

## Immigration to a Rural Settlement in Northwest Victoria – Personal and Familial Perspectives over 55 Years



An Australian history essay written ca1980 by Marion Dadswell (1928-1985), teacher and migrant worker, and daughter of Henry and Jessie Dadswell, Block 65A, Red Cliffs, Victoria

**Important note:** This essay for studies at Melbourne University was among the papers of Marion Dadswell who died at Mildura in 1985. It is **NOT** the final version of her history essay – this has not been located - and readers are asked to keep in mind there probably were refinements to this text.

However, the subject matter is important to the history of Red Cliffs and for this reason her family has published the essay in this form, even though the author may well have made corrections or additions which have not been found.

– Harley Dadswell, Canberra 2013

## **Italian Migration to Australia - the Background**

The following information provides some background of Italian migration to Australia generally - it is **not** part of the original essay but has been taken from *Community Profiles, Italy Born, 1991 Census*, published by the Bureau of Immigration & Population Research.

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Small numbers of Italians migrated to Australia prior to the 1920s. The 1921 census shows little more than 8,000 Italy-born residents in Australia.

The depression of the Italian economy after World War One, and restrictive immigration quotas established by the United States government in the 1920s, encouraged Italian emigrants to Australia. During 1922-25 more than 12,000 Italians settled in Australia. In 1926-30, another 12,000 arrived. Many worked as farm labourers.

A feature of Italian immigration to Australia was the tendency for new arrivals to settle in specific geographic locations, where people of the same village or town lived 'in almost complete isolation from the Australian community and from Italian communities other than their own'. Through the process of chain migration, in some instances almost the entire population of some Italian villages was gradually transplanted to Australia.

By the census year of 1933 the number of Italian-born in Australia had increased to 26,756. Between 1928 and 1945, Italian migration to Australia was reduced to a trickle.

Within a year of World War Two ending, Italian migration to Australia resumed, although at first the intake was small. Most of the arrivals had been nominated by others in Australia who guaranteed them work and accommodation. By 1947 the total number of Italian-born in Australia had reached almost 34 000.

A significant category within Australia's overall immigration intake in the early post-Second World War years was that assigned to Displaced and Stateless Persons, many of whom were from the Baltic and Slavonic countries. When the reservoir of Displaced Persons began to be depleted, the Australian government looked to alternative sources for immigrants. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Australia sought to attract more Italian immigrants.

The Australian and Italian governments signed an Assisted Migration Agreement under which, during 1951-68, about 42,000 Italian immigrants received an assisted passage to Australia. A considerably greater number of Italian-born settled unassisted in Australia in the three decades following the Second World War and, as a result, the Italian group soon became the largest single overseas birthplace group (after those born in the United Kingdom) in the Australia population.

Between 1947 and 1976, about 360 000 Italians arrived in Australia.

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### **Author's Note**

This study is based on the rural settlement of the Red Cliffs Irrigation District.

Census figures do not show who are children or grandchildren of Italian settlers, so, since there is no industry other than fruit growing and since all Italians except retired people and three tradesmen are on properties, figures have been based on the number of 'Italian' names and the number of blocks, or more latterly, hectares, owned by them.

It is an investigation into Italian feelings and experiences. A paper on Anglo-Australian attitudes, however, would have shown why this group has become in public affairs and participation, such a large, silent minority.

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### **Assimilation?**

"What's the hardest thing for me? Australia is where I wasn't born. Here I have no real language, not Italian, not English. I can never have real discussions."

Maria Roccisano, born in Sardegna (Sardinia), married to a Calabrian

### **Integration?**

"By the 1950's Italians, Greeks and Yugoslavs were starting to integrate into Australian society. The newcomers were aliens in a strange land, looked upon by their Australian counterparts with suspicion and hostility."

Mary J. Chandler, in *Against the odds: the story of the Red Cliffs settlement* (1979)

### **Multiculturalism and exchange?**

"Exposure to the culture and values of other societies has not only enriched Australians' experiences as individuals, it has also provided a set of alternative values and practices against which to judge their own."

