

Interview of Dr. James A. Butler
By Nyomi M. Gonzalez
Philadelphia, PA
March 26, 2012

Audio File 2:

Gonzalez: Yeah, I love to learn, you know. I would consider – would you, I hope this is ok, as a life time learner.

Butler: Oh yeah, right. Sure.

Gonzalez: Just constantly learning and trying to keep active.

Butler: Right.

Gonzalez: But I am curious as to why William Wordsworth; out of all the poets or English writers, why him?

Butler: I will take you back to years of yesterday where I first met Steve Parrish. And, he was assigned as my advisor, and he said, “Well, what sort of things do you want to work on in graduate school, young man?” And I said, “I am absolutely mad for John Keats, and I came here because I want to work with the Keats manuscripts.” And he leaned back in his chair and said, “Well, I’ll tell ya, you come to the wrong school. The Keats manuscripts are at Harvard.” I said, “What?!” *[laughs]* And then I said, “Well, what kind of manuscripts are here?” And he said, “Wordsworth.” I said, “Okay, I just became a Wordsworth fan.” *[laughs]* So sheer chance, sheer chance. I like Wordsworth, but I think I really like Keats more. And I really did make a mistake, I thought all the Keats manuscripts were at Cornell and they’re not. And – but they do have the – they have a very good collection themselves, and then they have microfilms of the archive that’s in Grasmere, in the English Lake District. So, partly by chance. But its – I mean that’s the kind of funny version of it, I think if you’re looking for the serious version of it, it has something to do with – it has something to do with a sense of, [a] very strong sense of place in Wordsworth. That he – he writes about what he knows, he writes about his community, he writes about the people within the community. So, and I’m so very attached to a sense of place. And there’s something – again it’s hard to describe this without sounding kind of sanctimonious or something, there’s something about the sympathy with people less fortunate than one or sort of something like that in Wordsworth – old leech gatherers, old Cumberland beggars, things of that sort. That’s just – it takes the reader and makes the reader think about people who have a whole lot less in the world than one has. And I think in Wordsworth, politically or socially, that’s a good thing to think about. I used to – the – I edited for Cornell the *Lyrical Ballads*, which is one of Wordsworth’s major collections. And the manuscript to that, the printers manuscript, is at Yale. And New Haven – Yale’s a wonderful place – but New Haven is a city with problems, New Haven, Connecticut. And – so I stay at this somewhat sleazy motel and I would leave there and walk up through a – what I thought was – even, I’m relatively comfortable walking around in Philadelphia, but what struck me as a particularly kind of dangerous area to get to the library. And I thought, what a strange thing to have all these manuscripts about a pastoral environment

3:25

and sense of place in a city which, obviously has some real social and economic problems. And then I thought – that was the first thought, the sense of place thing. And the other thing I thought, was well, I think that maybe this is the right place for them because that kind of sympathy for the people you walk by all the time and pay no attention to – and thinking what stories they have to tell and Wordsworth tells some of those stories. And there's – to inject politics in to this, I think in America there's a lot of walking by people without – ignoring them and not thinking about their stories, and their desires, their needs, their lives. And – so maybe that's the right place for somebody who – a writer who tells their stories – in the 19th century told their stories, maybe more of those stories have to get told today. So, that's my anti-one percent screed for today, and not my ninety-nine percent.

Gonzalez: Do you think that some of his stories are pretty relevant to today? That they can – they cross lines?

Butler: Yeah, I think it's – I think one way they cross is – he's writing at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and some of the sort of cottage industry crafts and things were beginning to disappear or lives people lived are being disrupted by the beginnings of industrialization. And maybe the same thing – that's some of what is happening in America with technological change. At this moment there are [a] whole group of people who have been left behind in that technological change and I think are having a hard time finding their place within that. And now we're dealing with – I edited also in the Cornell series a poem called *The Ruined Cottage*, and the – in that work there's a famine, the father of the family has to enlist to get money to – the bounty for enlisting to get money for his wife and child to eat. And I think we are fairly high unemployment rate, underemployment rate – it's not exactly the same, and it all – doesn't draw equal signs between these things two hundred years apart, but I think they're some of the same problems. So – and I really don't like to use the word relevant, Wordsworth's stuff is relevant to its own time. But I think it – but some attitudes there speak to the present.

