

**GREG CHRISTIE**  
**FELLOW 2005**

**A biography of the author, Eric Knight**

“...THEY’VE ALL COME TO LOOK FOR AMERICA...”

So the words of the old Paul Simon song go. He also mentions “Counting the cars on the New Jersey turnpike” which, if you happen to be from my generation, you do automatically as you land at Newark, New Jersey, on your very first trip to America.

You are of course subject to the laborious task of immigration control, a process which, in the case of those landing on ‘my’ 777, took two hours, something I had not bargained for and which did more to tire the already weary traveller than any other aspect of the trip. The none-air-conditioned immigration hall and the fractiousness of the many children brought the plight of those arriving at Ellis Island two-hundred years earlier into sharp focus. Finger and eye images finally taken, one can reclaim one’s baggage, which by now had been removed from the carousel to make way for the next ‘plane-load, which was already appearing as those from the previous flight sorted their belongings.

The heat of the immigration hall was soon forgotten, however, when overtaken by the blistering blast baking those not in the shade outside the terminal building. By the time the foreigner has been in America a week, he or she is well used to asking total strangers the oddest of questions and receiving a polite and helpful reply, but on day one, and after a long journey on a day which started at 4 a.m. you are apt to feel somewhat hesitant. I was on the point of asking a ‘local’ where I might catch the bus for Penn Station when a Brit came to my rescue having seen me looking utterly lost.

The man was going to the same destination and had done the trip many times so was well-versed in the procedure. He accompanied me to the bus stand, helped with luggage, sorted out the American money I had so far admired but not used, and helped me find the station entrance on arrival, so far so good? Not quite.

Knowing no better I queued in line for a train ticket to New Haven, Connecticut, this was a mistake. Firstly, I could have bought a ticket from a machine, had I known that was possible and where the machines were located. Secondly, I chose to travel by Amtrak when I should have explored the options; Metro North would have been cheaper, I could have bought my ticket on the train and saved an hour-long queue...and seventeen dollars, for Metro North prices are on the whole half the price of Amtrak’s. Of course, I wasn’t to know that because my research had been concentrated on Penn Station, which I selected as my departure point because the thought of navigating Grand Central filled me with dread, and Metro North trains depart only from Grand Central which, as I discovered later, is ten times easier to navigate despite being twice the size of Penn,

the main problem with the latter being that its 'tracks' are largely subterranean, which involves endless elevators and moving staircases. Now, all this might well be within the capabilities of your average male but it must be remembered in considering this report that I am a physically disabled person, and one, as I was about to discover, with no 'mobile' phone and no 'American' for 'mobile' phone.

Panic is not a word I use, or an emotion I generally subscribe to, but I did feel somewhat disarranged mentally and intellectually when the phone I had purchased especially for my visit failed, leaving me unable to contact my family at home who were waiting to be informed of my safe arrival. I tried to explain to a "cell" phone shop assistant that my 'mobile' wasn't working and could she help me. It wasn't until I produced the lifeless handset that I discovered the correct American terminology for the device. She couldn't help but seeing my obvious discomfort offered to send a text message if I gave her the number which, luckily, I had in the journal I had prepared before leaving and which contained all the contact numbers, names and addresses I needed both at home and abroad...I had even remembered to prefix UK numbers with the +44 necessary. She sent the message for free, and added: "Ya know, ya don't never need to be lost or in a panic on New Yoark, jus open yer mouth and ass for help." Great advice, true, and utterly reliable. I had to ask many times and many questions in New York and was never met with anything but absolute courtesy.

The first time I put the advice to work, however, was in trying to find my 'track' to New Haven. A man who said he wasn't a porter but who nevertheless wore a "Penn Station Assistance" shirt and wheeled a luggage cart, guided me safely on being asked, first to the arrivals and departures board where he ignored the advice given and took me to an unmarked track where he assured me the express would arrive in moments; it did, and he put my bags aboard with every courtesy and only reluctantly accepted five bucks for his trouble.

The journey to New Haven takes two hours, and so far I had stuck absolutely to my plan. I got a taxi from the station to my lodgings where I found a note pinned to the door asking those checking in that evening to "Phone this number", which I could not do due to the non-functioning "cell". A passer-by took pity on me when I explained how long I'd been travelling and that I was new to the tow, County, State, and Country. The door opened from the inside and a long-term resident helped me with my bags, showed me the kitchen and other facilities and offered to be my guide about the town. He asked where I was from and I casually said: "Nowhere you'll have heard of, it's a small town in the north of England." "Try me," he said, I told him. "Sure I know it, I studied in York for six years." Never underestimate your hosts, I said to myself by means of a rebuke for having assumed non-existent ignorance of my home.

Over the next few weeks my new friend would save me a fortune on eating out, take me to nearby beaches on days off from study, take me shopping, accompany me to the theatre, the bar, the various places of interest I needed to see, and become involved in my study programme. I am sure I

would have managed without him but I had asked my hosts if they could recommend someone who knew the area and who might have some free time. They selected a York/Yale graduate and lecturer whose family were in Virginia and who was totally familiar with the English way of life and one who knew what it felt like to be in a strange country for the first time. An inspired choice.

Only one more setback befell me that day, and that came in the form of a ruptured sun-cream bottle which would have caused a minor suitcase disaster had I not my wife had the foresight to place the sponge bag in which it was being transported inside in a plastic bag, she had "been there" and *ruined* that "T-shirt".

My first full day in the States started with the breakfast provided by my hosts, which consisted mainly of fruit, a large selection of fruit juice, coffee, breakfast buns and doughnuts. OK, I was determined to embrace the American way of life, but I had brought English tea bags in case of withdrawal symptoms. I did use a few of them eventually but found the new regime entirely to my taste and rather more beneficial to the health than the usual sugared Cornflakes and three mugs of PG Tips. I also found, all due to the heat, that I drank many more pints of water than was usual, which also benefits the system and makes perfect sense in temperatures unaccustomedly in the nineties.

My hosts directed me to the Visitor Centre who proved invaluable during my visit. They provided a town map, bus and train schedules, brochures on places of interest like art galleries, museums, heritage centres, theatres etc., all of which I found time to visit in order to take in the abundance of available culture. They also advised me of places I should not go – the area of the town where it was best to venture only during the day and never alone. I took their advice, and found the place something of a culture-shock. Only a few hundred yards from the "down town" area of designer shops and smart restaurants I found what I can only describe as a shanty-town full of once grand timber houses now almost derelict but still occupied, some with the remains of several scrapped cars, their interiors choked with weeds (or plants which looked like weeds but which were being purposely "cultivated"), their bodywork reduced to bare rusted metal.

Many of these houses doubled as hair dressing salons or, more often, nail bars, and this provided an odd juxtaposition; while the occupants of the houses were, as far as was possible, smart and well turned out, their homes appeared almost uninhabitable, and while the streets were mainly unwalked by strangers, I and my associate were met with welcoming smiles as we entered a café and sat down to clam chowder. I took this opportunity to strike up a conversation with some locals at a nearby table, this under the protection of the invisible shield worn by inquisitive foreigners. The people told me they were mostly unemployed since the closure of the steelworks in the early nineties. Most were on "assistance", all were black, and all appeared absolutely depressed by their situation. The housing, it transpired, was the cheapest in town, there was a school nearby, various liquor stores, a social club and community centre and, it

appeared to me, a social support system within a community in which almost all the residents were in the same boat.