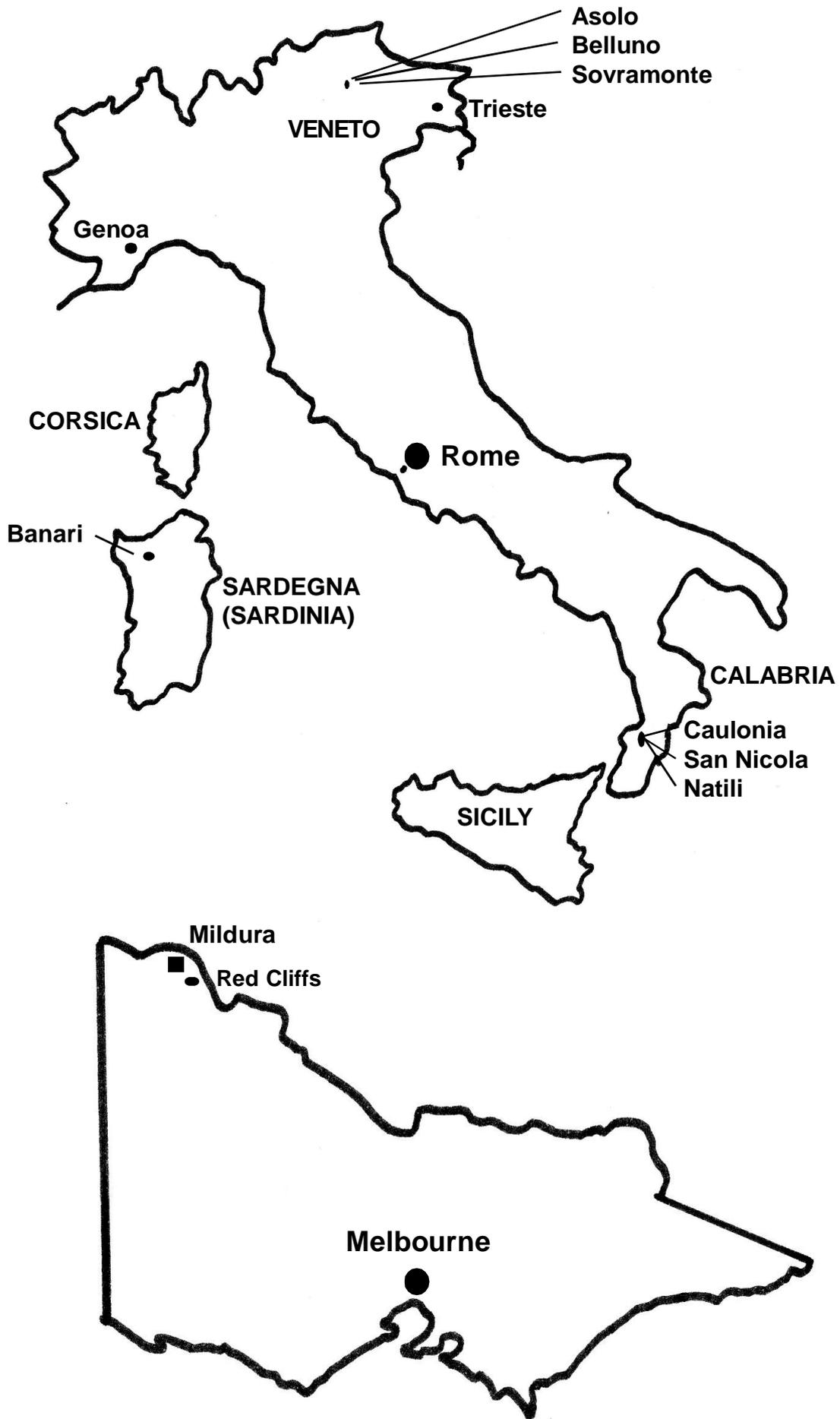
*Immigration Policies and Australia's Population. A Green Paper, 1977, p 54*

### **Ethnic apartheid?**

"I'm sorry to stare, but this is the first time I've seen what an Australian house looks like."

14-year-old Italian schoolgirl, born in Red Cliffs

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## *Immigration to a Rural Settlement in Northwest Victoria*

Red Cliffs in the Sunraysia district of North-Western Victoria is an area of intensive cultivation under irrigation from the Murray River. The main centre of the district, Mildura, was cleared and settled by the Chaffey brothers, two Canadian engineers, in 1886.

Red Cliffs, ten miles to the south, was opened up by the Soldier Settlement Commission in 1920-21. A former pastoral run, it was cleared by discharged servicemen working in gangs. Many of those men were allocated one of the 706 original blocks of land<sup>1</sup> which were planted with grapes suitable for drying and later, with small areas of citrus. This subdivision was the largest single-farm settlement scheme ever undertaken in Australia.

It was unique in other ways too. Since those who were allocated land were all servicemen discharged from the British Imperial Forces<sup>2</sup>, there was camaraderie among the settlers born of experiences many of them had shared in Gallipoli, Egypt and France. This closeness meant, of course, that those who were not “returned” could never become part of the in-group.

Naturally enough, there were also feelings of great patriotism and loyalty to the Crown and to England – the horrors of World War 1 could only have been acceptable had there been a valid reason, defence of England, for it – and the identification of England with the “right” thing and the “right” side was greatly heightened by the many English, Scottish and Welsh soldiers among the 706 settlers.

