

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE BORDER: A PERSONAL VIEW

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Since the partition of Ireland into two separate political entities in 1921, the border separating six Ulster counties from the rest of the country has been a major source of controversy. The existence of the border and the continued British rule of the North have given rise to political turmoil and civil unrest. To many residents of the six Northern counties, the border must be preserved so that they can maintain their cherished position as citizens of the United Kingdom. To many others it is an artificial boundary dividing an island which ought to be a united political entity. The differences extend to disagreement over the terminology used to define the two parts of the country. Some people prefer not to use the titles Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, on the basis that such use legitimates the continuance of British rule in the North. Many politicians and journalists lend further confusion to this by their apparently interchangeable and erroneous use of the terms "Northern Ireland" and "Ulster". Residents of Ulster's "other three" counties - Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan have to tolerate this mis-use of the provincial name. On a related theme, official data in the South such as Census of Population, classifies these three counties under that curious provincial title "Ulster (part of)". For the purposes of this paper, the two parts of the country will be referred to as the North and the South, probably the terms most frequently used in everyday speech.

The so-called "Troubles" or political unrest in, and concerning, the North are a constant source of media comment and reporting. Historians and other academics have written (and spoken) quite extensively on the issue. It is not the purpose of this paper to present an argument for the sustaining or dismantling of the border. Rather, it is my intention to present a personal view of the effects of the border on the physical and economic landscape and on the individual's "mental geography". What follows is based largely on my own experiences and impressions of life in the rural border area in west Cavan in which I grew up, some four miles from the border with County Fermanagh.

Since the early 1970s British Army checkpoints began to appear on many main roads, just north of the border. In many instances they create a very striking physical presence. Initially, they were temporary elements of the landscape, but more recently some of them have taken on a semi-permanent nature. The checkpoint just north of the village of Swanlinbar on the Cavan-Fermanagh border changed its precise location on a number of occasions

during the 1970s and 1980s before coming to rest at its current site, approximately one hundred yards inside the North. It appears as a veritable fortress, somewhat intimidating and looking larger and more elaborate each time I see it, along with its customary apparel of sandbags, spiked chains and traffic lights. This and other similar installations, being visible manifestations of partition, become obvious targets for many people for whom the border is a source of resentment.

The Irish Army and the Gardai also engage in erecting the occasional road-block, a much less obtrusive and more short-lived feature of the road-side landscape than their British Army equivalents. The sight of Irish Army landrovers patrolling narrow country roads is not an uncommon occurrence. An air-borne military presence is another intermittent feature. Looking northwards from the fields of west Cavan, the position of the border could frequently be adduced from the presence of a British Army helicopter flying just above the horizon along the northern side of the divide, adding a military element to the skyline.

The cratering of cross-border roads by the British Army has left an indelible mark on the border landscape, serving as a clear expression of territoriality. Travelling along these roads, one is suddenly confronted by a metal and concrete barricade of dubious architectural merit. These have, not surprisingly, provoked considerable resentment among many local residents, particularly farmers whose land straddles the border and who may have to make detours of three or four miles in order to reach parts of their own farms. Confrontations between the British Army and local residents occasionally occur, due to attempts by the latter to "re-open" these roads.

Leaving aside what can be termed the military landscape, the border has resulted in other differences between the human landscapes of North and South. As one crosses the border the road surface changes as does the colour of post-boxes, telephone booths and signposts. Northern signposts also lack the bi-lingual component of their southern equivalents.

As well as its political significance, the frontier has created borders in the social and economic lives of local residents. Following partition, customs controls between North and South were introduced. In order to prevent the illegal carriage of goods across the border, customs posts were constructed at, or close to, many crossing points. Such posts appear on both sides of the North-South border and are one very obvious physical manifestation of that territorial division. The Northern posts have been quite distinctive looking structures, although many of them have disappeared as a result of having been blown up by the IRA, leaving the somewhat charred remains as an unsightly feature on the landscape.