One man told me he had studied history at college and spoke knowledgably about America's past. He likened his plight to that of many during the depression and talked about "ghetoization" and "marginalisation by a white legislature", all of which was both surprising and shocking. We talked of drugs, alcoholism, prostitution, and religion, the latter being for many the mainstay of their lives, especially, I was informed, since 9/11, and this I found to be the case in all communities of every colour.

I visited the Italian quarter of the town, the Chinese, and the middle-class white areas where fine houses stand alone amid great well-tended lawns. Three things stood out to the first-time visitor: Almost every home flies the Stars and Stripes in a show of support for the troops in Iraq; every church of every denomination is full on Sunday mornings, and everywhere I was made welcome. There was one anomaly. In the most depressed areas there was always the odd house which stood out as being well cared for, neat, a new car on the drive. These houses, I was told, belonged to those who had been raised in the area but who had gone on to teach or work in well paid professional positions while maintaining their cultural and religious roots and preferring to remain in "their" community.

In the run-down areas, the residents gave me the same advice about not going there at night or carrying more than twenty dollars, even during the day, some of those giving the advice even admitted that when they had had a drink or partaken of some other substance, they could not be responsible for their actions. I draw no conclusions from these meetings but simply say that theirs is a way of life totally foreign to mine. I cannot identify with it and do not therefore feel qualified to judge it...but I did take the advice offered and did not venture there after dark. It is worth noting, however, that the shops providing for these communities were entirely staffed by community members and sold everything the "down town" shops sold, but at often half the price, so it was worth a daytime bus ride in order to take advantage of cheaper goods and, despite everything, unfailingly cheerful service.

It must, I feel, be said here that it is impossible to make judgements on any society or section thereof as a "foreigner". People undoubtedly treat you differently once they hear your accent. You may only take in what you see and hear, be as courteous as possible to those in your company and thank them for spending time talking to you. It would be easy, in finding those in reduced circumstances, to be patronising, and that would be offensive. It must be remembered that we cannot, should not, judge other societies by the standards of our own; we are visitors to their country, and enjoying a great privilege in being so. It is easy to be shocked by the poverty in which people live and impressed by the great luxury in which others spend their lives, the two often existing within yards of each other, but we must remain impartial, lest we fall into the trap of prejudice.

Planning one's time during the Fellowship is vital, and this was easier for me because the Beinecke Library at Yale where I was to study was not open at weekends. This meant I had weekends free to write up my notes and take in all the area had to offer. I found my time occupied in the week by my research, and with eighteen boxes of files to work through in eight weeks, worked out that I would need to read and make notes quickly enough to clear two-and-a-half boxes each week. In fact, some boxes were full of intricate notes and papers or journals which took a whole week to work through while others contained photographs which required only cataloguing and copying.

I made continuous notes about those files which needed closer analysis and allowed one week at the end of my visit to re-examine that which I felt I had not fully understood, and this paid dividends as a second reading often revealed more than the first. As it turned out, I finished my research on my last morning at the Beinecke but only because a power surge had deleted two day's work from the memory of my laptop computer, obliging me to backtrack, fortunately with enough time so to do due to careful time management. Discipline in this regard is vital, for after all, we may not get the chance to do this work again.

During my time in New Haven I found great comradeship in the company of others studying at the Beinecke, some of whom were staying in the same accommodation as myself. I realised this was very important to me over one weekend when, by absolute coincidence, all had either visits to relatives planned or weekend study elsewhere or sight-seeing arrangements. For the only time during my Fellowship I was alone, and even though I had plenty of work to do felt very lonely at mealtimes or when relaxing during breaks. We were all a long way from our homes and all, though we may not have admitted it, in need of the support we gave each other, both professionally and socially. I would therefore urge future Fellows to make friends as quickly as possible or get involved in some social group or activity as quickly as possible as this is vital to moral and a great boost to the confidence.

On one memorable weekend, a fellow researcher and I visited New York City and took the guided bus tour of the most important sights, the Empire State building, Ground Zero, Carnegie Hall, the United Nations building, Times Square, the Staten Island ferry, the Statue of Liberty, and my favourite, the Flat Iron building. The great thing about the bus tours are that one may alight at any point and take in the sights and sounds from ground level. This we did in Chinatown, Little Italy, Times Square and on Broadway. On another occasion we visited Hamanasset beach, a thirty-minute bus ride from New Haven on the road to Boston. Hamanasset is a Native American reservation where there is over three miles of almost totally deserted boardwalk. There are no shops, amusements, cafes or other "distractions". The beach overlooks Long Island Sound and proved to be the perfect antidote to the rigours of study and the turmoil of New York. These contrasting visits, I found, offered a periods of reflection upon one's work and I believe it is very important to "escape" occasionally as the project is often seen with fresh eyes and from a new standpoint when it is returned to after a break of a couple of a couple of days.

My visit to and research in New Haven culminated with a day trip to Boston where I visited my subject's old school, and here I had a very different experience. I had contacted the school before my visit to say when I would be calling on them and asking their permission to take photographs and look around the place, all of which was entirely accommodated. They had said, however, in response to my request to look at their records for physical evidence of my subject's presence, that they would not allow such research. I had hoped this might change when they saw a harmless visitor from Yorkshire interested only in historical fact, but it did not, and I was reminded by them that they had already informed me of this fact. They were polite but firm and did not succumb to what I assumed was my irresistible charm, and since argument would have been pointless and very discourteous, all I could do was walk away disappointed...some you win...

The New Haven experience at an end, I travelled to Grand Central station in New York City, from where I took a train to Croton-on-Hudson which sits at the widest point of the Hudson River. I had arranged before my visit to give a lecture to the Croton Historical Society who were to be my hosts for two days. Croton plays a very large and important part in the life and work of my subject, Eric Knight. It was here, on his return from Hollywood, that he wrote his most famous work *Lassie Come-Home*. Needless to say, the Historical Society is very proud of their association with the writer of America's best-loved adventure story and they had kindly arranged with the present owner of the house in which Knight lived for me to look around the place and spend time absorbing its atmosphere.

The house, once owned by Horace Greeley – very aptly the writer of *Go West Young Man* – lies about five miles from Croton in woods and hills which are immediately recognisable as resembling Yorkshire. It is not surprising, therefore, that Knight, a Yorkshireman by birth, felt at home there and able to write the archetypal Yorkshire story that is *Lassie Come-Home*. That the story should have been so readily accepted as an American adventure is something of a mystery, for it is set entirely in Yorkshire. The explanation is probably that the story represents qualities of honesty, truth, self-determination and escapism with which Americans so readily identified, particularly at a time when their country was, as now, at war in a far off land.

The house, very agreeably, is largely unaltered and this provided a great sense of what Knight's surroundings were like when writing the piece. I was allowed simply to take in the atmosphere at my leisure, to sit in his writing room, and later to explore the small town of Croton with no pressure of time. The Historical Society allowed me free access to their own extensive files in which I found evidence that Knight had lived there at the same time as Ernest Hemingway and Isadora Duncan and that he had taken an active part in village life, being involved in amateur dramatic societies, book groups, library clubs and schools. The society provided bed and breakfast accommodation and pre-publicity for my lecture, which was well attended by an enthusiastic audience who participated fully in proceedings. One attending, a ninety-three-year old lady, actually

remembered seeing Knight and Hemingway out riding through the village in the early morning. She painted a colourful word picture of the scene, the fall leaves turning to bright orange, the horses' hooves beating out an echoing rhythm in the silence of the carless lanes. One may imagine these scenes but when repeated by one who saw them they take on a life entirely of their own.

