

PROXY BRIDES

by Susi (Bella) Wardrop



A group of young proxy brides travelling to Australia on the Ship Neptuna in 1955

I have been studying one fascinating aspect of the Italian migrant experience - marriage by proxy. This practice was quite common among Italian immigrants. I have interviewed some of these proxy brides and have been fascinated and intrigued by their stories, and by the courage many of these young women showed.

Proxy marriages were first allowed by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the 1600s. The practice was generally used only in cases of hardship. Italian men wishing to marry in Australia were certainly in a situation which needed solutions. What Italian parent would allow his daughter to travel to Australia unmarried, with the promise of marriage on arrival! Hence the acceptance of proxy marriages, where the marriage ceremony took place with a proxy groom who was nominated by the real husband in Australia and was frequently the father, brother or close relative of either the bride or groom. Many of these marriages took place in the 1920s and 30s or earlier, but the peak was reached in the 1950s when there was a large influx of immigrants from Italy.

The last recorded proxy marriage in Melbourne was in 1976. The general pattern of Italian immigration was that a young man would leave his home and family to come to Australia in search of a better life.

In some cases, he would leave his wife and children behind, and send for them when he had the possibility to make a home in his new country. But frequently the immigrant was young, male and single. He found himself in Australia in an all male community, not only was there no wife, but no mothers, sisters or female companionship!

For these men wishing to marry there was a real problem: where to find a suitable girl. Certainly not in Australia. So they would try to find a bride in Italy. To return to Italy, find a bride, marry her and come back to Australia was possible only for those who could afford the time and money. A simpler solution was to seek help from family or friends. This was accomplished in several ways. The young man could write to his mother or family and ask them to find a girl in his hometown or village. This conformed to the quite common practice of arranged marriages. In other cases, the Italian man would hear of a suitable girl through friends he had made in Australia, maybe through working together. They would show a photo of a cousin or friend who was available and ready to come to Australia, although sometimes they were from quite different backgrounds. For many girls in Italy the problem of marriage was also significant, as nearly all the young men had emigrated.

The young couple would start to write to one another, exchange photographs, and if all proceeded smoothly they would set about the quite complex procedure of a proxy marriage, with the help of an Italian priest.



A marriage ceremony with a proxy groom in Italy.

In many cases, the young couple were already engaged, as soon as the man was in a position to marry he sent for his bride. For these girls there was only the trauma of leaving their family and home to go so far to her new life. In other cases, the couple had known each other as they were from the same or nearby village, so at least they had some idea of what to expect. However, where the girl married an unknown man, there was the added worry of what she would find, and whether her new husband would be as she imagined him.

Among the women I have interviewed, there has been a whole range of experiences and emotions. Most of the girls found that leaving their homes and families was a great sadness. Some felt that life in Italy was very hard and that in Australia it could only be better, and looked forward to a great adventure coming to a new country. In general these girls felt that fate or destiny had decided for them. Some were very young, some came from conditions of great poverty, some came from the North of Italy, others from the South, some had relatives or friends in Australia, while others knew no-one.

The idea of a ship full of proxy brides going out to an uncertain future with, in many cases, an unknown husband seems strange to us today. However, at a

time when the future in Italy seemed bleak, and the idea of arranged marriages was quite acceptable, the general feeling among these girls seems to have been one of expectation. In only one case among the persons I have interviewed to date, was the marriage a disaster ending in divorce. Most of the girls found their husbands to be understanding, and undoubtedly the men were also very nervous when waiting to see their new brides. Many of the girls felt that the fact of not having had a regular courtship and engagement period was a great disadvantage when starting married life particularly as they were so far from home and their mothers.

I am finding that interviewing persons who made these proxy marriages is a fascinating and rewarding experience. I have spoken to some of the priests of the Capuchin and Scalabrinian orders who assisted the Italian immigrants, and also to Australian priests connected with immigration, to understand the background to the period in which these marriages occurred. This facet of the history of Italian immigration in Australia is important and should be recorded as part of the migrant experience.

Among those who read this outline of the research study there will be some who have friends or acquaintances who married by proxy. I hope that they will contact us at the Italian Historical Society and help us to find more people, who would like to tell us their story. Of course, all information and interviews are completely confidential.



A proxy bride in Calabria being blessed by the village priest.