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# Lest We Forget: The Murchison Ossario a Sacred Italian War Shrine and War Grave

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*Front cover:* Ex voto from the Aeolian Islands. The caption reads: Goletta Santissima Annunziata di Stromboli, Capitano Giacomo Barnao, forzando per montare il Monte di Gaeta alle 4 pom[eridiane] del 23 Ott[obre] 1885. Il Capitano, fratelli ed equipaggio offrono per Grazia Ricevuta dall'Immacolata Concezione e Sant[Bartolommeo]. *The schooner Santissima Annunziata from Stromboli, Captain Giacomo Barnao, striving to pass the Mount of Gaeta at 4pm on 23 October 1885. The Captain, his brothers and the crew offer [this picture] for the grace they received from the Immaculate Conception and Saint Bartholomew.* [Image courtesy John Barnao; see article in this issue.]

*Back cover:* The hand-embroidered handkerchief made by Dario Lastoria, an Italian prisoner of war, which he gave to Loreta Giannotti before his repatriation to Italy in 1945. Donated to the Italian Historical Society & Museo Italiano (Co.As.It.) by Rita Cahill in memory of her late mother, Loreta Giannotti. [See article in this issue.]

## **contents**

reading italian australian lives by john gatt-rutter	4
between trieste and australia: chapters from mino's story by girolamo favretto	9
fraternising with the enemy: british-italian relations, 1939-1947 by nicole townsend	15
lest we forget: the murchison ossario, a sacred italian grave and war shrine by mia spizzica	27
the end of the era of abundance in the aeolian islands and the role of the società isole eolie in channelling migration to australia by john barnao	36
politica e cultura in un cenacolo di provincia: lettere di gino nibbi e di acuto vitali ad ermenegildo catalini di alfredo luzi	49
la scrittura autobiografica tra antropologia e letteratura recensione di john gatt-rutter, <i>the bilingual cockatoo: writing italian australian lives</i> di carla torreggiani	60



Fig. 1 – Sketch for the Murchison Ossario by architect Paolo Caccia Dominioni, 1957.  
[Image courtesy Anna Caccia Dominioni]

## lest we forget: the murchison ossario, a sacred italian war grave and shrine by mia spizzica

Mia Spizzica, a researcher in Italian Australian social history and currently a Research Associate with Museum Victoria, is completing a PhD in Italian Studies at Monash University in which she explores the stories of the surveillance, detention and internment of Italian civilians classified as enemy aliens during World War Two. Mia has published peer reviewed articles in the *International Journal of the Humanities* and in the *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, has contributed a series of articles to the Italian language Australian newspapers *Il Globo* and *La Fiamma* on Italian internment in Australia, and has spoken on this topic on SBS Italian Radio program, Rete Italia and Radio Italia. She was the historical archives researcher for the SBS television series *Once Upon a Time in Carlton*, and has collaborated with the Italian Historical Society and Museo Italiano at Co.As.It. Mia is currently working on three book projects: Mia Spizzica (ed.), *Hidden Lives: Italian internee families in Australia during WW2*, an edited anthology of eyewitness narratives, a history of the Murchison Ossario focusing on the lives and deaths of the 130 Italian internees buried in the mausoleum, and a monograph on the war art of Lamberto Yonna and other Italian artists and artisans who were interned in camps in Australia between 1940 and 1946. Mia continues to collect testimonies, documents and other material relating to the experiences of Italians civil internees during World War Two. She can be contacted by email: [mia.spizzica@monash.edu.au](mailto:mia.spizzica@monash.edu.au) or mobile phone: 0400 200 235.

