

SWEET SORROW: ROME'S NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY

THE CAPITAL'S NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IS AN ACTIVE PLACE OF MOURNING AS WELL AS BEING A TREASURE TROVE OF HISTORY

Mary Wilsey

The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.

Shelley's preface to his poem *Adonais* (1821)

Shelley's three-year-old son William was buried in "so sweet a place" in the summer of 1819, his friend and fellow poet, John Keats, early in 1821, and only a year later it was Shelley's turn. His body was cremated on the beach where he drowned near Livorno in summer 1822 but his ashes were brought to the cemetery in Rome; not to be placed in that "open space" he loved so much, but in the new cemetery, up close to the Aurelian walls. One wonders what Mary Shelley, still in her early 20s, must have thought of so much death.

But Shelley was right, and this is still a special place. Here ugliness gives way to beauty, darkness to light, sadness to a sense of peace. Young



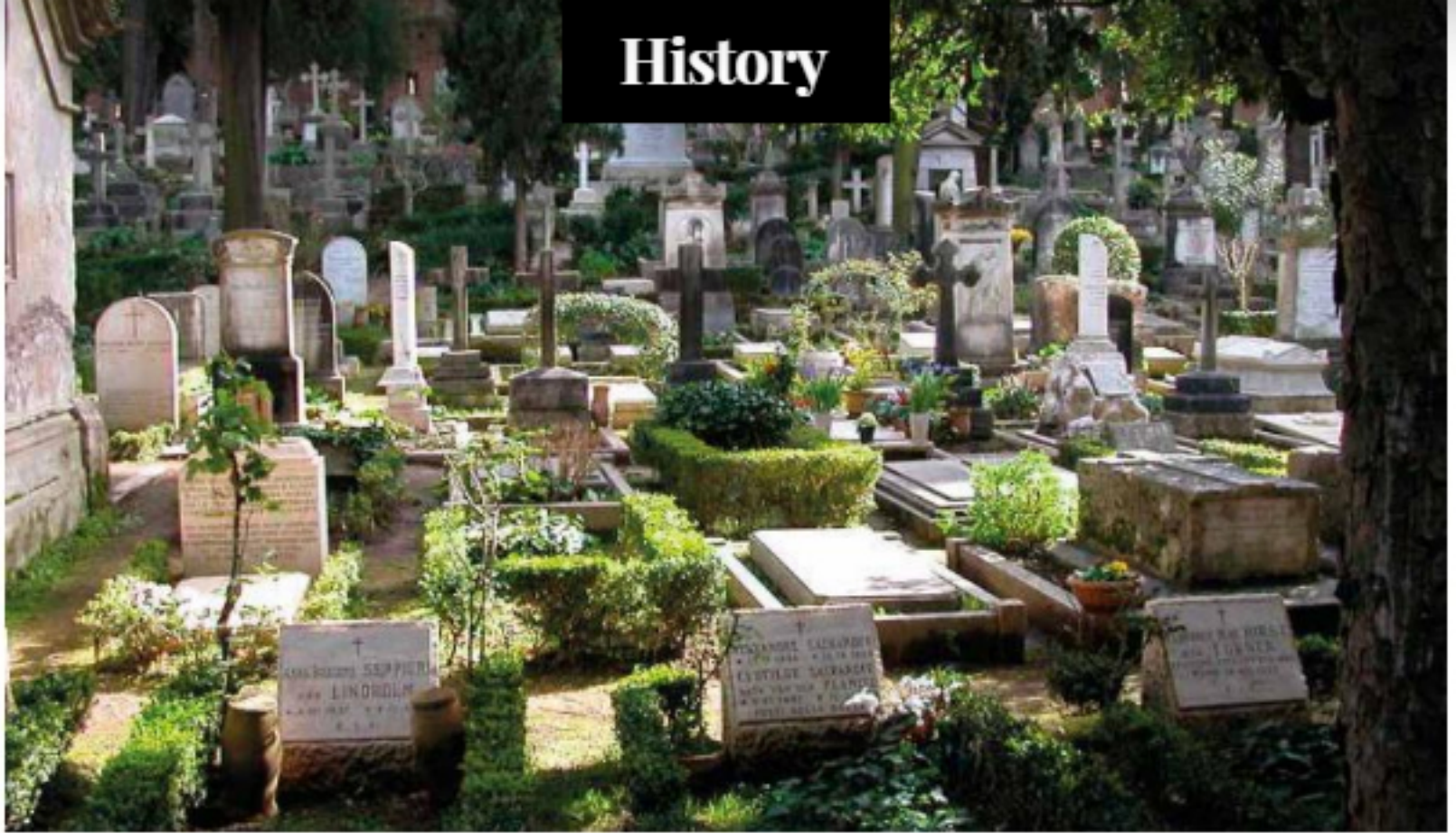
Non-Catholic Cemetery illustration by Jane Horton.

