

THE CONTINUING CHAIN: THE MIGRATION OF SANGIORGESI TO ADELAIDE IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

by

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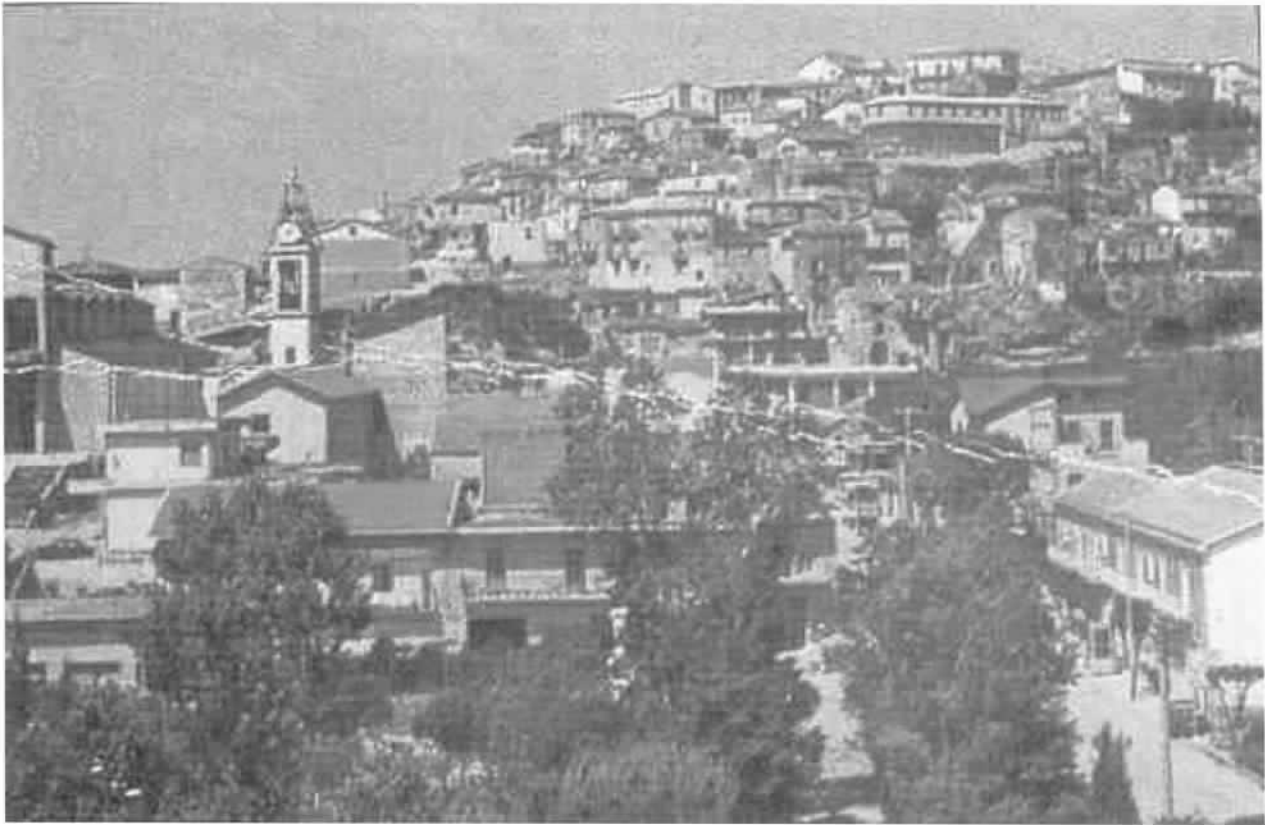
Italian migrants from Campania, together with migrants from Calabria and Veneto, make up over 50% of the Italians in South Australia.¹ In 1970, when Italian numbers were at their peak, an estimated 30% of the Italians who had settled in SA were from the Campania region, easily the highest percentage of any Australian State. In Victoria, for example, 30% were born in Sicily and 25% in Calabria; in New South Wales 24% were from Calabria and 20% were from Sicily.² Before the Second World War most of the Italians from Campania who settled in South Australia had emigrated from the two inland provinces of Benevento and Avellino,³ and this continued to be the case after 1945. Few Italians migrated to Adelaide from the port of Naples or surrounding coastal towns where there was a greater chance of finding work.

