



CO·AS·IT

NEWSLETTER
of the
ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
CO·AS·IT - VICTORIA

DECEMBER, 1992

VOL 3, NO 4

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About the newsletter

The newsletter aims to provide, to those who are interested in the history of the Australian-Italian communities, an outlet for the circulation of news, the exchange of information and the notification of future activities.

We welcome your suggestions for items to include in this newsletter, and invite readers to contribute newsworthy articles and short notes.

The Newsletter will be published four times each year. Subscriptions are available at \$10 per year, (postage included).

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CORRESPONDENCE FROM HIS BROTHER IN THE VALTELLINA TO COSIMO BERTI IN VICTORIA

by

Tony Pagliaro



A typical farmhouse near Teglio in the Valtellina.

Valtellina was an important source of Italian emigrants to Australia in the nineteenth century, but not very much has been written about this particular emigration. Some of the emigration contracts for Valtellinesi were drawn up in nearby Ticino, where many men worked seasonally as woodcutters. A list of some of those involved is to be found in G. Cheda's work, L'emigrazione ticinese in Australia. In the period before 1860 the ports of departure for emigrants from the area were in Germany, France, or England, not Italy, as one might expect. The agents for the shipping lines engaged in a very successful propaganda campaign in Ticino and it seems highly probable their influence extended into the nearby regions outside Switzerland.

The following letter has been made available by Mr John Berti, a member of the Historical Society. Mr Berti is a descendant of Cosimo Berti, born at Teglio in the province of Sondrio, Valtellina in 1841, the third son of Battista Berti and Domenica Valli.

The township of Teglio, 860 metres above sea level, has a population of about 1,000 inhabitants. A centre of government for the valley until 1620, it has some of Valtellina's most notable Renaissance buildings. It was annexed to the Swiss Grisons in 1528 but an anti-Swiss and anti-Protestant revolt took place in 1620 and on this occasion nearly all the Protestants of the area were massacred in the Church of St Ursula.

The letter is written by Cosimo's brother, Battista. Cosimo, like many others from Valtellina, emigrated to Australia in the era of the gold rushes. He sent large sums of money back to assist his family and to invest on his behalf. When he required the money at a later date, problems arose. The story is of a type commonly encountered in the correspondence of emigrants, especially in matters concerning the administration of parents' wills. The far-off relation has to combat difficulties in communication by mail, unfamiliarity with bureaucratic procedures, and the perception of family members that, as one writer put it, "the property of those who are absent belongs to those who are present." Where was the money invested? Could land bought and now occupied by other family members be sold? What did his uncle Paolo know about any transactions and why wouldn't he agree with Cosimo's brother's proposals? Scanning the letters and fragments of letters written to Cosimo between 1869 and 1893 one can get a clear idea of the frustration he experienced and the difficulties he faced. The picture becomes even more cloudy in 1893 when Cosimo's uncle dies. If space permits, we may return to this story in another issue.

The letter, like most of this type contains certain formulaic elements. "Vengo con questa mia" or "Vengo con queste due righe" is a standard beginning. "Addio (or "adio") e sono il tuo padre/ il tuo fratello" etc. is the usual conclusion. There is a similar formulaic "pull" regarding the contents of

letters, which encourages the writer to start by saying that everyone is in good health, even if this is later contradicted by news of death or illness, as in this case.

The clergy could have considerable influence in the villages of pre-industrial Italy and the letter also illustrates how the assistance of a parish priest could be invoked to help resolve family matters.

Battista's education was fairly rudimentary and at times he is uncertain as to where one word ends and another begins. So he joins the conjunction "e" with the following word, "elo" for "e lo"; "se non _" becomes a single "senone"; he writes "mia" for "mi ha". Elsewhere he hypercorrects, inserting an h where none is required: "Vengo con questa mia ha farti la risposta."

There is in addition a pronounced dialectal character: *ti* is used for *tu*: "ese *ti* verrai a casa"; *ga* (=g'ha) is used for "*ci ha*"; "*le partito*" for "*egli ... partito*". Confusion between double and single consonants, typical of northern regions, is also evident: "*tagliatti*" for "*tagliati*", "*tereno*" for "*terreno*", "*in soma*" for "*insomma*" etc. Pronoun object order is reversed with respect to standard Italian: "*lui il te dira*". As is still colloquial practice in some regions today, the word "*franchi*" is used anachronistically for "*lire*".

