



St. Thomas University Irish language instruction



The following question and answer interview with Críostóir Ó hUigín, the 2011/12 visiting scholar and Irish language teacher at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, was produced in condensed essay format in the June 2012 issue of The Shamrock Leaf. This full version provides a more complete and accurate view of Chris's always humorous, often irreverent, personality.

Chris was born in Dublin, but his connections are really in rural County Mayo, an old and very Irish part of the Republic, where Irish Gaelic can still be readily heard. We want to thank Chris for his time and his reflections on this past year in Canada.



Describe the program you're involved in that brought you here to St. Thomas. How many others are here in Canada and where are they teaching?

The programme I am a part of is a co-funded exchange programme between the Government of Canada and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in Ireland. The programme is coordinated by the Ireland-Canada University Foundation. Each year six visiting scholars are sent to six participating universities in Canada to teach Irish within the universities responsible department or programme. This is the third year scholars have been sent. They are located at: St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB ; St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS ; St. Mary's University, Halifax, N.S. ; Memorial University, St. John's N.L. ; Concordia University, Montréal QC ; St. Michael's College, Toronto, ON.

And this coming year will see an expansion as the University of Ottawa will also receive a scholar, bringing the number annually up to 7 Irish scholars.

One senior scholar is also appointed annually, and it varies where they go each year. This year they are at St. Mary's Halifax, and last year the senior scholar was in Toronto.

What part of Ireland are you from? Could you provide a little description?

I never like to answer this question!! I was born in Dublin, Ireland. That is the capital city. But I moved around a lot. And many people get confused as to where I'm from so I usually leave that out, especially with other Irish people, cause they can get a bit irritated trying to work me out! I've lived in many, many, many parts. So in short, I'm from Ireland, all-over - that's enough!

How prevalent is the Irish language among the people in your home town and surrounding area?

I speak a dialect of Irish most heard in the barony of Erris, Co. Mayo. The two strongest Irish-speaking areas are located near Ceathrú Thaidhg (north of Belmullet) and An Fód Dubh (on the Erris peninsula near the bottom tip).

It's complicated to explain, because the government chose to draw language boundaries in 1922 and again in 1956 to mark officially Irish-speaking areas. When they first drew the lines, the surveyors hugely exaggerated the amounts of Irish-speakers in regions so that poor families (Irish and Anglophone) could avail of state grants and benefits. So the language was weakened because large Anglophone areas were included, for reasons other than linguistic ones. The whole barony of Erris is designated Irish-speaking, in reality back in 1956 only the two towns I mentioned were actually Irish-speaking. English was the lingua franca in all other areas. That said, you will hear Irish in Belmullet the largest town in the barony and see bilingual signs, so had it not been for the silly boundary exaggeration we would probably be saying Irish is growing in Erris. But because it was drawn, we tend to say Irish is dying and less used. Even in these two Irish-speaking towns, Irish is under serious threat from English. The towns are peripheral and rural, sparsely populated, with very few young people. I suppose they are townlands rather than actual towns!

Nationally it is another story. Officially we are a bilingual nation, Irish and English are both official languages. Although you wouldn't be aware of that if you weren't Irish or you hadn't spent a good deal of time in Ireland. Unlike Canada, Ireland is not widely known as bilingual. And even Europeans ask when I say I speak Irish, oh you mean the dialect of English, and then I say no, and they ask do I mean Gaelic, and it goes on like that. Of course, the Irish government and Tourist Board do not even think to promote Ireland as having two official languages. With Canada, it is obvious, especially when contacting embassies and getting tourist information, you always say it is available in both of Canada's official languages. In Ireland, if it is available, you're lucky and even then it would not be advertised. I don't think the government even think about it- that Ireland is bilingual. It's only when an Irish-speaker complains that they suddenly go- "Oh, they speak Irish.... Have we got that in Irish? Etc."

Ireland has around 4.5 million (not including Northern Ireland). About 4% of the country is Irish-speaking, and around 40-45% are bilingual to some degree. Realistically, we accept that around 80,000 people speak and use Irish in the real sense, between native Irish speaking and fluent bilingual Anglophones. If we include Irish immersion schools that rises to somewhere between 160,000 and 200,000.

