

Italians in Toronto

Development of a National Identity 1875-1935



Zucchi

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Identity, 1875-1935

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*To my parents, Jacum and Nives,
in appreciation*

Preface

One of the difficulties with studying Toronto's relatively small Italian community before 1935 is the scattered nature of the sources. No single depository provides the bulk of the materials for writing a history of the group and few newspapers have survived from the early community. I am indebted to many individuals and institutions. The staffs of many archives and libraries were extremely helpful: the Inter-Library Loans Office at J.P. Robarts Research Library, University of Toronto; Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, especially the late Rev. James McGivern; the United Church archives; the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, all in Toronto; the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa; the Library of Congress in Washington; the New York Public Library Annex; the archives of the Franciscan Province of the Immaculate Conception in New York; and the archives of the Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists, in Brooklyn, New York. In Rome, I am indebted to the staff of the *Centro Studi Emigrazione*, especially to Dr Gianfausto Rosoli, who taught me to be streetwise in Italian archives and libraries; also to the staffs of the *Archivio Storico* at the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, and of the *Archivio dello Stato*, and to the *Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri*. I am most grateful to the late Dr Giovanni Battista and Mrs Vera Cragnolini for generously allowing me use of their apartment in Rome; it made my stay in the Eternal City so very pleasant. In many of the small towns which sent immigrants to Toronto (i.e. sending towns), officials were very helpful in allowing access to available registers and documents. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, the Uni-

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An earlier version of chapter 2 appeared in *Gathering Place: People and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945*, edited by Robert F. Harney (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario): 121-46. Part of chapter 3 appeared in a different form in *Studi Emigrazione/Études Migrations* 77 (1985): 68-79.

My greatest intellectual debt is to the late Professor Robert F. Harney, who supervised this study in its dissertation form, and whose enthusiasm first drew me to the field of migration history. Bob passed away just a few months before this volume was reprinted. His advice to me and many others in my field was indispensable. I shall always treasure his generous and affectionate friendship. The comments and suggestions of Professors J.M.S. Careless, Raymond Breton, R.J. Veccoli, and Donald Akenson were extremely useful and constructive.

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Introduction

Toronto has one of the largest Italian populations of any city outside Italy. While the estimated 400 to 500 thousand Torontonians of Italian origin constitute a smaller group than in New York, São Paulo, or Buenos Aires (Argentina), the 160,000 Italian-born immigrants in Toronto match their counterparts in number in those other cities. The vast majority of the city's residents of Italian origin are connected to the great immigration which followed 1948, especially the years 1951 to 1966.¹ Before the Second World War, however, Toronto already had a significant Italian population with three Little Italies, three Catholic parishes, and three Protestant churches or missions, numerous clubs and associations, newspapers, and ethnic city directories. There were at most about 15 to 20 thousand Italians in Toronto in this period – a fraction of today's community.

This book is an internal history of the Italian immigrant community in Toronto from the 1870s to the 1930s, the period we might call the prelude to the great immigration. Although it deals with the early Italian inhabitants of the city, it is not within its scope to present a catalogue of Italian pioneers. In this volume, I allude occasionally to what we normally call the "second generation," that is, the children of the immigrants, but this is not a multigenerational examination of ethnicity. I make use of a number of quantitative sources, but again, this study is not concerned with a demographic breakdown of this immigrant community. "Cliometrics," the study of history based on quantitative sources, has made great strides in recent years, especially in the area of social history. Although this book uses quantitative data, it is based on qualitative sources which are different but certainly not any less revealing than statistical data.

How then might we classify this volume? *Italians in Toronto* is an example of immigration history, or more exactly, migration history. It is especially difficult for Canadians to grasp the meaning of this expression. For almost twenty years now the country has been inundated with such terms as multiculturalism, minority rights, third force, ethnic roots, to the point that they seem almost interchangeable. As one historian has noted in a recent article, when it comes to studies in immigration and ethnicity, it is difficult to differentiate between academic research and policy making, between an historical interest in immigration and its place in society and coming to terms with the postwar wave of immigration and the resulting plethora of diverse, visible, and invisible ethnic groups.²

What is migration history? It is a field concerned with the whole question of migration in its historical context. Its interest is primarily the migrant, and it attempts to study the migration experience in its integrity "as a complete sequence of experiences whereby the individual moves from one social identity to another."³ Although migration history is sensitive to the politics, economics, and social forces of the individual countries with which the migrant under study is associated, it is not constrained by the category of national history; yet, paradoxically, it is sensitive to the problem of ethnic identity. If we are to study the "complete sequence," our focus must be the migrant in his or her old world setting, the commerce of migration which takes the migrant from Point A to Point B, and the new world setting.

In recent years, we have seen a great growth in the literature on ethnic groups in Canada, in history, in the social sciences, and in fiction. These studies have reflected the reality of the polyethnic composition of the population and self-awareness on the part of each immigrant group, their consciousness that they are Canadians and yet distinguishable from other Canadians. The studies also have reflected the investment of millions of dollars, at all levels of government, into the promotion of multiculturalism, that brainchild of the Liberal government of the late 1960s, which grew out of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism.

Unfortunately, however, the literature on the subject has also been, on the whole, mediocre. Although there have been some excellent studies on various ethnic groups or the concept of ethnicity, most of the work by lay scholars and serious academics has concentrated on individual or collective hagiographies, on policy making, or

on studies on prejudice and racism.⁴ True, some advances have been made. For example, historians no longer associate Canadian immigration exclusively with the peopling of the west. Although urban historians have become aware of the existence of immigrant groups in the city, they have not delved deeper into the place of the immigrants in the urban centre beyond acknowledging their presence in the urban context, examining generally their settlement patterns, or their relationship to political parties. Labour historians have fared better, especially in the 1980s. Now that the fruitless debate has been abandoned on whether class or ethnicity is the master key to unlock the mysteries of society, labour historians have begun to examine more seriously the complexities of the immigrant experience of the working class.

This study falls into the realm of migration history, but it also deals with the question of ethnicity. In the following chapters I will examine the background to the emigration of Italians to Toronto, their settlement and occupational patterns, ethnic enterprises, religious and institutional history in order to understand how their sense of identity changed with their immigration to Canada and, more specifically, to Toronto. In other words, the immigrants who came from Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries strongly identified themselves with their hometowns or home districts. Yet, in Toronto they also came to identify strongly with an "Italian" community. To understand why this was so is the main problem this book addresses.

The theme of hometown or regional loyalties among Italians has satiated the recent literature on Italian immigration both here and in the United States. Yet local loyalty was a real phenomenon among Italians and most Mediterranean peasants. Italian bureaucrats, philanthropists, clerics, or journalists who visited Canadian and American "colonies" at the turn of the century were struck by the hopeless provincialism of their conationals in the North American urban centres. In 1904, for example, Adolfo Rossi, head of the *Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione*, an Italian governmental agency responsible for overseeing the condition of emigrants at the time of departure from Italy, those in transit, and those already living abroad, observed that the family ties of the southern Italian "are deep and tenacious; in their hearts they develop an attachment to the fellow townsman along with affection for their family. This is followed by loyalty to friends of relatives, and then to co-provincials. On the