



## Crossing the River Magra in the 'land of broken bridges': risk in early nineteenth-century travel narratives

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**Crossing the River Magra in the ‘land of broken bridges’: risk in early nineteenth-century travel narratives**

**Abstract**

On the 25 October 2011 the River Magra in the far east of the Italian region of Liguria flooded with catastrophic effects, killing thirteen people and causing millions of euros in damage. Managing such an extreme episode is very hard, as local policy makers know well because the Liguria region is currently experiencing regular flood events. Serious floods in this region have often occurred seasonally in October and November as the result of extremely intense rainfall. While everyone can agree that rivers in flood present real environmental risks to human life it is important to appreciate that risk can also be in the mind. Understanding how people deal with environmental risk in this respect can help inform current policy, for example what tactics might best be used to persuade people to leave their homes when flood events are forecast. This article shows how reading a series of reports by early nineteenth-century travellers who tried to cross the Magra in flood reveals that perceptions of risk had a considerable impact on their behaviour in the face of a clear environmental problem. Furthermore, because these written accounts were consumed by a reading public back home which enthusiastically embraced narratives of travel, especially ones which dealt with what has come to be known as ‘dark tourism’ (i.e. delighting in danger), we can learn how telling stories might still be an important or even necessary part of successful risk management in the future.

Keywords – Liguria, River Magra, risk, travel, narrative, flooding

## Introduction

On the 25 October 2011 the River Magra and its tributary the Vara in the far east of the Italian region of Liguria (Figure 1) flooded with catastrophic effects (Nardi and Rinaldi, “The Magra River,” 2015; Nardi and Rinaldi, “Spatio-temporal patterns,” 2015, 327-328). 13 people were killed and the damage to property ran into millions and millions of euros. Another consequence was a flurry of scientific papers which have modelled the possible future risks posed by the Magra by reflecting in detail on what actually happened in 2011 (Buzzi 2014; De Angeli 2017; Dufour 2015). Both rivers have a long history of serious floods, which most often take place in October and November as the result of extremely high and intense rainfall: in the twentieth century on 24 November 1927, 18 November 1940, 27 October 1948, 31 October 1968, 13 November 1982. Statistics for the nineteenth century are lacking, but relevant information could be found in a range of archival and printed sources (Tropeano and Turconi 2004; Luino et al. 2018). A sizable amount of scientific research into flood histories and their consequences across the Liguria region has also been produced (Faccini 2012; Lanza 2003). Bridges across the area were historically built very high above river beds to avoid flood damage (Gabellieri and Pescini 2015, 65, Fig. 10), but that strategy was often unsuccessful as even the strongest of bridges cannot withstand the force of these rivers in full flood. Most Ligurian rivers are characterised by relatively short lengths, multiple tributaries and sources high up in the Apennines (Italy Geographical Handbook 1944, 45), characteristics which predispose them to flooding in their lower reaches, a risk often made worse by human attempts to confine the water in the interests of agricultural improvement and urban development rather than letting these rivers spread over considerable flood plains (Faccini 2012, 2016; Hall 2005, 58-62 on historic floods in the Stura Valley, SW Piemonte). As in most of Italy (see e.g. Pavese et al 1995), in addition to flooding (Lanza 2003; Faccini 2016), Liguria is a region with significant environmental risks, notably violent storms,

1 earthquakes, landslides and fire (Bruzzzone 2015, 172). Historically, the most significant  
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3 earthquake in Liguria took place on 23 February 1887, and resulted in huge loss of life and  
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5 extensive damage in the western Riviera (Science 1889). It generated a lot of contemporary  
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7 comment, including by travellers many of whom visited Bussana Vecchia near San Remo  
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9 which was abandoned in the years following the disaster (Julian 1984; Ouditt 2014, 88-97).  
10  
11 Bussana was for some years a classic site of what has come to be known as ‘dark tourism’  
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13 (Stone and Sharpley 2008).  
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20 **Materials and methods**

