Transnational Times

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Gianfranco Cresciani
THE ITALIANS IN AUSTRALIA
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CRESCIANI’S VERY READABLE revised edition of *The Italians* is particularly informative on the early history of Italo-Australia. First published in 1985 with ABC Enterprises, based on the excellent television series of the same name, this new edition promises to provide ‘the definitive account’ of Italian life in Australia ‘into the twenty-first century’. Cresciani’s treatment of certain aspects of Italian migration to Australia is worthy of such a bold claim. He is especially good at weaving together the histories of both countries to provide an instructive account of how the vicissitudes of one indelibly affected the other. His treatment of contemporary immigrant life, however, is rather dated.

The book can be divided into three sections. Early chapters explore how missionary work, geographic exploration and the vain desire to establish colonial ‘interests’ in the area characterised the endeavours of ‘official Italy’ in nineteenth-century Italo-Australia, while prospecting for gold and adventure were the motives of the relatively few ordinary Italian migrants at that time. Middle chapters cover the first half of the twentieth century, with detailed insights into its wars and their impact on migrant life. These years brought the first Italian immigrants, in search of a living and a better income, although, like the vast majority of Italian migrants, they ultimately intended (initially, at least) to establish themselves back in the homeland. This fact is largely overlooked by Cresciani, who is inclined to see Italian migrants as individuals intent on settlement in the new land, rather than as members of transnational households enacting the tried and tested economic strategy of return-migration for the benefit of their extended families. The phenomenon of repatriation (33.5% between 1960 and 1969), and the government inquiries that aimed to stem it, are largely absent from this text. Final chapters explore how missionary work, geographic exploration and the vicissitudes of one indelibly affected the other. His treatment of contemporary immigrant life, however, is rather dated.

The failure to update his research explains why the book is devoid of any reference to more recent transnational approaches to migration studies, and produces some contradictory findings. Cresciani writes about the migrants’ nostalgia for Italy, yet also argues that the migrants forgot their homeland or that they were uninterested in it. His penchant for the ‘frozen in time thesis’, where migrants get stuck in the traditional portrayal, needs to be tempered by an examination of studies on the second and subsequent generations, not to mention the phenomenon of ‘wog pride’ and the numerous works of theatre, fiction and biography by second-generation authors. Cresciani offers no glimpse of the not exactly provocative view that a unique Italian-Australian culture has developed with its own specific blend of cultural mores, continuously changing and adapting to circumstances as all cultures do.

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