



ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANACHRONISM: The Making of Flannery O'Connor's Biography

by *W. A. Sessions*

When in 2001 the estate of Flannery O'Connor approached me about writing an authorized biography of one of the most popular and celebrated American writers of the 20th century, I said no. In fact, I did not agree until almost a year later when I saw the need for a history of this writer who had been, in fact, a friend of mine. I knew right away that to explain the real life of this remarkable and remarkably popular writer, I should have to do what archaeologists call a series of "digs." I had to ask myself two questions: (1) did I want to write a book on a modern American author when I was about to write a book on Francis Bacon for Oxford University Press and (2) did I want to get involved in the immense research needed for the kind of cultural biography I write and especially wanted to write of O'Connor?

The irony in writing a biography of an American modern writer is that "digs" into O'Connor's mid 20th century life (1925-1964) assumes historical knowledge almost no one today has. For example, what

modern reader of the second decade of the 21st century — the audience I had in mind — could understand the tensions, the confrontations (not least the near civil war in the 1950s and '60s over Civil Rights), and the revolutions in style, sexuality and class in the very decade when she died? Who would take on such a job of sorting out the inevitable time-overlaps and anachronisms in telling such a story? Finally, in 2003, I decided to defy anachronisms and began the book.

Short Life, Big Impact

O'Connor's short life was dramatic enough in its clashes of culture (including the South's most crucial export, religion). A Georgia product, she was born in Savannah and died in Milledgeville — a Catholic of Irish background. In fact, her 19th century childhood home still stands on Lafayette Square in Savannah across from the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (with its booming bells every quarter hour). There she was christened, confirmed, received her first communion and made her first confession. Almost no other American writer has come out of such a world,

and in this sense, she was hardly typical, a fact emphasized



by her mother's family in Milledgeville being both Catholic and, like the Jews throughout the old South, thoroughly Southern, despite Protestants being the dominant ethnic group in the South at the time.

Any biography of O'Connor had to center on the fact that, at age 25, she was diagnosed with the disease that had killed her father at only 41, *disseminated lupus erythematosus*. In 1950, she was given only five years to live, but through the care of the brilliant Atlanta internist Dr. Arthur J. Merrill, she survived 14 more. In those years, she wrote most of her slender canon, two novels and a book of short stories published in her lifetime, as well as another book of stories and a book of essays published posthumously, and a long introduction to a book written by nuns, "A Memoir of Mary Ann."

Continued on p. 3

2

TECH TIPS

Learn to manage multiple online passwords.

2

HISTORY – APPLIED

Retired professor Tim Crimmins creates "app" for State Capitol tour.

4

RETIRED AND TRAVELING

Gerald Davis takes Trans-Siberian Express to altar.



TECH TIPS — Managing Passwords

In a technology survey of Emeriti Association members, several respondents asked for help in managing online passwords. The issue comes down to having passwords that are memorable yet complex enough to confound hackers.

Experts warn us to (1) **NOT use whole words** and (2) **NOT have the same password for all sites**. Instead, they suggest using a formula that creates strong passwords (including capital letters and numbers) with unique characteristics for each site.

The key is to apply a system. For example: any name (e.g., Charlie) becomes more complex by dropping the vowels (chr1) and adding numerals for, say, a birth year (chr105). Passwords become stronger by adding letters (perhaps caps) to identify password sites — chr105GS for a GSU password or chr105DL for Delta Airlines. Other variations could be to write the encrypted word backward or add symbols, e.g., #1 — lrhc#105FB.

To avoid stress, keep a master list of passwords in a secure place with dates of each time a change is made.

- Harry Dangel

The boomers are coming. Today – and every day on average for the next 19 years – 10,000 boomers will reach age 65. And, they will have more time in retirement than previous generations. Harry Dangel and I attended the Association of Retirement Organizations for Higher Education's biennial meeting where we learned about the number of faculty soon to retire, how productive they can be, and how other schools are servicing their current and future emeriti.

