

ANGELO CONFALONIERI
AMONG THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE
OF AUSTRALIA

*The True Story of a Missionary
and of His Life in the Dreamtime*

Edited by
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Angelo Confalonieri among the Aboriginal People of Australia

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Cover: Portrait of don Angelo Confalonieri (in Giovanni Cimadoro, *Della vita del Sacerdote Donn’Angelo Confalonieri*); Namarrgon, a rock art depiction of a mythical figure of the Aboriginal people of northern Australia; in the background, Confalonieri’s map of the Cobourg Peninsula.

This updated edition, based on the discovery of new documents, revises the earlier essay on the life of don Angelo Confalonieri published in two editions in Italian (2010, 2011) and one in English (2013), by the Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino:

- Pizzini R., 2010, 2011 (a cura di), *Nagoyo. La vita di don Angelo Confalonieri fra gli Aborigeni d’Australia 1846-1848*, Trento, Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino.
- Girola S., Pizzini R., 2013 (eds.), *Nagoyo. The life of don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia 1846-1848*, Trento, Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino.



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He lived a common life with them

Giovanni Cimadomo

Introduction	11
1. Angelo Confalonieri	17
From his Formative Years in Trentino-Tyrol to his Arrival in Australia	
2. Angelo Confalonieri in Australia	51
3. Between Military Colony and Trade Outpost	107
The Europeans in Port Essington	
4. Catholic Missions among Indigenous Australians in the 19 th Century	125
5. Confalonieri's Manuscripts	155
6. Creative Misunderstandings	213
Identity and Otherness in Angelo Confalonieri's Experience as an Anthropologist on a Mission among the «Savages»	
References	289
Index of names	305
The Authors	311
Acknowledgements	313

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INTRODUCTION

Rolando Pizzini

During his short life, Angelo Confalonieri made a significant contribution to the history of relations between Europeans and Australian Aboriginal people, and in particular between Catholic missionaries and the Indigenous population. This research stemmed from an idea that father Ferruccio Bertagnolli and I conceived one evening in June 2008 in Sydney, and it captivated the group of scholars I brought together far more than we had initially expected. Indeed, the missionary's story continually unfolded with surprises. Eventually, we all realised we weren't just learning about a «Trentino-Tyrolean» priest who died under harsh conditions among the Aboriginal people in a remote region of northern Australia. The story was, in fact, far more multi-faceted and compelling.

This research has therefore been enthralling, yet also complex and demanding for various reasons, primarily because the sources concerning the missionary are scattered throughout Australia, the Vatican City, the United Kingdom, Italy and New Zealand. Fieldwork in the area where Confalonieri was active – the Cobourg Peninsula, a vast and practically uninhabited region north of Darwin – also proved challenging. Furthermore, the testimonies and documents displayed some inconsistency, and at times even contradictions. In or-

der to recount his life, the involvement and help of people from different cultures and backgrounds were essential, including that of helpful Trentino emigrants in Australia who enthusiastically offered their support.

The Italian-Australian research team that I formed – consisting of linguist Bruce Birch, historians Elena Franchi and Stefano Girola, and myself – unanimously agreed on the need for a narrative approach¹ that would facilitate an understanding of Confalonieri and of the social, cultural and religious contexts in which he lived, without compromising on scientific rigour.

The story of don Angelo is the story of a man, a missionary, who decided to leave the safe environment of Trentino-Tyrol to plunge into a primeval dimension. His wish came true when, in the mid-19th century, he was sent to a land inhabited by people who were distant from any form of the culture and spirituality of the time, and perhaps even from any archaic form of European civilisation.

In the first chapter of this book, I explore Confalonieri's origins, education, and life choices, up to his arrival in Australia. His personal story is intimately intertwined with the broader historical context of Tyrol (including Trentino) in the first half of the 19th century. Where appropriate, I have followed the chronology of the biography written by Giovanni Cimadomo, a work that is reliable both due to its closeness to the events of Confalonieri's life and the fact that Cimadomo had been a fellow student of the missionary. The chapter is valuable as a starting point for a structured and in-

¹ While giving due space for the necessary quotations.

sightful understanding of the unique personality of don Angelo and the historical culture that shaped his life as a priest. He was filled with missionary enthusiasm, which, during his time in Cobourg, he understood as an immersion in Indigenous communities.

