

THE FIRST WAVE OF ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA

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The vast majority of Italian-Canadians trace their families' origins in this country to the great influx of Italian immigrants that occurred during the first two decades following the Second World War. However, these immigrants were preceded by an earlier contingent of Italians that arrived in Canada around the turn of the twentieth-century—primarily between 1896 and 1915. It was this period that saw the emergence of the first Italian-Canadian communities, and eventually, of the first sense of an Italian-Canadian identity.

Large scale immigration to Canada from outside the two “founding nations” began in 1896 with the institution of pro-immigration policies, motivated in large part by the need for cheap labour to build the growing infrastructure of the new country. Most Italians who arrived during this period worked as manual labourers in the construction of bridges, roads and railroads.

Italy too was a young country in this period, having recently been unified in 1861. As a result most of these immigrants tended to identify mainly with their natives villages rather than with the still abstract concept of an Italian nation. It was only in the Little Italies, where immigrants from all over the peninsula found themselves living in close proximity to one another, that the first sense both of an Italian and an Italian-Canadian identity began to take hold.¹

This growing patriotic attachment both to Italy and Canada was greatly reinforced when Italy entered the First World War on the side of Great Britain in 1915, and many Italian-Canadians

enlisted to fight on the side of both their old and adopted homelands. Although the onset of the war would mark the end of the first wave of Italian immigration, the first seeds of an Italian community in Canada had by then begun to take permanent root, a community that would go on to become one of the dominant elements in the country's multicultural mosaic.



Immigrants - Russian, Italian, Lithuanian (circa 1910-1911)

John Woodruff

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3193342

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193342>.

This photograph, credited to John Woodruff, testifies to the great novelty represented by the immigrant phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century. A photographer working for the Department of the Interior, Woodruff was commissioned between 1910 and 1911 by the Laurier government to photograph immigrants arriving in Quebec City.² Each group of immigrants in the series is shot against the same non-descript backgrounds and standing at an equal distance from one another, looking very much like didactic specimens. The costumes of these immigrants may strike the modern viewer as being almost too stereotypical to be true, yet other images in the series would suggest that the subjects were indeed photographed in what was then their actual apparel.



Immigrants, Arabs (circa 1910-1911)

John Woodruff, Photograph, Library and Archives Canada.

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193363.

Many of the immigrants depicted in this series were probably in transit towards the West. Such was the case for this group of Arab immigrants, as demonstrated by the railway tickets pinned to their lapels.



A group of workers; Canadian, American, Swedish, Italian and Scots in a C.N.R. construction Camp. Agabob, B.C. (circa 1913)

Photographer unknown

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3194431

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194431>.

The great majority of early Italian immigrants were primarily employed on major civil engineering projects, especially railroads. The nascent Canadian labour movements were generally opposed to the arrival of Italian workers, who most often intended to work in Canada only for a few years before returning to their country of origin, and thus had little incentive to involve themselves in the struggle for better working conditions.³ The railway companies often deliberately sought to exacerbate the situation by putting Italian workers together under an Italian foreman, thus lessening the chance that they would learn English and form bonds with the other workers.⁴ Nevertheless, maintaining such ethnic divisions was not always feasible, and the nation's construction camps were among the very first sites of the kind of multiethnic cultural exchange that has come to characterize modern Canadian culture. In spite of the diverse origins of the workers in this image (it could be speculated that the Italian is the figure on the left, given his darker complexion and the similarity of the style and tilt of his hat with the Italian immigrant in the previous image), their expressions show signs of a nascent sense of camaraderie.



Italian-Canadians in need lined up in front of the Italian Consulate for loaves of bread during the First World War, Toronto, Ontario (circa 1915)

Eugenio D'Angelo

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3367781

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3367781>.

Canada had the world's fastest growing economy between 1896 and 1914, at which time there was an economic slowdown that was initially exacerbated by the outbreak of the First World War. Unemployment rose substantially and many Canadians were pushed to the brink of poverty. Aggravating the situation for Italian-Canadians was the fact that Italy had for many years been a member of the so-called Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria, and was widely expected to eventually enter the war on the side of Britain's enemies. This photograph is one of many documenting Italian immigrant life in Toronto, taken by Eugenio D'Angelo, who was the secretary to the Italian Consul. D'Angelo also ran a steamship company from out of his office at the consulate, which is why his name appears on the ground floor window. Given the fact that the participants in this breadline are posing for the camera, and the care that has been taken to capture the Italian flag in mid-billow, one can speculate that this photo was commissioned by the consulate in order to showcase its charitable initiatives.



