

## Amigo, the King of his Castle

In 1984 a historian and poet Bruce Smith wrote a poem about Amigo and his castle.

He has no plans,  
his tools are few,  
he just builds,  
toiling in the winter warmth,  
shaping the elements of Australian wilderness  
into mixed reminders of another world  
deep within himself.  
Like a bizarre dream it relates  
absurdly to everything  
save the one whose dream it is.  
But herein lies the sense for from his dreaming  
in this outback world  
others still unborn will come and dream.

On November 10 1996 *Sun Herald* reported:

For the past fifteen years, Italian-Australian, Amigo, has been illegally building the fifteen metres tall Amigo's Castle in Lightning Ridge, a giant Romanesque construction made from more than twenty thousand ironstone boulders-each carried out from the bush in a rucksack. He intends it to be a home for a princess he has yet to meet. In the meantime he lives in a caravan at the back.

*Sunday telegraph* reported May 20<sup>th</sup> 1990:

A murdered Sydney pair is buried under hundreds of tonnes of earth in an opal mine at Lightning Ridge . A former British commando has been jailed for life for the double murder but the bodies of Caroline Horton 75 and her son Frank, 35, have never been found.

The couple, originally from England, wanted to get rich quick.

Police believe fellow miner Alan Robinson, who sold to Hortons the Emu Inn claim in 1980, shot them, dumped them down the mine, and then blew up the entrance with explosives.

When Hortons disappeared, Robinson moved back to Emu Inn and the claim he sold Hortons. He claimed that the Hortons hadn't paid him the agreed \$24.000 for the property.

The police theory is that Frank Horton started getting opals from the claim and Robinson got upset and decided to kill them and reclaim the mine.

Robinson had been charged with soliciting a fellow jail inmate to murder Vittorio Stefanato, a crown witness. Robinson had a further six years added to his two life sentences. A jury was told that Robinson approached a fellow inmate at long Bay jail and offered him \$25.000 to blow up Amigo. It was further alleged Robinson was to pay \$6000 to the inmate's nephew who after Amigo's death would falsely claim that Amigo has confessed to the murders which would force the case to be re examined.

Amigo is one of the famous Lightning Ridge characters. A huge Gothic style castle he built is reported to have underground passages and secret chambers.

Amigo claimed that during a friendly conversation about Horton's disappearance Robinson boasted that he murdered them. Amigo allegedly said to Robinson: It looks like a perfect crime. Robinson responded: When I do a job, I don't do a half job. Robinson was seen driving Horton's car, and selling Mrs. Horton's personal jewellery and furniture. He also made a bonfire of personal papers and other belongings saying to a friend: Frank won't need these any more.

*The Australian Women's Weekly* reported in February 1997:

Amigo worked hard for eight years but the only thing the unforgiving earth surrendered to him were rocks, rocks and more rocks. So in 1981 this nuggetty man decided to do the best he could with what he had. He built a rock castle.

Amigo said:

My hands have touched every stone so the castle became a part of me. When I started building I used rocks because they were free. I only wanted a small house to live in, but once I started, I really liked the way the rocks looked, all fitting together, so I kept going.

Amigo has no building qualifications and didn't follow any plan. Instinct was his only guide, design being created just one rock at the time.

Amigo had tunnelled about six metres below his castle, creating a labyrinth of cellars which provides cool solace from the scorching sun.

I have to use my energy on something, says Amigo. When I went back to Italy in 1980 my parents were disappointed that their son who set off to make his fortune found no opals and no wife. I think that is the real reason I am building a castle. I thought I'd better have something to show for my time here. If I had found my fortune I wouldn't be building a castle but now I'd rather have the castle than a million dollars

## **Vittorio Stefanato**

I talked to many people about my castle and how I built it. I tried to make it interesting for them so I told different details to different people but the story is always the same castle. People wrote bits of my story but they did not really say what I would like to say.

The castle is my public face, solid and strong because it is a rock. People come because the rocks represent stability, permanence, and strength.

There is also a private person behind the rock and that is much more difficult to talk about. My thoughts and feelings change constantly. They are like the seasons and the weather trying to wear down the rock. Only the rock is strong and can withstand the changes.

