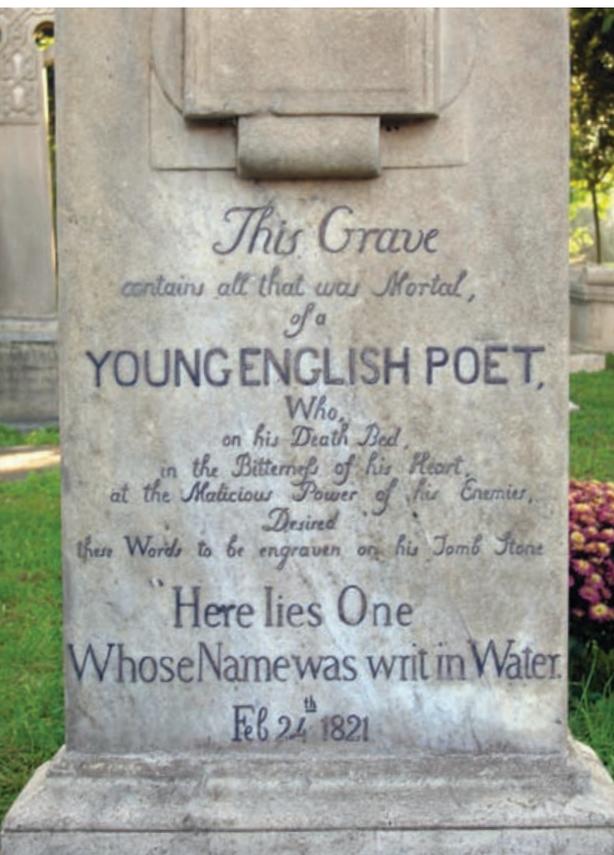


Among Rome's often dizzying chaos, the "Cimitero Acattolico" or Cemetery for Non-Catholics in Testaccio is a particularly tranquil spot. At the top of the hill, near the grave of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, the scents of pine needles and jasmine flowers intertwine to perfume the air which is otherwise thick with exhaust fumes from the traffic circle below. Down the slope, just beyond an ancient wall near the grave of poet John Keats, wild grasses dance in the shadow of the massive Pyramid of Cestius, itself a funerary monument from 12 B.C. The menacing sounds of Rome's human and vehicular chaos are muted here, replaced by the wraithy whisper of wind through the cypress trees playing harmony to the songbirds and cicadas. Exotic foliage and bursts of vibrant flowers adorn the 2,500 graves of famous foreigners like the son of German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and that of American poet Constance Fenimore Woolson, who wrote, "This cemetery is the only joyous cemetery I know of. Here the flowers always bloom, the birds always sing."

But it was not always such a serene place. The cemetery began around 1748 when the Vatican reluctantly designated the land for the burial of those who could not be interred in Catholic churches or in otherwise consecrated soil. Until that time, the non-Catholics of all ranks and class were buried near Rome's Muro Torto, alongside "impenitenti," mainly criminals and prostitutes who were literally dumped into nameless graves there. It was James Stuart

# Grave Situation

## AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE AWAITS ROME'S CIMITERO ACATTOLICO, A 2006 WATCH SITE AND FINAL RESTING PLACE OF NOTED ARTISTS, WRITERS, AND POLITICIANS



Ill, ageing heir to the thrones of England and Scotland and in exile in Italy, who begged that he and his fellow members of the English court not be buried in so common a place as the Muro Torto. The land near the Pyramid of Cestius, then on the edge of the city, became the final resting place for the Protestant foreigners, and eventually for non-Catholic Italians and today, for many Catholics who can prove kinship to someone buried there.

While the land was at least marginally better than that relegated to common criminals at the Muro Torto, the non-Catholics still had to follow a strict set of rules for burial. Namely, they could not be buried by daylight and thus the tradition of nocturnal burials by torch light is depicted in many eighteenth-century paintings of Rome. The most zealous of the narrow-minded Catholic community of Rome also instigated problems for the Protestants by heckling them and even attacking them during burial services, which eventually resulted in Roman guards surrounding the cemetery to protect the mourners. The Vatican also forbade the use of the symbol of a cross on any tombs, and, at least until the late 1870s, epitaphs could not contain any suggestion of "eternal bliss" which was relegated only to Catholics.

