Liverbirds and Literature: Studying British Literature in Context

In May of 2015, I was one of 10 Undergraduate and 3 Graduate students fortunate enough to pioneer the newest Study Abroad option for English majors, a 4-week Literature Program at Edge Hill University led by GVSU Professors Jo Miller and Jim Persoon. The unique experience of blending graduate and undergraduate students, as well as the creative, discussion based classroom environment created by Dr. Miller and Dr. Persoon enriched and empowered the educational experience of the students who participated. While the graduate students provided an informed and experienced perspective to our studies, the undergraduates brought refreshing energy and a lively sense of curiosity to every discussion. Together, the class and professors were able to create a passionate and wide-ranging dialogue about literature.

After a plane ride of falling asleep on the shoulders of classmates who were suddenly not strangers, we arrived at Manchester Airport, and were welcomed by Edge Hill University, our host for the next 4 weeks. We happily settled into our individual dorm rooms in the heart of campus for a brief rest, but soon Bill Johnson, the irrepressible Director of Edge Hill’s International office, drew us out of the solitude of our rooms to lunch and a lively tour of campus. A few days later, one of the most memorable occasions on our trip, was Bill’s “homeboy tour” of Liverpool, which not only introduced us to the city’s history, layout, and culture, but also made many of us fall in love with Liverpool. Indeed, this tour laid the foundation for my own Capstone project on the poetry and politics of Liverpool.

Our schedule for the 4 weeks saw us working together in a classroom setting on campus from about 9:00 AM until about 1:00 PM Monday through Thursday, studying a different author each week. Every Friday we took a field trip to a place related to the author we were reading that week. Our first week, for instance, we delved into the emotional and revolutionary poetry of the UK’s first female poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, which allowed our group to open up, inspired our own poetry, and created bonds in the classroom that carried us through the rest of the trip, making the experience even more rewarding than I had expected. The weeks following took us on a whirlwind through the “bananalambs” and “liver birds” of Liverpool, then back in time to the treacherous working conditions of Charles Dickens’
Hard Times and BBC’s adaption of North and South. Then it was on to Manchester, where we experienced for ourselves the speed, noise, and danger presented by the cotton loom from a fascinating demonstration at the Museum of Science and Industry. Emerging from the smoke of the factory, we escaped into the nature poetry of William Wordsworth and the world of Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit, as we stumbled off a bus into the rolling green hills of the Lake District, where we took afternoon tea in a hillside village, ducked through the dark doorways of Wordsworth’s homey Dove Cottage, frolicked in the open fields at his famous home, Rydal Mount, and hunted for all inspiration at Potter’s Hilltop Farm.

Still recovering from a weekend spent galavanting across Scotland in our free time and aching from our frantic dash to catch the last train back to Ormskirk, a small group of us gathered on the eve of our last week and cracked open William Shakespeare’s Othello. What followed was three hours of dynamic reading in preparation for the week’s coming studies, just one of many examples of how we were empowered to work creatively and independently of normal class time. The week tumbled by with more amateur, but energetic acting and animated discussions until we found ourselves wandering the streets of Shakespeare’s hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon. After exploring the garden of Ann Hathaway’s cottage, and visiting the site of Shakespeare’s grave, our group found ourselves jovially swapping delectable dishes at the Dirty Duck. Ultimately, the day drew to a close as we settled in for the opening night of world-class staging of Othello by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Acclaimed by The Guardian, as a “totally fresh perspective” that “made history” the RSC’s performance fueled a vigorous, yet bittersweet discussion on our final day of class.
With the official program ended, the class dissolved across the globe. While some weathered travelers headed home to jobs and families, others ventured on to bus through Scotland, tour the many attractions of London, or drive the countryside of northern England. But the end of the summer found us all together once again, at our very own Capstone conference presenting a summer’s hard work of research and writing, swapping stories over a celebratory lunch, and reminiscing about a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

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