

Venice

Jan Morris



VENICE

JAN MORRIS



ff
faber and faber

For
VIRGINIA MORRIS
a Venetian baby

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Foreword

This is the third revised edition of a book which I originally wrote in the persona of James Morris.

It is not a history book, but it necessarily contains many passages of history. These I have used magpie-style, embedding them in the text where they seem to me to glitter most effectively; but for those who prefer their history in chronological order, at the back of the book there is a historical index, with dates and page numbers.

It is not a guide book, either; but in Chapter 21 I have listed the Venetian sights that seem to me most worth seeing, arranged for the most part topographically, and only occasionally confused by brief purple passages. The index contains map references as well as page numbers, and any building mentioned in the book can thus be at least roughly located on the map of the city.

Nor is it exactly a report. When I wrote it, in 1960, I thought it was. I was a foreign correspondent then, and I planned this book as a dispatch about contemporary Venice. When I began to prepare its first new edition, some ten years later, I thought I could simply bring the whole thing up to date, as a newspaper editor reshuffles a page. However as I wandered the canals and alleys with my own book in my hand, I was quickly disillusioned. I soon came to realize that it was not that kind of book at all, and could not be modernized, as I had supposed, with a few deft strokes of the felt-tipped pen. In the edition of 1974, and in its successor of 1983, I changed the details of the book, but hardly touched its generalities.

For it turns out to be nothing like the objective report that I had originally conceived. It is a highly subjective, romantic, impressionist picture less of a city than of an experience. It is Venice seen through a particular pair of eyes at a particular moment – young eyes at that, responsive above all to the stimuli of youth. It possesses the particular sense of well-being that comes, if I may be immodest, when author and subject are perfectly matched: on the one side, in this case, the loveliest city in the world, only asking to be admired; on the other a writer in the full powers of young maturity, strong in physique, eager in passion, with scarcely a care or a worry in the world. Whatever the faults of the book (and I do acknowledge two or three), nobody could deny its happiness. It breathes the spirit of delight.

So I had mixed feelings in preparing those successive revisions. When I first knew this city, at the very end of the Second World War, it still perceptibly retained that sense of strange isolation, of separateness, which had made it for so many centuries unique in Europe. It was a half joyous, half melancholy city, but not melancholy because of

present anxieties, only because of old regrets. I loved this mixture of the sad and the flamboyant. I loved the lingering defiance of the place, bred of empire long before, the smell of rot and age which was so essential to its character, the queerness, the privacy. The neglect of Venice was part of its charm for me, as it had been for so many *aficionados* before. The very echo of a footfall in a shabby lane, the soft splash of an oar beneath a shadowy bridge, could tug my heart and shape my susceptible cadences.

By the 1970s all was different. Because of a great sea-flood in 1966, Venice had captured the concern of the world. The possibility of her extinction beneath the waters, remote though it really was, was seen as an international catastrophe, and from many nations skills and monies poured in not only to save her from drowning, but to restore all her fabrics and preserve her works of art. By the 1980s a new Venice was coming into being, protected, cherished, no longer sufficient to itself, but adopted by the world at large as a universal heritage. While I acknowledged the excitement of this new fulfilment, I could not altogether share it. For one thing, I believed the idea of Venice – my idea of Venice, anyway – to be unreconcilable with the contemporary world. For another, selfishly perhaps, foolishly even, I missed the tristesse. The sad magic had gone for me. Incomparable though Venice remained, I missed the pathos of her decline. I was out of love with her, I thought.

*

Another decade has passed, and here I am revising the book yet again. Am I in love once more? Perhaps, in a resigned, come-to-terms way. The Venice of the 1990s is yet another city, and has moved, I think, beyond nostalgia. Almost overwhelmed though it is by the pressures of mass tourism (sometimes more than 100,000 visitors in a single day), frequently addled by bureaucracy, chafing against the political control of Rome, it has found its new place in the world. All but gone is the curious, quirky Venice of long ago, the Venice of aristocrats and sea-peasants rooted so irrevocably in their own past. Today, I am told, less than 20,000 of the city's inhabitants can claim parents and grandparents born in Venice. Physically it has not greatly changed, but it is a less insular, more prosaic city, and a far more modern one – not a consummation to be sneered at, after all, for in its republican heyday Venice was an epitome of the very latest thing. Safer than any other Italian city, it has become a resort of rich Romans and Milanese, a place of second homes, not so much gentrified as plutocrified. At the same time it has discovered other functions for itself: as the most splendid of conference sites, as a centre of art studies and the techniques of conservation, as a real-estate investment, as a stage for spectacles ranging from regattas to rock concerts.

