

FROM MOLINARA TO ADELAIDE: THE SETTLEMENT IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA OF A SMALL SOUTHERN ITALIAN COMMUNITY

by Danielle Carr

Danielle Carr completed an Honours degree in Italian in 1999 at Flinders University, Adelaide. This paper contains the results of some of the research that she carried out for her Honours thesis both in the Adelaide community and in Molinara. Her supervisor was Associate Professor Desmond O'Connor.

Molinara is a small Italian town situated approximately thirty kilometres north-east of Benevento in Campania, and around ninety kilometres north-east of Naples. In 1911 the town's population was 3,369 but, due to migration, today the number has been reduced to approximately 1,980. Until the early 1960s very few of the inhabitants lived outside the walls of the medieval fortified town. Inside the walls sewerage was rudimentary, many houses still had no electricity, and the only water available was from the public fountains. Bartering, rather than cash, was still the preferred method of exchange, and Molinara's economy was solely rural. Cereals and olive oil were the main products of the town and its outlying lands, which was also the local centre for grinding wheat into flour. Farming was not easy, as there was very little machinery, and until the 1950s most families used donkeys for transport and bullocks for ploughing the fields.

On 21 August 1962 Molinara was at the epicentre of an earthquake which fortunately caused few deaths, but much destruction. The earthquake all but destroyed the medieval section of the town, and many of the houses outside the walls were also damaged. Subsidies from the Italian government, along with contributions from the Molinarese community in Adelaide, helped to rebuild the town, which now exists almost entirely outside the walls of the medieval section. Today in the old walled part only a few houses, a church and the town's sole pizzeria have been restored, the rest still lies in ruins. The earthquake also marked the beginning of diversification of the town's economy: industrial and commercial enterprises have since sprung up and now exist alongside the traditional agricultural activities.

The early 1950s saw many Italians from Southern Italy migrate to Australia, and Molinara was no exception. The average income of a southern

Italian was less than half that of Italians in the North, well over 50 percent of the labour force was in agriculture, a quarter of the population was illiterate, and the number of unemployed ranged from between 33 and 50 percent in the rural areas.¹ It is therefore little wonder that many southern Italians wished to leave their village in search of a better life. The exodus from Italy occurred mainly from these rural areas in the poor, agriculturally-based southern regions. The loss of inhabitants from the region of Campania was substantial, such that by 1981 there were almost 78,000 *campani*² living permanently outside of Italy.³

Between the years 1945 and 1982 approximately 300 *molinaresi* (fifteen percent of the population) migrated to Australia, nearly all of whom settled in Adelaide. Of these, just 38 later returned permanently to Italy.⁴ The peak decade of Molinarese migration to South Australia was 1955 to 1964, with the highest number, 92 migrants, settling in Adelaide in the two years 1959 and 1960 as part of a strong migration chain. The reasons for this group migration include not only the drive for economic betterment but also a natural calamity, the earthquake in Molinara in 1962. Ironically, the injection of Italian government funds in the reconstruction period helped improve living conditions and created new employment prospects for those who stayed behind.

Today very few South Australian *molinaresi* live outside of the Adelaide metropolitan area. All initially chose Adelaide because they had friends and relatives who were already there, who were willing to sponsor them, and who reported that work was plentiful and wages were high. Once the newcomers arrived, they decided to stay because they found people from their own region who could help them through the traumatic first months. Some *molinaresi* had initially wanted to



Panoramic view of Molinara as rebuilt after the earthquake of 1962.

emigrate to the United States, Canada or Argentina, but had found that it was much easier to obtain permission to come to Australia.⁵ All were totally convinced that Australia offered far more opportunities for them than did Molinara. The *molinaresi* are known for having *braccia lunghe e lingua corta* (long arms and a short tongue), i.e., they have the reputation of being people of action rather than words, and as such are people who have worked hard to create comfortable lives for themselves in their new country. The small proportion of *molinaresi* who returned to Italy underscores the successful integration of the Molinarese community into South Australian society and the close bond (linguistic, social, familial, religious, cultural) that the members of the community have established with each other in Adelaide.