Initially, there was also a moat around the Parte Antica, the oldest part of the cemetery where the sons of Keats and Shelley are both buried. Roman Catholics dropped dead cats and dogs in the moat for decades, giving the cemetery an unseemly nickname as "fosse dei cani" or the dogs' grave. But in spite of the many abuses against its inhabitants, the cemetery has always been defiantly peaceful. Largely unattended in the nineteenth century, the cemetery was like a country field, overgrown with flowers that had seeded from those planted on the graves. In 1821 when the poet John Keats had nearly succumbed to the consumption that killed him, he asked his dear friend John Severn for advice for where to be buried. Severn told him of the Protestant cemetery in the countryside, alive with blue and white violets and Keats is said to have replied that he "already felt the flowers growing over me."

The cemetery is still a well-kept secret in many respects, but those who wish to protect it by not exploiting it may just destroy it. On one hand, the famous graves of Keats and Shelley attract upwards of 10,000 visitors a year—a drop in the ocean when you consider



that Rome receives upwards of 12 million tourists annually. In a city so rich with cultural gems, the so-called Poets' Cemetery is rarely something first-time visitors to the city make time for, and as such the city of Rome does not consider it a tourism priority worth investing in. But it is, in fact, so much more than a collection of graves. It is an illustrated biography of the city during the last three centuries.

The latest chapter in the cemetery's history includes a barrage of threats that has nearly destroyed the hallowed sanctuary. In 2002, a survey conducted by ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, showed that 50 percent of gravestones were in need of conservation; 27 percent urgently. Nicholas Stanley-Price, who was director of ICCROM at the time of the survey and who now co-chairs an advisory committee to save the cemetery, says the site is faced with a slow deterioration. "People often refer to a tipping point, a moment or event that leads to the steep decline before you are faced with a huge problem," Stanley-Price told ICON. "The cemetery has definitely reached that point."

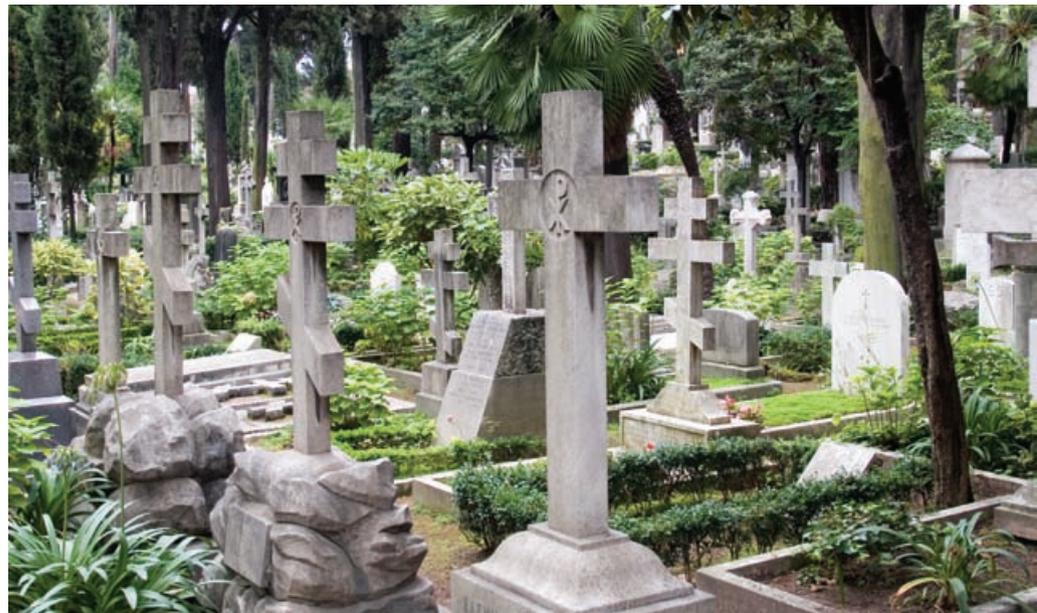
A quick glance across the grounds shows telltale signs of its obvious physical vulnerabilities—candy-cane striped construction tape encircles collapsed monuments precariously teetering on soft ground. A soil subsidence study has been ordered for late 2006, with the hope of determining just how precarious the situation is. Stanley-Price points out that a lack of supervision and even simple record-keeping make it difficult to ascertain the initial burial practices. Depths of the graves and the city's infrastructure, which includes a nearby subway line and numerous factories within the adjacent blocks all add to the potential problems. The gravestones themselves are also in need of repair. Plastic sheeting covers some monuments, many in varying stages of restoration. Many markers are smooth from wind and water erosion that has literally erased the inscriptions. Weathered scaffolding, some overgrown with foliage, props up the most fragile monuments.

