

# **Italian Immigration**

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HY3008 – History Internship at the State Records Office of Western  
Australia

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## Italian Immigration

Australia, and more specifically Western Australia (WA), has a history of immigration, attracting people from all areas of the globe. One group of immigrants were those of Italian origins, whose culture as a largely Catholic, non-English speaking group with a hardworking and family focused ethic set them apart as a minority amongst the rest of the WA population. Their cultural differences were often viewed negatively by the already established Western Australia European population. But attitudes to Italians by the majority of Western Australians from early 19<sup>th</sup> century to pre-war 20<sup>th</sup> century depended on factors such as their role in the community, their social status, time spent in Western Australia, and their ability to speak the English language. The reactions to Italians by Western Australians could be as diverse as acceptance and encouragement to exclusion and suspicion. The diverse attitudes to Italians by Western Australians is tangible from many primary source documents held by the State Records Office of Western Australia (SRO).

Records from 1829, when the British established the Swan River Colony, to about 1880 show few Italians entered Western Australia during this period, but when compared with the period's small European population the few Italians present were noticeable. Records from the period show that the earliest immigrants from Italy had mostly religious roles. While the Catholic religion is associated with Italians one of the earliest Italians recorded to arrive was a Protestant priest who had publicly denounced Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> Louis Giustiniani was chosen by the Western Australian Missionary Society that was focused on promoting the religious rites of the Church of

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<sup>1</sup> "Our Earliest Missionary," *The West Australian*, Sept 5, 1936, 5.

England, as their first minister.<sup>2</sup> *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal* recorded his and his wife's arrival in WA on the 2 July, 1836.<sup>3</sup> He began a church, erected a school house in Guildford, and began a farm on the Swan River, with the aim of educating and 'civilising' the Indigenous Nyungah population.<sup>4</sup> Giustiniani appears to have been a man of strong character, well-educated and the first European to defend the rights of Aboriginal Australians.<sup>5</sup> His defence of the Indigenous people of Western Australia<sup>6</sup> led to dislike of him until he was refused naturalization<sup>7</sup> and subsequently dismissed from the Mission in 1837, a relief to many Western Australians.<sup>8</sup> The number of Italians in Western Australia grew slowly after this inauspicious beginning with most in the colony linked to a role with the Catholic faith. Their influence was, however, major with the well-loved Canon Martelli<sup>9</sup> and the arrival of the Benedictine religious order containing many Brothers of Italian origin. The establishment of monasteries named (New) Subiaco and (New) Norcia show that though small in number, Italian influence in Western Australia's colonial period is still recognisable today.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lay Italians also arrived in small numbers. Nicoletta Salustri is recorded as the first female Italian in WA.<sup>11</sup> She was born in Italy and

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<sup>2</sup> "Missionary Establishment," *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, June 16, 1838, 95.

<sup>3</sup> "Shipping Intelligence," *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, July 2, 1836, 720.

<sup>4</sup> "Missionary Establishment," *op. cit.*, 95.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Gentilli, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil*, (WA: Italo-Australian Welfare Centre, 1983), 2.

<sup>6</sup> 'Dr Guistiniani's address to the jury on the late native trials,' *Swan River Guardian*, Oct 12, 1837, pg. 231.

<sup>7</sup> Colonial Secretary's Office, *Letterbooks*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 2755, Cons 49/9.

<sup>8</sup> Gentilli, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Kinder and Joshua Brown, *Canon Raffaele Martelli in Western Australia, 1853-1864: Life and Letters*, (Australia: Abbey Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Gentilli, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Westralian Library Foundation, *Australian Italians*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 2124, Cons 5658/14.

married James O'Byrne, an Irish born British soldier.<sup>12</sup> There is no assured evidence of the exact date of the Salustri-O'Byrne family's arrival in Western Australia, but it was possibly 1850.<sup>13</sup> She remained in the colony for the rest of her life. Photographs of Salustri as an elderly woman,<sup>14</sup> and of her daughters are available through TROVE.<sup>15</sup> From the 1880s, Italians predominantly operated the fishing industry, with Cono Glorioso<sup>16</sup> forming the Rockingham Fishing Company *Campagnia*.<sup>17</sup> The large Italian presence in the fishing industry led to complaints of job stealing and the spoiling of trade for British Western Australians, with the Western Australian government appointing a committee to investigate the fishing industry in 1906. Many Italians were also involved in the arts and other sectors of the community of Western Australia. Francesco Vanzetti arrived in Western Australia in 1896 teaching art classes, working for the Mines Department and establishing the University of Western Australia's (UWA) Italian Course.<sup>18</sup> Since 1987, twenty years after his death, the Italian department at UWA has commemorated him with the 'Francesco Vanzetti' award.<sup>19</sup> This slow but steady arrival of Italians into WA shows how this group of people were of varied character, employment and social status. Their presence assisted in Western Australia's cultural growth but their actions were not

