Ted Jones is a writer and journalist who specialises in travel and the arts. He is the author of *The French Riviera: A Literary Guide for Travellers* (Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2007).

'I'm fascinated to learn that Milton visited Galileo, that Freud could be "bowled over", and that Emerson described the Duomo as "like an archangel's tent". Bravo, Ted Jones, for gathering a trove of writers' responses to Tuscany and for writing such an engaging context for their travels. Knowing of those who traveled before us deepens our own responses to a place. This book enriches my own journeys in this fabled land.'

Frances Mayes,
author of *Every Day in Tuscany: Seasons of an Italian Life*

Praise for *The French Riviera*

'The ultimate travel book for anyone who likes sun and literature. I found it irresistible.'
Peter Mayle

'There are two views of the French Riviera. One says it is an overdeveloped blot on the landscape; the other that it is the epitome of style. If you veer towards the latter, and enjoy literary history, this book is for you. Drawing on the stories of more than 150 writers, Jones does a great job of buffing up the legend.'
Anthony Sattin, *Sunday Times*, Books of the Week

'Thoughtful, entertaining and vivid, Jones's *The French Riviera* sweeps us along the coast . . . Cap Ferrat comes to life. Jones's book is sad only because it reminds us of how much of the Riviera's tranquil beauty has been sacrificed. The list of literary lovers of the Riviera almost beggars belief. It is delightful to have their eloquent, acerbic, lyrical responses collected here, in a book that deserves to become a favourite with all travellers.'
Miranda Seymour, *Sunday Times*

'There is much to relish. The author is assiduous in recording who wrote what where and when, in seeking out memorial plaques and mourning lost landmarks.'
E.S. Turner, *Times Literary Supplement*

'A vivid guide to the Côte d'Azur in the eyes of some of the greatest writers of their time.'
Jane Mays, *Daily Mail*

'Certainly among the best of recent books on the area. Jones has done a lot of research and presents his results in a clear and lively style. The book will appeal obviously to those with literary interests but it's also designed to please those who enjoy Sunday paper-style gossip (broadsheet, of course).'
Patrick Middleton, *The Riviera Reporter*

'unsurpassed in literary name-dropping'
David Armstrong, *San Francisco Chronicle*

Florence and Tuscany

A LITERARY GUIDE FOR TRAVELLERS

Ted Jones

I.B. TAURIS
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Preface

On the evening of 15 October 1764, the English historian Edward Gibbon was in Rome, 'musing amongst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefoot friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter', and he knew with absolute certainty that he must write *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I had no such inspirational moment: I was aware only that for some years I had wanted to write a book about the writers of Tuscany. The only deterrent was that *Decline and Fall* took Gibbon 23 years to write. I wasn't sure if I had that long.

In Florence a year later, in 1765, the Scottish author Tobias George Smollett wrote in his *Travels through France and Italy* that he did not intend to write about 'every thing which is commonly visited in this metropolis'. 'All these objects', he wrote, 'have been described by twenty different authors. I shall not trouble you with a repetition of trite observations.' His words were written more than two centuries ago but they are even more appropriate today, when an internet search of 'books about Tuscany' elicits ten thousand responses, and minute historical details are accessible in seconds. Smollett wrote about *his* Tuscany. I shall write about Tuscany as it was seen by other writers.