Soon another factor affected the area too. The earlier occupations of settlers included many that had offered no training for a life on the land – actor, bank clerk, tailor’s apprentice, miner, lumber-jack, shop assistant, schoolboy – and for the many and great difficulties and hardships in the early period. As well, many were physically or mentally ill due to their war experiences, especially those who had been prisoners of the Turks<sup>3</sup>, or who had worked in German coal mines. Trips to Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, Melbourne (an 11 hour train trip) were usual and suicides were not uncommon.

Thus within one or two years, many blocks were left unworked, badly neglected or just abandoned so that the Soldier Settlement Commission very early on had many ownerless blocks, unwanted or unmanageable by the chosen, on their books.

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1. In a fashion typically Australian, the name “block” which “blockies” worked was retained, the words vineyard and horticulturist being virtually unknown. The writer, as a child, was astonished to see her father write “horticulturist” on a form. For long, she imagined another, mysterious occupation elsewhere.

2. Act No. 2916, October 1917: Discharged Soldiers from His Majesty’s Naval or Military Forces or of Commonwealth Forces. An amendment, 3039 of 1919, allowed nurses of the Forces who had served overseas to take up land as well.

3. “Guests of the unspeakable” was how Sir Thomas White, son-in-law of Alfred Deakin, termed his sojourn with the Turks. Our Welsh neighbour, who had shared his Levantine experience, put it rather more colourfully, but *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War* (Bill Gammage) reports the Turks as being very fair.

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The original holdings measured fifteen acres, a size which made them ideal for a family unit possessing rather more labour than capital, and Italian immigrants, with very few exceptions<sup>4</sup>, have worked on them in family groups, in most cases as owner-occupiers after their first two or three years in the district.<sup>5</sup>

But in fact, Italian immigrants did not come into the area *after* settlement but *with it*, for in the first allocation two men with Italian names were given blocks and in the third – the western area – another appeared. Block 133A went to Harry Cecchini, 176 to J. Augustine and 666 to J de Silveira.

Cecchini cannot be traced so it cannot be presumed that he was of immediate Italian descent but his name is a very Roman one. Augustine, who now lives in Mildura, a spry man 90 years young, is the son of a Triestino who fled Trieste in 1884 after having seen his father flogged by the Austrians.<sup>6</sup> Augustine's father married an Irish woman and the children really were not allowed to hear, let alone speak, Italian.

John Clermet (Gelwin?) de Silveira is a completely un-Italian<sup>7</sup> name but two sources say he was Italian.<sup>8</sup> Block 133A remained in the name of Cecchini until the 1940s, Augustine's was subdivided in 1926 so he decided to go to greener fields, and de Silveira left his in 1926 too.

Soon the first "real" immigrant arrived, Fortunato dalla Santa (Dalla-Santa). Born in 1897, he had come here in 1913 as a sixteen-year-old with his father from Sovramonti, a small village in the Belluno district of the Veneto region.

The father returned home but young dalla Santa stayed on working in the mines at Broken Hill. In 1918, a policeman he remembered with great hate hauled him into prison (or a court) and he was "extradited" to serve in the Italian armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

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4. An ice-works owner from a Sicilian family, long-settled in Mildura, a recently taken-over garage and a plumber from Trieste (whose brother is on a property) are the only known examples.

5. For this reason, the study is based on the figures of property owners – Census statistics do not show Australian-born children of Italians as belonging to these family groups.

6. The flogging may have disturbed the son more than the father, for the former died aged 76, the latter at 102.

7. Anglicisations and mis-spelling of all Italian names appears to have been *de rigueur* in the early records of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission.

8. C. C. Dunstan, who bought 666 from de Silveira in 1926, told Mario Dominelli when he bought it in 1953, "now the block is going back into Italian hands again." J. Augustine also knew him and recalled that he "was thick in the tongue", that is, spoke Italian, but it could really have been Spanish or Portuguese.

9. His family maintains that he was extradited because he was not naturalised, but by 1915 Italy had full conscription due to the terrible losses on the Austrian front. Hence his "extradition" was in fact a forcible recalling aided by a zealous, perhaps jealous, Australian policeman.

He landed at Genoa on 17 October 1918 and served in the Army until 1921<sup>10</sup> – in Russia and Austria. In 1922, he and a very young wife were repatriated to Australia – a photograph of them in a gharry at Kandy, Ceylon, shows him well content in the role of tourist. In April of 1924 he became a tenant of Block 1 and a contract of sale between him and the Soldier Settlement Commission is dated 1<sup>st</sup> May 1925. The Commission even granted him a loan to set up the block.<sup>11</sup>

Dalla Santa's very young wife (Maria) died in childbirth and after his two young daughters tried to burn down the house, he married by proxy another (Mafalda) from the same village. Mrs dalla Santa now lives in Mildura but the house where the fourteen children were brought up still stands in a superb position overlooking a billabong and shaded by huge olive trees that were planted only in 1942 but which look much older.

