

An aerial photograph of a small town in Calabria, Italy, during a dramatic sunset. The town is built on a hillside, with numerous houses featuring red-tiled roofs. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene and creating long shadows. The sky is filled with dark, dramatic clouds. The text "Growing up *calabrese* in Australia" is overlaid in white, with "calabrese" in italics.

Growing up *calabrese* in Australia

Vincent Morfuni KC

A GOOD “NEW AUSTRALIAN”

- ▶ Growing up Calabrese in the 1950s and 1960s entailed:
- ▶ Proving that one was a good new Australian
- ▶ Coping with racism
- ▶ Striving for excellence
- ▶ Achieving economic security
- ▶ Compartmentalising ones life as a consequence of the policy of assimilation
- ▶ Trying to prove that one did not fit the negative stereotype of the calabrese disseminated in the mainstream media.

Italian migration to Australia dates back to the first fleet on which there were some convicts of Italian origin. In the 19th century some Italians travelled to Australia and the discovery of gold in 1851 led to migrants from all parts of the world including Italy coming to Australia.

Census figures indicate that there were some 3890 in 1891 and about 33000 at the outbreak of WW2.



ITALIANS IN AUSTRALIA

The media
presentation of
migrants

The yellow peril;

The Dago peril
and

The Olive peril

- ▶ The media in Australia has disseminated a negative stereotype of the Immigrants almost from the beginning of immigration
- ▶ In part this was due to the White Australia Policy adopted by the new Commonwealth Government with the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, designed to deter the immigration of Chinese and Kanakas
- ▶ The restriction of kanakas from Queensland sugar cane fields forced the growers to seek substitute labourers capable of working in tropical conditions



Italian
canecutters,
Innisfail, 1923
[State Library
of
Queensland]

THE STEREOTYPE

Southern Italians were said to be:

DIRTY;

CRIMINALS AND MAFIOSI

IGNORANT;

NON WHITE

VIOLENT

ENCROACHING ON THE JOBS OF LOCALS

WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY

THE NEED TO ASSIMILATE

the negative stereotype is a product of the underlying racism that characterised Australian immigration policy from the foundation of the Federation.

The white Australia policy was buttressed by the Assimilation Policy that required migrants to assimilate into the dominant culture.

This in turn meant that many migrants felt obliged to forego their culture of origin.

White australia versus the need for labour

The need for labour in the cane fields of Queensland resulted in Italian workers being given assisted passage to Queensland on condition that they work in the cane fields. But the media was critical. It was the failure to attract northern European workers that led to Italians being allowed to migrate.

- ▶ The two themes of Australian immigration are “keeping Australia White “ and the need for Labour.
- ▶ The two have always been in conflict because there were not enough “white” people willing to do the work required ,for example in the cane fields and the mines.
- ▶ Labour therefore had to be “imported” thus the influx of migrants from allegedly “non white” parts of the world
- ▶ Hume Black, a prospective employer of the Italians admitted that he had *‘no particular hankering after Italians, if we could only induce some European farmers — men of our own colour — to accept these terms’*
- ▶ **THE MEDIA WAS VERY NEGATIVE ABOUT IT:**

the fiery Italian is as explosive as his native mountains and would overflow lava-like our regions and institutions ... the contingency of a mafia or camorra being established in our midst; of labour disputes and family quarrels being settled by the knife and of the terror of organised assassination being substituted for the law-enforced quiet and safety of our towns ... We want no blood-liquifying lazzarone from the Vesuvian capital to let daylight into us — no 'Sicilian cooks' to spoil our 'broth'. [1891]

THE BOOMERANG

3d

True to the old Italian saying that things often turn round
It flies in whirling circles to its owner's door
A LIVE NEWSPAPER - RADICAL OF THE SOIL



WHY ON EARTH DOESN'T JOHN HILL SHOOT THE WATERS?

