

# **READING THE IRISH LANDSCAPE AND ITS ROLE IN IRELAND'S CULTURAL HERITAGE**

## **BIRR, CO. OFFALY, IRELAND**

**Course ID: TBD**

**August 11 – August 24, 2019**

**FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTOR:**

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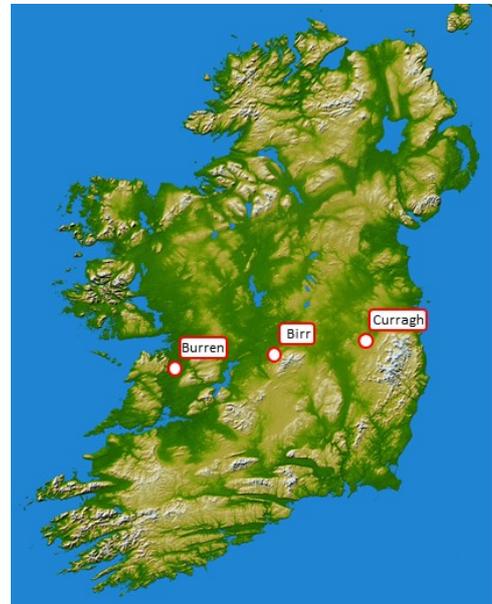
**Guest Lecturers:**

**Prof. John Feehan** and **Prof. Muiris O'Sullivan**, University College Dublin/Irish Heritage School



*'Today Offaly is a sacred landscape, enriched by the folklore, history, poetry, art and architecture of our Christian past. The landscape tells a story not only of our county, but of our nation. How we care for this priceless resource will be our legacy to future generations'*

- Caimin O'Brien



**INTRODUCTION**

This field and lecture-based field school provides students with an in depth understanding of how human settlement and cultural heritage is shaped by the natural environment. Students will gain a broad understanding of how a variety of landscapes are formed, impacted, managed and understood through both natural and cultural lenses.

The landscapes for this program are based in the very heart of the Irish Midlands (in the vicinity of Birr Town), providing ready access to an extraordinarily wide range of natural habitats and culturally important archaeological sites. This location acts as a convenient springboard to a variant range of landscapes and study sites further afield.

This field school is holistic in nature, affording students insights into the natural environment: from the bedrock geology that literally forms the foundations for the topography to the glacial and post-glacial geomorphology, ecology, archaeology and traditional and contemporary economy (and indeed mindsets) of the Midlands. Thus, this program is designed to provide a foundation level knowledge to students from diverse disciplines including environmental science, geology, geography, ecology, archaeology, anthropology and other backgrounds.

An important element of this program is the volume of fieldwork and the scale and variety of fieldtrips to different locations. These will provide students an opportunity to experience, appreciate, as well as record (through mapping and survey exercises) and interpret the variation in environments and landscape types within Ireland – and how these influence the country’s cultural and natural heritage.

The program provides a practical introduction to all aspects of the cultural heritage of the Irish landscape. It aims to give students a sound introduction into how to relate cultural heritage to the underlying geology as a foundation to the landscape.

As part of the program students will visit the following different locations:

### **BIRR**



Birr will act as the ‘base’ for entire program. Birr is a small town (population c. 6000) that nonetheless contains all modern amenities and is well served by public infrastructure. The town is well known as one of Ireland’s most important Heritage Towns, with significant early and later medieval archaeology and history, dating from at least Saint Brendan’s 6<sup>th</sup> century CE monastery. Today the town is best known for its mid-18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century CE elegant Georgian streetscapes. At the centre of the town is Birr Castle, a 17<sup>th</sup> century CE structure built adjacent the location of the original 12<sup>th</sup> century CE castle site. The castle remains the home of the Earls of Rosse to this day. The demesne landscape of the castle, which evolved from the oak parkland of the late medieval castle, is one of the finest in Ireland.

A large area of land surrounding Birr (and a large amount of County Offaly in general) is underlain by raised bog, much of which is currently being exploited for fuel and the generation of electricity by Bord na Móna, the state’s peat development company. The conservation of the resulting cutaway bog is currently a major exercise in ecological restoration in the region. Approximately 24 km north-east of Birr is one such restoration project - the Lough Boora Parklands, a destination for our fieldwork.