Gonzalez: Are you happy that you have finished editing the series? Are you a little saddened?

Butler: Yes. Well, as I sit talking to you, I'm very happy because I'm over what happened immediately afterwards. I thought I'd be very happy when we – we had a nice party at Cornell, it was partly to honor Steve Parrish and the end of the series. The woman who was my co-editor flew over from England and we had a great time and a number of people gathered together. But – and the party was great, then I came home and I went in to this kind of post-partum depression [laughs] where I – you know, I'm doing this series since – involved with this series since 1975, twenty – one years or so, I thought – so that – I mean whenever one got up, one never had to say, "Oh, I wonder what kind of things I'll find to do today," because there's always something to do in this series. And yet, I didn't work at it all day, every day by any means. But, you know, couple times a week you're always doing something for that series, and all of a sudden there was nothing to do. So I had to think about what to do. That's I think why I got – one of the reasons I got involved with the Wister stuff. So, on to the next thing.

Gonzalez: Yeah that's – Yup, on to the next project.

07:48

Butler: Right, next project.

Gonzalez: I know that after you finished at Cornell you came back to La Salle to teach.

Butler: Yes.

Gonzalez: That was in 1971...?

Butler: 71. I had a – it was – when I started grad school in [19]67 almost everybody who finished graduate school got a job, pretty much immediately. And over that four year period, the windows began to close for academic job hunting. And in [19]71 was when my – [19]70 or [19]71, my degree was one – I think up to that point, the peak year for production of Ph.D.'s. But there were – the other side of that is it was very hard to get jobs. And it's now a profession in which, it is even harder to get a job now than it was then. The difference was that we started with the assumption there were jobs for everyone, and that kind of disappeared over the next three or four years. So I had – I think I had three interviews at the Modern Language Association Convention, one was with St. Michael's from Winooski, VT,¹ the other was an interview, I will not name the institution – a big institution, where I went in and the interviewer had a tape recorder and – so I sat down and I said, "Hello," "Hi," and he said, "Just a moment, just a moment." And he would speak in to the tape recorder, "Appearance... satisfactory." [*laughs*] I thought, oh geez, this is awful; I can't go to this place. And I was hired – so – but I ran in to Charles Kelly, who I mentioned was my teacher and was then Chair of English at La Salle. I ran in to him at a bar and we chatted away and he said, "Oh, maybe we'll have a job. I don't know." So I spent the spring of my senior – of my last year at Cornell in England, got back had no job, two wives – yeah – two – no, just one wife – one wife, two children, no job and about a hundred dollars in the bank. And – so, I don't know I had – I was hired by La Salle three or four days before the semester started. This building had just opened.² So, this building and I came at the same time, in 1971. So, I don't know quite [what] would've happened if I didn't get that job. So – because I you know – three days to go before start of the year. I might have ended up doing something else. [*cough*] So I am grateful to Charles Kelly. Although, another friend in the department told me that, when they talked about me, about whether they wanted to hire me, he said, "Well..." – I had Charles Kelly for freshman writing, it was an honors – the honors course in freshman writing. And when he died I cleared out his office, which is by the way, this very office that I'm in now. And I found the grade book from my class on a shelf, you know, from thirty years before. So I, you know, probably should not open it up and see what everybody got, but I did. And there were three B's, nine C's and a D in honors English. So – and I got a B, so I got one of the three B's. But – to brag a bit – but this friend said that when they were talking about whether I should be hired, that Charles Kelly said, "I don't know, he doesn't write very well!" [*laughs*] So – but they hired me anyhow, even though I didn't write very well. So – and – once or twice – I've applied [to] a couple other places, but – and one that was pretty close to being offered a job

¹ For information on Winooski, VT please visit: <http://onioncity.com/>

² He is referring to Olney Hall, which opened in 1971. See Picture Appendix

11:53

there, I'm sure they would offer me a job and then I backed out. But I think when I looked in to my soul, I really didn't wanna be any other place. So, I've been quite happy here. It's allowed me to do – La Salle has been very good to me in terms of – for making it possible to do the research that I do and I like the students very much. And I've taught a lot in our Honors Program, so it's – and I – I don't think I would've been happy at a major research University, I wanted to do more teaching than that. I didn't wanna be kind of closeted away and just doing research. So, I like the teaching part of things.

