

# Twenty Years of Change: The Paradox of Italian–Canadian Writers

by Joseph J. Pivato

The most significant development which has taken place among Italian-Canadian writers since 1986 is the great amount of writing and publication. This was not supposed to happen according to most opinions. I recall that for the 1986 conference Dino Minni wanted to look at the uncertain future. Some of us had questions, or doubts, about what these authors were going to write about. Were they going to continue to talk about, and complain about the immigrant experience? So Minni made the theme of the conference “Writers in Transition,” which was a euphemism for assimilation. And I gave a paper entitled, “Nothing Left to Say.” Had Italian-Canadian writers exhausted the themes of immigration, and ethnic identity? Many of my academic friends said yes they had. Several authors agreed and planned to move on to other topics and literary problems. So it was a paradox that some of the writers used the occasion of the 1986 conference in Vancouver to found an association of writers now called the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers. This essay is a brief review of the history of AICW from 1986 to 2006.

There were several contradictions in this founding meeting. I recall that it took place not during the daily conference sessions and panel discussions but one late evening at a Vancouver café. Poets from Toronto and Montreal discussed the idea of forming an association of writers. I was not there at the time, but was told this the following day when these writers announced that “we” were going to start an association. There seemed to be general agreement with the idea, but there was some resistance to the notions of drawing up a constitution, and electing a formal executive. Some argued that we would get bogged down in these bureaucratic problems and end up in conflict and disunity. Maybe some did not think that such a disparate group would last very long anyway so why bother with constitutions and elections. About all we could agree on at that time was: the name AICW in our three languages of English, Italian and French; a membership fee of \$50 annually; a general statement about the goals of the association; and a newsletter. We hoped to have another meeting in 1988.

Then there was some discussion about who would collect the fees and produce the newsletter. Pier Giorgio Di Cicco suggest that I do this and further that I be the president. He saw the fact that I was in Edmonton as a solution to the rivalry among the writers from Toronto and Montreal. And he added that I had the most up-to-date mailing list of Italian-Canadian writers and so it would be easy for me to contact authors across the country. Maybe an Edmonton based president was recognition that this was going to be a national association and not just a club for Toronto and Montreal. One of the Italian visiting speakers at the conference was Cesare Pitto who helped us to focus on our immigrant roots, our simple parents and hard working ancestors by reading from the immigrant literature of southern Italy. So in this spirit we kept things simple.

That first conference was organized by Anna Foschi, Genni Gunn and Dino Minni at the same time as Expo '86 was taking place in Vancouver. After this very successful convention in

September 1986 we all went home in a state of euphoria. One of the first things I did was produce a newsletter on my IBM typewriter, photocopy the pages and send them out to as many Italian-Canadian writers as I could. Some people sent me additional names to add to my mailing list. Some conference participants sent me cheques for their \$50 fees so that I had to open a bank account for the association. To help me with collecting information for the newsletter I had a number of regional representatives: Mary di Michele in Ontario, Antonio D'Alfonso in Quebec, Caterina Edwards in the Prairies, Dino Minni in British Columbia, Ken Norris for the Atlantic and Pasquale Verdicchio for the USA. All of these people, except Caterina, were at this founding conference.

In that first newsletter I included a brief statement about the mission or goals of the association which we had agreed on in Vancouver. Here are those words:

The primary purpose of the association is to support the work and interests of Italian-Canadian writers. It will publish a newsletter, organize conferences, organize book launchings, readings, and interviews.

When we read them now they are rather naïve words. Ethnic identity now is much more complicated than we imagined then. And for some of us this complexity is what may have spurred us to go on with our writing. Despite forming an association it was a very uncertain time for young writers. Few of us could foresee that Frank Paci would go on to publish 7 more novels; that Mary di Michele would produce several collections of poetry and two novels; that Nino Ricci would win a Governor General's Award for *Lives of the Saints* in 1990, and go on to finish it as a trilogy. On the other hand, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco had produced 13 collections of poems by 1986 and with the publication of *Virgin Science* that year he entered a monastery and stopped publishing for 15 years.

We did not know much about Italian writers in Quebec so it was a surprise when Fulvio Caccia won a Governor General's award for French poetry in 1994; and Marco Micone won awards for his French plays in Montreal. Italian-Canadian writers would slowly begin to get critical recognition and academic support for their work. We could not foresee any of these developments during that first meeting in Vancouver.

In 1986 there were about 30 active writers of Italian-Canadian background. Most were working in English, some in Italian and those in Quebec published in French. At the time I knew this because I had all their names, addresses, and book titles. In many cases I had copies of their books and probably still have the best collection of Italian-Canadian publications. This was, and still is, a disparate group of writers, scattered across the country. It was hard to image that they would produce a significant body of writing.

