

The Best Revenge

by Thomas Fleming

Rome Revisited

"What is the theme of your conference?" asked a potential traveler to Rome.

"How republics perish," I replied.

"Don't you mean democracies?" he persisted, referring to the title of a good but far-from-profound book by Jean-François Revel. I congratulated him on getting the point of the title of our second Rome Convivium. After all, I explained, democracies always perish—and rather quickly, if we can judge from the histories of fifth-century Athens and Jacobin France—passing through the stages of constitutional order, mob rule, demagogic dictatorship, and autocracy, though not necessarily in the same sequence.

Democracies are a bit like a homicidal unicorn: They do not exist, and that is a good thing. Republics are something different. They come in many different types, from the aristocratic (Venice) to the comparatively popular (America before 1860), but they are all based on law and tradition. The ancient Romans lost the essence of their republic in gaining an empire long before Julius Caesar seized power, but they also preserved much of their republican legacy in the "principate"—that is, the early empire. Much of the credit goes to Augustus and his collaborators, who worked hard to re-

build the moral and religious foundations on which Roman greatness was based. Americans, as our country hardens slowly into empire, could learn a lesson or two from the Romans, and where better to learn it than in Rome?

Each time I go to Rome, I learn many new things about the ancient and medieval city. This time, I wanted to orient myself in republican Rome. I spent hours reading Platner and Ashby's old *Topography* (available at the LacusCurtius website), as I waited for Lawrence Richardson's magisterial *Topographical Dictionary* to arrive. It proved to be so good that I lugged the massive volume all the way to Italy and back. Professor Richardson would not remember me from Adam, but I attended several of his famous parties when my wife was taking archeology courses with him at Duke.

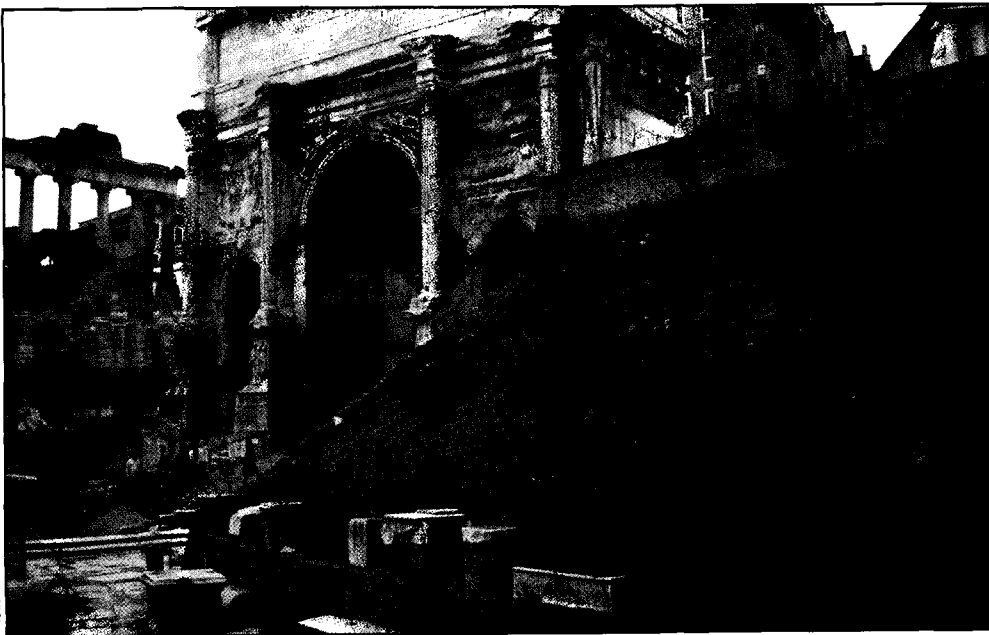
To give our travelers a feel for how the ancient city matches up with the modern, I also lugged along my laptop and prepared the first audiovisual presentations at a convivium. It began as the usual technophobe's comedy of errors, since I had lumped the files for different lectures together, which made it impossible for my assistant Nicole to follow in sequence. I had worked like a dog on what proved

to be the worst lecture I have ever delivered. We fixed the problems that night, and the rest of the presentations came off almost perfectly. To orient the group, I took a plan of ancient Rome and marked out well-known sites from the train station to the Piazza Navona to the Vatican. It was easy to show the location of our hotel, right behind Vespasian's Temple of Peace (erected after the conquest of Judea) and looking out across some ruins of the Augustan Forum to the Forum Romanum.

The Forum Hotel was even better than I remembered. The staff were very helpful, and, as better rooms became available, they generously upgraded several of us into lovely accommodations with views of the ancient city. At every breakfast at the Forum Hotel, we could look out to the Forum and the Palatine Hill. The weather in early January was warm enough some mornings that people could sit outside, and I do not think I put on my trench coat even once.

We were able to walk virtually everywhere—even up to the Museo Nazionale in the Baths of Diocletian, a superb collection of ancient sculptures and mosaics not far from the train station and surprisingly neglected. The museum is a large complex of several buildings, and, naturally, Chris Check took the metro travelers to one entrance, and I took the walkers to another.

