

Italians in Wales
and their Cultural
Representations,
1920s-2010s

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By

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To my late and dearest father whose tender smile will always give me strength and perpetuate his loving memory; and to my mother, whose 'appetite for life' and unconditional love are both a source of inspiration and endurance.

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the Avventurieri... the Adventurers, which serves as an accurate and picturesque description of the first Italian emigrants who settled in South Wales towards the end of the last century and started the caf es without which no township in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire is now complete. [...] The story of this caf  colonisation of an area so different in climate and character from the native land of the colonisers – the Avventurieri – has never been fully told.¹

Italians in Wales: a brief historical background

In 1996, Emyr Edwards wrote the musical *Bracchi*, inspired by the life of Giacomo Bracchi, an Italian who migrated to South Wales in the 1880s.² Mr Bracchi was originally from Bardi, near Parma, Italy, and is generally considered to be the pioneer of Italian confectionery shops in Wales. His name became synonymous with ‘Italian shop’ across the South Wales valleys, to which many other Italians from the Bardi area migrated to establish their coffee shop businesses. The musical opens with a scene representing a group of friends singing and dancing in their local meeting point, the Caff  Piccolo in Bardi (this coffee shop really exists), where discussions take place between Emilio and his grandfather about the hard conditions in those days, and the possibility of finding a good job abroad:

GR. BRACCHI: (to the waiter) Luigi! Cappuccino, per favore!

WAITER: Ciao, Ernesto

GR. BRACCHI: You see, Emilio, life here in the mountains of the Emilia Romagna is very hard for you and me.

¹ ‘Meet the Eminent Emigrants’, *South Wales Echo and Evening Express*, 19 April 1959, p. 2. By ‘the end of the last century’ Jack Parker, the author, referred to the end of the nineteenth century.

² The musical was initially written in Welsh, and performed first by Ysgol Gyfun Rhydfelen, a school in Pontypridd, and subsequently by Ysgol Gyfun Cymer, at the Parc and Dare Theatre in Treorchy. The author subsequently translated it into English by commission of the Amici Val Ceno Galles, an association of Welsh-Italians from the Bardi area, near Parma, in Italy, living in Wales. However, the play was never performed in English.

EMILIO: Grandpapa Bracchi, Papa says that there is gold at the other end of the rainbow.

GR. BRACCHI: He's quite right, my boy.

EMILIO: Far away in other lands?

GR. BRACCHI: In America and in Argentina.

EMILIO: In France and in England?

GR. BRACCHI: And in Wales.

EMILIO: Wales? Where's that?

GR. BRACCHI: The other side of England, where there's treasure in the ground. And men dig it up.

EMILIO: Treasure?

GR. BRACCHI: Black gold. They call it coal.

EMILIO: I've never heard of black gold.

GR. BRACCHI: (to the waiter who has brought the cappuccino) Ciao, Pietro.

EMILIO: Is there a fortune for everybody there, grandpapa?

GR. BRACCHI: that's where your uncle Alonso went, to open a café, and to sell ice cream.

EMILIO: Did he make his fortune, grandpapa? Did he get his black gold?

GR. BRACCHI: Well, he tried his best. It takes a bit of time to find a fortune.

EMILIO: That's where I'm going one day, grandpapa. To Wales, to make my fortune.³

As specified by the author in the note for the performance programme, although the names in this musical are fictitious but inspired by some of the most well-known Italian families who settled in Wales (the Bracchis, the Contis, the Fulgonis, to name but a few), the story is representative of the story of many other Italians who migrated from the same region. They left the unproductive farming lands of the mountain hills in northern Italy in search of a better living. They came to the Rhondda Valleys in Wales between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, attracted by the opportunities generated by the Industrial Revolution and the coalfield societies. The musical therefore commemorates the contribution of Italians to Welsh society by re-enacting why and how they came to Wales, and their settlement and vicissitudes up until the World War II.⁴

In *Lime, Lemon & Sarsaparilla: The Italian Community in South Wales: 1881-1945* (1991), currently the only published study of the Italian Community in Wales, local historian Colin Hughes explains that in the

³ Emyr Edwards, *Bracchi*, (1996), trans. from the original Welsh version by the author, music by Caryl Parry Jones, pp. 8-9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.