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22 As Liguria is a risky place, it is unsurprising that there have been many scientific studies, in  
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24 addition to those noted so far, designed to understand the risks posed by environmental  
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26 catastrophes. Alongside this work, some humanities scholars (not working on Liguria) have  
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28 raised important questions about how people facing environmental problems understand and  
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30 disseminate risk (Boholm 2003). Some studies include a significant historical element. In  
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32 particular, the Spanish anthropologist Gaspar Mairal has clearly shown what non-scientists  
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34 can contribute to risk studies (Mairal 2008, 2011) by demonstrating that the word ‘risk’  
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36 appeared in European languages as far back as the fourteenth century and that works of  
37  
38 journalism, notably those of Daniel Defoe in early seventeenth-century England, created the  
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40 sorts of literary narratives of risk which have been with us ever since. Risk as an idea  
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42 therefore has considerable historical depth.  
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46 Building on such points this article introduces the crucial matters of fate, luck, fortune  
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48 and agency to the study of environmental risk narratives through close analysis of a group of  
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50 early nineteenth-century travel narratives about Italy which described crossing the River  
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52 Magra at a particular site near Sarzana, the last significant town in eastern Liguria. The  
53  
54 Magra rises in the far north of Tuscany near Pontremoli and flows for just 62km through the  
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3 historic region of Lunigiana to the Mediterranean which it enters at Bocca di Magra near  
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5 Ameglia just beyond Sarzana. In the course of our period the ancient Genoese republic lost its  
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7 independence and as a result of the Congress of Vienna (1815) was absorbed by the Savoyard  
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9 Kingdom of Sardinia, with eastern borders with the Duchies of Parma and Modena (Assereto  
10  
11 1994, 178; Tonizzi 2007). That geo-political change gave rise to a lot of new map-making, in  
12  
13 a region already well-mapped (Quaini 1986, 219-230, 1994). A significant number of local  
14  
15 maps and plans survive in the State Archives in Genoa and Turin which demonstrate that  
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17 both entities worked hard to control the River Magra, especially from the latter half of the  
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19 eighteenth century onwards. These efforts included direct responses to flood events (and the  
20  
21 damage caused) and plans for rebuilding flood defences which mostly took the form of  
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23 physical barriers ('moli' or moles, which may have been counter-productive). Therefore,  
24  
25 'crossing the Magra', in a district of special interest to governing authorities in two states,  
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27 was both a physical necessity for any traveller who journeyed between Genoa and Tuscany  
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29 overland and a passage from one state to another, with the potential annoyance of passports,  
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31 border checks and customs, the traveller's *bête-noire* (Morgan 2001, 25-30; Mullen and  
32  
33 Munson 2009, 137-48, 162-169; Geselle 2001; Sinclair 1829, 309). For some it even marked  
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35 where 'Italy proper' began (Ruskin 2012, 170). It was also a narrative.  
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40 By the early nineteenth century Liguria, especially its capital Genoa and the coastal  
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42 Rivas, had long been frequented by visitors, both foreign and Italian, attracted by its mild  
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44 winters and ravishing scenery (Doria 2007, 363-365; Balzaretto 2011). Many travellers took  
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46 this road given the popularity of Pisa and especially Florence as tourist sites and the  
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48 improvement of it can be traced in successive editions of guidebooks, notably those of  
49  
50 Mariana Starke (Starke 1826, 1828). The attractiveness of this route increased with  
51  
52 technological change ('progress' in the vocabulary of the period) so that references to the  
53  
54 Magra can be found in a wide variety of travel genres including guides and road-books,  
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journals, diaries, letters and magazine articles, whether published or unpublished. The river was also drawn, painted and engraved, and featured in the occasional poem. Many authors were fully aware of ancient Roman interest in the *Macra* and of medieval references to it, notably Dante Paradiso IX, “I had my dwelling on that valley’s shore, Between Ebro and Macra whose short course, Divides the Tuscans from the Genoese”.

Some accounts of crossing the Magra took the form of quite lengthy narratives, which will be discussed here in terms of their interest in risk. In chronological order these are. (1) Mary Berry (1762-1852) who crossed the Magra (that ‘horrid river’) in the summer of 1823 (Lewis 1865; Riccio 2000; Kent 2004). (2) James Johnson, *Change of Air* (a memoir, 1831). (3) Davide Bertolotti, *Viaggio nella Liguria Marittima* (an Italian guide, 1834). (4) Captain Jousiffe, *A Road-Book for Travellers in Italy* (1840). (5) Fanny Trollope, *A Visit to Italy* (a memoir, 1842, by the mother of the famous novelist Anthony Trollope). Johnson’s is by far the longest account, at two pages in small print (Johnson 1831, 226-227). These narratives have been read in the context of other published accounts (e.g. Lullin de Chateaufieux 1820; Morgan 1820; Strutt 1828; Navone 1831; Conder 1831; Brockedon 1835; discussed by Balzaretti, Piana and Watkins 2015),<sup>1</sup> cartographic representations of the river,<sup>2</sup> other visual representations (see below), and some direct local knowledge of the area (I visited the Val di Magra in August 2010, and Pontremoli and Sarzana on several other occasions).

**Discussion**

As well as accounts written by individuals, the reader interested in foreign travel could also access basic Guides specifically written for tourists. These made clear to their readers that north Italian rivers could be dangerous. A typical example was Galignani’s *Traveller’s Guide through Italy*, a popular book which reached its seventh edition in 1824 having been first

published in 1819 which clearly spelled out the possible risks for travellers visiting this region.

