

Italian Canadiana

Eisenbichler, Konrad. Forgotten Italians: Julian-Dalmatian Writers and Artists in Canada

Francesco Loriggio

Volume 36, numéro 1, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092833ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v36i1.39378>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Loriggio, F. (2022). Compte rendu de [Eisenbichler, Konrad. Forgotten Italians: Julian-Dalmatian Writers and Artists in Canada]. *Italian Canadiana*, 36(1), 239–244. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v36i1.39378>

Copyright © Francesco Loriggio, 2022



Cet article est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Eisenbichler, Konrad. *Forgotten Italians: Julian-Dalmatian Writers and Artists in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. 307. ISBN 978-1-4875-0402-1 (hardcover); 978-1-4875-1929-2 (ePUB); 978-1-4875-1928-5 (PDF). \$58.

It's tempting, in reading this very engaging book, to immediately think about the intricacy of the tensions between periphery and centre that have always distinguished Italian internal politics both before and after the 1980s, when regions and regional governments were officially instituted and were granted some measure of legislative independence. It's tempting, but, of course, it would be wrong. The forgetfulness in the title of the essay collection Konrad Eisenbichler has put together is of a different sort. It's more drastic and irrevocable than the distracted, intermittent inattentiveness that has befallen the central government's relations with other Italian borderland regions such as Val d'Aosta or Trentino Alto Adige, or regions such as Sicily, Sardinia, and – it could be argued – the Italian South as a whole. It's a forgetfulness that pertains as much to Western-level or even world-level history as it does to Italian history.

Literarily and artistically, too, the Julian-Dalmatian presence in Canada adds to Italian Canadiana a dimension not usually associated with it. The authors, the works, and the geographical backdrop that the essays expound on are packed with memories of Mittel Europe, of an area that in the twentieth century went through two epochal realignments. First, with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the First World War and the subsequent recasting of various national frontiers, including those that resulted in the annexation of Trento, Trieste and Gorizia, Pola, Fiume, and Zara (as the latter three cities are known to Italians) by Italy. Then, after the Second World War, with the accords that once more reshaped the map of Europe and assigned all the cities on the easternmost extremity of Italy, except Trieste and half of Gorizia, to the newly created Yugoslavia. It's to these circumstances (at once local, national, and supra-national in scope) that the vicissitudes of the Julian-Dalmatians in Canada hark back. The 350,000 Italian men and women who left Fiume, Pola, Zara, and their vicinities did so either because they were expelled on political grounds or (mostly) because they felt they could

no longer reside in a land in which they had suddenly been transmuted into foreigners. Although the essay collection reports on a range of Julian-Dalmatian authors and artists – those among them whose biographies unfolded partially in the decades before the Second World War, and those who were either born in European countries outside of the region or in Canada in more recent time – the dismemberment of Venezia Giulia and Dalmatia and its repercussions on their Italian population is the leitmotif of the essays.

Not irrelevantly, imbricated with the special forgetfulness (particularly of Italy and the Italians) that hovers over the Julian-Dalmatians who were obliged to leave their home is the nature of the analogies they inspire when it comes to describing or remarking on their predicament. The two opening essays, Eisenbichler's introduction and Rosanna Turcinovich Giuricin's comments on those who left (the *esuli*) and those who stayed back (the *rimasti*), make this quite clear: the language that should arise most automatically in recounting the story of Julian-Dalmatians in Canada is the language of the Bible. Picking up on some verses of Diego Bastianutti, other contributions (those of Gianna Mazzieri Sankovic and Corinna Gerbaz Giuliano, besides Eisenbichler's) complement the references to the Judeo-Christian heritage with allusions to the second tradition that has nurtured Western culture. To confirm and reinforce Genesis and subsequent sections of the Old Testament, hence the theme of exodus and punishment, they draw attention to the figure of Antaeus, the son of Poseidon, who in Greek mythology would lose his strength when lifted from the earth beneath his feet. The "complex," the psycho-social attitudes linked with that character, serves to further underscore the magnitude of the disempowering, debilitating impositions Julian-Dalmatians have had to endure.

