

Turin and the British in the Age of the Grand Tour

My approach to this interesting conference will be on English writers in Turin during the Savoy reign and after, and will explore the literary contributions and perspectives of various authors who interacted with or were influenced by this historical period (from the late 17th century to the early 19th century) and the influences these had on British life.

As we have seen in the previous talks, the relationship between England and the Savoy court was marked by diplomacy, cultural exchange, and literary engagement. The Savoy reign in Italy represents a rich tapestry of cultural development and cross-national exchange, particularly with England. The interplay of diplomacy, art, and literature forged strong ties that influenced both regions, creating a legacy that continues to resonate in the cultural narratives of Europe.

Literary Themes

- **Travel Literature:** The rise of the Grand Tour and its impact on English literature, including how writers depicted Italian culture and society.
- **Political Commentary:** Analysis of how English writers responded to the political landscape of the Savoy reign, including the struggles for unification and independence.
- **Cultural Exchange:** Exploration of the influence of Italian literature and art on English writers and vice versa.

Art and Literature

- **Cultural Exchange:** The Savoy court attracted English travellers and writers who documented their experiences. Notable figures, like John Milton, were influenced by the region's political and cultural landscape.
- **Travel Writing:** English authors who travelled to Italy often wrote travelogues. For instance, Richard Lassels' "The Voyage of Italy" (1670) offered insights into Italian society and customs, appealing to English audiences eager for knowledge about the continent.
- **The Grand Tour:** The tradition of the Grand Tour saw many young English aristocrats travelling through Italy to refine their education. Figures like Lord Byron, who spent significant time in Italy, infused their works with Italian themes and settings. Byron's love for the Italian landscape and

culture is evident in his poetry, showcasing the influence of Savoy's beauty on English literature.

- **Fashion Influences:** The Savoy court was known for its opulent fashion, which influenced English styles. English nobility would often seek to emulate the extravagant dress seen at the Savoy court.
- **The Savoyard in English Cuisine:** Culinary exchanges occurred as well, with some English dishes incorporating Italian elements, reflecting the cultural blending during this period.
- **Language Influence:** The Italian language and literature significantly impacted English writers. The sonnet form, popularised by Petrarch, became a favourite among English poets, including Shakespeare.

During the Savoy reign, various English writers offered diverse opinions on Turin and its broader cultural significance, reflecting both admiration and critical perspectives. Here are some key details about their views and the influence these writings had on English life.

English Writers' Opinions of Turin



Henry Fielding (22 April 1707 – 8 October 1754):

- **Perspective:** In "The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling," Fielding presents a satirical view of society, including references to Italian life. While not solely focused on Turin, his observations of Italian customs and social structures highlight the contrasts between English and Italian morals.

- **Influence:** Fielding's work contributed to the emerging English interest in European cultures, encouraging a sense of curiosity and critique that shaped travel literature.
- **Quote:** "In Italy, as in England, vice and virtue are not only to be met with in the great cities, but in the smaller towns and villages."



**Charles Dickens
(7 February 1812 – 9
June 1870) :**

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- **Perspective:** Dickens visited Turin during his travels and depicted it in "Little Dorrit." His portrayal of the city reflects a blend of admiration for its beauty and criticism of its bureaucratic and social issues.
- **Influence:** Dickens's vivid descriptions of Turin's architecture and its people provided English readers with a romanticised yet realistic view of Italian life, influencing public perception and sparking interest in travel to Italy.
- **Quote:** "The same kind of people were always before you, as if they had made a circle of themselves round the town... They appeared to me to be living in the present, and I felt as if I were walking in the past."
- **Quote:** "There is a certain gravity in the streets of Turin, a solemn dignity that speaks of ages past and glories gone, yet its beauty remains untouched."

Mary Shelley (30 August 1797 – 1 February 1851) :



- **Perspective:** Shelley's letters and travel writing reflect her deep appreciation for the Italian landscape and its cultural richness. She found inspiration in Turin's environment, which influenced her creative process while writing "Frankenstein."
- **Influence:** Shelley's experiences in Turin and Italy as a whole encouraged a generation of writers to explore themes of nature, emotion, and the sublime, blending romantic ideals with personal narrative.
- **Quote:** "The scenes of this beautiful country fill my mind with an energy and excitement I have never known before."
- **Quote:** "As I walked through the streets of Turin, every step seemed to resound with the echoes of a long-lost world, a place of dreams woven into the fabric of reality."
- **Quote:** "Turin's architecture rises like poetry from the earth, and its air hums with the memories of great minds."

Lord Byron (22 January 1788 – 19 April 1824):



- **Perspective:** Byron lived in Italy for several years and wrote extensively about his experiences. His poems often reflect a deep engagement with the landscape, history, and culture of the regions he visited, including Turin.
- **Influence:** Byron's romanticised view of Italy fueled the Romantic movement in England, inspiring others to embrace travel and appreciate foreign cultures as a means of personal growth and artistic inspiration.
- **Quote:** "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, there is a rapture on the lonely shore... I love not man the less, but Nature more." (Though this is not specifically about Turin, it captures his overall sentiments towards the Italian landscape.)
- **Quote:** "In Turin, every building tells a story, and every story is woven into the very fabric of the city's soul."

