

ITALIAN MIGRATION TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA BEFORE WORLD WAR ONE: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ETHNICITY AND CONFLICT¹

by Patrick Bertola

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Well before the mass arrivals of the post-World War Two period Italian migrants had arrived in Western Australia (WA) in sufficient numbers to constitute significant communities and to draw generally negative responses from a wide cross-section of the Anglo-Saxon population. Nowhere was the Italian presence more evident than in the eastern goldfields of WA where, from the 1890s, most of the Italian migrants concentrated and where they played a significant role in the economic and social development of the region. On these goldfields, an area centred on Kalgoorlie, migrants from the north of Italy made up more than half of a southern European minority that fluctuated from 1.5 and 4.3% of the population between the 1901 and 1933 Censuses.²

These Italian migrants exhibited a number of clearly defined characteristics. First, a majority of those coming to Western Australia before World War One came from only three provinces in the Lombardy region – Sondrio, Bergamo, and Brescia,³ and on the goldfields were concentrated in a few areas and industries: the majority found work in the gold mining and associated wood cutting industries. Secondly, the patterns of migration which included high rates of both immigration and emigration, led to a relatively low number of Italian females,⁴ and a high proportion of males of working age. Further, there were high flows of migrants recorded in the periods between 1900 and 1914 with peaks around 1901/02 and 1911/13.⁵ Thirdly, for much of the period up to World War Two there was a general antipathy towards Italians and other southern Europeans which was partly based on racial and cultural comparisons that inferred inferiority. Finally, the migrant workers played a critical role in the consolidation and survival of the gold mining industry, particularly when profits began to fall, a function that combined with other factors to heighten antipathy towards

the migrants. Significantly, the last two of these phenomena existed despite the fact that Italians and other southern Europeans made up a very small proportion of the population on the goldfields.

In spite of the cultural and economic importance of these migrants from the north, there has been little detailed research into their presence. Indeed, apart from the work of Gamba and Gentili which had other main purposes, much of the past research into Italian migration to the goldfields of WA during the pre-World War Two period has provided a descriptive outline or has been a small part of another study.⁶ Moreover, most of the studies have neither fleshed out social and cultural aspects of the life of migrant workers and families, nor examined in detail their interaction with members of the predominantly Anglo-Australian society of the gold fields. Recognising that such questions require a more extensive study, I propose here only briefly to examine the last two of the phenomena relating to ethnicity and economy. However, this preliminary work is part of a much larger documentary and oral history project seeking to examine in detail the Italian migrant presence on the goldfields before World War Two.

Comment on the early interaction between Italian migrants from the Lombardy region and the host culture needs to take at least two factors into account. One, it occurred in the context of a longer debate in the Colony of WA on the control of migration; and two, it involved conceptions of otherness, especially the notion of race, that were somewhat different, yet historically connected to present day usage. Both these aspects were revealed in the parliamentary debate on legislation to regulate migration and indentured migrant labour, legislation principally designed to exclude those

who 'do not belong to the European race...'⁷ It is clear, however, that the European was conceived as something more specific, which S.H.Parker, Colonial Secretary, intimated when he asked '[Did] we desire Western Australia to be overrun...to the exclusion of the Anglo-Saxon race?'⁸

Not only was this exclusivity and Anglo-centrism evident in contemporary usage, but it also helps to explain why inferiority was synonymous with being of the Italian race, that is, not being Anglo Saxon. In those areas of the social sciences which we now associate with anthropology, and to some extent in populist and legislative thinking, race had become the central organising and classifying concept, a position that the concept of culture now holds. While this older usage of race was not always racist, there were certainly examples of it being so. Indeed, in the nineteenth century some theorists attempted to link social theory, the origins of social groups,



Four generations of women: Maria Rinaldi with daughter Domenica, grand-daughter Irene and great-grand-daughter Ivy in Kalgoorlie in 1920s. Maria and husband Giovanni came to Victoria from the Lombardy region in 1880s. They moved with their children to the WA goldfields early in the 1900s.

and comparative anatomy and in so doing concluded that cultural differences and apparent differences in intelligence and 'civilisation' could be explained in terms of permanent and stationary hereditary capacities.⁹ If this were the case, a natural corollary was that there was a hierarchy of inferior or superior abilities among races and that this was also manifest in national achievements. In other words, it was held that social evolution mirrored physical evolution. With such conceptions of race, southern Europeans could be and were seen as a race separate from, and inferior to, northern Europeans, or more specifically to 'Europeans' defined as Anglo-Saxon.¹⁰

