

# ARTS

## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Lady of the Wheel (La Ruotaia).* New York: Legas, 2012, By Angelo F. Coniglio

**KENNETH SCAMBRAY**

Set in Sicily in a small village in the late nineteenth century, Angelo F. Coniglio's novella, *The Lady of the Wheel (La Ruotaia)* is an historical recreation of the impoverished' circumstances of Sicilian life in the late nineteenth century. Reading *The Lady of the Wheel*, I was reminded of the realistic works of the famous Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga and of the Calabrese writer Saverio Strati. In their fiction Verga and Strati chronicle the impoverished and hopeless living conditions that Southern Italians faced after unification. More than eighty-five percent of the nearly five million Italians who came to America emigrated from Southern Italy, before the 1921 and 1924 immigration restriction laws reduced Italian immigration by nearly 99%. *The Lady of the Wheel* captures the impossible living conditions that drove so many to abandon their culture, towns, and families for a better life in America.

Coniglio's novella is set in the ancient village of Racalmuto in the province of Agrigento. While the events in the novel are fictional, the name places and the incidents and customs are historically accurate.

Coniglio's narrative is a gripping account of the impossible living conditions that his fictional characters had to endure as poorly paid and overworked sulfur miners. By the mid nineteenth century, sulfur mining had become Sicily's leading industry. As Coniglio's novel dramatizes, the owners of the mines employed children as young as ten years old and forced them to labor and live under horrific conditions. Denis Mack Smith reports in his history of Sicily that miners were so impoverished during this period that entire families were forced to live underground in the mines. Booker T. Washington visited Italy and Sicily in 1910 and was appalled at the conditions under which children labored throughout Italy, including children working in sulfur mines. In his book, *The Man Farthest Down*, he wrote, "The cruelties to which the child slaves of Sicily have been subjected are as bad as anything reported of the cruelties of Negro slavery."

Coniglio's narrative focuses on the fictional Alessi family, whose father, Nino, labors for long hours each day for what can only be described as starvation wages. As a miner; he does not bring home enough money at the end of the week to feed his family, including

his children, Tanuzzu and Giuseppa, who are still breast feeding, and Totò, age seven. Because of what Must be considered in Sicily during this time his advanced age, seven-year-old Totò is the most valuable child among his siblings. His fate in life would soon be sealed when the mine bosses come to Nino and his wife, Maria, and offer them the *suc-cursu di murti*, the "death benefit" payment that indentures Totò for a life-time of work in the bowels of the local sulfur mine. The *succursu di murti* was an established practice in Sicily at this time. The hopelessly impoverished

families are persuaded to sell their sons to the mines by a lump-sum payment that indentures their boys for years. Once the Alessi family, like all the other Sicilian families in the region, are paid the *succursu di murti*, their sons work, live, and eat in the mines under inhumane conditions until their families can afford to ransom them back. The chances of that ever happening among the poor Sicilian families who are forced to sell their children into bondage are slim to none. On the brink of starvation, Nino and Maria are forced to accept the miner's offer. Totò's *succursu di*

*murti* will provide enough food for them and their other two children for at least six months.

Once a thriving industry in central Sicily, sulfur mining was among the most inhumane work places in Italy. There is a word in Sicilian for the mines, "*Rumpispaddi*, the Backbreaker." Coniglio describes conditions that not even animals lived under at the times. Like all children his age, Totò's initial job is that of a *carusu*, a boy who must carry the sulfur an adult miner digs to the surface of the pit. If they spill their load or are too slow, they are regularly beaten by their cruel bosses. Their days are long and the conditions in the mine are both dangerous and unhealthy for the young boys. At night, they are given little more than bread and water and are forced to sleep on dirty straw mats in an unused portion of the mine with other overworked and filthy *carusi* their age. The only advantage that Totò has in the mine is that his father, Nino, works as a miner and is there to at least protect him from the brutality of Totò's boss.

Coniglio uses his narrative to expose another of the fascinating but sad consequences of the Sicilians' impoverished and hopeless lives at the time. With the money that they are paid by the mine for their son's life, Maria and Nino expect some respite from their grinding poverty. They now have only two mouths to feed. However, fate is not kind to the family. Soon after Totò leaves the family, Maria discovers that she is pregnant. Though Nino is aware of her condition, she has the child at night while he is away at work. In the most poignant section of the novel, with only a few hours before Nino returns from the mine, she is forced to make a choice. As a woman, she carries the burden as both the bearer of children and their caretaker. She already is nursing two children, and they cannot afford another child. Her choices are few: she could keep the new born and add only to the poverty of the family; take it to the river; or she can take it to the church and give it away.

Because of their extreme poverty, lamentably infanticide was an option that some Sicilian families considered at the time.

..... (continued below)

## BOOK REVIEW: CONTINUED

Unable to kill her newborn, with Nino still away at work, she takes it in the dead of night and puts it in the "wheel," the rotating window on the front of the church made to accept foundlings. When Maria rotates the "wheel," it rings a bell and the Lady of the Wheel, *La Ruotaia*, awakens in the back of the church and hurries to gather the new foundling and give it a safe haven and a home in the church with the other foundlings under her care. When Nino returns home from the mine, she tells him that the child was stillborn and she has disposed of it.