I cannot even honestly say what I think and feel about the people I like and about those that come to see me. I have to maintain propriety so I can continue living with these people. I need these people because we share bits of our private selves with each other. Being discrete and tactful stops me from being completely honest.

It does not matter if someone writes the truth about you after you are dead.

You can no longer hurt anyone and you no longer need anyone.

It is even harder to talk about my own private intimate thoughts and feelings although these thoughts and feelings make me who I am. My thoughts and my feelings are the most precious part of me so I am careful whom I share that with.

Perhaps the private me is not as solid as a rock.

Today I swept my castle and I found a honeybee in the corner. It looked dead.

I took it in the sun and it flew away.

A thought came to me that I am much like that bee.

Like a honeybee

Caught in the winter wind

With a frozen wing

Where is your sting?

Where is my sting?

I had enthusiasm, plans, energy and dreams but at the moment I feel no

urgency to create. I have no sting. My castle is waiting unfinished.

I see no purpose. Perhaps my feelings will soon change.

I was always anxious not to upset my mother with anything I did or said. It is a burden to feel responsible for someone's feelings. Now that she passed away I feel free to be myself. I don't owe anyone to be anything in particular. I don't have to please anyone.

There is always a fear of rejection, failure and old age but there is also the fear of being a stranger to people around you. A person needs to be understood and to understand, to be accepted and to accept. It is difficult for a migrant to ever fully achieve this because the part of a migrant always lives where he grew up and with the people he shared his childhood with. That part of him remains a stranger in a strange land.

Migration is a traumatic experience. Most migrants escaped from poverty and war and their guiding light was a better future for their children. They worked harder than Australians, because they wanted to grow roots into the new country. Australians resented their success.

When I was younger I wanted to make a fortune, get married and have a family.

Perhaps I am lucky that I never found a fortune. I never married and have no one to worry about. I believe that men are less concerned with the family than women. For women family and home and children mean everything.

Italy is a favourite tourist destination because of its ancient history, culture, natural beauty, mild climate and well-known cuisine.

Despite its ancient history and culture, Italy is one of the youngest European countries. It achieved independence and unification in 1861.

Until the Second World War there was a huge gap in Italy between the poor and the rich and little prospect for the peasants to prosper. During the last two hundred years twenty six million Italians left Italy in search of fortune.

Italian Missionaries were among the first white people in Australia. Like other great powers Italians struggled for expansion into the new lands. The white man in the eighteenth century maintained that it was their duty to bring civilisation, culture and religion to the rest of the world. Catholic Church was eager to have a part in bringing all that to Australian natives. Australia also promised riches to poor Europeans. Gold rushes brought many fortune hunters to Australia. By the beginning of the twentieth century there were eight thousand Italians in Australia and by the end of the century there were eight hundred thousand.

I find Italians in every town. In Lightning Ridge there are about ten of us. At the beginning of the third millennium the first generation migrants are old and dying out. The second generation call themselves Australians. They think and work and feel like any other Australians.

Italian names blended into every walk of life.

When Mussolini came to power he dreamed of creating the Second Roman Empire in which poor Italians would develop their colonies Libya, Eritrea and Somalia rather than immigrate to foreign countries. These countries in northern Africa had an important strategic position.

Mussolini also wanted to separate the church from the state because he believed that the church had too much influence on government decisions. Whatever government came to power little changed for peasants. Peasant remains a peasant.

The Second World War was especially devastating for Italians because they fought against each other siding with the foreigners on opposite ideological ground. Most Italians never wanted this war; they obeyed their leaders like people everywhere do.

After Italy surrendered in 1943 half of Italians sided with allies and the other half with fascists. They were mainly killing each other.

The West protected Italy from communism after the war, the Marshal Plan helped to rebuild Italy but the social reform also helped poor people to gradually prosper.

Before the war my father's family lived on a big property. There were over fifty people working for the landowner. They were allowed to keep fifty percent of what they produced.

After the war the government took the land from the big landowners and distributed it to those who worked on it.

Partisans would have preferred Italy to side with Russians but Christian democrats won the election and they turned to the West. Italy would never prosper with Russians like it did with the West. If you were known as a communist after the war it was harder for you to find a good job and be promoted. There was bitterness; people had to make a readjustment.