The olive peril

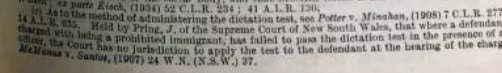
“The native Australian who expects a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work will find himself crowded out of Northern Queensland by Javanese, Kanakas, Chinese, and Italians each and all, bringing with them the diseases and vices of their special nationalities until the land is eaten up by the offscourings of the earth, and becomes a by-word among nations.”

The Boomerang

SUCH SENTIMENTS LET TO THE PASSAGE OF THE IMMIGRATION ACT 1901 BY THE NEW FEDERAL PARLIAMENT:

Section 3(a) was the particular provision that provided the government with the ability to exclude non-European immigrants and other "undesirables." It defined as a prohibited immigrant "any person who when asked to do so by an officer fails to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of the officer a passage of fifty words in length in an European language directed by the officer."

- ## THE DAGO MENACE



THE DAGO MENACE

Oh, the Dago's partly white, And sometimes he can
fight, And sometimes he lives on garlic, fish and sago;
His drink is lemon squash, Now and then he's known
to wash — And you'll have to speak respectful of the
Dago!

Oh, the Dago's often cheap, And he sweats while we're
asleep — I don't think he goes to bed, although he may
go! 'Neath the counter he will snooze, 'Mid the fish or
fruit refuse — Still you'll have to bow politeful to the
Dago!



He's both ignorant and slow And we often tell him
so! And his anger is the rage of a virago — For he'll
maim, or take a life, With his swift and sudden knife
But you'll have to take your hat off to the Dago!

He's a liar, it may be, And a fool, perchance is he,
Who thinks that images of wood and clay go! But
he bristles up his fur, At the sight of Death astir And
you'll have to act obsequious to the Dago!

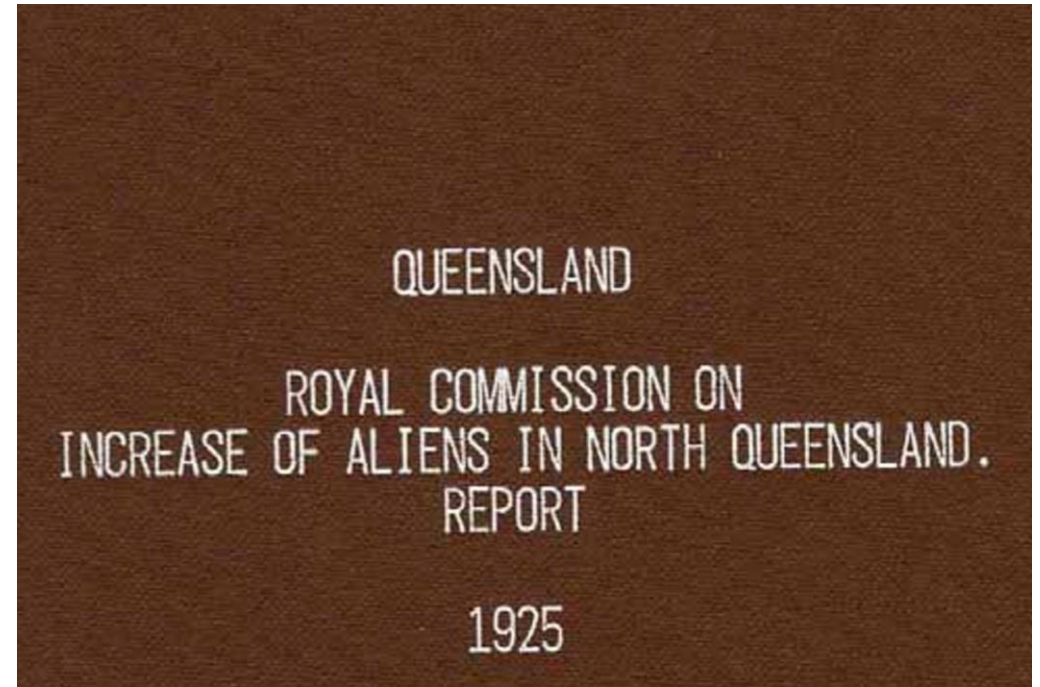
Yes! — it's not a pleasant thought For a Race that
dreadeth nought — To think St Jingo second to St
Jago! But, unless you make things hum That's
about what's going to come, And — Australia will
be waiting on the Dago! [1912]

