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### Highland Light: Growing as I Go

Jaime D. Bunting

*Ouachita Baptist University*, [jdbunting33@gmail.com](mailto:jdbunting33@gmail.com)

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JAIME BUNTING | VOLUME 20

# HIGHLAND LIGHT;

*growing  
as i go*



SPRING 2019

*If I could describe Scotland in one word it would be vibrant. The architecture; the city-streets; the landscapes; the culture. From the tiny fishing village in the Isle of Skye, to the extinct volcano overlooking the North Sea and Edinburgh City-Scape; from the so-rainy-and-windy-it-will-blow-your-umbrella-inside-out kind of days, to the soak-up-the-sun-in-the-meadows-and-have-a-cookout kind of days: everything looked fuller in color. More vibrant. Why, then, did it not always feel this way?*

### **My Study Abroad Journey**

Studying abroad is something I had looked forward to for a long time. Though I had never traveled abroad, I had done a lot of domestic travelling in The States. I love walking around the city; I love nature & exploring outdoors; I love learning about other cultures and what it's like to live in other parts of the world (or even other states and cities within the U.S.); I study world maps for fun and google places I want to discover more about. The idea of living in another part of the world intrigued me, to say the least.

I can't remember the exact moment I decided that study abroad was a "dream" of mine, but I assume it's a progression of my interest in geography, travel, and cultural relations. Two of my favorite classes to date are AP Human Geography, which I took my senior year of high school, and Contemporary World, which I took my freshman year of college. Both of these classes made me realize my fascination of the beautifully diverse world in which we live, and helped me choose a major I never saw myself studying: Political Science. As I became more aware of trends occurring throughout the world, the vast disparities that exist between people groups, and the historical precedent of power being used to oppress others, I viewed political science as a way to study these broken systems to hopefully use them for good and change them to be more just.

After choosing Political Science, I questioned for a while what I would choose for my second major. Mass Communications, maybe? I declared this for about a semester, seeing writing as a useful skill in any career and a step towards a possible future in travel journalism. I kept going back to the thought of Social Justice studies, though. I learned a lot of new issues in the Intro to Social Justice and other courses my first two years of college; I saw the pain and hurt of loved ones faced with injustice; I saw the name of Jesus, whom I know to be Love, being used to spew hate; I was confused, saddened, and at times, angry. I wanted to learn more about why this was, and what I could do about it. I then saw Social Justice as the perfect pairing to Political Science. It gave me the historical grounding I was yearning for, and flexibility in the classes I could take. It also provided me the opportunity to study abroad that I had so looked forward to. I appreciated that not only could I learn in a class-room setting, but I could grow through more hands-on opportunities such as community service hours, retreats, conferences, and a choice of a “broadening experience”, which I realized could be one of OBU’s exchange programs.

My mind was set; I was going to study abroad. When I set my mind on something, it’s hard for me to put it out of my mind. Contrary to what some may believe, to my benefit or downfall, stubbornness is one of my strongest-suits. I let this slide in most cases, in attempts to keep peace and not offend anyone, but if it’s something that really matters to me, It’s hard for me to let it go. I also have a tendency to romanticize things. In terms of travelling, I see pictures, I watch movies, I read books and articles, thinking “whoa, I want to go there!”. I daydream, I expect, I get excited at ideas. The struggle, however, is that when I go to follow through with things I put my mind to, once they start to become a reality, I freeze; I get anxious; I doubt my bravery and skill.

My study abroad journey was no exception. As I outline how I came to choose my study abroad site, what I had to do to make it a reality, and what my day-to-day looked like during the semester, there is a theme of uncertainty. I had to learn as I went – a very difficult task for someone struggling with anxiety. This process of learning as I went, though not without difficulty, grew me in invaluable ways and taught me lessons that have changed my perspective on life in many ways.

### **How I chose Edinburgh:**

Although I dreamt of studying abroad, I didn't have a specific site in mind. One of the reasons I chose to go to OBU was all of the study abroad options they offered. When I started to think more seriously about following through with my dream, I was in my junior year and my time to decide was narrowing. Many hours at my work-study in the political science office were spent scrolling through the OBU webpage detailing all of the possible places I could go. I looked up pictures of each place, looked over the university websites, and watched a lot of videos trying to get a sense of what life would be like there. Some of my friends who had studied abroad shared their experiences, as well.