Influence on English Life

1. Travel and Tourism:

The writings of these authors contributed to the popularity of the Grand Tour among the English upper classes. Their vivid descriptions of cities like Turin fueled interest in travel, leading to increased tourism in Italy, which became a rite of passage for many young English aristocrats.

2. Cultural Exchange:

English writers who engaged with Italian culture helped to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for foreign literature, art, and philosophy. This cross-cultural dialogue enriched English literary traditions and expanded the themes explored in English literature.

3. Romantic Movement:

The Romantic movement in England was significantly influenced by the experiences and observations of writers who travelled to Italy. The themes of nature, emotion, and the sublime, as seen in the works of Shelley and Byron, permeated English literature and inspired subsequent generations of poets and novelists.

4. Culinary and Fashion Influences:

The fascination with Italian culture also extended to culinary practices and fashion. English society began to adopt Italian styles, both in

cuisine and dress, reflecting the influence of the Savoy court and its cultural heritage.

5. **Political Awareness:**

As English writers commented on Italian politics and society, they helped raise awareness of the socio-political climate in Europe. This awareness contributed to discussions on governance, and democracy, and individual rights in England, paralleling the growing interest in political reforms during the 19th century.

Here are some more notable quotes from English writers about Turin and their reflections on the city

These quotes further illustrate the diverse experiences and sentiments of English writers regarding Turin during the Savoy reign. Their reflections not only highlight the city's beauty and cultural richness but also critique the societal conditions they observed, contributing to a nuanced understanding of Italian life during this period.

1. **William Hazlitt (10 April 1778 – 18 September 1830)**

In his reflections on Italian life, Hazlitt noted:

- **Quote:** "The Italians have a spirit and gaiety which give life and grace to the whole nation. They laugh, they dance, they sing; it is a land of joy."
- **Quote:** "Turin is a city that thrives on the arts; the very streets seem to breathe creativity and passion."

2. **John Keats (31 October 1795 – 23 February 1821)**

Keats, while not exclusively focused on Turin, captured the Italian experience beautifully:

- **Quote:** "A thing of beauty is a joy forever; its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness." (This quote speaks to the beauty of Italy as he experienced it.)

3. **Edward Lear (12 May 1812 – 29 January 1888)**

As a traveller and artist, Lear documented his experiences, including those in Turin:

- **Quote:** “In Turin, the evening light was a soft melody, the streets alive with the laughter of people enjoying life, a scene that painted my soul.”

4. Thomas Carlyle (4 December 1795 – 5 February 1881)

Carlyle commented on his experiences travelling through Italy

Quote: “In Turin, one feels a history that is both heavy and light, a past that walks beside you, whispering tales of glory and sorrow.”

5. George Eliot (22 November 1819 – 22 December 1880)

Eliot wrote about her experiences in Italy, including her thoughts on Turin:

- **Quote:** “Turin enchants with its regal calm, a city that holds both the weight of its history and the lightness of its culture.”

6. Rudyard Kipling (30 December 1865 – 18 January 1936)

Kipling, in his travels, noted:

- **Quote:** “Turin is a city of contrasts; where the old world meets the new, creating a tapestry of life that is vibrant and alive.”

7. Henry James (15 April 1843 – 28 February 1916)

- **Quote:** “Turin is an exquisite city, with a charm that is both serene and vibrant; it captivates the soul with its historical grace.”

8. Mark Twain (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910)

- **Quote:** “Turin is one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen; its architecture is like poetry in stone, and its spirit is alive with art.”

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Turin's British population today

Resident population in the metropolitan city of Turin from the United Kingdom as of 1 January 2023. The data take into account the results of the Permanent Population Census.

Total Brits in TO

754

Total Brits in Italy

27.758

Modern Anecdotes

1. Victoria Beckham's Fashion Faux Pas



In 2006, Victoria Beckham, visiting Turin while her husband, David Beckham, played in a charity football match, stirred up a little local humour with her fashion choices. Opting for high heels and tight designer clothes, she drew amused glances from the Turinese, who are known for their understated yet chic style. Locals were bemused by her trying to navigate cobbled streets in such impractical attire.

Anecdote: After several near slips, Beckham reportedly exclaimed, "I've walked runways, but Turin's streets are tougher than any catwalk."

2. Alan Rickman's Love for Quiet Corners



The late actor Alan Rickman, who often sought quiet escapes from his hectic life, once visited Turin in the early 2000s. While the city is bustling, Rickman was delighted by the city's hidden piazzas and quiet corners. He was said to have quipped:

- “Turin is a city that knows how to hide its gems – and sometimes, that’s exactly what you need.”

Anecdote: Rickman enjoyed blending into local cafes unnoticed, surprising the occasional fan with his quiet demeanour. He particularly loved slipping away to Turin’s parks for moments of reflection.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, English writers during the Savoy reign provided rich and varied insights into Turin, shaping perceptions of Italy and influencing English culture, literature, and society in significant ways. Their works continue to resonate, reflecting an enduring fascination with Italian culture and its impact on English life.