

of the
Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome



NEWSLETTER

The seated boy, Georges Volkoff, a work of Ernesto Gazzeri

Many visitors pause on first glimpsing the sculpture of a young boy seated on a rock and clutching a book. Aged only ten, Georges Volkoff (1925-1936) drowned in the river Aniene. Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, his mother was Anna Christovich (1902-1963) who was eventually buried with him (Zone 2.18.2). He lived in Rome thanks to General Ivan Volkoff, the military attaché at the Bulgarian Embassy in the 1930s, who was in fact Georges' stepfather (information supplied by Ignazio Farina).

works at the Elysée Palace in Paris, others in Britain, Turkey, Germany and Belgium, a portrait of King Fuad I of Egypt and his queen, and several works in South America (Lima, Valparaiso and Buenos Aires). When the Dutch sculptor Pier Pander (1864-1919; buried at Zone 2.9.18), was in failing health, he asked his friend Gazzeri to carve the sculptures he had designed for the Temple in his native Leeuwarden (see *Newsletter* 9). Gazzeri's largest work, located in a cemetery famous for its eclectic monuments, was his *Mystery of Life* (1928) at Forest Lawn in Glendale, California, a massive group in white marble of eighteen different figures.



Photo: N. Stanley-Price



Photo: Underwood, 1930

E. Gazzeri, *The Mystery of Life*

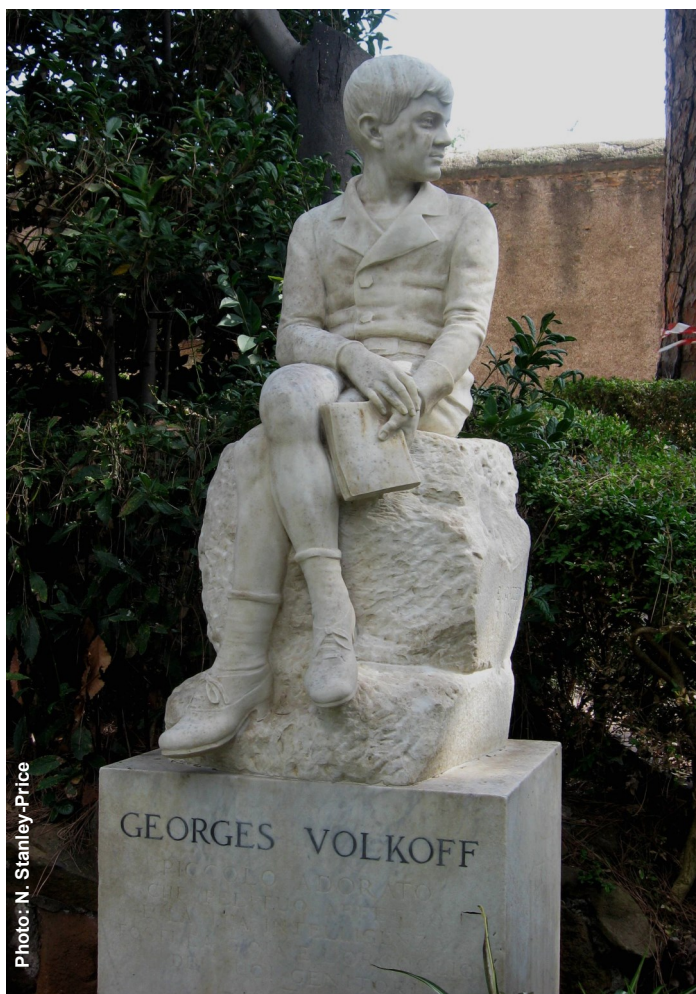


Photo: N. Stanley-Price

Volkoff after restoration, 2015

The sculpture commemorating this tragic death was designed by Ernesto Gazzeri (1866-1965); his name is prominent on the pedestal. Originally from Modena, Gazzeri had settled in Rome and had great success with commissions for portraits, statues and funerary monuments, many of them located abroad. His best-known work in Italy is the monument to the Renaissance philosopher Tommaso Campanella at Stilo in Calabria. Among his many overseas commissions were

