

Italy and the Grand Tour: The British Experience in the Eighteenth Century

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## Italy and the Grand Tour: The British Experience in the Eighteenth Century<sup>1</sup>

Lord Cholm—y's intended departure for the Continent, is not, it seems to revive the languid flame of love in a personal visit to Miss Dal—ble, that affair having been long at an end and the lady perfectly happy in the arms of a new *inamorato*: his Lordship's tour however is not to be of a very solitary nature, as one of the most accomplished women of this island has actually consented to accompany!

Readers of the *Morning Herald* of 11 April 1781 would not have been surprised by such an item of fashionable gossip. The notion of tourism as a means for the pursuit of pleasure was well established and any focus on the didactic goal of travel was constantly undercut by a very different reality of pleasure: the discourse of social benefit clashing, as so often, with the dictates of individual pleasure. In the eighteenth century travel to Italy can be seen as representing the summation of both processes, and much of the interest in reading the accounts of contemporary tourists reflects the preserve there of differing aspirations. Italy was at once the focus of artistic, and more generally cultural, education and a peninsula of pleasure, whether the delights in question were, for example, those of opera or the more sensual joys for which Venice was noted.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the attraction of Italy for some was being undercut by the degree to which it seemed to represent the past, not simply the past of classical splendour and culture, the past that inspired Gibbon among others, but also the past of the present. For the British, modern Italy appeared a land in the grips of reaction. Its reputation as a haunt of superstition and reaction was exacerbated by Italy's connection with Jacobitism, specifically as the place where the last Stuarts took refuge and ended

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1. I would like to thank David Atkinson, Joe Links, Philip Morgan, Mark Stocker and Henry Summerson for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. There is an extensive literature on the Grand Tour and Italy. British tourists can be traced through R. S. Pine-Coffin, *Bibliography of British and American Travel in Italy to 1860* (Florence, 1974). Recent work can be approached via Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad. The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (Stroud, 1992). The work of E. Chaney is also valuable, particularly his "The Grand Tour and Beyond: British and American Travellers in Southern Italy, 1745-1960," in E. Chaney and N. Ritchie (eds.), *Oxford, China and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton* (London, 1984).

their days. In particular, there was a marked failure to realise the degree to which there was an Enlightenment in Italy and, more specifically, to understand the extent to which, particularly in Lombardy, Parma and Tuscany, there were attempts to 'reform' and 'modernise' government and society as understood by contemporary standards. Instead, Italy appeared to be dominated by autocratic rulers and Catholic superstition.

Part of the problem was the shift in attitude towards Italian republicanism. In the seventeenth century Venice had appeared not only as a seat of pleasure but also as a model of civic virtue. Genoa had never enjoyed the same renown, but it had also benefited from the favourable interest displayed in Italian republics. By the eighteenth century the situation was different. As yet there was no widespread aesthetic of splendid decay, though Venice's appeal was still as strong as a centre of culture and pleasure. However, it was seen as an increasingly inconsequential state, a model only of rigidity. Genoa's reputation was damaged by the rebellions of its Corsican colony, and it also seemed inconsequential and rigid. Lucca was essentially a pleasant curiosity, a lovely backwater.

If the current political interest of Italy was in decline, the peninsula was also of scant or declining interest in other fields. The numerous tourists interested in military activities - in viewing manoeuvres or attending military academies - aimed essentially for Prussia for the former and France for the latter. The prestige of Italy as a land of the present was in decline. It was still important in spheres such as science, medicine and music, but even in these it was in apparently relative decline, especially by the second half of the century. A musical world that looked to Vienna, Mannheim and Paris had less time for Italy. Transalpine Europe was more important in science.

