

P E R S P E C T I V E

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH JONATHAN HILL HAS BEEN INSTILLING AN APPRECIATION FOR LITERATURE INSIDE THE CLASSROOM AND IN THE WORLD'S FAR CORNERS FOR NEARLY 40 YEARS.

By Tom Vogel

Q: You've described yourself as a "first-generation immigrant" in the United States. Can you elaborate?

A: In a literal sense my wife, Barbara, and I are first-generation immigrants. But our coming here did not conform to the immigrant model of popular American myth or historic tradition. We were not driven out of our homeland by persecution, politics or poverty. I sometimes feel embarrassed, even phony, about claiming to be an immigrant, since nothing in our experience compares with the hardship that many immigrants undergo even today to get to this country. We can claim none of the compassion and sympathy such immigrants deserve.

No, we are elective, voluntary immigrants. We are uprooted but not transplanted. I had no compelling reasons for rejecting my birth home. I have good reasons for embracing my adoptive country. But my feelings for the U.S. can never be as profound as my attachment to the place of my birth and upbringing.

Q: What do you miss the most about England, and what are some of the differences you've noticed between England and the United States?

A: My wife and I grew up in the English Midlands, in villages close to the town of Rugby, Warwickshire. I miss the intimacy, the compact intensity of the English countryside.

I miss too the mentality of the English. The English, the British in general, are empirical, pragmatic, understated. They are also habitually ironic. They have a genius for not taking themselves seriously, which comes as a surprise to many outside Britain, who think of the country as mainly pomp and circumstance. True, there's self-irony and self-mockery in the U.S., but it is keyed in a different way. In this country, humor collides; in Britain it curves. Think of the "English" on a ball in a game of pool.

But there are profounder differences between the two countries. The United States sometimes seems less a place than an idea, a prolonged exercise in 18th-century Enlightenment thinking. The last thing an English person would say is that England

was an idea. The English do not much care for ideas. If you asked an Englishman which he cared for more, freedom or his local pub, he would say his pub.

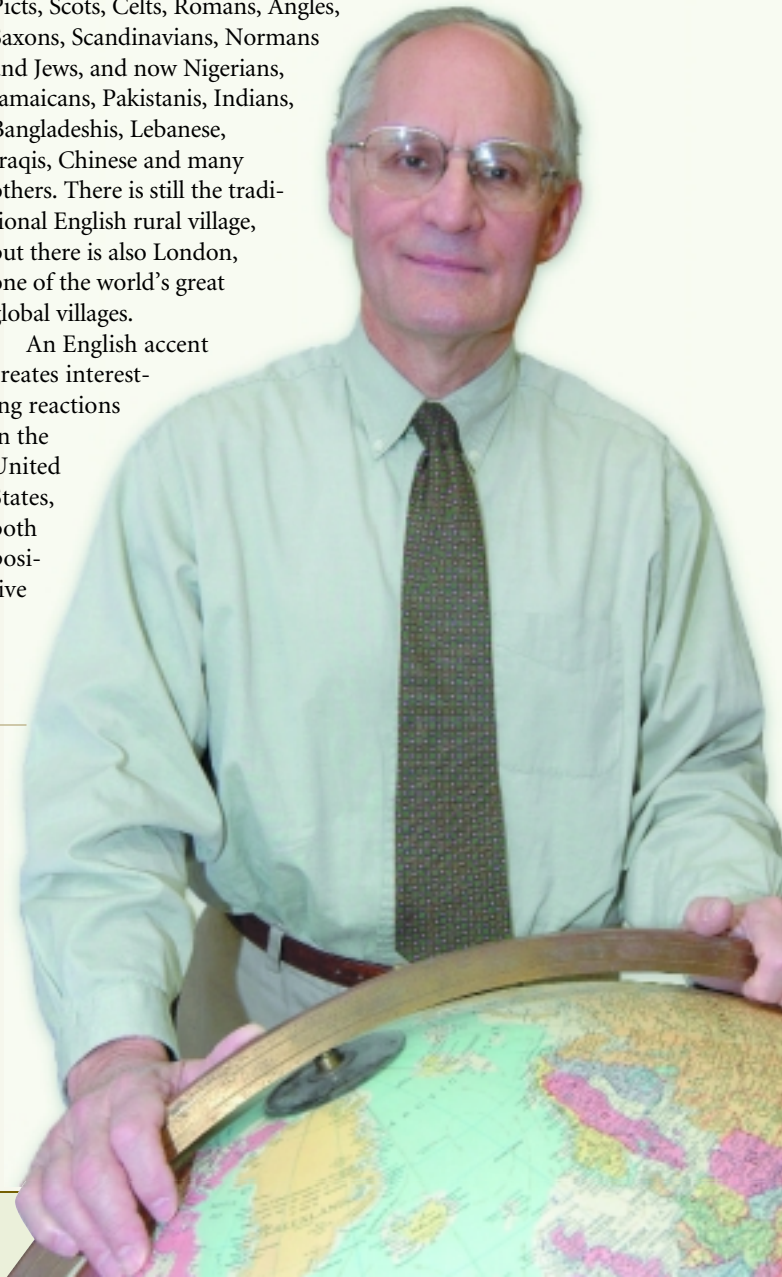
Q: What stereotypes do Americans hold regarding England and the English people?

A: From the outside, England can seem a tranquil and elegant theme park — as depicted in travel brochures, Jane Austen, *Masterpiece Theatre*, Christmas calendars and place mats. And it is in part just this, thanks to the National Trust and the country's devoted care for its lavish cultural inheritance. But it is also the land of one of the most mongrel populations in Europe: first Picts, Scots, Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Scandinavians, Normans and Jews, and now Nigerians, Jamaicans, Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Lebanese, Iraqis, Chinese and many others. There is still the traditional English rural village, but there is also London, one of the world's great global villages.

