

**Fostering Solidarity, Hybridity, and Transnationalism: Elizabeth
Dickerson Rice Bianciardi's Italy**

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.29081/cp.2024.29.07>

Abstract

Information about Elizabeth Dickerson Rice Bianciardi is scant and limited, despite her reputation as an accomplished journalist, who contributed to popular magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Harper's Monthly*. Apparently, she moved to Italy to further her education, at a crucial time in the history of both her country, grappling with the aftermath of the Civil War, and her host country, striving for unification.

This essay will focus on the two narrative pieces she penned during her stay in the peninsula: a biographical sketch of Giuseppe Garibaldi ("The Personal History of Garibaldi," 1882), and a travel account published in 1884, *At Home in Italy*. As will be shown, Rice Bianciardi succeeded in fostering a more sympathetic and positive image of Italy and the Italians, thus challenging inveterate stereotypes and misconceptions. In her works, Italy also became a symbolic space where the redefinition of her identity, both as a professional writer and a liberated woman, could take place.

Keywords: *bridging cultures, Elizabeth Dickerson Rice Bianciardi, Garibaldi, Italian unification, solidarity, travel literature.*

1. Introducing Elizabeth Dickerson Rice Bianciardi

Little is known about Elizabeth Dickerson Rice Bianciardi: her very name is uncertain, as she signed her publications with her initials (E.D.R.) and, according to different sources, D. may stand for Dickerson or Dickinson (*The Literary World* 1885: 519; Adams 1885: 189). Widely read by her contemporaries, who appreciated the articles she contributed to the *Springfield Republican* first, and then to

prominent magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Harper's Monthly*, she rapidly lapsed into oblivion after her death. She was born in West Springfield (Massachusetts), possibly around 1835; the few scholars who have devoted attention to her life and oeuvre concur that she died in her early fifties, in 1885 or 1886 (Carvalho, Phaneuf, n.d.: 112). The only surviving child of Colonel Caleb Rice (the first Mayor of Springfield), she moved to Italy to enhance her education, at the time when the country was grappling with the challenges of unification and the US was dealing with the aftermath of the Civil War (Ward 1858: 316). Her transnational experience proved crucial to her career and personal development. Indeed, while continuing to write articles for American journals and magazines, she established contact with the Italian intellectual circles, as well as with the large group of British and American expats residing in Florence. She even tied the knot with an Italian professor, Carlo Bianciardi, who, according to Joseph Carvalho III and Wayne E. Phaneuf (n.d.: 112), also held the title of count. Acclaimed as a poet, Elizabeth also sketched a biographical profile of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the hero of the Italian *Risorgimento*, and composed a travelogue, *At Home in Italy* (1884), based on previously printed materials, combined with fresh insights and ideas.

By focusing on her Italian works, this essay sets out to investigate the way the author strived to act as a cultural mediator, beyond widespread prejudices and inveterate stereotypes on Italy and its inhabitants, popularized in contemporary travel pieces penned by renowned writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Dean Howells. As will be shown, in her narratives, Bianciardi also turned post-unification Italy into a dynamic space of transformation, into the ideal setting for self-redefinition, both as a liberated woman (free from social and cultural constraints) and a professional writer. Before delving into "The Personal History of Garibaldi" (published in *The Century Magazine* in 1882) and *At Home in Italy*, a few preliminary observations on the way Italians were commonly viewed and

portrayed in the last decades of the Nineteenth century will prove useful to contextualize the textual analysis.

2. Common, stereotypical portrayals of Italy and the Italians

As Manfred Beller (2007: 194-198) has elucidated, while Italy was universally recognized as the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of liberal arts, its inhabitants were unavoidably associated with Machiavellianism, superstition, criminal actions, political and moral corruption, indolence, and Popish plots (Catholic proselytism was still regarded as a major threat to stability in Protestant countries). By the 1880s, when large waves of Italian immigrants from the Southern regions began to arrive in the US, seeking better prospects away from their motherland, hostility often degenerated into hatred and intolerance. The new settlers were labelled as treacherous and unassimilable, often ridiculed for their broken English or reduced to ludicrous and exotic caricatures (the Italian organ-grinder with his little monkey and the knife-brandishing, Italian delinquent, ready to kill for trifles, were omnipresent images). American authors travelling to Italy often contributed to disseminating and consolidating clichéd representations of Italianness. As Ernesto Livorni has pointed out, both Hawthorne and Twain – who visited the peninsula immediately before and after the Italian unification in 1861 – were thoroughly unconcerned with the political events of the day; besides, they lacked any sympathy for the people's plight for freedom. More specifically, Hawthorne's interest in the country was "neither historical nor political, not even social: it [was] purely aesthetic" (Livorni 2013: 373). Accordingly, the Rome featured in his *The Marble Faun* (with its countless museums, art galleries, ancient ruins, and temples) was the perfect setting for American sculptors and painters. In his novel, Italian men and women merely acted as picturesque models, when they were not simply part of the background: their colourful clothes, their exaggerated gestures, their improvised dances, and even their dark and wicked plots, reminiscent of the Gothic novel tradition, were allegedly staged for the consumption of foreign onlookers (and