The small rural village of Murchison in central Victoria holds many little known treasures. The Murchison meteorite that fell in nearby fields in 1969 is famous among astronomers as it contains the core chemical elements that are necessary for life on this planet. There are also seven internment camps dotted in grazing paddocks throughout what I refer to as the World War Two Internment Camp Triangle formed by the hamlets of Murchison, Tatura and Rushworth. The least known treasure of the area is probably the Italian Mausoleum (Ossario) that is located a short distance from the village post office, inside the Murchison cemetery on Weir Road. The Ossario has been described as “a sacred war memorial,” however, it is much more than a stone monument: the Ossario is also the site of an annual Italian pilgrimage that culminates in a military procession and religious service to honour the war dead.

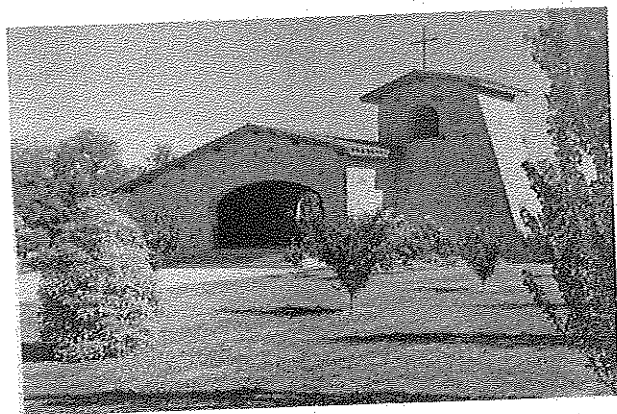


Fig. 2 – The Murchison Ossario in 1961.

Arguably the most important Italian war necropolis and memorial in the Southern Hemisphere, the Ossario holds an assured place in the historical records of the Italian diaspora as well as in the hearts of that community. Nonetheless, remarkably little has been written on the history of this shrine and its occupants.<sup>1</sup> The Ossario is a tangible object that links this nation’s past to the present; it is a focal point that bears witness to events that reshaped the lives of Italians who were interned as enemies in this country more than 70 years ago. The Ossario – one of two Italian war monuments on the site, the other being the Italian Prisoners of War Memorial, erected by prisoners of war in the Rushworth camp

and moved to its present location in 1968 – was built as a mausoleum to house the remains of the Italian war dead resting in Australian soil. Inside this building are the bodies of Prisoners of War and civilian internees who died whilst interned in Australia during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the Murchison Ossario, in addition to acting as a shrine of remembrance, is also a war grave of deep emotional meaning for not only the families of Italian military men whose relatives did not return home at war’s end, but also for the descendants of the thirty-six Italian civilians who died whilst interned in Australia. This article is a brief exploration of the historical and social significance of the Murchison Ossario as an iconic Italian war shrine and sacred war grave.

The Ossario’s burial chamber houses the remains of 130 Italians. Old and young, rich and poor, theist and atheist, fascist, socialist, anarchist and apolitical, soldiers and sailors, doctors, cane cutters and waiters: all are laid shoulder to shoulder regardless of their origin and life experiences. Some of the civilian deceased were newly arrived migrants or were captured in British controlled territories, while others were naturalised British subjects, having lived in Australia for many decades. The military dead were men from the Italian navy, air force and army. All were Italians, in death as in birth. They now rest near the ancient burial grounds of the Ngoraalum people, the traditional owners of the surrounding lands.

Almost 18,500 Italian prisoners of war, captured by the Allied Forces in North Africa during the Second World War, were detained in Australia until they were repatriated, some as late as 1947. During their imprisonment, almost 100 Italian military men died in different circumstances in six Australian States and Territories. Similarly, more than 36 Italian civilians, who were interned as enemy aliens by the Australian or the British government, died in internment camps in Australia. Some of the latter group had migrated to Australia in the inter-war years, while others were Italian merchant seamen or civilians captured in British-controlled territories such as Palestine and Singapore in 1940.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Vivien Achia, (2006) ‘Italian Internees in Victoria and the Murchison Ossario,’ *Italian Historical Society Journal*, vol. 14 No. 2, Jul-Dec 2006.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Bossence (1965) *Murchison*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of Australia, series MP1103/1, passim.



