The Grand Tourists Arrive in Rome

The poet Philip Sidney was probably the first young English gentleman to participate in what would become known as the "Grand Tour," the lengthy and leisurely trip through the Continent made by the students who, after years of arduous scholarship at Oxford or Cambridge, would then have the opportunity to continue his education at a somewhat slower pace, taking two or three years to study the art, languages, and literature of the great European cities. In 1572, Queen Elizabeth I gave permission to Sidney to make the tour so that he could learn French, German, and Italian while soaking up the culture of the countries of the Continent, believing that when he returned he could put his skills to use in her diplomatic corps. Accompanied by a tutor and three servants, Sidney visited Paris, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Strasbourg, Vienna, and Venice. Upon his return, Sidney was knighted and elevated to an ambassadorship.

The term "Grand Tour" was first used by the British author Richard Lesecher in his 1670 book *Voyage to Italy*, written as a guidebook for the young man preparing to embark on the adventure. Another author who provided a guidebook for the trip was Thomas Nugent, whose 1749 book was titled *The
two volumes that detailed Boswell's three years on the Grand Tour: *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, and *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica and France, 1765–1766*.

Boswell was such a scrupulously careful note-taker that his propensity for writing down every word uttered by his friend, Dr. Samuel Johnson, would result in one of literature's great biographies, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. That achievement would come twenty-seven years after Boswell, having just completed his study of the law in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Utrecht, Holland, arrived in Germany to commence his Grand Tour. It was 1764 and Boswell was twenty-four years old.

From Germany, the tour took him next to Switzerland and then to Italy. After a disagreeable crossing of the Alps—"I have climbed the rudest heights and drunk the Alpine snow" (Brady, 22)—he arrived in Turin on January 7, 1765. Making his way south, Boswell set foot on Roman soil in mid-February. He stayed in the city briefly, then went to Naples but returned to Rome on March 24 for an extended stay of sightseeing, scholarship, and sinning. Indeed, throughout his journal, Boswell displays an unceasing devotion to the search for female companionship. For example, on the night of April 12—evidently after a long and wearying romantic interlude—Boswell wrote that he would do well to take a break from womanizing: "Swear no women for week. Labour hard." (Brady, 65).

When he wasn't worrying about women sapping his strength, Boswell did get out into the city to record the sights. On March 30, Boswell wrote:

We saw the Baths of Diocletian, whose plan was explained to me by my antiquary. In the Carthusian church we saw also a fresco by Pompeo Batoni depicting Simon Magus carried in the air by the demons to show that he could perform miracles as well as Peter. The Saint worships God, and points with his finger to the place where Simon Magus will fall. A group watches this event. The composition of the painting is excellent. But Peter appears too uneasy, as if he were afraid that his prayers would not be effective. The colouring is false and unnatural, as if Peter had not only caused Simon to fall but had discoloured the flesh of all those around him. In Santa Maria Maggiore we saw some fine columns of oriental marble. I must not forget to add in passing that we saw a strange fellow sitting in the sun reading Tasso to a group of others in rags like himself. (Brady, 62–63)

According to that entry, Boswell visited Terme di Diocleziano, the remains of the sprawling public baths erected by the Emperor Diocletian between the years 298 and 306 A.D. The pink ruins of the baths are located just off the Piazza della Repubblica, a major intersection in the city where statues of art nouveau nymphs frolic in fountains, and where Rome's political agitators traditionally begin their demonstrations.

Diocletian's baths, covering two-and-a-half acres, were able to accommodate 3,000 bathers. Surrounding the baths were a number of ornate bathhouses, including a tepidarium, where a bather could get a hot—or, at least, a lukewarm—bath as well as the Aula Ottagona, an eight-sided building that did double-duty as a planetarium. About 200 years before Boswell visited the baths, Michelangelo oversaw construction of a convent at the site.

