22 March 2007

Dr Claire McIlroy
Coordinator
ARC Network for Early European Research

Dear Claire

Report on NEER-supported conference
‘Us and Them: perceptions, depictions and descriptions of Celts’
Department of History, University of Melbourne, 24-26 August 2006

The ‘Us and Them’ conference was an outstanding success, due in part to NEER’s generous contribution of the airfare for an international plenary speaker and travel funding for postgraduate students. Funding support was also provided by the University of Melbourne Faculty of Arts, Department of History and Gerry Higgins Chair of Irish Studies.

The three-day conference featured four international plenary speakers: Prof John Collis, University of Sheffield (iron age), Prof Máire Herbert, University College Cork (medieval), Dr Simon Taylor, University of Glasgow (early modern – NEER-funded), and Mr Malcolm McLean, Proiseact nan Ealan (contemporary). A very broad chronological period possible was covered both by these speakers and by other delegates.

The conference was attended by a little over 90 delegates from around Australia and overseas, 50 of whom gave papers. I am aware of two postgraduate students who were funded by NEER, one of whom gave a paper. Associated with the conference were a range of social activities, designed to encourage networking amongst the delegates. These included the official launch in conjunction with an exhibition of prints relating to a Gaelic cultural project, the conference dinner, a casual evening of Celti
c music, and a guided coach tour to sites of Celtic interest at Ballarat. A unifying theme of the conference and the activities was the notion of cultural memory and cultural translation, as notions of ‘Celticity’ from the iron age through early Europe to contemporary Europe and Australia were juxtaposed.

We also conducted an intensive language course in Old Irish, taught by Dr Catherine Swift, Mary Immaculate College University of Limerick, in association with the conference. This was attended by twelve postgraduates, academics and independent scholars from Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra.

In conjunction with the conference, all of the plenary speakers participated in other activities whilst in Australia. Mr McLean made contact with cultural organisations in Victoria and NSW with a view to future collaborations, and addressed the Celtic Club Melbourne and the Sydney Society for Scottish History. Professor Herbert gave seminars for the Melbourne Irish Studies Seminar Series, the Sydney Celtic Studies Foundation, the Sydney Centre for Medieval Studies and the Australian Early Medieval Association, as well as talking informally with postgraduate students and giving a fourth-year honours seminar. Professor Collis spoke to archaeological groups in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, and gave a public lecture and a fourth-year honours seminar in Melbourne.
Dr Taylor, whose airfare was paid by NEER, led a seminar about place-name studies as a tool in research in various disciplines. This was held on Tuesday 22 August, and was attended by postgraduate students and research fellows from History, Classics, Geography, English and Indigenous Studies. Refreshments were provided by the Department of History and the Australian Early Medieval Association. As well as an opportunity to explore innovative interdisciplinary methods of research, the seminar allowed important networks to be formed, both with Dr Taylor, and amongst students of different disciplines who had not previously made contact with each other. Dr Taylor also gave a fourth-year honours seminar at Melbourne and addressed the Sydney Society for Scottish History.

As a result of the ‘Us and Them’ conference, there has been a great strengthening of the networks amongst scholars of Celtic material around Australia. The conference also established relationships between scholars in Australia and our overseas visitors. For example, one of my postgraduate students will be taking a field trip to the UK in 2007, and will meet with Dr Taylor and his colleagues at Glasgow. Dr Swift has obtained funding from her institution to return to Australia in 2007 for further teaching and collaborative research.

Two collections of papers from the conference are currently being edited by me and two postgraduate students, and we are confident of publication by a European publisher. This process is providing valuable experience for the students, strengthening links between the contributors, and enhancing the profile of Australian research on early European material.

I would like to extend very sincere thanks, on behalf of myself and of all of those who benefited from the conference, to NEER for its generous assistance.

Dr Pamela O’Neill
Research Fellow

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