Among the deceased is one whose name is included in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Francesco Fantin was a sugar cane cutter at the time of his arrest in Queensland. An antifascist, he was killed by fascist internees on 16 November 1942 in Camp 14A, a civilian internment camp at Loveday in Barmera, South Australia.<sup>4</sup> Views vary regarding the circumstances of Fantin's death, and he remains an enigmatic figure more than 70 years after his death. Several researchers have come to the conclusion that the death of Fantin was no accident. In his PhD thesis, David Faber states:

South Australian police [...] found that Fantin was assassinated by fascist conspirators who contrived to intimidate witnesses and interfere with material evidence [...] frustrating the laying of a charge of murder and leading in March 1943 to the sentencing of Giovanni Casotti to two years hard labour for manslaughter.<sup>5</sup>

Another man's death in detention is recorded in a book published in 1981, *The Italian Farming Soldiers: Prisoners of War in Australia 1941-1947* by Alan Fitzgerald. Private Rodolfo Bartoli, captured in Libya by the British, was shot in the back and killed on 3 April 1946 while held in a prisoner of war camp in Rowville, an outer eastern Melbourne suburb. The officer who shot Bartoli, Captain Waterston, was never placed on trial for the killing. Alan Fitzgerald writes:

All the events took place in 1946, long after the end of World War Two. Despite the fact that Italy had changed sides in the conflict and declared war on Germany in October 1943, Captain Waterston in 1946 was treating his Italian prisoners as if they were dangerous enemy soldiers [...] From details of his behaviour first raised in Mr Santospirito's letter and then revealed in Mr Justice Simpson's inquiry, it is evident that Captain Waterston was temperamentally unfit to be in charge

of a prisoner-of-war camp in wartime, let alone months after peace had been declared.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the deaths in the POW and civilian internment camps remain a mystery to this day. My research aims to reveal why some of these people suffered untimely deaths in detention, far from home and family.



Fig 3 – Professor Ferdinando C. Bentivoglio shortly before he was interned in 1940.

It is noteworthy that no Italian civilian internee deaths were recorded after the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was removed from power in July 1943. One possible explanation is that some civilian internees were released shortly before they died, and so were not counted in the internee death statistics. A case in point is that of 72-year-old Professor Ferdinando Carlo Bentivoglio, who died hours after his release from detention at the Loveday Internment Camp. At the time of his release he was dying of cancer at the Barmera Base Hospital (Loveday) in South Australia. He spent his final hours travelling in a private ambulance with his son, a doctor in the Australian military, dying in the Royal Adelaide Hospital – a free man en route home to Sydney. Professor Bentivoglio is buried in the Adelaide Cemetery.<sup>7</sup> Archival documents also reveal that other deaths, both civilian and military, were not recorded in the register of deceased Italian detainees.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Nursy-Bray, 'Fantin, Francesco Giovanni (Frank) (1901–1942),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 1 December 2014, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fantin-francesco-giovanni-frank-12912>.

<sup>5</sup> David Faber, (2008) *FG Fantin: The Life and Times of an Italo-Australian Anarchist, 1901-42*, PhD Thesis, University of Adelaide, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Fitzgerald (1981) *The Italian Farming Soldiers: Prisoners of War in Australia 1941-1947*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives of Australia, series MP1103/1, Bentivoglio files, passim.

Until the Murchison Ossario was built, most deceased prisoners of war and civil internees remained buried in the locations of their detentions and deaths. After the war had officially ended in 1945, Australian military authorities required that the remains of these Italians be reburied in civil cemeteries.<sup>8</sup> My research has uncovered evidence which indicates that families such as that of civilian detainee, Dr G.B. Battaglia, had requested the repatriation of their loved ones; however, archives show that the Australian military authorities rejected these requests on health grounds. Some families were informed that their relatives were buried in cemeteries within internment camps, but were not informed when the bodies were relocated elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> By the time they were transferred to the Murchison Ossario in the 1960s, some of the mortal remains had been exhumed and reburied up to five times.<sup>10</sup> This situation may be among the reasons for the building of the mausoleum as a definitive resting place for the Italian war dead.

