

Brian O'Connell – History Talk – 2019

I'm very honoured to be back here in UCC to witness and pay tribute to the incredible work still ongoing here in the History Department at both undergrad and postgraduate level. And I want to thank Mervyn for the invite.

I've had an incredibly varied and fulfilling career since I left UCC and studying history here prepared me in all sorts of ways for it.

But I do have to start with a regret. Almost 20 years ago, I walked into my then supervisor, Dr Larry Geary's office and asked for a small extension on an MPHIL I was doing at the time on the Vandeleur Estate in west Clare. A matter of weeks I said while I worked through a few personal issues!

I'm afraid that short extension turned into a rather long one and much to my annoyance, the MPHIL remains spread across several folders stored in my parent's house. It's my one big regret that I didn't get to finish it.

The next time I bumped into Dr Geary after that extension request was about ten or more years after that, and by this time my media career had become somewhat established. The first thing I said to him was, "Listen about that extension"!!

We had a good laugh about it and he said to me **"the history department is always open to you."**

And that has been my experience of the history department here is that it is and always was an open department, open in terms of access to staff, in terms of ideas and open in terms of the ways it allowed you interrogate historical narratives.

I owe the history department here a hell of a lot, and in ways I'm probably not even overly conscious of. Studying history here taught me how to distil narratives, how to acknowledge bias, and how to set issues in context and how that context is often contested. Those are very important life lessons adaptable to almost every career.

Over the last 20 years, I've been lucky at times to have something of a ringside seat to some significant historical events – whether it's referendums on major social issues, war in Syria, or the Queen Elizabeth or the Pope's visit, or the mess that is Brexit. If any single social issue underlines the importance of history, surely it's the almost daily historical revisionism, much of it inaccurate, that has accompanied the Brexit debate.

Throughout all those events I've covered, I am convinced that without a background in history I don't think my work on those events would have been anywhere near as informed as I hope it was.

There was and I'm sure there still is an efficiency to the academic approach here that will serve you well for whatever career you choose.

For example: I remember Prof Joe Lee in a lecture on the origins of trench warfare in WW1 told us at the start of the lecture that, basically, there were bullets whizzing everywhere and some genius decided to dig a hole!

I can remember debates on the role of media, the ethnic status or otherwise of Travellers, and this remember was 22 years ago, analysing racism in Australia and the WAP policy, the failure of colonialism in Africa which I drew on when I reported on war in DRC or genocide in Rwanda in later years and many other topics and debates.

Studying history here helped me understand corruption in Irish politics, the class system, land agitation - all topics as relevant to society today as they were in past centuries and areas of learning that you can take with you into any career.

My close friends whom I studied history with here are barristers, comedians, academics, communications specialists and linguists.

So try not to get too caught up in the career race, try to consume as much history here as you can, safe in the knowledge that none of that learning is in vain and it will continue to percolate and impact on your outlook for years and decades to come as it has done for me.

I congratulate you all on your fine achievements and wish you all the very best in the years ahead.

Just be careful if asking for an extension that it doesn't become too permanent!