Throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. [TWAIN]
For months on end I had been nervously looking forward to this experience; saving money, informing friends and family (‘Northern Ireland? - Yes, Belfast – Isn’t that where they used to, well you know, bomb places and stuff? –Yep- Djeez man… etc.), planning my stay, browsing weblogs and grooming my mindset to a point of no return. After all, spending a couple of months abroad takes guts. Have a look.
Academic Study

When you live abroad, you spontaneously learn new things. However, we still had to do our share of formal learning if we wanted to keep our academic goals at heart. Which we did. The courses over at St-Mary’s are slightly different from the ones back home in Belgium, as you will read further on, but this unfamiliar approach does have its benefits. When you are a student at St-Mary’s, you attend both ‘normal’ classes and so called tutorials. The regular courses are being taught with a lower level of interaction as a Belgian student would expect, but in order to satisfy that particular part of your learning appetite you pay a visit to the tutorials.

I attended a number of courses, which I will briefly describe:

First of all there’s European History. It’s a course that’s always interesting, even if you’re not a history student. The lecturer, Mr Feeney, is a very experienced teacher and avid speaker and will most certainly NOT bore you back to medieval times.

Another course I attended was Irish Literature, tackling the Irish short story as well as some intriguing poetry fostered in a troubled society on the mend.

I also took some courses related to my own field of study back home (comparative education) and sat in on some religious classes, but the real pinnacle of educational comparison has to be the international week. What struck me the most was the diversity of the teaching methods used by an international crew of lecturers. I was pleasantly surprised to see that every visiting lecturer tried to do a good job and it seemed to me that everyone learned from this melting pot of educational strategies. Indeed, it’s a project a future Erasmus student should really consider joining, because you will easily pick up tons of good examples. And I haven’t even mentioned their course content! (you will have to read a bit more).

Cultural Programme

In an attempt to season our stay overseas we embarked on various cultural quests. But then again, what can be considered to be ‘cultural’? If cultural merely implies the transfer of one country’s look and feel to a visitor then my list would become endless, as our newborn lives attracted countless chunks of Northern Ireland to our gradually broadening points of view on a day-to-day basis. A chat with the neighbours, a quick visit to your local grocery shop or even the commercials barging into your favourite programme could be regarded as being culturally enriching from this perspective. Therefore, I will disguise my laziness as logic and state that on the other, slightly more restrictive hand cultural activities consist of interaction
between one person’s home grown perception of culture and another country’s fruits of the arts. There, my list just became conveniently more comprehensive.

Culture, real culture (cf. above) has been abundant in our home away from home, ranging from a course-based look behind the scenes of this country’s poetry and prose and our occasional visits to the Irish centre a couple of houses down the road over the numerous live performances by myriad local and foreign bands (obviously to be enjoyed from behind Guinness’ magically foaming beverage) to a submersion in opera (at the Opera House) and amateur theatre (the Culturlann, e.g.). I especially enjoyed the latter, which entertained us with a comical play about a couple on the brink of marriage, while their country and neighbourhood was at the brink of civil war.

Further down the cultural line, a couple of amazing pieces of Irish cinematography were to be found in Irish Film Studies. For some weeks on end, the classroom was regularly filled by either infectious laughs (The Commitments), trying a little tenderness nursing tissue craving tears (Song for a Raggy Boy) or both (Michael Collins).

Of course I have to include the murals, silent witnesses of a stormy past that have the power to grasp your attention while you in turn grab a book from the school library’s well stacked shelves and do some auto-educating. You can pop round to the local tourism office on the Falls road where you are bound to receive loads of informative brochures telling you where to go and what to see in this part of Belfast. The described tour will take you past some of the most striking examples of this civic art and other landmarks, and I’m sure they won’t leave you unmoved.
Finally, I have to mention the rich **pub scene** that cements this society and boasts tons of culture for us to skim off the top of a lovely, yet giant, pint or two. (the Hawthorn bar in –have a guess- Hawthorn street, is a huge pointer)

Concluding this paragraph, I would like to point out that the sum of the earlier mentioned experiences, as well as some additional trivia yet to come in this paper struck me on an unsuspecting moment some days ago. I was sitting on a park bench, being all botanical and contemplating my (soon to be a lovely/lively memory) time spent when I suddenly realized that I confidently would be able to tell the people back home what (Northern) Ireland really is about, given a couple of hours (days, maybe). Yes, transfer had occurred!