1880s Italy was, with the exception of a few large businesses in the north, an industrially backward country with a high level of illiteracy. The very backward form of agriculture was the *mezzadria*, by which ‘a tenant provided tools and labour while the owner of the land paid rates and taxes, and gave seeds and plant and stock’. ‘The profits were divided half and half – as the word *mezzadria* implies – or often more in favour of the landlord’.⁵ According to Hughes, the news of the industrial boom in South Wales came via the sea to Bardi as at that time, ‘wood cut from the hills around Bardi was sent to Cardiff and Swansea to be used as pit props and coal was sent back to Genova’.⁶ However, there are some reservations about this statement, since Bardi, especially in the nineteenth century, was a secluded and remote place in the mountains and was very difficult to reach.

There is some evidence that one third of the Italians in South Wales and Cardigan were connected with shipping: they were either ex-seamen who used to be employed in the merchant navy and who joined the British navy, being attracted by higher wages; or they were Italians with no previous experience of the sea, employed in various services related to shipping, such as shipping agents, coal merchants, lodging houses for seamen, etc. Other Italians were known to be itinerant people who came from London, including organ-grinders and ice-cream and chestnut vendors.⁷ They were generally recruited under the *padrone* system. The *padroni* were respectable and well-known people in the village where they came from in Italy, who needed apprentices to be employed in their successful business. They tended to employ young workers from their own village, which explains why, for example, eighty per cent of the Italians who arrived in Wales before the First World War were from the Bardi area, while the remaining twenty per cent were originally from the area of Picinisco, near the town of Frosinone, in the south of Italy.⁸ It is likely that the *padroni* (the masters) would make a payment to the parents before their son was sent to Wales, and that the young apprentice would live with the café owner and his family, who provided food and accommodation. There is some evidence that sometimes these boys were exploited by working very long hours and were treated like slaves by the *padroni*; but this was a small price to pay for preserving the hope that the time would

⁵ Colin Hughes, *Lime Lemon & Sarsaparilla. The Italian Community in South Wales, 1881-1945* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1991), pp. 17-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷ Lucio Sponza *Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Realities and Images* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988), p. 17.

⁸ Colin Hughes, *Lime, Lemon & Sarsaparilla*, p. 21.

come when they could set up their own shop.⁹ The *padrone* system eventually contributed to the expansion of another phenomenon called *campanilismo*, an expression of collective identity and affiliation to a particular geographical area of origin in Italy. *Campanilismo* is often an expression of the intention to preserve the link between, and the culture of, their place of origin.¹⁰ The best example of this cultural attachment is the foundation of independent societies by groups of volunteers of second or third generation Italian immigrants. These societies are named after their place of origin in Italy, and in many cases the title of the association also refers to either the nation or the town in which it is founded abroad. An example is the Amici Val Ceno Gales association (Friends from the Ceno Valley Wales), which was founded in 1975 by a group of Welsh-Italians with a strong Bardi connection.

The arrival of Italians in Wales coincided with the spread of the Temperance Movement, which in Wales was closely identified with Nonconformism. After the Sunday Closing Act in Wales (1881), the threat of pub closure on the day of the *Sabbath* was welcomed by Nonconformists, but, on the other hand, it represented a social disadvantage in the life of a miner. Although there is no evidence that the Italians took part in the Temperance movement, the first Italian cafés in the South Wales valleys were called ‘Temperance Bars’ to reflect the fact that they did not sell alcohol. The Italian shop would sell soft drinks, cups of Oxo or Bovril and ice-cream, as well as chocolate and cigarettes, and the whole family was involved in the running of the business. The Italian Temperance Bars represented ‘an attractive and cheap non-alcoholic alternative to pubs and clubs’,¹¹ and for this reason they became more and more popular as friendly, cosy and social meeting points. However, it can be argued that the use of the title ‘Temperance Bar’ was nothing more than a shrewd commercial move by the Italians, as it is known, for example, that they broke the law on Sunday trading by opening on the *Sabbath*, selling sweets to children. There were occasions when Italians were fined for

⁹ William Henri Wilkins, ‘The Italian Aspect’ in *The Destitute Alien in Great Britain: A Series of Papers Dealing with the Subject of Foreign Pauper Immigration*, ed. by Arnold White, (London, S. Sonnenschein & Co, 1892), pp.146-151.

¹⁰ The origin of the word *campanilismo* is ‘*campana*’, which means ‘bell’ in English. The bell refers to the bell tower, in other words, the religious symbol of the village. For more information about this phenomenon, I refer to Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor: The Italian Community in Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991), pp. 177-188.

