

MONTREAL'S KING OF ITALIAN LABOUR: *A Case Study of Padronism*

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ON 23 January 1904, more than 2,000 Italian labourers paraded through the streets of Montreal. They were there to fête Antonio Cordasco, steamship agent, *banchista* and director of a labour bureau. Two foremen presented him with a crown "in a shape not unlike that worn by the King of Italy." The crown was later displayed in a glass case along with a souvenir sheet containing eleven columns of Italian names and entitled "In Memory of the Great Parade of January, 1904, in honour of Signor Antonio Cordasco, proclaimed King of the Workers." During February, *caposquadri* and *sub-bossi* (foremen) organized a banquet for Cordasco. Invitations to the banquet bore a seal suspiciously like the Royal Crest of Italy, and Cordasco's kept newspaper, the *Corriere del Canada*, reported the occasion in detail.¹

Four months later, in June and July 1904, the "King of Italian labour" was under investigation by the Deputy Minister of Labour, about to be the centre of a Royal Commission inquiry into fraudulent business practices, and excoriated by officials of the Italian Immigrant Aid Society. What emerges from the reports, testimony and newspaper accounts about the activity of Cordasco and his competitors in Montreal is not just the picture of an exploitive and dishonest broker but of a man truly in between — willing enough to put his boot into those beneath him, such as the greenhorns who depended upon him for jobs, but also forced to tug his forelock and to anticipate the wishes of the English-speaking businessmen and employers whom he served. It was these men upon whom the labour agent depended in his delicate task of wedding North American capitalist needs to seasonal labour. Cordasco's career and the public assault upon him affords us a rare entry into the world of the *padrone*, the exploitive Italian brokers who were stock — but little understood — villains in the drama

¹ The chief source for this essay is the *Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Immigration of Italian Labourers to Montreal and the alleged Fraudulent Practices of Employment Agencies* (Ottawa 1905). The Commission produced a 41 page report and 170 pages of testimony. The Commission's report is generally marred as a source by an undercurrent of nativism, ignorance of Italian ways, and a view of free enterprise as part of the divine plan. Henceforth cited as *Royal Commission 1904*.



Montreal June 14th 1904
Hon. W. L. Mackenzie King
Deputy Minister of Labor
Ottawa Ont.
Dear Sir,
I take the liberty of forwarding you a photo
of my good remembrance of Italian Labor which
was presented to me on the 23rd Jan. 1904
Your obedient but servant
Antonio Spada

The "King writes to King. Note his crown." (A.V. Spada, "The Italians in Canada," Montreal, 1969, 86.)

of immigration.²

Antonio Cordasco, the protagonist of our story, appears in the end as a nearly perfect Italian parody of the "negro king," that peculiarly ugly phenomenon of an ethnic or colonial puppet who serves those who really control the society and the economy.³ In 1904, Cordasco's stupidity and avarice combined with circumstance — a late thaw, high unemployment in the United States, and pressure from the Montreal Italian Immigrant Aid Society and his chief competitor, Alberto Dini — to expose him to public scrutiny. He proved to be a man whose new crown rested uneasily; he had to threaten and cajole his *sub-bossi*, placate his capitalist overlords, hide from irate workers, and scheme to destroy competitors who aspired to his throne. Moreover, he carried on a complex foreign policy with *padroni* in other cities and with steamship and emigration agents in Italy and on Italy's borders. Cordasco stood astride a free enterprise system that brought Italian migrant labour into contact with North American job opportunity. His power lay in his control of the communications network between labour and capital, and that was not an easy position from which to carve an empire. Like the "negro king," he had neither the affection of his people, the migrant Italian labourers, nor the trust of his Wasp masters, but he served them both as intermediary and spared them both from dealing directly with the mysterious other.

The commerce of migration which Cordasco had ridden to power had grown up in the late nineteenth century. Canadian conditions were particularly suitable for the development of a seasonal guest worker system. The need for manual labour at remote northern work sites, the attitudes of Canadian big business and of European village labourers, the climate, the difficulty of transportation and the xenophobic immigration policy of the government, all meant that only a sojourning work force could reconcile the Dominion's needs and the target migrants' self-interest.⁴ The three necessary components to such a sys-

² The word *padrone* does not appear in the testimony. Mackenzie King, chief investigator for the Dept. of Labour and future Prime Minister of Canada, probably knew the word and its connotations from his American experience. I have used the word throughout the paper as a convenient label for the chief intermediaries but do so on the understanding that the reader has a wary and sophisticated approach to its use. I have dealt more historiographically with the *padrone* in North America in an earlier article. See R.F. Harney, "The *Padrone* and the Immigrant," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 5 (1974), 101-118.

³ The expression was popularized in Canada by André Laurendeau (1912-1968), the editor of Montreal's *Le Devoir*. Laurendeau claimed that Quebec was governed by "les rois negres" — the equivalent of those puppet rulers in Africa through whom the British authorities found it convenient to wield power. The expression in English probably would have the strength of "nigger king" not "negro king."

⁴ See Joan M. Nelson, *Temporary versus Permanent Cityward Migration: Causes and Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976) and R.F. Harney, "Men without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930" in B. Caroli, R.F. Harney, L. Tomasi, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto 1978).

tem of seasonal migrant labour were the capitalist employer, the European worker, and the intermediaries and brokers who controlled the recruitment, transportation, and organization of the labour pool for the employers. All involved saw an advantage in the system. For the Canadian employer — particularly the labour intensive industries such as the railways, the mines and the smelting interests — there was constant need for a docile and mobile work force, a force free from the taint of unionism and willing to be shipped to remote northern sites, a work force which tolerated exploitation at those sites in order to make ready cash, and which required no maintenance on the part of the employer during the long winter months.

Although the Canadian government preferred northwest European immigrants, the large employers of unskilled labour preferred south and east Europeans. They could be relied upon to feel alien in the new land, not to jump track, not to wish to farm, and to be transient or sojourning in their frame of mind. This made them a much more reliable work force than the Swedes, Finns, English, Germans, and others whom the government favoured as settlers.⁵ That is why employers circumvented Canadian government policy and used steamship agents in Europe and *padroni* in Canada to draw to the country labourers who were not seen as fit stock for permanent settlement in Canada, and why conflict between industry and government profited the *padrone* system. For example, the Commissioner of Immigration in Winnipeg could report to Ottawa that large numbers of undesirable migrants had appeared in the area at the behest of the railways:

I receive from time to time reports from Officer McGovern that there they have been passing through his hands large numbers of Italians from Boston, Massachusetts hired under contract by the Canadian Pacific Railway to work for that company in Canada . . . I think it my duty to call your attention to this fact that these people are well-known to be quite worthless as settlers and having ruined to large extent the prosperity of Boston, Mass., it seems to me unfortunate that this class of immigration should be brought in by the railways for any kind of work at all except to work in the mines. I do not know what steps can be taken to prevent it, as no one seems disposed to set the alien labour law in motion. But whether they come from the United States or not, I feel this class of emigration will not do our country any good. The blame for them coming here undoubtedly will be placed upon the Department of Immigration, although that department has nothing whatever to do with them and they have been brought here solely at the insistence of the railway company.⁶

⁵ On government immigration policy, see M. Timlin, "Canada's Immigration Policy, 1896-1910," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 26 (1963). For popular attitudes toward the immigrant labourers, see E. Bradwin, *The Bunkhouse Man* (New York 1928) and J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers within our Gates* (Toronto 1909). The latter was significant enough to have a *Bollettino* of the Italian Commissariat of Emigration devoted to reviewing its ideas and impact. "Gli stranieri nel Canada guidicati da un canadese" (recensione) in *Bollettino* #19 (1909). See also D.H. Avery, "Canadian Immigration Policy and the Alien Question, 1896-1919. The Anglo-Canadian Perspective," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1973.

⁶ Letter from Commissioner of Immigration (Winnipeg) to James Smart, Deputy Minis-

The government was perfectly correct in its assumption that the Italian labourers did not want to settle. For the workers, the advantage of this system was that they could operate as target migrants. They had come to North America without their families, not in order to settle, but to earn enough money to change their condition of life in the old country. Their image or myth of Canada, if they had one, was of a very hostile and frozen land whose people were not well disposed toward south Europeans or toward young foreign bachelors.⁷ The system usually enabled them to reach Canadian job sites for the short work season without undue delay or hardship. A single season's campaign enabled them to save money to send home; and, by staying several seasons, they could make a nest-egg so that they might never come back again. However, because of the necessity of arriving with the thaw in time for work and leaving before the St. Lawrence froze, or because of dishonest exploitation, target migrants were often trapped for many seasons, their savings dissipated by *padroni*-run boardinghouses, saloons, and provisioners.