From Croton I journeyed by road to Pennsylvania. And it is worth noting here that public transport in the US – though widely condemned by Americans as inadequate and expensive – is both efficient and cheap when compared to UK travel costs. The journey by Greyhound bus to Hellertown, some sixty miles north-west of Philadelphia and five miles from Eric Knight's last home in Pleasant Valley, takes just two hours and costs thirty-seven dollars. Hellertown, population 5000, consists of a main street off which various streets run lined with trees and pleasant white-painted timber houses. The town has all the usual amenities, shops, a public pool, and a very efficient library where I was able to access the internet in order to keep in touch with family and friends and continue my research. Again, the Historical Society, aware that my subject once lived among them, had invited me to talk to them about my research, in return for which I enjoyed several visits to his former home, Springhouse Farm, purchased with the proceeds from his best selling novel, *This Above All*. The current owners of the farm are related to Knight through marriage and were generous in allowing me to view his library, his paintings, and even sit in his chair, lovingly restored as a mark of respect.

Here also is the grave of Tootsie – the dog who inspired the Lassie stories – who moved with the Knights from Croton and who died in 1946. A statue of Lassie is erected on the grave and Lassie lovers from all over the world make pilgrimages to it even today. Again I was allowed to wander the lanes in order to take in the atmosphere and influences the place had had on the author. Regardless of how well one might feel one know a subject, it is not until you walk in their footsteps that a true feeling of reality is brought to bare on their existence. Until that moment they are to some extent a fiction, not real people, but when you see the trees they saw, touch the soil they tilled, walk where they walked, they come into very sharp focus.

My visit to Hellertown coincided with the annual Bethlehem music festival so I was able on days off from research to enjoy music from all over America and Mexico. This cultural experience was very enlightening as it offered an insight into the multi-cultural multi-ethnic influences upon America American society and American music. I also took the opportunity while there to visit the birthplace of Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), the subject of a Canadian friend's Doctoral thesis. I was able to take photographs using my digital camera which I then emailed to him, for which he was most grateful and which he was able to use to illustrate his work. As a keen photographer I was very tempted to take a selection of camera but which, conscious of baggage weight, I left at home in favour of a lightweight and versatile digital camera which I could download onto my laptop pc as my Fellowship progressed. The advantage of having all

one's pictures on CD or DVD is incalculable as this arrangement lends itself easily to film show organisation on one's return and the easy storage of documentary material. Also, most drugstores in the US offer very reasonable priced downloads to CD/DVD and even printing services.

I would suggest to future Fellows that a selection of photographs of their home town, family, workplace etc., be uploaded to their laptop or carried in snapshot form as I was regularly asked what my home was like or if I had family photographs or pictures of the area in which I live. Luckily, I had all of these and found most people eager to see illustrations, and since many Americans – those who have not visited the UK – have no real idea of the variety of houses and landscapes in the UK I was able to offer a useful insight into our own culture. It must be remembered that shops, streets, the traffic, the countryside, and town and cityscapes are quite different here, so having photographs of all these makes for very interesting conversation.

While staying in Hellertown under an arrangement with a fellow writer I met through our common interest in Eric Knight whereby I replenished the family larder in exchange for lodgings and trips to various places, I took the opportunity to spend three days in Philadelphia. This was a most important part of my visit as my subject worked and lived in that city for nine years. Again I travelled there by Greyhound bus, this time at a round-trip (return) price of seventeen dollars. The Visitor Centre once again proved invaluable with advice about a nearby hostel in which to stay, town maps and lists of reasonable priced eating places.

The hostel stay was most interesting and, in my view, indicative of the ever-present or perhaps growing influence of religion on American society, for this was a Christian hostel run by lay-persons of the Catholic Church. The accommodation was in eight-bed dormitories comprising a shared bathroom/shower facility, all at a very reasonable twenty-eight dollars per night. The establishment, however, allowed no shorts to be worn, and no bare feet, even in footwear. Beyond this there were no constraints and a breakfast of cereals and/or porridge was included. The hostel required evidence of identification and was only available to non-Americans or students. They were, however, happy to accept the photocopy of my passport – it is not wise to carry a passport with you at all times and vital to have a copy of it as this will facilitate easy replacement if the original is lost – and my National Union of Students identification card, something I would recommend Fellows carry if they have one as it can facilitate discounts even in far off countries. "Discounts for Students" is a sign regularly seen, I assume in all countries, but is never qualified by nationality, and in America it was only necessary to say I was a student – only rarely was I asked to prove it – in order to qualify for student travel and other discounts.

Philadelphia, I found, is a magnet for tourists seeking the historical sights associated with American Independence, Benjamin Franklin, William Penn, and the Liberty Bell, but is also the home of two excellent art galleries and an outstanding museum, one of which, the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art, houses a portrait of Eric Knight painted by Peter

Hurd, of which I had seen photographs but never the real article. I had contacted the gallery in advance by email in order to confirm that the painting was on public display and this turned out to have been a very wise approach for it was, at that time, in the vault in order to make way for a visiting exhibition of Mexican art. The curator, however, aware of the date of my visit, very kindly offered to have the work brought out for me to see, which I did, a great thrill and a big disappointment avoided by a simple email and some forward planning.

Fellows of the future might learn from my experience: If planning to visit museums, art galleries, libraries, archives, places related specifically to their area of study, always ensure that they will be open at the time of your visit and that that which you wish to study will be available. I am delighted to say that, notwithstanding a degree of necessary flexibility, I stuck to my itinerary almost to the last detail and by doing so saw everything I had planned to see.

From the maps provided I found Eric Knight's place of work, the Philadelphia Public Ledger on 6<sup>th</sup> Street, now the Spanish Consulate, where I discovered a well informed security guard had been warned of my visit and asked to make me feel welcome. I was allowed to take photographs of the building and its interior and given a guided tour of the many floors, after which I was invited to take lunch in the staff restaurant. From "the Ledger building" I made my way to three addresses in the city where Knight had lived, but one other, in 64<sup>th</sup> Street, I was unable to visit. 64<sup>th</sup> Street is of course fifty-eight streets from where I had spent my morning, and too far to walk, especially in the pouring rain. A man at the bus stop told me the next bus would be along in twenty minutes so I made my way to a nearby taxi rank. After giving the driver the address he said: "Oh I wouldn't go to that street, Mister." I explained that I didn't necessarily need to get off the taxi if the street was in an unsafe district, "All I want to do, I explained, "is take a photograph of the house, take in the area, and return here." "No, Mister," the driver replied, "you don't understand, "I wouldn't go there, and you shouldn't go there either, if you got any sense." I got the message and gave the place a miss, another example of listening to what local people say and taking their advice.

The final element of my Fellowship was to visit Los Angeles where I had been invited to stay at the home of Eric Knight's grand daughter. I journeyed to Newark, New Jersey, from Bethlehem by Greyhound bus, another very reasonably priced journey at sixteen dollars. The journey would have been faster by train but I decided to allow plenty of time and enjoy the sights offered by the slower and cheaper bus. As it turned out, I would have more time than I had bargained for.

