

The Job Hunt, 2008

The defiant bastion of Europe in North America

July 13th 2008

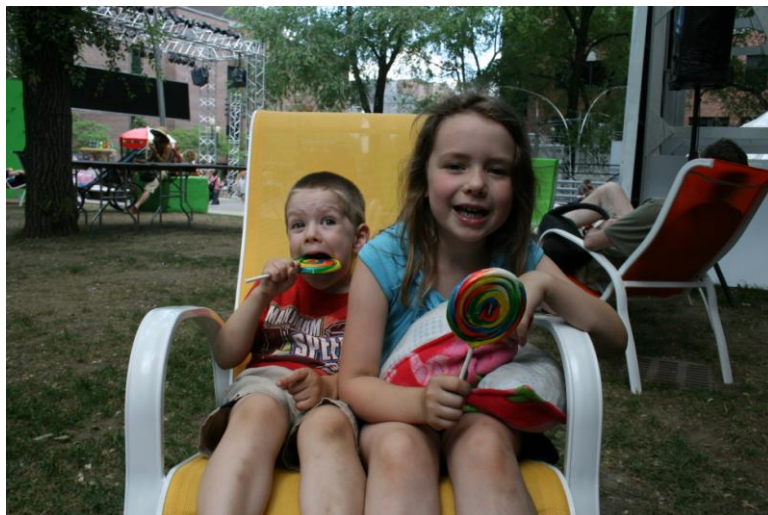
We have just had three days in Montreal, just as a test run for a possible move, since they have already given me an offer. The salary is good and it is tenure-track, the start-up package is okay but not great - really the advantage is the work/life situation in Montreal.

Work first of all - we spent Friday getting a tour of IRIC (the Institut de Recherche en Immunologie et en Cancerologie, at the Universite de Montreal) by Claude's newly graduated PhD student, Marie-Eve (very bright, I think she'll do well in her post-doc at Oxford). I love the set-up of IRIC, it is bright and shiny, all new and high technology. The building is designed for research, and lets natural light into every part of the building. Best of all, all the students and post-docs in the building look happy, talk to each other with smiles on their faces and interest in their work.



The mouse house is great (although I cannot imagine it staying helicobacter free at the current level of entry barrier, they should really divide it into two levels) with an amazing transgenics facility and best of all - lots of empty space! This is a place I would enjoy working in.

To our unexpected delight, one of the admin staff, Robert Turgeon, happens to be President of Heritage Montreal in his spare time, and organised a walking tour around the parks of Plateau with himself and Dinu Bumbaru (key advisor to World Heritage, he was sent to assess the damage of Dubrovnik after the war). We had a very pleasant stroll, discussing world heritage and the pleasures of being in a city where people enjoy life. They then dropped us off at Little Italy, so we could visit the Jean Talon Market and have a beautiful Italian meal.



How different from the United States that fourth generation Italian immigrants still speak Italian as their first language (along with French and English, of course). Montreal is so heterogenous, with multiple groups all living together and all respecting each other's culture. And for me, cities are more analogous to ice-cream than microarrays.

We spent Saturday with Sylvie,

Valerie and Loic. Sylvie and Marc are really the inspiration for me to move to Montreal. Beyond simply Sylvie encouraging me to apply, they provide an active example of life in Montreal - they are the happiest family I know. Both indulge each other's whims, they enjoy their work and throw themselves into it, but take all the time they need to play with Valerie and Loic and to be together (a difficult task indeed for a scientist).

A nice house, good food, a city easy to raise children in, this is where Montreal excels. We spent the morning playing bubbles with the kids (with the bubble trumpet we brought them from the Ukraine - they play so well together, sharing and looking out for each other), and then drove to the Old Port. There we ate crepes, walked around, tried a local ice-cream Sylvie touted as better than Ben and Jerry's, and enjoyed the blue



skies and stunning architecture. Afterwards we went to one of the many festivals that grace Montreal every summer, this one "Just for Laughs". It is a street comedy festival, with the typical giant head people walking around, distorting mirrors, clowns and carnival games. Not really funny, but certainly enjoyable with everyone out and about.



We looked after Valerie and Loic while Sylvie moved the car, we didn't have the guts to tell Sylvie that while she was gone they played a game together where they licked their lollypops, tapped it on the sole of their shoes and then licked it again. It is no wonder kids bring illness. In the evening we had an extremely enjoyable dinner with Claude and his wife Claudette, an experimental psychologist at Le Meac. The food and wine was superb - a lingering dinner with great food and

fascinating company, isn't that what life is about?

Sunday morning we had brunch together at Tutti Frutti, with mounds of fresh fruit. We then watched WALL-E at the movies (all movies are screened in both English and French, Valerie and Loic were quite happy to watch the English version for us), and Lydia taught Valerie and Loic how to make fairy bread before we flew out, onto our next choice.

Overall, I think we would always be foreign in Montreal. It is far more French than either of us expected before our first visit, 70% of the population speak French as their first language, and 30% speak no English at all. If I teach undergraduate at the Universite de Montreal it'll have to be in French (luckily I can teach Masters and PhD students in English). Still, it'll be a challenge and a life

ambition to learn French, and it would grant any children the amazing gift of bilingualism. And Montreal is one of the best places in the world to be slightly foreign, accepting and respectful of cultural diversity. Somehow they have managed to pick up all the best traits of the English, French and Americans, and allowed all the newcomers to keep their own cultural community while embracing that of Quebec.

Going to Ghent

July 15th 2008

I've never been to terminal five of Heathrow before (always being redirected during teething troubles), but it surprisingly nice. We flew from Montreal to Brussels overnight on Sunday-Monday, with a five hour stop-over in Heathrow. Lydia really enjoyed the shopping, buying a new cute hat and spending her life savings on Smythson of Bond Street stationary (which she promptly left on our next flight - but she got it



back a few days later), and I enjoyed the relative tranquillity of a terminal which doesn't make constant repetitive statements about staying by your luggage and boarding.

So we had two days in Ghent, Belgium, for my job interview at VIB (the Flanders Institute of Biotechnology). We spent the first evening wandering around the city, with nice old buildings, Ghent Castle and stunning Churches and Belfreys (including a couple of World Heritage sites).

English was more common here than in Montreal, with the Flemish much more comfortable in



adopting a language for utility. One of the nice things about the city was the way almost the entire population got about by tram or cycle. The beers, of course, were stunning, with an extraordinary diversity in flavour.

Our second day, the 15th, was also our first wedding anniversary, and the most important one to Lydia (being paper). Unfortunately she had to make do with a romantic dessert date in an exotic city, as I spent the day at the interview and couldn't

even give her her present (I had foolishly assumed that Smythson of Bond Street could whip up some social cards in under three weeks, but at least I knew they did handbags as well as stationary).



So the interview went quite well, my talk was well received and the questions they asked very exceptionally difficult ones, but ones I had previously contemplated. It was very odd though being introduced as "the youngest person they have ever had interview for VIB, at 28", and my age was brought up at each stage. More worrying though was after my talk, when I was interviewed by the external panel, and the first question they raised is why my current supervisor didn't support my application. I was thrown off to say the least, but when they explained that he hadn't sent in his letter of support I breathed a sigh of relief - forgetting to send in a letter was okay. I just wish they had let me know in advance so I didn't have to send an urgent email to Jessie and Sasha pleading for the letter to be sent within 24 hours.