Amongst the first three *molinaresi* to land in South Australia was Antonio Girolamo, who arrived in Adelaide on 11 October 1927.⁶ Girolamo was born in 1890 and as a young man had spent eight years in the U.S.A. He returned to Molinara just prior to the outbreak of World War 1, because

he did not want to fight for the United States. He was conscripted into the Italian army, and during the course of the war was captured and became a prisoner of war in Germany. His return to Molinara at the end of the war was short-lived, as he quickly began looking for alternative lands in which he could make his fortune. His refusal to fight for the US army meant that he was not allowed to return to America, and Argentina (which was a popular destination for *molinaresi* at the time) did not appeal to him due to the poverty, dirtiness and the hard times reported by early Molinarese migrants. A friend of his from the nearby town of San Giorgio La Molara told him of his friend, Giuseppe Catalano (from Ceppaloni in the Benevento province), who had already migrated to Australia and was residing in Broken Hill. Girolamo contacted Catalano, and asked him to arrange an *atto di chiamata* (sponsorship). After several months Girolamo was given permission to emigrate to Australia. He left Molinara in August 1927, leaving behind two young daughters and his pregnant wife. Three months after his arrival in Adelaide, his wife gave birth to their third daughter.



The medieval town of Molinara today. The earthquake of 1962 all but destroyed the medieval town, and it has been left virtually untouched since.



The Church of Santa Maria dei Greci. The earthquake caused considerable damage to the church, and it is one of the few buildings in the medieval town currently in the process of being restored.

In 1939, after being separated from his family for twelve years, Antonio Girolamo had saved enough money to bring them out to Australia. In Italy his wife sold all of their possessions and made preparations for the long journey but the Second World War broke out just eight days before the planned departure of Girolamo's wife and three daughters, and they were unable to leave. Six more years passed, during which time Girolamo had no news of his family in Italy, nor they of him. At the end of the war a letter from Girolamo arrived in Molinara, via the Italian Red Cross. In it he once again asked his family to join him in the country where he had by now been living for eighteen years. His daughters, however, had grown up, and they were reluctant to leave Molinara. The eldest was married and both the younger two were engaged. Their mother wrote and explained this to their father, who thought that it was important for at least the youngest daughter to come. Once again, Girolamo's wife started preparing for the voyage to Australia, which she finally made in November 1948, with her eldest daughter's husband, who had decided to migrate along with the mother and the younger sister. They arrived in Adelaide in February 1949 and were joined by the eldest daughter the following August. The youngest daughter, Maria, who had married her fiancé Giuseppe in 1948, left Molinara with her husband in October 1949. They arrived in Adelaide in time to spend Christmas with the family. Maria was pregnant. As the couple alighted in Adelaide from the train that they had caught in Melbourne, Antonio Girolamo started to cry. It was the very first time that he had seen his youngest daughter. She was now 22 years old. Giuseppe, the youngest daughter's husband, says that he later asked Antonio Girolamo what had prompted his tears at the train station. Girolamo replied: *'Mi chiedo se fosse la figlia o la moglie'* 'I kept wondering whether this was my daughter or my wife'). Just as he had left his wife pregnant with Maria in 1927, so Maria arrived pregnant with his grandson in Adelaide in 1949.

The migration story of Antonio Girolamo, who arrived at the head of a migration chain, is a vivid reminder of the hardships that Italian migrants endured before World War 2 and in the early post-war period. The Molinarese migrant group is particularly interesting because it is a case of large-scale migration from one small village

and, at the point of arrival, of a settlement pattern of limited geographical confines (the north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide). The difficulties of settlement were typical of those experienced by many other Italian migrants to Australia in the 1950s and 60s: the encounter with a monocultural society, the language barrier, the unfamiliar cityscape and landscape, the problem of finding suitable employment, the lack of organised leisure-time activities and subsequently, as the children were born and grew up, the struggle to transmit to the second generation the language, culture and beliefs of the parents. Like the *agnonesi*⁷ of William A. Douglass's study, the *molinaresi* in Adelaide share with the *molinaresi* in Molinara 'a common thread that runs through the lives of people residing in ... different parts of the world ... whose orientation and behaviour are in at least some respects conditioned by a continued loyalty to birthplace'.⁸

While the visible links with the town of Molinara remain strong through family ties and return visits, the links with contemporary Italy are arguably more tenuous. A pointer to this is the extent to which the *molinaresi* in South Australia use Italian-language media. Interestingly, the local Italian radio station is popular (because it focuses on the Australian-Italian community, its activities, local sport, and Italian music and songs of yesteryear), but Italian television from RAI-TV is less so, presumably because it reports mainly on Italian politics and current affairs in Italy, which are of little interest to the average Italian-Australian.