For the intermediaries, of course, the system itself was the source of their income. Without a constant flow of labour, without being able to pose for both the village labourer and the North American capitalist as the only one who could bring the two together to mutual benefit, the steamship agent and the *padrone* had no function. In the Canadian situation, they were helped by the problems of national boundaries, the new rigour of Italian laws, the competition between steamship companies, and the worker's lack of knowledge of the northern target. The North American employers maintained an almost willful ignorance of the work force. This made it easier for the intermediaries to manipulate the labour supply and to tie job brokerage to the network of migration which ran all the way from the remote towns of Italy to the remote towns of northern Ontario and British Columbia.

As Italian laws against foreign recruitment of labour grew more stringent, the town of Chiasso on the Swiss-Italian border became the centre of the illicit recruitment and flow of Italian workers to North America.⁸ Unravelling the *vincolismo* (linkages) of sham immigration societies, travel agencies, steam-

ter of the Interior (Ottawa) 27 August 1901, *Immigration Branch Papers* RG76, Vol. 129, File 28885 part I, Public Archives of Canada. This file will be cited henceforth as *Immigration Branch 1901*.

⁷ There was apparently little knowledge of Canada in Italy before the mass migration of the 1900s. The only available study of Canada in Italy seems to have been E. Cavaliere, "Il Domino del Canada. Appunti di Viaggio" which appeared first in serial form in 1887 in *Nuova Antologia* 43 (4), 700-747, 44 (6), 319-353, 44 (8), 665-692. As late as 1914, a *vademecum* for immigrants, *Calendario per Gli Emigranti di Societa Umanitaria* (Milan 1914), although it had accurate descriptions of many parts of the world, showed Niagara Falls on its map of Canada but not the industrial city of Toronto.

⁸ For the debate over emigration in Italy and the evolution of Italian laws about protection of emigrants, see F. Manzotti, *La Polemica sull'emigrazione nell'Italia unita* (Milan 1969), R. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (Harvard 1918).

ship companies, and *padroni* who controlled the flow is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is significant that a major role in this unholy commerce was taken by King Cordasco. Two simple points need to be made. First, in the so-called *commercio di carne umana* (white slave trade) there was as much competition in earning the right to transport human cattle to the slaughter yards of North American industry as there was in running the North American holding pens. For every *padrone* in Montreal or Boston, there were one or two steamship sub-agents in a town like Chiasso or in the interior of Italy. These agents earned their way by the *senzeria* (bounty) paid for each migrant recruited for steamship passage, and although the more responsible or clever among the sub-agents cared whether those they sent to America found work — because their reputations as agents depended on it — they were naturally not as sensitive to the fluctuations in the demand for labour as the North American *padroni* had to be. This made the sub-agents a sometimes unreliable part of the network for those who faced the more delicate task of maintaining a balance between the labour force and the employer in North America. One agent for Beaver Lines even boasted to the Canadian authorities that in a given year he had recruited more than 6,000 passengers from Italy, Syrians and Germans and as many more as anybody might request.⁹

It was Marcus Braun, a special inspector *en mission*, who drew the most complete portrait of the Chiasso way station on the *via commerciale*. Braun, by his own account, travelled 25,000 miles by rail and 600 by "special conveyances" through Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Rumania, Switzerland, Italy, and France in order to study the flow of emigrants to North America. Braun considered Chiasso the most dishonest and dangerous entrepot for the travellers. "I have the honour," he wrote, "to report that whatever I saw prior to my arrival at Chiasso with reference to shady emigration was nothing in comparison to that I saw and learned while travelling in Italy and the south of France."¹⁰

Ludwig, as agent for Beaver Lines, Corecco and Brivio for the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, and Jauch and Pellegrini for North German Lloyd's competed for the trade in clandestine, illegal, and unfit emigrants. Their clientele came as much from the southern provinces as from the Veneto. In fact, Braun added that Chiasso was one of the chief transfer points for migrants from the Balkans and the Levant also. The agents and companies mentioned, and a myriad of lesser ones, were far less careful with their human merchandise than were the steamship companies.¹¹

⁹ Letter of Luigi Gramatica, General Agent (Genoa) to W.T. Preston (London) 7 January 1902 in *Immigration Branch 1901*, File 28885.

¹⁰ Braun's report, supporting documents and miscellaneous related correspondence are in the National Archives in Washington. *Immigration Subject Correspondence* RG85, File 52320/47 (1903-1904), Immigration and Naturalization, Dept. of Justice. Henceforth cited as *Braun Report 1903*.

¹¹ By the turn-of-the-century, legislation in the countries of immigration made the

With the possible exception of Beaver Lines and Canadian Pacific, the steamship companies sinned, if crass free enterprise was a sin in those days, by omission. They took little responsibility for the recruiting methods of sub-agents, worrying or reacting only when blatant abuses threatened to bring government inquiries.¹² So the attitudes of the great carriers paralleled those of North American big business toward its padroni employees.

When Braun visited Chiasso, Ludwig had clearly been earning his bounties from the steamship companies. He was under indictment in Italy, where he was considered a predator. He had paid over 20,000 Swiss francs in fines and then jumped bail. The amounts of money that he forfeited show the magnitude of his business. Ludwig and his agents shifted from preparing unfit immigrants to the United States by the "Canadian back door" to helping seasonal migrants reach the channel ports.¹³ Braun reported in 1903 that recruiters of contract labour "laugh at the measures adopted against the transportation of their people, for the reason that they have the labourers instructed so well as not to entertain any fear of their deportation and the cost, etc. connected therewith."¹⁴ So Ludwig's success in recruiting or processing young migrants for Cordasco and Dini contributed to the glut of labour in the city and to King Cordasco's crisis.

A distressing aspect of this commerce of migration appeared when some of the very people who had been appointed to local committees to protect immigrants throughout Italy from unscrupulous steamship agents became themselves sub-agents.¹⁵ Sub-agents — the men whom both the steamship agent and *padrone* employed to reach the potential migrant in the back country — should not be depicted as wandering flim-flam men who preyed on bumpkins at country

transport companies responsible for return passage of those refused admission. For a model that could be applied to the study of transportation companies and sub-agents on the Italian borders, see Berit Bratne and Sune Akerman, "The Importance of the Transport Sector for Mass Emigration" in H. Runblom and Hans Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America. A History of the Migration* (Uppsala 1976). For the conflict between local agents and the great carriers in Italy, see G. Dore, *La Democrazia italiana e l'emigrazione in America* (Brescia 1964), 72-98.

¹² See the attempts by the other agencies to censure Jauch and Pellegrini for their practices at Chiasso. The latter firm caused press and government concern about the Chiasso connection by preparing clandestine immigrants too carelessly. *Braun Report 1903*.

¹³ *Braun Report 1903* RG85, File 52320/47 contains a number of transcripts of deportation proceedings held at Ellis Island in 1903. All of the cases involved older migrants, usually physically unfit, ticketed through to Montreal. Most of the migrants seem to be planning to stay in the New York area if admitted. According to Watchorn and to Rossi, the reverse device, entering the United States after being ticketed to Halifax and Montreal, was equally prevalent.

¹⁴ Letter from Knoepfelmacher to Braun, 31 May 1903, *Braun Report 1903* describes the preparation of migrants by the agencies in order to fool border authorities.

¹⁵ *Immigration Branch 1901*. "Suspect Emigration" dispatch from Chiasso to *Corriere della Sera*, 18 March 1901; *Braun Report 1903*.

fairs, pilgrimages, and feast days. They were often the local notables and officials. In the old country towns of emigration as in the North American ethnic neighbourhoods, middle-class brokers were not a criminal conspiracy but an involved web of profit, speculation and convenience. Braun's official account made note of this:

A large number of reputable persons such as priests, school-teachers, postmasters, and county notaries are directly connected with certain agents representing these steamship companies, and that they advise and instruct the emigrants how to procure steamship tickets, passports and all other things necessary for their travel, for all of which they receive a commission from agent employing them.

