

# community life: italian speakers on the walhalla goldfield 1865-1915

by anna davine

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the decades following the discovery of gold around Walhalla in 1863, thousands of men and women flocked to the district in the following decades hoping to make their fortune. Among them were hundreds of Italians and Swiss Italians. I argue that it is problematic to maintain that Walhalla's settler society was a case of Anglo-Celtic groups versus the rest. A more likely scenario is that the Walhalla community was made up of a variety of individuals, ethnic and national groups exchanging and negotiating boundaries in a frontier environment. Italians were on the goldfield from the beginning and helped shape Walhalla's economic and social life.*



*Fig. 1. An old map showing the location of the Walhalla area. Sourced from Internet.*

IN EARLY 1863, alluvial gold was discovered at Stringers Creek (later named Walhalla), about 180 kilometres east of Melbourne and quartz reef gold mines quickly sprang up around the district. Then, and in the following decades, thousands of men and women came hoping to strike it rich or, at least, make a decent living. Among them were, at least, four hundred

Italians or Italian speaking Swiss nationals, mainly from the Tirano province and the Ticino and southern Grisons cantons of Switzerland (Italians or Italian speakers).<sup>1</sup> Most came to Australia as sojourners intending to stay only a short time before returning home permanently. While many did return, a number remained and settled around the Walhalla goldfield. Some married or brought out wives and families, while others remained single. Italians generally lived in work clusters in the bush outside the township, cutting and transporting timber to the local gold mines. In local folklore, Italians are remembered as woodcutters and timber contractors but records show they really worked in a variety of occupations. Apart from miners, there were wine bar operators, hotel-keepers, boarding house owners, farmers, a boot-maker and a mining manager.

Italians speakers were part of Walhalla's early fabric, having been present since the district's first settlement. It seems unlikely that Walhalla's nineteenth century settler society was just a case of Anglo-Saxon-Celtic groups versus the rest, as typified in conventional colonial historiography, since it seems to me that there was no clear-cut division.<sup>2</sup> A more likely scenario

<sup>1</sup> This figure in itself suggests a still more inaccessible group which remained unrecorded because it escaped official or public attention.

<sup>2</sup> Local histories have often been histories of exclusion dominated by Anglo-centric accounts of progress and pioneer deeds. The term 'settler society' suggested the establishment of family and community, social institutions and some political

is that the goldfield was made up of a variety of individuals, ethnic and national groups exchanging and negotiating boundaries in a frontier environment. Walhalla's early citizens were mostly preoccupied with making as much money as possible from the gold diggings and related activities, rather than focused on local ethnic or national differences.

In 1948, a local, Henry Buchanan, recalled that Walhalla was 'a community where everyone knew everybody [and] in which there was practically no class distinction and there was a strong spirit of community helpfulness'.<sup>3</sup> While this may have been a nostalgic recollection of a bygone era, his observations do reflect the homogeneous nature of Walhalla's local society.<sup>4</sup> While English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh groups were dominant in numbers, the Italian presence was also significant. A multi-layered exchange took place between Italian and other groups, an interaction that was never static but evolving over the district's fifty years of gold mining activity. Double-sided bonds developed which saw relationships of co-operation, competitiveness and ambivalence both among Italians and between Italians and the wider local society.<sup>5</sup>

From 1865 onwards, most Italians – unlike the generally marginalised local Chinese – co-existed cordially alongside English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh and other groups.<sup>6</sup> This was in contrast to the later shabby treatment of Italians and Southern Europeans in Australia generally who, from the early 1900s, were faced with racial prejudice and injustice.<sup>7</sup> There

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bureaucracy. It often had rural connotations and followed the white occupation of land. See also Griffiths, T et al. (eds) 1997, *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, pp. 8-10.

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan, H & Heazlewood, GF, 'Early Walhalla Reminiscences', *Victorian Historical Journal*, volume XX11, No. 4, January, 1950, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> See Davison, G 2003, *The Use and Abuses of Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, particularly chapter 11, pp. 197-220. Davison has well documented the ways in which Australians use the past, not just in national politics but in local and informal settings as well. Davison (ibid., p. 199.) refers to 'pioneer history' and the way in which an ageing gold rush generation recorded local achievements producing a flood of reminiscences for posterity.

<sup>5</sup> Castles S et al (eds) 1993, *The Age of Migration*, Guildford Press, New York, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Interview John Aldersea 19 March 2002. Local Chinese market gardeners were valued but remained marginalized.

<sup>7</sup> Lack J et al (eds) 1988, *Sources of Australian Immigration History 1901-45*, Melbourne University

are, at least, three reasons for a seemingly easy acceptance, both during early and later permanent settlement. Firstly, the time of migration; secondly, Walhalla's early homogeneous settlement; and thirdly, Italian contribution and value to the local economy.

