

Gordon Craigie



An independent mind...

This month, I'm looking backwards to look forwards...

IF YOU'VE NEVER heard The Proclaimers' song "Scotland's Story", then you're missing a hard-hitting and extremely prescient gem. Released in 2001, on their album *Persevere*, the lyrics are perhaps even more relevant today than they were back then. They tell a story of the importance of immigration to our country, and of the part that immigrants have played in our collective histories – "the Gael and the Pict, the Angle and Dane" are fairly obvious choices I suppose, along with the Irish, but Craig and Charlie also chose to highlight "Jew and Ukraine"... who could've guessed back in 2001 how topical those ethnicities would be almost a quarter of a century later? Interesting too is how they include Gael and Pict, perhaps referring to the Clearances or other enforced movement within Scotland? We can all find different meanings within lyrics, but the underlying message of the song is extremely powerful.

There's been a lot of talk about "New Scots" and "civic nationalism" in Scotland's independence story over pretty much the same period of time that "Scotland's Story" has been around. We Scots often describe ourselves, proudly, as a "mongrel nation" in recognition of the role immigrants have played within many – most? – of our families. I've not gone too far into my own family's genealogy, but I don't think I'd have to go too far back down either line to find some Irish connections... although, unfortunately, too far to be able to claim Irish citizenship and, therefore, reclaim European citizenship! But I do have a wee tale to illustrate the effect

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that immigration can have many years down the line...

Lorenzo Valente was born in 1885 in Vallerotonda, a hillside town close to Cassino in the Lazio region of Italy.. His parents, Giuseppe and Teresa, were probably from ordinary working-class families, probably working on the land – "probably", in both cases, because we can't be absolutely certain. Unless someone records their family history in some way then all of these stories can be lost forever within two generations at most – a lesson for us all. Also, because of Vallerotonda's geographic location close to Montecassino, many official records were lost during the brutal battles fought in the region during the Second World War. But what we do know for certain is that Lorenzo, his two younger brothers, Pietro and Cosmo, and his elder sister, Maria, left Vallerotonda in the early twentieth century to seek better lives.

While his siblings ended up in France, the young Lorenzo ventured further afield and arrived in Glasgow around the turn of the century – he's first officially recorded in the 1911 Census, as a boarder in a house in Great Eastern Road. His landlord is also Italian, a fish restaurant owner, as is his fellow lodger. Interestingly, whoever completed the Census manages to misspell both of Lorenzo's names, so he's officially recorded as Lawrence Valenti! Anyway, in 1911, the 25-year-old Lorenzo (Lawrence!) is employed as a shopkeeper specialising in Italian produce – any of the dates or timelines in this story are entirely dependent on the availability of records – but by 1920 he's recorded as a confectioner. Oral history passed down through the family suggested that Lorenzo eventually owned an ice-cream shop and café in the Gallowgate, and this is confirmed as fact by the 1921 Census.

In 1914, Lorenzo married an Airdrie girl, Lilian Davies, and they started their new life together as tenants in a house in Burn Road, later to be renamed Invernairn Street, which would be demolished in the 1980s to make way for the Forge Shopping Centre in Parkhead. Their first son, Joseph, was born that same year and was followed by Alfredo in 1919, Teresa in 1922, Riccardo in 1923, Lilitana in 1925, Edoardo in 1931, and finally Nicandro in 1937. As was all too common back then, the couple also had three other children who, sadly, died in infancy – Guido, Giacinto, and Antonio. With a growing family and a successful business



The Arandora Star Memorial Garden at St Andrew's Cathedral, Glasgow

established, Lorenzo's move to Scotland from Italy had probably exceeded his expectations.

