REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

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Preface

My time at St. Mary’s University College in Belfast passed by very quickly, at the one hand, but at the other hand, it feels as if I have been here for years and I could fill this Reflective Journal with millions of exciting experiences. I have been travelling a lot ever since and saw many places around the world, but St. Mary’s is special...

1. Academic Study

Studying at St. Mary’s University College was a completely different experience for me in comparison to the university system and teaching methods at home in Germany at the University of Paderborn. St. Mary’s is a small and familiar institution where the contact between student and teacher is very close. Considering German overcrowded classrooms and long queues in front of lecturers’ offices, St. Mary’s is a lot better organized. Each class consists of about 40 students - in comparison to sometimes 400 in Germany - and lecturers welcome you to talk to them either about college affairs or personal issues at any time. You will always find a listening ear and a helping hand which is very important to feel home in a foreign country. Besides, as a symbol of close relationship, students and teachers call each other by first name - Mr. Anthony is, therefore, just Paul. My coordinator Gerard McCann took perfectly care of me and the other German students and we are very
thankful towards him - thanks Gerard. After my arrival at Jury’s Inn in Belfast, he picked me up, showed me the city for orientation, introduced me to Brige, St. Mary’s good spirit, and dropped me off at my new home. After two weeks, he took me and the other German students for a trip around the city giving us historical background about West-Belfast, The Troubles and Irish culture. Together with him, we visited the Protestant quarter, the Peace Wall, Belfast Murals and Milltown Cemetery. All places that should not be missed while staying in Belfast. Furthermore, he went with us and the rest of the Erasmus group to meet Belfast’s Lord Mayor and invited us afterwards for a nice mulled wine at the Christmas market in front of the City Hall.

During my semester at St. Mary’s, I participated in Brian Hanratty’s and M Lombard’s “Anglo-Irish Literature”, Margaret Keane’s “Divided Societies”, Paul Anthony’s “Reflective Journal”, “Comparative Education”, “Supervised Project” and “Irish Film Studies”, Jonathan Worley’s “Academic Writing” and “School Based Work” and I enjoyed each of it. “Anglo-Irish Literature” introduced me to a lot of Irish writers and artists like W. B. Yeats and James Joyce. It was very useful to learn about these authors as they are very much connected to Irish history. In Dublin, for example, the National Library shows special collections of Yeats’s works and you can visit the “James Joyce Writing Center” or the so called “Joyce Country” near Galway. Furthermore, pubs and shops along the Irish west coast are called, for example, “The Winding Stair” or “Joyces” referring to
their names and works. Therefore, it was very useful to know about these artists. Moreover, performing drama was one further part of the course offered as a tutorial. Here we worked on a project to perform Belfast city in a play which was very interesting and exciting.

Margaret’s “Divided Societies” dealt with “Nationalism” considering current affairs like the Ireland conflict, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the European Union. Her class gave me a lot of useful information about current political issues around the world and made me think about my own national and European identity. During the class, we had to work in international teams which helped us to get to know not only “Erasmus cultures” but also Irish culture.

Paul’s “Irish Film Studies” is to be recommended, too, as his movie selection deals with topics of (Northern) Ireland and is very informative. This way you learn a lot about history, Irish culture and Irish society.

Every Monday evening I left the classroom either amazed by Irish humour or shattered because of serious issues in Irish society. Paul’s “Irish Film Studies” was, therefore, kind of a personal emotional Monday rollercoaster and the movies very often stayed in my mind for the next following days.

The class of “Comparative Education” introduced us to different teaching systems around Europe. It did not take place every week but was organized occasionally. Paul organized lecturers from America and Spain to come to St. Mary’s to give us an idea of how teaching is organized in their countries. As we are part of an European exchange ourselves, it was very interesting to meet lecturers from different countries giving us an insight of their country, society and teaching system.

The “Supervised Project” was an E-project where we had to create a PowerPoint presentation for future use in the classroom, for example. We
did not have regular classes for this course, instead we got an introduction during the first week and, afterwards, worked on it at home. In my opinion, this work is very well to be recommended as it is useful for future teaching. It teaches you about the PowerPoint programme and it is something different to the essays you have to write in every other course. The “Reflective Journal” helps you to reflect and document your time at St. Mary’s and your experiences on the “Green Island”, at the one hand, and it helps future Erasmus students to get an impression about what their life will be like over here, at the other hand. Even if you do not need the credits, I would advice you to do it as you have a document, which is like a photo album and a diary in one. After a view years being back at home you can still open the file on your computer and remember the times you had in Belfast.

Jonathan´s “Academic Writing” helped me to practise essay writing and was a class which made fun. Very useful was the “Peer Tutoring” in which you have to bring your first draft to the “Writing Center” to discuss and get feedback from one Irish student.