In the 1950s and 1960s there were very limited opportunities for employment in the underdeveloped and impoverished rural areas of southern Italy. Despite the input of funds from Rome through the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (State Fund for the South), Campania, like other southern regions, continued to rely heavily for its economy on age-old agricultural practices. Between 1951 and 1971 over four million Italians left their towns in the south and migrated, some to the industrial triangle in north-western Italy, others to European countries or overseas. The number of Italians from the regions of southern Italy who migrated abroad in just the one year 1961 (270,000) was more than double the number who went abroad in 1952 (130,000). The most popular overseas destinations were Argentina, Canada, the United States and Australia, countries that had an urgent, though usually short-lived and sporadic, need for unskilled labour.⁴ For the Christian Democrat government of Alcide De Gasperi, which was keen to reduce the high post-war unemployment rates and to build up foreign capital reserves through the remittances sent home by Italians abroad, emigration became a central element of its international policy, with the export of its people

seen as a 'vital necessity'.⁵ The Italian government was happy to arrange migration agreements with countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Australia where there was a demand for labour. Indeed, the number of Italians whom the Italian government was hoping to encourage to go to Australia was far more than Australia was willing to receive.⁶

As many as 239 Italians from Campania are recorded as having already settled in South Australia in the 1930s.⁷ In a migration chain that bridges the divide of the Second World War, these early migrants were instrumental in sponsoring their relatives and *compaesani* to Adelaide in the 1950s and 1960s. This sponsorship, or *atto di richiamo*, was the means by which virtually all *campani* migrated to South Australia. The sponsor acted as guarantor, promising that the new arrival would not be a burden on the Australian government. Although 20% of all post-war Italians arriving in Australia came as assisted migrants – subsequent to the signing, in 1951, of the bilateral agreement between Italy and Australia – most of the assisted passages were offered to intending migrants from Tuscany and generally northern Italians, who were considered more easily assimilable, and more likely to have a trade qualification. Many of the farmer-migrants from Campania were not even aware of the assisted passage scheme. One Adelaide woman from San Giorgio La Molara recalls that after she embarked from Naples, the ship sailed on to Trieste where, to her surprise, 650 Triestines came aboard, all apparently with their voyage paid for by the government.

San Giorgio La Molara is an ancient town perched high on a hilltop approximately 30 km north-east of Benevento. Its name appeared in 14th century documents as *Castrum Sancti Georgii Molinari*, the descriptor *Molinari* being a derivative of the name of the nearby town of *Molinara*.⁸ San Giorgio's population grew from about 1,000 in the sixteenth century to a peak of



View of the hilltop town of San Giorgio La Molara in the province of Campania, Italy.

nearly 6,000 towards the end of the eighteenth century. Since then, mainly because of migration, the population has steadily declined to the three and a half thousand who live there today. The economy continues to depend above all on agriculture, especially cereals such as wheat and maize, and on the breeding of cattle, pigs, donkeys, rabbits, sheep and other farmyard animals. Other industries include clothing and leather goods.

The transoceanic migration stream from San Giorgio La Molara did not cease after the First World War when the United States imposed its entry restrictions. The *sangiorgesi* continued to look to overseas destinations where they hoped to be able to make a better life for themselves.⁹ Amongst those who migrated abroad between the two world wars, a small number chose to settle in Adelaide, having been told of the opportunities available there by other migrants from nearby villages. In September 1927 the first three *sangiorgesi* landed in Adelaide and another four arrived the following month.¹⁰ By the end of the 1930s at least thirteen Italians had arrived from the town and were working as market gardeners either in the north-eastern suburbs of Athelstone and Campbelltown or in the nearby hills districts of Piccadilly and Summertown.

On 29 September 1943, twenty-seven civilians were killed when San Giorgio La Molara, which was at the time occupied by German forces, was bombed by the Americans. Following the War, due to the acute shortage of work and the enormous destruction that the town had suffered, many *sangiorgesi* decided to emigrate. In the period between 1950 and 1970 entire families settled in Adelaide, sponsored by friends and relatives. Of the 38,000 Italians who landed in South Australia in these two decades, 797, equal to 2.1%, were from San Giorgio.¹¹ Meanwhile life in the town continued to be difficult for its townspeople: in 1962 and again in 1980 San Giorgio suffered more damage, this time from violent earthquakes.

