# Table of Contents

President’s Report 2014 1

The Professional Midwife: Adelaide’s Destitute Asylum and midwifery in South Australia 1880-1900

Bronte Gould 5

1848 and All That: early South Australia and the Cornish radical tradition

Philip Payton 17

Lois Quarrell: a notable mid-20th-century journalist and her impact

P. A. Howell 29

Italians in the Civil Alien Corps in South Australia: the ‘forgotten’ enemy aliens

Daniela Cosmini-Rose 43

The Torrens Island Internment Camp: law, history and the treatment of ‘enemy aliens’ in South Australia in World War One

Rebecca Martin 53

The First Commercial Wine Vineyard Planted in South Australia

Julie Holbrook Tolley 71

‘Mrs. Moore is most energetic and devoted to her work’: Bessie Moore 1859-1923, a career public servant

Margrette Kleinig 81

The Afforestation Proposal for Kangaroo Island During World War One

Bridget Jolly 96

‘MRS. HILLIER begs to inform … the Public of Adelaide that she has opened a SCHOOL’: education in the early years of settlement in South Australia

Kay Whitehead 111

Notes on Contributors 122

Book Reviews 123

 Presidents of the Historical Society and Editors of the Journal 137

Publications of the Historical Society of South Australia, 1974-2014 138

About the Society 139
Italians in the Civil Alien Corps in South Australia: the ‘forgotten’ enemy aliens

Daniela Cosmini-Rose

The period during the Second World War is remembered by the Italians in Australia as one of the hardest they experienced as migrants, owing to the restrictions that they were subjected to and the anti-Italian sentiment that had spread throughout the nation. Many Italian families were severely affected due to relocation during the war: some by military service overseas, some by internment in camps and others by conscription as labourers into the Civil Alien Corps (CAC) to work on civilian projects of a non-combatant nature such as construction works, salt production, cutting and handling of timber and scrub clearing. This article presents the findings from a study on the experiences of a group of Italian migrants who were removed during the Second World War from their usual occupations and from their loved ones to serve in the CAC where they were subjected to harsh conditions, discrimination and loss of liberties for no other reason than their ethnicity. Drawing on the analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with Italian migrants enlisted in the Corps and a selection of personal files held in the Melbourne office of the National Archives of Australia, the study argues that prejudice
and discrimination were major contributing factors to the treatment of Italians during the war.

From June 1939 aliens were required to register under the *Aliens Registration Act*, according to which:

‘Alien’ meant any person over the age of sixteen years other than a person who is a British subject within the meaning of the Nationality Act 1920-1936 or is ... entitled while in Australia or any Territory to all political and other rights, powers and privileges to which a natural born British subject is entitled.1

In August 1939, at the request of the military authorities, a special branch of the police forces investigated all Italian males residing in Australia and ‘sorted’ them into five categories ranging from those considered a very high security risk to those considered ordinary harmless persons.2 On the day that Australia received news that Italy had entered the war (11 June 1940), all migrants of Italian origin, even those who had become British subjects, were no longer just ‘aliens’ (unnaturalised foreigners) but became ‘enemy aliens’. By regulation enemy aliens were obliged to carry a registration certificate at all times for purposes of identity and to produce it at the local police station every week; they were required to obtain written permission before travelling beyond the police district in which they were registered and before changing place of abode. Non-naturalised Italians were prohibited from purchasing or leasing land and were also forbidden to possess items such as cameras, radios, carrier pigeons, wireless equipment, petrol, and all forms of motor vehicles, including motorcars, boats and aeroplanes.3 It was an offence to speak a language other than English in public places or on the telephone, and public assembly was strictly forbidden.4

Detention orders were deemed necessary for all those who were considered a security risk, while those included in the category of ordinary harmless people5 became subject to a number of stricter regulations and restrictions than registered aliens. Across Australia 4727 Italians were arrested and interned,6 of whom 173 were in South Australia,7 and those who were not held in internment camps were given the option of volunteering for military service, otherwise, from 1942, they were obliged to serve in the CAC to contribute ‘to some form of service of a national but non-combatant character’.8 The Corps also absorbed internees released from internment camps who were not allowed to return to their normal jobs, and prisoners of war.

