Dr. Eamonn Wall Accompanies Students to Ireland for Irish Summer School at NUI-Galway

By Lauren Terbrock
October 24, 2015

The summer of 2015 marked the 14th year Dr. Eamonn Wall, Smurfit-Stone Corporation Professor of Irish Studies and Professor of English, has traveled with students for the annual Irish Summer School at the National University of Ireland-Galway. The program offers the opportunity to study abroad for about a month every summer, and it provides a wide variety of courses to help each student—graduate, undergraduate, and lifelong learners—grow academically and creatively. Courses offered span literature, film, history, sociology, archeology, art, music, and creative writing.

The interdisciplinary nature of the program is a major draw for the students who travel to Ireland, as it attracts students from various departments looking to gain more experience (and more credits—students can earn 6 credits that can be transferred back to UMSL). Dr. Wall says that's just the nature of Irish studies: “it is not possible to study Irish history or archaeology, for example, without including something of literature—in both Irish and English.” John Fournie, an English MFA student, also found the learning opportunities outside of class valuable, as they provided “lessons that allow you to develop an independence and understanding of people that you wouldn’t get from a lecture, no matter the course.”

For graduate and undergraduate students—English and non-English majors alike—the time abroad is both engrossing and fun. While students do have exams, essays, and
other coursework to accomplish, Galway itself provides opportunity upon opportunity to engage in the culture of Ireland. June and July is not only when school is in session, but also when Galway’s festivals are in full swing. The Galway Film Fleadh (Festival) and the Galway Arts Festival seem to be the two largest events. However, Myrta Vida, an English MFA student, says there are numerous other local and international festivals to take part in: “I was able to attend a poetry reading by local Irish writers, catch a street performance by Spanish acrobats, watch a movie about Palestinian refugees, and attend a South African playwright’s one-man show, all in just one week!” Two undergraduate students, Cody Spotanski and Mallory Bochantin, were able to share their work at the Galway Arts Festival after taking the Creative Writing Poetry course. John Fournie recommends another way to experience Galway, too: “befriending some of the locals on a rainy night in a pub and learning the finer points of Gaelic football.”

As if the academic and creative writing opportunities aren’t enough to boast, the program offers chances to experience the Irish landscape outside of Galway. Because of all of the field trips and overnight stays, Vida says, “There is little excuse to not engage with the environment, history, culture, and beauty of Ireland . . . I’m now convinced that there are as many castles in Ireland as there are strip malls in the U.S.” And visiting the Aran Islands was an invaluable experience for Mallory Bochantin, an undergraduate Liberal Studies major: “It was some of the most gorgeous scenery I’ve ever had the pleasure of photographing. We rode bikes along the coast, and I kept stopping to take pictures of the ocean.”

From the Irish history, culture, and landscape, to the interdisciplinary academic opportunities, the students who traveled to Ireland this year found the experience to be enlightening to their academic and personal growth. Myrta Vida’s “sense of accomplishment” came not only from the new writing approaches she acquired, but also from her ability to “navigate [her] way through a foreign environment, all while also being a college student.” Ultimately, it seems, this multifaceted study abroad engenders a unique and interconnected learning that students can bring back to the UMSL campus and their community.

For more information on Irish Summer School at NUI-Galway, please visit: http://studyabroad.umsl.edu/summer/irish.html