

David Faber

# FG Fantin

## **The Life & Times of an Italo - Australian Anarchist 1901 – 42**

Thesis submitted towards  
the degree of  
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History is Us – Francesco de Gregori – 1985

History is us, let no one be offended,  
we are this field of needles under heaven...  
History is us, pay attention, no one is to feel excluded,  
history is us, we are the waves of this ocean,  
these sounds which break the silence, this silence so hard to digest.  
And then they say  
‘Everyone is the same, they all thieve in the same way’.  
But its only a line to convince you  
to stay at home in the evening.  
History doesn’t stop at your front door  
history enters your rooms, burns them, judges right and wrong.  
History is us, we write the letters  
it is us who have everything to win and to lose.  
And then it is people  
[because it is people who make history]  
when it’s a matter of choosing and moving, who find themselves with eyes open  
knowing very well what to do.  
Those who have read a million books and those who don’t even know how to talk,  
and this is why history makes us shiver, because no one can stop it.  
History is us, we are father and son,  
  
it is us, bella ciao, who march.  
  
History has no bolt holes, it does not pass the buck.  
  
History is us.  
  
We are this plate of grain.

*Translation David Faber*

Dedicated to  
my late adoptive father,  
Cyril William [Bill] Clements,  
who knew what it was  
to long for a better world

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is inspired by the historical principles of RG Collingwood, an historiographer whose precepts are recurrently cited herein.

It is the life and times style biography of Francesco Giovanni Fantin, born San Vito de Leguzzano in the Schio district of the Province of Vicenza in the Veneto region of Italy 20 January 1901, died Loveday Internment Camp Compound 14A, South Australia 16 November 1942.

SA police at the time found that Fantin was assassinated by fascist conspirators who contrived to intimidate witnesses and interfere with material evidence, (findings here confirmed) 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 in the Supreme Court of South Australia. (Casotti was subsequently deported.)

This thesis begins with the reconstruction of Fantin's origins in one of the rural crucibles of Italian capitalism and industrialism. The presence of anarchist traditions in the Province and in Fantin's immediate circle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is documented. The history of the Great War, the Red Biennium and the Rise of Fascism in the Schio district is then reconstructed in connection with Fantin's formative years, with particular reference to the role of the textile strike of 1921 as the precursor to the political and mass emigration from the district to Australia of which Fantin was a humble protagonist.

Fantin's years as an antifascist activist in exile in Australia are then rehearsed as an essential prerequisite for understanding why he was selected for assassination. The thesis closes with a detailed reconstruction of how his death was encompassed and its political implications managed by Dr HV Evatt. An Iconographic Appendix and Bibliography follow.

## **Statement**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed David Faber

## **Preface & acknowledgements.**

*Praise is the reflection of virtue.*

Bacon<sup>1</sup>

Theses are supposed to satisfy a test of originality, to add something substantial to the body of critical knowledge. That requires a quantity of labour that cannot be completed without incurring debts of gratitude that it is very properly customary to discharge in the preface to such studies as this. Moreover the apprentice historian encounters so much carping criticism that positive encouragement shines by comparison.

First of all must be thanked my former wife Anna Fabrizio Faber. For fifteen years she supported me and my work in disregard of my detractors through my difficult illness, until the accumulated negligence of quacks finally made it all too much to bear. Without her patience the realisation of this research, especially in Italy, howsoever incompletely, would simply have been impossible. My gratitude to her is undying.

In her absence the fellowship of friends has been doubly important. In the main they are too many and too modest to be named, but I would like to thank them anonymously here for those small gestures of companionship and practical assistance which have sustained me. Specific recognition for their support must go to my mother, Mrs Vivienne Beck, my Aunt Ms Rosemarie Allen and my friends Mr Gerald Graves and Mr Paul Harris. I would also like to recognise here all those at the Mood Disorder's Association SA with whom I worked as a volunteer and office holder from 1996 - 2003, particularly the President Bob Burke, and Dr Renata Maruszczuk. All these people have played a vital role in my recovery from the bouts of serious illness which disrupted my studies especially in the summer of 1994/5 and during 2006. Diana Burrato of the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service assisted with the recovery of sources which were lost at that time, enabling me to pick up the threads of my research. The deterioration of the international situation after September 11 2001 drew me into the Nowar activist network, which deepened my reflection on the participatory democracy of which Fantin was an exponent. Mr Kyle van der Borch and Mr Bruce Hannaford provided invaluable computing assistance.

My investigations began in 1984 as a community history collaboration between myself and the Adelaide office of the Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Emigrati e Famiglie, known as FILEF. Through a long gestation marked by many setbacks FILEF and I have kept faith with one another, and I am indebted to the organisation for much material and moral support. Like the PCI comrades of the *Casa del Popolo* of *Via Balconi, Cernusco sul Naviglio, Milano* in the mid 80s, so the FILEF comrades of Lowe St Adelaide lent me books from their collection. I owe both these outposts of the political culture of the revolutionary Italian proletariat an intellectual debt I here seek in part to repay.

Next I would like to thank the great niece of Francesco Giovanni Fantin, Shaneen Fantin, whom I was fortunate to meet in the final stages of my research. She has taken a constructive interest in my work, and I would like to thank her and her family for their support.