It is not surprising then that soon after their presence was evident in the Colony Italians were being defined as a separate race and classified as potentially 'undesirable migrants'. For example, during debate on the Immigration Restriction Bill in 1897 which Premier Forrest noted '[could] be administered in such a way as to prevent the introduction of undesirable persons',¹¹ F.C.Vosper, member for the goldfields seat of North-East Coolgardie noted that:

at some future time it might be considered necessary, in the interests of the Colony, to exclude Greeks, Hungarians, Italians, and other persons who were not coloured...[for] Persons of the nationalities mentioned had become a greater pest in the United States than the coloured races.¹²

Similarly, C.J.Moran, member for East Coolgardie, another goldfields seat in the Legislative Assembly, referred to the necessity of using the legislation not only 'to prohibit aliens or Asiatics, but also...[to] prohibit certain classes of Europeans from coming into this country.'¹³

Up to this time, the references to Italians as undesirable hinted at physical or cultural inferiority and stressed the need to maintain the essentially Anglo-Saxon character of the population. However, these factors soon were intertwined with economic questions, for the Italian migrants increasingly were concentrated in the gold mining and related industries where they were in competition with Anglo-Saxon males for employment. In this regard, their presence and the ensuing argument extended aspects of the conflict over the presence of Asiatic labour that had been ongoing since at

least the early 1870s. As a result, aliens in general and Italians in particular were, as Marie de Lepervanche has argued, 'desired and unwanted'.¹⁴ Desired, because mining, pastoral, agricultural, coastal shipping and pearling interests claimed that migrants enabled them to overcome a scarcity of labour, were thrifty and law-abiding, and 'worked harder and for less money than the whites'.¹⁵ Unwanted because metropolitan and labour interests claimed that migrants threatened cultural integrity and working conditions.

In the case of Italians, the emerging ethnic or racial division developed into more open conflict from the late 1890s. Arguably the timing was not so much connected with a mass influx of Italians, but rather it was more a function of when Italians started to arrive on the goldfields and how and why members of the host culture perceived them to be there. Italians began to appear in numbers and to gain employment when the gold mining industry was passing from the initial expansive period into a period of consolidation and rationalisation. From about 1898/99 companies faced more expensive mining operations, needed to secure and make new, large capital investments, and had to meet the demands for dividends from investors. Consequently they sought to cut labour costs, to introduce piece work, and to increase productivity. At the same time, a number of unprofitable or barren mines closed leading to a fall in numbers of miners employed and contributing to a rise in unemployment in the region. In contrast, it was argued that Italians arrived without English 'but [got] work immediately knowing at once where to go in order to obtain employment' in mines,¹⁶ a situation that labour and parliamentary representatives claimed was evidence of preference and migration under contract.

Not only were Italians apparently obtaining employment at the expense of local labour, but they also were used in the process of cutting costs. For example, at the Sons of Gwalia mine, north of Kalgoorlie, Herbert Hoover used Italians extensively in 1898 and 1899 to reduce employment and to cut costs. He did so by employing them to break a strike over conditions and piece rates, to replace teams of two drillers with one person, and to compete for contracts in underground work, a move designed to drive rates down.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the Italians, already culturally distinct and isolated, relatively powerless, and dependent upon the work became the object of growing ill-will.

In Kalgoorlie, where companies increasingly had to contend with refractory sulpho-telluride ores and the need to mine from greater depths, similar tensions began to appear as Italians were used underground. Although not as numerous as in outlying areas, the fact that companies employed them 'to get greater efficiency' in the costly and labour intensive work underground and because '[they] are the most steady workmen, and give us no bother'¹⁸ ensured that Italians quickly became the object of hostility that often was couched in racist terms. According to H. Daghish, the Labor Party Whip, they did not intermarry, did not intermix in mutually advantageous ways, and did not comply with 'our conditions of life' as their living habits were 'much inferior to those generally observed by Britishers'. If, as others had implied and Daghish had argued, 'we are all anxious to build up here, under the Southern Cross, a purely British race that shall be worthy of the traditions from which we sprung',¹⁹ then the Italians clearly had little to contribute.

The increasing numbers of Italians arriving in WA, their concentration on the goldfields, and the fact that men like Hoover and his company, Bewick Moreing, employed intermediaries to obtain labour, led to claims that Italians were arriving under contract and calls for the State Government to intervene. Early in 1902 the State Parliament debated a motion calling on the Commonwealth to enforce the Immigration Restriction Act strictly in order to contain the 'continued influx of undesirable aliens' into WA and to investigate the allegations that Italian labour was arriving illegally under contracts. Notwithstanding Premier Leake's resistance to calls for restrictions, in May the Commonwealth appointed Magistrate A.S. Roe to examine the claims. Much of the evidence about the migrants was circumstantial and relied on assertions. As a result, Roe concluded that there was no evidence of contracts and noted that 'the fact that the men go straight to friends of relatives...[at whose instigation they came]...has, in many cases, led to the supposition that they have come under contract.'²⁰

Continuing high levels of migration and the failure of Roe's conclusions to satisfy labour and much of the local community, led to renewed calls for some action. While unemployment increased among local miners, by 1904 southern Europeans, often collectively referred to as Italians, had risen in number to about 5% of the total underground workforce, with high

concentrations of up to 30% in mines that Bewick Moreing controlled. Popular agitation and pressure from local government leaders like the Mayor of Kalgoorlie who foresaw the 'danger of social disturbance'²¹ forced the James Government to commission an inquiry headed by A.Montgomery, the State Mining Engineer. Under terms of reference much broader than Roe's, it was to consider whether companies had given preference to non-British labour; to ascertain why the proportion of non-Britons had increased; to establish whether non-Britons were paid less; and to determine whether a command of English was essential for mine safety.