For the second chapter, I considered, among other aspects, the cultural and social climate that gave rise to «white» Australia, a context that was far from homogeneous due to both the vastness of the territory and the complexity of its civil society. Condensing this material was not easy and required a careful selection of data and historical developments. Conscious of these limitations, which are, however, unavoidable, I decided to portray the Australian adventure of this priest so as to observe him from a suitable distance, as much as possible. To do so, I set his experiences and choices within a diverse world comprising settlers, clergymen, Aboriginal people, deportees and a beautiful but harsh natural environment. Don Angelo's experience is thus retraced, highlighting his greatness and his extraordinary achievements: his talent for engaging with and living among people who were radically different from him – and from any other European – both in their religious beliefs and in their daily life and social relationships. He succeeded through respect, acceptance, listening, and dialogue; all of which is even more surprising considering that this was a historical period marked by a Western culture steeped in dehumanising and racist beliefs towards Indigenous peoples.

The chapter «Between Military Colony and Trade Outpost: the Europeans at Port Essington» by Elena Franchi provides the geographical and historical framework neces-

sary to place Confalonieri's experience in context. The significant relationships, far from rare, that the priest from Riva had with the British stationed at Port Essington, distant quite a few miles across the ocean from his hut, should not be overlooked. It was John McArthur, the captain of the «Victoria» and head of the military settlement, who helped him after the terrible shipwreck that sank his ship, and who had a small, remote hut built for him so that he could coexist better with the natives. In light of the documents, largely letters, the chapter highlights how the settlement of Port Essington, from its origins to its abandonment, reveals a «troubled» story, a rather uncertain character and an ambiguous vocation that led to its transformation from a military colony to a trade outpost, both ultimately destined to fail. Highlighting the failure of the British settlement underscores another element that makes Confalonieri's experience unique.

The contribution by Stefano Girola provides a historical overview of Catholic missionary efforts in nineteenth-century Australia. The investigation of the specific conditions in which this missionary activity developed and of prevailing cultural attitudes toward Aboriginal people, both within the Church and in secular society at the time, is key to understanding the context in which don Angelo carried out his mission. The author emphasises the Passionists' missions at Stradbroke Island, off the coast of Brisbane, and at New Norcia, in Western Australia, as these were roughly contemporaneous with Confalonieri's solitary endeavours in the remote north. The analysis of the difficulties encountered by the Passionists and Benedictines, of their way of relating to the Aboriginal people and of the practices that those mis-

sionaries adopted, helps the reader understand both the aspects in common and the distinctive features that characterised Confalonieri's work in the Southern Hemisphere. Girola's work also seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of missionaries in the relationship between Western societies and Indigenous populations in non-European countries.

Bruce Birch's chapter analyses the phrase books of Confalonieri written in *Garig*, an Iwaidjan language, within the linguistic context of the Cobourg Peninsula. The author also examines the social organisation of the peoples who lived there and how it emerges in the documentation. Finally, he introduces the map drawn at the time by the missionary, analysing the Makassan place names and their use by Aboriginal people. The chapter concludes with an exploration of historical aspects relating to both the manuscripts and changes in «land ownership» on the peninsula. Bruce Birch, a linguist who has conducted extensive research on and with the Aboriginal people of northern Australia, has unearthed linguistic and cultural meanings that would otherwise have been permanently lost. His work is therefore of considerable importance in understanding the relationship between don Angelo Confalonieri and the Aboriginal people of Cobourg.

The book ends with a second essay by Elena Franchi, who aims to represent don Confalonieri as an anthropologist among so-called «savages» and his mission as an existential adventure. The author deals with three fundamental issues that correspond to three parts of her contribution. First she presents the current scholarly debate regarding the study of the historical phenomenon of missions in the context of an-

thropological disciplines; then she shows a comparative reading, through various lenses, of the relationships between settlers, travellers and missionaries on one side, and Aboriginal people on the other, as well as between settlers and missionaries. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on Confalonieri's overall experience and the unique ways he engaged with Aboriginal people, revealing a remarkable capacity for cultural understanding.



Painting by Ambrogio Fermini, View of Riva del Garda, 1852, oil on canvas. Museo Alto Garda, Photo Archive

1. ANGELO CONFALONIERI

From his Formative Years in Trentino-Tyrol to his Arrival in Australia¹

Rolando Pizzini

Angelo Bernardo² Confalonieri was born in Riva del Garda on June 22, 1813³, in what was then the Department of South Tyrol within the Kingdom of Italy⁴. His father Pietro

¹ References: Boutry 1991; Bresciani 1873; Cardinale 2005; Cimadomo 1850; Corsini 1963; Costa 1977; Coviello Leuzzi 1972; De Finis 1987. Documents in the Archives of Propaganda Fide and Archivio Diocesano Tridentino.

² Angelo Bernardo will always be called only by his first name, Angelo.