In short it has, for better or for worse, got over some kind of historical hump. It no longer even aspires to the worldly consequence it once possessed, and with the aspiration has gone the regret. Contemporary Venice is what it is: a grand (and heavily overbooked) exhibition, which can also play useful, honourable, but hardly monumental roles in the life of the new Europe. Can one be in love with such a place? Sometimes I do feel a rush of the old emotion, but it is no longer when some dappled glimpse of a backwater stirs my memories, or I smell the intoxicating fragrance of crumbling antiquity, or feel a pang of poignancy. It is rather when I see the old prodigy once more in full flush, as it were, jam-packed with its admirers, jangling its profits, flaunting its theatrical splendours, enlivened once more by that old Venetian

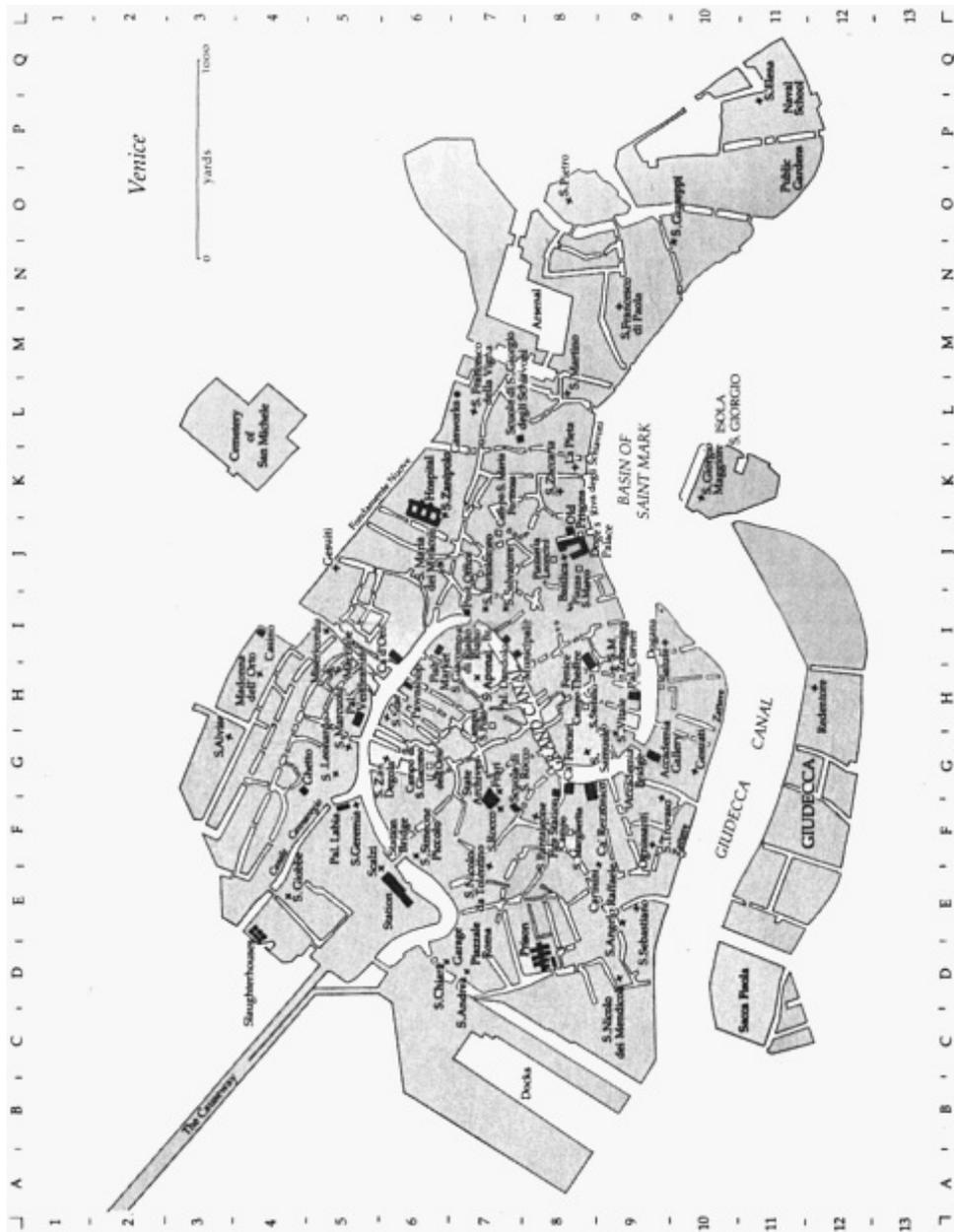
aphrodisiac – success.