In at least one instance, immigrants were found to be travelling with a local *notabile* (notable) who had with him blank passports stamped with the municipal seal of his district. The government, under pressure from the press, issued a circular to those on their way to Canada:

The government therefore makes known that the immigrants must be very particular to inform themselves beforehand of that country. It is necessary to remember that the climate there is most severe and that the winter is long, almost six months . . . the means of transport and communication are scarce and difficult. For unattached emigrants from rural districts who go out with the view of getting work there is no possibility of employment in Canada . . . it should help therefore to dissuade from emigration to Canada those who aren't provided with the necessary capital.¹⁶

Such a circular might dampen some prospective immigrants, but it drove others into the clandestine system. It implied that only through the networks of the steamship agents and labour agents could one possibly hope for any kind of worthwhile *campagne* (military campaign) in Canada, and that Canada could only serve as a land of short-term or seasonal target migration not as a land of permanent settlement. Contrast the government's solemn warning with the sort of letter Cordasco wrote to his Italian contacts, such as Antonio Paretti in Udine:

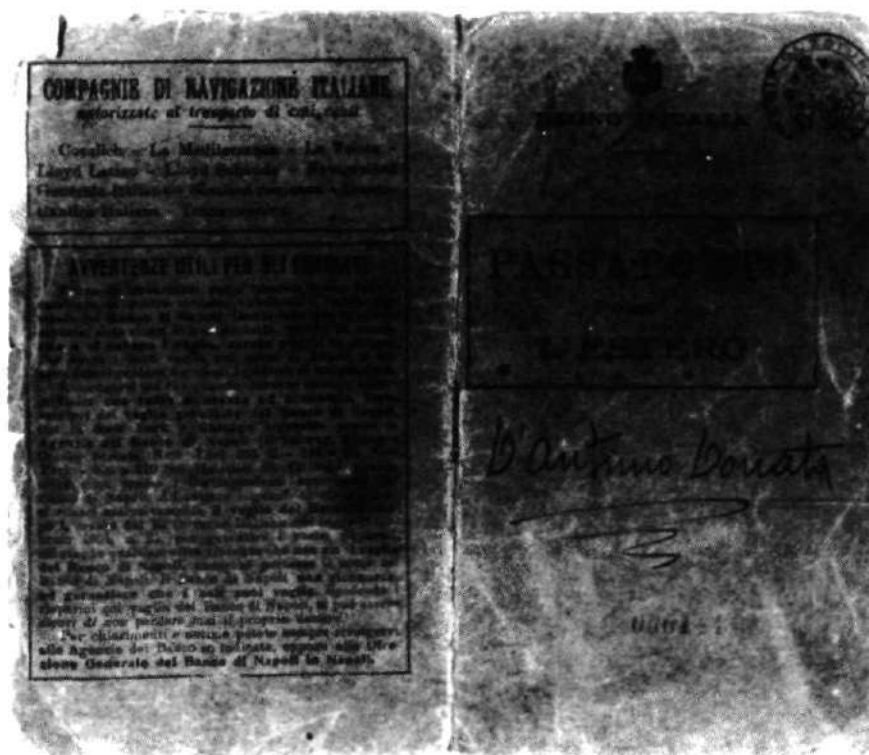
If you have any passengers you can send them without any fear. I am able to give them immediate work, the salary will be a \$1.50 a day. Besides that they will get a return ticket from me to the locality, they can board themselves or get board as they like. The work will last long and the payment is sure. Each man gets a contract in Italian containing the clear conditions under which they have work and which specifies the length of time and salary. In one word, there will be no tricks or schemes.¹⁷

Before we try describing the *padroni's* activities in Montreal — using Cordasco and also his competitor, Alberto Dini, as models — we have to explain the rapidity of Cordasco's rise to power athwart the lines of communication. The new king of Italian labour does not really seem to have been intelligent enough to control the situation, but the decision made by Canadian Pacific Railway to place the mantle of sole agent on Cordasco meant a small-

¹⁶ Government circular quoted in above dispatch.

¹⁷ Cordasco letter to Antonio Paretti, *La Veloce* agent in Udine (1 March 1904) *Royal Commission 1904*, 80.

time hustler grew into a large *padrone* broker mainly because of his felicitous relationship with one major employer and particularly with the railway's chief hiring agent, George Burns. It was Burns who made Cordasco into his "negro king." Burns operated out of an office in Windsor Station in Montreal called the Special Services Department of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Despite that euphemism, its main function was the hiring of docile foreign labour, especially Italians, Galicians, and Chinese for the railway's summer work.



Italian passport, circa 1915. The Multicultural History Society of Ontario Collection.

Burns had made up his mind during the 1901 strike that Cordasco offered him the easiest and surest means of maintaining an available labour pool in Montreal. The agent admitted as much on the stand during the Royal Commission hearings in 1904:

What means do you take in order to obtain this extra Italian labour? Answer: I have engaged that labour entirely through Italian labour agents. Can you mention the names of these agents you have employed? During the past three years, since the summer of 1901 I have dealt almost exclusively through Cordasco. Previous to that I had several

others engaged, such as Mr. Dini, two gentlemen by the name of Schenker, and possibly one or two more. But since 1901 you have dealt exclusively with Mr. Cordasco? Yes, I have Your Honour. Was that the year you had the strike? It was. And Cordasco got in touch with you during that year? I think the first business I had with Cordasco was in 1901. In connection with the strike? In connection with supplying Italians to take the place of track men who went on strike.¹⁸

Cordasco, working for the Canadian Pacific Railway, and Alberto Dini, on behalf of the Grand Trunk Railway, had to negotiate with the agents in Switzerland who were the immediate recruiters of manpower. A letter to Dini from the firm of Corecco and Brivio in Bodio, Switzerland, reveals the means by which North American labour agents and European steamship agents formed their alliances. The Swiss firm, in a covert relationship with both Frederick Ludwig in Chiasso and with Beaver Steamship Lines, and possibly even with Canadian Pacific Lines, masqueraded as representatives of something called "Società Anomina di Emigrazione La Svizzera" as well as other agencies of emigration in Switzerland which have legally been constituted.¹⁹

In fact, Corecco and Brivio had tried to monopolize the Chiasso Connection and the commerce of migration there. The letter to Dini in 1904 suggested the advantages of a full alliance:

You do not ignore that a brother of Mr. Schenker, one of those who has opened an office in Montreal for the exchange of money in order to compete with you, has lately opened an office in Chiasso, Switzerland and gets passengers from Italy through the help of Schenker who is in Montreal. The latter sends to his brother in Chiasso notices and orders for the shipment of men and the brother reads the notices to the passengers mentioning the ships they are to go by. Having acknowledged this action on the part of Schenker we took the liberty of addressing ourselves to you in order to advise you and inform you thereof and to ask if it would be possible for you to do something for us in the matter.¹⁹

So the steamship agents and immigration agents in Italy or on the Italian borders who needed to protect their bounties sought allies among the *padroni* while the latter sought safe suppliers of labour. In 1903, only one season after he had gained his lucrative hold over the Canadian Pacific labour supply, Cordasco wrote to Frederick Ludwig:

By the same mail I am sending you a package of my business cards. I ask you to hand them to the passengers or better to the labourers that you will send directly to me. . . . To satisfy the Italians better here I have opened a banking office of which I send a circular to you from which you can see that I can do all that they request. Awaiting for some shipment and to hear from you soon. Yours truly, A. Cordasco.²⁰

Cordasco apparently demonstrated both naïveté and lack of finesse in the letter to Ludwig. That gentleman, a smoother, tougher exploiter, wrote back to

¹⁸ Testimony of G. Burns, *Royal Commission 1904*, 41.

¹⁹ Letter from Corecco & Brivio to A. Dini (7 May 1904) *Royal Commission 1904*, 50.

