

*Vancouver's Society of Italians*

Raymond Culos

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1998. 223 pp. Illus. \$39.95 cloth.

BY GABRIELE SCARDELLATO, *University of Toronto*

Raymond Culos, the author of *Vancouver's Society of Italians*, is particularly well placed to undertake a study of Italian-Canadians in Vancouver. He is the son of a prominent Italian-Canadian Vancouver family who followed in his father's footsteps by pursuing a long and successful career as a journalist for a variety of Vancouver-based newspapers, including the important *L'Eco d'Italia*.

In compiling the current study, Culos was fortunate in having access not only to his father's interwar publications, which deal with various aspects of Italian-Canadian life in Vancouver, but also to his father's extensive personal papers, to a network of individuals who shared their memories with the author, to the Pacific Press library in Vancouver, and so forth. This impressive range of research materials is reflected in part in the volume's 200-plus photographs, virtually all of which are well reproduced by the volume's printer. Indeed, the publisher is to be complemented for an extremely attractive volume. More careful proofreading however, possibly by an Italian-language reader, would have prevented some glaring typographical mistakes: for example, Spillingbergo for Spillimbergo, Bangi di Lucca for Bagni di Lucca, cantini for cantine, locondiera for locandiera, compestre for campestre, Statari for Spatari, Camillio for Camillo, and many more. Also, one might question

the editorial decision to include many Italian-language terms in the text, usually without translation for non-Italian language readers.

Culos's study spans the period from 1904 to 1966. His opening date coincides with the beginning of Vancouver's first Italian-Canadian mutual aid society, while the closing year marks the final merger of a number of societies into an umbrella organization called the Confratellanza Italo-Canadese Society. The volume opens with a foreword by Judge Dolores Holmes (herself a scion of the Branca family, one of Vancouver's notable Italian-Canadian families) and includes an author's preface followed by twenty-four relatively short chapters organized chronologically.

The author reports his motivation in writing this work, which he describes as a "historical account of Vancouver's pioneer Italians and their institutions," as having been the desire "to chronicle the documented contributions of the men and women closely associated with Vancouver's Italian mutual aid societies." The result, for individuals interested in the history of one of Vancouver's oldest and best established ethnic groups, is a mixed success.

Culos has amassed a great deal of information for this volume, and, as noted, it is very well illustrated throughout with well reproduced historical photographs of both people and events.

Most, if not all, of the better known individuals in Vancouver's Italian-Canadian community appear here. Understandably, the author's family, and his father in particular, are featured prominently, as are various members of the Branca and other families. These individuals appear within the retelling of a fairly well known sequence of events, for which insightful detail sometimes is added. One of the few accounts previously available of association life amongst Vancouver's Italian-Canadians, a few paragraphs in Antonino Spada's *The Italians in Canada* (1969, 368-70), is augmented very significantly here.

Culos is also much more detailed in his treatment of events like Italy's entry into war in June 1940 and the subsequent arrest and internment of a number of Vancouver's Italian-Canadians. Indeed, this episode is covered in one of the book's longest chapters, and the author treats its events in a much more balanced fashion than most others who have written about them. There is ambiguity, however, in Culos's presentation and interpretation of these events and, equally significantly, in his recounting of activities that preceded them amongst Vancouver's Italian-Canadians. These ambiguities are indicative of what for this reader is the volume's major weakness – a general failure to present events in a useful historical context. Thus, although the internment of some forty-four of Vancouver's Italian-Canadians shortly after Italy entered the war against Great Britain in June of 1940 is covered in detail, there is little either in this or preceding chapters that would help a reader to understand why these individuals might have been singled out for arrest and internment by Canadian authorities. The episode is made even more quixotic

because it is introduced with the relatively well known story of the formation of the Canadian Italian War Vigilance Association of Vancouver by local barrister Angelo Branca, who brought together more than 300 individuals who pledged their loyalty to the Allied war effort.

Similar hesitations arise with regard to Culos's general presentation of the history of Italian-Canadians either in Vancouver or elsewhere in British Columbia. Readers who are not familiar with Vancouver, for example, might have difficulty in following Culos around the locales named in his text. North Vancouver is juxtaposed with locations in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (on Hastings and other nearby streets that can be said to have been the location of the city's original Little Italy). These, in turn, are juxtaposed with locales sometimes hundreds of kilometres distant (such as Fernie or Natal in the Rocky Mountains near the Alberta border), with no warning for readers that, in geographical (or other) terms, they might be very distinct settlements. Furthermore, there is usually no information provided that would help us to understand how, or if, Italian-Canadians in these disparate communities were connected.

In a similar vein, this volume cannot be recommended to readers wishing to gain an overall understanding of the history of the settlement of Italians in Vancouver. There is little information, for example, concerning the number of Italian-Canadians settled in the city between 1904 and 1966, why they might have settled where they did, and so forth. There is also surprisingly little reported about the general membership of the institutions whose history otherwise is chronicled here, often in considerable detail. Instead, readers are presented with the histories of a

number of relatively prominent Italian-Canadian families in Vancouver and the activities of some of their members and the institutions with which they were associated. In fairness, and despite the author's claim in his preface, these cannot be claimed as being all of Vancouver's pioneer Italians.

Culos does incorporate, however, a wealth of detail in this volume, and

he is to be complimented for having devoted himself so assiduously to what clearly has been a labour of love. Perhaps we can look forward to other studies from him that will expand this undertaking to include the many thousands who have featured in the broader history of Vancouver's Italian-Canadians.

### *The Hotel Georgia: A Vancouver Tradition*

Sean Rossiter

Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1998. 128 pp. Illus. \$40 cloth.

BY RHODRI WINDSOR LISCOMBE  
*University of British Columbia*

**T**he construction of identity, especially as the representation of social grouping, is a preoccupation of poststructural discourse. In setting aside the authority of document or text and author, the necessary concern to account for the person has legitimated closer study of the ephemeral and anecdotal staffage of lived lives. This enables greater attention to be directed towards the manner in which we inscribe and invest meaning through the apparently commonplace. The postcard, photograph, and publicity copy are now recognized as significant bearers of meaning, especially around popular attitudes.

That resource is exploited most effectively in this entertaining, if uncritical, biography of a local landmark. Illustrative material and personal narratives relate the changing repute of the Hotel Georgia and the socio-economic context of Vancouver from the former's construction in 1927 to

the present. These are arranged in a partly chronological, partly thematic, structure obviously designed to attract the new cyberspaced reader accustomed to chatty yet seldom annotated script and highly sophisticated visual techniques. This envisioned digital medium also requires sequenced structure, which the book designer, George Vaitkunos, has mimicked with elegant discipline through the architecture of the main photographic plates. These begin with an entry grouping of tinted postcards of the hotel and its environs, which provides a timely reminder of the extent to which we establish meaning through the very process of looking or of the acquiring of visual record. The placement of the Hotel Georgia and of other civic edifices in these postcards, so as to stress the buildings' commanding scale and hence technical attainment in relation to the magnificent topography, articulate the rhetoric of the last phase of the