**Social Programme, or how we kept ourselves entertained…**

Slightly more to the other side of the cultural spectrum one will surely stumble upon the social activities, which I believe are very much intertwined with the above. After all, without a human sauce, no culture can exist.

As Belfast people are very warm hearted in my opinion, you generally won’t come across shut doors, provided you do knock them friendlily. The most authentic account of this knocking can be found in some excerpts of my diary, of which I will gladly share a few pages with you.

**conditio sine qua non (week one)**

We had set off for Eire a couple of days ago with the Practice of Teaching Fun as a primary target. A few days into this Erazmataz, we can boldly state that the fun factor has been a high profile guest in our midst. Our coordinator, F. Hennessey –yes, the drink-, has contributed to this by being both very helpful and friendly, and showing off his ability to crack a leg slapper once every other ten minutes. He got us picked up at the drop-off point, a contradiction which I’ll explain briefly: when you (come) visit (us in) Belfast, the cheapest way to go about this business is to take a plane to Dublin, from where you hop onto an Aircoach, which will luxuriously bring you way North.

The Aircoaches release their cargo at the Judy Inn, a hotel near the Belfast city centre, and if you get lucky you’ll be chauffeured around by St-Mary associates, which are abundant. So far so good.

Frank (we can call him Frank because people only tend to interact on an informal basis here) enquired us about the most
basic of needs. There are three, in fact: sex, shelter and food, and as you can probably figure out we only managed to distill two of the above from his rather odd Northern Irish speech pattern. Thank God.

So, he took us to the closest, uhm, restaurant, and filled our bellies with a traditional dish that would even turn Jamie Oliver green with envy. Sausages, bacon, eggs, soda bread, potato bread and refreshing cuppas. Next stop: Lidl. There we got to pick out all our basic bottles, packets, jars and cartons. He then took us for a wee (See! They’re getting to my accent!) spin around town and showed us the house we would be living in for the next couple of months. It could have been a dump, it could even have been a place you wouldn’t dump your dumpy things in. But all those sad, dark thoughts evaporated as soon as we drove up Hawthorn Street.

Our house, in the middle of our street, is a gem. I mean, really, it has been refurbished, repainted, re-everythinged, and fitted with the most surprising karma ever. He’s a bit of a sneaky slick, this Karma dude, because it seems he wanted to, well, this might sound stupid, ‘test’ us. The first few days, everything was going right as rain. Heating, check, hot water, check, electricity, check. Then the mayhem started. Suddenly, the heating stopped working, and while being freezing cold and trying to fire up the cooker to get some heat into the house, the main fuse blew. ‘F’ing Hell?!’ must have been written all over our faces, but a quick call to the landlord conjured a maintenance guy in our giant freezer who sorted everything out in the blink of an eye (with a meaningful smile around his lips). The forehead blasphemy turned into ‘Sucker’ equally swift.

We got word of an Erasmus meeting in the college pub called the Beehive, so we used this blessed hot water to freshen up and got to know some of our future friends (no foes, hopefully, but hey, we still have Rock Paper Scissors as a dispute solver).

When in Rome, act as the Romans do. So as the church bells rang on Sunday, Frank took us to attend a catholic mass, which was beautiful and more lively compared to its Belgian counterpart.

On Monday, St Mary beckoned us with some more introductory activities and advised us on how to activate our local computer accounts. We e-mailed as if we were back in the early nineties, and at lunchtime we tried out the gourmet house kitchen. For as little as three pounds fifty, you are able to utter a satisfied grunt. How about that. We also met the local gym teacher, who told us all about upcoming football events of mythical proportions and left us nodding and wondering why we had never read any books on the appealing aspects of this sport. We then ventured into the student’s union office and met a charming pair of alumni who informed us about extra-curricular events and cups of tea to be had free of charge whenever we felt the urge to drop in. We had a laugh, a joke or two and filled our day...
strolling around, exploring the surrounding area and doing some assignments, all play and no work makes you look like a jerk.