The letter eventually came four days later, well after they made their final decision, but in the end I guess it wasn't make or break - they offered me the job! Really good news since the position had tough competition. The advantages are obvious - we'd be in the heart of Europe, in a charming town, a quick train ride from anywhere else. It would be amazing for science too, since the position includes a research budget of 2





million Euros. I essentially wouldn't need to worry about grants and could do any project I could think up and would have great collaborators available. The key disadvantages are the low salary (Belgium pays researchers far lower than the rest of Europe, even if they are willing to give them big budgets to spend on science) and the fact that it is not an academic position. My position would be with the VIB and would only be hosted by a university, so no tenure-track or anything. That makes it an amazing position for five years,

but insecure after that if my work doesn't generate patents for Flanders.

Zandsculptuurfestival in Blankenberge

July 16th 2008

Waking up in Ghent, we decided to take advantage of the biggest benefit of living in Belgium - the ability to zip around Europe by train. Lydia decided that her life's ambition was to see the Zandsculptuurfestival in Blankenberge, a tiny town on the coast of Belgium. The town certainly had ocean alongside land, with a strip of sand in the intermediate zone, but no Australian could ever call it a beach. Luckily, the beach wasn't our aim, we were here to see het zandkasteel. Every year in Blankenberge they create the world's biggest sandcastles for the Zandsculptuurfestival. This year the theme was princesses, specifically Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella and Rapunzel. The sandsculptures were indeed impressive, in both scale and detail. The secret is to use angular rather than spherical grains.



The Friet Museum of Brugge

July 16th 2008

With the morning in Blankenberge, we spent the evening in Brugge, a gorgeous city in western Flanders. The entire city centre is World Heritage listed, and the market square and medieval bell tower certainly deserves it. We walked around the city and also saw the 15th century Burgher's Lodge and St Jacob's church (built around 1240), but the highlight of Brugge was in the museums.

The most disappointing of the three museums we visited was



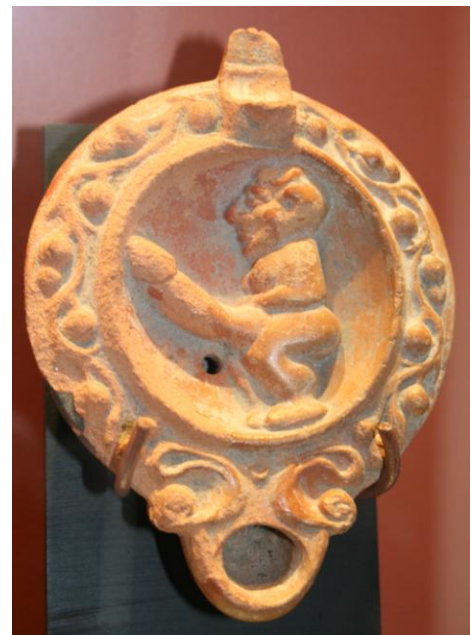
Choco-Story, the story of chocolate in Belgium. Fairly standard stuff about the history and production of cocoa. We learnt that the largest cocoa producers are the Ivory coast (35%), Ghana (20%), Indonesia (15%), Nigeria (5%), Cameroon (5%), Brazil (4%) and Ecuador (4%). After the Spanish colonisers of Mexico found out about cocoa, they took to it with such relish that they had their servants pour them cocoa even during religious services.

The Bishop of Chiapas, Don Bernard de Salazar, prohibited it during mass. Most people responded quite reasonably by just stopping going to Church, except one cocoa fanatic, who murdered the Bishop, ironically by putting poison in his own cocoa. It was only in 1528 that Cortez, the famous leader of South American genocide, brought back the secret recipe of cocoa to Spain (700g ground cocoa, 750g white sugar, 56g cinnamon, 14g cloves, 1 pinch aniseed, musk, amber, 14 pepper grains, 3 vanilla sticks, 1 hazelnut, orange flower) and in 1580 the first chocolate shop opened in Spain. The true highlight of the museum, though, was when Lydia inadvertently stole chocolate.



More interesting was Lumina Domestica, with the world's largest collection of lamps.

The lamps stretched back into our earliest history and into modern lighting, and the collection surprisingly interesting. For example they raised the question of lighting in ancient Egypt. I remember seeing the ancient Egyptian temples that had been occupied by Christian monks while in Egypt. Compared to the tombs the Christians didn't



find, these temples had two obvious characteristics -firstly the sculptures within reach had been destroyed, as they tried to scrub rival gods from the walls, and secondly a thick layer of black grease covered the walls and roof, unlike the perfectly clean stone on undiscovered temples. The mystery is that while lamps and torches were used in every day life, leaving greasy black traces on the walls and roof of common Egyptian dwellings, no traces were left on painted and engraves rock of tombs - so what did the artists use as light when working in the tombs? It has been postulated that it could have been mirrors, but the best Egyptian silver mirror only reflects 40% of light, so after only a few turns nearly all the light would be gone.



Tantalisingly, in the interior chamber of Hathor in Denderah, bas-reliefs 4,200 years old strongly resemble electric light bulbs. This might not be as outrageous as it sounds, as prototypic electric batteries were discovered from ancient Baghdad, 15cm high and 7.5cm in diameter, capped with a bitumen stopper with an iron rod emerging and

inserted into a silver-plated copper cylinder. Testing shows that addition of grape juice to the battery generates an electric current of 0.5-1.5 V. So could the Egyptians have developed a clean burning light source?

By far the highlight of the three, indeed the highlight of Brugge and possibly all of Belgium, was the Friet Museum, dedicated to both potatoes and fries. The humble potato was first mentioned by the Spanish in 1537 in Colombia, but thousands of varieties were grown for thousands of years before then.



When it was brought to Europe it became the new staple of the poor, giving a high yield per hectare (now on average it gives 16 tonnes per hectare, compared to 3.8 tonnes per hectare for rice, with Australia being the most efficient grower producing 100 tonnes/hectare compared to 40 tonnes/hectare in Europe/USA and 5 tonnes/hectare in Central Asia) and with the added advantage that an underground crop could not be easily pillaged by feudal lords and armies. Potatoes were also excellent for nutrition, being one of the rare few vegetables which contain all the essential amino acids. Likewise, they eradicated one of the three most feared diseases of the Middle Ages - ergotism (along with leprosy and the plague). Ergotism was

caused by fungus on rye, poisoning it, and causing problems for the very poor (rye bread was the staple food of the poorest people of Europe).

The condition caused gangrene, vasoconstriction, loss of feeling in the extremities and hallucination. It was called "St Anthony's Fire" because as a cure people went on a pilgrimage to Saint Antoine-l'Abbaye (which often worked because it removed the eater from the local crop of contaminated rye). Once the potato replaced rye as the food of the poor, the disease dramatically reduced in incidence.

Although to be fair, reliance on potatoes caused its own problems, as the Irish found out. Despite the enormous advantage of the potato to the poor (or perhaps because of it), the Church looked down on the humble potato, labelling it as the vegetable of debauchery. It was used in witchcraft, and as it grew underground it was associated with the devil and sexual appetite.

The London surgeon John Gerard wrote in 1597 "I planted some in my garden, they are nourishing and fortifying and provoke debauchery". Perhaps related, we saw the "maiden potato", a type of extremely knobbly potato so named as it was very difficult to peel, and only after a girl developed hands skilled enough to part it from its skin was she deemed ready to marry.



