Student Spotlight: Senia Foster

03/01/2017

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Senia Foster is a graduate student specializing in medieval Irish history. After receiving her bachelor’s degree in liberal arts at USU, Senia decided to stay for the master’s program. Her thesis research explores the Butler family of Kilkenny, Ireland, who were, she explains, “the most powerful family in Ireland for about 600 years.” Senia has also recently finished co-curating an exhibit in the basement of the Merrill-Cazier Library entitled, Transform, which features facsimile editions of medieval and early Modern books.

Next summer, Senia plans to travel to Dublin to do some research on the Butlers in the National Archives, after which she will go to Valetta, Malta to present at the Mediterranean Studies Association Conference of 2017. Aside from her time spent at school, Senia reports that she loves Lord of the Rings, baking, and spending time with her family.

Read our edited interview below.

What is your undergraduate Alma Mater?

I got a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts at Utah State University.

What appealed to you about the graduate studies program at Utah State University?

I liked that I knew most of the professors. As I was applying, they were really helpful, and a couple of them showed interest in having me work for them, so that was a big factor in my decision. Also, I like being close to my family.

What is your field of interest?

I am studying medieval Irish history. I’ve always loved Ireland. My background was in classical history which got me the language requirements that most medieval scholars need since most of the records are in Latin. I knew so little about medieval Ireland, but I wanted to learn more.

When and how did you first develop an interest in history?

I have always liked language so I started taking Latin, which gets you into classical history, and it kind of opened my eyes to the field. I never really liked it in high school because all we focused on was U.S. history, which doesn’t interest me that much. After that experience, I assumed I didn’t like history. But then I realized that there are lots of other facets that you can look into.

What projects are you working on right now?

Right now I am working on my thesis proposal. My thesis focuses on the Butler family in Kilkenny, Ireland in the fourteenth century. I’m also researching Catullus, who was a Roman poet, and his manuscript tradition. There are very few records of Catullus, so that’s interesting. I’m also curating an exhibit on rare book facsimiles.

Tell me a little bit about your thesis. How did you pick the Butler family?

Well, I’m related to them, but they were also the ruling family of Ireland. They were technically under the King of England, but he basically gave them free reign, so they
were the most powerful family of Ireland for about 600 years. That's what brought me to them.

Do you have to learn any Celtic languages?

I have to know Latin and English, and I just stumbled across some records in middle French yesterday. That might be something I have to look at because the court, in that time period, spoke French.

Tell me about the exhibit you're curating.

It's a curatorial seminar with Alexa Sand that is open to graduate and undergraduate students. Our theme is Transform and we are looking at how books and manuscripts and then, one step further, facsimiles (because that's what is in the exhibit) change society and also changed through time. It opens next week in the basement of the library (Transform, the second annual student-curated exhibit on the history of the book, can be seen in the basement of the Merrill-Cazier Library until January 20th 2017).

What is your favorite part of studying at Utah State University so far?

The faculty is fantastic. Every professor that I work with shows an interest, not only in the areas of their study but also in my own curiosities. When I am interested, they are interested. I just really love USU, the campus, and the atmosphere.

What is your number one goal as a graduate student at Utah State University?

My goal is to follow what interests me because that's the most important. For history majors, we already know that we are not going to make a lot of money, but finding that tiny piece of history that hasn't been looked at yet and making an impact on that field is my ultimate goal as a student.

Where do you hope your degree leads you?

I hope to work in a museum, probably curating, but we'll see where that takes me.

What skills do you seek to learn in order to take you there?

How to look at history from multiple angles. I mean from the dates and the important people angle, but also I have a folklore background so looking at the inconsequential things like ephemera and folk songs and oral narratives is what I hope to be able to find and use.

Is there an article, movie, blog, or book which inspired you that you recommend to others?

How the Irish Saved Civilization by Thomas Cahill is a fantastic book. If students are interested in Ireland that's a great one. As far as medieval history goes, fantasy novels are probably what sparked my interest in that time period.

What are you passionate about, other than history?

I really like watching movies. Lord of the Rings is probably one of my favorite movies of all time. And I really like baking.

If interested individuals want to follow you on social media or find you on the web, what is a good website or twitter handle for you?

You can find me on Facebook, or email me at seniafoster21@gmail.com