Many scholars have recognised that the situation of those Italians who were not interned during the war, as succinctly argued by Gianfranco Cresciani, was:

Undoubtedly the hardest … as they were considered as positive security risks and always under suspicion of being a potential threat to national security and were attacked by the most irrational and jingoistic section of Australian public opinion, and not only verbally.9

While a large number of publications have focused on different aspects of the internment of Italians,10 to date there has been very little research that explores the issues relating to those ordinary Italian migrants classified as ‘enemy aliens’ who, after the war broke out, tried to maintain a low profile and continue in their accustomed ways of life, by keeping their shops open, or by working in the building industry, in market gardens and on farms, until they were removed from their usual occupations and from their families to serve in the CAC. Regardless of the lasting benefit to the Australian economy that the Corps work scheme provided under wartime conditions, to the knowledge of the author, only one study has looked at the utilisation of the Italian enemy aliens as a mobile workforce within the Australian industry in the war years. Christina Gillgren, in her study of Italians and Croatians in the Western Australian Southwest timber industry 1919-1969, showed the extent to which the cultural distance between the ‘British’ Australian society and the ‘alien’
groups legitimated a regime of discriminatory regulations and practices, which caused prejudiced views of the inferior status of southern Europeans, and distrust of Italians in particular, to become deeply entrenched.\textsuperscript{11} Johann Peter Weiss in his study on internment in Australia during the Second World War documented the discrepancies in the treatment of enemy aliens against Australian workers and the difficulties they had to face in CAC camps.\textsuperscript{12}

What follows aims to address a gap in the literature by providing insights into the experiences of Italian migrants who served in the Corps during the Second World War, a ‘forgotten’ group of migrants whose lives were marked by hardship and restrictions imposed on them owing to the anti-Italian sentiment, which became even more acute during the wartime period.

The discussion is based on five semi-structured in-depth interviews with Italian migrants who were conscripted into the CAC and the analysis of a selection of 600 personal files held in the Melbourne office of the National Archives of Australia. The files, for which Special Access was obtained, contain information on the projects migrants were employed in, documentation relating to finances, medical leave, disciplinary matters and letters sent by the aliens themselves or by their families to government officials.

In March 1942 the War Cabinet decided that the pool of enemy aliens and refugee aliens should be made available to the Allied Works Council to work in remote areas on defence projects of a non-combatant nature. This arrangement aimed at controlling aliens by placing them under one authority and increasing security by removing them from coastal areas into remote inland areas, where they could be employed in large groups under easy surveillance.\textsuperscript{13} At the census of registered aliens at the end of 1942, in Australia there were 12,348 Italian enemy aliens, of whom 2132 were in South Australia.\textsuperscript{14} A year later, on 3 May 1943, the War Cabinet, under the National Security (Aliens Service) Regulations, decided to amend the regulations and to channel the scattered groups of aliens employed throughout the country into the CAC under the control of the Director-General of Allied Works. War Cabinet had approved this step as a means of giving relief to Australia’s worsening manpower shortage as the war progressed.\textsuperscript{15} Under the regulations any male refugee alien or enemy alien between the ages of eighteen and sixty could be directed to serve in the CAC on a civilian basis on projects of a non-combatant nature.\textsuperscript{16} The CAC marked an important shift in the use of alien labour which had become necessary for two reasons: on the one hand labour shortages became so acute in 1943 that all available sources of labour had to be utilised; and on the other, the new regulations would have empowered the Director-General of Security to have complete decision-making powers to determine when aliens should serve, especially powers over groups such as the Italians, who were considered more of a threat:

The Aliens Civil Corps will be different from the Civil Constructions Corps in that members will be employed continuously and will transfer immediately from one job to another. ... It is estimated that there are about 55,000 aliens registered in Australia. The Government believes that at least 10,000 of them can be more usefully employed. It is particularly concerned with the stronghold Italians and other aliens have on the fruit and fish trades.\textsuperscript{17}

Envy and resentment against the Italian community in South Australia had begun as early as the 1890s, when the first small community of Italians started to take shape there, especially in Port Pirie 200 km to the north of Adelaide, where the presence of a small Italian community of fishermen from Molfetta began to be criticised by the British-Australians: the new arrivals were poor and uneducated, came from Southern Italy, spoke a foreign language, did not integrate into
The wider community, exploited the fishing grounds and sent their earnings to Italy. Anti-Italian sentiment had intensified in the 1920s following the rapid increase in the number of Italian arrivals in South Australia, when the United States closed its doors, and consequently the previous small number of Italians in South Australia quadrupled to nearly 1500. The Anglo-Australians became concerned that the foreign influx might undermine their racial purity, and this fear led to anti-Italian feelings, which sometimes culminated in episodes of intolerance and violence. Italian wharf labourers on the docks at Port Adelaide, for instance, were particularly targeted in the period 1928-1932, at the height of the economic depression. Italians seeking work as labourers or as factory workers in Adelaide quickly learnt that employment was always offered, in order of preference, to Australian returned soldiers, married Australians, single Australians, British-born, Northern Europeans, and lastly, if any positions were still available, to Southern Europeans. 

