

SPUNTI E RICERCHE

Supplement

**Italian Figures
in Australian
Landscapes**

edited by

David Moss

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Monti Musoni ponto dominorque Naoni

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Introduction

In the vast, imaginary, library containing the products of all research into Italian international migration since 1870, considerable shelf-space would need to be reserved for the materials – books, articles, PhD theses, reports – devoted to the study of the arrival, reception and lives of the Italians who migrated to Australasia. Although that migration ended many years ago, its social, cultural and demographic features continue to generate research interest and significant publications. Loretta Baldassar (2001) and Adrian Boncompagni (2001) have renewed the study of the relationship between territory and identity by inaugurating a genuinely transnational approach to the migration process; Chiro and Smolicz (1999) have advanced our knowledge of language use and maintenance in the socio-linguistic tradition pioneered by Camilla Bettoni and Nina Rubino; Antonio Paganoni and Desmond O'Connor (1999) and Stefano Girola (2001) have added serious depth of study to the under-researched field of religiosity and ritual among migrants; and surveys of the role of Italians as the makers and subjects of film and fiction (Rando 1997) have extended our appreciation of the diversity of ways in which features of Italo-Australian life have been presented to non-Italian publics. Complementing these studies are Ros Pesman's innovative account of twentieth century Australian women travellers to Italy and elsewhere (1996) and Richard Bosworth's stimulating insertion of post-Unification Italian migration into the analysis of national foreign policy (1996).¹ With such a wealth of wide-ranging material available, it may be rash to claim that several aspects of migration remain neglected or ignored, in addition to those ripe for re-examination and reinterpretation thanks to changes in intellectual frameworks and methods of enquiry. This claim is none the less supported by the contents of the four papers in this Supplement, deriving from earlier and considerably shorter versions presented at the conference 'The Importance of Italy', held at the Humanities Research Centre of the ANU in September 2001, by authors who were then postgraduate students in the process of completing their PhDs in Australian universities.

The papers deal with features of the Italian community in different parts of Australia at various points between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth centuries. However, as Catherine Dewhurst and Francesca Musico both point out, to use the term 'community' to characterise the relationships among Italians in Australia in those years is to suggest a seriously misleading sense of collective purpose and identity. In 1901, for example, those born in Italy numbered little more than five thousand, most of whom were spread out across city and countryside (mainly countryside) in every state, and this figure had only risen to around 40,000 by mid-century. Any sense of communal identification and action as

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'Italians' was therefore likely to be inhibited not only by the tiny size of the population and the diversity in language and customs of the regions in Italy from which its members had emigrated but also by their geographical mobility within Australia and their permanent return to Italy in significant numbers. Although the accounts of Little Italies overseas frequently seem to imply a lifelong residence in the same neighbourhood of the original immigrant families, in fact Italian immigrants were on the move as soon as they could be from their initial destinations. The small scale of the community and the relatively unsettled and volatile relations within it thus provided particular opportunities for energetic and talented individuals to make their mark, and the essays which follow sketch aspects of the careers of some of the most prominent among them.

The essays fall into two pairs: Cate Elkner and Catherine Dewhurst address themselves mainly to the activities of two notable but socially and temperamentally very different individuals: the indomitable Lena Santospirito, whose welfare activities were based in and around Melbourne and the ebullient, possibly a shade racketsy, Count Giovanni Pullè whose professional, entrepreneurial and journalistic interests took him up and down Australia's east coast over nearly half a century. Francesca Musico and Monica Tolcvay concentrate on dimensions of organisational life, dealing in particular with the part-religious, part-political welfare initiatives designed to provide support for Italians temporarily or permanently down on their luck in Sydney and South Australia. In the pre-1945 period, the jumble of initiatives that predated the establishment of an effective welfare state in Australia (which, as Musico echoes Stephen Garton in reminding us, was barely more generous towards people born in Australia than to those born overseas) allowed energetic individuals a much more significant and visible organisational role than their more rigorously bureaucratised successors were likely to achieve. Not surprisingly, therefore, some public-spirited individuals both lay (eg the Sicilian political activist Francesco Sceusa) and religious (eg the well-connected Father Ugo Modotti) turn up in more than one of the essays below. Each essay opens up avenues for further reflection on its specific topic and will attract the interest of historians and biographers in particular. So in the remainder of this Introduction I want to draw attention to four general themes which are regarded as worthy of further exploration by all four authors.

