

Legion of the dead in Rome

By Harry Eyres

Published: Financial Times, April 16 2010 23:20 | Last updated: April 16 2010 23:20

Something of a false alarm took me to the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. I'd heard that the final resting place of Keats and Shelley had been placed on the World Monuments Fund list of the world's 100 most endangered sites. I'd read a piece by the cemetery's former director, written in 2006, warning that the place might have to close its doors within two years if new sources of funding were not found.

But the doors on Via Caio Cestio, named after the Roman magistrate – and, in the view of Thomas Hardy, jumped-up nobody – whose burial pyramid erected in 12BC stands guard over the site, were open and welcoming. Everything inside seemed hunky-dory, if one can use that phrase of a cemetery. Daisies and violets peeped from the grass beneath the majestic old pines and cypresses, in the oldest section of the cemetery, once part of the Roman People's Meadows, where Keats and his friend Joseph Severn are buried.

All the neglect that I'd been expecting to find within the enclosure – one side is guarded by a section of the Aurelian city wall – I experienced outside of it. I decided to travel by metro, and regretted my decision when faced with bestial overcrowding, graffiti-scrawled carriages and defaced maps, with the truly bizarre accompaniment of a news item broadcast through the intercom about Hugh Hefner – “still the playboy at 84”. I recalled we were entering the ninth year of the reign of the Emperor Silvio Berlusconi.

Emerging at Piramide station, I had to run the gauntlet of the traffic round the Porta San Paolo, “the hellish Roman traffic” as Kenneth Clark called it, which pays no respect to pedestrian crossings and whose constant ill-tempered snarl and pollution go a fair way towards destroying the beauty of the Eternal City. Caius Cestius's pyramid, covered with grime a couple of years ago, then laboriously cleaned up, was already half-black again with pollution.

When you visit the Protestant Cemetery you may think the realm of the dead offers a better model for community and amenity than the realm of the living. The place's official title is Cimitero Acattolico (Non-Catholic cemetery), which sounds a bit odd or paradoxical, but is meant to draw attention to the fact that not only Protestants, and certainly not only English Romantic poets, are buried here.

Eclectic cemetery might be the best name; there are Muslims and Jews here, Chinese and Japanese, the odd Zoroastrian, not to mention atheists (Shelley among them) and a fair number of Catholics, married to non-Catholics. By far the most visited tomb, apart from those of Keats and Shelley (whose ashes were brought here after his body, washed up on the shore near Viareggio, was cremated), is that of Antonio Gramsci, the most humane of communists.

The current director, one of those enthusiastic and capable Englishwomen you find running things all over the world in places they may have ended up for romantic reasons and who has turned the place's fortunes around, commented that a cemetery was like a library, only 10 times better. I started to have fantasies about an immense novel linking the stories of all those buried in a place that Oscar Wilde called “the holiest ... in Rome”. Not all are poets, but many are artists of one sort or another. The cemetery reminds you of how Rome acted as an irresistible magnet to so many

northern Europeans and Americans whose souls vibrated to other harmonies than those of industry and commerce. As Swedish physician and writer Axel Munthe put it, in prose that now seems purplish, “full of enthusiasm and young joy they journeyed hither, hailing the Eternal City as their mother”. Here lie the German painters Carl Fohr and Asmus Jacob Carstens, the Russian painter Karl Briullov, the Dutch sculptor Pier Pander, the Swedish art historian Jacob Bystrom, the German architect Gottfried Semper. Many of them, not just Keats and Shelley, died tragically young.

The most beautiful, haunting and abstract memorial in the cemetery is that of the young Scottish baronet James MacDonald, who died of malaria aged 25 in 1766, designed in the form of a truncated column by his close friend GB Piranesi. All who knew MacDonald were impressed by his range of learning and felt he was destined for greatness. Perhaps the most romantically tragic story is that of the young Englishwoman Rosa Bathurst, loved for her intelligence and beauty, who was drowned in the Tiber aged 16.

All are gathered amicably in death, with no distinctions or prejudices of race or religion or wealth.

Meanwhile, the Roman traffic continues to snarl around the Porta San Paolo; as a first step towards rendering the realm of the living more livable, might the Roman authorities consider rerouting the traffic and reconnecting the cemetery with the gate and the pyramid?

www.ft.com/harryeyres