Italy’s entry in the war had created the perfect opportunity for Anglo-South Australian firms to have the Italians ousted from those sectors of economic activity where they were competing with or could be replaced by Australians.

The migrants who were employed by the Allied Works Council, and then after 1943 conscripted into the CAC, remember that at the beginning of the war they were removed from their usual jobs and sent to various camps away from their families. Giuseppe (Tommaso) Fazzalari, who was first sent to the salt field at Dry Creek for three months, then to a labour camp in Barmera for a month, and finally employed as a tailor at a military factory that produced uniforms, recollected that in the Dry Creek camp there were about 300 Italians living in three huts. Of his experience in Barmera, where there were about 170 Italians, he recalled that:

We could not go out of the town. They came to collect us every morning by truck and took us into the bush to cut firewood. I believe that we were there to be out of the way.

Some of the main industries analysed for the purpose of this study, in which the aliens were employed under the jurisdiction of the Allied Works Council in South Australia, were Imperial Chemical Industries ICI Alkali at Dry Creek; the Woods and Forests Department in the firewood areas of Bundaleer, Wirrabirra, Barmera and in the South East; and the Commonwealth Trans-Australian Railway (Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Alice Springs, and American River in the Northern Territory). At ICI Alkali, where salt production had begun in 1940, aliens were asked to perform excavation, moulding and levelling of earth works and general constructions of earth and timber crystallisers for the production of salt, and such other work. The Woods and Forest Department required aliens to do cutting and
handling of firewood, gardening and fencing, and such other work as directed under their instructions.23

Many aliens enlisted in South Australia were also dispatched to the camps of the Commonwealth Trans-Australian Railway to work on the Port Pirie and Port Augusta Junctions in South Australia or to the Central Australia Railway in Alice Springs, Northern Territory. The Second World War saw a considerable increase in traffic through Port Augusta and an expansion of facilities for maintenance and repairs. An indication of the expansion of activities is given by the construction between 1942 and 1945 of 163 residences for employees at Port Augusta. Workers were first obtained from the CAC in February 1943, and put to work on the Trans-Australian Railway to speed up sleeper replacement. Over the whole period of their employment 756 men were engaged for varying periods with the greatest number employed at any one time being 461 in September 1944.24

The main difficulty found with the employment of CAC was that their labour was not as efficient as that engaged through normal employment channels. Such was the resentment among a great number of the aliens at being removed from their normal occupations and families and being expected to carry out work of such an arduous nature that they had no heart for the work and often got into trouble for insubordination.

The migrants interviewed who were conscripted into the CAC remember the subhuman conditions of some of the camps. Domenico Cirillo, for instance, who was sent to Port Price on the York Peninsula of South Australia to work in the salt fields and then to Berri to clear wood, recounted:

At Port Price we used to extract salt with a shovel. There were six other Italians and we were compelled to sleep on the floor
without a mattress, only with a pillow and a sheet. On the floor it was so cold that we were freezing to death, so one day I asked my boss for permission to go back to Adelaide to pick up some blankets, but he refused. Determined to get the blankets, one Friday night I secretly caught the postal utility to Port Wakefield and then the train to Adelaide. The next morning I went to the police station and I was fined £50.25

To the aliens employed by the Woods and Forest department who were unused to bush living and wood cutting, conditions proved intolerable and many complained of not being physically fit enough for those hard work conditions, and were so dissatisfied with their situation that they often went away from camp without leave or failed to return to camp when their leave finished. One alien who had been employed at Mount Burr for over a year refused to return to work because, he stated:

*The work at Mount Burr is too hard, it is wood cutting and I am not strong enough to cut wood. I told them in the office I could not do the work, but I was willing to do light work... Before I went to Mt Burr they told me they would give me another job after twelve months but they wouldn’t do that. I am not fit to do that sort of work and that is the reason I did not go back when the leave finished.*

Regardless of the fact that the War Cabinet had issued a general direction that for all purposes of priority the production of essential foods such as horticulture was to be regarded as a war activity,27 many Italians were removed from their market gardens and dispatched to various camps. This endangered the economic security they had tried to establish for themselves and their families, which had been one of the prime reasons for migrating to Australia. Many were faced with a number of difficulties and restrictions such as the closure of their businesses and forced relocation, and evidence from the files analysed also revealed the repercussions that this practice had on the women who were left to raise their children on their own or look after their businesses and gardens while their husbands were serving in the Corps. Often they applied for the release of their spouses, but more often than not their applications were rejected. A letter written by the wife of one of the enemy aliens conscripted to the Officer in charge is a case in point:

*I declare that I cannot continue to look after four acres of land to grow all sorts of vegetables that we used to grow, without the help of my husband. I also have to pay £40 rent a year for this land. I hope that the Commonwealth Authorities will have a bit of consideration and grant this request, otherwise I will have to abandon everything.*

The application was rejected owing to the essential nature of the work the husband was engaged in and his obligations as a member of the CAC.

