**Pier Giorgio Di Cicco Remembered**

 **Joseph Pivato Athabasca University**

In September 1986 Italian-Canadian writers from across Canada met in Vancouver for a conference sponsored by the Italian Cultural Centre and organized by Anna Foschi, Dino Minni and Genni Gunn. After the regular meetings of the day a number of authors went to a restaurant/bar and talked late into the night. They decided to establish the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers and this proposal was announced the next morning. Pier Giorgio Di Cicco was one of the founding members along with Antonio D’Alfonso, Pasquale Verdicchio, Dore Michelut, Dino Minni, Marco Micone and Joe Pivato. It was a surprise to many of us because all these writers had diverse personalities and often disagreed on may questions.

Of these founding member we lost Dino Minni in 1990, Dore Miclelut in 2009 and now Pier Giorgio Di Cicco.

Poet and priest, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco passed away on December 22, 2019.

As a poet and editor his contributions to Canadian literature are enormous.

As a priest who served the parishes of the greater Toronto area he helped many people and left a lasting impression on all who heard his homilies. Giorgio’s funeral was in Holy Rosary church which is next to my old high school, St. Michael’s. My

sister, Louise, and my daughter, Juliana, attended the simple funeral. He was 70 when he died.

My first contact with Giorgio was on November 5, 1976 when he sent me a letter inviting me to contribute to a new poetry anthology that he was editing. That anthology, *Roman Candles*, published in June, 1978, included 17 poets and began the phenomenon of Italian-Canadian writing. Giorgio promoted *Roman Candles* in Toronto and asked me to arrange a reading in Edmonton. At the time Giorgio was an assistant editor at the literary magazine, *Books in Canada*.

On October 16-19, 1978 Giorgio was in Edmonton giving readings at Athabasca University, The Dante Society and the University of Alberta. I also arranged TV and radio interviews. We promoted the anthology as well in Montreal since it included poets from Quebec. We discovered many different authors. Giorgio was the initial driving force for Italian-Canadian writing, a body of writing that inspired many other ethnic minority authors and transformed our understanding of Canadian literature into a more diverse representation of our national culture.

In Toronto Giorgio sometimes taught creative writing courses and encouraged many other writers such as Gianna Patriarca, Dore Michelut and Antonino Mazza. In 1978 Frank Paci published his first novel, *The Italians*, which became a Canadian bestseller. That same year in Montreal Antonio D’Alfonso founded Guernica Editions in order to give these new writers a venue for their publications. At the time the works of ethnic minority authors were often rejected by the gatekeepers of Canadian literature who were focused on creating a national literature based on Anglo-Celtic cultural roots. Giorgio lamented this problem in his “Preface” to *Roman Candles*. He wrote, “I found isolated gestures by isolated poets, isolated mainly by the condition of nationalism prevalent in Canada….” (9)

In response to these conflicting pressures I edited the critical collection, *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing* in 1985 with Guernica. It included ten contributors, three of whom had appeared in *Roman Candles*, and so it continued the work of promoting Italian-Canadian authors first started by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco. He went on to inspire many writers, too many to mention here.

At the foundational meeting of AICW Giorgio was an active participant in all the discussions. We did not know it at that time, but Giorgio had decided to enter the religious life. With the publication of *Virgin Science* in 1986 he had produced thirteen of his own books and then stopped writing for about 15 years. In the cloister of St. Augustine monastery it was often difficult to make contact with Giorgio.

After he earned a Master of Divinity degree in 1990 he left the monastery and taught high school for a year. It was pure coincidence that he was hired to teach at Fr. Michael Goetz Secondary School in Mississauga by Louise Pivato who is my sister.

As a priest Father Di Cicco worked in many parishes in and around Toronto. Because he spoke Italian he was also able to help Italian seniors who spoke poor English. He became known as a person with spiritual gifts.

With the appearance of *Living in Paradise* in 2001 Pier Giorgio Di Cicco returned to publishing his poetry. In 2004 he was made Poet Laureate of Toronto in recognition of his many contributions to Canadian literature. Giorgio went on to publish five more books giving us a significant body of work. In 2011 my critical collection, *Pier Giorgio Di Cicco: Essays on His Works* provided further recognition of his achievements as a writer. In addition to eleven essays on various aspects of his poetry books it includes an interview with Giorgio, a brief biography and a bibliography of his writings. It was published by Guernica Editions.

That fortuitous encounter with Giorgio in 1977 changed my career as an academic, a researcher and a writer. It also brought me back into the creative communities of Italian-Canadians in Toronto and Montreal. I am part of the legacy of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco. It was an honour to have known Giorgio all these years.

 Works Cited

Pivato, Joseph. Ed. *Pier Giorgio Di Cicco: Essays on His Works.* Guernica Editions 2011.