

Child Slavery in Sicily 1910

Tom Verso (January 20, 2008)



“The cruelties to which the child slaves of Sicily have been subjected are as bad as anything reported of the cruelties of Negro slavery.” Booker Taliaferro Washington: “The Man Farthest Down”

Anthony Tamburri of the Calandra Institute posits: “We need to take [Italian American] culture more seriously. We simply cannot continue to engage in a series of reminiscences that lead primarily to nostalgic recall. Instead, we need to revisit our past, reclaim its pros and cons...we need to figure out where we came from”

One “series of reminiscences” leading to “nostalgic recall” and needing disengagement is the pastoral romanticism about the conditions in Italy at the time of the diaspora. Sadly, in my opinion, some of our most outstanding writers and scholars such as Jerry Mangione, Ben Morreale, Donna Gabaccia, etc. have been instrumental, by errors of omission, of perpetuating images of Italy that lend themselves to “nostalgic recall.” In an effort to “revisit our past”, “reclaim its pros and cons” and “figure out where we came from” one can do no better than to read Booker Taliaferro Washington’s book “The Man Farthest Down.”

In the year 1910 Booker Taliaferro Washington - former African American slave and founder of Tuskegee Institute - traveled to Europe to acquaint himself, in his words: “with the condition of the poorer and working classes in Europe, particularly in those regions from which an ever-increasing number of immigrants are coming to our country each year.” In as much as, at that time approximately a hundred thousand Italians were arriving in New York every year, not surprisingly he traveled extensively in Italy. He published his observations and conclusions in a book he called: “The

Man Farthest Down: A Record of Observation and Study in Europe.”

Mr. Washington presents an ‘oh-so-not’ romantic description of the horrific reality of diasporic Italy, including the de facto enslavement of sulphur mining children in Sicily. Child-slaves which Italian Americans have conveniently forgotten in their quest to meticulously reproduce St. Joseph Tables. After reading Mr. Washington’s book, one wonders: who exactly ate at those (dare I say ‘mythical’) St. Joseph Tables; other than “The Leopards?”

Mr. Washington devotes five and a half chapters to describing life and labor in Italy and Sicily. In chapter XI, “Child Labour and the Sulphur Mines”, he makes one of his most cogent and poignant observations: “Certainly there is no other country [i.e. Sicily] where so much of the labour of all kinds, the skilled labour of the artisan as well as the rough labour of digging and carrying on the streets and in the mines, is performed by children, especially boys.”

Mr. Washington recorded descriptions of child labor in Catania, Palermo and Campofranco. In Catania Mr. Washington describes macaroni production, metal tool making, mandolin fabrication, boat and tile manufacturing. His description of a “little girl” metal worker and boy tile makers captures the essence of the others.

He writes: “About nine o'clock Saturday night my attention was attracted to a man engaged in some delicate sort of metal tool-making. What particularly attracted my attention was a little girl, certainly not more than seven years of age, who was busily engaged at this late hour in polishing and sharpening the stamps the man used. I could but marvel at the patience and the skill the child showed at her work. It was the first time in my life that I had seen such a very little child at work, although I saw many others in the days that followed.”

“I came across a tile manufacturing plant where almost all of the actual work was performed by the children, who ranged, I should say, from eight to twelve years of age. The work of carrying the heavy clay, and piling it up in the sun after it had been formed into tiles, was done by the younger children. I am certain that if I had not seen them with my own eyes I would never have believed that such very little children could carry such heavy loads, or that they could work so systematically and steadily as they were compelled to do in order to keep up the pace. I was so filled with pity and at the same time with admiration for these boys.”

In Palermo, Mr. Washington goes on to describe what reasonable may be characterized as ‘boy-mules’ - he writes: “I remember, one day in Palermo, seeing, for the first time in my life, boys, who were certainly not more than fourteen years of age, engaged in carrying on their backs earth from a cellar that was being excavated for a building. Men did the work of digging, but the mere drudgery of carrying the earth from the bottom of the excavation to the surface was performed by these boys. It was not simply the fact that mere children were engaged in this heavy work which impressed me. It was the slow, dragging steps, the fixed and unalterable expression of weariness that showed in every line of their bodies.”

But all the exploitation of children that Mr. Washington saw in Catania and Palermo, as shocking as it may have been, was ‘a day in the park’ when compared to the “carusi” of the Campofranco sulphur mines. “Carusi is the name that the Italians give to those boys in the sulphur mines who carry the crude ore up from the mines to the surface.”

