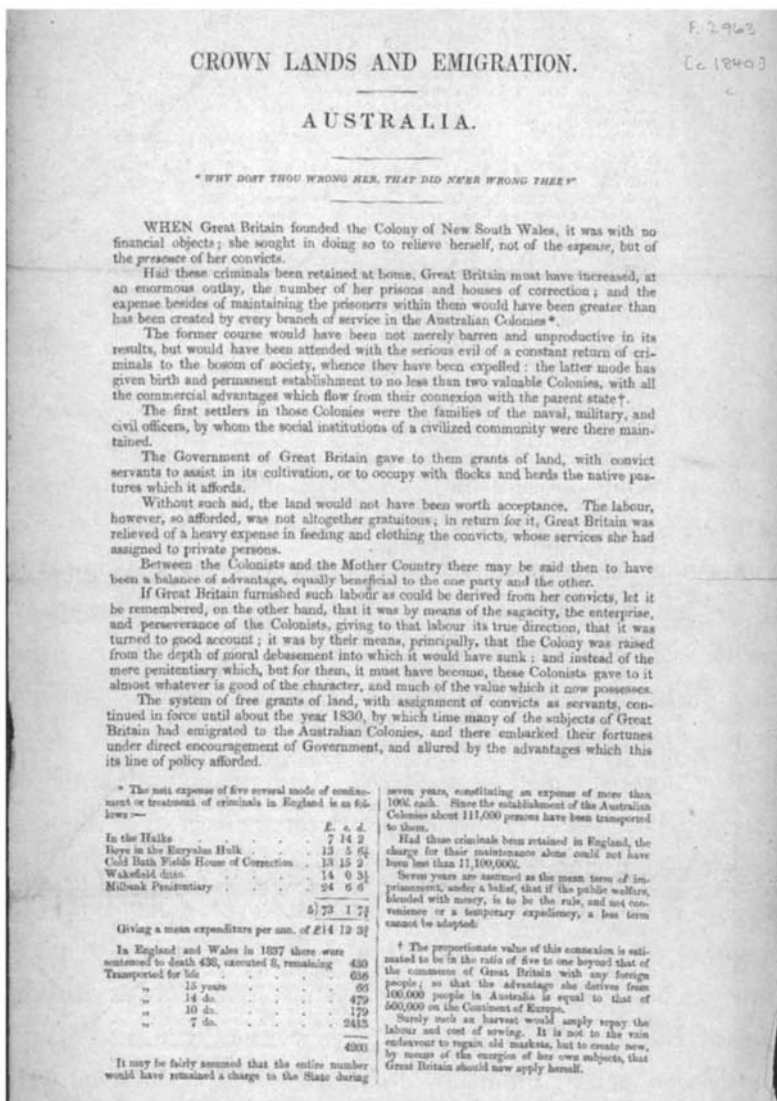


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A COUNTRY OF EMIGRANTS

From time immemorial, Italy, *La Bella Italia*, has attracted and mesmerised the foreigners lured to her shores for different and often contrasting reasons. Invaders and conquerors, from Hannibal to Hitler, descended on the peninsula by crossing the Alps, or raided her long and undefended coastline, dazzled by the fertility of the land, the beauty of the climate, the riches which could be plundered from her population.

For 2000 years pilgrims and religious reformers, from Luther to Lefebvre, have flocked to Rome and to other places of devotion to question or strengthen their faith, to scourge the Church or to pay homage to the cradle of Christianity. Artists and writers from many countries carried out their intellectual pilgrimage to this land, to draw on her vibrant heritage for their inspiration: Joyce, Ruskin, Goethe, Stendhal, Thomas Mann, Byron, Shelley, Keats and Maxim Gorky were among the many literati who lived in Italy and were influenced markedly in their work by the experience. Revolutionaries like Lenin, anarchists like Bakunin, poets like Ezra Pound—all visited and felt attracted by this ancient, complex and in many ways, unfathomable country, by its people, its culture, its politics.