One model is a UC Berkeley program that aims to help participants plan and implement a successful strategy for their next phase — a phase described not as retirement but rather a time to refocus energy on activities that contribute to a meaningful and valuable life. This popular program has seven three-hour sessions and covers topics such as physical and mental wellness, long-term care and financial planning. We hope to initiate some pre-retirement and retirement programs at GSU.

William Sessions, Professor Emeritus of English, will present his forthcoming biography on Flannery O'Connor to inaugurate the Emeriti Association/Library Author Series in mid-March (*see insert for details*).

We welcome David Fraboni who joined GSU in January as an associate vice president who will work with the Emeriti Association and other constituent programs. Dave comes to us from the University of Hartford.

Be sure to check out www.gsu.edu/emeriti for longer versions of newsletter articles under "News."

HISTORY – APPLIED

One of my projects in retirement is to work on my second NEH grant, which is developing a digital tour of the Georgia Capitol based on my recently published study "Democracy Restored: A History of the Georgia Capitol." When I received this grant in 2009, I envisioned working with vendors who program the devices used by museum visitors to hear about artists and their works, except with an added visual dimension.

Shortly thereafter, I was talking with Chris Kirkendall, a film and video graduate student. Upon hearing me describe what I was planning, he reached into his pocket and pulled out an iTouch. He asked why I didn't think about doing my project as an app.

As a result of Chris's question, I now have a development license from Apple and have begun working with him on production of a

capitol history app for the iPad, iPhone and iTouch.

The historic episodes for the app focus on elements of history that took place in the Georgia Capitol. For example, one looks at the struggle to end segregation and features accounts from Jimmy Carter and Leroy Johnson, both of whom were freshman senators in 1963.

Our app is set up so visitors can stand in the Senate Chamber and view a historic photo of Johnson, the first black legislator elected in modern times, while listening to him tell of arriving in the Capitol when its restrooms and cafeteria were still segregated. When visitors stop on the steps where Carter gave his inaugural address as governor, they can use their iPhone to watch part of that address and see him talking in retrospect about his predecessor, Lester Maddox.



Former President Jimmy Carter with Tim Crimmins

For context, the app will also allow visitors to see historic news footage on Maddox' efforts in 1966 to maintain segregation even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 required places of public accommodation not to discriminate based on race.

- Tim Crimmins

Tim Crimmins' GSU career focused on urban history and the preservation and interpretation of historic sites. He continues to work in these areas, but his digital history project has pushed his plan to write a history of metro Atlanta to a later stage of retirement.

Machete Research

By 2002, when I was deciding whether or not to take on this biography, there had been an amazing amount of critical interpretation of O'Connor considering her slim canon — an annotated bibliography appeared that year that was over 1,000 pages. In the next year I began writing — with the image of myself entering a dense tropical forest armed only with a machete and cutting my own paths into the reality of the book. One episode illustrates how the machete-research worked. O'Connor's introduction to the "Memoir of Mary Ann" had been a choice of hers to write — and I had to discover why this writer with a virtual death sentence would take time to write an introduction and really edit a book by nuns who were amateur writers.

In the introduction, O'Connor acknowledged Nathaniel Hawthorne as her master in the kind of emblematic fiction she strove to write.

These Atlanta nuns were Dominican Sisters founded in a special order by Hawthorne's daughter, Rose. Their convent here in Atlanta (still exactly behind Turner

Field) operated and operates as a hospice for incurable cases of cancer, their healing free to all regardless of background or religion. In the 1950s the nuns had cared for a little girl whose Baptist parents had virtually abandoned her to them — a child doomed to die of cancer but who, as the book reveals, survived until she was 12 in the loving care of the nuns.

"I began writing — with the image of myself entering a dense tropical forest armed only with a machete and cutting my own paths into the reality of the book."

In her celebrated introduction to this book, O'Connor wrote on the persistence of confident life amid immense suffering and revealed the truths of suffering itself. The Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oe, whose respect for O'Connor was so great that he mentioned her in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1994, was deeply moved by this essay. He found in her fiction the wisdom of meaningful suffering, including the place in

a technological society of human beings like "the Misfit," adapted by both Truman Capote in "In Cold Blood" and Cormac McCarthy in "No Country for Old Men."

