

## FACT SHEET

### CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN

*'Mum opened the shop in the late 1920s. She was very proud of her heritage and thought that everything Italian was best. When she decided to sell pasta and other Italian goods, "Dalla Toscana" really took off. Even during the war, business was good. We had orders from all the big hotels and Italian restaurants. We lived upstairs and my sister and I used to help after school.'* Anna Scariot remembering her mother Genoveffa Donchi. From *Per l'Australia: the story of Italian migration* (MUP, 2006).

#### **Introduction**

Prior to the Second World War, it was uncommon for Italian migrant women to work outside the home. However, many contributed to the family income by running successful boarding houses, doing piecework, taking in laundry or working in small family businesses such as fruit shops, grocery stores and tailoring shops. During the War, Italian women took over the running of family businesses and farms, replacing the men who had been interned, conscripted into the Civil Alien Corps or into the Australian Armed Forces.

In the post-war Australian economic boom of the 1950s, Italian women entered the workforce en masse, where they made a significant contribution in the manufacturing and service industries, in particular the textile, clothing and food sectors.

Italian-Australian culture owes much to the determination and resilience of women, who in both the home and the workplace have played a pivotal role in the maintenance of regional dialects, religious practices, customs and traditions.

#### **Fashion**

For many migrant women, sewing was a means of supplementing the family income without having to leave the home. The work of Italian seamstresses and embroiderers was already a byword for quality and style as early as the 1890s. In that decade, demand for their gold bullion and silk embroidery obliged the Steffanoni sisters to open two shops in Sydney.

From the 1940s till the 1970s, the Australian fashion industry relied heavily on Italian seamstresses and pieceworkers, who ran sewing and knitting workshops in their homes and garages. But it was not until 1959, when Madame Itala Serini opened Australia's first Italian couture house, that women stepped out of the backroom and into the designer's chair. Serini was the first in a long line of Italian-Australian designers that includes Mariana Hardwick, Bettina Liano and Carla Zampatti.

#### **Arts and communications**

Sophie Steffanoni was one of several Italians who painted with the groundbreaking Australian Heidelberg School in the 1890s. After the Second World War, mass migration brought award-winning visual artists Patricia Piccinini and Wilma Tabacco.

Italian singers were instrumental in the establishment of opera in Australia from the 1870s onward. Women like Giulia Tamburini Coy, Lucia Baratti and Leonora Parodi Fabris arrived with touring companies and remained to perform and teach. The legendary Carandini girls, whose parents taught singing and ballet in Hobart, toured the country in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Italian-Australian women continue to be active in the arts. Singers include Vanessa Amorosi, Tina Arena and Natalie Imbruglia. Among the actresses who have made their mark are Carmelina Di Guglielmo, Maria Portesi and Greta Scacchi. As well, there are writers Anna Maria Dell'oso and *Looking for Alibrandi* creator Melina Marchetta and the playwright Teresa Crea. A pioneer of women's radio journalism is Lena Gustin, affectionately known as Mamma Lena, who began broadcasting in Sydney in the 1950s. Josephine Cafagna, Virginia Trioli, Emma Albericci and Sharyn Ghidella are examples of the many women of Italian origin presently employed in the field of journalism.

### **Science and medicine**

Italian nurses and midwives began arriving in Australia in the mid-1800s. Many, like Angelina Borello, who worked in the canecutting district of Ingham in Queensland, battled isolation and primitive conditions to care for their patients.

There are now countless women of Italian descent working in the science field. Among the pioneers is scientist, inventor and travel writer, Dr Marie Bentivoglio, who in 1922 became the first Australian woman to receive a scholarship to Oxford. Her research in crystallography contributed to the development of plastic film.

### **Manufacturing and hospitality**

Italian women have always played an active role in family-owned bars, restaurants and reception rooms. It was no different in Australia, where they cooked and served customers on the goldfields and in town and city centres from the mid-1800s. In the 1870s, Maria Rinaldi managed the dual task of raising 9 children and helping her husband Giovanni run their Melbourne eatery. It is commonly acknowledged that Mietta O'Donnell, who died tragically in 2001, did much to promote Italian food and change the face of dining in Australia. Today, female restaurateurs and chefs of Italian origin ensure the continuing popularity of both traditional and contemporary Italian-Australian culinary traditions.

Many of the most successful Italian-Australian food manufacturers, importers and retailers began as small family businesses with wives and mothers at the helm. In the 1930s, Maria Italiano and husband Natale made traditional cheeses in the kitchen of their North Melbourne home and shared the task of selling their Perfect Cheese Company produce door-to-door to shops and restaurants.