I arrived at Newark at three-thirty in the afternoon for a seven o' clock flight, plenty of time to check in my bags, eat and prepare for a five-hour flight, then it flashed across the New Jersey sky: the most violent, colourful and magnificent thunder storm I had ever seen. Most people complained as flights were delayed and incoming flights were redirected, sometimes to airports hundreds of miles away, but I had the pleasure of a flexible itinerary so, having telephoned my hosts in LA to inform that my flight had

been delayed indefinitely and that on arrival I would book into a motel and contact them from there, I sat under the cover of the foyer canopy and watched as the sky turned every shade of electric blue and hammered with great explosions of thunder that split clouds in a spectacular piece of meteorological theatre. The street steamed as it was washed clean; taxi drivers wore oilskins as they battled unsuccessfully to remove baggage from the trunks of their yellow cabs without letting in the rain, travellers dashed their luggage carts through huge puddles then stood, like wet dogs just out of a river, shaking the rain from their limbs, and all to the accompaniment of shouted calls and whistles from soaked traffic policemen and the staccato timpani of windshield wipers set to high speed. This was one of the most unforgettable moments of my Fellowship, and one well worth the twelve hours I waited for my much delayed flight.

Alas, some travellers, many of whom had been stuck in their seats on the tarmac of some far distant airport for five hours, were not lulled by the beauty of nature; fist-fights broke out in baggage reclaim and police were called in seventeen times to quell near riots. The airline put out an announcement that delayed passengers would have to arrange their own accommodation and onward flights as "The delay was entirely caused by natural causes not within the control of Continental Airlines, thank you". Here was a whole new aspect of American life for me to observe, for those foreign travellers involved seemed merely grateful to be on the ground with time to compose themselves and room enough to stretch their legs. Several men were arrested for fighting and taken away by police while their partners cried in each other's arms. Hundreds bedded down for the remainder of the night in corners on their luggage, on benches, anywhere offering space to sleep. The storm subsided and finally I left New Jersey for LA.

The new self-checking system at airports is of course designed to cut down on airport staffing levels, and it offers a bonus in allowing passengers to select their seat. It is a good idea to check websites like [www.seatguru.com](http://www.seatguru.com) for an overview of aircraft seat configurations. This site is particularly easy to navigate as long as you know the airline with whom you will be travelling. I had done this but made a serious error in confusing the 757 with the 737, the latter of which I was now a passenger on. I had had seat number 29d in mind, this offering greater leg-room on the 757 but being the very last seat on the 737, and the one next to the lavatory – from which emanated an appalling smell – and for which queues formed thus blocking the galley and aisle. This made for a very uncomfortable flight and one which might have made me quite ill had I not carried in my hand luggage a pack of tea-tree soaked disposable wipes, the efficaciousness of which acted like smelling salts to revive the wilting constitution. I would advise future Fellows to follow this example and to remember that these wipes are also very effective in warding off mosquitoes – and subduing the effect of their bite if they do get through the defences – and very effective for cleaning shoes in the absence of more traditional methods.

Flying across the breadth of America was fascinating and could have been rendered more so had only the pilot announced the various States over which we were flying. Luckily, I had purchased a guide book in the UK which provided a list of the routes flown by various Airlines and which offered a rough guide as to where one might be at any one time. The pilot did, however, point out Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon, an awe inspiring sight at any time, I suspect, but especially so when it appears full of white clouds that give it a "giant cappuccino" appearance. The most striking feature, though, in comparing west with east from the air, is the desert, the tree-covered and patchwork nature of Pennsylvania giving way as it does to the grain fields of the mid-west and finally to the burnt arid grey-gold vastness of the desert was most striking, particularly when it turns suddenly, dramatically, to a city where water brought five-hundred miles in pipelines feeds green parks and the magnificently upright palm trees which line every street and which form a demarcation between the rough desert sand and that of the surf-pounded sweeping beeches that shimmer in the heat like vast mirages.

For me, as a fan of Hollywood, this was heaven. I have read all my life of the streets on which I was now travelling; Santa Monica Boulevard, Hollywood Boulevard, Mulholland Drive, Sunset and Vive, and there, just as I had always imagined it, the Hollywood sign, as great and striking as I had always imagined it would be.

My hosts had done their own checking and had met me on my arrival. We had stayed in a motel overnight and spent three days seeing the sights most vital to my research in LA. Happily, these included various addresses in Beverley Hills, Hollywood, Santa Monica and Malibu, where, on ringing doorbells, I found the presumably wealthy and "famous" residents more than ready to assist me and very willing to listen to the details of my project, largely, I believe, because immediately the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship is mentioned and the visiting card produced, an authenticity and sincerity of purpose is conveyed with which most people identify. It is vital, therefore, always to carry cards on your person as they can be produced easily and never fail to be of greatest assistance, as can the letters of introduction provided by the Trust.

My research in LA culminated with a visit to UCLA where, by prior arrangement, I looked into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox archive which contains records of Eric Knight's employment with film producers during 1934. Once again I found the librarians especially willing to assist a Churchill Fellow. This done, I journeyed to the home of my hosts ninety miles north-east of LA at Arrowhead Lake in the San Bernardino mountain range.

As well as being allowed free access to the extensive family files on my subject in the possession of his grand daughter, I was given a deep insight into the lives of a mountain community. The forty-thousand people who live in this self-contained centre of population enjoy the rarefied smog-free atmosphere only found at great altitudes and I was surprised to find that some of the mountains are snow-covered the year round, but then, I was six-thousand feet up and surrounded by giant pine trees and no less than five freshwater lakes. These lakes are "resorts" and offer everything we

would associate with the seaside. There is a close community and I was privileged to be invited to the homes of my host's neighbours to enjoy many traditional meals consisting mainly of the many fish caught in the lakes of Arrowhead, Big Bear, Aqua Fria, Crestline, and Blue Jay.

The mountains were devastated two years ago by fire, which was followed by an attack on damaged trees by Japanese bark beetle. I was shown vast areas where one-and-a-half million trees had been removed, an operation carried out in its entirety by helicopters, the steep mountain roads being inaccessible to heavy logging trucks. Many homes had been lost to the flames and were in the process of rebuilding, the work, I discovered, being undertaken in the main by Mexican illegal immigrants willing to work for half the salary of American labourers.

And here I found a strange paradox: Most Americans seemed genuinely shocked that the immigration process which I and my fellow-passengers had endured in the sweltering heat of an un-air-conditioned arrivals hall should have taken so long and been so rigorous when, in their words, "thousands of illegals from Mexico flood over the border every day unchecked". They voice their concern also that jobs are being taken by these illegal immigrants when they should be going to Americans, yet they employ them to tend their gardens, wash their cars and rebuild their destroyed homes. Those Mexicans to whom I spoke had a good command of English and appeared to be hard-working and conscientious. Some, when they had learned I was an impartial observer and not a Government Agent, showed me their homes in the mountains, all of which are the former homes of loggers who had lived on the mountain a hundred years ago. The houses were clean and the gardens well-tended. They are aware of their situation in being, in some respects, fugitives, but welcome members of a society keen to take advantage of their cheap labour while at the same time resenting their presence.

My hosts, while embracing the American way-of-life with regard to their ultra-modern home and lifestyle, retain close links with pioneering American traditions and I was able to take part in the pastimes of shooting, fishing, and hunting which they have always followed. Their boat, moored on Lake Arrowhead, provided a most interesting day of fishing for bass – a sport, like shooting, in which I have never engaged – amid the ultra-expensive power-boats towing water skiers and Para gliders. The presence of guns, however, was something to which anyone from the UK would have difficulty adjusting. I had never fired any kind of weapon before so I was shocked and surprised to find that it is possible to select any "safe" place in the mountains to loose off a few rounds. Targets were set up in trees and bushes and on rocks and a variety of hand guns, semi-automatics, revolvers etc., produced for me to try. By what I assume was beginners luck I did very well at this and was pronounced "a natural" from that moment on by my host and his friends, all of whom carried guns in their cars at all times and, when on hunting trips, in holsters on their belts. They were all most surprised that I, born and bred in the country, had never handled a gun, and this afforded an opportunity to discuss the cultural differences between our respective countries, the nature of and

difference in our recent history, and our differing attitudes to weapons as a whole.

