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Front cover: Ex voto from the Aeolian Islands. The caption reads: Goletta S[antissima] Annunziata di Stromboli, Cap[ita]no Giacomo Barnao, forzando per montare il Monte di Gaeta alle 4 pom[eridiane] del 23 Ott[obre] 1885. Il Cap[ita]no, fratelli ed equipaggio offrono per G[razia] R[icevuta] dall'Immacolata Concezione e S[an] Bartolommeo. *The schooner Santissima Annunziata from Stromboli, Captain Giacomo Barnao, striving to pass the Mount of Gaeta at 4pm on 23 October 1885. The Captain, his brothers and the crew offer [this picture] for the grace they received from the Immaculate Conception and Saint Bartholomew.* [Image courtesy John Barnao; see article in this issue.]

Back cover: The hand-embroidered handkerchief made by Dario Lastoria, an Italian prisoner of war, which he gave to Loreta Giannotti before his repatriation to Italy in 1945. Donated to the Italian Historical Society & Museo Italiano (Co.As.It.) by Rita Cahill in memory of her late mother, Loreta Giannotti. [See article in this issue.]

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reading italian australian lives

by john gatt-rutter

Professor John Gatt-Rutter is Maltese by birth and graduated at Cambridge in Modern Languages, concentrating on Italian. He has spent a lifetime teaching Italian language and literature and related topics at several British and Australian universities and was Vaccari Professor in Italian Studies at La Trobe University from 1991 to 2008. Since then, he has been an Honorary Associate of the University and of the Italian Australian Institute. His research publications include a life of Italo Svevo (1861-1928) and a literary appraisal of Oriana Fallaci (1929-2006). Over the last ten years, he has turned his attention to books which have told the life stories of Australia's Italians, which have been almost totally unexplored. His latest book, *The Bilingual Cockatoo: Writing Italian Australian Lives* published in 2014 by Hybrid Publishers, Melbourne, is a survey of these life stories.¹

Abstract

This is the text of a paper offered for the 7th Biennial ACIS Conference: Re-imagining Italian Studies (Adelaide, December 2013). Over the last three decades there has been an increasing number of full-length life-writing texts by and/or about Italian Australians. Mostly written in English, they claim citizenship within Australia as Italians. This area of study poses an intriguing set of problems for an Italianist as traditionally defined, balanced as it is between the textual and the experiential. I address some of these issues in my recent book, *The Bilingual Cockatoo: Writing Italian Australian Lives*.

¹ The book was launched at the Museo Italiano (Co.As.It.) on 30 April 2014.

The inaugural text of Italian Australian autobiography was a best-selling spoof, in fact the absolute best-selling Australian book of the twentieth century, Nino Culotta's *They're a Weird Mob*, which first appeared in 1957 and sold over a million copies in numerous reprints.² The joke was that no such person as Culotta ever existed and the real author was someone called John O'Grady. It took another quarter of a century for Italian Australians to take up O'Grady's cue and publish their life stories, or have it done for them. The "weird mob", of course, are the Australians, supposedly as seen by a visiting Italian.

Autobiographies, as Canadian scholar Julie Rak has recently explored, have become one of the most prolific genres in publishing within the Western, and, especially, the English-speaking, world. Her book on the subject is titled *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* and is succinctly summed up in the blurb as follows:

Since the early 1990s, tens of thousands of memoirs by celebrities and unknown people have been published, sold, and read by millions of American readers. The memoir boom, as the explosion of memoirs on the market has come to be called, has been welcomed, vilified, and dismissed in the popular press. But is there really a boom in memoir production in the United States? If so, what is causing it? Are memoirs all written by narcissistic hacks for an unthinking public, or do they indicate a growing need to understand world events through personal experiences? This study seeks to answer these questions by examining memoir as an industrial product like other products, something that publishers and booksellers help to create. These popular texts become part of mass culture, where they are connected to public events. The genre of memoir, and even genre itself, ceases to be an empty classification category and becomes part of social action and consumer culture at the same time. From James Frey's controversial *A Million Little Pieces*, to memoirs about bartending, Iran, the liberation of Dachau, computer hacking, and the impact of 9/11, this book argues that the memoir boom is more than a publishing trend. It is becoming the way American readers try to understand major events in terms of individual experiences. The

memoir boom is one of the ways that citizenship as a category of belonging between private and public spheres is now articulated.³

Julie Rak's dating of this trend as taking off in the early 1990s exactly matches, though, of course, on a vastly different scale, the increasing number of full-length life-writing texts by and/or about Italian Australians. In fact, I have often found the dividing line between autobiography and biography extremely evanescent, and I am studying Italian Australian autobiographies and biographies as a single composite group, two slightly different faces of the same phenomenon – namely the experience of transculturation.

Most of these texts, and an increasing proportion of them, are written in English, in accordance with their claim to belonging to the broader Australian society and polity, and their demand for acceptance or attention. A diminishing minority of them are written in Italian, and dwell more on the protagonist's Italian identity, while several appear in both languages. All these Italian Australian biographies and autobiographies are predicated on the paradigm of a migration narrative relating to the first and second generations of Italian immigrants, who find themselves propelled from one multi-faceted culture (Italian) to another no less multi-faceted culture (Australian), without wishing to relinquish the former. Subsequently, with the third or later generations, who are by now assured of their belonging within a multicultural Australia, but anxious to keep alive, or to revive, their residual Italian identity component, the life narrative comes to be predicated on a paradigm of rediscovery of the culture of origin. Bicultural belonging is, in one way or another, the central topic of all these texts, the central life-experience which they convey.

These full-length Italian-Australian life-writing texts number at least sixty, and collectively emphasise an individualistic paradigm, whilst broadly sharing a common narrative paradigm. The individual protagonist is the bearer of a unique life-experience. There are also, however, at least a dozen publications each comprising a number of much shorter, predominantly oral, histories by a group of people having something more or less

² O'Grady, John, 1957, *They're a weird mob – A Novel by Nino Culotta*, Ure Smith, Sydney, New South Wales: and Reed's, Wellington, New Zealand.

³ Rak, Julie, 2013, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press: Waterloo, Ontario.

precise, or more or less tenuous, in common, from an extended family group, to a socio-economic category or a common place of origin or of settlement, or even having come to Australia on the same sailing. These few publications may collectively add up to some five hundred individual or family life histories. They balance the individualistic paradigm of the individual stories with the group paradigm that bundles them together. Some of the full-length life histories of individuals, however, avoid a narrowly individualistic perspective. Piero Genovesi writes a life narrative of the Pitruzzello family, though centred on Sebastiano.⁴ Diana Ruzzene Grollo, in *Growing Through the Brick Floor*, not only writes the life narrative of her family, but presents it as representative of the immigration from the province of Treviso.⁵ Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli's pointedly titled *tapestry – interweaving lives* is a form of quilted narrative, criss-crossing to and fro between the countryside around Benevento, Adelaide, Melbourne and backwards and forwards in time between five generations of country people from the Campania, giving multiple points of view.⁶ While the life story of the legendary Australian Rules footballer, Stephen Silvagni, which might have been expected to be particularly individualistic in its focus, is cast by Silvagni and his co-author, Tony De Bolfo, as another kind of quilted narrative, in which a multiplicity of people surrounding Silvagni give short accounts of events in his life and incidents which throw light on his personality.⁷ At the same time, one cannot forget that the vast majority of Italian Australians do not have their story told, and that many actively resist doing so.

One of the repressed memories of Italian Australians is that of their experience of war-time internment as enemy aliens. Researchers have reported a widespread

refusal on the part of ex-internees to talk extensively about this experience. And two authors of full-length autobiographies have confessed that they long felt unable to "come out" about that traumatic and humiliating episode in their life. Yet one of these texts was the first Italian Australian autobiography to be published, namely the Queenslander Osvaldo Bonutto's *A Migrant's Story*, which appeared in 1963.⁸ The other was the Tasmanian Claudio Alcorso's *The Wind You Say*, which first appeared in 1993 and was quickly reprinted in 1994 – the same year as the second edition of Bonutto's book.⁹ Each of them foregrounds the internment experience: Bonutto's book, by making it by far the longest chapter and giving it the title *J'accuse!* Which was the headline under which Emile Zola published his open letter denouncing the anti-Semitic persecution of the French army officer Dreyfus; and Alcorso's, by placing the chapter at the opening of his book, ahead of the chronological narrative of his life. These are prominent instances of Italian Australians trying to understand major events in terms of individual experiences, to borrow Julie Rak's words, and clearly show that for them too the memoir "is one of the ways that citizenship as a category of belonging between private and public spheres is now articulated".

The year 1994, which saw the second edition of Bonutto's *A Migrant's Story* and the second printing of Alcorso's *The Wind You Say*, also saw the appearance of another autobiography which foregrounds the internment experience. This is Peter Dalseno's *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties*, which devotes the last ten of its twenty-seven chapters to that experience.¹⁰ This book presents an astonishing contrast to Alcorso's. While both autobiographers testify to the deep trauma and stigma of being interned as enemy aliens, their experience of internment, for most of the time in the same facility, Loveday Camp, on the River Murray, near Barmera in South Australia, is radically different. The twenty-six-year-old Alcorso, from a wealthy Roman family, had been only two years in Australia before being interned. Intern-

⁴ Genovesi, Piero, 2003, *Sebastiano Pitruzzello: l'uomo-la famiglia-l'industria*, Pantalica Pty Ltd, Thomastown, Victoria; 2nd ed. 2004. English translation by Walter Musolino, 2003, *Sebastiano Pitruzzello: the man-his family-his company*, Pantalica Pty Ltd, Thomastown, Victoria.

⁵ Ruzzene Grollo, Diana, 1997, *Growing through the brick floor*, Gro-Set, Thornbury, Victoria; translated by Piero Genovesi, 1999, as *Noi gente d'emigrazione: ricostruire un cammino*, Gro-Set, Thornbury, Victoria.

⁶ Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria, 1999, *tapestry – interweaving lives*, Random House Australia, Milsons Point, New South Wales.

⁷ Silvagni, Stephen, and Tony De Bolfo, 2002, *Silvagni*, Harper Sports, Pymble, New South Wales.

⁸ Bonutto, Osvaldo, 1963, *A migrant's story: the struggle and success of an Italian-Australian, 1920s-1960s*, H. Pole and Co. Pty., Ltd.; 2nd ed., 1994, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

⁹ Alcorso, Claudio, 1993, 1994, *The wind you say*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, New South Wales.

¹⁰ Dalseno, Peter, 1994, *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties*, Boolarong Publication, Bowen Hills, Brisbane, Queensland.

ment enables him to meet and to love the Italian agricultural workers, cane-cutters and farmers from Queensland and New South Wales, to make friends with a Communist industrial worker, and to learn Russian from an aristocrat from Riga, as well as to love the Australian landscape. Dalseno, lightly disguised as Peter Delano, has just turned twenty-one at the time of his internment. He has grown up with an unmarried mother amid the canefields of northern Queensland, exposed to the most sordid side of the immigrant Italian community. A few years in a Catholic boarding school have extricated him from that environment and transformed him from Pierino into Peter, an Anglo-Celtic Australian, only for him to find himself cast back into the community from which he now feels estranged. He has just obtained his naturalisation as an Australian and married his non-Italian sweetheart, when he is rounded up to be interned at the outbreak of war with Italy. The ordeal of internment for Dalseno/Delano is that of being forced back into his Italian identity and to have to live for three years in the company of many of those people from whom he most wanted to escape. Two such different accounts as Alcorso's and Dalseno's of what might have been expected to be a similar experience are diagnostically revealing of the socioeconomic factors at work within the demographics of immigration. Alcorso and Dalseno represent two opposite extremes of the spectrum of Italian internees in Australia.

Within the immigrant narrative paradigm I have mentioned, there is plenty of room for diversity. Two of the earliest autobiographies are actually written by a person other than the autobiographical subject, Maria Triaca's life of her grandmother, Amelia Musso Tilbury, titled *Amelia – A Long Journey*,¹¹ and Emma Ciccotosto's *Emma: A Translated Life*, written by Michal Bosworth.¹² Both are celebrations of the infectious vitality of women who arrived at an early age in Australia and survived adverse circumstances. Emma Ciccotosto's book was reissued a few years later under the title *Emma: A Recipe for Life*, with a culinary appendix, thus inaugurating the obligatory association of the integration of Italians

in Australia with their cuisine. Many Italian Australian life histories dwell on the immigrant's struggle with the English language, and many dwell on struggles of other kinds also – against discrimination and vilification, but also against the misfortunes that could befall anyone. Olga D'Albero Giuliani's two-volume *Piccola quercia: La vita di Olga* recounts a long-drawn-out and painful but cheerful awakening to feminism in Melbourne,¹³ while Sydney-sider Fernando Basili's memoir, published both in Italian and in English, lustily denounces apparent class-based discrimination by both Italian and Australian authorities.¹⁴

The immigrant narrative paradigm is interestingly and movingly transformed in Angela Napolitano's *Liborio: My Great Love*, which intertwines her husband's and her own life stories chapter by chapter with the courtroom drama of their successful case against Liborio's former employer for exposing him to blue asbestos which brought about his death by mesothelioma.¹⁵ Family affections emerge quietly victorious in this Western Australian double autobiography. The Brisbane-based Domenico Cacciola's *Il secondo padre* recounts a Sicilian-born undercover policeman's lifetime struggle to fight corruption within the police force itself,¹⁶ while almost the converse is the case in *I, Mick Gatto*, by a Melbourne underworld figure of Calabrian parentage anxious to clear himself of the suspicion of murder.¹⁷ Franca Arena, a champion of many radical causes, including women's rights and migrants' rights, strives in her autobiography to vindicate the rightness of her endeavours in the face of her political marginalisation.¹⁸ Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation* is a non-Italian Australian's attempt to understand the circumstances

¹¹ Triaca, Maria, 1985, *Amelia – A Long Journey*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, Victoria.

¹² Ciccotosto, Emma, and Michal Bosworth, 1990, *Emma: a translated life*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, Western Australia; 2nd extended edition, 1995, *Emma: a recipe for life*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, Western Australia.

¹³ D'Albero-Giuliani, Olga, 1994, *Piccola quercia. La vita di Olga*, 2 vols in one, Insegna Publishers, West Brunswick, Victoria.

¹⁴ Basili, Fernando, 2004, *Vita vissuta – Esperienze di un emigrato ("Perché?" "Perché")* [No publication details.] English version, 2006, *A Migrant's Experience ("Why?" "Because")*.

¹⁵ Napolitano, Angela, 2006, *Liborio: My Great Love*, Angela Napolitano, Tuart Hill, Western Australia.

¹⁶ Cacciola, Domenico (with Carmelo Cacciola and Ben Robertson), 2009, *The Second Father: An Insider's Story of Cops, Crime and Corruption*. St Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press.

¹⁷ Gatto, Mick, with Tom Noble, 2009, *I, Mick Gatto*, Victory Books, Carlton, Victoria.

¹⁸ Arena, Franca, 2002, *Franca – My Story*, Simon and Schuster, Roseville, New South Wales.

of the murder of a young student of Italian parentage and his parents' sense of outrage at the apparent miscarriage of justice.¹⁹

There is no lack of success stories – that of the Pitruzzellos, already mentioned, that of Sir James Gobbo, who rose to be Governor of the State of Victoria,²⁰ those of the Sicilian Queenslanders, Carmelo Caruso²¹ and Sarina Russo,²² that of Carlo Zaccariotto,²³ and others, though few of them are without tales of struggle or disappointment. One extraordinary text, however, foxes the field. The pseudonymous Fosco Antonio's *My Reality* both flaunts and flouts autobiography.²⁴ It presents all the essential components of the paradigmatic migration narrative, but eschews sequential narrative, choosing instead to fix moments or aspects of that narrative for analytical reflection, interspersed with many other kinds of discourse, including fantasy scenes, radical critiques of European civilization and its history of warfare, a rejection of the “rational humanist” and the “economic” myths. Problematising both Italy and Australia, Fosco opts out of the existing social order, identifies with its casualties, and seeks a new identity for Australia. *My Reality* may be seen as rogue autobiography, or perhaps as total autobiography, eluding definition and categorization. It is a provocation to re-think established categories.

But let us come down to earth. Let us return to the relatively safe and comfortable category of Italian Australian life writing and migration narrative. This area of study poses an intriguing set of problems. For an Ital-

ianist as traditionally defined, the challenge is that knowledge of the Italian language or languages no longer seems to be crucial, and knowledge of Australian social history and social culture would appear to be more relevant. Does this area belong to Italian studies at all? Textual analysis veers away from literary valence towards discursive valence, which is, of course, equally speculative. To the social scientist or the historian, the discursive valence of life-writing texts, speculative though this is, is likely to be as or more valuable than their highly dubious documentary valence, and could lend itself to qualitative far more than to quantitative analysis. Issues of geographical space and place, sociocultural belonging and identity, dominate the experiential dimension of the migrational and transcultural adventure. Sociological theorizations of group ‘belonging’ as a product of dynamic intersectionalism, as in Nira Yuval-Davis's *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*,²⁵ converge with psychological theorizations of ‘identity’ as componential, as in Peter Weinreich, and Wendy Saunderson's 2003 *Analysing Identity: cross-cultural, societal and clinical contexts*.²⁶ It is tempting to apply these analytical grids to the recently published *Ciao, Mate!*, subtitled *A collection of essays by iconic Italo-Australians*, edited by Dr Aniello Iannuzzi, which invites nineteen first-generation Italian Australian respondents to define their identity.²⁷ Reading Italian Australian biographies and autobiographies therefore requires or at least invites the acquisition of a whole range of competences which are new to a literary and textual and linguistic Italianist like myself, who is, into the bargain, a relative outsider to both Italian and Australian belonging.

¹⁹ Garner, Helen, 2004, *Joe Cinque's Consolation: A true story of death, grief and the law*, Picador Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, New South Wales.

²⁰ Gobbo, Sir James, 2010, *Something to Declare: A Memoir*, The Miegunyah Press, Carlton, Victoria.

²¹ Caruso, Carmelo, 1999, *Under Another Sky: The life and sentiments of an Italian emigrant*, and in Italian, 1998, *Sotto un altro cielo: vita e sentimento di un emigrante*. Mario Congedo Editore, Galatina, Lecce; and also Sampognaro, Irene, 2008, *Carmelo Caruso – I due cuori di un emigrante* and trans. By J. Dickinson as *Carmelo Caruso – The Two Hearts of an Immigrant*, Mario Congedo Editore, Galatina, Lecce.

²² Russo, Sarina (with Russ Gleeson), 2002, *Meet me at the top!* Crown Content, North Melbourne, Victoria.

²³ Zaccariotto, Carlo, 1987, ‘*Me Recorde...*’ narrato da Pino Bosi, Kurunda, Sydney, New South Wales.

²⁴ Antonio, Fosco, 2003, *My Reality*, © Fosco Ruzzene; revised ed. 2007, Total Cardboard, Melbourne/London.

²⁵ Yuval-Davis, Nira, 2011, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, SAGE Publications, London.

²⁶ Weinreich, Peter and Saunderson, Wendy (eds), 2003, *Analysing Identity: cross-cultural, societal and clinical contexts*, Routledge, London.

²⁷ Dr Aniello Iannuzzi (ed.), 2013, *Ciao, Mate! A collection of essays by iconic Italo-Australians*, Connor Court Publishing, Ballarat, Victoria.



Figure 1: Trieste, 1932. The author, aged 3, with his aunt Lidia Umech (née Favretto) and her daughter Rina. (Image courtesy of the author)

between trieste and australia: chapters from mino's story

by girolamo favretto

Girolamo (Mino) Favretto was born in Umago, Italy (today Umag, Croatia) in 1929 and moved to Trieste as a child. In 1936 Mino had a part time job as a ball boy at the exclusive Circolo del Tennis in Trieste. There he asked to be paid rather than in cash, in books, which he stored in a large trunk. This acquainted the young Mino with Emilio Salgari, Jack London, Victor Hugo, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and many other authors, triggering a lifelong love of literature. In Trieste, Mino trained as a fitter and turner and, after working in the shipyard, he worked for 11 years as an artistic clockmaker. He migrated to Australia in 1955, where he was a specialised worker at Cyclon and Kodak until his retirement.

Mino says of himself, "I was born in 1929 at the beginning of the Depression. I am Italian by birth, culture and language. I am Istrian because I was born in Umago d'Istria and grew up with the Venetian dialect. The first time I visited Venice, my first thoughts were that everybody was speaking Umaghese! From the ages of 3 to 26, I lived in Trieste and so I am also Triestino. I consider myself a part of this multi-cultural society that moulded immigrants from different nationalities, religions and social backgrounds, into what is called the 'Triestino' of today. My passport tells me I am Croatian because when Italy was defeated by Yugoslavia in the Second World War, the lands from Gorizia to Dalmazia, including those regions which had been Italian in language, culture and tradition for a millennium were annexed to Yugoslavia. Finally, I am Australian by choice. I became a citizen in 1964 and lived here for the longest part of my life. I got married and had five wonderful children here." We publish here two autobiographical pieces in the original English, illustrated with photographs from the collection of the author.

The Corridor (*l'andito*)

I met the corridor one day in the spring of 1935. I was then 6 years old, just out of a sanatorium in Rovigo, after a long bout of sickness. My father came to the railway station in Trieste to get me. Walking towards the Campo Marzio, he explained to me that I would have a new mother too.

Off a long wooden corridor there were, on the left, four doors opening into four apartments. The third one opened to the sound of our steps. A pleasant woman welcomed us and hugged and kissed me on both cheeks. She would be my mother and the place would be my home to the summer of 1955.

On the right of the corridor were two windows that looked out into a rectangular courtyard, home to a few rabbits and lots of rats. Thus my relationship with the corridor had begun. I soon started recognising the sounds of the various people walking to and from their apartments, as the floor boards transmitted the sounds of their footsteps like the beating of a drum.

Two short steps, a door slamming. An old lady and her daughter, leftovers from the era before World War I when Trieste was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were the inhabitants of the first apartment. All the apartments consisted of a kitchen and a large bedroom. The old lady's apartment was free of charge because her deceased husband had been a long-serving coach driver for the Greek-Austrian landlord, Baron Economus.

Then there were the tip-toes of the four inhabitants of the second apartment: Maria, the wife, Giuseppe, her husband, Renata, their nine-year-old daughter, and Luciano, their six-year-old son.

Another family of four, originally from Friuli, lived in the last apartment: Bruno, the husband, Maria, his wife, Alberto, their son, and Luisa, their daughter. They were very religious and their quick pace was particularly recognisable on Sundays when they travelled to and from mass at San Giusto Cathedral.

Through the corridor, I learned the ways of life of all our neighbours. In all those years, I did not have much to do with the Austrian women; our encounters only consisted of a brief "good morning" and "good night". On one occasion, I asked the older woman to trans-

late a letter I received from a girl who had been travelling through Trieste and whom I had met at a dance. Early one Sunday morning in 1953 I heard several people coming and going and lots of soft talking; later I learned that the old lady had died.

