

Keats-Shelley House

On the night of February 23, 1821, in a modest apartment beside the Spanish Steps, a man died. In his native England, he had some small notoriety as the author of a few failed books of verse. But in Rome, where he had lived for the past three months, he was almost completely unknown. The city government's only reaction to his death was to order his furniture and belongings burnt.

The dead man's name was John Keats, and he was 25 years old.

Three days later, Keats was laid to rest just outside the ancient Aurelian walls, in the overgrown field designated by the papal government for non-Catholic burials. There, in the shadow of the great pyramid tomb of Gaius Cestius, Keats' friends set up a simple tombstone inscribed with the epitaph the poet had written for himself: *Here lies one whose name was writ in water.*

By the time Keats was buried there, Rome's Protestant Cemetery was nearly a century old. It had been established in response to an influx of tourists from non-Catholic northern Europe, where – particularly in England – the fashion had developed for young men from aristocratic backgrounds to finish their educations with a grand tour of Europe.

These young lords were typically equipped with a university education, a great deal of ready cash, and a small entourage – which, depending on the inclinations of the tourist, might or might not include a tutor. From England, grand tourists crossed the channel to Belgium or France, making their way to Paris. After a short stay there, they proceeded south, often stopping in Switzerland before crossing the Alps into Italy. After a stay among the artistic treasures and expatriate colony of Florence, they proceeded to Rome, where they often settled for months.

Rome had always been a tourist destination; but for centuries, the bulk of her visitors had been Catholic pilgrims. Although the grand tourists were certainly fascinated by Rome's churches, they were at least equally interested in the city's ancient remains. In 1764, Edward Gibbon was inspired to write his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* while standing on the Capitoline Hill. Twenty years later, Goethe was so enthralled by the ruins of Rome that he spent three months in the city, accompanying a small group of German painters as they sketched leaning columns and shattered walls.

These painters were part of a burgeoning artistic community that produced views of Rome – *vedute* – as souvenirs for the Grand Tourists. Whether painted or engraved, *vedute* typically combined almost photographically accurate representations of Roman landscapes with a few brightly-costumed locals in picturesque poses. The paintings and engravings of the greatest *vedutisti* – artists like Giovanni Paolo Panini and Giovanni Battista Piranesi – became iconic, and made the ruins of Rome a definitive part of the European imagination.

Panini and Piranesi flourished in the early and mid-eighteenth century – a period that was in many ways the heyday of the Grand Tour. From the mid-1790s onward, travel to the Italian Peninsula was made difficult – at least for English tourists – by the Napoleonic Wars.

After Napoleon conquered much of northern Italy in the campaign that made his reputation, the Papal States became first a French satellite, and then part of France. Napoleon, a great admirer of Julius Caesar, saw himself as an heir to the Roman emperors. The center of his empire, however, was in Paris; and so, besides commissioning such Roman-themed Parisian monuments as the Arc de Triomphe, Napoleon ordered many of Rome's greatest artistic treasures shipped to the Louvre. He even compelled Pope Pius VII to come to Paris for his coronation, where he crowned himself in a neat reversal of the ceremony enacted by Leo III and Charlemagne more than a millennium before.

After Waterloo, however, Rome reverted to the popes, and the flow of northern European tourists resumed, swelling every year as roads and ships improved. Increasingly, the young lords were joined by those of less exalted social station, including a fair number of middle-class convalescents journeying to Italy for the sake of their health. John Keats belonged to this class of visitors.

Keats was born into a family that, though not quite poor, was far from aristocratic. After receiving a solid education at a local school, he was apprenticed to a surgeon at age 15. Although he progressed well in his training, he grew restless, and, sometime in his late teens, began to write poetry. At first, this was only a hobby; but as his interest deepened and he became increasingly dissatisfied with the thought of life as a neighborhood doctor, he began to dream of a career in literature. Finally, shortly after his twenty-first birthday, he abandoned his medical training and set out to be a full-time poet.

Like most full-time poets, he found his new career more difficult than he had anticipated; and it was only after two years of penury and critical failures that Keats began to produce the poems that would make his reputation.

The first was the unfinished Miltonic epic *Hyperion*. Next came *The Eve of St. Agnes*, a beautifully-crafted romance, and the haunting ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Then, over the course of a few weeks in spring 1819, Keats produced five of his six "Great Odes," sometimes described as the finest group of short poems in English. Their tenor is neatly summarized by the last lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn:"

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

In less than a year, Keats had composed some of the most lyrical and moving verse in the English language. In little more than a year, he would be dead.

Through the fall of 1818, Keats had nursed his younger brother Tom, who was dying of tuberculosis. In the process, he caught the disease himself. Just as the first appreciative reviews of his poems started to appear, he began to cough up blood. The hemorrhages became

progressively worse, leaving Keats emaciated and exhausted. Finally, on the advice of his doctor, he decided to travel to Rome, hoping that the warmer climate would restore his health.

Keats arrived in November 1820, desperately weak. With his friend, the painter Joseph Severn, he took rooms in a building beside the Spanish Steps, in a neighborhood closely associated with foreign authors and artists. Through the first few weeks of his stay, Keats felt vigorous enough to explore Rome, and even took a few short rides in the campagna. As the weather cooled, however, he faded quickly, and was effectively bedridden from mid-December onward. Nursed by Severn, he lingered on for three months, and finally, quietly, died.

Keats' reputation grew rapidly after his death. Victorian critics admired him extravagantly; and around the turn of the twentieth century, a coalition of British and American diplomats and poets took it upon themselves to buy and restore Keats' Roman house as a museum. The Keats-Shelley Memorial House was opened in 1909, and – with a brief hiatus during the Second World War – has remained open since.

Although hordes of tourists stream up and down the Spanish Steps, the Keats-Shelley Memorial House never seems to have more than a few visitors. Memorabilia of Keats, Shelley, and Byron line the walls, and the blended aromas of varnish and old books perfume the air. In the front of the museum, overlooking the Steps and the Piazza, is Keats' narrow bedroom. To stand here, and to look up at the high wooden ceiling Keats stared at through his nights of agony, can be a genuinely moving experience.

Keats, as I said, had few admirers in life. But among those few, fortunately, was Percy Shelley, whose long elegy *Adonais* combines a song of mourning for the dead poet with a celebration of his poetry's immortality. The 54th stanza is especially fine:

The breath whose might I have invok'd in song
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

I last visited the Keats-Shelley house on a drizzly afternoon in May. As usual, the musty rooms were almost empty, and I was alone in Keats' bedroom. As I watched groups of tourists, umbrellas flapping, scurry across the shining piazza, it occurred to me that Keats would have seen much the same thing from that window two hundred years earlier – tourists of a dozen countries, drawn by some combination of curiosity and restlessness and resolution to this corner of the ancient capital of the world.

The era of the Grand Tour is long past; but Rome continues to fascinate.