Gonzalez: Yeah, I think sitting by yourself doing research, after a while gets a little lonely.

Butler: Right. Yeah, it does. And – what saved it – in a way that Cornell Wordsworth is – I mean some of this was – we'd be over there as a family or sometimes I'd be there by myself but we'd be living with four or five other people involved with the series so it wasn't – even though the day was kind of working intensely by yourself, there was a – you know, your kind of built in social crowd of other people that you'd be involved with. So, for me this has been a very good place and I'm – I feel very lucky to have been here as a student and I'm happy to be here – yesterday was the Service Luncheon and I got my forty year pin, so I've been here [for] forty years.

Gonzalez: Oh, wow. Congratulations.

Butler: Right. So – I mean, there are pluses and minuses to staying in the same place for forty years. And I'm aware of the minuses but for me the pluses outweigh them.

Gonzalez: That's always the perfect kind of situation; you want to make sure the pros outweigh the cons.

Butler: Yeah.

Gonzalez: I know when you came back, there had been a lot of changes at La Salle. They started accepting women.

Butler: Right.

Gonzalez: About 1970 or so, how was that change?

Butler: I think in the end – it's definitely a change for the better. I think it was a very artificial environment before that. The – so when I came back, it was not that kind of – there was probably more women than there were the first year. But there'd be very few women in class, there might be three or four. And they would all sit together, and they'd have that kind of deer in the headlights look [*laughs*] whatever they are. But I think within [*cough*] – and one of these [*cough*] one of the students, a woman I had in class in [*cough*] excuse me, in 1971 when I came back, I still see. She lives in New York, she's a Jazz Journalist. But it's – within three or four

15:02

years, it's like the place had always been this way. And it was – looked a little bit more like life looked. And these were good things. And I – as far as La Salle, it could not have lasted as a single sex school. I think it had to take women if it was going to survive. So that it increased the enrollment pool and I think made it an all around better place. And certainly a place that looked more like the world and it's probably, probably good to teach to a class that looks like the world *[laughs]* rather than one that doesn't.

Gonzalez: Were they readily accepted when they first started enrolling? Or did it take some time to get used to it?

Butler: It did take some time. There were some awkward things occasionally. One I remember, there was a kind of rating thing – when a woman would walk by and there would be, like the Olympics, people would hold up signs, you know, 8.7 you know, 6.3. And again this didn't happen – this happened only once, but I thought it was so, so incredibly dreadful that it sticks in my mind. But I mean that's – so that's the attitude of some people, whatever. But – I mean I think what began to happen is it became fairly clear to a number of the guys that, oh my God they, they're, you know, they're better than we are *[laughs]* and instead are getting higher grades. And of course that's accelerated in the, I think the years since. It's – in the class I'm – in the Honors classes I teach, although not in the one I'm teaching this year, but in the Honors class that I teach there *[are]* more women than men and many of the women are much, much smarter than some of the men *[laughs]* And – so it's – and what are we up to now? Is it up to 60% women? It might be – may be even higher than that.

Gonzalez: Yeah, I think there are a little bit more women than men on campus.

Butler: Right. And, again there's all kind of societal reasons for that; but – the way in which men are socialized. But – if you look over the last ten years at the people who were student leaders, editors at the Collegian, etc. etc., many – there are more women than men for – in positions of leadership on campus. So, I don't know they're gonna put us all out of business. *[laughs]* What are we gonna do? *[laughs]*

Gonzalez: You could always do some internships with the women, to keep yourself busy.

Butler: Yes, we can do that. Yes, right, right.