The *molinaresi* of Adelaide are a close-knit community: they mainly frequent local relatives and *paesani* and the all-important Molinara Sports and Social Club, established in 1971. The attractive club was originally designed to be a focal point for the first generation and their children, but it now has an uncertain future because it is all but ignored by the second and third generation who are fully integrated into South Australia's broad and diverse society. The economic betterment experienced by the first generation migrants has brought with it the feeling of being 'between two worlds': life in modern-day Australia where the sense of loyalty to Molinara is defended and needed, and nostalgia for the earlier life in the Molinara of their roots, a youthful experience that today, with the passing of time, grows increasingly distant. Just as the Adelaide *molinaresi* had left Italy behind, now Italy has left



Group gathering of the Chiuchiolo, Sebastiano, Gentilcore and Monaco families at Lillian Street, Findon. The Monacos returned to Molinara permanently in 1989.



Post-christening party attended by the Gentilcore, Caruso and Boffa families.



Soon after migrating to Adelaide, Rocco and Rosa Longo celebrated their wedding with other Molinaresse paesani.



Luigi Chiuchiolo (dec.) in Melbourne, January 1956 after disembarking from the Neptune.

them behind. One migrant interviewed succinctly summed up the anguish stemming from his bond with Molinara: *Soffrivo e soffro ancora che sono nato là ma resto qua* ('I suffered then and I still suffer now because I was born there but I remain here').

Apart from family and relatives, today amongst Adelaide's Italians the most enduring and visible connection with Molinara is the devotion to, and celebration of, the town's patron San Rocco, a bridging emblem of identity and the annual reminder of the presence and continuation of age-old traditions and rituals. Established in Adelaide in 1957, the *fiesta* has been transposed from the traditional liturgical date of 16 August to the second Sunday in January, in mid-summer, so as to encourage maximum participation of devotees, who today number more than two thousand.⁹

How long will the 'Adelaide Molinara' survive? Like Italian communities everywhere, the *molinaresi* in Adelaide are concerned about the maintenance in their families of their language, culture and traditions. As the age of the community increases, so too does the distance between the elderly *molinaresi*, enthusiastic supporters of the club and of the *fiesta*, and the second and third generation descendants, for whom the migratory journey from Molinara has become the legendary tale of parents and grandparents.

Photographs supplied by the author.

NOTES

- ¹ M. Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1982*, New York, Longman Group Limited, 1984, p. 357.
- ² People from the Italian region of Campania.
- ³ G. Montroni, 'Popolazione e insediamenti in Campania (1861-1981)'. In *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni dall'Unità a oggi. La Campania*. Eds. P. Macry and P. Villani, Milan, Einaudi, 1990, p. 250.
- ⁴ M. Cirocco, 'Il fenomeno migratorio ed i cambiamenti della struttura socio-economica in un paese del meridione d'Italia. Molinara, dal 1891 ad oggi'. (The migration phenomenon and changes to the socio-economic structure of a southern Italian town. Molinara, from 1891 to the present day) University essay, s.a., s.l., supplied by author.
- ⁵ There is a large Molinarese community in Argentina, and smaller ones in the United States, Canada and Venezuela, but most of these migrants left Italy before World War 2.
- ⁶ Of the other two, Rocco Luigi Cirocco arrived six weeks earlier, on 27 August 1927, on the 'Città di Genova' and Michele Gentilcore arrived with Antonio Girolamo on the *Palermo* on 11 October.
- ⁷ People from the town of Agnona
- ⁸ W.A. Douglass, *Emigration in a South Italian Town. An Anthropological History*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1984, p. 1.
- ⁹ Antonio Paganoni and Desmond O'Connor, *Se la processione va bene ... Religiosità popolare italiana nel Sud Australia*, Rome, Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1999, p. 140.



Molinara today.