My colleague Anna Rosa Gualtieri assisted me in checking the transcription, but there are some passages which, for the present at least, defy understanding as well as some gaps in the text caused by wear and tear. Lack of punctuation adds to the ambiguity of certain passages. I have used angled brackets < > to suggest readings where the text is incomplete otherwise dots ... where it is incomplete or not decipherable.

Caro fratello

Teglio li 10 Agosto 1879

Vengo con questa mia ha farti la risposta dei saluti mandati dal Bartolo dello Bo... che le venuto in casa a farmi i tuoi graditi saluti lui ha fatto un felice viaggio nello stesso tempo mia consegnato una lira sterlina che ti col tuo favore gli ai dato di darmi.

Non potrei esprimermi con parole quanta ... la consolazione che ciai datta a noi tuoi fratelli ed alla tua cognata al sentire che grazia a Dio godi prospera salute come lo stesso grazia a quel Dio che mi d... la esistenza chi troviamo anche noi

tutti in famiglia il giorno 4 Febbraio la mia moglie ha avuto due figli eper disgrazia i ghia tagliatti da d'essa il dottore a pezzi per cui ti lascio considerare che disgrazia ... stata per noi ela mglie ti dico che per farla guarire la me costato assai ma adesso la comincia a stare discretamente ma le stato come far risuscitare un morto eppure colla gran regola le risuscitata da morte a vita.

Caro il mio prediletto con sommo dispiacere devo dirti che abbiamo un anno digrande carestia di tutti li generi tanto la vendemmia se fusse roba da seminare non sarebbe abbastanza per la semenza in soma primo il freddo dopo il troppo caldo esutto e fra tutto l'anno verr... ad essere molto miserabile ecarestioso.

E riguardo dei tuoi denari telo gi... detto di tener da conto di quella lettera che loro dicono che o terra o denari iga tanto da pagarti elo stesso dicono anche adesso ecirca a 1200 franchi ho io nella tua parte tanto in tereno che anno comperato dopo che sei via ti perche se ti vuoi li tuoi dinari anche loro i vuol la terra che anno comperato in tua parte dopo che sei andato via fino al tuo arrivo e con questo ricaveranno il denaro da darti in somma il galgin sele venuto a trovarti le partito i primi di Giugno lui il te dira il tutto come stiamo noi e cosa dice loro per li tuoi denari.

lo (?) in casa li 3000 franchi che ti ai mandati non lio conosciuti eloro dicono che li a<n>no adoperati in unione ede tanto che go descu<s>so loro ime dice lui il vegne a casa che da n<oi> il perdera nulla del fatto suo ese ti verrai a casa io alla tua presenza gli diro cosa nea f<at>to eti con quella lettera firmata dalle sue mani campando morendo tutti dice loro la suddetta lettera la ga forza col pagare, ...nulla a farla vidimare da un notajo dopo ga forza come un documento ele lettere che ai mandato li denari li o io eli conservo p<er> maggior regola, di piu se il zio Paolo mu<o>re prima che ti vieni lui il le sa cosa il nea fatto senon... una bestia puo lasciare una qualche distinzione riguardo alli tuoi denari edio sera mio impegno a dirlo al Sig.re Paroco di parlarli di farli memoria di questi sudetti denari perche li 3000 man<dati> del 68 lia tenuti lui che del 1870 io gleli o domandati io sevoleva darmeli elui adetto ...voleva tenegli lui perch... gliai mand<dati>...elui la de darteli.

E del resto io non posso ne menarli ne butarli siamo ... anche noi tutti e di farti un assegno come ti vorrai ile fa nemeno a ... vuol dire chese ne moriro uno di allora le cose dovranno poi giustarle per forza del resto io facio il possibile per ti e per noi ma non posso mai convincerti di nulla.

