

I'm Just a Travelin' Man

Education Through Wanderlust

by Derek Turner

“Education begins with life,” said Benjamin Franklin somewhere. That was how it always seemed to me when I was growing up in Southern Ireland in the 1970’s and 80’s.

I enjoyed some things about school, especially my secondary school—an experimental comprehensive, one of only two in the country at that time, opened to cater to us non-Catholic “ethnic minority” members. There were subjects I liked—English, geography, and history—and I did well in them without even trying, because I was interested (although why they forced adolescent young men to read *Silas Marner*—which, even today, I find not the most riveting of reads—still puzzles me). But I disliked the organized sports (and still do). And there were many subjects I detested—mathematics, the sciences, and compulsory Irish—to the extent that I never even opened my test papers in these subjects when sitting for my final exams.

School seemed to place unwarrantable limitations on my preferred activities of smoking cigarettes and cannabis, gathering “magic mushrooms” on a nearby golf course when I should have been attending math lessons, and “singing” and playing guitar in a rock group. To this day, I am almost entirely ignorant of anything in mathematics beyond the 12 times tables, and I still could not pass muster on C.P. Snow’s famous definition of being educated—knowing the Second Law of Thermodynamics (whatever thermodynamics are!). I looked forward to placing myself beyond the reach of these tedious impositions. While my older brother went on to be a brilliant, seemingly perpetual student of psychics and higher mathematics (he now teaches English in Mexico!), university seemed to me to mean merely a prolongation of childhood.

In a way, I had always enjoyed “traveling.” Apart from regular trips around Ireland and to the United Kingdom when young, I was always an avid reader of everything from comics to classics. From my armchair, I “journeyed” with Herge to Syldavia; with Swift to Lilliput; to Switzerland to meet Heidi; to America with Fenimore Cooper; to Spain with Hemingway; with Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* to the South Pole and his *Westward Ho!* to Elizabethan England; with Defoe to the South Seas; with *Three Men in a Boat (to say Nothing of the Dog)* along the enchanted Edwardian Thames; to the New Forest with Marryat; to a fogbound London with Conan Doyle; and to the far future with H.G. Wells and Jules Verne.

I took my bookish habits with me into the merchant and then military navy. While continuing to read voraciously, I incidentally got a rare insight into the life and landscapes of Europe. I spent several more-or-less happy years creeping up West

Country tidal creeks in little coasting vessels; watching whales off the Scottish coast, turtles off the Canaries, 25-foot basking sharks swimming directly below me from a ship off the coast of Mayo, and phosphorescent dolphins keeping company 200 miles off the Irish coast; getting drunk with Poles from the ship tied alongside us in Rotterdam; catching lizards in the baking hills outside Almeria; walking Valetta’s walls and rescuing a shipmate who had lost his money to a hard-eyed prostitute and her harder-eyed minders in El Ferrol de Caudillo.

One of the disadvantages of being brought up in Ireland was that, even at a Protestant school with a subtly different educational curriculum, there was an overemphasis on parochial Irish history and literature at the expense of the British tradition. While J.M. Synge was an admirable playwright, he was not Shakespeare. The more I read and explored, the more I realized what I did not know—a feeling simultaneously humbling and inspiring. Now, I began to read and travel more discriminatingly, trying all the time to fill up gaps in my historical or literary knowledge.

There are many disadvantages to autodidacticism, but one of the advantages is surely the satisfyingly spontaneous nature of one’s discoveries. The joy when one suddenly makes a connection between two historical figures, or events, or books is probably unknown to those who have had a more structured higher education. To stand in an English country church and realize suddenly that, “Ah, so this is the monument of the son of so-and-so, whose monument I saw in such-and-such, and who signed that treaty,” is exceedingly satisfying. And yet this is a very common sensation in the history-haunted environs of England, where every shire and every London postcode is filled with resonances.

Upon resuming landlubber life, I came to live in London and found whole new worlds swimming into my ken, like a citywide Chapman’s Homer. The first night I arrived in London, there was a massive storm over the Euston Road, and the air seemed charged with electricity—an appropriate curtain-raiser to what I could already tell would be a prolonged sojourn.

Maida Vale in west London, where I first lodged, is named in honor of a victorious 1806 battle against the French in Southern Italy but is not especially filled with literary connections (although John Tenniel, the illustrator of *Alice in Wonderland*, and John Masefield had both lived in postcode W9). It was very English, however, with its handsome Victorian houses, and it was only a short underground or bus ride into redolent central London, where every street name is a history lesson.