A pamphlet promoting emigration from the British Isles to Australia, 1840. The document claims that 'no one who is able and willing to labour need want the necessities or convenience of life; the poor are conveyed thither in safety, comfort, and precision, and what to them is of vast moment, without expense. The promotion of emigration, therefore, to this quarter, it will be seen, is a work of the most enlightened charity'. (Cresciani Collection)

Today, according to data collected in 1997 by the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), over 56 million tourists (207 000 of whom are Australian) go to Italy annually in a peaceful invasion, to enjoy her cultural life, her cuisine and folklore, her beautiful holiday resorts, the incomparable landscape, the extrovert and uninhibited way of life of her inhabitants. Some still see today's Italy as the land of classicism, of Rome and her empire, as the centre of that great tradition which, together with Greece, moulded what we today call Western Civilisation. To many, Italy means the Roman Catholic Church, faith, the spiritual inspiration experienced by being in Rome, by seeing the Pope, by visiting the Vatican or the Catacombs, by having, even for a few days, an unforgettable religious experience. Other people are attracted rather by the great secular tradition, by the cultural achievements of Italy, by the Renaissance, by the



Giuseppe Garibaldi, soon after being wounded at Aspromonte, with his wife, Francesca Armosino, and a daughter. (Archivio Fotografico Comunale, Rome)

splendour of imperial Venice, by the glittering cultural life of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence, Mantua, Pisa, Ferrara, Urbino, by the entrepreneurial acumen of Grand Ducal Milan, whose bankers at that time controlled European finance.

To modern tourists and to foreigners in general, Italy's best image is her past. The present, as far as they are concerned, does not even exist. Or, if scant notice is being taken of Italy's contemporary life, the stereotypes about her present are rather less noble and dignified. For instance, contemporary Italy is perceived as a country ruled by the Mafia, beset by governmental instability, haunted by political terrorism, plagued by the problem of a poverty-stricken South, as a land inhabited by an unruly, arrogant, boisterous, garlic-smelling, melodic 'race' of people, who, given the chance, are eager to emigrate to countries enjoying a superior, more orderly and sedate standard of living. Thus the dominant value-judgement of Italy expressed by many people is conditioned by the seemingly inexplicable and puzzling dichotomy between Italy's undeniably glorious past and her allegedly confused and turbulent present.

The reality is much more complex than the prevailing clichés and cannot be understood by looking into just one of the many facets of the prism. Italy is like a stage where, if one only looks at the performance taking place in the foreground, one can easily miss the importance of what happens backstage. Commonly held beliefs, for instance that Italy is a very old country and that the 'Italians' from long past are a homogeneous people, under closer scrutiny manifest their precariousness unless they are related to the general trend of Italian history.

Instead, Italy, like Australia, notwithstanding the many layers of civilisations—Sannite, Etruscan, Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical—is a relatively young nation having achieved independence and Unification by 17 March 1861.



The breach of Porta Pia seen from Villa Patrizi. In September 1870 Italian troops entered Rome through the breach of Porta Pia, effectively ending the Pope's temporal power. In July 1871 the Eternal City was declared capital of the Kingdom of Italy. (Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Rome)

Since the Middle Ages, the history of Italy had been one of divisions, of struggles between local factions which often sought aid from 'foreigners' in order to overcome and dominate their neighbours. It was a history of conflicts between Guelphs and Ghibellines, of city-state against city-state, of principate against principate, of Florence against Pisa, of Venice against Genoa, of 'Italians' against 'Italians'. For centuries this divisiveness, which some social scientists have described as a characteristic of the Italian people, was exploited by other nations and Italy became the battleground for their ambitions, a pawn in the game of power-politics for European supremacy played by the Great Powers.

Indeed, Italy was expendable, and the cluster of small states which characterised the political geography of the peninsula at the

beginning of the nineteenth century was the outcome of that Yalta-style settlement which had been agreed upon at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, where the Austrian Prince Metternich contemptuously declared that Italy was a mere geographic expression. Before 1861, Italy was indeed a 'geographic expression', a conglomerate of vassal states, subservient to the superpowers of Europe.

To the north-west the Kingdom of Sardinia, under the Savoy dynasty, was an uneasy buffer state between France and the north-eastern provinces of Lombardy and Veneto, since 1815 under



*Group of southern brigands captured near Salerno by the Italian Army in July 1865. (P. Becchetti, *Fotografi e Fotografia in Italia. 1839–1880*, Rome 1978)*

Austrian occupation. The Duchies of Parma and Modena were simply sinecures for members of the Austrian imperial family, and hosted Austrian garrisons. The Grand Duchy of Tuscany, ruled by offspring of the House of Lorraine, was also under the political influence of Austria, and the same can be said, to a large extent, for the Papal States which occupied today's regions of Marche, Lazio, Umbria, Abruzzi and part of the Emilia. To the south, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was ruled by the Bourbons, who had the unenviable fame of being the least enlightened and intelligent monarchs on the market.