Conversely, virtually all Irish native speakers are bilingual in English. Younger speakers sometimes have a better competence in English, especially written English, thanks to lax government planning in various fields, and parents' willingness to allow English dominate. Some older people in their 60s and up may have very little or broken English, but I do not know if we have any left that speak no English at all. We certainly have Irish-speakers with limited English, where they may make themselves understood, but they would prefer, and be most at ease, in Irish, i.e. if they needed a doctor for their broken leg the screaming and shouting would be in Irish rather than English. Many children who have not yet started school would also not speak English if they were from strong Irish-speaking families & areas, although they pick it up quite fast, that by 7 they are talking well in English.

When you first arrived in Canada what were your first impressions? Was there anything that stood out, and I mean locally, not just in the university?

The heat and the trees. It was 30 degrees, there was no wind anywhere,, and the damn forests spoil the view!!! I suppose for an Irishman, it looked like America looks to us on TV. So that was very strong and the accent is close to the American ones across the border. It took a while to able to see any difference between Canada and America - aside from the Queen and Metric measurements and French. But I understand the differences better now. Hence why I do the odd shop in Maine now and again!

Canadians are very quiet, you can be in a public place and all around they are gossiping or speaking to friends and you can't hear even a whisper! That is a skill I have yet to manage.

It was my first time being in North America ever, when I arrived so I was so excited and overwhelmed that it's hard to pinpoint anything from that memory. It was fun; I came through the States on the way so I just felt like I had been put inside the TV listening to all the accents, seeing yellow school buses, skunks, bears and all that stuff.

How do you go about teaching your students a language so unfamiliar to them? Are there special methodologies you use? How do you find their enthusiasm for it? Do you have the impression that any of them will carry on further with it?

Anglophones always ask this! Irish is as foreign to an Anglophone as is French. So I go about it the same way as a French teacher does. The only thing with Irish that's harder is it's more structured, there is more grammar and the spelling system is very different to Latin Based languages. We use the same alphabet, but letters are sounded differently - for example the combinations: bh, mh, dh are all sounded as either an English v or w sound.

Listening and repeating are good to begin, tongue-twisters, games and getting them speaking to each other and to me is important. You have to be encouraging as language learners are always ashamed to speak when they start out as they know they are saying it wrong or have mixed up the sentences. Or they have forgotten a word for something.

I found they were enthusiastic as could be for Uni students! They chose Irish as an elective so they chose to be in my class I didn't bolt them to the desk and force them to stay.

Well at St. Thomas there are only two courses Irish I and II. So after the second one there is nothing. I would love if STU would let me go back and continue on with Irish III and IV, then we would have an Intermediate class. And many had said to me they would take such courses if was teaching them. I'm trying to persuade them that the new scholar coming will be good too and they should take his courses.

A lot, I guess, enjoyed my personality and took my classes because I am, shall we say, quite unique – as far as a lecturer goes. They related to me and wanted to hang out with me sometimes - which was tough because I couldn't do that in my position. That said, even though I had to remain the "professional", they still enjoyed my classes and a lot came up to me to tell me that at the end of the year and one or two said to look them up if I end up in their neck of the woods, so I must have done something right!

Do you think there are things that could be added to the St. Thomas Irish Studies that might attract more students to enter the program?

I feel Irish studies is grossly underfunded/estimated at STU. The bigger departments and programmes are given all the opportunities. I feel smaller programmes are in more need of assistance to grow and make STU more diverse, rather than giving additional funding to, say, a well-established department that can easily pull in the students and researchers and survive on its own. Irish Studies, is not even a department yet at STU, which really baffles me. It should be and we should have a permanent member of staff who can teach Irish. That way the visiting Irish scholar has a mentor and we could have double the courses in Irish for students. I managed to fill my second semester beginners' course in Irish and it would be hugely significant if STU could offer the continuing course for those students in Semester I in the fall. However, because the scholar only teaches three courses over the entire year, the continuation

won't be offered in until Semester 2 and many of my students may feel they have forgotten too much in a year's gap and might be discouraged from taking it. I would love to see a Minor in Irish Language, as well as Irish Studies be available. That said, we need more staff and courses to do that. It is difficult as STU, like most universities today, is having problems distributing funds to departments and programmes etc. and it is hard to ask the university for additional funding for Irish, when larger departments also want funding for various endeavours. It's complicated. I just hope we strike oil in NB soon so the money troubles are no more!!

