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Grand Tour

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Abstract

The Grand Tour was a form of educational travel undertaken by young aristocratic and gentry men. Travel and separation from the home had long been an important means of forming young boys but a nascent Grand Tour developed in the early modern period. It reached its most recognisable form, and the height of its popularity, in the eighteenth century. Fully part of the eighteenth-century world of sociability, the Grand Tour simultaneously acted as a formative, experimental instruction in manners, a series of cosmopolitan *débuts* that introduced elite young men to European elite society, and a means of renewing and expanding elite British-Continental intergenerational connections.

The Grand Tour was a form of educational travel undertaken by young aristocratic and gentry men. Travel and separation from the home had long been an important means of forming young boys but a nascent Grand Tour developed in the early modern period. It reached its most recognisable form, and the height of its popularity, in the eighteenth century. Most Grand Tourists were the family's heir, although younger brothers and young men from less wealthy families sometimes joined them as companions, alongside tutors, who acted in *loco parentis*, and an array of servants. A Grand Tour typically began after school and/or university, and could last anywhere between six months and six years, with most Tours taking three to four years.

The Grand Tour was a formative rite of passage that was intended to finish an elite young man's education and form his identity as a member of Britain's ruling class. While the Grand Tour has typically been understood within an Anglophone context, there is a growing understanding of other traditions of educational travel, such as the German *kavalierstour*, the Bohemian *l'nderreise* and the Netherlandish *Groot Tour*.

A Grand Tour itinerary typically covered much of western and central Europe, including France, the Netherlands, the German principalities, Austria, Switzerland and Italy, with occasional excursions further afield to the Levant, Russia, Scandinavia and so on. A wide range of activities were undertaken, with considerable periods of time spent at academies, universities and at certain courts and cities. Grand Tourists would tour cabinets of curiosities, collections of arts and antiquities, battlefield and fortresses. They would take in classical ruins and modern sites of industry and commerce, witness scientific experiments and attend lectures, concerts, military reviews and the theatre. As the eighteenth century progressed, they became increasingly interested in nature, touring the Alps, cruising the Rhine and climbing Vesuvius.

Many of these activities were sociable in nature, and indeed, sociability itself was of deep importance. The Grand Tour was, amongst other things, meant to equip young men with enough social skill and polish to make a convincing entry into fashionable society back home, and enable Grand Tourists and their families to continue consolidating and expanding on their continental socio-political networks.

A typical starting point for attaining the skills was to attend an academy. Initially founded by seventeenth-century French educators to deter their nobility from attending Italian universities, academies quickly became a shared aspect of western European travel culture. In the eighteenth century, academies in Paris and along the Loire remained popular options, as did a newer wave of academies with strong ties to courtly life, such as Turin's *Accademia Reale* and the Duke of Lorraine's Nancy and Lunéville academy.¹

Through these institutions and the wider range of masters who gravitated to the area, Grand Tourists would receive tuition in skills that were deemed important to the art of refinement. This included riding, fencing and dancing, which honed graceful and confident posture, gesture and deportment, and language skills, which were crucial for conversation. French in particular was the 'lingua franca' across the European courts and learned societies, and back

in Britain amongst the Francophone elite. Without competency in this language, effective participation in fashionable eighteenth-century sociability was extremely difficult (Ansell 111-113). In addition to these lessons, Grand Tourists also had the opportunity to socialise with fellow British students and those with more international backgrounds. Turin's *Accademia Reale*, for example, attracted aristocratic clients from Italy, Germany, Austria, Poland and Russia.²

Beyond the academy walls, Grand Tourists tried out their social graces by participating in continuous rounds of sociability, during which they also had the opportunity to watch the performances of others closely, commenting on those who impressed, disgusted and charmed. They were expected to use letters of introductions and the services of British diplomats to enter into the different elite societies encountered throughout their travels. These societies could range from the most formal to the most provincial ducal, royal and imperial courts, as well as encompassing highly fashionable cosmopolitan sociability, rarefied sites of enlightened conversation.³ When in Paris in 1780, for example, George Herbert, later 11th earl of Pembroke, bounced between Versailles, the salon run by the Parisian hostess, Amélie de Boufflers, Duchess de Lauzun, and much wilder libertine sets.⁴ In certain locations - metropolis like Paris and Vienna, or when travelling through the many German courts - the time dedicated to socialising could be considerable. When in Vienna in 1777 and 1778, Philip, Yorke, later 3rd earl of Hardwicke recorded making fifty social calls in just one exhausting day.⁵

Grand Tourists also met and interacted with other British abroad. Diplomats, particularly ambassadors and special envoys, played an important role in facilitating this and other social activity. Some complained bitterly at the time and expense, but others, such as Sir [William Hamilton](#) in Naples, Sir Horace Mann in Florence and Sir Robert Murray-Keith in Vienna, clearly enjoyed and excelled in the hospitality aspect of their mandate. The role of social host was not just limited to the diplomats. Other British expats also built reputations for giving warm welcomes to Grand Tourists. Jennifer Mori, 'Hosting the Grand Tour: civility, enlightenment and culture, c.1740-1790', in M. Hilton and J. Shefrin (ed.), *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures, Practices* (Farnham: Routledge, 2009), pp. 127-140. The Irish peer, Kenneth Mackenzie, Lord Fortrose, later earl of Seaforth, who spent a considerable part of the 1750s, 60s and 70s abroad, is one such example. His rented apartments in Naples were a fashionable place to enjoy the latest in music, art and fencing, as depicted in Pietro Fabris's two paintings. John Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800* (New Haven, Conn. and London; Yale University Press, 1997), 373-5; 'Pietro Fabris, Kenneth Mackenzie, 1st Earl of Seaforth 1744 - 1781 at home in Naples: fencing scene', National Galleries Scotland, 27 June 2022,

Image



Legend

Pietro Fabris, 'Kenneth Mackenzie, 1st Earl of Seaforth 1744-1781 at home in Naples: fencing scene', National Galleries of Scotland, PG 2610, 1771.

