



**Italian Roots: Family History, Inter Generational Experience,  
and Identity**

**Catherine Dewhirst**

**Centre for Social Change Research  
School of Humanities and Human Services**

**Queensland University of Technology**

**Paper presented to the Social Change in the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century Conference**

**Centre for Social Change Research  
Queensland University of Technology  
21 November 2003**

‘Australia’ as a notion has formed part of both mythical and real experience for Italians over the last seven centuries since Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) wrote *La Divina Comedia* in the vernacular. Our *Terra incognita* was imagined as the doorstep to purgatory after death, but it was also experienced by real people venturing beyond the frontiers of the homeland peninsula as explorers, artists, writers, poets, scientists, sailors and migrants (Lorenzato 1995:iii-iv; Cecilia 1987:ch.1). The migration of Italians to Australia has had a profound impact on the social, economic and political spheres of this country, starting mainly with the post-Risorgimento period. As a result of their presence and interaction in Australia, Italians have made untold contributions and left many legacies. One intriguing and certainly contentious legacy is that captured by the modern-day term of ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic identity’ or *italianità* [Italianness]. We might therefore consider a discussion of Italian ethnicity as a valuable means for exploring important features about Australia’s past.

It is not easy to conceive of a means to map the evolution of Italian ethnicity for the Australian context as the Italian ethnic presence has suffered much discontinuity, especially as a result of World War II (Borrie 1954:117). One context available for an analysis of the salience of ethnicity - at least over an unbroken period of time - is immigrant family history. And one particular family is suitable for such analysis: that of count Giovanni Pullè. A case study of Pullè and his family and descendants is an ideal starting point for the exploration of ethnic identity in Italo-Australian history for several reasons. Pullè himself was one of the immigrants from the first mass migration phase after the Risorgimento. Born in Modena in 1854, he arrived in Brisbane in 1876 and rose to some prominence in Italian migrant circles during his lifetime, leaving documentary traces of his activities and networks. His family and descendants have also been part of a recent genealogical study, which was commenced in 1985, enabling the ground work to have already been established and making this an excellent focus for testing notions of an Italian heritage and identity. A longitudinal generational study can equally throw light on Italo-Australian experience and the legacy of an Italian migrant heritage. Over the twentieth century, the ‘Italian community’ for Pullè’s descendants became *the family*. This is because the family provided a sense of continuity that the Italian community, which has changed so dramatically since the early 1900s, could not.

In 1997 when I conducted fieldwork on the subject matter of ethnic identity, interviewing the descendants of Giovanni Pullè, my own ancestor, my respondents (with some exceptions) did not question being classified as Australians. However, when I asked them about whether or not an Italian ancestry was of importance, 35 of 44 responded affirmatively:

I just have this incredible feeling of affinity with Italy, with Italia, with my ancestors, with my family out there [who] I don't know, but I just feel part of them and part of the history of the family... (Yvonne 4th generation woman, aged 64)

Yes it's always been of importance to me... because it's part of my make-up. My mother was always proud of the fact and she brought me up to be that way. (Errol 3rd generation man, aged 77)

It's probably to do with identity and sense of self. I mean that was one of my early memories of something part of me, being integral, and I can't imagine [it] not being there. To not feel my Italian ancestry is sort of like cutting a bit out of me or something... (Julie 4th generation woman, aged 52)

Because it is who I am and what I am. Who you are is in your blood... I feel predominantly and definitely Italian... (John 3rd generation man, aged 56)

I just love things Italian... I don't know if it's because the connection's there or what. I just have an affinity to that look and that style and I just have an affinity to everything about it. (Susan 4th generation woman, aged 48)

Yes, it's a connection with my roots and my personality, why I am the way I am and it's important because of my childhood with my extended family... it's really important to me that my children connect with their own heritage too. (Simone 5th generation woman, aged 31)

The Pullè descendants have typically succumbed to the forces of assimilation through loss of language, exogenous marriage, geographical dispersion and upward mobility (cf Gordon 1964: 70-1; cf Gans 1979:193-4, 1994:579-90). Yet, while language is profoundly linked to ethnicity, Joshua Fishman (1989:180) suggests that in the migrant context a sense of national origin associated with ethnicity may persist. This view has been supported in the Australian setting by Laksiri Jayasuriya (1987:28) who states that the degree of language shift among ethnic groups 'may not necessarily indicate an outright rejection of ethnicity in the orthodox sense, but rather an attempt to redefine it in something more akin to what Gans has called... "symbolic ethnicity"'.

The extracts of my informants reveal varying degrees of a perception of Italianness from their migrant background. According to classical theories of culture and migration, they are distorted and completely unrealistic, irrelevant to the discourse of culture and migration, or as Walker Connor (1996:72) describes, belonging to ‘... the realm of the subconscious and the nonrational’. But, the perceptions of my informants stem from the knowledge of having an Italian migrant ancestor, thus meeting one of six distinct features of the French term, ‘*ethnie*’ [ethnic group or community], explored by Anthony Smith (1991:21): ‘1. a collective proper name, 2. a myth of common ancestry, 3. shared historical memories, 4. one or more differentiating elements of common culture, 5. an association with a specific ‘homeland’, 6. a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population’. What contributes to the knowledge of having an Italian migrant ancestor in the Pullè family is family history. Family history, when combined with an alternative approach to oral history, offers some appreciation of what occurs to an ethnic heritage over the generations.