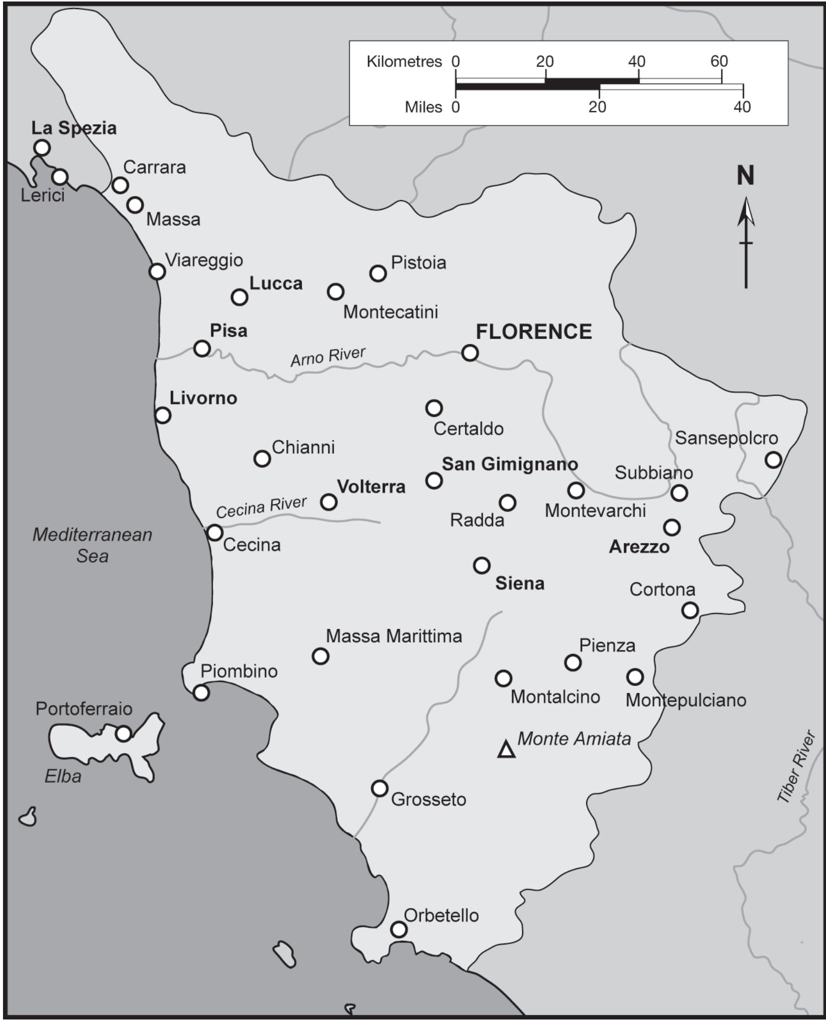
These writers' collective impressions are a total experience of Tuscany: its scenery, its sky and the people under it as much as its history, art and literature. This homogeneity has been expressed by writers in many different ways: Percy Bysshe Shelley, who lived and died there, eulogised its 'mountains, seas, and vineyards, and the towers of cities they encircle!'

So many writers have been attracted to Tuscany that my problem soon became not which to write about, but which to exclude.

Because this edition is in English, I have tended to give preference to Anglo-Saxon authors, and to omit those who, even if famous in their own languages, are less known internationally. Missing also – or almost – are those writers who scurried through Tuscany on their way to somewhere else. Goethe stayed no longer than three hours; J. G. Ballard's autobiography allotted Tuscany only a paragraph; H. G. Wells's Tuscan trysts were commemorated in one single place name; and the seriously ill Sir Walter Scott was so anxious to reach his native Scotland before he died that he hurried by, leaving no record of it at all (he made it back home with only two months to spare).

I applied similar criteria to places: thus Prato, a city with a population of nearly 200,000 – but seemingly authorless – is omitted, while little Certaldo (population 16,000) is included. How could I exclude Boccaccio's home town?

A work of this type may have one author but it is the effort of many: writers who have gone before have collaborated with contemporary ones. I am indebted to all the writers of Tuscany (much of whose original research was achieved without the benefit of search engines) and am contrite if, despite my efforts, I have inadvertently infringed any of their copyrights. I would also like especially to thank my wife for her boundless ideas, unfailing help and forbearance; Graziella Amerio for Italian translations; Roberta Boboli of APT, Florence and Claudia Bolognesi of the Consorzio Turistico di Volterra; Jessica Cuthbert-Smith for assiduous and positive editing; Professor Ceri Davies of Swansea University for Latin translation; Mary Hawkins, who introduced me to Tuscany; the Open University, which introduced me to Mary Hawkins; Julia Bolton Holloway, custodian of the English Cemetery of Florence and La Misericordia di Livorno, trustees of that of Livorno; David Mundstock of Intrepid Explorer for photography; Michael Pearcy of Words and Pictures for his generous help and advice with illustrations; and the staffs of the London Library and the English-American Library and the Bibliotèque Municipale of Nice.



