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Italians in America: A Celebration

New York, National Italian American Foundation, Mockingbird Press and Portfolio Press, 2001, pp. 207, \$ 45.

Italians in America: A Celebration is an interesting book for all the wrong reasons. It belongs to that peculiarly American genre of immigrant history cum success archemyth that has been a staple of publishing for more than a century and a stock of programming on public television for decades. For example, *The Italian American* (1980) by Luciano J. Iorezzo and Salvatore Mondello is one of a series put out by Twayne Publishers in Boston. The boilerplate apotheosis goes something like this: in the mother country distinguished historical personages, some of whom set foot in America in ancient times or made famous contributions, are brought on stage to proclaim the talent of the gene pool. Horrid circumstances drive people from their mother country. Great tribulations beset the plucky immigrants upon their arrival. Lurid photos and tales illustrate the suffering thereby exonerating the sufferers from any perceived pathology. Clinging to their native values, the immigrants begin to make themselves useful. Colorful customs are trotted out to demonstrate exotic peculiarities as benign and indeed entertaining. The immigrants redeem themselves with hard labor, then military and social service, and then catch the public eye as entertainers and athletes finally to prosper lucratively as they disappear into the mists of the American dream. Certain chapters may be suppressed or inflated according to the times or the audience.

There are two subsets of this genre: the first and ostensibly more scholarly purports to explain the ethnic group to «them» and is marketed to schools and libraries, although many of «us» will proudly swell the sales; the second more popular in format and language is shamelessly marketed to «us» to recite a self-congratulatory calendar of ethnic saints, to refresh the stations of the cross, and to reaffirm the credo, and thereby to instruct the ethnic group how to represent itself to itself. *Italians in America* belongs to the second subset – subclass: coffee table.

The genre has occasionally been blessed with sociological rigor and literary grace. *The Italians of New York: Five Centuries of Struggle and Achievement* (1999) with perspicacious scholarly essays and carefully chosen archival photographs edited by Philip V. Cannistraro and *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (1992) by Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale commend themselves respectively. Some of the best or most

interesting have been filtered through (covertly or frankly) autobiographical and therefore narrow lenses. I think, for example, of Richard Gambino's *Blood of my Blood: The Dilemma of Italian-Americans* (1974) or Gay Talese's *Unto the Sons* (1992), neither endearing themselves to a woman reviewer of Abruzzese descent, but which each seem envisioned by flinty eyes scrutinizing life lived as Italian Americans of very particular personal and provincial histories – however maddening that particularity is when projected indiscriminately onto the considerable variety of province, gender, generation, and class of other Italian Americans' origins. The magisterial overview, of say – a Luigi Barzini, has yet to be written and perhaps shouldn't be.

It would be a useful exercise someday to do a comprehensive comparative survey of such books, diagramming the shifting emphases on struggle vs. triumph, determining what constituted triumph for each half generation or so, mapping the itinerary along which the immigrant group traveled the geography of American values. Space does not permit.

Let us attend to this particular coffee table tome, *Italians in America: A Celebration*, and see how it instructs Italian Americans to represent ourselves to ourselves. The format necessitates highly selective choices. In each category there are bound to be omissions of events or persons dearly held important by some among us. Exemplars of the arts seem egregious or mediocre to me, for example. Redress is not sought here only a key to what the authors deem important to self-representation.

Two hundred seven glossy, very wide-margined pages are lavishly illustrated with the usual tintypes of Columbus natively turned out and gazing heavenward, familiar Lewis Hines / Jacob Riis-type photo archives of tenement squalor and noble but downtrodden workers, panoramas of vineyard grocery and factory, press kit photos of star athletes and entertainers, and a veritable yearbook gallery of headshots of middle management. Assiduously expunged are pictures of backyard shrines, street festivals, rollicking family dinners where people display their food and show their teeth, Mafiosi.

In plodding prose suitable for a middle school American History text, each chapter and subsection begins with an overview pared of anything controversial or idiosyncratic then proceeds in workmanlike fashion to string together a series of dry Who's Who entries into a reasonable facsimile of a running narrative. Although the popular format did not permit all-inclusive lists, great care has been taken to avoid privileging one mini-bio over another. In fact, one bio resembles any other. Generic adjectives like «gifted», «significant», «important», «successful», «major» preface a representative accomplishment of each honoree. It is difficult to tell the entrepreneur from the poet. Political saints, criminal scoundrels, and artistic eccentrics are either omitted or buried in lists and stripped of their capacity to excite the American

imagination, embarrass the Church, or pluck at the Italian heartstrings.

There is an odd «Afterword» of two and a half pages by CNBC finance reporter Maria Bartiromo, which scolds those who eschew the melting pot and who cling to hyphenated Balkanized identities that might manifest a «tepid loyalty to America and what it stands for.» But be of good cheer; a book that has up to this point earnestly erased any particularity that might distinguish Italian Americans from any other Americans now assures us that Italian Americans are the exception, unique in their ability to maintain a bicultural identity, whilst evincing low anti-social behavior, high family values, and unswerving patriotism.

In sum: we are instructed to represent ourselves as generally «distinguished» but indistinguishable.

Italians in America is underwritten by an uncritically chauvinist, conservative organization of *prominenti*, NIAF. It is a book written by a large committee, so its uninflected, consensual, corporate style is to be expected. Gay Talese, who is credited as editor, leaves nothing discernible of his stamp unless a certain primness is his. Talese's *Unto the Sons* ostensibly followed the same general pattern of immigrant success archemyth but fleshed out on the skeleton of his own family's saga. That book, which defied the roisterous stereotype, «abhorred this lingering manifestation of primitive emotion», as he described his own father (p. 17) and gave us a melancholic, bravely unendearing, but nuanced take on the history of Italians in America. *Italians in America: A Celebration* has brightly colored illustrations, but it is colorless.

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