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<sup>12</sup> 'Studio photograph of Nicolleta O'Byrne [nee Salustri], the First Woman of Italian origin to Migrate to Western Australia in 1850,' published 1892, accessed September 23, 2016, [trove.nla.gov.au/work/157882949?q&versionId=172107596](https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/157882949?q&versionId=172107596).

<sup>13</sup> *Australian Italians, op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> 'Studio photograph of Nicolleta O'Byrne [nee Salustri], the First Woman of Italian origin to Migrate to Western Australia in 1850,' published 1892, accessed September 23, 2016, [trove.nla.gov.au/work/157882949?q&versionId=172107596](https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/157882949?q&versionId=172107596).

<sup>15</sup> 'Studio photograph of two of the O'Byrne sisters, daughters of Nicoletta Salustri,' published 1860, accessed September 23, 2016, [trove.nla.gov.au/work/157882950?q&versionId=17210797](https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/157882950?q&versionId=17210797).

<sup>16</sup> *Australian Italians, op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Gentilli, *op. cit.*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Erickson, 'Vanzetti, Francesco Cesare Luigi Stefano (1878-1967),' Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2002, [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/Vanzetti-francesco-cesaro-luigi-stefano-11911](https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/Vanzetti-francesco-cesaro-luigi-stefano-11911).

<sup>19</sup> "Prizes," The University of Western Australia, last modified 2015, accessed September 15, 2016, [www.web.uwa.edu.au/study/prizes?fac=all](http://www.web.uwa.edu.au/study/prizes?fac=all).

necessarily seen by the general WA population. Discrimination and fear towards Italians was unfortunately a hallmark in most of their history in WA.

With the discovery of large gold deposits in WA during the 1890s, the population of immigrants of all races increased rapidly. Among these were many Italians, who came to WA to find gold and flee their homeland's financial problems.<sup>20</sup> There is much about Italian immigration from this time in SRO documents. One document from the Italian Consul in Melbourne dated 1877 contains names of Italian subjects, dates of departure from Italy, employment, whether the subjects were English speaking and how long they had spent in WA. Most had been in the colony for over twenty years.<sup>21</sup> There are also files containing details of those who applied for naturalisation, one dating between 1886-1903, containing the applications of many Italians whose applications were successful, illustrating that angst toward Italians did not necessarily apply to the colony's decision makers.<sup>22</sup> There is also evidence that Eugenio Vanzetti (the uncle of Francesco Vanzetti) was importing Italian immigrants into the colony and providing them with regular employment.<sup>23</sup> Vanzetti arrived in WA in 1896.<sup>24</sup> From analysis of correspondence between officials in WA and the Italian Consul General in Melbourne, it appears Vanzetti believed proper regulation of Italian immigration would benefit WA, as their positive cultural characteristics "cannot but do good". While Vanzetti was providing employment to Italians with little obstacle from the WA Government, the Italian Consul was at the time informed (by the

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<sup>20</sup> Catherine Dewhirst, "Collaborating on Whiteness: Representing Italians in Early White Australia," *Journal of Australian Studies* 32, no. 1, (2008): 40.

<sup>21</sup> Western Australia Police Department, State Records Office of Western Australia, Cons 430, Item 24/800.

<sup>22</sup> Supreme Court of WA, *Naturalization Act 1871 – General Orders of Chief Justice*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 61, Cons 3442, Box 1 A-G.

<sup>23</sup> Colonial Secretary's Office, *Italian Consul Melbourne, Italians Introduced into WA by Mr Vanzetti*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 675, Cons 527, Item No. 1896/3561.