So now it's Tuesday, and the clock tells me very explicitly that time is ticking away. Please excuse us for not typing relentlessly, but the world of Belfast is our oyster and oysters are very fun creatures once you stop being superficial about shells and snotty things dangling from them. So bye for now, while we hold fast to our principal condition sine qua non.

GO OYSTER,
GO ULSTER!

City Hall at night

A few days later...

It seems to me that time and space on this freaky island are packed with things to do, irresistibly luring and fishing for attention. Even the classes tend to behave in this manner, introducing us to a wholly different approach, which could be compared to university on one hand, while being more focused on teaching practice on the other hand. They like to keep these things separated, as opposed to our way of dealing with this in Belgium. Which one will prove to be the best? We'll soon -4th of February- find out during school placement, where I hope to catch more than a glimpse of the Irish side of the ballpark.

Hey teacher!

To say that I sat on that park bench this afternoon, face lit up like the birthday boy in a Norman Rockwell painting, listening to the soothing hum of the city, eagerly gulping beams of sunlight which in turn made me radiate while contemplating what a fine hand of cards I had been dealt would be slightly petting exaggeration's furry skin. But still. Life's a bitch, right?

Maybe you are reading this with a crinkled squint, which could either mean you are:
1) Rather confused

2) Far-sighted

3) Ignorant to the good advice expiry dates give you

Number one, laugh and cheer, for your needs will be catered to. Numbers two and three, you’re in our prayers. Speaking about prayers, they are by no means absent at our host schools. Nor is ‘shock and awe’, sparked by the teaching methods a foreign observer comes across. Discipline is a two-edged sword, so it seems. Forcing it upon your pupils while waving your gigantic iron fist initially comes with a very obedient group of youngsters, but overuse of this method turns the merry crowd into a flock of meek, numb sheep, including the occasional rampant wolf. Yet, Pink Floyd are clearly wrong in stating that they don’t need no education. They crave guidance. Many teachers here do understand these primal needs, and tell their apprentices to be brave, clench fists and not be just another brick in the wall. Indeed, I have seen some fine samples of good teaching in my school, which is one of the more ‘hardened’ all-boys schools in Belfast. Of course you won’t find lace veneer and pink upholstery, but a good, solid ethos founded on rev. De La Salle’s principals oozes down every wall. Within these walls we were being ushered around as if we were VIPs. Very Important Passers-by. Although we got smothered in opportunities to engage in all kinds of activities, which we eagerly did, I still got the feeling that we were merely interesting artifacts, didactical aids designed to help the pupils understand European citizenship. Of course all this was being organized with the best of intentions, but some real teaching would have been a fun walk on the wild side. Lo and behold, dear reader, the answers to our prayers: English, journalism, ethics, French, assisting in Spanish (OLA), religion, even physical ed. (we will take part in the school’s charity Fun Run), etc. And that’s just for now, as requests to grab a little drama by the horns are still pending. Our worrisome thoughts are melting like the North Pole, and as you might have figured out, are making way for a snug, pot-bellied and interesting agenda. To be continued.

International crowds are always a bit strange...  

La Salle’s annual Fun Run

All that sorted, we are now enjoying a few days off and a strikingly mild climate, both outdoors as indoors, and look forward to entertaining some three-day expats, who will be visiting our hamlet in a few days. In the meantime, we keep ourselves well-groomed and always on the lookout for interestingly meandering experiences. Locals tell us with appreciating whistles that the countryside is truly a gem, “fuckin' beautiful, like. Pfeew.”,
which makes me want to throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in a bag and jump over the back fence. See you on the other side!

**Life is like a box of chips.**

You always *think* you know what you are going to get –duh, chips, dumb ass-, but one way or another local chippies keep slapping your palate with an undoubtedly queer set of flavours, particularly the really dodgy places. The grease balls starring in this episode are of a highly diverse nature, and you are about to be nurtured.