There was not much more than an exchange of "good day" or "how are you?" with our other neighbours too. We all attended to our own business. We knew only a little about each other, and of course the corridor was part of it.

Giuseppe (Pino), from the second apartment, a man of about forty, worked casual hours in the port of Trieste. Maria, his wife, had to earn extra money to supplement their meagre income: she did washing and ironing for the soldiers in the nearby barracks. Pino had strong communist views and blamed the Fascists for all his ills. I sometimes played or swapped comic magazines with their son, Luciano. One day in 1939 I was reading one of Luciano's comics – I can still remember it was about the Phantom of the Jungle – when suddenly the corridor came alive. People were rushing in and out of the second apartment. Luciano had been sick for a week but we didn't realise how serious it was. He died during the night. When my mother learned that Luciano had died from an infectious disease, despite my protests, she was quick to burn all his magazines.

In 1941 Italy was at war and things changed for the worse. Pino was working less and less and drinking more and more. He had been declared unfit to join the army. Rina was taking on more work with the help of Renata, their daughter, to help make ends meet. Two years passed by and after the armistice in September 43, the Italian army disappeared. The barracks were now taken over by the German occupying forces. They too used the laundry services, so nothing much changed for the family. After a brief stint in prison for talking politics in a bar, Pino came home. I recognised his steps in the corridor one night.

In the meantime, Renata, now a good looking young woman of seventeen, had a German boyfriend. His steel-studded boots resounded in the corridor. The relationship did not last long. In 1945, the Germans went back home. The city was first occupied by the Yugoslavs and New Zealanders, followed by the Eng-

lish and Americans until 1953. With the Yugoslavs in the city and communism in power, Pino was finally happy. He made contacts with the new rulers and arranged for Renata to do a course to become a seamstress in a nearby city in Yugoslavia. After a couple of months, she came home. Her job at the tailoring school was to cook, wash and clean after a team of men who were rebuilding railway lines that had been destroyed during the war. Renata received no wages and little food. She worked twelve hours a day, with two extra hours dedicated to study. After she ran home and told her father of the hardship she had to endure, Pino's communist ideals vanished.

Mother and daughter were back in the laundry business, this time for the Americans. The Americans were very popular with the Triestine girls, and Renata too was engaged to a Marine. The corridor echoed his strong marching steps. Everything was now looking good for Renata; she was planning marriage and a life in the USA, but destiny had something else in store for her: war in Korea. Johnny, the Marine, had to go. In the space of two months their relationship was history. By the time I left Trieste, Renata was married to a local boy. Pino was drinking more than ever.

The family in the fourth apartment got along very well together; they all had the same way of thinking and never argued. They idolised *il Duce*, Mussolini. They were observant and devout Catholics, always dressed to perfection. Bruno was a driver for the *Filovia*, the electric cable bus service; he was a sight in uniform. Bruno's wife, Maria, barely made a sound on the floorboards in the corridor. She never raised her voice and in fact I do not recall her voice at all. Their son and daughter attended to their studies, never entertaining friends. They kept very much to themselves.

One day in 1941, Bruno answered the call of the army. By 1943, after having been wounded in Africa, he was back home. Now the corridor echoed his uneven steps, due to his injured left leg. He went back to driving buses until 1944 when, after the city had been heavily bombed, the bus service stopped. He eventually found another job, but I could see the strain in his face. The entire family was struggling, having to witness the disintegration of the Italian nation and of the ideals they held so dear. In June 45, the *Duce* was summarily executed by partisans and his corpse hung in Piazzale Loreto in Milan. I still remember the crying

and screaming coming out of their apartment. Then there was silence. Their footsteps echoed again in the corridor but there were no voices.

One Sunday morning in 47, their steps stopped outside our front door. My mother opened the door and all four, with big smiles on their faces, asked to come in. Once inside, the father opened a black briefcase, took out a few brightly-coloured magazines and started talking about the true meaning of life. They had found a new religion and had become Jehovah's Witnesses. To the day I left Trieste, their lives were complete.

The sound I loved to hear most of all was the strong, secure steps of my father. He was a seaman, working in the machine rooms of large passenger ships. He would come home once a month with purchases from South and North American port cities; he always had presents for me in his suitcases. It was a very happy time when my father would be home for a few days. We would go out and have a good time at the local *trattoria* with friends and relatives. In 1943, after some unpleasant experiences on convoys to Africa, my father was faced with the difficult task of trying to come home through the mess in which Italy was in after the armistice. It was a very happy sound indeed that the corridor made when he finally came home!

By this time, I was home less and less, as I was working and studying for my fitter and turner apprenticeship. At the end of the war I was 16 years old and enjoyed going out with my friends. My father was out at sea again. The years went by, to the day I decided to go to Australia. A few weeks before my departure, my father was ready to go to Genova, where he was to board a ship for America. We had a long talk and he could not believe that I had made such a decision. I helped him with his suitcases and walked down the corridor for the last time together. A very sad goodbye at the railway station and he was gone.

A few weeks later, my mother helped me pack my suitcases. We could not help crying a little. She had been a really good stepmother to me. We had been through many good and bad times together. I walked down the corridor for the last time.¹

¹ The names of some of the characters in this story have been changed.



Figure 2 – Seaford beach, February 1956: first picnic for these Italian migrants from Trieste. Mino Favretto in checked shirt; on his right, his friend Renato Sella (Image courtesy of the author).

Hay bales

My first three months in Australia were the worst of my life. At age 26, with no knowledge of the English language and far from my family and friends, I had to work at hard and dirty jobs. I would shift from place to place with no money left for food after paying for accommodation and transport.

Come December, feeling depressed I went to the Legend coffee bar in Bourke Street where many Triestini would meet after work. Discussing our new life, one chap mentioned that country jobs were very rewarding. I found out that Renato, who had just left the coffee bar on his way home, had been offered a job to recruit men to pick hay bales in the country. I rushed out and just managed to catch him as he was boarding a tram to Brunswick. By the time we had reached Dawson Street, I had the job and a new place to live among Triestini.

A couple of days later we left in the early hours of the morning. It was about five of us travelling on the back of a utility van. After about three hours on the road, feeling hot and dry, we stopped at a pub for a good lunch of steak and eggs. Renato had a sound knowledge of the English language and was our interpreter. Soon afterwards, we reached a large farmhouse. The boss was there, waiting with about 30 men, all mi-

grants like us coming from different countries and with little knowledge of the English language.

We found out that we had more than 30,000 hay bales to pick, but first we had to go to their location, which was far from the actual farm. We jumped into various trucks and utes and about 15 minutes later we found ourselves in the middle of a vast flat field. The hay bales were all around us as far as the eye could see. There was not one tree in sight and our first task was to turn the hay bales over so as to dry their moist bottom in the heat of the sun. We worked hard under the blazing hot sun until dusk set in.

We returned to the farm where there was a huge water tank on the corner of the farmhouse. We each had a turn, splashing water on ourselves, cleaning off the dirty sweat, and drinking as we went. The farmer came rushing down yelling “No! No! The water is precious, only for drinking!” That was our first lesson of how life was in the harsh environment of the country! We then ate dinner: grilled (more like burnt!) mutton chops, eggs, milk and tinned apricots aplenty. It would be the same for the duration of our stay there.

The farmhouse was a large building located between two small hills. It had a garden with closely packed

bushes and a few roses here and there. In the house there was a huge room; against the one brick wall (the other walls were weatherboard) there was a kitchen with an open fire. The nights were very cold. There were in the room three long tables made with rough timber, and we sat on long benches taking turns at the food on the tables. Two middle aged and two younger ladies worked in the kitchen. The farmer and his two right hand men were helping out and talking to us. I could not understand a single word. Country people had a soft way of speaking from the side of their mouths. There was no beer or any sort of alcoholic drinks, only good milk.

We were shown our accommodation in a long and narrow brick building divided into small rooms with four sleeping bunks and no windows. They looked like prison cells. At the end of the building there was a bigger room with a fireplace.

The next morning it was still dark outside, when there was banging on the door "Wake up!" It was pitch black, with no light in the rooms. So we opened the door, cold and sleepy, we got dressed and followed each other to the big room. In a corner there were a few buckets of water to wash our faces. The fire was on and the billy tea was boiling. We all had some and then we went near the fire to warm up. The truck drivers spoke fast and softly. The dawn was slowly lighting up the sky and unfamiliar birds were singing for us. I was fascinated by the new experience. And also eager to get to work and earn some good money. So were the others.

To our surprise, the Australians were not in a hurry. Still talking, we could feel the warmth of the sun as it was rising. Slowly the drivers put out the fire and started looking out towards the farmhouse; we followed them. We were again inside the big room warmed up by the fire. Breakfast was served: burnt mutton, eggs, milk and tinned apricots. It was nine o'clock before the farmer with the drivers around him moved out and entered the trucks with the men.

We went back to the field to finish overturning the bales of hay, but it was harder than the day before. The heat was unbearable, especially for the migrants from the Baltic countries and Germany. Several collapsed and had to be taken back to the city. The day after, after the same early routine, the drivers had a chute attached on an angle to the side of the trucks so that one end was parallel to the tray and the other

to the ground. That way, as the trucks slowly moved, the chute would scoop the bales up into the tray where two men would do the stacking: about four hundred bales to the truck. Again we worked very hard filling the trucks and then, back near the farm, under a huge sort of shed, transferring the bales to a covered hay stack. It took us about four hours to complete the task. Again many men were off with sun stroke. We rested for lunch. The Australian drivers went to the next village pub for lunch.

Upon their return, they were half drunk. With them, an ample beer supply. The next day after lunch I was sick. The change of diet took a toll on my stomach and I spent the rest of the day in my "cell". By night I was better. We were paid a penny per bale, to be split among the three men on the truck, and we could see that it was very little money. The drivers were particularly unhappy, especially with what they were spending on beer.

The following day started as usual, working hard in the heat under the blazing sun. The only shadow was under the trucks. After lunch the drivers came back drunk and in a bad mood. We started in the fields at a fast pace when all of a sudden our truck started taking up bales galore. The other trucks did the same: bales to the left, bales to the right, half bales, full bales. Hay flying everywhere. It was the charge of the drunks brigade! I did my best to pass what I could to Renato for him to stack: mission impossible. In the middle of this mess came the farmer. And sacked the lot. With the drivers gone, and the rest of the workers too, Renato and myself decided to stay on until the end of the holidays. After that we were due to start work on the assembly line at the Austin Simca car factory.

There were two trucks left; the farmer had a good driver. We acclimatized to the weather and the food. I had never felt better. I even put on weight. We changed the working time to the cool part of the day and the evening, when we worked in the light of the trucks' headlights, and rested in the hot hours. All went well. It was hard work with the bales weighing over 25 kilos. Our driver was very strong and active. He left for a few days for a hay delivery and Renato and myself had turns driving and stacking. I had never driven before, but it was first and second gear only in the field.

When the driver came back, there were only a few days left of the holidays. The bales were stacked very high under the shed and it took a strong effort to throw them from the truck to the driver, who was stacking them. The driver was under pressure from the farmer to finish clearing the field of the bales that were starting to rot. So he was hurrying us: "Faster! Faster!" Renato was short tempered and he had enough of "Faster!" In a fit of anger, he threw a hay bale at the driver with all his strength. That toppled the man from the top of the stack. At the same time, Renato's back went: from that moment he could

hardly walk. That was the end of our work at the farm.

Renato had to return to Melbourne and nurse his back until the start of the job at the car factory. Wages there were about ten pounds a week. In about three weeks at the farm we had earned about ten pounds each: not much, but we learned a lot about working conditions in the country, widened our experience and our knowledge of the English language. Plus I was stronger and in better health than I had ever been.



Figure 1 – Loreta Giannotti and Ainsley Evatt in India. Image courtesy Ainsley Evatt.

fraternising with the enemy.
british-italian relations, 1939-1947
by nicole townsend

Nicole Townsend is a third-year university student currently completing her Bachelor of Arts at Monash University. Nicole's research focus and interests lie in the area of military history and battlefield archaeology. She has recently completed an internship with the Italian Historical Society for which this article was a component. This article, Nicole's first publication, is an expanded version of a report submitted in partial fulfilment of the assessment requirements of her internship program with Monash University.

This article consists of two strands, namely traditional, publication-based academic research and the story of a singular friendship between an Italian prisoner of war and a British-Italian couple, as told to Nicole by the last survivor of this trio, Mr Ainsley Evatt. Nicole believes that the interweaving of these two strands bears out the fact that the ultimate subject matter of history is the lives of human beings, and that individual human experience, in turn, in order to be fully understood, must be situated within its wider historical framework.

Ainsley, Loreta and Dario

Ainsley Evatt, now 95 years of age, was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India, in 1921, when India was still a Dominion of the British Empire. Hailing from a military family (his grandfather, father and sister all served in the British armed forces) in 1944 Ainsley enlisted in the British Navy, where he served on a gunship escorting ships along the Indian coastline. It is this escort role which he credits with saving him from fighting the Japanese forces in the nearby Pacific theatre.

Ainsley recalls how he always told his mother he would never get married. That was, of course, before he met his future wife. One day, while visiting a friend's house, Ainsley met Loreta (Loretta) Giannotti, an Italian girl who also lived in Dehra Dun, in northern India, with her family. The Giannottis were part of the small Italian expat community living in India at the time. Ainsley and Loreta would come to talk over their mutual love of dancing: Ainsley even went on to win a number of ballroom dancing competitions following his migration to Melbourne. "We met, we fell in love. What more can I say?" Ainsley, for whom it was almost love at first sight, stated.¹ They eventually married after the end of the war in 1945.

Ainsley and Loreta were lucky in that they didn't experience any social discrimination as a result of their relationship, as many British women who began relationships with Axis men did. Loreta, who was a skilled horsewoman and regularly won races against the military men, was loved by the whole community. It was not the matter of her Italian heritage, but her personal character, that was important.

It was as a result of Loreta's Italian background that the young couple came to befriend an Italian prisoner of war. Dario Lastoria had been captured at the Battle of Bardia in January of 1941. Bardia was an Italian harbour colony located on the Libyan coast in North Africa and its location meant that it blocked the British advance into Libyan territory; consequently, the

British sent in Australian troops to take the Italian fortress at Bardia. The ensuing battle represented the first major World War II battle in which Australian troops took part; their victory left 36,000 Italians to be taken as prisoners of war by the Allies.² Dario Lastoria was one of these and he eventually found himself interned in the Dehra Dun prisoner of war camp.

Dario, like Loreta, was born in Rome and it is this common heritage, Ainsley believes, that led his wife and Dario to forge such a strong bond over the time of his internment in India. Every so often, at times once a fortnight and other times once a month, Ainsley and Loreta would host Dario for a day out from the POW camp. On these days, Dario, Ainsley and Loreta would go out to breakfast or lunch together at a restaurant, chat at home or visit the town's Italian priest, Father Luca, who also hailed from Rome.

Though Dario and his fellow Italian prisoners of war in India had a better experience overall in that they were viewed more positively and enjoyed more freedoms than their German counterparts, Dario still demonstrated how sad of a time in was for him when he was interned. On a cotton handkerchief he embroidered and gifted to Loreta, Dario wrote the words *età più bella, giorni più tristi*.³ Translating as 'the most beautiful age, the saddest days,' the handkerchief's words show the sadness Dario felt at his own incarceration and that of his comrades. Interestingly, after Ainsley and Loreta left India and Dario was repatriated to Italy, the couple and their Italian friend neither saw nor spoke to one other again. Ainsley always wondered why Dario and Loreta never tried to keep in contact despite the strong bond they formed. Perhaps this was the reason – even though they maintained a strong friendship during his incarceration, it is possible that after the war Dario may have wanted to move on from these 'saddest of days' and truly experience the 'most beautiful age' he yearned for.

¹ Nicole Townsend, Interview with Mr Ainsley Evatt and his daughter Mrs Rita Cahill, 19 January, 2015.

² Craig Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), p. 1-2.

³ See Figure 3.



Figure 3 – The hand-embroidered handkerchief made by Dario Latoria, an Italian prisoner of war, which he gave to Loreta Giannotti before his repatriation to Italy in 1945. Donated to the Italian Historical Society & Museo Italiano by Rita Cahill in memory of her late mother, Loreta Giannotti.

After the war ended, Ainsley and Loreta's life in India also encompassed the turbulent period surrounding Indian independence from Britain and the civil war the region experienced. Ainsley recalls how one day, whilst he and Loreta were heading home from visiting friends in a nearby town, they came face-to-face with a charging group of Sikhs who were raiding the area and killing anyone in their path.

In 1947, following the granting of Indian independence, the British government divided the former British dominion into the states of Pakistan and India. As part of this process, Britain allowed the local rulers of the then semi-autonomous states in the Punjab region, which was to be divided between the newly formed states, to choose which state they would amalgamate with. This process led to what Paul R. Brass refers to as a series of genocidal massacres and attacks which were carried out between the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab region; the Muslims were killing the Hindus and Sikhs in western Punjab, while in the east Hindus and Sikhs targeted the Muslims in retaliation for these attacks.⁴

⁴ Paul R. Brass, 'The partition of India and retributive genocide in the Punjab, 1946-1947: means, methods and purposes,' *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5 (2003): p. 88, available at <<http://faculty.washington.edu/brass/Partition.pdf>>

It was one of these Sikh raids Ainsley and Loreta found themselves caught up in: they were forced to flee and take shelter in the nearby church until the early hours of the morning when they took the chance to flee through the treacherous jungle, risking attack by the tigers which inhabited the area, in order to get home: "They were killing everyone in sight ... [but] they seemed to respect the [sacred ground] of the church we hid in. They didn't attack us there."⁵ Though they managed to make their way home, there was no law in this region of India for roughly two weeks and, as a result, Ainsley and his neighbours were forced to sleep with a gun under their pillows because it simply wasn't safe.⁶

With India's independence came the expulsion of British troops from the sub-continent; this of course included Ainsley, Loreta and their infant daughter Rita. Ainsley's departure from India with his family marked the last time he ever saw the place he was born and raised, and he would always miss the country. Their move to England wasn't the easiest – Ainsley and Loreta were used to the warm climate of India, not the cold of Britain. Loreta did, however, enjoy being so close to her homeland of Italy and she visited regularly during the time they lived in Britain. Ainsley recalls how he always received messages from Loreta on her trips to Italy begging for him to send her some tea because her supply had run out: "I would always get letters from her in Italy asking me to send her tea because she came to rely on it so much," he laughs. "Her suitcase was always only a few clothes with the rest full of tea!"⁷ Loreta had become, in true stereotypically British fashion, addicted to her tea.

Unwilling to put up with the cold weather, in November 1955 Ainsley moved his family to Australia, after having seen advertisements looking for skilled workers to come to the southern nation. Before entering the Navy, he had trained as a toolmaker and it was this skill that eventually led to the Australian government accepting his immigration application and providing him with accommodation and work in Melbourne.

Now, almost exactly sixty years after he first moved to Australia, Ainsley still lives in Melbourne. Sadly,

⁵ Nicole Townsend, Interview.

⁶ Ibid.

Loreta passed away recently, and it is clear to see from how Ainsley speaks of his memories with her, how true their love was. For Ainsley, who only recently became a great-great-grandfather, his time in India and the experiences he and Loreta had there with Dario are still very important. To this day, he carries with him a golden St Christopher's medal which was given to Dario by his mother when he left for war, and which Dario gifted to Ainsley and Loreta. Likewise, until her passing, Loreta always kept close track of the two handkerchiefs Dario had given her and which remained amongst her most treasured possessions. Even though they never saw or heard from Dario again after his repatriation, for Ainsley and Loreta the relationship that was forged and the memories have stayed with them forever.



Fig. 4. The second handkerchief given by Dario Lastoria to Loreta Giannotti, issued by the Italian Royal Air Force Donated to the Italian Historical Society & Museo Italiano by Rita Cahill in memory of her late mother, Loreta Giannotti.

Mr Evatt's story does not fit the standard premise which characterises many of the military related books and movies with which we are familiar. His is not a story of a man charging across the battlefields of Europe or sailing the high seas of the Pacific in the fight against the Empire of the Rising Sun. Rather, it relates to a less publicised aspect of the war-time experience, namely the incarceration of Axis POWs and the fraternisation of individuals whose homelands had found themselves on opposite sides of the battlelines. Though the primary source of reference for this article will be the accounts of Mr Ainsley Evatt

and his daughter Mrs Rita Cahill, their accounts will be supported by those of other British subjects and Axis POWs both in India and the British homeland for purposes of comparison and in order to support the conclusions this article will draw from Mr Evatt's account.

Epic tales of prisoners of war (POWs) have also become a popular subject to explore within the entertainment industry: "drama, human suffering, and survival in extreme situations" have widespread public appeal, after all.⁸ However, as Joan Beaumont notes, it has only been in the past decade or so that Australian scholars have begun to focus upon the history and experiences of Australian POWs.⁹ Rather, as Rosalind Hearder notes, it is the operational history of these wars which has remained at the forefront of scholarly research and writings: it is the large battles and the politics of war which still dominate and are perceived to be of the most importance to historians and the general population alike.¹⁰

Even with the increasing focus upon the history of POWs, scholarly discourse has tended to remain focussed upon only small aspects of the field; in Australia, the focus has been primarily upon the experiences of Australian soldiers incarcerated by the Japanese during the Pacific War. As a result, the onus has been upon ex-POWs themselves to write and share their experiences.¹¹

For the most part, the focus of English-speaking scholars within this area has been upon the Allied POW experience. In comparison, the experiences of Axis POWs and the impact they had on the societies where they were detained have largely been ignored within the scholarship of the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia in particular. For example, as Bob Moore has noted, Britain's hosting of hundreds of thousands of POWs as an auxiliary work force during the Second World War and the social issues which arose as a result are seldom even ac-

⁸ Rosalind Hearder, 'Memory, methodology, and myth: some of the challenges of writing Australian prisoner of war history,' *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 40 (2007): available at

<<https://www.awm.gov.au/journal/j40/hearder.asp>>

⁹ Joan Beaumont, *Gull Force: Survival and leadership in captivity, 1941-1945* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988).

¹⁰ Hearder, 'Memory, methodology, and myth.'

¹¹ Hearder, 'Memory, methodology, and myth.'

⁷ Ibid.

knowledge within social histories of the era.¹² In many ways, this is due to the final outcome of World War II: the Allies were victorious and as the well-known truism goes, “history is written by the victors”.¹³

The issue of fraternisation between people who found themselves on opposite sides of the battlelines, particularly between Allied citizens and Axis POWs, has been overlooked for the most part. This article aims to help fill in this gap in the scholarship by analysing the issue of fraternisation between British subjects and Axis POWs. The impact of aspects such as nationality, gender, location and the passage of time upon the response to and acceptability of this fraternisation will be explored in order to demonstrate that fraternisation was perceived and addressed in many different, often conflicting ways. Furthermore, the article will investigate whether the eventual acknowledgement of relationships between Axis POWs and British civilians depended on lack of enforceability rather than acceptance.

