ENG 120: From Ireland to America (and Back Again): Report on Incorporating Primary Sources from the Moakley Archive

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ENG 120: From Ireland to America (and Back Again): Report on Incorporating Primary Sources from the Moakley Archive

Submitted by Quentin Miller, English department
May 22, 2022

In spring, 2022 I taught a new course, ENG 120: From Ireland to America (and Back Again). The course studies Irish and Irish-American literature as a single body of work, examining in particular the ties between Irish and Irish-American culture, the push-and-pull factors that lead to emigration and repatriation, and responses to historical and personal trauma within literary works. The course is unusual in that it provides a short-term study abroad experience: the class traveled to Ireland during Spring Break to encounter cultural sites directly and indirectly related to the course content.

The Moakley Archives provided a unique enhancement for my course. The wealth of material related to the history of Eugene O’Neill studies at Suffolk provided an opportunity for students to examine O’Neill’s masterpiece Long Day’s Journey Into Night in terms of its relationship to Ireland. Moakley’s papers provided another opportunity for students to examine the Southie busing crisis of the 1970s, detailed from a first-hand account in Michael Patrick MacDonald’s memoir All Souls, from a number of different angles related to Congressman Moakley’s engagement with the crisis.

As an introductory literature course that counts for the STLIT requirement, ENG 120 does not require library research. Still, I thought the opportunity would be a valuable one, so I made a major research project a requirement of the course. From the very beginning of the semester, students were aware that they had to choose one of the two topics indicated above. In order to demystify the process, I did three things: (1) I conducted research in summer, 2020 to create a lightly annotated list of works in the archives that would benefit my students’ research so they didn’t have to start from scratch; (2) I invited Julia and Michael from the archives to attend one of my class sessions in order to introduce the concept of archival research and to provide a sampling of what is available in our archives; (3) I allowed students to work in groups of two, three, or four if they so desired and to submit a group project rather than individual projects. Not all students chose to collaborate, but that choice was available.

In sum I would say that the project was a great success. Students approached it with enthusiasm and seriousness, and the results were a pleasure to read: each one made an original argument that would not have been possible without conducting this research. Put differently, students didn’t just “tack on” secondary sources because they knew it was required; instead, they managed to build arguments fluidly and organically around the research they conducted in conversation with the primary texts.

I plan to offer the course again, hopefully every other year. I would change just a few things about the process. First, in my annotated list, I did not specify which items in the archives were available digitally. This was deliberate: I wanted students to actually enter the archives rather than just accessing them digitally so they could experience the pleasures of in-person discovery. However, I didn’t mandate that students enter the physical archive, and one group did conduct its research remotely. In the future I would specify that at least one resource should be one that is not digitized, and/or I would mandate that some research be
conducted in the archives even if all sources used in the project are available digitally. Two, I did not spend sufficient time talking about citations prior to the projects’ due dates. Some individual students asked questions about citation prior to submitting their projects, but others came in with some errors that could have been corrected in advance if I had devoted time to discussing citation. Third, I ended up being lenient with due dates, partly because the spring break trip was such a focus of the course that other dimensions tended to be relaxed, and partly because the resurgence of the pandemic caused me to have to pivot to online instruction three times (once at the beginning of the semester as required by the university, once immediately after spring break when I had to stay in Ireland while a covid-positive student was isolating, and a third time when I contracted covid in April). These disruptions were behind my leniency with deadlines, but I think I could have held students more accountable to the deadlines if I were to require some preliminary materials (such as an abstract, a thesis statement, or an annotated bibliography) ahead of the due dates in order to make sure they’re on track for the deadline and, relatedly, that they are able to complete their work with a minimum of time pressure. These are relatively minor tweaks to the syllabus and/or to my own pedagogy: I can’t think of anything else the archivists could do to enhance the experience more than they already have!