In her discussion of hermeneutics, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (1990:256) states that a phenomenological perspective ‘assigns major importance to the interpretations that people themselves place on their experience’. It is not just what oral history tells us, but the interpretations people make about the past that may complement traditional historical research methods (Yans-McLaughlin 1990:256). The undercurrent expressed in my own oral history findings stressed the heritage of family itself. To some extent (and in line with the theme of this conference section) my paper aims to demonstrate ‘an exercise in collective biography’, as Yans-McLaughlin (1990:283) puts it, or the ‘popular historical consciousness...’ (Yans-McLaughlin 1990:263) of an Australian family with Italian roots. Nevertheless, the idea of a longitudinal identification with a family’s ethnic origins encounters some resistance from some quarters today.

The notion of a persistent ethnic identity via the family has been given little credibility for two reasons. In the first place, Micaela di Leonardo (1984) argues against the ‘ethnic family model’, propagated in American sociological literature, for its inability to relate families to the broader context of social and economic life. The view of the family as an unchanging ethnic unit relies on misconceptions about race and stereotypes, particularly in terms of Southern Italian migrant

poverty, held for much of the twentieth century (di Leonardo 1984:177). In our more recent era, in which exposure to the popular consumption of ethnic images has become inescapable, families of ethnic background have encountered nostalgic versions of their migrant roots. Those families of Italian origin have been able to feast in the limelight of the ‘popularity of things Italian’ and the ‘ethnic industry’ (Baldassar 2001:27). This collective Italianness has always been and is still mythical (Baldassar 2001:81). As di Leonardo (1984:233) states : ‘The organic community, the patriarchal ethnic family, and the traditional ethnic woman are key elements in the contemporary political language of rhetorical nostalgia’. The ‘ethnic family model’ is linked to assimilation theories that regard ethnicity as static, reliant on ethnic community infrastructure, and not viable after the second generation (Crispino 1980; Gans 1979; Gordon 1964; Price 1963; Taft 1965, 1973). Assimilation theorists do not account for the ongoing construction and transformation of ‘ethnicity’ across the generations, a field that is currently being redressed beyond reductionist paradigms (Baldassar and Skrbis 1998; Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis 1994). Loretta Baldassar and Zlatko Skrbis (1998:455), for instance, emphasise ‘the significance of symbolic forms of ethnicity which acknowledge individual ascription of ethnic identity despite limited or even no involvement in formal ethnic organisations’. This view sees the construction of ethnic identity as something that implies a ‘multitude of conditions, settings and experiences and subsequently produces a multitude of potential outcomes’ (Baldassar and Skrbis 1998:457). Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis (1994) show how the construction of cultural identity and patterns of ethnic autonomy are also contingent on the interplay of power between the individual and influential social structures, and the interaction between the generations. These scholars often refer to migrants and their children (the second generation), allowing us to ponder how an ethnic heritage might be interpreted by the third generation and beyond.

The second reason that the persistence of ethnicity via the family has not received much attention relates specifically to the issue of family history itself. Ethnic histories, according to Elizabeth Tonkin et al. (1989:9-10), lend themselves to fiction, with genealogy being mentioned in terms of ‘not true history’, ‘mythical’, ‘perceived experience’ and ‘folk history’. It is therefore no surprise that studies on family history have not always been integrated into general theoretical explanations of social behaviour (Davison 2000:84). Margaret Hall (1979:19) explains that ‘family behaviour is usually treated as though it is only moderately important or influential in

society and as though it is relatively insignificant for a full understanding of general social exchanges'. In the nineteenth century context, Tamara Hareven (1977:5) signalled the need for a focussed approach on the family by studying families along generational lines, contextualising the gap in studies which have tended to examine families according to regions, communities or cities. She emphasises the need for 'longitudinal analysis of the individual family cycle instead of the "snapshot" method' (Hareven 1974:322). While the family has always been a dynamic site of resilience against corroding odds like industrialisation (Segalen 1996:377-8), Martine Segalen (1986:47) also comments on the loss of genealogical memory in families. Its loss, however, does not remove the need to ascribe symbolic meanings within families to the past as a part of the identification process relating to ideological constructs. Moreover, Segalen (1986:47) claims that: 'Our society still needs family symbols'. Family history keeping and the genealogical tree are symbols, representing the need to maintain a sense of the past and to connect with one's ancestral roots.

Genealogies are only one aspect of family history, but have a record of neglect in professional history (Curthoys 1987:447). This is because, according to Graeme Davison (2000:84), 'the average family history may appear not only trivial but almost inscrutable. It seems plotless, disconnected, unselective'. It has been criticised as 'ancestor worship', a hobby occupying the minds of middle-aged women, a desire to fulfil a need for identity (Davison 2000:80-1, 84). Genealogical research has existed for centuries, being used in the European context as a means for social, economic and political hegemony initially, and for racial supremacy policies subsequently. Interest in compiling genealogical roots resurged in the United States in the 1890s as part of a desire by members of the emerging upper-middle classes to distinguish themselves from the effects of the first mass migration phase (Hobsbawm 2000:292). Although there was some genealogical research conducted in the 1920s and 30s in Australia (Davison 2000:90), genealogical history has enjoyed increasing popularity from the late 1950s and 60s (Curthoys 1987:447; Hamilton 1994:14). A boom of inquiries into family trees and ancestral origins in the 1970s and 80s is perhaps best remembered with Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, adapted for television and watched in America by 130 million viewers in its premier season in 1977.<sup>1</sup> Around this time in Australia family historian Nancy Gray was instrumental in forming the Society of Australian Genealogists (Curthoys 1987). From Gray's (1973:119) experience, genealogical work is reliant