Unquestionably, before Unification, political power in these small states lay in the hands of their reactionary rulers, who tried to turn back the clock of history and restore in the peninsula regimes, ideas and policies which the French Revolution had effectively destroyed. Considering the political fragmentation and the disruptive influence exercised by the Great European powers, at that time no fair-minded European ever seriously thought that Italy would achieve unification. It was common belief that Italians did not seek unification, indeed, that there were no Italians as such, but a conglomeration of Piedmontese, Genoese, Romans, Venetians, who all spoke their own dialect, had their own distinctive culture, looked after their sectarian interests and were quite busy seeing that their rivals across the border would not outmatch them in economic, military and political influence.

Italian, as a language, was a minority language (as indeed it is even today, most Italians preferring to speak their own dialect). British historian Denis Mack Smith claims that in 1860 only 4 per cent of people spoke Italian, whereas Latin was still a language frequently used by the intellectual elite. Absent from the peninsula's historical experience were the profound cultural, social, economic and political upheavals of the Reformation, with its revolutionary



Multiculturalism ante litteram. Private Jacob Hreščák, of Trieste, Slovene, profession carter, at the outbreak of World War I, in August 1914, is drafted in the 97th Infantry Regiment Freiherr von Waldstätten of the Austro-Hungarian Army. The photo was taken by an Italian photographer. Hreščák was killed in 1917 on the Italian front by an Italian explosive device. Iacob's son, Ivan, served in the early 1920s in the Bersaglieri corps of the Italian Army, and his grandson emigrated to Australia in 1962. (Cresciani Collection)

impact as far as trade, business, individual interaction and ethics were concerned. Instead, the stifling cloak of the Counter Reformation characterised the intellectual and political life of the country. Italy was (and still is) a nation which had not experienced the disruption of a revolution, but was (and still is) the country of compromise, of doubtful alliances, of *compromessi storici*—historical compromises—where *bisogna tirare avanti*—life must go on irrespectively—because *le cose si fanno da sè*—things adjust themselves.

To this dismal picture of political reality we must add another, no less disheartening picture of the social and economic conditions of the country. With the exception of a few industrial complexes in the north, namely the textile industry and wool industry at Biella

and Schio, there was no viable industrial structure in the country. The Industrial Revolution came to most of Italy as late as the beginning of the twentieth century, long after Great Britain, France, Germany and Belgium had achieved their revolutions. Communications were extremely poor, given the geography of the country, its political divisions and the countless tariff barriers, and trade was still in its infancy. By 1848 Italy had only 265 kilometres of railway lines, and only in 1840 was the first Italian shipping line, the Raffaele Rubattino, founded in Genoa. Illiteracy was extremely high. In 1861, 90 per cent of the inhabitants of the peninsula could not read or write. Agriculture in many regions was still in an undeveloped, subsistence state, barely satisfying the needs of the inhabitants.

There was no militant workers' movement which could be even remotely compared to the Chartists in England. There was no sizable middle class to cushion the inaction of a reactionary ruling class and to express in a forceful and effective way the political needs of large sections of the population. There were indeed two societies, vastly different, two countries: the *paese legale* represented by the ruling class and its supporters, and the *paese reale* comprising the larger part of Italian society. There were rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited (then as today), with the difference that then there were no channels through which the demands and the aspirations of most of the population could be legally transmitted to the rulers. How, then, given this depressing situation, was Unification achieved, and what were the forces striving for it? Why and how did they succeed? Or did they succeed at all?

In effect the Unification of Italy was the end result of many components: the visionary idealism of a small band of intellectuals and revolutionaries; the determination of one state, the Piedmontese Kingdom of Sardinia, to achieve a centuries-old Machiavellian dream of a prince imposing his military and political hegemony over



Women carrying stones, c. 1900. Conditions of employment in preindustrial nineteenth-century Italy were harsh and often dehumanising. The peasantry, which represented the bulk of the labour force, had to endure long working hours and physically debilitating tasks.
(Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Rome)

the rest of the country; the complex struggle for supremacy of the European Great Powers, which the Italians partly exploited to their advantage, and of which they were the lucky beneficiaries.

To a large extent, the political fate of Italy was inexorably linked to the whims and turns of European Great Power politics, irrespective of the wishes of her rulers and inhabitants. It is indeed ironic, but by no means historically irrelevant, that Piedmont increased its territorial control over most of the peninsula in spite of repeated and crushing military defeats at the hands of the Austrian Army and Navy, as at Novara in 1849 and at Custoza and Lissa in 1866. Thus Unification was the successful product of diplomatic manoeuvring and military interplay orchestrated by Vienna, Paris and London and by a small band of 'Italians', while the vast majority of the peasantry stood by watching impassively, apathetically or even antagonistically, at this alleged political awakening, at this Risorgimento of Italy.