<sup>24</sup> Erickson, 'Vanzetti, Francesco Cesare Luigi Stefano (1878-1967),' [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/Vanzetti-francesco-cesaro-luigi-stefano-11911](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/Vanzetti-francesco-cesaro-luigi-stefano-11911).

government?) that there was no guarantee of employment for further Italian immigrants. However it was stressed that if they were prepared to work hard and adapt “according to English ways” they were sure to find employment.<sup>25</sup> Vanzetti’s scheme did not last for he fell into bankruptcy<sup>26</sup> and subsequently left WA in 1902.<sup>27</sup>

As the number of Italians increased in Western Australia, so too did the negative views by the English speaking population towards these people. The British colonies of Australia introduced racial policies during the 1880s, and later the White Australia Policy, to keep non-Europeans out, [maybe] but this would also extend to Italians and other Southern Europeans. However, the colonial policies flew in the face of the Commercial Treaty signed by the United Kingdom and Italy in 1883, ratified by all the Australian states (except South Australia) in the following year. The Treaty outlined that Italians would possess freedom of entry, have rights to acquire and own property, and the right to engage in business activities within Great Britain and British Empire. However, the Treaty had no immediate change on the negative attitude some Australians had towards Italians.<sup>28</sup> With Australian Federation in 1901, the new federal government immediately passed the Immigration Restriction Act. While this legislation does not explicitly refer to exclusion based on race, the institution of the Dictation Test was an indirect form of racial discrimination.<sup>29</sup> The Dictation Test could be administered at an immigrant’s point of arrival, requiring them to complete the test of 500 words in English. If the Immigration officer was

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<sup>25</sup> Colonial Secretary’s Office, *Italian Consul Melbourne, Italians Introduced into WA by Mr Vanzetti*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series, 675, Cons 527, Item No. 1896/3561.

<sup>26</sup> Supreme Court of WA, *Bankruptcy files, Vanzetti, Eugenio – importer-Perth*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 165, Cons3560, Item No. 1899/067.

<sup>27</sup> Gentilli, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil*, 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: the Story of Australian Immigration*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

unsatisfied with the results, the immigrant could be refused entrance into Australia.<sup>30</sup> While Federation unified Australia and gave the nation its own status[self - government in WA, separate from the UK, happened in 1890], the population of Australia still identified strongly with British customs, often referring to themselves as 'British'. This mindset influenced the perceptions of Italians, as their culture and customs differed from the British, and therefore excluded them on the basis of their non-English ways.<sup>31</sup> As stated by Leopold Zunini, the Italian Vice Consul for WA from 1902 to 1908, "Italians were not held in high esteem at that time. According to public opinion we were classed somewhere between the Chinese and the blacks. I am not exaggerating when I say that we were often dubbed 'black fellows',"<sup>32</sup>Italians, as southern Europeans, often had swarthy complexions, leading to questions about their 'whiteness', their traditional work that often involved manual labour was often seen as 'below' the standards of work a British citizen would do.<sup>33</sup> Their community and family values set them apart also, leading to fears of 'ghetto-ism'.<sup>34</sup>

The fear at the rising number of Italians in Western Australia is seen in various documents held at the SRO. In a file labelled 'Undesirable Immigrants' there is correspondence regarding the "influx of Italians" into the state[footnote the file reference here rather than later on?]. The arrival of many Italians is viewed negatively, as wording in the document stresses the need for greater vigilance, and the [requirement?desire?] to implement the education test to ascertain the immigrants' knowledge of the English language and to "protect" the state from European aliens. The file expresses a fear that Italians were taking Australian's jobs

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Richards, *Destination Australia: Migration to Australia Since 1901*, (Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Dewhirst, "Collaborating on Whiteness," 35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

on contract (prohibited under the Immigration Restriction Act)<sup>35</sup> for a lower wage, lowering the economic conditions of the goldfields where many Italians were working, and not conforming to the English mode of living.<sup>36</sup>

Another 1902 file documents Italians employed on the mines [include footnote reference here rather than later on?]. There is the desire? to ensure Italians filling positions of responsibility should have a practical knowledge of the English language, to avoid miscommunication and possible accident. This desire is further developed into insisting that men employed underground must speak English. Contained in the file is a letter stating, with an aggressive tone, that a group of English men had been dismissed from the Great Fingall mine at Day Dawn in order to make way for a “new batch” of Italians, expressing the fear that Italians were replacing “our countrymen”.<sup>37</sup> This growing antagonism towards Italians working within WA led to calls for an inquiry into the issue, resulting in the Federal Government commissioning Magistrate Augustus S. Roe to investigate foreign contract labour.<sup>38</sup> The commission of 1902 had high praise for Italian workers, and found no evidence to support that Italians were willingly receiving lower wages or that they came under contract. It does, however, state that a further influx of these people may not be beneficial to the state.<sup>39</sup>

The year 1902 appears to be the peak of Italian immigration to Western Australia’s goldfields. The following year saw a decline, but this did not prevent the 1904

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Immigration Restriction Policy,’ National Archives of Australia, last modified 2016, accessed October 5, 2016, <http://guides.naa.gov.au/more-people-imperative/chapter2/index.aspx>.