The painting that sparked Boswell's interest—*The Fall of Simon Magus*—remains on display in the Carthusian church that Boswell visited, Santa Maria degli Angeli. The church, designed by Michelangelo, was built in 1563 on the orders of Pope Pius IV, and dedicated to the Christian slaves who died building the Baths of Diocletian. The stunning painting was rendered in 1755 by Batoni, who originally hoped that it would hang in Saint Peter's Basilica, but Vatican authorities rejected it and, instead, the painting found its way into the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. So distraught was Batoni by the Vatican's decision that he gave up rendering religious scenes and turned to making his living painting portraits. In any event,
The Fall of Simon Magus depicts the ill fated that fell upon the Samaritan magician Simon. (Because of his skill at magic, Simon was called “Magus.”) It is said that Simon angered the Apostles Peter and John when he offered them money to gain greater magical power. Peter warned Simon to drop his worship of the black arts, but Simon refused and instead went to Rome searching for the secrets of holy magic. Evidently, Simon failed in his quest and went home to Samaria, where he attempted to prove his magic by having himself buried alive for three days, at which time he planned to rise from his grave. Instead, the stunt proved fatal.

Batoni painted a much different ending for the hapless magician. In Batoni’s version, Simon proves his magic by ascending above the Roman Forum before the eyes of the Emperor Nero and the population of Rome. He accomplishes this feat with the assistance of demons, who hoist him aloft by their hands. But the prayers of Peter and Paul cause the demons to release Simon, who falls to his death.

The other church cited by Boswell in his journal entry, Santa Maria Maggiore, is located several blocks from the baths in a square adjacent to the Piazza dell’Esquilino. Santa Maria Maggiore was most likely built in the fifth century A.D. The church acquired an impressive baroque façade in 1750, which is after Boswell toured the place. It is likely that the columns Boswell described in the church are located in the Capella Sistina—the Sistene Chapel, but not the Sistene Chapel whose ceiling was decorated by Michelangelo. The Capella Sistina found at Santa Maria Maggiore was commissioned by Pope Sixtus V in the sixteenth century. To erect the chapel’s marble columns, Sixtus ransacked ancient buildings for the materials and employed virtually every sculptor in the city to work on the project.

**EDWARD GIBBON’S SLEEPLESS NIGHT**

Usually, the young tourist required his father’s permission, and his father’s funds, to make the Grand Tour. As many prospective tourists would learn, fathers could be downright irascible when it came to opening their purses for the trip, a fact that was made clear to young Edward Gibbon. Also, political events beyond control of the young gentleman often delayed the tour. In Gibbon’s case, his visit to the Continent was delayed by an act of religious rebellion, which caused his father to banish him to a mountaintop in Switzerland, and then by the Seven Years War with France, which made it impossible for an Englishman to travel to Paris. Still, when Gibbon finally made his way to Rome, at the age of twenty-five, he would be struck with an idea that would change his life as well as history’s view of the ancient Roman Empire.

Even as a young boy, sickly and pudgy, Gibbon found himself fascinated with stories of heroic gladiators, conquering Roman armies, and the great leaders who built the Roman Empire. One day, while accompanying his father on a visit to a friend’s house in Wiltshire, England, young Gibbon found himself wandering through the home’s sizable library when he came across a copy of *History of the Latin Roman Empire* by Laurence Eachard. “I was immersed in the passage of the Goths over the Danube, when the summons of the dinner-bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast,” he recalled. (De Beer, 11)

Gibbon was educated at Oxford, entering the great university on April 3, 1752, at the age of fifteen. Hardly a dedicated scholar, Gibbon found his classes dull and often played truant, yet he constantly found himself drawn to Roman history and Latin studies. Gibbon’s admiration for the Romans did not end in the classroom. As a student, he found himself questioning the direction of the British church and drawn instead to the rituals of the Roman Catholic faith—he agreed with the notions of celibacy for priests, the monastic life of devotion to the church, the veneration of saints and the use of holy water in the services. And so, having located a priest with the help of a Catholic bookseller, Gibbon inquired about conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. “In our first interview he soon discovered that persuasion was needless,” Gibbon recalled. “After
sounding the motives and merits of my conversion, he consented to admit me into the pale of the Church: and at his feet on the eighth of June, 1753, I solemnly, though privately, abjured the errors of heresy.” (Gibbon, 86)