Tuscany

Central Florence

For Joan

1

Introduction

You cannot conceive what a divine country this is just now; the vines with their young leaves hang as if they were of beaten gold.

(John Ruskin, 1845)

With its historical villages and towns and verdant, undulating countryside, its treasury of medieval and Renaissance works of art and, above all, its ancient tradition of authorship, Tuscany is the obvious setting for a literary guide. Writers from northern Europe have been coming to Tuscany for six centuries.

The early exchanges between Britain and Tuscany were anything but cultural: from pre-Christian times, traffic along the coastal Via Aurelia, the road linking ancient Rome with France and eventually Britain, had consisted mainly of Roman conquerors and their trudging slaves. Later, in the Middle Ages, the inland Via Francigena – by then preferred over the Via Aurelia because it was less vulnerable to pirate attacks from the sea – put central Tuscany, and cities such as Florence and Siena, on the Holy Road to Rome, and for centuries it was traversed by itinerant monks taking Christianity to the heathen north, and pilgrims travelling in the opposite direction, seeking salvation. Later, trade routes, responding to demands for English wool and textiles and Tuscan oil, wines and finery, brought commercial traffic between the two countries.

Inevitably, the writers followed, but it is significant that the first English poet to visit Tuscany, Geoffrey Chaucer in 1373, came, not as a writer, but as part of a trade mission, charged by his employer, King Edward III, with negotiating landing rights at English ports. Chaucer's negotiations in Genoa were successful, but in the long

term it was the literary outcome of his journey that was of greater importance. Chaucer extended his trip, not only to see Florence for the first time, but also in the hope of meeting the Florentine poets who were his contemporaries.

The three greatest writers in Italian history, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Francesco Petrarca (1304–74) – Petrarch – and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), were all Tuscans. Chaucer, an admirer of all three, had already paid them the compliment of borrowing their rhyme and metre patterns – and sometimes even their story lines – thus becoming the first author to demonstrate the need for copyright laws. By some coincidence of location and culture, Tuscany had been providing the world of letters with inspiration and settings through the works of the Florentine poet Dante and his successors since long before Chaucer's arrival. Poetry has remained the most important element of Italian literature – described by the twentieth-century Italian writer Italo Calvino as 'poor in novelists but rich in poets'. We will see that poets have also featured disproportionately among Tuscany's expatriate literati.

Just as Chaucer has been called the father of English literature, so Dante can be called the father of the Italian language. After his banishment in 1302, Dante's writings while in exile included *De vulgari eloquentia* (*On the Eloquence of the Vernacular*), in which he advocated the use of the dialect that was understood by the ordinary people of Tuscany. Because Dante persisted in writing in the Tuscan language – at the time only one of a babel of dialects to be found in the Italian peninsula – rather than ecclesiastical or academic Latin, his language came to be adopted by later writers and was readily available when printing presses and cheap paper arrived in Italy. By the time of the nineteenth-century Risorgimento, when Italy became a sovereign state, the language of Dante continued to be adopted by later writers, and so became the language of the united Italy.

Within decades of the death of Dante, Tuscany was struck by the worst plague in history: an outbreak so virulent that it ravaged the whole continent, and came to be known as the Black Death.

The infection was brought by rats arriving in southern Italy in the 1340s, in ships carrying spices from the Far East. Over the next half-century, the plague would have a profound effect on the demography of Tuscany, killing more than two-thirds of its population.