The equinoctial rains and the inundations of winter torrents are particularly inconvenient, and even, sometimes, dangerous, especially in the northern provinces, and along the eastern coast. The immense number of considerable rivers, such as the *Tanaro*, the *Tesino*, the *Bormida*, the *Adda* etc. that pour their tributary waters into the *Po*, while with it they contribute so largely to the beauty and luxuriance of the plains through which they glide, yet, when swelled with continued rains, like it, overflow their banks and inundate the level surface of the surrounding country. On these occasions the roads are covered with mud, the fords rendered impassable, bridges not unfrequently swept away... (Galignani 1824, xi-xii, copied from Eustace 1813, 48).

In March 1823 the anonymous author of 'Letters from Italy', which had appeared in Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* since October 1822 wrote that:

From Sarzana to Genoa is about as perilous a journey, in the present state of roads and weather, as any gentleman need undertake. It is the land of broken bridges; not one had escaped... the Magra was terribly swollen, and had not been crossed for three or four days; we quitted our voiture, got over as well we could, and spent a day wandering and dreaming about Lerici and the Gulph of Spezzia ("Letters from Italy" 1822).

Italian road-books, which were generally less descriptive than guides, advised on the staging posts and posthouses to be found en route. For example in 1800 one guide to the Florence to Genoa road stated that 'One passes the River Magra, and when this is swollen one goes via Spezia, which is one post, and from Spezia to Borghetto are two posts' (*Nuova e sicura guida per chi viaggia in Italia* 1800, 27). Therefore, it is unsurprising that so many travellers advised by their printed (and presumably personal) guides noticed the River Magra in person and in print.

Mary Berry crossed the Magra on Thursday 12 June 1823 while travelling from Rome to Genoa via Florence (Lewis 1865, vol. 3, 340-341). Her description of this experience raises issues about who exactly is doing the narrating as her words are reported second-hand by Lady Theresa Lewis in her certainly censored edition of Mary Berry's memoirs ('Journals

and Correspondence') published in 1865, in 3 volumes each nearly 500 pages long. Berry herself had died in 1852 aged 80, a 'blue-stocking' relic of a long-lost pre-Revolutionary age (Lewis 1865, vol. 1, ix-xi). These volumes constituted the remains of the 'two large trunks' of material left by Berry to Lady Theresa with instructions to publish. Unusually, the original manuscripts survived such treatment and are now in the British Library.<sup>3</sup>

That day in June 1823 was extremely wet – Liguria is one of the wettest parts of Italy - which did not bode well for Miss Berry and her companions, her sister Agnes and ladies' maid Mrs Harriot. At 5 am when about to depart she noted that,

I had heard it raining fast since two o'clock in the morning. It still rained when we started, and had to ford the bed of the Magra. The rain which had fallen, and was still falling, had swelled the stream, but the peasants said we could pass, and the Comte de Sommariva's carriage had gone through half an hour before.<sup>4</sup> We really did pass the ford very well, with the help of a horse to our three mules; but the caleche, though guided by a peasant, had not exactly followed our track. The wheel came against a large stone; the mules pulled in vain, and fell down in the water one after another. We were not clear of the river ourselves when Giuseppe, our coachman, flew to the assistance of his comrade. They at last moved the large stone by the help of our peasant guides. Fortunately, the beasts could not move the wheel, or inevitably the caleche would have been overturned; and we ended by all coming out safe and sound. But for a long time I do not remember having been so frightened. The thoughts of fording that river made me nervous beforehand, and I watched the moment when one horse after the other fell into the full force of the current, when their guide was thrown over into the water, and when the carriage could not move, with poor Harriot sitting inside! There was no possibility of her getting out. She conducted herself with a calmness that I could not have had in her place. One crosses that horrid river five times before reaching Borghetto; but the other fords were wider, and less water. Friday, 13th – Arrived at Genoa (Lewis 1865, vol. 3, 340-341; Riccio 2000, 288-289).

This dramatic narrative is rich in relevant themes and it was, in a sense, the culmination of all her earlier attempts to cross this river. Miss Berry (and her sister Agnes) had made four previous tours of this part of Italy, the first in 1783, aged 21 (Lewis 1865, vol. 1, 40-43), when she arrived at Genoa via the Lemme valley and Bocchetta pass (772m) to the north of the city. Her description of the road then was detailed, including its many inconveniences. In 1817 (18 May) her father had died at Genoa, and he was buried there in the cemetery at Carignano (Lewis 1865, vol. 3, 109 ff., 161-164). In April 1818 she had



