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Reflective Essay

My historical research project, entitled “The IRA’s Role in Shaping Ireland’s Political Voice: Violence, Unity, and Division from 1916-1998,” required detailed research across a broad spectrum of sources, all of which I found through the University of Maryland Library system. The UMD Library system is a vast resource that I was lucky to have access to throughout the process of conducting research and piecing together my findings into a comprehensive study of 20th Century Ireland.

I began researching this topic for an independent study project for the Fall 2011 semester. I chose to study the IRA and the profound role it played in altering Irish politics, law, and order in both the heavily Protestant Northern Ireland and the mostly Catholic southern state of Eire. Diplomacy between the political actors in Northern Ireland, Eire, and the British Crown was conducted in attempts to quell the violence. Unfortunately, disorder created by erratic violence destabilized most of the peaceful attempts at diplomacy. The bloody balancing act between politics and bombings was always acted out in public view, something that greatly intrigued me. Growing up in the United States I never saw such an intersection between politics and violence. The complex struggle for peace, legitimacy, and independence interested me for its depth, complexities, and validity that it still holds in Ireland today.

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To gather and analyze sources for my project, I looked at biographies of notable leaders, analytical texts on politics during certain periods, and reflective historical essays which were written from an outsider's viewpoint. To start my research, I spent several hours on the third floor of McKeldin Library, exploring the Irish history section for any event, person, or organization in 20th Century Ireland that caught my interest and fit into my research concept. Then after talking to my advisor, Professor Dr. Alfred Moss, I went back to the third floor of McKeldin and spent several more hours in the British history section. I gathered texts that focused specifically on the south, the north, or from the perspective of the Crown. I also looked for materials written by historians from the north, from the south, and several British historians. Throughout the process it was important to maintain a balanced viewpoint while learning and analyzing materials. I was greatly assisted by the librarians at McKeldin during pressured stints while I was looking for books that I could either not find in the stacks or it was checked out already. I used Research Port for academic journal articles, written by authors from different countries and from different perspectives, which were invaluable in creating a balanced and historically accurate project. They had a calming effect and taught me how to find sources that were closely related to the books that I could not otherwise find.

In such a tumultuously violent history, it would be very easy to demonize one side of the conflict. It was important to maintain a fair stance as a historian while I was analyzing my sources. This allowed me to create an unbiased understanding of this conflict.

I worked with my independent study advisor, Dr. Alfred Moss, and collaborated with him to refine and improve my research tactics as I developed this project. He taught me to recognize new sources that I was not originally looking for. His direction influenced the direction my research took. Additionally, Professor Moss taught me that as historian, I need to feel

comfortable making judgments about the actions and events that I am reading about. Only then could I write a modern history of the Irish people that is dynamic and original. Any fear or insecurity in making my own decisions about what I was reading would result in a generic and flat project.

In terms of my research helping me in future professional endeavors, I learned to trust my analyses and my judgments for what I read. I learned to feel secure in my reading of a given topic and to use my analytical skills to develop my own individual understanding of material. The trained ability to choose a topic, explore it, and to finalize a detailed and original analysis will be invaluable in any professional field. Whether that field is history, law, politics, or economics, those skills will allow me to excel in my chosen field. That skill set was greatly honed during the duration of my research project.