Love of another kind, then. I cannot pretend that I feel about Venice as I felt when I originally wrote this book, and so once again I find that I cannot really revise it. To refurbish my Venice would be false; to rejuvenate myself would be preposterous. The inessentials of this third new edition – the facts and figures that is – have once again been amended. The essentials – the spirit, the feel, the dream of it – I have left unchanged. Though Venice no longer compels me back quite so bemused year after year to her presence, I hope this record of old ecstasies will still find its responses among my readers, and especially among those who, coming to the Serenissima fresh, young and exuberant as I did, will recognize their own pleasures in these pages, and see a little of themselves in me.

TREFAN MORYS, 1993

Thanks

Peter Lauritzen, whose own books include *Venice: A Thousand Years of Culture and Civilization*, *Palaces of Venice* and *Venice Preserved*, has done me the honour of casting an eye through the previous edition of this book, and helping me to decide what really had to be changed, and what was best left alone.





LANDFALL



At 45°14'N, 12°18'E, the navigator, sailing up the Adriatic coast of Italy, discovers an opening in the long low line of the shore: and turning westward, with the race of the tide, he enters a lagoon. Instantly the boisterous sting of the sea is lost. The water around him is shallow but opaque, the atmosphere curiously translucent, the colours pallid, and over the whole wide bowl of mudbank and water there hangs a suggestion of melancholy. It is like an albino lagoon.

It is encircled with illusory reflections, like mirages in the desert – wavering trees and blurred hillocks, ships without hulls, imaginary marshes: and among these hallucinations the water reclines in a kind of trance. Along the eastern reef, strings of straggling fishing villages lie empty and unkempt. The shallows are littered with intricate shambling palisades of sticks and basket-work, and among them solitary men, knee-deep in sludge and water, prod in the mud for shellfish. A motor boat chugs by with a stench of fish or oil. A woman on the shore shouts to a friend, and her voice eddies away strangely, muffled and distorted across the flats.

Silent islands lie all about, lapped in marsh and mud-bank. Here is a glowering octagonal fort, here a gaunt abandoned lighthouse. A mesh of nets patterns the walls of a fishermen's islet, and a restless covey of boats nuzzles its water-gate. From the ramparts of an island barracks a listless soldier with his cap over his eyes waves half-heartedly out of his sentry-box. Two savage dogs bark and rage from a broken villa. There is a flicker of lizards on a wall. Sometimes a country smell steals across the water, of cows or hay or fertilizer: and sometimes there flutters in the wake of the boat, not an albatross, but a butterfly.

Presently this desolate place quickens, and smart white villas appear upon the reef. The hump of a great hotel protrudes above the trees, gay parasols ornament a café. A trim passenger steamer flurries southwards, loaded deep. A fishing flotilla streams workmanlike towards the open sea. To the west, beneath a smudge of mountains, there is a thin silver gleam of oil drums, and a suggestion of smoke. A yellow barge, piled high with pop bottles, springs from a landing-stage like a cheerful dove from an ark. A white yacht sidles indolently by. Three small boys have grounded their boat on a sand-bank, and are throwing slobbery mud at each other. There is a flash of oxy-acetylene from a dark shed, and a barge stands on stilts outside a boat yard. A hooter sounds; a bell booms nobly; a big white sea-bird settles heavily upon a post; and thus the navigator, rounding a promontory, sees before him a city.

It is very old, and very grand, and bent-backed. Its towers survey the lagoon in crotchety splendour, some leaning one way, some another. Its skyline is elaborate with campaniles, domes, pinnacles, cranes, riggings, television aerials, crenellations, eccentric chimneys and a big red grain elevator. There are glimpses of flags and fretted rooftops, marble pillars, cavernous canals. An incessant bustle of boats passes before the quays of the place; a great white liner slips towards its port; a multitude of tottering palaces, brooding and monstrous, presses towards its water-front like so many invalid aristocrats jostling for fresh air. It is a gnarled but gorgeous city: and as the boat approaches through the last church-crowned islands, and a jet fighter screams splendidly out of the sun, so the whole scene seems to shimmer – with pinkness, with age, with self-satisfaction, with sadness, with delight.

The navigator stows away his charts and puts on a gay straw hat: for he has reached that paragon among landfalls, Venice.

