

Confessions of a Tenured Professor

Knowing Your Place: A “Professor” and “Travel-Writing Teacher” Returns to Scotland on a Study-Abroad Trip

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I feel that [this college] has found a way (or ways, more accurately) to fold into its identity the best of both worlds when it comes to embracing its urban community and celebrating individuality; and, as an individual who is a part of this community, I like being here for this reason...or at least this is what I've been saying in my various philosophy-of-teaching statements, submitted for reasons related to tenure portfolios and annual dean's reports. It's a statement I have tried hard to make come true in the way somebody tries to fall in love with somebody else, usually somebody close by and convenient.

And, for the record, I have liked working where I do. I have learned to embrace an urban community and culture that remains distinctly different from the one in which I was raised, one more outdoor-oriented and rural; and I have learned to enjoy spending what little spare time I have with people who share somewhat dissimilar interests and passions. But, still, *here* is not where I am from, and I'm finding out that where I am from continues to define who I am, a frustrating fact that will not let me fully become the type of person/professor I thought would when I first headed up this trail nearly thirteen years ago. I thought I would be more content, more at ease with what I was doing and where, exactly, I was doing it. I never thought, for

instance, that I would be a person who looks forward to the weekends or, worse yet, maps out months in advance vacations and getaways. But, I must confess, I usually know by the end of October when I'm heading to Utah in January to ski; and on several occasions I have bought my round-trip ticket for a pack trip in the Idaho Sawtooths in July months before I've put away my snow shovel in Minnesota.

So, now that I am “lashed to the mast” by virtue of tenure—to quote a colleague of mine from Wyoming who likewise earned tenure within the last year—I find that I am often seeking out imaginative ways within this profession to turn trips and long weekends into work, which is how, in truth, I ended up this last spring heading off to Scotland with students on a study-abroad trip. (I suppose that for the sake of full disclosure it should be noted that I am writing this while sitting at the University of Oslo near the Blindern T-bane stop, just four stops on the Sognsvan line from the hiking/biking/skiing trails that lead as far as one cares to go back into the nearby lakes and mountains—they really do. I checked.) Still, even when I arrived in Scotland (and again, a couple of months later in Oslo), I found that I carried with me across the Atlantic all of my searching, a fact brought close to home, incidentally, immediately by the students with whom I was traveling.

Mostly Medieval Studies majors, these were dungeons and dragons kids who are knowledgeable about obscure rituals tied to distant history and, paradoxically, all things modern and technological. They know how to juggle, play chess, find cheap tickets to the renaissance fair, imitate accents (especially British ones), fashion armor, read Latin, and, most notably, ask unnerving questions like magicians casting spells, questions that render the addressee speechless (case in point: we walk into a hotel in Aberdeen, and I enter last; before I can set my bag down,

one of our large, bearded scholars asks with a straight, harry face, “Hey, Colin, where’s the stairs in this place?” Honestly, to walk into a room and go 0 for 1 before even setting down your suitcase is tough when trying to establish credibility with the other professionals waiting to check-in.)

Sure, this depiction of these students amounts to stereotyping. But that’s only because they are mostly the same in different ways. They share a commitment to openness, to a kind of acceptance that seems to have been forged in isolation and, in some instances, pain. Many, though certainly not all, have been outcasts at one point or another; and all of them are incredibly accepting of each other and, for the most part, themselves. In essence, they are, to use a tired but accurate phrase, comfortable in their own skin. How refreshing, especially given how seldom they had a chance to change their clothes over the course of the three weeks we were traveling together.

Put another way, my traveling companions were years ahead of me when it comes to knowing who they are and where they are headed.

Another factor specific to this trip that forced me to face up to issues I thought I was leaving at home had to do with where we went and what we did on a daily basis. For the first six days, we lived in a 13th century medieval monastery, and then for the subsequent two weeks we toured castles, cemeteries, abandoned monasteries, and still more castles, always doing our best to immerse ourselves not just in the places we visited but also in the pasts tied to them, a way of thinking about history that we honed in that first week while living with the monks.

Living the monastic life meant that we attended services five, six, and sometimes seven times a day, rising for the first one at 4:30 AM and attending the last closer to 8:00 PM. In

between these times of meditative prayer (in Latin), we were working the gardens, observing the Grand Silence, studying the history of these practices, and giving ourselves over—just for a little less than a week—to this all-encompassing lifestyle, something that the brothers who lived within the confines of this hidden place in Northern Scotland do every day, year around, until the day they die. They are, without ambiguity, “monks.”

It was this last bald fact that soon struck me as more than a little remarkable. These guys do not lead double lives (or, as is my case, triple or quadruple lives). These are men who jump into the deep end and don’t even come up for air. They just stand down there in the deep being all monk-like, to paraphrase one of the students’ observation in his journal.

Eventually, as the week unfolded, I struggled. I struggled to get my mind around this kind of commitment and this singular type of focused life. So, I began sneaking away from the place in order to go running each afternoon, first skipping one service and eventually skipping two and three.