Io non posso far altro che ringraziarti del favore che il ti miai mandato eaugurarti salute e fortuna enoi tutti in famiglia ti salutiamo di vero cuore eli miei 3 figli ti mandano un bacio d'amore colla speranza di vedersi presto per il mal che noi ti vogliamo vorrei che al piu presto sarebbe possibile abbracciarsi nel seno della famiglia

*addio e sono il tuo fratello Berti Battista
emi saluterai tutti due i Liat*

My dear brother

Teglio, August 10th, 1879

I write you this letter in reply to the greetings you sent me with Bartolo ... who came to my house to bring your most welcome greetings. He had a good journey. At the same time he gave me the one pound sterling which you were kind enough to give him to give me.

I couldn't express in words how much consolation you gave to us your brothers and to your sister-in-law when we heard that thanks to God you are enjoying good health as do all of us in the family too thanks to the God who gives us life on February 4th my wife had two children and unfortunately they were cut out by the doctor in pieces so I let you imagine what a disaster it was for us and my wife. Believe me it cost a lot of money to make her recover but now she is beginning to be quite well but it was like resuscitating a dead person just the same with a great effort she was brought back from death to life.

My dearest brother with great sorrow I must tell you that we are having a year of great scarcity of all produce so much so that if the harvest were to be sown there wouldn't be enough seed to sow. All in all first the cold then too much dry heat and the year will turn out one of wretchedness and scarcity.

And with regard to your money I have already said to you to keep that letter where they say that

either in land or money they have so much to give you and they say the same now and I have about 1200 lire for your share in land which they bought after you left because if you want your money they want the land they bought for your share after you left until your arrival and with this they will get the money they have to give you. In brief, Galgin is coming to see you he left at the beginning of June and he will tell you how we are and what they say about your money.

I didn't see at my house(?) the 3000 lire you sent and they say they used them in association and I discussed it with them a lot and they say when he comes home he won't lose any of his property with us and if you come home I will ask them in your presence what they have done and you, with that letter signed by him, whatever happens you will tell them that the letter has legal force ... it costs nothing to have it validated by a notary and afterwards it has force as a legal document as do the letters you sent. I have the money and am keeping it to be on the safe side. Furthermore if Uncle Paolo should die before you come, he knows what he has done with it. If he's not an animal he can leave some clarification about your money and I undertake to tell the parish priest to speak to him and to remind him about the above-mentioned money because he kept the 3000 lire of 1868 and in 1870 I asked him if he would give them to me and he said he would keep them because you sent them to him and he had to give them to you and besides I can't withdraw the money or throw it away we are all ... and make you a cheque as I would like to. It means that if I die one day then matters will have to be settled besides I am doing everything possible for you and us but I can't ever convince you of anything.

I can do no more than thank you for the present you sent me and wish you good health and fortune and all of us in the family send you our love and my three sons send you a loving kiss in the hope of seeing each other soon and for all that we care hope that it will be possible to embrace each other once more within the bosom of the family.

Goodbye I remain your brother Battista Berti
Send my regards to the two Liats

GIUSEPPE CANTAMESSA

by

Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien

The following biography was prepared for the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and will appear in Volume 13, to be released in 1993.

Giuseppe Cantamessa (1892 - 1947), cane-farmer and internee, was born on 9 March 1892 at Conzano, Piedmont, Italy, the son of Pietro Cantamessa and Giustina, nee Garrone. In 1907 Giuseppe came to Australia on the SS Bremen to join his father who was working in north Queensland. Although his father returned to Italy in 1909, the young Cantamessa settled in Ingham on the Herbert River, where there was already a growing Italian community. He took up sugar farming at Ingham and became a naturalised British subject in 1913. In 1918 he married Piedmont-born Maria Alda Fiori of Babinda, north Queensland. They were to have five sons, two of whom died before reaching adulthood.

Frequently called upon to represent the Italian community, in 1925 Cantamessa gave evidence before the State royal commission which investigated the social and economic effects of increasing numbers of 'Aliens' in North Queensland. When prejudice against Italians intensified, particularly in the northern sugar districts, a "Gentlemen's Agreement" between the Australian Workers' Union, the Australian Sugar Producers' Association and the Queensland Cane Growers' Association, gave preference to British cane cutters by restricting the employment of those of non-British origin. Cantamessa campaigned against the definition of "British cutters" as those of British blood, which excluded naturalised British subjects of other



The marriage of Giuseppe Cantamessa and Maria Alda Fiori was celebrated at St Monica's Church in Cairns.



