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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

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

PERSON TO PERSON

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!

Where were you born?
Despite being told I look like a Swede, I've have no connection to 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 do you live?
I live in an apartment on the Lee Road in Cork — I can understand why people who remember 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, and 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 shield. As well as working in education and captaining Ebbw 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 wilderness full of weird plants and hidden corners, and quite possibly dragons.

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 Jante, which boils down to being humble about success and taking your turn at the oars. I think there are politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who could benefit from a lot more humility!

Who would you like to see as Minister for Finance and why?
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 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.

Favourite radio show?
I heard some repeats of Alan Partridge on UCC radio the other day, and it reminded me how much I liked that character. There's a little bit of him in all of us!

There are few shows I'd tune into regularly, but there are some excellent arts offerings on RTÉ, and I also try to keep up with the 'In Our Time' podcasts on the BBC.

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 sensational 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.

Favourite song?
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?
Not at the moment. I grew up with an endearingly stupid Labrador though, who once ate a hole through our kitchen wall. I also inherited a pot-plant named Ivar the Boneless.

Morning person or night owl?
Definitely not a morning person. It takes me a few coffees to get the brain up to speed, and Roderick Dale (my co-worker on the Project) knows not to ask me the tricky questions first thing in the morning. I prefer working 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.

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.

Name 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.

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 30-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...

VOYAGE: Tom on board a Viking ship.