Chaucer may have been the first English writer to visit Tuscany, but he could hardly claim to have been a trailblazer; the literary exodus from the north was still a long way off. The French essayist and philosopher Michel Eyquem de Montaigne called in briefly in 1581, looking for a cure for his kidney stones, but it would be another three centuries before the next recorded sighting of a British author.

Then, like buses, two arrived almost at once: John Milton in 1634, followed four years later by John Evelyn. A mere hundred years later, in the mid-eighteenth century, another couple arrived, this time together: Horace Walpole, son of British Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, and his 23-year-old travelling companion and old Etonian schoolmate, the poet Thomas Gray. They were the vanguard of the trickle of eighteenth-century Anglo-Saxon writers that included, later in the century, James Boswell and Tobias Smollett. The trickle broadened to a stream with the Grand Tour, that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aristocratic gap year, in which noble British families sent their young male heirs to continental Europe to round off their classical studies with exposure to its cultural treasures – and at times to a variety of socially transmittable diseases.

With the growth of the Victorian middle class, the discovery of travel as a leisure activity, (encouraged by a devout Thomas Cook), and the advent of affordable travel, the stream became a torrent, and, despite Lord Byron's optimistic promise that 'in two or three years the first rush will be over', it shows no sign of abatement. Tuscany became a magnet for foreign writers and has remained an irresistible attraction for centuries.

The writers came from many countries: from France, Alexandre Dumas and Stendhal; from Germany, Johann von Goethe and Rainer Maria Rilke; Denmark's Hans Christian Andersen; from

Russia, Dostoevsky and Chekhov; and, from the middle of the nineteenth century, the Americans – Mark Twain, Henry James, Edith Wharton and Sinclair Lewis. They were all far outnumbered by the British: the Shelleys, the Brownings, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, David Herbert Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster, Muriel Spark, Dylan Thomas – and many more. Such was the preponderance of Britons among the early migrants that resident continentals, having as yet no word for 'tourist' used its nearest equivalent: 'English'. Alexandre Dumas, in his *Une Année à Florence* (*A Year in Florence*), claimed that *all* foreigners, 'regardless of hair colour, age or gender', came from London. When he was staying at the Hôtel d'York in Nice (then the Italian Nizza) in the 1840s, he saw a coach pull up at the front door. When he asked where the guests were from, the manager answered, 'They're definitely English, but whether they are French or German I don't know.'

Fiction writers have found in the Tuscan people and landscape an inexhaustible source of characters and settings. Few expatriate authors returned to their home countries without the green shoots of their 'Italian novel' in their luggage: Harriet Beecher Stowe with her Renaissance saga, *Agnes of Sorrento*; George Eliot with hers, *Romola*; D. H. Lawrence with *Aaron's Rod*; Nathaniel Hawthorne and his *The Marble Faun* (published in England as *Transformation*); or Sinclair Lewis and *World So Wide*, to name a few. E. M. Forster's novelistic green shoots took some time to blossom, but in the years following his stays in Tuscany he published two: *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. If Tuscany was fertile soil for novelists, non-fiction writers needed to look little farther than the nearest castello, palazzo or landscape.

What was it that brought, and continues to bring, these many poets, novelists, biographers, playwrights and historians to Tuscany? It is certainly a place of calm; a haven from the pressures and distractions of life in northern cities; its climate, unlike their native one, is consistently pleasant. Another attraction was good health: it was generally believed – and endorsed by the likes of Tobias

Smollett, D. H. Lawrence and the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning – that the Mediterranean climate offered relief from respiratory ailments. London artist Seymour Kirkup came there in his late twenties for medical reasons and survived into his nineties. Modern medical historians claim that, in the longer term, the plague had a beneficial effect in that descendants of its survivors enjoy greater immunity to viral infections such as influenza and HIV than non-Europeans do.

