

THE COLOSSEUM

'While the Colosseum stands, Rome shall stand; when the Colosseum falls, Rome shall fall; and when Rome falls, the world.'
Ancient proverb

The Colosseum *is* falling down. Three slabs of ancient plaster fell from one of the entrance arches in the summer of 2010. What is to be done? This is the most iconic ruin in Rome, the largest amphitheatre ever built in the ancient Empire, scene of the deaths, at its inaugural games, of nine thousand beasts and who knows how many gladiators. Its true name is the Flavian Amphitheatre, because it was built during the reigns of two emperors of the Flavian dynasty, Vespasian and Titus, between AD 70 and 80. The name Colosseum comes from a colossal statue of Nero, in the guise of the sun-god Apollo, which stood beside it, in a place which had formerly been the atrium to his sumptuous Domus Aurea, the Golden House, which stretched for half a square kilometre in the very heart of the city, and whose gilded and painted halls, Nero is supposed to have claimed, made him 'finally feel he was being housed like a human being'. When this most depraved of all the emperors, murderer of his own mother as well as of his second wife,

finally took his own life, his successors tore down the Golden House and restored the land to the city, building public baths and an enormous arena on the site. This fact is celebrated by the satirist Martial, in a poem that formed part of his *Liber Spectaculorum*, published to coincide with the inauguration of the Colosseum:

Martial praises the Colosseum

Here where the stellar Colossus scans the very stars
And the cranes loom tall in the roadway
Once gleamed the odious halls of a rabid king—
The only house that stood in the whole of Rome.
On the spot where the Amphitheatre's august mound
Heaves into view, just there, was Nero's lake;
And there, where we gaze on the gift of thermal baths
A park had turned men out of house and home.
The limit of those never-ended halls stood where
The Claudian porch now casts its spreading shade.
Rome is restored to herself, and Caesar¹, under you
What once were a lord's, are now the people's
pleasures.

Liber Spectaculorum II, 1st century AD (Tr. AB)

Though Seneca never attended games in the Colosseum (in his day, it had not been built), he saw gladiator fights and wild animal hunts in other arenas, and in one of

¹ The emperor Titus, under whom the Colosseum was inaugurated.

Spain, and that between about 1159 and 1172 he travelled around the Mediterranean and into Arabia. His diaries of the journey are an important source work for the period.

Bernard Berenson (1865–1959): Berenson was born in Lithuania, the son of parents who emigrated to Boston, Massachusetts. On graduating from Harvard he travelled to Europe, funded by the Boston art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner. Europe was to be Berenson's home for the rest of his life. His plans to write a novel came to nothing; instead he fashioned himself into the most influential art historian and critic of the first half of the 20th century. *The Passionate Sightseer*, published posthumously in 1960, is a collection of entries from his diaries between 1947 and 1956.

James Boswell (1740–95): Scottish writer, most famous for his *Life of Samuel Johnson*. He was also a great traveller, and has left accounts of many of his journeys, both in Britain and abroad. Always of an amorous disposition (with Boswell, in fact, it was pathological), he is candid about his brief encounters and his battles with venereal disease.



Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973): Anglo-Irish writer, one of the great novelists of the 1930s. Her prose beautifully examines the lives that boil and bubble under a surface of calm respectability—her own life was one of marital contentment and extra-marital liaison. *A Time in Rome* is an excellent in-

roduction to the city, both ancient and modern, written unabashedly for readers who have not spent their lives studying the Classics. As Bowen says of herself, 'I have no Latin'.



Robert Browning (1812–89): Though Browning began his poetic career as an imitator of Byron and Shelley, he quickly relinquished the style, being temperamentally unsuited to it: he was, in fact, profoundly 'normal' and 'Victorian'. His great talent was for poetry as drama; and Italy, where he lived for much of his life, provided him with a rich cast of characters. He made his name with the voluminous *Ring and the Book*, which tells the true story, from different points of view, of a murder trial in 17th-century Rome.

Charles Burney (1726–1814): Composer and musical historian. He toured Europe in 1770, gathering material for his *History of Music*. He was the father of the novelist Fanny Burney.

Lord Byron (1788–1824): George Gordon Byron was the most famous poet of his age, feeding a public that was as agog to know the scandals of his private life as it was to peruse his verses. When in Rome on tour he became enamoured of the *Apollo Belvedere* and even, it is said, began to model his own appearance on the statue. His public and poetic personae are well known: aristocratic rebel, untameable libertine, champion of the underdog, show-off.