The deadline for submitting a study-abroad application to the Grant Center was coming up quickly. I needed to choose a site and figure out the logistics for the next semester. After considering all of the sites there were to offer, and needing to choose one to put on my application, my indecisive nature could only narrow it down to three options: John Cabot University in Italy, Salzburg College in Austria, and The University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Each university held unique interest.

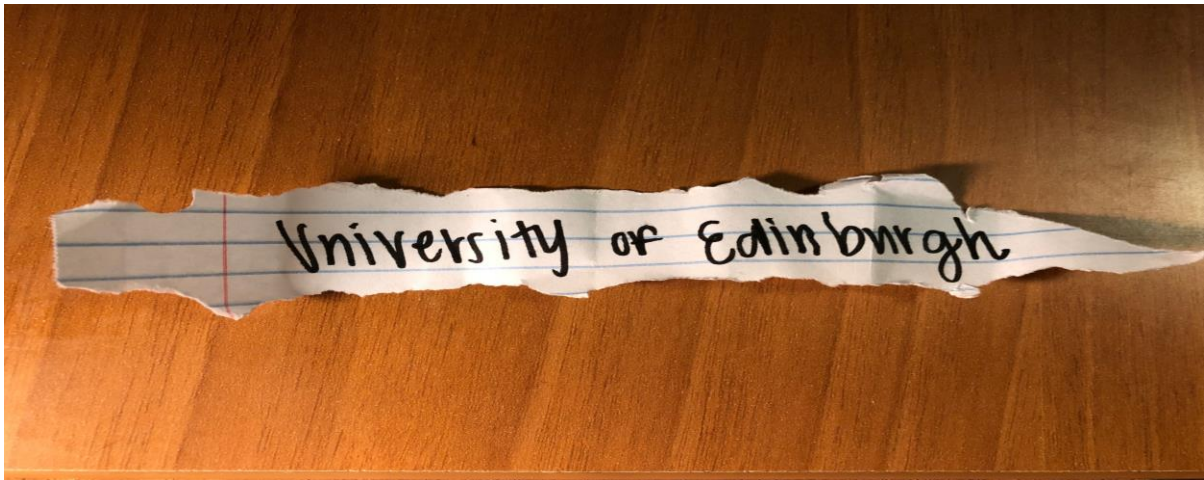
I grew up hearing my grandma talk about Italy all of the time. She, too, held a dear love for travel, and would gush about Italy. Most of the gushing was about Michelangelo and his

artwork. I came to know Michelangelo's *Pieta* and *David* because of her. As my grandma passed away a few years' prior, Italy would be a good way of honoring her memory. I knew she would be happy for me wherever I chose to go, though. As I researched the University, I found that John Cabot is a smaller school, with more tight-knit classes.

The same were true for Salzburg College. It is a study abroad university, meaning that the only students there for the semester are students on exchange. In this way, it is an even more tight-knit community, with a streamlined program of study (which I knew would help with my indecisiveness in terms of class choices). One of my good friends had who had studied there recently was also the one who reinvigorated my excitement over study abroad with tons of pictures, fun memories, and advice. Even more so, Salzburg is a city of music, one of my other passions. Living in the city where the Sound of Music is set? Yes, please.

Then there was The University of Edinburgh. Other than the language being the same, I knew this would likely be the most different college experience compared to OBU. Going to a small private school in Arkansas, I often wondered how I would handle going to large universities in a big city (1,500 students compared to 30,000). It was also a "prestigious" and "ancient" University, where people such as Charles Darwin studied; I thought that to be pretty cool. Not to mention the fact that Scotland is arguably one of the mostly beautiful landscapes in the world.

I talked to Ms. Tonya in the Grant Center for the millionth time. She assured me that there was no "wrong" choice; anywhere I went would be an enjoyable and growing experience. As my indecisive nature strikes once again, it was now up to a hat to decide. I wrote all three choices on a slip of notebook paper, tore them off, and placed them in a hat the very night the application was due to the Grant Center. Here is what the hat decided:



I would love to be able to write that from this very moment, all of my indecisiveness and uncertainty faded away. But the truth is, it did not. Regardless though, I stuck with the decision, sent the news to my family, selected the site on my application, and turned it in.