Heading in almost any other direction, Maida Vale was a good base for exploring less obvious landmarks, such as Kensal Green Cemetery, an impressive assemblage of Greek Revival

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chapels, catacombs, monuments, and sarcophagi containing the moldering remains of Thomas Hood, the Brunels, Thackeray, Sydney Smith, Trollope, Leigh Hunt, and Wilkie Collins, sandwiched together in 54 acres alongside the canal and near the gasworks. Nearby, too, there was Hampstead, with its Pitt, Byron, Keats, Constable, Romney, and many other echoes, where I bought a copy of *Tristram Shandy* that had once belonged to Barbara Hepworth. There was Harrow, where the author of *Water Babies* and *Westward Ho!* had lived, whose famous school was the *alma mater* of Robert Peel, Sheridan, Winston Churchill, and many others whose names are carved on the oak wainscoting; Willesden, Kilburn, Bayswater, and a hundred other places filled with half-remembrances of names referred to in history books, lectures once attended, novels once read, paintings once seen, people once met, conversations once engaged in.

It was uncanny to see, in real life, buildings glimpsed as Hogarthian backgrounds; to visit the bedrooms or gravestones of those who had once bulked large in English affairs or the rooms where world-shaking treaties had been signed and from which empires had been administered; to stand on the spot where Charles I had stood while he was condemned to death; to drink in pubs once patronized by Dickens; to sit in the church pew where Samuel Johnson had sat, "much moved" by the intimations of impending doom. With my *London A-Z* rammed into my pocket, and a list of notes culled from my ever-growing minilibrary of books about London, I spent all of my available days traipsing around churches, chapels, cathedrals, closes, crescents, commons, council estates, streets, schools, stately homes, pumping stations, parks, palaces, tumbledown factories, along rivers and canals, always trying to see places where the famous had lived, where proclamations had been read, movements founded or riots started, trying to make connections, trying to make sense of this confusing, exhilarating "city of villages."

Soon, I bought a tiny flat in Deptford—a grimy but fascinating suburb, only 15 minutes from Charing Cross, like a little bit of the East End shunted south across the river. The flat was new, but it stood just off New Cross Road, which is now legendary as the pilgrim road of Chaucer and where Roman remains have been found in gardens, and I often walked home the five miles from London Bridge late at night, filled with alcohol and numinous impressions of historical romance.

I liked the shades of Pepys, Nelson, Drake, and a host of others in this area, the site of a major dockyard from 1514 right up until 1969. I had my suits made in a 17th-century shop on High Street and coveted the bow-fronted Georgian house at the southern end of the street, near where the drunks used to roll around in the summer's dust. There were early-19th-century warehouses, and there was even a little stretch of 200-year-old cobblestones. There were picturesque 1820's shops that housed the butcher's premises (his family's business there since 1828, perhaps still there today) and 1830's cottages where Deptford blended into then-respectable Lewisham; there was elegant Albury Street, with its cherubim porch supporters and wooden door cases, where Nelson had lodged. I often stopped to admire Saint Paul's church, John Betjeman's "jewel in the heart of Deptford," Thomas Archer's English Baroque interlude near the railway line (London's first line, opened in the 1840's on a series of impressive and extant arches in the characteristic yellow London brick).

Even better is Saint Nicholas's church on Deptford Green, with its sturdy tower (*circa* 1500), its redbrick Jacobean nave and chancel house with round-arched windows and Dutch gabling, the gloomy yews overhanging 18th-century walls, the painting of Queen Anne attributed to Kneller, the Valley of Dry Bones carving attributed to local boy Grinling Gibbons, and, most striking of all, the stone death's heads that sit atop the gateposts (which I first saw, memorably, crowned with snow, the whiteness accentuating the unfathomable blackness of the eyes). Here, among the shipwrights, chandlers, naval officers, and businessmen, is buried John Evelyn's infant son, Richard, who died in January 1657. ("After six fits of a quartan ague, with which it pleased God to visit him, dies my dear son, Richard, to our inexpressible grief and affliction, five years and three days only, but at that tender age a prodigy for wit and understanding; for beauty of body, a very angel; for endowment of mind, of incredible and rare hopes"—surely one of the most affecting segments of his most evocative journal.)



Melanie Anderson

The youthful czar Peter the Great stayed in John Evelyn's Deptford house, Sayes Court (then a Kentish countryside retreat) in 1698, while studying shipbuilding, relieving his pent-up energies by trashing the house and its famous garden—causing the diarist's servant to grumble to his master that "There is a house full of people, and right nasty." Deptford was the scene of Danish incursions (the little river that gave Deptford its name and purpose, the Ravensbourne, is supposedly named after the Danes' raven emblem), the defeat of the Cornish rebels in 1497, the murder of Christopher Marlowe in an argument over who should pay the "recknyng" in a drinking den, and an early inspiration to the authors of *King Kong* (Edgar Wallace was a Deptfordian) and *Tarka the Otter* (Henry Williamson also wrote a short story about the Ravensbourne).

From Deptford, it was easy to continue exploring those parts of London yet unexplored, to drop down into Kent, Surrey, or Sussex, or to go farther afield and to the Continent. From SE8, as well as regular trips abroad, my wife and I toured all around England—Elgar's Malvern Hills, Housman's Shropshire, Bunyan's Bedfordshire, Du Maurier's Cornwall, Laurie Lee's Cotswolds, Scott's Borders, Hardy's Wessex, Bennett's Potteries, Priestley's Yorkshire, Lowry's Lancashire, and a plethora of other places, each with its unique character and teeming with cultural and historical associations. And in between traveling to see places, we could read about traveling to see places and continue to try to make sense of the bewildering richness of England.


