

From the Brontës to the Bluegrass

by Tessa Nelson-Humphries

"The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne"

—Chaucer

"How did you ever get here?" incoming students to my English classes at Cumberland College, now University of the Cumberlands, would ask once their sadistically-induced terror caused by the embellished tales of my former Freshmen had subsided. "And where'd you get that accent?" The last, of course, before wide dissemination of BBC and PBS television.

"I often ask myself the first question!" I'd reply, mopping my dripping brow in the horrendous humidity of those Kentucky summers before air-conditioning crept to campus. I'll try to answer both questions in this article

Certainly I'd never had to mop sweat in my Yorkshire birthplace, in the Brontë-country high on the edge of rolling, empty moors where the curlew's plaintive cry is still often the only sound. How to keep from freezing in those iron-hard northern winters was more pressing. In fact, in New Mexico, where I've finally settled after much gypsying, I can evoke shivers by simply remembering the stone-flagged floors in my childhood home, a former 17th-century coaching inn above Holmfirth, the steeply-streeted town made famous in the popular TV series *Last of the Summer Wine*—floors just like those shivered on by the sickly Brontës in their bleak Haworth Parsonage at the top of its very steep street. Yorkshire is our largest county, so large that the invading Danes divided it into "ridings" or "Ridings" as the word became, that is, into three parts for easier management. We had a North Riding, an East, and a West. There never was a South Riding, though a Thirties best-selling novel called *South Riding* by Yorkshirewoman Winifred Holtby is still a worthwhile read. Other famous "Yorkies" are, besides those Brontës, Laurence Sterne, Gunpowder plotter Guy Fawkes, highwayman Dick Turpin, poet W. H. Auden, writer J. B. Priestley and those fabulous theatre and film Dames Judi Dench and Diana Rigg. I was born in the West Riding, only child, mercifully, of a disastrous marriage between a large, Argentine-admiring globe-trotting British civil engineer father years older than my dainty Andalusian mother. When the inevitable marital crash resounded and my father hightailed it back to his beloved South America I was, aged seven, shipped south to boarding school and never really had a home again until I married. Incidentally, it is still common for children in the U.K. to be sent away to school and at even younger ages though I know many Americans are horrified. My Cumberland freshmen soon

learned it was no use expecting sympathy when they wept at having left home at eighteen to come to Appalachia. “Pooh!” I would snark briskly, “I’ve been gone since I was seven!” And, had I had children, I’d have taken in laundry if necessary to pay their expensive fees, so grateful am I for the lifelong habits of independence, discipline and responsibility those teachers gave me. In our very fractured marital society now, those schools are a valued haven for children who, like me, were footballed between feuding parents.

Since the editors of the *Journal of Kentucky Studies* mandate firm word limits I shall touch only briefly on the lively years between boarding school, college, career-sampling and coming as a very lucky Fulbright to America. That last is how I got here initially.

Writing was always my passion, so it was inevitable that I went into Journalism first, the only girl in a smoke-laden frantic press room full of cussing, hard-drinking male tobacco addicts who gave no quarter. I still recall one terrifying sub-editor booming, when I’d written that, “‘Mrs. Jones resides at . . .’—Kindly remember, young lady, that only kings and dukes reside . . . the rest of us just live at!” Many lives later that acid comment could still make me wince when people in Williamsburg, Kentucky, would answer their phones with “X’s residence!”

Women were not going far in reportorial work then, so I fled the roaring presses and occasional bottom-pinching and, because I was tri-lingual, became a government translator for a while. I moved on from that to becoming personal private secretary to the gangling middle-aged scion of one of England’s famous old Quaker chocolate families. Great job for a while, but my boss liked to goof off all day and then whirl into his office just as I was going home and I soon tired of scrawling midnight shorthand missives about cocoa prices in Ghana. Worse, however, was that I was expected to “fudge” to his longsuffering and very nice wife that he was “Delayed in A” when he was actually flinging extra-maritally at B, all of which later came out in the press—luckily just as our Ministry of Education was offering grants for those who had a degree or were near one to be awarded generous funds to finish on condition we went into a desperately understaffed teaching profession. I had taught Business English and Pitman’s shorthand in evening classes for adults so I did have limited teaching experience—even so, it was not an easy decision to leave the chocolate factory for it paid extremely well and offered a good pension down the road. However, only weeks into my teacher training in hideous cinder-block buildings on the bleak Lancashire plain I knew I had found “my bliss,” as the late Joseph Campbell expressed it. Luck held and I landed a post in a beautiful medieval city in the lush west of England to teach all girls in the town’s top school.