Many impecunious writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, became economic migrants, finding that they could make their pounds or dollars go further in Italy. Others came seeking freedom from the constraints of English society: D. H. Lawrence (whose capacious beachside villa cost him £25 a year) wrote, '[Italy] leaves the soul so free. Over these [northern] countries, Germany and England, like the grey skies, lies the gloom of dark moral judgment and condemnation. Italy does not judge.' (*Lady Chatterley's Lover* was published in Florence in 1919 – 41 years before the English edition.) Other constraints were parental (Elizabeth Barrett Browning), religious (James Boswell) and – particularly following the Oscar Wilde trial in 1895 – sexual. The American author David Leavitt described the homosexuality laws as 'a blackmailer's charter': Oscar Wilde's friend and biographer, the Irish-American author Frank Harris, described the situation somewhat imaginatively in his biography of Wilde: 'Every train to Dover was crowded; every steamer to Calais thronged with members of the aristocratic and leisured classes.' Percy Shelley wrote to his cousin, Thomas Medwin, 'Italy is the place for you – the very place – the Paradise of exiles – the retreat of Pariahs.'

Writers were attracted by a greater variety of settings, for not only were Italy's cities different from northern cities, but they were different from each other. The American historian N. M. Maugham wrote, 'the differences between Italian towns are as striking as those between Athens, Corinth, or Sparta must have been. This is more than a geographical contrast; the fierce antagonisms of the Middle Ages resulted in extreme individualism.'

Above all, what continue to attract and inspire writers and artists of all genres are the wealth of Tuscany's artistic, architectural and historical treasures, the warmth and love of life of its people and the variety of its highly cultivated countryside. 'The intensive culture of vine and olive and wheat', wrote D. H. Lawrence, 'by the ceaseless industry of naked human hands and winter-shod feet, and slow-stepping soft-eyed oxen does not devastate a country . . . it is a work of many centuries. It is the gentle sensitive sculpture of all the landscape.' 'Nothing is new in Tuscany,' the pioneering travel writer H. V. Morton declared, 'we were merely the latest of those who had laughed and joked upon that hilltop under the same blue sky.'

1 Tuscan landscape near Siena

2

Florence

The Renaissance City

An inexplicable miracle, an enchanted land of geniuses whose achievements evoke admiration and astonishment.

(John Najemy, *History of Florence, 1200–1575*)

I first arrived in Florence on a sunny but chilly February day many years ago, as a student. It was my final year at university, and I intended to devote the time exclusively to one subject: Italian art of the fourteenth century – what Italians call the *trecento* – on the optimistic assumption that I would thus have time in which to appreciate the city's other attractions.

I soon realised that if I were to complete the course in one year, I must not be tempted to look at anything outside the *trecento*. I would have to find a way to resist the siren calls of the Renaissance treasures, the paintings and palaces, sculptures and cathedrals that confronted and tantalised at every turn. I had to pretend that the Renaissance – those two or three centuries, beginning around 1400, during which art and science were 'reborn' in Florence and spread throughout northern Europe – never happened. As a reward for this sacrifice, I promised myself that I would return to Florence after my studies and enjoy all those churches and palazzos, the Michelangelos, Botticellis and da Vincis that I had to ignore then.

I did learn to love the *trecento*, and was soon enraptured by all those medieval castles, the Franciscan and Dominican monasteries, the sacred altarpieces and the frescoed Madonnas; but returning to the Florence of the Renaissance took rather longer than I expected;

I had to earn a living. Now, retired and living just a few hours' train journey from the city, I have been back many times, and have never tired of Florence and its treasures, regardless of period: Etruscan, Roman, medieval or Renaissance.

The American writer Sinclair Lewis, in his last novel, *World So Wide*, called Florence 'a city of ancient reticences and modern energy'. Florence is not one, but a number of cities: the first a vibrant commercial and financial centre, the birthplace of banking; the city whose very name became, in 1252, the first international unit of currency – the *fleurin* or florin – seven and a half centuries before the Euro. There is also the Florence, appropriately for the city in which Dante's *Divine Comedy* was born, that is a modern depiction of chaos: too many cars crowd into streets that were not built to hold them, their speed frenzied and their smell and noise demonic. Cars in Italy make a noise inversely proportional to their size, as if to assert their rights to the inadequate space: small cars make more noise than big cars, and scooters are noisier than both.

