

New Brunswick welcomes their new Irish language teacher: Seán Mac Risteaird (Jonathan Richards)

For the 2012-13 academic year, St. Thomas University welcomes Irish language teacher, Seán Mac Risteaird, (Jonathan Richards), to their Irish studies program. Seán is one of seven Irish language scholars living and teaching in Canada this year through the Irish Language Programme of the Ireland Canada Foundation (<http://www.icuf.ie/>). The other participating universities are: St. Michael's College, University of Toronto; Memorial University, St. John's; St. Francis Xavier, Antigonish; Concordia University, Montréal; University of Ottawa; and St. Mary's in Halifax.

We took a few moments to welcome him and learn a little more about our newest addition to the team.

This is not Seán 's first trip to Canada. *“I spent a summer in Toronto in 2008 and feel that Fredericton is very different in comparison. The people here are generally very friendly and courteous. There is a laid-back attitude here that I didn't see in Toronto. When in Toronto, I worked in a small café, where poutine was on the menu. We served it from time to time, but I must admit that Maritimers love their poutine in comparison! Another thing that stood out was the language and cultural differences between Fredericton and Toronto. French is much more visible here and can be heard on the street. Also, there is definitely a loyalist element to the city which I didn't see in Toronto.”*



Seán is from a town called Navan, Co. Meath in eastern Ireland just north of Dublin. Navan is one of the main urban areas in the Greater Dublin Area with a population of 30,000 or so, which would make it one of the biggest towns in Ireland. The town was once primarily a mining town, but this has changed in recent years with the development of other industries in the area. Like most towns in Ireland, Navan has seen its fair share of victims to the recession but has mostly been sector-specific (construction, for example).

While Irish is not a prevalent language in Navan, recent efforts have been made to encourage and promote the language within the community. The town does have a *Gaelscoil*, which is an Irish-language medium primary school, which Seán attended. There is also a vibrant Irish traditional music scene in Navan with its own Comhaltas branch. Navan lies right next to a transplanted *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking district) named Baile Ghib. Baile Ghib is a *Gaeltacht* that was born in the 1930s under a government initiative of sending Irish-speaking families to the east in hopes of reviving the language. Baile Ghib, which is only 5-10 minutes away from Navan, is a small Irish-speaking district compared to the *Gaeltacht* of Ráth Cairn that is thriving in comparison. The Ráth Cairn *Gaeltacht*, which is 20 minutes south of Navan, has been a huge success under the same government initiative. Seán explains: *“I went to secondary school in Ráth Cairn which helped me gain fluency that I wouldn't have otherwise acquired in a Navan secondary school. I then went on and did a BA in Irish in NUI Maynooth, meaning I've done all my education through the Irish language.”*

While there are many similarities between university life in Canada and back in Ireland he finds that student support is stronger here. Even if it's just the simple things like having meal cards to having cleaners in the dorms, these contribute to an easier transition from second-level education to third-level. Also there appears to be more flexibility in the Canadian system that allows for students to wait before making their final decision as to what studies they will major in.

Seán's teaching methodologies are based on modern language learning acquisition, which he first attained in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. *“I undertook a certificate course in language learning*

that I found immensely beneficial to my teaching career. When beginning with a new language, learners can be very daunted with the new system of grammar and phonetics being introduced to them. Taking your time with your learners, not over-loading them with grammar or vocabulary and developing your course around the needs of your students is essential. I use a lot of language games, roleplaying situations and small grammatical exercises in my classroom. I try to make my enthusiasm for the language contagious by showing them the fun side to Irish language and its culture. I have brought my class group out to Arthur's Day celebrations on-campus and also to the James Joyce Pub for the weekly music session. Lorraine Nolan, another Irish studies lecturer, and myself plan on organizing a Hallowe'en party for our classes in the future too! I have a feeling that a few members of the class will continue with Irish as there seems to be a keen interest in it as a marker of their identity as Irish-Canadian."

Echoing the sentiments of the Irish language teachers before him, Seán expresses his disappointment that, under the current funding and programming at STU, that there is no opportunity to continue on with Irish for a second year. This means that students abandon the work they've committed to the language after a full year's worth of work. *"I think that adding a few other Irish language courses and developing the Irish Studies program to a greater extent could possibly put STU on the academic world map of Irish Studies excellence - just like Notre Dame,- Indiana's Irish Studies department is nationally respected; STU has an excellent opportunity in further developing an established department."*

When asked about his expectations for our winter weather this year Seán responds with a chuckle. *"One of the main pastimes I've come across in the Maritimes is scaring foreigners about the coming winter! I'm looking forward to seeing real snow rather than the dusting we get at home."* He goes on to reveal that his father is from Chicago and half his family is in the United States, so he is not unaware of what to expect. He believes that Maritimers take great pride in how well they are able to handle sub-zero temperatures. He's hoping to be able to enjoy the winter and is preparing for it now!

Having already taken in some university hockey he expressed how much he enjoyed the game between UNB and STU and plans to go again. However, he's not too sure he'll ever become as fanatical about Tim Horton's as so many of our locals seem to be. He may stick to tea but won't be surprised if he eventually gives in and becomes a coffeeholic.

Seán readily acknowledges that Canada is a massive area to cover in one year, so does not expect to be able to get to the West coast at all. He hopes to see a lot of this side of the country. His father's family has Acadian heritage so, when he accompanied Seán during his first week in Fredericton, they went to PEI for a visit. They had a great time on the island and Seán hopes to go back before he goes home to Ireland. He also plans on visiting most, if not all, the other Irish language instructors. He will be going to New York before Christmas where he'll be giving a paper at a conference and using the opportunity to see the city. He'll be visiting home in Ireland for Christmas as *"I couldn't miss out on that at home - it's one of our favourite times in my family home. They'll be interested in the friends I'm making, what I think of the culture and what Frederictonians think of me!"*

Asked how others would describe him he thinks for a minute before replying: *"Hmm... tough one. I've been told I'm a friendly and approachable guy who is always up for having fun whether that is going for a few drinks or going to watch a movie. I'm incredibly social and love people. I always try to see the good in things and keep my head on my shoulders like my Mum has always taught me. Celebrating your good qualities without becoming cocky is what I've always been taught and that's what I try and do."*

While he has been enjoying his time here he knows he has commitment back home, such as finishing up my PhD in NUI Maynooth so doubts he will be staying on at the end of his term. He has been thinking of going into medicine or pursuing a job as a university teacher: *"I would love to live in Canada if there was an opportunity to study as a doctor here or if there was a position for me as a researcher in Irish studies."* So, who knows - we may just see him back in our neck of the woods in the future!