By 1936, therefore, Gazzeri had a formidable reputation. He was recommended to General Volkoff by the latter's friend Arnaldo Zocchi, the sculptor of the equestrian monument to Emperor Alexander II in central Sofia but who was now no longer active. After visiting Gazzeri in his studio and seeing his model of the seated boy, Volkoff dropped his original idea of a tall stela. Marcello Piermattei, the Cemetery's director, told him that this solution was also preferred by the Artistic

continues on page 2 →

→ continued from page 1

Committee (see the following article). The Volkoff memorial, he wrote, would complement nicely those to two other children who died young, the eighteen-year-old Maria Obolenskaya (Zone 1.10.45; see *Newsletter* 46) and the seven-year-old Greek girl, Lilia Tserépis (Zone 3.2.8.3), who had died in 1928. He warned Gazzeri, however, against using the white 'statuary' marble of Serravezza which, as the Obolenskaya sculpture had shown, was subject to weathering and pitting when exposed.

A second work by Gazzeri has recently been recognised. The reverse of the headstone of another foreigner, the American businessman Charles Henry Morgan (1847-1919; Zone 3.3.4.4) bears the inscription 'ERNESTO GAZZERI'. The headstone is now in poor condition; Piermattei's contemporary photo conveys an idea of Gazzeri's design.



Headstone of C.H. Morgan
(photo: M. Piermattei, Cemetery archives)



Grave of Lilia Tserépis and her mother
Photo: D. Jenkinson

What was the 'Artistic Committee'?

Piermattei reminded General Volkoff that the Artistic Committee must approve any innovative design (see above). In 1921 a General Committee assumed responsibility for administration of the Cemetery. Its members were the ambassadors accredited to Italy from twelve states whose citizens, mainly non-Catholic, were eligible for burial. For advice on proposals which had an aesthetic impact, whether for tomb design or garden management (see 'Tree cover in the past' below), they occasionally sought guidance from art experts who were usually the directors of the leading foreign academies in Rome.

Members of the committee at the time of the Volkoff case in 1936 were the directors of the American Academy (the architect Chester Holmes Aldridge, from 1935); the Accademia Tedesca (Villa Massimo; the art

historian Herbert Gerike); and the British Academy of Art (the Maltese sculptor Antonio Sciortino) (and not the British School at Rome in Valle Giulia). In fact, it was in 1936 that the Italian government closed this academy for practising artists in Via Margutta, in response to British criticism of Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. Sciortino, its director for some 25 years, returned to his native Malta (see *Newsletter* no. 18). Other monuments on which the Artistic Committee advised in the 1930s included Seeboeck's monument to his fiancée Elsbeth Passarge (see *Newsletter* no. 50), Kirk's tomb-chapel for his mother (see *Newsletter* no. 40) and the Hendrik Andersen family-tomb (Zone 1.7.10).

Nicholas Stanley-Price

Charles Mills and his Villa on the Palatine

H.V. Morton's book *A traveller in Rome*, first published in 1957, remains very popular. The author, then aged over 60, had visited the city many times since at least the 1930s. His earlier book, *In the steps of St. Paul* (1936), culminates in a chapter about Paul's presence in Rome. Such was Morton's fame as a travel writer that the first print-run of *St Paul* was 200,000 copies of which 100,000 had been pre-ordered. The scope of *A traveller in Rome* was much greater. Notably for us, it allowed Morton to reflect on what 'must be the most beautiful cemetery in the world and is certainly the best tended'. He involves its director, Marcello Piermattei, as his guide to famous tombs until they come to the 'grave I was most anxious to see, that of Charles Andrew Mills, of the Villa Mills, who entertained so many visitors on the Palatine'.

Morton was so intrigued by the story of Mills (1770-1846) that he devoted an appendix in his book to Mills's background and to his villa. Much of what the former journalist reported remains sound, although recent research by Tommaso Zerbi has produced a more substantial and revised history of the 'Villa Mills'. Born in London, Mills was the youngest of four brothers in a family long established on St Kitts in the West Indies. According to Morton, he was Collector of Customs on Guadeloupe (1809-17) until being unjustly (in his view) dismissed. He returned to England but by autumn 1817 he was in Rome. Among the many British who flocked to the city following the end of the Napoleonic Wars was the antiquarian Sir William Gell, a friend of Mills. In 1818 Gell bought an estate, known as the Villa Magnani, on the Palatine hill but only three years



Villa Mills redesigned by Smith (photo 1906)

later sold it to Mills. Part of the archaeological area of the Palatine, including the Domus Augustana, is often called 'Villa Mills' today.