In terms of methods of teaching and learning, the system of St. Mary’s is very much different from the German. As I mentioned above, it is a small institution which is more like a German school. The schedule is organized for you and classes are not only once, but sometimes four times a week including at least one tutorial. Instead of sometimes 14 courses in Germany, we here have six courses which are discussed in an intensive and detailed way. This prevents you from getting lost in classes, courses and information and does not mean that you learn less. Margret Keane´s online project was
a brilliant way to let students work in international teams and to make Erasmus and locals exchange their ideas about European identity. This way of teaching is not only innovative but, but effective and different from all other teaching methods I have experienced at St. Mary´s.

2. Cultural Programme

Before I came to Belfast in September 2008, I have already been travelling the south of the island half a year before with my best friend. We visited friends in Limerick, with whom we have spend a great time in Thailand, saw Kilarney, County Kerry and County Cork. Therefore, my plan was to focus my future travel on the northern part, especially the west coast, the area around Belfast and Dublin.

During the first days, my flatmates and some other Erasmus students went for a tour around Belfast to get an idea about the city. We were shown the inner city, West-Belfast, some protestant areas, many churches and the titanic area where the “Titanic” was actually built. We had a lot of fun in this funny red bus without roof, but we were absolutely freezing. So if you ever plan to do your Belfast trip in autumn or winter, wear some warm cloths and a hat!

One Friday in October, my coordinator Gerard McCann took us for a trip around Belfast to see the Protestant quarters, the Peace Wall, Belfast Murals and Milltown Cemetery. We could not have had a better guide and he gave us a lot of background information. You, as a future St. Mary’s
student should definitely go to see these places, they will tell you a lot. If
your coordinator does not plan to show you the
Belfast Murals personally, you can organize a “Black Taxi Tour” - it is absolutely
worth it and the more people you are, the cheaper it gets. The taxi driver will be able to tell you a lot
about Belfast’s past and the various paintings.
At a weekend in November my flatmates and the neighbour Erasmus house
made a trip to see Belfast Castle, CAVE HILL and Napoleon’s Nose. I was
so amazed by the view, the green hill and the beautiful rocks that I have
been up there nearly once a week since then. It is great for hill walking,
mountain biking and just to relax. From the top you
can see all of Belfast, the
ocean and on a good day
the Scottish coastline.
Besides, Belfast Zoo is up
there with a lot of nice
animals and special offers for students at some times like pay one for two.
Brige and Paul offer tours for international students like the HISTORICAL PUB TOUR and a trip to Bushmill’s Distillery and Giant’s Causeway which
you should not miss! The Historical Pub Tour
started at “The Crown Liquor Saloon” and brought
us to nearly every cosy and special pub around
Belfast like the Kelly’s, The Bittle’s, The
Kitchenbar and The Morning Star. Wherever we went our tour guide told us about the history and the culture of the pub - and of course we had a drink in nearly each.

The following weekend I went to **Dublin** together with some Erasmus students to spend a great time in an absolutely amazing city, which you should not miss, too. Paul had already shaped our ideas about Dublin with all his movies in "Irish Film Studies", but to visit Kilmainham Jail, to see the wall, the cells and to hear about the Easter Rising and the freedom fighters was a great experience. We spend the night at Isaacs Hostel, which is very well to be recommended. It is very basic, but the cheapest in Dublin and if you want to book in you have to call them about one or two weeks in advance to make sure that they have a spare bed for you. What you definitely should not miss in Dublin is a stroll around the city, St. Christ´s Church, St. Patrick´s Church, Kilmainham Jail, The Guinness Storehouse, Dublin Castle, The Temple Bar and all the beautiful and amazing galleries like the National Art Gallery, The Dublin Museum and the National Library. It is absolutely worth it and there is nothing comparable to the Temple Bar in Dublin at night time.

On every Friday and Saturday of the week, there is a nice market in **St. George´s Market** where they sell food, cloths and most of the time fair trade products. I would recommend you to go there on a Saturday as the market offers better selection of goods and gifts. You can drink a coffee there, try every kind of food you would like to (don´ t miss
the chocolate) and buy nice gifts for yourself or your family and friends. Next to the St. George’s Market there is, moreover, a fish and chip shop called “The George’s”. They serve and deliver very tasty and fresh fish and are not too expensive. You could combine a nice market day with a "chippy" afterwards. It is great!

The last week of October we went to a trip to BUSHMILL´S DISTILLERY and the GIANT´S CAUSEWAY which was a beautiful snowy, freezing, cold and windy day.

Luckily the three times distilled (as we learned!!!) Irish whiskey warmed us up from the inside so that we could walk along Giant´s Causeway in wind and snow. Please bring your had and wear water proof shoes, just in case!!! We originally wanted to go back along the coast line to Belfast, but as we could not see anything because of mist and snow, we drove back the direct way. But even though the weather was cold, it was a great time with the Erasmus group, we had good laughs and some of us saw the ocean in snow for the first time of their lives.

