

# Walter Temelini. The Leamington Italian Community: Ethnicity and Identity in Canada

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**Walter Temelini. *The Leamington Italian Community: Ethnicity and Identity in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 709. ISBN 9780773554696.**

After WWI, the Italian immigrants who settled in Leamington (ON), a municipality in southernmost Canada, came from the southern areas of Molise and Lazio. These people engaged in sharecropping activities, eventually acquired land and, after the introduction of greenhouses for vegetable cultivation, ascended the social ladder.

Walter Temelini introduces his sizable history of Leamington's Italian community stating that "literature informs history as much as history informs literature" (9). Although historians might contest this approach to a neglected piece of the Italian Canadian diaspora, I found Temelini's attempt to bridge the gap between two complementary disciplines both bold and promising. With boldness, however, comes risk, and *The Leamington Italian Community* is not free from issues that undermine its quality.

The book stems from a project that the Leamington Roma Club conceived in the 1970s to "provide a living testament of the Italian immigrants of southern Ontario" and "produce a volume of history which would shed light on the nature of the immigrant experience in Canada" (3). Oddly, this extensive documentation of the first settlers' experiences seems to have sat in the author's drawer for nearly forty years. The book betrays this long wait, which is not explained, by describing as "recent" the 1986 anti-McDonald's protest in Rome (324), and by using statistics that do not go beyond 1980. In addition, the lengthy bibliography, which would have benefited from subdivisions, hardly includes any entries beyond the early 1990s.

The fourteen chapters describing Leamington Italians' migration, settlement patterns and activities owe much to Robert F. Harney's *Oral testimony and Ethnic Studies* (1978). Indeed, the greatest achievement of the Roma Club's project was the gathering of nearly 400 audiocassettes containing interviews with first- and second-generation Italian Canadians realized by university students (among whom novelist Nino Ricci) between 1979 and 1981. Researchers also collected a vast corpus of documents, including passports and military discharge papers. Adopting Harney's methodology, Temelini shows how family and transnational networks determined settlement, marriage, and work patterns in Leamington. These archival sources enrich the study, along with government reports and coeval newspaper articles.

This approach, however, presents two problems. First, by confining the research to a micro-historical context, the author fails his stated aim of “universalizing” Leamington Italians’ experiences. Temelini tries to demonstrate how the history of the Italian settlements in Southern Ontario can be studied in the light of Humanism, hence according to an ideal of transnational cultural continuity. In so doing, the author shows a remarkable erudition but falls short when providing evidence for the feasibility of this fascinating plan. In the economy of the book, this approach produces the impression of a Canadian history overpowered by the glorious relics of the Italian past.

The second issue concerns the treatment of oral testimonies and the author’s acritical over-reliance on them. Undoubtedly, the operation of consigning the voices of older generations of Italian Canadians to posterity has merit *per se*; however, to construct the entire narrative on materials that are by nature “fragmented, disconnected, repetitious, and dramatic” (7) produces redundancies and gives the impression of an unbalanced and overwritten account of personal recollections.

Even the intent to fuse historical matters and literary analysis to render a comprehensive picture of Leamington’s thriving Italian community is not sustained by the necessary scholarly rigour, as shown in the concluding chapter, “The Universal Values of Ethnicity: Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints* and the Leamington Italian Community” (428–517). Indeed, the suggestion that “the small world of the Leamington Italian immigrants has been sublimated and universalized into art” (431) by Ricci’s novel is compelling. Temelini dissects *Lives of the Saints* (1990) offering a close reading of its rhetorical constituents and focusing in particular on the linguistic contaminations between Italian and English in an attempt to define the book as “an Italian-Canadian Historical novel” (512–13) and the “living testament” of “the forging of the new identity” (517). Although it is plausible that Ricci fictionalized his experiences as a third-generation immigrant, somehow universalizing the human vicissitudes that life through migration generates, the argument fails to consider scholarly literature in the shaping of transnational Italy or any critical studies of Ricci’s works. Similarly, the analysis of the novel’s (socio) linguistic aspects draws on dated scholarship.

The treatment of historical facts presents problems as well. Key references are missing, especially those regarding the internment of Italian Canadians, a topic Temelini approaches uncritically when recounting the story of Vito Peralta (the only Leamington Italian interned at Petawawa, ON and Fredericton, NB), by relying exclusively on his oral testimony (138–40). The chapter, “The War Years: ‘Good Canadians’ and Bad Italians or Vice Versa?” (132–58), lacks any reference

to studies such as Matteo Pretelli's *Il fascismo e gli italiani all'estero* (2010) that would have contextualized the fascist activities in nearby Windsor area, a stronghold for Mussolini's Canadian followers. Similarly, even some of Temelini's strongest pages, such as those dealing with "Postwar Growth" (159–90) in Leamington and neighbouring regions, fail to incorporate relevant scholarship published after 1988 (e.g., Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock's *The Making of the Mosaic*, 2010).

Thus, Walter Temelini's promise of a multidisciplinary work on Leamington Italians that is both scholarly and accessible remains unfulfilled. Notwithstanding its undeniable merits, including being the first publication on a significant community's settlement pattern in the context of Italian immigration in Canada, and the documentation in the four appendices (which include comprehensive lists of Italians who immigrated to Leamington between 1920 and 1980, names of those who bought land and established farms between 1920 and 1960), the excessive redundancies and the frequent tangents on Renaissance grandeur or Classic antiquities, limit the study's cohesiveness and its appeal to an academic public. As for its appeal to a lay audience, seven hundred pages hardly make *The Leamington Italian Community* a paperback. Local historians, however, will surely find a wealth of material in the rich body of information compiled by Temelini in this very generous—if not fully convincing—editorial endeavor.

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**Luca Somigli e Eleonora Conti, a cura di. *Oltre il canone. Problemi, autori, opere del modernismo italiano*. Perugia: Morlacchi Editore, 2018. Pp. 219. ISBN 9788869749918.**

Con *Oltre il canone*, Luca Somigli e Eleonora Conti danno un importante contributo agli studi che riguardano la modernità letteraria italiana e, sulla base della constatazione che l'idea di modernismo è stata ormai "acquisita alla storiografia" (9) nazionale, propongono dieci saggi dedicati ad altrettanti autori letti alla luce di tale categoria. Il modernismo, sostengono i curatori, va considerato in quanto "orizzonte di problemi all'interno dei quali collocare i tentativi di risposta che sono le opere" (18). Si tratta di un approccio in linea con le prevalenti tendenze critiche del mondo anglofono, come indica anche Pierluigi Pellini riferendosi in