How Mozart's Librettist Became the Father of Italian Studies at Columbia

The curious cross-contintental tale of Lorenzo Da Ponte.

One day in 1804, a fifty-eight-year-old man with hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes walked into the Isaac College Co. bookshop at 53 Broad St. He was Lorenzo Da Ponte, a defeated Italian patriot who recently moved eastward, with his wife and two children, from France, and in 1803 Da Ponte arrived in America, where he tried to support his family by opening a grocery in New Jersey. The store failed, and he opened another. It also failed.

In 1810, long after his European triumphs and tragedies, and after many years of teaching, Da Ponte, at sixty seven, was the first professor of Italian at Columbia. He was a cultivated student, paid his debts, and respected his family. It was another perceived slight for a man forever bemoaning the airs, and politics had chased him from Europe.

One day in 1807, the twenty-eight-year-old Moore, a biblical scholar who later gained fame for his poem known as "The Night Before Christmas," was impressed by Da Ponte and interjected that he could count the great Italian writers on one hand. "Lorenzo was offended," says Faedda. "He said, 'I could spend a month naming eminent Italian writers and poets.'"

After Mozart died in 1791, Da Ponte's chronic mishaps in amore and finance had finally failed, and he opened another. It also failed. It was another perceived slight for a man forever bemoaning the airs, and politics had chased him from Europe.

In 1805 Da Ponte became a private Italian tutor for the young widow of a prominent New York family. He made friends with writers, painters, intellectuals," says Faedda. "Everyone who was aware that he had worked with the great Mozart and spent years in the best European books and a pillar of culture," says Barbara Faedda, executive director of Columbia's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America. In 1950, Da Ponte became a permanent resident of New York. He was sixty."