Furthermore, DERRY and CARRICKFERGUS is worth a day trip! You can get there easily by bus from the Europe Bus Station. Going to Derry will take you about 1,5 hours, while travelling to Carickfergus is only 30 minutes. A trip to Carrickfergus is especially advisable on a sunny day and a return ticket is
only £5.20. It is a good way to escape noisy Belfast just for a few hours and to have a nice walk along the sea.

A very special day was the meeting with the **Mayor** of Belfast. He invited us for tea in his office and gave each of us a nice chat about our home country and Belfast in general. He explained to us the many pictures in the various rooms and finally gave our group a present. It was a real pleasure to have met him and we are all thankful for this special experience.

Sometimes, local students from St. Mary’s meet at the **Culturlann** to play some **Irish music**. It is a great chance for Erasmus students to get to know Irish music and to get to know some Irish people. It is good craic – as the Belfast people would say – and an easy atmosphere as everybody can join the music or bring his own drink. Furthermore, the Culturlann offers great courses to learn the Irish language, which you should not miss while studying in Belfast. They teach you some of the basics, how to pronounce the language and give you a good insight to Irish history.

If you are in Belfast during winter time, you should not miss the **Christmas Market** in front of the City Hall. It is an international market selling great continental food, drinks and gifts. In the middle of the market you can find a big tent which keeps you nice and warm and the mulled wine inside is superb!

One further good advice is to **travel by car** as often as you can while being in Ireland! I rented a car two times together with friends from home to cruise around the island. If you would like to rent a car, too, you should do it either directly at Europe Car or Budget Ireland or online with Rhinocar Hire (www.rhinocarhire.com). Both times, I booked with Rhinocar.
Hire, which is an online agency providing the cheapest offers from all Irish car rental companies and offer, furthermore, good insurances. You should rent it from Belfast City Airport as it is near the city center (shuttle bus available) and has the best opening times for returning the car (until 10pm). The first trip I made with my boyfriend was from Belfast to County Donegal. You should not miss Donegal City, Sleave League, the Glen Gesh Pass and a cruise along the coast line. It is absolutely beautiful and stunning!! The second trip I made with two friends from Germany was from Belfast to Sligo to Galway. We drove along the coast line and visited, for example, Achill Island where we stayed at “The Valley House” for one night. If you ever drive this route do not miss Achill Island it is too beautiful to describe it in words and by the way it has Europe’s highest cliffs - even though County Donegal (Sleave League) claims to have them. The Valley House reminded us on the famous house of Pipi Langstrumpf and is a great place to be as the owner is very friendly and runs a small pub in the celler. Do not forget to stop at Westport and definitely see County Connemara with its beautiful lakes, its national park (Connemara National Park) and Dog’s Bay Beach in the south! All in all, the west coast was the most beautiful idyllic part of Ireland I have seen while travelling the island.
3. Social Programme

Socializing in Belfast is absolutely no problem! But it is not to forget that every pub, club or bar closes at 1am, so make sure that you have had enough to drink until then or organize an after-party at your flat or your neighbours. House parties are already common between Erasmus students and a good chance not to spend too much money. And as there is nearly every week the birthday of at least one Erasmus student, you will visit different houses of the Erasmus people anyway.

In the first week of November, Paul, his daughter and Brige organized a EURO QUIZZ for us, where also locals participated in. It was good craic and we spend the time after the quizz dancing in the Beehive, which is the pub next to the university.

Before I came to Belfast, I used to think that HALLOWEEN is just a modern American invention, but here I learnt better. Actually it is the beginning and ending of the old Celtic year and, therefore, an important day for Irish people. In Belfast the shops were full of Halloween stuff four weeks before the event and every student talked about the dress he or she is going to wear. So throw away all your prejudices and enjoy the craic. My flatmates and I spend, for example, Halloween in the Bot and we had a great time there. But make sure that you are early as it is absolutely crowded, especially upstairs.
One amazing good time with the Erasmus group which I will never forget was the **Irish Night** at the university – thank you Paul and Brige for the organization, the delicious food and the unbelievably amazing music. We ate, drank, danced and enjoyed traditional Irish music for the whole evening and got an idea of the Gaelic language again as the event was spoken in both languages. To all future St. Mary’s Erasmus students: Don’t miss this day!!!

Places I liked best during my stay were mostly the historical pubs, like the Crown Liquor Saloon, the Robinson’s, Fidder Maggies and the Bittle’s Bar. In each of these pubs, Irish people meet to play some traditional Irish music – mostly in **Kelly’s**, the Kitchen Bar and the **Bittle’s**. The atmosphere in these pubs is special and not to be missed!