on sound historical records. Certainly, as has been noted elsewhere, it may also embellish studies of ‘those larger forces of social change’ (Davison 2000:87). Family history, as Gray (1973:120) acknowledges, is ‘no longer regarded in Australia simply as ‘ancestor hunting’. Its significance in specialized fields of research is now widely recognized. For the historian, genealogical research provides the essential background to biography, but it can offer, as well, new and illuminating perspectives’. One perspective that holds potential influence in the lives of migrant descendants is the narrative component of family history which for migrant families may be clarified by the concept of symbolic ethnicity.

Herbert Gans (1979:193, 198, 214, 218) coined the term, ‘symbolic ethnicity’, to describe an ethnicity connected with the upward mobility of third and fourth, and possibly fifth and sixth, generations of migrant descent in the United States. Symbolic ethnicity may be defined as a love and nostalgia for, and pride in, one’s migrant roots that is demonstrated in every-day life, felt and expressed symbolically (cf Gans 1979:204). The paradox that Gans captured was that assimilation had not corroded all signs of ethnic life. In fact, in her work on Armenian-Americans, Anny Bakalian (1993:6) argues that the assimilation of an ethnic identity occurs at the same time as its maintenance and that immigrant descendants respond according to different social and personal needs, resulting in a transformed sense of ethnicity. Bakalian (1993:431-2) points out:

One can say one is an Armenian without speaking Armenian, marrying an Armenian, doing business with Armenians, belonging to an Armenian church, joining Armenian voluntary associations, or participating in the events and activities sponsored by such organizations.

The distinction on which Bakalian draws is the difference in behaviour between first and second generation migrants (traditional Armenians) with descendants of and beyond the third generation (symbolic Armenians). Through generational change, Armenian-American’s have moved from “‘being” Armenian to “‘feeling” Armenian’ (Bakalian 1993:6).

The demonstration of symbolic ethnicity in every-day life is a more elusive concept than the ethnicity expressed by first generation migrants. Clearly the impact of migration on immigrants themselves transforms the expression of a cultural identity as Fitzpatrick (cf 1995:138) claims of

the Irish in Australian history. However, migration experience also happens on a landscape beyond settlement. Baldassar's (2001:5) theory of the return visit for Italian migrants and their children illustrates this point. Scholarship on the effects of migration thus reveal how ethnicity is expressed and lived in transformed ways, neither totally irrelevant to the original culture and heritage, nor inflexible in its interpretations thereof. For migrant descendants, as Gans (1979:204) claims: 'Ethnic symbols are frequently individual cultural practices that are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are "abstracted" from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings... to become stand-ins for it'. From his research ethnicity may be manifested in numerous ways, by individual or collective perspectives, based on historic or contemporary traditions, and according to myth or reality (Gans 1979:202-3), without the need for public recognition. Indeed, Mary Waters (1990:15, 150, 130) states that people voluntarily choose to identify with their ethnic origins for reasons to do with happiness for which both primordialism through the intimate family environment and social ascription through the broader society both help to explain ethnicity's persistence. For Bakalian's (1993:368) informants, family was the 'repository of Armenian culture and the web of social relations'. The place where ethnicity flourishes is in the family where it is 'nourished and sustained' (Bakalian 1993:441). The family context also enables symbolic ethnicity to develop amongst later generations when the need for ethnic community structures subsides. Although outside influences curb when and how ethnicity might be expressed, the family acts as the means for cultural expression and the structural reference point.

In my examination of the Pullè family, combining archival research with the oral history compilations of my informants (third, fourth and fifth generational descendants), three major cultural emblems emerged to explain the legacy of their *italianità*. Sites, traditions and custodians represent poignant factors in the negotiation of this family's Italian identity. The foundation of these cultural emblems must be attributed initially to Giovanni Pullè himself who had married Sarah McFarlane, a local Goodna-born girl of Irish migrant parents in 1879.<sup>2</sup> Intermarriage between Italian men, who far outnumbered Italian women in colonial Australia (in fact until well after World War II), and Irish or Irish-Australian women was notable in the nineteenth century (D'Aprano 1995:200). Pullè and Sarah had seven children. Although it is difficult to concede that a woman of Irish background would actively participate in the

Italianisation of her children, some of the literature on nineteenth century Irish women suggests an openness towards the ethnicity of marriage partners (Fitzpatrick 1998:179; Rule 1998:130). Waters (1990:33-6) more recently shows that a heritage is generally interpreted as a stronger ethnicity when it stems from the father, when it is Italian, and when it is the more recent.

