



“My Good Italian Friends”:
Vida Scudder and Boston’s Circolo
Italo-Americano

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Fumes of Garlic

IN 1871, historian Samuel Francis Drake bemoaned the influx of Italian immigrants into Boston’s North End:

Nowhere in Boston has Father Time wrought such ruthless changes, as in this highly respectable quarter, now swarming with Italians in every dirty nook and corner. In truth, it is hard to believe the evidence of our own eyes, though the fumes of garlic are sufficiently convincing.¹

Drake inhaled more fumes as the years went on. From 1880 until 1924, almost a million immigrants poured into the United States each year, many of them Italian.² In 1903, sixty-five thousand Italians lived in Boston and its suburbs, the number swelling to ninety thousand in 1912. Boston’s North End, the size of the parking lot at Disney World, housed most of the city’s Italians in 1910: thirty-thousand people.³ This unimaginable density produced the highest rates of disease and childhood death in the city.

¹Guild Nichols, “North End History-The Italians,” <http://www.northendboston.com/north-end-history-volume-5> (accessed August 9, 2021).

²Ruth Hutchinson Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 42.

³Stephen Puleo, *The Boston Italians: A Story of Pride, Perseverance, and Paesani, From the Years of the Great Immigration to the Present Day* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), XIII.

These newcomers threatened the complacency of most assimilated Americans. Perhaps, some Americans worried, they were so different that they could never be absorbed into the country. Perhaps they were to blame for social disorders rampant in cities. Southern Italians in particular—darker complexioned peasants fleeing drought, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and discrimination from the Northern Italian-controlled central government—were portrayed as stupid, drunken, and potentially lawless. In 1909, Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge proposed to exclude all immigrants who could not read or write. This legislation, he explained, would block “undesirable” immigrants such as Italians and Jews whose “traditions and inheritances, whose thoughts and whose beliefs are wholly alien to ours.” Lodge trumpeted, “The danger has begun. . . . The gates which admit [persons] to the United States . . . should no longer be left unguarded.”⁴ The legislation failed, but the xenophobia it embodied continued to simmer.

But not every Massachusetts Yankee shared Drake’s and Lodge’s views. In 1904, Boston activist, professor, and theologian Vida Dutton Scudder (1861–1954) founded a cross-ethnic group, the *Circolo Italo-Americano*, to foster “genuine democratic contacts”⁵ between Italian immigrants and long-time Massachusetts residents. The group’s mission was simple: “to advance social and educational work, and to promote a friendly understanding between Italians and Americans.”⁶ Its membership was about seventy percent Italian. The *Circolo* flourished under Scudder’s leadership. Italians and Americans mingled at its social gatherings, festivals, lectures, concerts, debates, receptions, and Columbus Day celebrations. In Scudder’s

⁴Henry Cabot Lodge, “The Restriction of Immigration,” *Speeches and Addresses, 1884–1909* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 243–66.

⁵Vida Dutton Scudder, *On Journey* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1957), 256.

⁶“Constitution,” November 1909, Denison House Records, 1890–1984, *Circolo Italo-Americano*, B-27, Series III, folders 80–86, folder 84, seq. 28, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:966885?n=28> (accessed August 9, 2021).

autobiography, *On Journey*, she calls the Circolo “the most exciting, quickening, and fruitful social adventuring I have known.”⁷

The story of the Circolo Italo-Americano adds texture and color to historians’ pictures of Progressive Era immigrant integration. Groups highlighting immigrants’ contributions to America, emphasizing friendship instead of “Americanization,” or led by Italians as well as Americans were rare during the period. Groups doing all three seem to have been unheard-of. Yet no scholars have focused on the Circolo, and the few who have mentioned it have dismissed it out of hand. Anthropologist Augusto Ferraiuolo called the group an “association for Italians, not of Italians”⁸—the exact opposite of what Scudder intended the Circolo to be. The historian Mina Carson characterized Scudder’s attitude towards Italians as “[u]nconscious snobbism coupled with a romanticized sense of historical kinship,” charging that Scudder saw Circolo members as “diamond[s] in a dustbin.”⁹

There is some truth to Carson’s charge. Born in the mid-nineteenth century, steeped from birth in late-Victorian ideas and language, Scudder belonged to her times, not ours. Some of her language about immigrants sounds condescending, stereotype-laden, and classist today. But she was also strikingly original. Many of her ideas regarding immigration were very different from those of her peers. In some ways, Scudder’s ideas presaged current scholarly thinking about immigration, and the group she created to embody those ideas resembled successful groups that foster immigrant integration today.

Examining Scudder’s immigrant efforts does more than fill a historical gap: it also highlights similarities between Scudder’s time period and ours. Some call twenty-first-century America “the New Gilded Age,” pointing to extensive income and wealth

⁷Scudder, *On Journey*, 254.

⁸Augusto Ferraiuolo, *Religious Festive Practices in Boston’s North End* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 89.

⁹Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 104.

inequality in both eras. Xenophobia and discrimination persist today as well. It is interesting to examine one creative effort to welcome immigrants in an era somewhat like ours, instructive to note the ways in which that effort succeeded and the ways in which it failed—and inspirational to discover an unheralded dynamo who spent her life working toward a just, equal world during a time period that in some ways resembles our own.

When Scudder began the *Circolo*, she was a seasoned activist. Seventeen years earlier, in 1887, she had suggested to college friends that they start a settlement—a home in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood where college-educated, economically comfortable women and men, both called “settlers,” would live, turning their dwelling into a one-stop community center. The settlement movement had begun in England, where Samuel Barnett founded Toynbee Hall in 1883, and Scudder had learned of it while spending 1884–1885 studying at Oxford. Her friends loved the idea. With Scudder as the group’s prime mover, the women named themselves the College Settlements Association (CSA), raised funds, recruited settlers, and in 1889 established the country’s second successful settlement, Rivington Street Settlement in New York City.¹⁰ Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, who had also become aware of settlements during a visit to England, opened Chicago’s Hull House two weeks afterwards. At the time, the CSA women and the Hull House founders had no idea each other existed.

Attracting educated, idealistic women barred at the time from most careers, the settlement movement flourished. The CSA opened two more settlements in 1892, one in Philadelphia and Denison House in Boston. In 1920, almost five hundred

¹⁰Eleanor Roosevelt volunteered at either Rivington Street Settlement or the nearby University Settlement as a young woman and wrote that the experience introduced her—and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then her suitor—to the struggles of the poor. When the future president accompanied her to a tenement house, she recalled, he “looked around in surprise and horror. It was the first time, I think, that he had ever really seen a slum . . . ‘My God,’ he whispered, ‘I didn’t know people lived like that!’” Quoted in “Women’s HERstory: Eleanor Roosevelt and US,” May 18, 2014, University Settlement, http://web11.fcnyc.org/us/news/blog/women_s_herstory_eleanor_rooseve/ (accessed September 14, 2021).

settlements dotted the United States. Most settlements offered very similar services. They had bath facilities, libraries, playgrounds, and savings banks. Settlers ran numerous clubs and classes and helped neighborhood residents, “neighbors,” often immigrants, find housing, jobs, and health care. They strove to bond with “neighbors” despite the wealth, class, and educational chasms separating them. A few settlements, such as Hull House and New York City’s Henry Street Settlement, also became hubs of Progressive reform. Hull House residents included labor and consumer rights advocate Florence Kelley; Julia Lathrop, director of the Federal Children’s Bureau; and Alice Hamilton, a physician specializing in occupational health. Henry Street Settlement, founded and headed by nurse Lillian Wald, was the first settlement centered on health care.¹¹ Scudder felt that Denison House, too, was “important in the same sense as Hull House, though on a smaller scale.”¹² Its particular focus was to help organized labor.

