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# Temelini, Walter. The Leamington Italian Community: Ethnicity and Identity in Canada

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**Temelini, Walter.** *The Leamington Italian Community: Ethnicity and Identity in Canada.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. Pp. 736 + 16 ill. ISBN 978-0-7735-5469-6 (cloth). \$65.

The history of Italians in Canada has received a great deal of attention in scholarly literature. Walter Temelini's *The Leamington Italian Community* is a welcome addition to this literature. It is an ambitious and interesting book that examines a range of topics, including early migration to Leamington and the surrounding area; how these people established themselves in this location; and the changes the community has experienced over a period of three generations. What makes the book distinct, if not unique, is its focus on a successful agricultural community in southwestern Ontario. The vast majority of books/articles written on Italian Canadians tend to concentrate on the community-building efforts of people who settled in larger, urban centres across the country. And, although smaller, rural communities have been at the centre of study, none of these communities has relied as extensively on food production (farming, greenhouses, and, to a lesser extent, fishing) and food processing (work in local processing plants) when compared to the Leamington Italians. In addition, the book benefits from the participation of the community, through its Roma Club, in the actual research and later publication of the volume.

In my view, Temelini attempts to achieve three primary, interrelated goals. First, he attempts to not only chronicle the history of the community but also place this history within the broader context of developments taking place in both Canada and Italy. Second, Temelini focuses extensively on the specific migration experience of Leamington Italians, as well as the impact and long-term consequences for both the immigrants and their Canadian-born children and grandchildren. For example, Temelini begins with a discussion of the experiences of early Italian migrants to the Leamington area, making use of interviews conducted by students in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This allows him to address certain aspects of community history through individual and family memories. The technique is effective, especially when he presents direct quotes from the interviews themselves (in fact, at times, I found myself wishing there were more of these quotes). The author then places these memories within a broader context – such as an examination of the “mythical” images of *America* present in Southern Italy at the time, as opposed to the stark realities individuals faced once they arrived in Canada, and how the emigration/immigration policies of both countries impacted how

would-be immigrants made their way to Canada, and what was possible once they arrived here. This section, however, would have benefited greatly from a more up-to-date review of scholarly literature. A glance at the bibliography reveals that there are very few works listed beyond the mid-1990s, and that most references are from the 1980s or earlier.

Third, Temelini makes a concerted effort to integrate history and literature, with the aim of expanding our understanding of the migration process and its impact on individuals, families, and communities, both in Canada and in Italy. He achieves his goal through an extensive discussion of Nino Ricci's novel *The Lives of the Saints*. Ricci grew up as a member of the Leamington Italian community and, before writing his novel, helped to compile and write a historical document based on the memories of Leamington Italians. *The Lives of the Saints* is, at least in part, a reflection of Ricci's great knowledge of the community. By addressing the parallels between Ricci's work and information about the community (including its links to specific areas of Italy), and then examining the highly inventive style Ricci uses to present this material in the novel, Temelini makes a good case for the importance of literature in helping us understand migration. More specifically, migration is a complex topic that requires a careful examination of the facts/data available to us. The novelist, through the use of emotion, metaphor, and other literary devices, can also contribute to our understanding of the topic. In the hands of a master writer, these devices can help transform how a reader experiences and thinks about migration. For Temelini, migration is more than a physical journey; it involves a search for self-identity. People undergo a long process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their identity in the new and changing socio-cultural environment. And, as Temelini argues, this is a process that both immigrants and their descendants experience, often within the context of intergenerational differences and tensions, as they search for what it means to be "Italian" in Canada. Nino Ricci's novel certainly gives us an insight into these processes.

*The Leamington Italian Community* is probably much too long (at 709 pages) to serve as a possible text for university courses. Individual chapters, however, could make a good addition to the reading list for courses dealing with Italians in Canada, emigration and immigration, history, and interdisciplinarity.

As a final comment, I wish to address a point that Temelini touches on briefly in a few places in the book. This comment is not meant as a criticism of the book, Walter Temelini, or the Leamington Italian community. It

is my way of raising an issue I believe we, as scholars of the Italian experience, should reflect on and, where appropriate, direct future research. Temelini suggests on pages 34–35, for example, that we reclaim and acknowledge the achievements and contributions of early Italian explorers (and others) who aided in the “discovery” and development of the “New World.” It is a part of our history in Canada (and the Americas). I agree with this point, but I believe that we also need to accept and acknowledge that their achievements, directly or indirectly, contributed to the large-scale displacement and suffering of Indigenous Peoples in the past, and that continues in modified form in the present. This is particularly important since, we as Italian Canadians, among others who have settled here, have benefited from the consequences of this displacement.

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