On a hunting trip I made further discovery, their guns are not simply for target sport or even personal protection – they eat what they shoot; the rifles they carried were for use on deer (each hunter had a freezer full of legally killed venison), and every one had had at least one close encounter with a bear or a rattle snake. Suddenly I realised that, as we here have neither, our need for a handgun is absolutely negated. These men were expert bushmen who could track a deer over many miles, tell you how big it was, what sex it was from the smell of its urine, where the coyotes were hiding out, how to spot a snake track or porcupine footprints, and when to stand very still and wait for a nearby black bear to regard you as harmless and go about its business. I discovered also that their sport was not simply destruction, their main interest being in conserving wildlife by maintaining its habitat, rescuing injured animals, observing the closed-season and reporting poachers and those who would disrupt the delicate balance of man and wildlife, progress and nature. Most importantly, I found all to be most generous to visitors, welcoming, and determined to acquaint the ignorant traveller with the ways of their world.

One final word to future Fellows would be this: In selecting medication for your trip please take account of the very different foods you may be eating and take the necessary preparatory medicines with you, you may not find them at your destination at all, or they may be there but available only under different brand names. Also take hay fever tablets even if you are not a sufferer, these work equally well for minor allergies to certain unusual foods. Be sure to include mosquito repellent, both for your skin and your room. It is also vital you take sun block if travelling to a hot country and apply it liberally, even if you already have a tan, and particularly to the scalp and neck, a hat is not always as effective as you might assume. Carry with you at all times the contact phone numbers you need in case of an emergency and in order to inform your hosts of any also minute changes of plan. Finally, avoid dehydration and do not assume the water from the tap is safe to drink, if in doubt drink the bottled variety, and while taking any non-alcoholic liquid helps in hot climates, plain pure water is by far best.

In summing up my Fellowship I would say that as a first-time visitor to the US I found it did not, in many respects, live up to my expectations – but that is entirely the fault of my expectations, not the place itself. I had expected America to be an ultra-modern extension of the UK, it is not, the streets are not paved with gold, there are many beggars, most of whom appear to live by means of salvaging recyclable material from garbage bins. There are many old cars being kept alive by running repairs and, outside “Down Town” areas, many run-down and depressed areas. There are illegal immigrants whose presence is both disliked and desired, many homeless with no apparent means of support and little recourse to any social support system resembling our own. There are those, on the other hand, who appear to enjoy enormous wealth and privilege and many who aspire to and support it by holding down two or three jobs, but from the homeless man who sleeps on the park bench to the street-corner hot dog

vendor, the mountain-top hunter and the millionaire, all made me welcome in a place which I found to be both totally familiar and utterly foreign, which is what it should be, for this enriches the Fellowship experience.

END

## Report to the Trust.

Annex One.

Itinerary:

The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Boston, Mass.

New York City.

Croton-on-Hudson, Westchester County, New York State.

Hellertown. Pleasant Valley, Bucks County. Philadelphia, Pa.

Los Angeles. Lake Arrowhead, Twin Peaks, Southern California.

## Introduction

### Aims of the Fellowship

The aim of my Fellowship was the completion of my research into the life and work of Eric Knight, Yorkshire author of, among other works, *Lassie Come-Home*. Having studied Knight for a period of ten years and having exhausted all avenues for further research in the UK, it was necessary, in order to conclude my project, to travel to the locations detailed in Annex One. The Knight archive at the Beinecke Library at Yale hold eighteen files of personal papers, and the other locations mentioned therein represent my subject's various homes and places of work. The archive at UCLA provided a vital insight into Knight's period of employment in Hollywood and also contained many personal letters which passed between Knight and his associates and friends in the UK.

I believed it vital to my research to take in the culture of these places as this was a subject upon which Knight wrote at great length and on which he made various predictions with regard to the future and furtherance of American society with regard to immigration and the integration of ethnic and minority groups.

The Fellowship was awarded against this background of my completed research and the vital importance of Knight's work, largely overlooked due to the enormous presence of "Lassie", the fact that he lost his life at a time

of mass destruction – 1943 – and my conviction that, as the only English-American working in the field of literature at that time, his contribution should be re-evaluated and recognised as both unique and on a par with any of his far more famous contemporaries. The ultimate aim of my Fellowship was to provide the material needed for a biography – the outcome of which, it is hoped, will be the re-publication of Knight's forgotten works.

It is my conviction that Eric Knight was the only author to have served in both World Wars and one of only few to make the ultimate sacrifice as a serving soldier. I am also certain that Knight, who wrote two novels which were best sellers on both sides of the Atlantic, is the only author of his eminence whose works are not and never have been studied in colleges and universities, thus depriving students and scholars of a body of work whose topics are as relevant today as anything currently in print.

Here was a man who boasted friendships with writers like Frost, Hemingway, Sandos, Cummings, and Steinbeck, with film makers Capra and Disney, and with high-ranking officials of American Government, among whom he numbered Harry Hopkins and the American President as friends. The work of no other author with such outstanding credentials has been so universally overlooked, hence my Fellowship and my commitment to rectifying the literary injustice of his absence from the world's library shelves.

### The Fellowship

My report should, I feel, include details of the preparation process preceding my actual visit to the US. Not having visited America before I had "expectations" but planned ahead as if visiting anywhere in the UK making arrangements with all those places and people I intended to visit, checking on opening times of libraries, museums, art galleries and those individuals I intended to interview. I thought it wise to carry with me copies of letters and email communications for confirmation when I arrived, and this paid dividends as the Americans seemed, as a whole, to appreciate efficiency in these matters.

I was careful to formulate a plan of action for my research activity and determined that above all else I should stick to it, even to the point of avoiding sightseeing until the bulk of my research was complete. I also obtained public transport schedules in advance and the addresses of the Visitor Centres I intended to call on for local information. I carried a journal with me which I used for my thoughts and impressions and which I am revisiting in the compiling of this report. The journal also contained lists of all those places I wished to visit in the various locations on my itinerary and these I ticked off as I went along. The journal also comprised all my contact numbers in case of delays, and this I carried with me in hand luggage for easy access.

In the same bag I also carried my prescription medication and a copy of the prescription in case proof were necessary of the various pills I carry, a

further copy of both this and my passport – in case of loss – I kept in my suitcase along with the insurance handbook, the plastic card for which I kept separately with my debit card. I purchased a new tri-band mobile telephone for use in the US and a UK/US power socket adaptor.

In packing a case I was conscious of weight and decided on a policy of packing for a three week visit, reasoning I would need no more clothes for three months than I would for the shorter period and bearing in mind that, for the last two weeks of my visit, I would be in a hotter climate in California than had been the case on the east coast. I did pack a light raincoat and this was wise as I needed it on four occasions. I also took with me photographs of my home, its surrounding countryside, and my family, all of which I able to show to my various hosts at their request.

So, with all possible bases covered I set out on this journey of a lifetime. I had chosen June 6<sup>th</sup> as my departure date as this was significant to my late father who took part in the D-Day Invasion. This might sound odd but I felt my epic journey might be blessed with the same favourable outcome as his was and that my Fellowship, awarded in memory of a great man who inspired many to great triumphs, might also conclude with great success. As it transpired this was also a day in which I had a substantial piece published on Eric Knight, the subject of my Fellowship, in a national newspaper, proof, as far as I am concerned, in the presence of what I call "synchronicity".