But however detrimental the natural elements have been for this cemetery, blatant mismanagement, from delayed prevention to outright neglect, has been far worse. A financial crisis, which escalated in 1999 with the depletion of a \$1 million endowment given by the family of

**ROME'S PROTESTANT CEMETERY CONTAINS THE GRAVES OF SOME 2,500 FOREIGNERS, INCLUDING SUCH LUMINARIES AS THE ENGLISH POET JOHN KEATS, FACING PAGE. KEATS WANTED HIS TOMBSTONE TO READ SIMPLY "HERE LIES ONE WHOSE NAME WAS WRIT IN WATER." BUT FRIENDS WHO FELT HE HAD BEEN ILL-USED BY CRITICS ADDED AN ANGRY PREFACE TO THE ELEGANT EPITAPH.**



**THOUGH KNOWN AS THE “PROTESTANT CEMETERY,” IT HOLDS NON-CATHOLICS AS VARIED AS AVOWED ATHEIST ENGLISH POET PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, ABOVE, AND MEMBERS OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, ABOVE RIGHT. THE GRAVE OF ELLA SLOCUM, WIFE OF AMERICAN SCULPTOR FRANKLIN SIMMONS, IS ADORNED BY A STATUE OF THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL, OPPOSITE.**



Clare Benedict in 1962 plunged the cemetery into a €1 million debt. The drop in value of the US dollar played a part in the losses, but whispers of corruption, ranging from pilfered funds to quasi-extortion of family members to pay their upkeep dues also played a role.

Family members like Frank Dabell, an art historian whose father is buried there, calls the past procedures “shameful neglect.” He remembers a time several years ago when a wind storm uprooted an overgrown tree next to his father’s grave, which subsequently fell into an adjacent tomb. For nearly three years, the tomb was open, despite efforts by Dabell to get caretakers to make the necessary repairs. His mother, incidentally, is buried in the Pere Lachaise in Paris, which he says is far better maintained and families pay nothing. “There should have been enough money to fix that,” he told *ICON*. “It’s inexplicable. This is, after all, a living cemetery, not just a memorial site.”

ICCROM’s study notes examples like Dabell’s as symptomatic of a lack of financial accountability and strategic planning. The 2002 study brought out a series of recommendations for long-term conservation, ranging from increasing income and instituting cost-saving improvements to what was seen as a last-resort plan—turning over the cemetery to the cash-strapped Comune di Roma, which would have surely led to eventual abandonment. Stanley-Price points out that the Comune di Roma and the Italian state have funded certain restorations of historical significance, but “they do not regularly contribute funds to the cemetery.” Still, the Italian ministry of culture does apply its rule of law aesthetically, and each new monument and restoration must be approved under stringent guidelines.

Autonomy of the cemetery and support by Rome’s considerable expatriate community coupled with a drive to lure visitors and supporters from across the globe is seen as the only real means for its survival. One need only look south to Naples to see what extended neglect can bring. In the late 1990s, the Protestant cemetery there literally washed to sea, caskets and all. In Naples, years of detachment by the expatriate community and lack of financial support by the city were to blame.

In Rome, the expatriate community and literary tourists have always held the cemetery in high esteem but have not been particularly generous financially. Until last year, family survivors paid only a fraction of what others paid for upkeep in Rome. Now, at an average of €350 per plot, the annual maintenance fees are likely to eventually help bring the cemetery out of debt. Finding a way to tap into the literary tourism market is also under consideration, but charging admission to the cemetery is seen as unsavory.

Since 1945, a group of volunteer foreign ambassadors have overseen the general management of a loosely formed foundation, but they were given little opportunity to do more than deal with immediate crises that arose. In 2005, the Dutch ambassador, Ronald Loudon, who led the committee for four years, retired. Within a few months,



his reluctant replacement, the Danish ambassador, left Rome for another posting. Shortly after that, with no one stepping up to lead the ambassadors' committee, the cemetery formed an advisory committee which has taken the helm at saving the cemetery. According to Stanley-Price, one of the co-chairs of that committee, the focus now needs to be "not just on threats, but on the capacity for crisis." He says, "To reduce any of the potential threats, you need systematic conservation." And that, he adds, "depends entirely on funding."

