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THE ITALIANS IN AUSTRALIA

The Italians comprised the first truly large wave of immigrants to have arrived from Southern Europe after World War II. Today, people of Italian background in Australia number around one million. The Italians have made an enormous contribution to the development of Australian society through the twentieth century and to the present, and Gianfranco Cresciani – this country’s foremost expert on Italian life in Australia – provides the definitive account. In this new edition Cresciani brings to life the important story of the Italo-Australian community into the twenty-first century.

Gianfranco Cresciani was born in Trieste, Italy and emigrated to Australia in 1962. He has researched the history of Italian migration to Australia since 1971, and is the author of many books on Italian culture including *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922–1945* and was the editor of *Australia, the Australians and the Italian Migration*. He is currently the general manager of infrastructure development within the Ministry for the Arts in New South Wales.

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Migrants waiting to board ship in Naples, 1910.
(Italian Touring Club Archives)

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For Jane, Emilio and Raffaella

“I believe in a multicultural society for Australia as unavoidable and desirable. It pains me to remember the chronic boredom of the predominantly Anglo-Saxon Australia of my youth. When I returned to live in the country after World War II, the presence of so-called ethnics is what made it bearable, and since then, their contributions have made life increasingly interesting.”

(Patrick White to Geoffrey Blainey, letter, 1984, quoted
in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 2002)

“Australia is my home ... Italy my place of nostalgia”.

(Franco Belgiorno-Nettis)

“To lose is part of our destiny. To lose your country is painful, but sometimes it can be normal, even healthy. All depends from the reasons which compelled you to leave, and the manner in which it was done, from your age or even from the season. The country in which you landed is not your Motherland, the country which you left ceases from being it, except in your memory. Your vision is disjointed between *us* and *them*, between *there* and *here*, between *once* and *now*. You have to wrestle with life before and life now: between discontinuity and nostalgia”.

(Predrag Matvejević, author of *Mediterraneo*)

“Continuing a family tradition of migrations, I share without any effort the destiny of two or three different countries. I mistrust the cosy metaphors and when someone is telling me that man must have roots, my reply is that only trees must have roots. And anyhow, if one must deal with metaphors, why roots and not wings?”

(Juan Octavio Prenz, Argentinian writer of
Istrian and Croatian background)

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FOREWORD

I first met Gianfranco Cresciani late in 1969. I was just back from a Cambridge PhD. My Harris Tweed sports coat and college tie demonstrated the fact. Although I was on the way to devoting my life to the understanding of modern Italy, the process was pretty incomplete. I had been raised in the deeply bourgeois North Shore of Sydney. Despite my pretensions to leftist politics, I accepted as natural that the local golf club to which I was joined at the age of 17 still banned Jews and Catholics from its membership lists. I had lived in Rome for a while in 1967–68 and knew some Italian academics. But Gianfranco Cresciani was my first real Italian friend and my first alerting to what would come to be called multicultural Australia.

Cresciani wrote an honours thesis and then a very distinguished MA under my supervision. The latter can be read in Italian or English version as the book *Fascism, Anti-fascism and Italians in Australia 1922–1945*. The MA would have been a PhD but for the predictably purblind regulations which then said that such a degree could only be done full-time. Cresciani, as a married and early mature-age student, worked for a living, and did his research ‘part-time’. And so an MA it was.

I mention this matter not to claim any responsibility for the quality and extent of the research which Cresciani did. What was happening

was one of those wonderful events for a youthful academic where I had happened on a 'student' whose destiny it was to teach me. And so, as our friendship continued and survived, I learned many things. I learned about Italy. I learned about the Italies. I learned about humankind. Cresciani was an immigrant from Trieste, that marvelously ambiguous city which stands at the junction of the Italian, German and Slav worlds, and not only them, since Cresciani's nickname while he was a *liceo* student was '*il turco*'—The Turk. One look at his photograph may tell you why. In Cresciani's very nature is embodied the impossibility of inscribing human beings into a single national or 'ethnic' category. The great Triestine novelist Italo Svevo remarked that 'it is the fate of humankind to live in mixed tenses', and this aphorism should be remembered whenever a Blainey, Howard or Hanson demands that we swear allegiance to 'one Australia'.