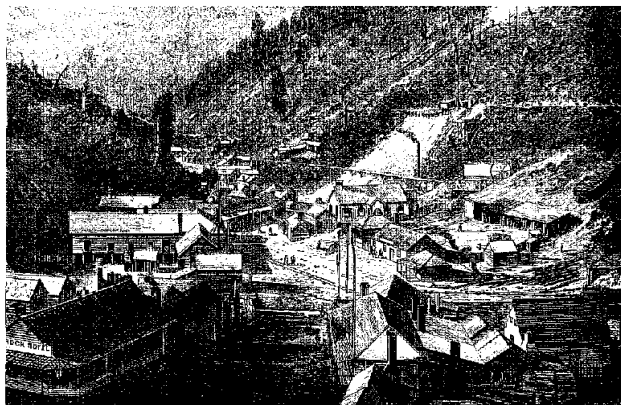


Fig. 2. Walhalla 1871. Source: A. Garran, *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, Picturesque Atlas Publishing, Sydney, 1886.

The time of migration was a significant factor in determining local acceptance of new arrivals, since in the nineteenth century there were few restrictions on European immigrants entering Australia. International politics also played their part. The 1881 Treaty of Commerce between Great Britain and Italy allowed free movement of their nationals between the two countries and their colonies. It stated in part that Italian and British nationals 'with their families ... could enter, travel or reside in any part of the dominions and possessions of the other contracting party'.<sup>8</sup>

Italy's *risorgimento* had been applauded by Britain and the Australian colonies but, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, criticism of the country's political and economic mismanagement was vehement and outspoken in the English speaking press.<sup>9</sup> This state of affairs was also widely conceded and deplored by Italians too. However, antagonism did not filter down and polarize the local community in any way nor did it appear to impact on local Italians. Anti-Italian sentiments featured in the

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Press, Carlton, pp. 137-160. See also Bertola P, 'Undesirable Persons: Race & Western Australian Mining Legislation', McCalman I et al (eds) 2001, *Gold – Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives Australia (NAA) series A44/85, 1938/1047, Department of Interior letter to Attorney General's department, 7 September 1938.

<sup>9</sup> See also Bosworth, RJB 1979, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian foreign policy before the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

*Walhalla Chronicle* of 9 December 1898, but the newspaper's editorial was not directed against the Italian people, nor against local Italians, but against the home government 'where the whole of officialdom appears to be quite rotten and it would be a blessing if the nations and Press of the outer world would take up the case of Italy and keep on crying shame upon that country and its methods until constituted authority has the decency and humanity to redress the public grievances or go and hang themselves'.<sup>10</sup> In its way, negativity towards the Italian Government created sympathy and an empathy towards local Italians and the harsh conditions many of them had left behind.

In the Walhalla context, work clusters of Italian men were put into place as support platforms for economic and social purposes, and not as a response to a threat from outside influences. Clusters were the result of chain migration linking the home community to Walhalla and part of a survival system adapted to an Australian environment, aiming to provide work, sustenance and companionship for family and friends. Both the early and the later, more settled family clusters played a part in sustaining social and cultural practices transported from the home community to an alien and unfamiliar world.

While work clusters were often isolated and isolating, the nature of work obliged most Italians to live outside the Walhalla township, and there is no indication that clusters were the product of a defence mechanism put into place as a reaction to pressures or hostilities from outside forces. Italians were not segregated by their ethnicity. Some chose not to be involved in local affairs because of language difficulties or cultural differences.

Prior to 1890, local newspapers rarely gave any indication of division or antagonism towards non-English speakers, except occasional outbursts against the Chinese. Consistent use of the word 'Italian' in local newspapers discloses a lack of awareness of the fact that the term was used to describe not only Italian, but also Italian speaking Swiss nationals within local society. Occasionally, light humour was expressed over the difficulty with surnames, the lack of English or understanding displayed by various Italian

individuals before the Courts, but it was rarely derogatory. For example, in February 1872, it was reported that 'two Italians whose names were so much alike that we could not tell "t'other from which" faced Police Court proceedings for removing timber from Crown Land without a woodcutter's licence'.<sup>11</sup>

The same case reveals official and community tolerance towards Italian woodcutters who broke local laws. The prosecutor, Constable Kelleher, told the Court that it was very difficult to get woodcutters to take out licences – 'in fact they very seldom did so until they were forced to by the commencement of prosecution charges against them'. Although his case was proved, Kelleher asked that the Italians be leniently dealt with as they had subsequently taken out the necessary licences. He suggested that a small fine be imposed as an example to others, 'to show them that getting a licence after they were summoned did not make the offence of cutting wood without that licence any the less an unlawful action'.<sup>12</sup>