The principal outcome of the inquiry was a recommendation to prevent the employment of Italians and other 'foreigners' unable to pass a test of the English language applied by a Mines Inspector. While the Commissioners could not find reliable evidence regarding pay and preference, they did attribute the 'popular outcry' to 'the abnormal rate of increase of the aliens' in comparison with the British population.²² Such an increase, they believed, could lead to the employment of men whose lack of English would threaten safety and, therefore, they proposed that a language test be applied so that companies could only employ labour having a basic command of English.

While the test appeared to satisfy a number of concerns, in practice it did little to address the more basic issue of how or why companies employed southern Europeans. Like a number of regulatory measures, it relied on subjective assessments and was, therefore, relatively unenforceable. Indeed, Montgomery later complained that 'the language test is a nuisance to all concerned with it and there is always much temptation to relax it...'²³ Thus, with a lack of administrative action and the resistance of mines to controls over employment policies, it is not surprising that, while unemployment among skilled mining labour continued at high levels in centres such as Kalgoorlie, the numbers of southern Europeans on mines increased: by 1909 they accounted for over 6.5% of the workforce in Kalgoorlie alone.

The increased numbers of migrant labourers and consequent renewed agitation followed a reversal of the trend in the middle of the decade when numbers of immigrants coming into WA had fallen and coincided with renewed moves by companies to cut mining costs. As profitability and productivity stagnated gold mining companies set about improving the technical

efficiency of their mines by concentrating operations, by improving economies of scale, and by attempting to lift production from the workers they retained. In Kalgoorlie, for example, the total of workers underground began to fall most noticeably after 1909 and by 1914 there were about 500 (or 15%) fewer miners employed in this department of the industry. At the same

time, and in spite of the instruction in 1911 from P.Collier, Member for Boulder and Minister for Mines, that the language test be vigorously enforced, the numbers of Italians and other southern Europeans had increased. As a result, Kalgoorlie residents passed a motion at a large public meeting in July 1912 supporting Collier's promise to limit the employment of foreigners; condemning the influx of foreigners as 'inimical to the welfare of local British citizens...[and] detrimental to the interests of the State'; and calling for regulations under which 'no man should be allowed to work about a mine unless he was liable to be called upon for the defence of Australia.'²⁴

Whereas the arrivals of new immigrants subsequently fell, the numbers of Italians and other southern Europeans in the mines continued to increase. In February 1913, W.M.Deeble, Inspector of Mines at Kalgoorlie, reported that southern Europeans now made up 22.65% of the underground workforce.²⁵ Clearly, this was much higher than their proportion of the general population and served to fuel local agitation, particularly when, notwithstanding the evidence of unemployment among skilled mining labour, the Kalgoorlie Chamber of Mines protested that companies did not purposely give preference to foreigners, but were forced to do so by a shortage of labour.

On the eve of the First World War, clearly the concerns of the Anglo-Saxon population on the eastern goldfields were focussed on the presence of Italians and other 'foreigners' in the mines to the exclusion of 'Britishers'. However, any attempt to ascribe the ethnically based tensions on the eastern goldfields to racial or economic factors alone remains problematic. For, interwoven with the ill-will that the employment practices generated was a perception of cultural inferiority that owed much to longer term racial conceptions and which was confirmed in the minds of Anglo-Saxons by the lifestyle of the migrants, by their apparent willingness to be used in efforts to drive down wages and conditions, and by their inability to transcend the boundaries that

separated them from the host culture. What this does indicate is a more complex set of relationships which will form part of a more detailed research project extending to World War Two and taking account of the continuing tension on the eastern goldfields that briefly broke out in violence against southern Europeans in general and Italians in particular during 1916, 1919, and 1934.

As the research on migration involves a significant oral history component, Dr. Bertola would like to hear from migrants from Valtellina, Brescia or Bergamo who arrived in Western Australia before World War Two. He would also like to make contact with relatives of such migrants and can be contacted at the School of Social Sciences and Asian Languages, Curtin University, GPO Box U 1987, Perth 6001; telephone (09) 351 3329 or telefax (09) 351 3166.



