

Bill Kent, Ros Pesman, Cynthia Troup (eds), *Australians in Italy: Contemporary Lives and Impressions*, Monash University ePress, Clayton, 2008.

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The result of a symposium at Monash University's Prato Centre in 2005, *Australians in Italy* is a collection of both scholarly articles and personal reflections on what its editors term the 'Australian love affair with Italy'. Building on previous work by Gaetano Prampolini and Marie-Christine Hubert on Australian writers, artists and travellers in Tuscany, this collection widens its scope to include the whole of Italy and aims to bring current scholarship on the Australian presence in Italy up-to-date. Editors Bill Kent, Ros Pesman and Cynthia Troup have sourced contributions from a wide range of individuals including academics, artists, Australian-Italians (or Italian-Australians), members of the Roman Catholic clergy, journalists, and writers. Most, if not all of these contributors, it should be noted, are distinguished figures in their respective fields. The ex-ambassador to Italy, Rory Steele, for example, provides an overview of diplomatic relations between Australia and Italy, and Whitbread winner Peter Porter regales us with a selection of his poems that have been inspired by his travels to Italy. In short, there is no disputing the quality of the contributions in *Australians in Italy*, and indeed, it is a comprehensive and much-needed collection that addresses the surprising gap in studies about the relationship between Australia and Italy.

That there has been so little literature produced on Australians travelling, or living, in Italy is surprising, given the increasing numbers that Cathy Crupi provides in her short survey of statistics for Australians travelling overseas and to Italy in particular. That only two works on Australians in Italy have been produced over the last fifteen years is disappointing. However, the present collection goes some way to addressing this deficit.

Intended as a survey of the relationship between Australians and Italy, the book covers a wide range of subjects from Australian artists working in Italy to educational tourism. The book is split into seven thematic sections of three to

four chapters and vignettes. Of special interest are the two chapters by Italians involved with Australian Studies in Italy. Lorenzo Perrona's contribution provides us with a unique insight into how Australian literature is viewed by Italian (and European) Literary Studies, and Silvana Tuccio details the history of *Sguardi Australiani*, a festival of Australian film held in Italy from 2002 to 2006. It is refreshing for the observer to become the observed, and to see the ways in which Australian culture is interpreted by Italians. However, this section of the collection is all too brief. The section devoted to the experience of Italian-Australian migrants returning to Italy is also worthy of special attention. The personal reflection by Luisa Panichi, as well as insights into the experience of returning to Italy by Loretta Baldasar and Aldo Lorigiola are especially valuable as they reveal a unique experience of emigrant return that has not yet been the subject of any close study. Other themes include artists working in Italy, featuring contributions by Udith Blackall, Ian Britain, Euan Heng and Jo-Anne Dugan, and Australian encounters of Italy by Jane Drakard, Chris Wood, Alison Leitch, and Camilla Russell. The Australian presence in Rome and the Vatican is covered by Peter Howard, Mark Coleridge, Antonio Pagliaro and Cynthia Troup, whilst Kent, Pesman, and J.R. Green contribute to Steele's and Crupi's broad overview of Australians in Italy.

The editors have also made the conscious decision that *Australians in Italy* should not just be a collection for an academic audience, but one that is accessible to the general reader as well. This is reflected in the small vignettes that break up each section of the book, which provide personal recollections on the experience of Italy, or of prominent Australians who helped to raise the profile of Italian studies in Australia, and vice versa.

While there has been an undeniable need for such a collection for some time, in my view the wide range of contributions in *Australians in Italy* only serves to highlight the great paucity of studies exploring the relationship between Italy and Australia. Though the Italian migrant experience to Australia has been covered by previous studies, the reverse, of Australians travelling to Italy, as Ros Pesman points out in her chapter, is sorely lacking. To be sure, this collection was only intended to be an appetiser of sorts to provoke further

studies, as the editors note. However, some of the appetisers provided are so tantalisingly short as to disappoint when the main course of a more extensive study fails to appear. Take for example the survey of Australians writing in Italy by Bruce Bennett, which reveals an extensive array of authors including Germaine Greer and David Malouf. Presumably constrained by spatial considerations, Bennett provides only the barest survey of the authors he has chosen, which leaves the reader hungering for more information on how Italy has influenced these authors and a more extensive study of these works. This shorter space suits personal reminiscences, however, as seen in the vignettes of Desmond O'Grady and Lisa Clifford.

The only minor criticism that could be levelled at the book is the fact that its juxtaposition of serious academic studies alongside lighter personal reminiscences tends to make the rhythm of the book slightly uneven. But this is only a minor quibble.

What Kent, Pesman and Troup have achieved, therefore, is to address the overdue need for an updated version of Prampolini and Hubert's first foray into detailing the Australian experience of Italy. The influence of Italy on Australian culture has been significant, and the book amply demonstrates just how wide-ranging this influence has been. It is however, as its editors note, only an appetiser, and it is up to the interested reader to carry out more research into the gaps that the book has missed. As such, *Australians in Italy* not only adds to a fuller understanding of the relationship between Australians and Italy, but also serves as encouragement to others to investigate the areas that have been passed over by contributors to the collection. To continue the metaphor used by the editors, our appetites have been whet, and it is now our turn to provide the fuller meal.

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