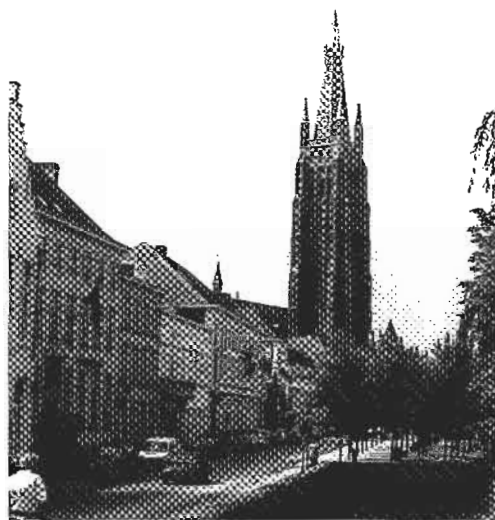


A college that takes thinking, learning and fun beyond the precepts of the nation state



Iain Reddish studied at the College of Europe in Bruges in the early 1970s. Here he looks back on the enduring effect of a zoo-like experience.

The ethos, dynamic and tradition which is the College of Europe at Bruges has always made it considerably more than simply another 'Post-Graduate Institute for Higher European Studies'. There is a touch of irony in that, since the College's creation, the outside world has all too easily tended to see the College in an overly narrow and somewhat elitist perspective as an institution with one focused goal: the provision of skilled up-market labour for the higher echelons of the European decision-making process. And while such descriptions do have a certain, albeit very limited accuracy, they are selective in the extreme and tell only one part of a much broader and richer story.

The College of Europe as a totality reflects a truly astounding diversity, from its student body and alumni to the catholicity of its visiting speakers and professors, from its ongoing organic institutional development to its role as a think-tank. The institutional balance between tradition and modernity always seems to be a healthy one.

We are all inevitably products of our time. I cannot help but notice that the genesis of many of my own perceptions and comments on the College inevitably reflect my experiences as a student at the College in the 1970s.

But more than any of the other universities I studied at or have been associated with, there is a comparatively far greater communality between the College then and the College now. And given the ever rapid growth and diversification of the College over the last twenty or so years, that is no mean achievement.

Given the highly focused nature of the work at Bruges, the diversity of its students and of where they end up professionally is quite extraordinary. The exotic assortment of variegated cultural baggage with which students have always pitched up in Bruges is to be expected. Each year's intake has always included students from all over the place, in every shape, size, political persuasion and cultural expression.

But looking at where they go to really does challenge the stereotype. Like other intakes, our little lot produced its fair smattering of ambassadors, almost-ambassadors, European Commission dignitaries and the like.

But far from everyone was hell bent on membership of the European Chapter of the Great and Good. My year (1971-2) has also produced its journalists, academics and school teachers. People ended up in just about everything from politics to animal welfare, mega-rich business people, political advisers to Greenpeace International, in tourism – we even produced a New Wave psychotherapist.

Ex-students are to be found across the private, public and voluntary sectors and at international, national, regional and community levels. But in a sense, adding together the formal and informal expansion of the European Union in recent years into so many areas of activity, none of this is in fact especially surprising.

As throughout academe, teaching ranged as it doubtlessly still does, from the absolutely outstanding to the idiosyncratically anaemic, the

bizarre and the eccentric. But where Bruges has always scored so highly is with the very high proportion of part-time staff and guest lecturers from the world which they are actually lecturing about. Without our realising it, in addition to gaining a very sound theoretical base, within the framework of our respective disciplines we were also introduced to strategic thinking, to problem solving and to the notion of damage limitation in situations where there are no clear or even discernible solutions. Looking back, the College's ability to attract some of the most original thinkers of its time has been truly impressive. I sometimes think that it's just as well that our youthful arrogance prevented many of us from realising quite who it was that we were pitching our wits against.

The communal living was great fun, if slightly zoo-like. But it was quite some years later that one realized how brilliantly the academic training was the whole time being contextualized by the social, emotional and cultural experience of living together.

For me the Bruges experience, despite my advanced age, is still very much ongoing and current. Bruges graduation brings with it membership of an active, contemporary worldwide professional network. The formal training

aside, Bruges anciens are never more than two phone calls away from informed, off-the-record, informal, inside briefings on just about every contemporary aspect of European activity or development across the whole gamut of the system. And as one who professionally continues to lean quite heavily on this phenomenon, I cannot underestimate its benefit at all possible levels.

For any young humanities graduates wanting to take their thinking and learning beyond the precepts of the nation state, the College has to rate as a serious consideration. And, possibly most important of all, learning there is fun.

Iain Reddish has had a dozen or so careers in politics, communications, public and government affairs, teaching and journalism, all of them with an EU tinge. He is currently a Brussels lobbyist.