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2  
3 forded the Magra, on that occasion without incident (Lewis 1865, vol. 3, 161). Did she feel  
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5 unlucky on this Ligurian stretch of her travels in 1823? Or was Friday the 13th ironically a  
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7 lucky day for her, of safe arrival? ('Friday the 13th' has probably been unlucky in Britain  
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9 since the medieval period). In all her accounts agency seems to lie with the river – as is the  
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11 case in current scientific discussions of the Magra - and in 1823 with the rain which had  
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13 caused the Magra to become so dangerous, rather than with the travellers who luckily  
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15 escaped with their lives. The Magra certainly caused a sense of foreboding in Mary which  
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17 might be called 'fate' in the context of the death of her father in Liguria's capital only a few  
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19 years before and she herself felt lucky as her use of 'fortunately' in this passage  
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21 demonstrates.  
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24         Two crucial analytical points need raising here. First, the relationship between content  
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26 and form. Second, the juxtaposition of local specialist and outside impressionistic knowledge.  
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28 Both points bring into question the reliability of our narrators. Berry's account of crossing the  
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30 Magra is far from unique in *what* it describes (i.e. content) just as it is unique in *how* it  
31  
32 describes (i.e. form) (Tyler and Balzaretto 2006, 1-9). All travellers who went from Tuscany  
33  
34 to Genoa had to cross the Magra unless they went by sea from Livorno/Leghorn. A typical  
35  
36 trip was made by Matthew Todd and his employer who travelled in France, Italy and  
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38 Switzerland in 1814-17. They travelled in an open boat along the Ligurian coast from France,  
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40 landed at Savona and then went by diligence to Genoa. Once they left Genoa they 'proceeded  
41  
42 over uncommon good roads, and passed many very pretty places. The day was very stormy  
43  
44 and Rainy, unfavourable weather'. They went to Sestri and Chiavari by boat and then because  
45  
46 the sea was so heavy they went overland from Sestri to La Spezia. 'We travelled over hills,  
47  
48 rock and execrable roads' (Trease 1968, 85-92). Travel was hampered by poor roads and  
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50 absent infrastructure. The lower Magra could not be crossed by a bridge, as there wasn't one  
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52 at this period, something which is clearly shown on contemporary maps notably the hand  
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drawn *Minute di Campagna* commissioned by the Sardinian State in the 1820s. Local maps also show that the river at this time was not some sort of unmanaged ‘torrent’ as the surviving narratives of foreigners, including Mary Berry’s, invariably suggest. ‘Torrents’ are mentioned by many travellers at this time (defined by the *OED* as ‘A stream of water flowing with great swiftness and impetuosity, whether from the steepness of its course, or from being temporarily flooded’) but in reality local river channels were carefully managed and it is therefore likely that unusual rain events caused the ‘torrents’ referred to.

In the case of Mary Berry her words have come down to us as the testimony of a unique eye-witness, although published over a decade after her death and transcribed by another. There is no doubt that she really was there and really did experience what she describes for her original diaries preserved at the British Library suggest as much. But that of course is not to say that her interpretation of her experience provides straightforward evidence of how risky this river crossing actually was in the early nineteenth century. Her writing does though provide excellent evidence of how risky the crossing was thought to be at this time and the publication of this and other accounts helped to spread the word about the risk to other travellers. This is not surprising as Berry was an experienced and successful author of history and editor of Horace Walpole, author of *The Castle of Otranto*, the first ‘gothic’ novel. Her plays (e.g. her 1802 comedy ‘Fashionable Friends’ which lasted only three nights on stage and ‘proved unsuccessful’) were less confident works but suggest ambition as a creative artist (Lewis 1865, vol. 1, xix). In her journals she was clearly telling a story or indeed multiple stories of her life as a traveller, just as Richard Colt Hoare recommended in his 1815 volume *Hints to Travellers in Italy*: ‘Every traveller ought to have two objects in view: the one, to amuse himself: the other, to impart to his friends the information he has gained’ (Preface) (Colt Hoare 1815 discussed by Laven 2015). So, as literary scholars long ago established, the genre ‘travel writing’ is indeed the complex hybrid

implied by Colt Hoare's statement which always mixes self and other ("Travel writing and Italy" 2012). Perhaps, in these circumstances, the risk of 'crossing the Magra' was in large part a literary creation. Perhaps events did not always happen quite in the ways described.

The longest description of the Magra in flood is by James Johnson in *Change of Air* (1831). Johnson (1777-1845), who had travelled widely outside Europe in his naval career, was by that time physician-extraordinary to King William IV and a proponent of the significant influence of climate on health which was a prominent contemporary medical theory, which pervaded travel narratives (Greenhill 2004). He crossed the Magra between Pisa and Genoa in late November 1829 with his local driver the vetturino Galliardi who he had hired at Pisa to take him to Genoa. Galliardi crossed himself before leaving Pisa at the start of their trip which did not bode well, although this was a sly comment by Johnson on Galliardi's Catholicism and perhaps his fatalism (another reprehensible 'Italian/Catholic' characteristic in the eyes of Protestant northerners). The narrative of the crossing is highly entertaining, as it clearly *could be* given that everyone survived. It was in fact a moral story of good fortune in the face of undeniable natural risk.