The estuaries of three virile rivers first formed the Venetian lagoon, rushing down from the Alps with their sediments of sand, shale and mud, and falling into the north-western corner of the Adriatic. For many centuries, sheltered from the open sea by a bulwark of sandy reefs, it remained obscure and anonymous, on the edge of the Pax Romana. Scattered communities of fishermen and salt-gatherers lived among its marshes. Traders sometimes wandered through it. A few of the Roman sporting rich built villas, picnicked, idled or hunted duck on its islands. Some historians say the people of Padua maintained a port upon its outer reefs; others believe it was much less watery then, and that half of it was under the plough. Around its perimeter, on the mainland of Roman Veneto, celebrated cities flourished – Aquileia, Concordia, Padua, Altinum, all rich in the imperial civilization: but the lagoon itself stood aside from history, and remained shrouded in myth and malaria.

Then in the fifth and sixth centuries there fell out of the north, in successive waves, the Goths, Huns, Avars, Herulians and Lombards who were the scavengers of empire. The hinterland was lost in fire and vengeance. Driven by barbarism, brutality and even the threat of Christian heresy, the peoples of the Veneto cities abandoned their comforts and fled into their obvious refuge – the lagoon. Sometimes, when a phase of barbaric invasion had passed, they went home again: but gradually, over the years, their exodus became an emigration. They became Venetians in fits and starts. Some were ordered into the lagoon by direct divine command, and were led by their formidable bishops, clutching vestments and chalices. Some saw guiding omens, of birds, stars and saints. Some took the tools of their trades with them, even the stones of their churches. Some were destitute – ‘but they would receive no man of servile condition’, so the traditions assure us, ‘or a murderer, or of wicked life’.

Many of these people went to the northern islands of the lagoon, fringed in reeds and soggy grass (where St Peter himself, for example, assigned one fertile estate to the citizens of Altinum). Others went to the outer perimeter, as far as possible from the fires of Attila. Gradually, in a movement sanctified by innumerable miracles and saintly interventions, the original humble islanders were overwhelmed, rights of property were established, the first council chambers were built, the first austere churches. Venice was founded in misfortune, by refugees driven from their old ways and forced to learn new ones. Scattered colonies of city people, nurtured in all the ease of Rome, now struggled among the dank miasmas of the fenlands (their ‘malarious exhalations’, as Baedeker was to call them, fussily adjusting his mosquito-net 1,400 years later). They learnt to build and sail small boats, to master the treacherous tides and shallows of the lagoon, to live on fish and rain-water. They built houses of wattles and osiers, thatched and mounted on piles.

Guided by priests and patricians of the old order, they devised new institutions based upon Roman precedents: there were governing tribunes in each settlement, slowly uniting, with bickering and bloodshed, into a single administration under the presidency of a non-hereditary Doge, elected for life – ‘rich and poor under equal laws’, said the first of Venice’s innumerable sycophants, ‘and envy, that curse of all the world, hath no place there’. The lagoon people were pioneers, like settlers in the early West, or colonials on the Veld. Crèvecoeur once wrote of ‘this new man, the American’: but Goethe used precisely the same phrase to describe the first of the Venetians, whose old world had died around them.

Their beginnings are distinctly blurred, and were certainly not so uniformly edifying as their early apologists would have us believe. It took many years for the lagoon to spring into life and vigour; and several centuries for these new men to stop quarrelling with each other, develop into nationhood, and build the great city of Venice proper, until they could say of themselves (as they said haughtily to the Byzantine kings): 'This Venice, which we have raised in the lagoons, is our mighty habitation, and no power of Emperor or Prince can touch us!' The early chronology of Venice is hazy and debatable, and nobody really knows what happened when, if at all.

Legend, though, is always precise, and if we are to believe the old chronicles, the foundation of Venice occurred on 25 March 421, at midday exactly. It was, according to my perpetual calendar, a Friday.

THE PEOPLE



1

Islanders

So the Venetians became islanders, and islanders they remain, still a people apart, still tinged with the sadness of refugees. The squelchy islands of their lagoon, welded over the centuries into a glittering Republic, became the greatest of trading States, mistress of the eastern commerce and the supreme naval power of the day. For more than a thousand years Venice was something unique among the nations, half eastern, half western, half land, half sea, poised between Rome and Byzantium, between Christianity and Islam, one foot in Europe, the other paddling in the pearls of Asia. She called herself the Serenissima, she decked herself in cloth of gold, and she even had her own calendar, in which the years began on 1 March, and the days began in the evening. This lonely hauteur, exerted from the fastnesses of the lagoon, gave to the old Venetians a queer sense of isolation. As their Republic grew in grandeur and prosperity, and their political arteries hardened, and a flow of dazzling booty enriched their palaces and churches, so Venice became entrammelled in mystery and wonder. She stood, in the imagination of the world, somewhere between a freak and a fairy tale.