¹¹ Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 72.

opening on a Sunday, but they paid the 5 shilling (25p) fine and carried on because it was the Sunday trade that contributed significantly to their profits.¹² The popularity of the Italian coffee shop in Wales was due to the fact that it became a social gathering point for the whole community, as documented in an article published on Monday, 20 April, 1959 in *The South Wales Echo*:

Eventually these cafés became unofficial clubs in their own right, the ‘debating clubs’ of the valleys with customers spending the best part of the evening gossiping around the coke stove, making a lemonade or a hot cordial last the night while they put to rights the troubles of the world.¹³

There is also evidence that a number of Italians worked in the mines, at least for some of the time. For example, the Frongoch lead mine, one of the largest mines in North Ceredigion, decided to employ 80 miners from Italy, in 1900.¹⁴ However it was for the cafés that the Italians in Wales became most famous. By the 1930s, the years that coincide with the decline of the coal industry and the Great Depression, Italian immigrants were fully established and well integrated into Welsh society. According to the *Guida Generale*, there were 336 Italian cafés in South Wales in 1939.¹⁵ Many Italians had become naturalised British subjects, and had served in the British Army during the First World War. The fact that Italy

¹² The project consisted of a research on Italians in Wales and the Temperance Bars conducted by the Blaengwawr Comprehensive School in Wales. It was supported by Comenius, a European Union programme for the schools sector, before Erasmus +, that offered schools across Europe funding for a range of opportunities. This research project can be viewed at: <http://www.blaengwawr.co.uk/website/downloads/projects/COMENIUS-PROJECT-PROMISE.pdf> [accessed on 6 August 2012].

¹³ ‘Meet the Eminent Emigrants’, *South Wales Echo and Evening Express*, 20 April 1959, p. 2.

¹⁴ More information about the Italians employed at Frongoch mine can be found on the following website: <http://www.plwm.org.uk/index.php?q=events/332> [accessed on 31 December 2012].

¹⁵ Anon, *Guida Generale degli Italiani in Gran Bretagna* (London: Edward Ercoli & Sons, 1939). The *Guida Generale* of 1939 is a comprehensive directory of all the Italian businesses registered across the UK. It includes a preliminary section about the Italian Royal Family and Mussolini, as well as some information about Italian consulates in the UK. The book displayed the Fascist symbol (a bundle of rods) on both the front and back covers. When Mussolini declared war on Great Britain, many Italian families who resided in the UK, and owned a copy of the book, deliberately burnt it for fear that the police, coming to arrest Italian males, would find it and use it as evidence of their association with Fascism.

was an ally during First World War is likely to have contributed to the welcoming attitude and positive perception of Italians in Wales.

So, Italians were generally well accepted, in spite of the tensions created by Sunday opening. Although in the interwar period, there were incidents of the windows of the Italian shops being smashed and the shops looted, these attacks 'are more likely to have been spontaneous, the wageless miners reacting perhaps to outward displays of luxury goods no longer available to them'.¹⁶ During the World War II similar incidents occurred, but this time they were deliberately targeted against the Italians. The date of Mussolini's declaration of war against Britain coincided with a series of chain reactions (rounding up, internment, the sinking of the *Arandora Star*) which, as we will see in detail in Chapter Two, challenged the relative stability achieved by this migrant group in the previous decades. Families were deprived of husbands and sons, and it was left to women and children to look after family and business.

The post-war years, by contrast, were again a period of prosperity for the Italian cafés and fish and chip shops, especially in the towns,¹⁷ and it remained so until at least the 1950s, when habits started to change:

Car ownership, the spread of television, the introduction of live entertainment into the drinking clubs, the popularity, for a while at least, of Bingo, and a higher degree of commuting between home and workplace, all served to reduce the appeal of the traditional Italian cafés.¹⁸

This period also coincided with a new wave of Italian immigrants who came to work in skilled jobs and established businesses. The closure of many collieries in South Wales and the migration of miners to other places to work deprived the valleys and the old communities of their vitality: 'the once throbbing Italian cafés and the miners' welfare halls alike, saw their clients drift away'.¹⁹ From the 1960s onwards, many Italian proprietors sold their businesses to developers, and many Italian shops became Chinese take away restaurants, marking the end of an era which changed the Welsh way of life, and the beginning of contemporary society.