When Pier Giorgio Di Cicco edited his anthology, *Roman Candles*, in 1978 he included 17 writers. So it was understandable that we had doubts that these few writers could produce an identifiable literature. And what language would this literature be in? Can there be an ethnic literature in three languages? Literary theorists were arguing this question for years. In that first newsletter from November 1986 I printed a note from the president, a confession:

I am still surprised that we have an association. In the years that I have been dealing with Italian-Canadian writers I have come to know them as very individualistic persons. In addition to this, writers tend to work alone. Not only are Italian-Canadian writers scattered across the continent but they publish in three languages: English, French and Italian. Given this diversity, the last thing I expected was the founding of an association. (6)

We could not foresee that many more writers would join us in the coming years so that today we have over 100 active writers. Some work in English, some in French, some in Italian and a very few in more than one of these languages. It seems that we can have one ethnic culture and identity in more than one language. Literary theorists have to take note of our example.

In the 1980s I could keep up with the books that these authors produced. I could get copies and read them cover-to-cover. But some time in the late 1990s I was no longer able to keep up with the number of titles being printed each year. There is now a critical mass, and this distinct literature will be with us for some time.

Over the twenty-year history we have had a conference every two years. The second conference was in 1988. During the academic year 1987-88 I had been appointed to the Mariano Elia Chair of Italian-Canadian Studies at York University. I took the opportunity to organize this conference in Toronto. The third conference was hosted by Carleton University in Ottawa in 1990 and organized by Francesco Loriggio, who also invited three Italian-Australian writers and some Italian academics. In 1992 the fourth meeting took place in Montreal and organized by Antonio D'Alfonso who expanded the theme to include film and so we finally met Paul Tana. The fifth was in 1994 in Winnipeg and was organized by Caterina Sotiriadis and included some Italian-American writers. The sixth in 1996 was held back in Toronto in a number of venues which I organized from Edmonton. This conference also had sessions and readings with South Asian writers. The 1998 meeting was in Vancouver and included sessions and readings with Asian writers from B.C. In 2000 we were back in Montreal with Licia Canton and Domenic Cusmano as the organizers. In 2002 we were in Toronto and Francesca L'Orfano tried to organize the conference to coincide with the Learned's meetings at the University of Toronto. The main venue turned out to be Ryerson University. The University of Udine hosted our 2004 conference in Friuli under the care of Anna Pia DeLuca and her staff. During these years the association slowly grew in size with the able work of such presidents as Anna Foschi and executive members such as Delia De Santis, Venera Fazio and Connie Mcparland. Guernica Editions and Antonio D'Alfonso were often there to publish the first books by many of these new authors.

## **Academic Recognition**

We must remember that Canadian literature was only getting critical recognition in the 1960s and academic support in the 1970s. So it was natural not to expect that Italian-Canadian writing would be taken seriously. In the 1980s when I told my academic colleagues that I was studying Italian-Canadian writing, they would look at me with a mixture of incredulity and pity. Obviously my academic career was not going to go anywhere.

An indication of the difficulties Italian-Canadian writers faced is part of my own experience. In May, 1981, I presented the first academic paper on Italian-Canadian writers at a large university

conference in Halifax. The paper was well received and I was asked to submit it for publication to the journal, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, by the editor, Robert Lecker. I also submitted a proposal that one issue of *ECW* be devoted to the new writing by Italian-Canadian authors in Ontario and Quebec. Two months later both my paper and my proposal were rejected as “too esoteric.”

In May 1983 I was in Vancouver and took the opportunity to meet with the editor of *Canadian Literature*, Bill New, to convince him to devote one issue of the journal to Italian-Canadian writing. He accepted reluctantly on condition that I solicit contributions from both English and French writers, then screen and review some of the contributions. I even rewrote parts of some papers and then sent them on to the journal. I helped to put the issue together. However when it came to my own essay it was rejected by one of the assistant editors on staff, no matter how often I changed it. I finally had to satisfy myself with only a short article in the notes and queries section at the back of this issue, *Canadian Literature* No. 106 (Fall, 1985). And there was no recognition in this “Italian-Canadian Connections” issue for all the work which I had done; not even a footnote.

In May 1984 many Italian-Canadian writers and academics attended a conference in Rome on “Writing About the Italian Immigrant Experience in Canada.” When the volume, *Arrangiarsi*, was published in 1989 many of the conference papers on history were included, but my paper and those of others on the literary topics were not.

It was because of these repeated rejections that I became convinced, along with Antonio D'Alfonso, that we had to produce our own critical studies and reviews of Italian-Canadian literature and that we had to publish them. This was the motivation behind *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing* which I edited. The ten essays came from across Canada including three essays from Quebec. Even after the publication of *Contrasts* in 1985, there was resistance. It took some time for critical and academic recognition to come to us.