The Murchison Ossario was designed in 1957 by the renowned Milanese soldier, writer and engineer, Paolo Caccia Dominioni di Sillavengo, who had also planned the El Alamein Italian mausoleum near Alexandria in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, information regarding the Australian builders of the Ossario was still research in progress; however, it is probable that the project manager was Melbourne architect René Stella, using Paolo Dominioni's design. The original Ossario was completed in about 1961.<sup>12</sup> At around the same time the Australian War Commission arranged the exhumation of deceased Italian prisoners of war and civilian internees from their graves in each state. As a result, most of the Italian war dead were relocated to Victoria by the time the Ossario was completed.<sup>13</sup>

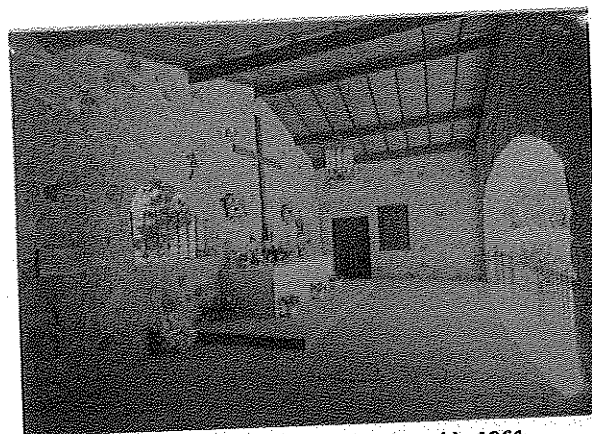


Fig. 4 – The Ossario's Chapel in 1961.

The original stone and granite building was designed with an open-air chapel; it included a bell tower with a bronze bell and an underground crypt below the chapel to house the coffins. These were laid in metal compartments with polished wood facings, stacked five coffins high in rows of ten. As a consequence of two major floods which resulted in the crypt being inundated with water, an above-ground necropolis (also five tiered) was built at the rear of the chapel.<sup>14</sup> The chapel, bell tower and necropolis are constructed using a traditional Italian rustic style stone.

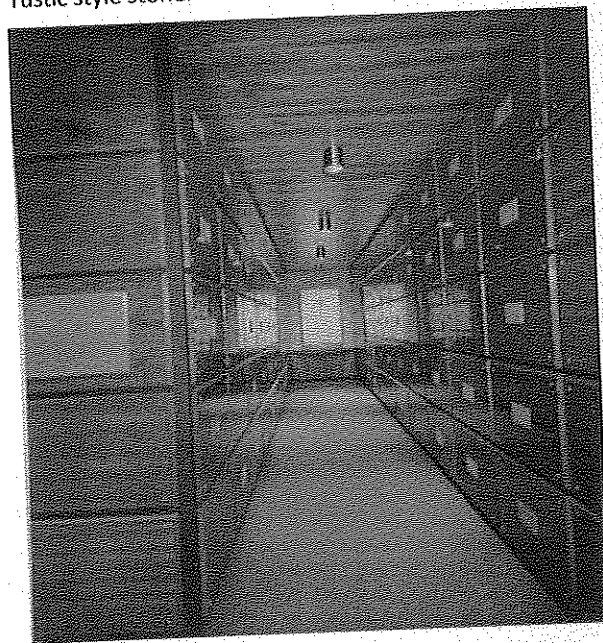


Fig 5 – The crypt of the Ossario in 1961.

A number of fine bronze plaques are located both outside and inside the structure. The plaques commemo-

<sup>8</sup> National Archives of Australia, series MP1103/1.

<sup>9</sup> Author's interviews with the families of internees, and National Archives of Australia, MP1103/1, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> National Archives of Australia, MP1103/1.