When Pullè sailed with his wife and seven children from Brisbane to Sydney in 1896, it was for the purpose of improving his business prospects in the ethnic food industry. It took about seven years before Pullè could establish what became the structural and cultural boundaries of his legacy of ethnicity which would trickle into the lives of his children, grandchildren and descendants well after his death in 1920. He mortgaged a family home at Brighton-le-Sands, 'Gordon House', and an adjacent block of land on which his Excelsior Macaroni Factory operated, with both providing the structural boundaries of the *italianità* that he encultured. Moreover, his involvement in the fledgling Italian communities across Australia at the time through his newspapers, *L'Italo-Australiano* (1905-1909) and the *Oceania* (1913-1915), contributed to a strong foundation of being Italian amongst fellow Italians (Dewhirst 2002) as within his family. His journalism and pasta-making business established the cultural parameters that had an impact on his children's lives both personally and professionally. The second generation ran the family business with their father, some dabbled in his newspaper business, they attended ethnic community functions, and most married and lived close to the family home around which their family and business lives centred.

The family's continued sense of 'ethnicity' over five generations was grounded initially by the presence and activities of the second generation and their involvement with the sites of Gordon House, the Excelsior Macaroni Factory, and Italy as the homeland that was visited or epitomised in the imagination through letters with and stories about kin. Traditions and storytelling, centred around the extended family, also had their place in the construction of an Italian identity. Gordon House was a pre-Federation property and emulated the grandeur and style typical of an Italian 'villa', reflecting Pullè's ancient family and cultural heritage (Dewhirst 1997). When Pullè passed away, the estate and factory remained in the names of two of his children. Gordon House was subdivided into flats during the Great Depression,<sup>3</sup> which allowed some members of the third and fourth generations to reside there over the 1950s and 60s. The factory premises were

only sold in late 1963, while the residential land was sold by late 1972, with Gordon House eventually being demolished.<sup>4</sup> The proximity of the family home to the family workplace from the time that Pullè had moved his family into Gordon House in 1905 enabled a strong sense of *italianità* to flourish.

Fused with access to the pasta factory, Gordon House represents a concrete link to the family's history, where family lore was shared and Italianness celebrated. Indeed, in many ways the home and business displayed physical traits associated with an Italian presence. These sites enabled traditions to be shared across the generations. Pullè and Sarah's children and grandchildren who resided at the homestead or in close proximity were continually exposed to the Italian decor that decorated the home, including depictions of the Pullè family crest. Family rituals brought extended members together on a regular basis. Over the years, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were also exposed to the pasta processing plant which, although as a company was liquidated in 1936, was still in operation under Pullè's youngest son, Guido Pullè, until the early 1950s.<sup>5</sup> Over the 1920s and 30s, business meetings were held by the second generation and strictly limited to their presence as had been done in Pullè's day.<sup>6</sup> But the Friday meetings always included dinner at the homestead for the extended family with often an array of Italian meals and wines. Notably, meal-times offer important associations that are carried through life and signal both an identity and a continuity with the past (Ortoleva 1992:33-4), and some remembered the cooking and meals as Italian. As one fourth generation woman recalled: '... there was a scrubbed wooden table where they'd made pasta, whereas in our home tables would be either of polished wood that we had in the dining room or mica tables that you had in the kitchen. But, scrubbed wood was different and the smells were different. The smells were, I guess, the ingredients that went into Italian cooking'.<sup>7</sup>

Pullè and Sarah had established a sense of family solidarity with Gordon House and the Excelsior Macaroni Factory which infused their seven children and grandchildren with an appreciation of their Italian roots. Over subsequent generations, the experience of and exposure to these sites and to the traditions they generated led many descendants to interpret the family itself as the source of their Italianness, revealing no need for the ethnic community. Despite the demographic trend in recent years of Italian families with lower fertility rates than ever,<sup>8</sup>

exposure to a very real extended family and the myth of the ‘large Italian family’ also informed a sense of Italian ethnicity. ‘Italians have big families and I guess that’s why we all had big families too...’ said one fifth generation woman.<sup>9</sup> Another of the fourth generation stated: ‘... the thing that was special was the family, the extended family; the feeling that even though I didn’t really know them very well and they didn’t know me, that I was special because I was part of the family. And in a way I feel I’ve recreated that’.<sup>10</sup> But sites and traditions can perpetuate little without the beliefs and actions of people. Here, Pullè family descendants consistently recalled the role of the second generation women.

Di Leonardo’s (1984:23-4) criticism of scholars who focus too readily on women in transmitting ethnic culture alerts us to the danger of explaining ethnicity through kinship and family to the exclusion of other important influences. However, Ellie Vasta (1995:159) acknowledges the role of first generation migrant women as ‘the ‘cultural custodians’ of Italian culture and tradition in Australia’ from her research on post-war migrants. Coinciding with an earlier phase in Australian history when ‘alien’ ethnicities were also not publicly encouraged, female agency harboured the Pullè family’s Italian identity and its expression through family (both domestic and extended) life. Although the second generation and their spouses provided the custodianship for the family’s experience of ethnicity to varying degrees, it was in fact Pullè and Sarah’s daughters who acted as the prime agents of culture, history, identity, and family lore over the generations.

