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On Ireland's Border: 'That Sad Old Game'

Thanks to "Brexit," Borderlanders will have to adapt, yet again, to what distant powers decide for them.

By GARRETT CARR JUNE 2, 2017

BELFAST, Northern Ireland — When Britain voted last June to leave the European Union, Northern Ireland voted to remain by a clear majority. Along the border with the Republic of Ireland, that majority was even larger, about 64 percent. The referendum was a hard knock for the Borderlanders — a blunt reminder that they are peripheral not only to the geography of Britain but also to the debate about its future. The damage that leaving the European Union could do to their lives and livelihoods was hardly considered in wider Britain.

On June 8 there will be another vote, this time to choose the next British government. There are pro-European Union parties that would try to reverse the decision to leave, but those parties do not have large enough bases to be serious contenders. And, even lumped together, Northern Ireland's political parties only fill a small minority of the seats in Westminster. So on June 8 we'll choose which government will lead Britain out of the European Union.

I was raised in the Republic of Ireland, close to the border with Northern Ireland. My father would sometimes drive north for supplies, and he liked to bring me along. "For the company," he would say to my mother. On the way home I got to play smuggler: a radio, a toaster, a little contraband alcohol under my seat. We were always carrying something that, strictly speaking, we shouldn't have, just to save a couple of pounds.

The Troubles were raging, and military installations guarded the line. Leaving

Northern Ireland, we would be filtered through a military checkpoint: towers protected with steel plating and camouflage nets. We would wait between blast walls as our car's registration was radioed in. Some memoirs describe routine humiliation at these checkpoints: Families delayed by the soldiers for no good reason, just to show who was in charge. This was never my experience, perhaps because my border-crossing days were later, the 1980s and early '90s. The best comparison I can make is with airport security; efficient but with a certain tension.

My father, I think, experienced the process as a challenge to his sense of identity. There he was, half an hour from home, having to explain himself to an Englishman with a gun. When we were allowed back into the south, the first thing we would see was a customs hut, a tin shack with a uniformed official sitting inside the door. There were customs controls on the border to stop people bringing in too many cheaper products from the north. It was he, not the soldiers, who represented risk. He had the right to search the car, charge tax on imports or even confiscate our haul.

Regular border-crossers developed a canniness for dealing with customs officials. My father knew how to chat to them, deploying a friendly smile that said he wasn't worth bothering with. "Just getting some groceries for the family," he would say. I realize now this was part of the reason he wanted me along — I completed the picture of a harmless family man just trying to get by. We were always allowed to continue, without trouble, but it was rather a sad game, with small prizes; I recall a cassette player and a new pair of curtains rolled up tightly and squeezed under the seat.

Of course now it's quite different. The European Union's creation of the single market, in 1993, meant the free movement of goods and people, removing the need for customs. Then, beginning in 1998, the military installations were dismantled as part of the new peace process. But the sense of the border as a set of rules or a prohibition, rather than a place, remained in my memory.

Over the last few years I have returned to the border and explored it, finally treating it as place. I followed the borderline from end to end, mostly on foot, occasionally by canoe. It is almost invisible now, although always delineated by something: a river, a hedgerow or stonewall. The surrounding area is mostly farms,

open heath and fir plantations. British and Irish cows moo at each other over low fences. The last military installations were removed more than 15 years ago, but I had the coordinates of where they'd stood. Arriving at these sites and examining the road surface, I would feel like an archaeologist of the recent past.

Usually the only indication that a steel tower had once been in a certain spot was that the road widened slightly, and then narrowed. Borderlanders sometimes park cars they're selling in these lay-bys, with a sign propped up in the windshield giving the price, in euros or British pounds, and two cellphone numbers, one northern and one southern.

The borderland is a practical place. It carries some scars, but people are mostly just busy trying to draw advantages from what is usually a disadvantage: living on the periphery. New tourism initiatives encourage hikers to visit the border's hill country, and I walked many stretches of unexpected beauty. Bridges have been built and roads reopened. There is still some smuggling, but it's limited to diesel fuel and conducted by criminal gangs, not people like my father. Today's open frontier means some Borderlanders live in the north but work in the south, or live in the south but send their children north to school. Life on the border still has complexities, but the canniness of my father and others has been replaced by something more unambiguous and legal, something more like the wisdom that comes from living with your feet in two cultures.

The next manifestation of Ireland's border will be as the only land frontier between Britain and the European Union, designed by people who may never have visited it. And the Borderlanders, yet again, will have to adapt to what distant powers decide for them.

There is obviously a great deal of frustration and anxiety along the border. It seems likely that some sort of customs process will return. Some suggest that military checkpoints may reappear. I don't accept this apocalyptic prediction; it would take a particularly deep spiral of disaster to return us to that. Those who think that it will have, to use a Northern Irish phrase, "lost the run of themselves." But the future border need not be militarized to do real damage to the borderland economy and society.

When Britain leaves the European single market, price differences will

probably yawn wide again. Smuggler gangs are already positioned to exploit them — diesel fuel smuggling has kept them in practice. The border could once again be a site of interrogation, a prohibition rather than a place. Customs checks would also mean the ever-so-slight but ever-so-real criminalization of the general public; lots of people will nip across the border to save themselves 15 percent on curtains, and who would really blame them? They're just getting by.

For my part, I hope we don't return to that sad old game where you are always betting on the weariness of customs officials or your ability to charm, with a smile and a wink.

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