The implications of 1992 notwithstanding, the North-South border serves to distort the trading zones of individual enterprises. Lower prices in the North mean that the catchment zones of many northern commercial enterprises extend well into the South, covering a much greater area than they otherwise would in the absence of North-South price differentials. There is a steady flow of southern shoppers across the border lured by cheaper goods. As a consequence, many southern traders in border areas experience reduced profit margins. Restrictions on cross-border trade mean that the catchment areas for livestock marts and creameries come to an abrupt halt at the border. Illegal cross-border movement of goods (including animals) is not, of course, an entirely unknown phenomenon, whether at a small or large scale. The sight of large trucks travelling along back roads in border areas could, perhaps, give rise to certain suspicions! Catchment areas for schools, doctors' practices and other services are also constrained by the border, although (ironically, some might say), one group of institutions which does not recognise the border, in terms of their own administrative structures, are the churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Price differentials between North and South have left their mark on the commercial landscape. A contemporary feature on the southern side of the frontier are disused petrol pumps. Many petrol stations have become relict features of the landscape of west Cavan and other such areas, while north of the border many new premises have appeared, virtually overnight it seems. The reason for this is the substantial differential in petrol prices between North and South, leading to the decline of petrol sales in the South and increased business for traders in the North. Another feature of the commercial landscape on the Northern side of the border are the prominent Bureau de Change signs attached to some shops and private houses close to busier crossing-points. Currency differences have prompted local entrepreneurs to become involved in the money changing business. The existence of cross-border commercial transactions (whether legal or illegal) necessitates the exchange of currencies and most residents of border areas possess quantities of both punts and sterling.

If the border has resulted in observable differences in the landscape, it may also have given rise to certain quirks in the individual's mental geography and perception of place. For my own part, the existence of the border appears to have created some form of block in my own geographic perception of west Cavan and the area's location within a wider context. To this day, I still think of Cavan Town as being closer to "home" than Enniskillen (the county town of Fermanagh). This is despite the fact that

the former is 25 miles away, the latter only 16. As a child, visits to Enniskillen were probably as frequent, if not more so, than visits to Cavan, yet my distorted sense of distance persisted. By the same token, Belfast has always seemed much further away than Dublin, although "home" is virtually equidistant from both cities. It is as though this political boundary, itself imperceptible except for a change in the road surface, functions so as to render locations on the other side of it seem further away than they actually are. Another oddity is the tendency of local people, myself included, to speak of "going up to Dublin" and "down to Belfast (or the North)". Whether this is a phenomenon peculiar to west Cavan is unclear, but it certainly turns some basic geographic concepts on their heads. It is also unclear whether this "inversion" is attributable to the existence of the border. Unlike parts of north Donegal, it is not necessary to travel south in order to get to the North! However, if one travels due east from west Cavan, one still arrives in the North! Of course, this is less geographically confusing than living in north Monaghan, where by travelling either due east or due west, one still reaches the North!!

The extent to which the visible vestiges of the border and its associated economic divisions, as well as the distorted geographical perceptions which may be related to them, engender a sense of the "other side" being a different country is a matter for conjecture. The political and social views of individuals in border areas (as elsewhere) are shaped by a variety of interacting and conflicting influences. Some southern Protestants in border areas appear to view the North as a sort of homeland, and participate with their northern counterparts in annual celebrations, such as Twelfth of July parades, while simultaneously not displaying any wish to live there. They appear quite content to adhere to the laws of a Dublin-based government. This suggests that attachment to place is stronger than political convictions, although some southern Protestants have migrated to the North. As stated earlier, many people who aspire to a united Ireland resent the existence of the border. The absence of any widespread overt attempts by local people with a nationalist political outlook to dismantle the border appears to suggest a certain passivity and an ambivalence towards its continued existence. This may be, at least partially, attributable to economic concerns. One may tentatively conclude that living in close proximity to a physical border with its political, administrative and commercial appurtenances may create a mental border. This latter may serve to reinforce the continued existence of the former.

In conclusion, it is obvious that the border between North and South has left distinctive features on the human landscape close to the boundary. Its imprint can also be seen on the commercial landscape. The close proximity of the border may also shape local resident's mental perception of geographic phenomena, providing them with a mental geography somewhat at odds with reality.

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