Occasionally, local tensions surfaced but their basis was generally economically motivated and consistent with problems found in any gold mining society. Ambivalence surfaced towards Italian woodcutters who, on one hand, were much admired for their work ethic and contribution to the local economy but, on the other, were criticized for demanding better work conditions from their employers. In April 1891, in a knee-jerk reaction, the *Walhalla Chronicle* reported that:

It is not often we have a strike at Walhalla but this has actually been threatened by Italian woodcutters on more than one occasion and failed through the determined action of the wood carters themselves. On this occasion (which was a very small one) eight men in the employ of Mr. G Nash (an employer here for 26 years standing) have struck work for a higher rate of cutting and have been replaced by Englishmen, who Mr. Nash has obtained from the Mirboo district. We are given to understand some of the strikers have been cutting without a licence and the police have the matter in hand.<sup>13</sup>

The matter was not taken any further as the Walhalla Court of Petty Sessions register shows that, between April 1891 and December 1892, no Italian was charged with cutting timber on Crown Land without a licence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Walhalla Chronicle (WC)*, 9 December 1898. Editorial was quoting from a magazine article written by 'Ouida' titled 'The impeachment of modern Italy'. It also referred to 'rioting in Italy caused by the want of bread, bad laws and the crushing weight of having to keep up a burdensome military system beyond the ability of the people to sustain'.

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<sup>11</sup> *WC* 21 February 1872.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *WC* 24 April 1891.

<sup>14</sup> Public Records Office Victoria (PROV), VPRS 359, units 2 & 3.

In the early twentieth century, when worker discrimination against southern Europeans surfaced in Western Australia's goldfields and elsewhere, there is no suggestion that local attitudes had deteriorated towards the few Italians still employed locally.<sup>15</sup> For example, the 1904 Western Australia Commission Report into mining and labour practices found that charges for accepting lower wages could not be proved against southern Europeans, nor that they had been imported under agreement to work in the mines.<sup>16</sup> The 1906 Western Australia Mining Act required that mine workers readily and intelligibly speak English. Ostensibly, this guideline was driven by safety concerns, but it was also bound up with Anglo-centrism and issues concerning relations between employer and employees in the workplace.<sup>17</sup> In Walhalla, only a small number of Italians were recorded as deep reef miners and none of the tensions found in other diggings, or any inquiry into the supposed acceptance of lower wages by Italians, emerged locally. It may have been that, by the early 1900s, Walhalla's few remaining mines were struggling and the local Amalgamated Miners' Association was more concerned with the consequences of their closure and the future of its members.<sup>18</sup>

Exclusion of Italians and other non-Anglo peoples from power or authority was not necessarily planned but was an evolving factor of Victorian society. On a local level, prominent English-speaking men were more inclined to fill local government and administrative positions.<sup>19</sup> Carlson, Gervasoni and Reeves have demonstrated the interaction of minority groups with local society in other Victorian goldfields.<sup>20</sup> In Walhalla, I found there were no

obvious barriers to personal advancement for ambitious individuals but that few Italians sought public roles. This disinterest or inaction is not surprising as many Italians saw themselves as sojourners who generally did not have a long-term interest in the district.<sup>21</sup> Those who became settlers were too preoccupied with economic and family commitments to seek out public office, a situation which could apply to both Italian and non-Italian alike.

Walhalla's Italian-speakers were bound together and drew their sense of identity from a common language, values, cultural traditions and practices peculiar to their districts of origin. Across time, the salient characteristic of the Italian speaking community was the overwhelming proportion of persons who were either related through kinship, whether by bloodlines or by marriage, or linked by village, district or province of origin. New arrivals re-connected to family and fellow *paesani* already in the district, some of whom were responsible for setting up the well-defined paths linking home to Walhalla. For most, bonds with their home district were ongoing, but fresh bonds developed between new arrivals and other Italians within the migrant settlement, which helped them to cope with change and provided a continuity of their traditional habits and values. It was also inclusive of the few from other Italian areas who were also residing on the goldfield.

I recorded 72 Italian-speaking men living in Walhalla and its surrounding districts between 1865 and 1875. This was out of a total of over 380 found between 1865 and 1915.<sup>22</sup> However, it is impossible to determine how many were living there at any given time. Prior to 1880, it is difficult to document many social activities involving Italians which could be defined as community based. It was only in the last one or two decades of the nineteenth century that Italian organizations were put into place to sustain and affirm the local migrant community's identity. These provided an important public function for Italians and were also instrumental in directly fostering social

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<sup>15</sup> Bunbury B, 'Golden Opportunities – Immigration Workers on Western Australia's Eastern Goldfields 1900-1965', I. McCalman, *Forgotten Histories*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> WC 23 December 1904.