While history has anointed one settler, Jane Addams, *the* icon of the settlement movement, Scudder is unknown and Wald and the Hull House reformers relatively obscure. During her lifetime, Addams was the most prominent woman in America as well. Of the many reasons for Addams’s fame, perhaps the most important, is that she sought it. Addams radiated charisma and craved leadership. She told her sister that she identified with a passage from a Robert Browning: “There’s power in me, and will to dominate/which I must exercise, they hurt me else./In many ways I need mankind’s respect.”¹³ In Scudder’s 1937 autobiography, she credited Addams’s force of personality for the continuing success of Hull House, whereas the CSA had dissolved as an organization in 1917, and although Denison House still continued, its connections to Scudder had ended. “We began with an Organization,” Scudder recounted. “[T]hen we

¹¹Lillian Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915), 10.

¹²Scudder, *On Journey*, 142.

¹³Quoted in Elizabeth Palmer Hutchinson Carrell, “Reflections in a Mirror: The Progressive Woman and the Settlement Experience” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 1981), 161.

established centers, then we sought for people to carry out our idea. We had splendid women among our organizers and our early residents, but we had no Jane Addams. Movements that endure begin, as Hull House did, from the opposite end.”¹⁴

Scudder, like Addams, possessed force of personality, charisma, and rhetorical savvy. But, unlike Addams, she was pulled in “three directions at once”: social reform, teaching, and writing.¹⁵ Scudder had a full-time job as an English professor at Wellesley College. A legendary teacher, she created a course resembling service-learning and mentored many students eager to improve the world. Scudder sought renown in the world of letters as well; when she founded the Circolo, she had published four books and more than eighty articles. Her settlement and other reform work had to be slotted in during evenings, weekends, and vacations. Scudder also chose to remain with her widowed mother in their Newbury Street home instead of living at Denison House.¹⁶ And so the woman whom one newspaper article snarkily dubbed “the ruler and mighty chief of the College Settlements Association”¹⁷ claimed that she “did not share much in the manifold settlement enterprises” and was instead “that rather rueful and wholly inferior person, a member of the committee.” Summarizing her life near the end of her autobiography, Scudder insisted—inaccurately—that she had never led any endeavor, instead working in “obscure ways” in “a subordinate role.”¹⁸

Another reason for Addams’s continued fame is that she is easy to understand, both literally and ideologically. Her best-known book, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, features crisp language, poignant anecdotes, and even illustrations by a

¹⁴Scudder, *On Journey*, 136.

¹⁵Scudder, *On Journey*, 175.

¹⁶In Scudder’s autobiography, she somewhat sulkily notes that whereas personal and professional obligations prevented the CSA women from moving forward quickly with their settlement plan, “in Chicago, Jane Addams and Ellen Starr shaped their lives as they pleased, and quietly went to live on South Halstead Street.” *On Journey*, 111.

¹⁷“Woman Chat,” *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), September 4, 1890, 10, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/565832923/?terms=Vida%20Scudder&match=1> (accessed August 11, 2021).

¹⁸Scudder, *On Journey*, 143, 430–31.

Hull House resident. Scudder’s formal writings, in contrast, can be dense, abstract, and verbose—though leavened with occasional zingers, reminders of the incisiveness and wit that charmed those who knew her. Politically, Addams was pragmatic and moderate, whereas Scudder was “ardently and defiantly a socialist.”¹⁹ In fact, in summer 1912, Scudder wrote Addams, “[W]e covet you in the socialist camp”²⁰—but the next month, Addams seconded Theodore Roosevelt’s nomination for president under the banner of the Progressive Party and went on to campaign vigorously for him.

Scudder’s experiences in the early days of the settlements clinched her socialist convictions: “I did not see how anyone could live among poor working people . . . and be anything else,” she recalled. She believed that “the social order was gravely diseased,” its pestilence revealed by the vast gulf between economic classes, and hoped that settlers could bridge this gulf by sharing their lives with “neighbors.” But settlement houses themselves would not spur fundamental change, Scudder felt. Such change could only be accomplished if “the middle classes”—by which she meant her own educated, affluent peers—became convinced “that the social order in which its members moved, tranquil and prosperous,” was “intolerable to any decent person.” She anticipated that when her peers experienced settlement life, they would emerge “transformed and enlightened. They would return to their natural milieus . . . with crusading spirit.”²¹

By 1900, however, Scudder had realized that few temporary settlement residents had been transformed by their experiences. “I was disappointed,” she admitted in her autobiography, drily adding that “not even a social cataclysm could turn some people radical.”²² In the lead article for the CSA’s 1900 Annual Report, Scudder mourned the professionalization

¹⁹Scudder, *On Journey*, 161.

²⁰Scudder to Jane Addams, July 19, 1912, Jane Addams Project, Digital Edition, <https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/4518> (accessed August 12, 2021).

²¹Scudder, *On Journey*, 161–62, 140, 160.

²²Scudder, *On Journey*, 161.

of settlement work: “The informal relations of earlier days . . . are yielding fast to the well-organized activities of a set of experts.” She mocked this new model—“An elaborate system of industrial education by the most advanced methods is applied through our graded clubs and classes”—and charged that settlements had become “part of the existing social machine, embraced by “all amiable and right-thinking persons” and increasingly supported by the rich.” “The world speaks well of us,” she noted tartly. To Vida Scudder, nothing could be more discouraging than the conventional world’s approbation. Scudder saw two possible paths ahead for the settlement movement. It could once again be guided by “an aggressive discontent, springing from an intolerable compassion” as Scudder and the other settlement founders had been. Or it could “allow the strong conservative elements . . . to dominate the others, and to subside into accredited instruments of a limited conscience.” She implored, “Let us hope this will not happen.”²³

Scudder suffered a severe breakdown the year after voicing this plea. Convalescing in Italy, Scudder became enthralled by the medieval saint Catherine of Siena. By 1903, refreshed and renewed, she returned to Boston and to her Wellesley career. She continued her leadership role within the CSA and her part-time work at Denison House, despite her disillusionment with the settlement movement. Shortly after her return, though, Scudder’s settlement efforts took a new direction.

One day, according to her autobiography, Scudder’s Italian tutor, immigrant Francesco Malgeri, chastised her for studying “a dead Italian” but ignoring “[Catherine’s] countrymen, here in your own city, neglected and sadly in need of fellowship.”²⁴ Scudder responded immediately by starting the *Circolo*. At the same time, she organized an Italian Department at Denison House, whose offerings included both the *Circolo* and

²³Scudder, “Settlements, Past and Future,” 3, 5, 4, 7; Annual Report of the College Settlements Association, 1900 (New York: The Republic Press, [1890–]), 3, seq. 7 (hereafter Ann. Rept. of the CSA), Collection Development Department, Widener Library, HCL, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:427345940\\$7i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:427345940$7i) (accessed September 14, 2021).

²⁴Scudder, *On Journey*, 253.

traditional settlement house endeavors such as clubs for children and women. The Italian Department operated somewhat separately from the rest of Denison House, raising its own money and issuing its own annual report. This separation shielded it from the scrutiny of Denison’s increasingly hide-bound Executive Committee.

Boston’s Italians were not completely “neglected,” as Malgeri had charged. He had been working for a North End organization that helped new immigrants adjust to the United States, steering them away from dishonest labor brokers (*padroni*) and bankers—usually Italian immigrants themselves. But Boston’s Italian Catholics, the religious majority by far, opposed this organization because its founder, Gaetano Conte, was a Protestant minister with evangelical instincts. The Catholics formed their own newcomer aid program and refused to collaborate with Conte’s organization, forcing it to close; when Malgeri suggested that Scudder work with Italians, he had just lost his job. Scudder hired Malgeri to help run her new Italian Department, which enabled him to continue his work with newcomers in addition to supervising the settlement’s Italian programs and helping run the Circolo.

