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Preface

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PREFACE

Ever since Giovanni Caboto set foot on “the new founde land”¹ on 24 June 1497, Italians have been in contact with the Indigenous populations of what is now Canada. Admittedly, relatively few Italians were part of the early settlement and colonizing history of what the Europeans then called New France: aside from Caboto, one thinks of Francesco Giuseppe Bressani (1612–72), the Jesuit priest who spent eight years as a missionary in New France (1642–50). His *Breve relatione*, an account of his missions in New France, was published in Italian in Macerata in 1653;² as Joseph Pivato points out,

It is the only part of the voluminous *Jesuit Relations* or *Relations des Jésuites* that is not in French or Latin. A factual account of the years he spent in New France as a missionary among the settlers and native people, Bressani’s text is at the same time a vision of the possibilities of future Italian settlement in the New World.³

That “future Italian settlement” was to come a few centuries later. It started in the mid-to-late 1800s when Italians began to emigrate in significant numbers to what was then British North America or Canada. They went mostly to Montreal or Toronto, but also to smaller towns, even as far away from Italy as British Columbia.⁴ One thinks, for example, of the Italian immigrants who settled in Trail, BC, the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa Nation and the Okanagan Nation, to work in the mines or on the railroad.⁵

¹ Jones, “Henry VII and the Bristol Expeditions to North America,” 447. As Jones points out, “Henry VII’s letter, which he [D.B. Quinn] could date to the years 1498–1500, was the first to use the term ‘new founde land,’” 446.

² Francesco Giuseppe Bressani, *Breve relatione d’alcune missioni de’ PP. della Compagnia di Giesù nella Nuoua Francia* (Macerata: per gli Heredi d’Agostino Grifei, 1653). The work was made available in translation only two centuries later, first in French by Felix Martin as *Relation abrégée de quelques missions des pères de la Compagnie de Jésus dans la Nouvelle-France* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1852) and then in English by Reuben Gold Thwaites in his *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, vols. 38–40 (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers, 1899).

³ Pivato, “An Italian Jesuit in Canada,” 161.

⁴ See Sturino, “Italian Canadians.”

⁵ See, among others, Scardellato, “Beyond the Frozen Wastes.” The Canadian Census, 2016, indicates that 1,320 (17.8%) of Trail’s population of 7,920 self-identify as being of

There were also some Italian intellectuals such as Giacomo (James) Forneri (1789–1869) who arrived in 1851 to take up a position as teacher at the Windsor Collegiate Academy in Windsor, Nova Scotia, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq Nation, and then in 1853 moved in Toronto, the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat Nations, to be the first professor of Modern Languages at the University of Toronto.⁶ While in Toronto, Forneri and other Italian immigrants may have had little or no opportunity to engage with the local Indigenous populations, but in the small towns of Windsor and Trail, Italians may well have had the opportunity to do so; unfortunately, little or no research has been done to date on this nineteenth-century contact between Italian immigrants and Indigenous populations.

The situation is nearly similar when we look at the massive immigration of Italians into Canada in the twentieth century. Admittedly, most of these new immigrants settled in Canada's major urban centres (Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton) where they had few, if any, occasion to be in contact with Indigenous people; but one wonders about those who settled in smaller communities with a significant Aboriginal population (Winnipeg, Sault Ste Marie, Sudbury, etc.) and how they engaged with them.

Briefly put, while much has been done to examine the interaction of the English and French colonizers with the Aboriginal populations of what is now Canada, the same is not true for the interaction of Italian immigrants to Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This special issue of *Italian Canadiana* seeks to help start a conversation on this topic.⁷ As is the case with all initial conversations, it is a bit awkward – where do we start, how do we start? Let's start with a few different ideas and then see where the conversation takes us.

The first article is a transcription of an interview that the Honourable Frank Iacobucci, former Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, granted to Sandy O'Handley and Dianne Brassolotto, the two hosts of the radio program *SweetGrass*. As a Canadian-born child of Italian immigrants, Justice Iacobucci is representative not only of the great successes second-generation Italian

Italian ancestry.

⁶ On Forneri, see King, *McCaul, Croft, Forneri*, 159–256.

⁷ The conversation has already started in other venues and ways, for example in the “Indigenous-Italian-Canadian Connections” initiative sponsored by the Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Toronto; see <https://www.iicconnections.com/>.

Canadians have attained but also of their full engagement with Canadian society in all its aspects. In the interview, Justice Iacobucci speaks about his work with the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (2006) and his role as honorary witness in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2014). As we read his words, we come to appreciate his profound commitment to Indigenous people and the work that has been done so far in seeking reconciliation and justice.

The interview is followed by Alessandro Tarsia's examination (through the lens of New Ethnohistory) of the various ways in which Italian immigrants have participated in the colonization of the Pacific coastal region and invites all newcomers to this country to engage in a meaningful way with Indigenous populations in order to better understand our shared past.

Margherita (Rita) Piazza points out that Italian Canadians and Indigenous populations have both experienced assimilation and acculturation and have had to face the challenges of displacement. Italian Canadians should thus seek to understand Canada's colonialism and support Aboriginal people in their efforts to decolonize Canada's history.

Italian Canadians can do this by appreciating, as David Della Rossa argues, the value of the oral traditions that are integral both to Italian and Indigenous people. They should then use these traditions to formulate an ecologically sustainable land management ethic that will preserve a healthy Earth for future generations.

For Anna Mongibello, another way for Italian Canadians to come to a better understanding of, and relationship with Aboriginal people is for them to reassess their role in naming places after Italians whose contributions to the French and English colonization of the territory is offensive to Aboriginal people. A wider conversation and the proposal of new names and new symbols to emblematicize the contributions of Italians to Canada may be a forward-looking step in the process of mutual recognition and respect.

In general, however, Italians have often been blind to the cultural multiplicities and multilayered diversities of Aboriginal populations. As Olga Zorzi Pugliese points out in her extensive examination of the four late twentieth-century mosaics by two Italian-Canadian artists, Luigi Nasato and Giovanni Gerometta, the visual representations of Indigenous people are, for the most part, still quite superficial and stereotypical, a product of the times and the lack of a genuine understanding of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures.

This is just a start. Clearly, there is a lot more research that needs to be carried out on the history of Italian Canadians' engagement with Indigenous

Nations and a lot more conversations to be had in order to overcome the assumptions of the past ... and of the present.

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Editor

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