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An Archaeology of Ireland's Border

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NOTE: This is was a photo essay. Only the text this given here.

An Archaeology of Ireland's Border
Garrett Carr

1.

I walked Ireland's border from end-to-end. The borderland is thinly populated: lots of quiet farmland, open bog. Encounters with people were not as common as I had expected. However, it is not a wilderness. Human marks are everywhere. I followed hundreds of footpaths and fences and crossed dozens of bridges. I felt I was seeing border people through the things they had built as much as through actual meetings. Sometimes I felt like an archaeologist – attempting to understand a culture through the things it built or left behind.

On a recent trip I came across a plastic tank on a quiet border lane, a one-metre cube and filled with the toxic side-product of diesel laundering. It had been dumped there the night before. Currently fuel is one of the few products worth smuggling but after Brexit it seems likely a cross-border price differential will open with other products too. This tank is a reminder that there are people along the border ready and willing to smuggle anything if there is sufficient profit.

2.

These days many journalists and photographers are visiting the border, reporting on the possible effects of Brexit. I have seen a photograph of this hut used to illustrate such articles at least five times. The small structure is on the old Belfast-Dublin road, right on the borderline. In the caption it is usually described as a former customs hut but this is not the case. It was built only to maintain planning permission that the owners hold for the site, permission that would lapse if the site is left empty. The hut has had only one other use in twenty years: artist John Byrne housed his Border Interpretative Centre in it for a week in 1998.

3 and 4.

Near Lough Foyle stands the remains of a huge British military airbase, closed before the Troubles. It was active during the Second World War. There are massive hangars for Lancaster bombers and rows of barracks now covered in ivy. Standing only metres from Limavady's outer suburbs is a mysterious black dome. I have discovered that it was designed for shooting practice. Tiny blubs were fitted to the inside of the dome to create the impression of a starry night sky. By switching lights on and off in a certain order the effect of an aeroplane passing overhead was created. In the middle of the dome trainee gunners would watch for this effect and take aim. It is an irony that these World War II relics are almost untouched but the most recent phase of the border's military history can hardly be found. All military structures built by the British Army during the Troubles have been completely erased.

5.

This image is 5-years-old, taken during one of my first border visits. It is the Blackwater River, where it constitutes the border between counties Armagh and Monaghan and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The stepping stones were what I came to call a 'connection', an unofficial crossing point along the border. I was interested in crossings that were previously uncharted – not on any other maps – so I made a map of my own to record them. This one was probably the most picturesque. I returned to this site lately with a TV camera crew to find that the

stones were gone. The crew did not mind, they filmed my disappointment instead. The removal of the stones was not the fault of Brexit. Locals feared the stones could cause flooding if trees or fallen branches built up against them so asked for them to be taken away.

The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border by Garrett Carr is published by Faber & Faber.

www.garrettcarr.net