Similarly the wife of an ex-internee employed by the Woods and Forest Department at Mt Burr, who had been left to run a coffee manufacture, applied for the release of her husband on the grounds that:

*Our need is very urgent for his release because we have enormous contracts for all over Australia, also canteen work for ammunition works. We do not employ anyone, only my mother and self. To do the work sometimes my father helps, but owing to his suffering from epilepsy fits is unable to be of much help to us. The work is very heavy for just women to do alone as there is a lot of heavy lifting to be done which I have always managed to struggle along with myself but I am afraid it will be impossible in the future for me to do as I am expecting my baby in a few months. ... Owing to my father’s illness we have had to sell our car which has been a big draw back to us.*

An investigation of the case was carried out, and the application was rejected on the grounds that the business was not of sufficient importance to warrant the applicant’s release.

Aliens were allowed three days’ leave per month. However, many aliens’ applications for leave were not granted during busy periods, not
even on compassionate grounds. One alien, a naturalised Italian from Queensland who had been interned at Loveday in May 1942 and subsequently released into the Allied Works Council in June 1943, was sent to work for the Commonwealth Railways in Port Augusta. He had already been away from his loved ones for over two years, when in July 1944 he received the sad news of his brother-in-law’s death. He immediately applied for limited leave to visit his family back in Queensland, where he thought his ‘presence was required firstly to console his sister and secondly to attend some private matters which she was unable to do. He was her only relative in Australia and he felt that it was his duty to help her.’ His leave was denied on the grounds that his presence was considered ‘not required’ on account of his brother-in-law’s death and he was believed to have used the funeral as an excuse in an endeavour to obtain permission to visit his wife.

Years of enforced separation from their wives and families were hard to accept for many aliens and caused so much anger and resentment that sometimes they became distrustful of the authorities, disrespectful of the rules, and were thus difficult to direct. Such was the dissatisfaction among aliens that most camp superintendents experienced problems maintaining discipline, especially with regard to aliens who went away from camp without leave. Many aliens turned up when it suited them rather than when told to do so. While it was recognised by the authorities that some members of the Corps would be resentful at being removed from their normal occupations and assigned work for which they may have not been suited, personnel officers overseeing the Corps were advised that:

A firm sympathetic approach is essential and it is necessary that all concerned should encourage members to a proper attitude to, and appreciation of, the work being carried out by the Corps. This does not imply any laxity as provision exists for firm disciplinary control if and when required.

In case of alleged breaches the aliens were liable to a reprimand, cancellation of leave, suspension without pay, or face a fine up to £100 and/or a maximum six months’ imprisonment. During the period 1942-45, nationally 1058 prosecutions were laid, and 947 convictions were obtained for such offences as refusal to obey travelling instructions or a direction to work. In 305 cases sentences of imprisonment were imposed and the remainder were met by fines. One of the aliens, for example, was jailed for twenty-one days because he left the camp and travelled from Port Augusta to Findon without a travel permit. He reported:

They told me at the Allied Works Council they were going to give me a light job but when I got there ... the boss told me that I had to pick and shovel work, I told him I could not do it as I was medically unfit and I asked him for a lighter job or to be put in the kitchen. He told me that there was no light jobs and would not put me in the

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Italians in the Civil Alien Corps
kitchen ... I decided to come home to my family at Findon. I wanted to come down to see a doctor and go to the Allied Works Council to ask them if they did not give me a light job as they promised.33

The files also demonstrate the insensitivity and deep-seated distrust of the Italians by camp supervisors and medical officers who, in their brief reports, accused them of being ‘humbugs’, ‘maligners’ and ‘foolish’. An Italian, who had appealed for release on medical grounds because of pain in his head and back and his subsequent inability to carry out hard work, was referred to by the medical officer who examined him as ‘a humbug; who is getting fatter and lazier every day’.34 The report of two medical practitioners, who visited an Italian woman who had appealed for the release of her husband on medical grounds because unable to look after her children on her own, reveal their impressionistic evaluation based on stereotypical views associated with Italians such as being clannish and more emotional than the Britishers. They reported:

On reaching the house we saw the woman in front of the house indulging in the social amenities with another lady of the Latin race. … On examination her hands indicate that she is doing hard work. Her tonsils are somewhat enlarged, and her blood pressure slightly raised – due to excitement.35

While camp and medical officials were often very enthusiastic about prosecuting breaches of regulations, authorities were at a loss as to how to discipline the men effectively, as prosecution often did not act as a deterrent, and many persisted in ignoring camp instructions to obtain leave passes, often going home without travel permits, failing to return or relentlessly applying for release on medical or compassionate grounds. The aliens’ disregard for camp rules has to be considered as part of the responses to what was believed to be an unreasonable treatment that brought about feelings of anger and bitterness that in turn resulted in the aliens’ lack of trust and respect for the Australian authorities and ultimately for their rules.

Between June 1942 and February 1945 only 1671 out of the 15,601 registered aliens served in the CAC, and of these only 676 were employed on defence projects of the Allied Works Council, while the remainder were employed by various authorities. The cost of administering a separate unit eventually was considered excessive by the War Cabinet and therefore disbanded in May 1945.36

Life in the CAC camps was just as hard or possibly harder than in the internment camps, as the work that the enlisted individuals were expected to do was of the roughest type: wood cutting, charcoal burning, railway fettling and maintenance work on roads and aerodromes that were often in isolated places, thus making sure that contact with Anglo-Australians or with the aliens’ own communities was not possible. Many internees were released from the internment camps at the end of 1944, but it was not until May 1945, when the Corps was disbanded, that workers in the CAC were allowed to go home and be reunited with their families. While the experience of Italian migrants enlisted in the CAC still requires further research, certainly the account that emerges from the files analysed does offer sufficient data to explore the impact that service in the Corps had on individuals, their families and their communities in a complex and enlightening way. As was the case with the internment of Italians, enlistment in the CAC, too, was unsystematic and random, not all ex-internees were conscripted, naturalisation was not a determinant for avoiding conscription in the Corps, and even the restrictions imposed by the government were not evenly applied across the corpus analysed. Just as most studies on internment concur with the judgement expressed by Robert Pascoe, that ‘internments were on balance a pointless exercise, instigated by irrational fears’,37 so, too, was conscription in the CAC not only unnecessary but also unjust. The experiences of Italian migrants in the Corps reaffirmed how deeply the perception of ethnic ‘otherness’ was entrenched among the Australian population. Identifying
and isolating Italians through conscription in the CAC became a way of defining Australia as part of the British world, and of perpetuating perceptions of the inferior status of Italian migrants based primarily on their ethnicity. For these reasons the legacy of these enemy aliens who served in the CAC should not be ignored. Indeed, their experiences, which affected not only the individuals involved but also their families and their communities, should be regarded as a significant part of South Australian and Australian history.38

This essay has been peer reviewed.

Endnotes


2 As reported by historian Gianfranco Cresciani, ‘Category A included all people suspected of espionage, of belonging to the Italian armed forces, of association with Communist organisations, of association with foreign political societies such as the fascist party and of association with criminal groups such as the Mafia. Category B comprised all people connected with shipping, port or harbor works, with transportation or communication systems, with factories for war materials, with public utilities or other occupations affording opportunities for sabotage or espionage. Category C included all leaders and people of influence in the Italian community, while category D included all Italian males of military age, capable of bearing arms, and category O included all harmless persons’. See Gianfranco Cresciani, Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia 1922-1945, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, p.172.


5 Cresciani, p.172.

6 Lamidey, p.52.


On the control and internment of ‘alien’ women see Maria Glaros, “‘Sometimes a little injustice must be suffered for the public good’: how the National Security (Aliens Control) Regulations 1939 (Cth) affected the lives of German, Italian, Japanese and Australian born women living in Australia during the Second World War’, PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2012.


14 Lamidey, p.6.

15 P. Hasluck, Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4 – Volume 1, p.596.


17 The Recorder (Port Pirie) 30 April 1943, p.1


19 O’Connor, No Need to be Afraid, Chapters 4 and 5.

20 O’Connor, No Need to be Afraid, p.175.


22 NAA MP14/1, 1004990.

23 NAA MP14/1, 1004959.


25 Interview with Domenico Cirillo, Adelaide 2005, see Cosmini-Rose and O’Connor, Caulonia in the heart, p.41.