<sup>11</sup> "Un uomo: Paolo Caccia Dominioni", *Rivista Militare*, Roma, Ministero della Difesa, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> 'Grand visionary Rene Stella dies,' Old Paradians Association, accessed 20 November 2014, <http://www.oldparadians.com.au/FullArticle.aspx?Article=Rene%20Stella>.

<sup>13</sup> Murchison Mausoleum documents held at the Health Department, Victoria.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



rate notable individuals and organisations that were involved in the construction of the monuments or in the annual commemorations that take place there. Two side walls inside the chapel bear the list of the deceased in bronze letters. All of the tombs have a lacquered, hardwood plaque bearing the name of the deceased.<sup>15</sup>

The Ossario is located approximately 60 meters inside the main entrance of the Murchison General Cemetery. The chapel and attached burial chamber are hidden behind an imposing iron gate hinged on stone pillars, and cloaked by a dark green curtain of mature cypress pines.

The Mausoleum has undergone a few changes since it was built. A series of photographs show that over the decades the landscaping has changed, with roses and other plantings replaced by an avenue of cypresses flanking the pathway leading to the Ossario and surrounding the perimeter of the site.<sup>16</sup> Over the last four or five decades, the cypresses have grown to create a dense mantle around the Italian cemetery, hiding the building from view until one has entered well into the site.

The chapel itself has been modified with the addition of black steel gates and window shutters, making it less vulnerable to vandalism. As a result of the inundation of the underground crypt by a number of floods mentioned earlier, Avelino Crespan was commissioned in 1974 to erect a crafted, harmonised stone extension attached to the rear of the chapel. His construction team included Alfio Sorbello, his son Ross Sorbello, Renato Pozzebon, Vince Romeo and Peter Cella, all from the Goulburn region. In a recent interview, Mr Crespan confirmed that the 130 coffins were respectfully relocated in the new extension, and were positioned exactly as they had been in the underground crypt.<sup>17</sup>

This monument is slowly fading from the consciousness of younger Italian Australians as the elderly no longer attend the memorials and the subsequent generations no longer care about or have never come to know about

the significance of this unique and sacred war grave, thus relinquishing this link to their Italian heritage. As Vivien Achia noted in her article, the building is of great historical significance,<sup>18</sup> an intrinsic part of the Italian wartime narrative. Despite this, it is possible that the history of the building and the stories of the war dead there enshrined may not find a place in the consciousness of future generations of Australians of Italian heritage. If its significance remains unknown to those who do not read Italian newspapers or listen to the Italian radio broadcasts that announce the annual Commemoration Day, the Italian Ossario di Murchison will become an increasingly enigmatic building, valued for its aesthetic and tourist appeal rather than for the stories of the deceased housed therein. However, there is hope that new interest in the building may be gradually growing amongst the descendants of the deceased who have reconnected with their loved ones, as well as amongst second generation Italian-Australians and Italo-philés in general.



Fig 6 – The entrance to the memorial avenue in 2014.

[Image courtesy of the author]

There are also signs that the Victorian and Commonwealth Heritage Commissions are taking a new interest in the site. The Victorian Heritage Commission has listed

<sup>15</sup> Research is in progress on all the deceased.

<sup>16</sup> Guido Ciacià, (2009) 'Il Sacrario Militare Italiano di Murchison', *Sentiero Tricolore*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Avelino Crespan at the Murchison Ossario, 8 October 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Vivien Achia, *Op. cit.*

the Murchison Italian Soldiers Memorial as a significant war relic.<sup>19</sup> In 2012, the Australian Heritage Commission published a report on places of cultural and historical importance in the Greater Shepparton area, which included the Murchison Ossario. The report states:

The Ossario, Murchison Cemetery, is of state historic and aesthetic significance. As the final resting place of 130 Italian prisoners of war and detainees who died in Australia during World War II, and as one of only three foreign war cemeteries located in Australia, two of which are located in the municipality, the Ossario is a poignant memorial. Aesthetically, it is an unusual example of a funerary structure in an Italian vernacular design. The aesthetic qualities of the place are enhanced by its landscape setting including the memorial avenue on the approach to the building.<sup>20</sup>

To date, my investigations have not been able to locate the Murchison Ossario in any official government war grave directory either in Italy or in Australia or of the United Nations. My investigations suggests that the Ossario di Murchison has no official war grave status in Australia.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the Ossario is not listed on any website as an Italian war grave, nor is it under the auspices of the Commonwealth War Grave Commission as the Japanese War Grave at Cowra and German War Grave at Tatura have been for many decades.

The lack of official communication with families of the deceased regarding exhumations, sometimes with multiple relocations and the final reinterment at the Ossario has resulted in relatives such as the Musitano, Battaglia and Caruso families being unable to locate loved ones for more than 70 years. There are few documents that follow each of the deceased to Murchison and little is known about the process of relocating Italian war dead.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Avelino Crespan who relocated the coffins from the underground crypt to the 1974 ex-

ension confirms that most of the coffins were labelled with the person's name and an identification number.<sup>23</sup>

Each year, on the second Sunday of November there has been a pilgrimage to the Italian War Grave at Murchison in central Victoria that has its origins in the early 1960s. In 1964, William Bossence offered a rare contemporary written account of the early years of the Remembrance Day event at the Ossario.

Every year a Remembrance Sunday Mass is celebrated at the ossario before a huge crowd of visitors from all over Victoria and Southern New South Wales. During the picturesque ceremony Italian choir-boys sing, and flowers are laid for each of the soldiers whose bodies are buried beneath the ossario. The 8<sup>th</sup> annual pilgrimage was held in 1964, and 1,200 people were present.<sup>24</sup>

With Italian post war immigration reaching its zenith in about 1970, the event rapidly gained strength in numbers and prominence on the Italian community's social calendar during the next few decades. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Italian social clubs were at their peak and dynamic leaders such as Luigi Gigliotti and Guido Ciacià among others, helped to keep the memory of the war dead foremost in the collective consciousness of the post-war Italian community, especially in Victoria. Theirs was a life-long labour of love and respect for those who had died as war prisoners. Cav. Guido Ciacià's role as the president of the Italian military associations in Australia was pivotal in bringing the deceased to Murchison. He is now in his mid-90s and no longer attends the annual event. Luigi Gigliotti, who migrated to Victoria in 1927, had been interned as an Italian 'enemy alien' in 1940. His wife and four children were left without a breadwinner for the duration of the war. This experience possibly may have given him the impetus to collect donations from the Italian community to build the Ossario. He died in 1989, leaving only traces of written evidence that refer to his labours in collecting £25,000 in donations for the construction of the Ossario.

Archival documents show that since the Ossario's construction, the Italian government had undertaken to pay

<sup>19</sup> 'Murchison Italian Soldiers Memorial,' Victorian Heritage Database, accessed 20 November 2014, [http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/#detail\\_places;156112](http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/#detail_places;156112)

<sup>20</sup> Heritage Concepts, (2012) *Shepparton City Heritage Study IIB*, Volume 3: p. 225

<sup>21</sup> Commonwealth War Commission, 2014; email communication with author

<sup>22</sup> Murchison Ossario, Letters and documents, Victorian Health Department

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Avelino Crespan at the Murchison Ossario, 8 October 2014

<sup>24</sup> William H. Bossence, *ibid.*, p. 183

for the Ossario's upkeep with an annual fund of roughly \$3,000 from the late 1960s onwards, while Australian branches of Italian returned soldiers organisations were entrusted with its physical security. Murchison resident Angelo Musso, the son of a Queensland-Sicilian internee, was the Ossario's caretaker until his death in recent years. According to local residents, there were no Italians in the Murchison local area who had a strong connection to the Ossario by 2013. With reduced funds arriving from Italy to repair and maintain such a precious building, Aldo Zanatta, president of the Alpini Club of Melbourne and his volunteers travel almost two hours to maintain the gardens, make repairs and keep vermin and insects from taking over the site. Without renewed interest by the next generation of Victorians of Italian heritage and appropriate funding from Italy, the future care of the Ossario has become a matter of increasing concern.