The dramatic consequences of their exile and some of the more practical responses it has elicited can be considered to be the focus of essays devoted to the organizational endeavours of the men and women who chose Canada as their destination. The bulletins or the *raduni* of clubs and societies scattered in the Canadian provinces or elsewhere in the world speak to the yearning for the pre-exile togetherness of the group and can be seen as attempts to reconstitute it. Rightly, a good number of the contributors linger at length on various aspects of this. In her text, Benedetta Lamanna highlights the importance of newsletters, more expressly as they regard the input of women in the editing and production component of written materials, or the planning of gatherings and assemblies. Some of the authors discussed in the collection epitomize a similar function. The poetry of Diego Bastianutti

and its relation to his Fiuman past is the focus of an essay by Corinna Gerbaz Giuliano and of an interview by Henry Veggian. The engrossing retracing of the life of a Triestine woman that Rosanna Turcinovich Giuricin has carried out is analyzed by Gabriella Colussi Arthur. For their part, Gianna Mazzieri Sankovic, Paul Baxa, and Robert Buranello zoom in on the pivotal role of Gianni Angelo Grohovaz, who, as a poet, writer of fiction, and editorialist in Toronto Italian-language newspapers and radio programs, embodied both souls, as it were, of the Julian-Dalmatian intelligentsia.

There is indeed something scriptural about the way that intelligentsia, that is, the *esuli* by and large, has endeavoured to hold on to the group's recollections and meanderings – scriptural both in the biblical sense of the term (whereby writers who themselves experienced the exodus see it as their mission to preserve the history of their people), and in its other, secular and more modern sense, if less emphasized. It is, after all, printing and the possibility of disseminating information to persons who were not in direct contact with each other that led to the advent of those imagined communities that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were the prelude to the rise of the idea of nation and national allegiance. By registering their survival outside their place of origin, by reaffirming their perdurance thanks to their linguistic and generally cultural proficiency, the now extraterritorial Julian-Dalmatians counter, in some fashion, the obliviousness to which geopolitics has consigned them.

This points to another fundamental difference of their experience, or the Canadian portion of it in any case. With the exception of Caterina Edwards, who spent her childhood in Britain before her parents settled in Alberta, the men and women who have brokered the memory of the group and recorded its presence in this country to instill into it some semblance of community have been themselves involved in the exodus. Many of them were middle-class men and women, already educated, with the wherewithal to be the mediators who permit the *esuli* to remain in touch with each other. As such, they enjoy a degree of literacy unavailable to the majority of Italian Canadians, who, as working-class emigrants, had to stick it out as best they could and would, at any rate, have been unable to parlay their tale themselves, to satisfy the scriptural urge, should they have felt compelled or inclined to do so. That task they have had to entrust to the offspring, their sons and daughters or descendants down the lineage who, unlike them, do have the necessary requisites.

It's the first and most direct distinction to bear in mind. However, there are others, more inherent to the self-chronicling that flows from it. If

the exodus, its whys and wherefores and the efforts to reconvene provide the intellectual brunt of the metanarrative *Forgotten Italians* sets out to tell, they don't comprise the only facet of the account it proposes or lets us discern. There is an ulterior, unaccentuated tier of meaning that accompanies the rest. Not all the essays have the exodus as their stated or unstated topic. At least one of them (the one by Elisabetta Carraro on the writer Mario Duliani and the artist Vincenzo Poggi) deals with individuals who came to adulthood in the 1930s, after the post-First World War peace conference that, responding to pressure from the Italian government and from Italian public opinion, adjudicated Istria and parts of Dalmatia to Italy. Both of those individuals were in Canada before the exodus and lived through one of the most traumatic events in the history of Italians in Canada, the internment during the Second World War of those deemed to be fascist sympathizers. And a still more typical and more overt Canadianization is intimated in the essays on Vittorio Fiorucci and Silvia Pecota by, respectively, Guita Lamsechi and Paolo Frascà, that spotlight Julian-Dalmatian artists who either came to this country in their late teens (the former) or were born here (the latter).

