TRATTO DA : The Irish and Other Foreigners di Shane Hegarty (2009)

Chapter 6 ~

ITALIAN CHIPPERS AND LITTLE JERUSALEM: OTHER IMMIGRATIONS

Irish visitors to Italy will no doubt have noticed that its national dish is not burger and chips. You do not swing onto Rome's Via del Corso to be met by the smell of boiling oil. You do not sit down for dinner, and choose an antipasto of batter burger and onion rings.

Which has always made it somewhat curious that the Italians in Ireland became renowned for their chippers, and that many of the names that were serving fish and chips half a century ago will still be serving snack boxes to peckish or drunken Irish this and every weekend.

It began sometime in the 1880s, when an Italian, Giuseppe Cervi, stepped off an American-bound boat that had stopped in Cobh and kept walking until he reached Dublin. There, he worked as a labourer until he earned enough money to buy a coal-fired cooker and a hand-cart, from which he sold chips outside pubs.

Soon after, he found a permanent spot on Great Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street), where his wife Palma would ask customers '*Uno di questo, uno di quello?*', meaning 'one of this and one of the other?' In doing so, Palma helped to coin a Dublin phrase, 'one and one', which is still a common way of asking for fish and chips. The shop, meanwhile, had launched an industry.

Much of what is known about the history of the chipper is detailed in the wonderful work of John K. Walton, a professor of

Social History at the University of Central Lancashire. In 1994, he wrote a book, *Fish and Chips and the British Working Class, 1870–1940*, and it is an invaluable addition to the admittedly small library of chipper histories.

In it, we learn that, by 1909, there were 20 fish and chip shops in Dublin, serving a population of only 290,000. This, though, was nothing compared with the size of the trade in British cities, where the relationship between chippers and Italians originated. In 1905, there was a fish and chip shop for every 400 citizens of Leeds and Bradford.

The chipper had first become popular in the north of England, as a happy amalgam of fried fish and cooked potato trades that had grown separately during the mid-1800s. 'It is not clear which area, and still less which individual, deserves the credit for bringing about the momentous marriage of fish and chips,' writes Walton. 'This is a matter of murky and probably insoluble dispute.' However, it is guessed that it happened sometime between the 1860s and 1890s.

It was in Scotland that the Italians began to make the fish and chip trade their own. Why they were so taken by the business isn't clear, though Walton suggests that it may have been because they saw the fish and chip shops of London as they passed through there on their way north. With Italians leading the way, Scotland was home to 4,500 chippers by 1914. In Glasgow alone, an estimated 800,000 fish suppers were being sold every week. Naturally, the shops often doubled as ice-cream parlours.

With the Italian immigrants to Ireland, then, came the chip shops. These were not the first Italians to make an impression in Ireland. Stucco workers had been imported to work on the big houses of the country; the tiling, glasswork and ornamental woodwork in Belfast's glorious Crown Bar were created by Italians moonlighting in between working on Catholic churches. Others were brought here as musicians and dancers.