As Charles Dickens put it, there is 'another and a different city of rich forms and fancies, always lying at our feet'. In the vortex of this whirlpool is yet another: Florence the museum, birthplace of the Renaissance. It is easy to understand why early travellers, lucky enough never to have had to cope with traffic any more anarchic than the occasional horse-drawn carriage or sedan chair, were enchanted by its harmony and beauty.

It should not be assumed that the Piazza del Duomo, although a traffic-free zone, is a haven of tranquillity. How could one expect to enjoy such treasures alone, especially in midsummer, when the city is besieged by tourists? As early as 1845, the English author and critic John Ruskin was complaining in a letter to his father, 'The square is full of listless, chattering, smoking vagabonds, who are always moving every way at once.' Today, day trippers, arriving by the busload from Turin, Milan and Rome and from cruise liners in Livorno and Civitavecchia, follow guides carrying garish banners, to be herded into an international phalanx of gawpers and photographers: note-taking Japanese hanging on their guides'

every word, clinging close together lest they become detached from their group, while American high-schoolers chatter as their guides expound unheard. The city powers, in an attempt to stem the flow, have restricted the number of coaches parked at any one time to 150. They might as well try to staunch Niagara Falls. The camera-clicking hordes photographing the pigeon-sullied statue of David outside the Palazzo Vecchio don't care that he is only a copy – a mere century-old *arriviste*, while the *real* David – the one sculpted by Michelangelo in 1504 – stands pristine and pigeon-free in a museum only half a mile away. But, as the travel writer Jan Morris says, 'tourism encourages unreality'.

Real or unreal, who can deprive the tourists of their right to be there? Ever since the Grand Tour, visitors have resented other visitors doing exactly what they themselves are doing: two hundred years ago, a curmudgeonly Lord Byron complained that the Mediterranean was 'pestilent with English – a man is a fool who travels now in France and Italy till this tribe of wretches is swept home again'.

In fact, the 'pestilence' of English tourists had begun long before Byron's day and, contrary to his predictions, has continued long after him. In 1860, the English author George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) wrote, 'We are at the quietest hotel in Florence, having sought it out for the sake of getting clear of the stream of English and Americans.' The American writer Dan Fellows Platt, in his *Through Italy with Car and Camera*, wrote, 'People have made of this paradise a hell, in particular a motorists' hell' – and he was writing in 1907. The *residential* Anglicisation of Florence, however, which began in the late eighteenth century and reached its peak in the nineteenth, is now in decline. It is difficult to estimate, in these days of open European frontiers, the number of permanent British residents, but it would probably be a mere fraction of the 35,000 estimated by the British consul in 1910. The British government finally closed its consulate in Florence at the end of 2011, after five hundred years, and replaced it with an Honorary Consul – to the great disappointment of the mayor, Signor Renzi. The falling Briton

count is being more than compensated by Americans, including those 'reverse patriots' decried by Sinclair Lewis: the descendants of Italian Americans.

Having visited Florence many times in recent years, I have concluded that, not only is a year not enough to enjoy its abundance, but a lifetime will not be enough. More learned writers and art historians than I have recognised this problem, which the English historian John Julius Norwich described in *The Italian World* as 'cultural indigestion'. Disillusioned, he found Florence, 'frankly, a disappointment', and blamed his own excessive anticipation:

> Perhaps I had expected too much, which would not have been surprising; perhaps, too, the weather had something to do with it, for the radiant summer was gone and I saw the city through a grey drizzle. Sadly, and despite frequent return visits, that first impression has never entirely left me. I have tried, again and again, to love Florence. The fault is entirely mine; mine, too, is the loss.

