



NEWSLETTER

Piranesi and the tomb of Macdonald



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

The tomb of Macdonald

The name of Giovanni Battista Piranesi will always be associated with Rome, thanks to his astonishing series of etchings of the city and its antiquities. Rarely is it associated with the Non-Catholic Cemetery, where one of the few works designed by him and actually executed is visible today.

This is his monument to a young Scot, Sir James Macdonald, who died - probably of malaria - at Frascati in 1766. The monument is stark in its simplicity, consisting of a re-used Roman column set on a high travertine base. The truncated column symbolises a life cut short (a concept that was to be much imitated subsequently) and has been re-cut to resemble a Roman milestone. On its upper part are carved two symmetrical *tabulae ansatae* - a form widely used in imperial Rome for votive tablets. On one of them a nine-line inscription in Latin records that Piranesi dedicated this memorial to the deceased.

The only building work that Piranesi designed and executed was a restoration of the façade and interior of the church of the Knights of the Order of Malta on the Aventine, together with the splendid piazza that precedes it. (Nowadays it is best known for the view of the cupola of St Peter's, seen through the keyhole of the door to the Priory's garden.) Piranesi worked at S. Maria del Priorato in 1764-1766 at the request of Cardinal Giambattista Rezzonico, the Grand Prior of the Order. The Cardinal also arranged for Piranesi's body to be interred in the church following the latter's death in 1778. There lies the only other tomb that we know Piranesi designed - his own.

When Macdonald died in July 1766, Piranesi would have been completing his project on the Aventine. He was already familiar with the Cemetery, a short walk further out into the meadows, having devoted an etching in the *Antichità Romane* (1756) to Gaius Cestius' monumental tomb seen from inside the walls. There would have been few visible traces then of the Protestant burial ground. The only tomb earlier than 1766 that is visible today is that of Baron von Werpup who had died the previous year. Other burials, such as that of George Langton (died 1738), had been made right at the foot of the Pyramid. So Piranesi's monument to Macdonald was among the earliest in the cemetery. In his journal entry for 12 August 1793, William Forbes describes the tomb and comments that Piranesi and Macdonald were close friends.

But who was Sir James Macdonald? Born into the Macdonald clan on the island of Skye in Scotland, the 8th Baronet of Sleat (1741-1766) astounded all those he met for showing an intelligence and knowledge far beyond his young age. James Boswell met him a few times and called him "remarkable" and extraordinary" and wished he could be like him. Less charitably, Horace Walpole had observed: "He is rather too wise for his age, and too fond of showing it, but when he has seen more of the world, he will choose to know less". In his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell reproduces the long inscription on another memorial to Macdonald in his home church of Sleat. He also appends the text of the last two letters that Macdonald wrote his mother, the second one composed at Frascati on the very evening before he died.

By then he seems also to have impressed a number of cardinals in Rome, for a contemporary account asserts that the Pope himself wanted Macdonald (a Protestant) to receive a proper funeral. If true, this indicates some official tolerance of the "Protestant burial ground" (significantly, the Pope was Clement XIII Rezzonico, uncle of Piranesi's patron mentioned earlier).

As did many wealthy young men, Macdonald set off after his education to travel in Europe, where he was particularly well received because of his outstanding talents. After a spell in Rome he travelled to Naples in January 1766 with Laurence Sterne (whose success with *Tristram Shandy* opened doors to him too) and a Henry Errington. Sterne and Errington returned to Rome for the Holy Week celebrations, leaving Macdonald in Naples and not realising how serious his illness was. The poor Scot eventually returned to Frascati where he died, his youthful promise unfulfilled. The memorial to him in Skye, erected by his mother in 1768, is off the beaten track, and plans by his relatives in the 1790s to erect a larger monument to him in Rome came to nothing. So the simple monument in the Cemetery survives as a friend's tribute to Macdonald and as a work of Piranesi that deserves to be better known.



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

The inscription on the Macdonald tomb

Nicholas Stanley-Price

This article draws on Roberta Battaglia, "Giovanni Battista Piranesi e il monumento funebre: la tomba Macdonald," *Prospettiva* 73/74 (1994), 169-179.

WHO THEY WERE...

Caroline Petigru Carson (1820-1892)

Caroline Petigru Carson was the kind of woman that people from the American South call a Steel Magnolia – she was well brought up, trained in the social niceties and traditional manners of the Old South, yet she had backbone and tenacity. The maxim she followed and taught to her sons was “Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re” (Gentle in manner, resolute in execution).



