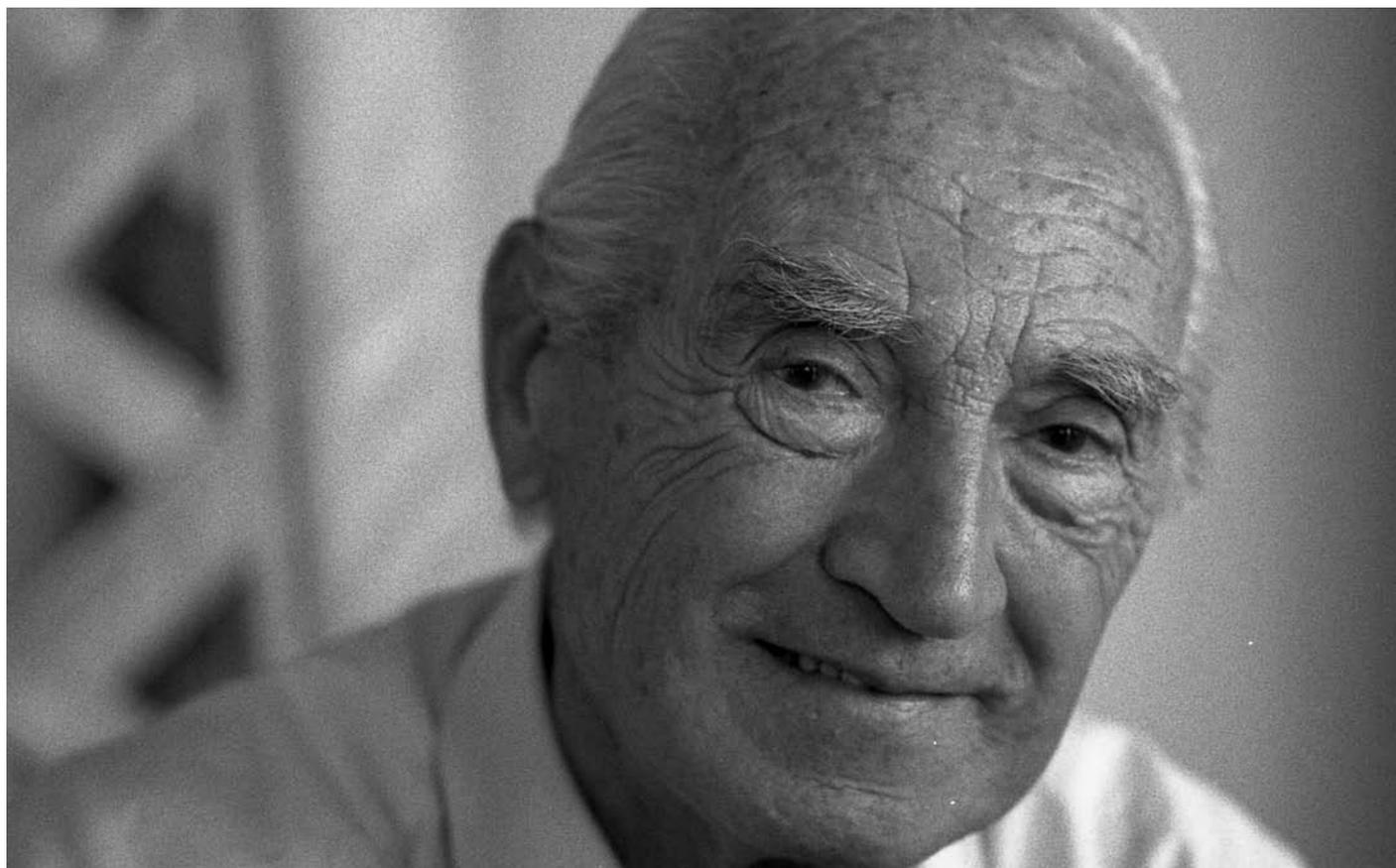


# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

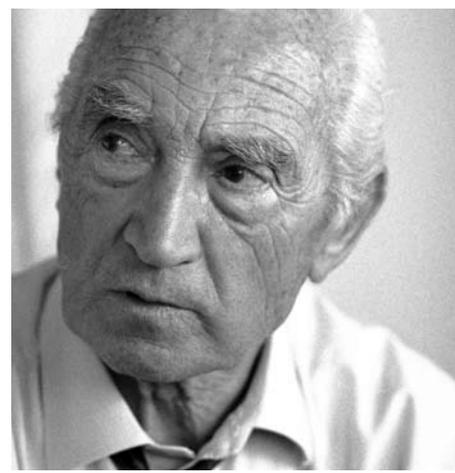
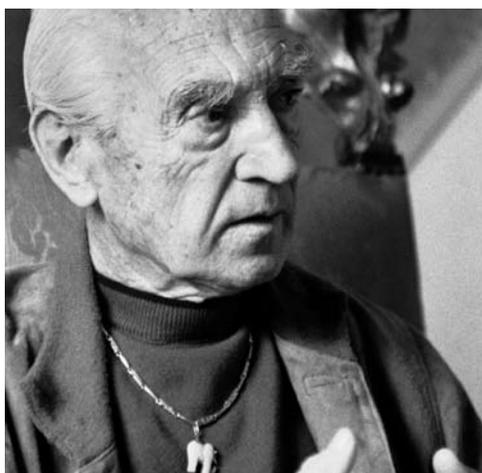
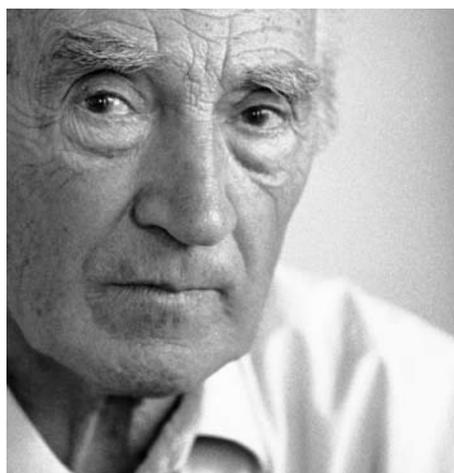
SERIES 2

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST  
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



## FRANCO BELGIORNO-NETTIS

INDUSTRIALIST



# FRANCO BELGIORNO-NETTIS (1915-2006)

## INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 2) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories – of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

## SYNOPSIS

Born in a poor Italian village in 1915, the young Franco Belgiorno-Nettis worked in his grandfather's blacksmith's shop. On leaving school, he was accepted at the Italian Military Academy where he spent five years training as an engineer.

When war broke out Franco was sent to North Africa as a lieutenant in the Italian Army. During the Battle of Tobruk he was taken prisoner and spent the next five years in a British POW camp in India.

After returning to Italy he was offered a job as an engineer with a company in Milan. It had a contract to build power transmission lines in Australia and in 1951 Franco worked on the construction of the first steel power transmission line built in this country.

Staying on in Australia, he founded his own engineering company, Transfield. Starting with virtually nothing, the company was awarded a contract to build power transmission lines in Port Kembla.

Transfield soon became a major industrial force and in 1991 it completed the successful construction of the Sydney Harbour Tunnel.

Franco Belgiorno-Nettis was also well known for his generous patronage of the arts and sponsorship of major cultural events.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media, History, SOSE/HSIE, Art and Business Studies.

The program is classified PG with the consumer advice: Adult themes.

## Growing up in Fascist Italy

Franco Belgiorno-Nettis was educated in Italy during the regime of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who came to power in 1922.