The German historian Bernd Roeck, in *Florence 1900,* found that: 'There comes a moment when one is awash with regular enjoyment and thinks that this is how it must be; when the churches, Madonnas, and Lamentations of Christ become a matter of total indifference and one longs for something else, without really knowing what.' The Italians even have a name for this disorienting condition: *hyperkulturia*, introduced by the Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini in her 1979 book, *Stendhal's Syndrome*. Her title is based on the French writer's gushing reaction to Florentine art: 'I was in a state of ecstasy with the heavenly sensations brought on by great art; . . . my heart beat so strongly that I was afraid I might fall.'

Visitors who hope to 'do' Florence on one brief visit tend to suffer the same artistic overload – even writers. The Irish-American writer, Mary McCarthy, in *The Stones of Florence*, casts a cold, if ironic, eye: 'For the contemporary [1959] taste, there is too much Renaissance in Florence: too much David, too much rusticated stone, too

much glazed terracotta, too many Madonnas with Bambinos.' A travel-worn Mark Twain, on his first trip outside the United States, damned the city with faint praise:

> Florence pleased us for a while. I think we appreciated the great figure of David in the grand square, and the sculptured group they call the Rape of the Sabines. We wandered through the endless collections of paintings and statues of the Pitti and Uffizi galleries, of course. I make that statement in self-defence; there let it stop. I could not rest under the imputation that I visited Florence and did not traverse its weary miles of picture galleries.

To the world-weary English novelist Aldous Huxley, Florence was 'a third-rate provincial town colonized by English sodomites and middle-aged lesbians'.

Ernest Hemingway's only recorded visit to Florence was in the spring of 1927, when he travelled with his journalist friend, Guy Hickok of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, in a battered old Ford. The trip purported to be a topical study of Mussolini's Fascist Italy. The resultant article, 'Italy, 1927', appeared in the *New Republic* magazine in August of that year. In it, Hemingway claims to have crossed northern Italy from coast to coast in both directions, visiting Ventimiglia, La Spezia, Pisa, Florence, Rimini, Forlì, Imola, Bologna, Parma, Piacenza, Genoa and back to Ventimiglia – a distance of some 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles), all in just 10 days. Apart from that article – described by his biographer, Kenneth Lynn, as 'semi-factual, semi-fictional' – the only written product of the journey was a picture postcard from Rimini, leading one to wonder if the article's final sentence: 'Naturally, in such a short trip, we had no opportunity to see how things were with the country or the people', was an editorial apology.

Florence's appeal is to the more leisured visitor. The English author and journalist Leigh Hunt, who spent almost three years there, said on returning to England, 'I loved Florence, and saw nothing in it but cheerfulness and elegance. I loved the name, I

loved the fine arts and old palaces . . . I loved the good-natured, intelligent inhabitants'. Travel writer Jan Morris wrote, 'The truth is that to me Florence is more than just a city: It is the idea of a city. No place on earth offers me an image more concentrated and more exact – the look of it, its history, its style and reputation all bundled into one intoxicating fancy.'

Tobias Smollett, the eighteenth-century Scottish surgeon-turned-author, was among the early British visitors to Florence. As a novelist, Smollett was an inspiration to contemporary writers, and many who came after him have acknowledged his influence – none more forcefully than Charles Dickens. Smollett, asthmatic, consumptive and jaundiced, hoped that the Mediterranean climate would ease his respiratory problems. He arrived in Nice in 1763 at the age of 42 and used it as a base for his journeys to Provence, Rome and Tuscany, which he recorded in his *Travels through France and Italy*, published in 1766. In his book, he described Florence as 'a noble city, that still retains all the marks of a majestic capital, such as piazzas, palaces, fountains, bridges, statues and arcades'.