Beyond the potato, the museum leapt into the world of the fry. Fries were invented in Belgium, but named "French Fries" by American soldiers as they didn't understand that the French-speaking soldiers from Wallonia who gave them Belgian fries were not actually French. We saw historical frying equipment, including the short-lived fries robot, and early ads for fries. We also found out about a number of world records:



- The largest weight of potatoes peeled by five people with standard potato knives in 45 minutes = 367.8kg.
- The largest potato = 2015g, 25cm long and 70.5cm in diameter, grown in 1992 by one Mr Schotten.
- Endurance frying record (most fries fried in 72 hours) = 15 000 boxes, by one Ludwig Reymen from Kalmthout on the 2nd to the 5th of April, 1987.
- Longest fry (potato puree division) = 9 794 metres (and 2cm by 2cm), by one Stephan Tyvaert.
- Largest potato crisps = 10cm by 17.5cm, by the US company Charles Chip (using extra large potatoes).

Disaster in Brussels

July 17th 2008

Today was a disaster! We had the morning to see Brussels, and then in the afternoon I was to interview at the Free University of Brussels (Belgian universities are either Catholic or Free). We wandered around the centre of Brussels, which was beautiful. The Grand Place was circled by guildhalls so ornate that even Lydia thought it was overdone, and she has a very high threshold for gold, statues and ornamentation. We wandered around the Royal Palace and gardens and saw the famous statue of the little boy peeing, and then I headed off for my interview with a promise to Lydia to meet her in the Grand Place between 6pm and 6:30pm so that we could catch our train.



I had been told that the ULB was only ten minutes away by taxi but I left myself an hour so I could see the campus. When I hopped in the taxi I gave the full address and even a map I had found on the website, but the taxi driver snorted dismissively and said he knew where the university was. Ten



minutes later I was there, and I walked around campus for half an hour before starting to ask people where the institute was. I was dismayed to learn that it was on another campus, but I still had half an hour, so I hopped in another taxi, cursing the first driver. The driver took a long hard look at the map and started driving. Half an hour later I was getting nervous, so I asked how long it would be. He replied that the second University of Brussels campus was not actually in Brussels, and that it would take another half an hour. Great, I was going to be thirty minutes late.

Half an hour later I asked again, getting really nervous. He replied "I will stop the meter now (at 150 Euros!) because I am lost". We drove backwards and forwards for another complete hour, despite the map with every turn-off listed, until he finally found the second campus. Despite being called the University of Brussels and being right next to the "Brussels South" airport, the second campus was actually just outside Charleroi, deep in Wallonia and closer to France than to Brussels!

An hour and a half late, I had to skip my interview with Muriel, their head of immunology (on the promise that she'd drive me back to Brussels, an interview me during the hour-long drive). I had a great chat with Etienne and then started my presentation. Just my luck, I had brought the wrong one - but maybe the adrenalin kicked in or something, because I gave one of the smoothest talks of my career. The questions afterwards by the selection panel were great, very insightful even without considering that their speciality disciplines were not immunology. The package they offered was also great, tenure in three years and funding to match the VIB offer. The only downsides are the low pay and the fact that it would be a commuting job. If it was in Brussels itself it would be a no-brainer, but now we have to weigh up the cost of me driving every day to work, or Lydia finding a job locally.



The Scholars of Trinity College

July 20th 2008

The last two days have been in Ireland. We flew into Dublin on Thursday night and spent Friday in Maynooth and Saturday in Dublin. The Maynooth position is very tempting, tenure after one year, access to large grants for research, good pay and a role in moulding the direction of research in the Institute of Immunology. My big concerns were that last time (due to HR gone mad) I wasn't allowed to meet the faculty as my application had to be kept confidential (regardless of my personal

preference, or the way every other university operates, with open interviews), and that mouse immunology was at a fairly low base in the institute so it would take me a while to build up to the infrastructure I needed for my research.



So it was a big relief to me to be able to return and talk to some people.

It really eased my mind that the HR issue wasn't covering up some big problems. I was also impressed that they had Max Cooper there that day to give a talk on the evolution of alternative adaptive immunity in lungfish and hagfish, a fantastic talk. Lydia was less impressed with the opportunities Maynooth presented for her to work, she wouldn't have difficulty in finding work in administration or

teaching, but nothing really jumped out at her. Walking down the tiny high street of Maynooth, we both agreed that we didn't really want to live in Maynooth either, so it'd probably have to be Dublin and commuting for me.

Saturday was to see Dublin. We started out at Connelly Station and did a circular walking tour of the city, through the main shopping district north of the river, crossing to Temple Bar (despite the current status as a binge drinking centre, it is named after the teacher and philosopher Sir William Temple, 1555-1627, Provost of Trinity College) and Christ Church Cathedral, and then walking to Trinity College.



Trinity College was an unexpected delight, and by the end of our tour Lydia was ready to sign up for another degree. Trinity College was founded in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth the 1st, on the site of an Augustine Monastery (closed by Henry VIII). The College is built around four squares. The first square we started at was Parliament Square, so called because it was built 1710-1840 after being founded by the short-lived Parliament of Ireland. The chapel on the square (designed by Williams chambers and identical to the exam hall) was the first chapel in Ireland to be consecrated for both Catholic and Protestant religions, but only alumni within five years of graduating can get married there. The scholars hall is also on Parliament Square, it is here where the Commons Lunch is served everyday, which is actually highly exclusive.



Students can chose to sit the scholars' exam after their second year, and those who do very well become scholars, being given a stipend to study, a scholarship for the rest of their degree and their post-graduate degree, and a free lunch every day. Scholars are called to lunch from the belltower, where school myth has it that anyone who walks under the belltower will never graduate from Trinity College with an academic degree. Our guide tells us that no student would ever walk under there sober, and he laughed when a group of school kids on tour did so. Next to the belltower is a statue of George Salmon. He was head of the university when there was a big push to allow women to join. He held out as long as he could, saying that women would enter "over his dead body". In 1904 the King decided to allow women to join and forced him to sign, he did so but said "I agree with my hand and oppose with my heart". He then made up a bunch of rules restricting women once they joined, such as only letting them enter by the back gate. By delicious irony, the old bigot had a massive heart-attack and died before the first woman entered, in the back gate over his grave.

The next square was Library Square, which contained the Old Library and Oregon maple trees planted in the 1820s, and New Square, with a nice law that only the croquette club are allow on. Since 1801 Trinity College has been a "copyright" library, meaning that they have a right to a single copy of every book published in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. To house the enormous number of books they had to build a new library, which was built in 1967 in horrible brutalist style and is called the giant concrete photocopier by students. The last square was Fellow's Square, with the arts and social sciences buildings, built by the same brutalist architect, and joining onto the Old Library again. The Old Library was built in 1712, and is the largest single room library in the world. The room is lined by busts of scientists and philosophers, and all the books are arranged not by subject or author, but instead by book dimensions, making it great for packing in books on shelves and horrible to find a book unless you know its exact size. Within the Old Library is the Book of Kells, which we then went and saw.

The Book of Kells is a partial bible with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all heavily illustrated in Celtic style. It is these illustrations that the book is most famous for. It was written about 800 CE in

St Colum Cille on Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, by after raiding by Vikings was moved to Kells for safety. It was then stolen in 1007 from Kells, recovered two months later minus the heavy gold of the cover. In 1653 it was sent to Dublin, and in 1661 loaned to Trinity College, where it has stayed. The book is written on vellum (calfskin immersed in lime or excrement and scraped clean of fur with a knife), and took 185 calves to write. The 8th century Book of Mulling and Book of Dimma are older, but neither have the stunning illustrations.