³ Riva del Garda, Parish Archives, *Libro dei nati* (Register of Births) 1813-1830, Birth Certificate, p. 30, no. 65: «Angelus Bernardus filius Petri quondam Petri Confalonieri Rivae, et Mariae ortae a Carolo Rossi ejus legitimae uxoris heri natus, hodie baptizatus fuit a me Alloysio Zecchini Cooperatore Pauli. Patrini fuere D.us Bernardus Mora, et Teresia uxor Josephi Stenghel – Die 23 Junii 1813». Cimadomo incorrectly indicates the date of birth as 13 June, 1813. Cimadomo 1850: 12.

⁴ The following year Riva del Garda and the whole territory of what is now Trentino became part of the Austrian province of Tyrol, of which it constituted the Italian part (Italian Tyrol or Welschtirol); in this chapter I use the term «Trentino» to refer to this territorial entity. The first twenty years of the 19th century were very difficult years for the Trentino region and particularly for the Trentino diocese. On March 6, 1803 the decree of Emperor Francis II was read in Trento Cathedral, announcing that the Principality of Trento was now under the possession of the House of Habsburg. Hence the temporal power of the prince-bishops of Trento ceased after eight centuries. Attempts were then made to suppress the diocese of Trento, in line with a plan that had been undertaken by Joseph II in the second half of the 18th century, which contemplated a sole Tyrolean diocese with see in Innsbruck, that would have absorbed the Trento and Bressanone dioceses. These attempts were unsuccessful, due to the strong opposition of Emanuele Ma-

ria Thun (bishop of Trento from 1800 to 1818), and the negative opinion expressed by Pope Pius VII. Thus followed, due to the application of the Pressburg Treaty of December 26, 1805, the handover of Trentino to the Kingdom of Bavaria ruled by Maximilian Joseph I. The Bavarians auctioned off part of the Episcopal goods, with the exception of those of Le Sarche. The convents of the Poor Clares as well as the Augustinians, the Oratorians and the Carmelites were secularized in the city of Trento. All this was accompanied by the imposition of heavy taxes on the local population, tied to the preparation of a new war. In this situation, a feeling of widespread discontent extended to broad segments of the rural and valley populations, which, together with the clandestine propaganda from the Austrians, led to the armed uprising conducted by Andreas Hofer. A difficult three-year period (1814-1816), the so-called «terrible years» followed. A series of poor harvests caused a worsening of the living conditions and the spread of poverty and disease in Trentino and in most of Europe. In 1818, bishop Emanuele Maria Thun died, and it was not possible to immediately nominate his successor because the Austrian government, which had taken Trentino into its possession again after the political reorganization defined at the Congress of Vienna in 1814, forbade the Chapter of Trento from using its secular rights to elect a new bishop. Pope Pius VII, in fact, within the framework of the new balance redesigned by the Restoration, had conceded to the Emperor of Austria the privilege of nominating the bishops of Trento and Bressanone. After further tensions between the Holy See and the Austrian Emperor, monsignor Francesco Saverio Luschin, a native of Slav Carinthia and belonging to a wealthy farming family, was nominated. For the first time in many centuries the bishop of Trento was not a nobleman. Francesco Saverio Luschin carried out his pastoral work with great energy throughout the diocese and distinguished himself by searching for a collocation of the diocese in the Tyrol area, in a position that would make it as independent as possible from the Emperor and the bishop of Salzburg, who filled the position of metropolitan bishop. From the Papal Bull «Ubi Primum» of Pope Leo XII, dated March 7, 1824, the dioceses of Trento and Bressanone had become suffragans of the Episcopal province of Salzburg. The not insignificant issue of the endowment of the diocese's assets which had been greatly diminished by the secularizations they had undergone remained to be solved; in particular, a decision had to be made about the bishop's revenue and properties. In the general climate generated by the Restoration, in which the political power of the Habsburgs consolidated alongside the power of the Church, school ed-

was from Riva del Garda and his mother, Maria Rossi, was from Sclemo, a small hamlet near Stenico, in the province of Trento. He had two sisters, Angela and Maria, who did not marry and lived with their brother Pietro who, like Angelo, became a priest. His mother died when he was nine and his father when he was seventeen⁵. The loss of his parents probably meant for him (and possibly also for his sisters) that his brother became a key support figure. After completing his primary education in Riva del Garda, he attended a grammar school in Trento at the current location⁶ of the *liceo classico* «Giovanni Prati»⁷ which, among others, was attended by the future poet Giovanni Prati and by Giovanni Cimadomo, who became a priest and his first biographer. The school had a curriculum and textbooks introduced by the Austrian school authorities under the Department of Education of Tyrol and Vorarlberg and the Austrian Aulic Board of Studies.

ucation was also reorganized along traditional standards. About this period see Maria Garbari, *Aspetti politico-istituzionali di una regione di frontiera*, in Maria Garbari, Andrea Leonardi (eds.), *Storia del Trentino. V: L'età contemporanea 1803-1918*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2000, pp. 13-164; Francesca Brunet, Florian Huber (eds.), *Vormärz: eine geteilte Geschichte Trentino-Tirols / Una storia condivisa trentino-tirolese*, Innsbruck, Universitätsverlag Wagner, 2017; Marcello Bonazza, Francesca Brunet and Florian Huber (eds.), *Il Paese sospeso. La costruzione della Provincia tirolese (1813-1816)*, Trento, Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche, 2020.

