

SEARCHING FOR SACRED GROUND: EAST COKER | By Principal Ty Tingley

When not ensconced in Oxford's Bodleian Library (or at a table in a favorite local tearoom), Principal Ty Tingley and his wife, Marcia, used their 10 weeks in England to explore the countryside, by car and on foot. "We never passed up an opportunity to visit an author's grave," Tingley jokes, or to search out a prehistoric ruin, even in the midst of rains so torrential that sheep grazing nearby "tried to hide behind us, looking for cover."

And yet to a pair of former English majors, "the landscape itself seemed familiar in an unusual way," Tingley notes. "Fragments of verse and lines from novels live in your head like the faces of casual acquaintances. In England, if you've read the British authors, these casual acquaintances keep reintroducing themselves." That was especially the case in East Coker, where, during a spur-of-the-moment visit to one literary landmark, the Tingleys stumbled onto sacred ground.

—B.B.

*Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

—T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton,"
The Four Quartets

*some photographs of the village and the church,
and it must have been then that he gathered the
impressions that he later set down in the poem
'East Coker.'*

Sir Rupert then quotes a line that is one of my favorites from the poem:

built in the mid-17th century. An historic marker told us that the almshouse was originally built to house 10 women and one man from the parish and that it had been in continuous use since its completion. Its completion was delayed, however,

Our lodgings in Dorset were not far from East Coker, an ancient little village of beautiful thatched roof homes nestled in the rolling fields of Hardy country. The name of East Coker is known to all English majors as the title of the second of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The sense of place is important in the poems. In Eliot, place generates memory—what has gone before—and imagination—what is to come. That proved to be true for both Marcia and me on this visit.

The story goes that there were Eliots (or "Elliotts," as they then spelled the name) living in East Coker as early as 1563, when the first parish mention of the family is made. Eventually some of the descendants of the early Elliotts moved to St. Louis, where they became Eliots. In 1888 there was born a son named Thomas Stearns.

After Harvard, T. S. Eliot came to Mer-ton College, Oxford and spent the rest of his life living in England. At his memorial service, when his ashes were interred in St. Michael's Church in East Coker, Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, who delivered the memorial tribute, said:

I do not know when he first visited East Coker in search of his ancestors, or how often he came to be here, but I do know that his last visit was in the late summer of 1939, when he took

And in reading The Four Quartets again for the first time in at least two decades, I found them different poems. No longer were they an academic exercise and a search for allusions. They were a narrative of the places we were visiting: physical places, spiritual places and places of the heart.

*Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shuttered with branches, dark in the after-
noon
Where you lean against a bank while a van
passes,
And the deep lane insists on the direction
Into the village*

Eliot touches here on one of the unifying themes in *The Four Quartets*, the journey we all follow into the dark. This vision of the darkening world and the deep lane that *insists* you follow it into East Coker has a touch of humor, however, as well as a sense of timelessness. As Marcia and I found walking the lane, you must lean against a bank, or jump in terror into a hedgerow, as a van passes. While you make your way toward something ancient and at peace, you are touched by the chugging commerce of the present.

Marcia and I were walking down the deep lane toward St. Michael's when we found ourselves in front of an almshouse

by the great plague. Nearby we found a simple stone that marked the common grave of 70 people from East Coker who died from the Black Death. I wondered how many survived to dig that grave.

The trees over this lane form a perfect canopy. Walking past the almshouse up the hill toward the church, you enter a tunnel of foliage, dim and damp. I ignored the fact that in the not-too-distant past a spur driveway had been hacked into the ancient growth. It led to "East Coker Court," a large mansion. I'm sure nice people live there.

Within 30 paces of the church the trees give way to the graveyard and a wonderful vista over the meadows and fields of East Coker. The view recalls another image from the poem:

*In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not
come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the
music*

(continued on page 100)

Colleen and Charles S. Markham '89
Edward
November 12, 2005

Jennifer and Brooks H. Pearson '89
Helene Bliss
June 19, 2006
Niece of Clifford L. Pearson '78

1991

Eric and Lisa Ann Johnston Junker '91
Meredith Grace Junker
February 13, 2006
Granddaughter of R. Graybill Johnston '63
Great-granddaughter of Russell M.
Johnston '33

1992

Andrea and Pablo Barrutia '92
Marisela Elena
May 11, 2006

Andrew P. and Sarah K. Netter Boone '92
Kurt Solomon
September 10, 2005

Jared W. and Schuyler T. Roach Heuer '92
Robert Schuyler
May 5, 2006
Nephew of Paget Roach MacColl '95
Great-grandson of John H. Roach '29
(dec.)