<sup>17</sup> Bertola, 'Undesirable Persons', p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Fahey C, 'Labour & Trade Unionism in Victorian Goldmining Bendigo' in I. McCalman, *Forgotten Histories*, p. 76. The Amalgamated Miners Association was established in Victoria in the early 1880s and became an integral part of the community in mining towns.

<sup>19</sup> Davison G et al 1987, *Australians 1888*, part of *Australians: An Historical Library Series*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Broadway NSW, p. 350.

<sup>20</sup> Carlson BR, 1997, 'Immigrant Placemaking in Colonial Victoria: The Italian-speaking Settlers of Daylesford', unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Social and Cultural Studies, Victoria University, Melbourne, Gervasoni C 2006, *Bullboar, Macaroni & Mineral Water*, Hepburn Spring Swiss Italian Festa

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Inc., Hepburn Springs & Reeves KJ 2006, 'A Hidden History: The Chinese on the Mount Alexander Diggings, Central Victoria 1851-1901', unpublished PhD thesis, History Department, University of Melbourne.

<sup>21</sup> Lack J. (ed) 2003, Templeton J, *From the Mountains to the Bush: Italian Immigrants write home from Australia 1860-1962*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley W.A., p. 48, made the same point in relation to sojourners.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 1 in book.

and cultural links with individuals, groups and organizations within the wider local society.

In relation to an Italian community and its functions, the only pre-1875 points of reference are limited to accounts from local newspaper, many issues of which have now been lost.<sup>23</sup> Although there were probably earlier ones, an early meeting place for Italians to socialize was the first registered wine bar in Walhalla, which was operated by Pietro Bertino, born in Rocca di Corio, Bergamo.<sup>24</sup> In 1872, he was granted a colonial wine licence for a house of 'four rooms exclusive of those required for family use', in Callows Lane, Walhalla.<sup>25</sup> Bertino held the licence until 1875.<sup>26</sup>

The first reference found in the *Walhalla Chronicle* of Italians congregating was in June 1875. It followed a work-related accident when Bernardo Bassanelli from Sernio, Tirano, was killed after a log struck him on the head and fractured his skull. A large number of mourners, including fifty Italians, gathered for the burial of Bassanelli, who

came to an untimely end. [The funeral] left Meikle's Bush Hotel on Monday afternoon. He was carried to the cemetery by his countrymen [,] about fifty of whom followed his remains. The Roman Catholic service for the dead was conducted by Mr. W.J. Kelly, subsequent to making an address to those present, which we have heard severally commented upon by some of his foreign co-religionists.<sup>27</sup>

In July 1891, another chronicled burial was that of Michele Magatelli, who was killed when the branch of a tree struck him on the back of his head while he was cutting wood. On this occasion, the *Walhalla Chronicle* reported that Magatelli, who was born in Tovo, Tirano, was interred in the Walhalla cemetery attended by 'thirty of his countrymen and a number of other townspeople'.<sup>28</sup> This was significant since not only was there a large Italian contingent in attendance, but there were also a lot of local people paying their final respects to the dead man. Their participation reflects an economic and social contact between the parties and demonstrates camaraderie between workers within the district's society.

<sup>23</sup> *Walhalla Chronicle*.

<sup>24</sup> Victorian Birth, Death & Marriage indices.

<sup>25</sup> *WC* 7 March 1872.

<sup>26</sup> The licence may have been transferred to Pietro Bernaschi.

<sup>27</sup> *WC* 28 June 1875. PROV, VPRS 24/P, Unit 326, file no. 585/1875. File named 'Barsanelli'.

<sup>28</sup> *WC* 17 July 1891.

A considerable number of Walhalla's Italian men married non-Italian women. This facilitated social and cultural contact with other groups and made the men more likely to integrate into local society. Italians had strong religious links with the Irish by virtue of Catholicism and marriage to Irish women was common. Carlson, too, noted of the Daylesford Italians that 'if they couldn't marry an Italian girl generally they married Irish'.<sup>29</sup> It generally meant that they were unlikely to ever return home. The Table (see Appendix) is neither conclusive nor complete, and the origin of two thirds of the women charted is unclear.