#### **How I got Enrolled & the Uncertainties in Between:**

Now that I was approved to study abroad through OBU, I had to be accepted through the University of Edinburgh and figure out all of the logistics this came with this. I soon came to find out that another student from OBU, Madeline, was also going to Edinburgh the next semester, providing further reassurance in my decision. We were the first two OBU students to do exchange with Edinburgh in a long time, so there were many more “unknowns” in what the semester would look like for us. It was good to have someone else to ask questions with. The Grant Center also held safety trainings and paperwork Q&A sessions to try and prepare all of the students studying abroad. To be accepted by the University, I had to submit an exchange application.

The exchange application to University of Edinburgh (UOE) consisted of letters of recommendation from professors, a copy of my official OBU transcript, as well as a personal

statement explaining why I thought Edinburgh was a good choice for exchange. The personal statement I submitted read as follows:

*Studying abroad is something I have dreamt of and talked about doing ever since I decided to go to college. I think it is an amazing way to grow, learn deeply, and explore the world. I love to travel and learn about different cultures and I believe studying abroad will be an amazing opportunity to do so. The University of Edinburgh seems like a great place for this dream to come true. One reason I chose Edinburgh is because I feel most at home around a diverse group of people who all hold different perspectives to share. University of Edinburgh has also been around for hundreds of years, carrying with it a rich history and culture. I think it would be amazing to physically live in Scotland and learn about this history and culture throughout the semester, simultaneously being able to continue my studies in Political Science and Social Justice. I also believe studying at Edinburgh will challenge me to grow in regards to how it differs from my home university. My home university is a relatively small college in a rural town, with about 1500 students. While I have grown tremendously over the past two years at my home university, having the chance to study in a beautiful city, with larger classes, and differing teaching styles will provide a well-rounded college experience. With all of this being said, during my semester abroad at the University of Edinburgh, I wish to continue my growth personally and academically, meet and bond with people from around the world, and explore the castles and greenery of Scotland and of the landscapes of Europe beyond.*

We spent the next few weeks looking at flats, and of course, making a list of all things to do in Edinburgh and where we wanted to go. I soon received my official acceptance letter from UOE and I was ecstatic; It seemed as though my hard work at OBU over the past two years, and how I had grown, prepared me to make a dream come true. I probably realize this preparedness more looking back, though. In the midst of an academically and emotionally tough semester, I doubted whether this was something I could actually do. What's interesting here is that at OBU, I'm halfway across the country from my hometown and family, where I normally cannot go home until the end of the semester anyways (which would be the same case for exchange). The only difference here is that I would be across the ocean rather than across the country. This should be exciting; this is what I had looked forward to, right?



My first semester at OBU was a really challenging time. I went through a “culture-shock” of sorts, where I felt really out of place, questioned whether I had made the right choice in undergrad, and struggled to make good friendships and connections. By my junior year, I had established more of a community and felt much more comfortable. Where the fear likely came in here, then, was that my time abroad of “starting fresh” would put me back to how I felt freshman year. What I didn’t realize at the time was that this experience actually prepared me to study abroad. When I first told my grandpa about the decision he said something like this: “wow, you have certainly grown from the girl who never wanted to spend the night away from home, to the girl going to school across the country, to a girl about to live across the world”.

Another source of apprehension came from finances. At this point, I knew that I was accepted to the UOE and that it worked out with my degree plan. The only factor hanging in the balance was if I could afford to. The day that I went to the financial aid office at OBU and found out that I would be able to study abroad honestly felt like a miracle. I walked out of the office, called my mom to tell her the exciting news, and on that same phone call she told me that she got approved to move into an apartment we had been praying about. I went from saying, “I’m hopefully studying abroad next semester!” to “I’m going to the University of Edinburgh!”. It became officially, official.

As the end of my semester wrapped up, though, more apprehension came to the surface. I spent the first 2 weeks of break (with only 3 at home before leaving for Edinburgh), putting off getting everything ready for my next semester. What if I did not make any friends? What if it didn’t turn out well, and I had no good stories to tell any of the people cheering me on back home? My final week before leaving, I received reassurance and encouragement from friends

and family; encouragement that pushed me to get on that plane when I almost didn't. I took the step of bravery & I'm here, more confident, to tell you briefly about the journey.