### **Business and leadership**

Leading businesswomen of the day feature prominently in posters produced by the New South Wales Italian Committee for Italians Abroad at the 1906 Milan World Fair. By the 1970s, Italian women were moving beyond family businesses to leadership roles in large companies. Entrepreneur and community leader Sarina Russo opened her one-room typing school in 1979. Fifteen years later, it had grown into the Sarina Russo Group of education, recruitment and investment companies. Julia Zaetta has been a magazine publisher since the 1990s. Her name has been associated with the Australian Women's Weekly, Better Homes and Gardens, Family Circle and New Woman.

Italian-Australian women have had a high profile as community leaders since the early twentieth century when many became advocates for the welfare of Italian migrants. During the Second World War, Lena Santospirito worked on behalf of Italian POWs and civil internees. In peacetime, she helped newly-arrived migrants find work and accommodation. In 1971, Elda Vaccari became the first president of COASIT, the largest Italian welfare body in Australia.

Women of Italian origin work in government across the country, the most prominent of whom is journalist Franca Arena, who was elected to the New South Wales Parliament in 1981.

### **Sport**

Italian-Australians are active in sports at a local and national level. In 2004, winemaker Vicki Vasarelli had cause to celebrate two achievements: she released a new range of wines and became Australian Women's Bocce Champion.

In 2005, aged 17, Monette Russo became the first Australian woman to win an individual World Championships medal in gymnastics.

### **The contribution of women in the Italian Historical Society Collection**

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to the contribution of Italian women in the following collections:

- Bonollo Collection
- COASIT Records and Archives
- Fashion Collection
- Food Industry Collection
- Library
- Opera Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection
- Santospirito Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Italian Migration: 1850-1900
- Italian Migration: 1900-1945
- Italian Migration: 1945-1970
- Proxy Brides
- Statistics on Italians in Australia
- The Arts
- Trades and Professions

### **Further reading**

The resources listed below can be accessed, by appointment, at the Italian Historical Society.

### **Publications**

Admirer, An 1977, *The story of Mamma Lena*, Saint Paul, Homebush, New South Wales.

Bella Wardrop, S 1996, *By proxy: a study of Italian proxy brides in Australia*, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Melbourne, Carlton.

Castles, S et al. (eds) 1992, *Australia's Italians: culture and community in a changing society*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, New South Wales.

———1992, *Italo-australiani: la popolazione di origine italiana in Australia*, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Turin, Italy.

Cavallaro Johnson, G & Baker, C 1998, *Italian-Australian courtship and marriage stories*, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, Queensland.

Church, J 2005, *Per l'Australia: the story of Italian migration*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

Crawford, P & Maddern, P (eds) 2001, *Women as Australian citizens: underlying histories*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

Dell'oso, AM 1998, *Songs of the suitcase*, Harper Collins, Pymble, New South Wales.

Italian-Australian Women's Association 1986, *Noi donne Italo-Australiane: documenti del primo congresso dell' Associazione donne Italo-Australiane sul contributo delle donne Italo-Australiane alla societa' Australiana = Proceedings of the first congress of Italo-Australian women on the contribution of Italian Australian women to Australian society, Sydney 26th October, 1985, Melbourne 27th October, 1985*, Italian-Australian Women's Association, North Fitzroy, Melbourne.

Kahan-Guidi, AM & Weiss, E (eds) 1990, *Give me strength, Italian Australian women speak = Forza e coraggio: a bilingual collection*, Women's Redress Press, Broadway, New South Wales.

Loh, M (ed.) 1984, *With courage in their cases: the experiences of thirty-five Italian immigrant workers and their families in Australia*, Italian Federation of Emigrant Workers and their families, Coburg, Victoria.

Martinuzzi O'Brien, I 1989, *Australia's Italians 1788-1988*, Italian Historical Society—COASIT and the State Library of Victoria, Carlton, Victoria.

Penny, J & Khoo S-E 1996, *Intermarriage: a study of migration and integration*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Saville, J 1995, *Protagoniste non spettatrici = Cinderellas no more: 10 years of the National Italian-Australian Women's Association*, National Italian-Australian Women's Association, Sydney.

Tence, M & Triarico, E 1999, *La dote: preparing for a family: the importance of the dowry in the Australian Italian family*, Immigration Museum, Victoria.

### **Periodicals**

*Italian Historical Society Journal* 1993-, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Carlton, Victoria.

### **Internet sites**

AustraliaDonna Working Group 2006, *home page*, South Australia, <http://www.australiadonna.on.net/italian/index.htm>

Martinuzzi-O'Brien, I 2002, *Italian Australia Records Project (IARP)*, Victoria University, Melbourne, <http://w2.vu.edu.au/iarp/Default.asp>

PictureAustralia 2006, *Looking for images of Australiana? PictureAustralia® is the place to start!*, NLA, Canberra, <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>

State Library of Victoria 2004, *Pictures catalogue*, SLV, Melbourne, <http://sinpic.slv.vic.gov.au/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

**Audio-visual**

*Hard work and hope: Australia's Italians* 1989, video recording, Italian Historical Society—COASIT and Equality Press, Carlton, Victoria.

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