In addition to the newcomer aid groups, the North End housed several settlements. North Bennet Street Settlement taught manual trades and offered clubs for neighborhood youth; Civic Service House focused on preparing immigrants to become citizens. But neither offered opportunities for Italians and Americans to interact socially. As Scudder put it, “Excellent social work was going on among the Italians in Boston. But it was all from the philanthropic angle, and we felt . . . that little of it got under their skin.” Scudder had always disliked this “philanthropic angle,” writing in her memoirs, “‘Sharing’ is a noble and democratic word, when it does not degenerate into cant; it was the key-note of our [settlement house] movement. Between that and ‘serving’ there was a line . . . for the term ‘Service’ carries a possibly implied condescension.”²⁵

²⁵Scudder, *On Journey*, 256, 138.

One factor that made North Bennet Street and Civic Service House “philanthropic” was their focus on “Americanizing” immigrants. Scudder avoided the then-ubiquitous term, pointing out that for Italians, “Americanization” had an “evil connotation.” When parents said their children were becoming Americanized, she wrote, it meant becoming “impertinent and headstrong—and vulgar.”²⁶ Public school educators fueled this intergenerational tension by attempting to instill in immigrant children an “absolute forgetfulness of all obligations or connections with other countries because of descent or birth.”²⁷ Recalled one former student, “We were becoming American by learning to be ashamed of our parents.”²⁸ Scudder wrote that in schools, Italian-born children were “forgetting their own language and learning to speak English pretty badly.”²⁹ She arranged for Circolo members to offer Italian lessons to immigrants’ American-born children, who “tend to forget the tongue of their fathers.” These classes were popular; Scudder and Denison House headworker Helena Dudley noted in an appeal for funding Scudder’s work with Italians, and the Italian government had paid for the textbooks.³⁰ This desire to preserve immigrants’ languages was rare among settlers. Jane Addams, for example, virulently opposed the idea of settlements teaching foreign languages,³¹ and Scudder mentioned in a plea for Italian Department contributions that some Denison House supporters “express indifference to these [Italian language] classes” and balked at helping fund them.³²

²⁶Scudder, *On Journey*, 254–55.

²⁷Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 130.

²⁸Puleo, *The Boston Italians*, 88.

²⁹Scudder, “Denison House and the Italians,” *The Commons* 10 (May 1905): 287.

³⁰Helena Dudley and Vida D. Scudder, “Italian Work at Denison House,” Denison House Records, folder 80, seq. 4, n.d., <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:32631184?n=4> (accessed August 9, 2021).

³¹Lisa M. Rabin, “Language Ideologies and the Settlement House Movement: A New History for Service-Learning,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 15, no. 2 (2009): 48–55.

³²Scudder, “Italian Work at Denison House,” Denison House Records, folder 80, seq. 69.

Creating “Un’ Oasi”

With the Circolo, Scudder attempted to create a mini-version of her original vision for settlements: a place where all members interacted as equals. She wrote, “[A]ctivity with our friends is a far better thing than activity for them. The two propositions stand for two entirely distinct ideals of social work.”³³ In fact, she wanted the Italian members to be first among equals: “Equal exchange of ideas and gifts was our theory, but privately I vowed to bring the gifts and powers of the Italians out into the middle of the stage.”³⁴ The name Scudder and Malgeri chose for the group reflects her goal. “Circle” implies egalitarianism and mutuality; the group’s name is in Italian, not English; and “Italo” comes before “Americano.” Introducing her new venture to other settlers, she wrote that the group’s goal was not only to “Americanize” Italians—she put the term in quotes—but to “‘Italianize’ ourselves!”³⁵ She said that Italians agreed as well, citing a visitor from Italy who called the Circolo “un’oasi”³⁶ (an oasis) and an Italian-language newspaper that lauded the group as a place for “Italians and Americans to meet and entertain one another on the basis of perfect equality.”³⁷

The Circolo’s executive committee was comprised of five Italians and three Americans, along with Scudder as president. There was one Italian and one American vice-president, an Italian recording secretary, an American treasurer, and four counsellors, three of them Italian. Various groups of members along with Scudder and Malgeri arranged monthly group meetings and other programs.³⁸ Scudder believed that the group’s success was “entirely due to its truly democratic character, to the co-operation and leadership of the Italians themselves” and that

³³Scudder, “Report of the Italian Department Denison House 1908–1909,” Denison House Records, folder 84, seq. 13.

³⁴Scudder, *On Journey*, 257.

³⁵Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1905, 85, seq. 83, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203348?n=83> (accessed August 9, 2021).

³⁶Scudder, *On Journey*, 258.

³⁷Scudder, “Denison House and the Italians,” 289.

³⁸Scudder, *On Journey*, 221.

Circolo activities were “the expression of [members’] own lives and their own desires.”³⁹ She told settlers that the Italian Circolo members “possess endless resources to entertain themselves, and us.”⁴⁰

A vital aspect of the Circolo was that Italian was its official language. Scudder recalled that there was another, “more high-brow” society in town, its members “cultured Bostonians who loved Italy” along with a handful of Italians. “Certain members of the other society slipped over to us, largely because our club language was Italian, and they liked that,” she wrote. Scudder led Circolo meetings speaking Italian with Malgeri’s help. Her “command of the tongue remained sadly imperfect,” she recalled, adding wryly that members sometimes stifled giggles at her wording, informing her that she spoke “Latin,” not real Italian. But she enjoyed leading meetings and continued her efforts.⁴¹ Most articles in the group’s monthly newsletter, the *Bollettino*, were in Italian as well. Making Italian the default language allowed immigrant members to be the experts, a welcome change from the rest of their lives in a new country. It also gave Americans in the group who wanted to learn Italian a chance to experience the disorienting feeling of being novices—a little taste of what recent immigrants felt every day. Each week, Scudder invited Italians and Americans to her Newbury Street home for informal conversation, with the Italians practicing English and the Americans practicing Italian. These evenings “allowed us the opportunity to exchange views on many subjects beside the English language,” she reported.⁴² Scudder noted that Americans’ desire to speak Italian helped level class distinctions as well as ethnic ones. At Circolo parties in wealthy neighborhoods, she said, no one cared about social status: “Americans eager for a chance to practice Italian do not

³⁹“The State Conferences,” *Charities and the Commons* 21 (October 1908–April 1909): 162.

⁴⁰Scudder, “Denison House and the Italians,” 289.

⁴¹Scudder, *On Journey*, 259.

⁴²Scudder, “The Department of Italian Work Denison House,” 1907–1908, 9, Denison House Records, folder 82, seq. 42.

care whether the courteous and patient person to whom they are talking is a cook or a count.”⁴³

Scudder’s respect for Italians’ leadership abilities starkly contrasts with the condescension other settlement leaders expressed towards immigrants. At one settlement house in Chicago, for example, the Italian Mothers Club members were not allowed to help plan the settlement’s Columbus Day celebration.⁴⁴ In another, Americans led all its clubs until the 1940s, complaining that Italians had little organizational ability. When settlers did allow immigrants to run their own groups, the goal was education, not empowerment. “As members of clubs and classes matured in experience . . . and grasped the principles and technique of organization,” Robert Woods of Boston’s South End House wrote, “residents saw that nothing so promotes assimilation of knowledge as participation in organizing educational enterprises.”⁴⁵

Besides helping Americans learn a new language, Italian Circolo members often helped with settlement activities aimed at less-educated, low-income Italians. Some attended the sewing club, cutting cloth as they translated women’s regional dialects into the standard Italian that some settlers understood. Others taught the classes where children learned Italian. Doctors treated Italian patients for free or at low cost. Some group members visited the homes of low-income Italians to help with problems of daily life. Scudder noted that the American charity workers, whose job included home visits, failed to understand the scope of poor Italian families’ suffering; “it can only be adequately discovered and relieved through the Italians.”⁴⁶

⁴³Scudder, “Denison House and the Italians,” 289.

