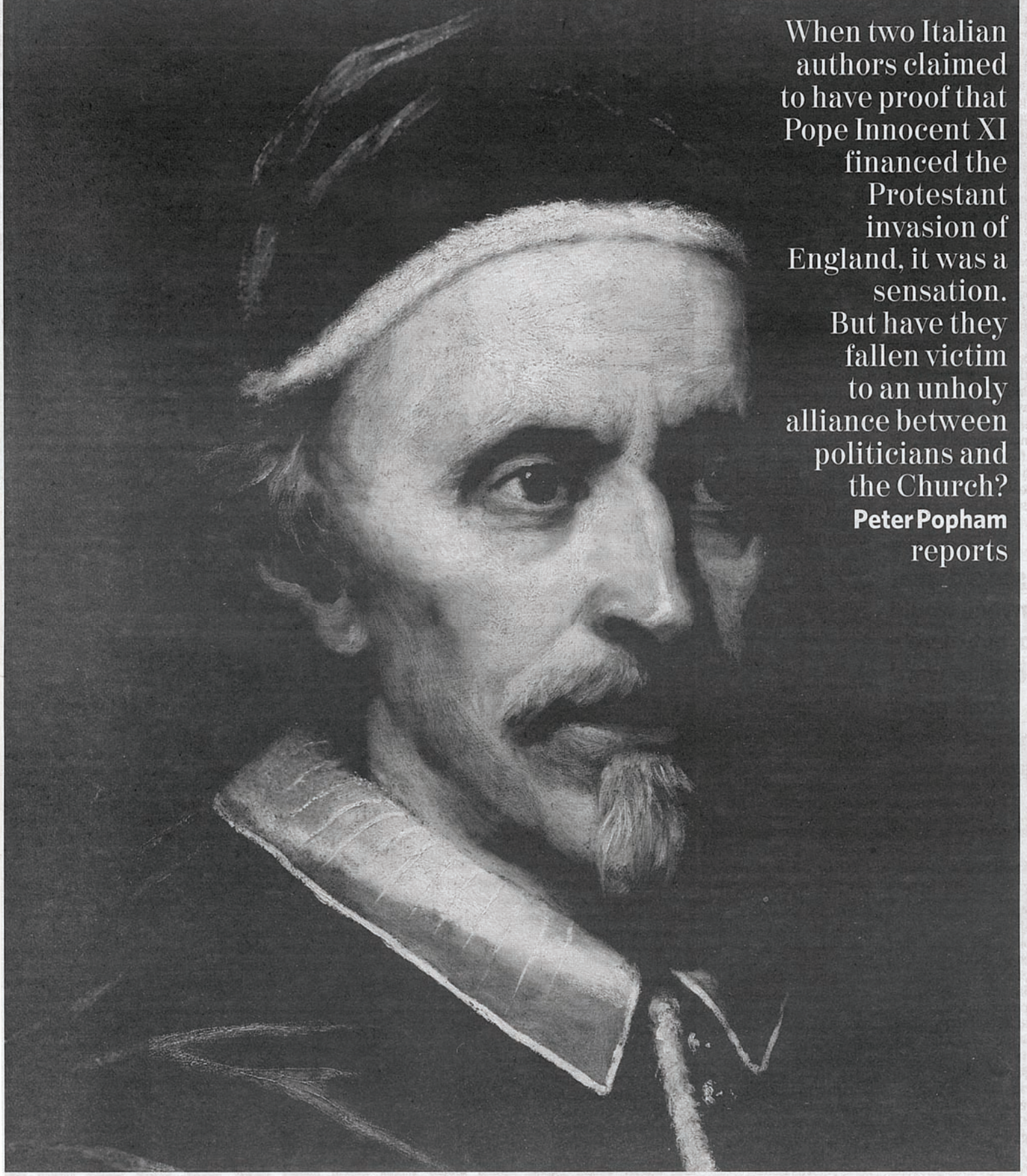
A PAPAL MYSTERY



When two Italian authors claimed to have proof that Pope Innocent XI financed the Protestant invasion of England, it was a sensation. But have they fallen victim to an unholy alliance between politicians and the Church? **Peter Popham** reports

Vengeance of the Vatican

On the streets of Rome the centuries stand still. Everything seems to have been here for ever, the tightly twisting cobbled lanes, the high tenements, the gorgeous piazzas, the baroque churches; yet nothing has ever been as it appears, and intrigue succeeds intrigue down the hidden passages of the centuries, the hand of power fleetingly discerned behind the arras of history.

Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti are living out this uniquely Roman déjà vu. Historical novelists who happen to be married to each other, they write in tandem, and *Imprimatur*, their first novel and the book that made their name and fortune, is set in Rome in 1683 and is an exploration of this world of labyrinthine intrigue.

An inn in the city has been put under quarantine, the doors barricaded with the guests inside, because one has died and the city has a terror of the plague.

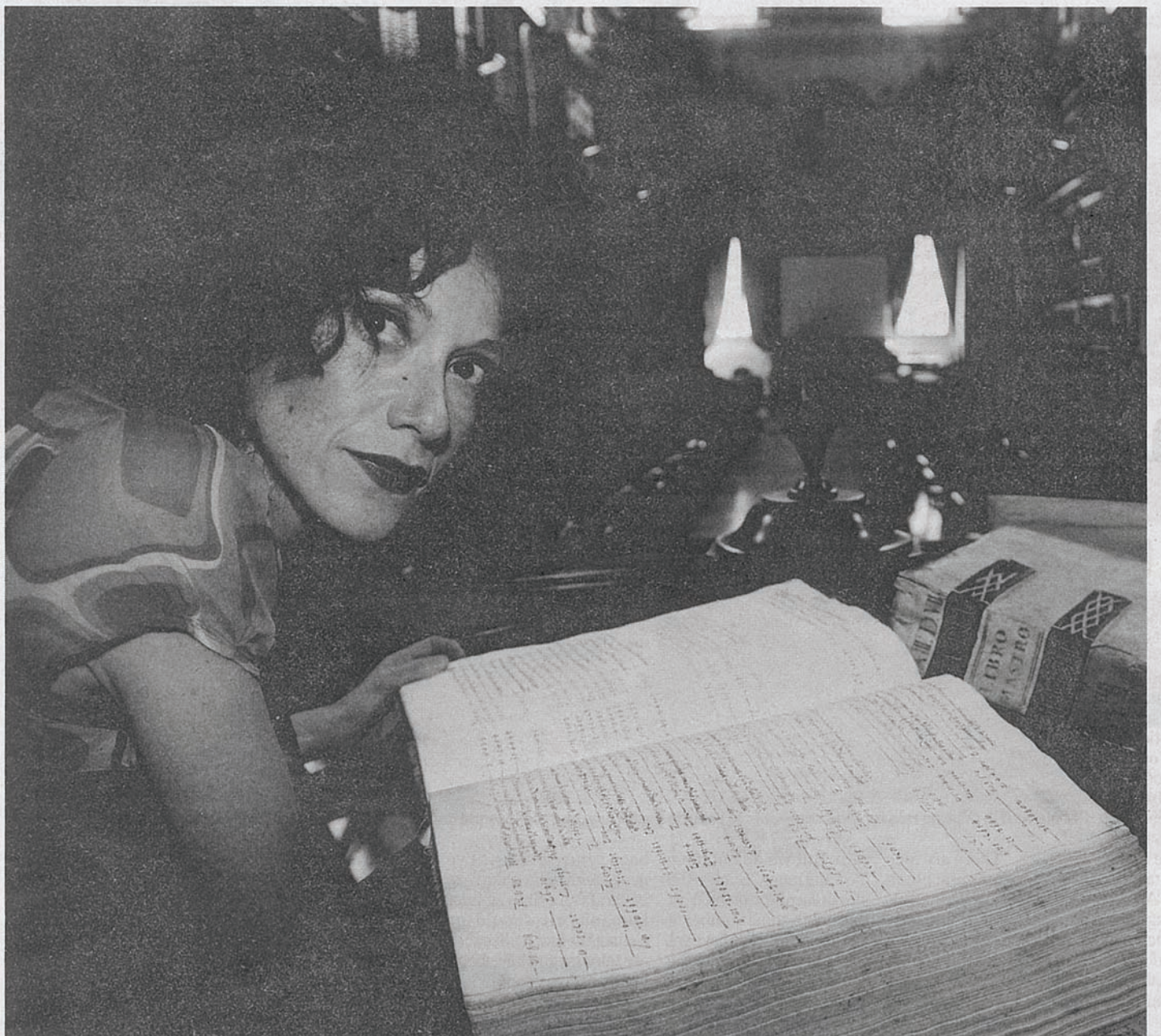
Coffined up in the lodging house with our narrator, an orphaned kitchen boy with ambitions to become a "gazzeteer", are an odd assortment of guests: Atto Melani, an abbot and acclaimed castrato singer, a rough-mannered Englishman, a fugitive Venetian glassblower, an insinuating French guitarist, a garrulous surgeon, a voluptuous courtesan. As the narrator's choleric patron, the inn-keeper Pellegrino, falls ill with a fever, and the talk turns to poison, readers find themselves sharing the paranoiac and claustrophobic lives of late-17th century Roman plague suspects – until the Machiavellian Abbot Atto, who is in the pay of Louis XIV, finds a subterranean passage of escape.

