

# Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad

*With the help of a NIAF grant, Mark Choate examines how Italy responded to mass emigration during the 19th and 20th centuries and finds that the glass was not always half empty.*



GRANTS

By Monica Soladay

While researching an essay as a senior at Yale College, Dr. Mark Choate first came across a new perspective on Italian emigration that would shape his work for the next 15 years.

Choate learned that Francesco Crispi, an Italian prime minister during the late 1800s, had once urged emigrating Italians to seek new lives in Africa rather than the United States — a move intended to build Italian colonies abroad. “I thought that was so interesting, that he was trying to put emigration and colonialism together,” said Choate, now a professor of modern Italian and European history at Brigham Young University. “So I decided to research that.”

Last year, Harvard University Press released Choate’s “Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad,” a book encapsulating his research. It examines how Italy tried to turn a negative, mass

emigration of its young men, into a positive — namely, colonization — and how countries like France and Germany tried to follow suit. A \$7,500 grant from NIAF helped Choate and Harvard University Press, a nonprofit, assemble the book with a color cover and pay for additional costs.

Since its publication, the book has received international interest. The historical education supplement of The London Times gave it a positive review and Milan-based publishing house Mondadori plans to release the book in Italian next year.

“Emigrant Nation’s” appeal lies in its ability to examine Italian emigration from a fresh angle, says Choate, who conducted research at state and diplomatic archives in Venice and Milan, in addition to former emigration hubs like Palermo and Naples.

“Italy wanted to...try to see this as expanded Italy rather than just a dead loss — these people leaving and never coming back,” Choate explained. Accordingly, some government policies encouraged educated Italians to move to Eritrea and Ethiopia among other potential colonies in an attempt to build up Italy abroad. “It was controversial in Italy at the time,” Choate noted. “In particular, the nationals saw this as the route to power, prestige and domination.”

The book also examines the economic and cultural traits of such emigrant communities, the culture tied to food exported from Italy, the Vatican’s religious interest in the emigrants and the development of Italian language schools abroad for emigrants and their children.

“My goal was to put this history in a contemporary context,” says Choate. “This Italian history from a century ago is so important to understanding international migration today.”

“Emigrant Nation” is available on Amazon.com.



Dr. Mark Choate

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