Located directly south of Birr are the Slieve Bloom Mountains, made up of rocks of considerable geological interest, as these mountains represent a highly significant episode in the geological history of Ireland. The rocks that make up the Slieve Blooms date to the Devonian and Silurian periods, 350 to 440 million years ago. At the beginning of that time, the area that is now the north-west of Ireland and the area that is now the south-east of Ireland, were on opposite sides of a shrinking ocean known as the Iapetus Ocean. By about 410 million years ago, these two areas collided, and a great mountain-building phase was in progress. The present-day Slieve Bloom Mountains lie along, or are very close to, the 'Iapetus Suture', the notional line that marks where these two areas with very different early geological histories amalgamated to create the area now known as Ireland. Several of the fieldtrips, and much of the field instruction in recording techniques, will be undertaken to the foothills of these mountain ranges.



The last phase of field assessment will be in the Monastic Midlands, looking at the landscape from the perspective of the Early Christian monastic tradition that started here in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Students will study the environs of Seir Kieran, where a pilgrimage tradition survives today that was established almost 1,500 years ago, and the iconic Clonmacnoise Monastery, which we will approach by boat along the River Shannon, affording an insight into how this monastic settlement may would have been travelled to in the past.

## THE BURREN



Students will undertake a fieldtrip in the Burren. The Burren is underlain by limestones of the Lower Carboniferous (Visean) period. The limestone formed as sediments in a tropical sea which covered most of Ireland approximately 350 million years ago. The Burren is one of the finest examples of a Glacio-Karst landscape in the world. At least two glacial advances are known in the Burren area. However, it is probably the effects of the last glaciation (the Midlandian) that are most in evidence in this National Park. It is thought that most of the Burren was overrun

by ice during this glaciation. This is evident by the presence of fresh deposits of boulder clay at altitudes of just under 300 metres. Of particular interest is the impact of the first farmers who arrived into this region on their surroundings, with the removal of tree cover resulting in a dramatic and catastrophic change to the landscape. The Burren is Ireland's most biodiverse area, internationally famed not just for its geology but also for its flora and fauna, and the rich archaeological heritage preserved here. During their stay, students will be introduced to all aspects of the geological and cultural heritage of this unique area. They will also become aware of how agricultural history shaped the geological and cultural character of the Burren as they see today.

## THE CURRAGH

The Curragh is located east of Birr in Co. Kildare. It comprises a flat open plain of almost 5,000 acres of commonage, well known for Irish horse breeding and training. The success of horse-breeding in the area is due to the composition and fertility of the sandy soils, which are derived from esker deposits and as a result have excellent drainage. The area is of particular interest to botanists and ecologists because of the many rare plants and numerous bird species that nest and visit there.



The Curragh has been recognised as an important landscape for millennia and is the focus of many Irish myths and pre-Christian settlement. Evidence of human settlement and impact on the landscape is at times subtle but is abundant and diverse.

### ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

**Credit Units:** Attending students will be awarded 2 semester credit units (equivalent to 3 quarter credit units) through our academic partner, Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a private, highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see grading assessment and matrix). This field school provides a minimum of 80 direct instructional hours. Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and registrars at their home institutions prior to attending this field school.

**Transcripts:** An official copy of transcripts will be mailed to the permanent address listed by students on their online application. One additional transcript may be sent to the student's home institution at no additional cost. Additional transcripts may be ordered at any time through the National Student Clearinghouse: <http://bit.ly/2hvurkl>.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

On successful completion of the program, students will:

- Have a good base understanding of the merits of taking a holistic, 'landscape wide', approach to any form of research inquiry – be that archaeological, cultural ecological etc;
- Be familiar with an outline of the archaeological and cultural heritage of Ireland, and in particular how the archaeological heritage of the Irish Monastic Midlands (and other studied areas) is expressed relative to, and influenced by, the underlying geology and topography –i.e. how people and place are co-defined and inscribed in landscape.
- Have a good understanding of the basic elements of Irish solid and glacial geology and how geology as 'bedrock' is instrumental in shaping the ecology, society and economy of the Irish Midlands (and other studied landscapes);

### DISCLAIMER – PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

You should be aware that conditions in the field are different than those you experience in your home, dorms or college town. Field work, which is so central to the program, involves work in the outdoors. The Irish weather is very variable, and you should be prepared for field work in all weather conditions – including rain. You are required to bring suitable waterproof clothing and footwear as well as sunscreen. **Students MUST be in good physical condition and able to walk three-five miles (5 – 8 km) a day on rough and hilly ground.**

If you have any medical concerns, please consult your doctor. For all other concerns, please consult the project director, as appropriate.

## PREREQUISITES

There are no academic prerequisites for this field school. What is required is enthusiasm, a sense of excitement and a readiness to give it everything. Students must be willing to engage with the local community, in which they are working and living, in a professional and respectful manner, both during the official work hours and when 'off duty'. A moderate level of fitness is advisable as this program entails a lot of fieldwork and walking.