Gonzalez: So, did it take some time for the females to gain these kinds of leadership positions?

Butler: Yes, it did. But it's – I don't want to overemphasize, I think the – I mean the first year or two – I mean after you got beyond, you know, the kind of random jokes or this and that, you know, said, "Oh we gotta get some yogurt in the cafeteria," you know. I mean we – it's almost that – I think we started out – that's the level we thought, we have – "What are we gonna do?" Well we need – we need more bathrooms, we gotta get yogurt in to the cafeteria. *[laughs]* And I think there's one other thing – but I mean – you see – I agree we needed more women's

18:49

bathrooms but I think getting yogurt seemed like a, you know, somewhat of a side issue to the running of life. *[laughs]* But I would say by the mid – to late [19]70s – I mean I think it's – took maybe four or five years, but I think by that stage its – I had a class – I've never had a class of all men or all women. I taught at Cornell, I taught one course at Cornell only. But then taught here, so it, it would seem to me very strange to have a class with all men or all women. It's – I think the – there are often different perspectives that are brought to bear depending upon gender and one likes to hear them.

Gonzalez: In terms of faculty and being a teacher, how difficult was it for women kind of, to get those positions? And then adjust if they had primarily men in the classroom?

Butler: *[cough]* Yeah – there were relatively – there were few women on the faculty at the start. So it – I mean we hired – in the [19]70s we hired more women. The – I don't – again, I don't have much data really on what, you know, women's reaction to teaching when there'd be mostly men there, because I think the – probably what happened there, if a woman ran in to a problem with that, she probably wouldn't come to a guy and talk about it. So I think the impulse would be to talk to [a woman] – except in extreme cases. And some – I can't remember any particular examples, although I remember things of this sort happening when I was Chair of English. I mean, occasionally *[cough]* a woman would come to me and say something happened that is beyond the pale here and you gotta deal with it. And again – I can't *[cough]* come up with a specific example other than just saying, I dealt with it. But – so again, I think there were relatively few women at the start and then I think we kind of reached a critical mass *[moves in chair]* maybe in the 19 *[cough]* – maybe 1980 or so, someplace there. Ten years in we had more women around and that kind of problem went away. But there were a while, say in the English Department, where there'd just be one or two women in the department. And I think we tended to hire very strong minded women. I don't know whether that was the goal of the persons – people doing the hiring or whether it was the kind of woman you attracted, who said, here's a school which has been all male, and they said, “Ok, let me at'em!” *[laughs]* You know, I can deal, and they could – I mean they – the women we hired were strong personalities, good scholars, good teachers. And I think if there was – I mean there are a couple – in terms of the male faculty who had been here for many years, I think some of them had some, some trouble. And the kind of easy, somewhat off-color at times camaraderie of, you know, all guys I think people had to learn pretty quickly that you didn't do that anymore. And I think, I think they were helped by some of the younger folk who pointed this out to them; you know we're not operating that way anymore.

Gonzalez: Change is always difficult.

Butler: Yeah.

Gonzalez: After a while.

Butler: When I was a student here, a lot of the people had been – there were a lot of – in the English Department there were a lot of Penn PhD's and several of the people had been involved

23:05

in the war. And had been hired after the war with the very rapid expansion of higher education – and La Salle was down below a hundred students at the end of the war and then *[cough]* the next year or two was over a thousand. So *[cough]* they needed a very rapid increase in people to teach. So, I don't want to portray this as the ideal little community, I think there were some bumps along the road. But in retrospect, I think it happened pretty quickly. Things work themselves out and we've gone from there. And if women were unhappy with something, with a student or with the faculty, they were pretty direct. Not harping, you know, not repeating, but just said, I'm unhappy with this behavior and will not stand for it. Okay. And as I say, the women we hired were very good through that period and many of whom are still here. Some have gone on to – one of them has gone on to a national office for the Woman's Association. There's some very, very successful women alumni out of the program. And again it's the same sort of thing of the – when we went co-ed in 1971 the first batch of women was a small batch but you think if, if you were the kind of woman willing to be the first people on a male campus and you know there's only gonna be a couple hundred women, at most, on the campus, then you're the kind of woman who says, "Doesn't matter to me, that's the school I want and I'm gonna go there." And – I think you're probably not a shrinking violet *[laughs]* and so – which was good.

