



# A spark of genius

Living abroad proved inspirational for four great British minds, as Carla Passino discovers

It was in Bruges where William Caxton first encountered the printing press, which he later brought back to England in the 1470s

**B**RUGES changed William Caxton's life. He went to the Belgian city, then part of the Duchy of Burgundy, as a mercer, settling there by 1453, and came back as England's first book printer. A successful merchant, he later joined the household of Edward IV's sister, Margaret, who had married Charles, Duke of Burgundy. As part of her retinue, he travelled extensively across Europe, including to Cologne, where he had some of his books printed. With his 'hande wery & not stedfast' from the effort of duplicating the translation of Raoul Le Fèvre's *Recueil des histoires de Troyes* he had done for Margaret and his 'eyen dimed with ouermoche loking on the whit paper', Caxton embraced the printing process, which had the all-important advantage of allowing him to distribute copies of his books to everyone 'attones'. Having learned the technique 'at grete charge and dispense', he opened a press in Bruges, →



## ← Bruges, Belgium

This historic 10-bedroom home sits by a canal and has its own dock and landscaped gardens, as well as 11,829sq ft of living space complete with fireplaces and stained-glass features. €3.875 million (about £3.31 million), Engel & Völkers Brugge (00 32 50 616 630; [www.engelvoelkers.com](http://www.engelvoelkers.com))





Clockwise from left: Financier Sir Thomas Gresham the Elder; economist and philosopher Adam Smith; the author and writer Mary Shelley and printer William Caxton

where he printed his *Recuyell of the Histories of Troye* in 1473. Returning to England in the 1470s, he brought his new craft with him and set up a shop in Westminster, where he printed the very first books in the English language. He died in 1491 as he was about to print his 100th book.

Belgium would also prove a gamechanger for Thomas Gresham. A merchant and Crown agent to the Tudor monarchs, he was living in Antwerp, a thriving port and one of Europe's commercial capitals, when, between a spot of bullion smuggling and a lot of spying, he had not one but three intuitions that would go on to make British history. The first was grasping the importance of foreign exchange rates and how to manipulate them to secure loans for the English Crown at the best terms: 'He would every day send seemingly unconnected merchant friends, or else his servants, armed with a cash float, to buy or sell amounts of currency ranging from around £20 to £500 (in today's values between £20,000 and £500,000) shortly before he planned to close one of his larger credit deals or make loan repayments, gradually raising or reducing the value of sterling in the direction that best suited him,' Gresham biographer John Guy said in a lecture for the 500th anniversary of the merchant's birth.

His second intuition was that his efforts to control exchange rates would always be partly frustrated, so long as sterling was debased. Thus, he was instrumental in persuading Elizabeth I to restore the currency to the strength it had before Henry VIII and Edward VI had fiddled with it. His view that the more base metals were added to coins, the more fine gold would be hoarded or illegally exported was popularised in the 19th century as Gresham's Law, although he never said that

'bad money chases out good money' (nor would he have been the first one to note it). But perhaps more importantly, he understood the power that bankers and merchants could have over rulers in need of funds and advised Elizabeth I to seek as much financing as possible from within the City of London rather than remaining exposed to the whims of foreign lenders and the vagaries of exchange rates.

When in Antwerp, Gresham also noticed how useful it was for merchants to have a place, the Bourse, where they could meet, catch up with the news and do business. Back in

England, he quickly proceeded to found his own version of the Bourse in 1571. It was very successful, but he didn't get the reward he expected: Elizabeth I, with whom he always had a difficult relationship, named the new bourse the Royal Exchange and granted the office of keeper to William Cecil. Despite his financial genius, Gresham ended his days in debt.

**'What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow'**

Much as Antwerp fed Gresham's talent for finance, France and Switzerland nurtured Adam Smith's genius for economics—despite an unpromising start to his visit. The success of Smith's first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, had secured him an appointment as a travelling tutor to the young Duke of Buccleuch. Together, they went to Toulouse, but, saddled with his young charge, Smith quickly became bored: 'The life I led at Glasgow was a pleasurable dissipated life in comparison to that which I lead here at Present,' he stated in a 1764 letter to David →



### ▲ Antwerp, Belgium

This early 19th-century property in Antwerp combines grand period architecture with an indoor pool, a roof terrace and a delightful urban garden. €3.4 million (about £2.89 million), Sotheby's International Realty (00 32 3647 3072; [www.sothebysrealty.com](http://www.sothebysrealty.com))





## ▲ Paris, France

Soak up the views of the Arc de Triomphe from this three-bedroom apartment, which occupies the third floor of a period building (with lift) and comes with a terrace. €5.7 million (about £4.8 million), Knight Frank (020-7861 1727; [www.knightfrank.com](http://www.knightfrank.com))



Hume. Desperate ‘to pass away the time,’ he began writing a new book, which would soon morph into his masterpiece, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

But Europe didn’t merely provide spare time for him to write: eventually, he moved to Geneva, where he met Voltaire, then Paris, where Hume introduced him to the leading minds of the French Enlightenment. Among them was François Quesnay and his Physiocrats, who believed that no constraint should be placed on labour and trade. Smith shared some of their views, but fiercely criticised others and this critical engagement was the intellectual backdrop to the development of his own theory.

Tragedy put an end to his French days—the Duke of Buccleuch’s younger brother passed away—and after a brief stay in London, Smith retreated to his native Kirkcaldy, where he spent six years polishing his vision of *laissez-faire* (albeit tempered by more government control than he’s generally given credit for): ‘By pursuing his own interest, [every individual] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.’ It became the basis for modern economics

and a cornerstone of British policy for more than a century.

But perhaps even more enduring is another masterpiece born at least in part from a bid to kill time: *Frankenstein*. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was only 16 when she fell for the ‘wild, intellectual, unearthly looks’ of Percy Bysshe Shelley, five years her senior and, shockingly, already married. After meeting her father’s stern disapproval the couple briefly left England for France in July 1814, and again in 1816, this time heading to Coligny, Switzerland. Byron and John Polidori had also rented a villa there, but an unusually cold, wet summer put on hold plans for boating and leisurely lakeside strolls. Instead, as Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote in her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, ‘some volumes of ghost stories... fell into our hands’. Eventually, the group decided to write their own, but Wollstonecraft Shelley struggled to think of a story, until a conversation between Byron and her husband, Percy, on galvanism, fired her imagination: ‘When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep... I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an

## ▲ Coligny, Switzerland

Set in the heart of Coligny, this spacious house has a large living and dining area, separate kitchen and a swimming pool in the garden. CHF7 million (about £5.8 million), Savills (0041 848 589 589; [www.savills.com](http://www.savills.com))

uneasy, half vital motion.’ Terrified, she tried to think of something else, but an idea hit her: ‘What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.’

What started as a short tale became a book, which Wollstonecraft Shelley finished after her return to England and published anonymously in 1818. Her time abroad continued to shape some of her later endeavours—having co-authored the *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* with Shelley and left England to settle in Italy in March 1818, she was inspired by her surroundings to write *Valperga or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, a historical novel about the war between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in 14th-century Tuscany, before returning to travelogues with her last book, *Rambles in Germany and Italy*. 🐉