## GRADING MATRIX

**Fieldwork Participation (60%):** Students are required to participate fully in the daily schedule. Assessment will be undertaken by the supervisory team and will be based on attendance, willingness to work and to try diverse tasks, attention to detail and accuracy, participation in teamwork and contribution to discussions.

**Field Journal (30%):** Students are expected to maintain a field journal and present it for evaluation during their final week. This notebook should record student's daily activities, including details on geological mapping exercises, notes on all fieldwork, check-lists of flora and fauna and details of lectures and laboratory exercises, as well as personal observations.

**Presentation (10%):** At the start of Week 2, students will be required to give a 3-minute presentation on a research topic of their choice, but which must be related to the program. The presentation will be given to the group in the form of a 'Ted Talk' and may use power point or other visual aids.

## ACCOMMODATION



Students will be housed in Home Stay accommodation in the town of Birr, Co. Offaly. Home Stay students live with local families, and experience true home life in provincial Ireland. Students are to keep the accommodation clean and tidy at all times and to be respectful towards their Home Stay family and roommates. Students will walk (or be dropped to and collected from) a designated meeting point. Breakfast and dinner will be provided along with a packed lunch. At weekends students are encouraged to avail of their free time and explore Ireland.

## TRAVEL & MEETING POINT

Students will be met in Birr, Co. Offaly. Since students will arrive on different flights at different times of the day, we will meet all students on the Sunday (first day of arrival) at Dooly's Hotel ([doolyshotel.com](http://doolyshotel.com)) at 6pm. Directions and travel information will be issued to all students once they are enrolled in the field school.

If you fail to make the meeting, please call/text or email Dr Stephen Mandal. You will be sent his local cell phone number once you are enrolled in the course.

## CULTURE, LOCAL ENVIRONMENT & ETIQUETTE

Birr is a quintessentially classic, small, friendly and safe Irish town, [some 130km] west of Dublin. All the relevant local government agencies are aware of the students' presence, and they and all the people of the town are anxious to ensure that your stay is safe and enjoyable. Students are asked to respect local sensitivities and traditions and to understand that the presence of such a large team of outsiders in town does not entitle participants to any special treatment or privileges.

Although everyone will speak English students should expect surprising cultural differences and exciting opportunities to learn about the lives of others as well. IFR students will be immersed in Irish culture through learning, language, food and music, and should be prepared for the rewards and challenges that life in a different culture will offer.

## EQUIPMENT LIST

Bring a basic travel/fieldwork kit, which is to include but not necessarily be limited to:

- Clothing suitable for wet and cool (as well as warm!) weather.
- Hiking-style waterproof shoes or boots.
- Sunscreen: when in the field students should wear an SPF daily to protect against UV exposure and windburn. Despite its relatively cool summer temperatures, Ireland has high UV in the summer months.
- A peaked or wide-brimmed sunhat for outdoors.
- Insect repellent (essential for periods of fieldwork).
- Laptop/tablet: a device on which you can prepare and submit your presentation and written assignments.
- Writing materials, including a strong field notebook.

## PROGRAM SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1

During the first week, the students will acquire an understanding of the natural framework of the landscape of the Irish Midlands, through a series of lectures and field studies, including field mapping. They will become familiar with the natural habitats surrounding Birr and develop an ability to see and interpret the interaction between the natural environment and the human world. The week will conclude with an exercise interpreting the influence of geology and landscape on archaeology, history and human possibility in the town of Birr, posing the question ‘Why here?’.

### WEEK 2

At the start of Week 2, the student will present their 3-minute Ted Talks on their chosen research topics.

During week two the students will go on a series of field excursions, including visiting the Burren. The Burren is Ireland’s most biodiverse area, internationally famed for its karst geology and the rich archaeological heritage preserved here. The students will be introduced to all aspects of the natural and cultural heritage of this unique area – specifically how the two interplay. They will also become aware of how agricultural history has shaped the natural and cultural character of the Burren, and how modern agricultural practice works to conserve and enhance that threatened heritage.

The students will also visit the Curragh, Co. Kildare, Ireland’s largest area of unenclosed land, to use the skills they have acquired to assess how the landscape was formed, to identify the human imprint on the landscape, and understand how it was shaped by the geological and glacial history.

The final field excursion will be to the north of Birr to look at Early Christian Ireland in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and how the physical landscape determined how the monasteries were located, thrived and were vulnerable to attack.