Many poor Italians escaped but there have never been any political divisions among Italian migrants like there are among those groups that came from communist countries.

Europe was devastated after the Second World War and many people wanted to escape as far as possible from pain and poverty.

Australians with seven million people realised that they have to populate or perish. They felt vulnerable against their more numerous neighbours so Australia opened its door to Europeans.

The living conditions in Europe improved since then and the need for mass migration ended in the eighties. At present Australia became a refuge for people from Asia and Middle East war torn countries. They became new Australians and they carry the brunt of prejudices because they are visibly different and they celebrate life differently.

Italians persevered to keep the best of their heritage and blend it with the best of what they found in Australia. They assimilated less than other groups of people.

Other nations may have lost their essence in the melting pot of Australian assimilation but Italians added their own to the melting pot and so influenced and changed what Australian culture was. They recreated and enriched Australian cuisine, fashion, art, building industry and they made their mark in politics. Italians made pasta and pizza part of Australian daily life.

I am not a member of any migrant organisation but I know that I can call on Italians anywhere in the world. We have a strong sense of community. It became fashionable these days for old Australians to boast about their European ancestors. They tell me about their Italian friends, in laws, ancestors and co-workers. Being continental is a mark of prestige rather than inferiority. It was fairly easy for us white Christians to assimilate with other white Christians. I am a part of what Australia is. The government established all sorts of multicultural offices and I suppose they have to make them serve some purpose but I have no need for them.

Most ethnic clubs became Australian clubs; the new generation does not know the difference. Migrants needed these clubs after they arrived to Australia, they had to have a place where they could gather as a community to celebrate and feel at home.

I suppose migrants became a unique blend of Australiana as well as of everything they brought within themselves from their country.

For my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday I received a card saying: 47 was the best year because that was the year you were born.

I don't know that the world changed because of me but 1947 was the time of huge changes.

In 1946 Italy became a republic and in the 1947 Treaty it lost its colonies and considerable territories.

In 1947 Australia also opened its door to European migrants.

I was born in Meduna Di Livenza near Treviso in northern Italy where dad's family comes from. I was named after my uncle Vittorio who died on the Russian Front during the Second World War.

I only remember dad as a young man, because he grew old when I was in Australia.

Dad was an adventurer. As a twenty years old man he was conscripted to work in Somalia from 1932 until 1934. When he got married he worked in Switzerland as a building labourer. He came home during winter when the building industry stopped. When the factory opened in our town he got a job there. Even when dad was around he remained an observer; he kept his distance. He wasn't to be disturbed.

I am a bit like that myself. I like to observe and try to determine the meaning of things around me.

Dad adjusted to changes around him. He claimed that it is best to go with the regime. If you go with the government you get the benefits. He quoted another Italian who said: It does not matter which side you are on, when the regime changes they will say that you were on the other side.

Dad's favourite saying was: Everything is temporary. Every year we rearrange our winter stores of produce in a different way.

I believe that he was saying that it's no use making permanent plans because circumstances change and one has to adjust to fit into the new system.

Dad was always self sufficient, he never asked for help from anyone.

On Sundays my two brothers and I played soccer. We were the best in our team and our team usually won the game. Dad came to watch and after the game he went to the pub with other men and they talked about the game and the players.

When dad returned home for dinner he said that I was the best player. He was proud of us boys and I was happy that I made him proud. He wasn't bragging about us but we knew that he was proud.

I also played trumpet in a brass band and sang in a choir.

My mother was born in Sicily but during the war her family were evacuated to Cismon del grappa, 80 kilometres north of Venice. When I was nine we all moved there and I later found a job in a metal factory. This beautiful mountain village had about one thousand people. Most had their own piece of land to produce their food. The three small factories also provided jobs.

Mum was the heart of the home and family. We went to church every Sunday we served as altar boys and went through sacraments. We did not pray at home. Perhaps my parents only followed what was required of them and of us all.

I used to write to my mother but since mum passed away the family fell apart and grew in different directions.

Mum was a hub of the wheel. My sister, my two brothers and I were the spokes in that hub. Perhaps dad was the rim of the wheel to hold us in place for mum.