It should be noted that though this article will concern itself particularly with the experience of fraternisation between Allied and Axis citizens in India and Britain, the conclusions drawn may also be applied to an Australian context. As was the case in Britain and India, fraternisation undoubtedly occurred between Italians interned in Australia and Australian women, and Australia generally took its lead from Britain when it came to what was and was not acceptable in terms of relations between POWs and the general citizenry.

Issues of Nationality

The nationality of the individuals concerned was undoubtedly the biggest contributing factor in the acceptability of any relationship between a British citizen and an enemy citizen, be they civilian, soldier or POW. Though every Axis power was considered an enemy, some were more acceptable than others. As Mr Evatt notes, this was certainly the case for Italians,

who he explicitly notes were “more acceptable as enemies than the Germans.”¹⁴

That being said, however, it is clear that Italians too were still to be viewed and treated as enemies, and as a consequence the government did not want British women associating with them. The chairman of a police court trying the case of two girls caught fraternising with Italian POWs was strong in his condemnation of the girls’ actions: “The Italians asked to be allowed to come over here to bomb us when the Battle of Britain was on, and they did their best to destroy France by joining in when France was being beaten. That is the kind of people you have fraternised with,” a local British newspaper, *The Newbury News*, quoted the chairman as stating.¹⁵ However, though the Italians were considered enemies and the British government did try to halt interactions between its citizens and Italian POWs, the Italians were preferable to their German counterparts.

There were a number of factors which influenced this difference in the perception of Italians and Germans. Pre-existing cultural conceptions of the enemy are cited by Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich as one of the largest contributing factors to this difference in perception.¹⁶ Italians had a long standing presence within the British community as they owned and operated many eateries and shops within the British Empire and had established a good rapport with the local communities.¹⁷ Speaking of his wife, Loreta, Mr Evatt attested to this, noting that his wife and the Italian population of India as a whole were generally well liked: “Everyone loved her accent. She was a great horsewoman [and would] race with the army men. Sometimes she would win, sometimes she wouldn’t.”¹⁸

In comparison, the British population’s perception of Germans was still tainted by Germany’s role in World War I. As Eugenios Michail notes, the blame of the horrors of World War I experienced by the British was left squarely at Germany’s feet following Allied vic-

¹² Bob Moore, ‘Illicit Encounters: Female Civilian Fraternization with Axis Prisoners of War in Second World War Britain,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, no. 4 (2013): p. 742.

¹³ This quote is widely attributed to Winston Churchill, although its exact origins are not known.

¹⁴ Townsend, Interview.

¹⁵ The National Archives (UK), MAF47/117 *Newbury News*, 6 August, 1942, as cited in, Moore, ‘Illicit Encounters,’ p. 747.

¹⁶ Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, *Prisoners of War and their captors in WWII* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 8.

¹⁷ Townsend, Interview.

¹⁸ Ibid.

tory.¹⁹ The British had not forgotten these experiences and, as a result, fraternisation with Germans during WWII was more objectionable than fraternisation with the Italians, who had after all supported the Allies in the First World War.

As the public's perception of fraternisation between British and enemy citizens was influenced by pre-existing cultural ideas and the events of World War I, so too was it coloured by the experiences made during WWII, in particular the atrocities of the Nazis. As Michail further states, the compounding of these perceptions was highly influential in the British public's negative reaction to fraternisation between British citizens and Germans.²⁰ Indeed, some British people went so far as to label the Germans "sadistic" and "just not human."²¹ In an interview with Britain's *The Daily Mail*, June Tull supported this assertion when she spoke of how the public reacted to her relationship with a German POW, Heinz Fellbrich. Tull cited the deaths of family members in the war at the hands of the Germans as a reason for opposition to their relationship: "There was a lot of hostility towards us. I could understand it because people had lost loved ones in the war," she noted, "After our wedding we received two sack loads of hate mail."²² This attitude was confirmed by Mr Evatt who stresses that "the Germans were treated differently because what Hitler was doing you don't do ... the countries that he occupied; he wasn't a benevolent conqueror you see."²³

The personal experiences people had of the behaviour of Italian and German POWs during captivity was

also a contributing factor to the public's relative readiness to accept fraternisation with the Italians. Mr Evatt believes that the arrogance and feeling of superiority he perceived in the German POWs he encountered in Dehra Dun, British India, was part of the reason why the Italians were preferred. "The Germans were very arrogant. They were held together with the Italians at first, but they were always fighting because the Germans thought they were betrayed; they thought Mussolini had surrendered early," he stated; "[the Germans] always thought they were so superior."²⁴

Mr Evatt attested to the manners, good behaviour and workmanship skills of the Italian POWs. Speaking of Dario Lastoria, Mr Evatt noted that he "was very well-mannered [and] wouldn't sit down on a chair before a lady sat down. He had these old world manners."²⁵ Mr Evatt's testimony is supported by those of a number of people who wrote to various newspapers in Britain to demonstrate their support of Italian POWs. One woman praised the Italian POWs interned near her home who offered their weekly earnings to the local poor, particularly those who had lost a loved one in the war, whilst a British interpreter labelled those Italian POWs he met as "good-natured and cheery."²⁶ It was qualities such as these that endeared the Italians to the British citizenry. When these qualities were added to the positive pre-existing cultural conceptions the British held of the Italian people and the overall negative view of Germans the British people retained from two world wars which they blamed on Germany, the result was a readier acceptance of fraternisation between British citizens and Italians than of British-German relationships.

Britain vs the Dominions

In addition to nationality, the location in which fraternisation took place was also a highly influential factor in the acceptability of any relationship between a British citizen and an 'enemy' citizen. In the British mainland, there was a stronger opposition to fraternisation between British citizens and POWs than there was in the Dominions, such as India. This depended

¹⁹ The levelling of blame for the outbreak of World War I at Germany was denoted in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, commonly known as the 'War Guilt Clause,' which required Germany to accept this guilt. See, Treaty of Versailles, June 28, 1919, as reproduced at, Yale Law School, 'The Versailles Treaty June 28, 1919,' The Avalon Project, accessed 21 January, 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partviii.asp>; Eugenios Michail, 'After the War and After the Wall: British perceptions of Germany following 1945 and 1989,' *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, 3, 2001, p. 1.

²⁰ Michail, 'After the War,' p. 1.

²¹ Mass Observation, FR 2248 German Atrocities May 1945, pp. 1-10, as cited in, Michail, 'After the War,' p. 1; Mass Observation, FR 2248 German Atrocities May 1945, p. 2, as cited in, Michail, 'After the War,' p. 1.

²² Helen Weathers, 'Sleeping with the Enemy: The British women who fell for German POWs,' *The Daily Mail*, 17 August, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article476097/Sleeping-enemy-The-British-women-fell-German-PoWs.html>.

²³ Townsend, Interview.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *The Times*, November 21, 1941, as cited in, Lucio Sponza, "Italian Prisoners of War in Great Britain, 1943-1946," in *Prisoners of War and their captors in World War II*, eds Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (Oxford: Berg, 1996), pp. 208; Lucio Sponza, "Italian Prisoners of War," p. 207.

on the fact that, unlike the Dominions, the British mainland was under constant threat of invasion from the Axis powers encroaching on its doorstep.²⁷ (This is not to say that the Dominions did not face any threat, including invasion, from the German war effort. Indeed, it is well known that Australia feared invasion by Japanese forces during the Pacific War as evidenced by various newspaper articles and propaganda posters.²⁸) As a result, the British government was stricter in its prohibition of fraternisation with POWs within the British Isles: the government did not want to risk the security of the state by allowing the establishment of such relationships.

The primary fear was that POWs, particularly those from Germany, would spread the Nazi ideology among the population and try to destabilise the nation from within. This fear was epitomised by the so-called 'British Fifth Column', the imaginary "phantom menace" which terrorised the British Expeditionary Force and stalked the subconscious of the British government and public.²⁹ Likened to a modern day Trojan Horse by Glyn Prysor, fear of this 'Fifth Column' led to the suspicion that POWs, particularly those of German origins, were working to destabilise the British war effort on the British home front, partly through their interactions with British civilians.³⁰ The

clearest manifestation of this concern was the British government's decision to transfer internees and POWs to the Dominions where they would pose less of a threat to the war effort.³¹

Though POWs and civil internees alike were considered a threat in the Dominions as they were in Britain, a comparatively more relaxed stance was taken to interactions between civilians and prisoners in the Dominions. Accordingly, unlike in the British Isles where the laws preventing British civilians from associating with civilian internees and POWs were enforced to the highest degree possible, in India this was not the case. Moreover, as noted earlier, a POW's perceived 'threat level' depended upon their nationality: Germans were seen to pose more of a threat than their "docile" Italian comrades and, consequently, the Italian POWs experienced more freedoms in captivity.³² As Mr Evatt notes, he and his wife were allowed to host an Italian POW at their house every so often without the requirement that he be completing some form of work at the time: "We would take Dario out for the day. We'd go to breakfast or lunch at a restaurant, then to the church to see Father Luca [a priest and fellow Italian] and then we'd go home and just talk before he had to return [to the POW camp]," Mr. Evatt said of their outings.³³

²⁷ Operation Sea Lion represented Germany's planned invasion of Britain. See: 'Operation Sea Lion,' *Royal Air Force Museum*, accessed 19 March, 2015, <<http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/history-of-the-battle-of-britain/operation-sealion.aspx>>

²⁸ Gary Brown and David Anderson, *Invasion 1942? Australia and the Japanese Threat*, research report prepared for the Department of the Parliamentary Library (Canberra: 1992), p. 1; *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 9 October 1941, as cited in Brown and Anderson, 'Invasion 1942?' p. 1; *Sydney Morning Herald*, editorial, 2 January 1942, as cited in, Brown and Anderson, 'Invasion 1942?' p. 1; *He's Coming South*. Poster. ID Number: ARTV09225. Australian War Memorial, accessed 9 February 2015. <<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV09225/>>.

²⁹ Glyn Prysor, 'The Fifth Column and the British Experience of Retreat,' *War in History*, 12, no. 4 (2005): p. 418. The term 'Fifth Column' was first used by Emilio Mola during the Spanish Civil War in 1936 when he boasted that in addition to the four columns advancing on Madrid, he controlled a fifth column, a *quinta columna facciosa*, which comprised Franco's supporters who would defect to support Mola when they reached the city. With regards to Britain, the term 'Fifth Column' was first used by John Langdon-Davies in a 1940 pamphlet in which he referred to this 'column' as the Nazis' "deadly secret weapon." See John Langdon-Davies, *The Fifth Column* (London: n.p., 1940), p. 4.

³⁰ Prysor, 'The Fifth Column,' p. 423.

Nor was fraternisation of this sort unknown in the British Isles, despite it being for a while punishable by law. Various cases of British civilians fraternising with POWs were brought to the attention of the British authorities. Speaking to Britain's *Daily Mail* newspaper, Margaret Stratton of Peterborough told of her relations with a German POW and how she and her family hosted him for Christmas dinner. The simple act of hosting her lover at her house was against the law, as POWs were forbidden from entering private homes at this point: "He should have arrested us," Margaret said of the police sergeant she later learnt knew of her now-husband's Christmas visit and who had turned a blind eye.³⁴ Margaret was simply lucky

³¹ Bob Moore, 'Turning liabilities into assets: British Government Policy towards German and Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32, no. 1 (1997): p. 120. Available SAGE Online.

³² Bob Moore, 'The Last Phase of the Gentleman's War: British Handling of German Prisoners of War On Board HMT *Pasteur*, March 1942,' *War & Society*, 17, no. 1 (1999): p.42. Available Maney Online.

³³ Townsend, Interview.

³⁴ Weathers, 'Sleeping with the Enemy.'

that the police sergeant knew her and was sympathetic to her situation.

Gender issues

Perhaps not unexpectedly, attitudes towards fraternisation between British citizens and foreigners in general, including enemy POWs, were not unaffected by gender bias. It was by and large more acceptable for a British man to have a relationship with a foreign woman, even if she hailed from an enemy nation, than it was for a British woman to associate with a foreign man, *particularly* if he hailed from an enemy nation.³⁵

The British government's strong opposition to fraternisation between POWs and British women in particular depended upon the fact that these women were not just fraternising with the enemy but also turning their back on the British men who were at war fighting for their country. "Aren't our boys good enough for you?" was the question one woman asked of June Tull, who left her Royal Marine boyfriend for a German POW.³⁶ Understandably, the public questioned how women such as June could justify the fact that they were fraternising with men whose comrades-in-arms had killed, and were continuing to kill, British fathers, brothers and sons on the battlefields of the war.³⁷

However, the societal values and expectations of the time must also be taken into account if we are to understand fully the particular disapproval in which women who fraternised with the enemy incurred. Britain, like many other countries of course, had a long-established history of being preoccupied with issues of female morality and sexuality. Though this preoccupation was both constant and consistent within British society, particularly during the late nineteenth century and throughout a large portion of the twentieth century, numerous upsurges in the fervour surrounding this issue can be isolated.³⁸ Sonya O. Rose asserts that such upsurges generally occur with the outbreak of war and the years immediately following a war.³⁹ In explaining this concurrence, Rose draws on the work of the American philosopher Rich-

ard Rorty, who argues that morality is "the voice of ourselves as a community, [as] speakers of a common language."⁴⁰ Immorality, Rorty concludes, is the performance of actions which the community would not do. Given this framework, it is to be expected that, at times of crisis such as war, when a specially robust and cohesive sense of national community is needed, the issue of immorality would surface more prominently than in normal circumstances.⁴¹ This helps to explain the British preoccupation with halting fraternisation between British women and POWs during WWII; the government was concerned that British women's "promiscuous" behaviour with POWs might threaten the societal cohesion of the country, which was underpinned by morality, respectability and, generally speaking, lady-like behaviour of the majority of its female population.⁴² Conversely, the British government concerned itself far less with the issue of British men fraternising with enemy women; and to the extent that it did, it had at its disposal no such ready-made moral standard to which men as such were held.

These expectations of British women persisted long after the end of the war, as Mr Evatt and his daughter Mrs Rita Cahill both note. Mrs Cahill recalls how her uncle all but disowned her cousin when she married a Sri Lankan man: "My uncle was so upset and so annoyed that he didn't even go to the wedding. He didn't speak to his daughter for years and years because she married a Sri Lankan."⁴³ Even when his son-in-law became a self-made millionaire in Scotland, he could not accept the marriage. "My brother-in-law was a member of a club in the country when an ex-colonel, who was president of the club, publicly introduced an Indian doctor as his son-in-law," Mr Evatt recalled. "That's what changed his mind, you see. If this ex-colonel could favourably accept an Indian man as his son-in-law, so too could he."⁴⁴ On the other hand, as we have seen, Mr Evatt's marriage to an Italian woman was accepted without trouble by his family and friends and by the wider community, as was their friendship with Italian POWs. These family

³⁵ Townsend, Interview.

³⁶ Weathers, 'Sleeping with the Enemy.'

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Sonya O. Rose, 'Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain,' *American Historical Review*, 103, no. 4 (1998); pp. 1147-1148.

³⁹ Rose, 'Sex, Citizenship and the Nation,' pp. 1147-1148.

⁴⁰ Ibid.; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 59, available online at: <pages.uoregon.edu/koopman/courses_readings/rorty/rorty_CIS_full.pdf>.

⁴¹ Rose, 'Sex, Citizenship and the Nation,' p. 1148.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 1148-1149.

⁴³ Townsend, Interview.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

dynamics illustrate the common use, well into the 1950s and 1960s, of double standards in relation to British men and women marrying foreigners.

The British government's preoccupation with halting fraternisation with the enemy encompassed also interactions between its male personnel and Axis women. Particularly in the final years of the war and immediately following its conclusion, the British government enforced a strict ban on fraternisation between its military personnel and Axis civilians in occupied countries. In an article published in September 1945, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Field-Marshal Montgomery announced a ban on marriage between British personnel and German women, and also on the billeting of British troops with German families, in order to prevent fraternisation. This was in direct contrast to the policies enforced in the American and French controlled zones of post-war Germany where, only a few days prior, exactly these two cases had been declared acceptable.⁴⁵

Interestingly though, Montgomery implied that the motivation was not so much the morality of the British troops, as the need to teach the Germans a lesson:

"The Allies' strict non-fraternisation policy is part of a planned programme to teach the German people the ultimate and final lesson. We must bring home to you the fact that you are not only beaten, but that you are guilty of this new aggression."⁴⁶

In other words, the British government's enforcement of a fraternisation ban on its male military personnel was not based upon the same problems it associated with British women fraternising with 'enemy' men: there were no issues of morality, nor was there the threat of a 'fifth column'. Accordingly, even though both British men and women were equally forbidden to fraternise with the enemy, there was a double standard evident in the fact that the ban, for the men, was viewed as a means of punishing the German population, rather than of preserving their own moral integrity as had been the case for the British women who had started relationships with Italian and German POWs.

⁴⁵ 'Fraternising Limited: British Ban on Marriages,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 25, 1945, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/42465922>>.

⁴⁶ 'This Time We Are Going To Teach You A Lesson: Montgomery's Message to German People,' *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, QLD), June 12, 1945, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/56382735>>

The Passage of Time: Acceptability vs. Enforceability

The attitude of the public towards fraternisation with the Italian and German POWs interned in Britain changed over time, to the point that the government's non-fraternisation policies no longer matched public opinion. Though many were still opposed to or at least wary of associations with POWs, more and more people were coming to accept them.

As we noted above, these relationships were perceived as more or less acceptable according to the nationality of the POW. Accordingly, it took longer for the British public to come to terms with fraternisation with German POWs. Italian POWs, on the other hand, were generally quick to endear themselves to the locals: their "tender attitudes" towards local children and their overall friendliness and helpfulness resulted in their gradual acceptance by the community.⁴⁷

The British media aided this process by comparing the Italian POWs with their German counterparts, whom they intended to demonise. In an article published in July 1943, *The Times* contrasted the "arrogant and surly" German POWs with the Italian POWs it described as "smiling [and] thankful to be out of the war" as they eagerly ran down the ship's gangway.⁴⁸ Increasingly, the public began to take up the view that the Italian POWs were not to be feared. In one particular Mass Observation Archive entry, the author demonstrated this changing attitude: "We have a proprietary feeling towards the Italians. Did we not help them form their nation? We cannot believe they are malignant, as the Germans are, or treacherous and cunning, as the Jap[anese]."⁴⁹ In another case, a teenage girl recalled how her opinions of the Italian POWs began to change once they actually met them in person: "We were quite prepared to hate the Italian prisoners when we heard they were to be housed [nearby, but] they were so handsome – black curly hair, shining eyes, little moustaches, little square

⁴⁷ *The Times*, November 21, 1941, as cited in, Lucio Sponza, 'Italian Prisoners of War,' pp. 208; Sponza, 'Italian Prisoners of War,' p. 208.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, July 28, 1943, as cited in, Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad, 'British perceptions of Italian Prisoners of War, 1940-1947,' in *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 32; Moore and Hatley-Broad, 'British Perceptions,' p. 32.

hands – that we soon found them impossible to ignore.”⁵⁰ These are only a few examples of numerous similar testimonies which can be found in various archives around the world.

The public’s perception of German POWs also changed with time, though it would take much longer for it to do so. As noted by Bob Moore, there was no doubt in the minds of the British public that the Germans were the “demonised enemy who had been actively trying to kill Allied servicemen only a few weeks before.”⁵¹ It wouldn’t be until after the war that it would become generally acceptable to fraternise with Germans. As Mr Evatt noted: “After the war it became acceptable to associate. It took a while, it did.”⁵²

While the British public slowly came to accept these ‘enemies’ in their midst, the path to acceptance was much longer for the British government. Arguably, the slow relaxation and eventual abandonment of non-fraternisation laws depended more on lack of enforceability than on an acceptance of such interactions by the government. In the early years of the war, the British government made an effort to strictly enforce its bans on fraternisation, particularly in the case of interactions with British women.⁵³ In many cases, as Bob Moore points out, British judges appeared to be punishing even minor infractions against the non-fraternisation laws, even though “mere fraternisation [did] not appear to be an offence.”⁵⁴ However, as the war continued, increasing numbers of POWs were brought to Britain: by 1945, there were over 150 000 Italian POWs in Britain, with over half of the men billeted or housed in hostels.⁵⁵ These housing arrangements, in addition to the general agricultural work the POWs completed in the British communities, meant that there were ever increasing opportunities for interaction between the POWs and the civilian population. Consequently, it became increasingly difficult for the British government to enforce non-fraternisation laws, with many law enforcement

officers turning a blind eye.⁵⁶ Once the war ended and the repatriation of POWs began, it became easier for the government to impede fraternisation by simply shipping the POWs back to Italy and Germany.⁵⁷ It wouldn’t be until 1947 that the British government would rescind these laws and allow Italian POWs to remain in Britain, and those who wished to return to join their partners to do so.⁵⁸

By this time, numerous cases were being brought before the War Office and various other departments of the British government pleading for Italian POWs who had fathered children to British women to be allowed to stay.⁵⁹ It was only with these claims that the true extent of fraternisation came to light, and the futility of trying to prevent it from occurring. The repeal of non-fraternisation laws in Britain was more due to lack of enforceability than because of an acceptance of such relations in their own right. In the words of Mr Evatt, “it was more an issue of them not being able to stop them [from fraternising] than anything else.”⁶⁰

The experiences of Ainsley, Loreta and Dario are indicative of the wider social structures and cultural norms holding in the British Empire during World War II. These experiences may be used to illustrate issues such as fraternisation with Axis POWs held in Britain and her Dominions. Ainsley’s testimony helps us show how the acceptability of fraternisation between British citizens and the POWs they came into contact with was influenced by a variety of factors. It is indisputable that the Italian POWs were preferred to their German counterparts and that fraternisation between British citizens and Italian POWs was more acceptable than any interaction with the Germans. This was largely due to pre-existing cultural ideas and previous wartime experiences. Likewise, the location in which POWs and British citizens found themselves was highly influential in how fraternisation was viewed by the general public and by the government. Non-fraternisation bans were enforced more strictly in the British homeland than they were in the Dominions as a result of the fear of a “Fifth Column” formed by the

⁴⁹ Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex) DR3194, as cited in Moore and Hatley-Broad, ‘British Perceptions,’ p. 33.

⁵⁰ Jocelyn Greening, *The Way We Were* (Upton-on-Severn 1991), 161–2, as cited in Lucio Sponza, *Divided Loyalties: Italians in Britain during the Second World War* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000) p. 211.

⁵¹ Moore, ‘Illicit Encounters,’ p. 752.

⁵² Townsend, Interview.

⁵³ Moore, ‘Illicit Encounters,’ p. 748.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 751.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 752.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Townsend, Interview.

enemy POWs held in Britain. In general, the Dominions did not face the same threat of invasion from the Axis forces as the British mainland did. Consequently, it may be argued, the Dominions were more lenient in their enforcement of non-fraternisation laws. The gender of those involved also evidently played an important part in the acceptability of fraternisation with POWs, as British women found themselves under much more pressure than their male counterparts due to pre-existing cultural perceptions and preoccupations with issues of sexuality and morality.