Gibbon's conversion to the Roman Catholic faith angered his father: “His good sense was astonished at my strange departure from the religion of my country,” he recalled. (Gibbon, 87). It also got him booted out of Oxford. Still only sixteen years old, Gibbon was sent by his father to Lausanne, a university high in the mountains of Switzerland, where Gibbon shivered in the wintertime while falling under the influence of Calvinist educators who, Gibbon's father hoped, would convince the boy to give up Catholicism. At Lausanne, Gibbon blossomed as a student. He continued his Latin studies, but found himself thirsting for other knowledge as well. He studied the Greeks, and also mastered mathematics, political studies, and became fluent in French. And, as his father had hoped, the Calvinists did succeed in convincing Gibbon to return to the Protestant church. “The various articles of the Romish creed disappeared like a dream, and after a full conviction, on Christmas Day, 1754, I received the sacrament in the church at Lausanne,” Gibbon wrote. “It was here that I suspended my religious enquiries, acquiescing with implicit belief in the tenets and mysteries which are adopted by the general consent of Catholics and Protestants.” (Gibbon, 96)

He remained at Lausanne for five years and would have remained longer, devoting himself to his studies, but his father decided his son had had enough college and ordered him to withdraw. With nothing else to do, Gibbon reluctantly joined the military, becoming an officer in the militia of South Hampshire, England. At the time, Britain was engaged in the Seven Years War with France, but Gibbon never got near a battlefield, spending the next two-and-a-half years marching his men along muddy British roads. His chief contribution to the militia was his deafness in completing the battalion's paperwork. Finally, on December 23, 1762, as a treaty with France was being negoti-

ated Gibbon—with his father's permission and letter of credit in his pocket—left for the Continent to begin his Grand Tour.

He spent time in France, then visited his old school in Lausanne and then, in 1764, Gibbon arrived in Italy. On October 15, 1764, while touring Rome, Edward Gibbon found himself overwhelmed with an idea: he would write the definitive history chronicling the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. He explains that day in his autobiography, Memoirs of My Life:

The historian of the Decline and Fall must not regret his time or expense, since it was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject. In my Journal the place and the moment of conception are recorded; the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of the evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan friars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol. But my original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the City, rather than of the Empire; and, though my reading and reflections began to point towards the object, some years elapsed and several avocations intervened before I was seriously engaged in the execution of that laborious work. (Gibbon, 143)

Gibbon's visit that day brought him to the Capitoline, the hill of Rome along the Via del Teatro where the ancient Romans established their government. It is the location of the former Temple of Jupiter, built to worship the father of the gods, by the Roman Lucius Furius Purpureo. The temple featured a statue of Caesar, whose head was said to move from west to east. The "Church of the Zoccolanti" that Gibbon speaks of is the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, which occupies the site of the former Temple of Juno, built nearby the Temple of Jupiter. On one night in 390 B.C., a flock of geese kept at the Temple of Juno started cackling so loudly that their keepers were awakened to discover an invading force of Gauls attempting to scale the hill. “The Romans never forget their patriotism,” the British
writer H.V. Morton notes in his 1957 travelogue of the city, *A Traveller in Rome*. “Once a year, a goose gorgeously arrayed in purple and gold was carried around the Forum in a splendid litter. This delightful spectacle was unfortunately marred by the usual touch of Roman cruelty, for a dog crucified on a cross of elderwood was also carried round, a reminder of the dogs which failed to bark the night that the Gauls tried to scale the hill.” (Morton, 63)

