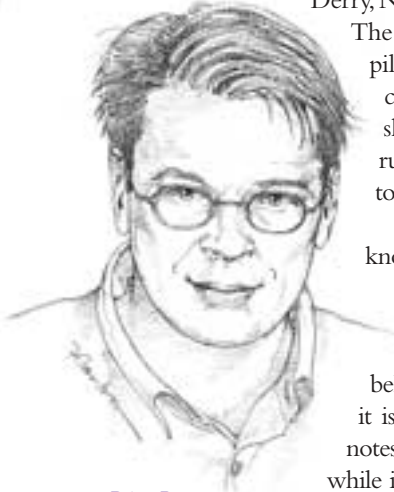


IMAGINING NEW HAMPSHIRE | By Brian Rogers



Brian Rogers

Some years ago I took a rock from Robert Frost's farm in Derry, NH. Surely you are not supposed to do this.

The trustees who care for the property want pilgrims, not poachers, and if louts like me can't keep our hands in our pockets, our shrines, literary or otherwise, are doomed to ruin. It is the reason, of course, none of us get to touch Stonehenge anymore.

Of the rock itself I can't say much. I don't know its constituent parts, whether it is slate or quartz or whatever else rocks are made of.

I can write that it fits nicely in the palm of my hand and that it came from the wall behind the Frost house. I'm not even sure that it is from the mending wall. One biographer notes that Frost got the idea for "Mending Wall" while in Scotland but that he had in mind an old wall back in Derry. Certainly the rock that sits before me meets Frost's description: "And some are loaves and some so nearly balls." If ever a rock were a ball, the one I poached is it. But possibly the wall needing repair—the act Frost describes in the poem—is farther out, beyond where I walked; that the neighbor lives "beyond the hill" suggests a certain distance. And I say "never mind" to such potential truths. It is a rock from a wall on Robert Frost's farm and that is enough for me.

The poem contains a pair of Frost's most famous lines. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," the speaker announces, but later the neighbor reminds him that "good fences make good neighbors." I remember when I first read "Mending Wall": my freshman year in college. I was already considering an English major when I enrolled in a literature course with Professor Robert Dutton. Dutton, semiretired and white-haired, worked the classroom like an evangelist, and he was having a love affair with Emily Dickinson, whom he referred to as simply "Emily." I liked Dickinson well enough, but it was Frost who got me going on poetry, not the first time that has happened to a college freshman, even one in California. Naturally, it wasn't long before I took the great leap: I tried to write a poem myself.

Were I brave, I would dig that poem out of my closet and reread it. I'd be horrified, I am sure. Then, as now, I was not a very good poet, and the poem described dust motes caught in a shaft of light. The final line, if I remember correctly, lamented the dust motes "falling to their inevitable doom," the implication being that we are all doomed, dust motes, humans, yogurt, you name it. My goodness, dust motes—what was I thinking! Certainly, though, I was trying to emulate Frost there, to use a basic image from nature (if dust motes in my room can be considered nature) and reveal an undercurrent of darkness. Nobody does that quite like Robert Frost, I think. It is why he remains our most widely read poet. His accessibility, I mean, not his darkness—though maybe that helps, too.

As I say, all this was happening in California, and I had never seen New Hampshire. But I know now that my early readings of Frost planted a seed. After all, he is often equated with New England, and I must have stored those images like acorns. And when, a few years later, my wife and I had "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" read at our wedding, I inched a little closer to New Hampshire soil. Besides "The Road Not Taken," it is Frost's most famous poem—and for good reason. How can anyone read the final lines without feeling the terrible weight of that repetition: "And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep"? All I knew of New Hampshire was contained in that poem: the darkness, the horse, the landscape, the snow.

My wife, on the other hand, had gone to summer camp near Hanover, and more than once she told me I would like that part of the country. Alas, I was pretty well fixed in California, deluded like so many others that there is no other place worth living. The weather, if nothing else, convinces people of that. Picnics rarely get washed out. March is typically mild. And I suppose I thought it was normal to meet Joan Baez at parties. Still, my wife and I said that we should try New England—"if only someone would give us a free year," we sometimes joked.

In 1996 we got the chance, when we were invited to come to Exeter on the George Bennett Fellowship, a writing residency. We didn't know what to expect. For all our preparations we could have been moving to the South Pole or Chad; we behaved as if we were leaving the known world behind. We had farewell picnics, farewell dinners and farewell toasts, and I might as well admit that I was drunk for six nights straight.

Our campus apartment at the Academy was furnished, and so we limited ourselves in our belongings. I brought only two books: John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, a favorite novel and one coincidentally set in a fictionalized Exeter, and Robert Frost's *North of Boston*. I don't know if I intended for them to be good luck charms, and part of the reason I write this piece is to understand how literature that springs from New Hampshire so moved a California native. Reading Frost as an undergraduate made me want to write in the first place; reading Irving's *Owen Meany* demonstrated to me the power of the novel. And so in at least one important way my relationship with the East had been about the interweaving of art and place and identity. I was imagining New Hampshire long before I ever crossed the state line in late summer.

It was the kind of year we expected, even if it took a month before we could sleep through the Academy bell. In the fall we marveled at the dying landscape, all those pastel colors, and we spent a raucous Halloween that was punctuated by a nearly lethal fire (some kids had tossed a stink bomb into a faculty apartment). We saw snow from December to April, and made friends with the teaching fellows, spending long

(continued on page 93)

ground German hospital on Channel Island of Guernsey, which was occupied by the Nazis throughout the war, but also the embarkation harbor of Portsmouth and the Cabinet War Rooms in London, to name a few. Together, these grisly reminders of war interspersed with transportingly beautiful art and architecture provided an especially vivid itinerary of history's cruel realities balanced with examples of humankind's creative genius.

