A Passion to Preserve
Fellows, Will

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John Anders

Born in 1948, John Anders grew up in coastal North Carolina. Since 1985 he has lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he received a doctorate in American literature at the University of Nebraska. “Before I came to Nebraska, I had read extensively in Nebraska and Great Plains literature in the hope of one day coming here,” John Anders says. “Now, I’m reading nothing but North Carolina books in the hope of someday getting back home.”

I COME FROM AN AREA OF THE COUNTRY rich in history and the preserving instinct. New Bern, with its colonial governor’s palace, and Beaufort, a three-hundred-year-old sea captain’s town, surround me with antique buildings and their abiding mystery. Some time ago I got involved in trying to save an old house in Havelock from being destroyed, my only venture into hometown politics. And a friend of mine once owned the oldest house in Beaufort, unofficially dated at 1698. Although unlivable, it was still usable for storage and play. He recently sold it, and it has been restored to a semblance of its former beauty. But even in its dilapidated state, it had a singular appeal; I was always thrilled to be around it, however ignorant I may have been of its meaning.

But despite an inherent southern propensity to be mesmerized by the past, my involvement with architectural preservation has always been that of an observer, whether watching it happen around me or seeing it in the pages of House Beautiful or Southern Accents. I am more actively involved in the preservation of literature. Reading forgotten authors is one of my passions. My particular favorites are the French writer Pierre Loti and the American George Washington Cable, the father of modern southern literature and the writer responsible for first putting New Orleans on the literary map. I read about, write about, and talk about these authors whenever possible as a way of saving them from oblivion. I try to find their books in either first or early editions, copies that have the look and feel of the past. I enjoy immensely their antiquated styles and lost language and delight in their intricate plots and strange patois. I am also drawn to authors who celebrate the past and its enduring symbols. Writers like Willa Cather, Sir Walter Scott, Walter Pater, and Elizabeth Bowen—especially her novel A World of Love, which is, in part, a paean to the presence of the past in our lives. All evoke in their fiction something beyond nostalgia.

My most feverish reading of late has been the historical novels of Inglis Fletcher. I’ve known about them all my life but never read one till
last summer. I drove around four counties back home looking for them. There are twelve in all, often referred to as the Carolina Series or the Carolina Chronicles, and I’m building multiple sets, including the many paperbacks and the signed and limited first editions. They all concern the English settlement of North Carolina, from the earliest attempts at colonization in the 1580s to just after the Revolutionary War. With a storyteller's imagination, Fletcher combines the panorama and pageantry of the historical novel with the colorful history of North Carolina. In doing so, she recalls some of the most romantic figures of the age: Charles I, for whom the Carolinas were named; Charles II and his “natural” son, the Duke of Monmouth; and later Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Scottish heroine Flora MacDonald.

Not a native North Carolinian, Inglis Fletcher happened upon her Carolina subject while doing genealogical research in California. She intended to write a novel of American pioneers following a great river west. Instead, having traced her family to eastern North Carolina, she kept them there, along with her other characters. She felt that no one had written of North Carolina the way she intended to, a way that would stress the state’s distinctive character and interpret its history more as a response to place than as a series of events.

Inglis Fletcher chose the town of Edenton as her fictional center and moved there in 1944. She used Edenton’s old buildings, such as the Cupola House, the Chowan County Courthouse, and Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church, as settings for her novels, and its surrounding countryside—the Carolina pines and pocosins—as background to their action. Perhaps the most famous historic house in Fletcher’s novels is Tryon Palace in New Bern, just a few miles from my home. Designed by John Hawks as the residence of the royal governors, it was considered his crowning achievement in colonial America. Like Versailles was to the French, Tryon Palace was to North Carolinians a source of discord and contention on the eve of revolution. In Raleigh’s Eden and again in The Wind in the Forest, Fletcher describes the crowds on the front lawn, celebrating its completion. She has them eating barbecue, a true North Carolina tradition.

Finished in 1770, Tryon Palace was destroyed by fire in 1798. In the 1950s it was completely rebuilt and furnished with period antiques, following the original architect’s drawings and Governor Tryon’s household inventory. While lovely to look at, nothing at Tryon Palace is authentic except, I think, the stables and a few bricks in the kitchen’s foundation. The restored gardens were modeled after those of eighteenth-century English country houses. Then in 1991 some of the palace’s original garden plans were found in a library in Venezuela. It turns out that the original landscape designer, Claude Sauthier, had been strongly influenced by a man who was himself a
pupil of the designer of Versailles. Thus, the garden style at Tryon Palace is now believed to have originally been more French than English. Talk about digging something up! Unlike Colonial Williamsburg, which also has reconstructed historic sites, Tryon Palace has the reputation of being a “beautiful fraud.” This latest embarrassment, if not a preservationist’s worst nightmare, is, nonetheless, what Henry James would call an aesthetic headache.

In the summer of 1983, at home in North Carolina, I was preparing to drive up the coast to attend a performance of *The Lost Colony*, the outdoor historical drama based on the play by Paul Green. Inglis Fletcher never wrote a novel of the lost English colonists, but she was certainly inspired by the story. So was I, partly because I had a black-haired, blue-eyed boyfriend who played one of the lusty, leaping Indians in the production that summer. Back in the seventies, I had gone to see *The Lost Colony* with some friends, and we were invited to a cast party after the performance. (The highlight of the party was a magnificent specimen of a man who had played the leading Indian role that night. As I remember it, he reveled in showing us how to remove his body paint.) Looking at a map to plan my route to Roanoke Island, I noticed the town of Nebraska, North Carolina, near where I was going. Since Nebraska was much on my mind at the time, I saw it as a good omen and made the short detour to see it. I mention this for two reasons. First, because I never knew before that time that there was a Nebraska, North Carolina, and, indeed, I’ve not found it on any map since. Second, because one of the first books I bought after coming to Lincoln in 1985 was a used copy of Fletcher’s *Lusty Wind for Carolina*. I bought it more out of homesickness than any desire to read it at the time.

Reading Fletcher, I hear names of people and places I’ve known all my life. So prevalent is the myth of Blackbeard in eastern North Carolina that as many places claim an association with him as they do with George Washington up in Virginia. In her own telling of Blackbeard’s story, Fletcher preserves his legend as convincingly as the recent discovery of his flagship, the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, which sank off the coast of North Carolina in 1718, just two miles out from Beaufort. While no treasure was found, other items have been recovered—a brass bell, a blunderbuss, and a twenty-four-pound cannonball—all exhibited at the local museum. I saw them when I was last home and thought it a lucky accompaniment to *Lusty Wind for Carolina*.

Willa Cather was not a historical novelist, at least not in the popular sense, but she had a historical imagination. During her first European tour, in 1902, her mood was at times particularly inclined to historical fiction. After visiting Chester, England, which she deemed “the quaintest and most picturesque of all English towns,” she wrote, “One can understand, lying a morning through at the foot of the Norman tower, why there are Maurice
Hewletts in England. The temptation to attempt to reconstruct the period when these things were a part of the living fabric of the world is one that must necessarily assail an ardent imagination.”

I have in my apartment a small green table with the paint chipped and worn away. Upon it is a bust of the Apollo Belvedere, roughly scarred as if recently excavated. Looking at these objects helps me think about the past and its preservation, for there are many ways to connect with the past, whether the culture of the ancient Greeks or the house next door. And that connection, that continuity, however and wherever we find it, is what keeps our spirit alive. Though Inglis Fletcher’s place in the archives of North Carolina history is secure, I’m doing what I can to help save her from near oblivion, as the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was recently saved by picking it up and moving it to higher ground.