

Teaching Forum

Celtic Studies in the University of Ottawa

Paul Birt
University of Ottawa

In the city of Ottawa, in Ontario, and the neighbouring areas of the Ottawa Valley which stretch almost as far as Montréal in Québec, it is not difficult to find communities which were founded by people of Celtic origin. Many of the villages and towns around Ottawa have Irish, Scottish and Welsh names, and just a cursory glance at the local telephone directory will demonstrate the effect in demographic terms that these peoples have had on the area. More recent immigration has served to enhance this impression. With this in mind, it is perhaps not too surprising that the University of Ottawa, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1998, should be the home of a Chair of Celtic Studies within the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures. Courses in Celtic languages have been taught in the University since 1972, but it was the establishment of a Chair of Celtic Studies in January 1986 which ensured a continual and integrated programme of Celtic courses and research. The establishment of this Chair was the result of the energy, expertise and money raised by members of the Celtic communities in Canada, and especially in the Ottawa region. The considerable funds which were obtained from this activity were matched by the Canadian Federal Government (Multiculturalism), the Provincial Government of Ontario and the Government of the Irish Republic. The driving force behind this campaign was Gordon MacLennan, who tirelessly planned strategy and led the fundraisers in their negotiations with government bodies. Dr Gordon MacLennan, a noted scholar in the field of Irish and Scottish Gaelic Language and Folklore was appointed the first Chairholder in 1986. During this same year the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies was held under the

auspices of the Chair and attracted some 200 participants from 11 countries. The Proceedings of this congress were published in 1988. The contribution of Gordon MacLennan to Canadian and International Celtic Studies is well recognised and his early death in 1992 was a severe blow to all who knew him.

During the years 1992 and 1997, the Celtic programme continued to be taught with classes in Welsh, Irish and Early Celtic Literature. Then in 1997, Dr Paul W. Birt was appointed Chairholder (having already served as Coordinator of the Chair) and together with two part-time assistants has developed the Celtic programme to provide regular annual courses in Irish and Welsh, together with Early Celtic Literature and bi-annual courses in Scottish Gaelic and Breton. Dr Paul Birt who graduated in the University of Wales is a specialist in 20th century Welsh Literature and has published in this field both in English and Welsh. He is also presently working on the early writings in Welsh by the settlers in the Argentinian Welsh communities of Chubut. The Celtic Chair in Ottawa attracts approximately 150 students each year, mostly from the undergraduate population but also reaches out to the local community by organising fundraising activities or special days when workshops are held. Recently a workshop was held in the University for community Irish language teachers in the eastern Ontario region. The Celtic Chair is an integral part of the life of the University and especially of the Modern Languages Department where the modern languages of the Celtic world are viewed as being an essential part of the linguistic mosaic of western Europe.

*Modern Languages and Literatures
25 Université, Suite 138
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada
E-mail: pwbirt@uottawa.ca*

#####