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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

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 European 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 at ease. 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! Of West Cork — hiking, climbing and transparent and community-focused.

Scandinavia — I'm from Abergavenny, a market town on the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park in South Wales. The area where I grew up has more castles per square kilometre than anywhere else in the world (due to its proximity to England!), and everywhere you look you see an opportunity for escaping into the beautiful countryside.

Where I live;
I live in an apartment on the Lee Road in Cork — I can understand exactly why someone who remembers its former days wouldn't want to live in the vicinity of St Anne's, but it's a beautiful building and perfect for working at UCC.

Family;
I'm unmarried, and have no children yet. My parents still live in Wales, my sister runs a well-known pub and nightclub in the centre of Brighton. I don't think our day-to-day lives could be more different!

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

Earliest childhood memory;
One of my earliest memories is running round a Roman fort with my grandad, carrying a sword and playing at being a Viking. I was working in education and captaining Ebbow Vale rugby team, he was a very knowledgeable 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 their garden as a kind of half-tamed wild space full of weird plants and hidden corners, and quite possibly strange sounds.

Person you most admire;
I really admire people like the Swedish woman Tess Asplund, who was photographed this week making 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 really dislike crude displays of wealth and status. There's a concept in Scandinavian folk culture called the Law of Dannevirke, which boils down to being humble about success and taking your turn at the oars. I think we're getting a bit out of whack, particularly on both sides of the Atlantic who could benefit from a lot more humility!

Where would you like to see as Minister for Finance and why;
I would love to see the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown coastline of Co. Dublin east of Dublin Bay. It is a beautiful coastal area rich in Viking history and would make a wonderful tourist destination.

Last book you read;
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.

Favourite programme;
To stick with a Norse theme, one of the best tracks inspired by the Vikings has to be Led Zeppelin's Immigrant Song. It's very irreverent, and full of cheesy pop-culture references to Norse myth.

One person you would like to see in concert?
David Bowie. Can we bring him back, please?

Do you have a pet?
Definitely not a morning person. It takes me a few coffees to get the brain working. I prefer work-up to scrutinise.

Your proudest moment?
I've just finished The Road Home, by Rose Tremain. It's a novel which humanises the experience of economic migrants, without being sentimental or sentimental. Like all good books, it leaves you with fresh eyes.

Best book 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.

How would you like to be remembered?
I think if I can help to promote greater inclusivity and equality in higher education, and spark off 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.

What else are you up to at the moment?
I'm preparing for a summer sailing with the Danish crew of the reconstructed Viking ship, Sea Stallion from Glendalough. I'm trying to get back into shape, and to prepare myself for living in close quarters with 60 people on a 36-metre boat. It's promising to be a fantastic voyage this year, as we're sailing between different events in Denmark, and there'll be a real festival atmosphere. I can't think of a better way to escape the office! Just don't ask about the facilities...

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

TOO much to be going on with.

Voyage: Tom on board a Viking ship.