Have you found many differences between university life here in Canada and that back in Ireland?

Yes. Uni here is totally à la carte. It's very like high school to me. The kids are very dependent on their parents and they aren't able to do much for themselves, as adults would. A 19-20 year old Canadian student would be on par with a 16-17 year old Irish high school student, in terms of know-how and maturity.

In Ireland, and most of Europe, Uni is very prestigious, here virtually all kids go to post-secondary institutions, be it NBCC or University. This is not so in Ireland. In Ireland if you go to university, you have your course (Major to a Canadian) chosen before you finish school. When you enter Uni, you pick your modules (courses to a Canadian) from within your programme only, e.g. if you take French, you pick modules and electives within the French department only, you can't decide you want to take Criminology 101 in First year as an elective as this is part of your BA. In Canada, you select courses and then work out have you enough in one area to major in something. That is totally a foreign concept to me. It is very generalised in my opinion. Irish kids have to know what BA they want before February of their last year. And even then the year before they have to make sure they select the right high school subjects to study in order to qualify for their BA. There are conditions for all university courses. If you want to study Science, you need to take Honours Maths, plus probably two Honours Science subjects and score at least a C if not a B to be acceptable to minimum entry requirements.

It also amuses me how on campus that student residences have a cafeteria and the students have meal cards. In Ireland residences, each floor or apartment is equipped with a fully kitted-out kitchen. Students are expected to be able to cook for themselves. Of course there is a cafeteria on campus during business hours, but students go to the store and buy their groceries and make their own meals back home. I laughed when I heard to this meal card. I don't think it helps students learn to fend for themselves. When will they learn to cook and budget if it's all paid for by their parents and then they have their meals in front of them every day without question?!

The style of courses here is odd also. Every course is three hours per week and that is it. In Ireland, it varies with the course, some are one hour, some are five. On top of the course classes you always have extra discussion groups or tutorials in smaller groups. And in Ireland, for each hour of contact you have in a course you are required to spend double that amount doing independent study. This is weighted into the Irish credit hour system, and Canadians have the most fun trying to understand our system. But students in Ireland will spend that time studying, writing essays, or doing projects, as the courses are structured in such a way that you have to spend that time doing your work or you won't get a passing grade. It's not like Canada, where if you're in class, follow what goes on and revise your notes you pass your class, oh no, that would be high school to us.

Graduate School in Canada is more equivalent to Undergraduate in Ireland, in terms of workload and the maturity of the students. Does any of this make sense??

Although we were blessed with an uncommonly mild winter this year, how did you find it? How different was it from back at home?

Oh it was grand. I enjoyed it. I like the cold so it doesn't bother me. We don't get snow often at home, but, thanks to weird weather, winter 2010 in Ireland brought -20 degrees and maybe 15-25cm of accumulation of snow around Christmas. That is unprecedented for 50 years back home. I guess that was good preparation for here. This year, winter 2011, it was +15 on Christmas day, so god knows what's going on. We were anticipating -10 to -20 again and we didn't get it! Normal Christmas temperatures for us would range from -5 to +5.

What are your impressions of our local activities and attractions – hockey games – did you have the chance to see one in person?; the farmers' market – how does it compare to back home?; Have you become a Tim Horton's fan? What are your favourite restaurants/fast foods and which do you miss most from back home?

If I were Canadian, I would have played hockey and I probably would be at STU studying on a hockey scholarship playing for the Tommies. I love to watch it. I wish I could play it. I'm trying to learn but it's something that will take a long time as I only started learning to skate at 16 or 17 and, in Canada, I am trying still to correct silly things like weak ankles on the ice. I will get it eventually. I can skate well enough though. Not quite ready to try hockey just yet.

I've been to couple of hockey games. I want to get to more next year. I'm watching the playoffs but the Canadiens are out, so it means nothing anymore.

Farmers Market - Great for breakfast!!!!

I like Tim's, but I'm no Canadian - I kept forgetting to roll up the rim and check to see if I'd won anything. I was coldly told that no self-respecting Canadian would forget that - to which I replied "I ain't no self-respecting polite Canadian". I don't drink coffee and never have as it makes me very ill. I do get tea at Tim's though and I like it - also addicted to blueberry muffins.