Rocco D'Angelo (May 1915)

Mr. Eugenio D'Angelo, Secretary to the Italian Consul, at his desk.

Library and Archives Canada.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3215622.

This is a photo of Eugenio D'Angelo taken by his brother, Rocco. It is in some ways a double portrait, given that it includes a framed photograph of the Italian King, Victor Emmanuel III.



Eugenio D'Angelo (1915)

Picture depicting Mayor Church of Toronto (centre) and Dr. Domenico Marino, Italian Consul (right).

Library and Archives Canada.

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3367770>.

Relations between Italian immigrants in Canada and the “old stock” culture changed dramatically in May of 1915, when Italy entered the war on the side of Great Britain and its allies. Here we see Toronto’s Mayor Thomas Langton Church posing with the Italian Consul Domenico Modugno and a group of Italian reservists and volunteers, probably on the grounds of the Toronto city hall. The mayor’s two-handed clutching of his hat, clenched teeth and slightly off-kilter stance convey a sense of discomfort, which, along with the impassive gaze of the Italian Consul, may be taken as indicators that the two men realized only too well the opportunistic nature of the Canadian establishment’s sudden embrace of the Italian community. For the Italian government as well, World War I seems to have marked the first recognition of the Italian Diaspora as a source of material support to the mother country, in this case in the form of manpower.⁵



Italian-Canadian Reservists marching off to First World War. Yonge and Dundas Streets, Toronto, Ontario (circa 1915)

Eugenio D'Angelo

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3367776.

The initial enthusiasm for the war among members of the Italian-Canadian community is conveyed well by the distinctly martial poise of many of these marchers.



Photo of five Italian immigrants in Canadian Army just prior to leaving for overseas. Trail, B.C. (1918)

Photographer unknown

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3651694>.

Not all Italian immigrants were so eager to sign up for the defence either of their former or adopted homelands, both of which they would have been likely to view as highly abstract entities. The young men pictured here, all originally from the province of Lucca in Tuscany, were all drafted into service.



'The Dumbells' Concert Party. Formed from 3rd Canadian Division in France. 'Marie' (A.G. Murray) and 'Tony' (A.W. Plunkett) in their Italian song and dance number (circa 1917-1919)

Photographer unknown

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada.

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3522921>.

The Dumbells were probably the most famous among the military entertainment units known as “concert parties,” whose task it was to help maintain morale among the Canadian troops stationed on the European front during the First World War.⁶ Pictured are Private Allan Murray and Corporal Albert William Plunkett, both soldiers of the 3rd Canadian Division and founding members of the Dumbells, who took their name from the crossed dumb bells that were the insignia of the 3rd Division. In their costume, expressions and pose, it is possible to infer something about the attitude towards Italians among the younger generation of Canadians at that time. This farcical portrayal seems to associate Italians with notions of romance, good-humour, and high-spiritedness. Along with the first sense of an Italian-Canadian identity, the early twentieth-century also marks the origins in Canada of an equally enduring phenomenon, that of the classic Italian stereotype, which can be seen as combining earlier romantic notions of Italians with new elements relating to the working class character of Italian immigrant culture.



Italian Shepherd's Pipe (circa mid nineteenth century)

Artist unknown

Engraving

Library and Archives Canada.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2172761.

This image reflects an earlier, more romantic image of Italian culture that was prevalent in Canada before the arrival of Italian immigrants on a large scale. There are some interesting similarities between the costume of the shepherd girls and that worn by Private Murray in his “Italian song and dance number.”

NOTES

¹ Robert F. Harney, "Toronto's Little Italy, 1885-1945," *Little Italies in North America*, Ed. Robert F. Harney and Vincenza Scarpaci (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981) 44.

² Library and Archives Canada, *Commissioned Photography*,
<<http://www.lac-bac.gc.ca/immigrants/021017-1700-e.html>>.

³ Strong union opposition to the massive influx of immigrant workers persuaded the Laurier government to pass the "Alien Labour Act" in 1897, which made it illegal to assist or encourage immigration into Canada.

⁴ Luigi Bruti Liberati, "Gli italiani in Canada: Studi e interpretazioni," *Dalla frontiera alle Little Italies: Gli italiani in Canada 1800-1945*, Ed. Robert F. Harney (Rome: Bonacci, 1984) 28.

⁵ Liberati, 35.

⁶ Library and Archives Canada, *The Dumbells*
<<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/gramophone/028011-1007.1-e.html>>.

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