkwood's own movements, which, despite Temple-Leader's assertions, were not restricted to Tuscany but covered a wide geographical area. The research has proved both logistically and methodologically challenging. Ambassadorial dispatches, a major source of information, often focused on larger issues rather than on Hawkwood himself; they were sometimes confused, on account of faulty reconnaissance, and sometimes intentionally misleading, to gain diplomatic advantage.[18] The dating of the letters presented difficulties. The authors frequently did not give the year, and the events covered and people involved (especially the Visconti wars with the papacy) were often strikingly similar. Chronicle sources possess their own slants. Writers tended to embellish battle descriptions and, often, to relate feats of arms in terms of ancient paradigms, the Romans and Greeks, comparing contemporary captains to legendary heroes such as Hannibal, Caesar, or even Alexander. Interestingly, the victorious side often overstressed the strength of the vanquished. All sources had to be read carefully with regard to the circumstances in which they were written and the potential bias of the authors.

Given the broad arc of Hawkwood's activities and the enormous amount of ground he covered, no claim is made here for completeness. But the documents make it possible to get a new reading of the soldier and person. The portrait of John Hawkwood is of a man who was an extraordinary military leader, if not always an admirable human being. More than any other, he developed the skills of a great military strategist and inspired in his fellow soldiers an unrivaled loyalty. He was a savvy and uncompromising negotiator who played his cards close to the vest and managed to gain a reputation for "honesty" even while beating his opponents at their own game of duplicity and manipulation. He could be cruel and savage but also conciliatory. He retained a close connection with his home in England and a keen sense of his English identity. He served King Richard II as an ambassador and slowly built a patrimony in his native Essex on which he hoped to retire. Throughout Hawkwood kept his true intentions to himself, and in the end few contemporaries knew him well.

The predatory nature of Hawkwood's behavior possesses a certain timeless quality. The historian Charles Tilly has recently drawn intriguing parallels between Hawkwood's "opportunism" and that of modern-day soldiers in Chechnia and Rwanda.[19] Analogies can also be found in the activities of the so-called German military enterprisers of the later sixteenth century studied by Fritz Redlich, the "corsaires" of seventeenth-century Malta described by Michel Fontenay, or the eighteenth-century Hessian mercenaries discussed by Charles Ingrao.[20]

But like all historical figures, Hawkwood is best understood in the context in which he operated. Hawkwood's story is that of the fourteenth-century mercenary. His experience, as a foreigner fighting in Italian lands, was shared by many soldiers—Germans, Hungarians, Frenchmen, Bretons, Catalans. These men were some of the most colorful figures of the day and included characters such as the German Oswald von Wolkenstein, who purportedly knew ten languages and wrote vernacular poetry, and Werner of Urslingen, whose armor bore the forbidding motto "I am the enemy of pity, God and charity." Hawkwood was one of numerous Englishmen—a group that included people of middling background, bastard sons of nobility, and even the occasional lord, like Edward le Despenser—who came for Duke Lionel's wedding and had a turn as a marauder in northern Italy. One obscure man-at-arms, John Carrington, wrote a brief diary of his experience.[21] What was unique about Hawkwood was the degree of his military success.

Most important, Hawkwood's story is the story of fourteenth-century Italy. It has long been customary in archival studies to tell the history of medieval and Renaissance Italy in discrete units, focusing on individual states, most often the great powers such as Florence, Milan, and Venice. But John Hawkwood worked all over Italy and never fully integrated into any single place. His perspective is pan-peninsular; his vantage entails, willy-nilly, a more careful accounting of the greater whole. Thus, tracing Hawkwood's life affords a useful methodology for understanding and interpreting the machinations of states in which he took part.

Indeed, Hawkwood's career provides a prism through which to view more broadly the historical events and developments of his time. The period was one of profound economic, social, and political changes on the peninsula. It saw recurrent famine and plague (most notably the Black Death of 1348), demographic crisis, intensification of regional and interregional rivalries, popular uprisings, and dissension in the church culminating in the papal schism in 1378. The transformative era, known to Italianists as the "crisi del Trecento," has been the subject of intense study and debate. Scholars have identified such trends as political and economic consolidation, the emergence of territorial states, the stirrings of republicanism, and the birth of a so-called Renaissance mentality pointing toward modernity. Hawkwood's activities were perforce bound up with these events and trends. He participated in the wars between the rival popes arising from the schism, in the territorial expansion of Milan, and in the establishment of Florentine hegemony in Tuscany. He was also involved in popular uprisings: he was in Pisa when Giovanni dell'Agnello took power, in Florence when the populist

Ciompi regime fell, and he participated in the events that led to Giangaleazzo Visconti's usurpation of power in Milan.

