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From Ireland to Egypt: an afternoon in Belfast

With an afternoon to spare and her TLR expense account burning a hole in her pocket Helen Rose took time off from her studies to visit one of Belfast's most celebrated attractions, the Ulster Museum.

The student life, I have found, is depressingly true to stereotype. We really are that lazy, we really do eat that many baked beans, and we really are that skint. My search for cheap (preferably free) and decent entertainment in Belfast has so far yielded little. There's two-for-one at the cinema on Tuesdays, various scattered open-mic nights, and the boyfriend's Xbox. One find, however, stands high and mighty, head and shoulders above the rest. It is the Ulster Museum. And I promise, the fact that it's less than ten minutes walk from where I live has nothing to do with it.

The museum is situated in Belfast Botanic Gardens, where the Palm House can also be found. We actually popped into the palm house on our way to the museum, just to have a nosy. It was small, old-fashioned, and completely bereft of people. It's surprising how eerie an empty greenhouse can be; my research assistant and I found ourselves whispering for no reason, and the little wooden statues lurking in the foliage suddenly seemed strangely threatening. We scarpereed, walking quickly past the abandoned wheelbarrows and deserted plant pots, feeling not a little like redshirts in an episode of Doctor Who (if I may mix my sci-fi references).

Reaching the museum does little to calm our nerves. The building is an enormous work of angry, cubic concrete that seems to growl at the park before it. It is, apparently, in the Brutalist style, which sounds about right. Inside, the building has the look of every public building renovated in the last twenty years, which stands to reason given that it was renovated between 2006 and 2009. It's big and white and full of space and sheets of glass. A very small part of me wants to put grubby fingermarks on everything.

The floors are divided into art, nature and history, with each area taking up two floors. We start at the top, in the museum's collection of artwork. Moving through the collections, from glass bath towels and a sculpture that looks suspiciously like a crotch, to more traditional paintings depicting baby-faced men in white wigs and daft trousers, it becomes clear that the art exhibits can broadly be divided into two categories. There are the "Ooh, In't It Nice" pieces, which are generally pretty, colourful and have titles like A Hill with some Trees on and People on Benches at the Front and Big White Clouds at the Back; and there are the ones met with silence and baffled stares before being hurriedly left behind and forgotten.

Moving past Jordaens' St Christopher Carrying the Christ Child, which bears a remarkable resemblance to Brian Blessed, we head down to the Natural World collection. The ice age exhibit was pretty cool. Otherwise, everything is stuffed and slightly creepy, though Peter the Polar Bear reminded me not a little of the family's labrador for some reason. The birds are probably the least appealing part of this section of the museum – case after case of glazed, glassy eyes that seem to follow you round the room. This area also holds a slideshow about invader species that have come to the UK, including the ruddy duck, the bloody red shrimp, and the sodding goat (one of these may not be entirely true).

On the bottom two floors are the historical and archaeological exhibits, which are – unsurprisingly for a museum – the most impressive of the lot. There are exhibitions on the stone, bronze and iron ages, early and late medieval Ireland, and ancient Egypt. The Egyptian area seems somewhat tacked onto the rest but it is hard to find fault given the high standard of the exhibit itself. There is even, in the middle of the room, Northern Ireland's very own mummy, having been brought to Belfast in 1834. Takabuti's her name; lying about looking skinny and gross is her game.

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In all honesty there is more in the Ulster Museum than can be covered here. Our visit took over three hours and we skipped a huge number of things, rushing past marine life, world cultures, the Troubles, jewellery, a stuffed yak, luminescent rocks, historical fashion, militaria and a piece of the moon. The list of what we didn't see is probably longer than the list of what we did.

Instead, the vast majority of our time was spent in the museum's 'Discovery Centres'. Art, history and nature each have their own discovery centre, where there are toys to play with, puzzles to do and various other activities to engage in for a frankly embarrassingly long time. Strictly speaking, these areas were made for children and school pupils; they're full of activities designed, according to the museum website, to "encourage pupils to explore, discover and question the world around us". However, letting that hold us back would have deprived us of the most enjoyable aspect of our visit – and making it the most enjoyable visit to any museum I've been to for quite some time.

In Discover Art I drew a picture of a teapot while my research assistant dressed up as a pirate. I would have joined in the dressing up but a little girl looked at the pink dress I was planning on wearing with such longing that keeping it would have been like kicking a puppy. Discover Nature wasn't quite as much fun as the other two but was still fairly brilliant. There were binoculars to bird-watch from the window, various animals' horns to pose with, and two microscopes with a tray of insects set in glass to put under the lenses. Making the magnified insects fight each other to the death was a particular highlight.

The best was saved for last, though. Discover History had a pile of children's shoes from different times and different countries, which proved surprisingly emotive, and a selection of historical toys which were exactly as fun as you might expect. There were also computers, which showed animations telling folk tales from India, China, New Zealand and Ireland, and books to accompany them. My research assistant was particularly taken with the terrace doll's houses, where the front of each house opened onto a typical British home from a different era. First was a Victorian home with a dinky little fireplace in every room; the WWII house played the sound of an air-raid siren; and the modern-day house had an Argos catalogue on the bed and a Nokia ringtone playing in the distance.

A brief trip to the café topped off our trip, though with our TLR expenses only running to £5 between us, it's hard to claim we could really do it justice. We had a hot chocolate each and, after rummaging in our pockets for shrapnel, even stretched to a biccyy.

The Ulster Museum is not somewhere to mosey around in half-heartedly while waiting for the rain to stop; it's not to be passively looked at or pondered upon. Rather, it is proof of the old adage that you get out what you put in; take the time to play, to interact, and to make the most of what the museum has to offer. The interactive features that are found throughout the galleries are exciting enough, with the Discovery Centres truly setting the Ulster Museum apart. If you feel shy and don't want to look a fool, find someone's child to take with you to use as a foil. A rainy weekday visit should keep the numbers of onlookers down, and if you go when it's really quiet, who knows – you may even get the pink dress all to yourself.

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