THE MAKING OF ITALO CALVINO:
EVA MAMELI-CALVINO, AND HER LABORATORY GARDEN

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In the making of some major, XX-century, internationally known Italian writers, science was a key issue. The origins of that interest is quite obvious in authors like Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973), a professional engineer, or Primo Levi (1919-1982), a professional chemist, but what about Italo Calvino (1923-1985)? Many have written on the subject, but mainly concentrating on the intellectual, theoretical, and political aspects of the relationships between Calvino and science. Yet, in many of Calvino’s writings science is culture in such a concrete way that it’s inevitable for the historian of science to ask to the concrete context in which had origin his interest for nature and technoscience. This is possible, as it happens, taking to the centre the role of a woman who has been kept on the margins for decades. Calvino himself, in his reserved way, described her:

… my mother […] never left the garden, where every plant was labeled, the house swathed in bougainvillea, the study with its herbariums and the microscope under the glass dome.

Italo Calvino grew up, played, dreamt, and wrote his first short stories in that lab house which was submerged in a botanical garden, peopled by scientists, botanical amateurs, and floriculturists. His mother, Eva Mameli-Calvino (1886-1978), was a graduate in natural sciences and one of the first women to get a stable job in a university south of the Alps. She researched and published extensively for many decades on botanical physiology and pathology, plant biochemistry, floriculture and agriculture. Besides, she was an active popularizer and one of the first supporters of the movement for the protection of nature in Italy. Mameli was a 34 years-old talented researcher when she gave up her promising university career to get married with Mario Calvino (1875-1951), an agronomist who in 1908 had left Italy to do research in South America. After five years of joint agricultural and botanic research in Cuba, where Italo was born, the Calvinos came back to Italy. They bought Villa Meridiana, a big house facing the then undamaged and cosmopolitan Sanremo (Côte d’Azur), a place which became a laboratory house and the seat of the Floriculture Experimental Station. In that special place, the couple’s children, Italo and Floriano (1927-1984), grew up and lived until their adulthood. The Calvinos-Mameli couple worked and lived together until Mario’s death, in 1951. Eva continued writing and doing research until her death, in 1978.

The paper will concentrate on the figure of Eva Mameli-Calvino in the context of the relationships between women and science in Italy from the beginning of the nineteenth century through the Fascism regime until the Cold war. Beside, it will examine the particular kind of couple collaboration that the Calvinos set up along their life together. Bringing to the light the Calvinos peculiar professional and personal paths will help to show that in many of Italo Calvino’s works the so-called two cultures are just one in a way that can be fully understood only entering in Eva Mameli-Calvino’s laboratory garden.