### Getting Settled in Edinburgh:



*“Well the road is wide  
And waters run on either side  
And my shadow went with fading light  
Stretching out towards the night  
The sun is low  
And I yet have still so far to go  
My lonely heart is beating so  
Tired of the wonder  
There's a sign ahead  
Though I think it's the same one again  
But I'm thinking 'bout my only friend  
And so I find my way home*

*When I need to get home  
You're my guiding light  
You're my guiding light”*

As the plane landed at the Edinburgh airport, it felt surreal. I was hopeful, yet terrified at the same time. This was the first time I had ever been out of North America (*I mean, technically I had a connecting flight at Heathrow, London, but we'll go with this*). Over the next five months, I was about to see with my own eyes what I had only read about and looked at in pictures. Through all of the anxious tears that went into finding the courage to get on the plane, as I landed, my favorite song came across my shuffle play: Guiding Light, by Foy Vance. The chorus goes, “when I need to get home, you're my guiding light.” Home, for me, is not

necessarily a place, but a feeling of acceptance, comfort, and peace. I felt a peace and a calmness wash over the semester.

That first night was still overwhelming, though. I met up with Madeline, and together we figured out how to get from the airport to the city-center and where our flats were (we ended up living only a few minutes' walk from one another). We arrived in the city early that afternoon, and by 4pm, it was already getting dark. This was fairly difficult when first exploring the city; it made finding our way around that much more confusing. I thought, how am I ever going to know how to get anywhere without using my phone? This came to be one of the coolest parallels of my semester abroad, though. At first, the days were short; the city seemed big and daunting. As the semester went on, the days got longer, and I came to know my way around the close-knit city really well.

There were a few days to get settled in the city before starting classes. In this time, I gradually met my flat-mates: Brian, a fellow semester exchange student from Pennsylvania, Claire, a year-long exchange student from France, Lynn, a Japanese-American four-year international student, and Sam, a four-year student from England. I had no idea who I'd be living with before arriving in Edinburgh. I didn't know whether it would be with all guys, all girls, or a mix. I didn't know whether we were all going to be exchange students or not, either. I say I met them *gradually*, as not all of us arrived at the same time. As 3 out of the 5 of us had already been living in the flat the previous semester, when I arrived at our 5-bedroom flat, I was confused to find a messy shared-kitchen, but no people. It felt as if I were moving into someone else's home, but without them being there yet or knowing who they were. I felt this is a way OBU, as well as UOE, could have done better in preparing me and other exchange students. It

felt much more comfortable as I met them over the first few days, though. Lynn and Claire were also eager to take me shopping for groceries and other essentials I couldn't fit in my luggage.

Though I had to figure out a lot on my own in the first few days, and there wasn't an international group in the way I expected, the University did put on various events to meet fellow students on exchange and introduce us to the school. The first was a mandatory meeting at McEwan Hall, a beautiful building and auditorium where they hold graduation, put on by the Visiting Student Office, when they told us about the resources the University had to offer in terms of health, safety, and academics. The Visiting Student Office was my point of contact for any questions or problems I had throughout my time studying in Edinburgh. I also found out at this meeting that UOE has about 8,000 new exchange students each semester – yes, this would be much different than anything I experienced at OBU. Though the help they offered was abundant, it was much more disconnected and streamlined than OBU. Due to the number of new students each semester, in those first few weeks, you had to wait awhile before being able to meet with an advisor.

Another event was *Taste of Scotland* held at Teviot Row House: the oldest student union building in the world. This was a fun event put on by students, where there were pipers, neeps & tatties, and a whole crowd of exchange students. Teviot is everything you'd imagine an ancient university building in Scotland to be: spiral staircases, numerous pubs, a library bar, a rooftop lounge, an "underground", a debating hall where they held ceilidh's. I went to many other events my first few days there, as well as throughout the semester.

Some of these other events were called "Tasters" (a taste of student led societies that put on events during the semester). UOE had an app, with all of these Taster events laid out, which was one of the things that got me more excited about following through with the semester. I

figured this would be a good way to feel connected to the Uni and make friends, so I made a plan of going to as many of these events as possible. A few Tasters I went to on my own were music related. One was an Acapella workshop that felt like it was straight out of pitch-perfect. I also went to the Female Voice choir, as well as the Edinburgh Concert Choir. I ended up joining both of them and going to rehearsals when I could. Though I didn't end up participating in either concert, I found it was something fun to do during the week where I could experience the Uni culture more fully. The Edinburgh choir, though, was open to anyone in the city whom wanted join. A few practices, I sat next to a middle-aged lady who had moved to Edinburgh a few years past. Though we had a good conversation, I don't remember her name, nor did I ever see her again.