⁵ Archivio diocesano Tridentino, Missionari Trentini 1948: p. 109.

⁶ The monastery of the Holy Trinity, confiscated by the State, was permanently assigned to the *liceo* in 1812 and to the *ginnasio* in 1816. The headquarters of the grammar school of Trento were so transferred to the former convent of the Poor Clares (now the location of the *liceo classico* “Giovanni Prati” (de Finis 1987: 315 and following).

⁷ For the history of the *liceo* «Prati», see de Finis L. (1987), *Dai maestri di grammatica al Ginnasio Liceo di via S. Trinità*. Trento: Temi.

The school textbooks were translated from German into a mostly laboured, mechanical Italian⁸.

The approach to classical studies according to the method applied by the Austrian school authorities was similar to that in the German-speaking cultural world and was prevailingly philological-grammatical rather than humanistic-rhetorical, which was the method preferred by the traditional Italian education system.

The teaching staff in the grammar schools in Trento and Rovereto mainly consisted of clergymen who were partially able to mediate these different methods and ensured a rigorous cultural education⁹, which could be influenced by the general climate of the Restoration. In the schools it was forbidden to deviate from the textbooks and a strong formal discipline ruled over everything¹⁰.

The young Angelo Confalonieri grew up in this cultural and political context, carrying out his studies diligently and successfully¹¹ in all the subjects imposed at that time:

⁸ See Corsini 1963: 241.

⁹ See de Finis 1987: 339.

¹⁰ «The teachers must strictly abide by the prescribed books and their frequent inclination to using their own manuscripts will not be tolerated. The Prefects will pay maximum attention to this issue and will be directly responsible thereof». «I professori dovranno attenersi esattamente ai libri prescritti e non sarà più tollerato l'abuso introdotto da essi tanto di frequente di spiegare i propri scritti. I Prefetti useranno la massima vigilanza di ciò e ne saranno responsabili» (*Codice Ginnasiale o sia raccolta degli ordini e regolamenti intorno alla costituzione e organizzazione dei ginnasi*, i.e. Grammar school rules or Collection of the orders and regulations concerning the constitution and organization of the *ginnasi*. Milan 1818, article 71).

¹¹ The archives of the *liceo classico* «G. Prati», contain the documents pertaining to his schooling. There is also mention of a period of study in Vicenza in 1833/34.

«He studied Latin and all the other subjects with great success. His personality became stronger, assertive, yet still amiable and he was well liked by all. Not even one of his schoolmates harboured a grudge against him; he was loved and esteemed and this was certainly a difficult achievement considering the superficiality and fickleness of that age group. Loyal, frank, easy-going with all, true friend to a selected few, near the end of his grammar school studies, together with two of his best friends he wrote a plea to be accepted as student at the Collegio di Propaganda [Fide] in Rome»¹².

He therefore decided quite early to devote his life to the ministry, seeing it as a means to apostolic missionary work. He wanted to commit himself entirely to the missions and to this end he willingly submitted to all rules and authorities, even if at times with some impatience. His earliest attempt to gain admission to Propaganda Fide¹³ proved unsuccessful,

¹² «Attese con felice successo allo studio della lingua latina nonché di tutte le ginnasiali discipline. Il suo carattere si fe' più marcato, deciso, senza cessare di essere ameno e caro a tutti. Non uno solo de' suoi condiscipoli, che gli portasse rancore; tanto sapea conciliarsi la stima e l'amore; impresa ardua certamente tra i giovani sì vaghi e volubili. Leale, franco, facile a tutti, amico a pochi, fu sul finire de' ginnasiali studi, che accordatosi a due suoi più cari stesero insieme un'umile supplica onde essere accettati siccome alunni al Collegio di Propaganda in Roma». Cimadomo 1850: 14-15.