⁴⁴Mary Ellen Mancina-Batinich, “The Interaction Between Italian Immigrant Women and the Chicago Commons Settlement House 1900–1914,” *The Italian American Woman in North America*, ed. Betty Boyd Caroli et al. (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978), 154–167, 165. Batinich, “Interaction,” 157.

⁴⁵Robert Archey Woods and Albert Joseph Kennedy, *The Settlement Horizon: A National Estimate* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1922), 136.

⁴⁶“Miss Scudder Reports for the Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1908, 85, seq. 84, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203356?n=84> (accessed August 9, 2021).

Mina Carson's charge that Scudder viewed *Circolo* members as "diamond[s] in a dustbin" reflects the fact that the group's Italian members were handpicked by Scudder and Malgeri. They chose professionals or people who had obtained professional training or education in Italy but in America had been compelled to enter manual trades. In Scudder's autobiography, she claimed that she originally wanted open membership but that it proved impossible; "one cannot aim at more than one objective at once."⁴⁷ She did not specify these "objectives," but it is clear that she and Malgeri aimed for cross-ethnic, not cross-class, fellowship. Scudder probably jettisoned any cross-class "objective" because her earlier attempts to interest uneducated "neighbors" in her own milieu's aesthetic pleasures had failed. "On what grounds should we try to meet? Uneducated people do not naturally like the same things as the children of privilege,"⁴⁸ she reflected. Scudder expressed little interest in the Italian Department's activities on behalf of uneducated immigrants, outsourcing these efforts to Malgeri and American volunteers. "Our desire," Scudder explained, "was less to work for the poorer elements than to express our gratitude for the gifts brought us by the better."⁴⁹ Calling educated immigrants "better" than poorer ones, of course, shows her unconscious snobbery. Scudder's sentiments were shared by Malgeri, who told settlers that by looking only at "the mass [of Italian immigrants] in its entirety, chiefly composed of poor laborers," Americans ignored "the various excellent civic qualities of individuals here and there."⁵⁰

Although *Circolo* members themselves were a select group, meetings solely for them occurred only once a month. Most *Circolo* events were intended for Boston's entire Italian community. The group's newsletter, the *Bollettino*, included open invitations to *Circolo* events, articles about Boston's

⁴⁷Scudder, *On Journey*, 257.

⁴⁸Scudder, "Democracy and Education," *Atlantic Monthly* 89 (June 1902): 820.

⁴⁹Scudder, *On Journey*, 257.

⁵⁰Quoted in Scudder, "Italian Work," Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1906, 87, seq. 85. <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203351?n=85> (accessed August 9, 2021).

recreational opportunities, and digests of laws affecting immigrants, as well as quotes from Scudder’s favorite authors and what she later drily referred to as “noble sentiments.” “We reached out through these means to the whole colony,”⁵¹ Scudder recalled.

“A Very Good Time”

“We have been chiefly occupied,” Scudder told settlers the year after the *Circolo* formed, “in giving our Italian friends, and incidentally, ourselves, a very good time.”⁵² She felt that creating fellowship was the *Circolo*’s most important function. “I would rather offer these Italians one reception, inspired by true affectionate desire to bid them welcome, than give them a whole series of lectures,” she wrote.⁵³ Although Scudder and the *Circolo*’s mixed Italian-American leadership organized most social events, some were spearheaded by Italian members, including a reception for an Italian baron and baroness, a benefit concert for earthquake sufferers in Italy, and large Columbus Day feasts.

The monthly *Circolo* meetings at Denison House always included entertainment—usually music sung or played by Italians, sometimes “Sleight of Hand” tricks or stereopticon pictures—as well as talks on serious topics. The Denison House Diary, a record kept by settlers of daily activities, offers a glimpse of these events, although the notes lack the *brio* of Scudder’s own writing. The *Circolo* meetings usually had “a large attendance” and were “enjoyable.” A typical entry read, “The Italian club met. The room was crowded and the guests most enthusiastic. There were stereopticon pictures of Italy. . . Singing and a dialogue from a play. The party reluctantly broke up shortly before 11.” At a farewell gathering before Scudder left for an Italian vacation, guests packed the room and

⁵¹Scudder, *On Journey*, 260.

⁵²Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1905, 85, seq. 83.

⁵³“Miss Scudder Reports for the Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1908, 83, seq. 82, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203356?n=82> (accessed August 9, 2021).

overflowed into the hallway. A Miss Civiletti sang “very acceptably,” an Italian group member spoke on capital punishment, and a visiting priest discussed Christian democracy in Italy. Despite the less-than-festive subject matter, these attendees, too, were “very enthusiastic.”⁵⁴ One Italian Circolo member, though, requested meetings that were less didactic and more relaxed. He wrote, “We like our informal music, our singing together, our occasional little plays, our chatting while having a sociable bit of refreshment.”⁵⁵

Every two weeks, the Circolo held public Sunday afternoon “lecture-concerts” in the North End, advertised on brightly colored handouts. These events, Scudder told settlers, were “the most important phase in the work of the Circolo.”⁵⁶ Lecture-concerts mixed education and entertainment. “The hall was usually jammed,” Scudder recalled. “We planned for about half an hour of speaking, followed by music. Usually our speakers were Italian; we had no trouble in securing competent persons, who could talk on anything from hygiene to art.”⁵⁷ Encompassing both the highbrow and the mundane, lectures focused on famous Florentine writers and artists; Italian unifiers such as Mazzini and Cavour; American icons of the day such as Emerson, Lincoln, and Longfellow; criminal anthropology; labor relations; and “Infectious Diseases.” A talk on tuberculosis, the *Boston Globe* reported, was attended by a large number of North End residents, especially mothers.⁵⁸ Italians usually provided the music, often songs from operas or now-unknown composers, sometimes chamber music.

⁵⁴Denison House Diary, November 1900–February 1908. May 15, 1904, folder 77, seq. 137; February 19, 1906, folder 77, seq. 189–90, Denison House Records.

⁵⁵“An Open Letter from a Member of the Circolo Italo-Americano di Boston, 1908” quoted in Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 71.

⁵⁶Scudder, “Italian Work,” 1907–1908, Denison House Records, folder 82, seq. 39–40.

⁵⁷Scudder, *On Journey*, 261.

⁵⁸“Lecture on Tuberculosis,” *Boston Globe*, February 22, 1909, 12, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/431017159/?terms=%22North%20End%22%20%22tuberculosis%22&match=1> (accessed August 12, 2021).