The enlarged temporal perspective that is also a key aim of *Forgotten Italians* raises its own questions. The exodus, the exile, and the attempt to keep the group together have been and are, for now, the defining, climactic moments of Julian-Dalmatian self-narrations. But will those moments retain their cogency, their poignancy, or will the future looming ahead for Julian-Dalmatians be the same future in store for other Italians in Canada – that is, for those Italians who left not because of expulsion but to seek the beacon shining bright on the hill they believed to be beckoning them towards the elsewhere they were striving to reach? More exactly, will the time warp to which all immigrants who decide to continue to inhabit the places they have travelled to have to submit be also the defining fate of Julian-Dalmatians? Does the law whereby those who arrive in places like Canada are followed by generations that swerve mentally and psychologically further and further away from the initial departure also apply to them? *Forgotten Italians* posits these questions, but then moves on without answering them. We sense they underlie Gianni Angelo Grohovaz's stand on Canadian socio-politics (his endorsement of multiculturalism and his postulation of the *terza forza* he envisioned for Italian Canadians is pondered by Paul Baxa in his contribution). And we can sense them in Ida Voderich Marinzoli's use of the concept of hybridity in her analysis of Caterina Edwards's *Island of the Nightingales*,

or the difficult steps and transactions that the characters in this writer's other works (*The Lion's Mouth*, most notably) must contend with as they try to make a home in their Canadian landscape.

As readers, we could furnish more indications of how life in Canada has affected or might affect Julian-Dalmatians and their self-depictions. There is the desire to erase the past one may envisage in Vittorio Fiorucci's exclusion from his posters of images that might recall his ethnic origins as well as his personal antecedents. Or there is the more subtle, less extreme approach that Silvia Pecota appears to have adopted. Born in Toronto, what has most impressed her visually about her parents' native land during her visits is the colour and texture of the stones she saw in the natural and built environments. For her, they summarized the aesthetic gist of the region. Thus, those stones have been one of the secret metonyms of her art, instrumental in convincing her that beauty may be wrought from flat slabs of rock. Content-wise, however, the most familiar of her works (whether in sculpture or in painting) have been about Canadian soldiers, first and foremost those stationed in Afghanistan. There is, finally, Diego Bastianutti. While he began his career writing in Italian and has never disavowed any of the existential or cultural implications of his Julian-Dalmatian trajectory (he was the one who first coined the notion of the Antaeus complex), in his later poetry he has turned to the English language and brought Canadian issues and the Canadian physical and social milieu more and more explicitly into his purview. In his most recent collection, *The Lotus Eaters/I mangiatori di loto*, several poems have to do with those few blocks of Vancouver's Downtown East Side, the city's (and perhaps the country's) most derelict, most forlorn neighbourhood. What catches Bastianutti's eye, as it should ours, about the human fauna that wander aimlessly through those streets, too often in search of a fix, is the proportion of members of Canada's First Nations.

It's still too hard to predict what sort of precise epilogue awaits Julian-Dalmatians, so one may appreciate why the contributors to *Forgotten Italians* may have wished to avoid doing so. Hopefully the various generations will find it possible to probe each other's self-portrayals and learn from them. Would the contact with that experiment in multiethnic conviviality that Canada now is in any way impinge on how the *esuli* might interpret the history of Istria and Dalmatia or the history of Croatia and Slovenia? And the lives of the parents, what can they teach to their Canadian-born children about the imperfections and the fragilities of Canadian society? Needless to say, that such interrogations have been instigated by the traces Julian-Dalmatians have

been leaving of themselves reveals as much about the interweavings between modern history and the imagination as it does about the interweavings between displacement, literature, and art. All of this enhances the intellectual appeal of *Forgotten Italians*. To date, it's simply the best, most absorbing work about Italians in Canada, about the varied local narratives their presence can give rise to, as well as about the broader intellectual and cultural reflections that presence can foster.

FRANCESCO LORIGGIO
Carleton University