

THE ITALIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN NORTH AMERICA

Edited by Betty Boyd Caroli, Robert F. Harney, and Lydio F. Tomasi. Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978.

Franca Iacovetta

Reflecting the early impact of ethnic and women's studies on North American scholars, the American Italian Historical Association chose the Italian immigrant woman as the theme of its tenth annual conference, which was held in Toronto in 1977 in conjunction with the Canadian Italian Historical Association. This volume contains papers presented at the conference. While historians loom large among the contributors, the collection covers a wide range of issues, perspectives and methodologies, ranging from historical discussions of women in Italian politics and on the pioneer frontier in the American southwest, to sociological and anthropological studies of second and third generation Italian women in contemporary American society. Most of the essays are scholarly, though frequently quite preliminary or even derivative, with respect to research findings and conclusions. Certainly, the 1977 conference organizers and the editors of this collection were forward-looking in their decision to devote an entire conference to women. And some of the contributors have gone on to produce valuable monographs on topics initially explored here. The papers have also contributed to the growing literature on middle-class women's organizations, social reform, and feminism in Europe.

The book is divided into five parts. The first contains articles that explore the economic, social and political determinants that shaped women's experience in Italy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To justify their inclusion, the editors stress the need to understand the Old World experiences of Italian peasants and how their "cultural baggage" influenced their adjustment to an urban industrial society. While this argument is compelling and indeed informs recent scholarly work on immigration, only one of the contributions actually focuses on with the type of woman who produced the majority of Italy's emigrants in America in either century. Emilana Noether offers a tentative and overly negative portrayal of peasant women in Southern Italy as "truly silent," illiterate and submissive creatures.

The remaining essays cover aspects of the fascinating history of Italian feminism. For example, Judith Howard documents how the first struggles of bourgeois and left-wing feminists in mid-to-late nineteenth century Italy focussed on the country's discriminatory civil code, particularly its lack of legal rights for victims of "seduction" and for married women. However, it requires a more careful attempt to define categories such as "moderate" and "radical" in the Italian context and to delineate class and political differences within the movement. Of interest to Canadian students are the parallels one can draw with respect to the history of Canada's women's movement. Mary Gibson's interesting piece on feminists and prostitutes is flawed by her strained efforts to draw parallels between prostitutes (usually former peasant "girls" pushed by poverty into the cities) and middle-class feminists. Both are portrayed as "outsiders" to the mainstream society, which leads her to ponder why the latter did not see in the former a political ally. Her own discussion of the feminist paternalism towards prostitutes provides much of the answer in so far as it reveals deep class cleavages. Again, we find that Italian prostitutes displayed characteristics similar to their British and North American counterparts in that they were often working class women who had turned to prostitution out of economic need after they had been victims of employer seduction.

Somewhat disappointing is Clare LaVigna's comparison of women in the Canadian and Italian trade union movements at the turn of the century, largely because it betrays a limited knowledge of Canadian history and generally exaggerates the impact of women in Italy's early unions. Still, she raises some valuable points: most female workers in Italy were agricultural workers, especially day labourers; socialist leadership was critical to trade union organizing; and some individual women did rise to prominence in unions, particularly within the largely female National Federation of Textile Trades. In a very provocative piece, Nancy Eshelman explores the efforts of Angelica Balabanoff, a Jewish Russian emigré who rose to prominence in the Italian Socialist Party during the early twentieth century, to create a mass-based socialist feminist movement among Italian immigrant women in Switzerland. An avowed internationalist, anti-feminist and free-love advocate, she appealed to working women through an "ethic of socialist motherhood" heavily borrowed

from German socialists August Bebel and Clara Zetkin. Relying heavily on the Balabanoff's newspaper columns, Eshelman offers no suggestion as to the successes or failures Balabanoff encountered.

Turning to the immigrant experience, essays in Section Two consider the complex web of family, kin networks, social institutions and reformers which helped to shape that experience. The American articles focus on the role of the settlement house, a late nineteenth century product of evangelicalism and reformism aimed at the amelioration of urban poverty in Italian immigrant working class communities of northeastern industrial cities. Settlement house workers, these articles reveal, treated Italian families as inferior and deficient units and sought ways to Americanize the newcomers. Yet, the authors differ with respect to whether the settlement house — with its provisions of milk and medical supplies, and classes on cooking, cleaning and childcare for women, English and recreation classes for children — provided a "humane" instrument of assimilation. In considering Philadelphia, Richard Juliani, for example, objects strenuously to the humanitarian school and insists that the special emphasis placed on targeting immigrant women and their children revealed the reformers' real concern with undermining the traditional Italian family. Settlement reports, he adds, also reveal a more than condescending attitude toward their Italian clients. A similar perspective informs George Pozetta's discussion of the short-lived efforts of wealthy and philanthropic patrons in New York City to establish a female industrial school employing Italian immigrant women in lacework and embroidery. Structuring her very sympathetic analysis of the Chicago Commons Settlement House around four biographies of women, Mary Batinich pays more attention to the strategies and responses of the women themselves, and concludes that despite the assimilationist intentions of settlement house workers, women at Commons not only enjoyed its educational and social programs but, over the course of four decades, they gradually influenced the content of the programs and joined committees.

