

BOOK REVIEWS

On Persephone's Island: A Sicilian Journal

by Mary Taylor Simeti. First published in 1986; Penguin edition 1988. Current recommended Australian retail price \$16.95.

Reviewed by Maria Mantello Sandbach.

In writing *On Persephone's Island*, Simeti declares her intention to be to "entertain those who know nothing of Sicily and to make their visit here more rewarding". Accordingly the book is appropriately published in the Penguin travel library. Certainly it is a valuable asset to the traveller with an interest in Italian culture beyond the somewhat one dimensional potted explanations of the average guide book.

"On Persephone's Island" is a journal rich in insight of the historical derivatives of many of the agrarian and religious rituals which characterise the rhythm of the seasons in Italy. However it in no way attempts to be exhaustive or authoritative on Sicily's history, customs, buildings or significant archaeological sites. As the author confesses, despite her academic background, she has not written within any theoretical framework - beyond that imposed by nature. Consequently her journal ambles along, peppered with extensive quotations from a wide variety of sources, pausing to reflect on the Simeti family history and tying it in with their personal celebrations of feasts and holidays from the annual wine making to the 2nd November pilgrimage and picnic at the cemetery to honour All Souls' Day.

As the title and conclusion of the book betray, Simeti has a curious duality of purpose which she identifies with that of Persephone, who belonged to two worlds. on the one hand the author writes with the keen detached observations of an anthropologist who has emersed herself in her community for twenty years. despite declaring herself an agnostic she appears to have a deep respect and willingness to participate in the religious observances of her subjects. However there is a passion underlying the book which makes it far more personal, a desire to convert and enthuse her reader as she presents herself

as a kind of "earth mother" playing bounteous hostess to her extended family.

From the perspective of any reader who is considering writing herself, the aspect of the book which is of particular interest is the author's identification with a subject in which she has a personal part. Simeti uses her analogy with the myth of Persephone to endeavour to reconcile her two worlds: the summer harvest at the family farm at Bosco, with the winter nursery in Palermo; the spontaneous decision of her youth to commit herself to Sicily with the measured reflectiveness of middle age.

Australia's Italians: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

Edited by S. Castles, C. Alcorso, G. Rando, and E. Vasta. Published by Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992.

Reviewed by Franco Schiavoni

This book is not a history of the Italian presence in Australia, but rather a sociological investigation into the dynamic Australian context within which that presence can be understood and to which it has directly and indirectly contributed. Thus, the book is simultaneously about the Italo-Australian community, racism, the movement from assimilationism to multiculturalism and the possible future transition from eurocentrism to post eurocentrism.

The book is also about the ideology of the contributors. Indeed this collection of essays edited and written by a plurality of authors with discreet chapters themselves usually involving several authors, presents heterogeneous material and is unified by an ideological perspective that sees things in terms of class, gender and racism. Probably the only exception to this ideological approach is Chapter Six, called "Place and Community: the construction of an Italo-Australian space", which - although written by an historian, Rob Pascoe - is probably the most sociologically and anthropologically inspired of the various contributions, and definitely the most free from ideological intervention. This

means, of course, that culture and ethnicity do not feature in the book as prominently as one would expect. Interestingly the Italian edition of the book, which consists of a larger number of contributions, has a more pluralist thrust.

In its historical component, the book contains no new research but is rather a revisitation, a summary and an interpretation of published material. Thus, we are guided through the early Italian migration, which coincides with the "construction of European Australia", through the World War II period with its internment policy and its prisoners of war, and finally through the post-war period which includes the wave of Italian mass migration and its subsequent cessation as well as the change from assimilationist policies to multicultural ones. While the focus is sociological, the history of the Italo-Australian community is given a fairly thorough treatment. A very interesting element in this section is Claudio Alcorso's testimonial on his internment, so rich in psychological and ideological insights. Claudio Alcorso feels that the war is between fascism and anti-fascism and, being an anti-fascist, cannot accept the injustice of his internment. The Crown's view, of course, is that what is at stake is not ideology but the defence of the British empire.

This entire historical section is placed in the context of the total Australian history viewed as fundamentally inspired and driven by racism. We are told that it was racism that led to the exclusion of the aborigines from the "capitalist relations of production" and to the conceptualisation of the White Australia policy. The emphasis on racism will be found by many excessive; at times one gains the impression that racism is almost a metaphysical category that has replaced older categories - such as Christian providence, the Hegel absolute and Marx economic structure - as the driving motor of history.