Besides, the **Beehive** offers Erasmus students good prices and karaoke every week. You should definitely go there when the St. Mary’s Student’s Union organizes dress up parties. It is great and you get to know a lot people who are not from your Erasmus group.

During the week, we mostly went to the **Empire**, the **Scratch**, the **BOT**, the Eg and the Limelight. All these spots are around the Botanic Avenue near Queen’s University and, therefore, most of the time packed with students. On Mondays the Scratch is very popular and crowded with young people, so make sure to be
early. On Tuesdays the best place to be is the Limelight as they play good music to dance. On Wednesdays the Box, on Thursdays the Bot or Stiff Kitten, the Eg and the Empire are best. A very nice Blues Band is playing in the Empire every Thursday night and on weekends they offer some concerts. Furthermore, the ODYSSEY ARENA includes the Buddah Bar and The Box where you can have a lot of fun either during the week or at the weekends. If you prefer a quiet and relaxed night at the cinema, watch out for special offers. There are a lot of different cinemas to go to in Belfast and you can find one in the Odyssey Arena, too.

4. Guidelines for Future Students

It is not easy to find general guidelines for every single person as every student and traveller has his or her own preferences and should make his or her own experiences. Following, I tried to set up a list of advisable Do´s and Don´t:

DO:

- ... Safe up a lot of money or get a job.
- ... Take lots of warm cloths.
- ... Bring an adapter for the plugs.
- ... Arrange a credit card.
- ... Get yourself a mobile phone number at The Carphone Warhouse (Talk Mobile).
... Get your landlord’s telephone number and make out a payment day.

... Do your shopping at Iceland, Lidl or Tesco - it is cheaper.

... Visit the historical pubs.

... use Fona Cap or Value Cap.

... Go up Cave Hill and Napoleon’s Nose.

... Do sports at Falls Leisure Center.

... Try to get to know many Erasmus students and locals.

... Learn the basic of the Irish language or an Irish instrument - for example at the Culturlann.

... Bring black pants and shoes for nightlife and school experience.

DON’ T:

... forget to travel as much as you can - Ireland is beautiful.

... live in a house with mostly people from your own nationality.

... walk home at nights alone and be careful of some Belfast areas - inform yourself before you go somewhere.

... forget to visit St. George’s Market - Saturdays are best.

... miss to take notes about your experiences (for the reflective journal)

... expect internet at home.

... forget your camera.

... forget to recharge electricity at your house.

... forget to check your oil level and buy in big oil amounts.

... walk along the street without watching out for dog shit - it is everywhere and I cannot count how often I stepped in.
5. Overall Reflection

When deciding for to study one semester at St. Mary’s in Belfast, I had the expectation of improving my English during university courses and to learn about Irish culture. But my time here gave me so much more than that... All the experiences I have made went far beyond my imagination and I am so very thankful to have spent my last three months here. Indeed, they were one of the most amazing times of my life. For the last years, I have been travelling a lot, saw amazing places, met many different people and made interesting experiences. But nothing is comparable with university life at St. Mary’s. It is special, it is unique, it is great and you as a future Erasmus student will love it!

At the one hand, my time here taught me what no history book could ever teach. I have been reading a lot about the troubles before, but visiting the various places of conflict, seeing the “Peace Wall” and talking to lecturers and locals shaped my mind so much more then any book could ever do. At the other hand, my time here made me meet fantastic people with whom I spend great moments, like my flatmates Leticia and Teresa (thank you girls!!!!) who I am going to miss very much - viva Espana. All these people I have met here - international students and locals - made my experience very special and I will be busy for the next years visiting many of them and in return showing them my own country.
But besides university life, travelling and socializing, the one week school experience was absolutely fantastic. I stayed at St. Colm’s High School in Dunmurry with three other local St. Mary’s students. The teachers were amazing and took perfectly care of me - thank you Mr. Cushnahan. I was even allowed to teach for two lessons which made this school experience indeed very special for me. The kids were wonderful, asking me one million of questions and I felt very sorry for having to leave after just one week of school experience as we all got on so well. Thank you St. Colm’s and thank you Paul, Nollaigh and Thomas who made my week at St. Colm’s even more fantastic especially at break time.

My last lines I want to spend writing about Kerstin who got victim of a terrible accident in a taxi and had to be transported home for medical treatment. I had a great time with you Kerstin and I am thankful for having met you. You are an amazing person and we are all missing you terribly. But I know for sure that we will meet up back home in Germany to reflect on all the great moments we shared. As a good advice to future Erasmus students: it is better not to take taxis indicating which part of the city you are coming from or heading to. Therefore, better use taxi companies like Fona Cap or Value Cap.
Finally, I would like to say a million thanks to Brige (you are irreplaceable), Paul and Gerard. You did so much for us and I am very thankful for every little thing! You made us feel very comfortable and gave us a great time in Belfast. You are the best!