In the case of British tourists, this tendency was accentuated by the particular development of Britain in this period. Tourists from the social elite of a burgeoning economy and an apparently successful political system, from a great and powerful world empire, were less inclined to feel a sense of inferiority than in the seventeenth century; at that time, to its own people, Britain had seemed superior in little besides its Protestantism. By the eighteenth century, in spite of the popularity of Batoni, Mengs, Piranesi and other Rome-based artists, it appeared that the country of Newton and Sloane, Reynolds and Watt, had little to learn from modern Italy. One of the more successful books by an Italian author read in Britain was the 1739 English edition of Francesco Algarotti's *Il Newtonianismo per le Dame* (1737), in which the theories of light and gravitation were explained in a series of dialogues: an Italian serving to reflect back British greatness. In a similar fashion, Canaletto, with his splendid canvases, used talents developed to depict Venice to show the glories of modern London. A neo-imperial, modern pride of London was expressed in his views.

The London on show had modern buildings such as the Greenwich Observatory, Somerset House and Westminster Bridge, and the rebuilt Westminster Abbey.

There was no contemporary equivalent in Venice and this offers an important clue to shifting views about Italy. Tourists concentrated on cities in the eighteenth century: they spent most of their time there and, until the end of the century, there was no cult of mountains or seaside to detract from this metropolitan focus. Individual tastes varied, but, in general, there was a marked preference for modern over old architecture, for the classical over the Gothic. This was true both of individual buildings and of townscapes.

Much of Italy was a bad disappointment from this perspective. George Berkeley praised the regularity of Catania, rebuilt in Baroque style after the devastating earthquake of 1693,<sup>3</sup> but few tourists penetrated as far as Sicily. Those who did were more interested in Greek remains and more likely to visit Palermo or Messina than Catania. Turin, with its rectilinear street pattern and squares, met with approval: in 1779 Nathaniel Wraxall found it 'a very elegant, well built, pleasant city'. Most towns, however, seemed cramped, their close-packed medieval centres associated with dirt, disease and poverty. As in the countryside, moral order was reflected, and moreover replicated and reinforced ideologies and the socio-cultural order. This tied into the wider metaphor of the city/urbs as a reflection of society; of the shifting meanings that urban landscape accumulate and lose. Cathedrals such as Padua, Pisa and Verona were medieval and gloomy, as were Lucca's churches. The dominant buildings were generally ecclesiastical in purpose and that did not commend them to most British tourists. There were new palaces, particularly the Bourbon creations of Caserta and Colorno, but they did not attract many visitors.

There was certainly no combination of buildings to compare with those constructed in London since the Great Fire of 1666. This period has been seen as one of the great rebuilding of British cities. Brick buildings with large windows were built in a regular 'classical' style along and around new boulevards, squares and circles. Parks, theatres, assembly rooms, subscription libraries, race-courses and other leisure facilities were opened in many towns. The total stock of public buildings in the West Riding of Yorkshire rose from about ninety in 1700 to over five hundred by 1840. This was also the period of the creation of Georgian Bath and Liverpool and Dublin, the New Town of Edinburgh and the West End of London. In the 1750s London rebuilt itself in a rational, measured and modern fashion, representing the wider health and progress of Britain. There was no equivalent in Italy.

A similar contrast also appeared to be the case in the countryside, although tourists devoted far less attention to it. Much of Italy seemed poorly cultivated or barren compared to the new-model agriculture of enclosing England. There was also no series of new stately homes open to respectable tourists as in Britain, no

3. E. Chaney, "Architectural Taste and the Grand Tour: George Berkeley's Evolving Canon," *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*, 1 (1991).

Castle Howard or Blenheim. Tourists paid great attention to Palladianism and, particularly in the first half of the century, a visit to Vicenza was considered an essential part of the Italian section of the Grand Tour. Palladianism marked an important cultural shift: English Palladians, Burlington and Kent, abandoned Rome for Vicenza and presented the Baroque as Catholic, 'absolutist' and architecturally impure. In his *The Palladian Landscape* (Leicester, 1993), Denis Cosgrove has discussed the process by which urban and rural were fused into one holistic and encompassing vision of order. Most of rural Italy, however, did not offer Palladian gems. Furthermore, the pleasure of travelling through Italy compared to Britain deteriorated during the century, because the Italian road system did not improve anywhere near as much as that of Britain (or France). Lord Hervey, touring Italy with Stephen Fox, versified his comments in 1729:

Throughout all Italy beside,  
 What does one find, but Want and Pride?  
 Farces of Superstitious folly,  
 Decay, Distress, and Melancholy:  
 The Havock of Despotick Power,  
 A Country rich, its owners poor;  
 Unpeopled towns, and Lands untilld,  
 Bodys unclothed, and mouths unfilld.  
 The nobles miserably great,  
 In painted Domes, and empty state,  
 Too proud to work, too poor to eat,  
 No arts the meaner sort employ,  
 They nought improve, nor ought enjoy.  
 Each blown from misery grows a Saint,  
 He prays from Idleness, and fasts from Want.<sup>4</sup>

These impressions were of varied importance for individual tourists, but, in combination, they helped to mark the degree to which Italy increasingly appeared a country of the past; and that increasingly became, for many, its glory, especially in the way Piranesi immortalised that past. This shift can be considered in a number of lights. The degree to which Italy's past was embraced while its present was shunned reflected a changing perception of both past and present and of the interplay between the two. As already mentioned, Italy at present appeared less attractive, and certainly no model, both because of changes in Britain and because the reasons why Italy had been criticised the previous century - Catholicism, Papacy, autocratic government and rigid society - were no longer matched by the same degree of compensatory respect for Italian republics and praise of her culture and intellectual life.

4. Hervey to Lady Hervey, 27 Aug. 1728, British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Additional Manuscripts 51345 ff 18-19.

The links between contemporary Italy and her past glories appeared increasingly tenuous in the eighteenth century. This was particularly a consequence of the declining reputation of modern Venice. The republican liberty and energy of classical Rome could be presented through the refracting example of Venice in the seventeenth century, but such an association appeared less credible in the eighteenth. Alan Brodrick, later 2nd Viscount Midleton, was disabused of his notion 'of the grandeur of the noble Venetians' when he visited the Senate in 1724.<sup>5</sup> Instead, there was greater interest in republicans and republics outside Italy, especially in the second half of the century in Corsica, Geneva and the United States of America.

It is also important to note the great increase in interest in classical Italy among tourists in the eighteenth century. Richard Creed, who visited Rome in 1699-1700, made only one mention of Roman remains: his was very much an account of Baroque Rome. Such an emphasis would have been unthinkable sixty years later and indeed in 1705 Metcalfe Robinson wrote to his father from what he termed 'the famous place in the world and the first motive that induced me to become a traveller: for indeed ever since I knew the name of Rome, and much more as I got an insight into its greatness and the stupendous effects of it in buildings, aqueducts, ways, sculpture etc. which yet are to be admired in these glorious remains of antiquity; I found always my desire increase of having a better knowledge of them, than is to be found in descriptions, and rather to admire the things themselves'.<sup>6</sup> The excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii, which began in 1738 and 1748 respectively, played a major role in the development of European taste, in part thanks to the relative inaccessibility of classical remains in Turkish-ruled Greece and Asia Minor. Neo-classical excitement and enthusiasm, not to say hype, in the 1770s and 1780s about the discoveries was very influential. There were also important excavations in and around Rome. The Neo-classical painter and archaeologist Gavin Hamilton excavated Hadrian's villa at Tivoli in 1769. The sculptures and other remains that were discovered in such excavations helped to bring an important revival of aesthetic appeal to interest in the classical world.

British tourists had a strong grounding in the classics and many compared the sites with descriptions by for example Horace, Lucan, Pliny, Strabo and Virgil. The sculptures themselves, however, and, more generally, the entire Neo-classical aesthetic, for example Winckelmann's ecstatic description of the Apollo Belvedere, helped to bring greater appeal to the classical world. The British sought to appropriate Classical Italy.

Thus tourists became more interested in Italy past. This affected their response

5. Alan Brodrick to his father, Viscount Midleton, 7 Oct. 1724, Guildford, Surrey Record Office, Brodrick Mss. 1248/6.

6. Metcalfe to Sir William Robinson, 15 Dec. 1705, Leeds, Archive Office, Vyner Mss. 6005.

to what they saw and also their itinerary. For example the Greek Doric temples at Paestum near Naples attracted increased tourist attention from mid-century. They played a major role in the controversy of the late 1760s over the respective merits of Greek and Roman styles. The Greek remains of Agrigento in Sicily also excited interest.