A Catholic Church was built a few years after the discovery of gold and a strong Italo-Irish bond was also forged through church attendance and religious functions.<sup>30</sup> It is not known how many Italians attended on a regular basis, but Walhalla's baptismal register between 1891 and 1915 includes the names of 36 children from 18 Italian families.<sup>31</sup>

In 1869, a local St. Patrick's Society was formed and, for many years, St. Patrick's Day became one of Walhalla's popular days for public celebration and helped draw together the district's different groups.<sup>32</sup> The extent of Italian involvement is not clear but, in some years, Italian males were among the event's organizers. Luigi Bruni was one who, with his wife Mary, was on the planning committee of the 1885 St. Patrick's Day annual picnic of the Catholic Sunday school.<sup>33</sup> There are no records of Bruni's involvement in previous years but his involvement was likely, since Luigi had been in Walhalla since 1868, if not earlier, and had married Mary Jane Smith, a local girl, in 1873.

Evidence of ethnic and religious tolerance in Walhalla emerges from the following account of St. Patrick's Day in 1885, written by a non-Catholic observer:

Although this picnic is known as the Catholic school picnic [,] it would be more appropriate were it called by some such name as the Walhalla

<sup>29</sup> Carlson B, 'Parallel Lives in Northern Italy and Central Victoria', Pascoe R et al 1998, *The Passeggiata of Exile: The Italian Story in Australia*, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> I could not find the date when the church was erected.

<sup>31</sup> Guatta W, 'Walhalla's Italians' in *Italian Historical Society Journal (IHSJ)*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Carlton, 2000, p. 18. By 'Italian' I mean someone with an Italian father.

<sup>32</sup> *Gippsland Times* 15 May 1869.

<sup>33</sup> *WC* 20 March 1885. NAA Series A712/1 1875/H5075, Luigi Bruni was born in Brusio, Switzerland in c1836 and arrived on the *Carntyne* in 1855.

public picnic [,] for the liberal minded committee sinking all question of creed or religion, have made their annual event so popular that the great majority of the inhabitants of the town and district yearly attend the celebrations [,] and are made welcome and enjoy themselves as fully as those for whose especial benefit the picnic is supposed to be got up. This year was no exception to the rule and Catholic and Episcopalian and Dissenter joined in harmony to spend a pleasant day, and that they fully succeeded was evinced by the satisfied look on every face at the close of day. Inner comforts of the inner man were attentively ministered by the Mesdames Rice, Costello, Bruni, Chalmer, Shallue, Enright.<sup>34</sup>

The following year, St. Patrick's Day was again celebrated in fine fashion. An Italian chorus was part of the day's entertainment and the occasion was enthusiastically reported as follows:

As usual the attendance was large, all creeds and countries being heartily welcomed and entertained by the management [,] and it was clearly to be seen that the most cordial feeling existed between all denominations – a feeling that is yearly fostered and strengthened on these gatherings, when true Irish hospitality is extended to all comers... During the day the State School flute and drum band, under Mr. Carvosse, played selections of music and the proceedings were further enlivened by Mr. Singleton's concertina playing and the excellent singing by a party of Italians.<sup>35</sup>

By the late 1880s, for reasons unknown, the celebration of St. Patrick's Day ceased to be a significant local occasion. Its decline was commented upon by the local newspaper as previously it had been a 'most successful gathering and liberally contributed to by residents of every nationality'.<sup>36</sup>

Italian men joined Walhalla's Masonic Lodge and several took up office within the association. Between 1879 and 1918, Walhalla Lodge No. 69 had just eight Italian members, but the men on record all had business interests and were involved in the local economy.<sup>37</sup> Those named were Angelo Monigatti, Pietro Monigatti, Pietro Raselli, Domenico Moratti, Luigi Gherardo Borserini, Bartolo Ferrari, John Antonio Merlo and Phillip Charles Fermio.

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<sup>34</sup> WC 20 March 1885. The reference to 'chapel' suggests a Protestant writer.

<sup>35</sup> WC 19 March 1886.

<sup>36</sup> WC 23 March 1888.

<sup>37</sup> Walhalla Lodge No. 69, an extract from Members of Lodge No. 1700 (EC) – 1876-1950.

People cannot live side by side without some sort of interaction taking place and business success generally requires a wide circle of contacts. While many Italians joined local institutions for economic networking, it is likely that there were also broader social and cultural implications as well.<sup>38</sup> Initially, interchange may have been exclusively economic, but many Italians had moved or were moving outside the boundaries of their work clusters, encouraged and warmed by outside friendships and links. Over time, they became distanced from some of their old world ways, broadened their horizons and moved in a wider social circle as they engaged more and more with an Anglo-centric world.