The guests entertained on different occasions by Mills in his house and garden, flourishing with roses and honeysuckle, were an illustrious group: the Prince and Princess de Montfort, Napoleon's mother Letitia and his niece Charlotte, the Countess of Blessington, the artist and writer Edward Dodwell and his young wife Teresa Giraud, and of

continues on page 3 →

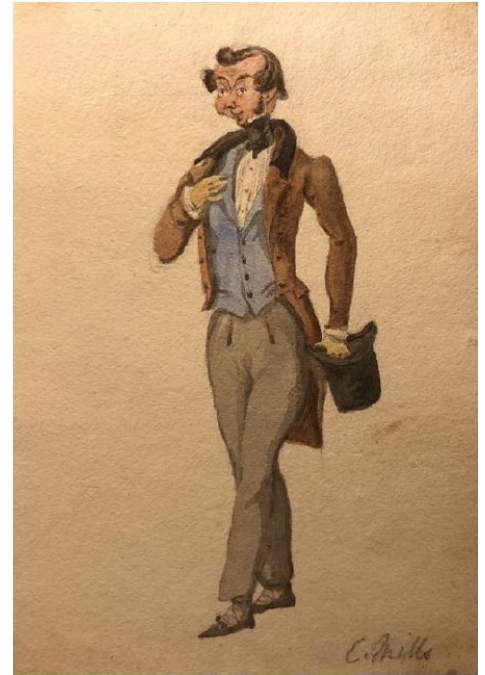
→ continued from page 2

course Sir William Gell who was living in Naples. But Mills was also known, unusually, for opening the grounds and the villa once a week to the public. He was not in fact responsible for the transformation of the Villa into the Gothic Revival mansion that was much commented on, painted and photographed before being demolished in favour of excavation. This was the project of a former official of the East India Company named Robert Smith to whom Mills sold the villa in 1846. Mills had left the Palatine and was living in an inn at the foot of the Spanish Steps when he died that year.

Mills's name is also associated with that of Rosa Bathurst. Distraught at the drowning of the young lady (see *Newsletter* no. 19) whom he had known well, he left Rome for six months. The very day of his return, as he passed Ponte Milvio he found a crowd gathered around the spot at which the river had belatedly released her body. Appropriately, Mills's grave at Zone V.12.18 lies immediately downslope from the fine monument to Bathurst by Richard Westmacott jr (Zone V.13.17). Its long epitaph, in English and Italian on different faces, recounts her fate.

Another of Mills's circle in Rome was Sir William Drummond of Logiealmond (1769-1828) whose headstone (Zone V.12.22) stands four graves to the right of Mills. At different times a Member of Parliament and Britain's ambassador to the Ottoman Porte and to Naples, he was also a scholar whose *Academical questions* apparently influenced Percy Bysshe Shelley in his scepticism. Lady Blessington reported the aged Drummond, aware of his imminent demise, as saying: "There is something in Rome, with its ruins, and the recollections with which it is fraught, that reconciles one to decay and death. The inevitable lot of all things seems here so strongly brought before one, that the destiny of an individual is merged in that of the scene around him."

Nicholas Stanley-Price



Charles Mills (Roma, Fondazione Camillo Caetani, "Roma 1833 album", caricatures by Filippo Caetani, n. 1670)



William Harris, architect at Selinunte, and his cenotaph in Rome

The name of William Harris (1796/7-1823), a young English architect, is forever associated with those of his friends Samuel Angell and Thomas Evans for their work at the site of Selinunte in Sicily in 1823. They planned to ship to the British Museum the metopes with sculpted relief figures that they uncovered at Temples F and C. But they had been working without an official permit and the local authorities stopped their work and prevented the export of any antiquities. The British Museum holds a rich collection of architectural drawings by Harris and Angell of the temples and their sculpture; but the metopes are today a highlight of the Regional Archaeological Museum in Palermo.

After their setback, Harris returned to Selinunte in mid-summer to make further drawings but he caught malaria. Weak with fever, he managed to reach Palermo but, after a relapse, he died and was buried in the old English cemetery in the Acquasanta neighbourhood of the city. The cemetery (top right of the photo) adjoined the Lazzaretto that isolated those with infectious diseases and



J.A. Lorent, *View from the Villa Belmonte*, 1865 (detail)



Selinunte, Temple C

visitors detained in quarantine. (The long landing-stage allowed access from the sea that avoided the isolation wards.) The simple headstone to 'William Harris / of London / architect / aged 27 years / ob. 16 July 1823' marked a sad end to Harris's travels. These had brought him in November 1821 to Rome where he stayed with his friends for some six months on their way to Sicily. He described his time in Rome and in Sicily in letters to his father which were discovered in 2012 at the University of Kent. Such was his popularity in Rome that his friends decided to erect a cenotaph to commemorate him.