The Circolo sometimes hosted large parties and receptions at the settlement open to all. Even bad weather, which usually doomed Denison events to poor attendance, did not deter three hundred guests from attending one reception. “The rooms were decorated with flags of America and Italy, and many flowers lent an air of festivity,” the Diary noted. “[A]ll pronounced it a grand success.”⁵⁹ Another reception drew five hundred people. The group held dinner parties; at one, featuring “ambrosial spaghetti,” Scudder recalled the “merriment of our 170-odd guests, the pleasant if largely pantomimic intercourse carried on across the table between Americans and Italians.” After the meal, Malgeri stood on the piano to deliver a speech.⁶⁰ At another dinner, reported the *Boston Globe*, “[M]acaroni and chianti were enlivened by the music of mandolins and guitars, when speeches were made more, or less, serious by Miss Scudder, Mr. Malgeri . . . and by the little 9-year-old son of Dr. Verde, but just arrived from Italy.”⁶¹

Occasionally, Circolo members and their families traveled to Boston’s leafy, affluent western suburbs for *festas* (parties) at “villas” owned by Scudder’s friends. Scudder wrote about one such party, “The lake and woods were themselves an idyll and our ninety guests gravely discussed which of the Italian lakes Waban most resembled.”⁶² On another occasion, families “rested on the hill under the apple blossoms, mandolins twanged, and song and talk rose gaily.”⁶³ One host provided cigars for the men and frosted the cakes in Italian colors.⁶⁴ A

⁵⁹Denison House Diary, November 1900–February 1908. February 3, 1906, Denison House Records, folder 77, seq. 187.

⁶⁰Italian Department Report, 1912, Vida Dutton Scudder Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

⁶¹Circolo’s Concert,” *Boston Globe*, March 24, 1912, 56, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/430915744/?terms=%22Circolo%27s%20Concert%22&match=1> (accessed September 13, 2021).

⁶²“Work Among Boston’s Italians,” *Charities and the Commons* 15 (1905–6): 538.

⁶³Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1904, 33, seq. 37, [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:427345962\\$37i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:427345962$37i) (accessed August 12, 2021).

⁶⁴Scudder, “Report of the Italian Department Denison House 1908–1909,” 7–8, Denison House Records, folder 84, seq. 13–14.

Diary entry about one *fiesta* summarized the party as follows: “It was a perfect day.”⁶⁵

The New City of Friends

Throughout her life, Scudder tried to collapse the divisions between groups that others viewed as separate and mutually incompatible—college women and impoverished immigrants, labor leaders and theology professors, Italians and Americans. Sometimes, as with the Circolo, she created opportunities for members of the different groups to meet and mingle. Often, she tried to “interpret” the experiences of a marginalized group to her own privileged peers. During her Circolo years, she also strove to interpret America to Italians.

Before Scudder founded the Circolo, she had concluded that America was “permeated with injustice and selfishness. Our claim to offer equal opportunity to all is a lie. . . . Our claim to be a land of liberty is a lie.”⁶⁶ But her contact with Italians awakened some “dormant patriotism.”⁶⁷ The *Bollettino* often featured articles about laws affecting immigrants or the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Scudder expanded these articles into leaflets distributed at Circolo meetings, lecture-concerts, and union gatherings. She then worked with other settlers and the Boston school board to produce *A Civic Reader for New Americans*, a collection of essays for use in public night schools by immigrant adults. According to the book’s editor, Civic Service House head Meyer Bloomfield, it was “intended to replace the ‘See The Cat’ book with which we insult the intelligence of the immigrant in the night schools.”⁶⁸

Scudder contributed one chapter to the *Civic Reader*, “Our Country.” It is the only chapter in the book that acknowledges

⁶⁵Denison House Diary, May 22, 1904, Denison House Records, folder 77, seq. 137–38.

⁶⁶Vida Dutton Scudder to Anne Whitney, November 27, 1904, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA, <https://repository.wellesley.edu/object/wellesley12478?search=Vida%2520%2520Dutton%2520Scudder> (accessed August 10, 2021).

⁶⁷Scudder, *On Journey*, 254.

⁶⁸“New Americans,” *Christian Register* 86 (October 10, 1907): 1149.

and celebrates immigrants’ ties to their former countries. “[W]e are all Americans if we decide to make this country our home,” Scudder wrote, but “he who loves two countries is richer than he who loves one only.”⁶⁹ She urged immigrants to teach their children to love both countries as well. Newcomers should learn English not as a replacement for their mother tongue but as a *lingua franca*: “only through English can we all talk together.”⁷⁰

Scudder’s chapter is also the only contribution that criticizes America. To many immigrants, Scudder acknowledged, America is not the “sweet land of liberty” of the familiar song. True, there is freedom of speech and religion and free libraries and schools, but many people lack the most important freedom of all—“opportunity and power for a man to become all that God meant him to become.”⁷¹ However, Scudder concluded, newcomers who become disillusioned by America’s inequities should realize that many citizens are striving against injustice and should join those efforts. Revealing her hope that immigrants would generate the national unity she craved, Scudder quoted Walt Whitman—“I dreamed that was the new city of friends”—and urged, “If a man does not find [his] city . . . to be a ‘city of friends,’ let him try to make it one. Perhaps he will be a better American than some who have lived here much longer.”⁷²

One way to encourage American values, Scudder believed, was to give Italians a chance to express their opinions freely. Americans, too, would benefit from this effort, she explained to settlers; “the opinions of these new citizens ought to be worth noting for those fighting for a better civic life.” At lecture-concerts, Scudder said, she gave the listeners “schedules of questions on one or the other subject, asking for written

⁶⁹Vida Scudder, “Our Country,” *A Civic Reader for New Americans*, ed. Meyer Bloomfield (New York: American Book Company, 1908), 61–62.

⁷⁰Scudder, “Our Country,” 63.

⁷¹Scudder, “Our Country,” 64.

⁷²Scudder, “Our Country,” 63–64.

answers.”⁷³ Once, she handed out pieces of paper and asked attendees to write down questions they wanted to discuss. “The results were enlightening,” she noted. Some audience members found America’s influence corrosive. “Why in America are fearfully multiplied drunken men and women, churches, and prisons?” “Why does the immigrant who arrives here as a respectable man, degenerate into a scamp?” “Do both sexes return to Italy stronger and more active or do they degenerate in the US?” Others pointed out racism among immigrants: “Why should the Catholic Irish so hate and oppose Catholic Italians in the factories?” People criticized local and federal policy—“Are the Puritanic [*sic*] laws that govern Boston necessary for the citizens’ welfare?” “Causes of political corruption in the U.S.”—and prejudice against Italians in the media: “How to fight the venal press.” They wrote of the need for Italian elementary schools and the benefits of trade unions. Some suggestions revealed “the seething forces of anti-clerical revolt and of social radicalism” among Boston’s Italians: “Dogma the enemy of freedom”; “The Church: how to destroy its evil power.”⁷⁴ Scudder told her settlement peers, “Such are the subjects . . . which are occupying the thoughts of these eager people—anti-clerical, radical, restless . . . yet with a growing receptivity to the living problems in this new fatherland.”⁷⁵

To further encourage free speech and respectful disagreement. Scudder tried to hold open forums with Italian speakers who held opposing views. This effort, she reported, was unsuccessful. In 1907–1908, amidst great internal strife in the Italian colony, the group even arranged for plainclothes police officers to attend these events. Tensions finally boiled over at an open debate between socialists and anarchists on “The Social Ideal of the Future.” The Italian members of the *Circolo* leadership opposed holding the debate, but Scudder and the other

⁷³Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1911, 46, seq. 48, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203363?n=48> (accessed August 12, 2021).

⁷⁴Scudder, *On Journey*, 263–64.

⁷⁵Scudder, “The Department of Italian Work Denison House,” 1907–1908, 3–4, Denison House Records, folder 82, seq. 41.

Americans forged ahead, believing that with careful ground rules, the affair would be successful. Everyone followed the rules until near the end of the debate, when anarchists surged onto the platform when a socialist was speaking. Chaos ensued. A man with a revolver appeared at Scudder's side, waving his gun protectively, and the police emptied the auditorium using tear gas. Afterwards, Boston's Italian consul resigned as Circolo vice-president and left the group. The Circolo avoided controversial topics after that debacle, Scudder wrote.