### DAILY SCHEDULE

Unless stated otherwise in the detailed schedule below, students will be committed to program activities from Monday to Friday inclusive, attending lectures and field visits. The normal working day is from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm with a morning tea break from 11:00 to 11:30 am and lunch from 1:30 to 2:15 pm – variations to the schedule will exist during fieldtrips. In preparation for their field visits, students will be introduced to the different areas of the country through a series of lectures (as outlined in the schedule below). Students will have the weekend free to explore the area and other parts of the country.

	<b>MORNING</b>	<b>AFTERNOON</b>
<b>WEEK 1</b>		
<i>SUNDAY (August 11<sup>th</sup>)</i>		Welcome
<i>MONDAY</i>	Orientation. Lectures: Geology of the Midlands in relation to the world at large (with particular reference to the United States)	Visit to Birr Castle
<i>TUESDAY</i>	Fieldwork: Visit to Glenbarrow and the Silver River for a geological field trip, including geological/geographic mapping and interpretation	
<i>WEDNESDAY</i>	Lecture: The Ice Age and its aftermath	Fieldwork: Esker visit at Knockbarron to interpret glacial geomorphology
<i>THURSDAY</i>	Lecture: Interpreting the influence of geology and landscape on archaeology, history and human possibility through mapping and landscape assessment. Birr Town as a case study.	Fieldwork: Birr Town case study
<i>FRIDAY</i>	Fieldwork: Birr Town case study continued	
<b>WEEK 2</b>		
<i>MONDAY (August 19<sup>th</sup>)</i>	Presentations (Ted Talks)	Lectures: The Burren

TUESDAY	Fieldwork: Travel to the Burren National Park	Fieldwork: Tour to significant medieval and Neolithic archaeological sites & to the Cliffs of Moher
WEDNESDAY	Lecture: The Curragh of Kildare, geology, landscape, culture and economy. Travel to the Curragh	Fieldwork: Field exercise on the Curragh focused on landscape assessment.
THURSDAY	Lecture: the bogs (landscape, geology, sediments, archaeology etc.)	Fieldwork: Raised bog and associated habitats at Derrinlough; the Mesolithic site at Boora
FRIDAY	Lecture: The landscape and cultural heritage of the Monastic midlands	Fieldwork: Seir Kieran and Clonmacnoise (approaching Clonmacnoise from Athlone by boat)
SATURDAY (August 24 <sup>th</sup> )	Departure	

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

### Recommended Reading

- David, Bruno and Julian Thomas (2008). *Handbook of Landscape Archaeology*. Walnut Creek, Left Coast Press. Chapters 1, 2 and 4.
- Jones, Carleton (2004). *The Burren and the Aran Islands. Exploring the Archaeology*. Cork, The Collins Press.
- O' Brien, C. 2006. *Stories from a Sacred Landscape: Croghan Hill to Clonmacnoise*. Mercier Press. Cork
- Viney, Michael (2003). *Ireland. A Smithsonian Natural History*. Belfast, The Blackstaff Press: Chapters 1-8, 12 and 17.

### Recommended Further Reading/Field Reference Guides

- D'Arcy, Gordon (1992). *The Natural History of the Burren*. London, Immel.
- Feehan, John (2003). *Farming in Ireland: History, Heritage and Environment*. University College Dublin Faculty of Agriculture.
- Feehan, John (2004). *A Long-Lived Wilderness. The Future of the North Midland Peatlands*. ERM in collaboration with the National Wetlands Park Committee.
- Feehan, John (2007). *Cuirrech Lifè. The Curragh of Kildare, Ireland*. School of Biology and Environmental Science UCD in association with the Department of Defence.
- Feehan, John (2013). *The Geology of Laois and Offaly*. Offaly County Council, in association with Laois County Council and the Geological Survey of Ireland.
- Feehan, John (2014). *Cluain Mac Nóis i nDeilbne hEthra: The Landscape of Clonmacnoise, County Offaly, Ireland*. Offaly County Council in association with Bord na Móna.
- Feehan, John (2016). *The Carran and Templecronan Looped Walks*. Clare's Rock Hostel, Carran.
- Feehan, John and Alison Rosse (2005). *An Atlas of Birr*. Department of Environmental Resource Management at University College Dublin in association with Offaly County Council.
- Feehan, John (1979). *The Landscape of Slieve Bloom: a study of its natural and human heritage*. Blackwater Press, Dublin (revised edition 2009).
- O'Connell, Jeff W. and Anne Korff (eds.) (2001). *The Book of the Burren*. Kinvara, TirEolas (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).
- Viney, Michael (2003). *Ireland. A Smithsonian Natural History*. Belfast, The Blackstaff Press.