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Summer will be spent with 60 people on a boat

UCC lecturer Tom Birkett will spend the summer sailing on a reconstructed Viking ship, here he explains why

**RECORDING HISTORY:** Tom Birkett is involved in the World-Tree Project, creating the world's largest repository of material on the Vikings.

**TELL us about yourself;** I've the great good fortune to be the lecturer in Old English at University College Cork, where I've been teaching and researching for the past four years.

As well as being an enthusiastic proponent of public engagement with the medieval past, I'm currently the Principal Investigator on the World-Tree Project, which aims to create the world's largest digital repository of material on the Vikings through community collection.

This exciting project is funded by the Irish Research Council, and we hope to capitalise on the current surge of interest in the Vikings to collect together a repository of photos, texts and teaching aids for everyone to be able to access and use. We're also hoping to find out more about how different communities across Europe engage with the Viking past — I find the different ways we perceive this shared history fascinating.

Though the scale of this European project is something new to me, I've been interested for a long time in initiatives that involve the wider community in academic research. In my field this involvement can be anything from poets and writers helping with translating medieval texts, to school visits or collaboration with local living history groups in the dissemination of research findings.

It can be even more hands-on as well — I've spent a few summers sailing with a reconstructed Viking ship in Denmark, where the sailors and craftspeople really take over from the academics in understanding how these fantastic objects were used.

I think there can be real benefits in making academic research more transparent and community-focused.

**Outside work,** I'm having a great time exploring the fantastic scenery of West Cork — hiking, climbing and paddling my way down the coast! My home is in Glendalough, where I spend my days working in education and capturing Ebbo Vale rugby team, he was a very knowledgable local historian, and I think his love of history and easy way of communicating that enthusiasm had a huge impact on me.

It led me back to the riches of the Viking Age, and how much I liked that character. There's a little bit of him in all of us.

**Earliest childhood memory?** One of my earliest memories is running round a Roman fort with my grandad, carrying a sword and playing in the sand while working in education and capturing Ebbo Vale rugby team, he was a very knowledgable local historian, and I think his love of history and easy way of communicating that enthusiasm had a huge impact on me.

I also remember our garden as a kind of half-tamed wilderness full of weird plants and hidden corners, and quite possibly dragons.

**Best friend?** My best friend from Wales moved to China, and I still haven't forgiven him.

**Person you most admire?** I really admire people like the Swedish woman Tess Asplund, who was photographed this week making hangikjöt — mutton smoked over birch or dried sheep-dung — at a dinner, but it didn't go down too well.

I also admire the Viking leader Håkon Håkonsson, a courageous one-woman stand against Neo-Nazis who were marching in Borlänge. Acting alone like that takes real courage.

**Person who most irritates you?** I think the famous Viking leader Olav Tryggvason would have made a great minister for finance — he was a dab hand at extorting silver everywhere he went, and using it to finance his pet projects back at home.

**Where was your most memorable holiday?** Small islands always have a special appeal for me — I went camping in the Lofoten Islands in Norway as a student, and there is something about the dramatic scenery, the clarity of the air and the beauty of the isolation that makes it feel like you've stepped off the map.

**Favourite TV programme?** After the Icelandic sagas, the best Norse export has to be the Scandinavian crime drama. I'm just finishing the Icelandic series Trapped, and it has me gripped. I don't own a TV, and wait for recommendations before watching a show.

**Your signature dish if cooking?** I once served traditional Icelandic Hangikjöt — mutton smoked over birch or dried sheep-dung — at a dinner, but it didn't go down too well. I decided to stick with a crowd-pleasing curry from then on.

**Favourite restaurant?** Haveli in Douglas, for a pretty authentic curry. I love their Chicken Makhani.

**Last book you read?** I've just finished The Road Home, by Rose Tremain. It's a novel which humanises the experience of economic migrants, without being sensationalistic. Like all good books, it leaves you with fresh eyes.

**Best song you read?** That's not a fair question to ask a literature lecturer! I will say that one of the most influential was Tolkien's Lord Of The Rings trilogy, for all its flaws. It led me back to the riches of medieval storytelling, and was a formative reading experience as a child.

**Last album/CD/download you bought?** I downloaded David Bowie's Blackstar on the advice of someone very close to me, and I can't help thinking how different this album is to anything else he did, and how much darker. His death left a huge gap in the music scene that I don't see anyone being able to fill again.

**What makes you happy?** Being out in the MacGillycuddy's Reeks with the Cork Hillwalkers on a fine day. I've been taking it easy for a few weeks after spraining my ankle, but I can't wait to get back to the mountains.

**What would you like to be remembered?** I think if I can help to promote greater inclusivity and equality in higher education, and spark a love of the subject in a few students who didn't know they were capable of reading medieval literature, that will be enough to be going on with.

Outside work, I'm having a great time exploring the fantastic scenery of West Cork — hiking, climbing and paddling my way down the coast! Just don't way to escape the office! Just don't let me flounder in the quiet of the evening if I have a deadline.

**Your proudest moment?** I think I was proudest of a small prize I won for writing fiction. I find it much easier to write academic essays and articles — writing creatively takes a lot more investment, and is a very personal thing to open up to scrutiny.

**Best thing you would do with the money you save on experiences such as travelling, rather than on things.** Spendthrift or saver? I don't think being a spendthrift is an option in academia! I'd rather spend the money I save on experiences such as travelling, rather than on things.

**One thing you would improve in your area in which you live?** There's very little I'd change about the area where I live, but in Cork city centre I'd love to see a bit more acknowledgement of the Norse roots of the city. The Beamish & Crawford Brewery Development is happening on what is most likely the original Viking settlement in Cork, and it would be a shame if this wasn't recognised in the redevelopment.

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