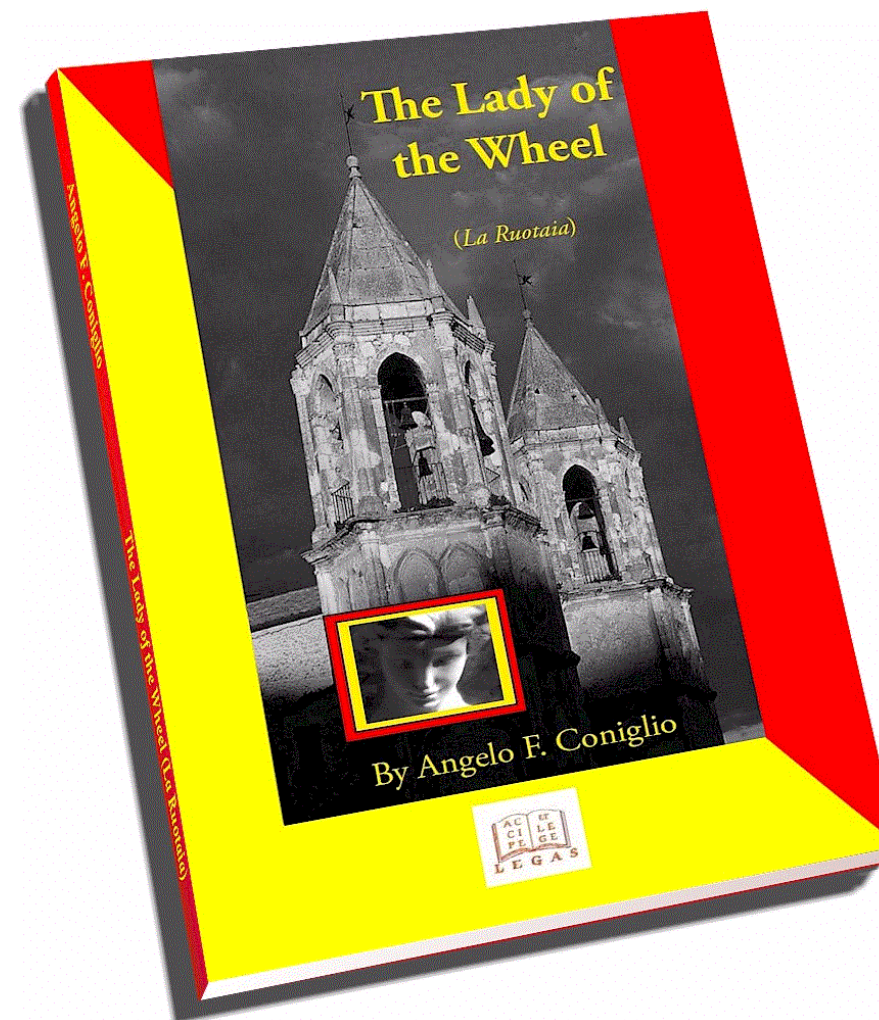
So impoverished were Sicilians during this period that gathering foundlings and caring for them had become an institution in Sicily. Even the architecture of Racalmuto's church, *Chiesa Madre Annunziata*, was specially designed to accept foundlings. The population of abandoned children was so large that orphanages had to be built to house those who were not adopted.

But in spite of the church's best efforts, as Coniglio points out, scores of these unfortunate children died within their first year of malnutrition and other opportunistic diseases. As Coniglio explains, once abandoned, children became the wards of the church. Their births were recorded, they were baptized, and then they were given one of several names reserved especially for foundlings: *Proietto* (castoff), *Esposito* (exposed), *Trovatello* (foundling), or, at times, the more derisive *Fieramusca* (horsefly). As a result of their names, these unfortunate children could never outrun their disgraceful origins.

In time, Nino is able to buy Totò back from the mine boss, to the man's great chagrin.

Unknown to Maria, her foundling daughter went on to work in the local church for over a decade and had become *La Ruotaia*. By chance, Maria learns the identity of her daughter, and the girl is finally reunited with her family.

Though in the end plot is hastily advanced to resolve the various conflicts in Coniglio's novella, the work's main interest lies in its realistic representation of Sicilian life in the late nineteenth-century. Though brief, his short narrative addresses a number of important historical discourses that still plague Southern Italy today, from the North's failure to fulfill the promises it made to the South in the wake of unification and the resulting impoverishment of southern life, to the condition of southern Italian women: It seemed that, poor as both men and women were at the time, women ultimately had to bear a double burden. Not only did they have to endure their family's grinding poverty, they also had to bear the burden of child bearing, rearing, and even disposal of their children. They were forced to make life and death decisions, and not always with the support and knowledge of their husbands. In spite of its narrative flaws, *The Lady of the Wheel* is a compelling narrative about the atrocious living conditions that forced so many Sicilians to migrate to other parts of the world. It is an important contribution to the Italian American narrative in the U.S.



<http://bit.ly/racalmuto>

**Ken Scambray is professor of English at the University of La Verne. His latest book is *Queen Calafia's Paradise: California and the Italian American Novel*. Aside from his collection of short stories, *Surface Roots*, his fiction and poetry appear regularly in national journals.**