Despite his academic distinction Cresciani did not find a university job in 1970s Australia. Could the selection committees still have been composed of people with world views like those of my one-time North Shore golf club? Whatever the case, Cresciani worked for a while for the Italo-Australian construction company EPT, and then took office in the New South Wales bureaucracy where he has been a major figure in the building of cultural relations with Italy and with many other countries. All the time he went on being a historian (EPT's generosity to an employee who wished to involve himself in cultural pursuits still leaves me open-mouthed. If only mainstream Australian businesspersons could be persuaded that there is something beyond the bottom line apart from sporting endeavour).

Cresciani's pertinacity was extraordinary. I readily admit to loving the feel of archives, the dust under the fingernails, the sudden joy of a tiny detail on which my wordsmithery can start to work. But I usually have the pleasure of burying myself in the state archives in Rome, where there are catalogues and assistants and a little coffee shop just outside the fascist building which houses the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. In his determination to write the history of

Italians in Australia, Cresciani had to find the documents for himself. Since Australian historians and Australian archivists were themselves long dismally monolingual, they had done almost nothing to chart histories which were literally beyond their ken, or should I say beyond their kith and kin even in imagination. For years the 'Cresciani archive' would be the only serious place for anyone to research on Italo-Australia.

Cresciani also had to put up with simplicities in a literature which did expand under the impulse of the financial and status opportunities that arose with governmental multiculturalism. At least one Australian historian of Italians in this country seemed to think that their character was determined by something called the 'Italian Big Mamma'. Many 'community historians', lying for their old nation in a manner that was still less restrained than is true with many national historians, unreflectingly preached 'filio-pietism' and 'Whiggery'. Their versions of the history of Italo-Australia had it starting small but getting ever bigger. Their 'Pioneers' were unsullied Heroes (they were generally boys) who passed on a torch of national grandeur to a succession of Great or Important Men. One such chronicler even thought that Marco Polo might have a case to be hailed as the 'Father' of Italo-Australia on the somewhat specious grounds that he had gone to China to discover spaghetti and China was not so far away from Oz. He and his colleagues wrote the sort of history which might have satisfied a Giovanni Howard had he existed; in their view no black armbands need sully a green-white-and-red glory transported here to the Antipodes.

Cresciani had no time for such crudities, with their appalling insult to the precarious and changing character of the human condition. His work had begun with an exploration of fascism and anti-fascism on Australian soil. He therefore knew that migrants never compose innocently united, primordial and eternal 'communities'. He knew too that in a group of human beings, however constituted, power, in one form or another, will always be exercised. Just

occasionally this power will be harnessed for the general good. Most often it will not. History itself is perennially a prey to the same dilemma. Should it accept its more obvious paymasters and fall to the task of propaganda, to the job of hedging around the fortress of the rich and rapacious with words? Or should it remained pledged to the cause of 'criticism, criticism, again criticism and criticism once more', as a major scholar who had seen meaning in 'Auschwitz' once urged? Cresciani, an anti-fascist historian to his bootstraps, has remained loyal to the second definition of our discipline. I share it with him and would like to think that it is what justifies the existence of historians in any society.

It is therefore an enormous pleasure and honour for me to welcome in this foreword the republication of Cresciani's history of *Italians in Australia*. When it first came out in 1985, it was a 'book of the film', Cresciani's ABC documentary, still far and away the best visual account of our migrant history. Now it has been amplified and reworked. Readers who cherish their commitment to liberty, equality and sorority will enjoy Cresciani's depiction of the travails and triumphs of people who migrated to Australia from both Italy and the Italies. Like us, these were people in transition, with identities which were both visceral and yet never wholly set. Like us, they did and did not possess free will. Like us, they were and were not Others. Their story teaches that national identity is always an oxymoron, one of those great oxymorons through which the human spirit in its glorious and loving ambiguity can survive even the troubles of the early twentieth-first century. Through our knowledge of the patterns of such identity over time, we may yet be able to hymn our place as citizens of the world.

