

Arts

The pasta presence

Exhibition showing Aussie-Italian links

galleries

IT WAS 1940, just after Italy had entered the war, when Sirle died a cruel blow to Antonio Dolce Rubbo (1876-1959), the prominent Italian-Australian painter and art teacher.

Rubbo, already acknowledged here as a benefactor of extra-ordinary generosity, had accepted a commission to paint Aminteo Mammiarola, the Italian Consul General and official spokesperson of Italian Fascism in Sydney. It was not a wise decision.

Rubbo soon found himself incarcerated in Sydney, becoming one of around 5000 Italian-Australians locked away during the war for the sake of national security.

The poet Aid Malopelle, Dante Mary Gilmore, angered at the humiliating treatment of a man who had put so much into the arts in this country, wrote to Federal Attorney-General Billy Hughes to defend Rubbo.

"I would like to say that if any word of mine will help towards his reinstatement, you may call me for it at any time," Dame Mary wrote. Rubbo's story is told in an exhibition at the State Library which showcases the history of Italian Australians. It is called, with a touch of irony, *La Dolce Vita?—Italian-Australians of NSW*.

Jim Anzilighetti, coordinator of The Italians in NSW Project, who curated the show, said Rubbo's status as a naturalised British citizen failed to protect him from the "genosity of being hit hard". Mr Anzilighetti believes Rubbo's incarceration lasted only a couple of weeks, although there is scant evidence of this.

"There's no evidence Rubbo himself was a Fascist," he said. In a sign of the nation's high

La Dolce Vita?—Italian-Australians of NSW, is on until July 2 at the State Library of NSW. Entry is free.

regard for him, Rubbo will later be commemorated to paint the posthumous portrait of wartime Prime Minister John Curtin.

La Dolce Vita? includes Sydney artist Arthur Murch's best of Rubbo, and Dame Mary's letter.

Rubbo's story is just one of many fascinating histories illustrated in the exhibition—stories which Mr Anzilighetti believes are helping the Italian community escape its isolated image.

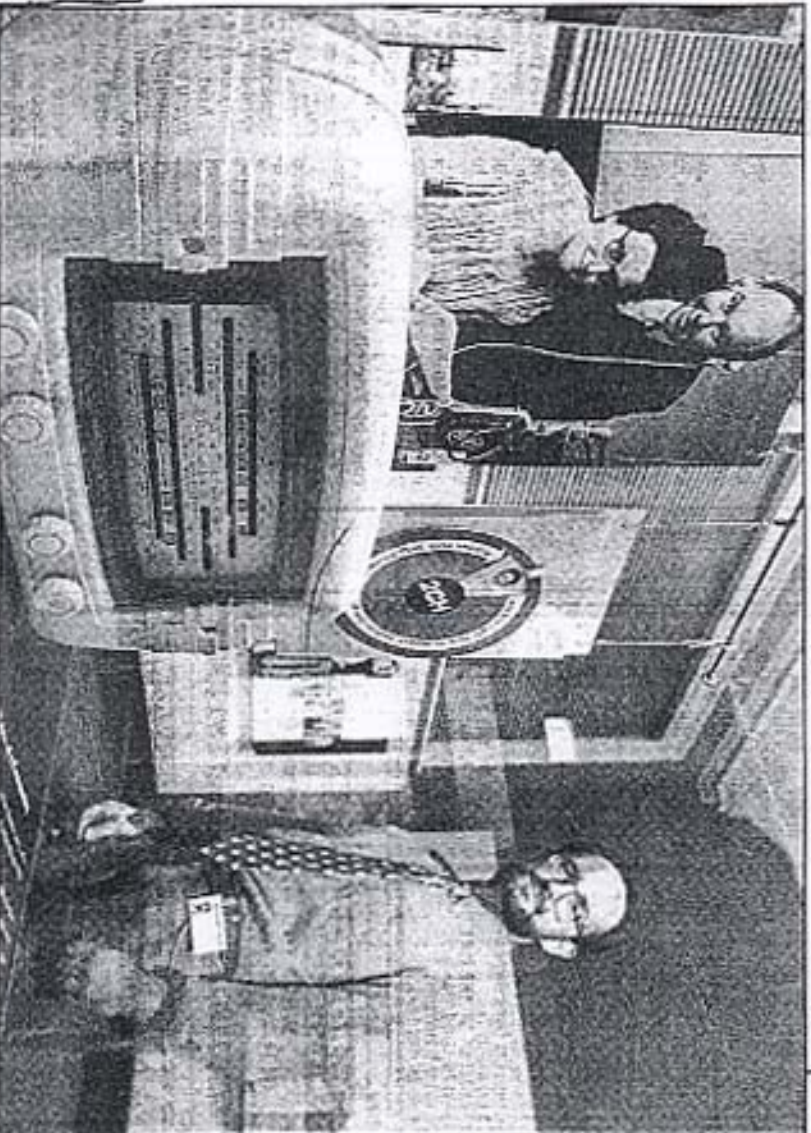
"The exhibition shows a lot more than that," he said.

"It shows the fascinating lives of these ordinary Italians led and in their own small, humble way what they have contributed to Australian society."

Booze baubles, photographs, diaries, letters and immigration papers help illustrate stories like that of Lena Quislin—or Mamma Lena as she became known through her radio program, journalism and welfare work.

Mamma Lena's advice columns in *La Primavera* in the '50s and '60s provide an intriguing and valuable glimpse into the problems Italian immigrants had assimilating in Australia.

There is the story of La Generala, the restaurateur in inner-city Stanley Street, whose many Italian migrants in the 1950s received their first Italian meal and where owners Angelina and Carlo Lorr



Influence over the years... La Dolce Vita? exhibition curator Jim Anzilighetti at the State Library

eral beyond them chase away the historical biases.

And there is the story of the Pachtla family whose school, George, would become a State government publisher and 1916 dice random breath, saying Mr Pachtlo is now Liverpool Mayor.

La Dolce Vita? is a focal point of the Italians in NSW Project which started in 1969 to collect, preserve and make available for research in the library, the docu-

mentary record of the Italian presence in NSW.

"A lot of the material we have got in the last five years is from people who have handed it for generations, or weren't aware of its historical significance," said Mr Anzilighetti.

For instance, the records of the Libera—as well as Fascist movement in Sydney—were found this decade behind an unusual chimney in Surry Hills.

They had been there for 40 years.

While Mr Anzilighetti has heard many stories of documents being destroyed, he believes there is still a lot of valuable material out there.

"If we encourage them to provide documentary evidence of their lives, it comes to us and enables Australian history to flourish to incorporate these different viewpoints that have been neglected for so long," he said.