RESEARCH ONLINE

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2007

Conclusion - The Italian Diaspora after the Second World War

James Hagan
University of Wollongong, jhagan@uow.edu.au

Gitano Rando
University of Wollongong, grando@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Hagan, J and Rando, G, Conclusion, in Hagan, J and Rando, G (eds), La Diaspora italiana dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale. The Italian Diaspora after the Second World War, Bivongi [RC], International AM Edizioni, 2007, 423-425.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Conclusion

Jim Hagan and Gaetano Rando

The Conference at Bivongi followed on others that had raised some serious questions about the Italian diaspora that occurred after the Second World War. We asked contributors to submit papers in three broad divisions, the first relating to the migrants' experience before departure, the second to experience in the host country, and the third to the cinematographic and literary interpretation of that experience. The papers contributed that successfully completed the peer review process are arranged in that sequence in this book.

We have called the first part of the book 'Departure and Return', because we found that the reasons for return, and the returning migrants' experiences, helped explain the original reasons for departure. It has long been conventional wisdom that the most powerful single motive for emigration after the War was poverty, and the Conference did not disturb that agreement. But it did elaborate on the forms of that poverty, and push the explanation of it back somewhat further to the structure of the Italian economy, especially in the agrarian South. The War accentuated, but did not cause, the degree of immiseration which pushed men, women and whole families out of their native land. Its origin lay in the relationship between landowner and landless, and it is not too fanciful to suggest that emigration may well have occurred even without the War and even taking into account the restrictions imposed by the fascist regime.

The poverty that Italians knew after the War no longer exists, but poverty still remains a reason for emigration from the South. Not from all of it; some urban areas of the South are now stable in population, or even show modest gains. But the small towns and villages in marginal agrarian areas have continued to lose population through the entire sixty years since the War ended, although not at the same rate. The causes of their poverty are now different, and the solutions the migrants have sought over the years have changed also.

An increasing proportion of people from the Italian south have sought their salvation over the years not in countries overseas, but in Europe and then in Italy itself. As

European countries have tightened restrictions on 'guest workers', so migrants from the South have found jobs in the more prosperous economy of Italy's North. Many of these latter-day migrants, unlike those of the fifties and sixties and even later, have not thought of migration as a permanent solution, and have returned, especially after they have saved enough to be able to solve some particular problem. They differ, too, in that they are no longer all unskilled workers. Some of them have marketable skills, and go where strong demand compels better wages. Others seek better qualifications in the universities of the North, and many of them stay there once they have graduated.

Much the same is true of those Italians who have emigrated overseas in the last twenty years or so, so much so the there has been some talk of a 'brain drain' from the South. The contrast between the background and qualifications of Italians who migrated to Australia in the post-War years and those who migrated towards the end of the century is sharp. The former were largely unskilled and unschooled, and they worked at labouring jobs when they arrived. The latter tend to be much better qualified, and they move directly into business and service industries.

Those migrants who were disappointed with what their new country seemed to offer returned to Italy if they were able to do so, believing that they had exchanged their old life for something no better or even worse. But often they found that the Italy they returned to was not the Italy they had left, and that once again, they were in a new country. As a group, their influence for change has been small, because their reasons for return have been individual.

It is not possible to say how many returned from countries overseas, but many of those who returned voluntarily often did so because they had not been able to make the progress they had hoped for in their working lives. They had left an Italy where their job prospects were poor, and they believed that in their new life they would be able to advance in status to become an independent proprietor, and perhaps even an employer of labour. For this they depended largely not only on the information and help from friends, neighbours or relations who had gone before them, but also on the larger networks of fellow countrymen that had evolved in the host country.

Networks of this kind developed wherever Italians went in large numbers. They had the primary purpose of helping migrants understand the ways of the new society of which they had become part, and offering help in times of need. They also served the purpose of finding employment and establishing business contacts. Some later migrants who had hoped for preference in employment were disappointed; the primary test that the established Italian employers applied was suitability for the job, and Italian entrepreneurs and would-be business proprietors often found that access to a compatriot clientele was not automatic.

In other words, over time Italians in commerce behaved increasingly like the business people of the host country. A parallel political adaptation seems likely; over a span of thirty or forty years, those Italians and their descendants who began life in their new country as hard workers without property often prospered, and their party political allegiance altered as they exchanged their bicycles for Mercedes. Outside their working lives, and independently of politics, they faced the cultural problem of coming to terms with a new set of customs and social values. Mere comprehension was extremely difficult in the post-War diaspora, especially for those who had come from a rural background where superstition was still powerful, who had little knowledge of the world outside their region, and practically no means of acquiring it. Were they to abandon their old ways of living for a way of life they found hard to understand? Or for the values of a society which out of prejudice often scorned their attempts at combining old and new?

These were themes that found expression in the films Italian migrants made, and in the literature they created. Rejection out of prejudice sometimes produced agony and despair. Even for those who escaped the worst of either, there was the continuous problem of deciding who they were, or what they or their children would become. Some welcomed as inevitable, some rejected, a hybrid amalgamation of values and customs. Some found refuge and even therapeutic comfort in nostalgia, and created a romantic version of the country that they had left behind forever.

Those who gave papers at the Conference founded their arguments on evidence provided by earlier scholarship. Sometimes the proceedings confirmed earlier findings and sometimes it re-interpreted them; but sometimes it broke new ground,

when scholars offered conclusions based on their own recent research. The insight was valuable, but subject to certain cautions, of which the researchers themselves were aware. In some of the newest research, the sample was small, and the conclusions suggestive rather than definitive; presentation and discussion centred on Southern Italy, although clearly the Centre and the North were involved; most papers about Italians overseas were based in Australia and Canada, and Argentina barely rated a mention; and the Australian and Canadian studies concentrated on small areas, rather than the entire society. The generalisations presented above under the heading 'Conclusion' need to be examined carefully, and before they can be presented with reasonable certainty, need to be subjected to detailed research - and perhaps the scrutiny of another conference.