



THE OTHER WORLD

February 13, 2018

Studying Abroad in Ireland

By Max Lorber

As you may know, the Maine Community College System is now taking applicants for the George J. Mitchell scholarship, a program that pays for a student to go to Cork, Ireland, for a semester to study at the Cork Institute of Technology. I was the recipient of this scholarship last year, along with another SMCC student, Michael Marino, and we are both currently here in Ireland enjoying the rare educational experience of studying and traveling in a different part of the world.

When I first got to Ireland, I landed in Belfast. Brief geography lesson for the laypeople: Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland, which is part of the U.K. (i.e., England, Scotland, Wales, etc.). Belfast was ground zero for the conflict between various factions of Catholic and Protestant militants and the British military. We're talking violent protests, teargas, bombings, shootings, the works. This went on from 1975 until 1998, when George J. Mitchell, who was a senator from Maine, brokered a peace deal that has lasted ever since.

I won't get into the how and why of it, but I will tell you that I stayed around the corner from the famous Europa Hotel, which was bombed 28 times during what is known as "The Troubles," and I would have never known what had taken place years earlier unless I researched it. What I mean is, Belfast has changed, Ireland has changed, innocent people aren't worried about whether the pub they are in will explode or not while they are enjoying a pint. But people still talk about it. Catholics go to certain pubs, Protestants go to others. Late night barroom brawls still go down. The walls that separated neighborhoods are still there, albeit nonfunctional, but there is a strange sense of separation.

But what kind of city is Belfast now? When I get to a new city, I like to explore, follow the crowds, judge the heart of the town, get lost, see things I would have never seen if I had only relied on a search engine, then hopefully find my way back. In Belfast, I found this strange underground passageway that leads pedestrians underneath a major avenue. It was covered top-to-bottom in layer after layer of elaborate, vibrant graffiti pieces.

I walked along the passage and a couple of classic British punks passed me, decked out in leather and metal piercings and tall mohawks, smoking something that surely was not tobacco. I passed them and came out onto the Queen's Square, which features the Albert Memorial clock. This gigantic sandstone clock was built on unstable ground, and it has a heavy lean off its perpendicular as if it had one too many pints (it was bombed in '92, also). I could hear music blazing from a pub across the way, so I followed it inside, where I enjoyed a few hours of brilliant, distortion-laced rock.



Graffiti in Belfast, Ireland. Photos by Max Lorber

Let me tell you, Belfast has soul. It is as if you can feel the pulse of it from underneath the criss-crossing streets, flowing freely with music wafting from pubs and concert halls, bouncing off the walls covered in street art, drifting up the facades of beautiful brick buildings from the late 19th century.

I met a few people in that pub, all travelers from the United States as well, and we ended up having rooms in the same hotel, so we went back together. There really is nothing like traveling, meeting new people, seeing and smelling and hearing new things. Everyone should travel; it is just as much an educational experience as it is a recreational one.

So myself and Mike are now in Cork, Ireland, studying (a little) and hanging out (a lot) with other foreign students from all over Europe. If you have read this and it seems like a fun experience, apply for the George J. Mitchell Scholarship. You never know what opportunities await you in the future.

I will be submitting another article to tell you all about my adventures in Cork County, and beyond. Stay tuned!