

It is perhaps one of geography's most enduring strengths that its perspectives and tools often appeal to those whose subject matter traditionally lies in other disciplines. Such is the case with Gavin Hollis, PhD candidate in English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, whose interests in early modern drama intersect with his continuing interest in the English geographical imagination.

A British citizen, Hollis began his academic career at Cambridge and later earned his MPhil from the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham. In 2006, he received the prestigious Walter W. Ristow Prize for Academic Achievement in the History of Cartography from the Washington Map Society for his paper, "Give me the map there": King Lear and Cartographic Literacy in Early Modern England." The article was published in *The Portolan*, the journal of the Washington Map Society, in the spring of 2007.

Hollis is currently researching and writing his dissertation, an exploration of the geographical imagination as it was played out in early modern drama on the English stage during a time of colonial expansion into the Americas.

The AAG Newsletter asked Hollis about the role of geographic perspective in his award-winning interdisciplinary work.

AAG NL: You have followed a very interesting arc from Cambridge to the Shakespeare Institute to English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. Could you perhaps describe any significant moments? How did you find your way through that path, a path which you obviously blazed for yourself?

Gavin: Describing my "career" as an arc or a path makes it seem far too planned-out. I was fortunate enough to go to a secondary school that did a great job preparing people for Oxbridge, and while at Trinity Hall Cambridge I met Peter Holland, who subsequently went on to become the director of the Shakespeare Institute where I did my MPhil on "Stage Direc-

tions: Shakespeare's Use of the Map." He suggested that I should go there for a year, and also laid the seed in my mind of going to do a PhD in the States (Peter is now at Notre Dame).

Peter's main interest is in performance studies (although he has written an excellent essay on maps in *King Lear*, which influenced my own), but his generous spirit and intellectual rigour have been very influential. I am very lucky that he has continued to help and show interest in my career. The final decision to go to Michigan was a result both of academic curiosity—I knew that I wanted to do a PhD—and of cultural curiosity. I've done quite a lot of travelling, but never lived anywhere other than London, Cambridge, and Stratford-upon-Avon. Doing a PhD in the States seemed like a good way to combine both desires. I've been very fortunate at Michigan to find excellent mentors and advisers, in particular Valerie Traub—but (as you can probably tell), the path/arc has been riddled with good fortune and excellent advice. Maybe it's a skill to recognize good advice or take advantage of luck.

AAG NL: How did you get interested in your subject matter? How does your personal biography intersect with the themes you are pursuing in your professional work? In other words, what themes that resonate with you personally are you pursuing in your work on cartographic literacy and geographic knowledge?

Gavin: There's an episode of the British sitcom *Blackadder* set in the reign of Elizabeth I. *Blackadder* sets off to explore unknown lands to restore his position at court as the Queen's favourite. Upon departure the Queen's chief minister Lord Melchett gives him a map which "The foremost cartographers of the land have prepared." The map however is blank: "They'd be very grateful if you could just fill it in as you go along." Although I was young when the program was first aired on



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the BBC, I remember the episode vividly. Lord Melchett's comment encapsulates the fascination both with maps and blank spaces on maps (Graham Greene was a much later exponent of this fascination) and with how maps are constructed and for whom. Not only is the map as material object fascinating and alluring, but also so is the cultural context of its production (in the case of *Blackadder*, a desire to conquer foreign lands is mirrored by *Blackadder's* desire to woo "the Virgin Queen"). The idea that there are blank spaces, and the desire to fill those blank spaces, raises all kinds of questions about power and appropriation—and resistance, too. I've always been interested in maps and travel from a very early age—I was fortunate that my parents were very interested in travelling, so I got to go not only all around Europe but also to Africa and the Middle-East when I was quite young. My academic interest emerged when I was trying to think of a topic for my MPhil at the Shakespeare Institute. The two maps scenes in Shakespeare—in *King Lear* and in *Henry IV Part I*—had always intrigued me. I was also spurred on by John Gillies' book *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, a brilliant study of the emerging "new geography" and its impact on Shakespeare and other literary figures. It showed how literature and geography are interlocking discourses—that literature is always about space (especially, but not exclusively, drama) and that geography is one of the most implicitly poetic of academic disciplines.