This was something from my study abroad experience that stuck-out to me right away. Due to the size of the University and the building being spread out throughout the city - not on a central campus like in The States - when I met someone, I would likely never see them again unless I made an intentional point of it. Though this was the case for some of the people I met, I did make friends that first week who stayed friends throughout the semester and remain friends now.

One of the first friends I made was Vivien, from Sydney, Australia, also on exchange for the semester. We met at the Baking Society Taster, where we made chocolate-orange cupcakes from scratch and competed against the other teams. She became one of the sweetest blessings and friends.



The “Exchange Eight” also started to form this first week: a self-titled group of friends from all over The States, Canada, and Holland. We started a group message that we still use to keep in touch with one another. We traveled together, did trivia together each week, and tried many new places in Edinburgh together.



The first week was also spent as a “tourist”, exploring the city for fun. In this week I walked the Royal Mile (with the Edinburgh Castle on one end and the Palace of Holyrood on the other), went shopping on Princess Street, and hiked Arthur’s Seat (an extinct volcano that overlooked the city, which you could see from my flat). All of these places became very familiar throughout the semester, yet never lost their wonder.

Looking back, I experienced a lot this week that answered the apprehensive questions I had before arriving. I got to explore a brand-new city and I was immediately amazed by the beauty of Edinburgh. It soon came to feel like home.

### **Classes & Day-to-Day Life:**

The University of Edinburgh has multiple campuses and programs, and I was enrolled in the exchange program with the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. I took three classes during my time there, which does not sound like a lot, but this is the normal course-load for the UK; it transfers to 18 OBU credit-hours. The most similar parallel would be to post-grad studies, where each class has a very heavy-reading load and a few major assignments. It is a much more independent learning environment, where you have to pace your own work accordingly. As you can imagine, adjusting to this new learning environment, while also wanting to spend all of your time exploring Edinburgh and Europe beyond, can be a difficult balance.

In my Britain, Ireland, and Empire class, I had a research paper due halfway through the semester, and an exam (which took the form of timed-essays) during the exam period at the end of the semester received credit for this class under the “historical roots” menu of my Social Justice degree. This class met 3 times a week: twice a week for lectures, and once a week for tutorials. Tutorials were also a new experience. Since class sizes tended to be large (this class

had a couple hundred students), tutorials were a way to unpack course material in a smaller group of students from the class. My tutorial leader for Britain, Ireland, and Empire was an interesting guy with a thick Scottish accent. One of the reasons I chose to take this course was because I thought it would be a good experience to learn about UK history in the UK. I really did enjoy listening to the lectures and the discussions in tutorials. An interesting facet of this course was that there were multiple lecturers; every few weeks a new professor would teach the class. Almost all of them had accents, so that was pretty cool.

The hardest course I took was International Relations Theory. I received credit for this course in my Political Science degree. It met twice a week: once for lecture, and once for tutorial. This was a fairly small class comparatively (about 100 students), and the course material was complex and dense. The two assignments for the course consisted of two research essays, one of which I got to write about feminist IR theory, which allowed me to make connections with other Social Justice Studies. I felt that Comparative Politics and World Politics, two classes I took at OBU, helped prepare me for this course most. I even had my mom send me pictures of my related notes from these courses when I was struggling to write for one of the required essays.

The third class I took, which if I had to choose, I would classify as my favorite, was Traditional Song – Scots. I thankfully got credit for it under Fine Art: Music. It was a seminar course, meaning it only met once a week, for two hours, and only had about 30 students. I felt that this class got me most involved with Scottish culture. There were a few other exchange students in the course and because of this, our professor taught brief historical backgrounds for the lessons. There were also many students who were studying traditional music as their major. It was good to be in a class that catered towards those with extensive musical backgrounds, and



those with almost none. Most of the time, we listened to songs and used them as case studies to delve into the Scottish music tradition. As these songs were often in Gaelic, our professor had to practically teach us a new language. She was Scottish herself, was a traditional Scottish singer, and was very knowledgeable and passionate about the topics. For this class, I had an essay, a presentation, and an exam. For my essay and presentation, I was able to look at women's role in traditional Scottish folk music, also relating back Social Justice studies and the those who have been historically oppressed still finding ways to fight for their place in society.