In order to learn of the particular migration experiences of the *sangiorgesi* of Adelaide, 20 interviews were conducted, 12 with men and eight with women. All informants arrived in Australia between 1951 and 1965, the majority between 1951 and 1956. All the males and half of the females had been *contadini* in Italy, and most were aged between 18 and 35 at the time of departure. Most remember vividly the bombing of the town on 29 September 1943, and two informants had relatives who were among the 27 killed. Three male informants who had been soldiers in the Italian army were taken prisoner

by the Germans following Marshal Badoglio's declaration of war on Germany. They recall that, as prisoners of war in Germany, they had little to eat, worked all day and were treated cruelly by the Germans. One *sangiorgese* remembers: 'Ci hanno maltrattato ... ho vissuto perché io ero giovane, ma tanti più che erano anziani o vecchi o malati sono morti tutti in prigione ... eravamo più di settanta, ottantamila italiani ... era terribile' (They mistreated us ... I survived because I was young but those who were elderly or ill all died in prison ... there were seventy, eighty thousand Italians ... it was terrible).

All recall the difficulties of life in San Giorgio immediately after the war. Even though the parents of all the informants owned land and the majority of the informants also owned some land themselves, they had to work all day, every day, in order to eke out a meagre living. One woman remembers that 'everything had to be rebuilt ... there was no money ... it was very hard. My grandmother used to make soap because there was no soap available. You couldn't find money for clothes'. A man recalls women walking around, without shoes, trying to find a piece of bread.

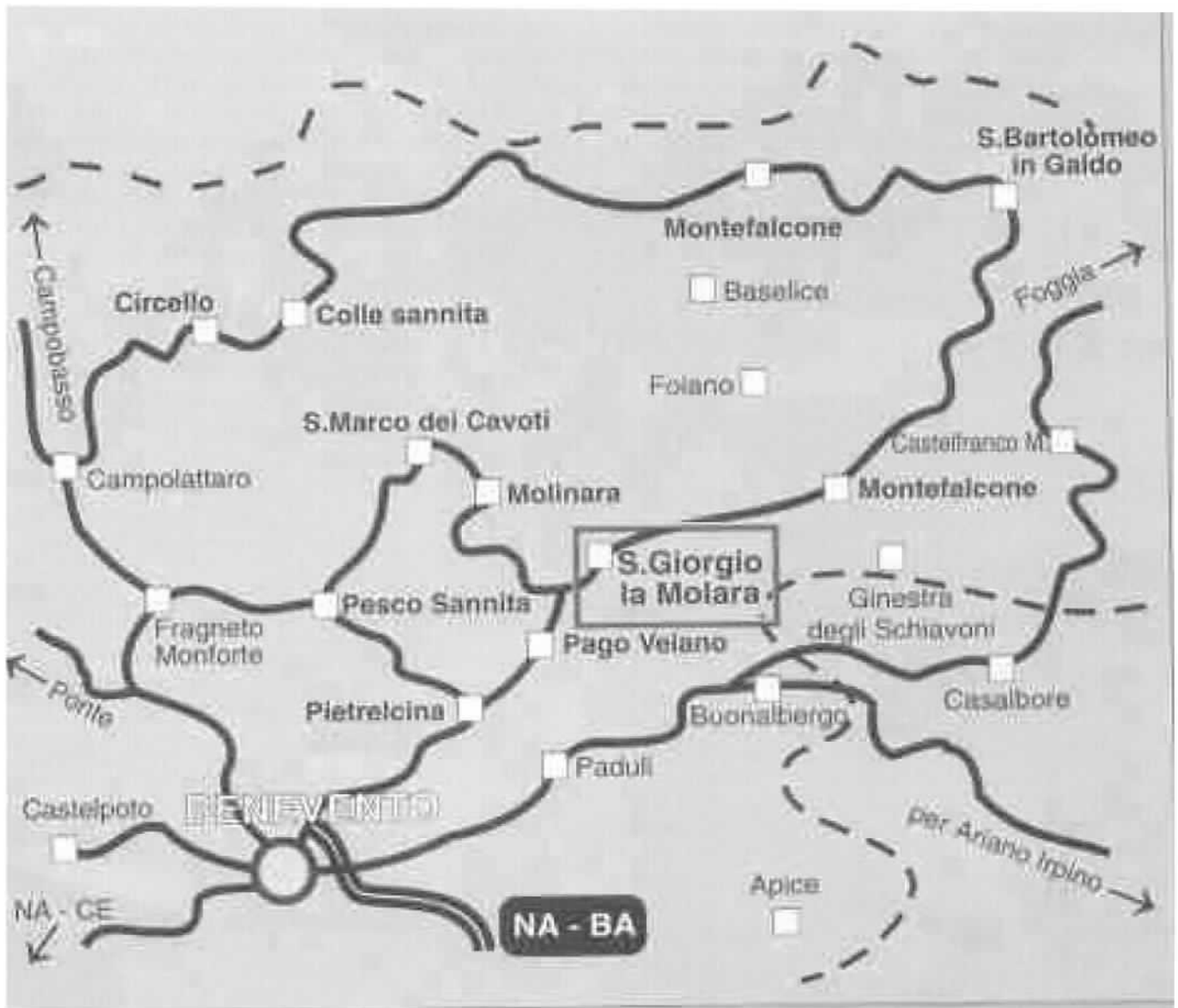
The town experienced a real exodus of its inhabitants, with as many as 20 *sangiorgesi* leaving on any one day to travel to Naples or, occasionally, to Brindisi, where they boarded their ship. Those who departed for Australia knew little about their far-off destination. One said: 'I used to hear that this was, they used to call ... [a] land of opportunity ... people used to go and never come back'. Six of the eight women informants migrated to Australia to join their husbands, from whom they had been separated for between one and five years. They had had no choice but to wait for their husbands to earn enough money to 'call' them out. Five of the six women had children. One had five children and had to wait the longest period before being able to join her husband, because he had had to save up a considerable sum of money in order to sponsor his family to Australia. While waiting in San Giorgio La Molarà all the women found life extremely difficult without their husband. They not only had to raise their children but were also required to look after the farm. Four of the six wives sometimes received money from their husbands but it was not regular or enough for them to live on. The husbands kept in contact with their wives by letter. Some of the husbands were very positive about their experiences in Australia. One wife, however, remembers that her husband's letters were always very critical of