couples in love with life wander among the graves, volunteers welcome you with smiles, cats meander across the grass, and flowers and bushes push up through the smallest of spaces, living nature among the dead. These days there are not only the violets and daisies as described by Shelley, but a magnificent memorial garden of trees and flowering shrubs; wisteria, iris, roses, plumbago, olives, and of course the pines and cypresses.

The Non-Catholic Cemetery is fortunate in its setting, although that was not the intention when the first burials took place there in the early 18th century. The open grazing ground for sheep near the Pyramid of Cestius was to provide for the mainly Protestant supporters of the deposed Catholic Stuart king of England and Scotland, exiled in Rome. It was an alternative solution for Protestants who were not allowed access to Catholic places of burial. Above all it was a long way from the inhabited parts of the city. In 1821 it would have been a considerable effort for Joseph Severn to get the body of his young friend, John Keats, from Piazza di Spagna, where he had died of tuberculosis, to the foot of the pyramid, especially when there were strict measures in force against contagion from the disease.

Keats was among the last to be buried on the original site which was closed in 1822 by the papal authorities, who feared that the growing number of mounds and monuments there would eventually impede the view and access to the pyramid. New ground was made available alongside, on the slope beneath the Aurelian walls. This is the part that now rises steeply from the large entrance gate up to the walls and towers

History



Rome's Non-Catholic Cemetery is located in the shadow of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius.

and then through various tiers and the additional zones added over the following decades.*

The once-open space described by Shelley is now enclosed. And instead of being a place of exclusion from Catholic cemeteries it has become one of the most sought-after burial places in the city, but still almost exclusively for non-Catholics. Although initially it was mainly north European and American Protestants who were buried there, hence the once popular name of the Protestant cemetery, there is also an Orthodox section, and Jewish and Muslim graves. There are inscriptions in more than 15 languages.

The cemetery is both an Italian site of interest and has been listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site since 1980. Poets of course will make for the graves of Keats and Shelley, and Italian historians and politicians for the last resting place of Antonio Gramsci, neo-Marxist philosopher and founder of the Italian Communist Party. Contemporary artists will look for Jannis Kounellis and the followers of the Inspector Montalbano novels can now visit the grave of the Sicilian writer Andrea Camilleri who was buried there last summer. Others may visit for the 19th-century funeral monuments and sculpture and some may just want to soak up the inspiration from this treasure trove of history.

But for all its attractions the Non-Catholic Cemetery is first and foremost a working cemetery. The director, Amanda Thursfield, is ever mindful of

that delicate balance between a place of mourning and an historical site loved by tourists. Very aware that she is constantly working with the bereaved, one of her most endearing policies is to keep a space for one coffin burial permanently available at any time. Certainly as a mourning relative, up against so many new problems, one would feel immediate relief and comfort to be surrounded by the kindness and thoughtfulness of Thursfield.

