



EAAS Postgraduate Travel Grand Report

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I was fortunate enough to receive a grant from the European Association of American Studies (EAAS) to assist with an archival trip to the Howard Gotlieb Research Center at Boston University. The center is the sole and recognised archive for the work of American author Richard Yates, the subject of my thesis. The author, best known for his seminal text *Revolutionary Road* (1961), has received very little academic attention, with Blake Bailey's biography *A Tragic Honesty* (2003) signifying the most comprehensive analysis.

I arrived at the archive with the intention of exploring Yates' correspondence during and after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*. Even though it received almost universal critical acclaim (it was nominated alongside Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* for the 1961 National Book Award) it sold modestly. This was to be a feature of Yates' professional life; despite writing for over 30 years, he has been largely neglected within the American literary canon. One of the main objectives for my trip was to explore the correspondence to see if Yates, or his editor at the time, Monica McCall, provided any reason for this lack of recognition. With a chapter of my thesis dedicated to Yates' place within American literature, I felt it was essential to further interrogate this idea of neglect.

Looking through the letters during and after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, it



became clear that Yates was unhappy with the marketing of the book; he felt it had been misrepresented as a suburban novel at a time when the literary market had been saturated with texts focusing on a similar theme. Yates was also disappointed by the amount of advertising space his publishers, Little, Brown, had purchased after the novel was released. Despite extremely favourable reviews from Dorothy Parker, Tennessee Williams and Alfred Kazin, Yates and McCall felt the marketing campaign had been poorly conducted. While the novel was eventually adapted by Sam Mendes in 2008, Monica McCall went to considerable lengths to sell the rights to

Revolutionary Road to various movie agencies. Looking through the correspondence, almost all of the studios rejected the script on the grounds of its melancholic atmosphere and tragic ending.

Prior to arriving in Boston, I contacted Kate Charlton-Jones, a scholar who had conducted a similar trip in 2009, for some advice. Kate, who has recently published her thesis on Yates with University of Alabama Press, suggested I email DeWitt Henry, a

protégé of Yates' when he worked as a creative writing tutor at Iowa University. DeWitt maintained a close relationship with Yates, conducting the well-referenced Ploughshares interview in 1972 and remaining in contact with the author up until his death in 1992. After our first meeting, DeWitt accompanied me to the archive to go over Yates' unfinished novel, *Uncertain Times*. DeWitt had expressed an interest in seeing if the novel could be published in its current state, and whether the manuscript—which was found in Yates' freezer after his death—comes to satisfying and coherent close. Although still in manuscript form, the novel interrogates many of the themes identified in my thesis: the lead character, Bill Grove, struggles with alcoholism, mental illness and insecurities over his masculinity.

In the weeks leading up to my visit, I consulted the inventory held by the Howard Gottlieb Center to ensure my time at the archive would be productive and beneficial to my thesis: I felt, with this being a single-author study, it could be easy to be drawn in to a biographical arc and reading of Yates' life without yielding any critical answers to his work

As much as this methodology assisted with my research, it became clear that the contents of the archive would present a series of unforeseen avenues ripe for exploration. My meetings with DeWitt



provided a first-hand account of the 1972 interview—and a whispered aside as to why Yates felt he was overlooked as a writer—and pushed me in the direction of *Uncertain Times*, which I will now happily integrate into my thesis. DeWitt has also suggested the possibility of publishing Yates' speeches when he was as a speechwriter for Bobby Kennedy, and is an avenue I'm hoping to explore after I finish my PhD.

Before my visit to Boston, I felt that my thesis relies heavily on *A Tragic Honesty*, primarily because of the extensive biographical details Bailey covers. By receiving funding from the EAAS for the archival trip, I believe I'm now in a position to integrate a significant amount original material—both through Yates' correspondence and my reading of *Uncertain Times*—within my thesis.