

ENGAGING THE AGE OF

Jane Austen

Public Humanities in Practice

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civic and academic. Launched in 2017, my digital humanities project explores connections between Walter Scott's epic *Waverley* novels and the swath of American towns that bears their name.

In the course of my research, I soon learned to spread a wide net and be open to unexpected connections. While the work of scholars researching and publishing in the areas of Scottish and American studies is indispensable to my project, I soon discovered that visiting locales and meeting individuals actively involved in their communities also yielded fruitful discoveries. Thus, I began calling or emailing libraries, historical associations, newspapers, visitors bureaus, preservation societies, and other organizations to identify people who might inform my work.

I followed with visits when possible, each of which enriched my research and yielded unforeseen pleasures. Examples include access to personal archives followed by a catfish lunch with a local historian in Missouri, an introduction to the local museum and public library by the executive director of a convention and visitors bureau in Ohio, a rewarding day perusing a mid-nineteenth-century edition of the *Waverley* novels in Iowa, and driving tours of several towns. People everywhere have been eager to share their expertise, although they sometimes require a bit of detective work to find.

I also learned how important it is to consider timing and strengths in your community. Local academicians, librarians, historians, and community members all expressed interest in my project, which led me to a second goal: to celebrate Walter Scott's legacy in Iowa during 2014, the year of *Waverley's* bicentennial.

Funding from university and local organizations was crucial and allowed me to arrange for lectures by Professor Alan Riach, a Scottish scholar from the University of Glasgow. He drew eager audiences to talks about the *Waverley* novels and the recent Scottish independence referendum and met with students, faculty, and community members. In addition, I worked with the executive director of the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature organization to arrange a literary and musical performance of Scott's work, narrated by Professor Riach, during the town's annual book festival. Timing contributed to the success of this event, since coverage of the referendum coincided with advertisements for the Book Festival as well as the bicentennial of Scott's first novel.

To engage both community and university, I sought a mix of students and scholars interested in Scottish literature and culture, as well as local and professional performers. Highland dancers from Iowa and Kansas, a children's choir, and local musicians performed new choreographies and arrangements based upon the traditional pieces Scott features in his novels, while a professional bagpiper from Scotland and a renowned fiddler from New York City also contributed their talents, all woven together by a compelling narration of Scott's influence in the Midwest. Over four hundred people cheered on performers at Iowa City's historic Englert Theatre. The following day, a private music school hosted a workshop featuring the Scottish fiddler, as did the University of Iowa Department of Music.

This performance inspired me to make another effort to bring historical literature alive and show its relevance today. Research, archival materials, interviews, and the bicentennial celebration led to my digital humanities project, the website *Under the Banner of Waverley*. Here I investigate why the *Waverley* novels appealed to readers, map where and when the eponymous towns were founded, and illustrate how Scott's legacy continues. His novels promote communal experiences and explore themes pertinent today, and I seek to provide lively examples to elucidate these connections, as I do in my teaching. My site shares access to the histories, colorful images, and archival material I have discovered. I have relied heavily upon the expertise of individuals in the Digital Scholarship and Publishing Studio at the University of Iowa, from the initial exhibit design and ongoing collection of materials to the interactive map of nineteenth-century railroads intersecting *Waverlys*. Because this is largely a community project, *Under the Banner of Waverley* provides an ideal place to enliven Scott's fiction while welcoming suggestions and future collaborators.

GAIN EXPERIENCE!

Literature, Travel, and Life

Amy Weldon

Mary Wollstonecraft died of complications from childbirth on September 10, 1797, leaving behind a devastated husband, a brand-

new baby girl, and an unfinished novel: "The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria." The narrator, locked in a madhouse and anticipating her own untimely death, addresses her lost daughter directly: "I would then, with fond anxiety . . . save you from the vain regret of having, through irresolution, let the spring-tide of experience pass away, unimproved, unenjoyed. — Gain experience — ah! gain it — while experience is worth having, and acquire sufficient fortitude to pursue your own happiness."⁷

On our January term study-abroad trip, in *Frankenstein's* Footsteps: The Keats-Shelley Circle in London, Geneva, Venice, Florence, and Rome, students and I imagine that Wollstonecraft is speaking not only to her own infant daughter — the future Mary Shelley — but also to us. And maybe she is. Wollstonecraft believed in experience of the world as a way to stretch the self's boundaries, put the ego in check, and counteract the timidity instilled in women by those who "rende[r]" them "objects of pity, bordering on contempt."⁸ As I look at my own students — awash in a sea of social-media noise and fake news, hedged about by protective parents and teaching-to-the-test rules, separated by electronic convenience from the endangered natural world, yet still searching for more life-sustaining ways of being — I see her words as a guide for all of us. My books *The Hands-On Life: How to Wake Yourself Up and Save the World* (2018) and *The Writer's Eye: Observation and Inspiration for Creative Writers* (2018) attempt to help students find the meaning they seek, with life in the living world as a bright thread to follow. Encounters with that-which-is-not-me — perhaps especially overseas — enlarge what students thought they knew and, in the process, enlarge minds, selves, and hearts.

