

### **A note from Garry Thomas about experiencing the Ithaca College London Center**

During Fall 2002, I taught "Crossing Cultures: The Anthropology of International Travel" at the ICLC, while my wife Connie and I lived in the college-owned "terrace" in Colliers Wood. This was a course about international travel, the social impact of tourism, ecotourism, etc., but it was especially designed to orient my ten students to multi-cultural London, to make sense of their experience, examine their values and cultural premises, understand and appreciate cultural difference - and perhaps become better at crossing cultures.

My students all expected the English to be different, of course. After all, they owned smaller cars (one of the first things they noticed), they drove on the left, their accents were difficult to understand . . . . But mostly, I think, they expected the English to be pretty much the same as Americans: strip them of the superficial differences of accent and driving on the wrong side of the road, and, well, people are people. And they mostly felt that they would get along with the Londoners they were bound to meet just fine. My syllabus took the opposing view, opening with the George Bernard Shaw quote, "The Americans and British are two peoples separated by a common language."

Three months later, after doing several observations and fieldwork exercises, my students came to appreciate Margaret Atwood's contrast of English reserve and obsession with privacy and Americans' "custom of letting it all hang out [as] a kind of verbal mooning." When they interacted with people other than IC students, it was other expatriates, young Australians and Germans, rather than Londoners - well, with the exception of Fred, of course. Fred, the "typical Londoner," got interviewed a lot that semester!

It was against this background that I met a neighborhood woman named Marnie at the corner store next to the Colliers Wood tube station, on a day when there was a much larger crowd on hand than usual. It turned out that a scene, complete with a parked police car, was being filmed for a soap opera. Marnie recommended the soap. "Interesting," she said, "although it lost some of its audience when it turned out that one of the police officers in the story is gay." Before I knew it, she was telling me her life story: three marriages, six kids, an affair in between - "you know, everyone likes to kick up their heels occasionally" . . . . She then asked about me, asking if I had pictures of my grandchildren. I didn't, but she still said, "I bet they're beautiful children" - a suggestion which I ignored . . . . We parted after fifteen or twenty minutes, having exchanged names but not addresses. Mmmmm, I thought, maybe she would be a potential key informant? (We never met again.)

My students, who had never met an "outlier" like Marnie, were shocked when I read this entry from my field journal. "She was obviously hitting on you," said one. (When I told the story to a long time London friend, somewhat reserved himself, he said, "Maybe she was a bit crazy?") It was one of those teachable moments about culturally defined categories, norms and what is defined as normal, first judgments, culturally honed expectations, and ultimately, admissions of conscious incompetencies.

I think my students quickly learned that we and the Londoners are different peoples. Wrote one in his field journal, "We are perceived as typical American students and have to contend with a stereotype: we are rich, uninformed, shallow, even stupid." When asked to write about what they advice they would give to the next semester's cohort of ICLC students, they wrote: Don't expect the US to be loved or respected . . . . Fairly or unfairly, you will be identified with American foreign policy - and be judged . . . . Act

interested, ask questions, listen, be open minded, be humble . . . . Don't mix alcohol and political discussion. . . . Stay abreast of current events, read the newspapers, and don't live up to the stereotype . . .

In the end, I was so proud that my students came up with such different understandings compared with Bill Bryson's *Notes from a Small Island* list - "incidental civilities, people saying mustn't grumble, beans on toast, pork pies, queuing, tea and crumpets, Tooting Bec" - well they would have liked Tooting Bec, if they'd ever taken the tube to Colliers Wood!

There was a time when I would have said that I'd rather that the college's resources be put into study abroad programs in a developing country rather than the Global North, rather than London. Teaching in the ICLC made me into a convert. I realized that the experiencing of London, even in the bubble that is the ICLC, is a good first step for students becoming citizens of the world. And I felt very privileged to be part of this. I can't say enough about Bill's role in facilitating all of the above! Thanks, Bill!