The cemetery has benefited financially lately after a surge in donations thanks to publicity garnered by making WMF's 2006 list of 100 *Most Endangered Sites*, but it is not nearly out of danger yet. The advisory committee introduced a "Friends of the Cemetery" organization with varying levels of membership, starting at €50 annually. The cemetery takes about €400,000 annually to run, but, according to Catherine Payling, curator of the Keats Shelley Memorial House and treasurer of the advisory committee, the only way to get out of the financial rut is to turn the cemetery into an example. She believes that the Protestant Cemetery in Rome can eventually be a model by which other foreigners' cemeteries can learn. A variety of innovative cost-efficient recycling plans are in the works, including reusing irrigation water and opening a small plant nursery from propagations of the cemetery's vast

selection of exotic foliage planted by the foreigners, much of which has been left to grow wild and is now strangling the native cypress trees. These plans will certainly help stop further damage, but it may take decades to repair the degraded stones and shore up the sinking soil. Plans also include encouraging donors in Rome, especially those whose families are buried there. The Bulgari family, makers of fine Italian jewelry, just donated €20,000 earmarked for a new watering system for the cemetery. Payling would like to see similar acts of generosity help save the cemetery. "The cemetery as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts," she told ICON. Says Stanley-Price, "It is an extraordinary microcosm of Rome as a center of artists, poets, and sculptors."

And, in fact, the romantic tales of visitors to Rome are what keep the legend of the cemetery alive. Even with its many problems, the cemetery is still a worthy magnet for foreign residents and affluent Romans who have discovered its serenity. And despite the obvious reference to mortality, there is little sadness here. It is a living cemetery, one of the oldest still in use in Europe. One need only gaze out over the sea of gravestones, topped with crosses, domes, and spires to glimpse an often untold part of this city's history. Unlike other sites, here there are no ancient ruins to decipher, no imperial lineage to memorize. All one needs to know is written on the tombs, engraved in English or Italian, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic script. Be they poets, artists, diplomats, or wanderers, they all made their way to Rome to die. Their stones tell tales of love and illness, fortune and misery, and life and death through the dates and cryptic epitaphs. A few years before Shelley's own ashes were interred here in 1822, he wrote, "It may make one in love with death to know that one should be buried in so sweet a place." But the threats to the cemetery, either by a return to neglect or by lack of financial support could make such sentiments an epitaph. ■



## AMONG THE BURIED

**CLARA WOOLSON BENEDICT**  
American humanist (1870-1961)

**JOHAN NIKLAS BYSTROM**  
Swedish sculptor (1783-1848)

**JACOB ASMUS CARSTENS**  
Founder of classicism painting (1754-1798)

**GREGORY CORSO**  
American beat poet (1930-2001)

**CHARLES DENSMORE CURTIS**  
American architect and writer (1876-1925)

**CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON**  
American poet and writer (1845-1894)

**ANTONIO GRAMSCI**  
founder of Italian communist party (1891-1937)

**CARSTEN HAUCH**  
Danish writer and poet (1790-1872)

**NICOLA PLATONOVIC KARABCENSKY**  
Russian lawyer (1852-1925)

**JOHN KEATS,**  
English poet (1795-1821)

**DORA MELEGARI**  
Italian poet and philosopher (1846-1924)

**THOMAS JEFFERSON PAGE**  
U.S. Navy Commodore and explorer (1808-1899)

**HEINRICH REINHOLD**  
German landscape artist (1791-1825)

**JOSEPH SEVERN**  
British Consul in Rome (1793-1879)

**PERCY BLYSSHE SHELLEY**  
poet (1792-1822)

**WILLIAM SHELLEY**  
son of Percy Blysshe Shelley (1816-1819)

**RIVOIRA TERESIO**  
Italian archaeologist (1849-1919)

**AMALIA ROSSELLI**  
English poet (1930-1996)

**AUGUST VON GOETHE**  
son of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1789-1830)

**WILLIAM WETMORE STORY**  
American sculptor and poet (1819-1895)

**RICHARD WYATT**  
British sculptor (1795-1850)