BOOK REVIEWS


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With a new publisher, a new title, a new look and updated text, The Italians in Australia is the revised edition of Gianfranco Cresciani’s The Italians, first published in 1985 by ABC Enterprises as an accompaniment to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s television documentary of the same name. The Italians in Australia differs from the original work in that minor textual and pictorial changes have been made throughout, and the last two chapters, on post-WW2 Italian migration and political and socio-economic changes in Italy, have been expanded.

The author is well known for other extensively researched publications on Italian migration to Australia such as the in-depth study Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945 (1980) and the collection of profiles and documents Migrants or Mates – Italian Life in Australia (1988). He has also contributed to various publications and has been editor of works such as Australia, The Australians and the Italian Migration (1983) and Giuliano-dalmati in Australia: contributi e testimonianze per una storia (1999).

The Italians in Australia begins with a concise description of the social, political and economic landscapes in Italy in the mid 1800s and the related contemporary events that led to the Risorgimento and the unification of the disparate regions of Italy into a nation-state in 1861, under the newly created Italian monarchy. Cresciani outlines the flaws, the short-sightedness, the negligence and the weaknesses of policy and administration that characterised the country’s new political authorities who did little to improve the lot of the majority of the population. Italians continued to suffer from endemic poverty and its related diseases and from labour practices that at best barely kept them alive. Those in government also failed in their attempts to address pressing concerns such as the lack of a uniform national infrastructure, lack of a common language, lack of basic public education, and lack of access to new technological advancements.

Cresciani explains that the unification of Italy was “an event thrust upon most Italians despite their wishes” (p.16), an event that would not facilitate adequate social progress or social justice for all. Rather, it was an event driven by the self-interests of the European powers of the time (Vienna, Paris, London) and a small group of men belonging to the Piedmontese upper classes, concerned with the promotion of their own, and their region’s, political power. The author also points to this time, after the
Piedmontese ruling élite had assumed control, as the beginning of the animosity of northern Italians towards southern Italians. (Over the course of the following century, this bias would see the north progressively prosper and modernise while the neglected south would witness an ever-increasing exodus of its population, an exodus that would peak in the post-WW2 years).

The beginnings of Italian mass migration (from many regions across the peninsula) were therefore triggered by the socio-economic woes of the late 1800s, aided and abetted by the propaganda of the newly flourishing steamship lines eager to capitalise on transit voyages to the Americas. Emigration was further encouraged by Italy’s politicians, who saw it as a ‘safety valve’ that who reduce social and political unrest and as a means to build up the nation’s coffers with foreign capital, in the form of remittances sent back by emigrants to their families.

Italians also emigrated to Australia. In Chapter 2 Cresciani traces the first Italians in the country from 1788, settlers who were mainly individual adventurers, sailors, researchers, tradesmen and entrepreneurs. The first small communities were founded in the 1800s by religious clergymen and missionaries, gold prospectors and miners. The author describes how the first organised small groups of Italian migrants began to arrive after 1861, some later establishing small enclaves, such as the ‘New Italy’ settlement in NSW, and the sugar cane-field workers in North Queensland who replaced the Melanesian ‘slave labour’ force.

From 1900 until 1940 Italian migration to Australia would slowly continue, despite the implementation of official restrictions regarding ‘foreign’ immigration. Most Italians in rural areas were employed in agriculture, building or mining; and in urban areas were employed as tradesmen, labourers, food importers and manufacturers or in the service industry. The great majority were poor, mainly illiterate people who had known great deprivation and oppression and who sought a better future for their families through their labour in Australia. In Chapter 3 the author details how the Anglo-Australian community, including government, often reacted with resentment and tension to such a visible ‘foreign’ presence of aliens who they felt could not be trusted to ‘assimilate’. Italians were frequently the target of xenophobia, vicious propaganda, racism and occasionally violence, which stemmed from ignorance, envy of their economic successes, hatred of non-British people and fear that they were ‘stealing our jobs’—sentiments exacerbated by the Great Depression.

Cresciani talks of the estrangement from the Australian community that many Italians consequently felt due to these conflicts and how, by the 1930s, the new Fascist consuls in Australia with their strong pro-Italian propaganda and migrant welfare policies were able to obtain the support of many in that decade. Chapter 4 covers the rise of Mussolini in Italy and describes how Fascism was, until the mid 1930s, very well received and admired as an ideology by many right-wing conservatives internationally, as well as by the Australian Establishment. The author also explains how left-wing political exiles who had fled Fascist Italy and had settled in Australia actively challenged Fascism and right-wing politics, thereby fuelling the pervasive fear of communists and anarchists in Australian society.

Cresciani states that when, however, Fascist Italy entered the war against the Allied Powers in 1940, “unwittingly and tragically for them, [Mussolini]…also declared war
on the Italian migrants in Australia, both Fascist and anti-Fascist” (p. 96). The direct result of Mussolini’s stand was the widespread internment of many men of Italian origin, who were considered security risks (charges that were all unfounded). While the author covers well the reasons and machinations behind the internment policy, he devotes most of Chapter 5 to the experiences of the Italian POWs who were sent to Australia for internment and who, ironically, contributed so much to the Australian economy and the war effort. Very little, by contrast, is written on the experiences of the civilian Italian-Australians who were removed from their families and livelihoods to be interned amidst the mounting public hysteria of possible invasion. Many faced financial ruin or hardship and suffered emotionally from the experience long after their release. Hardly anything is written on the experiences of the wives and children, at their most vulnerable, who endured very great stress and public hostility and who were left to support themselves however they could.

In Chapter 6 Cresciani briefly covers the major legacies of the Second World War: trauma, loss and displacement of individuals and communities, destruction and the beginning of the Cold War, and, in this context, he comprehensively presents the range of the Italian experience of post-war mass migration to Australia that continued for almost thirty years. The updated text includes the achievements of some high-profile men of Italian origin involved in business or civic roles, and the chapter benefits from updated statistical data, which gives a more accurate picture of the demographics of the Italian diaspora in Australia at the end of the twentieth century. The author also interprets this data to give what he believes is a more realistic assessment of the extent of the ‘Italian migrant success story’, and the impact that Italians and their culture have had on Australian society. He believes that Italian migrant success is a “complex reality” (p. 143), that is tempered by the significant negative experiences of emigration, and he reasons that despite the many achievements of the Italians in Australia “…it would be difficult to maintain that Italian influence has made significant inroads into the prevailing Anglo-American public culture of Australia” (p 148).

The final chapter, also updated, entitled “Full Circle”, concentrates on explaining clearly the intricate and complex events of the past thirty years that have forged today’s Italy: a modern, wealthy, powerful nation that is now seen as a ‘receiving country’ for immigrants.

*The Italians in Australia* is an informative, straightforward and concise overview of the complicated history of Italian migration, written in an uncomplicated, easy-flowing style. Cresciani’s book covers all the major stages of Italian migration to Australia over the past two centuries, with frequent reference to the background triggers in Italy of that migration, thereby providing a more complete, although basic, understanding of this human drama, which is, in essence, not just Italian migration history but also *Australian* history.