²⁰ Correspondence between Cordasco and Ludwig (October 1903) *Royal Commission 1904*, 82.

him within a month. Addressing himself to "Mr. Cordask," he explained that he had not answered "the letter immediately because I wanted to get some information about you." From the tone of the letter, Ludwig felt he had the upper hand in dealing with a *padrone arrivato* (parvenu) like Cordasco. He informed Mr. Cordask that he would "try him out and send passengers to him and see if he acts as an honest man and then he will give his address to most of the migrants going to Montreal." He added, "What I especially recommend to you is not to change your address every moment like a wandering merchant. On your envelope the address is 441 St. James Street and on your business card it is 375, now which of the two is the right address?" Ludwig went on to remark that he had done business with Dini for years and had found him a capable and good business associate. Mr. Cordask finally is warned, "We shall see then if you will work with the same conscience and punctuality."

Communication with those in the Old World who put labour on the *via commerciale* steamship agents, immigration agents, and local notables was sometimes testy to say the least. We find Cordasco complaining to a man from Udine who had sent him men who were stone cutters not labourers. The stone cutters had expected work as skilled masons or in quarries, but Cordasco claimed that he had distinctly warned the men before they left the old country that everyone should understand that the railway work available in Canada was for labourers, not artisans. A number of these men refused to go to British Columbia to work; they claimed that they were promised free passage on the railway, skilled work and better wages than those offered them when they arrived in Canada.²¹ Caught amidst the promises of the agents in the old country, his own hyperbole in the pages of the *Corriere del Canada*, the parsimonious approach to migrant labour of Canadian big business, and worker demands, Cordasco's role as a go-between sometimes reduced itself to lying to all parties involved, while walking a very difficult tightrope.

It was only the *padrone* who could find himself in great difficulty if he didn't regularly satisfy the aspirations of the migrant labourers. Cordasco was clearly the man in between, and, though he survived the crisis of 1904 and the *public scrutiny of his practices that came with the Royal Commission*, he only did so because he received the support of his employer, the Canadian Pacific Railway and because, in the long run, the migrants who were both consumers and commodities in the trade continued to accept the *padrone* system.

Cordasco himself sometimes sensed that he was a man dangling between forces which could manipulate him. There is a painful and a plaintive quality in a letter to a contact in Udine expressing his annoyance at the demands made upon him by workers: "I am not responsible for the extremely cold season that prevents the companies from starting work." The labour practices for which he was being criticized in 1904 had begun in 1901; they had begun with the

²¹ Letter from Cordasco to Antonio Paretti (26 April 1904) *Royal Commission 1904*, 82.

approval of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Cordasco described to the commissioners the situation in that year when three officials of the railway came to him, saying they wanted labourers and asking if he had any Italian labour to supply to the Canadian Pacific. At the beginning he could find only 400 or 500 men, and the company offered him no fee or salary, probably because they assumed that Cordasco himself would charge the labourers as would a regular employment agency. However, when the strike began later in 1901, they offered to pay him a dollar a man, and with that as an incentive, Cordasco rounded up about 2,000 men from throughout North America:

I picked up what I could get in Canada and when I could get no more here I wrote for some. Question: Where? Answer: I think I wrote to New York. Question: No where else? Answer: I wrote to Boston but did not get any there. Question: Anywhere else? Answer: That is all. I wrote to New York, Boston and Portland. Question: Did you send any men down there to look for men? Answer: I think so. Question: How many did you send over to the States during that time? Answer: Let me see, I sent four or five, perhaps six. Question: They went to different parts of the States? Answer: I sent them to Boston. I remember I sent men to Philadelphia and to Boston, that has just come to my mind.²²

Cordasco had learned in 1901 how to tap the labour force in the "Little Italies" of the eastern United States. The chance to earn a dollar a head must have been too much to resist, and it did not occur to him that, with his exclusive rights as the CPR's agent, he might reach a point where he would register more men than he could find work for. He devised a system in which each winter he registered both workers and foremen in a work book with his agency, charging a dollar a piece for workers and more for foremen, and assuring them that they would receive work in the spring from the railway contractors on the basis of their place on that list. What appeared to be a simple and sensible registration system, however, turned out to be a form of bounty not unlike that charged by the steamship agents. By over-inscribing workers and then failing to cope with a late thaw and the possibility that there would be less work than expected, Cordasco brought himself and his monarchy to the brink of economic and personal ruin in spring 1904.

In many ways the crisis in padronism was atypical because the *padrone's* profit and power, his relationship to the local "Little Italy," was based on a system far more complex than that of simply collecting bounty. The *inter-mediarismo* (brokerage) that he practised extended both into many aspects of Italian life in Canada and, as we have seen, along the communications network between European labour and North American industry. Cordasco's activities conveniently divide into those which, remembering our analogy to monarchy, we might call his foreign policy — and perhaps like the "negro king," his foreign policy was ultimately controlled by his colonial masters, Montreal's Anglo-Celtic businessmen — and his domestic policy, his organization and

²² Testimony of Cordasco, *Royal Commission 1904*, 74.

control of Italian labour in Canada. By extension, he helped to shape the Italian community itself.

Cordasco's foreign policy had the Chiasso Connection as its linchpin but it also included his relations with the various *padroni* and labour agents in the American "Little Italies" and his relations with the major steamship companies. The official report of the Royal Commission listed some of the methods Cordasco used to make contact with the labour supply in Europe. The investigators admitted that they could only infer from the correspondence a conspiracy to mislead workers. Mackenzie King, the chief investigator, had remarked that "there is no business relation existing between himself [Cordasco] and these agents but I think there can be no doubt as to their acting in direct accordance with an understood arrangement which he has with them."²³ King's remark has a resonance similar to that of American investigators at a later time who became convinced that the Mafia existed because they could not find evidence of it.

The nature of the *padrone* connection, the nature of *vincolismo* (complex linkage), led North American investigators like Mackenzie King and Marcus Braun to hint suspiciously of crime, when, in fact, padronism was a business — albeit the business of pre-industrial men — that they were catching a glimpse of. The agents may have seemed *strozzi* (sharks) to those outside the ethnic group, but a system of honour existed among them that depended on hand shakes, ascriptive encounters, kinship, mutual trust, and respect. In every major city the leading labour bureaus and *padroni* had a shared interest in controlling and regulating their relations with one another, so that too many new competitors, upstart foremen who had learned a bit of English, could not successfully compete.

The memoranda of understanding and letters of agreement that passed between Cordasco and his peers were callous documents reflecting the tenor of the commerce in human flesh. But steamship agents and labour agents of every ethnic background dealt with migrants thus, and the line between the clever use of the free enterprise system and fraud is more discernible to us now than it was then. Also, it is obvious, from the testimony of Mr. Mortimer Waller, that business practices did not change much as one crossed ethnic lines.

Question: Is there anything else you would like to state in connection with this investigation Mr. Waller? Answer: No sir, I do not think so. I think myself that Englishmen should have as fair a chance of supplying this Italian labour as the Italians themselves. Question: You think that an Englishman should have as good a chance to supply this labour? Answer: Yes. Question: You think that Englishmen have not that chance? Answer: No sir. Question: Why? Answer: The companies like the CPR will not go to anybody but Italians for the men.²⁴

²³ Report in *Labour Gazette* (June 1906), 1350.

²⁴ Testimony of Mortimer Waller, *Royal Commission 1904*, 48. Waller incidentally charged \$2 to register labourers for work and \$5 for foremen.

Mr. Waller had the same system of registering labourers as Cordasco, and charged approximately the same commission for unskilled workers and foremen.

Both Dini and Cordasco readily acknowledged on the witness stand their contacts with men in Chiasso like Ludwig and, a little less readily, their arrangements with the major labour agents in the United States. In 1901, Cordasco had made contact with Bianco Stabili and Company and Torchia and Company in Boston's North End. Through Boston and through Portland he was able to bring men up on the Boston and Maine and on other railways, moving them into the Canadian labour system. He also had contacts in Providence and Fall River. In some sense, while these men made Cordasco powerful by helping him find experienced labourers in the American "Little Italies," he established their power by making them successful brokers of labour in those cities. The railway company would, at Cordasco's prompting, supply free passes for those coming to work; it could deny those passes, or it could allow part payment of passage, affording the Montreal *padrone* a subtle, but effective, device for manipulating the numbers and skills of the local labour supply. Since most of the labourers were target migrants committed to making as much cash for as short a stretch of work as possible, the calculation of travel costs proved very important.