Italians also belonged to local friendly societies. These provided social welfare benefits to paid-up members for accidents, ill health and unemployment.<sup>39</sup> In December 1887, Luigi Bruni was elected an officer of the Walhalla branch of the Ancient Order of Foresters. While there are no known records of his re-election, it was unlikely a one-off situation.<sup>40</sup> Filippo Fermio, another Italian, was also elected at the same time. There are no continuous records of membership remaining but extant sources reveal that, in 1890, Fermio was re-elected as an office bearer.<sup>41</sup> Other members of the society included E. Battaiolli, who was appointed an office bearer in December 1896, and Giovanni Armanasco, who was on the Ball Committee of the Foresters 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary ball of 1898.<sup>42</sup>

In the early 1890s, and possibly earlier, an Italian Society was formed. There are no remaining records of its foundation members and composition, but its place within Walhalla's communal life was important as it helped manifest and promote an Italian identity within local society. The Society's members participated in public celebrations and rituals which affirmed Walhalla's identity. For example, in May 1894, the Italian Society was part of a community hospital parade which was conducted to help raise funds for leading Melbourne hospitals. The march featured an open-air service and procession and all

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<sup>38</sup> Carlson, 'Immigrant Placemaking', pp. 52-55, also found that successful and prominent Italian speakers in Daylesford joined their local Masonic Lodge and friendly societies probably for business reasons.

<sup>39</sup> Renfree N, 'Friendly Societies: An Unexpected Source of History of Italian-Speaking Pioneers' in *IHSJ*, Vol. 9, No. 2, July-December 2001, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> WC 15 December 1887.

<sup>41</sup> WC 3 January 1891. Another member was G. Pianta.

<sup>42</sup> WC 18 December 1896 & 9 September 1898.

Walhalla's friendly societies were represented. Thirty nine people marched behind the Italian Society's banner.<sup>43</sup> In 1899, in celebration of an anniversary of the Miners and Engine Drivers Union, the Italian Society took part in a procession which included eight local associations marching together in full regalia with their specific banners and flags down Walhalla's main street.<sup>44</sup> Nothing remains of the Society's regalia.



Fig. 3. Walhalla procession 1905, WH Lee, Accession no. H86/98/160, Latrobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

An Italian choir was already operating in Walhalla in the late 1880s but, sometime in the 1890s and very likely under the umbrella of the Italian Society, an Italian Choral Society was officially formed. It became a rich contributor to the community's ethos and identity and provided a popular form of entertainment for the local population. In hindsight, the Italian Choral Society played a vital role in placing Italians and their singing prowess within local folklore and history. On many occasions, the choir was backed by the popular Mountaineers' Brass Band. These musical events were well publicized and popular and 'first class programs' were printed. In October 1898, the *Walhalla Chronicle* reported that the Mountaineers' Brass Band had played several selections in the Rotunda, along Stringers Creek and 'was ably' assisted by the Italian choir.<sup>45</sup> It was a full program and the Italians gave a stirring performance singing five numbers. In the feature, the *Walhalla Chronicle* also reflected on the dangers local gold miners faced and the fragility of life itself. It gave a moving description of the concerns and uncertainties found within nineteenth century gold mining communities which encompassed all groups. Before the concert commenced:

<sup>43</sup> *Walhalla Miner (WM)* 4 May 1898. £26 (\$2600) was collected.

<sup>44</sup> *WM* 22 February 1899.

<sup>45</sup> *WC* 21 October 1898.

A much sadder ceremony had to be concluded before the strains of the band or the lusty voices of the swarthy cheeked sons of Italy could find vent in song. High up on the opposite cliff were gathered together a number of black coated figures, miners and miner's sons awaiting the coffin containing the mortal remains of one of their mates, one who succumbed to the dread skeleton ever stalking on the paths of the hardy sons of toil assisting in raising the yellow metal from the bowels of the earth – miner's complaint.<sup>46</sup>

The Italian Choral Society's involvement and participation in social and cultural events fostered community goodwill. In January 1900, at a benefit concert for bush fire victims, the choir rendered several pieces including *Nel silenzio della notte* and provided the finale for the night.<sup>47</sup> In March, a street procession and an open-air concert were held for the Empire Patriotic Fund and, again, the Italian Choir participated, on this occasion singing *La Violetta*.<sup>48</sup>

Sometime in the early 1890s, Walhalla's Casualty Hospital was opened but, over time, locals referred to it as a 'white elephant' because it was never fully occupied.<sup>49</sup> However, local Italians utilized the hospital's medical services and facilities on a regular basis whenever they were ill or incapacitated. The hospital proved to be important to those who lived alone, or in out-of-the-way places in the bush and who had no wife or family to look after them. It appears that an unofficial or informal mutual aid society for Italians was already in existence at the time. In August 1892, the *Walhalla Chronicle* reported that Antonio Tognella was injured when a log he was splitting fell on him, pinned him and broke his leg.<sup>50</sup> He remained in the Casualty Hospital for six weeks before returning to his hut, having spent several extra weeks of recovery time in the relative comfort of the hospital due to his countrymen contributing toward his accommodation there.<sup>51</sup> In August 1897, the *Walhalla Chronicle* reported that 'no less than five Italian woodcutters, all of them suffering from fractures of a more or less serious nature, sustained whilst at work in the bush, have

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *WC* 26 January 1900.