Nearby, on block 12, another Veneto man soon settled. Giuseppe Bugno had immigrated twice – at the age of two to Brazil and after returning at sixteen and serving with the Italian Army in the terrible campaigns on the mountainous frontier with Austria, had come out to Australia. With many other immigrants working on the Adelaide-Menindee railway, he too heard of the fruit harvest work at Mildura and came south.

Red Cliffs did not look much like Brazil or his native Asolo, a beauty spot made famous in English literature by Herbert Read and his guests, but it was quickly put into production. Though Bugno took over block 12 only in 1927, by 1933 the adjoining block 24 was also in his name, as was 16A in 1936. He was astonished, and we can presume delighted, to find a compatriot (though not from the Trevino district) on block 1, for soon he was invited to be *compare* – godfather – to one of the dalla Santa children, an honour neither given nor accepted lightly.

This very select group of Veneti was increased by the taking up of block 697 on the western side of the settlement (now known as Cardross but then called Little England) by Giovanni Salvestro in 1929 and by Arturo da Farra (Dal-Farra) settling on block 357 in 1933.

Together with two other Veneto families, one in Mildura and one in Wentworth, there was some occasional social life. But as few of the families had a car until the mid-1930s, the meetings must have been very rare. However, one delightful snapshot of a *piccolo festa* shows a group of men sitting in the back yard of the dalla Santa house, each playing an instrument – piano accordion, mouth organ and so on – and, it can be presumed, singing, for the mountainous region of the Veneto seems to make people sing, just as the dusty dry areas of Sunraysia now make people drink.

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10. All papers (showing the Italian habit of keeping records to the <sup>n</sup>th degree) have been kept including the *Fedina penale*, the criminal charge sheet, without which no Italian can prove that he or she has not committed any crime.

11. Popular memory has always spoken of the Discharged Servicemen's Settlement Act as having been amended to allow servicemen from Allied Forces to take up land but an examination of Parliamentary records shows no such alteration. The matter calls for investigation as the dalla Santa papers clearly show that he signed his agreement with the Soldier Settlement Commission.

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To this group, small and selective, of Veneto people, all of whom had arrived independently of each other, was added an Italian from the opposite end and side of Italy - from a very small village, Natili in Calabria, half way up the massive sides of Aspromonte. Francesco de Maria bought block 272 on December 13, 1928. (Despite the number, it was in fact just across the river flat from Bugno and dalla Santa.)

De Maria was allowed to take up the block because its being on an incline made it too steep for working.<sup>12</sup> Much more likely, it was probably one of the many abandoned by an ex-soldier. Italian hard work and perseverance put it into production and de Maria bought block 271, also considered “useless”, three years later. Remembering the mountainous area he had come from - the road to Natili appears to rise 1000 feet in two or three miles - he must have smiled at the Australian idea that the slight slope made the ground “useless”.<sup>13</sup>

Frank de Maria might have been surprised if he had known that he was to be, in a sense, a leader, for he was the first in a great chain of immigrants from Calabria. He had chanced on Red Cliffs because a cousin was working in Mildura.

Soon his brother Filippo had bought block 12 (1931) and his cousin Antonio Costa had settled on block 523 (1931). In 1932 Cesare Nicola Piscioneri bought 84 and 84A - he was another cousin - and Costa's brother Cosina had come to block 273. In 1935 Frank de Maria's daughter Maria and her husband Mario Circosta took over block 271. Mario Dominelli, a Costa cousin, was working blocks under contract.

The depression and World War Two prevented further settling. By 1947-48 only three more Calabrians, all related - Giuseppe Macri, Pietro Pasini and another Piscioneri cousin were block owners and by the 1951-52 season another three relations of the first wave were established – Vincenzo Brizzi, J. Paechiaia and Giuseppe Cricelli.

*Cugine* (cousins) or *parenti* (relatives) is how everyone is described. Inter-marrying had occurred between the inhabitants of the two villages, Natili and San Nicola near Caulonia, that nearly every Calabrian in Red Cliffs had come from. The practice has continued on here. Even the influx of new blood, that is Italians from other areas, has rarely changed that pattern.

In the early fifties, the old RAAF training base in Mildura became a migrant hostel and many newly-arrived migrants saw the area and remained. Others came to take part in the picking, the six to eight week harvest in February and March. Many of those who came up for it stayed to work for two or three years and settled down.

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12. According to his son-in-law, L. Circosta.  
See map 2 of district in Appendix [Note: this appendix has not been located].

13. Contour planting was not thought of in the 1920s. All rows of vines ran down the slope as did the irrigation water carrying the top soil. This necessitates a lot of effort and time redistributing the soil every few years. Quite clearly the billabong blocks were already planted up when the de Maria brothers took them up, for the rows still run downhill. Men from mountainous Italy, used to terracing, would never have planted them in that way.