Such sites were a world away from the Italy that modern reformers were striving to create. Indeed they took on much of their appeal from the degree to which past glory contrasted with a setting of present insignificance, poverty and backwardness. The remains thus served to demonstrate the cyclical nature of history: Italy, particularly Rome, was a *memento mori* of civilisation. Edward Southwell junior wrote from Rome in 1726,

I have spent 3 months with great pleasure and some profit among the ancient and modern curiosities of this famous city, which have cost me daily reading and application and filled 140 pages in my journal and I must own these heaps of magnificent ruins, and the view of so many places not only renowned for the actions and fate of so many heroes, but by the pens of so famous writers do fill the mind with great ideas of the Roman grandeur as also with various reflections upon the vicissitudes of all human things.

Edward Gibbon wrote that the Capitoline Hill 'gave ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave'.<sup>7</sup>

Such reflections were a standard cultural trope. Italy was now a stage depicting their validity. A stereotypical perception of Italy and the Italians as a country and a people both elevated and humiliated by the past had emerged. Eighteenth-Century Britain was an example of the process discussed by Steven Daniels in his *Fields of Vision* (London, 1993) by which modern, progressive nations frequently resorted to Rome in two ways: first to claim Rome's mantle of civilisation and secondly for the spectre of empires-fallen, both to reflect their present potency, by contrast and also, on occasion, as an admonishment against complacency. The remembrance of the Classical past was linked to the process by which impressions of Britain were reconstituted in, and by, Italy. Similarly, at a time of relentless modernising, Italian fascism turned to the classical past of Rome's historical legitimacy, but also a counterpoint to such modernism.

The popularity of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* helped further to focus the sense of the vicissitudes of the past and the related morality of history on the decline of Rome. That Rome was now the centre of Catholicism did not lessen this sense of flux and decline in the perception of Protestant Britons. For those who wished to make comparisons with modern Britain as a warning about possible decline Rome

7. Southwell to Lord Perceval, 9 April 1726, BL. Add. 47031; E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by J. B. Bury (London, 1900), vii, 301.

was of great potency. The imaginative map and idiom of such comparisons was to be widened as Britain acquired an Indian-based Oriental empire from the 1750s on. This encouraged comparison with imperial Rome because, unlike Britain's North American empire but like that of imperial Rome, the new British empire had no ethnic underpinning and was clearly imperial. Writers in the tradition of civic humanism, and later Romantic writers such as Byron, Shelley and De Quincey, searched for points of reference around which to discuss and resonate their anxieties about the effects of empire upon metropolitan culture.<sup>8</sup> Imperial Rome was the obvious focus of such a search for parallel.

In 1792 the Reverend Thomas Brand, 'bearleader' (travelling tutor or governor) to Lord Bruce, wrote to his friend, long standing correspondent and fellow Anglican divine, the Reverend Thomas Wharton, from Palermo,

We have had a little specimen of Sicilian travelling in a three days excursion to Segeste where is the finest remain of Doric Architecture in the Island. - It is in excellent preservation and commands a country which once I suppose was unequalled over the whole surface of the globe - What a country would this be with spirit of commerce and industry with well educated nobles and with a government regulated by Wisdom and Equity. And what a desert it is at present. For about 16 miles from Palermo the road is excellent, thanks to a bishop of great wealth and public spirit - beyond it is rugged and precipice or mud. There is not a wheel in the whole country, the roads are mere paths for a single mule and the few huts scattered round are as bad as Hottentot Kraals - we slept at Alcamo - Climate and Nature will do a great deal cramp them as you will: hence the vast population of the little towns - but they have the air of savages and it is still prudent tho' not absolutely necessary to go armed and attended by what is called a Campieri.

