

Italian Identity in Scotland: Archival Foundations

Italians have been present in Scotland for well over 150 years, have an interesting history and represent a well-established migrant group. Their arrival and settlement falls into distinct historical phases displaying diverse characteristics, the latest of which began around 2000 adding a new and very different stratum to 'Italian Scotland'. The community today is thus not only long-lived but also vibrant and varied and consideration of its archival underpinning, as well as the role of the archive in fostering identity, provides a useful lens through which to reflect on that history.

The most important archival source, offering a rich seam of data on the early period, is a census of Italians living in Scotland in 1933 that enumerates almost 6,000 individuals. Conducted by Mussolini's government, it is extraordinary that this unique census survived the War years, when most documents were either destroyed or returned to Rome in diplomatic bags. Indeed, that it survived until the present day given the ever-changing heads of the Italian consular mission to Scotland over the last almost ninety years is equally remarkable. From a historical point of view and that of the academic researcher, as well as of the genealogist, this cache of documents powerfully connects us to the past, telling both individual stories and also the collective chronicle of a people.

The census supplies high quality demographic and geographic data in addition to information on military service, political allegiance and associational affiliation. Most significantly, perhaps, it allows the construction of migration profiles through retrospective detail dating back to the 1870s. A considerable degree of mobility within Scotland and at an international level is revealed showing the migrants were part of the contemporaneous global Italian diaspora. The movement of Italians to Scotland was not linear and often encompassed sequential relocations within the UK and around the world.¹

Over the years, from the 1930s until recently, few people knew of the existence of this census and only a very small number of bona fide researchers had been permitted access to study its contents. In 2014 however, through an initiative I proposed to the then Consul General, Carlo Perrotta, a groundbreaking collaboration ensued with National Records Scotland, then under the directorship of Tim Ellis. NRS undertook to restore, conserve and digitise the census with a view to making it available to a wider public. Both the conservation project, carried out by Gloria Conti², and the digitisation process were completed in 2015, while complex legal negotiation of the agreement on access is still in progress. The final home of the physical documents is also unresolved, but the current Consul General, Fabio Monaco, supports them remaining in Scotland, perhaps on loan in perpetuity.

A further and supplementary source relating to the Italians during the 1930s can be found at the National Library of Scotland – a rare copy of the 1936 edition of the *Guida Generale degli Italiani in Gran Bretagna* – general guide to the Italians in Great Britain.³ This volume gives a strong impression of the period and the impact of Italian politics on the emigrant community. Significantly, the *Guida* lists Italians alphabetically by address and also includes adverts for businesses, profiles on individuals and so on. As a fascist propaganda publication, exaggeratory and often inaccurate, it nevertheless gives further archival foundations to the pre-War era and taken in tandem with the 1933 census portrays a well-established community with its self-created and sustaining economic niche in shops, fish and chips and ice cream. NLS recently made available an interactive online distribution map of Italians using the 1936 *Guida* combined with evidence on areas of origin in Italy from the census – an exploratory tool much valued by Italian families and potentially researchers alike.

2 See her article on this work in Broadsheet, October 2015. [Issue 35](#), p19.

3 The *Guida Generale* was published in 1933, 1936 and 1939. Only the 1936 edition includes a listing of Italians resident in Scotland.

1 For a full analysis of the census, see Colpi, T. 2015. *Italians' Count in Scotland: Recording History. The 1933 Census*. The St James Press. London.

The War formed a watershed in the Italians' history with enemy alien status, internment, the closing down of businesses and forced displacement of families living in restricted areas. The sinking of the SS Arandora Star in 1940 carrying internees to Canada with the loss of 446 British Italians lives, around 100 from Scotland, was a traumatic event, whose memory has lingered long. It wasn't until 1990 that much of the documentation on the War, including those onboard the Arandora, became available at the National Archives in Kew under the fifty-year rule. In 2010 public recognition of the event was achieved with the establishment of the Italian Garden and Arandora Star monument in Glasgow where a marble plaque lists the lost men, forming a very public archive and collective reference point. There was also a small exhibition at NRS, curated by Tristram Clarke, marking the 70th anniversary of the Arandora's sinking, again giving official platform and visited by many families who had lost fathers and grandfathers.

The first institutional recognition of the Italian community, showcasing their history and contribution was an exhibition presented at National Library Scotland in 1991. This fashioned a powerful statement, pulling together diverse

papers, documents, photographs, paintings and artefacts, helping crystallise Scottish Italian identity for both the Italian community itself and Scottish people who visited the exhibition. Unfortunately the paper collection, both from NLS's own archives and from within the Italian community, were never catalogued as a collection and are no longer available to the public. This perhaps highlights one of the issues relating to archival materials on the Italians in Scotland; there is no national or clear and leading depository. Materials and resources are widely scattered in local archives, museums, libraries, galleries and private collections. For the researcher, this web can sometimes be challenging to trace and unravel. On the other side of the coin, individuals and families are often unsure of the historic value of their papers, documents and photographs and are uncertain of how and where to deposit items.

As a result, a great deal of testimony and potential archival material have vanished over time, such as Aliens Registration booklets, and although there is a tradition of oral history within the Italian community, there is something of a sense of loss, certainly of the detail since often the past cannot be substantiated or verified. Unlike some other minority groups, the Italians in Scotland never managed to sustain their own institution,



Image: Arandora Star Monument, Glasgow. Plaque with Names of Italians Lost. Courtesy Terri Colpi



Image: Aliens Registration Booklet of Giuseppe Dora, 1920-1961. Courtesy Terri Colpi

or church, despite the latter being something numbers would have allowed. Although the Casa d'Italia at Park Circus in Glasgow survived from 1935 to 1989 and during that time also housed an Italian Consulate, as an organisation the Casa was never involved in preserving or promoting Italian history. That said, with its closure and also that of the even more enduring Club Romano in Dundee in 2016, much relevant documentation and potential archival material has inevitably been lost to posterity.

Yet, interesting and valuable records do exist. For example, business directories, rateable value rolls, photographs of the iconic Italian shops, plans and photographs of the Arandora Star, Poor Law Records at Glasgow City Archives; listings relating to internment at Inverclyde Heritage Hub; internees held in Scottish prisons and letters concerning war-time compensation at NRS; letters concerning the need for Italian priests at the Catholic Archives; diaries of Scots Italians from the First World War at NLS; and, in the Richard Demarco Archive, the life narrative of a prominent Scots Italian as well as a record of the artistic dialogue between Scotland and Italy over seventy years. Furthermore, the establishment of the Italo Scottish Research Cluster at Edinburgh University by Professor Federica Pedriale in 2011 marked a new and influential departure with its online archive, programme of cultural activity and,

notably, engagement of academia with the Italian community.⁴

The collaboration of NRS and the Italian authorities, mentioned above, generated a further manifestation in 2015/2016 in the form of a very successful exhibition which, a generation after the NLS exhibition of 1991, reinforced Scottish Italian identity and underscored the experiences of Italians as part of the national narrative. While the past, both distant and more recent, has a relatively firm foundation in terms of archival source materials, it may well be that for future investigators looking at the recent wave of new Italian migrants to Scotland, a more difficult research journey awaits. With free movement, at least until 2016, and a more heterogeneous and less visible group of professional migrants from all over Italy, tracing their arrival, occupations, residence and movement, social norms, aims and aspirations, will present interesting challenges which archives may well be tested to address.

⁴ For example [here](#).

Terri Colpi
Honorary Research Fellow, Department of Italian,
University of St Andrews