

Transnational Italians

Ros Pesman

Loretta Baldassar

VISITS HOME: MIGRATION EXPERIENCES
BETWEEN ITALY AND AUSTRALIA
MUP, \$39.95pb, 396pp, 0 522 83965 2

Tony de Bolfo

IN SEARCH OF KINGS: WHAT BECAME OF THE
PASSENGERS OF THE 'RE D'ITALIA'
HarperCollins, \$29.95pb, 381pp, 0 7322 7573 3

ON 24 NOVEMBER 1927 the steamship *Re d'Italia* arrived in Melbourne. The passengers on the ship were in large part peasant workers from the Italian peninsula, 110 of whom disembarked, much to the consternation of the local press, which carried lurid stories of the growing influx of undesirable Southern European immigrants.

Melbourne journalist Tony de Bolfo's original interest in the *Re d'Italia* was in recovering the history of his grandfather Silvio de Bolfo, who, together with two of his brothers, was among the migrants on the ship. In time Tony de Bolfo's curiosity expanded to encompass a search for the stories of all the Melbourne-bound Italian passengers. Why had they left Italy? What did they hope to find in Australia? How were their Australian lives or Italian lives, in the case of those who returned? What happened to their descendants? Through painstaking detective work, de Bolfo has recovered much detail about the individual lives of this cohort of mainly young men who had experienced World War I and the early years of Fascism in Italy and who encountered the Depression soon after their arrival in Australia. His biographies flesh out, in poignant examples, the statistics and general conclusions on interwar Italian migration. To take one example: migration was male — only three of de Bolfo's sample are women — but by no means confined to single men. Long family separation was a feature of pre-1950s migration. Antonio Cengia, from the province of Belluno in the Veneto, embarked on the *Re d'Italia* a year after his marriage. It was not until 1947, twenty years later, that his wife joined him in Australia. Three years later, she gave birth to their only child.

The life stories that de Bolfo has recovered illustrate another phenomenon of Italian migration, which both government authorities and scholars were slow to recognise. Far from being individuals whose worlds were confined to the village, many of the migrants who came to Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were world travellers, veterans of migration, men and women who had themselves, or were the children of people who had, previously spent time in other parts of Europe or North or South America. Many of those who came to Australia after varying periods of time

moved back to Italy, sometimes only to move on again. Eremengildo Ponta, from the province of Udine, remained in Australia three years before taking passage back to Italy in 1931. Four years later, he was working in Eritrea. He then moved on to Germany in 1936, where he remained until 1942. At the end of the war, Ponta obtained work in Switzerland and then in 1949 set out on his travels again, this time to Cameroon, where he became a house cook. He finally settled in Italy, in 1958. The North American historian Donna Gabaccia has rightly observed that what surprises the modern student of Italian migration is the migrants' capacity to move and communicate so effectively on a global scale, to join continents through their networks. The world of many Italian villagers was global long before globalisation.

Eremengildo Ponta, in leaving Australia, was far from unusual among the passengers on the *Re d'Italia* or among Italian migrants. Around one-third of those who came to Australia from north-eastern Italy in the interwar years returned, and the pattern is similar for post-World War II migration. What is difficult to distinguish in official statistics is permanent repatriation from return visits. Ampelio Aquasaliente, another *Re d'Italia* passenger, made his only trip back to Italy in 1975, forty-eight years after he had left: 'I thought it would be nice to take my family back to where their father and mother were born. The old home had changed a lot since I had left. It had grown into a very large city, compared with the little country village I remembered.' Aquasaliente commented that visiting and catching up with his siblings 'was a very emotional time for me, considering that when I first left they thought they wouldn't see me again. So I am glad that I went back to see them when I did.' Loretta Baldassar would argue that, in making his visit home, however long delayed, Aquasaliente was participating in a ritual of migration.

Baldassar, the daughter of Italian immigrants and an anthropologist at the University of Western Australia, writes of her fascination with the problem of how individuals, families and communities sustain and manage relationships over vast distances of space and time. The focus of her ethnographic study, *Visits Home*, is a group of Italians who migrated from the village of San Fior in the province of Treviso in north-eastern Italy to Perth.

As Baldassar rightly points out at the beginning of *Visits Home*, the experience of 'going back' has generally been ignored in migration literature, just as it was invisible in statistics. Australian authorities assumed that migrants were passive objects and permanent settlers. On both counts, as subsequent research has shown, they were wrong. Current scholarship, rather than viewing migrants as passive victims, constructs them as confident and capable individuals with their own strategies and agendas, who contributed to shaping their own futures. The universal goal of all villagers was *sistemazione*, the acquisition of a house, the establishment of a family and the means to its support. Migration was a culturally approved strategy to achieve a successful *sistemazione*. Having made and saved the necessary funds

abroad, the migrant would return home. The answer to the question that puzzled and worried Australian authorities in the 1960s — as to why so many migrants were repatriating — was simple: they never intended to stay.

While the migrants' intention on arrival may well have been to achieve sufficient wealth to set themselves up in Italy, many achieved *sistemazione* in Australia where their children grew up adjusted and content. But when settlement in Australia — or in any new country — became permanent, the obligation to return remained, and took on the attenuated form of the return visit. For the migrant generation, the visit home was a secular pilgrimage, a recognition and fulfilment of an obligation to family and community. For the second generation, the visit is a transformatory rite of passage, a reinforcement of identity through engagement with the source. Baldassar convincingly argues that migration is not merely a process of departure and arrival, but that return is a third and integral stage. Migration is not simply about departure or establishing one's family in a new country: it is also about ties to the homeland and the influence of this attachment on ethnic identity.

The visits home are complex and fraught events, taking different forms for different generations. Bonds of kinship and friendship may be enduring, but so too is competition. Reception by the relatives at home is not simple. The migrants are at the same time the ones who deserted and the ones whose desertion contributed to present well-being. The returning migrants departed at a time when the Veneto region was poverty-stricken and backward. When they come back, they are anxious to display the material success that they have achieved in Australia, to justify their permanent expatriation. But the Veneto to which they return is now one of the most prosperous regions of Europe, and those who did not make the sacrifice of migration are as well, if not better, off. The visitors also face challenges to their identity. In Australia they are considered Italian, and they may well have invested a great deal in maintaining their Italian identity; in visiting San Fior, for example, they are going home. But, on arrival, they are considered as *australiani* and effectively barred from returning to their original identities.

In this beautifully crafted, complex and multi-layered book, Baldassar strikes a nice balance between telling the migrant stories of return and situating the stories in current international scholarship on migration. In turn, her own work, as exemplified in *Visits Home*, is making a significant contribution to debates on migration, transnationalism and transregionalism, on the processes and choices in migrant identity formation, and on the relationship between space and identity. An older way of regarding migration was as disruption; the newer way, illustrated here, is to focus on the ways in which migrants attempt to build their lives across borders and maintain ties to more than one home, to think of Italians or Veneti or San Fiorensi as transnational or transregional communities linked by ongoing ties of family and community. Italy no longer refers to those who left as migrants but as *italiani all'estero*, Italians living abroad.