Caroline Carson (1820-1892),
Self portrait in pink (courtesy LaVonne Phillips)

Her journey through life was not always a smooth one. She had a good education, spoke French and Italian, and was always the belle of any ball. She was taught sketching and painting, but only as skills that a lady might use for her own amusement or the pleasure of others. Married off at twenty-one, she found herself an impoverished widow with two sons by the age of thirty-six and was to experience financial insecurity for the remainder of her life.

With money raised by friends of her late father, Caroline moved to a small house in New York City, where she lived for almost ten years. Having become a member of the genteel poor (though always with



Caroline Carson (1820-1892),
Pomegranate branch (courtesy LaVonne Phillips)

her own maid), Caroline sold her diamonds to pay for her son's education and lived from gifts, from jobs tinting photographs, and from the occasional sale of her paintings. In late 1872, she accepted an assignment to accompany the daughters of a friend to Italy. The trip was cancelled but Caroline received payment anyway, which allowed her to plunge into a new life.

In December 1872, she arrived alone in Rome and was immediately caught up in the expatriate social life, spending her first Christmas at the home of the American diplomat and banker James Clinton Hooker. By November 1873, she was ensconced in an apartment on Via delle Quattro Fontane in the centre of the American art colony in Rome. She complained about the climate and suffered from recurring bouts of bronchitis and other ailments, but that did not stop her from accepting the many invitations that came for parties, drives and trips.

Caroline's sojourn in Rome is documented in her letters to her younger son James, a selection of which have been edited by William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease in *The Roman Years of a South Carolina Artist: Caroline Carson's Letters Home, 1872-1892* (University of South Carolina Press, 2003). It is these letters which allow us to peer into a life punctuated by festive events at the home of sculptor William Wetmore Story in Palazzo Barberini or at Caroline's own weekly salons, where resident artists and visitors to Rome came to share gossip and ideas. Her social circle included the families of sculptor Richard Greenough and landscape painter William Stanley Haseltine, with whose family she spent Christmas in 1883.

Having arrived as less than a polished artist, Caroline Carson studied painting seriously in Rome and by 1881 was an accomplished water-colourist, known for her paintings of flowers. She was the first foreigner and the only woman invited to join the Roman Society of Watercolourists (*Societa' degli Acquarellisti*), founded in 1876. Caroline travelled in summer with friends, producing landscapes at Villa d'Este, Siena, Bagni di Lucca, Sorrento, Perugia and others in northern Europe. In Rome, she developed her considerable talents as a portraitist and her work was selling well by 1883, though she fretted about how many portraits she painted as "gifts" for family and close friends. Some of her work is in public collections in the United States.

Evidence suggests that Caroline Carson suffered from cancer, which began to keep her away from her easel and ultimately caused her death in 1892. She was the first woman artist to be buried in the Non-Catholic Cemetery.

Contributed by Sharri Whiting, who with the Colonial Dames of America and other volunteers is preparing a database of the more than 800 Americans buried in the Cemetery. To volunteer, please contact sharriwhiting@yahoo.com.

George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882)

No American has excelled in a greater number of diverse areas than George Perkins Marsh, who was born in Vermont in 1801 and died in Tuscany in 1882 after 21 years as the American envoy to Italy. Marsh is best remembered today as the author of *Man and Nature*, the first major American work on the environment. He was an influential Member of Congress and a leading American diplomat.

Marsh's ancestor John Marsh had emigrated from England to New England in 1633; his grandfather had been lieutenant-governor of Vermont; his father, Charles Marsh, was a prominent lawyer who served in the U.S. Congress.

George Marsh studied at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, graduated first in his class in 1820, and became a lawyer in Vermont. After serving a term in the state legislature, in 1842 he was elected as a Whig to the first of three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. In Congress, Marsh played a key role in reconciling opposing views as to what form the Smithsonian Institution should take, after years of debate. He opposed the annexation of Texas

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George P.A. Healy (1813-1894), *G.P. Marsh* (c. 1845)
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire;
bequest of Mrs. George Perkins Marsh

because it would bring a new slave state into the Union. Along with other Whig Congressmen, including Abraham Lincoln, he opposed the Mexican War, calling it a national crime.

Zachary Taylor, a fellow Whig, became President in 1849 and named Marsh minister to Turkey. In the next four and a half years George Marsh scored diplomatic successes at Constantinople and travelled extensively throughout the Turkish Empire. On return to America he found himself deeply in debt, thanks to a low salary and a brother-in-law who had mismanaged his property, but in 1857 his fortunes took an upward turn when he became Vermont's railroad commissioner.