However, despite the government's opposition to fraternisation with Axis POWs, the British public's attitude changed as interactions between the two groups increased. As fraternisation increased, the British government's ability to enforce non-fraternisation waned; anti-fraternisation laws were decreasingly enforced and eventually dismissed. In the end, while war obviously has the power to incite prejudice and hate, there were many such as Ainsley, Loreta and Dario, who withstood the societal pressures rallying against them and forged life-long bonds of love and friendship.

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article476097/Sleeping-enemy-The-British-women-fell-German-PoWs.html>.



Fig. 1 – Sketch for the Murchison Ossario by architect Paolo Caccia Dominioni, 1957.
[Image courtesy Anna Caccia Dominioni]

lest we forget: the murchison ossario, a sacred italian war grave and shrine by mia spizzica

Mia Spizzica, a researcher in Italian Australian social history and currently a Research Associate with Museum Victoria, is completing a PhD in Italian Studies at Monash University in which she explores the stories of the surveillance, detention and internment of Italian civilians classified as enemy aliens during World War Two. Mia has published peer reviewed articles in the *International Journal of the Humanities* and in the *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, has contributed a series of articles to the Italian language Australian newspapers *Il Globo* and *La Fiamma* on Italian internment in Australia, and has spoken on this topic on SBS Italian Radio program, Rete Italia and Radio Italia. She was the historical archives researcher for the SBS television series *Once Upon a Time in Carlton*, and has collaborated with the Italian Historical Society and Museo Italiano at Co.As.It. Mia is currently working on three book projects: Mia Spizzica (ed.), *Hidden Lives: Italian internee families in Australia during WW2*, an edited anthology of eyewitness narratives, a history of the Murchison Ossario focusing on the lives and deaths of the 130 Italian internees buried in the mausoleum, and a monograph on the war art of Lamberto Yonna and other Italian artists and artisans who were interned in camps in Australia between 1940 and 1946. Mia continues to collect testimonies, documents and other material relating to the experiences of Italians civil internees during World War Two. She can be contacted by email: mia.spizzica@monash.edu.au or mobile phone: 0400 200 235.

The small rural village of Murchison in central Victoria holds many little known treasures. The Murchison meteorite that fell in nearby fields in 1969 is famous among astronomers as it contains the core chemical elements that are necessary for life on this planet. There are also seven internment camps dotted in grazing paddocks throughout what I refer to as the World War Two Internment Camp Triangle formed by the hamlets of Murchison, Tatura and Rushworth. The least known treasure of the area is probably the Italian Mausoleum (Ossario) that is located a short distance from the village post office, inside the Murchison cemetery on Weir Road. The Ossario has been described as “a sacred war memorial,” however, it is much more than a stone monument: the Ossario is also the site of an annual Italian pilgrimage that culminates in a military procession and religious service to honour the war dead.



Fig. 2 – The Murchison Ossario in 1961.

Arguably the most important Italian war necropolis and memorial in the Southern Hemisphere, the Ossario holds an assured place in the historical records of the Italian diaspora as well as in the hearts of that community. Nonetheless, remarkably little has been written on the history of this shrine and its occupants.¹ The Ossario is a tangible object that links this nation's past to the present; it is a focal point that bears witness to events that reshaped the lives of Italians who were interned as enemies in this country more than 70 years ago. The Ossario – one of two Italian war monuments on the site, the other being the Italian Prisoners of War Memorial, erected by prisoners of war in the Rushworth camp

and moved to its present location in 1968 – was built as a mausoleum to house the remains of the Italian war dead resting in Australian soil. Inside this building are the bodies of Prisoners of War and civilian internees who died whilst interned in Australia during the Second World War.² For this reason, the Murchison Ossario, in addition to acting as a shrine of remembrance, is also a war grave of deep emotional meaning for not only the families of Italian military men whose relatives did not return home at war's end, but also for the descendants of the thirty-six Italian civilians who died whilst interned in Australia. This article is a brief exploration of the historical and social significance of the Murchison Ossario as an iconic Italian war shrine and sacred war grave.

The Ossario's burial chamber houses the remains of 130 Italians. Old and young, rich and poor, theist and atheist, fascist, socialist, anarchist and apolitical, soldiers and sailors, doctors, cane cutters and waiters: all are laid shoulder to shoulder regardless of their origin and life experiences. Some of the civilian deceased were newly arrived migrants or were captured in British controlled territories, while others were naturalised British subjects, having lived in Australia for many decades. The military dead were men from the Italian navy, air force and army. All were Italians, in death as in birth. They now rest near the ancient burial grounds of the Ngooraialum people, the traditional owners of the surrounding lands.

Almost 18,500 Italian prisoners of war, captured by the Allied Forces in North Africa during the Second World War, were detained in Australia until they were repatriated, some as late as 1947. During their imprisonment, almost 100 Italian military men died in different circumstances in six Australian States and Territories. Similarly, more than 36 Italian civilians, who were interned as enemy aliens by the Australian or the British government, died in internment camps in Australia. Some of the latter group had migrated to Australia in the inter-war years, while others were Italian merchant seamen or civilians captured in British-controlled territories such as Palestine and Singapore in 1940.³

¹ See Vivien Achia, (2006) 'Italian Internees in Victoria and the Murchison Ossario,' *Italian Historical Society Journal*, vol. 14 No. 2, Jul-Dec 2006.

² William H. Bossence (1965) *Murchison*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, p. 183.

³ National Archives of Australia, series MP1103/1, passim.

Among the deceased is one whose name is included in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Francesco Fantin was a sugar cane cutter at the time of his arrest in Queensland. An antifascist, he was killed by fascist internees on 16 November 1942 in Camp 14A, a civilian internment camp at Loveday in Barmera, South Australia.⁴ Views vary regarding the circumstances of Fantin's death, and he remains an enigmatic figure more than 70 years after his death. Several researchers have come to the conclusion that the death of Fantin was no accident. In his PhD thesis, David Faber states:

South Australian police [...] found that Fantin was assassinated by fascist conspirators who contrived to intimidate witnesses and interfere with material evidence [...] frustrating the laying of a charge of murder and leading in March 1943 to the sentencing of Giovanni Casotti to two years hard labour for manslaughter.⁵

Another man's death in detention is recorded in a book published in 1981, *The Italian Farming Soldiers: Prisoners of War in Australia 1941-1947* by Alan Fitzgerald. Private Rodolfo Bartoli, captured in Libya by the British, was shot in the back and killed on 3 April 1946 while held in a prisoner of war camp in Rowville, an outer eastern Melbourne suburb. The officer who shot Bartoli, Captain Waterston, was never placed on trial for the killing. Alan Fitzgerald writes:

All the events took place in 1946, long after the end of World War Two. Despite the fact that Italy had changed sides in the conflict and declared war on Germany in October 1943, Captain Waterston in 1946 was treating his Italian prisoners as if they were dangerous enemy soldiers [...] From details of his behaviour first raised in Mr Santospirito's letter and then revealed in Mr Justice Simpson's inquiry, it is evident that Captain Waterston was temperamentally unfit to be in charge

of a prisoner-of-war camp in wartime, let alone months after peace had been declared.⁶

Some of the deaths in the POW and civilian internment camps remain a mystery to this day. My research aims to reveal why some of these people suffered untimely deaths in detention, far from home and family.



Fig 3 – Professor Ferdinando C. Bentivoglio shortly before he was interned in 1940.

It is noteworthy that no Italian civilian internee deaths were recorded after the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was removed from power in July 1943. One possible explanation is that some civilian internees were released shortly before they died, and so were not counted in the internee death statistics. A case in point is that of 72-year-old Professor Ferdinando Carlo Bentivoglio, who died hours after his release from detention at the Loveday Internment Camp. At the time of his release he was dying of cancer at the Barmera Base Hospital (Loveday) in South Australia. He spent his final hours travelling in a private ambulance with his son, a doctor in the Australian military, dying in the Royal Adelaide Hospital – a free man en route home to Sydney. Professor Bentivoglio is buried in the Adelaide Cemetery.⁷ Archival documents also reveal that other deaths, both civilian and military, were not recorded in the register of deceased Italian detainees.

⁴ Paul Nursy-Bray, 'Fantin, Francesco Giovanni (Frank) (1901–1942),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 1 December 2014, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fantin-francesco-giovanni-frank-12912>.

⁵ David Faber, (2008) *FG Fantin: The Life and Times of an Italo-Australian Anarchist, 1901-42*, PhD Thesis, University of Adelaide, p. 5.

⁶ Alan Fitzgerald (1981) *The Italian Farming Soldiers: Prisoners of War in Australia 1941-1947*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 165.

⁷ National Archives of Australia, series MP1103/1, Bentivoglio files, *passim*.

Until the Murchison Ossario was built, most deceased prisoners of war and civil internees remained buried in the locations of their detentions and deaths. After the war had officially ended in 1945, Australian military authorities required that the remains of these Italians be reburied in civil cemeteries.⁸ My research has uncovered evidence which indicates that families such as that of civilian detainee, Dr G.B. Battaglia, had requested the repatriation of their loved ones; however, archives show that the Australian military authorities rejected these requests on health grounds. Some families were informed that their relatives were buried in cemeteries within internment camps, but were not informed when the bodies were relocated elsewhere.⁹ By the time they were transferred to the Murchison Ossario in the 1960s, some of the mortal remains had been exhumed and reburied up to five times.¹⁰ This situation may be among the reasons for the building of the mausoleum as a definitive resting place for the Italian war dead.

The Murchison Ossario was designed in 1957 by the renowned Milanese soldier, writer and engineer, Paolo Caccia Dominioni di Sillavengo, who had also planned the El Alamein Italian mausoleum near Alexandria in Egypt.¹¹ At the time of writing, information regarding the Australian builders of the Ossario was still research in progress; however, it is probable that the project manager was Melbourne architect René Stella, using Paolo Dominioni's design. The original Ossario was completed in about 1961.¹² At around the same time the Australian War Commission arranged the exhumation of deceased Italian prisoners of war and civilian internees from their graves in each state. As a result, most of the Italian war dead were relocated to Victoria by the time the Ossario was completed.¹³



Fig. 4 – The Ossario's Chapel in 1961.

The original stone and granite building was designed with an open-air chapel; it included a bell tower with a bronze bell and an underground crypt below the chapel to house the coffins. These were laid in metal compartments with polished wood facings, stacked five coffins high in rows of ten. As a consequence of two major floods which resulted in the crypt being inundated with water, an above-ground necropolis (also five tiered) was built at the rear of the chapel.¹⁴ The chapel, bell tower and necropolis are constructed using a traditional Italian rustic style stone.



Fig 5 – The crypt of the Ossario in 1961.

A number of fine bronze plaques are located both outside and inside the structure. The plaques commemo-

⁸ National Archives of Australia, series MP1103/1.

⁹ Author's interviews with the families of internees, and National Archives of Australia, MP1103/1, *passim*.

¹⁰ National Archives of Australia, MP1103/1.

¹¹ "Un uomo: Paolo Caccia Dominioni", *Rivista Militare*, Roma, Ministero della Difesa, 1988.

¹² 'Grand visionary Rene Stella dies,' Old Paradians Association, accessed 20 November 2014, <http://www.oldparadians.com.au/FullArticle.aspx?Article=Rene%20Stella>.

¹³ Murchison Mausoleum documents held at the Health Department, Victoria.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

rate notable individuals and organisations that were involved in the construction of the monuments or in the annual commemorations that take place there. Two side walls inside the chapel bear the list of the deceased in bronze letters. All of the tombs have a lacquered, hardwood plaque bearing the name of the deceased.¹⁵

The Ossario is located approximately 60 meters inside the main entrance of the Murchison General Cemetery. The chapel and attached burial chamber are hidden behind an imposing iron gate hinged on stone pillars, and cloaked by a dark green curtain of mature cypress pines.

The Mausoleum has undergone a few changes since it was built. A series of photographs show that over the decades the landscaping has changed, with roses and other plantings replaced by an avenue of cypresses flanking the pathway leading to the Ossario and surrounding the perimeter of the site.¹⁶ Over the last four or five decades, the cypresses have grown to create a dense mantle around the Italian cemetery, hiding the building from view until one has entered well into the site.

The chapel itself has been modified with the addition of black steel gates and window shutters, making it less vulnerable to vandalism. As a result of the inundation of the underground crypt by a number of floods mentioned earlier, Avelino Crespan was commissioned in 1974 to erect a crafted, harmonised stone extension attached to the rear of the chapel. His construction team included Alfio Sorbello, his son Ross Sorbello, Renato Pozzebon, Vince Romeo and Peter Cella, all from the Goulburn region. In a recent interview, Mr Crespan confirmed that the 130 coffins were respectfully relocated in the new extension, and were positioned exactly as they had been in the underground crypt.¹⁷

This monument is slowly fading from the consciousness of younger Italian Australians as the elderly no longer attend the memorials and the subsequent generations no longer care about or have never come to know about

the significance of this unique and sacred war grave, thus relinquishing this link to their Italian heritage. As Vivien Achia noted in her article, the building is of great historical significance,¹⁸ an intrinsic part of the Italian wartime narrative. Despite this, it is possible that the history of the building and the stories of the war dead there enshrined may not find a place in the consciousness of future generations of Australians of Italian heritage. If its significance remains unknown to those who do not read Italian newspapers or listen to the Italian radio broadcasts that announce the annual Commemoration Day, the Italian Ossario di Murchison will become an increasingly enigmatic building, valued for its aesthetic and tourist appeal rather than for the stories of the deceased housed therein. However, there is hope that new interest in the building may be gradually growing amongst the descendants of the deceased who have reconnected with their loved ones, as well as amongst second generation Italian-Australians and Italophiles in general.



Fig 6 – The entrance to the memorial avenue in 2014.
[Image courtesy of the author]

There are also signs that the Victorian and Commonwealth Heritage Commissions are taking a new interest in the site. The Victorian Heritage Commission has listed

¹⁵ Research is in progress on all the deceased.

¹⁶ Guido Ciacci, (2009) 'Il Sacrario Militare Italiano di Murchison', *Sentiero Tricolore*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁷ Author's interview with Avelino Crespan at the Murchison Ossario, 8 October 2014.

¹⁸ Vivien Achia, *Op. cit.*

the Murchison Italian Soldiers Memorial as a significant war relic.¹⁹ In 2012, the Australian Heritage Commission published a report on places of cultural and historical importance in the Greater Shepparton area, which included the Murchison Ossario. The report states:

The Ossario, Murchison Cemetery, is of state historic and aesthetic significance. As the final resting place of 130 Italian prisoners of war and detainees who died in Australia during World War II, and as one of only three foreign war cemeteries located in Australia, two of which are located in the municipality, the Ossario is a poignant memorial. Aesthetically, it is an unusual example of a funerary structure in an Italian vernacular design. The aesthetic qualities of the place are enhanced by its landscape setting including the memorial avenue on the approach to the building.²⁰

To date, my investigations have not been able to locate the Murchison Ossario in any official government war grave directory either in Italy or in Australia or of the United Nations. My investigations suggests that the Ossario di Murchison has no official war grave status in Australia.²¹ Furthermore, the Ossario is not listed on any website as an Italian war grave, nor is it under the auspices of the Commonwealth War Grave Commission as the Japanese War Grave at Cowra and German War Grave at Tatura have been for many decades.

The lack of official communication with families of the deceased regarding exhumations, sometimes with multiple relocations and the final reinterment at the Ossario has resulted in relatives such as the Musitano, Battaglia and Caruso families being unable to locate loved ones for more than 70 years. There are few documents that follow each of the deceased to Murchison and little is known about the process of relocating Italian war dead.²² Nevertheless, Avelino Crespan who relocated the coffins from the underground crypt to the 1974 ex-

tension confirms that most of the coffins were labelled with the person's name and an identification number.²³

Each year, on the second Sunday of November there has been a pilgrimage to the Italian War Grave at Murchison in central Victoria that has its origins in the early 1960s. In 1964, William Bossence offered a rare contemporary written account of the early years of the Remembrance Day event at the Ossario.

Every year a Remembrance Sunday Mass is celebrated at the ossario before a huge crowd of visitors from all over Victoria and Southern New South Wales. During the picturesque ceremony Italian choir-boys sing, and flowers are laid for each of the soldiers whose bodies are buried beneath the ossario. The 8th annual pilgrimage was held in 1964, and 1,200 people were present.²⁴

With Italian post war immigration reaching its zenith in about 1970, the event rapidly gained strength in numbers and prominence on the Italian community's social calendar during the next few decades. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Italian social clubs were at their peak and dynamic leaders such as Luigi Gigliotti and Guido Ciaccia among others, helped to keep the memory of the war dead foremost in the collective consciousness of the post-war Italian community, especially in Victoria. Theirs was a life-long labour of love and respect for those who had died as war prisoners. Cav. Guido Ciaccia's role as the president of the Italian military associations in Australia was pivotal in bringing the deceased to Murchison. He is now in his mid-90s and no longer attends the annual event. Luigi Gigliotti, who migrated to Victoria in 1927, had been interned as an Italian 'enemy alien' in 1940. His wife and four children were left without a breadwinner for the duration of the war. This experience possibly may have given him the impetus to collect donations from the Italian community to build the Ossario. He died in 1989, leaving only traces of written evidence that refer to his labours in collecting £25,000 in donations for the construction of the Ossario.

Archival documents show that since the Ossario's construction, the Italian government had undertaken to pay

¹⁹ 'Murchison Italian Soldiers Memorial,' Victorian Heritage Database, accessed 20 November 2014, http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/#detail_places;156112

²⁰ Heritage Concepts, (2012) *Shepparton City Heritage Study IIB*, Volume 3: p. 225

²¹ Commonwealth War Commission, 2014; email communication with author

²² Murchison Ossario, Letters and documents, Victorian Health Department

²³ Interview with Avelino Crespan at the Murchison Ossario, 8 October 2014

²⁴ William H. Bossence, *ibid.*, p. 183

for the Ossario's upkeep with an annual fund of roughly \$3,000 from the late 1960s onwards, while Australian branches of Italian returned soldiers organisations were entrusted with its physical security. Murchison resident Angelo Musso, the son of a Queensland-Sicilian internee, was the Ossario's caretaker until his death in recent years. According to local residents, there were no Italians in the Murchison local area who had a strong connection to the Ossario by 2013. With reduced funds arriving from Italy to repair and maintain such a precious building, Aldo Zanatta, president of the Alpini Club of Melbourne and his volunteers travel almost two hours to maintain the gardens, make repairs and keep vermin and insects from taking over the site. Without renewed interest by the next generation of Victorians of Italian heritage and appropriate funding from Italy, the future care of the Ossario has become a matter of increasing concern.

Many thousands of Italian migrants have visited the Murchison Ossario since the early 1960s when the first commemoration was held. The numerous buses filled with Italian social club groups from many states have now dwindled to a handful of buses from Melbourne and the Goulburn Shire. These dedicated, now elderly Italians are determined to keep the memory of the human costs of war as a tribute to their deceased compatriots who lost their lives, as long as they are well enough to travel to Murchison. However as the years go by, fewer and fewer of these first generation Italians will be able to make the journey.

On the second Sunday of November 2014, the Italian Consul General of Victoria, Cav. Marco Maria Cerbo, the Italian Military Attaché in Australia, Major Antonio Coppola, supported by Joe Morizzi and Domenico Biviano with their colleagues from the Italian Returned Soldiers Association of Australia, conducted the annual Italian War Dead Commemoration. The Ossario is opened for the annual public commemoration only on this one November morning. As this is a public event, anyone can join the solemn military ceremony and religious service in Italian. The Italian Consul General, dignitaries and community join the ageing Italian military groups in remembering the tragic consequences of war. As Guido Ciacià notes in his 2009 retrospective summary of the Remembrance Day, the gathering is the

only national Italian pilgrimage of its kind in Australia.²⁵ Given the progressive decline in the numbers that attend the event, one wonders if the Ossario's significance will be lost in the not too distant future. The annual commemoration may vanish from Italian Australian collective memory as the Australian born descendants of Italians lose all but superficial connections with their cultural heritage in an increasingly globalised and fast forgetting world.

However, in recent years, a few families and groups, some of whom have relatives resting at the Murchison Ossario, bring some hope that the memories of Italian war dead will not be forgotten by future generations. Relatives of the deceased such as the Di Martini family from Queensland, the Musitano family from Western Australia and other internee families make a regular pilgrimage to pay tribute to fathers and grandfathers who never returned home. These and many other families of deceased internees still feel the grief and loss of family members who died in custody. Lest we forget the death of Italians who were imprisoned as enemy aliens or prisoners of war and died in custody in Australia during the Second World War, research to uncover the truths of war's consequences continues.

Antonio De Curtis offers a few poignant words that summarise the lives and deaths of 129 men and one woman now in their final resting place in the Italian Ossario at Murchison:

A morte 'o ssaje ched'è? ... è una livella.
[Death, you know what it is? It's a leveller.]²⁶

Whether rich or poor, each of the 129 men and one woman rest in eternal peace together as Italians.

²⁵ Guido Ciacià, *Op. cit.*

²⁶ Totò (Antonio De Curtis), (1964) *'A Livella. Poesie napoletane*, Fausto Fiorentino Editrice, Napoli [translation by Mia Spizzica].

I am currently collecting information with a view to associating to each name in the Ossario a life story and a family story, which, in due time, will become part of the Ossario's story. If you think you may be able to contribute any information on the people interred in the Ossario or on the Ossario itself, please contact Mia Spiz

zica, c/o Italian Studies, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton, Victoria, 3800 or via email: mia.spizzica@monash.edu or via mobile phone: 0400 200 235, or contact the Co.As.It Italian Historical Society via email: ihs@coasit.com.au



Fig. 7 – An Alpino attending a service at the Murchison Ossario in 2014. In the background, a poster commemorating Francesco Fantin. [Image courtesy of the author]



Aeolian ex voto. The text reads: "The *bovo* of Captain Bartolo Barnao on 9 December 1873". [Image courtesy J. Barnao]

the end of the era of abundance in the aeolian islands and the role of the società isole eolie in channeling migration to australia

by john barnao

Born in Carlton to parents who migrated from Stromboli in the Aeolian Archipelago, John Barnao graduated from the University of Melbourne with a degree in Commerce and has worked in Banking, Accountancy and Tax Compliance. A course of French studies in Montpellier and a journey focusing on the Spanish conquest of South America, fanned his interest in European civilization, which was enhanced by further extensive travels and the completion of a Graduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics at Monash University, specialising in German. He has written articles on Sicilian speech and *modi di dire* [popular sayings], and has been compiling accounts of the life experiences of post-War Italian migrants to Australia. As a member of various local historical societies, he takes an interest in the grass root stories of ordinary people.

