Title of paper: Adopting and adapting: Italian settlement in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s

The biggest influx of Italians to Australia, including South Australia, occurred during the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the Australian government’s post-war immigration programme, which attempted to meet the perceived need to populate Australia and to supply labour for the nation’s expanding industries. Italy was keen to sign the migration agreement between the two countries in 1951 because of the pressures of unemployment at home following the havoc wreaked on Italy during the second world war.

In the two decades 1950-1970 over a quarter of a million Italians migrated to Australia, 30,000 of whom (12%) settled in South Australia. Like Arthur Calwell before him, in the early 1950s Harold Holt, Minister for Immigration, went out of his way to praise the industry and good qualities of Italians and to encourage them to come to Australia (since sufficient numbers of the preferred British migrants were not arriving), but at the very same time his migration officers in Rome were secretly attempting to restrict the entry of Southern Italians, who were considered too dark-skinned for pure-white Australia. In these years anti-Italian sentiments were visible, too, among some Anglo-Australians in SA as they attempted to come to terms with this – in comparative terms – large influx of Italians, and with the resulting shift away from a mostly mono-ethnic and mono-cultural society.

This paper considers some social and cultural implications of the settlement of Italians in South Australia during these two decades. Extensive use is made of the life experiences of a number of SA Italians who have been interviewed during the last ten years. Some of the features and outcomes of Italian migration to SA that are highlighted include: settlement patterns; Italian regional representation in SA; the reactions of Italians, on arrival, to the environment in which they found themselves; settlement difficulties; protests by Anglo Australians who did not approve of the presence of Italians in their midst; stereotyping of Italians; employment and upward mobility; lack of services and inherent difficulties; community activities, including clubs and religious festivals, that Italians established; the extent, often limited, of interpersonal and cross-community connections (including rejection and community isolation); gradual increase in the visibility and acceptability of Italians (in education, business, food, craftsmanship, housing, etc.); the acculturation of Italians; today’s Italians in SA and their personal and cultural connection with Italy.

The paper illustrates the extent to which the “Italianness” (italianità) of Italians has changed (socially, culturally, linguistically) over the last 40-50 years, such that the “Italian” identity, no longer rooted solely in Italy, but now determined by time and space and by individuals, remains fluid. Italians in SA possess an “Italian culture” (better: “Italian cultures”) that is being transmitted in various degrees and with various outcomes to second and third generation Italian-Australians.