

The Enormous Room Seven Years after John M. Gill's Final Visit to La Ferté Macé

Gillian Huang-Tiller

At midday on July 19, 2008, my husband Ken and I, taking a half day from his International Arthurian Conference, drove to La Ferté Macé from Rennes, capital city of Brittany. Our visit occurred seven years after John Gill and his wife Susan last visited the complex in 2001 (Petit 16). For a guide, we took with us the 1998 issue of *Spring* with Gill's article, "*The Enormous Room* and 'The Windows of Nowhere': Reflections on Visiting La Ferté-Macé."

It was a two hour drive northeast from Rennes to this Norman town. Thanks to help from student aides at the conference site at the Université of Rennes 2-Haute Bretagne (Campus Villejean), we got excellent directions. They also helped by calling ahead to inform us regretfully of the school's recess until the end of July. The current site has been turned into a technical school, known as the Lycée Nationalisé Polyvalent et L.E.P. Des Andaines. We learned that we probably wouldn't be able to see the inside of the buildings or have any chance to talk to a faculty member as Gill had in the visit chronicled in his 2002 article, "The Enormous Room Remembered." Gill met with a school librarian, M. Claude Froc, who showed him the pamphlet of the school's 1984 exhibit on the school building's long history. The exhibit recognized Cummings the American writer and his account of his WWI incarceration at the site, *The Enormous Room*, as an important document in the school's history. We hoped we might run into someone on the grounds as Gill and Susan did in their early visits, but such luck was not with us.



Figure 1

In the 1998 article, Gill gave a very detailed tour inside and around the three-building complex, looking up at the Enormous Room where Cummings and his friend William Slater Brown, along with some 30-60 others, were imprisoned for three months—from September 23 through December 19, 1917 (Kennedy 148, 156)—on the false charge of espionage by the French government (*ER* 41, 46). Coming in from the south, the opposite direction of Gill and Susan's entrance, Cummings' Enormous Room was

readily visible from half a mile away. I took a picture from the distance of the back side of the building complex from which Cummings and his fellow prisoners could look out through the unblocked windows (figure 1). The area behind the church on the school's left side in this picture would be the men's court (Gill, "Remembered" 174; see also Cummings' own sketch plan in this issue).

At the site, what we first noted was the addition of dormer windows to the top floor—this apparent remodeling was not mentioned in either of



Figure 2

Gill's articles, however. Pictures taken before and after WWI show that the current top floor did not then exist and instead was originally a vast space, covered by "a vaulted ceiling 25 or 30 feet above the floor" of the Enormous Room (*ER* 50; cf. Kennedy 150; "Views of La Ferte"; Gill, "Remembered" 169, 173). Nevertheless, today's visitors, if not looking at the old photos,

will not mistake the French third floor from the ground as the site of incarceration because of the unique shape of the "ecclesiastical in feeling" chapel-like windows (*ER* 50, 56).

Further, although the ten windows on the front side of Cummings' Enormous Room are the same as we saw in the old photos, the view from the back shows only eight windows (figure 2). In other words, gazing out of windows, adjacent to the middle building, as Cummings and other inmates did to have a peek at the women's court (*ER* 51-52, 57, 119), would probably be difficult, if not impossible, today. In the place of the two windows, the school has added a parallel, vertical structure, likely containing an elevator, staircase, or both at the side entrance. The middle structure seems to remain the same, without much discernible change, but there is an added overhang in the back of the third building (just past where the kitchen might have been located—*Cuisine* in Cummings' own sketch plan) not shown in a web photo from 1999 (figures 3 and 4). The church shows age in the color of its gray walls, possibly due to pollution. Other buildings appear repainted, with new doors



**Figure 3, Chapel,
Men's Court Side**



Figure 4



Figure 5, The greenhouse and shed

added and with replaced windows and shutters.

In addition, surrounding the site there are only two short walls extant flanking the entrance and a side wall on the school’s left with a mesh fence on top separating the back from the street (Imagine “the men’s court” in that area [ER 56]). We could also see added buildings on the grounds, including a newer shed and a greenhouse, across the back

space from the Enormous Room building, the wing of the three-building complex (figure 5). Because of these new additions and because the yard behind the building has been paved over in asphalt, the *cour* area in the back looked smaller—a bit hard to imagine a collective promenade by men and women on either side of a dividing stone wall, ten feet high, and many other activities taking place in the back behind the church and the middle building (figure 6 and 7; ER 39, 52, 57).

The school seems to keep making improvements to the grounds. The town’s outskirts, adjacent to Bagnoles-de-l’Orne to the south, are developing clusters of businesses. We had a buffet lunch next to the *E Leclerc* shopping center. With ongoing changes, I wonder if the Enormous Room, the building itself, will remain an historical site for Cummings’ readers and scholars to experience the beginning of his quest for IS (ER 168)—a state of being alive, the “Enormous Room” of “I AM” transcending the oppressive institutional collective.



Figure 6, Asphalt court



Figure 7, Asphalt court with far gate

—*University of Virginia at Wise*



Figure 8, Entrance, front (Enormous Room at left, behind trees)



Figure 9, Middle building, front

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