

Atrocities America Forgot

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Storia vera e terribile tra Sicilia e America [A True and Terrible Affair Between Sicily and America]

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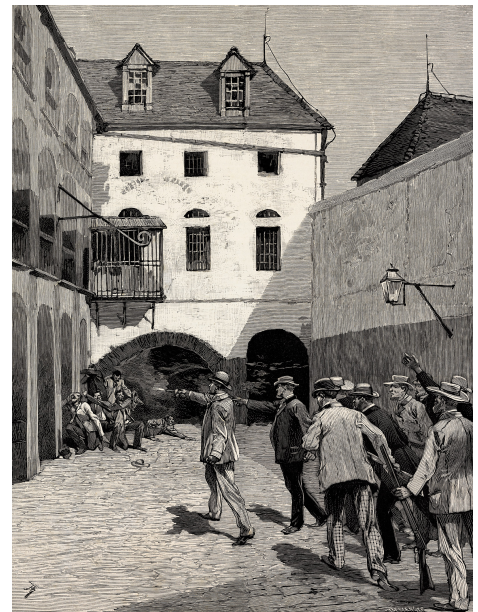
Palermo: Sellerio, 214 pp., €14.00 (paper)

On a sweltering July night in 1899, five immigrant Sicilian produce vendors were seized by a furious mob in Tallulah, Louisiana, and publicly hanged. The night before, Dr. J. Ford Hodge, the coroner of surrounding Madison Parish, had shot a goat that had wandered into his garden. When the animal's owner, fifty-four-year-old Pasquale Defatta, confronted him the next day over the loss of his goat, Hodge knocked him to the ground, pistol-whipped him, aimed the gun at Defatta's head, and pulled the trigger, but it jammed. At that point, his brother Giuseppe, thirty-four, ran out of the family's nearby store with a shotgun and fired at the doctor. Hodge sustained superficial wounds—birdshot pellets in the abdomen and thighs. Rumors soon erupted that the doctor had been murdered, and a mob came after the Defattas.

Pasquale and Giuseppe were lynched first, strung up in a slaughter yard on a winch used to skin cattle. Their brother Francesco, thirty, and their cousins Rosario Fiduccia, thirty-six, and Giovanni Cirami, twenty-four, were then dragged to a cottonwood tree on the village square. To the very end, even with a noose around his neck, Francesco believed that his American neighbors only meant to frighten him, to teach his family a lesson. "I live here six years. I know you all. You all my friends," a witness recalled him saying. Then the rope was suddenly yanked.

No one was arrested for the lynchings. Three grand juries found that no indictment could be issued. It had been "too dark" that moonless night to identify anyone in the lynch mob, the local sheriff testified. The Tallulah telegraph operator had been put under armed guard to prevent him from tapping out news of the men's seizure and calling for help. If he touched the wire key, he was told, "his brains would be blown out."

In the epoch of political chicanery, behemoth industrial monopolies, and explosive demographic changes that Mark Twain dubbed "the Gilded Age"—roughly between the 1870s and 1900—the specters of



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A mob killing Italian immigrants accused of murdering the New Orleans police chief; engraving from L'Illustration, April 11, 1891

immigration and race led to waves of extrajudicial killings, involving or covered up by law enforcement authorities and implicitly endorsed by the nation's highest officials. Most of the victims were African-American. But there were at least fifty lynchings of Italians, most of them between 1890 and 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act (also known as the National Origins Act) placed draconian limits on immigration to the United States from the Mediterranean Basin.

Ostensibly, Sicilians were white Europeans. But “they were a puzzle to white people” in rural Madison Parish, 230 miles north of New Orleans, wrote the *Harper's Weekly* reporter Norman Walker, who was assigned to cover the lynchings. The Sicilian fruit vendors were difficult to classify,...

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