readers). American innocence clashed with Italian contagious depravity in Henry James's novels (see, for example, *Roderick Hudson* and *Daisy Miller*), while in his *Italian Journeys*, William Dean Howells described Rome as hideous and filthy, and its citizens as "picturesque, and full of sweet, natural knaveries, graceful falsehood, and all uncleanness" (Howells 1867: 158). Conversely, women writers often proved less biased and more compassionate towards the Italians and their cause. Margaret Fuller's unfaltering support to Italian revolutionary patriotism is well documented; her attitude was shared by a few other American writers who, after marrying Italian refugees, exiles or immigrants, attempted to furnish the American reading public with potent counter-narratives which, in the words of Nick Ceramella (2013: 404), "paved the way for what can be quite rightly considered the beginning of Italo-American literature." Unquestionably, Elizabeth Dickerson Rice Bianciardi deserves to be added to this list, alongside Caroline A. Merighi and Elisabeth Cavazza who, in their writings, compellingly fostered the mutual grafting of cultures.

3. "The Personal History of Garibaldi" and *At Home in Italy*

In her "The Personal History of Garibaldi," Bianciardi, first of all, addresses the American concerns about Catholicism, by underlining the general's utmost contempt for the temporal power of the Holy See which, in his view, had always been the real "scourge of Italy" (Dickerson Rice Bianciardi 1882: 495). The narrative, then, proceeds with the account of his life and military accomplishments; the only, ample footnote included in the biography is quite revealing of her intent to dispel rumors and misconceptions regarding his stay in the US. The patriot had lived for nine months in New York, between 1850 and 1851, and for four additional months, between 1853 and 1854; during this period, he had stayed at Antonio Meucci's house and, "refus[ing] to be a mere idle guest in his family" (498), to quote Bianciardi, he had insisted on lending a hand at the candle-factory

Meucci was operating. The writer is at pains to distinguish Garibaldi from all the other Italian immigrants who travelled to the Promised land of opportunities to “mak[e] a living, if not a fortune” (498), and who were also accused of lowering the wage rates (as they were willing to work for less). Far from being an economic migrant, in fact, he is, first of all, depicted as selfless and cooperative, as well as being a transnational champion of liberty, since a league “composed of Italians, Cubans, Spaniards and Americans” (498) had entrusted him with a special mission to Cuba, aimed at reporting on the struggle of the local population, suffering under the yoke of their oppressors.

Bianciardi’s role as a facilitator of intercultural communication is even more evident in her travel narrative, *At Home in Italy*, where her views – matured over the long years she spent in her adoptive country – are clearly exposed. In the Preface, she directly addresses her American readers, inviting them to broaden their horizons and form their own opinions, instead of accepting and passively replicating ingrained commonplaces. The ordinary traveler is ironically equated to a snail, “that little animal which carries his house on his back. Whenever he meets with anything that conflicts with his experience or prejudices, he retires within himself, and can with difficulty be induced to examine what he disapproves” (3). Her eye-opening volume, therefore, sets out to shed new light on Italian habits and customs, thus succeeding in unblocking important channels of international communication. In “Italy as a Residence” (the first of the ten chapters of which the volume is composed), Bianciardi emphasizes the significance of travelling which, apart from the enjoyable opportunities it provides, also enables whoever embarks on a journey to become more objective and impartial.¹ As she remarks, in fact, comparing and contrasting different cultures (thus actively engaging with the host country) is “a corrective of rash judgements and of

¹ For a thorough discussion on the differences between a mere tourist, a pilgrim and a traveller, see Mihaela Culea and Andreia-Irina Suci, 2017, pp. 5-9.

narrow natural self-gratulation" (7). The writer also recommends fellow travellers to experience "the real life" (9) in Italy, by carefully avoiding luxury hotels which are interchangeable, regardless of their location: "the fashionable traveler," she observes, with a tinge of sarcasm, "need no longer envy that little animal which carries his house on his back; [...] he can travel all over Europe, if he chooses, without once varying his habits" (9). Lastly, she encourages her compatriots to become responsible and well-informed travellers (not just tourists), who read extensively before visiting foreign lands. In Italy, as she ironically notices, American ignorance may turn lethal: indeed, those who "find a grave" in the peninsula are actually the victims "not so much of the fever [...] as of bodily and mental exhaustion from overwork" (10), since the Old World (and Italy in particular) is so overwhelmingly rich in antiquities and outstanding natural scenes that an untrained body and mind cannot simply cope with so much stimulation.