The illustrations required inks from around the known world. The brown of the written was just crushed oak apples and iron sulphate, but the colours had rare reagents in them. Blue was made by crushed lapis lazuli from a single mine in Afghanistan and by the plant indigo, native to northern Germany. White was chalk and white lead. Yellow was orpiment (yellow arsenic sulphate), while red was from the Mediterranean plant *Crotophaga tinctoria*. Kermes red was made from the crushed pregnant bodies of the insect *Kermococcus vermilio*, only found in the Mediterranean. Green was copper and eggwhite.

We also saw the famous harp of Brian Boru, the last High King of Ireland. It is featured on the currency of Ireland despite being made a few hundred years after Brian Boru died in 1014.

Back to the Motherland

July 22nd 2008

For the last three days we have been in London. The last job interview for me, and the final destination to research for Lydia. London is immediately attractive to us because of Luke and Shyla. A city feels so much warmer when you can turn up and already be surrounded by good friends who show you the best parts about living there.



We have been staying with Luke and Shyla since Saturday night. On Sunday we went out for an English breakfast on Portobello Road in Notting Hill (which was fantastic), then they took us out to London Zoo. The Zoo is quite small, being in London, so they have concentrated on the most interactive exhibits and having only a few large exhibits rather than lots of small ones (with the animals needing the most space out at their second zoo).

I especially enjoyed the bug exhibit and the giant stick-insects. I was really interested to hear the origin of the saying "one for the road". When we were on the bus down Tyburn Road, Shyla told us that the people to be executed at the Tyburn gallows were allowed to stop on the road to have a final drink. We had a great Indian dinner just across the road from Luke and Shyla Sunday night.



Monday was my day of interviewing, and Lydia's day of stationary and paper museums. Once again, Mill Hill awed me with the fantastic people working there. In my opinion it is one of the best places in the world to be working on cellular immunology. The people are motivated, intelligent and collaborative. The bulk funding means they can focus on top research and not worry about applying for grants or getting the micky mouse papers. And the commitment to mouse biology is shown by the direct absorption of mouse costs by the institute, so individual labs don't have to factor it into consideration. The building is old, and on the very edge of London, but there are hundred good reasons to work there.

Today was the day for World Heritage sites. Shyla had to work, but Luke, Lydia and I caught the tube down to the Tower of London. The Tower was founded by William Conqueror after the Norman conquest of England in 1066. He founded the central tower, the White Tower, in 1078. Other towers and fortifications were progressively built, being completed by Edward I in 1285. The inner wall is the highest, at 15 feet high, with 13 towers. The outer wall is the thickest and has 6 additional towers, giving 20 towers in all. The moat around the tower is 125 feet wide. It was originally built too deep, such that it collected debris from the Thames rather than being washed clean by it. On this plus side, this has made the moat an archaeological gold mine. Our tour was conducted by a Beefeater (Yeoman Warder). The Beefeaters have been guarding the tower since 1485. They live in the tower with their families, and are locked in every night at 10pm (there is a whole little village inside the tower). Last September the Beefeaters gained their first female Yeoman Warder. To become a Beefeater you must have served in the army, royal marines or royal airforce for 22 years (people from the navy are not accepted as they do not swear to the monarchy), rising to the



level of Sergeant Major and having good conduct medals. The post seems to be an odd retirement position, being locked in at night and conducting tours during the day. They must go mad bellowing out the same poor jokes every hour, on the hour. In the tower we also saw the Crown Jewels (guarded in the tower since 1303, and including the largest perfectly cut diamond in the world) and the old armoury. Also interesting were the ravens of the tower. They are fed by the beefeaters (with beef) and their wings are kept clipped so that they do not fly away, due to the myth that if the ravens leave the tower, the city will fall.

After the tower Luke had to leave, but Lydia and I caught a ferry down to our next World Heritage site - Greenwich village. We wandered through the charming streets of the village, including the oldest brewery in Britain, and on the campus of Greenwich University. We then climbed up to the Royal Observatory of Greenwich. Interestingly, this used to be in the Tower of London until the Royal Astronomer John Flamsteed complained about the ravens to Charles II. It was after Charles II ordered the ravens removed that he was given the prophecy about the city falling, so instead he moved the astronomers out to Greenwich. The highlight of the observatory is the Meridian line, the definition of zero degree longitude, and the clockwork defining Greenwich mean time. Afterwards we went back into town to meet up with Gwyn and Lyn for a beer at the Mason Arms, and then had a great pizza dinner with Luke and Shyla.



Moving North
August 20th 2008

Flying from Seattle to Montreal, as Lydia and I consider leaving the United States, with its guns, extremist religion and broken social and political systems, I read *Rough Crossings*, and considered that people have been moving north for a more ideal society since the very creation of the US. *Rough Crossings* is a book about the US revolution from the perspective of slaves. The abolitionist movement had become extremely strong in the United Kingdom in the years leading up to the revolution (far more 'radical' than the movement in the American colony). Historically, slavery didn't exist in the British Isles, and it was only when rich landowners from the colonies started to bring back slaves to London that the hideousness of slavery was brought in front of the British people. Rapidly the concept of ownership over people was discarded in the British Isles, and the campaigners shifted their focus to the international slave trade and slavery in the colonies.

Indirectly, this movement against slavery in the UK was one of the triggers for the revolution. The cry of "no taxation without representation" may have worked in the northern colonies, and some of the leaders of the revolution were primarily concerned with personal independence (for white males), but the southern colonies were never seriously considering revolt. It was only when the Governors for the colonies began to suggest that in case of revolution slaves could be given their freedom if they joined in the defence of King George that the wealthy landowners in the south gained "patriotism", claiming that the King sought to destroy their way of life, and they needed independence to protect their wealth and property. Despite massive disinformation campaigns by slave-owners, lying that the Governor would just sell them in the West Indies for his profit, and the threat of severe torture and death for captured run-aways, over a third of all slaves in the south ran away during the revolution. They flocked to the British lines, even jumping into the ocean to reach British ships as they sailed past, all trying to enrol to fight for the loyalists. The Governors were true to their word, and provided freedom to families who fled behind their lines and men who fought in their army. When the British were defeated, these ex-slaves were the major point of conflict, the British claimed that they had been freed during the war, and should be able to leave as freed slaves to Nova Scotia with the other loyalists, while the new American Congress claimed that they were still property and should be given back. Ultimately the British won that argument, but not without George Washington personally insisting on the return of ex-slaves and even threatening to continue the war to get them.

...the whole system, the entire network of American society is one great falsehood from beginning to end... In their celebrated Declaration of Independence they [the founding fathers] made their loudest, the clearest assertions of the rights of man and yet at that time the identical men who drew up the Declaration of Independence and framed the American democratic constitution, were trafficking in the blood and souls of their fellow men... From the period of their first adoption of the constitution of the United States downward everything good and great in the heart of the American people - everything patriotic within their breasts - has been summoned to defend this great lie before the world... The people of the United States are the boldest in their pretensions to freedom and the loudest in their profession of their love of liberty yet no nation upon the face of the globe can exhibit a statue book so full of all that is cruel, malicious and infernal as the American code of laws. Every page is red with the blood of the American slave.