As I mentioned earlier, the University buildings were spread out throughout the city. At first I was worried about getting to lectures on time (as two of my courses were back-to-back), but as I found my way around the city, I could navigate to where I was going more quickly. I learned to love walking through the city to get to class. The tutorials and lectures I took were all held in different buildings; There was an interesting mix between modern and historic. The most central part of campus for the Humanities & Social Sciences, George Square, was much more modern than I expected. I spent many hours studying in the George Square Library, where I had to get to early enough in the day or I would not be able to find a free desk.

During the day, I also spent a lot of time studying at the University cafes they had in each building at George Square; they had the best cheese & tomato toasties and the best mochas. One of my favorite parts about Edinburgh that I miss greatly are the local coffee shops. Especially on the street I lived off of, there were numerous little coffee shops that made the best study spots. The Wi-Fi did not always work that great, but just stopping in to get coffee, a pastry, or soup, was worth it. Every coffee shop had a different aesthetic, and it was a lot of fun to try all of these new places. Mochas were my go-to-drink to try. Study abroad brings with it a new perspective: make the most of everyday because everything around you is exciting and new.

Whenever nice weather came along, my favorite part of the city came alive: The Meadows. The Meadows is a park in Edinburgh, with large green-space and trails lined with cherry blossom trees. When the sun was out, the green space was full with people picnicking, grilling, studying, lounging around with friends, playing Frisbee...it was lovely to go for walks there, read, and relax with friends.



In the evenings, since I lived in a self-catered accommodation, I often cooked dinner at my own flat, or went to Madeline's. It was a new experience for me since I never lived in an apartment on my own. Our shared-kitchen interactions were how I got to know my flat-mates. Whenever my flat-mate from France and I were in the kitchen together, she would often make comments about my dinner choices. We would sometimes unexpectedly talk for hours, whether it be about random YouTube videos she was watching or books she was reading, about France, or about our different travel experiences. I could always expect my flat-mate from England to stop in to turn on the tea kettle.

When not failing-at-cooking at my own flat, my friends and I would sometimes go out and try different restaurants in Edinburgh. There are actually a lot of different cuisine options to

choose from. One of my favorites I discovered was called Bonnie Burrito. It's like chipotle, but Scottish, and way better.

One of my favorite things to do became grocery shopping. Living in the city-center, the grocery stores were small little shops, with fewer options, and a much simpler process than shopping in The States. It also taught me a lot about easy sustainability practices. Almost everyone carried their groceries in reusable sacks. If not, you had to pay 5 pence for a plastic bag, that was nicely of reusable quality. The same rule exists in my home-town (5 cents a bag), but not nearly as many people follow its intentions. Once I got into the habit of always bringing my bags, or simply using my backpack to carry groceries, it became a simple task that makes a big difference in terms of sustainability.

Most everyone walked wherever they went. This was most definitely true for exchange students. Though I had to leave much earlier when I needed to be somewhere at a certain time, it made the journey enjoyable. Say I was walking to a new coffee shop or library – not only would I experience that new place, but I would get to walk through that part of the city and take it all in, as well. By the end of my semester abroad, an hour walk to somewhere did not seem long at all.

Twice a week, I went to a church about 10 minutes away from my flat: Life Church, Edinburgh. When not travelling on weekends, I would go to the Sunday morning service; the first Sunday, I was greeted with a hug at the door. As most people I came into contact with during other days were exchange students, it was nice to meet local residents through a local church. It was a good place for connection and belonging.

Life Church also had a young-adult bible study every week, led by the most welcoming church intern I have ever met. Each Wednesday, we would meet at the church, eat pizza together, and fellowship. We also had a few game-nights, dinners, and lunches together. I met

more full-time students at the University this way, as well as other exchange students. I met my friend Tiana this way, who I later travelled with and still keep in contact with.

Speaking of travelling, study abroad provided me the opportunity to travel throughout Scotland, as well as to many other countries in Europe. Before getting to Edinburgh, I was very anxious about never having planned a trip for myself, as well as not knowing how this would work in another country. I soon came to realize this is much easier than I thought, dangerously easy in terms of finances. You simply buy a ticket (whether it be a plane, train, or bus), book a hostel, and go.