But, given my early life, my feet remained itchy so, after completing the mandatory five years with a stellar teaching record I applied for a Fulbright Fellowship to spend a year in the United States. Fulbrights are not easily come by and there were grueling interviews at the American Embassy in London plus every inch of one’s life had to be gone over minutely. Hopefuls were not supposed to request specific states but, because of my Spanish background, I insouciantly asked for California! Probably stunned by my impudence I *did* draw San Jose—perhaps, also, because most oddly, the Victorian house I then lived in was actually called “San Jose” though no one ever discovered why or how it got the name. Is it any wonder I often feel like the person, was it Shaw, who opined, “Things have not happened to *me* . . . I have happened to things!”

Equally fateful and incredible is that, during my marvelous year, I met my “blue-print prince,” at 6’3” the shortest of three brothers. A native Californian who looked

amazingly like the late Gregory Peck, he had degrees from Occidental and Stanford and was teaching *Spanish*. Though we were destined to have barely six idyllic years together before unimaginable tragedy struck, he remains my lodestar. But more on that part of my journey later.

Fulbright rules mandated return to one's own country at year's end so K. gave up his promising Stateside career and exchanged birthright sunshine for the fogs and damps of Birmingham, one of our most grim industrial cities, since, though my husband had taught nothing but Spanish, they were so desperate for teachers they were willing to let him dust off his Math and Science and take him on. Talk about culture shock for him! From teaching small co-educational classes in a superb climate and driving to school in a convertible, my new spouse now found himself facing classes of forty-five to fifty tough, inner-city working-class lads in a Victorian redbrick jailhouse style school. And to get there he had to wait endlessly in driving snow or rain for overcrowded city buses. But those lads grew to love him, as the book in his memory they bought and sent me when they heard of his death touchingly testifies. They proudly referred to him as "Our American Sir" and, since he was very musical, he garnered some music teaching, and they gleefully learned "Night Riders in the Sky" and "*Cielito Lindo*" to the strumming of his guitar and the pride of their Headmaster, Mr. Rothera.

International marriage meant sacrifice for me too, so I relinquished my beloved post in that fine old school and moved to a post as Head of English in Walsall, another gritty city close to Birmingham. This was a very different school indeed, being run by a fierce spinster Headmistress who was allowed to literally whip difficult girls with an item called a tawse—though incidences had to be entered in a log. The rest of her staff was also totally spinstered and they made it plain I had fallen from grace by marrying at all, and then to a *Yank*. The fact that I wore trendy clothes and heels in contrast to their shapeless tweeds and beetle-crushing shoes did not endear me either though my girls approved.

Inevitably, warmer climes and more fulfilling jobs kept nagging. Yet again, in barged Fate with an ad in the London *Times* for people with good degrees and fluent in Spanish to teach in private schools in Buenos Aires. You may recall that my itchy-footed father had loved Argentina . . . Fate was busy. Not much flying then, so off we sailed aboard the RMS "Andes," flagship of the old Royal Mail Line, all expenses paid. "Roots at last!" we exulted as we unpacked in the elegant little house found for us in the tony suburb of Martinez by our new employers. K. took the train daily to Olivos to teach at St. Andrew's School for Boys, long-established and run, as were all private schools in Buenos Aires then, on strictly British lines, complete with uniforms, including school ties. I made a longer train and *colectivo* (small bus) trip up to Belgrano to Windsor College for Girls. For two years life was perfect. But, as anyone who studies Latin America knows, those countries are seldom stable and Argentina was morphing into a basket-case with bread strikes, gas strikes, postal strikes, demos and, worst, a collapsing currency. It was the worthlessness of the peso funds that were mandated to be paid into retirement funds for us in the United Kingdom that finally forced us to cut our losses and get out. Using up our last pesos, we fled on a tiny Norwegian freighter with only an Indian rug and "Friday" our fierce shepherd dog. As the only woman aboard as we crawled for weeks up the steaming Brazilian coast, I cherished him.