Larger Meaning

So, the corpus of O'Connor's work may have been slight, but the effect of her short life of 39 years has not been. Before finally accepting the task of writing the biography and beginning in 2003 (and finishing this last Christmas weekend), I had to assume the task of "digs" for an audience no longer interested in history and to make alive, through a blending of times, the ultimate reality O'Connor set in her fictional landscape of Middle Georgia. In her classic parabolic scenes of violence in her fiction, she imagined — and I had to try to understand — that point in time where the mystery of life itself had to come to terms with the entrance of every human being into the larger meaning of reality that, for O'Connor, came with suffering and finally death.

Bill Sessions lives with his wife in Brookhaven by a lake Sherman's army built. He enjoys swimming and watching people in nearby malls when he's not writing books.

More Than Science and Sputnik



Wayne J. Urban, professor emeritus of educational policy studies, is the author of a new book, "More Than Science and Sputnik, The National Defense Education Act of 1958" (NDEA), published in June by the University of Alabama Press.

This book examines NDEA, legislation that was designed to overcome a perceived but overhyped failure in the U.S. to produce enough qualified scientists, engineers and mathematicians to compete with the Soviet Union. The book highlights the larger agenda of many of the actors in the NDEA legislative campaign —

congressional sponsors (both from Alabama), members of the Eisenhower administration, education activists in the National Education Association, and members of the academic science community — and stresses the objectives that each had that transcended the obvious scientific emphasis in NDEA.

Mary Allen Jolley, a congressional staff member who helped pass the NDEA, wrote that "The passage of the National Defense Education Act broke the dam of a hundred years of federal inaction in American education; its passage was an essential precursor to the landmark legislation of the 1960s and transformed the federal role in education in America."

After retiring from GSU in 2005, Urban took a position in the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama. He and his wife share their time between Atlanta and Tuscaloosa. He travels extensively and recently went to Australia for the fifth time.

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RETIREMENT TIME IS TRAVEL TIME

By Gerald Davis

I traveled widely during 34 years at GSU, but more places beckoned after I retired in 1996. High on the list was the Trans-Siberian Railroad (called Transib).

In 1998, recently widowed, I teamed up with Alice Hankla, widow of GSU physics professor Robert Hankla. We planned our journey, took a Russian course, and studied Bryn Thomas' "Trans-Siberian Handbook."

Transib connects Moscow to Vladivostok, spanning 9,289 kilometers (5,772 miles), eight time zones (but all clocks run on Moscow time), and seven days' travel. We stopped twice en route: at Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk. We had a first-class compartment in Transib's best train, named Rossiya. Our coach had two attendants who kept a samovar of boiling water and refreshments. Dining cars served meals of uncertain ingredients, but home-cooked food stored in baby carriages was available at small-station platforms. In larger stations, westbound passengers sold Chinese products through train windows.

We passed into Asia at Yekaterinburg, then through Omsk, Novosibirsk, vast forests, and steppes to Krasnoyarsk. There two young men showed us the town, and we observed the fabled beauty of Siberian women. Our train to Irkutsk lacked air conditioning and taught us how hot Siberia gets in summer. In Irkutsk we enjoyed Siberian hospitality at the University of Maryland business center on Karl Marx Street, visited Lake Baikal, and sampled its fish. Then we rattled and swayed in rough terrain through remote villages and unfamiliar cities and arrived exhausted at Vladivostok with only a day to rest before flying home via Anchorage and Seattle.

Alice and I traveled well together. In 2001 we got married.



Gerald Davis and Alice Hankla



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January – March 2011

EMERITITIES

Activities Calendar

Below is a listing of upcoming emeriti events. Details for the events will be posted online and sent to emeriti via e-mail. The events in this calendar may change. All changes will be posted on the website at www.gsu.edu/emeriti under events. E-mail announcements will also be sent out to confirm events and note changes.

FEB

■ Monday, February 14 11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Join us for our annual **ST. VALENTINE'S DAY EMERITI LUNCHEON**. Portraits and visiting will begin at 11:30 a.m. followed by a brief presentation on the university's vital new strategic plan as we move into our second century. Luncheon will follow.