My first "discomfort" came in the form of the immigration process at Newark, New Jersey. The reception hall was, to my great surprise, not air conditioned, and while there were eighteen clerk's desks numbered, only one was in operation – and this in the early afternoon. I found the policemen on duty quite surly and unsympathetic to the fact that, as a disabled traveller, I am not as dextrous or agile as most, but then they are working under great pressure and on the whole dealing with visitors who, unlike me, have been through the routine before. The process took two-and-a-half hours and was quite stressful at the end of a long journey, but once clear of the hall I found staff ready and willing to help with cases and trolleys, even if they had no idea where the bus to Penn station departed from. Luckily, a British visitor came to me rescue and assisted with advice on getting to the station, also his destination.

My pre-visit efficiency, however, let me down once at Penn station for I had checked only on Amtrak trains, having no idea that Metro-North even existed or that their travel is cheaper, more efficient, and leaves only from Grand Central station which I had avoided believing, wrongly as it turned out, that Penn would be easier to navigate. Luckily, I found a helpful porter who guided me to my train after a long wait to buy a ticket. The journey from New York City to New Haven was fascinating as the train passes through the less glamorous areas of the city and which, it is clear, are somewhat depressed and, in some cases, apparently deprived, dirty, virtually derelict, all of which was quite a surprise as my expectations were of a "Frasier" or "Friends" kind of city where there exists only clean smart buildings surrounded by pleasant parks. A great many of my

“expectations” would not be met, some would be exceeded, but I will say more of this in my conclusion.

On arrival in New Haven I took a taxi to the Graduate Club – an organisation which exists to offer accommodation to scholars studying at Yale University – only to find it locked with a note on the door urging those checking in to telephone a number displayed, but here I had a problem, my mobile phone had stopped working immediately on my arrival in the US, something which caused me much distress as I found myself unable to inform my family of my safe arrival. Luckily, a kind passer-by offered to phone the number and a resident came down to let me in and carry my bags. I later discovered that three other guests from around the world had arrived that night, one of whom had no phone and very little English. Once again, a kind stranger came to the rescue and he too was eventually admitted. I had expected staff would be on hand to assist, but “expect” is a word I would quickly learn to abandon.

My room was very hot, too hot, and with no air conditioning, so a very uncomfortable night was only relieved by the fact that a bit of fiddling with my phone got it working, at which point I was able at last to inform those at home of my safe arrival. I found a fantastic breakfast awaiting me next day, with all the fruit and fruit juices known to man and many cereals or porridge if preferred. Friendly staff wanted to know where I was from and what I was researching and everything about my visit. I decided to adopt a “When in Rome” attitude and enjoyed the breakfast buns and Danish pastries provided along with coffee, endless coffee, when I am more accustomed to tea with breakfast.

So here was my first pleasant surprise, a delicious breakfast served by friendly smiling staff in an air conditioned room, outside which the New England sun beat down on tree-lined streets crowded with huge American trucks and cars and full of the noises and voices of an unfamiliar city. My first visit was to the Visitor Centre where I collected brochures on the museums and art galleries I wished to visit, and of which there are a great many. I then visited the Beinecke Library where my research was to take place and where I discovered that the reading room, two floors down, had no disabled access. Once again, staff members were helpful and offered the use of the service lift.

I would find out later that many public buildings do not offer disabled access or, where access exists, it is often by rear doors far from the main entrance, quite a surprise, and one of many.

The serious work of research began on day two. I had downloaded a copy of the archive contents in advance and simply began at box number one. Therein, I found thirty files, each file containing up to fifty individual pieces of paper, all of which I read, recorded and referenced with key words or names for easy location on floppy disc. This method has proved extremely efficient in the past and allows a great deal of flexibility as to points of reference since names and topics may be easily found during the process of writing up the results of the research in biography form. In

order to aid the process I also cross-referenced dates and places in order to map the life of my subject both geographically and chronologically.

I was lucky indeed to be in the company at the Graduate Club of some international researches, all of whom were studying at the Beinecke. These included two Canadians, a Chinese medical researcher, a Russian PhD student, a German and a Turkish doctor, a Cypriot author and doctor and various others who were staying only in the short term. The friendship of these people proved invaluable as we supported each other's study with regard to the language and culture, ate together having done communal shopping, and enjoyed trips to the beach, restaurants, cafes and local entertainment events like concerts and the theatre, much of which was free of charge as part of an annual cultural event. We all missed our families of course, but this was greatly reduced due to the new friendships we made, and in return for my assistance with things like English proverbs, points of history, literary history and English common usage, I received instruction on Russian, a language of which I had no prior knowledge and which I found a great deal easier than I would have imagined.

It must be said that these friendships were forged under unusual circumstances in so far as we were all far from home and undertaking serious study which might affect the rest of our lives, and as such will, I hope, endure.

With my Beinecke study almost at an end I experienced a disaster courtesy of a power-surge and lost three day's work from my laptop, this despite "saving" the work regularly. It could have been worse had I not had the foresight to back-up my work onto an additional disk, for the surge wiped the memory and the disk on which I was working completely. My back-up disc coming to the rescue, and having allowed plenty of time for the research, I was able to go over my lost work without too much difficulty. This done I was joined in New Haven by my wife who had come over to assist me with locating the various addresses in New York City I needed to research, these being where my subject had at one time or another lived.

Of course, we took in the sights of the city and visited all those of tourist interest like the Empire State building, the Flat Iron building, the Staten Island ferry, Ground Zero and so on, all of which was both a cultural and historic experience as it is impossible to absorb the culture of a place without actually witnessing it, a point I have made in my introduction. The addresses were all there, naturally, and seeing them gave a great insight into the mind of a man who hated cities but endured them because he worked for newspapers based in them before working his way to success and, as a consequence, back to a countryside which resembled England and Yorkshire.

We completed the same exercise in Boston, New Haven being equidistant from both cities, and were pleased to note the vast cultural differences between the two. As a keen photographer I was anxious to record what I saw but, as far as the cultural experience is concerned, tried to capture my

“impressions” of America as well as those places of usual interest. It should, therefore, be no surprise to find among the photographs I include in Annex Two some which reflect the impact the place had upon me as well as those “record” shots necessary to chronicle the visit.

On leaving New Haven I elected to travel to Grand Central station rather than Penn station as I had passed through it with my wife and had found it much more user-friendly than the latter. From Grand Central I journeyed to Croton-on-Hudson where the Hudson is at it widest, almost four miles across. My visit had been co-ordinated by the Croton Historical Society who had arranged by prior contact to act as my hosts and guides in return for a lecture on Eric Knight. Knight had lived in Croton and indeed, wrote his most famous work there. The society had arranged for me to see the house in which my subject lived, largely unaltered I’m delighted to say, and to show me their village and, most vitally, spend two days going through their extensive files. The lecture was well attended and much praised and given by both myself and an American friend and fellow-Knight enthusiast who had journeyed from Pennsylvania to meet me.

I returned to Pennsylvania with my colleague who had kindly arranged lodgings for me and who took me on several excursions to various locations, also the homes and workplaces of Eric Knight. Most notable among these was Springhouse Farm in Pleasant Valley, about five miles from where I was staying in Hellertown. Here was Knight’s last home and the one in which his widow lived until her death in 1996. The farm is preserved by the son of Knight’s widow from her second marriage and is almost as it was in the thirties. I was allowed to walk the deserted lanes, sit by the pool Eric Knight built, walk in his fields and even meet with people from a neighbouring farm whom he knew and who have lived there since arriving from Holland one-hundred-and-fifty years ago. What I learned from them was invaluable, for personal memories cannot be duplicated by any amount of research in books or archives.