Adjacent to the Capitoline is the Palatine, the hill where the city is said to have been founded by the twins, Romulus and Remus, in the eighth century B.C. At the foot of the Palatine, between the arches of Septimius Severus and Titus, the Roman king Tarquinius Priscus built the Forum, the Foro Romano, in the seventh century B.C. At one time a swampy area of the city that was used as a burial ground, Tarquinius had the swamp drained, clearing the way for what he hoped would become the cultural, intellectual, commercial, and political center of Rome. It was between the arches that victorious Roman armies would return, parading before Rome’s citizens while showing off their prisoners and holding aloft their spoils of war. Says Morton: “It is pleasant, as one looks down at the Forum, to think of the plump little figure of Edward Gibbon treading its stones ‘with a lofty step,’ during his brief visit to Rome in 1764, when he first conceived the idea of writing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. ‘After a sleepless night,’ he wrote, ‘I trod with a lofty step the ruins of the Forum; each memorable spot, where Romulus stood, or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell (how strange that Gibbon of all men should make this error!), was at present to my eye.’” (Morton, 60) Alas, there is little that remains of the Forum today although archaeological work goes on.

As for Gibbon, it would be twelve years before the first volume of *The History of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published. Altogether, Gibbon’s work spans thousands of pages and is published in six volumes, the last of which was completed in 1788, just six years before his death.

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JOHN MILTON AND THE WOLF IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING

Following his graduation from Cambridge, the English poet John Milton spent five years caring for his ailing parents before taking his Grand Tour. But in 1638, Milton’s mother died, and the poet found himself “desirous ... of seeing foreign parts, especially Italy, and with my father’s consent I set forth, accompanied by a single attendant.” (Orgel, 321) Milton spent two years on his tour, twice visiting Rome.

Born in 1608, Milton devoted himself, even as a young boy, to the study of literature. He recalls, “My father destined me in early childhood for the study of literature, for which I had so keen an appetite that from my twelfth year scarcely ever did I leave my studies for my bed before the hour of midnight.” Still, when he entered Cambridge, his ambition was to obtain an education in theology and, following graduation, enter the ministry of the Church of England. He spent seven years at Cambridge forming his own ideas about the organization of religion, many of which were at odds with the hierarchy of the Anglican Church. He also wrote poetry at Cambridge, finding a literary voice that would eventually produce some of the greatest poetry written in the English language. Finally giving up the idea of a career as a clergyman, Milton returned home to his father’s country estate to care for his ailing parents, where he immersed himself in his beloved books and continued writing verse.

A year before leaving on his tour, Milton published the poem *Lycidas*, written as a tribute to a friend who died in a shipwreck after entering the priesthood. Literary scholars have interpreted several lines of the poem to include a sharp attack on the Catholic church:

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The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swoll’n with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours space, and nothing said.
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But that two-handed engine at the door,
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.
(Orgel, 42)

Scholars have concluded that the “grim wolf” is the Catholic church, a reference to Matthew 7:15, which contains the admonishment to “beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” A year later, his attack on the Roman Catholic Church was very much on his mind as he made his way down the Italian peninsula. Indeed, on his second visit to the Eternal City, Milton harbored reservations about making the trip, believing his life was in danger. In his essay, Second Defence of the English People, Milton writes:

As I was on the point of returning to Rome, I was warned by merchants that they had learned through letters of plots laid against me by the English Jesuits, should I return to Rome, because of the freedom with which I had spoken about religion. For I had determined within myself that in those parts I would not indeed begin a conversation about religion, but if questioned about my faith would hide nothing, whatever the consequences. And so, I none the less returned to Rome. What I was, if any man inquired, I concealed from no one. For almost two more months, in the very stronghold of the Pope, if anyone attacked the orthodox religion, I openly, as before, defended it. Thus, by the will of God, I returned again in safety to Florence, revisiting friends who were as anxious to see me as if it were my native land to which I had returned. (Orgel, 322)

Evidently, by the fall Milton made his peace with the Catholics because on October 30, 1638, the poet dined at the English College, the Venerabile Collegio Inglese, a seminary for student priests from England. It is likely they had much to talk about.

Milton did survive the tour, returning home to become an advocate for parliamentary government and human rights. His poetry centered on even grander themes; his epic, Paradise Lost,

### The Venerable English College

By the time John Milton visited the venerable English College, the Venerabile Collegio Inglese, in 1638 the seminary on the Via di Monserrato already had a notorious reputation in England.