That was about the biggest snarl of the whole trip. We even managed to coordinate the trip to Ostia Antica without a hitch. I have visited many ancient sites in Italy, including Pompeii, but I was very impressed with Ostia. It is less grisly than Pompeii, and more of the mosaics and sculptures have been left, either in their original buildings or put into the museum on the grounds. It is also a wonderful place to walk around when the temperature is 60 and you have the place to yourself. There is really no better time to be in Rome than the weeks between Epiphany and St. Joseph's Day (though that may be pushing it a bit late). At lunch, we had Cipriani's, a wonderful restaurant in Ostia, all to ourselves, and, though a few of our guests were surprised to get an antipasto consisting of a few beans, they were



The Triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum.

even more surprised to discover that the antipasto was six separate courses of Roman country specialties, before going on to *tagliatelle all'amatriciana*, *bacalà*, *scallopine*, and on and on until all we could manage for dessert was the fresh fruit macedonia. Even the *vino della casa* was superb, to say nothing of the coffee and grappa we had after dessert.

When my wife and I got off the train at the Piramide station in Rome, we decided to work off lunch by walking back the three miles to the hotel. Chris Check and some of the college students took the long way home by going to see churches in Trastevere.

The six young students, in combination with seasoned travelers like Mrs. Drennan and Mrs. Augustyn, made the whole week an unusual experience. Through generous donations, we are able to offer partial scholarships, and we further cut the costs by putting them up in a convent used every year by the College of St. Thomas More in Ft. Worth. The kids, apart from my younger son, were all well behaved, though there were some long nights when they joined forces with three Southern businessmen not quite old enough to know better. I think I am happy to be losing the resilience of youth.

I hardly ever have a bad day in Rome. What do I remember best after six weeks of facing the bleak midwinter in Rockford? Walking through the Forum for the hundredth time—but this time actually understanding the place. Rambling around the Palatine on a sunny afternoon, eating an endless meal at Angellino ai Fori, a once-famous restaurant that has gone back to being simply a good place to eat . . . I do not actually think of



Dr. James Patrick explains the Baroque jewel, Sant'Ivo.

food first, though I do typically spend each day looking forward to *cena*. Some of the ladies managed to average more than one dose of *gelato* per day, but I am fastidious and only risk it for the best *produzione artigianale*. One of our best meals was an incredibly cheap dinner with Michael McMahon at a restaurant I refuse to name in public, though I will answer discrete inquiries.

I can describe the meals or outline the lectures and programs, but to get the flavor of our Rome Convivium, you would have to spend one dinner talking Texas politics with Tom Pauken and tax policy (American and Roman) with David Hartman, sit at the next dinner with Alberto Carosa and Rob Moynihan (of *Inside the Vatican*) plotting papal succession, and

the following night table-hopping from Prof. Andrew Fraser expounding on Australian immigration questions to Roberto de Mattei (special advisor to the Italian foreign minister and vice chairman of the Council on Research) explaining Italy's role in the European Union to Peter Stanlis explaining natural-law theory—or making bad puns to Mrs. Drennan—and ending up with a group of young men who seem to have no trouble striking up conversations with charming young women, though I might wish their conversation had been a little quieter beneath my window the last night at 3:00 A.M. I began to regret the upgrade to a sumptuous corner room.

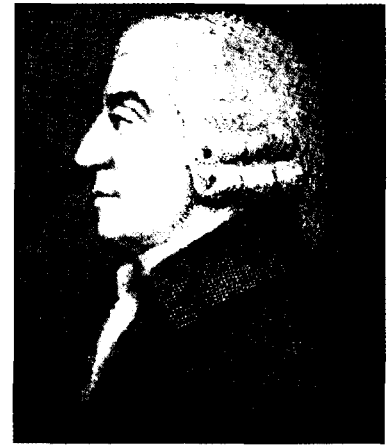
One night sipping cognac in the hotel, I discovered that we were making history. The hotel manager, an Italian of Greek extraction, came over to inform David Hartman that his was the last cigar that could ever be smoked in the bar of the Hotel Forum. The European Union had finally imposed its will on the freedom-loving Italians. "This country is finished," he declared sadly. But it is not: Rome survived the Vandals and Visigoths, and it will survive the European Union, and if, to smoke my cigar, I have to make a little *passaggiata* through Roma antica—past the Theater of Marcellus, up through the restored Portico of Octavia to Vecchia Roma and the old Jewish Ghetto—I can scarcely complain. We mortal generations come and go, as Homer told us, like leaves in the wind, but Rome endures.



Emily Brunner and Nicole Kooistra on the Palatine Hill.



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Scholars on the right blame the Enlightenment for the social and political ills that plague our times. In the eyes of these same critics, however, the Scottish Enlightenment of David Hume and Adam Smith merits praise for a less radical approach to questions of personal liberty and for an enthusiasm for free markets. Is this a reasonable analysis of the two Enlightenments? At least one man did not think so: Sir Walter Scott, whose body of work, including a remarkable biography of Napoleon, was a reaction to the French and Scottish Enlightenments. The Convivium will include sightseeing in the city that Robert Louis Stevenson described as "what Paris was meant to be." Edinburgh, with its medieval Royal Mile and its Enlightenment New Town, is an ideal location for contemplating the tension between medieval and modern.

The price for the Convivium includes five nights (arrive May 22; checkout on May 27) at the Royal Terrace Hotel, full breakfast, four group meals, all lectures and discussions, and selected excursions and entrance fees.

For more information contact Christopher Check, executive vice president, at (815) 964-5811.

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