¹³ The Congregation De Propaganda Fide, or the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, was then and still is the largest network for the organization of Catholic missions in the world. It was founded in 1622 to support and coordinate all of the Catholic Church's missionary activity, with the aim of making it independent from the preponderance of Catholic colonial powers. To support its activities and to find the resources necessary for these objectives, Propaganda Fide depends mainly on Pontifical Mission Societies, associations of church-goers founded between the 19th and 20th centuries having the specific goal of helping the Catholic missions in the world with material

however. The application written by Confalonieri and his friends to the College received no response:

«Either because they didn't receive it, or because they didn't think it was a wise idea to reply, given the young age and fluctuating fervour of the applicants and, fearing that it would take too long, he thought that he would more easily and quickly achieve his goal if he entered some religious institute»¹⁴.

Angelo Confalonieri decided therefore to continue his education as a novice in Arco with the Capuchin Fathers where he took his first course in philosophy. According to Cimadomo, Confalonieri himself had expressed «his sincere desire to open the way towards becoming a missionary»¹⁵. He also participated in the novice choir but unfortunately this commitment «was hard on his health and caused him a painful throat ailment»¹⁶.

This condition led him to leave the Order «without ever abandoning the idea of the missions to which he felt an irresistible calling»¹⁷.

In 1835 he was welcomed into the San Simone boarding school in Trento; the director at that time was monsignor Gentilini, who nurtured a feeling of deep esteem for Confal-

and spiritual means. Among these, there is the Society for the Propagation of the Faith founded in Lyon (France) in 1822 by Pauline Marie Jaricot.

¹⁴ «Ma sia, che la supplica non giungesse a quel Collegio, sia perché non si credesse opportuno il rispondere atteso la troppo tenera età e l'incostante brama dei supplicanti, il Confalonieri, paventando un troppo lungo indugiare, pensò che più facilmente e presto sarebbe riuscito allo scopo, se dato gli fosse entrare in qualche religioso istituto» Cimadomo 1850: 15.

¹⁵ Cimadomo 1850: 15.

¹⁶ Cimadomo 1850: 15.

¹⁷ Cimadomo 1850: 16.

onieri and «was always a brother and dear friend to him and helped him with advice and spiritual admonitions»¹⁸.

In the boarding school he carried out his work, taking care of the students entrusted to him, while continuing his studies in philosophy and theology. However, he once again turned to Propaganda Fide, still without success. Nevertheless, determined to pursue his missionary choice, Confalonieri wrote to the archbishop of Gorizia, Francesco Saverio Luschin¹⁹ to ask him if «he could expedite his path towards the missions»²⁰.

It can be assumed that his young age, as well as the vast number of people who were available to dedicate themselves to ecclesiastical life and among them those who felt called to missionary life, contributed to yet another lack of reply²¹. The choice of an ecclesiastic life was further facilitated by the dedicated efforts of the Trento bishops and supported by numerous teachers and educators belonging to the clergy whom Confalonieri encountered during his preparation to becoming a priest in Trentino.

¹⁸ Cimadomo 1850: 17.

¹⁹ Francesco Saverio Luschin was the bishop of Trento until 1834.

²⁰ Cimadomo 1850: 17.

²¹ Consider to this regard that in 1834 the diocese of Trento had about 1,400 diocesan priests, over 300 religious and approximately 700 stations dedicated to the care of souls (Costa 1977: 240). Giovanni Nepomuceno de Tschiderer was the bishop at that time. He was ordained as presbyter on July 27, 1800, became auxiliary bishop of Bressanone in 1832 and bishop of Trento from May 3, 1835 until December 3, 1860. He distinguished himself for his intense pastoral activity carried out even in the smallest communities of the diocese. He helped the needy through many institutions and initiatives, such as, for example, the Deaf-mute Institution of Trento which bears his name today. Giovanni Nepomuceno De Tschiderer was beatified in Trento on April 30, 1995, when Pope John Paul II visited the city.

After two years at the boarding school, he entered the episcopal seminary in Trento to study theology²². Here we find the first accounts of the personality of Angelo Confalonieri which suggest a sometimes intolerant and rebellious spirit, and this is even more true considering that the statements date back to a few days before he was ordained. Despite repeated reminders to pay, he and his friend Giambattista Weber did not settle their Seminary fees, to the point that the administrator Dusini was forced to write a strongly worded letter to the Princely Ordinariate dated 23 June, 1839, the salient points of which are as follows:

«Giambattista Weber and Angelo Confalonieri are indebted to this Seminary [...]»²³. In my capacity as Administrator, I have repeatedly asked them to repay these debts, but always in vain. [...] I have threatened both of them with appealing to this Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Ordinariate to have them suspended from sacred ordination should they fail to fulfil their obligations to the Seminary. Until now, I have not been able to obtain such payment, and I fear that the Seminary will lose these two sums if the aforementioned Weber and Confalonieri, once ordained priests, abandon it without having settled their debts [...]. To prevent the Seminary from incurring such loss, I respectfully appeal to the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Ordinariate to assist me, by virtue of its authority, in recovering these sums, by declaring to the two debtors that they will not be admitted to the upcoming sacred ordinations unless they have paid the amounts owed [...]»²⁴.

