

PATRIMONY ON PARADE

The Collection, Preservation and Exhibition of the Italo-Australian Documentary Heritage at the State Library of New South Wales

by Jim Andrighetti

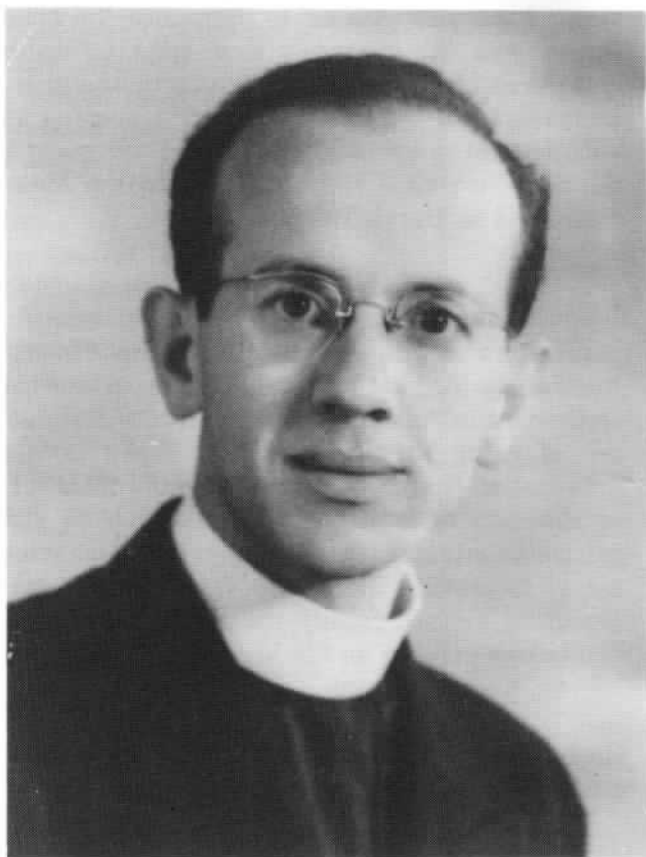
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On the eve of World War II, Father Giuseppe La Rosa, an Italian priest and the founder of *La Fiamma*, arrived in Sydney, newly ordained from Rome. Although La Rosa spent only a decade on Australian soil, he left a bountiful legacy for Italian-Australians. Until now his achievements have been largely unacknowledged, reduced to a footnote in Italo-Australian historiography and omitted from the canon of the Australian Catholic experience.¹ The State Library of New South Wales was granted access to the personal papers of Father La Rosa, previously held in private hands, for an exhibition which has elevated this remarkable prelate from relative obscurity to the purview of Australian history.

From March to July 1995, the State Library of NSW presented the exhibition, *La Dolce Vita?: Italian-Australians of NSW*, a milestone in the library's public programs. The first major exhibition on the twentieth-century Italian presence in NSW, it illuminated aspects of the bittersweet lives of ordinary and extraordinary Italians eclipsed by the historical record. One astute reviewer doubtlessly had La Rosa in mind when he referred to the small epiphanies awaiting visitors to the exhibition.² *La Dolce Vita?* drew largely on the nascent archive on Italian migration to NSW at the State Library. Since the inception in 1989 of The Italians in New South Wales Project, a joint venture of the Library and the Italian Historical Society (NSW), which operates under the auspices of Co.As.It., the Italo-Australian documentary heritage of NSW has been assiduously collected and preserved in the Library for future researchers.

When war broke out, Father La Rosa was working on the staff of the Apostolic Delegate, The Vatican's representative in Sydney.³ He was chiefly responsible for monitoring Vatican Radio,

transmitting messages from Italian families to their loved ones in Australia.



Father Giuseppe La Rosa, c.1947. Courtesy of Domenico La Rosa.

In 1942 Archbishop Gilroy appointed La Rosa Chaplain of the Italian community. He compiled a pocket-size prayer book, *L'amico del prigioniero* (The Prisoner's Friend) (1943), for distribution among the faithful who were interned. Thousands derived solace from this compendium, among them La Rosa's father and brothers behind the wire. His family had migrated from Calabria to Australia between the wars.