The Ferry report

- ▶ “The general opinion is that the Northern Italian is a very desirable class of immigrant. He is thrifty and industrious, law abiding, and honest in business transactions. Those arriving in the past have generally been trained agriculturalists, many of whom have become successful farmers”

“It was the swarthier Southern Italians who were dubbed ‘the Chinese of Europe’ and execrated as ‘scum and refuse’ while the lighter-skinned ‘thriving highly paid and long-headed Piedmontese ... the Scotchmen of Italy’ were distinctly preferred”.

- ▶ Ferry report p15



THE OLIVE PERIL

‘THE CHINESE OF EUROPE’

DESCRIPTION OF SOUTHERN ITALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN STAR NEWSPAPER 1887

Letter to Prime Minister Bruce from the Premier of WA c.1934

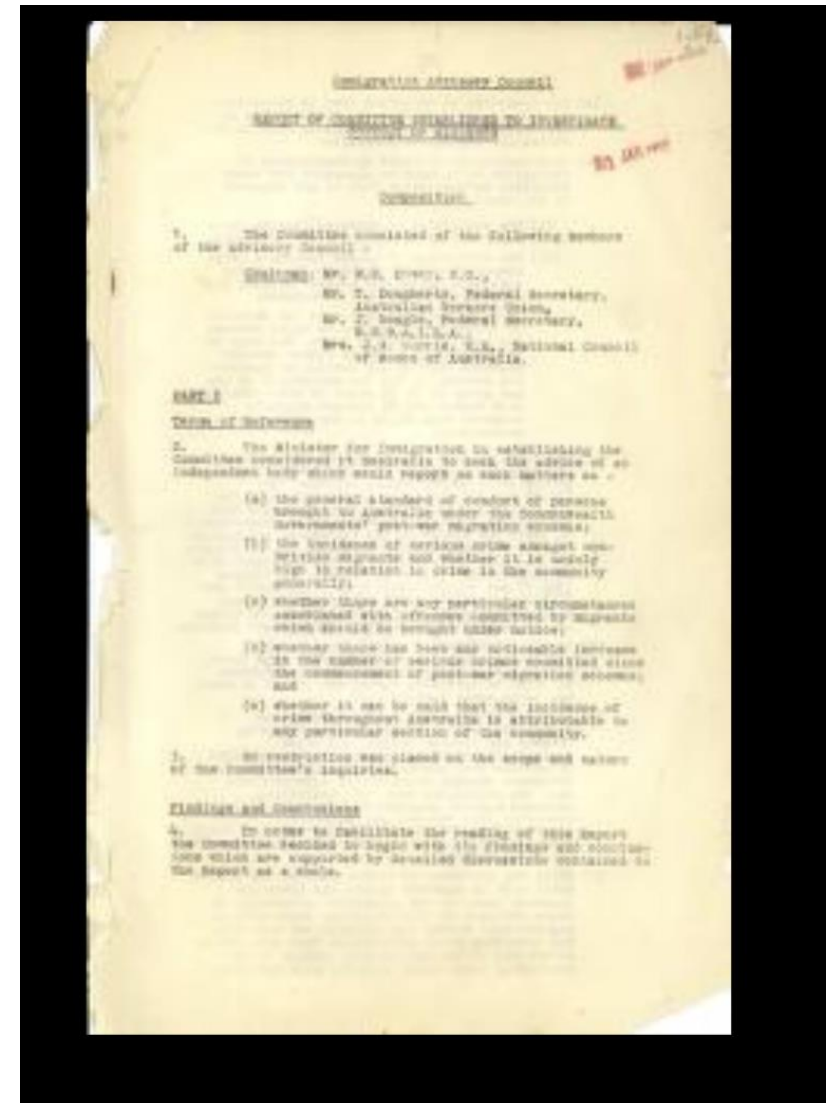
I have received a communication, through Mr. James McGirr, M.L.A., from the Liverpool Branch of the Australian Labor Party, intimating that at the last meeting of that Branch an emphatic protest was carried “against the policy of the Federal Government in allowing the influx of foreign criminals to Australia”.