I travelled to the Scottish-highlands twice with the International and Exchange Student Society (IESS), who planned out guided bus tours (another fun way to meet people). The first IESS tour was a day-trip to Glenfinnan and Glencoe. I had never seen Harry Potter before, and in anticipation of seeing the infamous Glenfinnan Viaduct and Blake Lake, I of course, had to watch them. Watching the Harry Potter movies with friends for the first time in Scotland is one of my favorite memories from my time abroad. The IESS trip I took was to Isle of Skye, which is easily the most beautiful place I have ever been. My first trip out of Edinburgh was a day trip to Glasgow, which was surprisingly much different from Edinburgh only an hour or so away.

For my “reading week” (a week off of classes in February), I spent a few days in Portugal. One day was spent exploring Lisbon, where I met other people my age traveling Europe, listened to Fado music, and ate lots of Pastel de Nata. The people in this city were so kind. The next day was spent exploring the castles of Sintra, along with a friend I met the day before. St. Patrick’s day weekend was spent in Dublin, Ireland. I got to experience the craziness of the St. Patrick’s day parade, which is mostly American tourists annoying the locals.

The longest trip I took was my two week “spring vacation” in April. My spring break started with a day-trip to Liverpool, England. From there, I took a train to Manchester, England, and caught a flight to Italy where I spent the bulk of my break. In Italy I went to Pisa, Cinque Terre, Florence, Rome, and Venice. The last two days of break were spent in London, England, ending with a Shawn Mendes concert and a train ride back to Edinburgh.

After all of my school-work was over, I had 10 days before flying back to Maryland. When first looking over the semester calendar, I thought, how am I going to spend those 10 days? By the end of the semester, I was wishing for so much longer. I took my first solo-trip, and spent the day in Berlin, Germany. Berlin is somewhere I really wanted to go considering all that I have learned about it in my political science and history courses – other than its rich historical significance, I learned that the East Side Gallery (of the Berlin Wall) is the largest open-air gallery in the world, which I got to see in person. From Berlin, I then flew to Copenhagen, Denmark, which was one of my favorite trips I took. I met up with friends from my home-church who were on vacation in Europe at the time. We went to markets, explored castles, walked around the city, and spent one day in Tivoli Gardens.

My last few days of study abroad, I really wanted to spend in Edinburgh. I was going to miss it so much, and I wanted to soak up as much of the city as I could while I was still living there, which may never be the case again. I spent the last few days saying bye to friends and getting to see parts of the city I had not been to yet. My last night, I spent at Portobello Beach, watching the sun-set on a challenging, yet beautiful semester.



Each place I traveled, I could talk for hours about the fun, the sentimental, the at-times scary, and everything in between. I could also say the same for all of the places I got to enjoy within Edinburgh itself. One of the best parts about studying abroad is that you actually get to *live* in the city you are studying in – you get to experience the country and culture much more in depth.

### **Valuable Lessons**

#### **Imperfectly, Perfect:**

At the very beginning of this paper, I wrote of the vibrancy of Scotland, then raising the question, why did it not always feel this vibrant? In the midst of an amazing experience, that I am so grateful for, I also experienced severe anxiety.

Ever since my senior year of high school, I realized that if I tried in school, I could do well. I began to take academics, and my grades, very seriously. Along with this came a sense of perfectionism; a sense that my intelligence was hanging in the balance until I could complete an assignment well.

When I got to Scotland, I brought this mindset with me. From the few major assignments I did have, I felt a pressure that I had to do just as well on them as I would at my home University. The thing is, I was in a completely new learning and living environment. The

University culture also takes academics very seriously, which added to the pressure I put on myself. When I tried to do work, I would freeze; my mind would go blank. I started to experience panic attacks with schoolwork, where I could not focus enough to get the work done.

I thankfully had the Visiting Students Office to reach out to, who offered me help and grace with submitting assignments. It is hard for me to write about this, because it is such a paradox of emotions. I made some amazing memories, but also experienced some of my most severe anxiety. What I have learned from this, though, is that it is okay to reach out and ask for help; it is okay to need grace. It is also okay to not live up to the expectations, we and others, place upon us. We are so much more than our expectations and the product of our work.

From the beginning of the semester, to the end, and every day of my life, I hold onto this truth: God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is all things good and love, and his presence is with me wherever I go. He empathizes with my anxiety, with my depression, with my doubts. In this, I find freedom to live.

