



## Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

**Report Title:** Poet's Prize, Nature's Beauty, Time's Triumph - Literature and Locale in the British Isles  
**Name:** Deborah Williamson

**Other Team Members:**

**Program:** Greater Houston Area Program

**Trip Dates:** 11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001  
**Location Visited:** British Isles

**Post Fellowship Reporting Template:** PFR Template 02

**Project Summary:** The idea of a journey to the land that produced the literary giants of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries was, for me, "the impossible dream." That dream became possible in the summer of 2008 when I actually traveled to places I had only read about, dreamed of, and taught for years:

England – the land of Austen, Dickens, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and others too numerous to name or see;

Wales – home to ancient bards like Taliesin and modern ones like Dylan Thomas;

Scotland – birthplace of Harry Potter and the magical works of Burns, Stevenson, Scott, and Barrie

Ireland – immortalized in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and the novels of James Joyce.

The British Isles, for me, have always been synonymous with great literature, not only for the wonderful work itself, but for the foundation it provided for our American literary heritage. My appreciation for this literature has deepened in the ten years I have been teaching British literature to high school students. A few years ago, I became interested in the locales and environs associated with classic British writers, especially those of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. I felt that my own, as well as my students', understanding and appreciation for this literary heritage would be enhanced by visiting locations that these authors had written about and places that influenced the writers themselves. Our studies of various British masterpieces are always preceded by discussion of the geography, history, and culture of the British Isles. I have long felt that "spirit of place" shapes writers and their works; I have been able to experience that in connection with American authors. I had no first-hand knowledge, however, regarding the connection between British authors and their locales. I also wanted my students to understand the impact of men and women who were able to see beyond their particular environments and circumstances to create literature that speaks to readers decades or centuries later.

My fellowship to the British Isles confirmed my ideas about the important connection between an author and his or her locale. Experiencing the places where some of the world's greatest writers lived and wrote added fuel to my already intense appreciation for this wonderful canon of literature and its creators. Almost without exception, the areas in which they lived and worked profoundly influenced the writers on whom I focused. Over and over, I saw the how these beautiful landscapes and locales influenced, inspired, or enriched the creative genius of writers of the past three hundred years. This experience will enable me to build real-life connections so that British writers can be more to my students than just faces in textbooks or answers on tests.

**Career Impact:** Experiencing first-hand the land of some of the world's greatest writers has deepened my appreciation for their particular works, but it's also given me a clearer understanding of the importance of place for every person. The sites I visited have such a "sense of story" in them, maybe because of the long human history in the British Isles and the way history is so ever-present there through the ancient sites and ruins and ageless architectural structures. I experienced a completely different sensation than I do when I visit beautiful or important landmarks in the states; maybe the difference lies in the thousands of years of known human story, as opposed to a few hundred. Also, Nature seems to have flung her most intense hues into these islands - greens are more varied, blues appear more vivid, and browns seem richer. I feel so much more "in tune" with the writers we study in my classes, because I've seen the places that inspired and fed their creativity. Descriptive passages in Jane Austen's, the Brontes', Hardy's, Doyle's, or James Herriott's novels, for example, are more alive to me now, and I can communicate the reality of those descriptions to my students. These places really exist. It's more obvious than ever to me that writing is intensely connected to surroundings, in much the same way that Olympic athletes normally excel in sports associated with their geographic locations. Understanding the strong connection between the works of these literary giants and their locales enables me to offer more practical support to student writers, as well as providing encouragement for my own creativity. Writing about "what you know" and "where you are" has more meaning now. British writers – whether poets, novelists, or playwrights – have captured for all time the essences of their surroundings, communicating it in ways that still touch and move us centuries later. I feel better qualified to help my students find their own stories through their particular surroundings and circumstances, because I can see how important locale and environment were for some of the world's greatest writers.

**Classroom/Community Impact:** Many of my students, for various reasons, have not been academically successful in the past, and

many of them have a very limited “world-view.” My first-hand experience in these writers’ locales will add depth to our discussions and credence to some of our interpretations. In the past, as we’ve studied these places, students would ask, “Have you been there?” or “Have you seen that?” Always before, my answer had to be, “No, but I’d like to.” Now I can help them see, not only what those places look like, but how important they were to the writing on the pages in front of them. Literature becomes real and relevant to life when students understand that great writers, with disadvantages and problems similar to those of modern teens, made their circumstances or surroundings the well from which inspiration and creativity sprang. I want them to see that these writers were not just old pictures and sterile words in a textbook, but real people with real problems and lives, who lived in real places that I can describe to them. Many of these great British writers led troubled or tragic lives; from that trouble and tragedy, they were able to produce beautiful writing with timeless themes. Hopefully, my students can realize that they, too, can use the written word to give voice to their own dreams and frustrations.

Also, I want my students to realize that learning, excellence, and dreams are lifelong pursuits. My own commitment to continued learning should add authenticity to my expectations of them. They hear me say that one of my dreams has been to visit the British Isles. When they hear that I’ve actually achieved that dream, I gain credibility, and they are encouraged to keep reaching toward their own dreams. My students no longer see me as someone who only facilitates their learning, but they see me as a learner, too, walking beside them in gathering, processing, and applying that learning in relevant ways. Already, my fellowship experience has inspired other teachers to think about pursuing similar opportunities. The knowledge and experience I gained from my fellowship has already expanded the “collective” knowledge of our English department. I’m able to share first-hand observations of other cultures, geography, and philosophies with teachers in my department, as well as in other disciplines.

**Open Response:** Although I do not currently have plans to share my fellowship experience at a formal in-service, I have talked to many other teachers about its potential benefits, both professionally and personally. The writers I’ve admired for years now seem more than just literary geniuses; they’ve become, more than ever, my muses – ready to, as Shelley said, “beam on me.” More than ever, I’m encouraged to pursue my own dream of writing.

**Quote:** I want my students to realize that learning, excellence, and dreams are lifelong pursuits. My students no longer see me as someone who only facilitates their learning, but they see me as a learner, too.

## Photos:

The magnificent Bath Abbey

Oxford University

England's Lake District

Beautiful Yorkshire

An English village

Wordsworth's Dove Cottage

The Welsh coast

Edinburgh, Scotland