In 1951-52 there were 16 Italian owners in two distinct groups – the four Venetians and the twelve Calabrians. (Their industry had been such that they owned 27 blocks between them.)

In the season 1957-58 the 16 Italian owners had increased to 42; by 1963-64 there were 97. Another five years and the sum was 114. In 1973-74 there were 192 blocks owned by Italian names.

By 1978-79 however, the number had dropped to 174,<sup>14</sup> understandably due to retirement or death for the thirties group who are in their 70s and 80s and many of the 1950s arrivals could be in their 60s.<sup>14a</sup> Work on a block is extremely heavy in the harvest season and most men must have young, strong help for that period after they reach fifty.

In migratory movements of people, there are two factors involved – the push of the country of origin and the pull of the receiving society, an ethnographic *pushiniprelli* as Dr Doolittle might have said. Since 1870 Australia has admitted many who felt the “push” from Italy; Raffaello Carboni of Eurelea (?) and John Augustine’s father fleeing the Austrians in Trieste both left Italy because of the political conditions.

The socio-economic pressure was such that for many Italians emigration was the only hope. In the last half of the 19th century and the first 30 years of this, migration became the norm. It is calculated that in the period 1900-15, 40% of all Calabrians emigrated to the USA<sup>15</sup> and the pattern in the Sunraysia district appears to have been set by earlier family precedents. Heslop<sup>16</sup> found that the fathers of 44% of the Italian growers in the Mildura area had been to other countries to work.

Mario Dominelli (arrived in Australia in 1926 aged 18) set off to earn money for the family because his brother had come back from the USA and it was his turn to leave. Sam Brizzi is a very old man now – he fought in the First World War. His brother, who came to Australia with him, had been in Pittsburgh for 15 years before the war.

Mario Circosta (Frank de Maria’s son-in-law) paid his fare with £40 given to him by his brother recently returned from the USA. There were many other mentions of men having been in South or North America before coming to Australia. Heslop found that emigration from Calabria was an expected sacrifice in the longer-term interests of the family.<sup>17</sup>

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14. Interestingly, in the period in which Italian owners dropped by 22, the number of Turkish “blockies” rose from none to 22 men, with 30.5 blocks.

14a. Frank de Maria was 42 when he settled in Red Cliffs.

15. Lopreato, A., *Peasants No More: Social Class and Social Change in an Undeveloped Country*, 1967.

16. Heslop, A., *Agricultural Extension among Fruit-growers of Italian Descent in Mildura*, M.Ag.Sci thesis, Melbourne University, 1977, page 81.

17. Heslop op cit page 41.

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This migratory habit disturbs the picture Australians have of the bare, stony mountain sides of Italy pushing its peasants out. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* refers to the continued emigration (and repatriation) of Sicilians and Southern Italians as a “type of collective madness”<sup>18</sup> and in listening to the stories the migration does appear to have become institutionalised – a lemming syndrome as it were.

The father of Maria Roccisano went to the USA in the 1920s, returned to Sardegna and then set off for Australia in 1927. Each year he said he was returning home but his wife tired of that and brought her two daughters out in 1937.

Tony Sergi, now 31, arrived here in 1953. His uncle had gone to the USA so in 1949 (a non sequitur in Sergi’s mind) his father went to Argentina. He didn’t like it, returned home almost immediately and left for Australia.

Sam Lamarino, now a rising solicitor in Mildura, belongs to a family that emigrated to Argentina, returned home for two years and then set off again. Perhaps the “collective madness” explanation has more to do with emigration than the push of the economic conditions.

Most skated over why they came – perhaps they don’t know. That conditions forced people to leave is not always now remembered or if it is, not recounted, for in ten essays on “My parents’ life in Italy” written by Grade 6 children in a local primary school, three mentioned that there was enough money for a car and plenty of work. Six wrote the opposite. One girl wrote “there weren’t any holidays for there was no money. There wasn’t even money for food”. Since all children came from Natili or San Nicola in Calabria, their parents were sharing the same conditions.

Another push factor undoubtedly operated. For some men Italy had become too constricting – the home scene in particular. Giovanni Fenu from Banari in Sardegna “couldn’t settle down after being in the army in Somalia”. So he looked around for further adventure and decided on Brazil. His brother came home with two tickets for Australia – a persuasive shipping agent. Such is the way decisions are sometimes taken.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the pull factors are the concomitant of the push set – Giovanni Fenu’s desire for *avventura* is a clear example – the home district being too constrictive and the unknown country possessing an allure – albeit unspecified. But all the men who had set off exerted from Australia a great pull to women, and if they had them, children. Family reunion, in most cases ardently desired for its own sake, also had an economic by-product – extra pairs of hands.