She remained, first of all, uncompromisingly a city of the waters. In the early days the Venetians made rough roads in their islands, and rode about on mules and horses: but presently they evolved the system of canals, based on existing water-channels and rivulets, that is to this day one of the piquant wonders of the world. Their capital, the city of Venice proper, was built upon an archipelago in the heart of the lagoon. Their esplanade was the Grand Canal, the central highway of this city, which swung in a regal curve through a parade of palaces. Their Cheapside or Wall Street was the Rialto, first an island, then a district, then the most famous bridge in Europe. Their Doges rode in fantastic golden barges, and outside each patrician's house the gondolas lay gracefully at their moorings. Venice evolved an amphibious society peculiar to herself, and the ornate front doors of her mansions opened directly upon the water.

Against this extraordinary physical background, the Venetians erected a no less remarkable kind of State. At first a kind of patriarchal democracy, it became an aristocratic oligarchy of the tightest kind, in which (after 1297) power was strictly reserved to a group of patrician families. Executive authority passed first to this aristocracy; then to the inner Council of Ten; and later, more and more, to the still more reclusive and reticent Council of Three, which was elected in rotation, a month at a time. To maintain this supremacy, and to prevent both popular risings and personal dictatorships, the structure of the State was buttressed with tyranny, ruthless,

impersonal, bland and carefully mysterious. Sometimes the stranger, passing by the Doge's Palace, would find a pair of anonymous conspirators hanging mangled from a gibbet, or hear a whisper of appalling torture in the dungeons of the Ten. Once the Venetians awoke to discover three convicted traitors buried alive, head downwards, among the flagstones of the Piazzetta, their feet protruding between the pillars. Time and again they learnt that some celebrated national leader, admiral or *condottiere*, had grown too big for his buskins, and had been strangled or thrown into gaol. Venice was a sort of police State, except that instead of worshipping power, she was terrified of it, and refused it to any single one of her citizens: and by these means, at once fair and ferocious, she outlived all her rivals, and preserved her republican independence until the very end of the eighteenth century.

All this was wonderful, but no less marvellous was the wealth and strength of Venice – which was, so the Venetians assiduously let it be known, divinely granted. First St Theodore, then St Mark the Evangelist supervised the destinies of the Republic, and all kinds of sacred relics and allusions gave power to the Venetian elbow. '*Pax tibi, Marce, Evangelista Meus.*' So said a heavenly messenger to St Mark, when the Evangelist was once stranded on an apocryphal sand-bank in this very lagoon: and the words became the national slogan of the Venetian Republic, a divine writ of recommendation.

She was the greatest sea-power of her day, unrivalled in tonnage, fire-power and efficiency. Her great Arsenal was the supreme shipyard of the world, its secrets as jealously guarded as any nuclear armoury; its walls were two miles round, its pay-roll numbered 16,000, and in the sixteenth-century wars against the Turks a new galley left its yards every morning for 100 days. The Venetian Navy, manned by free men until the slavers' seventeenth-century heyday, was a most formidable instrument of war, and long after the rise of Genoa and Spain as naval powers, Venetian gunnery remained incomparable.

Venice stood at the mouth of the great Po valley, facing eastwards, protected in the north by the Alps. She was a natural funnel of intercourse between east and west, and her greatness was built upon her geography. She was hazily subject first to Ravenna and then to Byzantium, but she established herself as independent both of east and of west. She became mistress of the Adriatic, of the eastern Mediterranean, and finally of the trade routes to the Orient – Persia, India and the rich mysteries of China. She lived by the eastern commerce. She had her own caravanserais in the cities of the Levant: and 'all the gold in Christendom', as one medieval chronicler querulously observed, 'passes through the hands of the Venetians'.

In Venice the Orient began. Marco Polo was a Venetian, and Venetian merchants, searching for new and profitable lines of commerce, travelled widely throughout central Asia. Decked in Oriental fineries, Venice became the most flamboyant of all cities – 'the most triumphant Citie I ever set eyes on', wrote Philippe de Commines in 1495. She was a place of silks, emeralds, marbles, brocades, velvets, cloth of gold, porphyry, ivory, spices, scents, apes, ebony, indigo, slaves, great galleons, Jews, mosaics, shining domes, rubies, and all the gorgeous commodities of Arabia, China and the Indies. She was a treasure-box. Venice was ruined, in the long run, by the Muslim capture of Constantinople in 1453, which ended her supremacy in the Levant; and by da Gama's voyage to India in 1498, which broke her monopoly of the Oriental