²² Archivio diocesano Tridentino, Missionari Trentini 1948: p. 110.

²³ [...] indicates the presence in the documents of words that are not significant for the purposes of the quotation or are difficult to read.

²⁴ «Giambattista Weber, e Angelo Confalonieri hanno il debito verso questo Seminario [...]. Nella mia qualità di Amministratore li ho più volte accittati al

INDEX OF NAMES

- Abel: 110
 Acosta, Josè (De): 213, 275
 Agnolin: 213, 276
 Albertini, Andrea: 26
 Allen, Jim: 51, 102, 107, 111-112, 118, 120, 213, 216, 255-256, 260
 Alligator: 98, 247, 250, 258-259
 Angeli, Alessandro: 35
 Armstrong: 248
 Barker, Collett: 159, 174, 177, 212, 247, 255
 Barrett, Thomas: 57
 Barrow, John: 112-113, 115-116
 Bathurst, Henry: 110, 113
 Beaufort, Francis: 119-120, 248, 261-262
 Beete Jukes, Joseph: 241
 Bertagnolli, Ferruccio: 11, 67
 Birch, Bruce: 12, 15, 83, 88, 92-93, 142, 155, 245, 268, 273, 280, 288
 Boland, Thomas P.: 125, 132
 Bonazza, Marcello: 19
 Bouchet, Maurice: 59-60
 Bourke, D. F.: 51, 62, 67, 69, 74-75, 81, 84-85, 100-101
 Boutry, Philippe: 17, 45
 Brady, John: 41, 43-44, 46-48, 59-62, 66-70, 85, 125, 140-143, 240, 271
 Bremer, Gordon: 111, 115-119, 124, 209, 237-238, 244-245, 247-248, 261-262, 268
 Brothers Frere: 59
 Brunelli, Giovanni: 35, 48, 58, 60, 64
 Brunet, Francesca: 19
 Buckley, William: 98-99
 Butler, Martin: 59-60
 Calaby, John Henry: 107, 109, 111
 Cameron, James Macdonald
 Rapon: 51, 81-82, 94, 107, 111-123, 213, 216, 237-240, 244-246, 248-250, 257-259, 261-262, 266, 268, 278
 Campbell, John: 107, 113-114
 Campion, Edmund: 125-126, 141

- Capell, Arthur: 51
 Caporelli, Nicola: 47-48, 59-60, 67
 Cappello, Sergio: 213
 Cardinale, Gianni: 17
 Carrier, James G.: 213, 251
 Chambers: 258, 260
 Christie, Ernest MacGregor: 51, 104
 Cigliano, Santa: 51-52, 54, 56
 Cimadomo, Giovanni: 5, 12, 17, 19, 21-23, 27-29, 35-36, 38-41, 43-44, 46-51, 58, 62, 69, 74, 88, 213, 216, 283
 Colajanni, Antonino: 213, 226, 229, 244
 Confalonieri, Angela: 19, 44
 Confalonieri, Pietro: 38-39
 Cook, James: 131
 Cooper, William: 152
 Corsini, Umberto: 17, 20
 Costa, Armando: 17, 23
 Coviello Leuzzi, Anna: 17, 39
 Crawford: 91, 285-286
 Curci, Carlo Maria: 39
 Cuturi, Flavia: 213, 218-220, 222-223, 225, 229, 275, 282
 Darling, Ralphes: 113, 129
 Darwin, Charles: 11, 150, 285
 Davis, Jack: 268
 De Dompieri, Simone: 35
 De Finis, Lia: 17
 Delahoyde, M. Ignatius: 59
 De l'Estoile, Benoit: 213, 269, 280
 Dixon, James: 126
 Donovan, Timothy: 59-60
 Douglas, Mary: 228
 Doyle: 58-59
 Durack, Mary: 125, 150
 D'Urville Dumont, Julius Sebastian Caesar: 118
 Dusini: 24
 Earl (coniugi): 76, 78, 107, 114-115, 118, 120, 155, 177, 206, 211, 245, 247-248, 254
 Eddy, John: 129
 Elena, Dominicus: 12-13, 15, 31-33, 62, 82, 91, 95, 107, 142, 213, 238-239, 245, 250, 266
 Encroe, D. vedi McEnroe, John: 63, 74
 Endicott, Michael A.: 125, 146-147
 Essenhigh, Richard: 51, 74-75, 78
 Evans, Nick: 155, 157-158, 195, 228
 Fagan, James: 59-60, 62, 75, 80, 142