Abstract

After reaching its peak in the late 19th century, the Age of Merchant Sailing Ships in the Aeolian Islands went into a sudden, rapid decline. This paper covers events that occurred during a period of 60 years from the 1880s, and traces the root causes of the departure of so many and why Australia featured as a preferred destination, especially from the 1920s. As 2015 celebrates 90 years since the founding of the Società Isole Eolie in Melbourne, its role in swaying the decision of Aeolians to come to Australia is examined. At the outbreak of World War Two, *Eoliani* were the largest regional Italian group in Australia and had a highly-organised presence. Today, the descendants of migrants from these islands are still one of the largest Italian Australian communities. But after several generations, most are now detached from the migration stories of their *nonni*, which nevertheless remain central to a fuller appreciation of Aeolian, and Australian history.

It has always been a challenge living on the volcanic Aeolian Islands (*Isole Eolie*), situated in the Tyrrhenian Sea (*Mare Tirreno*), off the northern coast of Sicily. Since historic times, this geologically volatile archipelago has attracted the hardiest of people, especially those seeking refuge or on the run from the mainstream. Despite being constantly prone to attacks from pirates and brigands, islanders forged a unique lifestyle in a sea of isolation and instability. Still today in winter, stormy waters play havoc with ordinary life. Residents often are cut off, especially in the outlying minor islands that rely on service ships for their supplies and are affected by considerable economic stress as a result. Many teachers and essential service providers must rely on the daily high-speed hydrofoils (*aliscafi*) commuting from Milazzo on the mainland mass of Sicily, 35 kilometers from the port of Lipari on the largest island of the archipelago.

Not all people of Aeolian descent now living in Australia know that their self-confident forebears, many of whom were skilled seafarers and ship's crew, began to leave the seven islands in the late 1880s as the result of a series of major calamities that continued to stalk them for a period of 60 years, right up to the last, trying days of the Second World War. The lowest ebb was reached in May 1943 with the sinking of the only remaining supply ship in Aeolian waters, the *Santa Marina*, leaving the inhabitants alone to face insurmountable food and material shortages. The sinking not only caused great loss of life, it exacerbated the widespread hardship that had already been inflicted on the local community by a series of catastrophes that had started long before the war commenced. At the end of the conflict, many felt there was little choice but to leave their birthplace and follow those who had already gone to seek a new beginning elsewhere in the world.

To better understand the rise, decline and eventual restoration of Aeolian fortunes, it is necessary to start with an earlier landmark event – the destruction of Lipari in 1544, by the ferocious pirate Barbarossa. In the rebuilding of the city, Lipari was considered so important an island to the region's Spanish overlords, that to protect it against future marauders, Charles V constructed the impregnable citadel (*Il Castello*), still today one of the most impressive fortifications ever built in the Mediterranean. The sheer scale of its vertical walls re-

flects the regard in which the Aeolian Islands were held and the stubborn determination of the Spanish Crown to protect its commercial and strategic interests.

Although lesser attacks continued in Aeolian waters for several centuries, by the end of the first decades of the 1800s, the threat from pirates had largely subsided. In 1830, France seized Algiers from the Turks and began to exert its influence in the western Mediterranean and to foster its growing colonial ambitions in North Africa. For the Aeolian Islands, the lack of safety that had previously held back economic expansion was removed, and the now-secure waterways were open for business. The islands were quickly able to capitalise on their main geographical advantage – their position linking Sicily with the Italian mainland at Naples. As the Aeolians were already skilled as boatmen and seafarers, this led to a period of prosperity and population growth, reflected in the increasing number of sailing vessels that began to navigate the Aeolian seas. In addition to acting as a thoroughfare, the islands also provided the transportation services needed to meet the growing trade in local and regional produce.

The harvests from rich volcanic soils and abundant fishing grounds spurred the Aeolians to become successful merchant traders. At the height of its productivity in the late 1880s, Salina, the second largest island in the archipelago, was home to a big mercantile fleet and was producing every year more than 10,000 hectolitres of its acclaimed aromatic Malvasia wine.¹

All boat landings, such as Stromboli's Ficogrande Beach, were crowded with sailing ships (*velieri*). The *Palamitara* longboats would lay the nets used to catch tuna and swordfish, and there were also smaller vessels, called *vuzzi*, similar to those featured in the fishing scenes of the 1950 Rossellini film *Stromboli: Terra di Dio*. The census of 1871 reports that Stromboli's population of 1,999 included 40 maritime ship masters (there were 30 fishing boats) and 16 sail makers, as well as fully-employed ship-hands, millers and farmers tilling the land.²

¹ Alberto Cervellera and Marcello Saija, *Mercanti di Mare: Salina 1800-1953*, Messina: Trisform, 1997.

² Luigi Salvatore d'Austria, *Le isole Lipari*, translated into Italian by Pino Paino, Edinix Editrice, Centro Studi, Lipari, 1978, [Erzherzog Ludwig Salvator, *Die Liparischen Inseln*, Vol. VIII (Prague, Heinrich Mercy, 1896)] includes statistics, engravings, topographies, customs, dialect etc.

There was so much commercial activity going through Salina's port of Santa Marina during the peak of this 'Era of Abundance' that the island achieved a large measure of administrative freedom from Lipari, which, as the agricultural heart of the Aeolian islands, it has managed to retain until today.

Italo Toni records that in 1869 there were 172 mills and grind-stones operating in the Aeolian Islands, processing mainly wheat and barley, both imported and locally grown. As a consequence, many of the islands' inhabitants were able to attain a heightened level of prosperity.³

Sydney Aeolian scholar, Peter Tesoriero, writes:

In the 19th century there was prosperity and full employment on the islands. A prosperous middle class had emerged, particularly on the islands of Lipari, Salina and Stromboli [...] the middle class owned the sailing vessels that provided most of the shipping services. Their activities covered the Tyrrhenian Sea, the mainland and much of the central Mediterranean. Occasionally, Aeolian merchant sailing ships went further afield. They made voyages to the Americas and even to the Pacific.⁴

At the peak of the Era of Abundance in the mid-1800s, the future of the local *Eoliani* seemed assured. The islands continued to attract seamen and social outcasts in search of refuge (*gli approdi*). And, there were also the adventurous, seeking a fresh start in the challenging volcanic environment.

The 1891 census showed that there were a record 21,200 people living in the Aeolian Islands.⁵ Stromboli, for example, had 2,716 residents and was terraced with crops going up to the very top of the volcano's slopes. The other islands were also fully cultivated. Yet, a wave of misfortune was about to be unleashed such that by the end of World War Two, the population of the Islands would fall to 14,000, eventually dropping in the

1970s to just 11,000, most of whom living in Lipari. Stromboli, for example, fell to a post-war low of 700, and by the 1960s, only a few hundred residents remained.⁶

The mass exodus from the islands was a direct consequence of the following events: (1) Volcanic activity on the island of Vulcano; (2) phylloxera outbreak; (3) the extension of the continental railway to southern Calabria; (4) the earthquake of Messina; (5) the volcanic eruption at Stromboli; (6) the Second World War.

1. Volcanic activity on the island of Vulcano

The island of Vulcano has always been a temperamental wonderland. Originally composed of four volcanoes, its marvels include hot springs, gurgling mud holes and underwater fumaroles. Today it is characterised by the strong sulphur smell around the mildly radioactive mud baths of the Laghetto dei Fanghi. The promontory of Vulcanello, upon which rests a variety of tourist accommodations, emerged from the sea in 183BC from an underwater eruption. The lava eventually hardened to become the newest land mass in the Aeolian Islands. By the mid-19th century, it appeared that the island had stabilised and it started to attract commercial investment to exploit its sulphur and alum reserves. This stillness came to an abrupt halt with a series of violent volcanic explosions in 1888, when liquid sulphur (a rare geological phenomenon) began to be ejected from the smouldering peak of Fossa di Vulcano, once believed by the Romans to be the workshop chimney of the god Vulcan.

Most of the northern part of the island was owned by a single person, James Stevenson, a Scotsman, who ran its sulphur mines, which provided meagre work for many of the island's inhabitants. The eruption created such terror, that it convinced Stevenson to sell his holdings hastily to a few courageous bidders. The local economy was adversely affected as he fled, never again to return.

This sudden eruption was not unusual in an area known for the explosive power of Mother Nature, but it was an omen of worse to come.

³ Italo Toni, *La maledizione dei lupini: vicenda vera ed oltre 100 anni di storia*, Grafiche Scuderi s.a.s., Messina, 2005, p. 91.

⁴ Peter Tesoriero, 'The Aeolian Diaspora' from *Documents of the Conference on Minorities and Cultural Assertions*, University of Wollongong, 8-10 October 2004, p. 73.

⁵ Luigi Salvatore, *Op. cit.*

⁶ Census ISTAT, Messina, 1977.

2. *Phylloxera epidemic*

In the age of Magna Graecia (from the 6th century BC), Greek colonists brought grapes that found a favourable setting among the green hills and fresh water springs of the central island of Salina. For generations the prized Malvasia wine had been the economic lifeblood of the Aeolian Islands, in particular Salina. In the 1880s production was at its peak supplying the lucrative markets of England and France.

The boom ended in 1889/90 with the infestation of *Phylloxera*, an insect pest which caused almost total destruction of the vines. Aeolians had thought initially that their isolation would work in their favour – that they were far enough from the mainland to be spared the scourge that had been afflicting much of Europe. As the blight took hold, the Aeolian economy collapsed and its sizeable merchant fleet was left crippled. It was seriously feared that Malvasia production would disappear altogether. This created the first big movement of people away from the Aeolian Islands. Within 15 years, only half of Salina's pre-*Phylloxera* population of 9,000 remained.⁷

The grandfather of Australian business leader and former President of the Geelong Football Club, Frank Costa, was one of those hard hit by the *Phylloxera* outbreak.

Life was good for the young Francesco (Frank's Nonno) when he married Anna Costa in Val di Chiesa in 1886 [...] when the devastating horticultural disease *Phylloxera* struck the Aeolian grape and wine industry. Within a year all the vineyards of Salina were rendered useless and the Mediterranean wine industry was all but destroyed. Devastated, Francesco watched helplessly as his once healthy wines [...] withered and died [...] It was of little consolation that he was not to blame.⁸

In addition to the *Phylloxera* crisis, the lack of finance made it impossible for locals to compete when family-

owned sailing vessels began to be superseded by larger, more efficient – and far more expensive – steam ships (*vaporì*). Bankruptcies ensued as islanders lost the basis of their livelihood.⁹

3. *Extension of the continental railway to southern Calabria*

The success of the Risorgimento (the movement that led to the unification of Italy into a single state in 1861) gave impetus to expanded trade between the North and the South of the new nation. But commerce was hampered by a primitive railway network, which ended at Eboli (near Salerno, just south of Naples), nearly 400 kilometers short of the southern tip of Calabria. Not only did the overland journey present a difficult obstacle to be overcome, due to poor roads and communications, but there was also the additional difficulty of getting the freight across the Messina Strait (*Stretto di Messina*) to Sicily. Although unpredictably rough seas often made sea travel difficult, the easiest and shortest way of travelling between Naples and the Sicilian centres of Messina and Palermo was by sea passage through the Aeolian Islands, especially via the mainland Sicilian port of Milazzo.

At its height, Stromboli, the closest of the Aeolian islands to Naples, boasted a fleet of 65 transport ships. The intensive trade out of the port of Naples reached such an intensity in the mid-19th century that it infused the traditional Sicilian-based Aeolian dialect with characteristics of Neapolitan speech.¹⁰

The decisive turning point came in 1895 with the opening of the Southern Tyrrhenian Railway linking Northern Italy with Villa San Giovanni, at the tip of southern Calabria. By March 1905, the station was connected with ferry services carrying rolling stock across the Straits of Messina. This ended the strategic advantage

⁷ Marcello Saija, quoted in *The Eolian Islands: Pearls of the Mediterranean*, Società Editrice Affinità Elettive, Messina, 1997. Saija is an academic (University of Palermo) who regularly visits Salina and was a coordinator of the Eoliano Heritage Study Program, sponsored by local Aeolian municipalities and Melbourne's Società Isole Eolie in 2013; see also Note 28.

⁸ Des Tobin, *Frank Costa: Family, Faith and Footy*, Killaghy Publishing, Malvern, Vic., 2nd ed., 2007, p. 14.

⁹ Marcello Saija, *Mercanti di mare*, *Op. cit.* states that, like Ireland at the time of the Potato Famine, Salina should act as another warning of how over-reliance on a single crop, in this case grapes, can have catastrophic repercussions in the event of crop failure.

¹⁰ The traditional Aeolian dialect is a variant of Sicilian and is easily distinguished by the muting of the final 'i' and 'e' vowels in word endings. The article by Rosemarie Taranto 'Aeolian Dialect' in *Società Isole Eolie: 1925-1995, From the Seven Islands to Melbourne*, 70th Anniversary Edition, recalls this Neapolitan influence on Aeolian speech, pp. 67-69.

of the Aeolian Archipelago, which had until then assisted the good fortune of the locals.

In the 1880s, successful Aeolian maritime captains, like my great-grandfather (*bisnonno*) Giacomo Barnao (1820-1907) and his extended family, ran an efficient fleet of merchant sailing vessels. In earlier times, some of them had become so well off they could afford to buy a house for their male heirs. But the phylloxera epidemic and the extension of the railway network to Villa San Giovanni jointly triggered an unstoppable downward spiral for the Aeolian ship transport industry. It seemed to the hapless Aeolians that not just the vagaries of nature were pitted against them – now also technological progress was conspiring to make the sea route to Sicily increasingly superfluous; moreover, with the advent of large steam ships, the relatively small Aeolian sailing ships were fast becoming obsolete and increasingly struggling to compete.¹¹

4. The earthquake of Messina

On December 28, 1908, the most powerful earthquake ever to hit Europe (7.5 on the Richter Scale) shook Southern Italy, destroying Messina on Sicily's North-East coast – the capital city of the province to which the Aeolian Islands belong. Even with the relatively crude instruments of the time, the quake was said to have registered in Washington DC. The massive tsunami that accompanied the earthquake also hit the city of Reggio Calabria, which lay close to its epicentre across the Strait. It was the biggest natural disaster ever recorded in Italy, with over 100,000 people killed in one morning.¹²

With such an unprecedented death toll and Messina, the administrative centre of the province, largely in ruins, Aeolians were left with little choice but to look overseas, especially the USA and Argentina. As experienced seamen with a long history of sailing the oceans,

the Aeolians were already aware of the potential for opportunities in distant places.¹³ They knew what lay beyond the horizon more so than most other Italians, especially the land-based agricultural workers of Sicily. Information became the key factor that accelerated emigration from the Aeolian Islands to new destinations.

It is significant that between 1890 and 1940 the province of Messina was the source of more than half of Australia's male Sicilian settlers.¹⁴ Most were either Aeolians or survivors of the 1908 earthquake.

Affected by damage to buildings and loss of trade, the traumas of those years lasted a lifetime for many Aeolians. Peter Tesoriero cites a typical example:

I found a contract entered into by my great-grandfather Gaetano Famularo, for the repair of his house on Stromboli that had been damaged by the quake. He was so traumatised by this, and by his experience in Messina, he developed a phobia about sleeping indoors.¹⁵

5. The volcanic eruption at Stromboli

The constant activity of the Stromboli volcano is the mainstay of the present tourist industry: each evening scores of thrill seekers equipped with helmets, climbing boots and hiking sticks, head to the summit to experience the nightly fireworks. To safeguard islanders and climbers, there are helicopter evacuation centres located at various assembly points. Little do visitors know that the mountain, known to the locals as '*Iddu*' ('him'), has an unpredictable violent side. Today, 'he' is monitored daily by the scientists of the Protezione Civile (the Government agency for civil protection). They are mindful of the eruptions of 1919 and 1930 which brought heavy loss of life, destroyed most of the island's fishing boats under huge boulders, and left the

¹¹ For a fuller discussion, see Marcello Saija, 'Salina and Malmsey', in *The Eolian Islands: Pearls*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 78-79. For the extension of the railway through Calabria, see p. 110.

¹² The official death toll has never been determined. Estimates differ, but between 60,000 and 70,000 people were killed in Messina, out of a population of 150,000. The loss of life in Reggio Calabria was between 50,000 and 60,000. A total for both centres of 123,000 is often quoted, which may reasonably be accepted.

¹³ Readily available information and the 'solidarity network' as key factors assisting emigration from the Aeolian Islands to new lands, is a recurring theme in Gerardo Papalia, 'With an Island as their Hearth: the Aeolians in Melbourne and the Società Mutuo Soccorso Isole Eolie' in the e-book journal, *Southern Question: Aspects of Aeolian Migration to Australia*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza, Issue 4, Feb 2014, pp. 21-46.

¹⁴ Robert Pascoe, *Buongiorno Australia: Our Italian Heritage*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, Vic., 1987, pp. 66-71.

¹⁵ Peter Tesoriero, 'The Aeolian Diaspora', *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

island under 12 cm of ash and lapilli. The explosive power of the eruption of 11 September 1930 was such that the volcano ejected stone blocks that rained, with lethal consequences, onto the isolated village of Ginestra. If the loss of vital crops from incendiary scoria and lava spot fires in 1919 failed to convince all that Stromboli was a tough place to live, the 1930 toll of 11 dead and scores injured, combined with the tsunami that destroyed the fishing boats on the beach of Ficogrande, finally convinced most of the waverers that it was time to leave. Half a century earlier, the island had been regarded as a good place to run a business. It was the closest to Naples and had a wide beach to accommodate and service sailing vessels – both fishing and merchant. With its fertile volcanic soils, it seemed that living alongside the volcano was worth the risk. But after 1930 many began to see ‘*Iddu*’ as an unacceptable threat to life.¹⁶

It is not surprising that most of the founders of the early American-Aeolian groups in Oswego N.Y., and of Melbourne’s Società Mutuo Soccorso Isole Eolie (SMSIE, now known as Società Isole Eolie), were *strombolani* that had emigrated – either to America, or first to America and then to Australia – in response to the volcanic instability menacing their livelihoods.

6. The Second World War

In 1924 the USA introduced a policy severely limiting immigration, especially for those of Italian origin. By the eve of the Second World War, Australia had become the favoured destination for Aeolian migrants, especially

single males going ahead of their families to see if they could establish a new life. Founded in Melbourne in 1925, from the very beginning the SMSIE started raising funds for those left behind and serving as a point of reference for newly arrived migrants from the islands. With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1939, and the declaration of war by Mussolini on the British Commonwealth in June 1940, the activities of the SMSIE were curtailed until it was eventually shut down by the authorities. Monies previously sent to assist the needy living in the ‘old country’, were misinterpreted as active support for the policies of the Fascist regime of Mussolini. The suspension of these collections exacerbated the hardships being experienced ‘back home’, at the same time as Aeolian waterways were being subjected to hostile submarine activity and the islands themselves were under frequent curfews. With restricted inter-island trade severely impacting the local economy, life was reduced to basic subsistence level.

Already suffering from food shortages, rationing and hit by a severe drought on Lipari, difficulties for the islands reached a head on 9 May 1943 with the sinking of the *piroscafo* (ferry ship) *Santa Marina* off the coast of Vulcano. 61 people lost their lives, almost all local civilian passengers and crew. After this tragedy – caused by torpedos from a British submarine whose captain mistakenly believed the *Santa Marina* was carrying German troops and secret military documents – the seas became too dangerous to navigate and the islands were left to fend for themselves as best they could with only a few small vessels sporadically ignoring the danger.¹⁷

Most Aeolians endured hunger for the duration of the war. The islands could not grow enough grains and the inhabitants were forced to get by on meagre rations, wine, olives, figs, prickly pears, capers, Mediterranean wild grasses, such as *rapuddi* (mustard greens; *brassica futillosa*) and whatever fish could be caught or traded:

It was an indescribable tragedy and the consequences were that the islands now had no boat to provide them with those few necessities of life [...] so the food situation got worse and worse [...] The only topic of conver-

¹⁶ One of the best eyewitness accounts of the 1930 eruptions was given by the poet Stefano Cincotta to the SBS Foreign Correspondent program, screened Australia-wide on 24 July 2007. He was then an 8 year old boy and was interviewed in response to the most recent violent eruption that caused the evacuation of the island several months earlier. The chapter ‘Lo Scoppio del Vulcano nel 1930’ in Stefano Cincotta’s book *Antiche culture strombolane*, Edizioni Di Nicolò, Messina 1999, brings out the deep affection Strombolians have for the volcano that has always dominated their lives, and to which, as the name ‘*Iddu*’ shows, they attach human qualities. “There was a huge tsunami, the whole island was on fire [...] the people were terrorized, some went to America, some to Australia. But the most courageous stayed behind. We had to insist because they [the authorities] wanted to take us away, saying it was too dangerous. But we said, ‘We’ll die but we aren’t going’. And we won. We love our little island, God bless it!” pp. 19-20. Author’s translation from Italian.

¹⁷ A detailed account of the sinking of the *Santa Marina* and a list of the dead, is given in Italo Toni, *Maledizione dei lupini*, Op. cit., p. 52. The loss is still commemorated in the Aeolian Islands. The British submarine *Unrivalled* was on patrol from its naval base in Malta.

sation was 'food' and the useless efforts to acquire some [...] Stromboli has never produced anything that can rightly be considered food. Its products were: wine, oil, figs and capers [...] So my father and three of his friends decided to go to Lipari on a rowboat. That was rather hazardous as it was a long distance for a small boat [but] they had to take the chance. It took them 5 hours of constant rowing to get to Lipari and they trudged one hour to get up to the country. They succeeded in getting only a scant quantity of supplies [...] They got home late in the evening, exhausted with fatigue and relieved that we could get through for a further short time.¹⁸

Many of the bravest, falling back on their traditional seafaring skills, defied sudden storms and the threat of floating mines, rowing between the islands to barter goods or ferry urgently sick passengers. The capital city of the province, Messina, still suffering the effects of the 1908 earthquake, was heavily bombed during the war and was itself engaged in a dire battle for survival, further adding to the desire of many Aeolians to leave the province as soon as the war ended. School education, always limited, had suffered too during the war years. There really seemed to be no future in the islands.

Meanwhile, many Aeolians living in Victoria were interned or recruited to work in the Civil Aliens Corps, where they were directed to cut down forests for fire wood or farm the land to contribute to the war effort. With the absence of many breadwinners, Italians in Australia had to silently endure the deprivations of war. Women, without the assistance of Social Security, tried to run their fruit shops (the traditional trade for Aeolian migrants) and other businesses on their own, with the help of other Italians who were spared internment, or with the kind assistance of those in the local community who had remained friendly. During this time, prominent Aeolians, such as Lena Santospirito, continued to raise funds to assist the most afflicted and their families. Her close association with the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix was instrumental in exposing the

wartime plight of Victorian Italians in an effort to obtain better treatment than was the norm in other states.¹⁹

The role of the Società Isole Eolie in the migration of Melbourne's Eoliani

The vast majority of young Australians of Aeolian descent are unaware of the fact that they would not be living in this country had it not been for the supportive presence of the Società Mutuo Soccorso Isole Eolie (SMSIE, since 1990 known as the Società Isole Eolie – SIE).