Well integrated into the wider community, Giuseppe Cantamessa served on numerous local organisations. Above, in the premiership team of the Inglebrook Tennis Club in 1927, Cantamessa is seated on the right. Below, seated second from the right, he was photographed with other members of the Herbert River Cane Growers' Association.



backgrounds. An Italian Association of the Sugar Industry, of which Cantamessa was briefly the President, was formed in 1931 to protect the interests of those of Italian origin in the Sugar Industry. A good organiser and a fluent speaker, he advocated moderation and conciliation, and worked to bring about industrial harmony.

Eventually producing an average cut of 2000 tons on 'the most improved sugar property' in the district, Cantamessa was chairman of the Herbert River District Cane Growers' Association and an executive-member of the Cane Prices Board at Macknade. He represented Ingham from 1929 to 1936 on the Queensland Cane Growers' Council, and in 1931 was consulted over the preparation of a new Federal sugar agreement. An active member and office holder in most local sporting clubs, he was District Vice-President of the North Queensland Life Saving Association, Patron and President of the Bowling Club, and also at various times an active member of the Tennis, Football, Golf and Cricket clubs. Cantamessa had taken part in the relief work for victims of the Herbert River floods in 1927 and was associated with several charitable appeals. Elected to the Hinchinbrook Shire Council in 1936, he served on the district's first Labor administration until his forced resignation four years later.

Italy declared war on France and Britain on 10 June, 1940. Next day Cantamessa was interned. In his unsuccessful appeal, heard on 24 August, he denied any interest in 'foreign politics', asserted his loyalty and pointed out that his eldest son had enlisted in the Militia in 1938, being the first of Italian background in the Herbert River district to volunteer. The authorities lacked concrete evidence that he held fascist sympathies, yet a donation to the Italian Red Cross during Italy's Abyssinian campaign in 1936, his opposition to British Preference in 1931 and his leadership qualities were the grounds on which he was detained. He remained in custody for more than three years, being held in internment camps at Gaythorne, Queensland, Hay in New South Wales and finally Loveday in South Australia. He was released on 10 November, 1943 but restricted to his farm until 20 March, 1945. Cantamessa's internment is an extreme example of the treatment received by many British subjects of Italian origin in north Queensland during the Second World War.



Giuseppe Cantamessa after his release from internment camp.

Survived by his wife and three sons, Cantamessa died of a cerebral tumour on 27 March 1947 in Brisbane Hospital and was buried in the Ingham cemetery; his funeral cortege of 200 cars was the largest seen in that town. His obituary in the Herbert River Express noted his "honourable service to those he represented" and recorded that "he discharged his duties to his adopted country faithfully and well".

Sources:

Royal Commission appointed to Inquire into and Report on the Social and Economic Effect of Increase of Number of Aliens in North Queensland, Report PP (Qld) and QSA, PRE/A849; Internment file, G. Cantamessa, CA 753, BP242/1, Item Q6446; Townsville Catholic News, 1 August, 1947; Herbert River Express, 5 April, 1947; Townsville Daily Bulletin, 28 April, 1931; Archbishop Duhig correspondence, (Catholic Diocesan Archives, Brisbane).

BOOK REVIEWS

On Persephone's Island: A Sicilian Journal

by Mary Taylor Simeti. First published in 1986; Penguin edition 1988. Current recommended Australian retail price \$16.95.

Reviewed by Maria Mantello Sandbach.

In writing ***On Persephone's Island***, Simeti declares her intention to be to "entertain those who know nothing of Sicily and to make their visit here more rewarding". Accordingly the book is appropriately published in the Penguin travel library. Certainly it is a valuable asset to the traveller with an interest in Italian culture beyond the somewhat one dimensional potted explanations of the average guide book.

