

KEELEY TRAVEL is a travel agency that doesn't sell holidays run by architectural historian Tom Keeley. This travelling agency acts as both guide and tourist, visiting one destination at a time. KEELEY TRAVEL is interested in the echo between people and their surroundings, and what the gaze of the tourist can show us about the everyday through architectures, landscapes, histories and geographies. Design by Simone C. Niquille.

WALKING THE IRISH BORDER

I'm at the start of a journey, and it's a long one. I'm walking the meandering 310 miles of Irish Border from Lough Foyle to the Irish Sea. It's a site that has been playing on my mind for some time, ever since I read Colm Tóibín's *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* about a decade ago, long before Brexit shifted it into the spotlight.

For several years I knew I wanted to do something with it but was never sure what. Gradually this coalesced into my PhD proposal, a homage of sorts to Tóibín's journey. During this process the ground shifted, the 2016 Brexit Referendum changed everything. Not only in terms of the political landscape of the UK, but also the lens through which the work I was doing would be read, and the context in which it would be produced. Despite it's name barely being uttered during the lead up to the vote, the Irish Border was now centre stage.

While from a personal political perspective Brexit is a terrible thing, it does provide a deep layer of purpose (as well as headaches) for the work I'm doing. The border in Ireland has existed for just under 100 years – with the centenary fast approaching in 2021 – but in its lifetime it has undergone changes and has been seen differently in different periods. Sometimes harder, sometimes more or less invisible, sometimes changing its route entirely.

This research looks at the border over the last century, focussing on specific dates and sites that illustrate these moments in history. The route that I will walk – initially alone but again with others – will connect these locations and historical dates spatially, creating a line that will walk along, across, and into the space of the border at a time when it's meaning and materiality could change significantly.

I'm not the first to undertake a journey along this border. H.V. Morton did so back in 1930, documented in his book *In Search of Ireland*, asking when “this idiotic frontier [is] going to disappear?” It seems it did more recently, the genius of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement keeping the border for those who supported it and making it disappear, at least conceptually, for those that did not. Now, however, we are in a position where the skills and nuance that made that negotiation possible appear to be wholly absent. We are in a more divisive politics where detail and sensitivity are thrown by the wayside in place of bombast and nostalgia.

The shifting sands that make up Brexit have forced me to refocus my broader border research. While this is not a Brexit project, it is seen and produced from within the context of Brexit, with the possibility that the border may change significantly through the course of the work. With this in mind, and with the deadline of 29



The border at Lifford Bridge, Co. Donegal.



Muff, Co. Donegal.

March 2019 fast approaching, I have been photographing the border as it stands. While an impossible task to capture everything, I need a document of how it exists at this moment in time, and have been taking pictures of every public road that crosses the border. There are 208.

There's very little to mark the crossing at present. A sign going from miles to kilometres and vice versa. Some main roads have a "Welcome to Northern Ireland" sign, but they are rare, and interestingly I'm yet to come across a sign welcoming drivers into the Republic. Petrol stations form a major architectural feature of these areas, poised to profit from fluctuations in currency on either side. Though this seems a more one-sided transaction for now. The most consistent marker of the border is the subtle line in the tarmac across the road, where one jurisdiction's roadbuilders end and another's begin. An echo of a border more than anything else, a trace of the line on the map made faint in asphalt.

These traces of histories – the official heavy histories of the relatively recent past and the relationship between the UK and Ireland – are set out architecturally and invisibly across this swathe of the island. But while these histories provide the frame through which the border and this research are seen, they are but part of

the story. The unofficial everyday histories and practices that make up the border are equally part of this picture. They occupy the gaps and edges, they make the border real and also make it disappear. It's this multi-layered approach that this work hopes to build, a cacophony of voices that understand the messy reality of a place and what makes it what it is.

The Boundary Commission

Paul Muldoon, 1980

You remember that village where the border ran
Down the middle of the street,
With the butcher and baker in different states?
Today he remarked how a shower of rain

Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane
It might have been a wall of glass
That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.

Public Road no. 200 of 208, Bridge End, Co. Donegal.





Public Road no. 207 of 208, Muff, Co. Donegal.

Public Road no. 205 of 208, Carnagarve, Co. Donegal.





Public Road no. 203 of 208, Lenamore, Co. Donegal.

Public Road no. 201 of 208, Dundrain, Co. Donegal.



Introducing the Irish Border

The Irish Border runs 310 miles from Lough Foyle to the Irish Sea and has divided the six counties of Northern Ireland from what is now the Republic since 1921. Its sinuous route stems from 17th-century county boundaries, the irregularities of which are heightened due to the unique relationship between architecture, history, geography, and politics in these islands.

With the so-called “Irish Question” remaining relevant to UK politics for more than 200 years, and now once more due to Brexit, this ongoing research uses lessons of the border to produce a public architectural history that looks forward and looks back. It questions how sites of the Irish Border tell the history of its past, present, and future condition.

The research understands the Irish borderlands through a series of walks along and across the border, both alone and with others. These routes are determined by key historical moments, showing how the border has been seen differently over time. Through the walks these histories are connected spatially, deriving from, and relating to, key sites along the border where they take place.

This approach is underpinned by the restaging of a ‘hedge school’: an 18th and 19th-century Irish pedagogical precedent used to develop a method that practices history with others. The timing of this is critical; conducted as the centenary of Partition in Ireland approaches in 2021 and as the UK exits the EU.

This research tests a way of producing a public architectural and landscape history that takes research beyond the archive and the academy; responding to the specific geographies and histories of the border, as well as the daily practices around it. It asks how histories – both official and unofficial – have influenced the border, and in turn how they may have been shaped by the border in the first place.



Public Road no. 206 of 208, Muff, Co. Donegal.

Fáilte/Welcome

This and subsequent brochures from KEELEY TRAVEL will be dedicated to the Irish Border, the site and subject of my PhD research. The coming editions will document and disseminate aspects of this research, the introduction to which is outlined below; zooming in and zooming out of sites of the border, and the methods through which I and others understand them.

The border here is many things: concurrently a line on a map, a physical presence, an invisible threshold, an act of violence, a mythologised landscape, depending on your point of view. It is also the site of run-of-the-mill daily routines, with neither of these extremes coming to define it.

Thank you for reading,

Tom Keeley



Public Road no. 202 of 208, Dundrain, Co. Donegal.



Public Road no. 204 of 208, Lenamore, Co. Donegal.