We landed jobs in New Mexico and began seriously working on advanced degrees. K. had plans to explore Mayan culture for his work and so, our first summer back, we went down to Yucatán . . . real jungle, not the beer-sodden swamp it has since

so sadly become. Mosquitoes were rampant but we didn't worry, having lived in more infested places. However, although only seemingly mildly sick, K. developed "massive encephalitis" as his death certificate baldly states, and succumbed in three days. His terrible end left me with a wound that never, ever heals though I re-made a life with a rock-solid Kentuckian who took me away to Appalachia. He literally put me back together and encouraged me to go on with my career and I like to think that when his time of trial came with a diagnosis of the terrible Lou Gehrig's Disease, I was there for him.

Fate, again, was meddling for I had never even exchanged a passing "Hi!" with C. whenever I saw him on our New Mexico campus. With no interest in re-marrying, I had turned down his first few proposals, especially as I was not sure I wanted even to remain in America. (I became a citizen later and he was so proud.) "I'll grow on you!" he threatened after one more proposal. "You make yourself sound like some kind of fungus!" I sniffed.

Dear Cumberland students . . . are you still listening to how I got here?

C. knew the late, great Dr. James Boswell, then President of small, undistinguished Cumberland College and so he very speedily gave my husband a job but could hire me only to teach Freshman Composition since a master's degree was requisite to teach on a college level.

Now came *my* turn for culture shock. Remember, back in 1964, I-75 was merely a gleam in some mad civil engineer's eye . . . probably someone like my father. Thus for me to have to drive those twisting, narrow mountain roads in a much larger car than I had ever been used to plus the fact that in the U.K. we drive on the left, was totally terrifying. Thus did my drawl and my unflinching insistence on the highest English standards come to the Bluegrass.

If those "freshers" quailed at me, I certainly quailed at them, horrified at their slow speech, dreadful grammar and generally abysmal preparation for higher education. There were more personal shocks, for pants, then, were forbidden for women faculty and co-eds and chapel attendance was compulsory for everyone, even this rather strayed Episcopalian. Moreover, for the very first time in my life, I encountered racial prejudice for, in one of its two furniture stores I was shockingly asked by the owner, perhaps because of my brunette coloring, "Are you a *dago*?" And later, when we enrolled a couple of Jamaican students, who, of course, looked African, students could not understand why they sounded pretty much like I did. Further, unless we taught year round, we got no salary during summers so we had to toil on with no time to read in our fields or even relax. It was truly punishing. In all honesty, I seriously considered fleeing back to the U.K. and letting C. file for divorce.

Fate, as so often in my life, came bustling back when Dr. B. drew my attention to a flyer from the AAUW offering scholarships to women wanting to go into college teaching by upgrading their degrees. Those saints awarded me a Fellowship that enabled me to complete my Master's in English and they encouraged me to go on for a doctorate by giving me further funding. Meantime, Dr. B., perhaps shrewdly suspecting I might flee, also offered some funding that would allow me to enroll at the University of Liverpool where the distinguished Shakespeare scholar, Kenneth Muir, was Head of English, along with many other very eminent folk. Since C. was due a sabbatical, it was agreed he, too, could spend a year abroad and so to Liverpool we went. Time for my Kentucky spouse to have some culture shock too. I remained a second year after his sabbatical and then, since Liverpool mandates three years of work for a doctorate, returned to Kentucky to actually write my dissertation. My second year at Liverpool,

I was delighted to be given a post as Resident Tutor at Rankin Hall, a women's dorm, and also a seminar to teach. At one stage after my return, I felt all would go down to disaster for my thesis director, Dr. Miriam Allcott, like me, a product of a mixed marriage, was suddenly widowed, just as I had been, and I feared she would not be able to carry on. But she did, never missing a package of chapters, and even lined up the most distinguished Dickens scholar, Professor Kenneth Fielding, to be Chief Examiner over my orals. Doctorate done, I settled down to teach Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jacobean Drama, the Romantics and Victorian literature. Speaking of Jacobean drama, it seems apt here to slip in an anecdote pertinent to my class. At its end students were always asked to evaluate the course. Jacobean drama is no doddle and especially was it not so for my mountain lads and lasses but they worked hard and got through. But one girl, a pleasant enough student but with a tremendously narrow religious view, on her evaluation wrote solemnly "Well, Dr. T made it interesting. . . but it could have been more Christian!" Oh, poor Webster and his star-crossed Duchess of Malfi—I have an uneasy suspicion that student went on to become a Mrs. Pardiggle.