My brother is an important man at home and he writes sometimes. I write straight back and hope that he will not write again for a long time. What could I write to him if the weather hasn't changed since the last letter? He does not know the life I have and I don't know his life. Things that belong together stick together without glue but some things never can, they fall apart and stay apart.

I was always looking for adventure.

As a child I liked to explore the ruins of the old Roman fortification in Italy where I grew up. The secret passages and the mystery of it all fascinated me. At the age of twenty-two I read in the Reader's Digest about Lightning Ridge opal. I suppose that article changed my life. I came to Australia in 1970.

In Tennant creek where I played soccer, people did not know my name so they called out Go Amigo. The name stuck and everybody knows me now as Amigo, which in Spanish means a friend. In Italian a friend is Amico.

In Tennant creek I met Klaus, A German opal miner, who showed me the first opal chip bottle. He was going to Lightning Ridge so I packed my camping gear into my land rover and went with him.

I worked on opal now for 29 years. I still like to do at least a few hours of mining each day. When you get tired you sleep better and you are happier. The work takes the toxins out of your system.

When I first came to Lightning Ridge I made a camp at Three mile. Klaus and I became partners and worked together until Klaus left. I started with the Czech Julius at Billy goat Hill on Meehi towards Angledool. We found a bit of opal. We were one of the first miners there but Billy Goat Hill soon became a great rush. The other two miners took a day off from digging to go goat shooting. They saw the white Billy goat disappearing over the hill. They chased it and lost it, but on the way back they stumbled on the abandoned diggings and found bits of colour.

They drilled a shaft. It is a dream of every opal miner to sink a shaft and bottom on precious opal. They drilled on opal. The next thing we knew the whole hill was pegged out. A local farmer let the news out to the newspaper. But the miners weren't worried. They had their claims, which should keep them rich and happy. Nobody tells you how much they found, some found millions but most found nothing. At the time miners laughed at the suggestion that there might be a danger from claim jumpers and ratters. Miners were all honest, genuine men then. They trusted each other. Not like now.

In 1980 I went back home to Italy. I haven't made a fortune and I had no wife so I felt that I failed. When I returned to Lightning Ridge I made a camp under the tree and started to build the castle next to it. I needed to do something, I suppose, to make people pay attention. I had to do something spectacular to show the world that I am not a failure.

I've never done any building in my life but when I saw big conglomerate iron boulders beside the road I began picking them up and taking them home. Conglomerate stones have pretty white pebbles in the ironstone.

Later I found lots of ironstone at nine mile; I loaded them on my truck and brought them home. At the beginning I had no plan, I just wanted to build a nice place to live in. Soon it became a creative hobby that gave me much satisfaction. After I finished the large room in which I now live, I kept on building. I was only interested in how the structure looked; I wanted to create a work of art. I sat back and imagined what it should look like as I placed each boulder in its place. I was really building to satisfy my own creativity.

People asked me what will happen to the castle when I die. Some say that the government will take it if I don't make a will. Will the Prime Minister come to live in it, I wonder? It does not matter who lives in it and who looks at it, or owns it; the castle will remain a part of Lightning Ridge . You simply can't take it away.

I will never go away from Lightning Ridge.

Sometimes I get annoyed with people. I like the visitors coming to look at my castle but I don't like to answer endless trivial questions about how many bags of cement I used and how many boulders are there. It is like asking an artist where he bought his brushes and how much he paid for them. I want people to look and enjoy and think whatever the castle inspires them to think and enjoy. A picture means different things to different people and so does my castle. If it makes people think and dream, I am happy.

I don't seek attention personally. I like to keep my life private while the castle is there for everyone to see. I wanted to build something spectacular for

people to take notice but I don't want them to take notice of me but only of what I have done.

It is distracting to work under constant scrutiny; I lost interest and creativity. I like visitors passing through the castle but I wish to remain in the background. I feel that the art should make an impression by itself without my explanations. Things have their own meaning, it isn't important what the castle means to me; it is more important what it means to each visitor.

I like to imagine and think and make sense of my surroundings. I get many visitors. Jehovah Witnesses come, Seven days Adventists come. I go to any church. I am a good Christian. Like most Italians I was brought up as a Catholic but I really don't believe that God should be hidden in any particular church. Nobody should have a monopoly of God because if there is a creator he created the world for all.

Perhaps it is good to remove yourself from the world and pray in the privacy of the church but one most often prays when real life problems have to be overcome or are overcome.

People of other traditions claim that God is everywhere, but do you really talk to God when you talk to a bird or a flower? Perhaps we created God in our own image.

Religion reminds me of a story about a father who loved his three sons equally. He had one diamond ring. He promised each son at different times to leave him the ring after he dies. The ring would mean that the son was the leader of his people.

Before he died the father decided to have two fakes made to keep all three sons happy. Nobody could tell which was the real diamond.

After their father died the boys argued endlessly about who is the one with the real diamond, and who is the real leader.

The other story I like is about the real love.

Once a girl asked her fiancé to prove to her that he truly loved her.

How can I prove it, asked the boy?

Kill your mother and bring me her heart on the plate still warm and pulsating, said the girl.

The boy killed his mother, placed her pulsating heart on the plate and ran with it towards his girl. He stumbled and fell tipping the heart on the rocky road. As he tried to pick up the heart, he heard the tiny, worried voice coming from the heart: did you hurt yourself, son.

Anyway, we all claim to know Jesus better than anybody ever knew him.

Everybody is trying to interpret his words as he understands them but people of his time were the only people who could really relate to him because he was telling them about things they lived with.

I like the story Jesus apparently told about the pool where an angel came to stir the water to give it a healing power. People rushed into the pool with their little ailments but there was a really sick man lying there beside the pool for years.

I often wonder about the meaning of the story. How come someone did not push the sick man into the water? Then again being right next to the pool couldn't he ask someone to help him into the pool? Perhaps he could have even pushed himself with some effort. Why was he there, sick beside the water that could make him well?

If you believe that something will make you well, it will.

Sometimes only one more step is needed. Sometimes behind the next inch of dirt hides the fortune. Many miners have given up the mine and others later found the opal in the next truck of dirt from the same mine.

I like the adventure and the mystery. But most of all I like a challenge.

I enjoy dancing. Three times a week I go to the club. We do line dancing and Latin American dancing. Line dancing is more challenging. We travel and meet other dancing groups. We have competitions and go to festivals.

Someone asked me if I would do things differently if I had another chance, if I was twenty again. I don't think I would want to be twenty again. I am fifty-four now and I travelled the hard long road to be where I am and to be who I am. I wouldn't want to travel that road again. There are new experiences in front of me.

If I found a million dollars tomorrow I would like to see the world but I would return to my castle. People I know come and visit; they like the stability of my place. The rocks give you strength. Rocks are forever.

I wonder sometimes what it is like to be rich. I remember a story about the tramp that lived under the bridge with his mates. One day he bought a lottery ticket and won a million. He bought the bridge and told his mates to clear off from under his bridge. Money changes people; it takes you away from the comfort zone of your mates.

It's much the same on the opal fields. You find a fortune and lose your comfort zone.

If you sit under the tree and see the butterfly, you follow its movements; you admire its colours and wonder about the meaning of it all. If a swarm of butterflies comes along you shoo them away because they become a nuisance.

It's much like that with people.

A friend of mine says that Lightning Ridge is a crutch to lean on for people who do nothing and wait together to do nothing. Lightning Ridge is a comfort zone for them.

They stick together, everybody talks but nobody listens, there is noise but nothing is said.

One miner said: When you get a feeling to do something, lay down until the feeling passes.

Makes you wonder if there is a purpose in doing whatever you are doing.

Maybe just being is better. Maybe we are wrong in thinking that being smart, active and creative means being better. Maybe whatever makes you happy is better.

Maybe my friend is wrong, maybe we all want to do something, and maybe it only looks like we are doing nothing. Maybe everybody is doing something. There are more philosophers and politicians in Lightning Ridge than anywhere else. They exchange ideas on how to make a better world and life more meaningful.

But do we make a better world and is life more meaningful?

Another miner said that he goes to the club to hear voices because he lives on his own and there is too much silence in his life.

People spend time leaning on the bar because behind the bar one meets people who think the same and do the same.

You hear who is who and what is what; who made it on opal and who didn't. Opal is the one common denominator.

But maybe everybody needs to be something more than a fortune hunter and is something more. Opal miners stepped out of the system to see the system better.

Perhaps everybody needs to do something and does something. Maybe this is the reason people paint more pictures and write more poetry in Lightning Ridge than anywhere else. There were books written and pictures taken and stories told about the mysterious opal miners. Maybe we all need to Joed out and be counted.

I built a castle out of ironstone. Perhaps other miners build castles in the clouds. Maybe we are all waiting for the fairy princess to illuminate our lives.

Maybe heaven is just a castle of our dreams.

Everybody is searching for our weaknesses so we forget how strong we are.

The system takes your strength and makes you dependent. Every time you help the chick out of the shell you deprive the bird of the struggle that strengthens it. Maybe Lightning Ridge is the one refuge in which free thinkers can walk incognito through life.

I lived on my own in the Ridge for 28 years. I have little in common with people in my home-town; I have little in common even with Italian community in Australia because there are few Italians in the Ridge. I am closer to Australians than to Italians who never left Italy.

Now I have a friend from home that has travelled a similar road I travelled. We can go right there to our beginning and share the memories of our growing up as well as the reality of our becoming Australians.

Familiar things make you feel at home with another person. I like to travel with a friend so I can share what I see and experience. Another person adds strength and gives everything an added meaning. When you bring pictures of the places you've seen for people to see, they soon become bored but when you experience those places with someone the memories of those places bring you closer.

What's the point of going around the world if you have nobody to share the experience with?

When I went home for the first time in 75 I travelled with backpackers through Europe, Middle East and Asia. I suppose the experience of other cultures prepared me for the multicultural Australia.

My African friend tells me that the ancient statues in the Middle East originally represented Africans with flat noses but when white Christians took over they smashed the noses so the statues looked more like them.

I don't know if the story is true or not but I know that we like the familiar faces. Jesus in the most Christian countries is a blue-eyed blond handsome, curly haired man.

I suppose it would be hard to adore someone who is not like us or who is not perfect by our standards. God created us in his image and we created God in ours.

It is hard for everybody to adjust to the changing society. America had time to blend their many national and racial groups but Australia is young and has been rushed into change. You can't ignore ethnic differences but the differences of a small group should not change the fabric of the society.

A friend of mine says that Muslims have set the seed for the take-over. The gang rapes of white Australian girls by Muslim Youth in Sydney have stirred a lot of unrest. The ever-increasing number of boat people, refugees from Islam countries, is coming illegally to our shores. Australian humanitarians want to open the country to them but there is a real fear in the society that the change will be too painful. People become restless and dangerously reckless when they have nothing to do and nothing to lose.

These days the media is not allowed to report the racial or ethnic identity of a criminal. How can you ignore the person's different background and appearance?

When Italians came to Australia after the war they felt responsible for each other. If Italians achieved something in Australia they were called Australians but if they had done something bad they were called Italians. If one Italian committed a crime the whole Italian community felt condemned and responsible. This made the community look after their own law and order. Italian migrants protected their small businesses. They paid insurance, every insurance protects you and every insurance costs you. Mafia is an Italian tradition of protection.

Mafia protected Italian migrants who tried to compete when people made it difficult for Italians to succeed.

Later Mafia became glorified in films and books but it really grew from poverty and prejudice.

Mafia looks after you when you are good and they look after you if you are bad. They help you if you pay their share and they get rid of you if you don't. Like most insurances do.

Mafia is not only an Italian way of protection.

Chinese protection rackets is a copy of Italian Mafia. Mafia is everywhere because everybody needs protection and someone to do the dirty work for them.

In Australia we hear of drug dealers being protected by police. A lot of money is paid to corrupt policeman who keeps drug dealers in business.

Since the collapse of communism Russia has become flooded by Mafia.

Most governments and big business have people who get rid of their opponents. Sometimes they only need to destroy the person's credibility to remove him. Destroying someone's credibility it is the easiest way to destroy a person or a group of people.

Australians want migrants to become naturalised but maybe it would be better if they did not. If a migrant commits a crime during a certain number of years, Australians should be able to extradite them. This would save us all a lot of trouble.

I am still not a naturalised Australian; I like to travel with Italian passport.