Australia, so much so that she lost her patience and told him emphatically to choose – either return to Italy or sponsor her out, it was up to him. In the end, he decided to call her out to Australia.

The day of departure presented mixed emotions for many of the informants. As one woman recalls, 'one part of you wants to go ... and another part of you ... you're leaving behind your family, your friends ... everything ... it wasn't easy'. Several informants said that they had a good time during the long voyage of a month or more by ship, since there were 'feste notte e giorno'. One informant, who migrated with her brother, thought the journey was 'beautiful ... my brother and I, we enjoyed this trip, it was the best thing we ever had ... I still remember when we passed through the Suez Canal ... the canals, all the people living in there, still remember that. The journey was wonderful ... it was long but we enjoyed it ... it was something new to us'. Others, however, were not so lucky to travel on a modern ship, but instead had to put up with old war ships or passenger vessels that were too small and too light. Some remember water leaking into the ship, plates crashing to the floor when the weather was rough and having to put on life jackets as a precaution. Sea sickness was also a problem. One informant spent eight days in the hospital on board, another lost eight kilograms during the journey as a result of sea sickness and his dislike for the food.

On arrival in Australia, the *sangiorgesi* were faced with a new reality. Many remember their first impressions: the extreme heat (most of the migrants left San Giorgio in winter and arrived to be greeted by a scorching Australian summer) and the unusual and different landscape, a 'terra morta' (dead land) that seemed to be 'bruciata ... tutta bruciata' (burnt ... all burnt). One woman, for whom Australia seemed to be a big, lifeless desert, felt upon arrival that she had 'lasciato una miseria e trovato un'altra' (left one poverty and found another). Many wanted to return immediately to Italy but were financially unable to.

The men, upon arrival, found accommodation with relatives or *compaesani* and began work immediately, some the following day. Not surprisingly, they took any work that they were offered. In fact, one *sangiorgese* recalled, with a smile on his face, that when he was asked by an Australian migration officer in Rome what he wanted to do in Australia, he replied emphatically 'che trovo, faccio!' (what I find I'll



Detail map of the province of Benevento in the region of Campania, Italy.

do!). In the two decades when South Australia's industries were booming, some found factory work, particularly at the General Motors Holden car plant at Woodville, others became cement workers, some worked on the land or found employment cutting stones for home building. All the informants gave the impression that they had had a strong work ethic. Indeed, they seemed slightly offended when asked if they had ever received unemployment benefits. They made it very clear that they had never been unemployed in their life and had never received any sort of social benefit. One said that he did not know what it meant to be unemployed.