"On Persephone's Island" is a journal rich in insight of the historical derivatives of many of the agrarian and religious rituals which characterise the rhythm of the seasons in Italy. However it in no way attempts to be exhaustive or authoritative on Sicily's history, customs, buildings or significant archaeological sites. As the author confesses, despite her academic background, she has not written within any theoretical framework - beyond that imposed by nature. Consequently her journal ambles along, peppered with extensive quotations from a wide variety of sources, pausing to reflect on the Simeti family history and tying it in with their personal celebrations of feasts and holidays from the annual wine making to the 2nd November pilgrimage and picnic at the cemetery to honour All Souls' Day.

As the title and conclusion of the book betray, Simeti has a curious duality of purpose which she identifies with that of Persephone, who belonged to two worlds. on the one hand the author writes with the keen detached observations of an anthropologist who has emersed herself in her community for twenty years. despite declaring herself an agnostic she appears to have a deep respect and willingness to participate in the religious observances of her subjects. However there is a passion underlying the book which makes it far more personal, a desire to convert and enthuse her reader as she presents herself

as a kind of "earth mother" playing bounteous hostess to her extended family.

From the perspective of any reader who is considering writing herself, the aspect of the book which is of particular interest is the author's identification with a subject in which she has a personal part. Simeti uses her analogy with the myth of Persephone to endeavour to reconcile her two worlds: the summer harvest at the family farm at Bosco, with the winter nursery in Palermo; the spontaneous decision of her youth to commit herself to Sicily with the measured reflectiveness of middle age.

Australia's Italians: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

Edited by S. Castles, C. Alcorso, G. Rando, and E. Vasta. Published by Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992.

Reviewed by Franco Schiavoni

This book is not a history of the Italian presence in Australia, but rather a sociological investigation into the dynamic Australian context within which that presence can be understood and to which it has directly and indirectly contributed. Thus, the book is simultaneously about the Italo-Australian community, racism, the movement from assimilationism to multiculturalism and the possible future transition from eurocentrism to post eurocentrism.

The book is also about the ideology of the contributors. Indeed this collection of essays edited and written by a plurality of authors with discreet chapters themselves usually involving several authors, presents heterogeneous material and is unified by an ideological perspective that sees things in terms of class, gender and racism. Probably the only exception to this ideological approach is Chapter Six, called "Place and Community: the construction of an Italo-Australian space", which - although written by an historian, Rob Pascoe - is probably the most sociologically and anthropologically inspired of the various contributions, and definitely the most free from ideological intervention. This

means, of course, that culture and ethnicity do not feature in the book as prominently as one would expect. Interestingly the Italian edition of the book, which consists of a larger number of contributions, has a more pluralist thrust.

In its historical component, the book contains no new research but is rather a revisitation, a summary and an interpretation of published material. Thus, we are guided through the early Italian migration, which coincides with the "construction of European Australia", through the World War II period with its internment policy and its prisoners of war, and finally through the post-war period which includes the wave of Italian mass migration and its subsequent cessation as well as the change from assimilationist policies to multicultural ones. While the focus is sociological, the history of the Italo-Australian community is given a fairly thorough treatment. A very interesting element in this section is Claudio Alcorso's testimonial on his internment, so rich in psychological and ideological insights. Claudio Alcorso feels that the war is between fascism and anti-fascism and, being an anti-fascist, cannot accept the injustice of his internment. The Crown's view, of course, is that what is at stake is not ideology but the defence of the British empire.

This entire historical section is placed in the context of the total Australian history viewed as fundamentally inspired and driven by racism. We are told that it was racism that led to the exclusion of the aborigines from the "capitalist relations of production" and to the conceptualisation of the White Australia policy. The emphasis on racism will be found by many excessive; at times one gains the impression that racism is almost a metaphysical category that has replaced older categories - such as Christian providence, the Hegel absolute and Marx economic structure - as the driving motor of history.