The son of the family, only thirteen when he knew Eric Knight, told a wonderful story about Knight literally “tightening his belt a notch” and saying, “Joe, I’ll go hungry before I see you miss your chance to go to college just because your Ma and Pa can’t afford the fees.” And he did indeed support the boy who went on to be a teacher. Memories like that are exactly what I went to America for, and this one alone made the trip absolutely worthwhile.

The Lindtners, owners of Springhouse Farm, asked if I would be willing to act as their guide if they were to visit Yorkshire next year, a duty I declared myself happy to perform. They could not have been more welcoming or accommodating to me so I was very happy to be able to return the favour and to take the opportunity to show American visitors – very wealthy ones in this case – our country.

While staying in Hellertown I was able to travel the sixty miles to Philadelphia where I stayed in a strict Catholic hostel – the like of which I do not think exists in the UK – where shorts and bare feet were banned. The place was very cheap, clean, and provided a simple but wholesome

breakfast...and an insight into the strong sense of religion I encountered throughout my visit, more points on which I will make in my conclusion. I found the city different again from Boston and New York with its turn-of-the-century architecture, very lively Chinese quarter and continuous pageantry, all of which is designed to attract and entertain the many tourists who enjoy a constant and unceasing "Fourth-of-July" atmosphere, paradoxically, many of whom are British. I visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art – where I had arranged to see a painting of my subject – and several of his addresses, but not all. One address, on 64<sup>th</sup> Street, had to be scrubbed from my agenda, a taxi driver telling me, "I wouldn't go there." I waited for him to add "if I were you." But he simply meant that HE wouldn't go there. And here again you are brought to the realisation that while your experience may have been utterly delightful and rewarding, you have seen only what the tourist is likely to see while, only a few blocks away, there lurks another America, one which, presumably, you are not supposed or desired to see.

The most important part of this visit was the Public Ledger building which, despite the paper having closed in 1934, is preserved as it was, complete with "PL" welcome mat at the door. I had prearranged my visit and a security guard had been detailed to show me around the building where I was permitted to take pictures and take in the atmosphere of an unchanged building in which Eric Knight worked for some nine years, and who, from his 9<sup>th</sup> floor office, resumed contact with his estranged daughters, all of whom had been told, I discovered, that he was dead, a poignant moment in his life brought colourfully to life all the more strongly for being on the very spot of its occurrence.

My Hellertown stay coincided with the annual Bethlehem "Musikfest", a musical event of great renown and one which brings together people and music from all over the American continent, a cultural experience where food and drink from all the States of America is served in a delicious culinary experience as varied as the accents of those who, on encountering a visitor from England, are always delighted to engage in conversation. I was able to perform a service in Bethlehem for the two Canadians I had met at the Graduate Club in New Haven. Their joint research was into the work of Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) who was born in Bethlehem, Pa. and whose birthplace is marked by a plaque which I photographed and emailed to them, for which they were most grateful and which I was happy to do as an act of continued international friendship.

MY research in Pennsylvania may have centred more upon the experiential than the scholastic but was no less fulfilling for that. Touching those everyday items one's subject touched, walking the same fields and lanes and talking to people whom he talked to is incalculably valuable and totally fulfilling in the most spiritual sense of the word, all of which was conducted in temperatures in the nineties with humidity not far behind, but I was about to leave for California where everything, everything, would be very different.

The first thing realised on crossing the breadth of the United States is of course its size. It is possible to fly across the Atlantic in less time, and

nothing could have prepared me for the vast difference between east and west which I was about to encounter. The weather, though equally hot, was immediately more tolerable with almost zero humidity. The people are equally friendly if not more so, and this I found odd because the freeways are jammed apparently at all times by people in a great hurry to go or get back from somewhere, but once out of their cars they appear to have all the time in the world to talk. And once again, as soon as you are discovered to be from the UK the conversation is likely to last some time. One reason for their apparent extra enthusiasm for the British is distance; one is “only” three-and-a-half thousand miles from the UK on the east coast of America but when this is stretched by crossing it to eight-and-a-half thousand you are seen to have made an epic journey, and your presence there as a result is, seemingly, more appreciated.

The cafes were, to my surprise in LA, equally cheap, even on the beach at Santa Monica. Public transport likewise, entry to most museums and art galleries either free or very cheap, and the archivists at UCLA as willing and helpful as those across the country at the Beinecke. The studios of Paramount and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, though heavily guarded by security, were welcoming to the researcher and always courteous and accommodating. I had always held a idealistic view of Hollywood, the studios, Beverley Hills, Santa Monica, the Street of Stars, Malibu, Mulholland Drive, Sunset and Vine, Hollywood Boulevard, Echo Park and all those other “magical” names to which we attach great, almost mythological, idealism, and for the only time those “expectations” – not quite as “abandoned” as I had intended – were met fully and without the slightest disappointment.

Here was a great experience, and another first for me; my subject, with whose views I find almost always concur (hence my fascination with his work) loathed Hollywood with a passion and hated California absolutely, presumably because it differs and differed so violently from England and Yorkshire, but I loved the whole place. The way the sea meets the desert, the great rolling surf, the magnificent palms, the wonderful mirror-glass buildings and the easy opulence of a place entirely at ease with what it is. In short, I saw an honesty of intent which Knight took to represent living a lie. But movies are lies – and that in fairness is what Knight hated, his idea of entertainment leaning far more toward documentary than fiction – and I believe LA supports that lie absolutely while admitting honestly that it is doing so. LA is a merry-go-round in the same way as York is a museum, and it should be seen as such, enjoyed, and left far behind when you travel, as I did, on the last leg of my Fellowship to the mountains around San Bernardino.

A distance of ninety miles separates LA from Lake Arrowhead, the last twenty of which climb six thousand feet into the crystal clear air of pine-covered, snow-topped mountains. Forty thousand people live in what is a self-contained community which is often cut off from the outside world by the snows of winter. There are five lakes at the top of these mountains, all but one of which were created by nature, the last being man-made and supplying water to San Bernardino.

The mountains suffered a devastating fire in 2003 which resulted in the loss of one-and-a-half million trees and many houses, an attack of Japanese bark beetle wiping out a further five-hundred thousand trees the following year, all of which were removed by helicopter as the roads are too dangerous for logging trucks.

When one sees how many trees remain, it is hard to believe how many have been lost, for the mountain is still thick with pines. Locals ask the visitor to look around, "Can you see the houses?" they ask, and when the answer is "Yes", they say "Well you couldn't, before the fire." It's true, when viewed from the lake – on which my hosts keep a boat – there are defined gaps where it is clear there were recently trees. There are houses on the mountain into which the sun now shines but which were hidden from its glare for forty years.

Why live in a house, indeed pay a vast sum of money for it, if it is hidden from view? Why live in this already secluded place behind a secure fence guarded by armed officers in a gated community? Why have your house fitted with heavily tinted windows? Why have a helicopter pad on the roof? Well, if you are a mega-rich Hollywood movie star, all this makes sense, and these mountains are home to a great many, and so comfortable are they that they sail their million-dollar boats on the lakes, water ski, picnic, and do all the other "normal" things we all do. They even go fishing...

"That guy look familiar to you, buddy?" my host, Gordon, said as we fished from a jetty. "No," I said. "Looks familiar to me," he replied. We fished, exchanging the odd word with the man on the scarcity of bass. Finally, we moved back to the boat to try our luck elsewhere. "Hey, mister, anybody ever tell you you look like Patrick Swayze?"

