

Moving On - Part 2

I have been crossing the Border in Ireland for as long as I can remember. Back and forward many times each year. It divided our family: my mother from north Leitrim and my father from mid-Antrim. Separated my home from my grandparent's farm. Places I loved. Early crossings were marked by the tension of an Irish Customs inspection, of car and baggage. Pass, and you got into the Free State. Fail, and you returned to the North to offload the contraband. A pound of butter? Later the frontier was marked by police and army checkpoints, with high green security sheeting that became unremarkable.



An early satellite image of Ireland and Britain (Wikipedia)

In Derry I discovered the Border again, harder and more fortified. It's close to the City. Cuts it off from a large part of its historical and cultural hinterland. The few roads out to Donegal were heavily militarised, gated security checkpoints. Elsewhere along the arc of territory that was incorporated into Northern Ireland was a network of blockaded side roads. I ran, walked and cycled over many of these unauthorised cratered crossing points. Areas that were regularly patrolled and observed by the Army. Fields on either side often became grim places with a sense of no-man's-land; abandoned cars and machinery, dumped waste, and sometimes bodies.

The reality for those who live around political Borders is that they divide us. They are a hindrance to the ebb and flow of our daily lives. We work around them as we can. Living on the Donegal Derry Border is no different. And worse, this hundred-year-old Border remains a fudged Imperial solution that institutionalised sectarianism, difference.

In the early nineteen eighties, we had been living in Muff for about two years; a small village right on the Border. Daily trips to Derry meant going through the permanent checkpoint at Culmore. Mostly this was routine with little delay. However, one evening was more memorable. On my way to a Derry meeting of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, better known as CND. I was pulled over, probably at random, and questioned by two soldiers. One, a tall young man with a South of England accent. He held a clipboard. After the usual boot-

and-bonnet search, he began to ask familiar questions in a friendly but formal tone. The other was shorter and I recognised him as a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment.

‘Where are you coming from, Sir?’ the English soldier asked.

‘Muff,’ I replied swiftly, wanting to get along.

‘Place of birth?’

‘Ballymena.’ The answer written down on his clipboard.

‘*How long have you lived there, Sir? In Muff?*’ the UDR man asks in a mid-Antrim accent very similar to my own. I turned to him and answered that it’s been a couple of years.

‘Is this your car?’ the English voice again.

‘Yes, it is.’

‘*You like it there? In Muff? Sir?*’ The Antrim man again, adding emphasis on the ‘sir’. I switched my attention.

‘I do, yes.’

‘Date of birth, please?’ the Englishman asks, who’s given the answer he wants, and follows up with, ‘And where are you going to?’

‘A CND meeting in Derry.’ I replied and he wrote that down.

‘*A CND meeting. What’s that, sir?*’ I turn to the UDR man and explained what it is - a campaign aimed at removing the threat of nuclear weapons.

‘Thank You. You can go now.’ The English soldier told me after I gave him the address of my destination.

'Is it a large group then, sir? CND?' The Antrim accent continued, getting sharper with each question. I answered that it was fairly small.

'You can go now, Sir.' I looked again to the English voice and nod.

'Does your country have nuclear weapons? Sir?'

And I really didn't know. Does my country have nuclear weapons? My country? Muff? Antrim? What was my country? Where did I belong? Had my Antrim mates come to get me back? Northern Ireland, UK, or the Republic of Ireland?

'No.' was all I said eventually. He flicked his head for me to leave; my fellow Antrim-man seeming happy at some achievement I couldn't figure. And to a degree, I still remain confused by that question. At having to decide between one and the other. Of course, we can claim multiple identities, and I do. We *have* multiple identities. Yet the circumstances on the Border that night demanded a singular choice.

On a slightly different note, the best Border, and train song I've come across is one by Kevin Doherty on All Aboard, a track from his album Strange Weather. Enjoy the carriage-swaying rhythm and the sharp lyrics, as the train makes its way from Buncrana to Derry, across the Border. I caught a live version many years ago in Buncrana, where we now live. That night the train rolled on and on, past the Border, past Derry. Superb.

All Aboard, Kevin Doherty

“We’re heading South... to the North

You can keep your East you can keep your West

It’s the North and South that I like best

We’re heading South

To the Border, Why always a Border?

Why always a border?”

End

Strange Weather is available on CD and on some online platforms, [here](#).