In 1904, Cordasco may have tried to use this device as a safety valve once he saw that too many workers were arriving in Montreal. For example, in a letter to Angelo de Santis, a labour agent in Buffalo, the *padrone* reminded him that "the railway fare from Buffalo to Montreal has to be paid by the men, a free pass from Buffalo being given in July and August only, but then the season is short and the earnings little."²⁵ Cordasco apparently miscalculated the impact of the recession in the United States on Italian sojourners. In bad years like 1903, men were more than willing to accept the loss of income which paying their own passage to Montreal entailed.

When we first encountered Cordasco at his mock coronation, we were watching a media event. The parade and banquet took up most of a special issue of the *Corriere del Canada* and that special issue was printed and sent to many Italian towns. With touching modesty and some *campanilismo* (localism) Cordasco himself claimed that he never sent any newspapers abroad except to his own village. But it seems obvious from the testimony of trapped migrants to the Commission that issues of *Corriere del Canada* were used as an advertising device to encourage labour to come to Canada from throughout Italy. For example, a witness from Reggio Calabria said that he had seen many circulars and newspapers, and that, at about the same time, a man had come to his village with packets of Cordasco's business card. Cordasco had also sent business cards to Ludwig and to almost everybody who addressed inquiries to

²⁵ Letter from Cordasco to De Santis (10 February 1904), *Royal Commission 1904*, 130.

him. Although hardly grounds upon which to base a charge of conspiracy to defraud, the flow of business cards back and forth seems a fitting image for describing the network that existed between *padroni* and emigration agents. It served the steamship agent in Italy well to be able to give the migrant Cordasco's card and to direct him to Cordasco, as if the *padrone* were but a runner for the steamship agent himself, and it obviously served Cordasco to have the fish directed into his net as they came toward Montreal. Braun had noticed that business cards were the *lettres de cachet* of the commerce of migration. "Most emigrants are in possession of cards of all kinds of boardinghouses, emigrant agencies and 'Homes' of all nationalities in all the cities of the United States. I attach here one of said cards of which thousands can be obtained daily . . ." An intermediary's card could stand as a free enterprise alternative to the passports and legal documents inaccessible to so many migrants of humble background.

Both Cordasco and Dini were evasive in their testimony about their use of newspaper advertising. Dini's advertisements were mostly printed in *La Patria Italiana* and Cordasco's in the aforementioned *Corriere del Canada*. These newspapers may have existed as more than advertising devices for the *padroni* — Dini and Cordasco were careful not to claim any direct relationship to the papers, and each paper had an editor who tried to be independent and to create an Italian cultural *ambiente* (ambience) in Montreal — but several curious letters bring the editors' independence into question. For example, Cordasco wrote to Luigi Scarrone, a newspaperman in Toronto, describing himself "as the capitalist administrator of the *Corriere del Canada*." Cordasco asked Scarrone, as a favour, to write an article about the *padroni*, since he could not do it himself, because "if I should place this before the readers they will say that I sing my own praise or that I order others to praise me. So you can, (and I thank you for that) send articles on the work and solidity of the Canadian Pacific Railway but do not tell the readers that I belong to this newspaper."²⁶

The *padrone* was an ethnic entrepreneur involved in many businesses. In his testimony, Dini told the judge, "I have got an employment office, banker is name known to Italians." Earlier in his testimony, he had also pointed out that he was the steamship agent for North German Lloyd's Line, Hamburg-American Anchor Line, and two Italian lines, including La Velocce. Cordasco in turn had extracted a promise from Mr. Burns of the CPR when he helped find strike breakers in 1901, that the CPR would help him become the agent for their steamship line, for Compagnie Générale Transatlantique and for several others. Like Dini, he referred to himself as a banker and his newspaper announcement to the labourers in 1904 began:

To the army of the pick and shovel Italian labourers, bosses do not show a double face, do not be false but only one. Be true. Have a soldier's courage, apply to the elegant and solid Italian bank of Antonio Cordasco, if you do not want to weep over your misfor-

²⁶ Letter from Cordasco to L.P. Scarrone (9 February 1904), *Royal Commission 1904*, 103.

tunes in the spring when the shipments of men will begin.²⁷

Both men described themselves as bankers, perhaps as steamship agents and employment agents, but would not have used the word *padrone*. They specialized in performing as brokers between labour and capital, as transmitters of remittances and pre-paid tickets, and as steamship agents, while engaging, because of the migrants' dependence on them, in many other businesses.

Cordasco's banking, for example, included lending money to foremen so that they could pay the registration fee of a dollar a head for their work gangs. Often the faith of the workers in the *banchista* was touchingly naïve. A 1903 letter reads, "We the undersigned, signed with a cross mark because we cannot write or read, both of us, we authorize Mr. A. Cordasco to draw our wages for work done in the month of October last, 1903. And we both authorize the Canadian Pacific Railway Company to pay over our wages to Mr. Cordasco at 375 St. James Street." Cordasco himself understood the complex nature of his *intermediarismo*. An advertisement appearing in *La Patria Italiana* showed a rather charming, if dangerous and old-fashioned, sense of the word *patronato*: "If you want to be respected and protected either on the work or in case of accident or other annoyances which may be easily met, apply personally or address letters or telegrams to Antonio Cordasco."²⁸ It was protection that the *padrone* offered, protection against undue delay, protection against fraud by others, protection against all the dangers of an unknown world, of a world where the labourer could not cope for himself because of lack of education, lack of language skills and lack of time to stand and fight when his cash supply was threatened.

Mr. Skinner, Mr. Burns' assistant, showed a certain sympathy for Cordasco, for the *padrone* who had to deal with what Skinner seemed to see as the child-like qualities of the labourers:

He has lots of trouble. He keeps an office with a waiting room, and they are the resorts where these people spend all winter. They come to smoke, he keeps all sorts of conveniences for them.²⁹

In a strange way, the chief power of the intermediary, just as in the old country, lay in his literacy. Cordasco's clerk on the witness stand mentioned writing over 87 letters a month. When Dini was pressed as to what he actually did when people came to him seeking work, he answered, "I write to several contractors, to employers, to Grand Trunk if they want labourers and if they want them I'll ship them quickly." He was asked how many contractors he represented, and replied, ten or twenty. "When the contractors want labourers, they have my address, they write or telegraph me, if I have any Italians to send them." So it was their ability to correspond and to communicate with the American

²⁷ Notice in *La Patria Italiana*, Royal Commission 1904, 106.

²⁸ *La Patria Italiana* (20 February 1904), Royal Commission 1904, 107.

²⁹ Testimony of CPR agent Skinner, Royal Commission 1904, 26.

employer which made *padroni* powerful. They played a role no different from that played by the bourgeoisie of the small towns of the Italian south and northeast, a role in which literacy was a form of capital and the basis of the brokerage system itself. Men who would have been brokers between the well-born and the peasantry or between government and peasantry in Europe, found themselves brokers between sojourners and English-speaking employers.³⁰

There is no doubt that Cordasco made a profit from both the employer and labourer. That was only fitting since he served both groups. The amount of the profit, however, was outrageous by any standard. At one point, it became clear from the testimony that Cordasco was buying from his own supplier near Windsor Station and supplying most of the canned anchovies and bread for labourers at different Canadian Pacific sites across northern Ontario. He made 150% profit on a can of sardines, the bread was often moldy and he clearly made a high profit on it as well. In one season he cleared \$3800 as a provisioner. The figure of a dollar a head for registration of men pales in comparison. Cordasco obviously was not only profiteering but down-right grasping. The foremen who came to the stand to testify against him pointed out that they had been forced to raise the money for the banquet that had been held in his honour and that some of that money had also mysteriously disappeared into Cordasco's pocket.³¹

If the investigators had understood the system a little better, had understood the degree to which the foremen and labourers were also consumers, they would have noticed that the anger of those who came to the stand was not over the fact that they had to pay tribute to Cordasco or that they had to register seasonally for work with him, but that he had not found jobs for them or for their gangs that year. The foremen particularly, since they too were men in between, were galled by the fact that they had promised their gangs work, that they had often raised the dollar a head for Cordasco from their gangs, and perhaps the possibility of exercising their own petty tyranny and corruption over the work force. One foreman, Michael Tisi, was pressed on the witness stand about the fact that he had paid ten dollars to be foreman of a gang of 100 men and that each of the men had paid two dollars. He admitted paying that, but he felt that he had no grievance against Cordasco. He answered simply, "They went to work. I'm not complaining about that."³²

It has always seemed illogical to speak about a large scale broker like Cordasco controlling thousands of men through ties of paesanism, kinship or even through shared ethnicity. In 1903, the CPR hired over 3500 Italians. Cordasco could not have known them all. They came from all over Italy, from

³⁰ See Harney, "Commerce of Migration," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 9 (1977), 42-53, on the concept of the *borghesia mediatrice*. See G. Dore, *La Democrazia italiana e l'emigrazione in America* (Brescia 1964).