- Frederick Douglas, the self-educated run-away slave, in London 1846.

We hear the myth of America being founded on liberty, when it is patently untrue. Immediately after the revolution Congress went to war against the First Nations, seeking to deprive still more people of freedom. The Spanish-American war was started on a pretence in order to capture Spanish colonies

in the Americas. The Mexican-American war was a blatant land grab from a country they should have been treating as a sibling, having come through its own revolution for independence from colonial masters.

We hear all these myths and believe them without thinking them through. America was (and still is) behind the rest of the world in ending slavery, in granting women the vote, in ending institutional racism, in providing universal health care. We know now how far modern America is behind the developed world in allowing indefinite imprisonment and torture without trial, reserving for itself only the right to invade countries and not be bound by international laws. We say, without thinking, America has fallen from greatness and lost its moral authority. Has it, though, ever actually had moral authority? Has there ever been a period in America's history where it has truly led the world? Perhaps America embracing a progressive concept has never been the beginning of a movement, perhaps the point where America finally joins the rest of the world has always been instead the end of the movement. So why do we all buy into the American narrative? Is it simply because American pop culture has sunk its tendrils so deeply into each of us that we have started to take for granted the flawed premise American culture is based on?

I would be glad to join in the proud and long tradition of moving north to embrace a functioning, compassionate, society.

Ah, Scandinavia

August 31st 2008

The pleasure of being in Europe, when our flight (from Seattle to Brussels) has a five hour stop-over in Copenhagen, we get hours to walk around the city. Immigration takes only minutes, with adequate staffing and a quick look at our passports, and then a high-speed train from the airport to the city centre is only twelve minutes.

We started at Kobenhavn Hovedbanegarden (the central train station) and set off on our walk. It was a simply beautiful day to spend walking around Copenhagen. Sunny blue skies with just a wisp of cloud, warm sun and beautiful Scandinavian-style houses lining the cobble-stone streets. We didn't have time to enjoy the number one attraction in Copenhagen, the amusement park Tivoli just outside the train station, so we just walked around its outskirts to enjoy the beautiful gateways.

Then we were in Radhuspladsen, a beautiful cobblestone square filled with stunning animalistic Mayan-style statues coated in a green patina, some of the few statues I've seen where I had to tear



myself away from looking at them, so intriguing were their details. The square is just next to the Radhus (City Hall) and the start of the Stroget. Oddly the square was populated by an American Indian band.

The Stroget is the world's longest pedestrian mall, running through the length of the centre of Copenhagen and lined with boutiques and cafes, with the occasional square. The city is so quiet and peaceful. Even a square filled with people is not loud. Maybe it is due to coming straight from America, where you can hear "private" conversations ten metres away? Or the traffic, which is largely silent bicycles gliding by, rather than noisy cars (and no one bothers to lock their bicycle up - who would steal bikes from Danes?).



At the end of Stroget we stopped at Kongens Nytorv for a sandwich and a beer, then we walked down Nyhavn, a beautiful canal street, with gorgeous houses (including one where Hans Christian Anderson lived), many boats and so many people out. Even on this, the busiest street we saw, when we stepped off the main street to see the embassy of Trinidad and Tobago we were struck at just how silent it was.

From Nyhavn we walked up to Amalienborg, where a group of girls were posing by the photos in Japanese anime set up, then walked to Amalienborg Slot, where Princess Mary lives. Lydia wanted to say hello but she was back in Hobart. Marmorkirken Church was interesting, then a walk to the gardens of Kongens Have, with beautiful landscaped grass and people lying around to enjoy the sun.

Copenhagen is a beautiful city, surprisingly peaceful for a city its size.

In Brussels

September 3rd 2008

Belgium is an interesting country. Walloon, Flanders and Brussels are all so different.

Ghent (in Flanders) is gorgeous, the research institute has fantastic facilities for me, and everyone speaks perfect English, yet it seems a lot ... colder? Certainly not unfriendly, everyone is very nice, but there is such a strong cultural boundary between work and life that making friends and social contacts at work just doesn't register. I have to remind myself that even though the Flemish speak perfect English, their culture is extremely distinct from mine. Quite formal and reserved, extremely punctual, they take their beer glasses very seriously (Lieve complained when she thought my beer came out in the wrong glass, it turned out the company just changed their glass design) and probably everything else more seriously.

It is multicultural in that it is tolerant of all cultures, but in itself it is extremely homogenous. I've also been struck at just how few women PIs there are (I haven't actually seen one). When I asked Lieve about it she said that women chose their family life over the hours that a PI must work, still it is surprisingly that Flanders would force people to make that choice, and that it would always be the woman who had to make it.

Brussels, though, is different. More dynamic, more truly multicultural with an actual mix of people, languages, food... Unfortunately, for historic reasons the university there is small – it was actually set up as a protest against the Catholic University of Leuven (it is the Free University, all Professors have to sign a pledge that they will never let dogma get in the way of their research or teaching) and kept small by the Catholic state (and then split in two when the Flemish gained the right to be educated in their own country). The resources (chiefly the mouse house) would take some work in Brussels, but would I want to live in Brussels and commute to Ghent every day?

Belgian solutions

September 4th 2008

Before Flemish was recognised as an official language in Belgium, French was culturally dominant in education, politics and society. The back-lash against this is still being felt, even though the Flemish are now more numerous and richer. One of the side-effects of the official recognition was that universities were suddenly allowed to teach in Flemish. The Free University of Brussels was split into a French Free University of Brussels and a Flemish Free University of Brussels, which



were able to share a campus and a city for a while at least, because Brussels (unlike the rest of Belgium) is officially bilingual.



Things were more complicated at the Catholic University Leuven. The town of Leuven is in Flemish territory but all the teaching was in French. The solution was to split the University of Leuven into a Flemish University of Leuven in the town of Leuven, and a French University of New Leuven in a brand new town 10km away in French territory (called "New Leuven"). Which university was to keep the library? Leuven kept all books A to L, while New Leuven took M to Z. That is a "Belgian solution".

Recently the Flemish University of Leuven has found another "Belgian solution". The university was founded as a public university of the city of Leuven but later taken over by the Catholic Church. The country is now very secular, and the church has been forced into a minority position on the board, giving all Professors freedom of inquiry.

Recently, though, the University invited a top Flemish stem-cell researcher back from Minnesota. This was too much for the Pope, who protested that the University Hospital performed euthanasia and abortions and now stem-cell research – how could they call themselves Catholic? The board responded that they would remove "Catholic" from the name, but wanted to keep the funding stream from the Church and not offend the traditionalists. The Belgian solution? The international name of the university is the "University of Leuven" while the Belgian name of the university is the "Catholic University of Leuven".

Abortion was central to another Belgian solution. All laws in Belgium need to be signed into law by the King of Belgium, but the King cannot refuse to sign a law passed by Parliament. When the Catholic country became secular enough to allow women reproductive choice, they passed a law allowing abortion. The only problem was that the King was staunchly Catholic and asked Parliament not to violate his ethics by forcing him to pass a law he disagreed with against his free will.

But why should the free will of the entire country be violated to maintain the free will of a single person? The Belgian solution? The King and Parliament together searched the books and found an ancient law that disposed the King if he was unfit to rule, placing his duties in the care of the Prime Minister. Parliament voted that the King's emotions were clouding his judgement making him unfit, disposed him and got the Prime Minister to sign the law. The next day they voted that since the law



was a done deal, the King's emotional response against it no longer made him unfit to rule and they reinstated him.