Gonzalez: Ok. So, maybe this would be a good point to stop.

Butler: Ok, we can...

Gonzalez: And then maybe same time next Monday, if that works for you.

Butler: Is next Monday Easter?

Gonzalez: No, I think it's two weeks from now.

Butler: *[looks in calendar]* Yeah, I can do that. So that's the second?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Butler: Second of April, 2pm. Yeah, I actually have it written down already.

Gonzalez: *[laughs]* Ok.

Butler: Ok. So, that'll work. Ok, what kind of things do you want to talk about next time? Do you have an idea? Or is it better to ambush me? *[laughs]*

Gonzalez: *[laughs]* Aw, I don't want to ambush you.

Butler: Right.

25:48

Gonzalez: I think, I just wanna continue with the English Department and just how that evolved, since you were a student and since you came back as a faculty member. And then probably just finish off with a lot of the Wister stuff.

Butler: Ok. Right. The other thing I didn't talk about at all was the Honors Program.

Gonzalez: Oh yes, we can absolutely talk about that.

Butler: And we can do that. I come to that, in some ways, unique experience. Because I was part of it, when it really wasn't much of a program in [19]63 and then – so I went – by the end it was something, it really was a unique model by the time I got out. And then I – then when I came back I taught in the program for a number of years. And when John Grady who – we will not see the like of again, when he died, I directed it for two years. So I've seen it from a lot of different – and the class I'm teaching now, I teach in the Honors Program. So, I've seen that from a lot of different angles. So, we can talk some about that next time too.

Gonzalez: Yeah, absolutely. I'd love to hear those – to be in the program and then teaching and then director, that's an amazing point of view. I'd love to hear that.

Butler: Yeah and it was a – for a lot of people in the program, it's one of the real points of identification with La Salle; to think of that program. That's another place for – I mean the women are running away with the place. *[laughs]* So they are doing some nice work in the program. So. Ok. Well, nice to talk to you. You're – nice of you to sit there and actually listen *[laughs]*

Gonzalez: Oh no problem, very interesting, very interesting. And I mean that, you know, it's very sincere. You have a really great story. And I'm really hoping to hear more of it when we're back next week. *[computer beep]*³

Butler: Yeah, it's – well, it's like Wordsworth in a way you concentrate *[cough]* it's a concentrated story, when you're at the same place and there are other stories – and I certainly admire people where there's other stories to tell, but they're different stories; if they've been many different places and seen the whole wide world. But there's also stories to tell when you have a story that's concentrated to a particularly place, and watch – watch that place change over a number of years.

Gonzalez: You've watched La Salle change for a very long time.

Butler: Yeah. But, as with anybody who is at a place for a long time it's – a typical thing for you to say and the right kind of questions to ask is to say something such as, Well, how is it different? And what's different about this? But of course my perspective on that is there's no point where – it's one thing if you go away and then you come back and say, “Oh, wow things

³ A computer sound (almost beep like) can be heard; most likely to alert Dr. Butler to a new email.

are really different!” but when you’re kind of living the thing, the differences are so incremental that, at one point you say, “Oh, wow it’s very much different from what it was back then.” But it doesn’t seem to be one point where that kind of thing happened. Or often one precipitating event, there just [have] been a whole kind of small steps, that have produced something, something that is barely recognizable from what it may have been ten years ago. But I have a hard time saying, “No, this is the one thing that did it.” I see why the poles are different, but the various steps in between sometimes are hard to pin down exactly what happened. But we’ll talk.

Gonzalez: We will. Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

Butler: Ok, sure. So, 2 o’clock. Same time next week.

Gonzalez: Yes, sounds good.

Butler: Right, Right, Good. Sounds like this is uh, therapy time for you *[laughs]* or whatever for me – no it’s for me, not for you. Yes, so thank you. I will try to do better in my life in the next week *[laughs]* and we’ll talk again.