Further, that members deplore the methods which, while permitting human garbage from the South of Europe to obtain employment, prevented good Australians from getting work, and, at the same time, was responsible for clean white men from England, Scotland and Ireland, walking the streets and roads looking for means to make a living.

In accordance with the undertaking given to Mr. McGirr, M.L.A., this expression of opinion is communicated for your consideration.

The Dovey report

IMMIGRANTS ARE LESS INVOLVED IN CRIME THAN LOCALS



THE VICTORIA MARKET KILLINGS

Report of the killings at the Victoria market in the 1960s added to the negative stereotype because the reports asserted that the killings were due to warfare between rival members of criminal organisations and they were calabrians. No one was convicted of the murders. One who was tried was acquitted. Cusack, a US policeman wrote a report that was not made public that alleged that the 'Drangheta' was in Australia.





Trimboli

Photo of Trimboli upon his acquittal on a charge of murder connected to the Victoria market killings.

Challenging the stereotype

At a communal level there was no challenge.

The ethnic media did challenge it but without much effect; Thus Sacchi exposed it in his report for the Corriere della sera in the 1920s and Randazzo in the 20th Century.

But the social clubs and other associations did not. There were a number of reasons:

The clubs were regionally based;

Lack of unity within the community;

Lack of leadership;

Reluctance to engage with authority and the fear of reprisal;

The need to “assimilate”

Filippo Sacchi, journalist and novelist, 1939

► An Italian journalist based in Queensland, Filippo Sacchi, explained this racism to readers of *Corriere Della Sera*: 'Why all this bitter feeling against the Italians? I will explain — in order to keep Australia "white". "Keep Australia white!" is the true catchword of this crusade. In fact we are not "white", we are "olive." "Olive-skinned influx", the invasion of the "olive-skins" is how a large Melbourne evening paper refers to the announcement of an inquiry by the Queensland Government into Italian immigration in the northern districts. And at another congress, of Australian women, a well-known speaker, after exhorting Australian housewives not to purchase fruit of the Italian vendors, even at lower prices, laments that after so much done to preserve Australia "white" against the menace of the Asiatic, "olive" immigrants continue to establish themselves in the country.'



Il Globo's **Nino Randazzo** continued to critique this prejudice after 1959: 'The Australian press has once again become an open wound in the body of our multicultural society. In Australia today we have – and we are not too surprised – criminals of Italian origin and of any other national extraction, we have corrupt cops, but we also have, above all, irresponsible journalists and newspaper owners who tolerate and even seem to encourage so much irresponsibility. It is very sad to have to observe and document this uncivil phenomenon just from the columns of a newspaper!'



via Dolorosa, Italia



Illustration: MICHAEL FITZJAMES

Silvia Greco

I admit it. I was naive. When I recently made a visit to my homeland Italy, I expected to find dissent. What I'd been reading in the Australian, English and French press of Silvio Berlusconi (the first Italian Prime Minister to be affected by a severe case of sarisiasis?) was shocking. His affairs with prostitutes and his alleged habit of rewarding the lowliest with a role in his party or, worse, with a job in the parliaments of Italy and Europe, were humiliating to Italians, surely? (Not to mention Italy's chronic Mafia and Camorra

corruption.) But I was amazed to find how few people were actually protesting. The opposition, the Partito Democratico, has never seriously questioned Berlusconi's media monopoly, the entrepreneurial activities that made him one of the richest men in the world or his fitness to run a country where chased by magistrates and angry prostitutes. Even the Vatican has been sluggish in reacting to Berlusconi's alleged criminal or un-Christian actions. In Italy it's almost as if the middle classes are not participating in politics any more. Dissent is left to individuals, and takes the form of angry tirades in front of a mid-

