It is the tradition in Trinity College Dublin that newly appointed Professors are invited to give an inaugural lecture. The lecture represents the official recognition of their promotion to Professor, and the lecture itself provides an opportunity to showcase their achievements in research, innovation, engagement and teaching activities before an audience of members of the University community, invited stakeholders and the general public. An inaugural lecture is a significant event in an academic staff member’s career.

In Trinity College Dublin, inaugural lectures are a ceremonial occasion; academic robes are worn by the inaugural professor and the rest of the platform party.

The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences is proud to present the inaugural lecture of Professor Seán Duffy
KING ROBERT BRUCE THE IRISHMAN

ABSTRACT

Robert the Bruce was Scotland’s greatest king and perhaps the most famous Scot who ever lived. But what do we know of Robert Bruce the man?

King Robert Bruce was son of Robert Bruce son of Robert son of Robert son of William son of Robert son of the yet another Robert Bruce, the first of the family in Scotland. This first Robert Bruce hailed (and took his name) from Brus, now Brix, about 5km south of Cherbourg at the north-western tip of Normandy. In the first two decades of the twelfth century he was granted substantial lands in North Yorkshire and in co. Durham by the English king, Henry I, and when the latter’s protégé David I became king of Scotland in 1124 he made Bruce lord of Annandale on Scotland’s southern border with England. There began the family’s rise to greatness in Scotland, which culminated in the inauguration of Robert the Bruce as king of Scots in 1306.

These Bruces, it would appear, were no Irishmen. Yet King Robert Bruce’s younger brother Edward would soon afterwards be installed as king of Ireland—in effect, Ireland’s last high-king—and O’Neill of Ulster would then write to the pope seeking support for Ireland’s new Scottish king. In this famous Remonstrance, Edward Bruce is stated to be descended from O’Neill’s “noblest ancestors”. How can this be?

This lecture explores the Bruce family connection with Ireland and their immersion in the Gaelic world of the West Highlands, the Islands, and Galloway. It will be shown that the Irish connection stems from Edward and Robert Bruce’s mother, a Gael from the Firth of Clyde. They had a brother called Niall, named after their maternal grandfather, whose own grandfather in turn was Gilla Brighde (“devotee of St Brigid”). The latter’s son Donnchad held the earldom of Carrick in southwest Scotland but also acquired a significant stake in the Glens of Antrim in the days of John de Courcy and King John. When Edward Bruce invaded Ireland in the summer of 1315, he did so as heir to this Ulster lordship.

It was because of his Gaelic heritage that Robert Bruce could write to potential Irish allies from Rathlin Island in 1306-7 reminding them that the Scots and Irish have “sprung from one seed of birth” and have “a common language and customs”. And it was because of his Gaelic heritage that the Irish, having helped Bruce secure his position as king of Scots—in the teeth of English opposition that culminated in King Robert’s great victory at Bannockburn—could turn to him and his family for assistance. Together they initiated a Celtic Alliance of Irish and Scots—and the Welsh, whose involvement the Bruce’s also solicited—the purpose of which, O’Neill says (in a letter to MacCarthy of Munster which historians have wrongly neglected), is to “shake off the heavy yoke and tyranny of the English”. Anti-English sentiment, the lecture concludes, is not a modern phenomenon. It was alive and well long before Brexit in the days of King Robert Bruce the Irishman.
Professor Seán Duffy
Professor of Medieval Irish and Insular History
Seán Duffy is Professor of Medieval Irish and Insular History at Trinity College Dublin. He is a graduate of Trinity, from which he also holds an M.Litt and a PhD, the latter completed while a Scholar at the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. He is a Fellow of the College, where he has lectured since 1993. He has been Head of Department, a member of the Board of Trinity, and Secretary to the Fellows. He has written or edited about 35 books and nearly 50 peer-reviewed journal articles and book-chapters, has organized 30 conferences, served on 10 editorial or advisory boards, has been external examiner of undergraduate history in four third-level institutions and of doctoral theses in several others, and has supervised upwards of 25 doctoral candidates of his own, several of whom now lecture in UK and Irish universities.

Professor Duffy has published widely on Irish history generally, and medieval Ireland in particular, on Anglo-Irish relations through the ages, on the history of the Celtic countries in the medieval period, and on the history and archaeology of Dublin since the Viking Age. A cornerstone of his research has been the examination of Ireland’s relations with Scotland, Wales, and the Kingdom of Man and the Isles in the Middle Ages, concentrating on the period between the battle of Clontarf in 1014 and the battle of Faughart in 1318 (in which Edward, brother of Robert the Bruce was killed). In his work, he has developed a transnational approach, and has been particularly concerned with the response of the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh to domination by England from 1066 onwards, and especially the extent to which, after the English invasion of Ireland in 1169, Ireland’s experience mirrored that of Scotland and Wales.

Since 1998, Seán Duffy has been chairman of the Friends of Medieval Dublin, a not-for-profit advocacy organization and is much involved in pro bono consultative and advisory work on matters relating to history and heritage, particularly with Dublin City Council. Since 1999 he has organized an annual interdisciplinary conference on medieval Dublin, the proceedings of which are published each year by Four Courts Press. In 2014, he was a founder and organizer of the prestigious biennial James Lydon Lectures in Medieval History and Culture, the volumes of which appear in a dedicated Cambridge University Press series. He is also co-founder of the Trinity Medieval Ireland Symposium, held biennially (and now a new Four Courts Press series), as part of which plans are well-advanced for a major national conference in May 2019 to mark the 850th anniversary of the 1169 Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland.
Trinity College, founded in 1592, has an unusually long, successful and innovative record in the academic study of history.

The Erasmus Smith’s professorship of Modern History was established in 1762 and one of its most notable incumbents was the celebrated J.B. Bury (1861-1927), author of *History of the Roman Empire* (1893), *The Life of St Patrick and his place in History* (1905) and *A History of Freedom of Thought* (1914). Bury’s successors included several distinguished historians of modern Ireland, including T.W. Moody (1907-84) and F.S.L. Lyons (1923-83), under whose guidance, from the 1930s, the Department played a leading role in the creation of a critical school of modern Irish historical scholarship. The current occupant of the Erasmus Smith’s chair is Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, a historian of the seventeenth-century Irish nobility. A second professorial chair, the Lecky Professorship in History, was established in 1913. The chair’s occupants have included several notable medieval historians, including Edmund Curtis (1881-1943), A.J. Otway-Ruthven (1909-89), J.F. Lydon (1928-2013), and I.S. Robinson. The current occupant of the Lecky Chair is Professor Ruth Mazo Karras, a specialist in medieval social and cultural history, gender, and sexuality.

Initially medieval and modern history were taught in the same department but, as in many universities, two separate Departments of Medieval and Modern History were established in 1965, maintaining their existence until reunited in 2005. At that point the combined Department of History was linked with Classics, History of Art and Gender Studies to form the School of Histories and Humanities. The History Department retains, however, its distinctive identity and it remains committed to its tradition of rigorous and innovative scholarship. It has recently, for example, been in the forefront of collaborative ventures with IT specialists designed to digitize important historical records.

The present Department of History has over twenty-five full-time academics, along with several post-doctoral fellows, a substantial body of postgraduate research students, and a thriving group of graduate students following taught M. Phil courses. Consistently rated as “excellent” in external reviews, the Department enjoys an international research profile in several areas, most notably in the history of Ireland from the Middle Ages to the present day. In addition to its expertise in Irish history, the Department also includes specialists in European history, especially in France and Germany, and in non-European history including the USA and China. Fields include historiography, migration and settlement, religion, class, diplomacy, politics and warfare, and social and environmental history.