Today all but one of the people interviewed are Australian citizens. Despite pressure from his wife, the one *sangiorgese* who refuses to become an Australian, says that not being an Australian citizen has never caused him unemployment or

other difficulties. Most became Australians because they felt that by being naturalised they would have more rights and more assistance, and would more easily be able to buy property. One concluded that 'it's right, we've been living in this country for so many years, it's only fair'. One thought that if he didn't become an Australian citizen 'maybe something might happen and they'll send me back, and I don't want to go back'. Another described all the bad things that he had left behind, including the corruption, and added: 'That's enough of Italy. I want to be an Aussie'. Not all the women who became Australian citizens, when their husband took the step, were happy to do so. One woman who became naturalised because of her husband's decision to become an Australian said: 'Io non volevo perché non volevo tradire la madre mia' (I didn't want this because I didn't want to betray my motherland).

Where do their loyalties lie? Most made it clear that although they had become Australian citizens, they were always also Italian. One stated emphatically: 'I'm Italian and I respect the country where I am, but I want people to respect me at the same time. I'm still Italian but I'm an

When asked whether they would like to return permanently to live once more in San Giorgio, the unanimous answer was no. In their early years in Adelaide a number had thought of leaving Australia and resettling in their birthplace. One informant did return to San Giorgio in 1984 with his wife and twelve-year-old son, intending to remain there. But the wife found that she had been happier in Australia, so after a brief period they returned to Adelaide. In 1995, on a subsequent trip to Italy they once again thought about resettling in San Giorgio, but decided against it



Road sign at the entrance to San Giorgio La Molara and a panoramic view of the township in the distance with the surrounding landscape.

Australian just the same ... I'm an Italian Australian, that's what I am'. Most said that they would defend Italy if necessary and would never want to harm their mother country. Two, however, showed open hostility towards Italy and said that they had been more than happy to hand over their Italian passport, one adding that if a war broke out, he would happily fight against Italy. For a minority, the scars of the migration experience, and the accompanying sense of political and social abandonment, still remain.

because they felt that their son was then too old and too settled in Australia to be uprooted. Today all the informants agree that it is too late to contemplate a permanent return. They have all made for themselves a life in Australia where they have made so many sacrifices. As one woman said: 'Come fai a tornare?' (How can you go back?). Her family is here, her children have married here, her life, she says, is in Australia. They could not contemplate starting all over again at their age, when most are in their seventies and eighties.

This does not mean that they have not revisited San Giorgio La Molara. Indeed, all but two have returned at least once to their home town, and some as many as four times. As Loretta Baldassar has noted in her recent study of Perth migrants from San Fior in the Veneto, the visit home becomes a 'secular pilgrimage', a visit to the home 'shrine', where there is not only renewed contact with family and friends left behind but a renewal of cultural ties and personal identity.¹² In the movement between two 'homes', the *sangiorgese*-Adelaidean – or the Adelaidean-*sangiorgese* – finds a bridge, continually constructed and perhaps illusory, between youthful past with its memories, and the reality of the mature-age present, between a village on a hilltop in Campania and a suburb on the Adelaide plains. The 'sanctuary' lies somewhere in between, in a hyphenated identity that the Italian migrant negotiates. Attachment to just one side of the double identity can create a sense of *absence* of the other. One *sangiorgese* from Adelaide remembers crying when he revisited San Giorgio, as he suddenly realised that he had become homesick for Australia. In San Giorgio he felt that he just could not cope.

For the *sangiorgesi*, as for other migrants in other places, the establishment in Adelaide of tangible signs of that double identity helps to come to terms with self on a day-to-day basis. Italians in South Australia, as elsewhere, have, from early post-war settlement, established clubs, associations and religious festivals as a vehicle for social and cultural affirmation, institutions that contribute to the maintenance of the collective memory, albeit frozen in time, of the village, province and region of origin. In 1978 migrants in Adelaide from San Giorgio La Molara established the San Giorgio Community Centre, which today is an important 'village' meeting place for the *sangiorgesi*. Twenty years earlier, in 1957, at the peak of post-war settlement, the *fešta* of the patron saint San Giorgio was established, with the support of the Capuchin Fathers, at the new St Francis of Assisi Church in the suburb of Newton.¹³ Today as many as 1,500 Italians, including second and third generation *sangiorgesi*, take part in the celebrations.