- In order to appreciate the era of Franco's early years both when he was in school and at military college, in pairs carry out some historical research into Mussolini's Italy, looking at the kind of society that was being forged under his rule, and in particular the type of education system and doctrinaire ideology about patriotism and national duty being taught to the young. Was there any opposition in Italy to this? How did minority groups, such as Jews, fare under Mussolini? Was there strict propaganda control and censorship of the mass media? Prepare and write an essay-style article in 500-600 words. You may illustrate with photographs, maps, drawings of national flags etc, as applicable. Ensure that all the sources you gain your information from are listed in a bibliography at the end of the article.
- In the program, Franco says of his childhood that freedom within his family group did not exist. Discuss in class the kinds of freedoms that were denied him, and how important or necessary you think those freedoms are (or are not), to any child's development. For example, do you think he was deprived? Do you think his parents were unnecessarily strict, or may there have been valid reasons for the way in which Franco was raised? Explain whether or not Franco is now critical of his father, when looking back many decades into the past.
- At the age of 16 or 17 Franco comments that he felt the need to escape from his family. As though you were Franco (or someone similar to him), write a set of personal diary entries expressing your hidden feelings, thoughts, hopes, desires, frustrations and anxieties about the situation you are in.
- Plan and write a short story about being, at 18 years of age, 'the youngest stationmaster in Italy'. Consider the mode and viewpoint that you will use to present the story. Will it be a comedy, a family and workforce drama? Will it be narrated in the first-person by the railway stationmaster himself, or from the viewpoint of someone else, such as one of his parents or a sibling, or will it be presented in the third-person, from the viewpoint of an all-seeing narrator?

## Military, World War Two

World War Two broke out in 1939 while Franco Belgiorno-Nettis was still undergoing his officer training and engineering studies at the Turin Military Academy. Italy, under Fascist rule, entered the war as an Axis ally of Hitler's Nazi Germany, and it was inevitable that Franco and his fellow officers-in-training would be required to take leadership positions during military action. In 1945, towards the end of the war, Italy's Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, was captured by the Italian Resistance

movement and executed.

- When Franco's younger brother gained entry into the Turin Military Academy, Franco's father found this a 'disappointment'. Discuss in class why this might be so. In pairs, plan and write a short scene in which the younger brother then harshly tutors Franco in preparation for the Academy's entry exam, believing Franco to be 'second-rate'. You may add imagined detail in the dialogue to supplement and expand upon the scenario. Rehearse and play the scene in class. An alternative is to plan the script for dialogue and sound effects only, and to record it as a sound file for playback on your school's intranet.
- Plan and draft an official letter from the Academy to Franco, advising him that he has won a bursary to begin a course of study. You may wish to use desktop publishing software to produce the document in printed form, perhaps making it look scroll-like and including an official crest or insignia.
- Carry out research then prepare a display poster about the Turin Military Academy, looking at its history, its location and buildings, its function, purpose and traditions and whether it is still in existence today. (See website references.)
- In retrospect Franco says that he was 'totally brainwashed' during his Academy training. Discuss in class then write an appraisal in 150-200 words of what you think he means by this comment. (You may wish to revisit the first activity in this study guide, with reference to Fascist ideology and to media censorship.)
- Franco refers to the 'mentality' of being a young officer. Define this mentality, and discuss how it is reflected in the photographs shown during this sequence of the program. For example, do the photos convey a truthful and realistic impression of military life and warfare? Are they designed to impress the viewer?
- In pairs, research the North African campaign of World War Two, particularly the Battle of Tobruk, 1941-1942 (see website reference). Write a short account of the Battle of Tobruk, and its outcome, particularly as it affected Italian soldiers.
- Plan and write a personal account of what it might be like to experience being taken as a prisoner of war. For example, might there be conflicting responses, such as relief, bitterness, feeling let down by your commanders, loss of morale?
- Discuss in class how Franco could say that, as a prisoner of war in India, he was 'free'? Is this a contradiction in logic? Drawing on his comments during the program and on further research about this part of his life, write a short fiction based on his and others' experiences, about being a prisoner of war. (See 'Italian POWs in India' in website references.)

### **An Immigrant in Australia**

When Franco Belgiorno-Nettis arrived in Australia, it was not, originally, as an immigrant but as a representative of an Italian engineering firm. However, when he decided to make his life in Australia, the result was an archetypal migrant success story, characterised by the gradual creation of a great engineering empire and the consequent growth of a powerful family dynasty of business entrepreneurs and patrons of the arts.

- During the program Franco tells us that after the war, when he returned from years of British captivity in India to Italy, he could not adjust, and felt that 'Italy did not belong to me anymore'. Discuss in class, then write your own commentary about this, examining why Franco felt this way. Write in the first-person, as though you were someone in Franco's position.
- When Franco is asked what he found when he arrived in Australia in 1951 to work on the construction of power transmission lines, he replies, 'Wilderness!' Carry out research into the experience of European migrants during the early 1950s, then, as though you were in the same situation, write a letter home to a family member about it. (Those who have family members who went through these experiences themselves may wish to draw on their memories or family stories; although ageing, perhaps older members of the family might even speak to the class about their lives as new migrants in a strange land. Note also the information on the Transfield website about Italian migrants of the 1950s – see website references; click on the History section, scroll to 1956 section of timeline then select 'Men, Sweat and Guts'.)
- As a class, research and compile a list of feature films and TV drama series about the experiences of European migrants in Australia, from the 1940s to the 1960s. Examples may be the films *They're a Weird Mob* (1966) and *Silver City* (1984). Select and view one of these films and discuss in class such questions as the depiction of migrant life in Australia and whether or not that depiction is realistic and accurate. After the discussion, write your own review of the film in 350-450 words.

### **Transfield**

Transfield was formed in 1956 by Franco Belgiorno-Nettis and his business partner, Carlo Salteri, a mechanical engineer. The company was readily able to find employees from the large numbers of Italian migrants entering Australia, many of whom did not have pre-arranged employment and who did not speak English.

- In pairs, research the history and development of Transfield and prepare a selective timeline of the company's beginnings, growth, important events and building projects, takeovers, mergers, changes in ownership, to the present day. Include references to Franco, his family members (where relevant) and to Carlo Salteri. You may illustrate and add explanatory notes as required.
- Select one of Transfield's projects, such as the building of the Sydney Harbour Tunnel, and create an illustrated magazine-style double-page spread about it. Before beginning on this activity you may need to discuss in class the range of topics, themes and information you should research, and how to go about organising and presenting it.
- Research and write your own newspaper report about one of the two business problems Franco encountered, referred to below. The report should contain the basics of 'who, what, where, when and why', looking at the background to the issues, the reasons for the problems, how they were dealt with, and any long-term effects:
  - » Franco splits with his long-term Transfield business partner, Carlo Salteri.
  - » Franco's sons disagree about the way Transfield should be run.
- Write a short commentary about present-day Transfield and its importance to Australians; include its current projects.

## Arts Patronage

As Franco Belgiorno-Nettis' Transfield business empire and wealth grew, he was able to pursue other entrepreneurial interests, in particular his patronage of the arts in Australia—in distinctly cultured, Italian style.

- From the program, define in class the characteristics and qualities that attract Franco to art and to artists. Sydney architect Philip Cox has referred to Franco as taking a 'Medici-Florentine' attitude, while former Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam has termed Franco 'an Australian Leonardo da Vinci'. Explain what you think they mean. (Quotations are from a *Sydney Morning Herald* obituary; see website references to Franco Belgiorno-Nettis.)
- Research the introduction of the Transfield Art Prize and its later transition into the Biennale of Sydney art festival, including Franco's role and input into both, then prepare an illustrated poster display promotion about the Biennale's history, designed to interest and attract art students.
- The Sydney Biennale has had its fair share of scandals, dramatic events and sensations. Following from the previous activity, research these, then draw on them in any way you think best to plan and write a short fiction story.
- Discuss in writing (200-300 words) a favourite work of art from any of the Sydney Biennale exhibitions.
- Discuss in class the benefits to the arts community, and to the greater Australian community in general, of wealthy business and private entrepreneurial patronage of the arts. Would these large sums of money and resources be better spent elsewhere? Do the arts deserve to be patronised? If you had great wealth at your disposal, what might you donate it to, or spend it on, as an act of patronage or philanthropy?

## Identity, Marriage and Family

During the program Franco Belgiorno-Nettis refers to his wife, Amina, as 'a tremendous element of stability in my life'.

- Discuss in class the circumstances in which Franco met Amina Cerino-Zegna. What role did Amina's mother play in this?
- When Franco married Amina he was in Australia while she was in Italy; they were married by proxy, with Franco's brother standing in for him. In pairs or small groups, devise a short drama play about this situation. Carry out rehearsal readings, revise the script and dialogue as necessary, then present either a reading or a drama performance to the class. Alternatively, arrange the script for sound only, then record for playback on your school's intranet.
- Amina joined her new husband in Australia in 1952. Imagine her feelings and thoughts about her decision to go out alone to an unknown country; write a set of personal diary entries about this, as she journeys across the world.
- Franco says he was lacking in a sense of the 'natural affection' that was apparent in Amina. Discuss why this might be so. Listen to Franco's words at the end of the program when discussing his family. Is he content? Are there any similarities between him and his own father? (Take into consideration the relationship with his sons over the management of Transfield.)
- Following from the previous activity, write a short story about an ageing father-figure whose family authority is tested and challenged by his adult children.

## Media Studies

Carry out the following activities:

- According to information on the Transfield website (see the website's History section titled, 'Men, Sweat and Guts') Transfield recruited Italian migrants as they were arriving in ships from Europe. In pairs or small groups, discuss the possibilities, then devise a scripted storyboard scene of camera shots, dialogue and sound effects for a fiction drama about a newly arrived migrant.
- If Franco's life story were to be turned into a dramatised feature film, which parts of it would you highlight and develop? Discuss in small groups, then write your own report on the type of movie you would envisage, explaining your thinking behind your choices.
- From the previous activity, create a movie poster for the proposed film version; it will need a title, an illustration, a catchy text 'tag' line, names of at least two actors and a director's name.
- In 300-400 words write a review of the program for a popular weekly TV magazine.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Books and other print material:

Kathleen R. Allen, *Entrepreneurship for Dummies*, IDG Books Worldwide, Foster City, CA, 2001

Joseph B. Bonnici, *Prisoners of War: The First Authentic Account of the Lives of Italian Prisoners of War in British Hands in India*, Croydon, Vic, 2007 (Note that this may be an unpublished memoir; see National Library of Australia for information.)

Natasha Bullock and Reuben Keehan (eds), *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney, a Critical Reader*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre Ltd, Woolloomooloo, 2006 (Note that there are publications relating to each Biennale of Sydney event; the above book is one example.)

Julia Church, *Per L'Australia: The Story of Italian Migration*, Miegunyah Press, Carlton, Vic, 2005

Gianfranco Cresciani, *Transfield: The First Fifty Years*, ABC, Sydney, 2006

Peter FitzSimons, *Tobruk*, HarperCollins, Pymble, NSW, 2006

Gideon Haigh, *Bad Company: The Cult of the CEO*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2003

Christopher Leeds, *Italy Under Mussolini*, Wayland, Hove, East Sussex, 1988

Newcastle Region Art Gallery, *Works from the Transfield Collection*, Newcastle, NSW, 1985

Teresa Jean Odendahl, *Charity Begins at Home: Generosity and Self-Interest Among the Philanthropic Elite*, Basic Books, New York, 1990

#### Film and TV

Tristram Miall (director), *The Belgiorno-Nettis Family*, episode 6 of *Dynasties*, Series 2, ABC, 2005

Michael Powell (director), *They're a Weird Mob*, Roadshow, 1966

Sophia Turkiewicz (director), *Silver City*, Sonart, 1984

#### Websites

Battle of Tobruk; being captured:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Compass#Capture\\_of\\_Tobruk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Compass#Capture_of_Tobruk)

[http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/fulgor/volume1i3/papers/fulgor\\_v1i3\\_oconnor.pdf](http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/fulgor/volume1i3/papers/fulgor_v1i3_oconnor.pdf)

Franco Belgiorno-Nettis:

[www.smh.com.au/news/obituaries/an-achiever-whose-dreams-came-true/2006/07/10/1152383674252.html](http://www.smh.com.au/news/obituaries/an-achiever-whose-dreams-came-true/2006/07/10/1152383674252.html)

<https://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/20bos/about-us/history/>

[www.abc.net.au/dynasties/series2/ep06.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/dynasties/series2/ep06.htm)

Fascist Italy:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian\\_fascism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_fascism)

[www.thecorner.org/hist/total/f-italy.htm](http://www.thecorner.org/hist/total/f-italy.htm)

Italian POWs in India:

[www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar)

(Search for Artemio Ettore Torselli. After the results appear, find more of Torselli's story by clicking the appropriate page link.

Parts 4 and 5 of his *Memories* are relevant.)

[www.tribuneindia.com/1998/98oct17/saturday/head4.htm](http://www.tribuneindia.com/1998/98oct17/saturday/head4.htm)

(Scroll down to Yol: Once a haven for prisoners of war.)

Benito Mussolini:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benito\\_Mussolini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benito_Mussolini)

Sydney Biennale:

[www.biennaleofsydney.com.au](http://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au)

Sydney Harbour Tunnel:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney\\_Harbour\\_Tunnel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_Harbour_Tunnel)

Transfield:

[www.transfield.com.au](http://www.transfield.com.au)

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/companies/transfield-forced-to-change-name-and-brand-to-broadspectrum/news-story/4298172cafeba603e6daa621bc796121>

## AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY: FRANCO BELGIORNO-NETTIS

A Film Australia National Interest Program

Director/Producer: Frank Heimans

Executive Producer: Sharon Connolly

Duration: 26 minutes

Year: 1995

Study guide written by Roger Stitson.



For information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

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