

# In-betweeners

## Walking the Irish border

GARRETT CARR

A fireworks dealer is sitting in the door of his shop, a quarter of a mile from Ireland's border. He sees the camera around my neck and looks weary. "You can't move for photographers around here", he says.

"I was here first", I tell him.

He laughs at that. Not cruelly, we are just passing the time of day. "No", he says, "I was here first".

When the UK voted to leave the EU, Ireland's border started getting a lot of attention. It still does, and Boris Johnson has yet to allay anyone's concerns about the border after Brexit. My obsession with the border goes further back. I walked it from end to end a few years ago, mapping unmarked cross-border routes – stepping stones, paths, footbridges and gates – ways across the border not found on any other map. I photographed and charted them on a map I call "The Map of Connections". It was important to me that the map was as complete as possible, a principle that forced me to always keep in visual contact with the borderline, clambering through hedges or wading up to my knees in marsh if necessary. Yet the border refuses to remain static for the convenience of photographers, mapmakers, or politicians. On trips back to the border I discovered that connections I charted are gone, while others have appeared. An extraordinary amount of photography is coming from the border at the moment, both for the press and for galleries. The work has helped me identify subjects for the next edition of the map.

On this trip I am bringing with me a photograph of a woman on a bridge: I want to look for the location where it was taken. The bridge is a slab of concrete laid across a narrow stream, truck trailers parked in long grass on one side and trees growing on the other. The woman and the bridge are in the middle distance, her back to the camera. "Ihuaku, Taylors Folly, Louth/Armagh Border" is from the series "Fieldnotes from the Border" by Anthony Haughey. I recognize the huge scrapyard full of lorries and trailers next to the border. I also remember that the entrance gate was closed the day I walked this stretch of border. The photograph shows a small footbridge with no handrails: perhaps the trees were concealing it when I went by. I want to find out if it is a connection for the next version of my map. This time I find the gate open and walk in. It is an enormous site, about two dozen acres. There are old tractors, half-dismantled diggers and wheel-less vans but mostly there are trucks and trailers, scores of them. Some trailers have more trailers stacked on top of them, or engines on pallets or the carcasses of truck cabs. The sun shines but there is no birdsong here. I can hear indistinct clunks and clacks but it is hard to tell if they come from inside one of the scrapyard's sheds or somewhere miles distant.

I have an Ordnance Survey map of the area with me: 1:50,000 scale. The border is represented by a dashed line but here the borderline's twists and turns are so tight that the map



A stile on the Irish border, photographed by Garrett Carr

cannot capture them. They appear as a chaotic array of black lines all pointing in different directions. So it seems that some of these trailers are in the north and some are in the south, but it is hard to be sure which. I hear an angle grinder start up in one of the sheds. I could go to speak to the operator but I feel suddenly shy. I've heard that two gates in the corner of this yard were used for pig smuggling during the last century, British pigs emerging through the other gate as Irish. I find the gates overgrown with brambles now, put beyond use.

I follow the boundary stream but fail to find the bridge from Anthony Haughey's photograph. One bank has been recently scraped flat by a JCB: perhaps the bridge in the photograph was lifted away during the work. Or perhaps the bridge was not actually on the borderline; Haughey's notes did not claim that it was, only that it was near it. It is unlikely that he is as obsessed with the exact location of the line as I am. I lean against a 1970s Ford and look at the water for a while. Somewhere out of sight metal is working metal. It feels appropriate that I have not found what I was looking for among these decaying trucks by an impossibly tangled border. Despite the nuts and bolts, the iron and steel settling into the ground, this is a changing place.

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I have lunch at a burger van parked on the Belfast–Dublin road, close to the border. It is called Motherfruckers. Some would have considered Mothertruckers an effective enough double entendre but the owner, Eamonn Clifford, goes that extra mile for his customers. His business operates from the corner of a lay-by big enough for fifteen rigs. This was once a customs and excise point, where trucks pulled in to have their loads checked, until the Single Market. When I arrive four truckers are standing around Eamonn's van wolfing down

burgers and chips. Eamonn has also served plenty of photographers since the Brexit referendum; they tend to work this stretch of the border as it is convenient for both Dublin and Belfast.

"But I don't see so many photographers these days", Eamonn tells me on this visit, "that's all dried up".

Eamonn was himself a subject. Charles McQuillan took his portrait for a photo essay called "Brexit worries from the Irish border", published by the *Guardian* in September 2018. He wore a new baseball cap especially for the shoot, but the first thing the photographer did was make him take it off.

"You look glum in the picture", I remark. This is not usually how Eamonn comes across.

"I know", he says. "The boys said I look as if I'd just lost a tenner".

I hang around a while as truck drivers come and go. Some chat, others retire to their cabs to eat, then honk their horns to say goodbye to Eamonn as they pull away. Most are travelling within Ireland but some work the Continent too – professional border-crossers. One trucker shows me a dent on the door of a storage box fitted to the underside of his trailer. "Could have been a refugee," he says thoughtfully, "hoping to slip across with me."

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I move on; I have a mountain to climb. Anglesey is the last high point before the border's eastern end. The border here is represented by a 4-foot fence, with a single length of barbed-wire along the top. The photographer Tristan Poyser followed this fence in 2018 and found a stile in it. He photographed it for his project "The Invisible In-Between". It looks like an attractive connection; a stile raised up on old chair legs – a handy spot to cross the border without risk of tearing your trousers.

It is not just the border that has changed. I'm

out of shape; Anglesey Mountain is a harder climb for me this time. It is a muggy day. I am sweating until I get above the tree line and into the breeze. It is the season for purple heather and foxgloves. Pipits zip about. Sharp and pulsing, their call sounds almost digital. Their calls mingle with another common sound in border country, the distant trumping of a stone-breaking excavator. When I get higher I stop to survey the territory and can see the source 5 miles away, a grey hole in a green mountain-side, yellow excavators pecking at the rock walls. Further towards the sea and along the border I can see Narrow Water, site of a massacre of British soldiers during the Troubles. That road leads to Warrenpoint, where cargo ships are docked, their lids open to the sky. Grain or gravel of some sort is being loaded into open-top lorries. Peace and prosperity are interconnected here, both inseparable from the commerce rolling through the valleys below.

I push on and soon find the stile. I doubt it is new; I must have missed it the first time I climbed Anglesey. Perhaps I wandered away from the fence, walking for a while on slightly lower ground, in sight of the fence but not right beside it. The stile is perfectly formed but a humble thing, low and in the same muted tones as its surroundings. It is the seventy-eighth unofficial border connection I have seen, and I think one of the most perfect. The stile is the work of a person who wanted to get from A to B, perhaps the owner of the few hardy sheep I see both sides of the fence. One day a farmer carried a hammer and nails up here, along with a few lengths of wood, and the elegantly turned legs of a discarded chair. The stile could have been put together in ten minutes: a small investment to secure future convenience. I think it is something more too, a softly spoken statement about lives along the border in this moment: creative and pragmatic, peaceful and discreet.