R. J. B. Bosworth
University of Western Australia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I was invited by Cambridge University Press to work on a revised edition of *The Italians*, which I published in 1985 with ABC Enterprises, I wondered what would make the book more relevant, more topical to the contemporary reader. I reflected on the events of the last eighteen years that have given a different connotation to the history of Italy and of Italian emigration abroad. In doing so, I also recalled the people who had a lasting influence on my vision of the Italian migratory diaspora.

Two events in particular highlight the changed world and the new reality facing Italians who migrated many years ago across the oceans, to faraway countries, including Australia. One is the assent, given by the Commonwealth of Australia on 4 April 2002, that Australians of Italian background can regain their Italian nationality without losing the Australian one and thus maintain dual citizenship. This is an important acknowledgement of the contribution given by Italian migrants to their country of election, as well as recognition by Australian society of the importance of their cultural heritage—a novel, big step since 1985.

The second event is the widening, on 13 December 2002, of the European Union from fifteen to twenty-five member countries, thus

creating a superpower of 455 million people. From this day, the Italian migrant overseas, thanks to his or her recently acquired dual citizenship, is also a member of the Union, a legal *cives orbis*, a citizen of the (European) world.

These legal and political milestones, as well as the profound social and economic changes in Italian and Australian society, have prompted me to largely rewrite the last two chapters of the book and to review, update and add new information to the others. To write about migration history means to span over the history of two countries, of many cultural *milieux*, of a plurality of micro histories hidden behind the events described by 'official' history, by macro history. It means, most of all, to speak out on facts and events conveniently forgotten or wilfully ignored by historians in the country of departure as well as the country of arrival.

Therefore, I am indebted, in the first place, to all Italian migrants who, during my thirty-two years of research in this area, have graciously agreed to be interviewed by me, to share with me their experiences, to entrust to me their memorabilia, photographs, records and documents, to make it possible for me to tell their tale, in my attempt to carve for them a rightful place in the historiography of Australia as well as of Italy.

In the second place, I owe a great debt of gratitude to three people who, over many decades, guided, helped and spurred me to go on writing on migration history. Richard J. Bosworth, unquestionably the most authoritative Australian scholar on contemporary Italy, from the beginning has been a valued friend, a trusted adviser, a helpful critic, an example to follow. The late Renzo De Felice, the Italian authority on Mussolini and Fascism, taught me that it was possible, indeed a duty, to historicise that *mondo dei vinti* (world of the vanquished), to salvage from neglect the history of those Italians outside Italy, to 'subvert' the comfortable interpretations of official

historiography. The late Gianfausto Rosoli, the humble Scalabrinian priest who dedicated his life to unearth the history of Italians who migrated to other continents, taught me the unique historical value of each migrant experience, its centrality to the global economy of migration history.

Also, I wish to reiterate here my sincere appreciation for the assistance received from all staff of ABC Enterprises involved in 1985 with the first edition of *The Italians*, in particular to Glenn Hamilton for spurring me to write this book and to Helen Findlay and Nina Riemer for editing the text; to Leigh Nankervis for her professional graphic art work; to my research assistant, Belinda Mason, for her dedication in patiently and unrelentingly tracking down throughout Australia information and historical evidence which otherwise would not have been discovered; to Lloyd Capps, Christopher McCullough and Julie Cottrell-Dormer for affording me their invaluable collaboration. Sue Silversmith merited special mention for her efficiency in getting the then almost illegible manuscript into a presentable state for the publishers.

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Sincere thanks are also due to Professor Richard Bosworth of the University of Western Australia, who gracefully consented to write the Foreword to this volume.

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Finally, to my wife Jane, son Emilio and daughter Raffaella, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for their constant support and patience in giving me time to rewrite this book and somehow relive the Italian migrant experience.