In the early years of the Cold War Father La Rosa was in the vanguard against anti-religious forces. In 1945 he formed the San Francesco Catholic Italian Association to propagate a richer Christian lifestyle among the laity. He was also an organiser of the Catholic sponsored aid committee, Relief to Italy from Australia, which assisted the war victims of Italy. In the mid-1940s La Rosa proposed the idea for an Italian Catholic newspaper to counter the influence of *Il Risveglio*, organ of the secular Italia Libera Movement. Originally to be titled *L'Apostolo* (The Apostle), the newspaper began publication as *La Fiamma* in 1947. He edited early issues of the paper before editorial responsibilities were assumed by the Capuchin Franciscan Friars at Leichhardt, under the direction of Father Anastasio Paoletti.

Returning to Italy in 1959, La Rosa embarked on a distinguished career in the Vatican. In 1973 he visited Melbourne as a member of the Papal Legation for the 42nd International Eucharistic Congress. On his retirement in 1985, La Rosa was appointed Supranumerary Protonotary Apostolic.

The State Library of NSW has always collected material such as correspondence, diaries, photographs and pictures recording the participation of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds in the history of NSW. The historical record of the Anglo-Celtic majority of the population has, however, overshadowed that of the ethnic minorities in what historian Gianfranco Cresciani has described as *l'egemonia della storiografia* [the hegemony of historiography].⁴ A consequence of such exiguous sources has been the marginalisation of various groups from the recounting of Australian history. During the 1980s the Library made a concerted effort to redress this imbalance in its collections and to reflect more adequately the State's cultural diversity.⁵ The salutary lessons learnt from this proved invaluable in consolidating the Library's partnership with the Italian Historical Society (NSW).

The identification of Father La Rosa's papers as a significant collection of Italo-Australian documentary heritage worth preserving in the State Library could not have been achieved so quickly without the Society's connections. When La Rosa died in 1990, his personal papers passed into the custody of his brother, Domenico. In 1993 I was introduced to Domenico La Rosa by his longtime friend, legal associate (both men

were solicitors) and President of the Italian Historical Society, Peter Tesoriero. Through him I developed an appreciation for the significance of Father La Rosa's contribution to his compatriots in Australia.

Later I approached Domenico for access to his brother's papers, specifically for my research towards *La Dolce Vita?* and ultimately for their preservation microfilming by the Library. At the time Domenico had been compiling a tribute to his brother, incorporating Father Giuseppe's memoir, *Dieci anni tra gli Italiani in Australia, 1939-1949* (1988), currently in press. Having just read Ian Hamilton's *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (1992), I was slightly more sensitive than usual to the possible caveats imposed by families on the use of papers in their keeping. My concern proved unwarranted; Domenico gave me unstinting assistance and freely placed his brother's papers at my disposal. The papers are shortly to be copied for the Library's collections.

The State Library accepted an invitation from the Italian Historical Society to preserve jointly the State's Italian documentary heritage. The genesis of this venture owes much to the indefatigable efforts of the Society's inaugural President, Father Adrian Pittarello. A Scalabrinian priest and Director of the Migration Studies Centre, Pittarello has published widely on Italian Catholic migrants in Australia. The NSW Project is modelled on the partnership between the State Library of Victoria (SLV) and the Italian Historical Society of Victoria (IHSV), established in 1983, the first of its kind in Australia to link successfully a mainstream collecting institution and an Italian community organisation.

While the NSW Project has sought to emulate the success of its southern counterpart, some fundamental distinctions can be drawn between the two. The SLV has received more accessions, largely the result of the greater emphasis on copying records such as correspondence and particularly photographs, donors preferring to lend originals. The IHSV as the proactive partner has been directly responsible for significantly augmenting the SLV's holdings of Italo-Australian documentary materials. Stringent economies of scale in recent years have, however, restricted the SLV's input to the venture. Despite this, the IHSV has pursued its co-operative collecting commitments, spurred on by an impressive exhibitions program. Unlike

the IHS (NSW) it retains its own collection, now burgeoning, including duplicate material awaiting transfer to the SLV. The administrative resources of the IHSV are considerable compared with the IHS (NS) where one part-time field officer has been employed for short terms, funded by the Australian Multicultural Foundation and the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW. The fact that the IHSV has attracted the largesse of various funding bodies and prominent Italian benefactors can be largely attributed to the quality of the project it has undertaken and to the status and influence of its chairman for twelve years, Sir James Gobbo. Unfortunately, Sydney's Italian community has no equivalent advocate; a salient factor when the corporate sponsorship represented approximately half the total budget for *La Dolce Vita*?