From oral family history, the four second generation Pullè daughters nurtured their Italianness as mothers or aunts by running the pasta business, maintaining family order, entertaining and preparing meals (servants appear to have also been employed), and bringing up children, nieces and nephews. Some of the Pullè women, irrespective of whether they had children, adopted the role of cultural custodian or ‘repository’ of family lore which continued to influence a generation of grandchildren. Kate Maccheroni Collins, the great-granddaughter of nineteenth century Italian migrant, Giovacchino Maccheroni, explains a similar occurrence in her family by the ‘proximity of the home’ where the women folk spent most of their day while the men were out, thus linking the role of ethnic continuity with historical modes of behaviour. Her great-aunts were considered ‘...the definitive sources of correct, accurate information of the history of the family... Because, I

think, it might go back to the fact that they always stayed at home... If you spend two thirds of your life around the home, then you're obviously going to absorb an awful lot more information...'.<sup>11</sup> In the Pullè family, family home and workplace were located together, and when it came to later generations of custodians who neither lived nor worked at the sites, regular family rituals ensured the anchoring of a link to the Italian past.

Custodianship, not surprisingly, is enhanced by longevity and it was via this role that specific details of the family's history were shared. The most prominent custodians of family ancestral history appear to have been Margarita Pullè Folli (Rita) and Irene Pullè de Mostuejouis (Renie), who largely outlived their other sisters, Ethel Pullè and Ivy Pullè Ryan. In particular, from the 1920s to the 1950s, Renie could be described as the chief custodian. The role of custodian can be defined by its cross-fertilising characteristics, where female influence spanned into other sub-branches and across generations, allowing this process to occur. As one fourth generation woman recalled: 'Auntie Renie... we'd sit down and go through the family book, which was in Italian...That's where I got my love of the family I think [for] my background... through Renie... She also had a good memory I think and she had been to Italy. She'd talked to Felice, the one who'd researched to do that book. And she knew a lot of the people involved... with the family tree'.<sup>12</sup> From the 1950s to the 1980s, Renie's niece, Yolanda Pullè-Sampson, took on a similar role. 'Landie was a very special person in my life', explained another fourth generation woman. 'So she talked to me. She first showed me the Pullè books... Aunty Renie and Aunty Landa were probably the main contributors to that knowledge'.<sup>13</sup>

Knowledge of the family's history was crystallised by the fact that both Renie and Yolanda had returned to Italy to visit kin and were consequently given a written family history of the Italian Pullès. The family history book itself, entitled *Pullè (1200-1931)* and written by Giovanni Pullè's youngest brother, Felice Pullè (1931), provided family members with second-hand information about their Italian heritage. Those who spent time with both women spoke of the pride they voiced in the family's Italian heritage which was supported by specific knowledge. Information on the family's history generally tended to be based on the direct experience of these women. The family history book itself substituted for direct contact with kin in Italy over time, enabling a feeling of belonging to be perpetuated. Armed with their experiences and the

family history book, Renie and Yolanda had an impact on the perceptions of family members about being Italian in a way that was out of proportion with the degree of Italian 'blood'. At the same time they inspired custodianship to be taken up by other family members.

Information from the family history book was shared cross-generationally and became associated with direct experience of Italy and the Italian relatives, contributing to the myth-making of family ancestral legends on an Italian and ancient French landscape. The book in fact anchored elements of ancestral knowledge and reinforced a specific kind of past, contributing to a perceived Italian identity. One fourth generation man described the book as fascinating and 'part of the family heirloom'.<sup>14</sup> The longer-term effect of the book was its position in the family as the only access each descendant had to her/his Italian heritage, especially with the passing away of the earlier generations, the eventual sale and demolition of the family home and factory, and the loss of life style by the late 1960s. When the family genealogist, Margaret Ryan, had *Pullè (1200-1931)* translated into English in 1994, many family members contributed financially. The effects were far-reaching into the fourth and fifth generations, as one fifth generation woman said: '... it was very interesting and quite exciting getting it'.<sup>15</sup> The book itself came to represent the symbolic link to the family's Italianness. It contained information on noble forebears, an aristocratic title, the coat-of-arms, the family motto, the village of origin, and acts of noble courage which have each taken on symbolic meaning and relate to the specific family identity as Pullès. What this reinforces again is the potency of a specific family history in sustaining an 'ethnic' identity.

Those Pullè family members not exposed to the main cultural emblems, such as most of the fifth generation, still found ways of expressing their connection with their Italian origins. A number of factors have influenced their interpretations about coming from an Italian family, such as stories told by parents or grandparents, knowledge of the family's nobility, and a general curiosity about the roots of the Pullè name. Rudolph Bell (1979:67-8) suggests that the continuity of the family is historically a critical theme for Italian families whose survival was assured by continuance of the family name, generation after generation. Pride in a family's surname is also acknowledged as an influential factors in reaffirming an ethnic identification in the migrant context (Waters 1990:64-5). But the Pullè family surname was even more important

given its link to European history. Storytelling mostly focussed on the family's aristocratic heritage, both unusual in the Australian migrant setting and captivating for family members. In the literature on the history of the Italian nobility, Anthony Cardoza (1988:595) and Arno Mayer (1981:3-4) both suggest that some aristocratic families maintained their sense of nobility well into the early twentieth century. Such is the case for the Pullès where an unreserved pride was expressed about the noble title of count/countess and very few were unable to elaborate on the meaning of the surname. In some cases, particularly where the surname has disappeared with marriage, a naming tradition emerged, involving the choice of Italian or Italian-associated first names amongst family members of up to the fifth generation.