Scudder had another ambitious aim for the Circolo. A long-time socialist, she had come to believe that socialism and Christianity—as she defined each—complemented each other perfectly and hoped to convince the group members to embrace her convictions. Looking back thirty years later, Scudder made fun of a lecture she gave arguing for this synthesis. “I may have waved my red card,” she ruefully recalled. “[I]t was a marvel that they listened without disturbance. . . . Probably they did not half know what I was saying, and my awkward language put them to sleep.”⁷⁶ Scudder would go on to publish several books and numerous articles detailing her beliefs.

In the Circolo's early years, Scudder expressed hopes that it could help achieve an even more impossible goal: uniting Boston's Italian community. She wanted immigrants to “forget the internal dissensions [*sic*] that divide them, and turn from petty provincial interests to the growing sobering sense of the great social whole.”⁷⁷ Scudder believed at first that the Italian community welcomed the Circolo. The group had ties to several community leaders; member George Scigliano, for example, was a popular state legislator who crusaded against the Mafia. Boston's biggest Italian newspaper, *La Gazzetta del Massachusetts*, published articles praising the group. Scudder wrote that Circolo-sponsored events fostered fellowship between different community factions. She described a large Columbus Day festa at Faneuil Hall, packed with “[a] goodly array of

⁷⁶Scudder, *On Journey*, 264.

⁷⁷“Civic Education for Italians: Details of an Interesting Movement,” Good Government Association, Boston, *City Affairs*, November 1906, n.p.

Italian societies, military, ecclesiastical, industrial,” the galleries overflowing with women and American guests. “It is said that this is the first time that the sectional feelings of the Italians in our city have been so conquered as to unite them all in so great number,” she concluded.⁷⁸ “We are assured,” Scudder told settlers, “that our Sunday afternoons are the one rallying point for what is best in the life of the great Italian colony.”⁷⁹

Scudder tackled her more usual role, schooling members of her own social class about members of another, with her trademark vigor. She lauded her “good Italian friends”⁸⁰ in the *Boston Globe*, in social justice-oriented periodicals, in CSA reports, and at conferences. According to Scudder, immigrants’ isolation in their own colonies harmed everyone. Absent contact with friendly Americans, she stated, immigrants had come to decide that politicians bought votes, that workers had no recourse from exploitation, and all Americans hate “the Dago.”⁸¹ In 1912, amidst mounting American fears of foreign anarchists, Scudder chastised Americans for failing to interact with Italians. “Thrown back among themselves,” she claimed, immigrants become cynical and more radicalized. “This is dangerous, but it is the fault of the American citizen, not the foreign alien. It is our fault!”⁸² She urged Bostonians to attend Circolo events: “Come and visit them! See for yourself!”⁸³

Scudder told her peers that Boston’s Italian community comprised four distinct groups. Settlements, she stated, had no interest in “longtime residents, affluent, who stay in the background and by the opinion of their country-men, would better stay there.” Perhaps some of these longtime residents were the labor brokers and bankers who preyed on newcomers. Another

⁷⁸Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1905, 87, seq. 85.

⁷⁹Vida D. Scudder et al., “Department of Italian Work Denison House Circolo Italo-Americano,” December 1908, Denison House Records, folder 83, seq. 22.

⁸⁰Pauline Carrington Bouve, “My Good Italian Friends,” *Boston Globe*, March 10, 1912, 72.

⁸¹Vida D. Scudder, “Denison House and the Italians,” *Commons* 10 (1905): 287–88.

⁸²Quoted in Bouve, “My Good Italian Friends.”

⁸³Vida D. Scudder et al., “Department of Italian Work Denison House Circolo Italo-Americano,” December 1908, Denison House Records, folder 83, seq. 22.

group, the “great mass of ignorant and illiterate laborers—generally from Southern Italy,” benefited from the conventional settlement efforts offered by Denison’s Italian Department and by many other settlements. But, Scudder claimed, settlements’ greatest opportunity lay with the two remaining groups. One group was professionals, who had had little opportunity to meet friendly Americans and were delighted to do so. The other was “a shifting throng of educated young fellows. . . . These are the people whom America is making into youthful cynics.” These disaffected newcomers could potentially become a “dangerous element,” Scudder warned, but the “fellowship and sympathy” they found in groups such as the Circolo would “bring them into loyal enthusiasm with American ideals.”⁸⁴

From the accounts we have, Scudder’s outreach to Americans bore some fruit within Massachusetts. The governor of Massachusetts, Curtis Guild, wrote a letter printed in the *Bollettino* congratulating the Circolo on its work.⁸⁵ Guild also formally opened an arts and crafts exhibition arranged by the Circolo and the Italian Department, proclaiming to the one thousand attendees that Massachusetts welcomed “the sturdy Italian citizenship into the new and strong America.”⁸⁶ Prominent Bostonians with names like Brandeis, Saltonstall, Hemenway, and Longfellow attended Circolo events. As for national outreach, an article from the time says that Denison’s Italian work was known throughout the country.⁸⁷

“Almost Insuperable Difficulties”

But Scudder soon realized that she and the Circolo could never unite Boston’s Italians. The community, she wrote, seethed with conflict: “I have never known anything to equal

⁸⁴Scudder, “Denison House and the Italians,” 288.

⁸⁵Letter dated February 13, 1906, Denison House Records, folder 80, seq. 23.

⁸⁶“Italian Arts and Crafts,” *Boston Globe*, December 2, 1908, 9, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/431026396/?terms=%22Italian%20Arts%20and%20Crafts.%22> (accessed September 13, 2021).

⁸⁷Lilian Marchant Skinner, “The Opportunities of Denison House,” *New Boston* (1910): 402.

the factions, the animosity, the dissensions that prevailed among [Italian immigrants].”⁸⁸ In the CSA’s 1907 Annual Report, Scudder wrote that a “turmoil of internal dissensions” in the Italian community had caused the Italian Department “almost insuperable difficulties” despite its efforts to “soften animosities and to prevent hostile manifestations.” She mentioned “scandalous personal recrimination, constantly aggravated by the Italian press.”⁸⁹ Scudder did not go into more detail at the time about the community’s internal dissension or the “scandalous personal recrimination.” But it is easy to see how the differences between Circolo members and most of Boston’s Italians could have triggered community hostility.

For one thing, most Circolo members were from northern Italy, whereas most of the Italians in Boston came from southern Italy. Northern and southern Italians disliked each other in Italy and continued their distaste in America. Southern Italy was agricultural and poor; northern Italy, industrialized and wealthier. Unification, which Scudder lauded, had not improved southern Italians’ lives; the unified government, based in the north, taxed agricultural workers and their products heavily and starved the region of much-needed funding. Northern Italians had access to education and Circolo members were well-educated, but many southerners could not read or write. Even within the Circolo, there may have been a chasm between northern and southern Italian members: the only extant reference to the Circolo by a rank-and-file member is an open letter requesting “more of these informal talks where some Southern member wanders in fields of memory and calls to his northern brother.”⁹⁰ Scudder’s own love of Italy encompassed nothing south of Rome. In her many trips to the country, she visited a southern region only once, writing a friend, “[Sicily] is a

⁸⁸Scudder, *On Journey*, 255.

⁸⁹Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1907, 83-84, seq. 82-83, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203354?n=82>, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203354?n=83> (accessed August 11, 2021).