As I prepared to lead the third (2016) and fourth (2018) incarnations of *In Frankenstein's* Footsteps, a subtle question shimmered into view: How can I both prepare students for what they will see *and* preserve the dignity and freshness of their own first encounters? Walker Percy's essay "The Loss of the Creature" (1975) describes the existential Mobius bind of tourists, continually regarding themselves regarding a place and short-circuiting the very experience they seek. Yet do I really want to ask a first-generation college student who has never been out of the Midwest to read such an essay before she departs? No, actually, I don't. Although it's my

responsibility to keep students safe, to equip them with the raw materials of texts and contexts, to emphasize intellectual curiosity, and to build a peer group in which that intellectual curiosity can flourish, it's not my responsibility — or my right — to tell them how they should feel in the moment of encounter itself.

This realization leads me into evaluating my own teaching. Always before me is the deadly dry specter of Mr. Causabon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) sucking the life out of Rome: "There is hardly any contact," Eliot writes, "more depressing to a young ardent creature than that of a mind in which years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy."⁹ Accordingly, my pedagogical goal is to offer imaginative encounters with a place through the lens of historical and literary texts — the same kinds of encounters the Romantics staged and described for themselves. I try to capture the imaginations of curious but travel-weary students. Once inside the Colosseum in Rome, we head straight to an overlook point above the arena for a few minutes of pure staring. Then everyone gathers around to build a quick platform of shared knowledge. "Lord Byron imagined gladiator contests, too, when he visited here," I say, and a student reads aloud the dying gladiator passage from *Childe Harold*, canto IV (1818) to show us how.

In Byron's time, the Colosseum was even more of a ruin than now, weed-covered and open for anyone to wander through at will. Yet to the ancient Romans it epitomized the glory and spoils of empire. Spectators entering the Colosseum would have been spritzed with exotic perfumes from all the recent shipments into Rome, flaunting imperial greatness to their noses as well as their eyes and ears. And several species of animals went extinct because they were harvested so often for contests here. Yet to the average Roman — as to an average member of *any* culture — these norms must have seemed, well, normal. From here it's a short step to the sort of reflections on empire Byron also led us to as we read *Childe Harold* in Venice a week and a half earlier. In closing, I share aloud Charles Dickens's 1846 verdict: "Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Colosseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. God be thanked: a ruin!"¹⁰ By now, about twenty minutes

have passed since we first walked onto our viewing spot, and I invite students to walk, write, and explore for the next hour. All around the arena, students wander, perch, scribble, gaze, ponder. Someone always circles back to ask me if they can copy Dickens's words (the perfume and the animals show up too). Even those who confess to not knowing much about history feel energized, propelled to reflect and seek further knowledge.

Of course, I have to foreclose some types of overseas experience, since one person's bad choices affect everyone. I teach students that the greatest danger is their own naivete: "You must always maintain a 'second sight' for how you look and sound to others," my syllabus states, "Obliviousness to context can lead others to perceive you as entitled and insensitive — which is not a positive way for *anyone* to move through the world." In on-campus orientation sessions, we model appropriate jackets, shoes, and daily wear, designed to make us comfortable and unobtrusive (no college logos, "athleisure" attire, or leggings worn as pants; sweaters, scarves, narrow dark jeans, and tall boots or hiking shoes are the norm). Students travel in small groups, not alone, during independent exploration times in each city and check in with me around nine o'clock every night. If they enjoy a glass of wine with dinner, they do so knowing we'll be on our way bright and early the next morning. Always, they tell me the course standards make them feel prepared, safe, and empowered.

Preparation starts on campus. Reading applications and conducting interviews, I build a group of students willing to "geek out" and to be active, curious learners and good colleagues. I share my syllabus (with its standards, packing list, and mobility considerations) as soon as they show interest in the course. They read our primary texts — *Frankenstein*, Daisy Hay's group biography *Young Romantics*, and poems and letters by the Romantics — in advance and bring them along. In November, students attend the Center for Global Learning's mandatory predeparture orientation and two orientations of my own: a get-acquainted lunch in the cafeteria and a show-and-tell tutorial that helps them organize logistics and feel, viscerally, the challenges of fast-paced travel. To this session, all the students, dressed in appropriate daily wear, bring their passports, coats, and carry-on-sized suitcases and backpacks — our whole luggage allowance for the trip. We review the syllabus.

Then, moving at city pace, we carry our bags down the stairs from a classroom, outside to a crosswalk, across the street, and then onto the opposite curb, all in five minutes.