<sup>48</sup> *WC* 23 February 1900.

<sup>49</sup> *WC* 5 August 1892.

<sup>50</sup> He left Walhalla in c. 1896.

<sup>51</sup> See *WC* 28 October 1892 for possible reference to a mutual aid society.

been treated, inclusive of the two at present occupying the spare ward of the hospital'.<sup>52</sup>

In December 1897, a group of Italians officially formed the Italian Medical Aid Society under the 'moving spirit' of James Renaldi, a local wood contractor and identity, to provide medical attention and nursing services for Italians who met with an accident and needed assistance.<sup>53</sup> In early 1899, the Italian Medical Aid Society held its annual meeting.<sup>54</sup> When the official business was over, the night became a social affair and light entertainment was provided in the form of songs sung by 'N. Ferrari' and the Italian Choral Society.<sup>55</sup> A week later, members of the Italian Medical Aid Society took part in the procession through town that was held as part of the Labour Eight Hour Day celebrations.<sup>56</sup>

By the early 1900s, the Italian Medical Aid Society was struggling with numbers and had not been able to satisfactorily achieve its long term goals of nurturing and supporting sick members. Poor yields from local gold mines led to a declining Italian male population which, together with competition for members from the Amalgamated Miners' Association, led to the Society's inevitable decline.<sup>57</sup> The Italian Society and Italian Choral Society, too, survived only as long as there were enough men remaining and working locally.

The assassination of King Humbert of Italy in 1900 was commemorated at a sacred concert organized by Walhalla's Italian residents and supported by the local officials, council members, ministers of religion and the local Member of Parliament.<sup>58</sup> There were outpourings of sympathy towards Italians for their loss. It was also reported that a portrait of the dead king was to hang in the Mechanics' Hall.<sup>59</sup>

It is largely due to the popularity of the Italian choir if impressions of singing Italians and their musical capabilities have remained in Walhalla's folklore, even though several

recollections reveal a stereotyped and romanticized view. It was aided by the popularity of the Italian Choir. Memory is an imprecise tool and is often clouded by later and retrospective perceptions of the actual events. As Phillipe Nora wrote, 'memory should be seen as being in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, [...] vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation'.<sup>60</sup>

In her memoir, Isabella Cleugh (who was born in Walhalla in 1866 and left in 1881), recalled that, as an adolescent, she had received some tuition to play the piano and singing lessons. The exotic nature of young Italian male singers clearly impressed the young Cleugh at the time:

About four on Saturday afternoons they (sic Italians) would trail in and having finished their shopping [and] had a pow-wow with their resident countrymen. They would trek back to their huts about 8 pm. After they left the township they'd start singing. Some of them had splendid voices and when singing quartets it was a great treat to listen to them. I was told some of them were clever musicians, both instrumentalists and vocalists.<sup>61</sup>

Cleugh provided a favorable account of Italian males and an insight into the role of intermediaries who assisted comrades when their English was inadequate to transact the purchase of supplies and other necessities from local shopkeepers. She wrote:

Once a fortnight on Saturday afternoons, the Italian woodcutters would come into Walhalla for their fortnightly rations. Some could speak very good English, some pidgin, and some none. The ones who could not speak English had a spokesman. I believe it was very funny to be in the shops listening to them, but good humour always prevailed, and according to the shopkeepers, good payers.<sup>62</sup>

It is debatable whether Italians saw the need to challenge the status quo of Walhalla society, since they were, from its infancy, a small but significant element within it. They helped shape the district's economic and social life and were

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<sup>52</sup> WC 13 August 1897.

<sup>53</sup> WC 15 December 1897.

NAA Series A712/1 1897/F7350 Giacomo Rinaldi/Renaldi (later Renaldy) was born in 1851 in Sernio, Tirano.

<sup>54</sup> WC, 22 February 1899.

<sup>55</sup> Guatta, *IHSJ*, p. 15, members of Italian Choir, at this time, included F. Bassarollo (E Battajolli), C. Del Frate, G. Giudici, G. Armanasco, G. Pelusi, D. Cabassi, D. Della Torre, P. Fopoli and A. Rossi.