Rolling phonemes the likes of [yaaawn], [yiiihaaa], [WOW] and [fuk] into a condensation of sentences is a tricky thing to do, as you will never really be able to transfer this emotion-induced soundtrack to your reader’s heart, or guts for what it’s worth, but it would be rude not to try and communicate some of these feelings to our flock of full bred, home grown connaisseurs eager for information, so kick back while I cut to the multiculti chase: International Week.

-International Week? But, don’t mind me asking, aren’t you staying overseas for three International Months? Is my metric awareness playing tricks on me again? God no! Why are you doing this to me?-, I hear you thinking. And yes, the past couple of moons have been quite the globetrotter, but International Week is a concept in which visiting lecturers from all over the world whizz over to St-Mary’s on their Nimbuses 2000 (how’s that for a plural) and cram the nitty gritty of their countries into our eager, or slightly numbed (depending on that mythical and evasive Night Before) minds. It has been interesting to see both the teachers’ presentation as well as analyze their ways of teaching, creating a map of Europe and America where one might come across great big boring [yaaaawn]-ing emoticons and huge [WOW] signs in stead of your average landmarks and capitals. Belgium proved great, though, with my sincere congratulations to KaHo’s and KdG’s visiting staff. [Yiiihaaa]
Eurovision contest, concluding the International Week (Go ahead, laugh)

Souped up by the Giant’s Causeway tour, the Bushmills distillery tour and the historical pub tour that formed the entertaining lard of our International Week, we decided to take a tour ourselves. A tour off the beaten track, starting with a wee celebration of Christmas somewhere in March. If you think I’m joking, do consult the picture area where you will most certainly find myself, drunk uncle Pieter, cousin Fred, auntie Annie, wacky sister Joline, Alexandra the lonely neighbour and baby Sophie curling round the Christmas tree, anticipating an exchange of gifts while digesting the meal of a lifetime (thanks to Mieke the chicken, RIP). We weren’t only trying to be non-conformists, oh no sir, Chrismarch Eve had a symbolic ring to it as well! It turned out to be an appropriately festive prologue to the road trip we were about to embark upon. Republic, here we come!

Unsuspecting left-hand drivers, here we come as well! To say that the commuting population of Ireland slept in fear the past couple of days is a bit stretching things, but we did have to get used to the freak cars and ditto roundabouts popping into view when you least suspected them. But hey, who cares, the ten of us were westbound and moving, packed in a set of Renault’s fine Clios.
The first town we hit was Letterfrack, only slightly more famous for its alphabetic coat that has been dug up in the twenties and is said to date back to Medieval times rather than for its splendid location smack in the middle of Ireland’s lunar base: daunting Connemara. The Old Monastery Hostel nested us for the night and overwhelmed us with warmth due to roaring fireplaces and a laid back 60’s atmosphere that would make you wish your parents found each other’s eyes beckoningly glistening a few years prior to your current time of conception. Was it the LSD in the air, or the laughs and cheers that have created this most merry of memories, I don’t know, but the next morning all of us felt like making miles, not war, and veering even further down South to the lovely city of Galway.

Christopher Columbus is said to have found proof of undiscovered lands on the shores of this historic city, but I for one have encountered even more enlightening trivia. The Long Walk for instance, chaperoning the river Shannon, which at nighttime took to my senses and told me about the meaning of life, the reason of being and the whereabouts of Das Bierhaus - How I miss our Belgian brew!-. Yes, Galway has been a darling, enveloping our rat pack in cosiness and replenishing our batteries with tasty pizzas, savoury music and sweet bedzzzzz at the Sleepzone hostel. Time, however, was a rare commodity as we had only rented our cars for three days. We didn’t have the opportunity to cultivate an extensive experience but I can safely say that the thriving nightlife and welcoming atmosphere are likely to have me citytripping there some time in the future. Day three would have to be spent mostly inside our motorized ministers of death, but not before we had tried to grasp the sheer vastness of the Cliffs of Mohair. I suspect their name comes from the relentless gale force winds barging into the coastline and rustling our hair until all of it stands on end, creating the illusion that one has more hair than prior to the sightseeing (How do you like them apples, David Copperfield?). But then again, I am full of rubbish, so never mind. Do mind the cliff edge when you should visit them, because you wouldn’t be the first overenthusiastic tourist to literally hit rock bottom down there.
Freewheeling back to our home away from home rendered some of us melancholic, others became sleepy and one or two passengers were scared to hell –sorry guys-, but on the whole I can say that the endorphins thrived in our veins. One happy crew, all stuck with some cheerful tune in our heads and a hungry feeling in our thunderous tummies. A feeling for more.