³¹ Testimony of Pompeo Bianco, foreman, *Royal Commission 1904*, 163.

³² Testimony of Michele Tisi, foreman, *Royal Commission 1904*, 33.

the Veneto to Sicily; few, if any, were his *paesani* (fellow townsmen), let alone his friends and relatives. It was the *sub-bossi* who organized and controlled the work gangs. Sometimes those gangs were made up of *paesani* but not always. The testimony of the *caposquadri* (foremen) partially explains one aspect of the padrone's power. One foreman, Sal Mollo, in his testimony pointed out to the Commission that his "men don't know him [Cordasco] at all. They know me. When I went there to his bank he would not hear me." Another foreman, Pompeo Bianco, claimed to know all of his gang of 104 men brought from the United States, except for perhaps 12.³⁹

Loyalty to the bosses was functional; it had to do with their ability to operate as secondary intermediaries, in this instance between the men and Cordasco, but usually between the men and the section bosses of the CPR. If that loyalty was sometimes based on regional allegiances, such as the whole gang and the boss being Calabrese or being Venetian, it was still not synonymous with *paesanism*.

From the ranks of these foremen however, as well as from other small entrepreneurs, individuals came forth to try to compete with Dini and Cordasco in the lucrative trade in migrants. If Cordasco was the *generone* (*haut bourgeois*) then these were the *generetti* (*petit bourgeoisie*) nipping at his heels. Whatever the true basis of loyalty between *sub-bosse* and gangs, Cordasco was able to control thousands of men from his Montreal office without going into the field; it could depend not just on his own immediate employees but on the *sub-bossi* as vassals.

The veil did lift enough for us to see how the *padrone* ultimately depended on his Anglo-Saxon master, the employer of labourers. Cordasco saw Burns or his assistant Skinner almost daily. No doubt the lines of communication between him and Burns were closer than between most *padroni* who served a more varied clientele, but Dini's relation with the various contractors and with the Grand Trunk Railway seems to have been as intense. Much of Cordasco's power over his Italian migrant labourer clientele derived from his right to advertise himself as the only acting agent for the CPR. Although he maintained some independence from Burns and the CPR by being able to pose as the most efficient intermediary for the gathering of Italian labour, his position *vis-à-vis* the company was not strong. It could withdraw its patronage at any time and turn to his potential competitors or directly to his *caposquadri*.

On the stand, Burns admitted readily that he had given Cordasco a monopoly: "You have always stated that Mr. Cordasco was labour agent for the CPR. Answer: I have said that he was sole agent to hire Italians." From the phrasing, one senses that Burns really did find the ways of the migrant Italians mysterious and needed Cordasco's help. He remarked of Cordasco's runners, "these men have connections down there [the States] and they pick out forces

³⁹ Testimony of Salvatore Mollo, foreman, *Royal Commission 1904*, 34; testimony of Pompeo Bianco, foreman, *Royal Commission 1904*, 29.

of men, pay a lot of expenses, railway fare and two or three dollars a day.'³⁴ He had been so impressed by Cordasco's energy and ingenuity in finding strike breakers in 1901 that he remained committed to him through the 1904 crisis.

Burns contributed directly to the expansion of Cordasco's role from that of a minor employment agent into a *banchista*. The commerce of migration led inevitably to a variety of entrepreneurial possibilities and the CPR's agent gave his blessing:

The way it came about was this. He only had a regular office and was doing a large business but he had no steamship agencies. And of course when these Italians come back from work most of them have a good deal of money which they want to send over to their relatives and friends, some for their wives and children and they buy these steamship pre-paid tickets. Cordasco is desirous of getting a line of these tickets on the different steamship agencies. And he came to me about the matter and I told him he could easily get agencies if he made the proper representation to the agents that were in New York. Question: You recommended him? Answer: I took some steps to get these agencies for him.³⁵

So from his castle in Windsor Station, George Burns protected his vassal from both do-gooders and the competition of lesser brokers because the railway found the *padrone* system efficient and flexible. A delegation from the Italian Immigration Aid Society had approached Burns offering to provide him with Italian labourers directly from Italy through the good offices of the Italian government. Burns replied to them,

I have taken up the question of the employment of labour with the proper authorities and have to advise you that it is not the intention of this company to change the arrangements of the employment of Italian immigrant labour which have been in effect during the past few years. Our present system has given entire satisfaction so far and I therefore regret I shall be unable to place direct with your Society any specific order for any number of men.³⁶

Cordasco's sway over Italian migrant labour had the approval of the company. For example, at the famous banquet in the *padrone's* honour, most of the foremen in attendance were impressed by the presence of the chief superintendent of the CPR's Vancouver division. After all, that gentleman would be hiring 5000 or 6000 Italians during the coming spring, and he seemed to be there honouring his friend Cordasco.

In 1904, company support, even though it showed the limits of Cordasco's

³⁴ Testimony of Burns, *Royal Commission 1904*, 61. It is important to note that Burns stressed that Cordasco was sole agent for Italian labour: he had in that sense an ethnic monopoly but not a franchise for hiring all track crews. As Burns pointed out (52), Italian labour had a specific purpose — "The Italians on our line are used to replace these men who have been employed earlier in the season on contracts, and to whom at this time of year, July and August, when the harvest starts, the farmer offers high wages and they jump their jobs, and the work is left behind, and we have to rely on anything we can get."

³⁵ Testimony of Burns, *Royal Commission 1904*, 41.

³⁶ Letter from Burns to C. Mariotti, Secretary of the Italian Immigration Aid Society (16 March 1903) *Royal Commission 1904*, 3.

independence, enabled him to thwart attacks upon his monopoly. That support came in at least four ways. First, at no point in their testimony did Skinner or Burns speak explicitly enough to compromise Cordasco. Second, they maintained throughout his exclusive right to hire Italians for the railway rather than turning to aspiring *sub-bossi*. Third, they had refused to order manpower from Alberto Dini, Cordasco's main competitor. Fourth, Burns did his best to discredit or ignore the Italian Immigrant Aid Society.

With his overlords to protect him, Cordasco's lines of communication to Ludwig in Chiasso, to Stabili in Boston, and to other lesser *padroni* in Portland, Providence, and Fall River, and agents in New York and Buffalo were secure. Cordasco seemed as safe as a *padrone* could be. To raise money for the banquet in his honour he warned any man who hesitated to donate five dollars to the cause that he would publish his photograph upside down on the souvenir sheet. The real threat was that "anyone who refused to pay will go out of my office," that is, would be eliminated from the hiring register. In an address to labourers printed in *La Patria Italiana* Cordasco flaunted his monopoly:

If you do not want to weep over your misfortune in the spring when the shipment of men will begin you will do business with me. Do not believe that with your dollar that you will be able to get work like your comrades who have been faithful. Those who had signed the book earlier. We will inspect our books and money orders and our passage ticket books and those who will not have their names in them will in their despair tear out their hair and will call Mr. Cordasco, Lordship Don Antonio. 'Let me go to work.' 'No, never,' will be answered to them. 'Go to those to whom you have sent your money away...' Forewarned is a forearmed man.³⁷

Despite this unintentional parody of Christ's monopoly over salvation Cordasco could not stifle all the competition. The same entrepreneurial spirit that brought so many of the migrants to North America led a certain number of men to see in Cordasco or Dini models for action. One could almost say that an infernal spirit of capitalism had begun to inject itself into his feudal system. Foremen, *sub-bossi* and *caposquadri* who had been in America for a number of seasons — especially if they spoke English well — must have seen advantage in eliminating Cordasco as intermediary even if they did not aspire to a brokerage status for themselves. The *sub-bossi* were, much like the *generetti* of the post-risorgimento, at once in a feudal and capitalist relationship with the *padrone*. The *sub-bossi* gave Cordasco his power; he gave them theirs. Each could claim to provide work to those below them. If one of the *generetti* tried to by-pass Cordasco and deal directly with the employer, Cordasco could only hope that the employer would not take advantage of the situation to undermine him.

