

The Expedition Fund made it possible for me to travel to Italy last summer. Being interested in Renaissance literature, I decided to follow the footsteps of the author John Milton, and tried to visit some of the places he saw during his Continental trip in 1638-9. Besides being an amazing experience, this trip turned out to be extremely useful for a module I have taken on Milton, as well as for my dissertation. It really helped me to realise how painting, architecture, literature and all artistic forms of expression are interconnected and inform each other. This trip allowed me to situate the texts I have been studying within the broader cultural and historical context in which they were written, and had a great impact on my understanding of them.

I began my trip by travelling to Florence, the hub of Renaissance art and culture. I was able to find accommodation not far from Via del Giglio, where Milton stayed during his trip. From there, I explored the city on foot, admiring the beauty of the narrow little streets and the buildings that have remained untouched since the Fifteenth Century. I visited Brunelleschi's iconic Cathedral, Giotto's bell tower and the many statues scattered around the city. It was great to be able to compare Masaccio's Biblical frescoes in the Cappella Brancacci – one of the first examples of realism in the visual arts – with Milton's descriptions of the same scenes in his literary works. Milton famously met Galileo during his trip, so I visited the museum dedicated to him. The sections on early modern scientific thought were very informative, and I was able to see some artefacts about Milton himself. Since I was staying so close to Milton's original accommodation, I tried to imagine what he would have visited and realised how close the Medici Library was. It was great to have access to it, as it contained some amazing literary sources that are impossible to find elsewhere. The breath-taking beauty of the city really topped it all.



During the week I spent in Tuscany, I was also able to organise a couple of day trips to Pisa and Arezzo. I was especially fascinated by the latter. Being the birthplace of the poet Francesco Petrarca, I visited the various places relating to his life; it also treasures the house of the famous artist Giorgio Vasari, known for his architectural work and his writings. Many of the Medieval buildings of the town are still intact, and it was amazing to see the original castle and the high towers dominating the skyline. The historic coats of arms of the various guilds and factions are still displayed on the walls of the buildings, and the whole atmosphere made me travel back in time.



After a week in Tuscany, I travelled up to Bologna. I climbed up the the Asinelli Tower, which gave me a great advantage point over the city; I then visited the great Basilica, and the endless porticos spreading throughout the city. Among the many museums, the highlight for me was probably the Anatomical Theatre. Originally used for anatomical lectures, this wooden chamber was completed in 1638, just before Milton arrived in Bologna. After a day trip to Ravenna, I moved on to Ferrara. I visited the castle that hosted the court of the Estense family – an amazing intellectual centre in the Renaissance, in which Milton probably stayed. I also managed to visit the house of the writer Ludovico Ariosto, and the original mansion of a Renaissance merchant. Finally, I ended my trip in Venice. It was here that Milton heard the music of Monteverdi, and bought many of the scores that he eventually brought back to England. Venice treasures many centres testifying to its long tradition of musicians, and one can still see the buildings of the Serenissima, from the time when the city was an independent Republic.

Overall, my trip proved a great intellectual experience. It really stimulated me to think more broadly about the ways in which literature works in society, and is shaped by history. It allowed me to understand the texts I have been reading in a much more informed way. I was also able to gather some important information for my dissertation. I would recommend to apply for the Expedition Fund to everyone who is planning to do something similar.