Game Changer

September 5th 2008

Before I left I told people that I had an open mind, but Belgium would have to do something seriously impressive to get over the line. In Montreal I like the people, the institute, the resources, the city and the lifestyle. Lydia and I had decided beforehand to sign up with Montreal if the offer had met my minimum criteria – it is only because it didn't (surprisingly to me, since I set bare minimum realistic standards) that we kept up the process with other institutions. Individual people in Montreal – Sylvie, Claude and Pierre – have been an enormous help to me, dedicating a lot of their time to helping me. But I have never really felt that the IRIC itself really put itself behind the offer.



The attitude of IRIC appears to be to invest in the institute (building, equipment, platforms) so that good people can do great research. It is a good attitude, certainly better than the vast majority of scientific institutes which just provide space (and charge heavily for it) and will (I think) fall behind as science becomes more technologically advanced and expensive and needs to rely on central services rather than what individual labs can sponsor and specialise in. Still, my research is technologically basic, beyond mouse models, so the benefit to me initially would be rather limited. I prefer instead the approach of VIB. Yes, they invest in shared high technology platforms that allows small labs to compete with the monsters of the scientific world. But rather than pouring all their money into making these platforms cheap they focus on simply making them available and giving the money to researchers to use as they see fit. This is an enormous advantage to me, because it gives me the intellectual freedom to decide for myself whether to spend it all on complex experiments or to spend it on people to do simple experiments on complex mice. Both the VIB and the Universities have also gone out of their way to smooth over issues with me and to make their best offer first

(which is just as well, because I'd rather turn down an offer than negotiate).

Actually the only complaint that I have with the VIB in the process is that they have been too focused on me, ignoring me when I said that options for Lydia really are the most essential aspect of the recruitment. Either consciously or unconsciously they have treated her as a "non-working spouse", as if this move is for my career and she just needs to find something to occupy her time.

They moved fast enough to up my pay offer for the time she'll be unemployed, but never really took our enquiries about her career options seriously – ignoring her list of people she would like to talk to, not talking to people to research her options, and just providing a career advisor who simply told her there was "zero percent chance she could work in the public health sector".

At that point we were just going to walk away. Yes, I liked Belgium and the offer, but I think I can succeed in Montreal or London equally well, and if Lydia can't get a job that will be rewarding in Belgium we wouldn't consider it. This is going to be a dual career move, not a sacrifice by one of us for the other. I really only went to the last day in Leuven out of politeness, so while I really enjoyed my chats there I was blown away when the vice-rector mentioned that Leuven was the centre of more than 600 Europe-wide non-profit new clinical research trials every year and that they were looking for analysts. This is the type of thing which is tough to know if you are outside the country and outside the field, but it is staggering to think that Belgians in biomedicine didn't think to mention it to us, since it is exactly what Lydia wanted. I had sent them her CV and job requirements, so it would have been easy to set her up with an interview during her visit.

Oh well. All's well that ends well, and we now know that Belgium has great opportunities for Lydia. I also think that the VIB undersold itself to me on my first recruitment interview. The start-up offer was impressive, but they didn't show me the brand new buildings with state-of-the-art facilities, the cost-recovery high-tech platforms and the quality of scientific researchers available as colleagues. Perhaps for Belgians returning it was obvious, but for an Australian who had never contemplated a tiny country on the exact opposite side of the globe often mocked by its own neighbours, I had no idea of just how high-powered science in Belgium was. Molecular immunology in Ghent, nanobodies and parasitology in Brussels, autoimmunity and diabetes in Leuven, there would be quality colleagues where-ever I went. Brussels may be the ideal living place for us, but the mouse house there would be limiting (and would cost half my start-up to improve). Ghent has a great centralised facility, but Leuven has a great interaction between basic and clinical research.



The past week has been exhausting, interview after interview for five days straight, late nights and scarce meals, but it may very well have been a game changer.

A taste of Amsterdam

September 6th 2008

If Paris is style, Amsterdam is cool. And not cool in the high school manner of the kid who gets into trouble and bullies others around, but the authentic "I don't give a damn what you think about me" style.



Lydia and I caught the train here from Ghent via Antwerp on Friday night. I was burnt out from my week of interviews, so we just crashed in our miniscule hotel room on Damrak in medieval Amsterdam. The next morning we started by walking through the streets and over the canals of Amsterdam, seeing the beautiful old buildings, built leaning forward and with a hook at the top so that residents can use a pulley system to get furniture into their houses without navigating the tiny steep stairs.

The city is so quiet, with hardly any cars and everyone zipping about on old bicycles (they use old bikes so they don't have to bother locking them up, and in a country below sea level there are no hills to require decent gears), Amsterdam has 600 000 bicycles for a city of 750 000 residents.

Our destination was Anne Frank Huis. The story of Anne Frank is devastating. Her father, Otto Frank, saw where Hitler was leading Germany and moved his family to Amsterdam in 1933 (he tried to move to America but was denied a visa). Unfortunately, in 1940 it took the Germans only five days to conquer the Netherlands, and the anti-Jewish laws started going into effect. In 1942 he decided to move his family into hiding, and constructed a secret annex in one of his warehouses, relying on his Dutch employees to provide for and hide the family.

They spent two years in the annex, without fresh air or sunlight, too frightened to make any noise, living in a climate of fear. It is horrible just how natural this existence comes to Anne, being only 13 when she entered, who gets hurt the



most by the people around her and the prudish upbringing she was given. They were so close to surviving the holocaust when they were betrayed just weeks before the city was liberated. They were split up and sent on the last train from Amsterdam to the concentration camps. Anne's father, Otto, survived Auschwitz, but seven months after he had been freed, and just weeks before Anne's camp, Bergen-Belsen, was liberated, Anne died alone after watching her mother die of starvation trying to feed her daughters and her sister Margot die of typhus.



Just one case among the more than 100 000 who died in the Netherlands, a number so great that it includes three other "Anne Franks". I think Primo Levi describes our reaction to Anne Frank perfectly: "One single Anne Frank moves us more than the countless others who suffered just as she did, but whose faces have remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is better that way: If we were capable of taking in the suffering of all those people, we would not be able to live."

With the museum is an exhibit Free2choose, which challenges visitors to consider the rights of the individual.

After Anne Frank Huis we visited the Amsterdams Historisch Museum, where we got to see a brief history of Amsterdam from its origin as reclaimed farm land from the fens, through to its trading might and current life.

Our next stop was another museum, this one the Hash Marihuana and Hemp Museum, dedicated to all things marijuana. The Dutch are very proud of their logical approach to drug control, and the fact that it works so well

– despite marijuana being decriminalised and available in 300 coffeeshops around the city, the youth use is the lowest in Europe (and far lower than America), as is the use of heroin (the legalisation of marijuana takes away the distribution base of drug dealers) and their drug-related violent crime, incarceration rate and associated criminality are all far far lower than in America or other more "zero tolerance" countries. It is staggering to think that so many countries follow America's failed policies on drugs when the alternative Netherlands approach works far better.

In the evening Lydia and I went on a cruise around the canals of Amsterdam. It was a pleasure to see all the old buildings and sit back and watch the city bustle around us. I especially enjoyed the fact that the cruise included unlimited beer (and unlike some places they were filling up your glass the second you finished) and stopped to pick up Domino's Pizza and Ben and Jerry's ice-cream for us half-way through.