The story turns on the enmity between the pope of the time, Innocent XI, and Louis XIV of France; and on the fact – Monaldi and Sorti insist that they have established beyond doubt that it is a fact – that Innocent XI bankrolled the invasion of England by William of Orange; leading to the downfall of James II and the (Catholic) Stuarts, the triumph of the Protestants, and the end of Catholicism as a force in English politics.

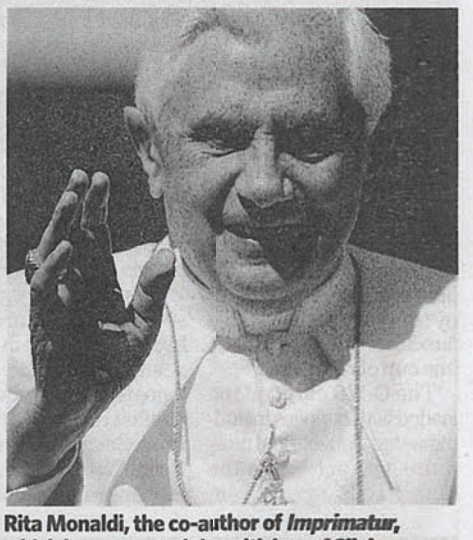
That is the hinge of the story; and 320 years later – because Rome is the eternal city, and the powers that control it are eternal – it became the hinge of the lives and careers of these novelists, too.

Because their claim that Innocent XI, Benedetto Odescalchi before he was enthroned, financed the Protestant invasion of England is a sensational claim, and one the Church cannot accommodate, even today.

For the Catholic Church, Innocent has always been one of the great popes, for his commitment to cleaning up the Church in Europe but, in particular, for throwing enough money and political energy into the defence of Vienna to repel the Turkish siege of 1683 and save Europe from the







Rita Monaldi, the co-author of *Imprimatur*, which has attracted the criticism of Silvio Berlusconi and, it seems, Pope Benedict GETTY

scourge of Islam. The idea that this saintly figure was somehow involved in the triumph of King Billy and the crushing of papism in Britain, would be ridiculous and offensive if it were not – as Monaldi and Sorti insist, producing stacks of ancient volumes, some full of ciphers, to prove their case – nothing but the naked truth.

Today Monaldi & Sorti are successful across the continent – *Imprimatur* is published in Britain on 15 May – yet almost completely unknown in their native land. That is not an oversight on the part of the Italian book trade. Monaldi and Sorti have been blackballed by Italian publishing and journalism, apparently on the informal but irresistible orders of the Catholic Church.

Stated that baldly, it seems improbable. The Church has not ruled beyond the Vatican walls since 1870. Italy is a mature democracy. Pope Innocent XI lived from 1611 to 1689. How can one talk of bans, of papal censorship?

To explain why exposing the financial transactions of a pope who has been dead more than 300 years should activate the most effective machinery of censorship in the Western world requires that we go back a bit.

Monaldi and Sorti are accidental novelists. Rita Monaldi is petite and delicately made, Francesco Sorti is short and wiry and energetic, with pince-nez perched on the bridge of his nose. Both graduated from Rome's Sapienza University in 1991, though they only met later. At Sapienza, Francesco had written his history of music thesis on Abbot Atto Melani of Pistoia, the castrato singer and diplomat who was famous among the royal courts of Europe – and who used this ease of access to become one of the most influential and slippery spies of his age.

Fired by this research, Monaldi and Sorti decided to write a historical novel based on Atto's life. Though fiction, every detail of every aspect would be solidly grounded in historical reality, they decided: the setting, the characters, the food, the music, the dreadful medical "cures" to which individuals were subjected, everything.