At the college, young priests were trained in the Roman Catholic rites, then sent to Britain to spread the faith to their countrymen. Alas, the practice did not sit well with the Anglican authorities back home. Between 1581 and 1678, forty-four Collegio Inglese graduates were rounded up by English authorities. The young priests were tortured, tried, and sent to the gallows. The college was founded in 1576 by British Cardinal William Allen, who took over a hospice that tended to the needs of poor and infirm British Catholics making their pilgrimages to Rome.

Since 1818, the seminary has been known as the “Venerable English College” because of the forty-four priests who were martyred as well as 130 priests who suffered imprisonment and exile; forty-one of the priests have been canonized or beatified by the Roman Catholic Church.

According to H.V. Morton, author of the 1957 guide to the city, A Traveller in Rome, the school has an appreciation for the theater, dating back to its earliest days. Morton wrote that the diarist John Evelyn visited in 1644, where he dined “and afterwards saw an Italian comedy acted by the alumni before the Cardinals; again, the following year he dined at the College and this time saw an English play. How interesting it is that the College should have retained its histrionic traditions; for I heard that the alumni were at that moment rehearsing HMS Pinafore.” (Morton, 310–11)
relates Adam’s fall from grace, placing it in the context of a cosmic drama that examines the birth of the struggle between good and evil. A lesser work, *Paradise Regained*, tells of human salvation through Christ, and includes several lines that salute the Eternal City:

All nations now to Rome obedience pay,
To Rome’s great emperor, whose wide domain
In ample territory, wealth and power,
Civility of manners, arts and arms,
And long renown thou justly mayst prefer
(Orgel, 656)

Milton went blind in his later years and suffered a brief term of imprisonment during the Restoration, but kept writing and amused himself with music and good conversation with his peers. He died in 1674.

**TOBIAS SMOLLETT ENTERS FROM THE NORTH**

Not every Englishman who traveled through the Continent did so with the intent of sowing his wild oats. The Scottish author Tobias Smollett crossed the English Channel on his way to the Continent in June 1763 at the age of forty-two. He was accompanied by his wife, Nancy. Indeed, the Smolletts were hardly in a festive mood. Just before leaving for their tour, the Smolletts suffered the death of their fifteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth. Smollett also suffered from asthma, a condition aggravated by London’s foggy climate. They hoped the sunny weather ahead in southern France and along the Italian peninsula would cheer them up and, according to Smollett, “prove favourable to the weak state of my lungs.” (Smollett, 15)

Born in 1721, Smollett grew up with the ambition to be a soldier but his grandfather, who was supporting him, had already bought a commission in the military for Smollett’s older brother and did not want to incur the expense again. So at the age of fifteen Tobias was sent off to college in Glasgow, where he studied the healing arts. Smollett left college and headed for London a qualified surgeon, but by then his interest had been drawn to the literary world. His first attempt at writing produced the play *The Regicide*, a tragedy dramatizing the death of James I. It was, by most accounts, a laughable attempt at literature. Undeterred, Smollett kept writing, even though he was proving utterly incapable of supporting himself with the written word. Destitute and near starvation, Smollett was finally forced to accept an appointment as a ship’s surgeon, which caused a delay in his development as a writer for nearly four years as his vessel, under the command of Admiral Vernon, headed for the West Indies and the siege of Cartegena. Smollett returned to London in 1744, where he established a practice of surgery. He had also married well, meeting the beautiful heiress Nancy Lascelles during his time in the West Indies—they married in 1747. His professional and personal life now secure, Smollett returned to writing and, in 1748, produced his masterpiece: *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, a boisterous comedy about a sailor that portrayed the British tar as a hard-drinking, fun-loving fellow, always ready for a good fight and a good joke. Other literary successes would follow.

By the time the Smolletts departed on their tour, Tobias was a well-respected, albeit curmudgeonly, man of letters. In the months to follow, he took careful notes while on the tour and in 1766, shortly after his return, Smollett published *Travels Through Italy and France*, his guide to the two most traveled nations on the tour.