Logging five, ten, and soon fifteen miles a day by the end of our stay, I ran further away each afternoon in a meandering array of random paths through the woods that, by the last day, lead all the way to the nearby town of Elgin. Standing there in my sweaty t-shirt and running shorts on the edge of the bustling little municipality, I was completely content to be anonymous, a blank slate, nobody—not a monk-in-training, not a professor, mentor, travel-writer-wanna’--be...nobody. And nobody knew that I was nobody. It was just me, and it felt incredibly freeing.

The next day, with a bag full of stinking running clothes and muddy shoes, I—along with my more holy but less fit counterparts—left the monastery and headed to Edinburgh by way of

Oban, which is to say that we first drove through the Highlands down to the west coast of Scotland before returning through Glasgow and back over to the east coast.

We stopped at Cawdor Castle on the first leg of the trip, and while at the castle I was struck by the static nature of the British class system and how this system no doubt repressed and yet liberated those who have over the years lived and died within its grasp, those poor souls buried in Gray's country churchyard (how about that for a wee bit a poetry, eh?).

Upon entering the castle—the reputed site of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—we were greeted by a staff member whose desk sits just past the drawbridge and just inside the castle walls. “Here you are,” she said to each of us, handing us a tour brochure, before adding what sounded like an off-the-script suggestion, “Be sure to read the captions throughout your visit. Each was written by a Mr. Longbottombottom [sic], who worked for the castle caretakers. He had a splendid wit.” The staff woman offered this last bit of information in a way that suggested that she and Longbottombottom are somehow on the same level, colleagues separated by centuries.

And as it turned out, her assessment was spot on. This man Longbottombottom was hilarious, or as hilarious as one can be under the circumstances. One entry reads, “This note is for railway enthusiasts only, so pigeon-fencers should push on,” and another declared in a parenthetical (if such a thing is possible), “Madam, that is a palindrome,” and a third avers with a wink, “Work in this room of the castle was particularly well-suited for confirmed spinsters and professional invalids.” A longer, more involved editorial was hidden away in the room near the end of the tour, where Longbottombottom penned a note about the beloved castle dog “Scotty,” which “was given to young Allister Campbel, the graysheep of the family, who had flogged it severely. It was bought back again by a bevy of furious aunts.”

But my favorite literary flourish accompanied a description of the dustcart in the kitchen. Having detailed the history of each noteworthy item in the room, Longbottombottom concluded wryly with, “The dustcart is... a dustcart.” Affectively understated and coming as it does near the end of the tour when the reader is expecting a comment of another sort, this is a real zinger that makes one want to find the woman at the front desk and share a laugh with her about the resident Shakespeare’s wit.

There are the grapes of wrath and there is this, this comedy that seems to have come from a mirthful, truly talented man who was stuck writing copy for a castle tour that—when he was writing the notes—didn’t yet exist but, he must have known, eventually would.

Later that afternoon—and almost every afternoon from that day through until the end of the trip—I found myself following the students interested in old cemeteries and their stones through a medieval plot covered in moss and crumbling granite. In this one as well as the others we visited, nearly all of the headstones noted the person’s closest family relationships, his or her connection to whoever paid for the stone, and, finally, his or her profession.

What struck me, though, was the way in which the profession was listed as if it was synonymous with the person: “Hugh MacDonald, Shoemaker; Ian Wallace, Mason; Charles Graham, Rope Maker; Maggie Farquharson, Trusted Servant.” That’s it. That’s who they are, or were, set indelibly in stone—Shoemaker, Mason, Rope Maker, Servant. What would mine say, I wondered: Professor, Teacher, Failed Writer, Outdoor Enthusiast, Favorite Son, Delusional Moron?

I had better bring this thing to a close, as one of the rules of travel writing I picked up on Google is to avoid a blow-by-blow account of the trip; so, I'll get to the end, when—having survived a robust hike in the Highlands, a week in a monastery, nine days in Edinburgh, several tours of death and decay in cemeteries scattered throughout the countryside, and a volcano that refused to make the news—I was sitting at a large wooden table across from an attorney, my wife at my side. We had just filled out our wills and health directives the night before, and the elderly attorney in the nice suit was reading them quietly to himself. He finished my wife's first, looked up at her, and smiled approvingly like a teacher grading a spelling test in front of his favorite pupil. Then, he turned to my papers, picking them up as though they were admissible evidence in his most important court case. He read slowly. I waited. His one eyebrow arched and he asked, "You want your ashes scattered in the Sawtooths?" "Yep," I said, nodding. I felt my wife look at me, somewhat surprised by this pronouncement. "Which? The ones in Idaho?" he continued. "Yes," I returned, reading his response. "The ones in central Idaho where—" "But we won't be together," hastened my wife. "I'll be here in Minnesota, and you'll be there."

And that's when it hit me. My job, my career as a college English professor—one that I honestly love so much—divides me in two, for now, taking me as it does away from where I am from and from who I am when I am not working. Hence, there will be no headstone that says "Professor" or "Teacher" or even "Loving Father," but there will be boulders everywhere, and pine trees, and lakes, and sweet, sage-scented dry air and eternity. Perhaps my kids (and maybe even some of my students) can climb up there, sit in the rim above some mountain lake in the Sawtooths, and think of all that I was and tried to be. Or not. That's OK, too.