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FEATURE

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BRITISH-IRISH BORDERS AS LINES OF CONNECTION AND DIVISION

The Irish border is 100 years old. The men who drew a red pen around the boundaries of six Ulster counties could hardly have imagined the consequences of their actions. Such deeds were not, of course, untypical at the time. But this imperial cartographic act was very close to home. Partition of the island of Ireland was not about war, nor territory, nor, primarily, economics. It was about politics (including domestic British politics) and identity – with no small measure of ideology in there too. A century on, Northern Ireland is again in the middle of a fray in British and Irish politics, and the focus is once more upon its borders.

In and of itself, drawing a line across a map does nothing; it is human activity which gives a border meaning and effect. From this principle, we know that the significance of any border varies by context. The relevant context, for a state border, is not just geographical; it is historical, legal, political, socio-cultural, and economic. Immediately we see, therefore, that when it comes to the creation of new – or 'harder' – borders, it can easily become subject to dispute. Such border-related contestation may come from within the state or from another state, as in the case of irredentism, i.e. the claim by one state over the territory of another.

This was the situation for the Irish border until the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement. Only after that British-Irish Agreement was Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Irish constitution, rewritten to retract Ireland's claim over the six counties. Instead, the Irish state and the UK accepted the principle of majority consent. That is: the Irish border can be removed and a united Ireland created if a majority in Northern Ireland vote for this to happen. This prospect helps to explain why it is that the Irish border remained politically and symbolically important within Northern Ireland even as other forms of friction over it were eased, mainly through European integration.

The Irish border is totemic of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. When that relationship has been tense, we have seen the worst effects at the border in the form of violence, controls and barriers. When the relationship has been good, the Irish border has become – to all intents and purposes – open, invisible and criss-crossed with connections. With the UK's exit from the European Union, the challenge of managing the Irish border as a source and a symbol of British-Irish difference became an international concern. The Brexit process itself became afflicted by the tendency of the Irish border, as historian Diarmaid Ferriter (2019) put it, to 'polarise and frustrate, with reverberations well beyond Britain and Ireland'.

Both the UK and EU were jointly determined to protect the openness of the Irish border, even as its status changed to become that of an external boundary of the European Union. The negotiated outcome they came to in the Protocol on Ireland/ Northern Ireland in the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement reflects the promised 'flexible and imaginative' approach. Northern Ireland remains de facto within the EU's single market for goods, and the default setting is that the Union Customs Code is applied on goods arriving to it from non-EU states, including Britain. This is a complicated and extraordinary arrangement. It requires considerable adjustment to manage the movement of goods across Northern Ireland's other border with Britain: the Irish Sea. This is why many borders experts, including members of IBMATA, repeatedly emphasised the need for detailed planning and preparation in anticipation of implementing the Protocol.

As this book recounts, historical experience from Ireland/Northern Ireland has already shown that international agreements do not bring complete resolution of complex problems; indeed, treaties have consequences that have to be enacted and managed. Any new border regime is but the working out of a changed legal, economic and, on occasion, political relationship between two states. This is true of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol in the Withdrawal Agreement. There has been a hardening of borders all around Northern Ireland because of the changed legal conditions for movement across them. Whether it be for the movement of pets or plants (across the Irish Sea) or mobile phones or migrant workers (around the Irish land border), these new conditions make the borders around Northern Ireland seem friction-filled. And the friction is not confined to

inconvenience and costs.

With complication and upheaval comes insecurity, and with this comes a retreat to the most trusted moorings. In times of flux in Northern Ireland, the two main political ideologies (British unionism and Irish nationalism) coalesce around opposing pillars. The whole process of Brexit is about adding friction and separation where there was none before. A process of dis-integration, no matter how limited, has inevitably disturbed the fragile political consensus. In a pattern seen since the earliest days of partition, anger about what is happening at borders between Britain and Ireland has recently become manifest on streets within Northern Ireland. This has included 'interface areas', where the 'border' under pressure may be a physical 'peace wall' separating a predominantly unionist community from a predominantly nationalist one. A century after partition, and as we enter the post-Brexit era, it seems an appropriate time to re-examine the borders of Northern Ireland.

There has, unsurprisingly, been a surge of books on this topic recently, including some fascinating studies on its history as a customs border and as a securitised frontier, see Leary (2016) and Mulroe (2017). This book is a bit different to the others. It is part of the series published by Sage which seek to answer the questions: 'What do we know and what should we do about...?' Often in public debate there is a demand for greater clarity about the facts, and that is one of the things the books in this series provide: to set out 'what we know'. But not only can there be disputes about facts, there are almost invariably different views on what should follow from these facts. In any case, public debate requires more of academics than just to report facts; it is also necessary to make suggestions and recommendations about the implications of these facts. Hence the books also ask: 'what we should do'.

When it comes to setting out 'what do we know' about the Irish border, this book focuses as much on connections and interdependence east/west and north/south as on divisions. The section on 'what should we do about' the Irish border is understandably wide ranging. It considers the role of technological solutions in facilitating movement across a border. It looks at lessons from the difficulties in handling the coronavirus pandemic across Northern Ireland's borders with Britain and Ireland. And it also considers the process by which the Irish border would be removed altogether (at least in constitutional terms) by Irish unification. Ultimately, what we need to know about the Irish border underpins what we should do about it, i.e. to recognise that the relationship between the UK and Ireland can perpetuate conflict, or build peace. Much of that depends on whether the borders between them are treated as lines of connection or lines of division.

This book will be the latest of many on the subject of borders to be authored by an academic from Queen's University Belfast. Founded in 1845 by Queen Victoria, Queen's Belfast was one of three colleges on the island of Ireland – the other two in Cork and Galway. In 1867, a new professor of theology was appointed to the university. Revd. Professor Josiah Porter was born in Donegal, went to school in Derry/Londonderry, and studied at university in Scotland. He spent ten years as a missionary in Syria and Palestine, where two of his children were born. His youngest son, William, was born in in Belfast – in University Square – in the year of his appointment to Queen's. After completing a scholarship at the university, William moved to England to study and work. His eminent career saw him become responsible for implementing the first laws controlling immigration across the UK's borders. At the time of the partition of Ireland, William Haldane Porter was Chief Inspector under the Aliens Restriction Act. As well as being knighted in 1926, Sir William was made an officer of the Order of Leopold of Belgium. In 1930, Sir William and his English wife, Lady Sybil, retired to live in Dublin, Ireland. He died in 1944 and is buried in St James' Church in the city. It is known nowadays for tourists attracted to the Guinness Brewery, but St. James's Gate has been a stopping-off point for pilgrims since medieval times. The professional and the personal life of Sir William Haldane Porter exemplifies the significance of borders as lines of connection as well as lines of division. Written just a stone's throw from where he was born, this small book attempts to explain the Irish border in terms of both.

What do we know and what should we do about the Irish border by Katy Hayward is published by Sage in June 2021. https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/what-do-we-know-and-what-should-we-do-about-the-irish-border/book275653

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