

PORT PIRIE'S ITALIANS AND FASCISM

by Desmond O'Connor

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"Darkness, smallness, noisiness, fatness and smelliness formed an Australian stereotype of the Italians", wrote Bromley in 1955 in his thesis on the 'problem' of assimilation of the *molfettesi* in Port Pirie.¹ Bromley had in mind Southern rather than Northern Italians, for it was they who above all were perceived as the 'olive peril' for Anglo Australia in the first half of this century.² According to Lyng (1927), Southern Italians unfortunately possessed the wrong racial strains, having been "impoverished by an infusion of inferior African and Asiatic blood".³ Bromley himself claimed that Southern Italians had "made it more difficult for the North Italians to be assimilated in Australia" because they had a "passionate impulsiveness" (they used a knife in brawls) and were "clannish, illiterate".⁴ At the height of such xenophobia and racism - during World War II - the Molfettese community of Port Pirie bore the brunt, in South Australia, of the Australian Army's antagonism: though they made up only 12% of the South Australian Italian population (Table 1), at Loveday in May 1943 they accounted for half of the State's Italian internees.⁵

The community of settlers from Molfetta (prov. Bari, Puglia) began to establish itself in Port Pirie around the turn of the century. According to Gentilli and Corrieri, the first Italians settled in Port Pirie in the mid-1880s.⁶ But there is evidence that Italians, including Southern Italians, were in the area some time before this. Although Port Pirie (situated 227 km north of Adelaide on Spencer Gulf) was not incorporated as a town until 1876 and did not attract a large population until the Broken Hill Associated Smelters began operating there in 1889, it was, even in the 1860s, a busy port that was used for direct shipments overseas of the wheat and wool produced by hinterland pastoralists.⁷ By the 1880s, ships were bringing as many as two thousand sailors a year to the Port, and some of these jumped ship.⁸ The first South Australian census to record nationalities shows that in 1881 eight Italians were already residing in the area (Table 1).

Italian seamen and fisherman had been active along the South Australian coasts almost from the time of the colony's proclamation: Antonio

TABLE 1: *South Australia: Italian-Born Population in South Australia and in the Local Government Area of Port Pirie, 1881-1947 (for 1881-1911 Port Pirie is recorded as part of the SA County of 'Victoria'). Source: Australian Census.*

Year	South Australia			Port Pirie		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
1881	133	8	141	8	-	8
1891	163	23	186	6	-	6
1901	293	34	327	18	4	22
1911	153	31	184	45	7	52
1921	296	48	344	44	18	62
1933	1203	286	1489	148	66	214
1947	1662	766	2428	168	109	277

Giannoni, from Rimini, left the *Recovery* at Port Adelaide in 1839 and in the 1840s was a whaler and a sealer at Victor Harbour and in St. Vincent's Gulf.⁹ Salvatore Cilento, from Naples, was a boat builder and sea trader who also plied the Gulf from the 1870s.¹⁰ In the same decade two sailors from Puglia were living in the colony: Antonio Angelinawich [sic], born in Lésina (Foggia), was given a certificate of service as master of a vessel in 1874 by the Marine Board of South Australia;¹¹ Francesco Ventura, born in Brindisi, arrived in South Australia in 1875 and is recorded as becoming naturalised in 1895, at which time he resided at Port Lincoln. Furthermore, the Adelaide Hospital admissions register shows that crewmen from Genoa, Venice, Trieste, Naples and Palermo were working in South Australia from the 1850s.¹² It seems certain that many of these sailors, on their return to Italian ports, would have told of the opportunities available in this 'respectable' Australian province.

The establishment of a colony of Molfettese fishermen at Port Pirie from the 1890s coincided with the expansion of the Port as an industrial centre. The town's population grew in this period from less than 1,000 in 1881, to 4,000 in 1891, to double this number in 1901. The demand for fish from the abundant local waters came not only from the inhabitants of Port Pirie but also from the growing population in inland Broken Hill. But as early as 1898 there is evidence of friction between the Anglo Australian fishermen and the new Italian arrivals. In that year a complaint was lodged with the Fisheries Department that the 'twelve or fourteen fishing boats' belonging to Italians at Port Pirie were fishing out the waters because their boats were carrying 'from 200 to 700 fathoms of nets'.¹³ The Molfettese fishermen, accustomed to being marginalised, even in their own country, continued to fish in their open 'plank boats', staying away from shore and their competitors for weeks at a time.¹⁴ Initially, as was their wont, they did not consider their migration to be permanent.¹⁵ Amongst the list of passengers departing from Adelaide for overseas in 1903-1904, fourteen common Molfettese names are recorded. Some fishermen subsequently returned to Port Pirie with their relatives, and these included a number of women, who joined the original four shown in the census of 1901. By 1947 the male:female ratio had reached 3:2 (Table 1).

