Henry Millon


A British visitor to Rome in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century would most likely have been fascinated by the ruins of ancient Rome as monuments of picturesque decay, evidence of man's inability to transcend time. A French, German, or Italian contemporary might, equally likely, have seen the ruins as manifestations of an ancient order and grandeur, an example that could guide the present, an achievement contemporary society should seek to emulate. Among themselves, the continental scholars might seek disparate archaeological evidence in the ruins to uphold differing views, as materialist arguments for a revival of a republican form of government or to bolster notions of an inherited ecclesiastical or temporal empire. Imagine the discussions, sometimes heated, that probably took place in the Caffè Greco on the Via Condotti, as republicans argued with supporters of the papal states, with adherents of a unified Italy under a single sovereign, and with those who had experienced the Cospirazione state of the French Empire. To an Anglo-Saxon overhearing the debate, accustomed to viewing Rome as a painfully decayed site best seen at night to heighten its effect on romantic sensibilities and the city as peopled by a decadent, mercantile, and intellectual populace, the issues might well have seemed incomprehensible or too impassioned to be taken seriously.

It is the merit of Carolyn Springer's The Marble Wilderness that she addresses these various views—the ways Italian and other continental intellectuals, politicians, and writers used the Roman ruins, artifacts, archaeology, and contemporary art and architecture in Rome to further political goals in the papal states and Italy in the period between the death of Winckelmann in 1768 and the European revolutions of 1848. This short book, a literary and cultural history, considers the works of Roman painters, sculptors, and architects in the service of political goals: Raphael Mengs, Giambattista Piranesi, Antonio Canova, Michelangelo Simonetti, Paolo Baccigalupi, Raffaele Serra. It also discusses the relation of archaeology and political philosophy in the works of Italian letterati and social thinkers: Vincenzo Monti, Pietro Etroe Viscioni, Angelo Mai, Giacomo Belli, Ugo Foscolo, Giacomo Leopardi, Ippolito Min- mone, Giuseppe Martini, Massimo D'Azeglio, Vincenzo Giaoberti, Giuseppe Garibaldi. Professor Springer has organized the material into two parts of four and three chapters, respectively. The first includes two chapters that show the attempts of Clement XIV and Pius VI Bruschi to use the new Vatican archaeological museum to legitimize their rule as Christian successors to the imperial Caesars (continuing thereby a long tradition of such claims) and the panegyrics that extolled the contemporary achievement of the papacy and, somewhat optimistically, heralded a new golden age. A further chapter in the first part delineates the changed situation after Napoleon's defeat of papal forces in 1796 (with an appendix that stipulated the transport of 100 major works of art from Rome to Paris); the archaeological excavations initiated by Camille de Tournon for France; the exile of Pius Vili in 1798; the brief occupation of Rome by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1806–08; and the repatriation of the remains of Pius VI who died in exile; the preparation of the Brachis tomb in the Confessio at St. Peter's by Canova with a statue of Pius VI kneeling in prayer placed immediately above the tomb of St. Peter (the statue has recently been moved to a new, less prominent location); the reoccupation of Rome by Napoleon in 1809 as one of the French Imperial cities; the exile of Pius VII; the renewed and exalted exaltation of Rome by de Tournon in the Forum; the restoration of the papacy after the fall of Napoleon; the reestablishing of the archaeological sites by Pius VII; the return of the art works from Paris; the construction of the Braccio Nuovo by Pius VII for the rapidly expanding decorative programs for the Chiara- monti Galleries (by Francesco Hayez, Vincenzo Ferri, Filippo Vert, Luigi Duranini, Giuseppe Cappon; Filippo Agnelli, Domenico De Angelis); the panegyrics of Canova, Angelo Mai, and, finally,
the ridicule of the mania antiquaria by Massimo D’Angelo, who first came to Rome in 1814. The fourth and final chapter of the first part is devoted to the private poetry of Giovanni Bell. Professor Springer has extracted from Bell’s sonnets those that reveal his classical and often caustic reactions to the claims of archaeology and the papacy (even though he was for most of his life employed by the Vatican). She provides an exemplary analysis of these pieces—often in difficult translations—that expose the Roman popular reaction to the successive waves of interest in Roman archaeology by the papacy, the French, and the Roman Republic.

Part Two examines the uses of archaeology among those who sought Italian unity in the years following Napoleon. The first of three chapters contains a detailed analysis of Ugo Foscolo’s Das Sepolcri as a response to Napoleon’s Edict of St. Louis of 1804 that prohibited burial within cities, and its arousal of patriotic, nationalistic, Italian sentiments. Concurring the prohibition as an intentional divorcing of the present from the inspirational models of the past, Foscolo invites meditation on tombs of exemplars in Milan, Florence, and the ancient Mediterranean world. Professor Springer states that “probably no single text did more to adapt the archaeological metaphor to the service of Italian nationalism than Foscolo’s Das Sepolcri.” In 1874, after the unification of Italy, Giuseppe Mazzini recalled that “Foscolo was one of my first enthusiasms in life.” A succeeding chapter looks at Mazzini’s dream of a new Italy “bored beneath the edifice of the ancient regime,” that would supplant the papacy and other realms in Italy with a new democratic tradition. For Mazzini, the ruins of Rome were “invoked as a setting for revolutionary action.” Vincenzo Gioberti, on the other hand, saw the ruins and artifacts as evidence of a prime position once enjoyed by Romans and Italians but lost through foreign domination. Mazzini worked for a democratic, unified Italy, Gioberti for a unified Italian nation with Rome and the Pope at the head of a federation of regional states. The chapter examines Gioberti’s Promatei morale e civili degli Italiani, Mazzini’s responses to Gioberti and to Charles Didier’s Rome sotterranea, in his studio Italia e, and concludes with a brief but valuable look at Giuseppe Garibaldi’s novel Cilea, in which Rome and the Colosseum are seen as the site of a popular revolution.

The final chapter chronicles the election in 1846 of Pius IX, a known liberal cardinal, his amnesty of political prisoners shortly after his election, the granting of a constitution in 1848, the new papal idea, the collapse of the government of Pius IX and his flight to Gaeta, the second Roman Republic of five months with Mazzini as one of the triumvirs (together avec Carlo Armellini and Aurelio Saffi), the French occupation of Rome after the battle of Porta San Pancrazio, the restoration of Pius IX, the new republican idea and inspiration from the defense of Rome, the interruption of archaeological exploration of the Forum and ancient Roman sites and a shift of attention to the catacombs and early Christian sites, the inauguration of the Museo Pio Cristiano at the Lateran (transfered now to the Vatican), the erection of the Column of the Immaculate Conception in the Piazza di Spagna (in 1856) to commemorate the promulgation of that Dogma and French support eroded after the defeat of Napoleon III by Germany in 1870, the occupation of all papal territories including Rome by troops of the King of Sisow with the subsequent unificational effort of the Pope. Professor Springer thinks Italy still to be “resolutely intransigent.”

This rich and extensive material has been compiled and thoughtfully discussed by Professor Springer. The volume will be valuable for any who wish to know more about the interrelation of art, archaeology, and politics in a particularly chaotic period in the history of Rome.

The introduction discusses models of archaeological representation as the period and provides an illuminating examination of the use of Rome, ruins, and archaeology by Byron in his Childe Harold. A brief chronology accompanies the text as well as eighteen pages of notes that testify to a command of a wide range of literature surrounding the subject. However, there is no bibliography, and the index of names is unaccountably incomplete.