

Context for the Meaning of 'Contadino'

I have spent most of my life in Australia thus being exposed to British customs however not taking too much notice of their apparent class system. Australia is governed under the Westminster Parliamentary system at the Federal level with the House of Lords being replaced by the Senate as the oversight body to the Prime Ministerial executive which constitutes the legislature. There is considerable competition between the British and the Anglo-Saxon Australians based on the historical ties going back to colonisation. The subtle social differences have led to continuing banter between Australians and the British mostly in good humour.

Italo-Australians would stay out of the fray if possible, believing it to be an in-family thing; however, it has been common practice for Italians to call their fellow Australians '*kangaruni*' if an opportunity arose to hedge their superiority distasteful as it may have been. Immigrant Italians were not left unscathed in the fracas which initially marked our arrival to the new land with calls of '*dago b..* and graffiti messages adorning walls and bridges '*dagos go back*'. That said, in brief Australians do not much care for the implied class system which still exists as a veneer in Britain and Italian immigrants have benefitted from the overall egalitarianism that exists in Australia.

It is against this background in which I have grown up that I was reminded of the word '*contadino*' which I had known but not given much attention to. It suffices here to say that one of my cousins gave some assistance to look up records of the Simonetti family in Francavilla, the town in Italy where I was born. The word '*contadino*' appeared against each of the names and I was a little embarrassed to be confronted with such details about my ancestors. At that time I did not have a proper appreciation of the meaning of the word '*contadino*' and silently cringed about its social connotations about my family's past. I now understand that it will have significance in the continuing exploration of the Attisani-Simonetti ancestral history and related discourses.

The Oxford English-Italian dictionary has an entry for '*contadino*' as '*farmer*' however I have still had difficulty in such a translation into English because I believe it does not adequately convey the condescending '*Italianism*' of implied class structures. Christopher Duggan¹ says that poverty was quite pervasive throughout the peninsular, both in the North and South which was a legacy of feudalism in the South and exploitation by rich and powerful elite that controlled the City States in the North. Other translations for '*contadino*' are '*peasant, rustic*' and on colloquial terms as '*yokel*' making for an eclectic demeaning mix from which one would rather not be associated with. Be it as it may, in the Italian feudal context the vassals were also known as '*contadini*' which will remain in common use for official documents up to the end of the Monarchy in 1946.

As I researched Italian history and that of my own family, it is striking that my father Michele was classified as '*contadino*' even in his military record. I also found it

¹ A Concise History of Italy

interesting that one of the persons studied as part of my father's WWII history, Lieutenant General Gian Carlo Turchetto referred to '*contadini – agriculturists*' in the type of work that Germans would enforce on officers, after all, Italian POWs were reclassified as '*free civilian workers*'. Gian Carlo is not happy with the possibility believing that the farm work is demeaning to his officer status.

In family discussions that may relate to some historical anecdote; personalities that would come up in conversation, were often referred to by the title such as '*barone or conte*'. The title referred to would be one that the person may have held under the Italian Monarchy pre-WWII. I have found this an oddity of traditional Italians; it's as if Italy never became a Republic. The '*Libro d'Oro della Nobiltà Italiana*' is an Italian social cringe factor; a directory of noble families that existed between 1315 and 1797 remains in circulation to this day.