

## ***Strip to Identity* partners visit Leuven's historic Irish College: Where understanding cultural identity has been the order of the day since 1607**



Despite the drizzly conditions, on the afternoon of Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> March a small group of *Strip to Identity* partners strolled from Miniemeninstituut to Janseniustraat to visit Leuven's historic Irish College, now *The Institute for Ireland in Europe*. The group included job shadowing participants from Italy, Norway, Slovenia and Turkey and Miniemeninstituut's trainee teacher from Ireland. Upon arrival the group was welcomed by the institute's director, Malachy Valley, and given a lively talk by him about the history and current activities of the institute in the new auditorium, the college's converted chapel.



Known as "The Grand Project", one of the chief aims of the Irish Franciscan order, who founded the college in Leuven in 1607, was to move away from the old Gaelic Irish stereotypes of barbarism and illiteracy and establish a new Irish cultural identity in Europe. This project had four main pillars: the Irish language, collecting and preserving Irish history, vindicating Ireland's ancient sanctity, and demonstrating Ireland's tradition of scholarship. One of the greatest achievements of the Irish Franciscans' grand project was the creation of many written manuscripts. *The Annals of the Four Masters*, the most well-known of these works, is a collection of chronicles of Irish medieval history. This work is proof of the stimulating environment that Leuven provided them to work in and the value of having a European base from which to develop new ways of expressing their identity.

Established in 1984 on the grounds of the historic Irish College, the non-governmental organisation that is *The Institute for Ireland in Europe* acts as a resource for the island of Ireland in Europe. Amongst others it seeks to strengthen links and develop partnerships with universities, colleges, businesses and cultural organisations both within and outside of Ireland, as well as with universities and centres around Europe which have an Irish Studies focus.

A tour of the grounds of the historic college by Louise Mooney followed the talk, including information about the famous Leuven font, which was the standard font used in all written works created at the college and the college's original stained glass windows which are part of the auditorium. The visit was rounded off with some

much needed tea, coffee and biscuits to warm us up after the walk in the rain from school.

*Strip to Identity* seeks to help all participants better understand their own cultural identity and that of others by giving traditional stories new forms through the comic book project. The many mobility exchanges for pupils and teachers of the partner schools is also an important part of developing this better understanding of ourselves and others. The Irish Franciscans, too, sought to better understand their own culture and give it new forms through producing written works about Ireland's cultural history while being part of life in continental Europe.

Thanks to Louise Mooney, Malachy Vallely and the staff of the institute who welcomed us and made the visit possible.



**Words:** Sheila Casey, 9th May 2015

**Photos:** Alja Lubič and Remzi Hanilçi

**Links:** [www.leuveninstitute.eu](http://www.leuveninstitute.eu)