

Leonie van der Meer decided to step out of her comfort zone and study in Dublin for a year.

The Life and Opinions of a Harting Scholar

Damn the postmodern age. There, I said it. It's a bleak and hopeless era we live in, and what depresses me most about it is that we have simply stopped believing. God, the authority of our elders, the competence of the US President: we simply don't buy it anymore. Some sour bunch we are. That goes for me, at least, and although I have a slightly narcissistic tendency to always take for granted that my opinion is The Opinion, I think it's safe to assume most of you smart cookies are as well-informed and enlightened (and therefore as cynical) as yours truly.

You see, I watched Braveheart the other day. It must have been about the tenth time I saw it, yet that did not thicken my skin in the least. I still can't help but go all gooey when a disembowelled Mel Gibson/William Wallace shouts "FREEDOM!!" mere seconds before kicking the bucket. Maybe I am a hopelessly naive romantic (so sue me), but I think it would be rather lovely to once more have a shared identity and a common goal, and be immensely, and most of all irrationally, proud of the soil you walk upon.

But there is hope. True heart-warming patriotism still exists, and even though us civilized folks have (quite recently) decided that bashing each other's brains in for the sake of it not being a very nice thing to do; that doesn't mean there is any less of a battle. However, nowadays we tend to call the battlefield a pitch, and swords and axes have been replaced by a ball. That's right people, I'm talking sports. (*I am talking sports.* That I'd live to see the day.)

I've lived in Ireland for quite a while now, and as a consequence I have warmed to certain typically Irish things, and not necessarily the things I had expected. Guinness? Yummy. Skinny jeans and bright pink socks in leopard print flats? Bring it on. The Irish public transportation? Er..that's a difficult one actually. It's kind of like a bad boyfriend: you know you shouldn't trust him, yet you do, and you immediately forgive him when he turns up fifteen minutes late (the "he" in this story is the bus driver, and no, I don't have a bad boyfriend, just so you know). But the thing I've come to love most of all, the thing that reflects my fuzzy feelings about Irish culture in the most accurate way, is rugby. And that has nothing (ok, not everything) to do with the – sometimes literal – avalanche of well-toned arses.

Excuse me if I'm going all pedantic on you, but I think a short history lesson is vital here. You

may have heard that for a long long time the English ruled over Ireland, and not necessarily in the friendliest of manners. For instance on November 21, 1920, also known as the first Bloody Sunday, they entered Croke Park, the Dublin-based stadium of the Gaelic Athletic Association, during a Gaelic football match, and shot thirteen spectators and one player. Understandably, the Irish haven't welcomed the English back into Croke Park, the epitome of Irishness, ever since. But when earlier this year, Lansdowne Road, the rugby stadium, had to be torn down right in the middle of the Six Nations (the yearly rugby competition between Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, France and Italy), there was no other solution than to play Ireland-England in Croke Park. Painful, maybe, but then, what better revenge than to kick rosy English butt in such a historically laden place?

Days before the game, there was a buzz of anticipation in the air. My flatmates, most of whom had tickets for the game, were not quite themselves. When I asked one of them what would happen if Ireland lost, he answered: "We'll just weep". On D-Day, Dublin was pulsating. There simply is no other word for it. Pubs were spilling over, people in green jerseys were singing "Ireland's Call" in the streets, and Sinn Féin members demonstrated against what they considered the travesty of playing *God save the Queen* on such sacred Irish grounds. But it happened, gracefully and without incidents, and the English were humiliated only by the fact that they were eventually beaten forty-three to thirteen.

I can't recall an instance of feeling this proud in my life. I am aware of the hypocrisy in that – had I ended up spending a year in England I would no doubt have cheered for them – but mix romantic idealism with an inexplicable devotion for the underdog, and there you go. I got completely carried away by the waves of sheer ecstasy, people around me were hugging each other, it was like being in the middle of one big nationalist orgy. And let me tell you, it was good. Finally I belonged, I was part of a vast organic unity and nothing and no-one could rob me from that feeling.

For five whole minutes, I understood, better yet, I *experienced*, the driving force behind William Wallace and his army of Scots. Then the chemical rush in my brain faded and my rationality took over. I'm not Irish, nor will I ever be – or want to be, for that matter. I'm continuously



baffled by their island mentality, their phoney Catholic strictness and their disregard for environmental issues (these are all harsh generalizations, mind you, but generally, this is how I see it). However, I can see that it is a country on the move, a country that, despite its recent history of oppression and unfortunate geographical position, will soon seek to fully take part of Europe. Naturally, I cannot but applaud that, but if there is one thing I hope, it's that in the process, the Irish won't lose their quirkiness.

Mariëlle Pack has been studying in Austin, Texas. In the Angler, she writes about something which is typical of that area or America in general.

Texas State Capitol

Let us leave campus and check out the city of Austin. With its 600,000 inhabitants, and therefore not the largest city of Texas, it is the state capital. The Texas State Capitol is located a couple of blocks south of campus. This is where the Texas laws are made.

When I first saw the building by night, it made a big impression on me. It is very similar to the Capitol in Washington DC, but the Texan Capitol is bigger! Everything is bigger in Texas!

A couple of years ago, the golden statue that stands on top of the Capitol had to be replaced by a new version. The Texans were not able to pull that task off. They could not get the old statue off the top with their choppers, since they were too light. So, the Texans called in the help of the Georgians (Georgia is situated west of Texas), since the Georgians had stronger choppers. However, the Texans, being proud as they are of their state, could not just let "those Georgians" take the old statue off the Capitol and replace it with a new one. So, as a solution, the Georgians were declared Texans for one day, so they could proceed and replace the statue.



I have taken two tours of the Capitol. Guides take you from the huge circle shaped hall to the basement and up to the fourth floor. It is huge! Paintings of all the Texan governors hang in the hallways. The last one, G.W. Bush, can be found on the first floor with other paintings all around you in a circle. Older paintings hang on the second to the fourth floor. You can almost see them when you look up to the banisters of the second, third and fourth floor.



And right above you, several floors higher, hangs the stars of Texas on the rounded ceiling. It looks small, but it is three meters wide!

Fun fact: In the backyard of the Capitol, the opening scene of the movie *Spy Kids II* was filmed. It's my favorite as well.

The Capital seen from the west. There is a beautiful park around the Capitol, where you can walk. The four entrances are guarded by state troopers.