AAG NL: What formal or informal background do you have in geography? Have you taken graduate courses in geography and have these been significant for you?

Gavin: Ironically, I absolutely loathed geography classes at school. I think the things that draw me to the discipline now—the fact that so many sub-disciplines fall under its umbrella—was what confused me. That and a horrible teacher who shall remain nameless. What I know about

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geography, and cartography in particular, I have picked up along the way, especially when I was working on my MPhil at the Shakespeare Institute. I have to admit I know little about what geographers and cartographers do—that is, I have little or no knowledge about the technical sides of the disciplines—but I'm very interested in the impact of geographical knowledge on literary production, and, more broadly, on its impact on daily life. An article I am writing for a collection of essays of cartography in early America originated in a course on Transatlantic Epistemologies. The article is about John Lederer, a German explorer and cartographer who explored the Blue Ridge Mountains in the 1670s, and in particular about his "cartographic encounters"—how he took geographical information from Native Americans and how he (mis)interpreted that information. I'm also interested in this article with re-evaluating the idea of the map not just as material object but as an immaterial or ephemeral one—hence I am interested in mappings employed by indigenous, "non-literate" (in a Western sense), oral cultures, and how these interacted with, were superseded by, or were incompatible with Western cartography (and vice-versa).

AAG NL: How have geographers reacted to your work?

Gavin: Positively. The feedback I got from the Ristow Prize judges was enthusiastic, and when I've presented geography/cartography influenced research at conferences it has been well received. I think that geographers on the whole are very enthusiastic about interdisciplinary work (it is after all an interdisciplinary discipline), which is great for someone like me who has no formal training. Geographers are very forgiving types.

AAG NL: Can you tell us about your method? Do you consider your method a hybrid of those from different disciplines, and what you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of both your method and working across disciplines generally?

Gavin: While I'm influenced by other disciplines, I'm still quite firmly a literary critic, and close reading is my stock-in-trade. Although I don't slavishly follow a particular critical school (I think the days of doing so are coming to an end), I was raised in the literary tradition of new historicism. My initial interest in cartography stems from Harley's application of Marxian-Foucauldian ideas onto cartography—that was basically what my MPhil was all about. I now hope I've moved away from that approach—for all Harley's influence, it does seem rather dated. But I think that the best criticism comes out of being able to ask the best kind of question—and the best kind of question is usually the simplest one, but one that no one has quite come up with yet. Good questions breed their own particular methodologies to answer them.

AAG NL: Can you tell us about your dissertation project? It is obviously different from your *Portolan* article. Can you tell us what your research questions are and how you are pursuing them?

Gavin: My dissertation, "The Absence of America on the Early Modern Stage," has evolved out of a fascination with the "special relationship" between Britain and America, in particular its early phase when Britons commenced transatlantic enterprise and colonization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It focuses on the anomaly that advocates of colonialism

denounced playing companies as enemies to their cause, even though the response of early modern drama to English settlement in the New World was muted: no plays are set there, few feature Native American characters, and those that do reveal them to be Europeans in disguise. In order to understand both the nature of these criticisms and the sympathies of players, playwrights, and their audiences, "The Absence of America on the Early Modern Stage" juxtaposes a number of sites of cultural performance: playhouse drama; courts masques; civic pageants; and colonialist writings such as sermons, travel accounts, overseas trading company documents, and maps. It argues that even though early modern drama did not represent America directly it articulated and circulated criticisms and concerns about English activity in the New World that were common in London at the time of the establishment of the first transatlantic colonies. This interdisciplinary approach enables the reconstruction of voices and experiences otherwise lost to us—those of opponents of colonialism, settlers, and Native Americans.

The Ristow Prize has been awarded each year since 1994. It recognizes significant academic achievement in the history of cartography and honors the memory of Walter W. Ristow, Chief Emeritus of the Geography & Map Division, Library of Congress, and co-founder and first president of the Washington Map Society. Full or part-time undergraduate, graduate, and first year post-doctoral students attending accredited U. S. or foreign colleges and universities are eligible for the award. Deadline for 2008 award applications is June 1, 2008. See the Washington Map Society website for more information at www.washmap.org/. ■

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