As we have seen, George Burns of the CPR did not take advantage of the situation. He found it easier to have one reliable *padrone* and to turn a blind eye to his corruption and unfair exactions. By 1904, with the help of the company, Cordasco had defeated non-Italian suppliers of labour and had

³⁷ *La Patria Italiana*, advertisement (20 February 1904), *Royal Commission 1904*, 106.

excluded Dini from the CPR system, while he himself cut into Dini's commerce with the Grand Trunk Railway. From the *padrone's* correspondence, we can see how he used Burns and the sub-contractors' fear of anarchy in the supply system to thwart emerging competitors. Cordasco went so far at one point as to write a letter to Boston interfering in the recruitment of labourers there and in the competition between the Bianco Stabili Company and Torchia and Company. He warned Messieurs Torchia that there was no point in recruiting people for the CPR in British Columbia because he, Cordasco, was the sole agent for that railway and he would only order manpower through Stabili. He ended his letter thus, "No shipment of men will be recognized but those made through Stabili and Company."³⁸

Despite the bravado of that letter, Cordasco pestered Burns with complaints about incidents in which sub-contractors along the right-of-way hired workers through Italian foremen rather than deal through Burns and Cordasco. Over the years, as Italian officials like Viola and Moroni had noted, more target migrants became stranded in towns along the railway right-of-way, especially in the North.³⁹ Since migrants wintered in close proximity to their foremen, it became possible for a contractor to hire a gang without referring back to Montreal. Consequently, some of Cordasco's monopoly over the labour pool needed for the interior of the country was threatened, and he turned, apparently in righteous indignation, to Burns for help. For example, Cordasco wrote to complain about an interpreter named George Patrie, alias Gaetano La Patria, alias De Patrick, warning Burns that Patrie had lied in promising seasoned workers to one of the sub-contractors. According to the *padrone*, Patrie could not supply experienced railway hands, only boys and greenhorns. In another letter, he notified Burns that Mr. Paul Christopher, an Italian foreman, had hired out a crew of 25 Italians who had not passed through Cordasco's system. Christopher's men had received a free railway pass to the job site which Cordasco considered a breach of faith on the part of the company.⁴⁰ We cannot be sure that Cordasco received satisfaction after these protests, but it is clear that Burns preferred to work through him and that Burns agreed with Cordasco that a centralized system was the most effective one for the railway to maintain.

The greatest challenge to Cordasco's pre-eminence in the commerce of migration arose from the changing attitude toward protecting labourers in Italy. If it was Montreal civic authorities who precipitated the Royal Commission inquiry into Italian migrant workers, it was the city's Italian Immigrant Aid

³⁸ Letter from Cordasco to M. Torchia & Co. (12 March 1904), *Royal Commission 1904*, 89.

³⁹ M. Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto 1971). The author estimates that over 25% of Ontario's Italian population in the 1900s was in the North. The figure would be much higher in the summer. For a discussion of the problem of the census, the thaw, and migrant Italian labour see R.F. Harney, "Chiaroscuro: Italians in Toronto, 1885-1915," *Italian Americana* (Spring 1975), 148-149.

⁴⁰ Cordasco's letters of complaint to Burns, *Royal Commission 1904*, 141-143.

Society, acting for the new Commissariat of Emigration in Rome, which tried to pounce upon the unfortunate situation in order to destroy the *padrone* system, or at least to discredit Antonio Cordasco.⁴¹ The Society, even though it had existed as a local private organization for a number of years, was incorporated under Canadian law only during winter 1902. Its leadership was a compound of Italian government officials, local professionals of Italian descent and the *notabili* from among older Italian settlers of Montreal. Among the Society's officers were Honoré Catelli, director of the city's largest pasta manufactory, and — unfortunately for the Society's image — Alberto Dini, Cordasco's principal rival as Italian banker, travel agent and employment broker.

From the outset, the Society did not seem as intent upon solving the problems that arose from clandestine Italian migration to Canada as it did upon usurping Cordasco from his position in the network. Long before the Royal Commission hearings, the Society had tried unsuccessfully to undermine the Canadian Pacific Railway's support for Cordasco. Special agent Burns admitted on the stand that he had been informed of a number of incidents in which the Society accused the *padrone* of cheating workers. A letter to Burns' immediate superior in 1903 hinted darkly that Cordasco was hoodwinking the railway, implying that Burns was in collusion with him. The letter came from the Society's offices:

We suppose it never came to your knowledge that certain people, possibly authorized to deal with your company, engaged Italian labourers to work on your roads, only on payment of a commission of \$3.00 each, and refused to engage those who cannot afford to pay such commission. . . . We wish to stop an abuse of charging \$3.00 pr more to poor men, whose children are perhaps starving.⁴²

For his part, Cordasco never treated the Society as other than a rival intermediary and labour brokerage. Dini's presence on the group's board of directors lent some credence to Cordasco's claim that there was no ethical difference between the services he rendered or the fees he charged to sojourners and those that the Society wished to substitute. Cordasco, with characteristically clumsy malice, tried to discredit the Society as well. In winter 1903-1904, he had written to the editor of an Italian newspaper on Mulberry Street in New York City. Paying him for advertising space, the Montreal *padrone* added, "please make an article speaking about the negligence of this

⁴¹ With the passage of new legislation on immigration in Italy during 1901, the Society had changed from a private Montreal charitable agency to an adjunct of the Italian consulate funded by the Italian government. Its papers of incorporation listed as the Society's purpose: "1. the assisting of Italian immigrants to reach Canada; 2. assisting Italians to obtain employment; 3. assisting Italian immigrants to obtain land for settlement. . . ; 4. assisting Italian immigrants in every possible way; 5. enabling persons in Canada in want of labourers, artisans or servants to get from Italy desirable citizens." (Incorporation 10 November 1902).

⁴² Letter from Italian Immigration Aid Society to D. McNicoll, General Manager Canadian Pacific Railway (26 March 1903), *Royal Commission 1904*, 73.

Consul and the Italian Immigrant Aid Society."⁴³ And, even though he had written earlier to the CPR agent to warn him that the best labourers were being siphoned off by other companies, Cordasco reacted to the first public outcry against the number of Italian migrants loitering in Montreal in spring 1904 by telling Burns that it was the Society who had, by providing shelter and sending notices about agricultural possibilities in Canada to Italy, caused the embarrassing glut of greenhorns in the labour pool:

Sure will be disgraceful [sic] for these poor emigrants with the old ones which they put up here all winter, and Italian Consul with his Society are to be blamed and they should be crushed to peace [sic].⁴⁴

Because of Dini's presence on the Society's board, Cordasco and his lawyers were able to deflect the struggle away from the point that the Italian government would have preferred, that is, that regulation (and *patronato*) should replace exploitation and the *padrone* system. However honest the practices of Dini and his companions, he was a *banchista* and a rival broker; his presence on the board of directors brought the Society's integrity, or at least its good sense, into question. At a board meeting, Dini had protested against disbursing Society funds to help indigent Italian workers; he suggested that most of the migrants were feigning destitution in order to stay on the dole. It is not clear if Dini, like Cordasco, found himself competing with the Society as a moneylender during winter 1903-1904, but it is certain that the Society's officials directed immigrants to Dini's "bank" when they had remittance or exchange questions.⁴⁵ At any rate, the Society could not transcend the free enterprise values of its members or of the economy around them, which is why, in the end as we have noted President Catelli had agreed with the Commissioners that the troubles of the spring of 1904 really rested with the simple statement that "business was business."

Candori, the Secretary of the Society, boasted from the witness stand that the Society had drawn to Canada a better class of Italian workers from Venetia, "picked men, and any railway company would be glad to have these men because they are strong and even good looking."⁴⁶ Both the Society and Canadian immigration authorities tended to use words like "class" and "type," when in fact they meant race. The Society's intervention against the *padroni* was ineffective because it misunderstood the temper of Canadian officialdom and even more the distinction between the government's desire to find agriculturalists for the prairies and the desire of the major employers of unskilled labour to find men who would not settle down. In a letter to the CPR authorities, the Society boasted that they would bring over men who, after

⁴³ Letter from Cordasco to V. Capparelli, editor of *L'Operari* (28 January 1904), *Royal Commission 1904*, 139.