¹⁶ Colin Hughes, *Lime, Lemon & Sarsaparilla*, p. 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Cultural memories of Italian immigrants in Wales

The history of Italians in Great Britain is generally well documented by authors such as Father Umberto Marin, Lucio Sponza, Terri Colpi, Bruno Bottignolo, Alfio Bernabei and Colin Hughes. These studies explore Italian migration to the UK from a historical perspective, concentrating on identifying patterns of migration to the UK, such as the recruitment under the *padrone* system, the geographical areas of settlement (Clerkenwell, Bedford, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Belfast, South Wales), and the various patterns of employment (organ grinders, statuette makers, chestnut vendors, ice-cream vendors, coffee shop owners, etc). However, more work has to be done to connect empirical study with wider theoretical debates on identity, particularly in the realm of cultural studies. In this respect, Anne-Marie Fortier has moved in this direction with her book *Migrant Belongings* (2000), in which she traces the formation of Italian migrant belonging in Britain by looking at historical narratives, political debates, religious processions and rituals, war remembrances, activities of the Women's Clubs and other performative acts. Wendy Ugolini has also recently published a monograph called *Experiencing War as the 'Enemy Other'* (2011), which explores how notions of belonging and citizenship amongst the Scottish-Italian community were undermined in a time of war. More recently again, Marco Giudici has written a doctoral thesis on the Italian migrant experience in Wales, from a historical perspective. His work examines the extent to which Italians (the most noticeable minority group in Wales) have influenced the cultural and social landscapes of Wales, and how their positive impact has been used for nation-building purposes, especially in the post-devolution era.²⁰

If we look at how historians have over time represented the Italian diaspora, particularly the case of Italian migration to the UK, there has been a tendency to construct Italian migrant identity by simultaneously celebrating the contribution of Italians to the host community, and yet acknowledging the marginal and subordinate status of the Italian migrant community abroad. For example, in his book about the history of Italian emigration, Robert Franz Foerster recognized as early as 1919 the important place of Italian immigrants in the history of many countries around the world. Furthermore, he envisaged and encouraged a sort of moral and ethical obligation on the part of historical chroniclers to record and celebrate the contribution of the Italian community to civilized culture, and he emphasised the affable and sociable nature of Italians that

²⁰ Marco Giudici, *Migration, Memory and Identity: Italians and Nation-Building in Wales, 1940-2010*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bangor, 2012).

allowed them to mix and interact with people of different cultures around the world.²¹ In Foerster's words:

So embracing has been this emigration that a chronicle of its development must constitute an indispensable chapter in the history of the Italian people, whose gifts to civilization and whose qualities in human intercourse have attached them to men everywhere. So memorable likewise have been the contributions of the emigrants in a number of lands that chapters setting forth their fortunes there must always hold a place in the histories of the several countries themselves.²²

Over fifty years later, at the beginning of his celebratory book about Italians in Great Britain, *Italiani in Gran Bretagna* (1975), Umberto Marin, writes:

Dedico queste pagine agli emigrati
e soprattutto a coloro fra essi
che mai le leggeranno, perchè condannati ad una sottocultura
che l'espatrio ha reso incurabile.

A loro ho dedicato anche la vita:
e furono appunto essi, con le loro diurne sollecitazioni,
a impedirmi di scrivere queste pagine
con più accuratezza e in bella forma.²³

²¹ Robert Franz Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), p. v.

²² *Ibid.*, p.v.

²³ 'I dedicate these pages to the migrant people, and above all to those amongst them who will never read them, because they are condemned to a sub-culture that expatriation has made incurable. To them I have also dedicated my life: and it was indeed they, with their daily requests, who prevented me from writing these pages with more accuracy and in a nice way' (my translation). Umberto Marin, *Italiani in Gran Bretagna* (Roma: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1975), p. v. Umberto Marin was a one of the founder-members of the Scalabrinian Centre (Centro Scalabriniano) in London, and was, amongst other things, Director of *La Voce degli Italiani*, a magazine with news and articles about the Italian migrant community in the UK (mainly London). The book traces the history of Italian emigration to Great Britain from the Middle Ages up to the modern era. Marin starts by stressing the influence of many Italian artists, traders, bankers, monks, etc., on British culture and society. He highlights aspects of the migration process, such as the contraction of work, the settlement, and the organization of a sort of 'social welfare' for Italian migrant workers, focussing for example on the creation of unions, as well as health, and social and cultural institutions. It also provides an