Brand continued by comparing England and Sicily as 'the two countries which are the extremes of Civilisation and negligence'.<sup>9</sup> In short, Italians were unfit to inherit their Classical past, and it was reasonable, indeed necessary, for it to be appropriated by the "civilised" British. Similarly, the *Tribuna* of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the ultimate 'art gallery' of eighteenth century tourism, was seen as important, in part, because it provided a context for aesthetic display on the part of tourists, as in the posing *milordi* of Zoffany's painting of 1772-80. The appreciation of the wonders of ancient, Renaissance and Baroque civilisation did not therefore lead to a positive appraisal of modern Italy. Instead, it was the opposite that was the case: Italy was seen as 'decivilised'. In contrast, the 'South Seas' of the Pacific Ocean that were being explored by the Europeans in this period and were making a powerful impact on fashionable opinion, were seen as at once uncivilised by

8. N. Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East. Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 1993).

9. Brand to Wharton, 3 April 1792, Durham, University Library, Wharton papers.



European standards and yet offering a glimpse of primitive virtue in terms of a true civic society, a communal 'noble savage'. There was no sense in these cases of the fall from civilised grace that Italy seemed to provide. Indeed much of Italy seemed decadent, fallen as a consequence of cultural, social and psychological faults from Classic splendour and, as such, part not of the reforming Europe of apparently Enlightened progress, but an extension of the Orient. This was a period of growing Orientalism. Agrigento invited reflections similar to Greek antiquities or to Palmyra and other stages in the imaginative East. This was not simply an impression of deserted ruins such as Paestum. A sense of decay was also felt by tourists visiting the cities. John Mitford wrote of reaching 'the decayed town of Pisa ... The buildings erected as receptacles for the victorious galleys of the republic, are now made the stables of the prince. The loss of liberty has reduced this once flourishing town from one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants to about fifteen thousand'.<sup>10</sup> Rome was more populous and active, but the contrast between classical and modern Rome was one that emphasised present decay, Henry Carr wrote thence to his brother-in-law in 1739,

As to the appearance of the town itself considering the very great numbers of palaces that are in it I believe most people are disappointed, for setting aside the churches, pillars and obelisks which are of themselves a great ornament the rest does not answer one's expectation, the lower part of fine palaces being frequently let off and divided into little shops and greatness and meanness are so jumbled together (as we often see them in life in the same person) that the appearance they make upon the whole is but very indifferent, and even where the palaces are not so disguised, the contiguous houses being often ill built there is not any of them which strikes the eye at once like Grosvenor or St. James's Square, or several other squares and streets we have in London.<sup>11</sup>

Piranesi's prints led to tourists being disappointed when they saw the reality. Carr's comparison with Britain, as with Brand, was typical. The tourists tell us as much about Britain and the British as about Italy and the Italians. Modern Britain was held to define civilisation, a view not commonly held in earlier times, and one that reflected the greater self-confidence and wealth of the British in this period. This was a fusion of Protestantism, economic growth, international success and the Whig myth. The last was more successful and lasting in creating standards by which Britain appeared superior to foreign countries than in sustaining a coherent and united viewpoint on domestic politics. British self-regard and condescension towards foreign countries, not least Italy, was not dependent on contemporary foreign praise for Britain, although, in so far as British commentators and tourists were aware of it, it could not but have contributed.

10. Mitford, Gloucester, County Record Office, D2002 F1, pp. 93-96.

11. Gateshead, Public Library, Ellison papers A 28 n°. 63.

Thus Italy in this period was increasingly seen as a country slipping into the past, one whose present inhabitants were of limited consequence. The tourist experience became one in which awe and interest was focused upon Italy past and not developments in contemporary Italy. Gibbon stressed the appeal of the past:

the footsteps of heroes, the relics, not of superstition, but of empire, are devoutly visited by a new race of pilgrims from the remote, and once savage, countries of the North.<sup>12</sup>

This prefigured the obsession with sand, sea and sun in later tourism to the Mediterranean. The net result was the same. As more tourists travelled to Italy they knew and cared less about its current culture and society and, instead, saw the Italians as foreign to their concerns. This led to contempt, indifference or neglect; to a widespread ignorance about the country they were visiting. In addition, in so far as the 'authentic' cultural experience of travel was represented as being in the secret precincts off the 'beaten track' where it could be discovered only by the sensitive, true traveller and not the vulgar tourist,<sup>13</sup> this authenticity, like the democratising and institutionalising tourism that developed in the nineteenth century,<sup>14</sup> rested on an appreciation of historical Italy and of Italy as history. Venice had a particularly powerful and aesthetic appeal,<sup>15</sup> but it was as a city of past splendours, a rich spectre of past glory.