⁴⁴ Letter from Cordasco to Burns (10 May 1904), *Royal Commission 1904*, 57.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Candori, secretary of the Society, *Royal Commission 1904*, 18.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Candori, Society secretary, *Royal Commission 1904*, 13.

working on the railway, would settle on the land and "make industrious Canadian citizens."⁴⁷ Such a promise pleased neither those who preferred the workers to think like sojourners nor those who preferred to people the prairies with northwest European stock. A line from the Society's bulletin — "Look at the splendid results that the Italian agriculturists have had in South America, and especially in Argentina. Why should you not have the same result in Canada?" — must have elicited the answering shudder that Canada was a protestant, northerly, British colony, not a potential Argentina.⁴⁸

In the end, the Commission was unwilling to attack directly the major companies involved in employing Italian sojourners, and those companies refused to desert their intermediaries, so the *padrone* system came through the 1904 crisis unscathed. There is little evidence for the claim that more honest brokers began to compete successfully with the chief *padroni* after 1904, even though a limit was placed on how much a labour bureau could charge to register a worker.⁴⁹ Neither Cordasco's nor Dini's power declined after the hearings, and both passed quietly from being *padroni* to *notabili*, their prominence measured by stained glass windows in parish churches and by their presence on Montreal Italian civil committees.

The employers such as the Canadian Pacific Railway section bosses had the means to resist revolt. When Italians at Crow's Nest Pass in British Columbia refused \$1.50 a day, they were simply dismissed and the local labour agent began "filling orders with Galicians from the North."⁵⁰ On the other hand, Cordasco had no protection from the caprice or anger of Italian workers; he

⁴⁷ Letter from Mariotti to McNicoll, *Royal Commission 1904*, 13.

⁴⁸ The phrase about Argentina was contained in one of the Society's bulletins, *Royal Commission 1904*, 15. Block settlement in the Canadian West did resemble the Argentine experience, but Italians were not encouraged by the authorities. The Minister of the Interior himself wrote to an aide that "no steps are to be taken to assist or encourage Italian immigration to Canada..." Sifton papers, quoted in D. Avery, "Canadian Immigration Policy and the Foreign Navy, 1874-1914," *Historical Papers* (1972), 135-156. The Italian consul in Montreal reported in 1901 that not a single Italian migrant interviewed in the city wished to settle. All were sojourners or seasonal labourers looking for ready cash. *Immigration Branch 1901*, File 28885. "As a matter of fact Mr. Solimbergo [the consul] found out that out of all Italian emigrants who were already in Canada, not one thought it of any use to become a colonial." Emigration of Italian peasants to Canada, enquiry of *Corriere della Sera* (June 1901), typescript translation of newspaper article.

⁴⁹ See Spada, *Italians in Canada*, 89. The Commission recommended finally that Montreal pass a by-law, like Toronto's, which required licensing for labour bureaux and a scale of fees for registering workers for employment. *Labour Gazette* (June 1905), 1348. Cordasco in the end, made restitution to registered workers who got no work under \$3,000 and resumed his business without using a registration fee system. As we have seen that was not the chief source of his income and power anyway.

⁵⁰ Letter from Burns to Cordasco, *Royal Commission 1904*, 113. Burns also informed the Italian Immigration Aid Society of this matter.

faced physical attack and verbal abuse. If men he gathered were dismissed or left a job site disgruntled, he could only plead for patience from *sub-bossi* or for patronage from other employers. So the consumer power of the migrants — before they were acclimatized or turned to North American unionism — when it was exercised, it was against the *padrone*, not the employer. In this, as in every aspect of the system, a *padrone* like Cordasco was the man in between. Not only did he face the anger of workmen and treason from his vassals, but he ran the risk of being seen as an unreliable broker by big business because he supplied troublesome men.

Cordasco then was probably a nasty man and certainly did not deserve the excess profits he exacted from the migrant labour force, but he did, except perhaps in spring 1904, do his job. The historical literature has too often assumed that the male sojourners of the 1890s and 1900s were helpless victims of the system, potential settlers held in thrall by the *padroni* and condemned to exploitation and to transience by his machinations. At least in the Canadian case, that was simply not so.



Men in front of a train car. Public Archives of Canada Collection.

The sojourners accepted the *padrone* because they reckoned that he provided them the best alternative in their search for cash; their commitment to the system, like their avoidance of unionism or agricultural work, reflected their desire to return home as quickly as possible with cash and with as little North American encumbrance as possible. When an official of the Commissariat asked Italian labourers in the Niagara Peninsula why they hadn't taken up some of the rich farm lands in that region, the answer was simple: "We have to think about our families in Italy."⁵¹ In 1900, the Canadian Consul in Montreal had reported that of all the trapped migrants interviewed there, none had come to Canada to settle. Agricultural work did not bring in the cash which was the goal of the sojourning family member. Some measure both of the *padrone's* successful delivery of services and of the frame of mind of the Italian Canadian labour force can be found in the fact that Canadian remittances to Italy were the highest per unit for any part of *Italia oltremare* (Italian immigrant diaspora) as late as 1908.⁵²

Dini testified honestly and simply at one point to the Royal Commission. When pressed to admit that it was the extraordinary competition between agents like himself and Cordasco which had led to so many migrants arriving in Montreal that spring, he remarked that that was not so. It was easy enough, he said, to understand why men who earned the equivalent of 25 cents a day in their home towns might come to a land where they could make \$1.50 a day and twice that much if they became foremen. All of the Commissioners who investigated Canadian conditions later on for the Canadian government concurred on one point: sojourners were content with their margin of saving and profit. They complained of the cold, of unsanitary and unsafe conditions, and sometimes of a *padrone's* dishonesty, but, for example, in 1910 Viola found men in the mines at Cobalt saving a dollar a day. Foremen, according to Moroni, made as much as \$3.50 a day — ten times the daily wages in southern Italy, and reason enough, if not justification, for Cordasco's surcharge when registering *caposquadri* in 1903 and 1904.⁵³

Attolico, in 1912, met a Calabrese youth in the bush "at a little station four hours away from Lake Superior."⁵⁴ The youngster complained to him about missing his village but he had wintered over in a bunkhouse because he did not want to go to Port Arthur and spend his salary on *madamigella* ("the ladies"). The boy had already sent 350 lire — the equivalent of a half year's wages — to his mother back in his home town and had been in Canada less than three months when Attolico encountered him. He did not mind the deprivation but he

⁵¹ B. Attolico, "L'agricoltura e l'immigrazione nell'Canada" in the *Bolettino* #5 (Anno 1912) Commissariat of Emigration, Rome, 547.

⁵² See *Revista di Emigrazione* Anno 1:6 (August 1908). On a basis of amount per remittance, the figures were: Canada 221 lire, Argentina 194, U.S.A. 185, Brazil 168. 64% went to the South of Italy and the vast majority of remittances to Italy from Canada came through the postal savings system.

⁵³ Moroni, "Le condizioni attuali," 49.

kept repeating that, while there were many other Calabrese about, he was the only one from Mammole and had no one for company but God. Since the young Calabrese section hand worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway, he was mistaken if he thought the deity was his only companion. The latter might have heard his prayers, but it was Cordasco or one of his successors who had found him his job, remitted his money to his mother, delivered her letters to him, would handle pre-paid tickets for kinfolk or for his passage home later on. It was a *padrone*, not God and not the free flow of labour to capital, who had brought a man from the hills of Calabria to the northern Ontario bush.

Protest against the padrone system came more often from social workers, labour leaders and nativists than it did from the consumers, the migrant labourers. Historians have rather superciliously assumed that that is because the sojourners knew no better or had no choice, but in fact, the system ended when the consumer no longer found it satisfactory. Padronism was callous, exploitive, and often dishonest, but it fulfilled a function for those migrants who chose to come to America, not as permanent immigrants, but in search of cash to improve their condition in the old country. To understand padronism properly and to give all parts of the system — employer, intermediary, and labourer consumer — their due, we must see it as part of the commerce of migration not as a form of ethnic crime.

³⁴ B. Attolico, "Sui campi di lavoro della nuova ferrovia transcontinentale canadese" in the *Bollettino* #1 (Anno 1913) Commissariat of Emigration, Rome, 7.