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Martin McKinsey

Associate Professor of English - College of Liberal Arts

Professor McKinsey traveled to Scotland in July to present a paper at the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literature.



Professor McKinsey, honorary Scotsman on Edinburgh's North Bridge

There is something to be said for armchair travel. You are not liable to have your wallet snatched out of your pocket, as was mine on my way to catch a flight from Athens to London. Nor are you likely to spend a sleepless night in the airport because of a missed connection, as I did at London-Stansted during my return trip. Still, for all the disadvantages of actual travel, more than likely what you experience between such mishaps will make you glad you left your armchair behind.

This past July, with the help of a CIE travel grant, I attended the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literature (IASIL) in Glasgow, Scotland. It was the third IASIL conference I had attended. The first two had been in Ireland. That this year's conference was being held in Scotland had a symbolic dimension. Not only did it reinforce the "World Perspectives" theme of the conference, it also hinted at a mending of fences in Scottish-Irish relations, long strained by differences over the Northern Irish question. The location was lucky for me personally as well, since despite a growing academic interest in Scottish literature, I had never set foot in the country. The IASIL conference allowed me to gracefully fill that gap.

Not surprisingly, given the economic downturn, attendance was lower this year, especially among Americans. I myself had flown in from Athens, where with the help of a research fellowship from the Onassis Foundation I was completing a book on the twentieth-century Greek poet C.P. Cavafy. The theme of the conference allowed me to combine my Greek project with my research interests in contemporary Irish literature, as I compared two poems by Cavafy with poems by Northern Irish poet Michael Longley. The subject of my talk, as it evolved in the weeks beforehand, had to do with how war victims are commemorated in verse. The fact is, you never really know what your subject is, and what its true dimensions will be, until you sit down to write. I plan to spend some of my sabbatical year researching scholarship on public monuments – especially war monuments – and to use this to develop my discussion into a journal article.

In addition to presenting my own paper, I was also called in to serve as chair on two other panels. Outside conference hours, I grabbed the opportunity to meet Alan Riach, head of the Department of Scottish Literature at University of Glasgow and current president of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies. Both he and conference organizer Paddy Lyon brought me up to speed on "literary Glasgow," from poet Tom Leonard ("wirraw init thigithir missyz") to novelist James Kelman ("There was a wee bit of hallucinating going on, but no that much, no when ye come to consider it.") Fortunately, these and other conversations were conducted in standard English, not the near impenetrable Glaswegian variety you sometimes hear on the streets, that writers like Leonard have attempted to capture. Glasgow itself is an impressive Victorian edifice of stone: the Empire's "Second City" in its nineteenth-century heyday, but fallen on hard times since the post-war industrial decline. Urban renewal has erased all but a few traces of its industrial past, and left great rips in its urban fabric; nevertheless the freshly sandblasted city is making a comeback as habitat and destination, and beginning to live down its gritty "mean streets" reputation.

I took advantage of a free weekend to hop over to Edinburgh, an hour away by train. Edinburgh is Scotland's more recognizable cultural capital, home to an internationally famous summer arts festival. The festival was still a week away, but between the Scottish Poetry Library, where I spent the better part of one day, and sights like Edinburgh Castle and the Scottish National Gallery, there was more than enough to distract me. As it happened, my visit coincided with the Edinburgh trip of the UNH Cambridge Summer Program, so I was able to rendezvous with English department colleagues for a delightful meal of mussels and oysters. (Thanks to Andy Merton for snapping my picture.)

Now what was that I was saying about the pitfalls of travel?





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