One of the most significant events influencing the decision of Aeolians to migrate to Australia occurred in 1921-22, several years before the official founding of the SMSIE, with the return to Stromboli of Domenico (Mick) Di Mattina, who had established himself in Melbourne as a successful fruiterer since 1914. During the visit, he spoke with many families about work opportunities in Australia, before returning to Melbourne in the company of his youngest brother, Frank. With the introduction of quotas restricting Italian migration to America in 1924, many of those contemplating a departure from the islands were reminded of Mick's words highlighting the advantages offered by Australia. He gave mentoring, moral support, sponsorship and the chance to find a job on arrival at the Di Mattina Shop in Acland Street, St Kilda.²⁰

One such 'recruit' was the ambitious Vincenzo Criscillo, who was to become a founding member of the SMSIE. His son Salvatore recalls;

Vincenzo's break came with the arrival (to Stromboli) of a family friend, Domenic Di Mattina, who offered to take young men to Melbourne. He promised them two years' work and accommodation with his business acquaintances. In 1922 Vincenzo and his friends Vince Toscano, Vince Di Mattina, Frank Di Mattina, Joe Cincotta, Jerry (Girolamo) Cincotta and Giovanni Russo

¹⁸ From the unpublished memoir of WW2 in the Aeolian Islands written in English by Maria Antonietta (Ninetta) Bongiorno in March 1998, pp-61-65. Feats of endurance and affinity to the sea run deep in traditional Aeolian culture. It is not surprising that *Eoliani* were mainly conscripted to do service in the Navy, rather than Army.

¹⁹ For details of the work of Lena Santospirito, see: Gwynedd Hunter-Payne, *Cabrini: A Hospital's Journey: 1948-1998*, The Helicon Press, 1998. Also, Santospirito Collection at Co.As.It, Italian Historical Society.

²⁰ Paul Elenio, 'Business People' in *Alla Fine del Mondo* (To the ends of the Earth), Club Garibaldi NZ, 2012, Ch.5, p.54. There are other independent sources mentioning Domenico Di Mattina (see Note 21 for another account).

set sail for Australia. The 35 day boat journey cost the handsome sum of 35 pounds, and gave them their first opportunity to learn English. With their basic schooling and a self-proclaimed cocky attitude, they soon adapted to life in Australia. The older, established Italian families supported them, as did the local Italian club [...] they were on their way to the success they had dreamed of. After serving their two year 'apprenticeships' the young men were free to go their own ways.²¹

The "local Italian club" mentioned is the embryonic SMSIE which, at the time, was the only regional Italian association in Melbourne. Upon finalising its Constitution and commencing operations in 1925, most of the above migrants became its first formal members. Its founding Committee played a crucial role in continuing to channel men to Australia by influencing the migration decisions of many wishing to leave the islands to seek a future elsewhere in the world. Some of the founders were *strombolani* who, having previously participated in the *Società Mutuo Soccorso Isola Stromboli* (SMSIS) in the United States, then came to Melbourne and formed the backbone of the fledgling Melbourne body. Dante Tesoriero writes:

Those who migrated to the USA formed the SMSIS in 1911 in Oswego, New York whose members at that time, included my late father Salvatore Tesoriero and his brother Giuseppe Tesoriero, and my late father-in-law Salvatore Barnao who later migrated to Australia.²²

Many others who had been encouraged by Mick Di Mattina to come to Australia later elected his other younger brother, Bartolo (Bob) Di Mattina, as the SMSIE's first Secretary.

This momentum also gathered pace in New South Wales within the like-minded Circolo Isole Eolie, which in 1929 was bolstered by the move to Sydney of the abovementioned Vincenzo Criscillo, who came with other foundation members of the Melbourne SMSIE, such as Vince Toscano. Eventually, these men would settle in Wellington, enhancing New Zealand's own Italian migration story. Criscillo served as President of Wellington's Club Garibaldi from 1980 to 1995, and Toscano's daughter Ginette Toscano-Page rose to become its first woman President, a position which she held for eight years until 2013.

Researcher Charles Price records that in 1891 there were already 900 Aeolian Islanders in Australia. By the mid-1920s that number had doubled, and it continued to increase since. Much of this was in response to the positive influence of the Melbourne SMSIE and the personal initiative of the Di Mattina family and a growing group of other sponsors.²³ As the word spread that a sense of belonging and material help was available through the organised Aeolian community of Melbourne, including traditional culture and festivities centred on the cult of San Bartolomeo, a surge of further arrivals ensued.

By the beginning of World War Two in 1939, Aeolians were by far the biggest European sub-group living in Australia, and the SMSIE was prominent in representing their interests. From the outside, the seven islands that form the Aeolian Archipelago appear to be quite different. Yet all inhabitants, irrespective of island of origin, have always considered themselves as partaking of a single Aeolian identity, sharing the same speech and sea culture. This close bond that was forged over the centuries also became the cornerstone of the SMSIE. This sense of solidarity continues today in the SIE, among its members and friends, but it was strongest among the earlier immigrants.

So effective was the SMSIE as a focus not only for Aeolians but also for the wider Italian community, that upon outbreak of war club minutes and membership lists

²¹ Salvatore Criscillo, *Famiglie Strombolane, Stromboli Connection*, Moore Warburton Ltd, Wellington NZ, 2000. p. 74.

²² Dante Tesoriero, 'My views' in *Società Isole Eolie: 1925-1995, From the Seven Islands to Melbourne*, 70th Anniversary Edition, *Op. cit.*, p. 100. In this article, Dante writes that in 1975 he met on Stromboli Giovanna Bongiorno, who confirmed this account; she had been on the committee of the precursor to the SMSIS, the *Circolo Progresso Stromboli* in the early 1920s, there on the island. Dante writes that the word 'progresso' is quite apt as it was one of the world's first such organisations to have a woman on its board.

²³ Another supporter of new arrivals was Giuseppe Mandile (1906-72) who migrated to Australia in 1925 and is known to have assisted at least 8 families; see Giuseppe (Joe) Biviano, 'The fruit and other Aeolian Connections,' in *Società Isole Eolie: 1925-1995, From the Seven Islands to Melbourne*, *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

were seized by authorities. Wartime SMSIE Secretary, Bob Di Mattina, despite being by then a naturalised Australian citizen, was arrested in 1941 and detained at the high security Internment Camp at Loveday (SA). The suspicions of the wartime authorities were later shown to be unfounded.²⁴ As Italy's role in the war diminished, Bob Di Mattina was released and returned to family life. Undiscouraged, he went on to serve an unparalleled 25 years as Secretary and 9 years as President of the Società, the organisation he so dutifully served til the end of his life.

My father [Antonino Bongiorno] and Bob [Di Mattina] my brother-in-law [...] were among the founders of the SMSIE. It kept the Eolians together and came to their aid in their hour of need [...] In order to raise funds they would have concerts and balls, picnics and raffles. Bob was the secretary of this club. He was very keen in his job.²⁵

A poignant postscript to the SMSIE's pre-war prominence, is the fact that its very success as a leading Italian migrant organisation led to an initial decline in its influence and activities. At war's end, members were slow to re-join as they feared being placed under surveillance by authorities nervous about world developments and the uncertain shape of the post-war political order.

Rebirth – the fortunes of the Islands restored

Having turned full-circle, today the Aeolian Islands are among Italy's most desirable holiday destinations. Their UNESCO World Heritage status puts them at the top of the most spectacular volcanic attractions in Europe. Visitors are drawn to the beauty and the breathtaking landscapes of the rugged coasts and natural environment. The merchant sailing fleets are long gone, but in summer there is an endless stream of transport vessels and passenger ferries vying with yachts and pleasure

craft, each seeking to find its own niche experience in the islands.

The population has recovered from the early-1970s low of 11,200 to its current 15,900. The climate, scenery and history going back to before the Bronze Age have created a tourist retreat for people tired of the big-city traffic, or those seeking to take a weekend break from the stresses of life.

The once calamity-prone islands and Spartan lifestyles have given way to images of enchanting black-sanded beaches, mud baths, hiking trips to mountain peaks, and diving with dolphins in turquoise waters that are also home to schools of colourful fish.

Visitors often ask descendants of Aeolian migrants: "why did your parents voluntarily leave such an enchanting place"? Did those that departed not notice the pervasive charms of the place, the unique confluence of wind, water, fire and soil – the basic elements of nature, in a combination very few other locations can offer? It clearly never occurred to these migrants that, despite the seismic instability that characterised Aeolian life from the late 1880s, and their struggle to get supplies especially during the war, they had actually been living in an idyllic paradise.

It is now better appreciated why Aeolians who resettled abroad never adequately discussed the history of the mass departure, not even with their children, let alone outside the community. In particular, they very rarely spoke about the prosperity enjoyed by the islands in the mid 19th century, focusing instead on the more recent setbacks that affected them during their own lifetimes. As a consequence, many of their descendants have come to think that the exodus was a result of the fact that the islands were somehow essentially deficient, or at best simply marginal and insignificant, and therefore had little to offer.

However, the islands' recent resurgence should be enough to dispel the mistaken perception that Aeolian migration was due to the inherent inadequacy of the islands, rather than on specific historical events that contingently affected them. Further, those that emigrated never disdained or disparaged their place of origin. Nor did Aeolian migrants display inherent deficien-

²⁴ Rev. Fr. Salvatore Di Mattina, 'An Aeolian Family's Story: the Di Mattinas', in *Società Isole Eolie: 1925-1995, From the Seven Islands to Melbourne*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 99-100, contains an eyewitness story of Bob's detention by his son. A further, unpublished, account, by Nella Lo Schiavo, is held in the archives of the SIE.

²⁵ Ninetta Bongiorno, unpublished manuscript, *Op. cit.*, p. 7 (Vol.1) & p. 37 (Vol.2).

cies after coming to Australia. On the contrary, many of them became self-made business owners and shopkeepers – predominantly greengrocers, because their environment had made them tough, motivated and independent. Getting up at 3AM and toiling hard all day did not trouble them. In some areas of Australia (Ulladulla in New South Wales and Fremantle in Western Australia), Aeolians started notable fishing enterprises. In New Zealand, they founded a great part of the commercial fishing industry, based at Island Bay. The seas had always been their backyard and they were not spooked by the treacherous sea around Wellington and the danger it presented.²⁶

By and large the Aeolian migrants did not talk about the unfortunate events – a mixture of technological change and the cruelties of nature – that culminated in their forced departure. They avoided explaining things, especially to those outside the group, unaware that to others they often came across as cliquish, insular and disengaged from other Italians.

Italian groups included those from the Aeolian Islands who settled into the northern areas of the city. These arrivals seem to have kept to themselves and to have not assimilated with other Italians.²⁷

It could never have been envisioned during the years of Aeolian crisis that extraordinary opportunities would be generated by a newly-established industry based on tourism and hospitality. The archipelago has today been transformed, not just by the hoteliers and operators that fostered the economic boom and by the adventurers and volcano trekkers, but also by filmmakers, authors and artists – as well as ordinary folk seeking a break from the rat race. And at last Italy, and particularly the regional government of Sicily, has woken up, finally letting go of the outdated stereotype of the islands as a good place to banish prisoners. This new appreciation of what was always present and in the main, unexploited, has now given the islands a fresh role, that

of a place where every soul, earthly or mystic, is able to find a renewed heartbeat away from the confusion of modern life.

In more recent times, descendants of the Aeolian diaspora are returning in increasing numbers to discover their roots. An important initiative of this kind was the 2013 *Eoliano Heritage Study Program*, sponsored by Aeolian local municipalities (*i Sindaci delle Isole Eolie*) and Melbourne's SIE – which was due to celebrate its 90th year in 2015, making it the longest-standing Italian regional club active in Australia. The club today continues its focus on preserving memories, organising community activities and promoting the unique culture, traditions and food of the islands.²⁸

Conclusion

With the removal of the threat of piracy, the Aeolian Islands experienced a surge of economic prosperity and rapid population growth that peaked in the mid-1880s. This period of expansion was given impetus with the unification of Italy in 1861, when the archipelago was able to capitalise on its geographical position as a transport bridge between Central Italy and the southern parts of the nation. The fading era of relative abundance was recorded in the voyages and surveys of Habsburg Archduke Ludwig Salvator in the 1890s, just before Salina's disastrous Phylloxera outbreak unleashed its full fury – the first in a series of misfortunes and other factors, including the technological progress that made sailing vessels obsolete. This sapped the confidence of Aeolians and directed their gaze towards better opportunities available in more accommodating and geologically stable lands.

The mass movement away from the islands continued beyond the end of World War Two. Despite the trauma of emigration, however, the people never forgot their birthplace, meeting regularly to recount their life stories

²⁶ For extensive coverage of the role Aeolians played in the New Zealand fishing industry, see Vincent Moleta, *Family Business: An Italian-New Zealand Story*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2012.

²⁷ Tom Hazell AO, Past President of Dante Alighieri Society, in his Memorial for Carlo Anthony Bracchi, published in *Dante Alighieri Newsletter*, Melbourne Branch, August 2014, p. 6.

²⁸ In 2013, the SIE sponsored the first *Eoliano Heritage Study Program*, an intensive 2-week, multi-generational journey of discovery that took place in the Aeolian Islands. With over 20 participants, it was organised by *Società Isole Eolie* Committee Members Janetta Ziino and Cristina Neri for Australians of Aeolian background seeking to explore their ancestral roots. Using Salina as a base, participants experienced the history, culture and natural attractions of the islands.

at community events and SIE gatherings, such as the annual 'Picnic Eoliano'. And to underline the unending passion for their islands, they often expressed a desire to return home as soon as the conditions on the islands would improve. Such was the case with Frank Costa's grandparents:

Just before his (Nonno Francesco's) departure for Australia, word came to Salina that a strain of Phylloxera-resistant vines was being developed. The news encouraged Francesco to believe that once he saved sufficient money to return home he could commence a replanting program that would restore honour and prosperity to the Costa family [...] His heart remained in Salina, and after saving enough money he was overjoyed when he was able to return home in 1895.²⁹

But the forced dispersion of the culturally homogenous community of the Aeolian archipelago to other countries was for most migrants a one-way process. Sharing a unique culture forged over centuries around seafaring lives and volcanic landscapes, Aeolians banded together wherever they went. Their background welded them to a point where the tight bond was sometimes misunderstood as aloofness and a desire to avoid those outside the group. In essence, at every gathering and until death, migrant memories formed the basis of most conversations: 'working in the shop' and sharing common experiences living on Europe's most volcanically active island chain.³⁰

²⁹ Des Tobin, *Frank Costa: Family, Faith and Footy*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 15-17. Also Gerardo Papalia, in 'With an Island as their Hearth: the Aeolians in Melbourne and the SMSIE', *Op. cit.*, states that Aeolians 'were akin to nomads who never assimilate totally into their host culture'. He is correct when he says 'it became a small step for these men to jump ship in a country where they saw good prospects'. They were restless, 'a mobile population and wise to the ways of the world' (pp. 22-25). Having been forced to flee their homeland, they were often homesick and longed to return. Peter Tesoriero makes this point again in his 'Aeolian Diaspora' Conference Speech, *Op. cit.*: 'it is true that many of the islanders saw the diaspora as a temporary exile. For Natale and Maria Grazia [relatives of the author], the desire to return was so strong that it overcame their desire to be with their children and grandchildren' (pp. 79-80).

³⁰ Gerardo Papalia, in 'With an Island as their Hearth: the Aeolians in Melbourne and the SMSIE', *Op. cit.*, discusses the sense of 'solidarity' which kept Aeolians content in their own company. As a non-Eoliano 'outsider', he perceptively captures the complex essence of the Aeolian character and 'collective identity'. He states that being

The generation of today's *eolo-australiani* has shed that perceived aloofness and merged into the broader family of Italian groups that now form a central part of mainstream Australian society.

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'the periphery of a periphery' has acted both as a 'barrier isolating the islands and as their principal gateway to other worlds. It has fashioned their unique world' (pp. 22-25).

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**politica e cultura in un cenacolo di provincia:
lettere di gino nibbi e di acuto vitali
ad ermenegildo catalini**

di alfredo luzi

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Il presente articolo è una versione aggiornata del saggio del medesimo autore contenuto in D. Pupilli (a cura di), *Ermenegildo Catalini. Un intellettuale tra liberismo e comunismo*, Istituto Gramsci, Ancona 1997.

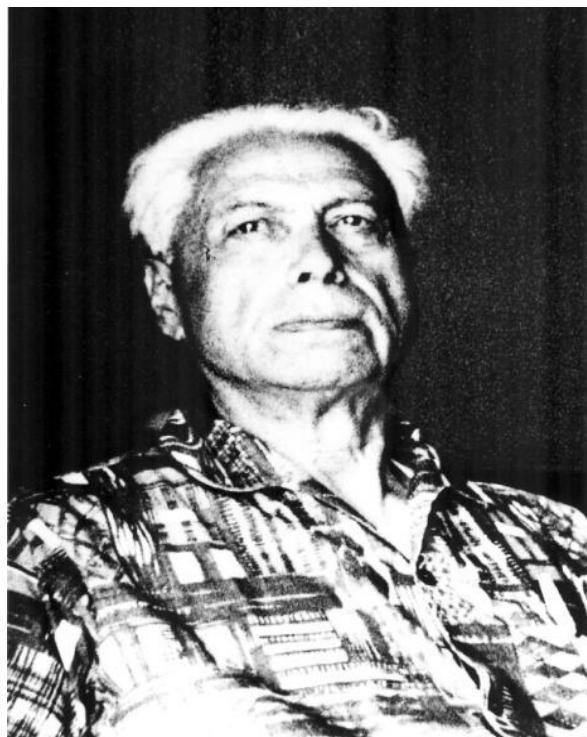


Fig. 1 – Gino Nibbi (1896-1969) (vedi il volume *Gino Nibbi. Marchigiano d'Australia* di Carla Carotenuto).

Da alcuni anni, l'interesse per la storia delle "piccole patrie", i territori di provincia decentrati rispetto al potere economico e politico, come può essere quello del circondario fermano, sta sgretolando il luogo comune che attribuisce ad essi la mancanza di cultura, l'assenza di progettualità, l'immobilità del tempo esistenziale.

Lo sviluppo di alcune ricerche individuali, proiettate verso la ricostruzione puntuale ed analitica di biografie di personaggi ricchi di fascino (Licini, Catalini, Nibbi, Vitali, Bartolini, Maticotta), ha determinato una convergenza d'indagine sulla vitalità culturale e sociale del territorio, soprattutto per quanto riguarda l'ambito comprensoriale tra Fermo, Porto S. Giorgio, Monte Vidon Corrado, Grottazzolina.

Come primo risultato, è da sottolineare la revisione metodologica del rapporto tra nazione e regione, tra centralità urbana e periferia, con la conseguente rivalutazione di ciò che può sembrare marginale ed emarginato e che invece partecipa attivamente della dinamica tra passato, presente e futuro, anche se in modo meno aggressivo di quanto si possa fare nelle grandi "capitali della cultura". Senza riesumare la bandiera del mu-

nicipalismo, sarà opportuno indagare con maggiore attenzione e con prospettive nuove sulla rete di rapporti che univano personalità diverse per formazione e generazione, alcune allontanatesi dal territorio ma rimaste in contatto con i sodali, per individuare quali erano i legami antropologici e culturali che tenevano uniti i componenti di un vero e proprio cenacolo di provincia.

Già alcuni anni or sono, impegnato nella riscoperta critica di un grande scrittore fermano, Franco Maticotta, avevo potuto rendermi conto che quel linguaggio così ricco di richiami culturali, quel coraggio etico, il rigore ideologico che spesso si tramuta in crudeltà del pensiero, non potevano non essersi alimentati da un rapporto costante con le idee e le proposte di altri uomini di cultura, gli amici, i coetanei o i maestri riconosciuti che figuravano con maggior frequenza nella biografia dell'inquieto cantore degli orti marchigiani. Ma non ero riuscito a superare la soglia delle supposizioni, non avendo disponibili riscontri documentali.

Successivamente mi ero imbattuto nella figura di Gino Nibbi, narratore e giornalista fermano-sangiorgese, di venti anni più anziano di Maticotta, che ben presto aveva abbandonato le Marche per sperimentare l'avventura australiana. Grazie alla lettura di alcune sue lettere agli amici marchigiani, pur nella incompletezza del materiale epistolare e dei dati biografici, seppi che tra gli interlocutori c'erano figure note come Osvaldo Licini e meno note come Ubaldo Fagioli o Ermenegildo Catalini (detto Checco).

Il quadro era divenuto più completo e più complesso in occasione di una ricerca sulla biografia di Acruto Vitali, poeta e pittore sangiorgese, preliminare ad una prefazione inserita in un volumetto di poesie inedite pubblicato dalla Stamperia dell'Arancio di Grottammare nel 1992.

Dovevo però attendere la comparsa del volume di Domenico Pupilli su Ermenegildo Catalini¹ per avere finalmente alcune informazioni fondamentali su un intellettuale a me del tutto sconosciuto, che aveva invece svolto un ruolo di guida nel gruppo dei coetanei e dei più giovani. A lui, lontano dalle Marche, si rivolgevano per avere consigli o sollecitare giudizi, talvolta rimproveran-

¹ D. Pupilli, *Il Professor Catalini. Vicenda umana e passione democratica di un "piccolo maestro"*, Livi Ed., Fermo 1995.

dolo per il lungo silenzio che intervallava le sue rare lettere.

In questi ultimi anni, fortunatamente i responsabili degli archivi pubblici e gli eredi dei fondi epistolari privati hanno favorito la consultazione del materiale, permettendo agli studiosi di ricostruire un tessuto culturale, sociale e politico di inaspettata vitalità e ricchezza, che emerge dalla reciproca corrispondenza intercorsa tra i componenti di quel gruppo di giovani di talento, originari del comprensorio fermano, che tra il 1920 e il 1940, dall'instaurarsi del fascismo alla sua caduta, si erano scambiati utopie, delusioni, opinioni letterarie, polemiche politiche, ossessioni, esperienze di vita quotidiana.

Gino Nibbi, impiegato presso la *Società Molini e Pastifici* di Porto San Giorgio, è certo la personalità più insofferente al tempo sempre uguale di una cittadina addormentata come Porto San Giorgio, che si risveglia solo d'estate quando giunge per le vacanze la buona borghesia fermana e romana ad occupare i villini *liberty* sul lungomare.

Sensibile al mito emigratorio ed esotico della ricerca del paese felice che negli anni Trenta fu uno degli archetipi antropologici più vivi e radicati in Europa, già dalla primavera del 1927 Nibbi progetta di abbandonare definitivamente l'Italia, anche a motivo del deteriorarsi del clima politico in cui il fascismo ribellistico e rivoluzionario della prima ora aveva trovato alimento per poi assumere forme intollerabili di potere totalitario.