RIALTO CENTER FOR THE ARTS

80 Forsyth Street NW, Atlanta, GA 30303
On the corner of Forsyth and Luckie Streets (parking will be validated)

RSVP by February 8

Adrienne Crosby, acrosby@gsu.edu
or 404/413-1330

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■ Thursday, March 17 10:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

William Sessions, Professor Emeritus of English, presents his making of the authorized biography of his friend Flannery O'Connor. His appearance is the first in the Author Series presented by the Emeriti Association and the Library. Welcome Bill and enjoy the lunch that will follow.

LIBRARY SOUTH

8th Floor, Special Collections
Campus Map: <http://library.gsu.edu/96.html>
Free parking with GSU ID

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Do consider donating to the Emeriti Association. Donations to the operating account pay for the food and beverages for our meetings, one of our bigger expenses. Donations to the endowment account can be used for scholarships and professorships. emeriti@gsu.edu, 404/413-1327 and www.gsu.edu/emeriti (see [link to Donations](#)).

In Memoriam

Thomas John Brieske, professor emeritus of mathematics, died on Nov. 7, 2010, of an infection. Tom became a faculty member in the GSU Mathematics Department in 1969 and retired in 1996. He was director of graduate studies for mathematics and statistics for 21 years and was renowned for his excellence as a teacher. After retirement, as a patron of the East Lake Foundation and an avid golfer, he volunteered to teach golf and life skills to children around the East Lake Country Club and helped design the mathematics curriculum for the Charles R. Drew Charter School in that area. Tom was an early member of the Emeriti

Association's coordinating committee and contributed immensely to establishing our organization. He was physically very active and a good friend to everyone he knew. He will be missed.

John S. Cochran, professor emeritus of finance, died in Atlanta on Nov. 21, 2010. John served on the faculty of the Department of Finance from 1965 until his retirement in 1996. He was also acting chairman of the department in 1967-1968. John received his Ph.D. from Harvard University and held the prestigious Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) professional designation. He wrote

extensively and produced a prolific set of case studies used in university classes that focused on investment and portfolio management. He was also an economic historian and an authority on the development and financing of the early transcontinental railroad system in the Pacific Northwest. During the latter part of his career he produced a seminal textbook, "Personal Investment Portfolios: A Portfolio Management Guide for Individual Investors." John was gracious to all. His friendliness and kindness will be remembered.

Recap: Emeriti Events from Fall 2010

Luncheon, October 11: Provost Risa Palm engaged emeriti with a description of the University's recently developed strategic plan, which will move Georgia State toward world-class status. Provost Palm also honored new emeriti by presenting them with a Georgia State University paperweight.



New emerita Lyn Thaxton and Provost Risa Palm at Emeriti Luncheon on Oct. 11.

Benefits Meeting, October 27: Coinciding with the beginning of the open enrollment for medical insurance, GSU Benefits Counselor Corrin Sorteberg clarified the issues surrounding the decisions we were required to make. Lunch and discussions followed.



Emerita Marjorie Girth (left) with GSU HR professional Corrin Sorteberg and her associate Kia Graves-Craddock at Oct. 27 Benefits Meeting.

Georgia Dome Tour, November 5: GSU's Athletic Department treated emeriti to lunch, a tour of the facility, a look at the last football practice before the final home game of the season, and a chance to meet Coach Curry. Emeritus Rankin Cooter arranged this event.

Library Tour, November 12: Librarian Jennifer Jones gave emeriti a tour of the newly redesigned library website, tips for logging into databases from off-campus, general database search tips, and an overview of available online support guides and tutorials. Afterward, two separate special interest sessions were offered – one on how to use the Ancestry Library Edition database for basic genealogical research, and one on using LexisNexis and Factiva databases for general news searching.



Sanford Bederman and Gerald Davis at the Dome for Panther football.

Holiday Party, December 4: John and Anna Hogan hosted their annual holiday party for emeriti. Good food, drink, and fellowship were enjoyed by all.



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