Few Italians from other regions settled in Port Pirie. The only conspicuous group from another

region was initiated by Angelo Bassani who arrived with his wife towards the end of the 1880s and became a fish vendor.¹⁶ Bassani, from Rocca d'Arsiè (prov. Belluno), subsequently brought out other *paesani* who found work at the Smelters. An analysis of the Passenger Statements for the years 1927-1940 gives an idea of how closely knit the Port Pirie Italian community became: of the two and a half thousand Italian passengers who arrived in South Australia by ship from overseas in this period, 193 stated that their intended residence was Port Pirie. Of these 193 (113 males, 80 females), 171 (c.90%) were born in Molfetta, 7 more were from other towns in Puglia, and 10 were from Arsiè. Over one-fifth (41) of the 193 were returnees, having lived in Port Pirie previously, and 57 of the 97 adult males gave their profession as sailor or fisherman (18 were labourers or farm labourers, 4 were tailors, 3 carpenters, and 2 mechanics).

Once the Consular Agent for Italy in South Australia, Giuseppe Amerio, had set up the first Fascio in Adelaide in 1927, he realised that a unique opportunity awaited him to create a second branch at Port Pirie.¹⁷ Not only were these Italians all gathered in the one small locality, but almost all were from the same Italian town, many were inter-related, nearly all worked in the one industry (fishing), and there was frequent movement between Molfetta and Port Pirie. Furthermore, although the fishermen were absent from Port Pirie for weeks at a time, they always returned to shore to celebrate religious festivals especially the feast of the *Madonna dei Martiri*, which could easily be 'fascistised'.

The Port Pirie Fascio was formally established on the Easter weekend of 1929 when 170 Italians turned up at the parish hall of St Mark's Catholic Church and 107 membership subscriptions were paid. The following September, the festival of the *Madonna dei Martiri* became the occasion for the inauguration of the Fascio's banner, a celebration attended by the local priest, who spoke in Italian of the close bond between the Fascist regime and the Church, and by the Lord Mayor of Port Pirie, who acknowledged that the Italians of Port Pirie were good patriots and good citizens.¹⁸ By 1932 the participation of Fascio, Church and State in the festival of the *Madonna dei Martiri* was even more conspicuous: that year, 400 people, including the Chief of Police and local councillors, attended the Ball organised by the Fascio and held in the Catholic Church hall,



Commemoration on 5th of April, 1931 of the founding of the Port Pirie Fascio. Back row (left to right): Onofrio Caputo and Pasquale Catanzaro. Front row (left to right): Gaetano Mezzina, Francesca Caputo (leader of the women's section) and Francesco Camporeale (Secretary). (Courtesy Australian Archives)



Commemoration on the 5th of April, 1931 of the founding of the Port Pirie Fascio: Vanguard of the Italian children. Far left: Party Secretary, Francesco Camporeale. Middle row, second from the right: Pasquale Catanzaro. (Courtesy Australian Archives)

which was adorned with the Italian and Australian flags and the portraits of Mussolini and King George. Proceedings began with the grand entry of Vice-Consul Amerio, the Mayor of Port Pirie, and the secretary of the local Fascio, Francesco Camporeale, while the orchestra played 'Giovinezza' and 'God Save the King'.¹⁹ Such public support for the Italian community was a reflection of the respect that Fascist Italy still enjoyed abroad, as a peace-loving friend of Britain, as an anti-Bolshevik bulwark, and for its new Church-State relations after the signing of the Lateran Pacts. Many Italians saw such social gatherings and the formation of Fascist

women's groups, youth groups, an Italian School and a *Dopolavoro*, as tangible expressions of the interest of Fascist Italy in the plight of migrants far from their homeland and surrounded by an alien environment. The committee of the Port Pirie Fascio was less subtle in its political activities: in 1929 it sent a protest letter to the University of Melbourne requesting that Omero Schiassi be removed from his teaching post;²⁰ in the same year it successfully 'fascistised' the Italian members of the Port Pirie Fishermen's Association; in 1936 it organised the collection of gold wedding rings for Italy's depleted coffers;²¹ and it informed Rome of the existence of 'about