Gonzalez: *[laughs]* Ok.

Butler: Ok, thanks.

End of Audio File 2:

30:04

Picture Appendix



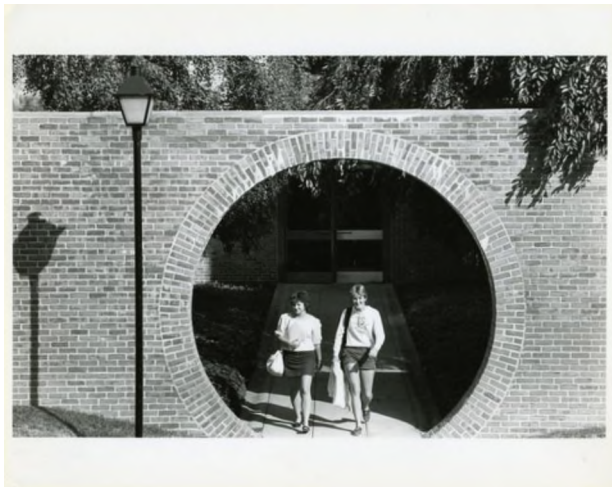
View of Olney Hall, 1971



Female student in Olney Hall,
early 1970s



Students in Olney Hall, early 1970s



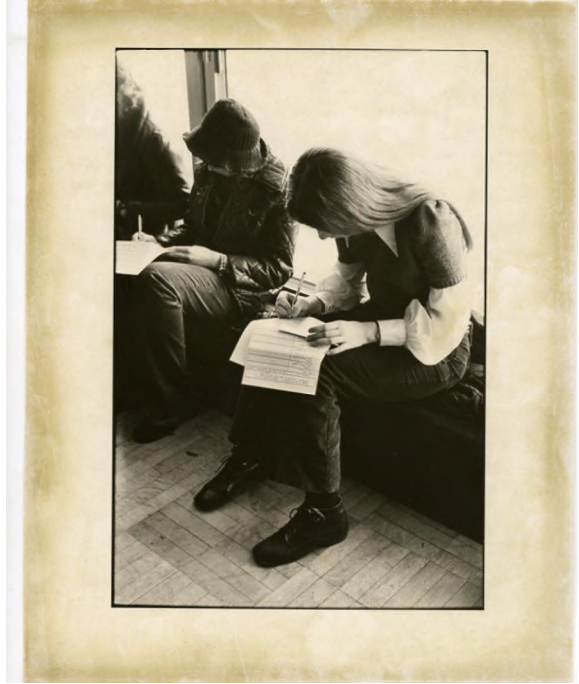
Female students leaving Olney Hall, early 1970s



Female students lounging in front of
Olney Hall, early 1970s



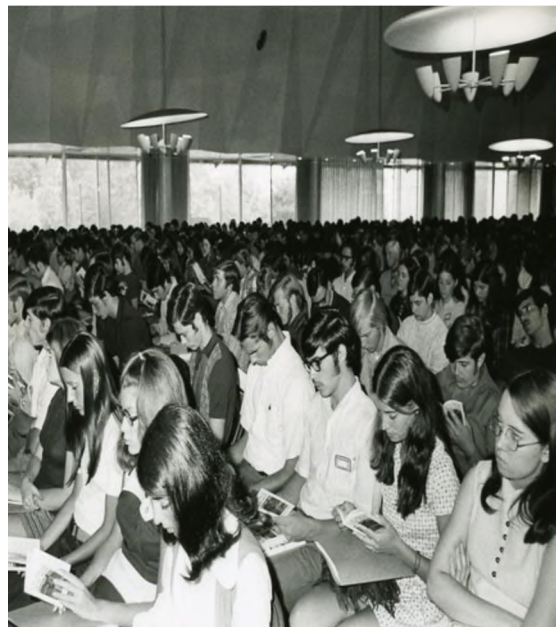
Cheerleader at a La Salle basketball game,
early 1970s



Female students working, early 1970s



Female student in class, early 1970s



Students at an assembly, early 1970s