An appropriate question at this point is whether or not the family's private noble history can be separated from a perceived Italian 'ethnic' identity. From my findings, surname and noble ancestry have combined to impart a sense of both distinction and Italianness. This is problematic since it implies an identification with Italianness via the family history of ennoblement, rather than through the impact of migration and of ethnicity. Whereas many members of the Australian Pullè branch use the aristocratic history to define who they are, they have collected no official documents and little memorabilia, unlike their kin in Italy and other families of noble descent.<sup>16</sup> With the exception of the work, *Pullè (1200-1931)*, depictions of the family crest, and the family surname, little remains to link the family to its aristocratic past. What does remain takes on symbolic value and has found fertile ground in the current multicultural environment and at the height of consumer Italy.

The economic boom of the post-World War II period has fuelled renewed interest on a public scale in the images of ethnicity as well as greater possibilities to lead an affluent lifestyle, enabling symbols of ethnicity to be bought as commodities in consumer societies (cf Bakalian 1993:8, Baldassar 2001:78-80, di Leonardo 1989:233-4, and Waters 1990:6-7, 90). As name changes occurred over time through marriage in the Pullè family and descendants dispersed geographically, resulting in less association with the original cultural emblems, most of the fourth and fifth generations have nevertheless continued to explain their identity through narrative form by emphasising primordial ties. Where primordialism is less evident, instrumental contexts emerged to explain the Italian heritage. As a result of family upbringing and continued

interaction with extended family, some Pullè family descendants reported *feeling* Italian. What this suggests is that intergenerational experience is responsible for creating the emotional character of attachment to an ancestral identity which happens to be supported secondarily by the broader consumer market. One fourth generation man expressed this clearly: ‘I will buy Italian wine for instance... We’ll buy it because there’s that link... it’s made in Italy’.<sup>17</sup> Initially vital for a sense of both an Italian and an ethnic background, ancestral knowledge represents a potent force when combined with family history and custodianship.

The notion of an ‘Italian ethnic identity’ illustrates a historic aspect of Australia’s peoplehood. Although numbered at only 5,678 in 1901 (McDonald 1999:4), Italians became the largest non-Anglo-Celtic group by the early 1920s (Borrie 1954:40). Despite ebbing numbers since the early 1970s, this remains the case.<sup>18</sup> Today the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, from analysis of the 2001 Census, indicates that people born in Italy make up the third largest migrant group at 1.7% of the population, with those born in the United Kingdom and Ireland at 5.8% and those of New Zealand origin at 1.9%.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Australia’s multicultural phase inaugurated greater popular acceptance of the ethnic question to the extent of now considering migrant descendants as an important category. Helen Ware (1981:24) points out that up to 900,000 Australians in the early 1980s could be said to claim Italian ancestry, including an estimate of those sharing up to one sixteenth of Italian immigrant roots. Over the last decade, census results have shown that Australians ‘...of Italian descent were the largest ethnic group from a non-English speaking background at about half a million or 2.7 per cent’ (NMAC 1995:1). Census results have always reflected an interest in the composition of a nation’s peoplehood. With the census in 2001 questioning the ancestral background with which people identify - to which 90% of the population gave up to two ancestries and which has yet to be thoroughly analysed<sup>20</sup> - we are currently witnessing an interest in the potential longitudinal effects of ethnicity.

The lives of Australia’s Italian migrants and their descendants bear witness to the transformation of Australian society and its peoplehood. Indeed, the concept of ‘multiple’ Australian identities has been well argued by Ann Curthoys and Jan Ryan. Historically, as Curthoys (1997:27-8) reminds us, ‘... there seems to have been an emphasis on Britishness, assimilation and ethnic homogeneity, to the point of wiping out popular memory of an earlier multiculturalism’. She

argues that neither the stereotypes of an Australian national identity, nor of distinct and harmonious ethnic groups provide a sense of who Australians have been and are (Curthoys 1997:36). Focussing on the Chinese in Australia's history, as well as people of Chinese extraction, Ryan (1997:71, 75, 77) is critical of how the complexities of Chinese identities in Australian history, not as a single ethnic stereotype, but as people of diverse ancestries, experiences and 'cultural dialogues', remain excluded from the dominant narrative on identity. She voices the need for a 'new synthesis' with 'a re-examination of sites of difference and dialogue' in order to engage in Australia's multiple identities (Ryan 1997:77). The question of migrant roots remains important given the continued focus on issues related to ethnic origins and influences. An examination of the Pullè family, for instance, touches on the changing experiences of Italians in Australia and of women's roles, and on the impact of societal forces like post-war migration and consumerism.