An English accent creates interesting reactions in the United States, both positive

Professor Jonathan Hill came to St. Olaf in 1969 for what he thought would be a year. He has stayed a lifetime. Hill has taught 18th- and 19th-century British literature, in particular the Romantic period, and contemporary Caribbean literature. In January 2006, he and his wife, Barbara, led St. Olaf Center for Lifelong Learning programs to Barbados and St. Lucia, and in June 2008 they will lead a Study Travel program in England and Wales.

Born in the very heart of England, Hill did his undergraduate and graduate work at Keble College, Oxford. He taught at University College, Dublin, and then at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. PHOTO BY DAVID GONNERMAN '90



and negative. Often you are granted a level of intelligence you do not have, or people's eyes can glaze over in a dreamy roll. On the other hand, the accent can be heard as supercilious and condescending, and it can provoke the singularly embarrassing defensiveness of attempts to imitate it to one's face. My accent did serve me in one unusual way. When I came to the States I swapped from a European brand of cigarettes to Marlboros, but I could not say "Marlboro" in a way cashiers could understand. So I had to quit smoking.

Q: Discuss your involvement in St. Olaf Study Travel programs and your upcoming journey to England and Wales.

A: Barbara and I led three Study Travel programs in Britain in the 1980s. We went from one beautiful place to another with delightful groups of fellow travelers. One of the reasons we stopped thereafter was Barbara's work. She ran Treats, a deli-restaurant in Northfield, a more than full-time job. Now she is retired, and we're ready to go to England and Wales again. So we are offering a program in the summer of 2008 — green landscapes, ancient castles, soaring cathedrals, lakes and valleys, cottages and gardens, and London.

Q: Talk about your interest in illustration, particularly the illustrator George Cruikshank.

A: I became interested in George Cruikshank (1792–1878) because he illustrated early works by Charles Dickens, and I wanted to know how he had influenced Dickens. His life and work took me into the long history of graphic satire in 18th- and 19th-century Britain where we find the origins of the modern social and political cartoon. Cruikshank was the leading graphic satirist of the Regency period (1810–20) and later a leading illustrator of the early Victorian novel. Literature allows me to read stories. Cruikshank lets me look at funny pictures.

Q: Your teaching and scholarship is in the British Romantic period and, more broadly, the 18th and 19th centuries. What drew you to this era?

A: It was primarily a matter of temperament. My mother grew up in a Welsh-speaking family and was fluent in the language. Words are to the Welsh what money is to the English. And words do not come any richer than in Romantic poetry. My attraction was also political and social. I find the radical liberalism of the period inspiring.

I have recently become interested in the book history of the period, specifically in a binding style known as "books in boards." The phrase refers to the most common style of retail binding employed between 1790 and 1840, a hard-backed binding but one covered entirely in paper. It is a style that stands between leather binding in earlier periods and cloth binding in later. I am researching both British and American use of this binding, and the comparisons and contrasts between the two are very interesting. More broadly, this research, which treats books as physical objects, as material culture, provides welcome relaxation from the elevated raptures of Romantic poetry.

Q: How did you become involved with literatures of the Eastern Caribbean?

A: It started with the poetry of Derek Walcott, the St. Lucian-born Nobel Prize winner. I first read him more than 20 years ago, and I was instantly hooked. On behalf of the English department, I invited him to come and give a reading at St. Olaf. This was before he won his Nobel Prize. We could still afford him.

I decided I needed to know more about the world and culture from which Derek Walcott had come and for which he spoke with such power and eloquence. And so the whole Caribbean opened up for me. It was but a short step from reading and teaching Caribbean literature on campus to saying, "This is an Interim course waiting to be launched." Since then I've led the Interim course "Literatures of the Eastern Caribbean" seven times. It has given me great satisfaction to establish it and recently to hand it over to my colleague Karen Cherewatuk, who will lead it in the future.

Q: Do you see current trends in literacy eradicating the long novel and interest in the study of it?

A: There is no question that the rise of the Internet, along with the rise of popular visual culture, is affecting more traditional dimensions of print culture. Are attention spans getting shorter? Is the long novel dead? It has supposedly been dead for quite some time, and yet publishing still thrives. It depends on whom we are talking about. The population at large? Or that much smaller, privileged proportion of the population who go on to higher education, and within that segment, the even tinier number who go on to advanced education in the humanities? I doubt if they will stop reading, any more than they stopped reading when movies first appeared. Am I in denial? Possibly. Does this worry me? No.

Q: You've said, "My teaching has only ever been as good, and as pleasurable, as my students." How so?

A: I have always found St. Olaf students to be lively and motivated learners who take their work seriously. Many students are like that, but St. Olaf students add to these qualities a courtesy of manner and decency of instinct that has made my teaching career at St. Olaf something of a charmed life. Time and again, when I have taken Interim groups to the Caribbean, I have received compliments on the demeanor of our students. These compliments have come from those who have experienced very different kinds of behavior from other American students.

I also believe that our students, beneath an apparent surface homogeneity, are unendingly diverse. I use the word "diverse" deliberately. In present public discourse, "diversity" denotes, in the main, ethnic and racial difference. I am referring to invisible diversity, the numberless differences of temperament, emotional complexions, imaginative casts, the infinite reach and variety of the inner lives of our students. No two of my students write in the same way. 🦁

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