

Spotlight on Faculty: Robert Evans teaches “King Arthur: Man or Myth” – Interview with Ann Caswell, PR

In 1978, Robert Evans moved from London to MDI with his family to take a research position at Jackson Laboratory. There, he worked as a full professor in the field of immunology, searching for cures for cancer. Little did he imagine that some three decades later he would be teaching at Acadia Senior College – not about genetic research or DNA, but: “King Arthur, Man or Myth?”

With roots in Wales, it is perhaps not surprising that Robert might become fascinated with the Arthurian Legend. Robert says he was raised “proud of being Welsh.” It is basic to his identity, especially within the rivalries of the nationalities of the United Kingdom. Then, in middle age, he began to wonder: Why am I “proud to be Welsh? What does being Welsh mean?” And he delved into the history of his native land and culture.

“Of course I knew the stories, the Arthurian legends. Everyone knows they are fictional. But as I read Welsh history and got into the 4th and 5th centuries, the resistance of the Britons against the invading Saxons, the name “Arthur” kept coming up. I wondered: Could this warrior chieftain be the real man behind the legends?”

His interest became a passion. One look at his study, where the shelves are filled with hundreds of books on the topic, testifies to that. Eventually, he undertook some primary research of his own – A study of the Llandaff Charters, a collection of centuries-old land transfer documents archived at the University of Wales, and accessible on the internet!

With a knowledge of Latin, Robert has painstakingly searched through the puzzle of the Charters, constructing genealogies of the Welsh clan Silures. He has concluded that a Dark Ages warrior with the nom de guerre of “Arthur” (meaning Bear Man) was the figure Athrwys, a prince, a real person – and very possibly the historical core of the mythological King Arthur.

After retiring from his work at “the lab,” Robert became involved with ASC. One day in 2001, while hiking with a group, he was chatting about his study of King Arthur. A friend suggested that he teach a class on the topic at the Senior College. Since then, College members have been privileged to participate in such a class six times, most recently this past fall.

Robert's 10 hour class takes students far back in time, beyond the medieval romances of courtly love, Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, Excalibur, Mordred and Merlin, Camelot and Avalon. Behind the magic of these tales lies the Dark Ages of Celtic life, so-called because little written history of that period exists.

Robert leads his students through references to Arthur in ancient documents – in the 15th century work of Sir Thomas Mallory to the 12th century writings by Geoffrey of Monmouth. And through references by more obscure writers: Nennius, Gildas, and the Venerable Bede. And into Dark Ages heroic Welsh poetry and narratives of the Lives of the Saints.

The class travels to dimly lit times of the Roman occupation of Britain, the collapse of Roman rule, the little-known tribal life of early Britons and their Brythonic language, the invasions by the Saxons, and their efforts to subdue the native Celts. They learn of Celtic resistance at Badon Hill and Camlann, decisive battles in Arthurian history, but geographically illusive. Students are invited to form their own conclusions about King Arthur: Man or Myth?

Robert has found his work with Acadia Senior College to be immensely satisfying. “First of all,” he says, “Preparing the course made me organize, systematize, and prioritize my research. From then on I had a framework for continuing.” But more important, he says, has been the experience of interacting with group after group of intellectually curious peers. “You can tend to become withdrawn after you retire, you know, but teaching this course has meant the opposite for me. I've been able to interact with others, sharing my knowledge about something I enjoyed – and they seemed to enjoy it too!”