In Italy I consulted for local knowledge Professor Emilio Franzina regarding the social history of the Veneto and Vicenza Province and the labour movement thereof. He referred me to Ezio Maria Simini concerning the labour history of the Schio district. This was some of the best advice I was ever given. Simini is an accountant and communist activist, one of those part time historians who put some academic historians to shame. I wish Signor Simini and Professor Franzina well in their ongoing struggle for historical enlightenment.

Likewise I must thank the late Professor Marcello Montagna, historian of the wartime Italo-Australian antifascist association Italia Libera / Free Italy of which his father Massimo was a protagonist in keeping with the traditions of one of Italian communism's most illustrious families. Signor Montagnana spoke English with a proper strine accent, having grown up in inner Melbourne playing street cricket with child peers who never bothered about his foreign origins, his family having got out of Italy on the last boat after the passage of the fascist regime's anti-Semitic racial laws. He was very generous with his time in keeping me posted regarding his research, contiguous with mine given the association's contemporary interest in the Fantin affair, and even facilitated my efforts on more than one occasion, for which I am grateful.

The staff of the libraries and research institutes named herein have been courteous collaborators. I would like to acknowledge in particular the encouragement of Professor Gaetano Grassi and the staff of the Istituto Nazionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione in Italia of Milano; also Professor Giulio Sapelli, onetime Director of the Istituto Feltrinelli of Milano.

Both these institutes house specialist collections of interest to the political, social and cultural historian of the Italian labour movement. Also of interest, even concerning Australia and its Italian community, was the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, the literary wing of a cultural institute endowed by Empress Maria Theresa of Austria as suzerain of Milan. Gianfausto Rosoli of the Centro Studi Emigrazione Roma will have forgotten the afternoon he devoted to assisting me, but I have not. Such is also the case of Dottor G Navoni Cancelliere Dirigente of the Prettura of Schio, who kindly admitted me to the treasures of his court's archives.

Transferring our attention to the antipodes, I would like to thank Ms Margaret Hoskings of the University of Adelaide's Barr Smith Library, and Mr Graham Thomas & Ms Mara Seton of the Adelaide Office of the National Archives of Australia. Also to be thanked are the staff of the State Library of SA. Any Adelaide historian who overlooked it in the mistaken belief that the city's academic libraries had a monopoly of scholarly resources would be sadly mistaken. I would also like to thank Mr Norman Smith of the Human Resources Management Branch of the SA Police and Mr Peter Alexander for their kind assistance regarding the figure of Detective Sergeant Bill Gill. Not to be forgotten neither are the staff of the SA History Trust Migration Museum and their director Viv Szekeres. Mr Bruce Greenhalgh, Historical Collection Librarian with the Supreme Court Library, Adelaide, was also helpful. State Coroner Wayne Chivell also found time to address an inquiry regarding the wartime operation of the Coroner's Act. Mr Bob James kindly bestowed on me some documents concerning Francesco Carmagnola.

I am indebted also to certain scholars for specific advice – to Professor Stuart MacIntyre, for the emphasis he advised me to place on the figure of Detective Sergeant Gill, and for the encouragement given me by Professor Geoffrey Bolton in my exploration of methodological issues during the 'history wars'.

Last but not least it is my agreeable duty to thank my academic supervisor Associate Professor Tom Sheridan. The candidate approaches the doctoral thesis as a form never before attempted, which he or she will never be permitted to undertake again. In such situations the constructive advice of an old hand is bound to be appreciated. Recognition is due also to the Department of Economics of the University of Adelaide for the hospitality it has accorded me as a post graduate student. The University itself is also to be thanked for making allowance for my health in the requirements for completion of this thesis.

Regarding the persons who responded to my requests for information about Fantin and his world, the reader will find their names listed alphabetically in the bibliography. Suffice it here to say that they deeply touched me with their confidence, generosity, trust and veracity. It is from them that I have derived my belief in the fundamental reliability of oral sources. I hope they will find respectful the interpretations advanced here regarding their testimony.

After the completion of this thesis, VG Venturini published Never Give In, a study of Italian antifascism in Australia 1924 -56 which sketches amongst other things Fantin's Italian background and publishes the bulk of Australian archival holdings concerning his assassination. Except for a period in 2003 when he sought my advice, our researches were conducted wholly independently. Our work is substantially mutually corroborative, and his ample backgrounding of the origins and history of Italian fascism and antifascism may profitably be read as a preamble to this study, substituting the chapters on the same themes I wrote and discarded for motives of space. Without attempting to exhaust the richness of his valuable contribution to Italo-Australian historiography, I have noted relevant data and themes where appropriate, not excluding notice of minor errors of fact, situating his work in the literature. I give however a more nuanced and considered account of the handling of the Fantin affair by the Australian authorities, which together with my investigation of Fantin's circumstances prior to his emigration in 1924 and my reliance on Italian as well as Australian sources regarding his life in Australia, represent the historical correction to the literature which is the burden of this thesis. Moreover, whereas like Cresciani and Nursey Bray before him, Venturini describes the killing of Fantin as a probable murder, I offer a demonstration that Fantin was assassinated by fascist conspirators.

David Faber February 2008