To demonstrate that Italy and the US are not so far apart, Bianciardi establishes thought-provoking parallelisms between the countries: contrary to what is commonly believed, the cities of Northern and Central Italy (which she explores extensively) are just as comfortable in the Summer months as Boston and New York (40). The *tramontana* reminds her of the cold gusts of wind that sweep across New England, a region that, in turn, bears striking similarities with Bagni di Lucca and its surrounding areas, given the *unpicturesque*, "prosaic character" (185) of both locations.

In her travelogue, the author also endeavors to subvert what was deemed to be the *national character* of the Italians. The first and foremost virtue she surprisingly attributes to the inhabitants of the peninsula is *patience*, clearly manifest in the way they make "the sacrifices which [their] lately-acquired unity and freedom have imposed upon [them]" (38) (the Italian political scenario is frequently hinted at, thus signifying the writer's appropriation of male prerogatives). The alleged Italian idleness (*dolce far niente*) is replaced

with “a keen and delicate sense of opportunities, and a genius for waiting” (98), a sentence she borrows from Reverend William Chauncey Langdon, another *Italianized* American. As she further explains, “apparent indolence under tyranny, civil and ecclesiastic, may be but a waiting for the necessary conditions of success” (96). Uncompromising papistry is actually a nightmare belonging to the past, while religious pluralism is a characteristic of modern-day Italy, “thanks to the beneficent toleration of the Italian government” (182). Bianciardi’s heartfelt apology to Italy and the Italians may be summarized through the words of praise uttered by Reverend Langdon, which are quoted extensively in *At Home in Italy* to support her thesis: “Oppressed Italy has been down-trodden and crushed, but she has risen again as, perhaps, no other people ever rose out of such depths of political and social degradation, and her great *risorgimento* is the marvel of modern history” (94).

Bianciardi’s involvement with Italy also granted her the opportunity to carve a space for her own literary voice to grow. Her hybrid, transnational persona stands out as a real expert in Italian matters since, in her writings, she manages to combine the perspectives of an outsider (due to her American background) and an insider (the latter is suggested through the use of the first person plural inclusive pronoun *we*). Knowing the habits and the peculiarities of her fellow countrymen and women, she can advise them on what to bring along (“the warmest possible clothing” [12], American stoves, and solid door locks), what to expect in terms of food (not enough meat, even though one can easily grow accustomed to a poorer diet [151, 199]), where to find a convenient accommodation (24). Fully conversant with the native language of the country (the travelogue is interspersed with Italian phrases and idiomatic expressions) and knowledgeable of the places she inhabits, the author can convincingly complement the information featured in popular travel guides, such as Murray’s and Baedeker’s, with her own, first-hand, perceptive observations. She even engages in dialogue with other (more famous and male) travel writers, such as Hawthorne, James or Trollope, only

to highlight their inaccuracy and biased partiality.² Nonetheless, she herself is not completely immune to it; a subtle tendency to objectify the Italian population, to turn men and women into commodity, may be detected in several passages of her account. Indeed, some old women in Perugia spinning from distaffs, “might have sat for the Fates of Michel Angelo”; a monk at Camaldoli is portrayed as “a mild, scholarly-looking man, a figure that one would have liked to paint” (271).

4. By way of conclusion

To conclude, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, beside the countless stereotypical depictions of the Italians as sluggish, childish, impulsive, superstitiously religious, and ignorant, a few narratives and travel pieces struggled to offer a less biased view of the country and its people to the American reading public. The biographical profile of Garibaldi composed by Elizabeth Dickerson Rice Bianciardi and her *At Home in Italy* certainly belong to this category. In her life and writings, she unreservedly embraced her role as a sympathetic cultural mediator, thus contributing to debunking misconceptions and developing a more authentic international understanding, at a momentous time in the history of both nations.

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² Nathaniel Hawthorne is either mentioned or quoted on pages 21, 32 and 167; Henry James is cited on pages 87, 88, 90, 91; as for Trollope, he appears on pages 101 and 264.

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