Furthermore, the State Library of NSW, unlike the State Library of Victoria, has assumed the leadership role in the NSW Project and has acquired substantial collections of personal papers and organisational records, unrivalled in Melbourne. The largest collection is the papers of former radio broadcasting couple, Mamma Lena and Dino Gustin. Other voluminous accessions are the records of FILEF (NSW Branch), the Dante Alighieri Society (Wollongong Branch), the San Francesco Catholic Italian



Mamma Lena Gustin at 2CH with her husband and program producer Dino (standing), and English-language announcer Friel Smith, c.1963. Photo: Brian Bird.

Association, the Italia Libera: Australian-Italian Anti-Fascist Movement (NSW Committee) and the National Italian-Australian Women's Association (NSW Branch). Some major personal collections include the papers of journalist and broadcaster, Pino Bosi; the former State parliamentarian, George Paciullo and the celebrated artist, Antonio Dattilo Rubbo.

It became apparent early in the life of the NSW Project that without full-time staff on the IHS (NSW) much of the collecting impetus would fall to the Library. In the past two years, however, the important field work carried out by the Society's Louise Bayutti has identified materials for likely deposit in the Library. The State Library acts independently and on advice from the Society in making approaches to individuals and organisations. As Co-ordinator of the Project at the State Library, I am responsible for the final appraisal, acquisition and cataloguing of Italo-Australian records, and any related reference and copyright enquiries. The archival principles of provenance and original order are observed in arrangement and description of these records.

The State Library's commitment to improving access to the Italo-Australian documentary heritage in its collections has been assisted by generous funding from the Australian Multicultural Foundation. This funding enabled the library to employ for a short term an additional archivist to assist with the cataloguing of incoming English-language collections. Apart from the Library's production of aids for researchers, brief collection entries are regularly submitted for publication to the National Library of Australia's *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia*.

The recently published *Italians in NSW: A Guide to Archives in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales* lists the majority of private archives collected by the Italians in the NSW Project.⁶ The *Guide* covers mainly records of the twentieth century. The sketchbooks of the influential portrait painter Giulio Anivitti, in Sydney in the 1870s are the outstanding feature of the small amount of material relating to last century. Personal papers of individuals from all walks of life predominate in the *Guide*. As well, the records of various associations reflect their social, cultural, religious and political agendas. A range of commercial activities is glimpsed, but business records are still under-represented in the Project.



The Sydney Fascist Party assembled to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the March on Rome, Sydney, 1932. Photo: Sam Hood.

Italian citing the occasion as the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, 28 October 1932, at the Consul General's residence at Potts Point. However, Hood did not take the photograph on that day. A search of Hood's 1932 day book of appointments, acquired by the Library in 1993, revealed that the nearest entry to the above date was unequivocally for Sunday 6 November: 'Consul Marchesi / 2.45 No.10 Wylde St PP. / Group 50-'.⁹

The photograph reproduced here and in *La Dolce Vita?* was not published in the local Italian press, neither in *Il Giornale Italiano* nor in the *Italo-Australian*. A notice, however, did appear from Felice Rando, Secretary of the Sydney *Fascio*, informing its members of the availability of photographs taken when they had recently attended the Consul General's residence.⁹

A small box of negatives labelled 'Italian Consul' has recently been identified among a further consignment of Sam Hood's images. The Italian Consulate's patronising of Hood's studio unwittingly created the evidence, as in the photograph of the Sydney Fascists, by which the

authorities identified Italians for internment.