In una lettera del 13 maggio a Catalini, che in quel periodo insegnava a Lucera, egli scrive:

Ormai mi vengo idealmente liberando da questa poverissima vita e mi preparo per la fine dell'anno a intraprendere un viaggio per l'Australia. La rompo con tutti: mi rifarò giornalista e mercante di *bric-à-brac*. E' una cosa ormai decisa irrevocabilmente, sai!²

Ma il progetto troverà non poche difficoltà organizzative e subirà continui rinvii.

Dapprima il viaggio sembra imminente:

² Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 13 maggio 1927. Archivio Buschi.

La mia partenza è fissata per fine gennaio.³

Tuttavia, una serie di intoppi burocratici e logistici impediscono la realizzazione del sogno: il rifiuto del rilascio del passaporto (per ottenere il quale si può supporre che Nibbi abbia fatto intervenire presso il Ministero degli Interni la sua amica Margherita Sarfatti), e la sparizione temporanea delle casse di effetti personali già inviate a Napoli per essere imbarcate (per risolvere il caso, Nibbi chiede aiuto a Catalini in una lettera del 1 marzo 1928 raccontandogli l'accaduto e invitandolo ad intervenire in suo favore presso la ditta di spedizioni):

La mia partenza quindi (se il diavolo non ci mette ancora la coda) avrà luogo irrevocabilmente il 19 aprile.⁴

In effetti, da un confronto con alcune lettere inviate *in itinere* da Nibbi ad Acruto Vitali, si può evincere che la partenza sia avvenuta verso la fine di aprile o nei primi giorni di maggio 1928. Al di là delle connotazioni strettamente esistenziali, il mito del viaggio agiva nella psicologia di Nibbi come una sorta di metafora ossessiva, testimonianza di un ulissismo e un nomadismo intellettuali che accomunavano intere generazioni di giovani di provincia. Negli stessi anni, poco più a nord, a Pesaro, Dino Garrone esprimeva nelle lettere all'amico Virgilio Lilli la stessa insofferenza alle norme di una società borghese codina e benpensante e la stessa ansia di girare il mondo, di fuggire verso l'ignoto.⁵

Il desiderio è convogliato su un tema ricorrente nella scrittura epistolare, che è insieme strumento informativo di dati biografici ma anche luogo di condensazione di aspirazioni sollecitate dall'immaginario giovanile e censurate nell'impatto con la società:

Certo è tremendo e mi ossessiona in tutte le ore il desiderio di distaccarmi da queste consuetudini, per salvare quest'ultimo tratto di giovinezza in un angolo del mondo dove sia possibile misurare l'intensità delle proprie emozioni, magari soltanto per appagarsene, e

³ Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 19 novembre 1927. Archivio Buschi.

⁴ Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 28 febbraio 1928. Archivio Buschi.

⁵ A. Luzi, "Il mio braccio sotto il tuo. Lettere inedite di Dino Garrone a Virgilio Lilli", in *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, XXIX, Università di Macerata 1996.

crearsele e viverle sopra tutto, dal momento che di esprimerle non mi è concesso.⁶

Nibbi sa che non sarà sufficiente neppure la dislocazione fisica e geografica per liberarsi dal fantasma del viaggio. Da Melbourne, qualche anno dopo, quando è ormai inserito nel lavoro (aprirà il *Leonardo Art Shop* a Little Collins Street, non lontano da Carlton, il quartiere degli italiani) ed è molto apprezzato dagli intellettuali del luogo che lo considerano l'importatore della cultura italiana contemporanea in Australia, egli scrive a Catalini:

Sto preparando le valigie per partire per il Pacifico: Nuova Guinea, Tahiti, etc. [...] Al mio ritorno dal Pacifico prenderò la mia famiglia e ci avvieremo per l'Europa. Io per Parigi e mia moglie con i bambini per Ascoli. [...] Si viaggia, caro Gildo, su tutta la linea, e il viaggio che sto per intraprendere sarà come la realizzazione di un mio lungo sogno.⁷

Il viaggio nel Pacifico verrà realizzato nel 1934 mentre Parigi rimarrà la meta agognata, dove pochi eletti (tra questi l'amico Osvaldo Licini che vi aveva soggiornato saltuariamente tra il 1917 e il 1926) avevano avuto il privilegio di vivere l'avventura intellettuale più esaltante nella storia della cultura del Novecento.

Nel 1937 lo scrittore sangiorgese rientra in Italia per un breve periodo, il tempo di visitare Parigi e di far pubblicare da Parenti il volume *Il volto degli emigranti*⁸. Ma ormai egli ha assimilato fin nelle fibre più profonde della sua personalità la condizione dell'emigrante. Incapace di dimenticare la vecchia Europa e troppo europeo per apprezzare senza riserve la vita australiana, non riesce mai a trovare un rapporto euforico con i luoghi in cui fissa la propria dimora.

Nell'aprile del 1937 da Milano annuncerà a Catalini il prossimo ritorno in Australia:

Ci rivedremo il prossimo luglio quando ripasserò al paese prima di imbarcarmi per l'Australia.⁹

Negli anni successivi la vita dello scrittore sarà caratterizzata da un continuo andirivieni tra Italia e Australia fino al rientro definitivo nel 1963.

A Catalini (al quale egli si rivolge con esordi diversi: "Carissimo Checco", "Carissimo Gildo", "Caro Checco", "Carissimo", "Carissimo Amico") Nibbi trasmette informazioni puntuali sul suo lavoro di giornalista, chiedendogli spesso di intervenire personalmente per recuperare copie di giornali in cui sono stati pubblicati suoi articoli:

Ti mando tre fascicoli di *Stream* di cui sono stato il fondatore e propugnatore: rivista già spenta per inesperienza amministrativa...¹⁰

E mi preme di raccomandarti quell'altro articolo sugli "Italiani di Tasmania" (un secondo) che inviai al Corriere Adriatico il 2.2.32 e che dovrebbe essere giunto ad Ancona verso il 15 di marzo.¹¹

Con questo stesso corriere invio al Corriere un articolo nuovo che è di un genere che deve piacerti e che s'intitola "Emigrati".¹²

Ma coinvolge anche l'amico in iniziative culturali forse non realizzate. Infatti in una lettera del 20 marzo 1925 dichiara:

Ho ricevuto il tuo commento dei primi 19 paragrafi del Capponi. Va benissimo; procura però d'essere un po' calligraficamente più chiaro nel resto, che attendo entro la settimana p.v.¹³

Fino ad oggi il testo risulta introvabile. Potrebbe trattarsi, tenuto conto della forte passione pedagogica del Catalini, di un saggio dedicato al volume del famoso Gino Capponi *Pensieri sull'educazione* (1845), su cui si sono formate intere generazioni di insegnanti.

⁶ Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 8 febbraio 1928. Archivio Buschi.

⁷ Lettera datata Melbourne 3 febbraio 1932, Archivio Istituto Regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione di Ancona (d'ora in poi I.R.S.M.L.A.).

⁸ G. Nibbi, *Il volto degli emigranti: scene di vita in Australia*, in *Collezione di Letteratura*, v. 7, Parenti, Firenze, 1937.

⁹ Lettera datata Milano 1 aprile 1937. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

¹⁰ Lettera datata Melbourne 28 marzo 1932. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Lettera datata Melbourne 25 aprile 1932. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

¹³ Lettera datata Ascoli 20 marzo 1925. Archivio Buschi.

In qualche caso il fitto scambio epistolare può anche dare adito a malintesi. In occasione del trasferimento al Liceo Rinaldini di Ancona probabilmente Catalini avrà informato Nibbi della sua intenzione, tutta politica e sociale, di aprire uno studio legale per aiutare gli operai, i poveri, gli umili, a districarsi tra gli intrighi della burocrazia giudiziaria, senza tuttavia abbandonare l'attività didattica. E Nibbi, equivocando, si sente in dovere di rimproverare l'amico per poi trasformare il rimprovero in occasione di elogio:

Non so capacitarmi come tu abbia preferito abbandonare l'insegnamento per l'avvocatura. L'insegnamento mi è sempre parso, nel mio orizzonte limitato alla Marca, come una forma meno sacrilega di esistenza. Però se ci ripenso bene mi convinco che tu devi avere spiccatissime qualità per quest'altra professione. E ripenso al tuo argomentare fluido, caldo e ininterrotto delle nostre passate conversazioni.¹⁴

Il gruppo di sodali che prima della diaspora iniziata con la partenza di Licini per Parigi e di Catalini per Avellino nel 1924, mantiene rapporti frequenti, con incontri e lettere, si trova coinvolto nelle turbolente vicende politiche che caratterizzano la storia d'Italia di quegli anni. Anche nei più inconsapevoli si fa strada la coscienza che il rivoluzionamento fascista non è che la maschera di una incipiente dittatura e che la strategia mussoliniana per rafforzare il potere prevede lo smantellamento delle istituzioni democratiche.

Tra questi è Gino Nibbi a dimostrare una crescente sensibilità politica, dopo Catalini, che già vicino a Gobetti e alle idee di "Rivoluzione Liberale", sceglie di affiancarsi a Guido Dorso nella lotta meridionalistica, optando, quale vincitore di concorso, per l'insegnamento nel Liceo di Avellino.

Proveniente da famiglia di idee repubblicane, Nibbi è ostile alla violenza delle squadre fasciste che scorrazzano anche per Porto San Giorgio e forse subisce l'umiliazione di bere l'olio di ricino.

Già in una lettera del 9 novembre 1924, in un periodo in cui, dopo il delitto Matteotti e la secessione dell'Aventino, il governo fascista sembra isolato (anche per

l'atteggiamento scelto da liberali come Giolitti e Salandra che al congresso di Livorno dichiarano la loro dura opposizione al fascismo), Nibbi sollecita la rivolta morale dei compagni di vita:

Certo noi assisteremo in questi giorni a qualche evento straordinario. Ma c'è nell'aria una minaccia di transazioni tale da compromettere forse un'azione spontanea del popolo che si vergogna finalmente di aver perduta tutta la sua dignità. Caro Gildo, staremo a vedere soltanto?¹⁵

Ma dopo la promulgazione della legge del 24 dicembre 1925 che attribuisce a Mussolini tutto il potere, Nibbi è preso dallo sconforto e denuncia l'inerzia in cui è caduta una intera generazione di giovani intellettuali, incapaci di ritrovare una passione civile collettiva:

Ma i calori di tutti sono epidermici in fondo e molti si son fatti solitari. Siamo organicamente incapaci di trascinare per dieci o venti anni consecutivi e con intensità incandescente una silenziosa rivolta morale. Che farci? Tu correggi i compiti, io correggo quotidianamente me stesso dei "gentili errori" delle opinioni facili e delle ingenuità di cui troppo ci siamo pasciuti.¹⁶

Argomento che gli è caro e che si ripropone in un breve messaggio del 6 maggio 1926:

Ciò che io desidero dipende dalla tua discrezione: cose vitali e di passione sebbene io sia arciconvinco che la nostra accidia sia destinata a consolidarsi e che il migliore conforto di questi anni ci derivi dalla nostra solitaria ostilità ad un mondo che si burla di noi.¹⁷

Nelle lettere che ho potuto esaminare, spesso Nibbi nasconde la sua adesione politica alle idee liberaldemocratiche, in nome delle quali Catalini sta lottando nel Sud Italia, sotto l'affettuosa ironia nei confronti dell'amico e maestro marchigiano che si è subito identificato con i principi del meridionalismo al punto da firmare un suo articolo sull'ultimo numero della *Rivoluzione Liberale* dell'8 novembre 1925, dedicato a "Il caso Missiroli vi-

¹⁴ Lettera datata Melbourne 25 aprile 1932. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

¹⁵ Cartolina postale datata 9 novembre 1924. Archivio Buschi.

¹⁶ Cartolina postale datata 10 marzo 1926. Archivio Buschi.

¹⁷ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 6 maggio 1926. Archivio Buschi.

sto da un meridionalista”, con lo pseudonimo di “Homo Meridionalis”:

“Accidenti come ti fermenta il sangue agl’ipogei! Non per nulla già ti senti così spaesato da dire “Noi meridionali”.¹⁸

Così mi racconterai le delizie e le amarezze giornalistiche dell’Homo Meridionalis.¹⁹

Frequenti sono i riferimenti al dibattito politico di quegli anni nel quale Catalini svolge un ruolo primario, discutendo di leggi elettorali, di proporzionale e di uninominale, di questione meridionale. Il punto di riferimento è comunque Piero Gobetti e la sua rivista:

Carissimo Gildo, hai visto l’ultimo numero di Riv. Lib.? Ci sono, di Gobetti, delle noterelle d’attualità serene e gustose, e dei punti di vista che collimano singolarmente con i tuoi: specialmente dove parla della lotta elettorale. In realtà si sente un po’ di ristoro di fronte a quella coerenza inflessibile e indiavolata.²⁰

Ti confesso che m’è piaciuta l’entrée a R.L. per quanto scabroso ed estraneo sia per me l’argomento. Le mie distrazioni non mi consentono come sai di rendermi conto anche in profondità della questione meridionale.²¹

Mi sarebbe piaciuto vederti per sentire se sei sempre sconsolato e fino a qual punto, ché qui non mi consolo d’altro che della sincera disperazione e del nichilismo morale di Gobetti. Anche Missiroli è partito: salutiamolo romanamente!²²

¹⁸ Nibbi fa riferimento ad un articolo di Catalini “Uninominalismo nel Sud” pubblicato su *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, IV., n.7, 15 febbraio 1925. La lettera, senza data, è stata dunque scritta successivamente. Archivio Buschi.

¹⁹ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 10 agosto 1925. Archivio Buschi.

²⁰ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 15 febbraio 1924. Archivio Buschi.

²¹ Lettera senza data ma successiva al 15 febbraio 1925. Archivio Buschi.

²² Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 21 ottobre 1925. Per il riferimento alla inaspettata conversione al fascismo di Mario Missiroli, vedasi D.Pupilli, *Il Professor Catalini. Vicenda umana e passione democratica di un “piccolo maestro”*, Livi ed., Fermo, 1995, p. 22; vedasi soprattutto la “Lettera a Missiroli” pubblicata da P. Gobetti su *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, IV, n.37, 18 ottobre 1925 (“Tu hai sempre letto più Oriani che Marx: è giusto



Fig. 2 – Ermenegildo Catalini (1895-1958), studioso della questione meridionale e collaboratore di Piero Gobetti.

Più a suo agio Nibbi è quando parla di cultura, soprattutto di letteratura e pittura. Era d’altro canto abitudine del cenacolo di amici scambiarsi opinioni sulle polemiche letterarie dell’epoca, concedere prestiti di volumi, chiedere informazioni sulle novità librarie.

Attraverso le lettere di Nibbi a Catalini si può ricostruire quasi passo passo la formazione culturale dello scrittore fermano-sangiorgese. La passione per la letteratura francese, che Nibbi ha in comune con Acruto Vitali, è confermata da una fitta serie di riscontri:

Ti manderò poi per direttissima e con lo stesso corriere Stendhal, Proust e tutto quello che vuoi.²³

Ti ho preparato alcuni libri francesi fra cui Sainte-Beuve, Villon e Duhamel che intendo regalarti.²⁴

Oltre ai libri che ti dissi ho preparato pure un saggio di Henri Massis su Radiguet.²⁵

T’informo che ti ho preparato degli altri libri francesi – buoni – fra i quali un Apollinaire.²⁶

che tu scambi il “popolo” col proletariato. [...] Speriamo che il fascismo non ti tratti come Soffici: che non ti faccia sacrificare la lirica pura sull’altare della patria.”).

²³ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 21 ottobre 1925. Archivio Buschi.

²⁴ Lettera datata porto San Giorgio 19 novembre 1927. Archivio Buschi.

²⁵ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 13 dicembre 1927. Archivio Buschi.

²⁶ Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 8 febbraio 1928. Archivio Buschi.

Ma non mancano allusioni alle sterili diatribe che affliggono la cultura italiana di quegli anni e soprattutto giudizi severi sulla qualità della letteratura italiana di quegli anni, in particolare quella più omologata al potere politico:

Come si comporta Strapaese a Lucera? Avremo – non ti pare – da esilararci per qualche annetto con queste amenissime dispute letterarie!²⁷

Condivido perfettamente le tue idee per ciò che riguarda la letteratura ufficiale, che è una fungaia di gusti convenzionali e borghesi.²⁸

Intanto mi fa piacere che tu stai riprendendo una rivincita in favore della vita pratica, la sola che conti (senza che Benda ce lo rammenti) davanti allo sfacelo di tanta letteratura.²⁹

Nibbi dunque aveva letto il noto saggio di Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs*, uscito in Francia nel 1927, che accusava gli intellettuali di essersi asserviti al potere politico, o quanto meno era al corrente delle polemiche sviluppatesi in Europa dopo la pubblicazione del volume.



Fig. 3 – Osvaldo Licini (1894-1958), artista e pittore, maestro dell'astrattismo italiano.

La pittura era invece l'ambito artistico in cui Nibbi si muoveva con maggior competenza e passione. L'amicizia fin dal 1920 con Licini, i contatti con Bartolini, l'innata capacità critica, avevano favorito la sua preparazione artistica.

Egli aveva iniziato la sua attività a Porto San Giorgio come "libraio antiquario" ma batteva anche la campagna marchigiana alla ricerca di quadri rari e dimenticati.

In una lettera del 10 luglio 1925 egli dichiara (ma è prudente nutrire qualche dubbio sulla autenticità della attribuzione):

I nostri paesi di montagna sono pieni di pregevoli cose: figurati che alla Curetta ho trovato delle stampe del Piazzetta e del Pinelli bellissime, dei libri rari sull'architettura.³⁰

Ovviamente nelle lettere si ritrovano molti giudizi favorevoli a Licini.

Nel maggio del 1927, a meno di un anno dalla partenza per l'Australia, egli riferisce a Catalini dell'interessamento di Margherita Sarfatti per l'artista di Monte Vidon Corrado:

Ora non mi trattiene che la prigrizia di Osvaldo il quale lavora a barlumi per il Leopardi e secondo i quarti di luna. Sai che deve esporre quest'estate – incitato dalla Sarfatti – con il 900 italiano ad Amsterdam e Rotterdam?

Più volte egli esprime il suo entusiastico apprezzamento:

Io penso che tutti gli altri italiani ci scapiteranno di fronte a lui.³¹

Comunque Osvaldo vale molto di più di tutti i Soffici e Carrà, e te lo dico sinceramente, ha delle risorse e delle qualità formidabili per diventare un grande pittore.³²

²⁷ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 13 dicembre 1927. Archivio Buschi.

²⁸ Lettera datata Melbourne 28 marzo 1932. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

²⁹ Lettera datata Melbourne 19 gennaio 1933. Archivio Buschi.

³⁰ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 10 luglio 1925. Archivio Buschi.

³¹ Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 13 maggio 1927. Archivio Buschi.

³² Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 19 novembre 1927. Archivio Buschi.

Nibbi aveva visto giusto, ma sul piano critico non si dichiarava un difensore ad oltranza dell'astrattismo. Era pronto a giudicare negativamente il tradizionalismo ufficiale e il ritorno alla retorica neoclassica, funzionale, se non proprio asservita al potere politico:

Ma strana questa silenziosa congiura dei critici contro gli'impressionisti! Non s'accorgono che dopo l'ottocento, questo neo classicismo aulico dell'era nuova è il secondo clamoroso tentativo di una povertà disperata di genio plastico.³³

Ma con altrettanta sincerità rifiutava un'idea di avanguardia che non avesse il coraggio di imporre e motivare una frattura netta dalla tradizione:

Io mi rendo conto della necessità d'impostare il problema dell'astrattismo in termini molto vivaci. Però mi sembra che la polemica si venga a indebolire quando manca una soluzione di continuità tra la grande arte del passato e quella della nuova corrente che gli astrattisti vogliono imporre, dato che non intendono ripudiare il passato.³⁴

Proprio grazie ai libri e ai quadri, d'altro canto, egli era riuscito ad inventarsi un lavoro in Australia. Il suo *Leonardo Art Shop* di Little Collins Street era diventato piano piano il ritrovo non solo dei critici e degli artisti australiani ma di tutti coloro che nel lontano continente desideravano conoscere le novità europee.

Decise di raccogliere in una sorta di dizionario tutte le sue idee sui pittori amati, da Beato Angelico a Van Gogh, e ne diede notizia a Catalini:

Mi sembra in questo zibaldone di aver detto qualcosa di originale su Van Gogh, Michelangelo, Giotto, Rimbaud, il Greco e l'oriundo romagnolo, e focoso Cézanne, assieme a tante notazioni bizzarre.³⁵

Attese al lavoro di revisione ininterrottamente per più di venticinque anni, ma la sua *Galleria* è ancora inedita: attende che i concittadini sangiorgesi la portino al-

la luce come testimonianza di un uomo di grande cultura e di grande amore per la propria terra.



Fig. 4 – Acruto Vitali (1903-1990), poeta e pittore sangiorgese.

Di sette anni più giovane di Catalini, Acruto Vitali occupa spesso in questo cenacolo di intellettuali di provincia un ruolo di discepolo, anche se notevole resta il suo contributo alla conoscenza tra gli amici della poesia francese contemporanea, in particolare di Rimbaud e Verlaine. Indifferente alla problematica politica e con un bagaglio culturale ed esistenziale meno ricco di quello di Catalini o di Nibbi, egli è tutto dedito a cercare, tra i dubbi e le aspirazioni giovanili, la via per realizzare il suo progetto di divenire cantante lirico.

In lui convivono con pari intensità l'aspirazione alla poesia e la passione per la musica. Solo nel 1940, quando rientrerà da Milano dopo aver esordito in palcoscenico nel 1929 nelle vesti di Nadir (personaggio dei *Pescatori di perle* di Bizet) rinuncerà alla carriera e si dedicherà alla poesia e più tardi alla pittura.

La vita sangiorgese, fatta di ritmi lenti e ricorrenti, gli si presenta con i caratteri leopardiani della noia, benché Vitali, facendo parte di una famiglia di indubbia solidità economica, potesse godere del privilegio di viaggiare, accogliere amici in casa, acquistare libri.

³³ Cartolina postale datata Porto San Giorgio 24 febbraio 1926. Archivio Buschi.

³⁴ Lettera datata Melbourne 2 dicembre 1937. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

³⁵ Lettera datata Melbourne 1 febbraio 1940. Archivio I.R.S.M.L.A.