The contribution of the Italo-Australian community to the development of Australia is acknowledged and reasonably documented in its various components: the participation in the industrial and agricultural labour force and in the world of business; the linguistic, cultural and literary presence; the creation of community structures. Unfortunately the account of this contribution,

which is almost universally described in positive terms, is somewhat marred by the harshly critical undercurrent which characterises the presentation of mainstream Australian society. No doubt, it is the precise duty of intellectuals to bring to the fore the full problematicity of things; nevertheless it is also important not to overturn the balance. To emphasise the problems and barriers, structural and otherwise, facing the new settlers can lead to an undervaluation of the great opportunities that have been opened to them. Thus, we are repeatedly told that the Italians were involved in hard dirty and dangerous jobs, worked in areas of low mobility and formed the "Southern European occupational ghetto"; we are told that, in relation to the mainstream population, they still remain overrepresented in lower status jobs and underrepresented in higher status jobs. What is forgotten is that the majority of Italians came here as unskilled and at times semi-literate labour hands, had no expectations of joining the middle classes, and were happy to be given an opportunity to work and work hard. Thus their living experience of the new situation was related to their previous working conditions and employment opportunities and not to some political or trade union ideal. Doing two jobs for some time can be seen as an inhuman effort, but also as a wonderful opportunity to improve one's living conditions more rapidly.

Similarly women are on the one hand described justly as the "custodian of Italian culture", on the other they are presented in terms of the usual rhetoric of double disadvantage. A closer look at the situation especially in the early period might uncover the fact that men, while rarely participating in the traditional domestic work, were in fact doing other things, often enough were working two shifts and had much less of the cultural role and vicinity to children that wives had.

The chapter on business and entrepreneurs is an interesting example of the tension between a reasonably objective account of things and the problems that this creates for a radical ideology. Italian success in independent farming and small business has to be acknowledged, but how can it be explained in a society which sets up structural barriers to migrant mobility? The question remains unsolved. There is a

suggestion that Italian migrants sought the independence of small business to escape the hostility and racism experienced in the work place. Ultimately, the authors' positive view of Italian migrants is due to the fact that they are seen to belong to the working class; once they enter the world of small business then one does not know what to do with them. We are revealingly told that small business occupies a "contradictory class location in class analysis"; hence the difficulties and the tensions in giving a fully satisfactory account. Needless to say, the successes in the world of big business are underplayed and we are told that the Italian community has not benefited "from the success of the rich view".

One could multiply the examples in which ideological intervention aims at correcting the presentation of evidence that could lend itself to a different interpretation. In a few cases rapid and controversial value-judgments are introduced without a proper discussion. These involve the role of Co.As.It., Filef, *Il Globo* and *Nuovo Paese* as well as the Salemi case and political personalities. It is not possible to engage in a proper discussion of these issues in this context.

The discussion on multiculturalism is fairly extensive. Again the authors clearly prefer the rights/welfare model of multiculturalism viewed in terms of cultural and linguistic pluralism. The latter is considered as conservative, the former radical. Again we have an ultimately simplistic ideological position which leads inevitably, and not so paradoxically, to an assimilationist perspective. If migrants are considered in terms of class and gender, then culture becomes peripheral. What is important is class and gender consciousness. And of course a view of society in view of class and gender conflict cannot be interested in cultural maintenance and cannot ultimately explain culture in the wider sense but at best some sub-cultural codes.

The book is, on the whole, very useful. It does provide a serious account of the Italian presence in Australia and a serious discussion of many broader issues affecting the total society. It is by no means sure that a clear connection, causal or otherwise, is established between the Italo-Australian contribution and the broader picture. The latter functions at times as a context and at

times as an intrusion. At another level, the book's ideological and teleological movement seems at odds with the emphasis on disparateness and discontinuity which characterise our post-modernist era.

Australia's Italians: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY definitely deserves to be read but not uncritically.

BOOK LAUNCH

VICTORIA MARKET, by Nino Randazzo, is a play in three acts, published in both English and Italian. The English translation is by the late Colin McCormick. Launched at Co.As.It. at the Annual General Meeting on 9 December, 1992, its publication was supported by a grant from the Australia Council.

Copies can be purchased at Co.As.It. Italian Historical Society or at Insegna Educational Publishers, 410 Moreland Road, West Brunswick, VIC, 3055. The price is \$14.95



NINO RANDAZZO

VICTORIA MARKET

Testo bilingue italiano-inglese
Traduzione inglese di COLIN McCORMICK

TEATRO
ITALO-AUSTRALIANO

Dramma
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