Magnificent Obsession

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Jacqueline Templeton
(Edited by John Lack, assisted by Gioconda di Lorenzo)
FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE BUSH: ITALIAN MIGRANTS WRITE HOME FROM AUSTRALIA, 1860–1962
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POSTHUMOUSLY AND HANDSOMELY published, this book is a poignant tribute to its author’s ‘magnificent obsession’. For a decade before her sudden death in April 2000, the Melbourne historian Jacqueline Templeton had pursued her interest in the migrations to Australia of Italians from the Valtellina, a province of Sondrio in Lombardy, high up in the Alpine and prealpine zones of northern Italy, close to the present-day border with Switzerland. On the day following the completion of her manuscript, Templeton was diagnosed with a terminal illness and told that she had only months to live. That night she suffered a severe stroke; three days later she was dead. Family and friends grieved for the loss of a vibrant and charming woman.

As this book testifies, with Templeton’s too-sudden passing, the world of scholarship suffered its own terrible blow. Templeton was a gifted writer, a fine teacher, an imaginative scholar, and a loyal and principled colleague. The Department of History at the University of Melbourne had been her professional home for most of her working life. It is clear also that the Valtellinese community, which Templeton had known so well on her many visits to the region, had lost a sensitive chronicler and interpreter of the ambitions and aspirations of its wandering sons and daughters. In those lives and in the lives of their descendants, Templeton picked up the threads of an important human story. In her telling of it, she embraced a singular and powerful strand in the long history of the Valtellina itself. She has enriched understandings of the complex processes of migration to Australia, and she has made an original contribution to the historiography of the European migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At the time of her death, Templeton’s manuscript stood as a draft of 160,000 words. After her committed labour of years, and her travels back and forth between Australia and Italy, there was the danger that publication might not occur. As Templeton had conceived her task when she closed her laptop on that morning in April 2000, more than a year of work remained to polish the manuscript and to prepare it for the press. Much vital biographical and family history material necessary for an understanding of the central core of her book — a selection of the letters of the migrants themselves — existed only in various drafts. And no publisher had yet been found. But, in a collective act of professional generosity, a number of Templeton’s colleagues, led by John Lack, worked to bring the manuscript into its final form and to find a publisher. This story of good academic citizenship recalls the efforts made in the same department by R.M. Crawford and J.A. La Nauze in the 1950s to bring into print the manuscript of Margaret Kiddle’s pioneering Men of Yesterday (1958). She, too, had died with a great and vivid work barely complete; and she, too, was selflessly served by her colleagues and friends, who brought her work into print.

Kiddle’s very different story of migration and settlement eventually won the status of a classic. What Kiddle did for the Scots who settled the great acreages of Victoria’s Western District, so Templeton has now done for the Valtellinese Italians. In a pattern of chain migration sustained over the course of a century, they left their sometimes less tangible but no less important imprint in Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and far north Queensland. Some followed opportunity across the Tasman to New Zealand. Australasia offered in abundance the kind of work the Valtellinese reared in hard conditions at home — could do: mining, timber work, bush clearing, railroad and dam construction, and cane cutting.

Today, the Australian-born descendants of those migrants are to be found in all states and integrated throughout society. And yet, unlike Kiddle’s Scots, who came to build pastoral empires, the Valtellinese migrants saw themselves as temporary sojourners in Australia. Their strategy was to make money to pay debts, or to invest in or expand land and business at home. For many, whole lifetimes passed with Australia eventually claiming them by default; for others, life was resumed in Italy and families reunited sometimes after years of separation: sons from parents, brothers from siblings, husbands from wives and fathers from children. Over eight years, one sojourner survived as a timber worker in Western Australia by evoking the presence of his wife and his small child. Only then could he imagine that he was still sharing their family life. Of his young son, he wrote: ‘I have to content myself with thinking of him and imagine he’s in front of me happy and mischievous, just how he was, and I escape into my thoughts and am happy.’

The glory of this fine book is Templeton’s own eloquent voice — lucid, assured, compassionate. Templeton is deeply informed across all the manifold layers of her story. She has a sensitive capacity to understand and interpret the voices of the generations of migrants, whose lives and experience might so easily have been rendered null and void by neglect, indifference, the loss of vital records or the lack of someone prepared to break new ground. Templeton was a scholar with a commanding knowledge of the Australian and international literature of migration. She was at home in archives and libraries, and knew well that official records of various kinds could throw light on the origins and causes of journeys, the nature of migrations, and their ebbs and flows. But while such records might illuminate the demographic character and social processes of migration, she knew that in Australia itself it was difficult to find the letters or diaries that might tell something of the individual experiences of the protagonists. To catch
their absent voices, Templeton began a search for letters written by the emigrants, travelling to Valtellina on several occasions. Those Valtellina visits gradually yielded a rich trove of letters written from and to Australia between the 1860s and the 1950s, and eventually to the creation in Lombardy of the Archivio delle Lettere degli Emigranti.

Templeton’s book is in two parts. The first is her meticulous examination of the Valtellina–Australia migrations over the course of a century. The second provides a selection of 124 letters written across much of that century: the earliest date from the 1860s, and the last are written in the years 1952–53. Templeton is careful of the claims she makes for these letters. Most, she says, fail the usual tests of published letters — high style, wealth of factual information or prominent authorship. She rightly cautions care in reading them for broad generalisations about ‘the migrant experience’. Ultimately, the letters stand for the insights they offer not on collective experience but the concerns of a handful of individuals. With those caveats, the letters offer a rich and moving testimony on an experience that is integral to Australia’s own story. Like David Fitzpatrick’s selection of the letters of Irish emigrants in his mighty Oceans of Consolation (1994), Templeton’s humane scholarship reinforce an understanding of the ‘invisible ties’, the personal and social networks, which are crucial to the conduct of migrations.