25 subversives, all from the Veneto', who worked at the Smelters.²²

Many Italians felt a new sense of national pride following Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-36, but the war also served to increase Britain's hostility towards Mussolini and to encourage racist elements in Australia, including South Australian Premier Butler, to be more outspoken in their condemnation of the continuing influx of Southern Europeans.²³ Following the signing by Mussolini of a military alliance with Hitler in May 1939 and the outbreak of war with Germany four months later, pro-Fascist Italians in Australia, both recent arrivals and long-term naturalised residents, were considered a security risk. At Port Pirie, as elsewhere, the police prepared dossiers on the most well-known Fascists. Port Pirie detective J. Slinger, who had some knowledge of Italian, was particularly imaginative in his sinister portrayal of those he identified. Of Party Secretary Pasquale Catanzaro he wrote: "This man is the holder of a Fishing Licence in Port Pirie and calls himself a Fisherman, but he has no boat and is never seen out fishing. [...] He is suspected of having plans of the town of Port Pirie with the layout of all vital spots, including the works of the Broken Hill Associated Smelters".²⁴ Furthermore, the leader of the Women's Section of the Fascio, Caterina Pasculli, was, according to Slinger, "suspected of having strong Communistic views."²⁵

When Italy declared war, Slinger immediately arrested the leading Fascists, including

Catanzaro, and raided the latter's house, especially the room he had identified some weeks before as the one that Catanzaro "keeps locked and will not allow even his wife to enter".²⁶ To his pleasant surprise, Slinger found there not only photos of Port Pirie's Fascists but also the Fascio's book of monthly members' payments dating from 1929 and containing 202 names. In the following months, as more Fascist sympathisers were rounded up, the register was produced at the hearings as indisputable evidence of involvement in the Fascio. Domenico Pasculli, when arrested, was notified of the additional charge that he was the husband of Caterina Pasculli, the leader of the Women's Section. Caterina, however, was neither arrested nor interned because being a woman, the mother of two children and the expectant mother of a third, she was not deemed a threat to the national security.²⁷

The Criminal Investigation Bureau also confiscated detailed records of the Fascio in Adelaide, but Adelaide Security, and in particular the local Italian-speaking Sergeant Sandford, had a more amicable relationship with the city's Fascist Sympathisers, many of whom were business people of Northern Italian origin. The result was that some of Adelaide's Italians were not arrested at all or were released after several months' detention. The *molfettesi* of Port Pirie, on the other hand - less educated, less competent in English, more dependent on each other in a close-knit community and, above all, fisherman who though naturalised were unrealistically considered a serious military



Inauguration of the Italian School at Port Pirie, 9th September, 1932. Centre: Party Secretary, Francesco Camporeale and on his right, Italian School teacher, Caterina Pasculli. (Courtesy Australian Archives).



Members of the Port Pirie Fascio celebrate Mussolini's victory in Abyssinia, May 1936. Back row (left to right): Antonio Mezzino, Vincenzo Caputo, Antonio Camporeale, Giacomo Mezzino and Giacomo Salvemini. Front row (left to right): Domenico Pasculli, Pasquale Catanzaro (Party Secretary) and Caterina Pasculli (leader of the Women's Section). (Courtesy Australian Archives).

threat because with their boats they might attempt to interfere with the important sea route from Whyalla - were not given this opportunity of early return to their families.²⁸ Almost all those who were interned remained in Loveday for most of 1943 and a few until 1944 (Catanzaro, who at his hearing in July 1940 impressed the National Security Advisory Committee for his 'honesty and candour' and his 'attractive personality', was nevertheless deprived of his British citizenship in 1942, and was the last of all the South Australian Italians to be released, in October 1944; other restrictions on his movements were not revoked until June 1945).²⁹

Some indication of the anguish felt by the internees and their families during these years of separation, as well as the camp administrators' ignorance of what Italians would consider normal social exchanges is apparent in a 'Report on Visitors' prepared at Loveday following a visit in 1942 by members of two Molfettese families from Port Pirie:

At the conclusion of the interview Salvatore Caputo, Vito Caputo and

Domenico Pasculli deliberately and defiantly kissed Miss Caputo, Mrs Caputo and Mrs De Giglio, in spite of having been repeatedly warned that this was not permissible. Mrs De Giglio said, "Why shouldn't they kiss, they are not criminals". They refused to stop when ordered and the guard was called. [...] After the visitors had been removed, the internees were held pending Camp Commandant's decision as to whether the latter should be put under arrest. [...] The episode was provoked by Mrs De Giglio, who deliberately gave her hand to Pasculli and offered to kiss him at the end of the interview; though she had been repeatedly warned that personal contact was forbidden. She also shook hands with one of the other internees, the man sitting next to Pasculli.³⁰

NOTES

¹ J.E. Bromley, *The Italians Of Port Pirie*, dissertation presented for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the Australian National University, 1955, pp. 1, 12, 212.

² Roslyn Pesman Cooper, 'Italian views of Australia in the first half of the Twentieth Century', in Gaetano Rando & Michael Arrighi (eds), *Italians in Australia: Historical and Social Perspectives*, Department of Modern Languages, University of Wollongong, 1993, p. 167.