Johnson described the 'wild and romantic scene' around the 'roaring Magra, where the new road winds along the brinks of yawning precipices'. The road was not yet finished with 'few parapet walls or stones'. Near Borghetto they met a 'wild and savage-looking country' and a 'mountain torrent' which had been swelled by rain. Although narrow it 'appeared to me rather dangerous'. His driver did not think so – a significant rupture in the narrative – and drove across. He got to the other side safely but the carriage with Johnson in it got stuck. Johnson made to swim for it, was told to stay put by Galliardi, and it all ended well when the horse pulled him to shore. The sanguine Galliardi assured a shaken Johnson that he would 'become quite reconciled to such incidents, especially between Genoa and Nice' (Johnson 1831, 227). This extended passage reveals its author to have been an avid

1  
2  
3 reader of contemporary Gothic fiction as it is shot through with Gothic adjectives: wild,  
4  
5 savage, yawning. Johnson’s graphic description quite consciously drew on art and fiction  
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7 with a carefully placed allusion to ‘painters, poets and romance-writers’. Yet as a narrative it  
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9 was like Berry’s a warning to other travellers about the loss of agency by the traveller (and  
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11 even his expert local guide) when faced with water out of control and, interestingly, advice  
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13 that tourists might do well to trust their guides for Galliardi, a superstitious Italian Catholic,  
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15 took such risks in his stride while Johnson, a supposedly rational British medical man, was  
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17 genuinely worried, needlessly as it turned out.  
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21 The Liverpool historian Thomas Roscoe chose to reprint this very passage in the  
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23 *Landscape Annual*, which he edited (Roscoe 1833, 197-199). This popular serial, aimed at  
24  
25 tourists, appeared between 1830 and 1834, and several of its volumes covered Italian travel.  
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27 In the 1833 volume a chapter on the Val di Magra, which preceded the one where Johnson  
28  
29 was quoted, conjured up the literary and historical associations of the area (Dante and the  
30  
31 Malaspina family), as well as its picturesque value as landscape (Roscoe 1833, 192-195).  
32  
33 Roscoe commented that ‘Nothing can be imagined more grand, more majestic, more truly  
34  
35 romantic, than that part of the Appennines [*sic*] so little visited by travellers’, which  
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37 demonstrates that new travel narratives could actively encourage the development of tourism,  
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39 in part by suggesting that readers could experience for themselves the risks and associated  
40  
41 thrills of Italian travel.  
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44  
45 This volume – unlike Johnson’s - was illustrated with steel-engraved plates by J. D.  
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47 Harding, a well-known artist of the period who travelled extensively in Italy (Powell 1998,  
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49 94). Steel-engraving was a recent mark of progress which meant that images could be  
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51 reproduced more easily and cheaply than copper plates (Powell 1998, 91). Harding’s ‘La  
52  
53 Magra near Sarsana’ [*sic*] (Figure 2) focussed on the road approaching the Magra with the  
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55 river crossing and prominent hilltop town of Vezzano Ligure in the background (Roscoe  
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1833, plate opp. 192), which was the very road both Berry and Johnson travelled on. This image gives a good sense of the poor state of the road and of the highly 'romantic' scenery. Close examination of it does not show any temporary bridge or other means of crossing the river. Other contemporary images of this crossing point tell a similar story. Richard Parkes Bonington's 'View near Sarzana, Val di Magra, 1826' (National Galleries of Scotland, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/4684/view-near-sarzana-val-di-magra>; Dubuisson 1924, 75) and Clarkson Stansfield's 'French Troops fording the Magra' (York Museums Trust) which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1847 (Powell 1998, 113) each give a good idea of the terrain and state of the roads encountered by travellers at this time, allowing for artistic interpretation. Neither picture represents any bridge or other means of crossing but Stansfield's oil, which is undated and an imaginary picture of a distant historic event, nevertheless suggests that it was possible to ford the quite shallow river on horseback.

Berry and Johnson represent fairly mainstream examples of the well-connected and sometimes rich British travellers who went to Italy at this period, and Johnson clearly wrote his book for an active contemporary market in narratives of Italian travel (Pine Coffin 1974, 142-225; Watson 2000, 22-53). Accounts in French and German were common too and similar in attitude to Anglophone works. Unsurprisingly, Italian writers adopted a rather different tone in narrations which were more detailed (e.g. *Descrizione* 1780) and often more ethnographic in nature than those of foreigners. A good example is Davide Bertolotti (1784-1860), a prolific professional writer of history, fiction and travel narratives who consciously sought out a wider public (Ponte 1967). His travel books are the most highly regarded now as in these he proved to be a precise recorder of local custom, notably in *Viaggio nella Liguria marittima* (three volumes published in 1834), the result of three years residence in Genoa and written when he was 50 years old. Bertolotti's perspective on the Magra is set out in his discussion of the country around La Spezia and Sarzana (Bertolotti 1834, vol. 3, 174-177).