- Farrelly, Terence: 59-60
 Filippi, Lodadio: 28
 Filzi, Giovanni Battista: 28
 Fitzmaurice, L. R.: 246
 Flood, Bernard: 125, 146
 Flynn, Frank: 51, 108, 213, 216
 Fogarty, M. Catherine: 59
 Fontaine, Leander: 59
 Fonteinne, Léandre: 60
 Forster, Gregory M.: 125, 139
 Fowler, William: 59-60
 Franchi, Elena: 12-13, 15, 62, 82, 91, 95, 107, 109, 142, 213, 238-240, 245, 250, 266
 Franzoni, Filippo: 39-40, 46, 48, 69-70, 101-103, 237, 240, 264, 269, 271, 279
 Frayne, M. Ursula: 59-60
 Garbari, Maria: 19
 Gasbarro, Nicola: 213, 218, 220, 223-227, 230, 235, 256-257
 Gascoigne, John: 125, 134, 242
 Gastmann: 32-33
 Gentilini, Luigi: 22
 Gibney, Matthew: 145
 Giovannelli, Agostino dei Bar: 104
 Gipps, George: 81-82, 94, 116, 121-122, 238, 245, 249-250, 257-259, 262, 265, 277-278
 Girola, Stefano: 4, 12, 14-15, 73-74, 83, 125, 148, 231, 242-243, 261, 263, 268-269, 279, 282
 Giusti, Francesca: 51-52, 54, 56
 Glenelg, Charles Grant: 115-116, 253-254
 Gnerre, Maurizio: 213, 218-219
 Goodenough, Ward: 213, 234
 Goold, James Alipius: 125, 148
 Goosen, Gideon C.: 125, 131
 Gorman, John: 59-60
 Graham, John: 98-99
 Grey, George: 92, 115-116, 155
 Gruzinski, Serge: 213, 219
 Haebich, Anna: 125, 139
 Harris, John: 149
 Hay, Robert: 112-115
 Heeres, Jan Ernst: 107, 110
 Hobbes, Thomas: 125, 131
 Hofer, Andreas: 18
 Hogan, Nicholas: 59-60, 62, 75, 80, 142
 Holtz, Messrs: 268
 Home, J. Everard: 250
 Hope, G. H.: 49, 59, 117
 Huber, Florian: 19
 Hughes, Robert: 51-52, 55-58, 98, 100
 Huxley, Julian: 51, 82, 91, 101, 104, 213, 216, 274, 285-288

- Huxley, Thomas Henry: 51, 82, 91, 101, 104, 213, 216, 274, 285-288
- Imbruglia, Girolamo: 213, 227
- Jaricot, Pauline Marie: 22, 45
- Jaricot, Philéas: 22, 45
- Keesing, Roger M.: 213, 252-253
- Kelly, M. Aloysius: 59, 125, 128, 150
- Kenny, Dean: 125, 142
- Keys, Charles: 246
- King, Philip Gidley: 126
- King, Philip Parker: 110-111, 117
- Kuper, A. L.: 237, 244-245, 248
- La Cecla, Franco: 213, 224, 282
- Laikard: vedi Leichhardt
- Langari, Ludwig: 247
- Leichhardt, Ludwig: 66
- Lencioni, Maurizio: 135
- Leonardi, Andre: 19
- Leone, A. Rosa: 213, 232-233, 242, 263, 281
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude: 229
- Linane, James Thomas: 80, 103
- Lindqvist, Sven: 51-52
- Lubbock, Adelaide: 107, 120
- Luighe: 268
- Luschin, Francesco Saverio: 18, 23
- MacGillivray, John: 51, 95, 99, 101, 107-108, 111, 119, 155, 163, 177, 213, 216, 237, 239-240, 247, 250, 257, 260, 266-269, 278, 285-288
- Mackenzie: 76-78, 80
- Macquarie, Lachlan: 126
- Malinowski, Bronislaw: 213, 221, 229
- Malwakak, Joy Williams: 177
- Mantegazza, Paolo: 231
- Marland, William: 254-255
- Marshall, Tim: 51, 55
- Marsilli, Claudia: 4
- Marti, Joaquin: 213, 216, 284-285
- Martin, Denis W.: 59-60, 125, 135, 213
- Mary, André: 47, 60, 95, 203, 213, 224, 228, 282
- Mattalucci-Yilmaz, Claudia: 213, 217-218, 231
- McArthur, John: 14, 81-84, 87, 94, 97, 107, 112, 117-118, 121-124, 238-240, 245-246, 249-250, 254, 257-262, 265-267, 277-278, 284, 286
- McEnroe, John: 63
- Mezzofanti, Giuseppe Gasparo: 92
- Millar: 75-77