Unlike the travellers of today, most of whom arrive in Florence by air or rail, the early arrivals had time to appreciate the panoramic first view of the city from the surrounding hills. James Fenimore Cooper, the author of Western novels, the most famous of which is *The Last of the Mohicans*, was one of the first American writers to visit Tuscany. He recalled his first view of the city in 1828: 'the city of Florence appeared, seated on a plain, at the foot of the hills, with the dome of its cathedral starting out of the field of roofs like a balloon about to ascend.' The first impression of the American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne evoked the triumphant journey of Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

> by and by, we had a distant glimpse of Florence, showing its great dome and some of its towers out of a sidelong valley, as if we were between two great waves of the tumultuous sea of hills; while, far beyond, rose in the distance the blue peaks of three or four of the

> Apennines, just on the remote horizon. There being a haziness in the atmosphere, however, Florence was little more distinct to us than the Celestial City was to Christian and Hopeful, when they spied it from the Delectable Mountains.

Charles Dickens decided, in 1845, in view of the failure of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, that he and his family could live less expensively in Italy, and obtained contracts for articles and a travel book to be called *Pictures from Italy*. He was enchanted by the city:

> I need not tell you that the churches here are magnificent. But how much beauty of another kind is here, when on a fair, clear morning, we look from the summit of a hill, on Florence! See where it lies before us in a sun-lighted valley, bright with the winding Arno, and shut in by swelling hills; its domes, and towers, and palaces, rising from the rich country in a glittering heap, shining in the sun like gold!

No one has yet been able to explain fully the amazing fusion of artistic, intellectual and scientific talents that converged in one city, initiating the era of cultural change that we now know as the Renaissance, or how, over a period of 200 years, one small city state roughly the size of today's Portsmouth could nurture such artists as Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Donatello and Botticelli, writers of the calibre of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, and scientists such as Galileo. (Portsmouth-born geniuses do not come so readily to mind.) It was fortuitous that the Renaissance should coincide with the political dominance of the Medici, whom Dickens called 'the Good and Bad Angels of Florence' – an enlightened dynasty with the wealth and power for their city to flourish – and historians such as Dante, Machiavelli and Vasari to record it. It was, as the American historian John Najemy wrote in his *History of Florence 1200–1575*, 'an enchanted land of geniuses whose achievements evoke admiration and astonishment'. 'What city,' asked Gene Brucker,

> not merely in Italy, but in all the world, is more securely placed within its circle of walls, more proud in its palazzi, more bedecked with churches, more imposing in its gates, richer in piazzas, happier in its wide streets, greater in its people, more glorious in its citizenry, more inexhaustible in wealth, more fertile in its fields?

A long-term resident of Florence, the English poet Walter Savage Landor, marvelled, in his *Imaginary Conversations* that 'A town so little that the voice of a cabbage-girl in the midst of it may be heard at the extremities, reared within three centuries a greater number of citizens illustrious for their genius than all the remainder of the continent'.

Florence began life as a Roman military encampment in the first century BC. Over the next 13 centuries it grew and prospered, at least twice overflowing its city walls, until at the beginning of the fourteenth century its population was 120,000, or about three times that of London, making it one of the largest cities in the world. According to the sixteenth-century sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, 'Caesar decided to call the city Florence [Fiorenza], as it was a very beautiful name and very apposite, and it seemed, with its suggestion of flowers, to make a good omen.' The legend is supported by the prominence of the *giglio*, or lily, in the city's flag, and the dedication of its cathedral to Santa Maria del Fiore.

Because the plague arrived in southern Italy from the east, Florence was the first city in Europe to suffer its devastation. No protective measures existed at the time, and the plague and its successive outbreaks killed almost three-quarters of the city's population. Despite this, by the time the first English writer, Geoffrey Chaucer, arrived in 1373, the city's population was still 50 per cent larger than that of London.

The city's next crisis was politico-religious: thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florence was dominated by the rivalries between the Ghibellines, supporters of the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Guelphs, supporters of the Pope. The conflict had repercussions in