morning cappuccino, rather than proper political opposition. Where is all this apathy coming from? Undoubtedly Berlusconi used his television channels to bewilder the country, crushing opposing voices and creating a grotesquely vulgar society full of naked girls and arrogant politicians. Civil society is dormant in Italy; corruption after 20 years of Berlusconi (first as an entrepreneur, then as a politician), has become palpable everywhere. "All politicians, from all parties, got rich. They got themselves a wage which is three times the European standard", a professor from Rome points out in despair.

And little real news on Berlusconi makes it into the papers. In Milan I question a journalist, who confides: "It's the worst I've seen. Heads of newscasts often avoid certain topics, not because they are asked to, but because they think it's safer." Leonardo Sciascia, the Sicilian writer, once wrote that Italians are "the most docile people on earth". Docile? Or do they have a penchant for quiet cynicism, especially when money is to be made? According to police reports organised crime is stronger than ever. Think of the proposed bridge to link Sicily with Calabria. Why unite Italy's two poorest regions?

Because it'll provide juicy work for the mafia. Italian police recently tapped the conversation of two camorristi discussing how to get rid of a ship full of toxic waste off the coast of Calabria. "Wait for the right weather conditions and sink it," said one. "But why here, where we go swimming ourselves?" asked the other. "E chi se ne fette... (who gives a fuck) with the money we make we can go for a swim in Hawaii." This is today's Italy. Fanc' along the Costa Nostra?

Silvia Greco is a freelance journalist

- The prejudice continued unabated, nonetheless. A cartoon by Michael Fitzjames appeared on 20 November 2009 in the respected financial newspaper, Australian Financial Review that repeated the slurs directed at Italy and Italians. As Randazzo and others pointed out, this newspaper knew perfectly well the economic achievements of modern Italy.

As chair of NIAF, the National Italian Australian Foundation, I led a formal complaint against the newspaper and its publisher. Perhaps because it was a long-running problem, we received very little support from individuals or organisations in the Italian community in Australia. We were successful in winning an apology.



Inset from the offensive Michael Fitzjames cartoon, depicting Italy as 'Berlusconia'

Lessons from the Fitzjames episode

The experience made many of us reflect on the reasons for the resigned attitude of so many Italians in Australia. One issue was the fragmented nature of the Calabrian community, with its diversity of social clubs, mostly built in bricks and mortar after 1945, including separate clubs for Dellianova, Acquaro, Reggio Calabria ; Bagnara. This pattern echoed the suburban distribution of calabrese. Each club was almost like the piazza in the paese of origin. It gave members a sense of security and a place where they could play cards, bocce and eat meals as well as speak in the language of home.



What the clubs did not do was advocate for the community or seek to challenge the stereotype in the media

Another reason may have been that younger members of the community chose not be involved with the clubs because they considered them to be anachronistic and not useful for them to progress within the wider community

A lack of community feeling

Distrust of authority and reluctance to join with it



This thinking explains why we decided to create the Australian Calabrese Cultural Association (pictured: the ACCA committee in 2017)

ACCA PROJECTS

- ▶ ACCA has :
- ▶ Organised 2 conferences in Calabria the first in Cosenza in 2019 and the second in Reggio in 2023.the gap is due to the covid restrictions.
- ▶ Established the Calabrese of the year award;
- ▶ Established the Sono Calabrese YouTube channel;
- ▶ Challenged the AFP assertions relating to Italian criminal activity especially in relation to the Calabrese;
- ▶ Is in the process of organising a history of the contribution of the calabrese in Australia.



Gala Evening Cosenza October 2019

ACCA 1ST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2019

- Our work to foster a balanced and nuanced image of the Calabrian story in Australia is still in its infancy, and we welcome your support and ideas. We hope that our work is the beginning of a new interest in true history of Calabrian-Australian heritage and culture in Australia.