<sup>56</sup> WC, 2 March 1900.

<sup>57</sup> Amalgamated Miners' Association was established in 1881; in 1884 it had 140 members, but no names register has been found.

<sup>58</sup> WC, 14 September 1900.

<sup>59</sup> WC, 26 October 1900.

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<sup>60</sup> Nora P, 'Between History and Memory: Les lieux de Memoire' in *Representations* 26, spring 1989, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Cleugh IF 1944, *Childhood Reminiscences of Early Walhalla – Walhalla and its inhabitants as I knew them*, reprinted 2003, Paoletti's ('Adventurer') Maps and Videos P/L, Langwarrin p. 49. See also de Prada L 1978, *My Walhalla*, Gippsland Printers, Morwell, for an Italian descendant's memoir.

<sup>62</sup> Cleugh, p. 49.



an accepted part of its multi-layered community. If they appeared to be marginalized because they lived in work/migrant clusters outside Walhalla's perimeters, it must be noted that it was only for economic reasons that they lived in isolated locations on the goldfield where their skills could be best utilized. Language and cultural differences have not been addressed here in great detail, but it is likely that some Italians chose not to integrate, or be involved in the wider society, because they already had kin and *paesani* around them who continued to provide moral and social support.

Economic tensions in other mining centres in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, particularly Western Australia, did not surface locally to any great extent, probably because Walhalla's Italians had been in the district for decades and were already part of the district's make-up. Organizations were set up by Italian leaders to promote and celebrate their social and cultural identity within the wider community. Their participation in communal celebrations contributed to Walhalla's identity and helped cement their place within the district's ethos.

## APPENDIX

### KNOWN MIXED MARRIAGES OF MALE ITALIAN-SPEAKERS IN WALHALLA – 1865-1915. Birthplaces, if known, in brackets after the name

MALES	FEMALES
Giuseppe Battanta (Someo, Ticino)	Julia Sullivan (probably Ireland)
Pietro Bertino (Rocca di Corio, Bergamo)	Lydia Mary Sleeman (England)
Pietro Bernasocchi (Carasso, Ticino)	Elizabeth O'Connor (probably Ireland)
Luigi Gherardo Borserini (Stazzona, Tirano)	Jane Anne Ratcliffe
Martino Borserio (Villa di Tirano, Tirano)	Jane ?? (later married Giovanni Pianta)
Giuseppe Antonio Luigi Bruni (Ticino)	Mary Jane Smith
Giovanni Cabassi (Tirano)	Susan Patterson (probably Ireland)
Giuseppe Calanchini (Switzerland)	Alice (Limerick, Ireland)
Vittorio Campagnolo (Bergamo)	Anne Gray (Ireland)
Matteo Canali (Tovo, Tirano)	Mary Tippet (probably Ireland)
Bernardo Contessa (Lombardy)	possibly Mary Ann McKenzie
Antonio Cramerì (Poschiavo, Switzerland)	Catherine McDonald
Carlo Della Torre (Tirano)	Rose Oliver
Filippo Fermio (Lovero, Tirano)	Mary ??
Giovanni Godino (Piedmont), later known as James Gordon	Maria Lazel (England)
Enrico Antonio Iseppi (Brusio, Switzerland)	Mary Annie Smith
Pietro Costantino Iseppi (Brusio, Switzerland)	Sarah Ann Watson
Giovanni Tommaso Monigatti (Brusio Switzerland)	Edith Bates (England)
Lucio Monigatti (Brusio, Switzerland)	Margaret Mary Collins (Ireland) (later married Pietro Negri)
Michelangiolo Stub Monteagresti (Livorno)	Alice Maud Callanan (Ireland)
Pietro Negri (Tirano)	Margaret Mary Monigatti (Collins) (Ireland)
Giacomo Gabriele Passini (Switzerland)	Annie Augusta Pinch
Giuseppe Pianta (Madonna di Tirano)	Hannah Fry Fraser
Giovanni Pianta	Jane Borserio
Antonio Giacomo Plozza (Tirano)	First wife: Emilia Badorotto – returned home 'second wife': Ethel May Seear (Walhalla)
Francesco Raffaele (Sicily)	Priscilla Dunsby
Antonio Simonin (Italy)	Mary McDonnell
Giovanni Togni (Italy)	Priscilla ??

Source: Victorian Birth Death & Marriage indices. The table includes males who were, at some time, in the Walhalla district. Most couples were not married in Walhalla; some couples married prior to arrival in Walhalla and others married after the Italian male's departure from the district.