Eric Loth Jr. and Christina A. Minicucci '92
Fritz Declan
March 15, 2006

Karyn Bysshe Vella and Joseph B. Vella II '92
Caitlin Bysshe Vella
December 9, 2005

Joseph B. Vella II and Karyn Bysshe Vella '92
Caitlin Bysshe Vella
December 9, 2005
Great-niece of Henry F. Cygan Jr '62

1993

Carl Creswell and Michelle E.
Mazzocco '93
Owen
May 25, 2006

W. Steven and Kristin Groos
Richmond '93
James Walter
May 18, 2006

The Alumni/ae Records Office

appreciates your help in compil-

ing this information. Please send

news of a birth, marriage or

death to Alumni/ae Records

Office, Phillips Exeter Academy,

20 Main St., Exeter, NH 03833;

email records@exeter.edu.

Sacred Ground

(continued from page 7)

*Of the weak pipe and the
little drum
And see them dancing around
the bonfire
the association of man and
woman
In daunsinge, signifying
matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious
sacrament.
Two and two, necessarye
coniunction,
Holding eche other by the
hand or the arm
Whiche betokeneth concorde.
Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or
joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic
laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy
shoes,
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in
country mirth
Mirth of those long since
under earth
Nourishing the corn.*

I always thought that the Middle English was a bit too precious, too intellectual; but the connection of those fields to ancient cycles of fertility and death, to crops sown and to the sowers deceased, some of whom slept at our feet, was powerful.

It was getting dark, the church was utterly deserted, and, I assumed, locked. Marcia, being the brave Tingley, pushed at the door, next to which a large and intimidating security panel gleamed red. It opened. No alarms went off. We stepped in.

Earlier in the week we had visited the Catholic church on the Woodstock Road in Oxford where Tolkien had tried to go every morning to take communion. It is a very active parish and apparently, from the number of candles burning in it, has a lot of visitors. We commented

when we left that we couldn't feel what attracted him to the church. Nothing in its architecture or the feeling you got from its sanctuary resonated with us. Sometimes stone and wood seems to speak in inaudible but discernible ways.

St. Michael's murmured a very different message from that of Tolkien's church. I thought of a line from "Little Gidding":

*You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform
curiosity
Or carry report. You are here
to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.
And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the
conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the
sound of the voice praying.*

Something resonated in T. S. Eliot when he visited East Coker and came to St. Michael's. Perhaps he heard the gentle rhythms of those antique feet, remembered rhythms from moonlight dances, preserved in the frozen imagination of the graveyard. Perhaps some of the ghosts dancing were his relatives. He made arrangements to have his ashes buried in the churchyard and thus lived out the opening line of "East Coker": "In my beginning is my end."

We only spent about twenty minutes in the church. We signed the guest book, left a few pounds for the parish fund, and bought a copy of the memorial sermon for Eliot. We both found some time to meditate and pray. I thought about my friend [English instructor] Rex McGuinn, who died unexpectedly in 2002 while training for a marathon. Rex would surely have read Eliot's entire canon before he visited the church, and, in fact, I am sure he had.

And while he was born in North Carolina, not Dorset, I'm sure he would gladly join in those antic dances.

The thought occurred to me later in the day, thinking about this moment of quiet, that so many of our visits to ruined castles and deserted abbeys have been about the search for sacred space. Not that we lack it in our day-to-day lives in Exeter, but the places that have appealed to us and have made us tarry have been those that spoke through their stones and their history. As Eliot says in "Little Gidding":

*A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for
history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So,
while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a
secluded chapel
History is now and England.*

And in reading *The Four Quartets* again for the first time in at least two decades, I found them different poems. I read them swiftly: no longer were they an academic exercise and a search for allusions. They were a narrative of the places we were visiting: physical places, spiritual places, and places of the heart, for ultimately, *The Four Quartets* are poems about aging.

And on the theme of aging T. S. Eliot offers us some sound advice:

*Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still
moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper
communion
Through the dark cold and the
empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry,
the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise.
In my end is my
beginning. ■*