Like other Italian communities in Adelaide, the now-elderly first-generation migrants from San Giorgio hope that their culture and traditions will be maintained by their children and grandchildren. While this remains an aspiration, it is more realistic to think that the descendants of those who arrived in the 1950s will be willing

to acknowledge and come to terms with the heritage of their forebears and construct their own particular *sangiorgese*-Adelaidean identity. 'Return' visits of the younger generations can help achieve this and even result, if the visits are frequent or long enough, in a rediscovery of their ethnicity and the transformation of their identity.¹⁴ ■

Notes

¹ Today approximately 25 per cent of the Italian-born in SA come from Campania, 21 per cent from Calabria and 11 per cent from the Veneto. See Desmond O'Connor, 'Italians in South Australia', in James Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People*, 2nd ed., Cambridge U.P., 2001, p. 496.

² *Italiani nel Mondo*, XXVI, No. 15, 10 agosto 1970, p. 14. Australia-wide, in 1976 the most numerous Italian-born by region of origin were, in descending order, from Sicily, Calabria, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Abruzzo, and, in sixth place, Campania (Helen Ware, *A Profile of the Italian Community in Australia*, AIMA and CO.AS.IT, Hawthorn, Vic, 1981, p. 27).

³ Desmond O'Connor, *No need to be afraid*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town SA, 1996, p. 118.

⁴ Gianfausto Rosoli (ed.), *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana 1876-1976*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Rome, 1978, pp. 43, 107-9. See also Federico Romero, 'L'emigrazione operaia in Europa (1948-1973)', in Piero Bevilacqua et al., *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Partenze*, Donzelli Editore, Rome, 2001, p. 398.

⁵ Romero, pp. 402-3.

⁶ *Il Popolo*, 13 agosto 1950, p. 6. Italy was hoping that 50,000 Italians would be admitted to Australia each year.

⁷ National Archives, SA, D4880/1&2, quoted in Desmond O'Connor, *No need to be afraid*, p. 118.

⁸ M. Iazeolla, *San Giorgio La Molara - il dialetto, i proverbi, i modi di dire, le immagini*, Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana, San Giorgio La Molara, 1994, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 7.

¹⁰ These seven were: Grazio Domenico De Ionno, Mariano Marciano, Carmine Paradiso (20 Sept. 1927), Domenico De Ionno, Michele Mercorella, Vincenzo Pescheta and Donatangelo Trotta (11 Oct. 1927).

¹¹ Unpublished archival data compiled by Desmond O'Connor.

¹² Loretta Baldassar, *Visits Home. Migration experiences between Italy and Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, Vic., 2001, pp. 223, 245, 323, 338.

¹³ Antonio Paganoni & Desmond O'Connor, *Se la processione va bene ... Religiosità popolare nel Sud Australia*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Rome, 1999, p. 96.

¹⁴ Baldassar, *op.cit.* pp. 288, 331.



WHAT BECAME OF THE PASSENGERS OF THE RE D'ITALIA

In Search of
KINGS

TYPES OF ITALIAN MIGRANTS who arrived yesterday in Melbourne by the *Re d'Italia*, which berthed at 19 North Wharf with passengers and cargo from southern European ports.

Il primo Passaporto è valido per un anno
 IN NOME DI SUA MAESTÀ VITTORIO EMANUELE III
 RE D'ITALIA
 PASSAPORTO
 rilasciato a *Biacetti*
 per l'Australia
 17 SET 1927
 IL QUESTORE

Il primo Passaporto è valido per un anno
 IN NOME DI SUA MAESTÀ VITTORIO EMANUELE III
 RE D'ITALIA
 PASSAPORTO
 rilasciato a *De Bolfo*
 per l'Australia
 Numero del Passaporto 8491

IN NOME DI SUA MAESTÀ VITTORIO EMANUELE III
 RE D'ITALIA
 PASSAPORTO
 rilasciato a *Bianchi*
 per l'Australia
 Numero del Passaporto 5251
 26 SET 1927

TONY DE BOLFO

Cover of the book *In search of Kings* by Tony De Bolfo. The article on following pages is an extract from the book.