³ J. Lyng, *Non-Britishers in Australia. Influence on Population and Progress*, Melbourne University Press, 1935 (first ed. 1927), p. 93. See also other examples of prejudice quoted in J. Wilton and R. Bosworth, *Old Worlds and New Australia*, Penguin Books Australia, 1984.

⁴ Bromley, p. 13.

⁵ Australian Archives (hereafter AA): D1920/0 Item 6. From a list of 129 SA Italian internees at that date, 61 can be identified as residents of Port Pirie.

⁶ Gentilli suggests that the overseas (Austrian) barque *Honor* might have brought the first *molfettesi* to South Australia in 1885 (J. Gentilli, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil*, Italo-Australian Welfare Centre, Marangaroo WA, 1983, p. 26). For Corrieri the first recorded Italian to arrive in Port Pirie was, in 1885, Vito Caputo, who jumped ship in Sydney in 1883 (M. Corrieri, *Italians of Port Pirie. A Social History*, Our Lady of Martyrs, Port Pirie Community, 1992, pp. 23, 35).

⁷ For the history of Port Pirie see N. Robinson, *Reluctant Harbour. The Romance of Pirie*, Nadjuri Australia, Jamestown SA, 1976, and K. Bullock, *Port Pirie, The Friendly City. The Undaunted Years*, Peacock Publications, Norwood SA, 1988.

⁸ Robinson, p. 198, Bullock, p. 17.

⁹ For his biography see my 'From Crewman to Cabbie: A Profile of the First Italian Settler in South Australia', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 19, 1991, pp. 8-25.

¹⁰ *The Adelaide Chronicle*, 17 Oct. 1914 p. 39. See also my essay 'Italians in South Australia: the first hundred years', in D. O'Connor and A. Comin (eds), *Proceedings of the First Conference on the Impact of Italians in South Australia*, Italian Congress Inc. and Italian Discipline. Flinders University of South Australia, 1993, pp. 15-32.

¹¹ State Records (SA): GRG 51/120, 276.

¹² *Ibid.*: GRG 78/49.

¹³ *Ibid.*: GRG 81, Series 1, 594 (1898). See also Robinson, p. 273 And Bromley, p. 25.

¹⁴ Corrieri p. 50.

¹⁵ R & M Bosworth, *Fremantle's Italy*, Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, Roma, 1993, p. 52 and pp. 24-27. This volume, for its approach to the whole issue of migration, beyond what is suggested by the title, should be essential reading for all those interested in the history of Italians in Australia.

¹⁶ Corrieri, p. 35; Bromley, pp. 26, 29.

¹⁷ For a fuller account of Amerio's activities in South Australia, see my 'Viva il Duce: The Influence of Fascism on Italians in South Australia in the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal*

of the Historical Society of South Australia, 21, 1993, pp. 5-24.

¹⁸ AA: AP501/2, 'Cronistoria del Fascio di Port Pirie'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Festeggiamenti della Colonia Italiana di Port Pirie'.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 'Cronistoria del Fascio di Port Pirie'.

²¹ The distribution of replacement steel rings was organised to coincide with the 1936 Port Pirie festival of the *Madonna dei Martiri*. At the 'thanksgiving Mass for the victory in East Africa' the Bishop of Port Augusta Norman Gilroy (subsequently Sydney archbishop and cardinal) blessed the steel rings and gave a sermon in Italian 'full of love and Catholic faith and patriotism' (AA: D1915 SA2625).

²² AA: AP501/2 (various).

²³ "Southern Europeans are extremely difficult to absorb into the social structure of the country, for their temperament and their method of living is so different from that of Australians" (Premier Butler, *The Advertiser*, 19 August 1937, p.17)

²⁴ AA: D1915 SA2559, 'Secret Information', 7 September 1939.

²⁵ AA: D1915 SA2625, 'Recommendation for Detention of Domenico Pasculli', p. 7.

²⁶ AA: D1915 SA2559, Report of Slinger to Sergeant Virgo, Port Pirie, 29 May 1940.

²⁷ AA: D1915 SA2625, 'Report of the National Security Advisory Committee concerning Domenico Pasculli', 15 August 1940.

²⁸ AA: AP501/2, Lieut. Sexton, *A brief history of the activities of the Fascio di Port Pirie*, (November 1941).

²⁹ AA: D1915 SA2559, 'Report of the National Security Advisory Committee concerning Pasquale Catanzaro'. Though Catanzaro had originally been naturalised in 1930, he had to wait until 1953 before he was granted permission to be naturalised once again.

³⁰ AA: D1915 SA2625, 'Report on Visitors to Internees, week-ending 26 June 1942'. For a description of camp life see M. Bevege, *Behind Barbed Wire. Internment in Australia during World War II*, University of Queensland Press 1993, especially Ch. 8.