The Pullè family example highlights the important role of family history in the persistence and transformation of ethnicity. The results of my case study clearly differ from analysis of ethnicity in the ethnic group community (cf Castles et al. 1992). From an ethnographic inquiry into family history, we may observe how this family accepted its Italian roots and 'ethnicity' without the need for ethnic community infrastructure. An 'Italian identity' was reinterpreted intergenerationally before the onset of multiculturalism which only later assisted in cementing the family's Italian roots. In his work on ethnonational bonds, Connor (1996:71) points out that quality within kinship groups of 'not *what is* but *what people perceive as is* which influences attitudes and behaviour' (his emphasis). This positions migration as a longitudinal process, influencing descendants and their families through perceptions of ethnicity further than scholarship in this field acknowledges. One of the fundamental contributors to the continuity of an Italian identity in the Pullè family has been family history itself. If ethnic identity may be sustained over a number of generations, in an age when family history details are increasingly recorded and accessible, we may need to think anew about the descendants of the post-World War II mass migrations and how multiculturalism meets their needs, particularly when the traditional structural and cultural boundaries of ethnicity are more secure than in a previous era. Despite problems associated with mainstreaming and even greater concerns about globalisation, ethnicity and ethnic identity remain important factors to many individual migrants and their

descendants in a world now far removed from the comforts of myth and imagination. Perhaps Dante's *La Divina Comedia* was not so far from the truth after all.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bakalian, Anny 1993. *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*. New Brunswick, New Jersey : Transaction Publishers

Baldassar, Loretta 2001. *Visits Home: Migration Experiences between Italy and Australia*. Carlton South : Melbourne University Press

Baldassar, Loretta and Skrbis, Zlatko 1998. 'The second generation and the transmission of culture', in M. Alexander, S. Harrding, P. Harrison, G. Kendall, Z. Skrbis and J. Western (eds), *Refashioning Sociology: Responses to a New World Order*. Brisbane : TASA Conference Proceedings; pp.454-459

Bell, Rudolph M. 1979. *Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy since 1800*. Chicago & London : The University of Chicago Press

Borrie, W. D. 1954. *Italians and Germans in Australia: a Study of Assimilation*. Melbourne : Angus and Robertson

Castles, Stephen, Alcorso, Caroline, Rando, Gaetano and Vasta, Ellie (eds) 1992. *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society*. North Sydney : Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Allen & Unwin

Cardoza, Anthony L. 1988. 'The Enduring Power of the Aristocracy : Ennoblement in Liberal Italy, 1861-1914', in Collection de l'Ecole Française de Rome (ed), *Les Noblesses Européennes au XIXe Siècle*, Roma: Università di Milano & Ecole Française de Rome, pp.595-605.

Cecilia, Tito 1987. *We Didn't Arrive Yesterday: Outline of the History of the Italian Migration into Australia from Discovery to the Second World War*. M. Furey (trans.). [2nd edn]. Scalabrians, Red Cliff : The Sunnyland Press

Connor, Walker 1996. 'Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond' in J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity*. Oxford, New York ; Oxford University Press, pp.69-75

Crispino, James A. 1980. *The Assimilation of Ethnic Groups : the Italian Case*. Staten Island, New York : The Center for Migration Studies of New York

Curthoys, Ann 1987. 'Into History', in A. Curthoys and T. Rowse (eds), *Australians from 1939*. Broadway, N.S.W. : Fairfax, Syme and Weldon; pp.439-449

- 1997. 'History and Identity', in W. Hudson and G. Bolton (eds), *Creating Australia*. St Leonards, N.S.W. : Allen & Unwin; pp.23-38

D'Aprano, Charles 1995. *From Goldrush to Federation: Italian Pioneers in Victoria : 1850-1900*. INT Press : Pascoe Vale South, Victoria

Davison, Graeme 2000. *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*. St Leonards, N.S.W. : Allen & Unwin

Dewhurst, Catherine 1997. 'Count Giovanni Pullè: A Legacy of Italian Immigration in Australian History'. *Italian Historical Society Journal*. Vol.5, no.2, July-December, pp.4-12.

- 2002. 'Giovanni Pullè: Pioneer and founding father of Italian ethnicity'. *Spunti e ricerche*. Vol.17, Supplement, pp.26-49

Fitzpatrick, David 1995. *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*. Carlton, Vic. : Melbourne University Press

- 1998. "'This is the place that foolish girls are knowing': reading the letters of emigrant Irish women in colonial Australia", in Trevor McGlaughlin (ed), *Irish Women in Colonial Australia*. St Leonards, N.S.W. : Allen & Unwin; pp.163-181

Gans, Herbert 1979. 'Symbolic Ethnicity : The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America', in H. Gans, N. Glazer, J. R. Gusford and C. Jencks (eds), *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press; pp.193-220

- 1994. 'Symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religiosity : towards a comparison of ethnic and religious acculturation'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Vol.17, no.4, October, pp.577-592

Gordon, Milton 1964. *Assimilation in American Life : the Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. New York : Oxford University Press

Gray, Nancy 1973. 'Tracing Family History', in Dufty D., Harman, G. and Swan K. (eds), *Historians at Work: Investigating and Recreating the Past*, Sydney : Hicks Smith and Sons; pp.111-122

Hamilton, Paula 1994. 'The Knife Edge: Debates about Memory and History', in K. Darian-Smith and P. Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*. Melbourne : Oxford University Press; pp.9-32

Hareven, Tamara K. 1974. 'The Family as Process: The Historical Study of the Family Cycle'. *Journal of Social History*. Vol.7, pp.322-329.

- (ed) 1977. *Family and Kin in Urban Communities, 1700-1930*. New York, London : New Viewpoints.