Italian woodcutters with family and friends in front of the Home from Home Hotel in Kalgoorlie in 1926. The hotel was bought in 1925 by the Omodei and the Giannatti families. On weekends, Giovanni Omodei used to drive his truck to the nearby Karowang woodline to pick-up the Italian woodcutters to generate business for the hotel. In 1927, Omodei sold his share to Giannatti who continued to run the business until the hotel was destroyed by fire during the 1934 riots.

NOTES

1. These comments are preliminary in that they are made at the outset of a longer study of economic and social aspects of Italian migration before World War Two. The local economic aspects examined form one part of the study, a major part of which will be a series of interviews with surviving migrants from that era.
2. P. Bertola, 'Ethnic Differences in Kalgoorlie, 1893-1934', unpublished Honours thesis, Murdoch University, 1978, Appendix 14. In 1911, southern Europeans made up about 2.8% of the population of the statistical area centred on Kalgoorlie.
3. Data in Charles Price, *The Method and Statistics of Southern Europeans in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1963) Appendices 8-21, indicates that 64% of naturalised Italian migrants into WA by region of origin in the period 1896 to 1940 came from Lombardy.
4. In 1901 and 1911, for example, females made up only 5.3 and 6.5% respectively of the Italian born populations in and around Kalgoorlie.
5. At times during these periods there were also high rates of emigration. However, it is argued that because of the turnover and the tendency of Australians not to differentiate between individual Italians, this had little effect on the perception that there was a flood of 'undesirable' Italians into WA and the goldfields.
6. Charles Gamba, 'Italian Immigration to Western Australia: A Study in Economic History and Sociology', unpublished MA thesis, University of WA, 1949; Joseph Gentilli with Carlo Stransky and Charles Iraci, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil: Italian Migration to Western Australia, 1829-1946* (Marangaroo, WA: Italo-Australian Welfare Centre, 1983).
7. S.H. Parker, Colonial Secretary, speaking during a debate on the regulation of Chinese labour, *Western Australian Parliamentary Debates (hereafter WAPD)*, 2, 4 October 1893: 1031.
8. WAPD, 2, 4 October 1893: 1031
9. Much of the anthropological work upon which the conclusions were based involved innumerable measurements of head shape or anatomical features.
10. An example of this notion of inferiority can be found in the 1925 report of the South Australian Royal Commission into Plumbism (lead poisoning). Notwithstanding the stratification of the workforce and working places in the lead smelting works along ethnic lines, the Commissioner made remarks that suggested southern Europeans had some physical weakness that made them more susceptible to lead poisoning. Among other things, he noted that 'the foreign nationality groups' in the category of less than two years' employment had the greatest rates of plumbism - Maltese 81.89%, Greek 80.55%, Italians 76.67%, German 42.6%, British 28.4%, Scandinavian 12.5%.
11. WAPD, 11, 15 Nov. 1897: 425.
12. WAPD, 11, 23 Nov. 1897: 498.
13. WAPD, 11, 22 Nov. 1897: 495.
14. Marie de Lepervanche, 'Australian Immigrants, 1788-1940: Desired and Unwanted', in E.L. Wheelwright and Ken Buckley (eds), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1975): 72.
15. R.S. Haynes, WAPD, 11, 23 Nov. 1897: 498. Arguably, one of the greatest limiting factors in the early development of the Colony was the shortage of labour. Despite attempts to solve this through the importation of convicts between 1850 and 1868 it was not until the great influx of free labour during the gold rushes that WA gained the mass of labour necessary for extensive economic development.
16. Daghish, WAPD, 20, 29 Jan. 1902: 2604
17. See Hoover to Bewick Moreing and Co., Coolgardie, various dates in 1898, Sons of Gwalia Letter Book, MN270, Battye Library, Perth.
18. R. Hamilton, Manager of Great Boulder Pty. Gold Mines, and W.J. Loring, Manager of Bewick Moreing, Report of the Royal Commission on Foreign Contract Labour in Western Australia, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers (CPP)*, Session 19012, 2, Paper A44: 19, 5.
19. Daghish, WAPD, 20, 29 Jan. 1902: 2604
20. Report of the Royal Commission on Foreign Contract Labour in Western Australia, *CPP*, Session 19012, 2, Paper A44: 6, 8.
21. Mayor of Kalgoorlie to James, 14 Jan. 1904, Mines Department correspondence file (MD) 1603/04.
22. Report of the Royal Commission on the Immigration of Non-British Labour, *Votes and Proceedings of the Parliament of Western Australia*, 1904, 2, Paper A7: 6.
23. Montgomery to Secretary for Mines, 13 Feb. 1913, MD 787/12.
24. C.E. Eccles, Town Clerk, Kalgoorlie Municipal Council, to Collier, 17 July 1912, MD 787/12.
25. Deeble to Montgomery, 27 Feb. 1913, MD 787/12.