The extent to which the developing eighteenth-century perception hitherto discussed was linked with modern clichés about Italy is unclear. The nineteenth-century Italian *Risorgimento* perhaps reawakened interest in Italy as a 'proper' country among British politicians and intellectuals with the theme of the nation striving for freedom and to an extent breaking the claims of the past. Not only did Byron obviously enjoy living in Italy, but with his links with the Carbonari, had strong sympathies with Italy's aspirations towards political freedom, such as they were, and might easily have died in Italy instead of Greece. However, Italy's reputation may have suffered from being the place of refuge chosen by dangerous radicals such as Byron and Shelley. Byron absolutely loathed most of the English travellers he met in Italy, except for other Bohemians such as Lady Blessington. The dubious lifestyles and opinions of British émigrés to Italy may not have done

12. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, vii, 324-325.

13. J. Buzard, *The Beaten Track. European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture', 1800-1918* (Oxford, 1993).

14. The essential work for nineteenth-century tourism is J. Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, 1987). Valuable recent works include A. Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea. The discovery of the seaside in the Western world, 1750-1840* (Oxford, 1994) and F. Kaplan (ed.), *Travelling in Italy with Henry James* (London, 1994).

15. T. Tanner, *Venice Desired* (Oxford, 1992).

much for the latter's reputation among the compatriots of people like Shelley.

Yet later in the century the cause of Italy became more popular, not least because revolution no longer seemed a serious prospect in Britain. Writers such as the Brownings and especially historians such as Trevelyan were very interested in Italy-present. Wordsworth was greatly influenced by 'the *idea*' of Italy, a fusion of Classical civilisation and landscape and hopes of modern regeneration, and engaged with Italian poets, moralists and historians;<sup>16</sup> while Dickens, a keen supporter of the *Risorgimento*, devoted much space in the journals he edited to Continental topics.<sup>17</sup> The local newspaper in William Bell Scott's painting *The Nineteenth Century, Iron and Coal*, finished in 1861, carries an advertisement for a 'Grand Panorama!!! Garibaldi in Italy. Struggles for Freedom ...', a show that ran in Newcastle that March.<sup>18</sup> The manner in which Garibaldi was applauded by working-class crowds when he visited England in 1864 testified to the way in which Victorians of all social classes were able to relate many of the events taking part on the Continent to their own struggles and aspirations.

Yet such enthusiasm proved short-lived: once united, Italy ceased to arouse sympathetic interest, and even during the *Risorgimento* there had been an important element of condescension. In E. M. Forster's times there was a lack of interest in modern Italy. The reconceptualisation of Italy that was such a powerful feature of its imaginative treatment by eighteenth-century British travellers has remained potent and dominant ever since. Apart from the republicanism of Garibaldi and the *Risorgimento*; and to an extent the apparent 'order and backbone' that Mussolini gave them, the Italians have since been regarded in such a fashion, as less civilised or developed. This can be readily seen in current attitudes, although it is less overt than in the past. However, modern discussion of Italian politics, and the sizeable publishing industry around guides, travel books and reminiscences of Italy both manifest this tendency.

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16. A. G. Hill, "Wordsworth and Italy," *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*, 1 (1991), pp. 111-125.

17. M. Hollington, "Dickens and Italy," *Ibid.*, pp. 126-136; K. Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764-1930* (London, 1980); H. Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1992).

18. P. Usherwood, "William Bell Scott's *Iron and Coal*: Northern Readings," in *Pre-Raphaelites: Painters and Patrons in the North East*, Laing Gallery exhibition catalogue (Newcastle, 1989), pp. 46-47, 55.