

## PLOD ESSAY: Give me your tired, your poor...

With a federal election coming we are up to our eyeballs with opinions on the perennial immigration issue. So often the use of incendiary language such *illegals, boat people, terrorists* is used to describe people seeking refuge rather than more legitimate terms such as *asylum seekers* or *refugees*. We are threatened with an image of Australia sinking under the weight of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free”. Yet, all we have to do is look around us in Wonthaggi to realise that there are and have been refugees among us who have left a wonderful legacy in this town.

Although Arabs make up only 40% of the 30 million people in Sudan, over the last 20 years, the Arabic speaking Sunni Muslims have managed to maintain domination by ruthless military coercion of the southern majority population, most of whom are Christian. Recently we have had an influx of Sudanese refugees sent to many regional centres around Victoria. Some came to Wonthaggi. A friend told me that the town she lives in took three months to find permanent accommodation for the three Sudanese families sent to them. By contrast, in Wonthaggi it took one afternoon to house thirty refugees. Mitchell House, the Catholic Church, the schools and Wonthaggi citizens in general have welcomed these people, given them sanctuary, security and freedom. This is an indication of Wonthaggi’s generous spirit, which may be directly connected with the foundations laid by earlier refugees who came here.

Some of the first migrants to come to Wonthaggi were the Scots. In our early local newspapers, the Caledonian Society is plainly a force in Wonthaggi’s social and sporting life. Scots have been migrating to Australia in large numbers from the 1830s when poverty and subsistence crises, especially in the Highlands, created urgent need to flee the country. From that time, industrialisation so overtook Scotland that by the late 1800s only 11% of the workers were still on the land. Shipbuilding provided the basis for the economy but after the Great War it began to falter. Decline in industry meant decline in the demand for coal. The Scottish workers were the lowest paid in the British Isles. This created a climate for social and political unrest,

which, in turn, caused conflict. It is because of these circumstances that so many Scots came to the Wonthaggi State Coal Mine.

Jim Chambers was one of these people. In his homeland, he was a miner and, naturally, a union man, but being such was not easy in the mines in Scotland. He was also a self-educated man, who kept up with the progress of movements intended to improve the prosperity of the workingman. After the Great War, he and his brother made an attempt to organise a union campaign for work safety and conditions, but they were immediately sacked, and the bosses made sure they were blackballed from every mine in the country. Thus, Jim was forced to leave Scotland in 1923. Since his political beliefs and his unionism made it impossible to live in his homeland without risking jail, he became a political refugee.



Jim, Elsie, Joe, Nellie, Ron, Agnes, Dave Chambers 1920

Yet, what would Wonthaggi be if Jim

Chambers, his wife, Agnes, and his five children had never come here? Jim went to work in the State Coal Mine as soon as he arrived and continued to work until the last years of his life. He was due to retire but WWII came along and he kept right on working.

“Jim, of course, was involved in union work,” explains his 91-year old daughter-in-law, Lyn Chambers, when asked about the kind of man Jim was. “He was that sort that if he hadn’t been born into the working class he would have been a professor. He was always reading when you saw him. He didn’t have that organisational skill that his wife had. He was very quiet, but I was told that when the miners were trying to decide what to do about a strike and what their laws were and how they’d manage, they’d go down to Jim Chambers at crib time and get his advice. ‘Cause that’s the sort of fellow he was. Yet, he didn’t do any of the organisation. He knew the law and what they would be up against. He knew all the philosophies of Socialism, Unionism, Co-operativism, Marxism. That’s the kind of character he was.”

We all know his wife, Agnes, who was fiercely political, became a force to be reckoned with in this town. Not only was she a founding member of the revolutionary Miners’ Women’s Auxiliary, but also

as Lyn says, “My mother-in-law in the forties was trying to get a maternity wing because she knew the women couldn’t afford it. And she had this knack of asking the church clubs and the CWA who were against the Lefties at that time, but when she could chair a meeting and keep the people focused on the maternity and get them to come up with idea to raise funds and all this sort of thing. She kept it together to do the job. The same thing happened with the comfort station and she was trying to do the same thing with the kindergarten, but that took twelve years.”

And then was their son, Joe, a beloved primary teacher, a political and community activist, a founder of the Historical Society, followed by his wife, Lyn, who is still active and invaluable in the ways she contributes to this community.

Just as in 19th century Scotland, after the Great War Italy was reeling from poverty and subsistence crises. The government encouraged its people to emigrate and establish enclaves of Italian life throughout the world. The flow to Australia occurred in 1921 just after America closed its doors to migration, but slowed during the Great Depression. After WWII, impoverishment in the defeated Italy was once again at record levels just at the time Australia decided on a policy of industrialisation that needed workers. We opened our doors to Italians as the chosen European migrants. Domenico Gatto was one of those migrants, but he didn’t come here to escape poverty. He fled his homeland because his life had become untenable in the culturally complex and honour bound society that had Calabria [in southernmost Italy] in its grip. He was in some ways a refugee.

As Sam tells it: “My father, being the oldest member of the family, was honour bound to go and seek revenge for the honour of the family, which he did. That fellow being a good friend of Dad’s and that same fellow here in Australia came to visit Dad. But to maintain the honour of the family, my father had to go there and cut this fellow’s face, which he did... My dad was the kind of man who could get along with anyone... He was a real charmer... There was a festival in the town near by. And since he was young, handsome, loved music and enjoying himself, he went to this religious festival. While he was there two people got into a pretty serious fight with knives

out and everything. And my father, being the type that he was he went there to separate the two, which he did, but while he was separating them one of them wounded the other. Mussolini was trying to clamp down on all these vengeful acts of honour in Southern Italy and so since Dad was involved in the fight, he was given two years in jail. While he was in jail – I don’t know the ins and outs of this – Dad learned which people you didn’t cross because of course if you cross them then you have to defend yourself, but these people had noticed Dad because of what he has done to protect the honour of his family. They approached him and in some way, I don’t know and will never know the details, he was forced to become one of the ‘little ones’ of the Drangheta. All of this story came to me indirectly from Mum and other relatives in Italy because my father would not talk about that. He came out of jail early because of good behaviour because he could sing and do all sorts of things. But once you have been approached and trapped by one of these organisations, you’ve had it.”

The war put a stop to much Drangheta activity and Domenico, like many others, thought they would let him go, but when he was again approached after the war he decided to leave Italy forever even though he had a wife and family, was a good provider, had his own carrier business, olive groves, vineyards, cows, sheep and goats and made cheese and ricotta for the family’s use and to sell. “At that stage,” says Sam, “we got a letter from my mother’s cousin, Sam Golotta, who was in Wonthaggi at that time, singing the praises of Australia and how free it was and my father, bitterly opposed by my mother, made the decision there and then to leave Italy. This was in 1949. That same year, *‘per un mio ideale’* (for an ideal of mine), he left for Australia.”



*Domenico Gatto just arrived*

Domenico Gatto was a refugee, trapped by ancient cultural traditions, but he found freedom and security in Wonthaggi. Can you imagine our town without the Gatto family here? Without Mr Gatto’s cheese and ricotta enjoyed by so many and still missed? Can you imagine it without Sam singing in the choir, directing plays, leading the Historical Society, researching the and the history of the town, writing books...?

