1. Introduction

This article will outline the mainstream ideological, political and intellectual discourse on Italian emigration and emigrants from the first decades after the unification of Italy (1861) until the first years of the twentieth century. The reason for choosing this period is that mass emigration due to the high percentage of people who left the country during that time impacted not only on Italian society, but also had a great influence on the collective imagination of successive generations with respect to emigration in general. Furthermore, this essay will consider some novels of the Italian literature of emigration\(^1\) related to the mass movement of Italians to North and South America in the aforementioned period of the so-called “great emigration”. The works accounted for in this article were published between 1870 and 1914. Their reception among readers was generally positive, but apart from a very few cases, critics today tend to consider these works as minor literary productions. Nevertheless, the authors of this kind of fiction remain the most representative Italian writers on emigration. The aim is to show that, by correbo-

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\(^1\) In this paper I adhere to the distinction made by Emilio Franzina, who differentiates between Italian emigrant literature (It. letteratura italiana dell’emigrazione) and Italian literature of emigration (It. letteratura italiana di emigrazione). The former is the product of the literary activity of emigrants and their descendants, while the latter is the corpus of literary works written in Italy or abroad whose topic is emigration (Franzina 1996: 2).