In spite of the celebrated story of ‘success’, Marin invites the reader to reflect upon the challenges generated by the encounter of two cultures. In particular, he criticises the social and cultural marginalisation of Italian immigrants in the UK. Significantly, Marin confesses that it was their subordinate position that created a sense of conscious resignation amongst migrant Italians, and that prompted him to dedicate his life to them. Ten years later, Bruno Bottignolo explains that because of the socio-political and cultural ties between member states of the European Union, ‘an Italian migrant who enters and lives in Great Britain can go unobserved. He is often described as an “invisible immigrant”’.²⁴ In spite of the fact there are few obstacles to his integration into British society, he does not find ‘many realities to help this insertion or to favour the active practice of the limited rights of citizenship which are conceded him’.²⁵ Echoing Marin, Bottignolo underlines that amongst the factors that constitute the subordinate position of Italian migrants and Italian culture in relation to British culture are: the linguistic difficulty that minimises interaction and ‘reduces opportunity where a series of limitations of rights already exists’; the Italian immigrant’s invisibility as an expression of his limited socio-cultural relevance; the preparation of the immigrant himself and his ability to socialise.²⁶ The awareness of occupying a subordinate position could also be one of the factors that, in many cases, has prevented previous generations of Italian immigrants in the UK from developing an extensive migrant literature.

Book’s aim and structure

This book aims to enrich academic scholarship by investigating cultural narratives of Italians in Wales from 1920s–2010s. It will make use of sources that have been neglected, such as the photographs of Italians in Wales during the interwar period and local newspapers reporting on the incident of the *Arandora Star* sinking during World War II. It also provides an original contribution to debates on migration, memory and identity drawing on recently emerged sources, such as the accounts generated by second and third generations of Italian migrants about the traumatic experience of WWII, and the published works of Welsh-Italian

insight into the nature of the diplomatic relationship and cultural exchanges between Italy and the UK throughout the centuries.

²⁴ Bruno Bottignolo, *Without a Bell Tower* (Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1985), p. 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

authors such as Servini, Pelosi, Spinetti, Emanuelli and Arcari. Finally, this book also provides an original approach by comparing these 'narratives of belonging' with the representation of the Italian migrant experience in Anglo-Welsh literature. Inevitably, the tragedy of the *Arandora Star* occupies a central role in this study of the evolution of migrant identity within the Italian community in Wales. This is owing to the significance of the tragedy from a historical and psychological point of view, and to the creation in Wales of the First National Memorial of the *Arandora Star*, which generated cultural memories and new narratives.

The book follows a chronological journey from the interwar period, a time in which Italians in Wales were generally regarded as fully established and integrated, through the World War II, and up to the first decade of the twenty-first century, to explore the formation of a distinctive, yet complex, Welsh-Italian identity and its (self)-representation.

Chapter One is a study of the photographic representations of Italians in Wales in the interwar period. It reflects on the role of photography in documenting the Italian migrant experience between the two wars. Photographs of Italians in Wales during the interwar period typically feature Italian cafés, family snapshots, and social gatherings. The chapter engages in a textual analysis of these photographs, inspired by the work of Susan Sontag and David Bate on photography, and, in particular, the work of Marianne Hirsch on family portraiture and post-memory. The analysis focuses on the role of photographs as substitute narratives in the absence of oral and written testimonies of the first generation, and on their role in the trans-generational transmission of memory. Inspired by Hirsch, for example, the analysis reveals how photographs are not static objects, but the way we look at them is conditioned by sociological, psychological, historical, nostalgic and mythical preconceptions. A comparison with photographs of Welsh shops, families and social groupings of the same period highlights the tensions between two cultures, the Italian and the Welsh, in both the differences and the similarities. The analysis of Italians in Wales portrayed in this period, therefore allows for important tropes of Welsh-Italian life to be used as a starting point for the following chapter.

Chapter Two addresses the problematic position of Italians in Wales during the War. During this period, the internment of Italian enemy aliens and the tragedy around the *Arandora Star* sinking represented challenges to the (self)-perception of Italian identity, and complicated the mechanism of formation of a Welsh-Italian identity with stories of enforced cultural divisions, family disruption and memory loss. The chapter highlights how after nearly seventy years of silence, recent commemorative events around the *Arandora Star* sinking have been able to engage second- and third-

generation Italian immigrants in the difficult task of post-memory. The chapter offers a thematic analysis of a selected corpus of written and oral testimonies set against the analysis of how Italians in Wales were represented in the press and national culture during the War.

Chapter Three discusses in more detail the delayed emergence of Welsh-Italian narratives, and takes inspiration from the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assman and Stuart Hall on identity and memory, particularly the difference between communicative memory and cultural memory. The chapter, therefore, studies the trans-generational transmission of memory in accounts produced almost exclusively in recent decades. The analysis of these texts probes the construction of second- and third-generation Italian family memories of migration, and how they interpret the experience of their ancestors. It asks how such narratives articulate their sense of belonging to two cultures: for example, how they represent Italy and Wales, and which metaphors or fictional devices are used to represent a sense of cultural identity.

