Bill Chace: president of the University

Late last spring, I had the unexpected pleasure of being offered the opportunity to teach a Freshman Seminar, and to do so on a topic for which I have a passion: the history and literature of Ireland.

These seminars (every first-year student, irrespective of major, is meant to introduce participants both to a scholarly topic and to Emory itself—the culture and the community. This particular seminar was also to be the first to include an “overseas component”; I was told I would be taking the students to Ireland for a week during the fall semester break. Of course, I relished with anticipation the seminar and was very pleased that we would be able to do with such an unusual opportunity.

I thought immediately of how I would close the gap between what we could read about Ireland and what we could actually feel, hear and breathe when we arrived on its soil.

It is one thing (and a very wonderful thing) to read the words of Jonathan Swift, William Butler Yeats, Liam Ó Flatharta, James Joyce, Medbh McCuekan, Frank McCourt or Seamus Heaney. It is quite another to traverse the land where they lived and wrote, to gain a sense of the space they occupied and the history that enclosed them. In the case of at least one of these writers, Medbh McCuekan, the class would be able to meet her and to talk with her about her poems.

And yet another advantage loomed large in my mind. Students at Emory, if they are from the United States, come from a country, numbering some 280 million people, that occupies an immense land mass. Ireland is an island of two small countries whose combined land area is slightly larger than South Carolina; its population is about one-eighth of that of the United States. Would it not be good for 15 American students to dwell, even for a week, in a more constricted space, and yet one with an extraordinarily complex and tangled history? Would it not be good for those students to imagine, if only for a week, how they would live amid a different set of cultural, religious and political reminders and markers?

And behind all my thinking about this course was my interest in introducing the freshmen to an Emory that is an international and cosmopolitan institution, one in which the peculiar idiosyncrasies of American life are constantly exposed to the buffets and challenges of the otherness of life elsewhere in the world. We live in a superpower, but such economic and military superiority hardly protects us from naiveté and ignorance about all the things of the world that we are not directly acquainted with. How good it would be, then, for 15 students, a teaching assistant and me, to go forth from the campus, armed with the knowledge afforded to us by our reading, to encounter a people, a land, a history and a culture somewhat knowable, somewhat foreign, and everywhere remarkable.

Oct. 15, 2002

Dateline: Dublin

After having arrived safely, we found ourselves quickly into the life of this bustling, cool, somewhat rainy and somewhat sunny city. Whatever jet lag might otherwise have blighted our first few hours on the ground was overcome by the steady flow of meetings, walks (some quite long), encounters with learned and witty Dubliners, opportunities of the most genial kind (James Joyce, and two excellent guided (and private) tours, one of which was by James Joyce) and two excellent guided (and private) tours, one of which was by James Joyce and two excellent guides (and private) tours, one of which was by James Joyce and two excellent guides.

As the world (and during this week, our class) has come to learn, the Irish have proved extraordinary exporters of two most generative entities: themselves and their literature. And, indeed, we have been told while here (on an island of 6.5 million) that some 75 million people are within a three-hour flight of Ireland and that the Irish language is meant to introduce the freshmen to an Emory that is an international

I have a passion: the history and literature of Ireland. What can I say? I have been raised in a small town in Maine, I saw Emory as the opportunity to reach beyond my comfort zone and to immerse myself in a diverse educational experience.