But what of our Exonian truant, mentioned above in the quiz? In an attempt to give my lectures a bit of Exeter relevance, I had enlisted the aid of Ed Desrochers, the Academy's archivist, to assemble the names and military affiliations of any Exonians who had participated in D-Day. In the course of that little exercise we uncovered the unlikely story of one François Lacloue '44 (who later changed his name to Francois de Valombreuse and who by coincidence my wife, Susan, and I had met in France a few years ago). At that time François never mentioned his WWII experiences; his Exeter file, uncovered last spring, was much more forthcoming.

It seems that in the fall of 1941 the enterprising lower-middler, wanting to help his fellow French in their fight against Hitler (but somewhat confined, to say the least, by 8 o'clock check-ins), conspired with an itinerant band of French sailors temporarily stationed at nearby Portsmouth. After meeting the sailors at an exhibition soccer match, François learned from them where to find the nearest Free French enlistment center. And thus, on a cold winter morning in 1942, the 15-year-old left Wentworth Hall, never to return, and slipped off to the train station down by Gerry's on Lincoln Street. There he boarded a Boston-bound train and

made off, via Boston Airport, for Montreal and one Commander Quedrue. Many other adventures ensued—training in Nova Scotia; evading pursuing parents and school personnel; traveling clandestinely across the Atlantic; more training—but the important point of the story is that young François was among the Free French soldiers who participated in the D-Day invasion and Battle for Normandy—all at the age of 17!

Thus was provided one small story, among many, that together comprised the three lectures on D-Day. And of such small stories, the history of D-Day was made—a bit of Exeter in that largest of all invasions.

James Joyce

(continued from page 29)

rightful place in the streets of Dublin, interacting with the citizens and visitors to this city, which served as a receptacle for his memories and indignation.”

Sakash began studying Joyce as a freshman at Wesleyan University, and her senior thesis was an installation event based on the various incantations of sound and music found in the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses*.

“The past year has been an incredible learning curve for me—this being my first major undertaking of this size and international scope,” she says. The success of *Wandering Rocks, Revolving Doors* was evidenced, she adds, not only by local and international media coverage, but also by the continuing relationships and collaborations that evolved between the participating artists and the art community in Dublin.

Now back in the States, Sakash is currently working on a CD-ROM catalogue for the WRd project as well as future curatorial and creative projects. *Wandering Rocks, Revolving Doors* can be viewed online at www.WRd.org.

—Julie Quinn

Finis Origine Pendet

(continued from page 94)

hours in the dining hall after everyone else had gone back to their rooms. By June, when it was time to return to California, I still didn't know in which direction the ocean sat.

Returning was fine with me, incidentally—or so I thought. I have claimed that it takes five years to feel comfortable in any place, and no residency is long enough to become part of the scenery. So we came “home” and rented a condominium and returned to being very Californian. And I fell into a funk, a pretty miserable funk. I drove my wife mad with complaints about California—the idiocy of the Motor Vehicles Department, the high cost of everything, the number of people around us all the time, things that had not bothered me before. I began idealizing our time in the East, and I plotted our return, graduate school or a faculty position or the even farther-fetched notion of another residency.

I also went in search of Robert Frost's *New Hampshire*, a book that won Frost one of his four Pulitzer Prizes and the first appearance of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” It proved remarkably hard to find. Each time I walked into a used bookstore I would scan the poetry section, but it was not until two years later that I found a copy. It was not a first edition. Those run something like \$500 or \$600, and I couldn't have afforded one anyway. The copy I found cost \$25, less than your average new hardcover book, but I keep it in a plastic baggie as if it were an original of the Magna Carta. It keeps company with my copy of *North of Boston*.

But I live south of San Francisco now, quite a ways south, actually, on the Monterey Peninsula. It has been seven years since we left New Hamp-

shire, and I ought not to complain. If I wanted, I could go and watch the otters playing in the kelp or spend the afternoon on the beach; there is never any shortage of fresh vegetables, and there are more restaurants around here than I can count. Besides, we won't be going back to New Hampshire anytime soon. We have children, and there is insurance to think about, and pay raises, and play groups. That doesn't stop my mind from wandering, though.

Last night, for instance, the baby woke early. She was sick and needed comfort. It took over an hour of rocking before she went back down... and then I couldn't sleep. It was nearly 5 in the morning before I drifted off. And I had the most amazing dream. I dreamt that I rose from the ground, almost like a balloon, and when I reached the tree line I began to soar upwards. Racing against me were dry yellow leaves—definitely New England leaves. It was wildest sensation, a most authentic feeling. I mean to tell you, I was really flying. Who knows where I was going?

But this morning, when I sat at my desk to write, the first thing I did was to hold that rock from Frost's farm in Derry. Part of it is blanched from the sun, and it must weigh a good pound or so, plenty for the paperweight it has become. Of course it is more than a paperweight. It is a link to a place. A piece to a puzzle. A symbol of what matters most.

At the very least, that rock is the only tangible thing I took from New Hampshire. ●

Brian Rogers was the Academy's Bennett Fellow during the 1996-97 school year. He recently received the Faulkner Society prize for Best Novel-in-Progress.