Chapter Four explores the portrayal of Italian immigrants in Anglo-Welsh literature. Fictional and semi-fictional texts were all produced in the post-war period up until the last decades of the twentieth century. They generally testify to the positive impact of café culture upon the Welsh way of life, but they also reflect on the traumatic events that affected both the Welsh and the Italian communities during World War II. A thematic analysis of these texts identifies, on the one hand, elements of exclusion created by the construction of 'ethnic othering' and stereotyping (frequent references to skin colour, bodily features, but also religious tensions), and on the other, elements of inclusion in the portrayal of the family and the role of the mother. This chapter, therefore, examines how authors have interpreted the experience of Italians in Wales, and asks if it is possible to establish a 'pattern' of representation amongst these texts.

And in the Conclusion I will summarise my research findings, and reflect on Welsh- Italian identity, suggesting future areas of research.

CHAPTER ONE

ITALIANS IN WALES IN 1920S-1930S: A VISUAL PERSPECTIVE

*Photographs, as the only material traces of the irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life.*¹

In his study on photography, David Bate noted how in the nineteenth century portraiture gradually shifted from being a privilege for prosperous people who wanted 'to be pictured in a family tradition' to a popular 'means of identification' for the masses.² Thanks to the evolution of technology, photography became a relatively inexpensive tool used by the emerging industrial society to portray masses of people; and portraits became 'a semiotic event for social identity'.³ Photographs are an invaluable and indispensable source for the documentation and study of migration, as photographs have played and continue to play an important role in cross-border movements.⁴ During the Great Depression of the 1930s in America, Dorothea Lange, an American photojournalist, documented the migration of people in search of better jobs. Although her work is more about the consequences of the Great Depression from a human point of view, migrants here being associated with mass inwards re-location for economic reasons, the photographs set up iconic images around the idea of migration. A well-known example is the *Migrant Mother*, which belongs to a series of photographs that Lange made of

¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press: 1997), p. 5.

² David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), p. 68.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴ Moussa Konaté, 'Pictures from Here for the People over Yonder: Photography in Migratory Circuits'. This is a working paper for the symposium *Staying and Leaving/Toso any Ka taka: Photography and the Representation of African Migration*, Bamako, February 2011, 'Images d'ici pour Gens de là-bas: La Photographie dans les circuits migratoires'; www.migrationandmedia.com/index.htm [Accessed on 6 August 2012]. The paper was translated into English by John Barrett.

Florence Owens Thomson and her children in California between February and March 1936.⁵ Whilst photojournalists, video-makers, artists specialising in photography and amateurs alike ‘have made possible the creation of indispensable sources of images on the theme of migration’, Moussa Konaté stresses the fact that sociologists and anthropologists, ‘have paid scant attention to how photography interrelates with migration’.⁶

This chapter offers a study of the photographic representation of Italians in Wales against the backdrop of the interwar period, and uses photographs taken from history books, local history projects and private collections. It starts with an historical and sociological overview of Italians in Wales in this period, and then shows how photographs documented Italian migration in the UK/Wales during that time. The work of some scholars on photography, such as Sontag, Noble, Hirsch and Bate constitutes the theoretical framework for the analysis of a representative number of photographs. The analysis is guided by specific research questions whose answers highlight important aspects of Italian migrant identity and of the relationship with the host community in the period that preceded the World War II.

Locating Italians in Wales in the interwar social and historical background

It is estimated that there were 1,533 Italians in Wales in 1921 while in 1931 the number dropped slightly to 1,394.⁷ Figures provided by the 1921 and 1931 censuses present gaps and discrepancies in the way Italians in the UK were recorded, mainly due to the insufficient means of recording data at that time. There is no doubt, however, that figures had more than tripled since 1871 testifying to the great impact that the Industrial Revolution had in attracting foreign, as well as ‘neighbouring’, workers.⁸ Wales specialised in sectors of heavy industry, such as coal, steel and tinplate, which depended crucially on the export market, and therefore on transport, commerce and the ports. When the demand for primary metal and coalmining industries decreased, the economy of the region inevitably resulted ‘in high unemployment rates and the emergence of some acutely

⁵ An overview of Lange’s *Migrant Mother* series of photographs can be found on the following website: http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html [Accessed on 10 August, 2012].

⁶ www.migrationandmedia.com/index.htm [Accessed on 6 August 2012].