<sup>36</sup> Colonial Secretary’s Office, *Undesirable Immigrants*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 675, Cons 752, Item 1901/1280.

<sup>37</sup> Premier’s Department, *Employment of Italian Miners on Mines*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 36, Cons 1496, 1902/1059.

<sup>38</sup> Gentilli, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Premier’s Department, *Prime Minister asking for Mr A. S. Roe’s services in connection with foreign contract labour question*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 36, Cons 1496, 1902/0898.



Western Australian Montgomery Royal Commission to report on foreign employment in the Goldfields. The report of the 1904 Commission<sup>40</sup>[move footnote to end of sentence] states that there was exaggeration regarding the supposed high influx of Italians into the state, illustrating that Anglo-Australian fears regarding Italians were unfounded.<sup>41</sup> The Commission reported that most Italians in the mines were employed as woodcutters due to the strict rules on English proficiency and underground safety.<sup>42</sup>

It was at this time that the wealth from the WA goldfields began to dwindle and word began to circulate back to Italy discouraging further immigration to WA. The period from 1905 to 1910 saw little increase of Italians into the state. There were advancements in agriculture during this time, but this field of work was difficult and gave little in return, appearing as a less attractive option for many. In a 1906 file titled 'Italian Immigration', there is a memo from the Italian Consul in WA Carl L. Zunini, proposing an agricultural scheme that would settle Italian farmers on WA farms.<sup>43</sup> It was also at this time that the State Government enacted legislation to favour land settlements. By 1911, WA had 35.1% of Australia's total Italian population with naturalisation of Italians in WA peaking in 1914-1915 with the beginning of the First World War. An immediate decrease in naturalisation followed from 1916-1921. After 1921, as the world settled following the horrors of WWI, different global political decisions, especially America's limitation on Italian immigrants, affected immigration choices and resulted in a new period of Italian inhabitation of Australian soil.

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<sup>40</sup> Department of Mines, *Employment of foreigners on mines*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 20, Cons 964, 1904/1063.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Pascoe and Patrick Bertola, "Italian Miners and the Second-Generation 'Britishers' at Kalgoorlie, Australia," *Social History* 10 no. 1, (Jan 1985): 12.

<sup>42</sup> Gentilli, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil*, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Premier's Department, *Italian Immigration*, State Records Office Western Australia, Series 36, Cons 1496, Item 1908/0146.

There has been an Italian presence within Western Australia since the early days of the colony.<sup>44</sup> While the number of Italians early on was small, numbers increased dramatically at specific points in Western Australian history. The gold rush of the late 1880s saw an increase, but many came for short periods and did not permanently settle in WA. Italian immigrants' limited knowledge of English and tendency to remain segregated in their cultural group lead to growing fears of ghetto-ism from the 'British' population of WA. These fears lead to antagonism towards those of Italian decent and resulted in two Royal Commissions investigating foreign employment in the mines. While these Commissions could find no evidence to support the suspicion that Italians were employed illegally or receiving lower wages, fear and angst towards these people continued in popular behaviour. Claims of increased Italian immigration in 1904 were unfounded, and fears of alien invasion and Australians losing their jobs to Italians had no grounding. The results of the Royal Commission did not prevent continued derogatory behaviour toward these people by the general public. It is important to stress that while there were those who spoke out against this race of people, and while decisions and investigations were made into Italians, there were those who acted positively towards these foreigners. Many Italians were able to make a life for themselves in WA, and with large numbers of Italian immigrants into Western Australia after the Second World War, a rich diversity of culture resulted and continues to this day.

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<sup>44</sup> Westralian Library Foundation, *Australian Italians*, State Records Office of Western Australia, Series 2124, Cons 5658/14.