After quoting Dante (Paradiso IX) on the river he noted that the Magra had to be crossed by ferry-boat because there was no bridge in the lower valley ('Convien traghettare in barca la Magra, a cui nella bassa valle mai non venne imposto il freno di un ponte'; Bertolotti 1834, vol. 3, 175). The footnote to this sentence implies that the reason was cost: it was simply too expensive to build a bridge ('La spesa di un ponte in legno sopra la Magra monterebbe a circa 500m. lire'). This seems to have been a subject of contemporary debate outside Italy as well as the following year William Rae Wilson, in a book dedicated to Queen Adelaide herself a Continental traveller, reported that he had crossed the Magra safely in a flat-bottomed boat and argued that a bridge would be impractical referring to others who had argued for it (Wilson 1835, 110). Bertolotti had also noted that local peasant women, who found the cost of the ferry prohibitive, waded across the river bed through the water up to their armpits when able to do so. This was not something the average tourist, British or otherwise, would have contemplated.

Bertolotti, like Roscoe, thought highly of the local scenery which 'might offer graceful and frequent subjects to the heated imagination of a painter' (Bertolotti 1834, 175). A waterfall in the upper valley which was especially picturesque in winter when iced over was, he argued, as spectacular as that at Tivoli near Rome; a large claim as Tivoli a site on every tourists' to do list. Bertolotti went on to note that the river 'cut off and often interrupted the Sarzana road' where is entered the Sardinian kingdom at Santo Stefano Magra because of the confluence with the Vara ('precide e spesso interdice la strada di Sarzana', Bertolotti 1834, vol. 3, 176). At this point the mouth of the river, which deposited gravel and sand forming a beach, was until thirty five years before a site of stagnant water which made the local peasants ill but this risk to health had been removed by a Lombard agronomist who drained the area and made it productive for agriculture (Bertolotti 1834, vol. 3, 176). Here was a narrative of improvement, characteristic of contemporary public debate in Britain

which contrasts completely with British narratives of Italy as ‘backwardly southern’ and a very risky place. All of this was – as might be expected by a local author – far more detailed than any narrative intended for British tourists, and yet Bertolotti was clearly very sensitive to the tourist sensibility and we might say the tourist potential of this valley, despite the environmental risks of which he was aware but which he was apparently less inclined to dramatise than Berry and Johnson.

The more prosaic genre of the guidebook also contained plenty of advice about the Magra. William Brockedon’s *Road-Book from London to Naples* (Paris, 1835) while predictably focussed on the beauty of scenery and views along the Ligurian coast pointed out that ‘the passage of the river Magra, often dangerous from the violence of its torrent, is usually made by a *pont-volant*; the broad bed of this river is sometimes entirely covered by its waters, but when seen dry it presents a desolate appearance’ (Brockedon 1835, 105). The very basic map he printed of this route shows the Magra misleadingly crossed by the road from Sarzana to Spezia (Brockedon 1835, opp. 81) (Figure 3). A *pont-volant* while a functional sort of ferry crossing was obviously at the mercy of the weather more than a wooden or stone-built bridge but had the virtue of being cheaper to replace. They survived in Italy until long after the invention of photography. This one over the Magra was mentioned again by Captain Jousiffe in his *A Road-Book for Travellers in Italy* in 1840 (Jousiffe 1840): ‘After leaving Sarzana the river Magra is crossed by a *pont-volant*. If it were possible to erect a bridge here, it would add much to the safety as well as convenience of the traveller, as the passage of this river is often very dangerous, from the violence of its torrent’ (Jousiffe 1840, 169). Jousiffe thus confirmed the absence of either bridge or ferry boat over the Magra in the course of his description of the old road between Massa and Lavenza which he advised was best avoided, as it was strewn with rocks and wet and swampy even in summer (Jousiffe 1840, 168). He added some further detail to Brockedon’s account of the river crossing, on



which he appears to have relied. Jousiffe, a military man, seems to have been a seasoned traveller who had been to Spain, Batavia [Java] and India, as well as Italy, so he might have been expected to understand that the local authorities had no doubt considered the possibility of a bridge and decided it was too dangerous (surviving maps imply this much) or too expensive as already noted. Other guides continued to caution against the Magra for several decades.