⁷ Colin Hughes, *Lime Lemon & Sarsaparilla. The Italian Community in South Wales, 1881-1945* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1991), p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

distressed areas'.⁹ In particular, the decline of the coal industry was a result of the introduction of oil, which replaced coal in many of its former uses.¹⁰ The wide-scale unemployment in the coal industry caused many people to leave the valley communities in order to find jobs elsewhere.¹¹ It is known, for example, that some Italians returned home between 1921 and 1931, possibly as a result of the Great Depression. Dennis Thomas, however, highlights the fact that while it is estimated that four hundred and forty thousand people left Wales between 1921 and 1938, it is difficult to give a comprehensive figure for total migration.¹² In his comparative study of immigrant communities in modern Wales, Neil Evans emphasises that Wales moved from being 'a net importer in the period before the First World War' to 'a net exporter of people',¹³ but he fails on the whole to provide more evidence or specific references to the effects of the Great Depression on the various migrant groups. Little is known, for example, about the Irish and Jewish people, whose migration to Wales coincided with the onset of industrialisation in the nineteenth century, or about the Spanish people, who also arrived in 1900 to work in the South Wales mines, and were well known trade unionists. As for the Italians, surprisingly, Colpi explains that for the Italian community in Britain, this was 'partly a period of further growth but mostly a period of consolidation', as the first generations of immigrants had settled in, surmounted the trauma of the first World War and 'settled down to hard work'.¹⁴ Colpi also explains that 'every small town in even the more remote areas of Scotland, Wales and the north of England accepted as normal and part of

⁹ David Smith, 'Wales Between the Wars', in *Wales Between the Wars*, ed. by Trevor Herbert & Gareth Elwyn Jones (Cardiff: Cardiff University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 12.

¹⁰ Wales was the major exporter of coal, and the more expensive process of coal extraction due to the geological conformation of Welsh soil contributed to the decrease in the production of coal. For more information on the Depression and its effects, please refer to David Egan, *Coal Society: A History of the South Wales Mining Valleys, 1840-1980* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1987), pp. 120-130.

¹¹ David Egan, *Coal Society: A History of the South Wales Mining Valleys, 1840-1980* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1987), p. 126.

¹² Dennis Thomas, 'Economic Decline', in *Wales Between the Wars*, ed. by Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (Cardiff: Cardiff University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 16.

¹³ Neil Evans, 'Comparing Immigrant Histories: The Irish and Others in Modern Wales', in *Irish Migrants in Modern Wales*, ed. by Paul O'Leary (Liverpool University Press, 2004), p. 169.

¹⁴ Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor: The Italian Community in Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1991), p.71.

the town's life their one or two Italian family businesses'. Their success was due to the fact that Italians were almost entirely self-employed and working in small service businesses, which enabled them not only to survive but to some extent also prosper.¹⁵ In his study of the Welsh-Italian community, local historian Colin Hughes offers some evidence of this sort of 'golden era' described by Colpi in an interview with Marco Fulgoni and Ida Pini from Pontypridd, conducted on 23 November 1986. Hughes explains how, despite the economic difficulties around them, the family were able to survive:

The whole family was involved in the running of the business, and their whole life revolved around it. Maria Fulgoni still appeared in the shop, with her own stool, when she was ninety-eight years old. Ida worked there for the full seventy years of ownership. Marco started young, took over the business when his father retired in 1952, and ran it until the end in 1986. As with other Italian cafés customers could stay as long they wished and spend as little as they liked. One courting couple used the café as a meeting place and sat before the fire for three hours each evening, day in and day out, for twenty years. During the three hours they bought one pork pie between them, using two plates and two knives, and two cups of tea. [...] In the long pit strike of 1926, the miners spent even less, but the shop somehow survived.¹⁶

The Fulgonis, like the majority of the Italians in Wales, owned their own business and passed it on from generation to generation. Through the decades, and in times of economic difficulty, they were able to adapt to the circumstances, and continued to offer valuable services to the Welsh towns and villages. The informal atmosphere of the coffee shops and the 'relaxed attitude' of the Italians are likely to have contributed towards attracting customers, who used the shop as a meeting place, whether to discuss the current economic affairs or simply to court and socialise. In many cases, the staff working in the shop was kept on with reduced wages. Hughes reports that:

the striking miners were welcomed to sit around the stove even if they had no money. A cigarette was given to anyone who would start a song, and this was handed around as others joined in. The butt was awarded to the one who could sit longest on the hot stove.¹⁷

¹⁵ Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Colin Hughes, *Lime Lemon & Sarsaparilla*, p. 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