She combines a feeling of warmth with a quiet confidence about the daily work of running a cemetery. She estimates that there are probably on average about 20 coffin burials a year, which is not a great deal, but as cremations become more and more frequent the requests for placing ashes and plaques have increased, as have those for memorial and thanksgiving services for loved ones.

It is one of the oldest burial grounds in constant use in Europe. But the history of the cemetery has been chequered with difficulties between the foreign legations in Rome and the papal authorities who once ruled the city, and then by the new city government after unification of Italy in 1870. It has been fought over, literally, a couple of times, first in the 1848 uprising to establish the Republic of Rome and then again at the end of world war two as Allied troops battled their way into the city. Damage was soon put to rights, but at the end of the 20th century, and even in the first few years of the new one, not only were the doors almost permanently shut, but the cemetery was near insolvency. Thanks to Thursfield and a group



The Scuola Popolare di Musica di Testaccio bid farewell to Geoffrey Watson on 8 February. Photo courtesy David Cull.

of volunteers it is now open from 09.00-17.00 Monday to Friday, all day Saturday and on Sunday until 12.30. In addition strict accounting, as well as donations from a dedicated group of Friends of the Cemetery, has meant that the cemetery is once again solvent. A committee of 15 ambassadors (the British ambassador took over as president from the Finnish ambassador last year), a lawyer, a treasurer and an expert in the restoration of monuments now keeps vigilant control.

When Thursfield took over in 2008 another of her jobs was to reorganise the administration. This has included data-basing the 2,500 burial plots in the cemetery, which has simplified the collection of the annual fees, which were badly in arrears before she became director. For a single burial plot these amount to about €600 a year between the concession, which lasts for 30 years and is renewable, and the annual maintenance.

The daily administration is considerable, whether keeping up with the active concessions or organising the lengthy procedures (and often quite expensive ones) for the gradual removal of the remains in the non-active graves (about half of the 2,500 total) to free up space. A more unexpected aspect is looking after the trees and plants, not to mention the cats. The 435 trees in her charge are demanding and now all have frequent health checks and if any need to be taken out, they are replaced by new ones.

Many of the pines and the cypresses, which had been neglected for years, were diseased and dangerously old. Fallen branches and trees are difficult (and expensive) to extract from the tightly-packed graves but also a danger to both people and the monuments. In spring 2019 a cypress split in two one night but luckily only caused slight damage to the Obolenskaya tomb which had only recently been restored.

For all of this the cemetery remains a place of inspiration, whether for literature, the visual arts, or even just the history of its foreign community. This has become even more so with the recent opening of a small space for exhibitions not far from the visitors' centre. It has already hosted several artists, including one last summer of works by Edith Schloss, art critic of *Wanted in Rome* for many years. The celebration was to mark the 100th anniversary of her birth and it seemed fitting that her grave was only a short walk away.

Over the years the cemetery has also become a special place in *Wanted in Rome's* history, with the death of many of its founders and friends buried or remembered there. The most recent event was to give thanks for the life of Geoffrey Watson. For many years Geoffrey was one of the pillars of the magazine and the Milan website, but his role started long before that, when as head of the British embassy press office he always treated the fledgling magazine with the same respect as he did the big national and international media. After he retired he became part of our team, keeping us on the straight and narrow with his unflinching attention to detail. His meticulous proof reading, his anecdotes and his comments became a vital part of the office buzz. It was very much in keeping with Geoffrey and the cemetery that he had a happy send-off by his family, friends and the Scuola Popolare di Musica di Testaccio on 8 February. Sadly only 24 hours later we heard of the death of the sculptor Peter Rockwell. Peter was another friend and supporter of *Wanted in Rome* for many years, with his illustrations, articles and advice. He died in his native United States but in the spring his ashes will be brought back to the cemetery, where he worked tirelessly as a volunteer, sculptor and a world expert on stone carving during his last years in Rome. Here he will rest beside his wife Cinny.

* Nicholas Stanley-Price wrote a detailed history of many aspects of the cemetery to mark the 300th anniversary of the first burial there in 1716.