He describes the organization of the work in a sulphur mine: “The actual work of digging the sulphur is performed by the miner, who is paid by the amount of crude ore he succeeds in getting out. He, in his turn, has a boy, sometimes two or three of them, to assist him in getting the ore out of the mine to the smelter, where it is melted and refined. The caruso is purchased by the miner from the parents.”

Then he describes the process of enslavement: “The manner in which the purchase is made is as follows: In Sicily, where the masses of the people are so wretchedly poor in everything else, they are nevertheless unusually rich in children, and, as often happens, the family that has the largest number of mouths to fill has the least to put in them. It is from these families that the carusi are recruited. The father who turns his child over to a miner receives in return a sum of money in the



form of a loan. The sum usually amounts to from eight to thirty dollars, according to the age of the boy, his strength and general usefulness. With the payment of this sum the child is turned over absolutely to his master.”

Mr. Washington a former slave himself concludes: “From this SLAVERY (emp.+) there is no hope of freedom, because neither the parents nor the child will ever have sufficient money to repay the original loan.”

READ AND WEEP- Life of the Sicilian boy-slaves:

“Strange and terrible stories are told about the way in which these boy slaves have been treated by their masters...one sees processions of half-naked boys, their bodies bowed under the heavy weight of the loads they carried, groaning and cursing as they made their way up out of the hot and sulphurous holes in the earth, carrying the ore from the mine to the smelter...

“The cruelties to which the child slaves have been subjected, as related by those who have studied them, are as bad as anything that was ever reported of the cruelties of Negro slavery. These boy slaves were frequently beaten and pinched, in order to wring from their overburdened bodies the last drop of strength they had in them. When beatings did not suffice, it was the custom to singe the calves of their legs with lanterns to put them again on their feet. If they sought to escape from this slavery in flight, they were captured and beaten, sometimes even killed.

“As they climbed out of the hot and poisonous atmosphere of the mines their bodies, naked to the waist and dripping with sweat, were chilled by the cold draughts in the corridors leading out of the mines, and this sudden transition was the frequent cause of pneumonia and tuberculosis.

“Children of six and seven years of age were employed at these crushing and terrible tasks. Under the heavy burdens (averaging about forty pounds) they were compelled to carry, they often became deformed, and the number of cases of curvature of the spine and deformations of the bones of the chest reported was very large. More than that, these children were frequently made the victims of the lust and unnatural vices of their masters. It is not surprising, therefore, that they early gained the appearance of gray old men, and that it has become a common saying that a caruso rarely reaches the age of twenty five.”

“It seemed incredible to me that any one could live and work in such heat... in a burrow, twisting and winding its way, but going constantly deeper and deeper into the dark depths of the earth where the miners loosen the ore from the walls of the seams in which it is found, and then it is carried up out of these holes in sacks by the carusi.”

“All the ore is carried on the backs of boys. In cases where the mine descended to the depth of two, three, or four hundred feet, the task of carrying these loads of ore to the surface is simply heartbreaking. I can well understand that persons who have seen conditions at the worst should speak of the children who have been condemned to this slavery as the most unhappy creatures on earth.

Mr. Washington sums up: “I am not prepared just now to say to what extent I believe in a physical hell in the next world, but a sulphur mine in Sicily is about the nearest thing to hell that I expect to see in this life.”

Today a Google search of ‘Campofranco’ brings forth scores of web sites celebrating the beauty and pageantry of the town. Most interesting from the “reminiscent nostalgic recall” point of view is the complete absence of any reference to or signs of the sulphur mining days. Campofranco is seen today in an idyllic setting nestled in a valley between the panoramic mountains. How different is Mr. Washington’s description the Campofranco countryside:

He writes: “For many miles in every direction the vegetation has been blasted by the poisonous smoke and vapours from the smelters, and the whole country has a blotched and scrofulous appearance which is depressing to look upon, particularly when one considers the amount of misery and the number of human lives it has cost to create this condition. I have never in my life seen any



place that seemed to come so near meeting the description of the "abomination of desolation" referred to in the Bible. There is even a certain grandeur in the desolation of this country which looks as if the curse of God rested upon it. I am not prepared just now to say to what extent I believe in a physical hell in the next world, but a sulphur mine in Sicily is about the nearest thing to hell that I expect to see in this life."

I am sure that all the professors of Italian American studies nod their heads in agreement with Prof. Tamburri admonitions to "revisit our past [and] reclaim its pros and cons." I wonder how many require their students to read "The Man Farthest Down"?

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