The contribution of the Italo-Australian community to the development of Australia is acknowledged and reasonably documented in its various components: the participation in the industrial and agricultural labour force and in the world of business; the linguistic, cultural and literary presence; the creation of community structures. Unfortunately the account of this contribution,

which is almost universally described in positive terms, is somewhat marred by the harshly critical undercurrent which characterises the presentation of mainstream Australian society. No doubt, it is the precise duty of intellectuals to bring to the fore the full problematicity of things; nevertheless it is also important not to overturn the balance. To emphasise the problems and barriers, structural and otherwise, facing the new settlers can lead to an undervaluation of the great opportunities that have been opened to them. Thus, we are repeatedly told that the Italians were involved in hard dirty and dangerous jobs, worked in areas of low mobility and formed the "Southern European occupational ghetto"; we are told that, in relation to the mainstream population, they still remain overrepresented in lower status jobs and underrepresented in higher status jobs. What is forgotten is that the majority of Italians came here as unskilled and at times semi-literate labour hands, had no expectations of joining the middle classes, and were happy to be given an opportunity to work and work hard. Thus their living experience of the new situation was related to their previous working conditions and employment opportunities and not to some political or trade union ideal. Doing two jobs for some time can be seen as an inhuman effort, but also as a wonderful opportunity to improve one's living conditions more rapidly.

Similarly women are on the one hand described justly as the "custodian of Italian culture", on the other they are presented in terms of the usual rhetoric of double disadvantage. A closer look at the situation especially in the early period might uncover the fact that men, while rarely participating in the traditional domestic work, were in fact doing other things, often enough were working two shifts and had much less of the cultural role and vicinity to children that wives had.

The chapter on business and entrepreneurs is an interesting example of the tension between a reasonably objective account of things and the problems that this creates for a radical ideology. Italian success in independent farming and small business has to be acknowledged, but how can it be explained in a society which sets up structural barriers to migrant mobility? The question remains unsolved. There is a

suggestion that Italian migrants sought the independence of small business to escape the hostility and racism experienced in the work place. Ultimately, the authors' positive view of Italian migrants is due to the fact that they are seen to belong to the working class; once they enter the world of small business then one does not know what to do with them. We are revealingly told that small business occupies a "contradictory class location in class analysis"; hence the difficulties and the tensions in giving a fully satisfactory account. Needless to say, the successes in the world of big business are underplayed and we are told that the Italian community has not benefited "from the success of the rich view".

One could multiply the examples in which ideological intervention aims at correcting the presentation of evidence that could lend itself to a different interpretation. In a few cases rapid and controversial value-judgments are introduced without a proper discussion. These involve the role of Co.As.It., Filef, *Il Globo* and *Nuovo Paese* as well as the Salemi case and political personalities. It is not possible to engage in a proper discussion of these issues in this context.

The discussion on multiculturalism is fairly extensive. Again the authors clearly prefer the rights/welfare model of multiculturalism viewed in terms of cultural and linguistic pluralism. The latter is considered as conservative, the former radical. Again we have an ultimately simplistic ideological position which leads inevitably, and not so paradoxically, to an assimilationist perspective. If migrants are considered in terms of class and gender, then culture becomes peripheral. What is important is class and gender consciousness. And of course a view of society in view of class and gender conflict cannot be interested in cultural maintenance and cannot ultimately explain culture in the wider sense but at best some sub-cultural codes.

The book is, on the whole, very useful. It does provide a serious account of the Italian presence in Australia and a serious discussion of many broader issues affecting the total society. It is by no means sure that a clear connection, causal or otherwise, is established between the Italo-Australian contribution and the broader picture. The latter functions at times as a context and at

times as an intrusion. At another level, the book's ideological and teleological movement seems at odds with the emphasis on disparateness and discontinuity which characterise our post-modernist era.

Australia's Italians: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY definitely deserves to be read but not uncritically.

BOOK LAUNCH

VICTORIA MARKET, by Nino Randazzo, is a play in three acts, published in both English and Italian. The English translation is by the late Colin McCormick. Launched at Co.As.It. at the Annual General Meeting on 9 December, 1992, its publication was supported by a grant from the Australia Council.

Copies can be purchased at Co.As.It. Italian Historical Society or at Insegna Educational Publishers, 410 Moreland Road, West Brunswick, VIC, 3055. The price is \$14.95

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VICTORIA MARKET

Testo bilingue italiano-inglese
Traduzione inglese di COLIN McCORMICK

TEATRO
ITALO-AUSTRALIANO

Dramma
in 3 atti



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