In summer 1823, the New Cemetery had been in use for only six months. Burials were made at the top of the slope of the Zona Vecchia. In April 1823 Shelley's ashes were moved to the 'only interesting spot', in Trelawny's view, within the tower of the Aurelian wall. The cenotaph to Harris (Zone V.14.21) was installed a few metres down the slope from Shelley's grave. To its left is the grave of Maria Erskine (d. August 1824) and to its right that of Edmond Hamond (d. January 1826) so the chronology is credible. Ten years later a visitor noted the stone dedicated to 'Harris the architect' in this location, as did the Swiss author Theodor Gsell-Fels when compiling a list of graves that he had seen (*Rom und die Campagna*,

continues on page 4 →

→ continued from page 3

1883). These two accounts contradict the conclusion (based on a letter of 1888 from the British ambassador in Rome and cited in my published inventory of burials in the Old Cemetery) that Harris's cenotaph was moved to its present position from the Old Cemetery.

Harris's artist friends in Rome selected a surprisingly rough block of travertine for his cenotaph. It has defied attempts to read the inscription. Below (with uncertain readings in parenthesis) is the first full reading of the epitaph to this talented young architect.

TO THE MEMORY
OF
WILLIAM HARRIS
OF LONDON ARCHITECT
WHO DIED AT PALERMO THE 16 JULY 1823
AGED 27 YEARS
HIS ARDOUR IN THE STUDY OF HIS PROFESSION AND
IN DISCOVERY OF INTERESTING GREEK SCULPTURE
AT SELINUS EXPOSED HIM TO A MALARIA FEVER WHICH
DEPRIVED HIM OF LIFE AFTER FIVE DAYS OF ILLNESS.
TO MARK THEIR AFFECTION FOR AN [AMIABLE]
FRIEND THEIR REGRET AT THE PREMATURE LOSS
TO THE WORLD OF AN ARTIST OF TALENT AND TASTE
AND THEIR SYMPATHY AT THE DISAPPOINTED HOPES
OF THE PARENTS AND RELATIVES OF AN ONLY SON
[HIS] BROTHER ARTISTS FELLOW TRAVELLERS
DEDICATE THIS CENOTAPH



The Harris headstone in Palermo



The Harris cenotaph, Shelley's grave behind

Nicholas Stanley-Price



A thank-you to the Friends

Following the fall of the pine-tree in November 2024 (see *Newsletter* no. 69), the Director commissioned reports, which the Friends kindly funded, on the health of other pine trees. The dynamic pulling tests conducted by Dott. Agr. Andrea Santacroce of Studio BEeAGRO recommended that three pines be felled, but subsequent assessments by Alberando and other experts have advised delaying such drastic action.

Tree cover in the past

Its trees have always been a characteristic feature of the Cemetery. The photo here shows a density of cypress trees in the Zona Vecchia much greater than it was in the 19th century or than it is today. At bottom left, the photo shows piles of cobblestones stored in the Comunal *magazzino*. The photo must date to the early 20th century, before the *magazzino* was greatly extended. In the 1920s Piermattei had many dangerous trees felled but the Artistic Committee rejected the idea of removing all the tallest trees since this would potentially destroy the beauty of the Cemetery.



Unknown photographer. Cypress trees in the New Cemetery, early 1900s (?)

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

THE NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IN ROME

via Caio Cestio, 6, 00153, Roma

Director: Yvonne Mazurek

OPENING HOURS

Monday to Saturday 9:00am - 5:00pm
(last entrance 4.30pm)

Sunday & Public Holidays: 9.00am -1.00pm
(last entrance 12.30pm)

Tel 06.5741900, Fax 06.5741320
mail@cemeteryrome.it

NEWSLETTER of the Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

Nicholas Stanley-Price, EDITOR
Anka Serbu, GRAPHIC DESIGN
Grafica Di Marcotullio, PRINTER
ROME, 2025

Contact: nstanleyprice@hotmail.com
Disponibile anche in versione italiana
www.cemeteryrome.it

All previous Newsletters and an Index of contents are available at www.cemeteryrome.it