- Hobsbawm, Eric 2000. 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press; pp.263-307
- Jayasuriya, Laksiri 1987. 'Immigration Policies and Ethnic Relations in Australia'. Conference Papers. *Canada 2000 - Race Relations*. October, Ottawa, Canada
- di Leonardo, Micaela 1984. *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans*. Ithaca & London : Cornell University Press
- Lorenzato, Guerrino 1995. *La visione italiana dell'Australia: Immaginario e realtà*. St Lucia, Queensland : Minerva E & S
- Mayer, Arno 1981. *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War*, London : Croom Helm.
- McDonald, Peter 1999. *Community Profiles 1996 Census: Italy Born*. Canberra : Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia
- National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) 1995. *Multicultural Australia : the Next Steps Towards and Beyond 2000*. A Report of the NMAC, vol. 1 & 2, Australia Government Publishing Service
- Ortoleva, Peppino 1992. 'La tradizione e l'abbondanza. Riflessioni sulla cucina degli italiani d'America'. *Altreitalia*. Vol.7, pp.31-52
- Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria and Skrbis, Zlatko 1994. 'Authority, Compliance and Rebellion in Second Generation Cultural Minorities'. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*. November, vol.30, no.3, pp.259-272
- Price, Charles 1963. *Southern Europeans in Australia*. Melbourne : Oxford University Press
- Pullè, Felice 1931. *Pullè (1210-1931)*. Riccione : Topografia Moderna
- Rule, Pauline 1998. "'Tell father and mother not to be unhappy for I am very comfortable' : a sketch of Irish women's experience in colonial Australia', in Trevor McGlaughlin (ed), *Irish Women in Colonial Australia*. St Leonards, N.S.W. : Allen & Unwin; pp.123-141
- Ryan, Jan 1997. 'Chinese Australian History', in W. Hudson and G. Bolton (eds), *Creating Australia*. St Leonards, N.S.W. : Allen & Unwin; pp.71-78
- Segalen, Martine 1986. *Historical Anthropology of the Family*. J. C. Whitehouse and S. Mathews (trans.). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press

- 1996. 'The Industrial Revolution : from Proletariat to Bourgeoisie', in A. Burguière, C. Klapisch-Zuber, M. Segalen and F. Zonabend (eds), *A History of the Family*. Vol.2. Cambridge, U. K. : Polity Press; pp.377-415

Smith, Anthony D. 1991. *National Identity*. London : Penguin Books

Taft, R. 1965. *From Stranger to Citizen: a Survey of Studies of Immigrant Assimilation in Western Australia*. Perth : University of Western Australia Press

- 1973. 'Beyond the Third Generation: the Ethnic Identification of Jewish Youth', in P. Y. Medding (ed), *Jews in Australia*. South Melbourne, Vic. : Macmillan and Monash University, 1973, pp.193-222

Tonkin, Elizabeth, McDonald, Maryon and Chapman, Malcolm (eds) 1989. *History and Ethnicity*. ASA Monographs 27. London & New York : Routledge

Vasta, Ellie 1995. 'The Italian-Australian Family: Transformations and Continuities', in R. Hartley (ed), *Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia*. St. Leonards, NSW : Allen & Unwin; pp.144-166

Ware, Helen 1981. *A Profile of the Italian Community in Australia*. Victoria : Citadel Press.

Waters, Mary 1990. *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identity in America*. Berkeley, CA : University of California Press

Yans-McLaughlin, Virginia 1990. 'Metaphors of Self in History: Subjectivity, Oral Narrative, and Immigration Studies', in Yans-McLaughlin, V. (ed), *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*. New York & Oxford : Oxford University Press; pp.254-290

---

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> History Channel Exhibits: Roots, 'Celebrate Black History Month', [www.historychannel.com/exhibits/roots/index.html](http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/roots/index.html) [retrieved on 31 October 2003].

<sup>2</sup> MS, Queensland State Archives: Marriage Reg. no.1177/93 (Queensland).

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Boyd and Margaret Ryan, 31 August 2002.

<sup>4</sup> MS, Land Titles Office, Sydney: Vol.12008, fol.22; and Vol.9414, fol.27.

<sup>5</sup> MS, State Records of New South Wales Archives, Company Records: Ref.3/5771, no.2683. Also interview with John Charker-Pullè, 1999, and personal communication from Boyd and Margaret Ryan, 31 August 2002, as well as from Neil Pullè, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Zita Pullè Simitopoulos, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Julie Rivendell, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Alene Gelbard, Carl Haub and Mary Kent 1999. 'World Population Beyond Six Billion'. *Population Bulletin*, Washington, March, vol.54, iss.1, pp.3-43; p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Jennifer Scanlon, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Julie Rivendell, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Kate Maccheroni Collins, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Yvonne Pullè, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Julie Rivendell, 1997

---

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Michael Folli, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Sarah Osborne, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, see the case of the Swiss-French de Werra noble family: Musée cantonal d'histoire, Sion, *[In]fortunes: Les barons de Werra aux XIXe et Xxe siècles*, Exposition temporaire, Tour des Sorciers, Sion, 1 juin-30 septembre 2001. My thanks to Associate Professor Gary Ianziti for pointing out the de Werra family's exhibition.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Peter Dewhirst, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, [www.abs.gov.au/websitesdbs](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitesdbs) [retrieved on 15 September 2002].

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Ancestry' Fact Sheet, [www.abs.gov.au/websitesdbs](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitesdbs) [retrieved on 17 February 2003].