Robert Harney's insightful depiction of the male sojourner's experience in Canada as being intimately connected to his position within the family and hometown to which he intends to return a wealthier man, stresses the fact that men dominated migration to early twentieth century Canada. According to contemporary crit-

ics, the male migrant was an aberration and his sojourn created conditions of social disintegration both in the hometown and in North America. In the former, social disintegration was linked to women who, in the absence of rigid controls, gave into their innate sexual promiscuity, while in the latter, men became brutish because of their harsh working and living conditions. Harney's efforts to dismiss as exaggerated evidence of cuckolding in the hometown leads him to discuss the migration as a rational strategy employed by families. The migrant's "decline into brutishness," he adds, lay not in the sojourn itself but in its "betrayal." When a temporary stay was thwarted, either by climate or dishonest intermediaries, the migrant became separated from his family and village for an abnormally long time, thereby throwing into disarray family lifecycle rituals of sex, marriage and inheritance. In another historical piece on the immigration process to Canada, Franc Sturino focuses on the role of flexible kinship networks in facilitating the family- and village-centred migration from Italy after World War Two. Though more conventional in approach to migration, Sturino expertly covers points of continuity and discontinuity in the immigrant experience, and he employs a dynamic model of behaviour, except when it comes to his passive portraits of women, who are depicted as being taken care of, watched over and protected by men.

Among the more controversial papers are those contained in the third section, which deals with generational differences among Italian women with respect to motherhood and family, work, education, and sexuality. Exploring tensions and conflicts at work in the family and their impact on the young Italian woman caught between divergent worlds, most of the articles present research findings on

how women from different generations perceive their roles. In her well-documented historical essay on changing female work and family roles in Providence, Rhode Island 1900-1940, Judith Smith observes, for example, how by 1940 second-generation daughters shifted from factory to white collar work and began challenging their parents' hitherto undisputed control over their paychecks. Nancy Stroms' piece on changing sexual attitudes among third-generation Italo-American adolescent women is also well informed and avoids the heavy reliance on socialization theory with its static and stereotypic categorizations of Italian immigrant woman, a pitfall that mars most of the other contributions.

Middle class and ethnic biases abound in the two American essays documenting efforts to establish a mental health program for immigrant women, and in the Canadian article on the immigrant generation by Harriet Perry. Perry analyses the metonymic definition of the Italian female and concludes that of the variety of role models accessible to Italian women — spinster, nun, whore, girl and wife — it is the last role that is most revered in Italian culture, as though this were not the case for most other cultures, including the Anglo-Saxon North American one! Her reliance on a metaphor of woman as house is, ultimately, a weak substitute for a more dynamic model that might attempt to integrate into an analysis the contradictory and multifaceted roles women performed. These articles fall into the trap of drawing a dichotomous model that sees the Italian working class women in either pathological terms (the submissive housebound creature) or as the powerhouse of the family within the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the authors do supply us with fascinating biographies and they expertly articulate the sexism under-

lining the cultural mores of Southern Italian peasants, particularly as they regard female sexuality and its link with familial honour. And though we may differ with respect to whether this constitutes real power within the family, they provide much evidence indicating the central importance of the mother in keeping family and kin networks intact.

The final section contains papers on stereotyping of Italian women in America literature and Hollywood films, and a piece on Italian actresses who worked the amateur and professional Italian theatres of late nineteenth-century New York City. It is concluded with a series of poems by accomplished Italo-Canadian poets, Rosario D'Agostino, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, and Mary di Michele, that speak to the sense of marginality they experienced as first-generation immigrant children and adolescents. They explore their recollection of childhood in Italy and, in the case of di Michele's contributions, powerfully capture the class system which conspired against the peasants of rural Italy and the cultural customs regarding female sexuality which oppressed its women.

This volume has been superseded by new scholarly works and the MHSO itself recently hosted a second conference on the history of immigrant women in Ontario. While the anthology suffers from a lack of cohesiveness and the empirical findings and theoretical discussions may seem somewhat limited, perhaps even stale, to us now, it nonetheless represents an important early attempt to address questions raised by the once renegade sub-fields of women's and ethnic studies. And there are research findings and interpretive insights that have withstood the test of time.

WOMEN OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Edited by Monique Gadant. Translated from French by A. M. Berrett. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1986. Available from DEC Book Distribution.

Poppy Cobanoglu-Padley

The collection of articles contained in *Women of the Mediterranean* was first published in French as an issue of *Peuples Méditerranéens*, in 1984. It was then translated into English, by A. M. Berrett, and published in 1986. Those of us who

are interested in Women's Studies from a cross-cultural perspective are aware that a great majority of work is not available to us because of nonexistent translations. Therefore it is a welcome change when translations become available. It is also a welcome change to see many of the essays contributed by individuals from the actual countries addressed. Half the contributors are from diverse backgrounds — a potter, a mid-wife, women activists, social workers and so on; and the other half are social scientists.

Although the majority of articles in the book are contemporary, they deal with women operating in diverse cultures

(Europe and Asia, Christian and Muslim, rural and urban) and, in particular, in societies at very different levels of economic development. In spite of this fact, the contributors of the book stress with some success the problems as well as the experiences that women of the Mediterranean have in common. In the majority of cases the women speak for themselves.

One of the major themes in the articles is that Mediterranean women are closely subject to the authority and control of the men of their family — their father, brother and husband. The majority of the women interviewed are conscious of the strong patriarchal order and their oppression as