In 1861, as America's Civil War began, Abraham Lincoln named George Perkins Marsh the first American minister to reunified Italy. Marsh worked hard at keeping the Italian government pro-Union, and in keeping Confederate shipping out of Italian ports at a time when there was only one Union warship in the Mediterranean. Another difficult task was politely turning down the offer of Giuseppe Garibaldi, liberator of Italy, to become commander-in-chief of the Union forces. In the end Garibaldi was offered, but refused, a commission as major-general. Marsh was relieved; he opposed employing a general who viewed himself as on a par with sovereigns.

Marsh finished *Man and Nature* in Turin in 1863; it was published in America in 1864 and began to find the readership it has kept until today. Before Marsh, American and European writers welcomed the mark that humans were making on the natural world; this was progress. Marsh warned that humans were despoilers, and must become conservers and restorers of natural resources if the human environment was not to worsen.

Man and Nature did not make Marsh rich, nor did his salary. His finances were strained by having to move his household when the capital changed from Turin to Florence in 1865 and to Rome in 1871. While in Rome, Marsh was seriously embarrassed by the State Department's publication of a confidential dispatch in which he had commented that Italy was under France's thumb. Marsh enjoyed close personal relationships with Italian leaders, and the storm passed.

In July 1882 Marsh died at Vallombrosa in Tuscany, where his

friend Adolfo di Berenger had established a forestry school. His mortal remains were met on arrival in Rome by Foreign Minister Pasquale Mancini, the diplomatic corps, and a regiment of lancers and lie in the Cemetery.

Marsh's name is borne by the first centre, at Clark University in Massachusetts, created to study the human dimensions of global environmental change.

The best sources for Marsh's life are David Lowenthal's magnificent *George Perkins Marsh, Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) and the uncompleted biography by his widow, Caroline Marsh, *Life and Letters of George Perkins Marsh* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888). See also Peter Bridges, "The Polymath from Vermont," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Winter 1999, 82-94.

Contributed by Peter Bridges, minister of the American embassy at Rome in 1981-1984 and ambassador to Somalia in 1984-1986.



Who is buried here? The Cemetery databases

Many visitors to the Cemetery ask how to find a particular grave or whether a certain person is buried there. But, much as we welcome visitors, you don't have to come to the Cemetery to have these questions answered. You can consult the Cemetery's two databases at home. Both have been accessible through the internet for some time; but the recent launch of our new website was an opportunity to make access to them easier.

1. The Burial Database is compiled from the Cemetery's own records. Search it using the person's surname (*cognome*), with or without the first name (*nome*). If unsuccessful, you can search instead by place of birth (*luogo di nascita*) or search all those of that nationality (*cittadinanza*). Another option is to use the approximate date of birth or date of death, if you know one or the other (go to the *Cerca per data* option). Click on the surname(s) listed under *Risultato* and you will find details of the person(s) and the location of the grave in the Cemetery.

2. The Grave Database, a digitised plan of all graves visible in the Cemetery in 1986, was the outcome of a joint project of the British School at Rome and the Swedish Institute in Rome (and the electronic database is hosted by the Danish Academy in Rome). Directed for them by S.P.Q.Rahtz, this intensive survey recorded the location (using its own sequential numbering system), type, dimensions and inscription of each grave existing at that date. You can search by surname of the deceased, by year of death or by nationality. You can also use digitised plans of all the graves in each zone to identify the graves adjacent to the one of interest.

The two databases provide different types of information because they are based on different sources of data, leading occasionally to some discrepancies. Sometimes the discrepancies are due to variations in family names or in spelling (especially in non-Roman scripts). It is wise to search both databases before concluding that there is no record of a person you think might have been buried there.

These databases constitute an invaluable source for historians, genealogists and anyone interested in their family history. We long to integrate the two databases, updating and correcting them where needed, to create one master inventory and plan of all burials ever made in the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Do you know of a generous benefactor who might help us in this goal?

By the way, all back issues of the Friends' Newsletters are now available on our website.



How others see the Cemetery

Antal Szerb (1901-1945)

Antal Szerb was a novelist, short-story writer, essayist, historian, and scholar widely considered one of the most important Hungarian writers of the 20th century. He was born in Budapest, grew up in a middle-class family of assimilated Jews, and was a lifelong practicing Catholic. Nevertheless, with the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, Szerb was dismissed from his teaching post under the anti-Jewish laws of the time, and sent to a forced labour camp at Balf where he died.