Writers began to win awards for their work. The volume of publications began to create a critical mass so that this work was difficult to ignore. More and more essays and articles were published in literary magazines and academic journals. My first article on these authors, “The Arrival of Italian-Canadian Writing,” appeared in *Canadian Ethnic Studies* in 1982. My second was “Documenting Italian-Canadian Writing,” in the first issue of *Italian Canadiana* in 1985. Books of essays began to appear slowly: *Writers in Transition* came out in 1990, edited by Dino Minni and Anna Foschi. It was the proceedings of that first conference from 1986.

My book of essays, *Echo*, came out in 1994 and included for the first time that conference paper which I had presented in Halifax in 1981 and that had been rejected by publishers. Some of my essays in this volume were influenced by my experience in Australia in 1991 during which I met many Italian-Australian writers and academics. Since then I have been able to collaborate with Gaetano Rando of the University of Wollongong.

In 1996 *Social Pluralism and Literary History*, ed. by Francesco Loriggio came out. It included many of the papers from the AICW conference held in Ottawa in 1990. In this volume I have a

paper which points out the neglect, if not rejection, of Italian-Canadian writing by the Italian Studies academics.

In this vein of questioning the postcolonial condition there is Pasquale Verdicchio's *Devils in Paradise: Writings on Post-Emigrant Cultures* which appeared in 1997, followed by Marino Tuzi's *The Power of Allegiances*, which is Tuzi's Ph.D. thesis from York University. M.G. Vassanji edited an Italian Canadian issue of *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* in 1998.

After Pier Giorgio Di Cicco edited *Roman Candles* in 1978 and D'Alfonso and Caccia co-edited *Quêtes: Textes d'auteurs italo-québécois* in 1983 it became clear that we had to produce our own anthologies. I was involved from the beginning with the creation of *Italian Canadian Voices* edited by Caroline Di Giovanni in 1984, though I did not get recognition as an editor. It was soon out of date and out-of-print. This was a strong motivation to produce a major anthology that included a wide spectrum of genres representative of what authors were publishing. The result was *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing* which I edited in 1998. It includes work by 53 writers and is being used as a university text. In the same year Marisa De Franceschi brought out *Pillars of Lace* an anthology devoted to Italian-Canadian women writers. In 2004 Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis produced *Sweet Lemons: Writing with a Sicilian Accent*, which reminded me of Dorè Michelut's anthology, *A Furlan Harvest: An Anthology* (1993).

The papers and some creative works from the Montreal AICW conference of 2000 were collected in *The Dynamics of Cultural Exchange* ed. by Licia Canton. The academic papers from the Udine conference appear in *Shaping History: L'Identita italo-canadese nel Canada anglofono* edited by Anna Pia De Luca and Alessandra Ferraro (2005). Much of the creative work from this 2002 conference is collected in *Writing Beyond History* (2006) edited by Licia Canton, Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio.

In addition to conferences members of the AICW organize book launchings, literary salons, readings and other promotions in their local cities.

In Canada you do not exist as an artist until your get both critical and academic recognition. So it is encouraging that books by Italian-Canadian authors have been used in the classroom. They include Paci's *Black Madonna*, Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, Mary di Michele's *Mimosa and Other Poems*, Caterina Edwards' *The Lion's Mouth*, Marco Micone's *Voiceless People*, Antonio D'Alfonso's *The Other Shore*, and Minni's *Other Selves*. When I was visiting professor at York University in 1987-88, I created and offered the first credit-course on Italian-Canadian writing. And in my courses in Canadian Literature at Athabasca University I have included many of the titles listed above and many others. Since 2000 I have created and maintained a research site on Canadian writers which includes a number of academic profiles of Italian-Canadian writers. See the list of works cited.

We in the AICW also helped to promote a general recognition of ethnic minority writing in Canada and beyond. George Elliott Clarke repeatedly holds our work up as a successful example that other minority groups could follow:

The Arrival of Italian-Canadian Writing ...offers a useful model for scholars of other minority or ethnic Canadian communities who seek to affirm and reconceptualize these literatures. Surveying early Italian-Canadian writing, commenting on notable, contemporary figures... ushers, formally, an entire literature into being. (2002, 325)

See also his detailed study, "Let Us Compare Anthologies: Harmonizing the Founding African-Canadian and Italian-Canadian Literary Collections," the keynote paper at the AICW conference in Toronto in 2002 and posted in 2006 in the Athabasca University Canadian Writers site.

Many of the titles listed above were published by Guernica Editions which has promoted ethnic minority writers since it was founded in Montreal in 1978. In 2000 Guernica initiated its Writers Series: a chain of texts each devoted to an individual Canadian author. Among the 25 authors featured up to 2007 there are a number of Italian-Canadian writers: Frank Paci, Caterina Edwards, Mary di Michele, and Mary Melfi. Others will be included in future volumes.

## The Big Question

The Association of Italian-Canadian Writers has had 20 years of success. I was honoured to be a small part of it. More important I have made many friends. But we have had only modest response to our distribution of books by these very creative artists. One of the big questions for the future is: What support are Italian-Canadian writers getting from the Italian communities?

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