Another couple of vignettes of Appalachian college life seem timely too. Things had improved by this time to the extent that Cumberland had a Speech and Drama Department second to none under the massive figure and thundering tones of Mike Walters, a self-confessed "briar-hopper" who yet had an impressive knowledge of the wider world. He badly wanted to stage *The Lion in Winter* and, though C. had just been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease, or Motor Neuron as it is called in the U.K., he persuaded me that it would be good for me to play Queen Eleanor. Since she was, in actual fact, a decade older than Henry, it seemed apt and my husband was able to enjoy watching rehearsals and helping me run lines. Our college production was sensational and that fantastic, eerily-shadowed Gothic set built from scratch by mountain boys and girls, really should have been preserved somehow. Costuming and music were also phenomenal everyone agreed. One of my "sons" in the play, Richard, who would become the famed Lionheart, has to be slapped hard by his mother for some impudence. Now I had "Richard" in class and found him delightful and not all slapworthy, so I would feebly flap a hand in his direction and hope Mike would not notice. Fat chance. "HIT him! HIT him! He'll duck!" Mike would roar. We finally got it right, of course. One other "Mike story" merits telling for he was an outstanding and independent character. The robe for a Ph.D. in English, at University of Liverpool is a beautiful bright scarlet, faced with heavy black silk, along with a long, long medieval hood. Ever-quipping Mike never failed at Convocation to ask "May I kiss your ring? And when are you hearing Confession?" To which I always sweetly replied, "Not yours! *They* would curl even a tonsured head!"

I now tell a more serious story, not to burnish my own image but to show what our Cumberland faculty often did besides teach in those mountains. I had in class a young woman with children, wretchedly-married to such a brute that he allowed her no money for hose and so she was bare-legged even in Kentucky winters. Remember, pants were proscribed on campus back then. Early one bitter January morning I got a call from Miss Macpherson, our great Dean of Women, known to all as "Miss Mac." "T," she begged, "I've got S. here in her nightgown! Her husband ordered her to go out and get the paper and he has locked her out, shouting that if she wants to go to college so much she can go in her nightgown!" Did I, Mac continued, since I was about the same small size as S., have any warm clothes I could lend S. I did. That brave aspirant to a better life eventually graduated, made me a chocolate cake from very slender funds, got a divorce, took her children north and got herself a fine

career as a social worker. As profs. do, I forgot about her. Years later, at a crowded homecoming, I felt a tap and looked round to see an attractive, well-dressed woman on the arm of a very prosperous looking man. "Dr. T.," she said softly, "You don't remember me, do you? I'm S.! And this is my new husband, W." For once, words failed me. Later on, Mary Susan, Dr. B.'s charming wife passed on to me that S. had told her that "Dr. T. has had more influence on me than anyone in my whole life!" Trained from childhood never to cry in public (that boarding school ethos), I broke down, touched that my own sorrows and tragedies had yet borne such good fruit in what I had dubbed an unlikely vineyard.

Time moved on and Fate began prodding me to return to New Mexico. Just before resigning from Cumberland I was made, to my huge surprise, a Kentucky Colonel for "Services to Education" and then, just after I moved away, I got a call late one night from a former student who got her own doctorate in my special field and is now Head of an English Department in a southern university, asking if I would mind if she and some of my former English students collected funds to endow a scholarship in my name at Cumberland for a boy or girl majoring in English. "Mind!" I recall squeaking. "My Deah (sic). Get it done!"

So the foregoing, as briefly as I could manage, is how I got "from the Brontës to the Bluegrass." Perhaps because of my Spanish heritage I am something of a fatalist but I have never forgotten the prophecy of an old gypsy who read my palm at a long-ago fête held to raise funds for a crumbling cathedral. "*You!*" she intoned, black eyes snapping, "Will not be a stay-at-home and will find your happiness in foreign lands!"

Between tragedies and setbacks, so I did and I retain immense gratitude to Dr. James Boswell in particular for giving me the chance to do useful work for others, however hard it was at times which, with his empathy, I think he knew. I am grateful still to those young people, many of whom have become real friends, who endured my at times incomprehensible accent and more incomprehensible insistence on perfect papers!

As my beloved Shakespeare put it . . . and he said absolutely everything:

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will."
Hamlet, Vii. 10