Frances ('Fanny') Trollope (1779-1863), mother of the famous Anthony and herself a very popular author of novels and travel books, was widely travelled in North America, Germany, France and Austria, and she published books about each trip. She spent 25 years at the end of her life in Florence, living at the Villino Trollope where she died in 1863. In 1842 she published *A Visit to Italy* a travelogue centred on Tuscany. Fanny and her elder son Thomas Adolphus were travelling the road from Genoa to Pisa in April 1841 and like all the authors discussed so far she stressed the difficulties of fording the Magra but with the twist that she castigated the state of Modena for not putting a bridge in place in pointed contrast to Sardinia (Trollope 1842, vol. 1, 60). This was simply a mistake as the Magra was not in Modena territory. Mother and son travelled in a 'landau sort of carriage' but this was not sufficient to insulate them from the difficulties of getting across the river. Fanny was not impressed by having to ford the river, suggesting that a bridge would be a better idea, and, with typical English arrogance, that 'the engineering talents of any English urchin of ten years old, would enable him to suggest a remedy for the worst difficulties of this formidable impediment, after looking at it for five minutes'. Indeed she hinted that the local inhabitants were a 'strangely-barbarous' and 'remote' race (Trollope 1842, vol. 1, 61), a commonplace culturally-superior attitude often expressed by British travellers (perhaps especially Christian missionaries) at this time, although to what extent they were genuinely xenophobic has been debated (Porter 1984). They got across the river on the *pont-volant* and the main problem was



that it was slow and clumsy rather than especially risky. Trollope implies that ‘fate, ‘luck’ and ‘fortune’ were less important than a ‘sensible’ attitude to natural phenomena and that humans, by which she meant white English people, could and should manage their environment properly. This might simply have been redolent of her character or perhaps of a new attitude to the environment brought about by the rapid industrial and technological change which Britain, unlike Italy, was undergoing at this time.

## Conclusion

The impact which the River Magra could have on those who crossed it is well-illustrated by a letter dated 2 May 1845 in which John Ruskin, the painter and future art critic, assured his father that ‘you will see by the Sarzana mark that I have got all right over the Magra’ (Shapiro 1972, 48). He was travelling from Liguria to Tuscany and referring to a previous experience in 1840 when he and his parents had trouble negotiating the crossing. Later in his memoirs he recalled that:

Of the passage of the Magra a day or two afterwards, my memory is vague as its own waves. There were all sorts of paths across the tract of troubled shingle, and I was thinking of the Carrara mountains beyond, all the while. Most of the streams fordable easily enough: a plank or two, loosely propped with a heap of stones, for pier and buttress, replaced after every storm, served the foot passenger. The main stream could neither be bridged nor forded, but was clumsily ferried, and at one place my mother had no choice really but between wading or being carried. She suffered the indignity, I think with some feeling of its being a consequence of the French Revolution, and remained cross all the way to Carrara (Ruskin 2012, 169).

The linkage in the mind of Ruskin’s mother between the difficulties of the Magra crossing and the French Revolution, absurd though it may seem to us, demonstrates that some travellers worried more about human failings than about the power of Nature. Yet there can be no doubt that the recent history of the Magra demonstrates that it is a real risk, especially when it floods catastrophically as in October 2011. That event is part of the long history of Ligurian floods which has engendered much scientific comment in print (Faccini et al. 2016).

This article has sought to complement that research with analysis of travel narratives from the first half of the nineteenth century to propose a micro-history of a single river crossing as a contribution to historicizing risk. The textual accounts analysed above did not describe a catastrophic flood but a more normal state where the river became dangerously swollen because of seasonal rains which rendered fording it on foot or horseback or crossing it by ferry dangerous or even impossible. This everyday physical risk soon became a narrative of risk (Mairal 2008) which developed into what could be termed a ‘riskscape’, a specific area prone to risk. The different narratives of actual crossings of the Magra can be read as an overarching narrative of ‘crossing the Magra’ and that narrative can then be analysed in terms of its content and form (White 1987). The series of river crossings reported by travellers in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s really did happen (content) and, although travellers’ tales are not particularly useful sources (form) about how and why specific historic floods happened, they do shed light upon the routine risks travellers encountered or feared they might encounter. As outsiders they noticed things which locals perhaps did not (*cf.* Balzaretto et al. 2012; Piana, Watkins and Balzaretto 2016; Bruzzone et al. 2018). One of these was risk, and that allowed authors to explore the thrills that travellers and their readers experienced in conquering danger (Goldsmith 2016).