After our Pizza Cruise we walked through the Red Light District to see the prostitutes standing in their booths (around 360 booths line the Red Light District). Some were actively trying to attract customers, while others seemed extremely bored and sat there doing crossword puzzles or text messaging. It is very interesting, sex and prostitution is not only legal but it is also not taboo – the Red Light District is not a seedy area, but a vibrant night spot, where people go about their business, find a restaurant or a bar, or watch the kayakers move through the canals in a congo-line.

A very different feel from Las Vegas, for example, where the "sinfulness" of the site is part of the titillation.

Cycling in the city September 7th 2008

This morning was my last morning with Lydia for a week or so, as she has to head back to work while I have a conference starting Wednesday. We got up early to get her to the train station, while the streets were still being scrubbed clean from the previous night's revelry. We said our farewells, I nearly made Lydia miss her train as she jumped through closing doors after one last kiss, and I went back to bed for a decent sleep in.



Apart from lazy naps and copious amounts of good food, today was spent joining the hundreds of thousands of Amsterdamers on bike. I joined Mike's Bike tour to ride out of the city and into the country side. The weather was crummy, raining on and off all day, but it was a pleasure to ride through the streets of Amsterdam, over the canal bridges, along the bike paths and into the country side.

We saw one of the remaining Dutch windmills, once ubiquitous as they reclaimed land from the water using an Archimedes screw, now relatively rare (many were ripped up for fuel during the long hard winter at the close of WWII) and simply show-pieces (with the real work being done by sophisticated pumps). The windmills are more than just a national monument and tourist attraction, they are an insight into the Dutch mentality. The Dutch are often called liberal, and indeed there are many liberals in the country, but it is not a defining characteristic like it is with the Nordic countries.

Prostitution and marijuana may be legal, but they aren't national pastimes. Only 5% of business in the

Red Light District is from Dutch (and only 5% of the women working there are Dutch), and only 6% of Dutch use marijuana (although this is much larger among the Moroccans and Surinamese, who avoid alcohol). Instead the laws are a practical Dutch solution.



Rather than being liberal, the Dutch have a "polder mentality". Those who live in the polder, the reclaimed land, have to rely on each other. They might not like each other, but unless they all work together the defences fail and they all will be together under the water. This has taught the Dutch that social problems need social solutions, and to tolerate your neighbour even if you don't like them. Unlike many other countries, the Netherlands also remembers that during WWII it was not only the Nazi fascists that committed the holocaust – plenty of homegrown fascists actively took part in a purge of Jews, communists, homosexuals and liberals.

The backlash in horror from this deviation from polder mentality bred the liberal laws of the Netherlands that are supported by even the conservatives in the country as the right of people to chose for themselves, even if they don't approve of the choices they make.

Behind the windmill was Rembrandt Hoeve, so called because the farmhouse appeared in the background of several sketches Rembrandt did of windmills. The farm is a cheese and clog factory, and we got to watch both being made. The clogs are surprisingly quick to make on a simple lathe. Now only four factories make wooden clogs in the Netherlands, and most of those go to tourists. The only people who wear them now tend to be farmers, because it is practical to have a shoe that floats and dries



quickly when working in a polder, and one that saves your foot if you are stomped on by a cow. Until recently construction workers wore them for the same reason, but living in town they were subject to more mocking and switched to steel-capped boots.

On the ride back we stopped in at an Irish pub for a beer. I had a quick couple of Duvel's to refresh myself, quite a nice beer and surprisingly strong (strong enough that the Irish bartender said to me when I ordered my second "you do know this is not an ordinary beer, right?"). I got good language advice from our guide, who only spoke English until he was thirty, but is now fluent in five languages (which is good to hear from someone who was monolingual beforehand). He said that he learned Danish when living in Copenhagen with his Danish girlfriend by borrowing Danish pornographic comic books from the Copenhagen library (which had a very large collection). She made him read one to him every night, and corrected his Danish in the nicest possible way. He said the experience was very rewarding.

Sorry Luxembourg

September 9th 2008

Yesterday I caught the train from Amsterdam to Luxembourg City, a long train trip that crossed the breadth of Belgium and took over five hours. When I left in the morning the weather was miserable, cold and wet, the type of day where you take one look out of the window in the morning and climb back into bed to while away the hours with a good book. Surprisingly, after a couple of hours not only the rain but also the clouds disappeared, giving a glorious day with a deep blue sky and the type of white fluffy clouds I used to paint.

Getting off the train in Luxembourg City it seemed a world apart from Amsterdam or Brussels. Luxembourg is the perfect alpine castle, rising spires and turrets, old buildings with deep gray slate roofs.



The steep city walls rise up from the surrounding ravine and elegant bridges cross the expanse with the verdant green of the forest below, a combination of trees grown wild with their age and perfectly pedicured gardens. Walking along the top of walls you can see majestic views into the city and across the ravine. Walking along the base of the walls you marvel at their height. No wonder, like the ancient Athenians, Count Sigefroi chose this natural acropolis for his fort in 963 CE.

The city is truly a fairy tale kingdom. It reminded me very strongly of Veliko Tarnovo in Bulgaria, with perhaps a splash of Frankfurt. Despite this, within three or four hours I was wondering what it is I would do with my second day in the magical kingdom. Please Luxembourg, don't be offended -

it is not you it is me, without Lydia by my side to share the pleasure even a fairy tale is less than satisfying.

Past Glory

September 9th 2008

It is interesting just how much Porto looks like the old town of Guayaquil. I guess more correctly, Guayaquil looks like Porto, since the colonial architecture of South America obviously followed the motherland, even if I visited the colonies first. But more than the architecture, there is another aspect of the city that feels the same, a look of fallen grandeur, a city which once was a world powerhouse, only to decline in importance and size over the ages. It is interesting the influence this has over a city's architecture – cities with constant success, like London or Paris, are constantly growing and rewriting their architectural history. They become a mosaic, with small patches of the city reflecting different periods of growth. Other cities reach their pinnacle and then stop growing. There is no need to build over the old parts of the city, so the city becomes preserved as a single architectural unit reflecting the dominant style at the peak. For the cities at their peak during the conquest of the new world, they actively retracted in size with the loss of the colonies. This explains the state of slight decay of all the beautiful old buildings, after the city no longer had the resources to even preserve what it once build, let alone expand on it. So you get poor families living in the most beautiful but run down areas, old clothes hanging out of the windows to dry, amazing facades but no flooring left.



Drinks in Porto

September 10^h 2008

It was so much fun to be able to catch up with Michelle again. Odd to think that it has been years since we went to the Middle East together, and I've only been back to Canberra for one day since then. Also a million thanks to Michelle for suggesting that we just sit and drink beer all afternoon, rather than climb around the city! After lots of days walking, visiting museums, looking at pretty buildings and taking photos it was really nice just to sit back and chill for hours on end...

After we each had lots of beer we staggered to the conference. On the way Michelle decided she wanted to have a photo taken with a hot Portugese policeman. We disagreed on which Portugese policeman was hotter - this was her choice:

The policeman did have an impressive knowledge about New Zealand.