Today, Monaldi and Sorti live in Vienna but they came back to Rome last week to offer a taste of the reality in which *Imprimatur* is grounded, and a quick scamper through the archives in which they did their research.

We met by the central fountain of Piazza Navona, and the couple led me north a few blocks, past Santa Croce, the university of Opus Dei, to a winding, nondescript medieval Roman lane called Via dell'Orso, or Bear Lane.

On that road, house number 87 to 88, was the setting for the novel: Palazzo del Donzello, an ancient "locanda" or inn in the 17th century, for which they managed to obtain the guest book. Today, it is a rather seedy rooming house, the mustard yellow stucco flaking from the facade.

The somewhat stolid narrative style of the novel takes getting used to but the richness and detail repay the effort. And, despite its fascination with the minutiae of the lives of the times, *Imprimatur* is also an intensely political book, which culminates in the narrator's appalled realisation that the Catholic world has been betrayed by the Pope himself. "It had all started almost 30 years ago," the narrator reveals. "It was then ... that the Odescalchi family had besmirched itself with the most infamous of crimes: aiding heretics.

"It was about 1660 ... The House of Orange was, as ever, short of money. To give an idea of what that meant, William's mother and grandmother had pawned all the family jewels.

"After a series of highly secret overtures ... the House of Orange turned to the Odescalchi. They were the most solvent moneylenders in Italy. Thus the wars of heretical Holland were financed by the Catholic family of Cardinal Odescalchi, the future Pope Innocent XI."



Francesco Sorti: co-author of the thriller set in Rome in 1683

'Despite great success in Europe, the authors are virtually unknown in their own country'

It was the final twist in a historical novel, not the central thesis of a work of scholarship. But in elaborate and carefully referenced appendices, Monaldi and Sorti revealed that, far from being a novelistic *jeu d'esprit*, the identifying of the Odescalchi pope as the main financier of William of Orange's invasion of England was based on solid and original research.

Even that might not have mattered: when all is said and done, this was a novel; Innocent XI lived and died long ago. Monaldi and Sorti had produced an extremely juicy book pressing many of the same buttons as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and, in April 2001, Mondadori, the publishing house owned by the Berlusconi company Fininvest, bought the Italian rights to it.

And on 19 March 2002, Mondadori published it. The book immediately began to sell: on 14 April, *Corriere della Sera* said *Imprimatur* was the fourth best selling book in the country. In May, Mondadori published a second edition.

But then something strange happened: bookshops began mysteriously to run out of copies, and, though a second edition had been published, no new ones arrived. Despite the book's initial success, the authors and their agent found it impossible to obtain press coverage, the exception being a venomous piece in the Berlusconi-owned daily, *Il Giornale*. The novel was subtly but efficiently "disappeared", as if it had never existed.

What happened?

Something significant happened between the date Mondadori accepted the manuscript and publication day: the event now known as 9/11.

According to an informant of Monaldi and Sorti's inside the Vatican, in response to the attacks on America, the Church decided to advance the long-suspended cause of Innocent XI to be canonised: as the pope who had prevented the Turks from overrunning Christendom in 1683, that struck the conservative Opus Dei types who dominate the Catholic hierarchy as an exemplary way to show the church's defiance towards the new Islamic wave.

Then *Imprimatur* came out, with its harsh words on the Odescalchi pope – and more particularly its harsh facts and references, designed to bury once and for all the accepted version of Innocent XI's life, found both in Wikipedia and the Catholic Encyclopedia even today, insisting (in identical words) that "there is ... no ground for the accusation that Innocent XI ... supported (William of Orange) in the overthrow of James II".

As a result, the authors learnt, the planned canonisation of Benedetto Odescalchi was suspended indefinitely. The authors of his downfall were not forgiven. Their punishment was subtle but devastating, and ongoing: despite great success throughout continental Europe, with two more books published, four planned, and Peter Greenaway planning to turn all seven in the series into films, they remain virtually unknown in their own country.

The fury of the Church is understandable. What is less easy to fathom is how they persuaded the entire Italian media world to go along with it.

"It's not so much censorship as self-censorship," says Rita Monaldi. "When Italian journalists realise a book has been damned, they think they had better leave it alone because otherwise it can damage their career. This is something instinctive in the Italian media. The *Imprimatur* experience really disappointed us. We've broken our bridges with Italy."