Con toni poetici d'impronta dannunziana e decadente, egli esprime a Catalini la sua insoddisfazione:

Qui i tempi annoiano anche i lupi. Questo malefico marzo mi mette non so quale rabbia malinconica; e il mare che non si può più udire con quella sua minaccia saccheggiatrice! Giornate buie ed ozi brumosi. Rimpiango i chiari Marzi, le tamerici nuove, che ad Aprile vedremo sfiorite.³⁶

In altra occasione, subito dopo il matrimonio della sorella celebrato il 31 gennaio 1929, desideroso di intraprendere con impegno lo studio della musica nonostante la sferzante ironia del Nibbi che lo giudica "pazzo da legare", egli scrive:

Io sono ancora qui in attesa che un primo riso di sole abbrevii questi tragici climi immobilissimi. Le ore bianche scorrono desolatissime e mute e nella trasparenza dell'anima s'indugiano fino al disgusto i fantasmi cenciosi della mia gloria a venire.³⁷

Ma nemmeno a Milano, dove si era già recato per avere lezioni da grandi maestri d'opera, riesce a placare la sua inquietudine, la sua ansia di successo. Rivive così nella sua esperienza individuale l'antinomia antropologico-culturale tra campagna e città:

Veramente da una settimana ribatto questo marcapiè e benché le mie vacanze Sangiorgesi stavolta siano state brevi, pure mi perdura un leggero smarrimento e turbamento che attribuisco più alla stagione che al paese: non più nuovo questo per me, ambrosianissimo ormai, esploratore. Ti dirò anzi che forse da questa assuefazione alla città, sicurezza di conoscenze, conoscenza dei luoghi, consumata esperienza dei suoi molteplici e seducenti tranelli proviene questa sensazione di vago sconforto che si sposa a un'indifferenza totale (che se non passasse, chiamerei funesta) per tutte le cose a cui un tempo mi avvicinavo con curiosità accanita e trepidante di romantico.³⁸

Per contrasto, nelle lettere torna frequentemente il *topos* mitico del viaggio. Ma se Licini andrà a Parigi e Nibbi andrà in Australia e Catalini vagherà tra Marche, Irpinia e Puglie seguendo le sue ragioni politico-morali, Vitali, pur dichiarando di voler andarsene in America, in Australia, a Parigi, non saprà mai tagliare definitivamente il nodo che lo lega in modo viscerale alla propria cittadina marinara. Anche la lunga permanenza a Milano o periodi più brevi passati a Roma non saranno che parentesi temporanee di una emigrazione auspicata ma mai realizzata:

Oh l'oppressione di qui! Io sono veramente malato d'una nostalgia che non so, ma che è certo di climi nuovi. Alle volte questa mania diventa una vera tortura. Perché dunque starsene qui a soffrire, quando la via non mi è affatto negata?³⁹

Il suo giovanile narcisismo lo spinge a trasformare spesso una semplice lettera di notizie di vita quotidiana in spazio di esercitazione letteraria, dando sfogo alle sue attitudini di eroe tardoromantico:

Tu ridi, ma mi pare d'averti qualche volta detto che la certezza di non vivere a lungo, io continuamente e implacabilmente la sento nel murmure veloce del mio destino; è un richiamo inconfondibile e che non sfugge a certi miei indugi che sono poi frequenti soliloqui con questa dolce e non precisamente triste creatura che non voglio di nuovo nominarti per pudore e rispetto di questa mia gentile confidente.⁴⁰

Ovviamente anche per Vitali lo scambio epistolare con gli amici si trasforma in officina letteraria, nella quale occupa uno spazio preminente la cultura francese:

Quando tu verrai a Pasqua avrai a tua disposizione i libri che già consultasti, aggiunti a pochissimi altri di interesse minimo. Cominciano a ravvedersi anche le volpi francesi! Per questo fatto sono molto triste: amavo tutte le novità francesi; fragranti voci parigine, che mi facevano nuovo ogni giorno.⁴¹

³⁶ Lettera senza data, probabilmente del marzo 1928. Archivio Buschi.

³⁷ Lettera datata Porto San Giorgio 14 febbraio 1929. Archivio Buschi.

³⁸ Lettera senza data, probabilmente del febbraio 1929. Archivio Buschi.

³⁹ Lettera senza data. Archivio Buschi.

⁴⁰ Lettera senza data, probabilmente del febbraio 1929. Archivio Buschi.

⁴¹ Lettera senza data, probabilmente del marzo 1928. Archivio Buschi.

Egli chiede in prestito volumi per arricchire la sua cultura:

Quando vieni, vorrei tu mi portassi se l'hai la *Estetica* di Croce ed anche qualche grande greco – Eschilo, Aristofane – tradotto; puoi?⁴²

Portami dunque qualche buon libro che tu comprendi mi possa piacere.⁴³

E dà giudizi severi su scrittori che non ama:

Bacchelli non mi attira gran che, non sono arrivato che a pochi capitoli e già sono stanchissimo.⁴⁴

E' importante invece per lui, anche attraverso le lettere agli amici, giungere all'autoconvincimento del proprio valore musicale e poetico sollecitando la loro opinione o riportando quelle gratificanti di chi apprezza la sua voce o i suoi componimenti.

Così Vitali fa sapere a Catalini che è seguito nello studio della musica dal maestro Calza, che il maestro Melocchi di Pesaro "mi dice di perseverare nella mia nuova vocazione", che "il dottore si è meravigliato della larghezza singolare della voce" e infine, con una lettera inviata da Milano in data 18 maggio 1929, che "molti, pensa, paragonano la mia voce a quella di Caruso".⁴⁵

Ma le lettere di Vitali a Catalini sono anche una miniera di informazioni sulla genesi della sua vena poetica.

Vitali aveva conosciuto Nibbi nel 1925, dopo la pubblicazione sulla rivista anconitana *La lucerna* della poesia "La forma della sera". E con l'appoggio di Nibbi egli chiede a Titta Rosa di interessarsi per l'edizione di un volume. Ma la riconsegna del manoscritto ritarda e Vitali se ne lamenta con Catalini:

Vorrei mandarti il manoscritto delle mie poesie, ma Titta Rosa – che Dio lo benedica – lo trattiene ancora presso di sé e non accenna a rispondere ancora alle numerose mie richieste.⁴⁶

Da parte sua Catalini aveva espresso giudizi lusinghieri sulle capacità poetiche di Vitali, che gliene è grato:

Tu hai incoraggiato la mia poesia; hai trovato baleni qua e là di felicità commosse e luminose, hai aggiunto ch'io posso dare buonissima poesia dimenticando qualche capziosità simbolista, sempre urgente nella mia disperazione lirica.⁴⁷

E gli invia in dono, nella primavera del 1927, il dattiloscritto di "Gitana", poesia pubblicata successivamente in *Il tempo scorre altrove* (1972) ma la cui prima stesura risale al 1921, e di "Mito d'Alba" e "Natale", testi mai raccolti in volume.

Esitante nella scelta tra poesia e canto,

"Ben altro artista vorrei essere, uomo di sensibilità e di cervello, ma come vedi, l'ugola prepotente sovrasta tutto, e tutto addormenta.

[...] Già anche la poesia, questa polla che un giorno mi nacque non si sa di dove, e che ora non riesco più a destare".⁴⁸

Esaltato dal successo che riscuote negli ambienti giovanili milanesi:

I giovanissimi hanno per me delle vere adulazioni, si sono innamorati della mia lingua e del meraviglioso accento. Ma chi sapeva tanto? Certo che sarei venuto a Milano prima a metter magari su una scuola di aristocratico parlare.

Vitali cerca nei rapporti epistolari con il professore, con il politico, con il letterato Catalini la guida spirituale che gli indichi la via della realizzazione del sé.

Ma abbandonata la "chimera dolcissima che è il mio canto", tornato nel torpore della provincia marchigiana, egli trasformerà la sua esaltante esperienza di sodale di uomini come Catalini, Nibbi, Licini e Fagioli, in fertile terreno per la sua poesia e la sua pittura.

Il lavoro su epistolari frammentari, la cui consultazione mi è stata concessa dalla cortesia della famiglia Buschi

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Lettera senza data, probabilmente dell'ottobre 1928. Archivio Buschi.

⁴⁴ Lettera senza data. Archivio Buschi.

⁴⁵ Lettera datata Milano 18 maggio 1929. Archivio Buschi.

⁴⁶ Lettera senza data. Archivio Buschi.

⁴⁷ Lettera senza data, probabilmente del dicembre 1928. Archivio Buschi.

⁴⁸ Lettera senza data. Archivio Buschi.

e del direttore dell'Istituto per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione delle Marche di Ancona, ha lasciato, come è facile intuire, una serie di buchi neri nel percorso di ricostruzione della biografia intellettuale ed esistenziale dei personaggi studiati. Mi auguro che l'esile fiammella accesa nel buio di una storia forse minore, ma non priva di valori ideali e politici, possa contribuire a far luce sulla vitalità culturale delle generazioni che ci hanno preceduto nella fortunata sorte di "abitare questi odorati colli"⁴⁹.

Lettera di Gino Nibbi a Ermenegildo Catalini

Melbourne, 28.3.32

Carissimo Gildo,

ho ricevuto un'altra tua bella lettera e te ne ringrazio.

Torno oggi da Sydney dove mi sono recato ad assistere all'inaugurazione del magnifico ponte di cui riferirò durante queste vacanze di Pasqua ai giornali. E mi preme di raccomandarti quell'altro articolo sugli "*Italiani di Tasmania*" (un secondo) che inviai al Corriere Adriatico il 2.2.32 e che dovrebbe essere giunto ad Ancona verso il 15 di Marzo. Questo mi preme più dell'altro, anzitutto perché non ne ho alcuna copia, e poi perché mi soddisfa di più (piacerà di più anche a te) per via di un ragionare più astratto, più commosso, e nello stesso tempo più contenuto. E' facile che in Redazione sia stato scambiato per una copia dell'altro che tu facesti pubblicare, come mi riferisci.

Ti mandai una lettera di sei o sette fogli la quale conteneva un parziale chiarimento di quella disgraziata faccenda di Bifur. L'hai ricevuta?

Condivido perfettamente le tue idee per ciò che riguarda la letteratura ufficiale, che è una fungaia di gusti convenzionali e borghesi. Ti dissi che l'*Italia Letteraria* non mi ha pubblicato un articolo perché c'erano sincerità come queste: "minatori, campioni dell'antiretorica, etc.?".

Ti scriverò quest'altra settimana, caro amico, e scusami la tentazione di parlare in modo così prevalente di me stesso. La mia vita è piena di gaffes così gravi. Ed io m'immagino fortunatamente che fra amici sia una cosa naturale perdonarsi egoismi così eccessivi.

Ma ora mi vien voglia di domandarti: hai proprio abbandonato l'insegnamento?

Vorrei raccontarti un milione di cose, rivelarti presentimenti che tu nemmeno sospetti, orientamenti ultimi della mia intensissima vita. Ma lo farò a viva voce appena ci rivedremo.

Ti mando 3 fascicoli di *Stream* di cui io sono stato il fondatore e propugnatore: rivista già spenta per inesperienza amministrativa, ma di cui critici di alto valore come Basil Bunting e poeti come Ezra Pound hanno ammesso l'alta importanza come documento straordinariamente vivo e moderno. Hanno detto che in Inghilterra non si potrebbe neanche concepire un documento culturale di quel genere.

Ma siamo d'accapo, caro Gildo, scusami le inguaribili evasioni.

Aff.mo Gino

⁴⁹ Cit. Giacomo Leopardi, *I Canti*, XXII, *Le Ricordanze*, 1829.

la scrittura autobiografica tra antropologia e letteratura
recensione di john gatt-rutter,
the bilingual cockatoo: writing italian australian lives

di carla torreggiani

Carla Torreggiani è nata a Roma, città nella quale vive e lavora come scrittrice. Si è laureata in Antropologia Culturale all'Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", con una tesi dal titolo *"Ho visto la fotografia di mio marito l'ho guardato e ho detto sì". Il matrimonio per procura delle emigrate italiane in Australia*. Da diversi anni si occupa di emigrazione italiana in Australia e parallelamente studia la cultura dei popoli aborigeni. Nel 1998 ha vissuto un'esperienza sul campo a Waite River Station, nel Northern Territory, dove ha svolto ricerche etnografiche sulla popolazione aborigena, approfondite presso lo Spencer and Gillen Museum di Alice Springs e presso la State Library of Victoria. Nel 2001 ha pubblicato il romanzo di viaggio *Nel Deserto con uno sconosciuto* (MIR), e con il racconto "Desert Dreaming" ha vinto il concorso d'autore *Espressioni 2003* promosso dalla Regione Lazio. Ha collaborato con il quotidiano CISL *Conquiste del lavoro*, occupandosi del lavoro degli italiani all'estero e in particolare degli italo-australiani, pubblicando articoli sui "mestieri migranti" e sulla recente emigrazione in Australia di giovani italiani. Per il giornale in lingua italiana di Melbourne *Il Globo* ha redatto articoli riguardanti la cultura popolare italo-australiana, e per l'*Italian Historical Society Journal* del Co.As.It. ha scritto a proposito della conservazione della memoria storica dell'emigrazione. Attualmente svolge libere ricerche antropologiche nella comunità italiana di Melbourne, e sta ultimando un libro sulle memorie autobiografiche e le scritture migranti.

Il libro di John Gatt-Rutter, *The Bilingual Cockatoo: Writing Italian Australian Lives* studia le biografie e autobiografie degli italo-australiani. L'interesse principale dell'autore è la ricerca e l'analisi delle scritture di vita e della letteratura del fenomeno migratorio in generale. In questo lavoro, il professor Gatt-Rutter porta all'attenzione del lettore un corpus di oltre 60 testi, scritti principalmente in inglese. Di fronte a questa caleidoscopica produzione, l'autore ha saputo selezionare, esporre e comparare i vari lavori, proponendo brani suggestivi ed emozionanti e dando ancora una volta voce agli scrittori italo-australiani. In *The Bilingual Cockatoo* c'è soprattutto una puntuale analisi delle strategie testuali adoperate dagli scrittori, attraverso la quale lo studioso esplora anche il contenuto delle storie dal punto di vista delle esperienze vissute. Per questo motivo si può affermare che il libro rappresenta anche uno studio etnografico che accompagna il lettore nel percorso stilistico e psicologico che intraprende chi racconta la propria vita: storie di successo, ma anche narrazioni di traumi, sofferenze, risentimenti. Accompagnando il lettore lungo i vari percorsi di integrazione dei singoli protagonisti, l'autore analizza il valore culturale di queste opere, fornendo un contributo al sapere antropologico, in quanto le storie di vita sono fonte, documento e genere che ben rappresentano questa disciplina.

Le esperienze riportate nel libro sono rappresentative dei fenomeni comuni a tutte le migrazioni e attraverso di esse si ricostruisce la storia dell'emigrazione italiana in Australia. In un arco cronologico di riferimento che va dalla fine del 1800 ad oggi, si snodano storie di persone che partono da luoghi con una forte "predisposizione" alle migrazioni: sono uomini, intere famiglie, ma anche donne che seguono padri e mariti. Da queste biografie emerge la viandanza dei protagonisti, la città che segue la campagna, l'Australia che prende il posto dell'Italia. Vite scandite dal tempo del lavoro, dal tempo dei sacrifici, e dal tempo che separa gli emigranti dal proprio luogo di origine dopo l'allontanamento, spesso drammatico, dalla propria vita di famiglia e dal gruppo di provenienza. Dall'analisi di biografie, autobiografie e scritture personali affiorano memorie comuni e memorie collettive da cui è possibile ricostruire le storie di intere comunità e scoprirne i repertori culturali.

Una funzione fondamentale delle storie di vita è la loro efficacia narrativa, e John Gatt-Rutter è maestro nel trasmettere viva e forte la loro dialettica espressiva, enfatizzando l'impegno degli autori di raccontare la loro esperienza di migranti, il loro passato, le aspettative, il successo, ma anche le delusioni. Alcuni racconti sono più intimi di altri, più personali, e talvolta rivelano i sentimenti più reconditi. Tra queste pagine si delinea così il profilo dei diversi autori, spesso persone comuni, italiani di diversa provenienza e con differenti livelli di istruzione, ma tutti col sogno di cercare fortuna nella lontana *Terra Australis*. I narratori descrivono, talvolta con velato narcisismo, il loro viaggio lungo l'esistenza; è impossibile comunque non avvertire nelle loro parole il bisogno mai sopito di reinsediamento all'interno di una nuova identità collettiva.

I testi sono analizzati uno ad uno così da evidenziarne accuratamente motivazioni e tecniche di scrittura; ed è evidente che il professor Gatt-Rutter osserva e interroga i testi facendo uso di una raffinata sensibilità e di un armamentario di competenze e conoscenze acquisiti nel corso di una formazione specialistica e di un lungo esercizio della sua professione.

L'autore interpreta e analizza i testi anche da un punto di vista glottoantropologico: per mezzo di un'accurata esemplificazione e di un puntuale commento linguistico, Gatt-Rutter fornisce un resoconto dei fenomeni e degli usi linguistici che caratterizzano il modo di comunicare degli italo-australiani, mettendo al contempo in luce aspetti della condizione socio-linguistica delle comunità italiane in Australia e soffermandosi in particolare sui traumi subiti dai migranti a causa della loro diversità culturale. Al momento dell'arrivo in Australia gli emigranti italiani non erano infatti preparati culturalmente, socialmente, e soprattutto linguisticamente, ad inserirsi nella società anglosassone. Quasi nessuno conosceva l'inglese e in Australia il dialetto e l'italiano risultavano naturalmente inutili al di fuori delle cerchie dei migranti. Per potersi integrare nella società ospitante e per poter partecipare alla vita civile del nuovo Paese, gli italiani hanno dovuto imparare una nuova lingua, in molti casi con grandissime difficoltà. Con grande empatia l'autore, servendosi della voce degli stessi narratori, affronta molte delle problematiche legate all'emigrazione, come

la xenofobia, l'ostilità da parte di molti australiani, l'emarginazione, nonché il senso di inferiorità e la crisi d'identità degli emigrati, testimoniando altresì il loro bisogno di accettazione come italo-australiani. Dai brani scelti emergono anche problemi di genere; sono spesso le stesse autrici a raccontare la storia della donna. È grazie a questa selezione che il lettore può iniziare a conoscere la soggettività dei protagonisti, la faticosa costruzione della loro identità etnica, politica, professionale, familiare ed emotiva.

Un intero capitolo del libro tratta i traumi e le ingiustizie subite dai migranti italiani; lo studioso riporta con distacco professionale anche i temi più delicati, confessati tra le pagine delle opere esaminate. Come già ricordato, l'analisi testuale presuppone un'attività di selezione; il lavoro di John Gatt-Rutter è guidato da coordinate concettuali alla luce delle quali sceglie di concentrarsi su testi che apportano al suo bagaglio – e a quello del lettore – un arricchimento culturale oltre che umano.

Il professor Gatt-Rutter, in un incontro consapevole e attivo con i testi e la loro interpretazione, riassume ed espone i tratti più significativi delle biografie, talvolta comparandole fra loro e riconoscendo in ogni caso che esse sono il frutto di un incontro tra una storia individuale e riferimenti collettivi. Emerge nettamente che il genere autobiografico non si trova al di fuori della storia e che la vita degli autori può servire anche come mezzo per la ricostruzione del passato. Con un suggestivo e puntuale modo di presentare i testi e contestualizzarli socialmente e storicamente, Gatt-Rutter ricostruisce la macrostoria e, nelle pagine dedicate alla guerra, ci fornisce un quadro generale della situazione degli internati in Australia come *enemy aliens*, attraverso le memorie di quegli italiani che hanno vissuto quella drammatica esperienza. Impiegando sia la mera osservazione che l'anamnesi dei testi, l'autore riaffronta, in tutta la sua complessità, il fenomeno dell'emigrazione italiana in Australia e le problematiche ad esso legate. Il riconoscimento del valore culturale e sociale di queste opere è uno degli obiettivi principali dello studioso, che è stato guidato da un forte senso di responsabilità e di impegno morale nell'individuazione dei criteri di raccolta e di interpretazione del materiale. La scrittura ha permesso agli uomini e alle donne le cui biografie sono discusse nel libro di Gatt-Rutter di dare sfogo alla loro necessità di raccontarsi, di protestare, ma anche di ringraziare la

società ospitante. Lo studioso non manca di mettere in risalto le narrazioni di successo e di auto-realizzazione, riportando esperienze di riscatto materiale e simbolico attraverso storie di italiani che si sono distinti per il loro contributo alla società australiana nel lavoro, nella cultura, nel cinema e nello sport.

Il volume, infine, affronta la questione della differenza tra autobiografia e biografia, e l'autore pone l'accento sulla difficoltà di operare una netta distinzione tra i due generi. Per cominciare, nessuna autobiografia è una storia solamente individuale, in quanto racconta eventi, luoghi e vicende che accomunano gruppi di persone in un determinato contesto storico, culturale e sociale. Le scritture autobiografiche, pur rappresentando uno strumento per una riflessione su sé stessi, si avvalgono in molti casi di almeno un intermediario tra il soggetto della storia di vita e il testo pubblicato, per cui l'autobiografia si rivela spesso come un lavoro familiare, una costruzione identitaria di tipo creativo, scritta con l'aiuto di figli o di nipoti. Sia che le vicende siano drammatiche, sia che si tratti di storie di riscatto e di realizzazione, le esperienze degli emigrati italiani sono state vissute prima di essere trasferite sulla pagina, ed è per questa ragione che il metodo di costruzione del lavoro autobiografico si avvicina a quello utilizzato per le biografie. La storia di vita, anche se è intesa come una rappresentazione dell'esperienza personale, s'intreccia comunque con la storia degli eventi, e le biografie della gente comune presentano e propongono aspetti differenti della storicità. Alcune biografie sono basate su interviste, su racconti spontanei, altre si basano su racconti più elaborati, ma tutte le biografie analizzate in questo libro, nella loro singolarità, hanno innumerevoli punti di contatto. Ordinate lungo la linea cronologica dei fatti e delle circostanze che collegano tra loro gli individui, queste narrazioni di vicende personali formano una parte della Storia. Questi racconti di vita non solo rappresentano la storia della comunità italiana in Australia, ma anche la storia di quella società multiculturale di cui gli italo-australiani sono ora parte integrante. Questi racconti, inoltre, costituiscono un importante mezzo di comunicazione e di continuità intergenerazionale, in quanto forniscono alle generazioni future la possibilità di attingere al patrimonio culturale delle generazioni che le hanno precedute.

L'opera di John Gatt-Rutter costituisce fonte di spunti e di idee per linguisti, antropologi, storici, sociologi e critici letterari, ed invita a leggere e ad analizzare i significati contenuti in ogni narrazione. L'ampia antologia proposta e l'analisi dei testi realizzata da un punto vista letterario e dei contenuti, suscita interesse e curiosità, stimolando il lettore a leggere per intero le storie di vita trattate. La sensibilità e l'attenzione partecipe con la quale l'autore affronta le scritture di vita invogliano il lettore a conoscere le altre sue opere.

John Gatt-Rutter è stato Professore di Studi Italiani presso la La Trobe University di Melbourne ed è attualmente Professore Associato Onorario dell'ateneo e dell'Italian Australian Institute at La Trobe University. Ha dedicato gran parte della sua attività agli studi di italianistica, scrivendo opere su diversi autori tra cui Italo Svevo e Oriana Fallaci

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Contributors

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