

Lindsey N. Chappell  
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English  
Amici di Via Gabina Traveling Fellowship—Post-Travel Report

When you're climbing Giotto's bell tower in Florence, there's a point when—panting and sweating—you're inevitably struck by the fact that visitors to Florence have been struggling up these 414 steps for over 600 years. John Ruskin thought this edifice the “one building in the world” where the “conditions of power and beauty” exist “all together, and all in their highest possible degrees.” But as I huffed up the stairs just after sunrise one morning, I wasn't thinking about the advances of Western civilization or about the perfections of fourteenth-century Italian architecture. I had come to Italy to research the lives and writings of British expats during the Risorgimento—the Victorian travelers (particularly women) who had also ascended these flights for an incomparable view from the top.

And all I could think was: “Those ladies were buff.”

Even in my light jersey dress and roomy Converse, navigating the narrow flights proved challenging. Anyone who managed it in stiff nineteenth-century shoes and full skirts, hoops, and corsets was, in my opinion, a champion. In fact, I was in Florence to investigate a few Victorian ladies in particular—at least one of which had written in her 1861 travel diary about ascending this campanile. Her name was Susan Horner, an extraordinarily well-connected figure in the arts, natural science, politics, literature, and social reform. She has also been completely forgotten in modern scholarship, though at the end of the nineteenth century her travel guide, *Walks in Florence* (co-authored with her sister Joanna), was considered a standard for the countless English tourists in Florence. Susan Horner published widely, on subjects ranging from Italian poetry and art history to the highly unladylike topics of European politics and revolution. She even published a novel (anonymously) about an Anglo-Venetian opera singer named Isolina.

I had first met Susan Horner far away from Italy—at Rice, in fact. I was in the Woodson Center completing an assignment on archives for Helena Michie's graduate seminar, and I came across a folder of letters to Susan and Joanna. Judging by the letters from important historical figures, these Victorian sisters moved in public intellectual circles for decades, yet I had never heard of them. And because the Woodson folder only contained letters written *to* the sisters, not written *by* them, I wasn't able to read Susan's own words until I found her two travel diaries digitized by the British Institute of Florence, where my research would eventually take me in person.

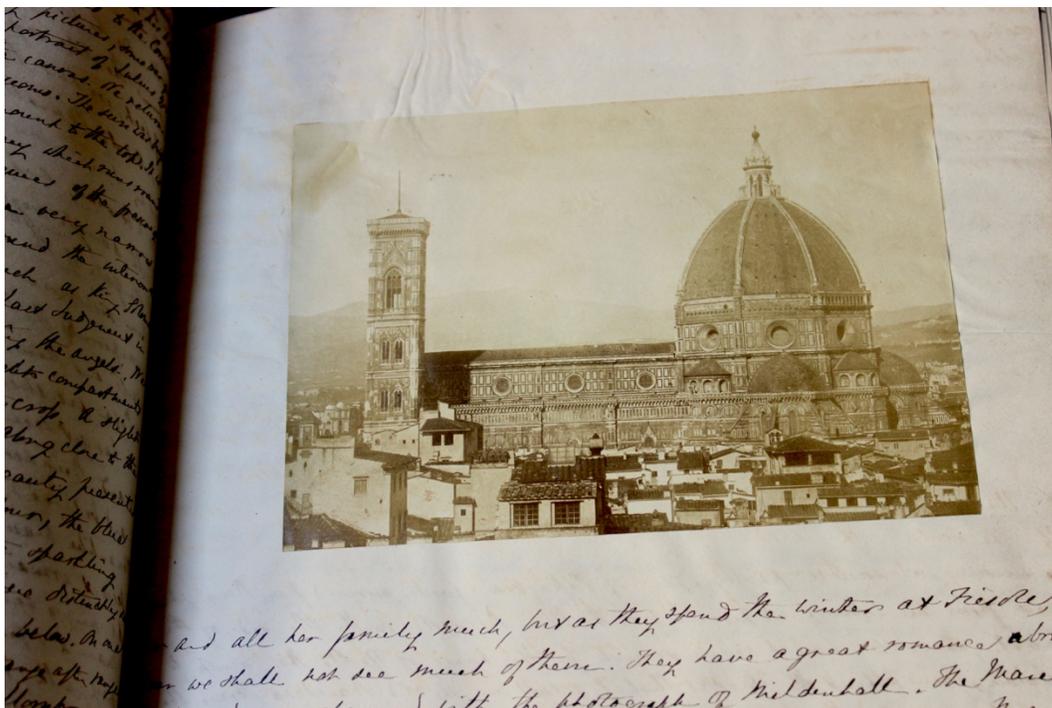
My appointment with the British Institute's archivist and resident Horner expert, Alyson Price, was why I found myself cursing Giotto so early in the morning. My jetlag and early-bird tendencies (fueled by good Italian espresso) inspired me to undertake a feat of athleticism before the Institute opened. When Susan had ascended this campanile on a whim one day, she only recorded in her journal that the climb was “a harder ascent, though not so high as the Cathedral.” By the time I reached the top, I decided this understatement was proof positive that she must have been superhuman—doubly so considering she habitually wore a steel crinoline.

My conviction of Susan's superpowers only increased when I arrived in the archives. Susan was a truly prolific writer and worker. At the British Institute, I saw some of her hand-written, privately circulated publications. In addition to the original travel journals, lavishly decorated with sketches and photographs, there was a hand-illustrated children's book and a collection of family reminiscences regarding famous acquaintances (like Napoleon and Lady Byron). At one point when discussing the Lyell descendants (Susan's sister Mary was married to the famous geologist Sir Charles Lyell), the archivist pulled out a huge scroll detailing the Horner genealogy. Kneeling on the floor, we unrolled this family tree and she pointed out the connections (many of them famous) that characterized the Susan I knew from that folder of correspondence in the Woodson.

Susan has become especially significant to my dissertation, in particular through her descriptions of Florence as marked by a “living past”—a present and thriving history that saturated daily life. This conflation of past and

present, I discovered, was just one instance of British writers in Italy grasping to define a particular kind of time not to be found elsewhere. For example, in the Archivio Contemporaneo at the Gabinetto Vieusseux, I discovered a letter that the novelist Vernon Lee (née Violet Paget) wrote to her friend Angelica Pasolini dall'Onda (later Countess Rasponi): "I shall never get over the curious sensation, like the conscious strangeness of a dream, but a sort of additional wide awakesness, which I have every time I come this quickly from Italy to England. It is a special sensation ... This acute one of the sudden difference of surroundings. But I think we shall be very degraded beings no better than our trunks or hatboxes if ever we lose it. And yet I suppose most people who travel do lose it. It is something like the sense of interval in music: the importance of each of the two notes immensely increased by the fact of its not being the other: the tonic important because of the dominant, the dominant important because of the tonic."

In addition to the British Institute of Florence and the Vieusseux, I worked in the Biblioteca e Archivio del Risorgimento and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (where I found additional Susan Horner letters). Material from these archives has not only shaped my last dissertation chapter (which, thanks to the Amici di Via Gabina fellowship, I was able to complete upon my return to Houston) but also provided material for additional publications and presentations. I've already integrated this research into a conference presentation for the 2016 International Society for the Study of Narrative, and I have agreed to present another paper on Anglo-Italian relations in Florence next summer as part of the North American Victorian Studies Association's conference. I am truly grateful for this opportunity to pursue my research in Italy.



A page from Susan Horner's 1861-2 travel journal, featuring a postcard of Florence's Duomo; Giotto's Campanile stands on the left.