A polyglot and intellectual by nature, Szerb read and spoke English and German in addition to Hungarian, and as a young man spent extended periods of study in France, Italy and England. György Poszler, in "The writer who believed in miracles", describes him so:

"He was a scholar amongst writers and a writer amongst scholars, that made him both a better writer and a better scholar. He believed in literature, yet he treated his faith with irony. He believed in scholarship, but he doubted his own accomplishments. Szerb was a mild-mannered man with an ever-present sceptical smile. His violent death betrays much about Hungarian history and literature in the first half of the 20th century, and about the triumph and failure of the assimilation of Jews."

The following excerpt comes from his largely autobiographical novel published in 1937, *Utas és holdvilág* (English translation by Len Rix, Pushkin Press, 2000, as *Journey by Moonlight*):

Here, among the dead...for at that moment he was walking in the little Protestant cemetery behind the pyramid of Cestius, beside the city wall. Here lay his fellows, dead men from the North, drawn here by nameless nostalgias, and here overtaken by death. This fine cemetery, with its shady wall, had always lured souls from the North with the illusion that here oblivion would be sweeter. At the end of one of Goethe's Roman elegies there stands, as a memento: Die Pyramide vorbei, leise zum Orcus hinab. "From the tomb of Cestius, the way leads gently down to Hell." Shelley, in a wonderful letter, wrote that he would like to lie here in death, and so he does, or at least his heart is there, beneath the inscription: Cor cordium.

Mihály was on the point of leaving when he noticed a small cluster of tombs standing apart in one corner of the cemetery. He went over and perused the inscriptions on the plain Empire-stones. One of them read simply, in English: "Here lies one whose name is writ in water". On the second a longer text declared that there lay Severn, the painter, the best friend and faithful nurse on his death-bed of John Keats, the great English poet, who had insisted that his name should not be inscribed on the neighbouring stone, under which he lay.

Mihály's eyes filled with tears. So here lay Keats, the greatest poet since the world began...though such emotion was somewhat irra-

tional, given that the body had been lying there for a very long time, and the spirit was preserved by his verses more faithfully than by any grave-pit. But so wonderful, so truly English, was the manner of this gentle compromise, this innocent sophistry, that perfectly respected his last wishes but nonetheless announced without ambiguity that it was indeed Keats who lay beneath the stone.

Alexander Booth



Other contemporary writers of fiction have used the Cemetery as an unusual venue for discreet encounters in Rome – at least a less usual venue than the Trevi Fountain or the Piazza di Spagna. Emilio Calderón's *The Creator's Map* (John Murray 2008, translated from the Spanish by Katharine Silver) was a best-seller in many languages. The rather far-fetched plot owes something to Dan Brown but the setting is a historical one (Rome under Mussolini) and the atmosphere of the city is well portrayed, fruit of the author's residence as a fellow at the Spanish Academy in Rome in 2004 while writing the book. In his novel the Cemetery serves a number of roles as meeting-point, as murder scene and finally, some years later, as burial-place. The author takes some liberties with the history and layout of the Cemetery, but this is how his narrator (a young Spanish architect) describes his first impressions on a visit set in 1937:

"We walked down Via Caio Cestio along the cemetery wall until we found a locked iron gate. The sign invited us to ring the bell for entry.

Once inside, we stood facing one of the most spectacular sights in Rome: twenty to twenty-five thousand square meters dotted with elaborate tombstones, mausoleums, azaleas, hydrangeas, irises, oleander, wisteria, cypresses, and olive, laurel and pomegranate trees, all framed by the Aurelian wall and the Cestius Pyramid. A place of astonishing beauty."

Its beauty also impressed the English crime writer P.D. James who has one of her characters, victim of a car crash in the centre of Rome, laid to rest "in that most beautiful of burial grounds, the British Cemetery at Rome" (*Death of an expert witness*, Faber and Faber, 1977). As this Newsletter reminds its readers, 'Keeping it beautiful' is one of our main goals in maintaining it as a place of peace and inspiration to writers and others.

With thanks to Ana Almagro for bringing Calderón's novel to my attention and to Brenda Jones, one of our faithful volunteers, for spotting P.D. James' reference.

HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

This Newsletter is made possible by the contributions of the Friends of the Cemetery.

The Friends also help fund the care of the trees in the cemetery and the restoration of tombs. Please can you help us by becoming a Friend? You can find a membership form at:

www.cemeteryrome.it

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