Ok at the mention of fast food I am going to warn you that this is a North American thing. Eating in Ireland does not centre around restaurants and fast food joints! In Ireland, we eat at home, at friends, or in a family fun café or sandwich bar. The food at home is amazing, you have no idea! Over here, it's all chains and brands. ☺ We do have McDonald's and Burger King and the likes but you won't catch Irish people eating out there often. Maybe teenagers on the way to the cinema or something. Before coming to Canada I had not been in McDonald's or Burger King in years! Now I am there maybe once a week, maybe twice, and it frightens me. I try to cook at home as much as I can but if I'm on the go on the road or in town, I don't have a lot of choice - there are few sandwich bars or decent cafes with the food I am used to at home here. I'm adapting, but I haven't found my Canadian self yet in terms of food and eating habits.

I am partial though to Pulled-Pork in a box, poutine is my drunk food, and I do enjoy a Canadian BBQ around a bonfire.

Have you been back to see your family this year? What stories of your experience in Canada were they most interested in?

I went home for Christmas. They just asked if I liked it and showed them pictures. They asked typical things as Irish people who haven't been here would: "Do they really say Oot and Aboot and Eh?", "have you tried maple syrup?" "is there moose everywhere?" "is it really American" and such. You have to bear in mind Irish people will refer to "American", when talking about the U.S and about Canada as well, we mean NORTH-American, but we say American. Canadians take offence, misunderstanding that we do actually know Canada is a separate country.

I'm trying to remember if there is anything in particular, but it's mostly "Is it just like as it is on TV?" I know I had thought from TV everything would be gigantic size, houses, cars etc. The houses can be big, but cars are more or less non-gigantic. Houses over here in the Maritimes are definitely upside down in layout though to an Irish person. For me it's like Scandinavia or Greenland meets America.

What places have you managed to visit while you've been here? Any experiences stand out for you in particular?

I've been around and out of New Brunswick. Within NB I have seen Moncton, Bouctouche and that general area, as well as Saint John and Fredericton. I've seen up as far as Hartland and Woodstock on the west side. And I've got briefly to the centre Boiestown, Doaktown, Blackville, Miramichi. I've yet to see Fundy and the Acadian Peninsula up by Bathurst and Edmundston direction.

Other places Nova Scotia I've seen Halifax and the Annapolis Valley and a little of Cape Breton and the Celtic Colours festival there.

I've been to PEI and I LOVE it. It is literally New Ireland. It looks like home. They have a slight lilt (not as good as Newfoundland, but good enough). They quarrel over land and fishing, the weather. They gawk when an out-of-towner walks in a bar and they know how to hold their drink. I love those Islanders with a passion.

Went to Newfoundland and loved it too. Their accent is a mix of Cork/ Waterford / Wexford in Ireland and we had some fun explaining we weren't from NL. The locals couldn't tell the difference. It doesn't look like Ireland to me though, even if it sounds like it.

Briefly been to Ottawa and Kingston in Ontario - a different world to the Maritimes. I'm definitely an adopted Maritimer as I found Ontario sooo strange. I was in Montréal briefly as well but I'll need to spend more time there to get a better picture of Québec. I have haven't decided whose side I'm taking there, Québec or the rest of Canada, we will see.

Not yet been out west, but I'll get there some day. I'm not in a rush though. I love my maritime Canada.

And Lastly, Stateside - - I've been through Maine all the way to Portland. It I more like how I would imagine a North American town to look. Also saw New York on St. Patrick's Day - a weekend to be remembered with my god Islander friend Ferne Stewart. Definitely an unforgettable experience!

What are your plans for after your term here is up? Have you considered staying in Canada or do you feel it's time to go home to your family and friends?

I am not going anywhere! I will be around for a year or two more at least. There are no prospects back home, so I'm waiting on here till things get better. If that takes 10 years then I guess I'll have made a life here and stay more permanently, but I don't want to think about that now. Every Irish emigrant is so

mentally traumatised to leave that Island that we don't enjoy thinking "I am here forever". We prefer "I'll go home some day soon now". I will always be Irish, always, always.