The first, tackled directly by Cate Elkner, concerns the nature of the data on which research conclusions about the migration process are established and the extent to which they must be shaped by the kinds of data on which they rely. As she points out, the dominant approach has been to make use of official sources: statistics, reports, minutes of meetings and correspondence generated by government agencies or, less commonly, ecclesiastical bodies and trade unions. Used with due attention to the meanings, and changes in meanings, of the classifications employed and the methods of assigning individual cases to the broad categories, these kinds of publicly available records are of course indispensable.² As Elkner argues, however, the letters and diaries authored by migrants themselves are

in several ways an equally indispensable research resource yet, with some significant exceptions (eg Baily and Ramella 1988), they remain largely unexploited. Moreover, their authors are by no means entirely confined to the unusually literate or well-educated classes. Douglass (1984: 120-1) records that by 1899 the volume of letters arriving from abroad in the South Italian town of Agnone was so great that street numbers had to be fixed to houses to facilitate their delivery. Half a century later, a DOXA survey (Luzzatto Fegiz 1956) revealed that two-thirds of emigrants wrote frequent letters home and almost everyone did so occasionally.

Such troves of personal correspondence and diaries are of course often not easily accessible – the opportunity for Catherine Dewhurst to consult the documents of the life of a non-political émigré aristocrat must be a rare one – and their value is uneven and unpredictable. At a general level they can be used to ‘humanise’ the migration process and to show migrants not simply as anonymous members of social classes driven by the allegedly vast impersonal forces of globalising labour markets but as active shapers of their own transnational destinies. But, mined imaginatively, they can generate the kind of evidence and insight on specific topics which cannot be extracted from most official records and statistics. Correspondence reveals much about the motivations for movement to specific places at specific times, for example, as well as suggesting the extent to which contact between kin, friends and sponsors is maintained across time and distance. In this respect they can furnish details of an important phenomenon which official records do not track – the extent to which members of single families, dispersed across various continents, not only keep in contact with one another but encourage on-migration from one extra-Italian national destination to another. The importance of this type of lateral movement has been suggested by the detailed genealogical study of the mobility of members of a single extended family but is inevitably obscured by the exclusive emphasis on migration out of and into Italy itself that official statistics are designed to capture. But in a world where creating a self-conscious community of Italians outside Italy is assuming increasing official importance (witness the Berlusconi government’s creation of a special Ministry for Italians outside Italy in 2001), these exchanges between emigrants living in different countries of destination may be an important element underlying the international networks of *italianità*.

The use of personal records in all the papers here brings us to a second common theme. Although, as I noted above, authorship of letters and diaries is by no means simply the preserve of the best-educated groups among migrants, the greater extent to which the members of those groups are prepared to commit to paper details of their daily activities and reflections on the migration process can offer particular insights into one segment of Italo-Australian life. These groups include welfare workers in secular and religious institutions, journalists and newspaper editors, entrepreneurs, priests – men and women for whom literacy and literary skills are integral elements of their professional lives. Their careers and milieux are rarely the focus of analytical attention but they supply the core materials in the essays below. For reasons of numerical importance, most of the sociological studies of migrant life

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have been devoted to manual workers and artisans: the suggestion made long ago by Marzio Barbagli (1982) that the emigration of a significant proportion of Italian graduates in the nineteenth century would repay analysis has not been followed up. Of course the members of lower social groups are traditionally more exposed to the official gaze and tend to have fewer resources to protect their privacy than their social superiors so that they can more easily become available for sociological scrutiny. But researchers seem to have been rather reluctant to devote attention to an ambivalent category of migrants whose members have for professional and social purposes to face both towards fellow-Italians and towards their host society peers and institutions. Lena Santospirito, for example, evidently relied heavily on her direct personal contacts with the then Minister of Immigration, Arthur Calwell; and Giovanni Pullè's migrant association, the *Stella d'Italia*, proclaimed its intention of working as much with the Australian government as with Italian immigrants in order to integrate them better into their host society. Probably more importantly than the consular representatives with whom their relations could easily be strained, these Italians stood at the 'frontier of recognition' between Italy and Australia and, like the occupants of many interstitial categories, have often been regarded with some diffidence not only by those on each side of the boundary they straddle but also by academic analysts. For example, apart from mostly perfunctory references to its members in the accounts of Italian immigrant life in North America, the category of *i prominenti* is one that has received little serious attention. Certainly in the Australasian context, analyses of the lives of the most influential leaders of local Italian communities which go beyond the merely celebratory are very rare for any period and effectively non-existent for the period before 1945. The innovative research presented below is therefore especially welcome and the authors' theses and ensuing publications will open up new directions and opportunities for research. For example, the opportunity to compare the origins, local formation and activities of Italian elites in Australia and Argentina or North America will become a real and fruitful possibility. Comparative studies of the social mobility and organisational activities of Italian immigrants in their various societies of destination have in any case been another seriously neglected dimension of migration studies. Here is a chance to launch it on a scale which can take account of individual initiatives in their different national and historical contexts.