Although scholars have long acknowledged the importance of war, and indeed some, like Hans Baron, have afforded it a critical role in political events, there has been remarkably little research on the subject itself. A generation ago, the great Annalist historian Fernand Braudel complained in his study of the Mediterranean civilization that scholars were "as ignorant about war as the physicist is about the true nature of matter."[22] This remains true, particularly with regard to Italy, for which there exist only a handful of studies on war for the first part of the fourteenth-century and none for the second half.[23] As a result, many of the conflicts in which Hawkwood fought have not been studied at all. Thus it is part of the task of this book to reconstruct them.

A similar lacuna exists for the related field of diplomacy. Little has been written since the publication of Garrett Mattingly's pathbreaking *Renaissance Diplomacy* in 1955. Mattingly focused on the fifteenth century and later. Yet he explicitly credited the fourteenth-century mercenary with sharpening the skills of the Italian diplomat and thus helping to pave the way for the refined, permanent embassies of the fifteenth century.[24]

But neither war nor diplomacy can be understood in the abstract. It is the fundamental objective of this book to follow Peter Paret's injunction, stated most conspicuously in his *Understanding War,* that war be treated as an intrinsic part of "all other areas of society and culture."[25] The point deserves special emphasis here, since fourteenth-century Italian wars involved foreigners and thus it is especially easy to view them as external to other societal phenomena. This has in fact been the particular malady of Italian scholarship, which has dealt with mercenaries, both foreign and native, as "outsiders," separate from the mainstream of Italian life, or at best as symptomatic of the decay of that society. The pioneering works of Michael Mallett, John Hale, and Piero Pieri have helped correct this notion as it was applied to Italian mercenaries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[26] But any attempt at revision has been hampered by lack of attention to fourteenth-century soldiers and by the general belief that warfare conducted by these men was little more than a "negative intermezzo," hardly worth study in itself. The meager scholarship consists mostly of studies by Italian and German scholars, dating from the nineteenth century, and is suffused with nationalistic biases and limited by a preference to study foreign soldiers less for their own sake than as a stage in the broad evolution of Italian warfare.[27]

Hawkwood's career emphasizes the inherent impossibility of separating mercenaries from Italian society. Though an Englishman—and proud of it—Hawkwood was a fundamental part of the society he served. Contemporary diplomats, politicians, and chroniclers never mentioned Hawkwood apart from the events he participated in; nor, more generally, did they separate the wars he fought in from the course of their own daily lives and the destinies of their cities and states. Scholars who remove Hawkwood from his Italian milieu perpetrate an unfortunate alchemy.

Hawkwood was, as we shall see, involved in diplomacy as much as in war. Mercenary-related diplomacy played an important part of the overall diplomatic strategies employed by states, and Italian politicians often used mercenary issues to manipulate the larger political context. Hawkwood's actions always had a political dimension to them, particularly in the later stages of his career, when he accumulated a large patrimony of Italian territories. The deterioration of relations between the cities of Siena and Florence in the late 1380s, for example, can be properly understood only with recognition of Hawkwood's role as a landed lord in southern Tuscany. Hawkwood's funeral, beyond its function in commemorating the captain, formed part of a larger discourse among Italian states and became a means by which the Florentines propagandized and projected images of power to their neighbors.

After 1375, Hawkwood often served as ambassador for King Richard II of England, a role through which he became an instrument of English foreign policy in Italy and vice versa. More broadly, Hawkwood's career, and that of the foreign mercenaries in general, can be viewed apart from a strictly military context as a species of cultural exchange, which brought men of different national backgrounds together and helped on all sides to engender a sense of ethnic, even national, identity. The twentieth-century German historian Friedrich Gaupp goes so far as to make Hawkwood the embodiment of the spirit of the Renaissance, an example of Burckhardtian "illegitimacy" rising to leadership by dint of native skill and industry.[28]

Finally, Hawkwood's career sheds light on that most elusive aspect of fourteenth-century Italian society, the "very special sort of social organization" (as John Hale called it) known as the medieval army.[29] The following pages will elucidate the military environment in which the foreign mercenary operated, giving snapshots of the day-to-day vicissitudes of camp life, the relations among the soldiery, tensions between troops and civilians, negotiations between troops and their employers and between armies and their victims. It will be evident that beneath the glamour of battles won and lost the life of the soldier was often one of marches through obscure fields and of a struggle simply to manage in the face of limited resources and inadequate pay. It will also, I hope, become evident that war was a pervasive phenomenon on the peninsula, which should be viewed, to quote G. N. Clark, not as a "succession of occurrences" but as its own institution, with a "regular and settled mode of action."[30]