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18. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 11<sup>th</sup> Edition, page 8. Just now the village of Natili Naroo is filled with only women and children – all the men are in the industrial north of Italy or in countries north of the Alps. Menless villages are common throughout the South and constitute a grave social problem.

19. It is extraordinary how all Italians repatriated from Somalia, Tunisia and Libya feel a *nostalgia d’Africa*. Yet 75% of all Southern Italians and Sicilian expatriates returned home from the USA in 1900-1920 (Scott, F.D., *World Migration In Modern Times*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1968, page 45) but very few from rural areas of Australia (one known case in Red Cliffs – and very special reasons for it). Perhaps not the urban experience such as in Pittsburgh but the space or rural experience in North Africa or Australia is the key to the explanation.

Planting and harvesting do not register whether hands are male or female, young or old. Women worked in the heat as hard as the men and the children were driving tractors almost as soon as they could walk (not quite – but nearly so). “The Australian could not understand the migrant making his wife and children labour in the field all hours of the day,” wrote an Australian observer.<sup>20</sup>

Maria Roccisano says that Italian women wanted to work and “even if they didn’t want to, they had to, for they had no one to borrow from and every penny counted just to keep the family in food”. In her opinion, it was not patriarchal force but a mother-hen instinct that had women working outside so hard.

Whether for extra hands or for family reunion, Italians came to Australia in great numbers in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.<sup>21</sup> In Red Cliffs many arrivals were proxy brides or mother and the children. By 1971, family reunion had so changed that, for example, when Giuseppe Daniele aged three came from Oppido Mamertina, not far from Natili, to join his father, he was accompanied by his mother, an uncle and aunt, his cousins and “Nanna and Grandpa”.<sup>22</sup>

But adventure and the family reunion were not the only pull. Apparent economic rewards were in some minds<sup>23</sup> for Mario Dominelli in 1926 referred to Italian migrants in Perth meeting the ship at Fremantle to urge any Italians on board not to get off. “All is not *parfait* in WA” was their cry. One such ship-meeting could have been by a Mr Maffeur of Mildura who told the local priest, a fellow countryman from Veneto, how he had arrived there in 1921, cut wood and loaded it for seven pence a tonne and after seven months of seven-day-a-week work was given £11.

Another who thought he was going to golden fields was Giovanni Fenu who recounted that he was told by an agent (shipping? immigration?) of the wonderful wages to be got in Queensland. When they arrived in 1952 they found the story false. Mario Circosta in 1926 had heard the same story.<sup>24</sup>

Another pull factor may have been included in the advertising information supplied by the Department of Immigration, “Come to sunny Australia” – but the sun is not exactly lacking along the Mediterranean littoral. It has been suggested that the letters telling of a new house, land, TV, a car are more convincing.

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20. Mary Chandler, *Against the odds: the story of Red Cliffs settlement*, 1979. Ms Chandler did not mention the number of Anglo-Australian women who had to work the same hours outside because of an ill or alcoholic husband.

21. *Community profiles. Italy born*, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research.

22. Written in his essay on “My parents’ life in Italy”.

23. The reference to it, however, was rather oblique. No-one ever admitted to coming here to better their finances. The subject was slithered over. Perhaps they did come for a better future for their children or to be their own master, and economic rewards were only a concomitant of these.

24. *Studi Emigrazione*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Kore Anno XII, March 1976, Number 41, “L’emigrazione Italiana in Australia 1876-79” by Nanzia Messins, tells of a letter sent by an Italian in Queensland to the Society of Patrons of Italian Emigrants outlining the actual conditions (as against those advertised in agents’ letters), to expose the dishonest claims of the agents in the 1870s. So nothing had changed in 80 years.

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In Red Cliffs no-one alluded to this but the fact is that nearly all the Calabrians, 78% of the Red Cliffs Italian population, have come from two villages from where the original settlers came – Natili Veechio where Frank de Maria came from and San Nicolas near Caulonia, 20 miles away as the crow flies – a fairly rugged crow it would need to be – where Frank’s cousin Antonio Costa and his brothers came from. (All the others came independently and mostly alone except for one group of three families from Campario). So, clearly the chain migration established by the earliest Italian settlers in Mildura from Caulonia and from Benestare – five miles from Natili - has been responsible for the 78% of the Calabresi in Red Cliffs.<sup>25</sup>

What did all these people find when they arrived here? The men shrug their shoulders and say it was hard but imply that it was not too hard for “real” men. One man who did tell was an old resident in Mildura. He told Heslop that “My mother made me come”, he said with great emotion. “She said I was to find my brother and keep him company. I found him sewing bags in the wheat country near here. The flies and the heat! God, I didn’t believe that human beings could live here. I pleaded with him to go home. He would not, and I had to stay with him. I had no money. I don’t want to go home now as my mother is dead”.<sup>26</sup>

Other men told of living in a shed for the first five or six years and working around the clock to make enough money to buy the property or to convince the banks that they were good risks.