⁹⁰“An Open Letter from a Member of the Circolo, 1908” quoted in Diner, *Hungering for America*, 71.

marvelous land, but very desolate in its beauty, a land of memories alone. I am glad to have seen it; I do not want to go again.”⁹¹

The Circolo comprised people, including Scudder, sympathetic to socialists and anarchists, and Boston’s Italian Catholic community was anti-socialist and, especially, anti-anarchist. Although Catholic religious groups did not attack the Circolo openly, Scudder wrote in her autobiography that they “work[ed] against us out of sight and through vicious attacks in the chief Catholic newspapers.” But in fact, the Circolo’s “extreme radicals”—argumentative young socialist and anarchist men—were Scudder’s secret favorites, even though they “gave us the most trouble as time went on.”⁹² Scudder had always enjoyed lively discussions with young people. During her Circolo years she felt disenchanted with her Wellesley students, finding them lethargic and uninterested in socialism, so speaking with these Circolo members must have been a welcome change. The Italian members of the Circolo in leadership positions were less enthusiastic about anarchists, though, judging from their advice against holding the “Social Ideal of the Future” debate and the consul’s departure afterwards.

A handful of these anarchists, of course, *were* dangerous. Some were Galleanists—followers of Luigi Galleani, the Vermont-based publisher of the *Cronaca Sovversiva* newspaper which advocated violent overthrow of the government, and the author of a widely-distributed manual on bomb-making. Although no anarchist violence occurred in Boston during Scudder’s Circolo years, by 1915 the North End had become the headquarters of Italian anarchists in America, according to Stephen Puleo.⁹³ In 1916, a bomb planted by Galleanists destroyed a North End police station and smashed windows for blocks. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, whose murder trial galvanized the nation in 1920, were Galleanists. Scudder did not know either of the men, who lived outside Boston and

⁹¹Vida Dutton Scudder to Anne Whitney, May 11, 1902, Wellesley College Archives.

⁹²Scudder, *On Journey*, 264, 266.

⁹³Puleo, *Boston Italians*, 105.

were not active in the anarchist movement until 1912. Like many Progressives, though, she believed in their innocence, calling them “martyred men” whose execution was “a blot on the fair fame of Massachusetts.”⁹⁴

Malgeri, Scudder recalled in her autobiography, was a particular target of community attack. This dedicated, hardworking man epitomized almost everything that the Italian community’s powers-that-be despised. Predatory *padroni* and bankers, who were influential community members, resented anyone who protected newcomers from their abuses—exactly Malgeri’s livelihood. A report by the American Unitarian Association, which also funded Malgeri’s work, noted that Malgeri was “opposed and condemned by the irresponsible and criminal people of his own race, whose only aim is to undermine the welfare and oppose the progress of thousands who come among us.”⁹⁵ Malgeri was also an ardent Protestant, associated in Catholics’ minds with the Protestant immigrant aid group the Catholics had derailed; the Protestant-run Denison House; and his other funder, the Unitarian Church. He may have even engaged in a little proselyting. The American Unitarian Association, which at the time embraced evangelism, reported that although Malgeri’s work was secular, “his teachings, so far as they are religious, are in harmony with our views.”⁹⁶

Malgeri had another strike against him that Scudder never mentioned. Before emigrating to the US, he had been the personal secretary to Italian statesman Francesco Crispi, an important leader during Italian unification and prime minister twice. Crispi had proved to be an authoritarian prime minister, violently suppressing a peasant revolt in southern Italy. He was also a colonialist, and his invasion of Ethiopia resulted in a brutal battle that claimed the lives of six thousand Italians. Forced to resign after this battle, Crispi contended at the end of his

⁹⁴Scudder, *On Journey*, 298.

⁹⁵Lewis G. Wilson, “Department of New Americans,” *Annual Report of the American Unitarian Association 1910–1911*, 59.

⁹⁶Lewis G. Wilson, “Report of the Secretary,” *Ann. Rept. of the Amer. Unitarian Assoc. 1908–1909*, 29.

life with charges of embezzlement and bigamy. Most mentions of Malgeri in English-language newspapers describe his advocacy for immigrants and not his life before he entered America, but he was open about his association with Crispi, at least in the English-language press. The first time Malgeri's name appeared in an English-language newspaper, he was identified as Crispi's personal secretary,⁹⁷ and a 1912 *Boston Globe* interview with Malgeri is subheaded “Once Secretary to Crispi.” He told the *Globe* interviewer that he migrated to America because after Crispi's death “I cared no more to stay in Italy. There were many changes.”⁹⁸ Assuming Boston's working-class Italians knew of Malgeri's work for a deeply unpopular leader, they would have had another reason to vilify him.

The anthropologist Augusto Ferraiuolo frames the community's animosity towards the Circolo in terms of religious conversion. Conflating the Circolo with all of Denison House and lumping all settlement houses and philanthropic groups into one category, he charges that they sought to convert immigrants to a new way of life and Catholic immigrants to Protestantism. These attempts at “assimilation and Americanization,” in his words, threatened the economic and social grip that the *notabili*, prominent members of Boston's Italian community, held over newcomers.⁹⁹

Ferraiuolo has a point. Malgeri, the Circolo, and Denison's Italian Department as a whole *did* seek to free immigrants from the *notabili*'s control. Scudder's conception of “assimilation,” however, had little in common with her philanthropic peers. At the time, most Progressives, including Jane Addams, embraced a “melting pot” concept of immigrant integration. Israel Zangwill, who coined the term, called America “God's crucible, the Great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming,” each “race” adding its unique

⁹⁷“Women's Clubs,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 17, 1903, 22, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/735400198/?terms=Malgeri&match=1> (accessed August 10, 2021).

⁹⁸Pauline Carrington Bouve, “Little Stories of New England People: Italian Social Worker,” *Boston Globe*, April 7, 1912, 75.

⁹⁹Ferraiuolo, *Religious Festive Practices in the North End*, 89.

flavor to the *mélange*. Inter-marriage, Zangwill believed, was the key to transforming America into “the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God.”¹⁰⁰ In contrast to this view, Scudder’s version of assimilation anticipated Horace Kallen’s concept of cultural pluralism. She wrote that the *Circolo* inspired “a marvelous sense of what the emergent people might become, when the glory and honor of many diverse nations should have entered through its gates and created its citizenship.”¹⁰¹ In this metaphor, as with the “melting pot,” immigrants come together to create a new people. But in Scudder’s vision the newcomers are not ingredients, dissolved and re-formed by some alchemical chef-deity. Instead, they do the work, walking through the gates and crafting a new, multicultural America. It is an appealing idea, but one out of step with the reality in Boston’s Italian community at that time. In the early twentieth century, writes Stephen Puleo, most Italian immigrants were not interested in becoming American citizens, believing that doing so would be “a final renunciation of their beloved Italy.” Only twenty-five percent of Italian immigrants, Puleo notes, had gained citizenship by 1915.¹⁰²

The *Circolo* survived its 1907–1908 difficulties. As Scudder recalled in 1937, “Though our adventure in fellowship encountered every obstacle that such an adventure could meet, it did not fail.”¹⁰³ Records from 1908 to 1912 include programs for the *Circolo*’s monthly meetings at Denison; advertisements for the bimonthly North End lecture-concerts; and numerous *Bollettino* issues. In the CSA’s 1909 Annual Report, Scudder wrote, “Our social life in the *Circolo* Italo-Americano continued pleasantly as usual,” adding that the group’s annual *fiesta* was the “most beautiful and memorable” ever.¹⁰⁴ The next year, the group held a commemoration of the life of Julia Ward Howe, who had visited the *Circolo* and become the

¹⁰⁰Mann, *The One and the Many*, 99.

¹⁰¹Scudder, *On Journey*, 254.

¹⁰²Puleo, *Boston Italians*, 103–04.

¹⁰³Scudder, *On Journey*, 267.

