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’amicoo 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 Risteglio*, 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]. 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. 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 (NSW) 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 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 Guide is arranged alphabetically by the name of the creator of each collection whether it be a person, family, business or association. Each entry provides a succinct description of contents and information on date range, call number, language, format, quantity, access conditions, source and date of receipt. A biographical note appears where warranted. A detailed contents list is included to amplify voluminous or complex collections, such as the Gustin papers. An index by Italian region to the birthplaces of creators of collections is followed by a comprehensive index to names and subjects which concludes the Guide.

Since the advent of The Italians in NSW Project, the State Library’s holdings of Italian-language printed material have slowly increased. Periodicals and ephemeral items, such as leaflets and posters produced by the plethora of Italian clubs and associations, are the most vulnerable printed material to slip through the bibliographic net. The Project strives to raise awareness among publishers of their obligation to forward to the Library for permanent record one copy of each of their publications.

An important periodical acquisition this year has been a complete set of Il Canguso, quarterly of the National Association of Emigrants and Ex-Migrants of Australia (ANEA), established in 1976 in Padua. Lent to the Library for microfilming by Aldo Lorigiola, co-founder and President of ANEA, this publication provides a unique window through which to view the return migration phenomenon. Lorigiola was a Scalabrinian priest from New York when he arrived in Unanderra, Wollongong, in 1955. The nearby Port Kembla steel works had absorbed thousands of his Italian parishioners. Insights into Lorigiola’s role in the incipient Immaculate Conception Parish, Unanderra, established by the Scalabrinian Order, can be gleaned from the papers of leading laymen, Stan Williams, lent for copying by his widow in 1992.

Original material of non-Italian provenance, such as the Williams papers above, highlights the rich and complementary nature of the State Library’s collections. Research For La Dolce Vita? revealed elucidating sources scarcely analysed in the past for documenting Italian-Australian history. The evocative photograph of the Sydney Fascist Party in the 1930’s, reproduced here, is one example. It was taken by Sydney commercial and newspaper photographer Sam Hood. In 1973 the State Library acquired his collection of 33,000 negatives, which were copied onto more stable media and then onto video disc. The full spectrum of society from the Depression years to the fabulous Fifties was now available at the press of a button. In 1991 the Library’s curator of photographs, Alan Davies, selected the following photograph in an exhibition of Hood’s work and in the accompanying publication, Sydney’s Exposures: Through the Eyes of Sam Hood and His Studio, 1925-1950 (1991). The photograph drummed up as much speculation as fact. Owing to the presence in the photograph of the Italian Consul general, Marquis Agostino Ferrante, the date range narrowed from 1932 to 1934. Where and when it was taken remained unconfirmed until midway through La Dolce Vita?

Founded in 1927, the Sydney Fascio had become well drilled in the public relations battle with Italian-Australian anti-Fascists. Under the watchful eye of zealous consular officials, the party sought to capture the loyalty of Italian migrants to Mussolini’s regime. Public displays of allegiance, conveying order and discipline, focused on the emblematic black shirts and trappings of the fascisti. The young boy in the photograph is kitted out in the uniform of the Balilla, the Fascist youth organisation, symbolising the pervasive influence of Fascism. Standing behind him is Consul General Ferrante. On the balcony are members of the women’s Fascio, with its founding secretary and later to become the doyenne of Sydney’s Italian community, Caterina Stassi (second from the left).

Further details about the photograph have since come to light. With the solicited assistance of exhibition-goers, more names and faces have been matched. One excited visitor identified her late husband in the shot. She even produced another photograph of the same group taken on the same day by Sam Hood. On the back of her photograph is Hood’s stamp and an inscription in
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 50-7'.

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.

ENDNOTES


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.


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.