A slightly different scenario is the one described by Hector Emanuelli in *A Sense of Belonging. From the Rhondda to the Potteries: Memories of a Welsh-Italian Englishman* (2010). During the Great Depression, his family business suffered so much that they made the decision to migrate to England in search of a brighter future:

Unfortunately, the roots we were beginning to put down in Wales were soon to be torn up. Conditions had deteriorated so much in the Rhondda and trade was suffering so badly that not even my mother's business acumen was able to turn the tide. I remember Louis and I hearing furious arguments between our parents. We felt something was afoot. The strikes, the hunger marches, the unemployment, the many departures were taking their toll of the business and no amount of hard work seemed to help. In the late 1920s the kindly James family left the Rhondda and moved to England, where prospects were better. My mother was devastated! One day in 1932 our parents announced a radical and awesome decision. They were going to emigrate! The five of us were to leave the valleys, and we were to go to a foreign country: England!¹⁸

However, historians tend to agree that even in the interwar years the Italians in Wales continued to be a large and visible foreign presence, with several cafés present in virtually all villages. Hughes, for example, reports that a scrutiny of the *Guida Generale* reveals that in the 1930s, in Pontypridd alone, there were five Italian cafés in Taff Street (Servini, Franchi, Fulgoni, Pinchiaroli, Antoniazzi) and at least seven others in nearby streets (Conti, Cordani, Marengi, Orsi, Rabaiotti).¹⁹ Hughes also reports that 'by 1938 there were well over three hundred cafés in Wales and Monmouthshire, mostly in the mining valleys of the south, owned by Italian immigrants or their descendants'; and another source refers to fifty-two Italians working in the catering field in Merthyr Tydfil alone.²⁰

Another aspect of the Welsh economy of this period is important in explaining why Italians in Wales were only marginally affected by the Great Depression, but it is not always mentioned. While Wales was described and referred to as a land of 'unremitting depression, unemployment, decline and misery, a hollow-eyed nation in permanent

¹⁸ Hector Emanuelli, *A Sense of Belonging. From the Rhondda to the Potteries: Memories of a Welsh-Italian Englishman* (Langenfeld: Six Town Books, 2010), p. 36.

¹⁹ Colin Hughes, *Lime, Lemon & Sarsaparilla*, p. 65.

²⁰ Ronald J. Williams, 'The Influence of Foreign Nationalities on the Life of the People of Merthyr Tydfil', *The Sociological Review*, 18 (1926), 148-152, (p. 24).

procession to the Soup Kitchen'²¹, holiday resorts expanded in the commercial coastal towns as a reflection of the growth in tourism and holiday-making.²² Although Hopkin explains that the 'experience was class-specific' and the beneficiaries were mainly the middle classes, 'there is much evidence of working-class outings in the apocryphal charabanc to the seaside'.²³ To some extent, the Italians exploited the situation in their favour. For example, Colpi points out that in the 1920s and 1930s, ice-cream parlours proliferated in coastal locations across the UK.²⁴

This period of consolidation, prosperity and relative stability would, however, be compromised during the War, especially after Mussolini's declaration of war on Britain (June 1940). It was during this period, in fact, that Italian migrants across the UK feared being associated with Fascism, and, in many cases, disguised their most visible signs of Italianness.²⁵

Photography, history and Italian migrant identity

Photographs provide an interesting and invaluable source to document the presence and the relative 'success' of Italian businesses in Wales between the 1920s and the 1930s. If, on the one hand, there is a lack of first-generation accounts amongst the Italian migrant community of that period, and a scarcity of memories transmitted and recorded by subsequent generations (the first memoir to be written by any Welsh-Italian was Les Servini's *A Boy from Bardi: My Life and Times* in 1994),²⁶ on the other,

²¹ Deain Hopkin, 'Social Reactions to Economic Change', in *Wales Between the Wars*, ed. by Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (Cardiff: Cardiff University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 53.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57. Hopkin also explains that the expansion of tourism was also due to greater opportunities for travel, such as the expansion of the motor car and motorbike with sidecar attached 'which opened up new horizons for thousands'. Also, in those years, if on the one hand the salaries and wages decreased, on the other hand, the price of goods also decreased, and this made it possible for those who were self-employed to live reasonably well.

²⁴ Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor*, p. 81.

²⁵ Chapter Two (below) discusses precisely the problematic position of Italians in Wales, by looking at their representation in local newspapers, and at the impact of WWII on the Welsh-Italian community in recently emerged second- and third-generation testimonies.

²⁶ Chapter Three (below) looks at the recent emergence of a Welsh-Italian narrative, and will engage in textual analysis of the texts from the perspective of cultural memory.