"I am Patrick Swayze," the man said, removing his baseball cap for proof of identity. There followed a conversation on fishing, the weather, England, boats, deer, in fact anything but the movies. Mr. Swayze pointed out that we were in fact fishing off his land and that we were welcome to do so and to tell his security, if we were challenged, that he had said so. We parted with handshakes, a pleasant meeting with a stranger at an end. A lake official told me later that the star had spent twenty-million dollars building his house by the lake, "Guess he must like fishin' ", he said.

The mountain air is unpolluted, the way of life slow and relaxed. Coyotes wander the roads like tame wolfhounds, deer drink at roadside streams, squirrels hop down from their branches onto the deck and eat from your hand, humming birds whiz past your ear like bullets from a gun while the southern California sun beats relentlessly down at a constant eighty-five degrees, until the winter, and while surfers are still enjoying the Malibu beaches at the bottom of the mountain, snow clearing is going on at the top. I had had no idea the San Bernardino mountain range even existed before I arrived there, so for once I had no expectations. Any I might have had, however, would have been far exceeded by this most breathtaking of places...and one which offers yet more paradoxes.

Lake Arrowhead and its neighbours, Agua Fria, Crestline, Bluejay, Big Bear, and Running Springs could not be more different from LA and

Hollywood. Its residents, having made a fortune in the cut-throat world of the movies, relax and fish and swim, float their boats and supervise the illegal immigrant labourers who tend their gardens and carry out building work for a fraction of the cost of employing an American. The Mexicans work hard, they are courteous and have renovated the ancient logging cabins they occupy at the top of the mountain, but most Americans, even those who willingly employ the Mexicans, describe them as parasites or "illegals", under which term they are given work, "Oh I got some illegals in to put up a new garage and pave the drive, they need the money." one resident told me, almost as if he'd committed an act of reluctant charity.

The Mexicans, however, are cashing in the American dream ; the buyer pays less for something than it is worth while salving any conscience by claiming altruism, and the seller embrace the twin-ethos of "making it" by earning a living through hard work and fair competition, thus the "dream" is perpetuated and has backfired on the society responsible for its invention.

The most important part of my mountain visit, however, was not social observance but the family files of Eric Knight's grand daughter, which revealed more to me than I could have hoped. Families are complex, and grow more so the further back one researches, but here I tied together all my loose ends and finally made sense of those issues which had puzzled me for so long. The circumstances surrounding Knight's death had always bothered the analytical mind; the accident which killed him did not make sense, accidents don't, often, but the witnesses to this one differed so widely in their interpretation of events as to render it a mystery. But here the mystery was solved, like the final piecing together of a jigsaw puzzle whose component parts had been spread halfway across the globe...it could never have made sense until those who had been engaged in its construction came together to decide which was sky, and which sea.

I can say no more on the outcome of this element of my Fellowship without writing an entire book upon it, and that, after all, was the basis upon which my Fellowship was awarded.

## Conclusions

It must be remembered in reading my conclusions that a part of my Fellowship was the observance of the American way of life, a subject I would not feel qualified to address – or speak on – had I simply been engaged in the process of literary research.

I have spoken at length about my expectations on visiting America. Often they were not met, sometimes they were exceeded, but this is not the fault of America but of my expectations. We are fed from the earliest age a diet of American culture, almost exclusively through television and film. We are inclined to believe America will be an extension of the UK only bigger and brighter and more efficient and more modern. Wrong. It is bigger, so vast we can hardly comprehend it, but in many respects America, in my view, is a backward country with ultra-conservative views, inadequate

housing for the less well off, an apparently unsatisfactory social security system, little regard for the disabled, often appalling footpaths and a policy of deliberate ghettoization which the foreign observer feels can only lead to social unrest.

The US electrical system is inadequate, many cars on the road are fit only for the scrapheap, high voltage power lines, the like of which have been buried underground in the UK for forty years, still dangle dangerously across main streets in which pollution is so thick it hangs like an immovable wall of thick mist.

It appears the Americans are a very religious people, but when you read that church attendance has risen thirty-seven percent since 9/11 you begin to formulate the view that most are in fact terrified of a further terrorist attack and have turned to their respective Gods for salvation. One might say they have panicked, and until the events of the weekend of September 24<sup>th</sup> that might have been seen as an overstatement, but perhaps they panicked again in the mass evacuation of citizens fearing Hurricane Rita. Had the American Government not been so slow to react to the previous hurricane, rumours that their apparent indolence was due in part to the fact that the area affected is almost entirely occupied by a black population would not have arisen, nor would they have been afforded any credence by anybody who had not visited America, for surely this is a country where everybody is truly equal. Having been there, however, I would say the opposite, inequality is rife, and issues regarding it swept under a carpet of pretended social satisfaction.

Security reflects the highly nervous state of the population, their favourite reply to the foreigner enquiring as to why it is necessary to be body-searched even when buying a postage stamp in a main post office being, "Did you hear about 9/11?" At first we sympathise, after all we all saw it unfold before our eyes on television, but after a while the question becomes an insult, of course we heard about it, the whole world heard. Later, it is hard not to reply. "Yes, did you hear about Knightsbridge Barracks, Omah, King's Cross, the London Bombings?" You don't, of course, but the question is something of an insult to those of us who feel nothing but sympathy for those suffering terrorist attacks.

Finally, the IRA appear to have destroyed their weapons, and perhaps part of the reason "The troubles" went on so long is our carry-on-regardless attitude, stoicism in the face of danger, perhaps if we had "panicked" we might have been more vigilant. But there is a feeling of fear in the air which may not be apparent to the two-week visitor but which is very palpable to the longer term tourist. And in a way this for me is a good thing. When Eric Knight wrote *This Above All* (1941) it was credited with having persuaded Americans that our fear of invasion was real despite the fact that the "war" was overseas, albeit not far overseas, and that they should join us in our struggle. Knight here was trying to capture "the thunder of war", a thunder I perceived, less so in the west, but prominently in the east.

In saying all this, however, it must be remembered that America is a foreign country, albeit one with which we share a common language. It is naïve in the extreme to expect it to be nothing more than an extension of the UK. It would be foolish to judge it by our standards, for it differs in almost every respect and is full of people who are unfailingly generous of spirit, immensely proud, and ever-willing to welcome as one of their own the British visitor, in particular one whose research involves the work of one whose life and work was so touched by the America of which he was so proud and for which he gave his life.

It should also be said that many American's perception of the UK is often equally at odds with reality, as I discovered. The first question is almost always. "Where are you from?" If your answer is "England" at first, you quickly adjust this to "The North of England" because, for many, "England" is London. Several people, on hearing that I live three-hundred miles from London said, "Gee, I didn't know England was that big." One person asked if I came from, "Somewhere in Europe" while another was surprised to see my photographs of the breathtaking Yorkshire countryside, "I thought England was so small and so populated that you all lived next to each other, I didn't think you had fields, just houses." One man told he knew England very well, he'd been there three times, he said, always to London, "But London is England, isn't it, there London, and then Scotland." I treated all these misconceptions politely, they all came from graduates, after all, and were no more in error about my country than I had been about theirs. And in the same way that I had "expected" America to be an extension of the UK, they assume the UK to be a mini-America, misconceptions all round, I'm glad I was able to set the record straight and explode a few myths along the way.

My Fellowship has provided the basis upon which I will now build the rest of my career as a writer. The jigsaw puzzle is complete thanks to an opportunity which will inform and influence, not just my writing, but my entire outlook on life.