La Dolce Vita? also introduced many visitors to E.O. Schlunke's literary depictions of Italian prisoners of war on the homefront, immortalised in his acclaimed short fiction. He was the first Australian writer to chronicle and satirise the impact of Italian POWs as farm labourers on a rural community. Schlunke's diaries of 1944-45 record his experiences as *padrone* (boss) of these prisoners on his wheat and sheep property near Temora in the Riverina. One of the prisoners under his charge, Giuseppe Maringoni, recurs as a character of the same name in several stories. In these diaries the seeds for Schlunke's fiction were sown, which sprouted into a sheaf of stories in the *Bulletin* before the migration boom of the 1950's.

Apart from its primary collecting role, the Italians in NSW Project has contributed markedly towards raising the profile of the State Library among Italian communities. From 1991 the Library has enjoyed unprecedented contact with the Italian Consulate through the former Consul General, Dr Fabio De Nardis. He

presented a range of opportunities and initiatives have been afforded to the Library, including the venue for international symposia and travelling exhibitions, joint publishing ventures and a sister-relationship with an Italian library. The Italian Historical Society (NSW) and The Library Society have jointly sponsored various lectures and talks. The State Library Press has published two books sponsored by the National Italian-Australian Women's Association, *Growing up Italian in Australia* (1993) and *Buon Appetito* (1994). Magic Boot Entertainment, the leading distributor of Italian feature films, has regularly screened classics, the contemporary and the avant-garde of Italian cinema in the Library's Metcalfe Auditorium. On the second anniversary of the Project, *Nel Nuovo Paese*, a small exhibition of materials was mounted at the Club Marconi at Bossley Park, in Sydney's outer-western municipality of Fairfield. Further afield, in a bid to promote the Project in country areas, *La Dolce Vita?* travelled to Griffith for a short engagement in September last year.

The Italians in NSW Project continues and the State Library welcomes additions to the collection. Enquiries about, and offers of material to, the Project should be directed to Jim Andrighetti at the State Library of NSW, Macquarie Street, Sydney 2000. Telephone (02) 230 1506, fax (02) 230 4086.



Bicycle thieves? E.O. Schlunke flanked by two Italian POWs on his farm at Reefton, near Temore, NSW. Courtesy of David Schlunke.

ENDNOTES

1. Pino Bosi, *On God's Command: Italian Missionaries in Australia*. CIRC, North Fitzroy, Vic, 1989, pp. 93, 95, 127; Gaetano Rando, 'Aspects of the History of the Italian Language Press in Australia 1885-1985' in Gaetano Rando and Michael Arrighi (eds), *Italians in Australia Historical and Social Perspectives*, Department of Modern Languages, University of Wollongong and the Dante Alighieri Society-Wollongong Chapter, Wollongong, NSW, 1993, p. 205; Frank Mecham, *The Church and Migrants, 1946-1987*, St. Joan of Arc Press, Haberfield, NSW, 1991; Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History*, 3rd rev. ed., NSW University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1992; and Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia: A Social History*, Collins Dove, North Blackburn, Vic, 1992.
2. Mark Thornton, 'Dolce vita, storia amara' *The Sydney Review*, No. 75, May 1995, p.10
3. Little has been published on the work of the Apostolic Delegation. For a recent treatment on the conflict between Australian Irish-born bishops and the Italian Apostolic Delegates, see Richard Hall, 'Should you ever go across the sea from Ireland...' *Eureka Street*, Vol.5 No.2, March 1995, pp. 24-29.
4. Gianfranco Cresciani, 'I documenti per la storia dell'emigrazione negli archivi australiani' *Altretalia*, 8, luglio-dicembre 1992, p. 142.
5. Jim Andrighetti, 'The Italian Connection' *New Librarian* Vol.1 No.7, September 1994, p.27.
6. James Andrighetti (comp.), *Italians in New South Wales: A Guide to Archives in the Mitchell Library*, State Library of New South Wales (Mitchell Library Manuscripts Guides, No. 17) State Library of NSW Press, Sydney, 1995.
7. Desmond O'Grady, *Correggio Jones and the Runaways: Italo-Australian Connections*, CIS, Carlton, Vic, 1995, pp. 107-112.
8. This photograph was reproduced devoid of much of its informational content and context in Gianfranco Cresciani, *The Italians*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, 1985, p. 70.
9. *Il Giornale Italiano*, 12 November 1932, p.3.