¹⁰⁴Scudder, “The Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1909, 102, seq. 104, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203359?n=104> (accessed August 11, 2021).

members’ beloved “Nonna” (grandmother).¹⁰⁵ In 1911’s CSA report, Scudder noted, “No new departure, but a satisfactory deepening and broadening of lines already established” and commented that the year had been the “richest and most searching” yet.¹⁰⁶

“That Episode Was Over”

After these years of apparent calm, the Italian Department’s 1912 report comes as a shock. “We are neither praised nor petted in the Italian colony,” Scudder wrote, adding that she had just read “a virulent attack from an Italian paper, abusing indiscriminately the Circolo, Mr. Malgeri, and the ‘muciose zit-telone [sniveling old maids]’ who conduct it.”¹⁰⁷ Despite this hostility, Scudder remained Circolo president through the next year. But by 1914, she was gone. In fact, she left not just the Circolo and the Italian Department but completely separated from Denison House. “That episode was over . . . a new phase of life began,”¹⁰⁸ she recounted in her autobiography.

Perhaps one factor in her departure was weariness with the continuing tensions between the Circolo and most of the Italian community. In Denison’s Annual Report for 1913, Scudder related an incident that epitomized these tensions. The Lowell Institute, an organization that organized lectures, had arranged for an Italian economist to give lectures sponsored by the Circolo. These lectures, Scudder wrote, offered information useful to new immigrants in particular, and many new immigrants attended the first session and listened attentively. However, the audience also included “habitual attendees” at Circolo events, men whose “longer residence in America and thorough and intelligent understanding of its conditions . . . rendered much of the subject matter obvious and trite.” During a lecture these men spoke up, loudly criticizing the speaker.

¹⁰⁵Denison House Records, 1910, folder 85, seq. 38; Scudder, *On Journey*, 258.

¹⁰⁶Scudder, “Italian Work,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1911, 46, seq. 48, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:30203363?n=48> (accessed August 10, 2021).

¹⁰⁷Italian Department Report, 1912, Scudder Papers.

¹⁰⁸Scudder, *On Journey*, 268.

The situation “proved well-nigh disastrous,” Scudder told the settlers, “for an element in the colony which has always harbored . . . hostility to us, was quick to take advantage of it.” Scudder stated that the Circolo would in future not align itself with any particular group or set of ideas and would rely more on Italian input in its programming. The group, she concluded, will continue “under leadership that will bring new devotion and inspiration.”¹⁰⁹ It was her goodbye.

But the main reason Scudder stopped working with the Circolo was not the Italian community’s frictions; it was the Denison House community’s. Scudder had supported organized labor in various ways for many years, often working together with Helena Dudley, the head of Denison House. In March 1912, Scudder gave a speech at a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The speech, she felt, was mild: she praised the strikers’ unity, called for nonviolence, and pledged to boycott textiles produced under unjust conditions. But this was no ordinary strike. The “Bread and Roses” strike was led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a group that terrified Americans, and the strike was front-page news throughout the nation. Scudder became a victim of guilt by association. Newspapers across the country reprinted her remarks. Angry letters poured into Wellesley College unsuccessfully demanding her dismissal. Helena Dudley supported the strike as well; though she had not addressed the strikers, the Denison House Executive Committee forced her to resign. As Scudder noted in her autobiography, both she and Dudley “were rather too radical for the committee of the moment.”¹¹⁰ In a 1902 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Scudder had written that as settlements become increasingly efficient, professionalized, and limited in scope, “the spirit that yearns towards full social regeneration, the spirit of the amateur, the lover, leaves them and passes on.”¹¹¹ She was speaking, of course, of her own

¹⁰⁹Scudder, “The Circolo Italo-Americano,” Denison House Annual Report, 1913, 26, seq. 33.

¹¹⁰Scudder, *On Journey*, 276.

¹¹¹Scudder, “Democracy and Society,” *Atlantic Monthly* 90 (1902): 348.

spirit. Scudder’s Circolo involvement had temporarily reinvigorated her commitment to Denison House, if not to settlements in general—but by 1912, she was ready to withdraw from the movement she had been instrumental in creating.

In the wake of her departure from Denison, Scudder exited Boston both literally and symbolically. She had a house built near the Wellesley College campus, leaving her longtime Newbury Street home, and continued teaching at Wellesley until her retirement in 1927. For the rest of her long life, she channeled her activist energies through venues other than the settlement movement, most of them within the Episcopal Church. She produced seven more books and 136 more articles. Scudder’s last book, published when she was ninety, advocated the abolishment of nuclear weapons and the creation of a European union.

After Scudder left, the Circolo continued for another year under the leadership of Malgeri and Mary Gove Smith, a salaried worker with the Italian Department. But the Italian Department lost its autonomy. Denison’s new head announced that the settlement’s Appointment Committee would “regulate” all future Italian Department hires and that the Italian Department’s finances would be merged into the general Denison treasury.¹¹² Mary Gove Smith resigned the next year. The Circolo became an independent organization of only Italian men and women who met at Denison but had no other connection with the settlement.

From “Americanization” to “Integration”

One hundred-plus years after the Circolo Italo-Americano, the words used by those who study or work with newcomers have changed. Instead of “Americanization” or “assimilation,” the preferred term is now “integration.” But word differences aside, researchers who study immigrant integration define this process much as Scudder did. Michaela Hynie, a scholar

¹¹²“Closer Union with Denison House,” Ann. Rept. of the CSA, 1913, 24, seq. 31, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:1136238?n=31> (accessed August 10, 2021).

focusing on immigrants, writes that integration encompasses “equitable access to opportunities and resources, participation in the community and society, and a sense of belonging and security.” The Circolo, by design, created its own community and involved its members in the settlement community, and Scudder strove to facilitate Italians’ entrance into larger communities by helping them become comfortable in Boston and by providing citizenship education. Hynie also notes that integration is a “process whereby both the receiving communities and the newcomers change, and change each other.” Scudder made the same point in different words, seeking to “Italianize” Americans as much as to “Americanize Italians.” Successful groups that mix established residents and newcomers, Hynie states, generate “feelings of intimacy and equality between the group members . . . shared goals and cooperation to achieve them, and institutional norms that support positive intergroup relationships.”¹¹³ These descriptions encapsulate Scudder’s objectives for founding the Circolo—objectives that were to some extent achieved.

The fraught interactions between the Circolo and the Italian community, too, point to potential issues that might resonate today. Scudder launched the Circolo without fully understanding the dynamics of the community she sought to work with and influence. Her first and most important liaison to that community, Malgeri, was a human flashpoint for community tension. The Circolo members Scudder and Malgeri chose were interesting but not representative of Boston’s Italian community. In addition, although Scudder said that the group had equal leadership, she also liked to be “La Bossa”—which, in fact, was her “pet name” in the group.¹¹⁴ But in order to positively affect the wider Italian community, the group would have needed to include members more typical of that community. In addition, Scudder would have needed to subdue her “Bossa” tendencies and truly allow Italian members equal power to

¹¹³Michaela Hynie, “Refugee Integration: Research and Policy,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 24 (3): 267, 271.

¹¹⁴Scudder, *On Journey*, 253.

set the group’s agenda, determine its policies, and plan its programs.

The most important takeaway from the story of the Circolo, however, is that it gives the lie to the idea that Progressive reformers’ work with immigrants focused solely on converting them into generic, de-ethnicized Americans. Examining the Circolo and the ideas of Vida Scudder reveal a less monolithic, more colorful picture. “[W]ith all its blunders and disasters,” Scudder reminisced about the Circolo, “I feel that it enriched lives more than any other social activity in which I was ever engaged.”¹¹⁵ For both herself and the Circolo members, she may have been right.

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¹¹⁵Scudder, *On Journey*, 268.