Image



Legend

Pietro Fabris, 'Kenneth Mackenzie, 1st Earl of Seaforth, 1744-1781, at home in Naples: concert party', National Galleries of Scotland, PG2611, 1770.

As this suggests, Grand Tourists were not the only British travellers abroad. Numerous others also had cause to travel, either due to their jobs – diplomats, the military and merchants – or for educational purposes.⁸ Students intending to become physicians, surgeons and lawyers, for example, travelled to receive training in France and the Netherlands. Sponsored by patrons, artists and architects also sought to enhance their training by journeying to the artistic centres of France and Italy. For writers and thinkers, travel and the sociability therein acted as an important means of expanding professional networks and becoming part of the republic of letters. In 1764, for example, [Adam Smith](#) resigned his chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University to act as Henry Scott, 3rd duke of Buccleuch's Grand Tour tutor until 1766. In doing so, he gained the opportunity to meet leading *philosophes*, such as Voltaire, D'Alembert, D'Holbach, Helvetius, and Morrellet, and *économistes*, like François Quesnay, Dupont de Nemours, Mirabeau, Mercier de la Rivière, and Turgot, as well as partake in the salons of D'Enville, De Boufflers, [Du Deffand](#), and De L'Espinasse. Despite his poor French, the trip bolstered his growing international reputation.⁹

The eighteenth century saw a growing number of older British men and women travelling abroad. Some were motivated to relocate to the continent as the result of scandal, political exile, financial difficulty or ill health, but increasing numbers travelled for purposes of pleasure and leisure. Frequently undertaking similar routes and itineraries to the Grand Tourist, they were the start of what would gradually develop into modern cultures of tourism. Sociability was equally important to almost all non-Grand Tour travellers. Take for example the respective experiences of [Hester Lynch Piozzi](#) and Elizabeth, Lady Fremantle. Travelling on honeymoon with her Italian husband, Gabriele Piozzi, from 1784 to 1787, Hester Lynch Piozzi described meeting and conversing with a variety of *salonniers* in Florence, Rome and Venice.¹⁰ Lady Fremantle (nee Wynne) was raised in the cosmopolitan European elite societies of Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy during the 1780s and 90s, and then married in 1797 to Thomas Francis Fremantle, later the Naval Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean. Her diary outlines a well-rehearsed and discerning process of establishing her family in the fashionable society of cities ranging from Naples and Nice to London and Brighton.¹¹

Young Grand Tourists were under considerable pressure to socialise well and effectively. Parents and guardians could be unrelenting in their demands, and letters from Tourists and tutors responded by talking up their social successes, and listing in detail who they met and who showed them favour. Experiences of failure were as revealing. Letters from less well connected Tourists show that without the correct letters of introduction, accessing more rarefied gatherings could be impossible. Even for the well-connected, socialising could be challenging if one was shy, unsure, or hindered by a reluctant tutor (Goldsmith 65-82).

This pressure was not simply about getting in enough practice. Grand Tour socialising often led to long-lasting friendships and networks, whether between the Grand Tourists themselves or with older European or British acquaintances. As the century progressed, sons increasingly followed in their father's social footsteps, renewing connections made by the previous generation (Goldsmith 75). Moreover, the newest generations were being closely watched by British and European society who traded their impressions and predictions back and forth. When attending George II in Hanover in 1752, the influential political figure, Thomas Pellham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle wrote to Lord Ashburnham of 'Two different Beauties' he'd encountered: the stepbrothers, Lord Frederick North and William Legge, 2nd earl of Dartmouth.¹² To them, he wrote that he and his wife longed to welcome them in England: 'You are the favourites, & will continue so'.¹³ North, in particular, fulfilled the potential that Newcastle could see, and went on to become prime minister in 1770. Less savoury impressions and predications were also accurate. Writing to his sister from Rome in 1756, George Simon Harcourt was surprised to hear '[Henry Herbert, 10th earl of] Pembroke has so good a character in England, for his Lordship, was rather famed for excesses of all kinds abroad than for any other thing'.¹⁴ Pembroke proved Nuneham right when he left his long-suffering wife and eloped in 1762 with Elizabeth Catherine Hunter.¹⁵

Grand Tourists were frequently criticised either for picking up undesirable social manners or for only fraternising amongst themselves.¹⁶ Some criticism even came from within the

ranks. George Legge, Viscount Lewisham, for example, wrote of the embarrassment generated by his ‘half-drunk’ and ‘most openly abandoned’ peers who made life difficult for those that ‘are really desirous of creditable French connections’.¹⁷ Detractors could, and did, misrepresent the overall social picture of the Grand Tour, but letters and diaries certainly were peppered with lists tallying up the different acquaintances from school or university found in each city along with accompanying anecdotes of high-spirited or boorish behaviour. Nevertheless, even this informal associational homosociability had its value. Jason M. Kelly describes such activities as a ‘laboratory for social learning’, and notes that some of these experiments, like the Society of the Dilettanti (originating out of Grand Tour friendships formed in the early 1730s), had an influence that endured even after travel had ceased.¹⁸

Fully part of the eighteenth-century world of sociability, the Grand Tour simultaneously acted as a formative, experimental instruction in manners, a series of cosmopolitan *débuts* that introduced elite young men to European elite society, and a means of renewing and expanding elite British-Continental intergenerational connections.

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