Many thousands of Italian migrants have visited the Murchison Ossario since the early 1960s when the first commemoration was held. The numerous buses filled with Italian social club groups from many states have now dwindled to a handful of buses from Melbourne and the Goulburn Shire. These dedicated, now elderly Italians are determined to keep the memory of the human costs of war as a tribute to their deceased compatriots who lost their lives, as long as they are well enough to travel to Murchison. However as the years go by, fewer and fewer of these first generation Italians will be able to make the journey.

On the second Sunday of November 2014, the Italian Consul General of Victoria, Cav. Marco Maria Cerbo, the Italian Military Attaché in Australia, Major Antonio Coppola, supported by Joe Morizzi and Domenico Biviano with their colleagues from the Italian Returned Soldiers Association of Australia, conducted the annual Italian War Dead Commemoration. The Ossario is opened for the annual public commemoration only on this one November morning. As this is a public event, anyone can join the solemn military ceremony and religious service in Italian. The Italian Consul General, dignitaries and community join the ageing Italian military groups in remembering the tragic consequences of war. As Guido Ciacià notes in his 2009 retrospective summary of the Remembrance Day, the gathering is the

only national Italian pilgrimage of its kind in Australia.<sup>25</sup> Given the progressive decline in the numbers that attend the event, one wonders if the Ossario's significance will be lost in the not too distant future. The annual commemoration may vanish from Italian Australian collective memory as the Australian born descendants of Italians lose all but superficial connections with their cultural heritage in an increasingly globalised and fast forgetting world.

However, in recent years, a few families and groups, some of whom have relatives resting at the Murchison Ossario, bring some hope that the memories of Italian war dead will not be forgotten by future generations. Relatives of the deceased such as the Di Martini family from Queensland, the Musitano family from Western Australia and other internee families make a regular pilgrimage to pay tribute to fathers and grandfathers who never returned home. These and many other families of deceased internees still feel the grief and loss of family members who died in custody. Lest we forget the death of Italians who were imprisoned as enemy aliens or prisoners of war and died in custody in Australia during the Second World War, research to uncover the truths of war's consequences continues.

Antonio De Curtis offers a few poignant words that summarise the lives and deaths of 129 men and one woman now in their final resting place in the Italian Ossario at Murchison:

A morte 'o ssaje ched'è? ... è una livella.  
[Death, you know what it is? It's a leveller.]<sup>26</sup>

Whether rich or poor, each of the 129 men and one woman rest in eternal peace together as Italians.

<sup>25</sup> Guido Ciacià, *Op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Totò (Antonio De Curtis), (1964) *'A Livella. Poesie napoletane*, Fausto Fiorentino Editrice, Napoli [translation by Mia Spizzica].

*I am currently collecting information with a view to associating to each name in the Ossario a life story and a family story, which, in due time, will become part of the Ossario's story. If you think you may be able to contribute any information on the people interred in the Ossario or on the Ossario itself, please contact Mia Spiz-*

*zica, c/o Italian Studies, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton, Victoria, 3800 or via email: [mia.spizzica@monash.edu](mailto:mia.spizzica@monash.edu) or via mobile phone: 0400 200 235, or contact the Co.As.It Italian Historical Society via email: [ihs@coasit.com.au](mailto:ihs@coasit.com.au)*



**Fig. 7 – An Alpino attending a service at the Murchison Ossario in 2014. In the background, a poster commemorating Francesco Fantin. [Image courtesy of the author]**