Once we're overseas, the preparation pays off. Trusting that their peers and I will protect them, students flourish amid swiftly changing challenges. By the end of the second day in London, they're comfortable with the Tube (the city's subway system) and the unfamiliar mix of coins with which they buy coffee. They keep journals on paper and pen. During the day, we sit down to rest and write on Rome's Palatine Hill or the windswept meadow beside the Villa Diodati, overlooking Lake Geneva in Switzerland. During our discussions, I stand ready with texts and exercises but try to let the students lead the conversation. Sharing stories of independent small-group explorations is always great fun when we're back together again. Always, I try to trust that the point I need to make will arise from discussion and from experience — and it usually does. Brandishing Mary Wollstonecraft's words as a rallying cry — "we are gaining experience!" they joke when faced with crowded Metro trains, museum closings, or "weird" food — students grow and change in amazing ways, right under my eyes. (Of course, Wollstonecraft knew this: "It is almost as absurd," she writes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, "to attempt to make a youth wise by the experience of another, as to expect the body to grow strong by the exercise which is only talked of, or seen.")¹¹

In 2018, I tried two new ways to bring text and experience together. In any teaching situation, I believe in reading texts aloud, yet I don't want my voice to dominate. So I made copies of short poetry or prose texts related to sites we visit, wrote the date and place connected with that text on each, and put it in a numbered envelope (keeping a master index). Before we boarded our departing flight, I handed out those envelopes. Students could open their envelope and discover what their text was and where they would read it aloud — but they kept it a secret from the whole group until the moment itself. The students loved the readings and the range of texts — short excerpts from our course packets and related works like Dante's *Inferno* (early 1300s), Lauren Elkin's *Flâneuse* (2016), Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), and Freud on Rome as a model of the mind from *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) — and their

peers' voices seemed to animate the words in their minds very readily for discussions and writing.

Thinking about reading at Keats's grave led me to my second new idea: fragmentary gravestone rubbings, made directly on the pages of students' journals. How might carrying a piece of a famous name that let you engage with the reality we discuss together, that for the Romantics the fragment was emotionally suggestive and rich in a way the complete thing could not quite be? How does it feel to hunker down with charcoal in your fingers, scratching it across the page you press against the stone? So I tucked a packet of good ivory resume paper into my suitcase and presented it to students (with pencils and charcoal sticks) on site. Students *loved* making the rubbings, which heightened their imaginative engagement with the writers—frequently, they'd choose one portion of the stone for their (public, frameable) piece of paper and another for their (private) journal page.

I'll never forget the moment in Rome's Protestant Cemetery when a student pointed to the tiny white daisies in the grass. At the Keats-Shelley House that morning, we had learned that Keats sent his friend Joseph Severn to check out this cemetery, where Keats knew he'd soon be buried. Severn reported back that the grass was full of daisies, just like the ones that adorned Keats's bedroom. Lifting his eyes to his bedroom ceiling, Keats had smiled. *I think*, he is reported to have said, *I can feel them over me even now*. And now, as students reflected on this anecdote, their gaze was fixed on these newly blossomed flowers, modern echoes of this nineteenth-century story. "Severn was right," one student breathed. "He would have come out to this cemetery in January. And it's January now." In that moment, the student's imagination passed through past and present swift as a needle through cloth, stitching them elegantly—and permanently—together, with physical experience in a place as the key. Other students remark on this process as well. Assessing the course in her journal, one student wrote, "Dr. Weldon helps point out things to us and opens the doors to possibilities and knowledge. . . . We choose to step through the door and out into the world, and we need to grasp the knowledge and experience for ourselves, to snatch up the world around us and feel the cravings for knowledge ourselves." Of

course, Keats anticipated this. "Axioms in philosophy," he wrote, "are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We have read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the Author."¹²

On our last day in London, students and I walk to Mary Wollstonecraft's gravestone in Old St. Pancras Churchyard. With our feet in the mud, we review the story of her daughter Mary learning to read by tracing *Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*. Later, of course, that engraved death date, ten days after her own birthday—September 10, 1797—must have seemed like a single reproach, endlessly renewed. *Frankenstein's* author met her mother only in the pages of her books, the portrait that hung in her father's study—the same portrait we view at the National Portrait Gallery in Trafalgar Square—and her own imagination. We remember how she and Percy Shelley met secretly and declared their love to one another at this spot. We speak and declared their love to one another at this spot. We speak Wollstonecraft's words from *Maria* aloud, hearing how they surely would also have rung through the heart of a girl in love with a sexy married man, chafing to escape from her father's chilly house, eager, in following her mother's advice, to find her way toward the older woman, if only in the pages of books and a lifetime of travel, physical and intellectual. *Gain experience—ah! gain it*. Yes, we respond, across distance and time. We will.

As an undergraduate, I would have swooned over a course like Amy Weldon's. The desire to combine graduate studies with literary tourism, visiting all the places I had read about as an undergraduate English major, is largely what motivated me to enroll as a graduate student in England at the University of York. I went on various literary pilgrimages,¹³ including one in which I memorized Keats's "To Autumn" as I walked the riverbank trail south of Winchester that inspired its composition. *How romantic!* I thought, quite pleased with myself. I went to London, Edinburgh, Bath, Nottingham, and the Lake District to stand on the soil where my favorite works were conceived or written. I even went to the Gulf of Spezzia, where Shelley drowned, on a jaunt to Italy. The power of such a pilgrimage, as George Dekker argues, lies in synecdoche: "For tourists as for pilgrims, sacred sites and relics possess their aura and talismanic power