The Smolletts arrived in Rome sometime between February 25 and 28, 1765. They approached the city from the north, traveling along the Via Flaminia. Arriving at the Tiber River, they crossed over the Ponte Molle:

You may guess what I felt at first sight of the city of Rome, which, notwithstanding all the calamities it has undergone, still maintains an august and imperial appearance. It stands
Constantine out of Rome, maintaining his rule of the empire. Still, the two armies prepared for battle.

Late in the afternoon of October 27, the eve of the battle, Constantine looked toward the setting sun and had a vision: He saw a cross emblazoned on the sun, and heard, spoken in Greek, the words: "Under this sign, you will conquer." The next day, the two armies clashed, and Constantine emerged the victor. Maxentius' army retreated, but Constantine's men showed them no mercy. Many men were slaughtered on the bridge. Maxentius met his death on the north bank of the Tiber. Constantine entered Rome and claimed the empire. And since it was the sign of the cross that had led him to victory, Constantine, who had been a pagan, declared an end to the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, clearing the way for Christianity to explode as the dominant religion of Europe: "Nothing of the antient bridge remains but the piles," Smollett said. (Smollett, 221)

Smollett crossed the Tiber—he called it "foul, deep, and rapid"—and noted that "the bed of this river has been considerably raised by the rubbish of old Rome, and this is the reason given for its being so apt to overflow its banks." (Smollett, 221) Following the Via Flaminia, Smollett arrived at the city, entering at the Porta del Popolo, "an elegant piece of architecture, adorned with marble columns and statues ... Within side you find yourself in a noble piazza, from whence three of the principal streets of Rome are detached. It is adorned with the famous Egyptian obelisk, brought hither from the Circus Maximus, and set by the architect Dominico Fontana in the pontifical care of Sixtus V. Here is likewise a beautiful fountain designed by the same artist; and at the beginning of the two principal streets, are two very elegant churches fronting each other: Such an august entrance cannot fail to impress a stranger with a sublime idea of this venerable city." (Smollett, 222–23)

The three roads that converge at the northern gate, the Porta del Popolo, are the Via Flaminia as well as the Via del Babuino and the Via del Corso, although a number of smaller streets also
converge at the scene, which is now a plaza, and is known as the Piazza del Popolo. Smollett apparently missed the show, but it was not unusual to find condemned criminals on public display in the gate, often tortured for the entertainment of the citizenry. The obelisk Smollett described was moved to the Porta del Popolo in 1589 from its previous home at the Circus Maximus. The two churches—the Santa Maria dei Miracoli and the Santa Maria di Monte Santo, were erected in the 1660s by the architect Carlo Rainaldi. In 1655, Queen Christina of Sweden, who abdicated her throne after converting to Catholicism, arrived in the Eternal City on the Via Flaminia. She stopped at the gate to find it featuring a plaque engraved in her honor by the baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, with the words: “Felice Fausto Ingressui,” meaning “a happy and blessed arrival.”

The Eternal City played an important role in the lives of the three great poets of the Romantic age: Byron, Keats, and Shelley. Indeed, Lord Byron reserved a prominent place for Rome in one of his most famous works, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, while Shelley drew on his knowledge of the city’s history and its people while authoring his play, *The Cenci*. Certainly, Shelley’s dark story of a murderous Italian family does not rank among the poet’s most important works—few contemporary theatrical groups attempt to tackle the tragedy—nevertheless, the somber mood of the play can probably be attributed to the fact that Shelley wrote the tragedy shortly after the death of his young son.

As for John Keats, the poet lived in Rome for just a few months before his death—hoping that the warm Mediterranean breezes would cure his tuberculosis. He is believed to have done little or no writing while living in a home at the foot of the Spanish Steps, the Scalinata di Trinità dei Monti. Sickly, melancholy, bitter over his treatment by the British literary critics and separated from Fanny Brawne, the woman he loved, Keats died in 1821 at the age of twenty-five. It is truly sad that while living