Yet eventually it happened that we became a little tired, not of London as such, but of living in London. Like thousands of other middle-class people, we were fed up with high housing prices, grime, and crime. Gangs of black youths would hang around at New Cross Station, snatching bags and phones from women; a black man tried to rob me at knife-point in Deptford's nature reserve, as I was walking home one winter's evening; there were drive-by shootings just up the road in Peckham, where Oliver Goldsmith had once taught at an academy. With such fauna proliferating, and the unspeakable Ken Livingstone recently elected as London's first mayor, cultural riches were eventually not enough of an inducement to stay. London, we felt, was rapidly becoming decivilized—not to mention de-Englished. When we finally left Deptford, in 2000, it was already around 40 percent Afro-Caribbean.

By then, we had located a small, neglected redbrick cottage on the Lincolnshire coast, 200 miles to the north, in an area away from all major transport axes and, accordingly, largely untouched by so many of the phenomena we disliked—an area described enticingly in a Channel 4 television program as “the most backward part of England.” We guessed we would fit in quite well.

Although we have not found Lincolnshire to be quite as “backward” as we had hoped, it is something of a backwater—insofar as anywhere in an embattled England can now be so regarded. Yet even here, looking out over a 90-acre field yet near shifting salt marshes and the sea, we are surrounded not just by rare animals and plants but by new literary and historical ghosts.

Across the field is the church of All Saints, “the cathedral of the marsh,” built around 1380 when the Lincolnshire Marsh was sending its wool across all of Europe, with its brass of 1424 showing Robert Hayter wearing a bascinet (the latest known English representation of what was already an obsolete piece of armor), its 15th-century wooden screens of sneering faces glaring at Jesus, and its organic patchwork exterior painted by John Piper. In *Sons and Lovers*, D.H. Lawrence describes his visits to “our” beach. We are just a few miles from Saltfleet Haven, where “our” river reaches the North Sea, now silted up, but which once sent two ships to fight the French in the 13th century. Going the other way, we are also near Mablethorpe, partly drowned by the sea in the great storms of 1287 and whose denizens long made a living ship breaking and smuggling. (We have a salvaged 19th-century teak ship's door in our cottage, which I pulled out of a sand dune and had remounted as an internal door.) Throughout the earliest work of Tennyson, there are hints of the Lincolnshire landscapes he lived in and loved, and in amongst the architectural wasteland of Skegness (from which, wrote that prickly patriot Nicklaus Pevsner, “the sea retreats twice a day far out in shame”) can still be found the Vine Hotel where Tennyson stayed during his holidays in what was then a quiet fishing village founded at the Viking Skeggi's ness (or headland).

We are about seven miles from Alford, where one Thomas Paine spent time as a customs officer—a suitable employment for this irritating man. At nearby Willoughby, a local lad called John Smith dreamed of adventure and soon left, first to fight Turks for the king of Hungary, then to found a colony in honor of the Virgin Queen. We are ten miles from Louth, where Georgian houses bake in the hushed sunshine below Saint James' looming perpendicular spire, whose vicar launched the

Pilgrimage of Grace against Henry VIII's monastery despoilers, for which he was hanged at Tyburn (not far from Maida Vale!). Scythes allegedly sported in anger by some of these conservative “pilgrims” in their fruitless campaign are on display in the modest church at Horncastle, 20 miles away, for centuries the scene of a riotous horse fair, described by George Borrow in his *Romany Rye*, one of the most wanderlust-inspiring books I have ever read. And then there is Lincoln Cathedral, proud on its limestone cliff high above the fens and wolds; Barton-upon-Humber, with its Saxon tower; Alkborough, with its mysterious turf maze and expansive views over the confluence of the Humber and Trent; Gainsborough, the setting, as “St Oggs,” for *Mill on the Floss*, with its timber-framed Old Hall; Brigg, whose fair was immortalized in a beautiful folk song later rescued from oblivion by Percy Grainger and orchestrated by Frederick Delius; the original Boston with its stupendous “Stump”; and a host of other riches scattered carelessly across the landscape that gave birth and early sustenance to so much of “Albion's Seed.” Here, on the indefinite edge of England, there are constant reminders of what she has been and—now just as important and far more urgent—what she could one day be again. 

We Are Here (winter, Slovenia) by B.R. Strahan

In the sunsets and the rain
In the rise and fall of rivers
In the empty hours
And the crowded days

Here the mountains speak
In heavy tones and snow
Is not a metaphor for silence
But a fearsome white noise

Coming to the edge of all
These words the verbs waving
Furiously from bright slopes
The nouns too frightened to speak

Ever green is a bare branch
A holiday hollowed out
From stone that echoes with tales
We tired of telling long ago