Giovanni Fenu with his brother and a friend went cane-cutting in Queensland each year in order to finance the land they were buying and planting. In turn, one stayed back to keep up the work on the block. But it sounded like real adventure as he told of the hardships. Obviously he was young and very strong.

While the men discount the hardships, the women remain silent – but when alone they tell of a continual and heavy struggle.

The early experiences of, for example, Mrs dalla Santa, vary not at all from those of her English-speaking neighbours. However her rigorous early life in the mountainous province of Belluno in the Veneto region (which makes the Dixon regime of Life-Be-In-It appear to be devised for senile paraplegics) obviously gave her the stamina and strength to endure.

In Sovramonte, she carried 50 pounds up to the pasture areas on the higher mountainside in summer and back down again. Work started at 5am and continued till 8pm. Then it was time to make the bread. The seven-day-a-week program kept her fully occupied and she remembers with great bitterness that when she was married in a proxy service along with other proxy brides, the priest didn’t present her with the usual gift of a Bible as she didn’t attend church. How could she? There were no services between 11pm and 5am when she was free.

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25. Tables 3 and 4 in the appendix. **Note:** this appendix has not been located.

26. Heslop op cit

When she arrived in Red Cliffs in 1932, it was to heat and dust – “The heat; my Christ, it was 100 to 110 for days on end”. In the 30s, the dust was terrible. “South Australia flew past into New South Wales – and sometimes on to New Zealand – silting up houses on the way”.<sup>27</sup> Doing the washing – a copper in the bare backyard – not even under a tree for shade. And the work – “She (I) sleep in late, the day she (I) get up at 5am”. There were cows to milk, the calves to feed, the pigs, hens and vegetables to attend to, and water (between the irrigations) was always scarce.

In the picking time, the fire under the dipping tank had to be lit early (before dawn) so that the tank would heat up in time for the fruit to be dipped after it was picked. She also worked on the block and at times pushed a wheelbarrow laden with buckets of fruit, up the sandy slope. “It wasn’t a good life, especially when she (I) can’t talk (English)”.

Mrs Philip de Maria from Calabria was only half a mile away but they never became friends. “She couldn’t speak proper Italian,” said Mrs dalla Santa. However any possible friendship was blighted from the beginning. “She (my) husband took she (me) down to meet her and she came in and put three lettuces on the table – straight from the garden – and she said “have some”<sup>28</sup> - what kind of people eat unwashed lettuce?” When Mrs dalla Santa’s daughter suggested “have some” might have meant “take some home”, the old lady considered it highly improbable. Poor Mrs de Maria – to be judged so harshly for a gesture of friendship – but then she was a Southerner.

Bitter as her life was, for much of her family life was beset with problems,<sup>28A</sup> she now says: “She a better life here. If you give me whole town (of Sovramonte), me not stay there”.

In 1937 Maria Roccisano didn’t find the district any better. She, with her sister and mother, arrived and as they drove past the finer houses in Mildura the girls cried out “Is that our house”? The father always replied “No, ours is much better than that”. When he drew up at a corrugated iron shed with hessian walls they burst into tears. “But my mother never said a word. She just got out of the vehicle and immediately set to work. And the doorway wasn’t needed for the hessian was so rotted that you just walk through it”.

Maria Roccisano was then 11 and eager to continue on at school. But a polio epidemic closed the schools and the two girls started working on the block for their father. Then he said “It’s no use starting school – we’re going back to Sardegna”. The war came – and no return – and no school either. She finally married a neighbour, Mario Roccisano from Natili in Calabria. Her father was furious – and the war ended eight months later.

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27. The writer well remembers that the sand could be shovelled, not swept, out of the house.

28. Mrs dalla Santa must be the original feminist. The only pronoun she uses is “she” even when speaking of her husband.

28A. In addition to two step-daughters she had twelve children of her own.

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Nor was it any better for the women in the 50s. Maria Fenu came out to marry in 1957. Her husband, brother-in-law and sister-in-law had lived in a shed while they slaved to get themselves established. They had transported an old derelict house. When she came – “It was awful. Everything was awful. It was quiet. So isolated – (10 miles from the town and no other blocks near) and I couldn’t go anywhere – not even to church. We were too busy and I couldn’t understand – and nobody had a car”.

When the priest came to visit, the only words he could say were “Belle café” – a good conversational opening but not guaranteed to further the conversation. Mrs Fenu appears to be in a state of anomie. She doesn’t want to go back – but Red Cliffs is not the place that it is for her husband. “To me it’s all the same – here, Sardegna, wherever.” Maria Fenu has no relatives here, only the family she married into. She has the look of a stateless person – and the lack of will to change anything.