But Lorenzo's life, like all Italians in the UK, would take a less positive turn in 1940, when Mussolini decided to join with Germany in declaring war against Britain and France. Immediately all Italians resident in Scotland were viewed in the same way as Germans, enemy aliens. All Italian men who had lived here for less than 20 years, and were aged between 16 and 70, were considered for internment. Fortunately for Lorenzo, only in his mid-50s at the time, he must've qualified for the lesser restrictions imposed on those who had been resident for more than 20 years, and the family story is that his only penalty was to be forbidden from being within a certain distance of the sea – apparently a 30-mile exclusion zone – presumably to exclude the possibility of signalling to enemy ships? Compared to others who were sent to internment camps for the duration of the war, this must've seemed a bearable sanction. He was certainly more fortunate than the 470 Italians who perished on the ill-fated internment ship, SS *Arandora Star*, which was torpedoed by the German Navy in the Atlantic en route to Canada in July 1940. The Arandora Star Memorial Garden next to Glasgow's St Andrew's Cathedral is very moving and well worth a visit.

The circumstances around this time would obviously have had a profound effect on Lorenzo's children too, and they recalled trying to minimise their "Italian-ness" at school and around their home. Whether it was because of the war, or whether their parents had already thought about this previously, Joseph, Alfredo, Teresa, Riccardo, Liliana, Edoardo, and Nicandro were always known as Joe, Alfie, Teresa, Dick, Lily, Eddie, and Andy. Sadly, in 1948 aged just 51, their mother, Lilian, died.

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Lorenzo and Lilian with Dick, Teresa, Lily and wee Eddie, probably around 1935?

Each of the children married, except for Dick, and had families and careers – for example, Dick was a Chemistry lecturer at Imperial College in London, Andy was a journalist in Fleet Street before moving to Mallorca for many years, and Eddie was a mechanical engineer. So, as is still true today despite the outright lies and disinformation peddled by right-wing politicians, it has always been the case that immigrants are



net contributors to society and add immensely to our social fabric. Lorenzo moved 1600 miles away from his homeland to build a new life, and the consequences of his decision are still positively affecting Scotland today – his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren continuing his story through education, professions, and families of their own drawing other families with their own stories into this ever-expanding web. Lorenzo Valente died in his Invernairn Street home in 1951, aged 65.

So why am I telling you all of this? Well, because I have so much to be grateful to Lorenzo for. Because he came to Scotland, because he married Lilian, because they had child number six, Edoardo Lorenzo Valente – known to all as Eddie – because Eddie met and married Ruth Wilson, because they moved to my home town after their youngest child, Angela, was born... Lorenzo is a crucial part of my own story. And that story took a fantastic twist back in September 2023 when – ironically nine years to the day after we, the citizens of Scotland, failed to reclaim our nationhood! – the Italian Republic recognised me as a citizen, courtesy of being married to Angela, whose entitlement to Italian citizenship stems from the grandfather she never met. We both feel that Lorenzo would be proud and happy that his family journey has in some way gone full circle – *viva la repubblica!*

I so look forward to the day when my Republic of Scotland passport will sit alongside my brand-new Repubblica Italiana one. There are many reasons why we've pursued this citizenship, and honouring Angela's heritage and her grandfather's memory is definitely the main one. But the whole endeavour took on added significance after the Brexit clusterboughach imposed upon us against our will. Going through the various processes involved in the necessary document collection has been eye-opening, frustrating, time-consuming, and expensive (!) but

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also very educational – I've now got an Italian language certificate from the University of Siena for a start! We've found out so much more about the Valente family history and also, sadly, found out how much we don't know and probably never will because of the passage of time. Only Andy, Nicandro, of Lorenzo's children is still with us and, because he was the youngest child by some distance, there's probably much he doesn't know either.

Special mention must be made, however, of one aspect of the UK's colonial attitude to Scotland which came to light during our document gathering. When we sovereign Scots require an official copy of our birth certificate it's simply a very straightforward and fairly priced (£12) procedure of requesting the certificate from the National Records of Scotland in Edinburgh. Within a week a beautiful, embossed document arrives, which then has to be sent to England for "legalisation"... yes, our colonial masters have to endorse (at a cost of £45!) our officially issued certificate as "genuine"! This really infuriates me!

But enough of that, the upside is that Angela and I can now look forward to 2024 as Italian citizens, and as European citizens once again with all of our freedom-of-movement rights restored. And, ultimately, it's all down to the ambition and hard work of Lorenzo Valente and his contribution to Scotland – as Craig and Charlie so beautifully put it, "we're all Scotland's story and we're all worth the same".