- Missi, Matthias: 33-35
 Mora, Bernardo: 17
 Moran, Patrick Francis: 125,
 135, 141, 147, 213, 216, 287
 Mulvaney, Derek John: 107, 110
 Naepels, Michel: 213, 243
 Nailon, Brigida: 125, 146
 Neimal: 93
 Neinmal: 240
 O'Donnell, M. Baptist: 59
 Odon, Théodore: 60
 O'Farrell, Patrick: 125-127,
 145-147
 O'Kelly, Greg J.: 125, 128, 150
 O'Reilly, John: 59-60
 O'Reilly, M. Evangelista: 59
 Parker, William: 110-111, 117,
 250
 Pesciaroli, Luigi: 135
 Phillip, Arthur: 56, 98, 110, 117,
 126
 Pieterszoon, Pietre: 110
 Pizzini, Rolando: 3-4, 11, 17, 51,
 107, 142, 240, 273, 275, 279-
 281, 283-284, 286-287
 Polding, John Bede: 61, 64-70,
 72-73, 75, 101-103, 128, 132-
 139, 147, 264-265, 271, 279,
 284, 286-287
 Pompa, Cristina: 213, 277, 282
 Powell, Peter: 59-60
 Prati, Giovanni: 19-20
 Preiß, Anton: 31
 Priest: 80, 258
 Pritchard, Evans: 228
 Prosperi, Adriano: 213, 272
 Rafael, Vicente L.: 222
 Raffaele, Paul: 51-52
 Raffaello: 40
 Ray: 77-78
 Reid, Gordon: 51, 66, 89-90, 95,
 107, 110, 113-114, 116, 123,
 213, 216, 253-255, 274, 280, 286
 Reynolds, Henry: 51, 55, 125,
 150-151
 Ricci, Matteo: 138
 Robinson, George Augustus:
 98-99
 Rooney, Bernard: 125, 144-145
 Rossi, Carolo: 17
 Rossi, Maria: 19
 Rudd, Kevin: 139
 Russo, George: 51, 69, 100-101,
 125, 143
 Salvado, Rosendo: 49, 51, 59,
 62, 83, 85, 104, 125, 142-144,
 151, 213, 216, 282-284, 286
 Scaraffia, Lucetta: 213, 221,
 228-229, 231-232
 Schmidt, Wilhelm: 232

- Serra, José: 59, 68, 142-143
 Sharp, Andrew: 107, 110
 Smyth, Henry: 117
 Snell, Joseph: 135
 Sommella, Vincenzo: 51-52, 54, 56
 Spearman, Alexander: 115
 Spillet, Peter: 51, 81-83, 85-87, 89-90, 92-93, 95-97, 246-247, 280-281
 Stanley, Owen: 47, 120, 249, 261
 Stenghel, Josephi: 17
 Stephen, James: 114-115, 118-119, 121, 239-240, 246, 261, 266, 278
 Stewart: 248-249
 Stockton, Eugene D.: 125, 140-141
 Stokes, John Lort: 155, 177, 246
 Sugar: 259
 Sweatman, John: 51, 81-82, 84, 86-87, 89, 91, 95, 97-98, 177, 213, 216, 237, 241-242, 263, 265, 273-275, 279-281, 283, 286
 Tasman, Abel Janszoon: 110
 Terry, Joseph: 129
 Thevaux, Francois: 59
 Thierse, John Joseph: 59
 Thomson, Edward Deas: 122-123, 238
 Thorpe, Osmund: 125, 135
 Thun, Emanuele Maria: 17-18
 Tilston, Richard: 84
 Tobia: 40
 Tootell, Denis: 59
 Truganini: 99
 Tschiderer, Giovanni Nepomuceno (de): 23, 25, 36, 43
 Ullathorne, William: 43, 67, 125, 127-132, 141, 269
 Vaccari, Raimondo: 135, 140
 Van der Geest, Sjaak: 213, 229
 Vincent: 59-60, 132
 Wallace, James: 250, 258
 Walter, George: 125, 140
 Wanji-Wanji: 247
 Washington, John: 116, 245, 249, 261
 Weber, Giambattista: 24-25
 Weiner, Annette: 221
 Whipple: 258
 White, Carmel: 107, 109
 Wilson, Thomas Braidwood: 55, 123-125, 146, 159, 213, 259
 Withers, Alan: 82
 Xavier, M. Anne: 59
 Yungun: 260
 Zerbini, Laurick: 213, 243

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