Afterbirth

September 11th 2008

he opening session of the conference was extremely painful - the conference chair decided to do a stand up comedy routine, with sad old jokes about his wife spending lots of his money on shoes while they are in Porto. They then introduced the three winners of "life time achievement in autoimmunity". The first was Georg Wick, for his work on obese chickens. The second was Ruth Arnon for inventing copaxone for the treatment of multiple sclerosis. The chair made a big fuss that she was a woman and had broken "the so-called glass ceiling", which I think is pretty crummy - the glass ceiling is broken when the chair doesn't have to comment on it. The third was the most painful part - the recipient of the lifetime award was Eric Gershwin. The chair got up and introduced him as Georg Wick, a bit embarrassing. He then started a ten minute powerpoint presentation on the life work of Eric Gershwin, including photos of Eric Gershwin with an arrow pointing to him saying "Eric Gershwin" and publications with Eric Gershwin listed as the last author. Despite this, the chair heroically kept up calling him "Georg Wick" for the entire presentation, becoming excruciatingly more painful with each mention. Surely if you research a presentation on a particular person for their lifetime achievement you would remember who it was when you gave the presentation? Eric Gershwin then got up and said "Now I know what the afterbirth of a placenta feels like".



The city of trip-eaters

September 12th 2008

This talk yesterday was so bad. It was billed as "mathematical modelling of in vivo dynamics of CD4+ and CD8+ Foxp3+ regulatory T cells". It promised so much, but delivered so little. They had

some peptide that they wanted to see what it did to regulatory T cells so they injected it, a scrambled peptide or vehicle alone into two mice per group. They then bled the mice each day for sixteen days and did CD4/CD8/Foxp3 staining. The resulting graphs just zig-zagged up and down, with each of the groups being identical. Anyone else would have just concluded that their peptide did nothing, but no, these people did "advanced mathematical modelling" on the data.

They assumed that the data was reliable and each up and down meant that the vehicle was changing the immune response. They said that the fact that all three groups went up and down together made it ultra-reliable (rather than assuming that each day's staining was slightly different). They then noticed a mathematical trend - on those days where the proportion of CD4+ cells that were Foxp3+ went up, the proportion of CD4+ cells that were Foxp3- went down! Completely ignoring the basic mathematical truth that the two populations are also going to have inverse changes because they have to add up to 100% they then said that their model proved that the vehicle treatment caused spontaneous pulses of Foxp3+ T cell proliferation which in turn pulse down the Foxp3- proliferation. They also said that there was a blip of CD8+Foxp3+ T cells on day two, which proved that CD4+Foxp3+ T cells require priming by CD8+Foxp3+ T cells before they can function. I have never see such a load of tripe! Incidentally, Porto is the home of tripe since 1415 when the citizens of Porto showed their support for Henry the Navigator by supplying his voyage to Morocco with all of their beef, keeping only the cow stomach for themselves to make tripe from. Since then Porto's citizens have been known as triperios (tripe-eaters).



Port tasting

September 13th 2008

Yesterday Michelle and I skipped out of the conference early to go port tasting on the south side of the river (Gaia).

The origin for Port lies in a French-English war more than 300 years ago, when the French embargoed French wine from the English. The desperate English, seeking wine, sailed to the port of Porto, near the Douro wine valley, and bought Portuguese wine to fuel their habit. Unfortunately the wine would turn to vinegar during the transit, so some bright spark decided to spike the wine with 20% brandy to preserve it. This is why port is so alcoholic, and also why it is sweet (the brandy is added on the second day of fermentation, stopping the fermentation process while there are still lots of grape sugars in the wine).



We visited Grahams winery, which was established in 1820. Our guide was endearingly enthusiastic, but unfortunately didn't really shut up and just kept on talking about Port and Port making. Finally we got to taste four different Port wines (I preferred the white Port, which I didn't even know existed before). This was strong enough for Michelle to unexpectedly say "In the US they don't even pay lobsters". A comment which, while true, is mystifying, especially as they call lobsters crayfish in New Zealand.

After the Port tasting we slowly worked our way from the Gaia side of the river back to Porto, stopping off at cafes to have beers, especially one nice one which overlooked the river and was set up with deckchairs facing Porto. They put red cordial in my beer.

According to wikipedia, the British naval tradition for drinking Port is that it should always be passed to the left (Port to port), and if someone forgets to pass it one should never ask for it directly. Instead, one should ask "Do you know the Bishop of Norwich?" Anyway in the know will recognise they have forgotten to pass the port and will do so. Anyone not in the know will reply in the negative, at which you can remark "He's an awfully nice fellow, but he never remembers to pass the port."

Immigrants not welcome

September 14th 2008

I'm used to being treated as suspicious scum by American immigration officials, on the assumption that I either hate the country and am a threat, or I love the country and will disappear into it as an illegal alien. Finger prints, biometric photos, registering my every move with the federal police -

gross violations of civil liberties are just part of the American experience. But even by those standards, today was frustratingly extreme.

I had flown into Brussels the night before from Porto, and so I only had to walk across the road from the Brussels airport to catch my flight. Should have been a piece of cake, but United Airlines set up a security post before I could even register my flight and check in my luggage. Standard stuff - what do you do in America (and I know enough to say I am a student studying diabetes, rather than some answer scary to the science illiterate), what is your address, what countries did you visit on this trip, did you pack your own bag, were you given any presents by people in Europe, what hotel did you stay in last night, what conference did you attend in Portugal, what hotel did you stay at in Porto, what was the address of the conference hall in Portugal, where are copies of your train ticket from Brussels to Luxembourg, etc etc. But then the questions became a bit more pointed:

"Why did you visit Lebanon and Syria?"

"Tourism"

"Why did you pick Lebanon and Syria?"

"They are beautiful countries"

"All countries are beautiful, why did you pick Lebanon and Syria in particular?"

"They are particularly beautiful" (this brought a serious frown, so I had to detail the tourist attractions in Lebanon and Syria, outline my mode of travel, tell them where my tour operator was based and so forth).

"It seems like you have been to a lot of Arabic countries, why did you go to Malaysia?"

This was just too tempting, I only have so much willpower when dealing with ignorant officials:

"Malaysia is not an Arabic country, Arab is an ethnicity - in Malaysia they are Malay not Arabic. I believe the term you are looking for is 'Islamic', and the reason I went there is that it is also beautiful, it is close to Australia and I wanted to see the rainforest".

It is just mindblowingly stupid to give enormous powers to invade privacy and arbitrarily detain people to officials with less training than a WallMart greeter. I have a US work visa, which means my entire background has already been approved by the FBI (twice actually). The FBI is (hopefully) actually trained to investigate, unlike this guy. Some people do just happen to like to visit different cultures and see beautiful places. This type of rubbish doesn't even make anyone safer, it just irritates people.

It took interviews by three staff members and over an hour to let me check my baggage in. Once I finally made it to the counter the lady behind the counter apologised profusely - "I am so sorry, it isn't us, the Americans are slightly paranoid about people who don't carry much luggage". All that rubbish just because I travel light.

Ten minutes in

September 14th 2008

Actually one hour and ten minutes in if you count the wait in immigration, but it only took ten minutes to overhear the booming voice of a woman at a health food bar asking where the nearest Burger King is, the southern twang of a man in Borders asking for a book of Christian living, and badges for McCain-Palin '08. Of course, as Lydia will freely state, I am at my most irritable in airports so it is an unfair reintroduction to America after two weeks in Europe...

And the winner is...

September 19th 2008

...Belgium. Yes, Lydia and I are going to be Australian-Belgians.

Ik heb zojuist geworden hoogleraar immunologie aan het Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie.