

THE CAMBRIDGE BARREL ORGAN CASE
RICHARD HOLTON

In May of 1898 the Cambridge newspapers reported on a court case involving Italian organ grinders. It was a story of many parts: of a woman's elopement with a younger man, of an abandoned husband demanding justice, of the alleged theft of jewellery, two barrel organs and an ice cream cart. Small wonder it made the papers. Equally remarkably though is the light it sheds on the difficult lives that many Italian immigrants were leading.

Let us start at the beginning. Pietro Antonio D'Agostino and Maria Valenti had married near Naples in 1887. About five years later they moved to England, and settled in Croydon with Maria's mother. They worked as organ grinders, and rented out rooms in their house to lodgers. Croydon had a sizeable Italian community at the time, but for some it was a violent world, and, from the court records it seems that Maria—more so than Pietro—was in the thick of the violence. This didn't come so much from threats from outside, though there were some of those—one of the Croydon organ grinders was charged with stabbing in 1893, after a gang of local toughs tried to take his organ (he was acquitted). More common was fighting within the community. In 1896 an argument in a pub after a funeral got out of hand, and Maria was apparently quite badly beaten with an iron bar by four of her compatriots. At other times Maria seems to have been the instigator: she had several convictions for drunkenness and assault.

In 1897 Pietro, perhaps tired of this life in Croydon, decided to set up an ice-cream business in Scotland. Just before Christmas he and Maria went up to Stirling together. Maria, who handled their financial affairs—she was literate, and could speak English—then returned to Croydon, ostensibly to sell some things to pay for the new venture. Pietro waited for her in Stirling. But she never came back. Pietro heard from his mother-in-law that Maria was no longer in Croydon, and so he went back. He discovered that she was indeed missing, as were the two barrel organs that they had bought on hire-purchase, an ice-cream cart, the jewellery that he had given to Maria, and various other things. What he did find was a love letter addressed to his wife, from another Italian, Emilio Cozzi, bidding her come to Cambridge. Maria, it seemed, had responded to his bid.

Emilio Cozzi was fourteen years younger than Maria—he was just 22. He too was from southern Italy, but from the mountain town of Senerchia, some 50 miles south-east of Naples. Senerchia had been a small and stable community that had seen little movement for many hundreds of years. Everybody knew everybody; in fact everybody was related to everybody and their descendants (including the current writer). That stability changed in the 1880s, when Senerchia began to witness significant emigration, both the US and to England. Initially those coming to England went to London—there were half a dozen or so Senerchians recorded in Clerkenwell's Little Italy in the 1881 census—but by the end of the century they

were spread much more widely. One of the main Italian lodging houses in Croydon, *The Christiani Macroni*, was run by the del Giudices, a family from Senerchia; and three more Senerchia families were living in Cambridge, working as organ grinders—the Russos in Fitzroy Street, the di Marcos in Staffordshire Gardens, and another family of del Giudices in Leeke Street.

On young Emilio's arrival in England, this was the network of relations that would have supported him. It looks as though he initially went to Croydon, to the del Giudice lodging house there—presumably this is where he met Maria. Then he went on to Cambridge, rented a house in Norfolk Street, and wrote, calling her to come.

For Maria to get from Croydon to Cambridge with two barrel organs and an ice-cream cart would have been no simple matter. She persuaded two of her Italian lodgers from Croydon to help her. It would have involved taking the train to London Bridge, pushing the organs and the cart across to Liverpool Street and taking another train from there. Once in Cambridge she moved in with Emilio in Norfolk Street. She had promised employment to the two men she brought with her, but they never got paid, so looked for other work.

When Pietro arrived in Cambridge in search of Maria, bringing with him Maria's mother, he went straight to the police. Unlike Maria, he spoke little English, and so had to get an interpreter. The police seem to have been sympathetic. Detective-Sergeant Marsh, who had apparently seen Maria and Emilio around Cambridge, went with Pietro to Norfolk Street, and arrested them both. One barrow organ was located in a nearby shed that Emilio rented, together with the ice cream cart, newly painted in Emilio's name. The other barrel organ was found at the Horse and Jockey in East Road.

The committal proceedings in the Magistrates' Court look to have been quite an event. Canon Christopher Scott, the Catholic Mission Rector for Cambridge, translated the incriminating letter from Emilio—he had learned Italian as a student in Rome—and then stood surety for the accused. Romolo Giordano, a clerk at Trinity College but born in Formia, north of Naples and so familiar with southern dialects acted as the translator. In addition to Pietro, witnesses included Maria's mother, the two men who had come with her from Croydon, and various Cambridge organ grinders, including some of Emilio's relatives. The magistrates decided that the case should proceed to a jury trial.

The trial was something of a let-down. The case collapsed immediately on the straightforward grounds that the receipts for the barrel organs were in Maria's name. How much this simply reflected the fact that she was the one who was literate and handled the finances was rather unclear. Nevertheless she could hardly be accused of stealing what was legally hers. What was surprising was that, knowing this, the magistrates had let the case proceed. Perhaps the idea that the property in a marriage was the property of the husband was so deeply engrained that they could not shake it. The case against Maria was withdrawn, and the jury was instructed to acquit Emilio.

Despite having been prosecuted by her husband Pietro, Maria went back to him in Croydon. By 1900 they were both fined for refusing to move on from the patch where they were playing—they were opposite a butcher, who happened to be a town councillor. Maria, it was noted, had been especially abusive towards the police. The following week she was arrested for playing again in the very same spot; the court took this to be deliberate defiance, and fined her more heavily. She insisted, reasonably enough, that if the butcher could earn his living, she should be allowed to earn hers. In 1903 she was back in court as the plaintiff, after being attacked by two Italian hot chestnut sellers. She claimed at first to have been living with her husband, but as more evidence came to light on appeal, it seemed that she had been living with another Italian man, and that there might have been some provocation on her part towards those who attacked her. Pietro, her husband, had dropped from view at this point; perhaps he had returned to Italy. Maria and her mother stayed on in their house in Croydon, and went on having minor brushes with the law, for running an unlicensed lodging house, and for having a dangerous monkey that bit some children. Maria died in 1909; she was only 48. Her mother remained in Croydon; her last court appearance (or non-appearance, since she failed to show) was for keeping a dog without a licence. She died in 1918.

Emilio Cozzi didn't stay long in Cambridge. He returned to London, and then left England in 1900 for Chicago. There he married one of his Senerchia cousins, and had six children. Some time after 1916 he left the family, heading west, ending up in Salida, Colorado, which at that point was still something of a frontier town but with a large Calabrian population. In 1921 he married again, this time to a 21 year old Argentinian-Italian (he claimed he was 34, but in reality was 45; there is no evidence of a divorce from his first wife, and the catholic church where he married wouldn't have recognised it anyway). They had three children and he stayed in Salida, working on the railroad. He died, divorced from his second wife, in 1953.

The small Senerchia community in Cambridge lasted ten years or so after the trial. The families sometimes went back to Senerchia for short periods—the Russos and the di Marcos both went back for a spell in 1901, perhaps to avoid the census which was viewed with great suspicion by many immigrant families. Nevertheless, their primary home was clearly Cambridge, and organ grinding was a job, like any other. Once they had paid off the organ, it was enough to support a family. But clearly it was a tough life. The first to leave Cambridge were the del Giudices, departing for Chicago in 1907, where Michele worked as a labourer for the street car company. The following year the di Marcos moved back to Croydon, to take over the lodging house from their relatives there. Finally the Russos left for Chicago in 1913, where Antonio worked as a shipping clerk. That certainly wasn't the end of the Italian presence in Cambridge: other Italians were moving in, including Anaeleto Sylvester, originally from Lucca, who moved to East Road around 1910 and opened the ice cream business that was to be a Cambridge fixture for many years. But the departure of the Senerchia families marked the end of an era: organ grinding, and the way of life that went with it, was dying out.