### **The Beauty in Relationships & Connection:**

The opportunity to study in another country, experience another culture fully, and travel across Europe is amazing in itself. One of the most important lessons, if not the most important lesson, I learned from my time abroad, though, is that the connections we make with other people in this life is what truly matters. Those connections are what makes life so meaningful and worth living; it's what makes life *full of life*. In the cheesiest way put, it's not about where we are or what we are doing, but who we are with. I don't know that I fully realized the importance of this lesson until a full-year after my time abroad. I was sitting in Life of Christ class, a few weeks into the spring semester of my senior year. It's a required class for Social Justice, and for those first few weeks, with graduation coming up soon, I struggled a lot with the

question of purpose. Obviously, in a class about the Life of Christ, you're faced a lot with the question of who Jesus is, what he meant by the words he said and the actions he took, and what this means for how we live out our daily lives. Such questions of faith are interpreted many different ways, and from all of my previous studies of Social Justice, I know that certain misinterpretations can often lead to injustice in the name of religion. The question of who Jesus is then something we should continually be seeking wisdom about. Throughout class discussions, I found myself having to continually defend my own thoughts on why I believed Jesus to be who he is, and how this has led me to be passionate about Social Justice topics such as mass incarceration, climate change, the refugee crisis...(to name a few).

This one particular day in class, we were talking over the passage of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus talks to at the Water-Well. In this passage, Jesus intentionally took a particular route in his journey so that he could stop and talk to this woman. She was labeled a sinner, and due to her status as a Samaritan and Jesus' as Jewish, it was socially frowned upon for them to even be communicating. Jesus did not follow this norm, however, and instead made her feel seen, accepted, and respected. It just so happened that on the same day that we were talking over this passage, I kept coming back to the question of purpose. What am I going to do with Social Justice and Political Science? If there is so much pain in the world, and these issues are so multifaceted, how is anything I am going to do make a difference? What is a tangible way I can even make a difference? And then my professor asked the class what our thoughts were on Jesus from this passage. What I wanted to say was that Jesus often, like he did with this woman, took time out of his normal ministry (where crowds followed and gathered), to make individual people who were hurting and suffering to be seen, healed, and ultimately, loved. I thought, should this not be the point of our life and ministry, as well? To make others feel seen and loved?



Then, it clicked. I realized that If I'm not living everyday through the love of Christ, and sharing this same love with other people, then what's the point of what I am doing? In other words, while the work and career I have one day does matter, the way I treat people as I do the life-changing works matters, too. It would be hypocritical to do good work, helping others, but not be loving to people who I come into contact with throughout my day. What is the point of helping many lives, if I don't take the time to acknowledge the lives of those right in front of me? The focus should not be on the work itself, but on the people and individuals you are trying to help. This is at the very heart of Social Justice work. To acknowledge the worth, dignity, and value, of life.

This has honestly been one of the most freeing lessons for me. I don't need to be in continual search of what my "purpose" is. As long as I am loving others and seeking wisdom, I am living out this purpose. Hopefully, this will lead me to a career. But, I know that as long as I am living with this new-found purpose, I'm living in Jesus' will. In my life, this looks like turning my focus from what life "should" look like, and instead, enjoying things for what they are. It looks like not putting my value in what I produce, such as my schoolwork or creative projects, but realizing I am already valued. This freed me from the expectations I placed on my own life. It freed me from thinking that I needed to accomplish certain things to be successful. It freed me to realizing that I have time for relationships, for connection. This is what makes life beautiful: being alive with other people. Looking back on my semester abroad, I realize I was learning that lesson along the way. At first, I had all of these ideas of how I wanted the semester to go. If you've ever made a plan or expectation, you know they normally do not go as planned. As I already mentioned, having these expectations made me so anxious about not living up to them. I realized it was not about how many places or countries in Europe I got to travel to, but

whether or not I enjoyed the time I spent in those places. I know this to be true: the places I did get to travel to were made that much more meaningful because of the people who were with me.

**Concluding Thoughts:**

I am so grateful for the opportunity that I received through OBU, The Social Justice Department, and The University of Edinburgh to make my dream of studying abroad come true. I cannot help but think about all of the students and friends this semester who had to let go of their dreams, and return home earlier than expected from their semesters abroad, as well as those who had looked forward to studying abroad in the fall. I know this must feel heartbreaking. Hopefully in the near future, when it is a safe and responsible choice, you have the opportunity to travel again.