A third theme common to these papers is their exploration of the variegated world of welfare, interpreted to include not just the activities of formal institutions like the Church but also the attempts by Italian activists or entrepreneurs to alleviate hardship for the casualties of migration. As Musico points out, welfare for immigrants is a field that has been relatively neglected at least in the Australian context. Too often welfare organisations and initiatives have been presented as a mere extension of patronage relations which simultaneously encourage the acceptance of severe inequalities within the immigrant population and between it and the host community and defuse the potential for collective mobilisation to reduce them. The conflict between egalitarian and charitable forms of solidarity has

recently been explored by Richard Sennett (2003) in his description of the contrasting approaches to compassion and care taken by the Chicago social worker Jane Addams, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, and her Christian antagonist, Frances Xavier Cabrini, who was sanctified in 1950 after a life devoted to the welfare of immigrant and impoverished communities. The language of sin and compassion seemed to Addams a recipe for entrenching the sense of humiliation and social inferiority, while to Cabrini it represented the way in which both rich and poor could acknowledge their common, equal, submission to God. The status in Chicago enjoyed by Mother Cabrini has many parallels with Melbourne's Lena Santospirito (and perhaps even more with her Sydney counterpart 'Mamma Lena'); and the two Lenas would surely have endorsed Mother Cabrini's express ambition both to train young immigrants not to be ashamed to be Italian and to prove to the host society that Italian immigration was in no way threatening. As Monica Tolcay notes, however, the authority and effective influence of members of Church hierarchies could not be guaranteed by virtue of their formal positions alone: almost everything depended on the attitudes and commitment they brought to their religious and welfare work.

The final shared theme to be highlighted in these essays – and the target of some well-taken remarks by Dewhurst and Musico – is their emphasis on the active construction of whatever common social, political or 'ethnic' identities were established among Italian immigrants in Australia. Frequently the collective identities assumed by, or attributed to, immigrants and the associations that embody them are treated as the natural product of some underlying characteristic conferred by place of origin or gender or upbringing. What each of these essays underlines, by contrast, is the importance of what we might call the 'informational infrastructure' through which a sense of common belonging could be deliberately fashioned. The initiatives of the nascent mass media – the forays into regular broadsheet and newspaper production by Nicola Sceusa, Giovanni Pullè and Giovanni Prampolini, the establishment of a religious newspaper by Father Ugo Modotti (successful enough to have acquired some 8000 Italian readers in the early 1940s) and the radio broadcasts and agony columns of Mamma Lena – was a vital element in building the foundations for whatever feeling of Italianness existed by mid-twentieth century among Italian immigrants. Gianfranco Cresciani's research (eg 1980) has underlined the importance of this dimension of community-creation, especially for the Fascist period; and a systematic survey – at least, as systematic as the surviving, fragmented and widely dispersed evidence makes possible – of the nature, ownership, contributors, readership and social role of the Italo-Australian press from the late nineteenth century onwards would be especially welcome.

The expansion of a parallel 'social infrastructure' owed much to the energy devoted to the unflagging correspondence and personal involvement on behalf of immigrants by Italians like Lena Santospirito and to the tireless visits to his far-flung flock by Father Paul Zolin (aged 67 when he first arrived in Australia in response to the need for an Italian priest who understood the forms of Italian religiosity better

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than the local Catholic priesthood and spokesmen). If private archives reveal the immigrants themselves as determined shapers of their own destinies as well as occasional victims of events that they could neither have predicted nor avoided, the records also draw attention to similar features at work in the creation and dissolution of the organisations which presented Italianness to the non-Italian population. The work of such organisations became much easier of course after the mass migrations of the 1950s and 1960s and after multiculturalism had become official government policy in the 1970s. But the earlier efforts, under more difficult circumstances when neither funding nor official recognition existed and with a highly dispersed population to contact and attempt to represent, provided one of the foundations on which multiculturalism could build. It is important to see their details excavated and their historical and institutional context restored in these essays. The interest of each of the four analyses suggests the significance of the dissertations on which they are based and of the further publications which can be expected from them.

David Moss*

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Notes

- ¹ These references are confined to works on migration to and from Italy. For a recent sample of the wide range of Australasian contributions to the knowledge of contemporary Italian politics, society and culture, see Moliterno (2000).
- ² A common example of the notably sloppy use of official statistics on migration is to take the number of recorded departures as an indication of the number of different departing individuals. Thus Mother Cabrini (see below) who made 21 voyages between Italy and North America between 1889 and 1917 is multiplied into 21 different emigrants.
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