No-one admitted that migration had had any cost until a young man, Tony Sergi, told of his mother being continually on the edge of a breakdown in the early years. Isolated from anyone who could talk to her – they didn’t even have a horse and cart for some years – probably worn out by very hard work, no money to buy food and very probably in very difficult living conditions. She just cried and cried.

Tony Sergi felt that most of the Calabrian women in the 50s had suffered like this. “In the 60s there were so many others about, ready to help and give support, but in the 50s we were alone as on an island”. When asked about this, Maria Roccisano said that she thought it was probably true of nearly all Calabrian women – the isolation and desolation was just too much for them to bear.

After that revelation, carefully kept from Australian eyes, the cost to the men started to become apparent. In one long established group, one man died of alcoholism at 58, another drank and gambled every cent the family ever made, a third suicided and the son of a fourth changed his name to an anglicised form during the war to avoid the constant chiding of his Australian Army colleagues. Among the later (1950s) arrivals, one Calabrian started drinking and then took to his family with an axe. They did the unheard of thing – among Calabrians - of leaving him. So the personal cost, though hidden to Anglo-Australia, has been considerable in this small area.

Since Italian immigrants or their descendants own 1,315.2 hectares or 23.9% of the whole Red Cliffs irrigation district, it would be reasonable to suppose that this percentage would show up in participation in community affairs, but a glance at diagram 2 in the appendix\* shows that this is not so. There is one participant in Apex – the grandson of an Italian settler. The secretary of the RSL reports that Mr Sam Brizzi, who was in the Italian army in World War One “attends the Anzac Day ceremony each year but has not joined the RSL though he is, of course, eligible to do so”. It is not known if Mr Brizzi knows that.<sup>29</sup>

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\* The appendix to this essay has not been located.

29. It is possible that the old man sees Anzac Day as an Antipodean All Souls’/All Saints’ Day, since both fall in the same (Chrysanthemum) season. He would have passed this very important religious observance every November in his youth, paying tribute to the dead.

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On boards of management, one Abbruzese is a member of the Water Board, a very important liaison group of growers that advises the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission about growers' needs. One man from Emilia is on the board of the Red Cliffs Club and one from the Marche has been a constant participant on the High School Council.

Though Italians are passionate followers of soccer, there are none in the football club even though the coach has tried to get Italians onto the team – parental opposition prevents boys from coming to practice.

But even though there is no apparent community participation by Italians, they enjoy a rather rich life quite separate from their Anglo-Australian counterparts.

They go to dances at the Club da Vinci, they attend and give weddings for 500, 600 or even 700 people. They once a year follow the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary through the streets of Red Cliffs, pinning notes on her dress as they did in Calabria and then spending the rest of the day on all the joys of a fair – again as they did in Calabria.

They kill pigs and spend the day making salami for the year ahead, in groups, and bottle their own wine from their own grapes. And they now go to Mass celebrated in Italian by the Scalabrini priests, an order especially established to serve migrants.

The police say that Italians “have fallen over backwards to be good citizens”. So the two groups do not meet even in jail, although a son of an Italian migrant was found guilty of driving with a blood alcohol level of .310.<sup>30</sup>

Integration, Australian-style, can be seen through the eyes of a Red Cliffs historian. By the 1950s, Italians, Greeks or Yugoslavs were starting to *integrate* into Australian society. The newcomers were *aliens* in a strange land, looked upon by the Australian counterparts with *suspicion* and *hostility* (my italics).<sup>30A</sup>

This type of integration was rejected by Italians. As Maria Roccisano said, “Italians have to be very much wanted before they can mix and feel secure. Rather than feel insecure, they stay among their own”. Rather understandably.

Migrant groups have been often overlooked in the studies and words written about them. The Green Paper of 1977<sup>31</sup> writes that “the vast majority of migrants have benefited in coming to Australia .... in social terms as represented by freedom, social mobility, educational opportunities ...”. How the Italians of Red Cliffs would laugh if they had ever been taught to read, and speak, in terms of such concepts.

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30. *Sunraysia Daily*, 27 February 1979

30A. Chandler, M., op cit

31. *Immigration Policies and Australia's Population. A Green Paper*, page 54.

Migrant teachers were not put into schools until 1971. Red Cliffs High School does not have enough non-English-speaking children now to warrant a teacher so those newly-arrived children “will, of course, have to learn to speak Australian”<sup>32</sup> by the magical osmosis method, a method that fails lamentably to teach Australians foreign languages when they are abroad.

And still schools are closed for the long summer break in December and January, not in the harvest season of February and March when all family hands are so needed.

Social mobility – there isn’t even social exchange. One Italian school friend brought a book to an Australian house and after the 10 minute visit apologised for staring. “You see, this is the very first time I’ve seen what an Australian house looks like”.

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32. Calwell, A. A., Minister for Immigration, 1945.

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