Fish and chips, anyone?
Guidelines for future students

DON’T

- Bring too many clothes, as Primark will tempt you with two pound deals and leave your suitcase obese.

- Be afraid of asking questions. People tend to respond with vigor.

- Stay at home. Leave your safe nests, as cosy as they might seem, for you will ALWAYS find a peer to talk to or a tune that tips toes, to say the very least…

- Skip lessons, because the attendance sheet relentlessly lurks in the background.

- Rely on your native driving skills. LEFT should be imprinted on you irises.

- Think Guinness is bad for you. It isn’t. It's healthy.

- Refrain yourself from e-mailing me with any questions (rikvangerwen@hotmail.com)

DO

- Rent a car and venture south. (Enterprise is the cheapest company)

- Talk a sunny stroll through the city. The layout is self explanatory and you don’t need sherpas, compasses or an emergency number on speed dial.

- Be tempted to take a mural tour with a black taxi, as the driver will provide you with a circumspect view on the Troubles and how they still linger in the local community.

- Shop at Iceland, ASDA or LIDL, where you get the most pounds for your pound.

- Keep an eye on your electricity gauge, and I would reckon you are likely to use about 200 litres of oil per semester.

- Plan a visit to the Culturlann, as they occasionally boast hugely entertaining theatre.

- Try and speak as much English as you can possibly muster.

- Something new every day. Sloth is a sin.

- E-mail me with your queries (rikvangerwen@hotmail.com)
**Overall reflection on the experience (500)**

**Thundering Abroad**

Got my motor running, hit hard on the highway. Looking for Erasmus, and whatever comes my way.

Now what exactly has this Northern Ireland Erasmataz flung at me? Shiploads of boring stuff, of course. That’s why I’m writing this reflection, to give you an insider’s view into my obnoxiously boring little life. Simple as pie. You don’t have to continue reading, you know.

Congratulations, reader! Rest assure, the latter was just a wee test of character, for the Irish are far from faint hearted people. Surely, there’s been a whole lot of living going on around here in Belfast. Living and learning, yet I consider them to be synonymous. So, brave heart, do step into my office and sign up your horizons for broadening.

Living at the heart of the Falls road area, which used to be an infamous battleground during the Troubles, has been a bit daunting. Fortunately, peace has found its way into both Protestant and Catholic communities, and I didn’t experience any hostility at all. On the other hand, though, the huge peace wall and below-the-belt remarks in pubs illustrate the fact that the history these people share still is highly inflammable.

Equally sparkly situations are to be found in the Queens University district, where bars, pubs and clubs are abundant and prove to be excellent providers of swinging hips and slightly contagious smiles, throbbing to the sound of the beat in this crisp, newborn city. Yes, if fun is what you seek, exhilaration is what you get. Belfast rarely behaves as a party pooper.

Catering to my academic goals, I found out that St-Mary’s is filled to the brim with warm and friendly people who will eagerly tell you all about dos, don’ts, tourist traps and craic. No, I’m not talking about crack cocaine, which is pronounced in exactly the same way, but about the Irish word for a hellovalotoFUN. Fun that can be had enjoying various sports, such as Gaelic football, hiking, climbing etc. or, if you get fed up with the muscular strain, myriad opportunities to visit Dublin, Scotland and tons of hidden gems in Ireland. Even the president of Ireland agreed to have a word with us!

In the midst of this whirlwind I stand smiling, big-eyed and radiant with curiosity about tomorrow. Born to be, yet wilder.

Sláinte! (Google it…)

---

**Meeting President Mc Aleese**
Thank You!

Briege
Paul
Frank
Mr. Finn

And all the people that fell off this page due to my cheesecake of a memory.