



A BREATH OF FRESH AIR  
SIOBHÁN E. O'BRIEN

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I was born and raised in Donaghmede, a suburb of North Dublin, Ireland. After six wonderful years at Holy Faith Clontarf (and thanks to a very inspirational science teacher), I decided to pursue a degree in Natural Sciences from Trinity College Dublin. In my final year, I fell in love with zoology and, without much thought, moved to Cornwall in the south-west tip of England to undertake a M.Sc. in Evolutionary and Behavioural Ecology followed by a Ph.D. in Evolutionary Biology at the University of Exeter. I carried out postdoctoral fellowships at the University of York and ETH Zurich before moving to Berlin in September 2018 for four wonderful months in Grunewald. In January 2019, I began a tenure-track position at the University of Liverpool. – Address: Institute of Integrative Biology, The Liverpool University, Biosciences Building, Crown Street, L69 7ZB Liverpool, Ireland. E-mail: Siobhan.O-Brien@liverpool.ac.uk.

Wiko has a way of climbing into your soul and dusting off those neglected parts of your personality you sacrificed for your career. I arrived in Berlin armed with a list of papers to be written, data to be analysed, grants to be submitted – and by the time I departed (having completed very little of what I had actually intended to do), I had grown into a fully-fledged dance party DJ, mediocre German speaker and aficionado of Bear-Pit Karaoke\*.

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\* Since 2009, Joe Hatchiban (from Dublin) has been travelling around with his battery-powered speakers, entertaining crowds at Mauerpark. If you are looking for a feel-good afternoon with lots of entertainment by local crazies, this is for you. Every Sunday (except in winter) at 3 pm.

At first, the calm at Wiko is almost unsettling, totally at odds with the chaotic adrenaline leftover from my frantic final few months finishing my position in Zurich. Wiko will sit back for the first few weeks and smile while you fight against the calm that you are not accustomed to. After this, the focus of conversations turns from ERC grants and rejected papers to more Wiko-flavoured topics. In the office, I regained the ability to do “deep” work, completely focused on writing and research for the pure joy of it. It was almost self-indulgent – in a hugely positive sense. I realised that in the midst of lab work, getting the next job and buckets of admin, this was a skill I had completely lost. The lack of distractions at Wiko is real, made possible by a truly incredible team who went above and beyond to make everything run so smoothly.

My goal during my brief four months at Wiko was to take the time to develop a fundamental grounding in community ecology and apply this to the study of microorganisms. For me, communities of microbes are no different from groups of animals in the Serengeti, with the added complexity (read: excitement) of evolutionary changes taking place almost at the same time as ecological changes. I wanted to use this approach to better understand communities of microorganisms living in our gut or in the cystic fibrosis lung, for example. Tim Barraclough is a real leader in this field, and Wiko gave me the opportunity to invite him over to chat with us about how he brings this community ecology perspective to microbial communities.

This was pure self-indulgent learning at its finest. Yes, I would ultimately use these ideas to form a grant application or student project, but there was no deadline, no limits to how deep I could go and no competition from other things on my to-do list. I was also intrigued by how many scientists at Wiko approached quite similar questions from very different perspectives, often dictated by what school of thought they’d had training in. As a zoologist, I approach microbiological questions very differently to a medic might, for example. I wondered whether, as scientists, we make full use of these different perspectives, or are we naturally inclined to assemble into groups of like-minded thinkers?

This period of deep thinking at Wiko allowed me to develop a strong sense of where I was going scientifically. The gift of time permitted me to dive into what I truly loved, (eventually) without those constant feelings of guilt that come with choosing one task over another. Preparing for my colloquium was a hugely rewarding and engaging task – as scientists we rarely have the opportunity to present our ideas in depth to an audience composed of non-scientists alongside some majorly big cheeses. The question of “what excites you” and “why do you do what you do” takes centre stage – but at Wiko there is

no judgement for how fundable or feasible it is. It's a pure unadulterated scientific love-in!

It didn't take long before my neighbours in Grunewald became family. The surnames on what initially felt like the world's most intimidating mailboxes now evoked feelings of happiness, friendship and fun times. Of course, they are all fantastically bright and famed. One particular interaction during my first dinner was with the unforgettable David Armitage, who coined the phrase "Atlantic archipelago" in lieu of the British Isles, which needless to say is quite a popular phrase in Ireland. I was always keen to hear more of Peter Keller's stories about finding (or avoiding?) the perfect BPM for a spotify playlist, which came in handy for Wiko's infamous dance parties. I savoured every ounce of advice given to me by the plethora of senior scientists casually over breakfast, or more commonly, over that post-dinner whiskey. Outside Wiko, Mandy and Hassan always kept my appreciation of the youth culture up to date, with trips to Harry Potter exhibitions, questionably themed bars and kebab tours of Berlin. Winterfeld market on Saturday morning was always a delight, bumping into many Wiko neighbours and secretly judging anyone who didn't rate the tiramisu (ahem Jason!).

Wiko taught me some important life lessons. Get a good desk lamp. Always have dessert. Don't be afraid to do some self-indulgent learning. Push the boundaries. Look outward. And, of course, the Debbie Wade Macchiato special will keep you going for the rest of the day.