

A letter from Southern Italy

A BRANCH OF MY FAMILY tree extends into the mountain village of Torre de Ruggerio. Situated south in the toe of Italy, this is godfather's own country, but it is best not to talk about that around here.

Rather, people are proud of the delicious red tomatoes, the figs and olives and bushes laden with capers which spring surprisingly from the hard, steep volcanic rocks. The family has recently opened a guesthouse in an area which has no tourist trade, but a main road under construction is pushing into this remoteness.

The numerous churches tend to be very lofty and ornate even in the most impoverished of villages. Many are festooned with the effigies and bones of numerous saints from the distant past. To the modern western eye, the decor borders on violent circus. For example St Agatha stands in Taormina holding her breast aloft with a pair of tongs, savagely removed by a cruel Roman proconsul before rolling her in hot coals.



The patron saint of Naples, St Gennaro, whom the catacomb guide matter-of-factly declared had stopped an eruption of Mt Vesuvius, was ungratefully beheaded by the Emperor Diocletian, all graphically illustrated in paint.

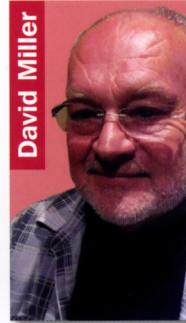
In a strange way, these stories seem to form part of the European Dreamtime, to which many Australians belong.

For a doctor on tour, the most amazing of these saints was the handsomely moustached Dr Moscati of Naples. It came as

a surprise, because he was not an ancient cleric or martyr, but a bronze statue complete with stethoscope, a more modern man.

In a wing of the church his surgery is preserved behind glass, just as he left it. Why the doctor had his examining couch in a church poses interesting questions, but the office itself is an old-fashioned doctor's surgery complete with instruments and an obstetric monaural stethophone, not so different from places I have worked in, in earlier years.

LIGHT AIRS



His extended bronze hand is well polished. As I stood in wonderment at this medical saint, a worshipper came up to him and lovingly stroked the reassuring hand, gazing adoringly into the kindly downcast eyes.

Amazing medicine at an affordable price.

The elderly patient seemed to leave the church with a spring in her step, looking much, much better.

Penning on the Aeolian island of Lipari.