ACCA 2023 CONFERENCE

Projects undertaken by ACCA “COTY”



Victorian MP John Pesutto is
proud of his Calabrian heritage

Of course, physical meetings will never disappear

We have booked venues for an annual gala dinner

Each year these dinners grow in size and give us an opportunity to promote a positive image of Calabrian life in Australia

One highlight is the announcement of the Calabrian of the Year



Calabrian of the Year

- Awardees to date:
- **Anna Maria Arabia**, CEO, Australian Academy of Science
- **Joe Avati**, entertainer
- Professor **Elisabetta Barbieri**
- Dr **Theresa De Fazio**, educator
- Professor **Joe Lo Bianco**, sociolinguist (*pictured*)
- **Tony Roccisano**, entrepreneur

Australian Calabrese Cultural Association YouTube series Sono Calabrese

► Our second major project is a series of regular interviews with Australians of Calabrese background taking about their lives and experiences. These are uploaded to YouTube, and run for up to 3 hours in duration. To date we have produced 91 videos. Some have several dozen views; the interview with Professor Tony Sofo (pictured) has already reached 9000 views



Sono calabrese

- The Joe Avati interview has received over 20K views to date



AFP PRESS CONFERENCE

- ▶ On 7 June 2022 assistant commissioner Ryan was reported as having said: ““It's entirely possible that people would be living next door to members of the 'Ndrangheta without knowing,” AFP Assistant Commissioner Nigel Ryan said today, describing the mafia as quiet puppet masters who control killer bikie gangs and hardened criminals on the frontlines of Australia's drug, illegal gambling and gun trade.”



Challenging media reports AFP PRESS CONFERENCE 7 JUNE 2022

ACCA challenged the factual assertions in the press conference and sought support from other associations and clubs.

<https://www.9news.com.au/national/afp-finds-web-of-mafia-crime-families-linked-to-italy-ndrangheta-in-australia/5cbc417c-57e9-4d65-a120-8db091c301de>

STOP LABELLING US AS CRIMINALS

opinion piece
in Il Globo

ACCA challenged the facts asserted in the press conference. It wrote to the Attorney general and the AFP and requested retractions. Il Globo published an opinion piece by me rebutting the statements made by the Assistant commissioner in the press conference.

STOP LABELLING US AS CRIMINALS IL GLOBO OPINION PIECE

- ▶ The press conference by Assistant Commissioner Riley of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) is testament to the fact that vilification and stereotyping is alive and well within our law enforcement agencies. In the conference held on 7 June 2022. Assistant Commissioner Riley indulged in fear mongering and threatening a section of the Australian community (Italians in general and Calabrese in particular.

IL GLOBO OPINION PIECE

- ▶ [Italians] have made positive contributions to Australia, a fact acknowledged by many political leaders and **politicians**. Italians comprise significant numbers not only of trades and commercial enterprises but also of the professions. All Italians have now been branded by Assistant Commissioner Riley as potential criminals, of whom ordinary Australians should be wary.

AFP AGREES

Eventually a meeting was held between ACCA and the AFP and the AFP agreed that in future the persons ethnicity would not be referred to unless it was an element of the crime. They also agreed that some of the statements in the press conference were wrong and that the majority of calabrese were law abiding.

What was interesting was that although ACCA HAD requested assistance from clubs and individuals in contesting the stereotype projected by the AFP, we received very little help. Indeed, the reaction of most of them reminds me of the Joke about two friends being confronted by a thug and one says to the other "lets you and him fight".

However, the action of ACCA has resulted in a change of approach by the AFP, and we consider that to be a good thing.

REVISIONING THE HISTORY

A HISTORY OF THE CALABRESE IN
AUSTRALIA

IS A PROJECT THAT ACCA HOPES
TO REALISE WITHIN THE NEXT 2
YEARS

COUNTERACT THE EMPHASIS ON
THE NDRANGHETA

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