The old risk narrative of ‘crossing the Magra’ described here was superseded by a modern narrative of human agency when in the early 1860s a bridge replaced the old fords and ferry, as befitted the dawning ‘Age of Progress’. Dudley Costello writing in 1861 reported that ‘Until 1858, the only way of crossing the river was by a ferry-boat, but after heavy rains had swelled its flood, the passage of which was often impracticable for many hours’. Now however the problem of crossing ‘a wide and furious torrent’ was ‘solved’ by the construction of recently built ‘fine stone bridge’ (Costello 1861, 103). This bridge, of thirteen arches, took the Kingdom of Sardinia around five years to build after legislation to do

so was passed by the Camera dei Deputati in May 1856 (Archivio della Camera Regia 1856). The tolls payable, in an attempt to recoup the huge cost, were approved a few years later in 1863 (Archivio della Camera Regia 1863). By 1865/6 an engraving of the bridge was being used to illustrate contemporary construction techniques to the engineers who read the *Giornale del genio civile*, a specialist technical engineering magazine (*Giornale del genio civile* 1865/6). Travellers were surely comforted by this technological development which ensured that the Magra was quickly and easily crossed: ‘the train passes through another long tunnel, and crosses the broad Magra’, Baedeker stated in 1879 (Baedeker 1879, 112). It was so easy compared to half a century before that the bridge, which took both train and carriage traffic (‘promiscuo della ferr. E della carrozz.’, Bertarelli 1916, 260) (Figure 4), itself became a site of tourist interest as revealed by a surviving late nineteenth-century postcard (Figure 5). However, even that substantial stone structure was destroyed by a flood on 31 October 1968 almost exactly one hundred years after it opened, suggesting that a bridge crossing at this point was perhaps not the capital idea most British tourists believed it to be. Perhaps, after the disaster of 25 October 2011, that remains so and the old narratives of risk may be about to return, all the more poignantly after the horrific collapse of the Ponte Morandi in Genoa during a heavy storm on 14 August 2018, killing 43 people.

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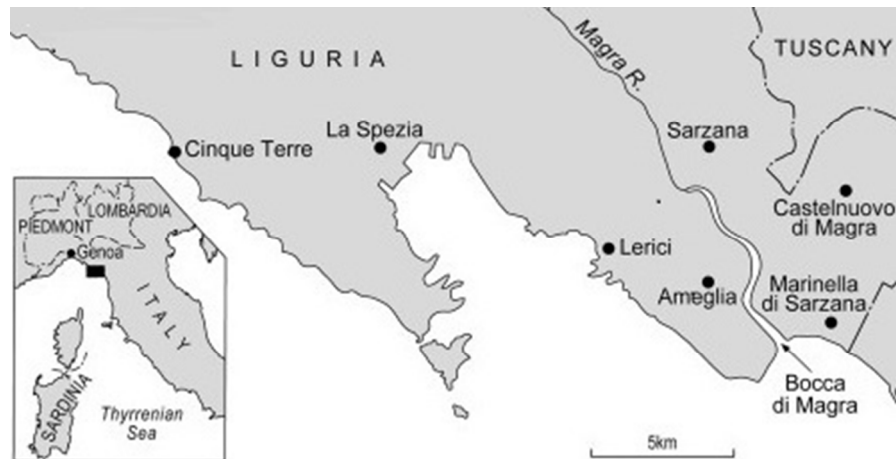
<sup>1</sup> Although I have focussed here on published narratives the Magra's textual presence is also found in many unpublished manuscript journals designed for family and friends rather than the wider reading public. My research with that material is ongoing.

<sup>2</sup> For digitised material see (Genoa)  
<http://www.topographia.it/DFrontofficeGe/index.htm;jsessionid=76B4FE3AE418B2D15FE0F000052CDED8>  
(Turin)  
<http://archiviodistatotorino.beniculturali.it/Site/index.php/it/progetti/introduzione/cartografia>

<sup>3</sup> British Library, Add. 37726-37761, in 35 volumes. I have not been able to consult these in preparing this article.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Battista Sommariva, d. 6 January 1826, politician under the French and artistic patron.





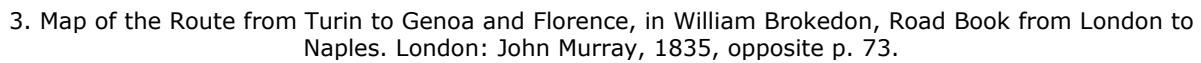
1. Lower Magra Valley.

37x19mm (300 x 300 DPI)



2. J. D. Harding, 'The Magra near Sarzana. Coast of Genoa', in Thomas Roscoe (ed.), *The Landscape Annual for 1833. The Tourist in Italy*. London: Jennings and Chapman, 1833, engraved plate opposite p. 192.

67x43mm (300 x 300 DPI)



123x102mm (300 x 300 DPI)

63x51mm (300 x 300 DPI)





5. Postcard with a view of the rail and road bridge over the Magra near Sarzana, late nineteenth-century.

51x32mm (300 x 300 DPI)