

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

"Sure that's niche. You must be pretty fit now"

"The British are talking to themselves"

"There's an element of this being a Michael Collins moment for the Irish Government"

"Tis an awful day. Do you have a rollie? You must be mad doing that walking. I don't like the rain. Tis a terrible day. I'm headed to town. Good luck to yer"

"You've a fair old walk ahead of you then boy"

"They're still here you know"

I'm halfway along my walk of the border. I began in Derry in the north, and am currently in Bawnboy, Co. Cavan in the Republic. It's taken me two weeks to get this far, or thereabouts. I feel like I'm just about getting into the rhythm of it, beginning to inhabit the border, to adopt 'border time'.

But what is the border and what to call it? Is it the Irish border? The border on the island of Ireland? The British border in Ireland? The border between

Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland/Ulster/Norn Iron and the Republic/Free State/south? The illegal border carving off the 'Occupied Six' from the 26 counties? An Teorainn? Language here is loaded, each description of the same thing supplies connotations and meaning that may not be obvious at first sight. Everything depends on your position, with the 'constructive ambiguity' of recent years permitting people of differing points of view to live peacefully.

Much of the time it's near impossible to ascertain which side of the border you're actually on. As I've said before, there's little to mark it, and the labyrinthine nature of roads crossing it add to the confusion. There are more crossings along this border than there are on the whole EU frontier with Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova.

Someone said to me that the border is a place of listening rather than looking. To some degree this is true: the things that you see at first glance may seem one thing, but at closer inspection are quite another. Listening to, but more importantly hearing the nuances and subtleties of what is being said – and what is not – in the landscape, the architecture, and by the people of the borderland is critical. I guess that is what I'm trying to do, and still learning, to tune in to a different frequency, to really understand, as an outsider, what this place is all about.



Gurteen Road, Garrison, Co. Fermanagh.



Strabane, Co. Tyrone.

The mode of travel is key in this; walking, slowly moving across the landscape, allowing it to swallow you up and become part of it as you make your way from A to B. It's a different kind of engagement and permits me to see things I otherwise may miss.

I've had every kind of weather thrown at me. Hail, sleet, snow, gale force wind, stinging rain, even a spot of sunshine at times. Perhaps in some way the weather is attempting to mirror the state of politics that hangs heavy over the border?

Architecturally so far it is difficult to spot differences from either side in the form of buildings. The same patternbook 1970s bungalows from Jack Fitzsimons' Bungalow Bliss are scattered across hills and fields. A book that has arguably made one the biggest contributions to Irish architecture in living memory – albeit primarily enacted by non-architects. There are also the ubiquitous ruins, crumbling back into the land from whence they came. They are eaten up by tree roots and ivy, the rusted beauty of their corrugated metal slowly disintegrating.

I've been trying to work out at what point you begin to feel the border, to know its presence is near? There's something in the way the line 'others' what's on the opposite side. Not necessarily for good or bad, just in the knowledge that there is 'somewhere else' over there. This filter perhaps comes from within, with you (and I)

the viewer projecting your own knowledge onto places wherever they may be. What do I know of Crossmaglen? What have I heard of Swanlinbar? What baggage am I coming with that may or may not skew my view of either for better or worse?

Perhaps this journey is less about defining the differences between each side of the border, and more about what both sides have in common. Maybe, even, that there is a distinct architecture of the borderland itself? Are there things that differentiate these stretches of land from the further reaches of each state away from the border?

The border blurs in and out of vision, invisible for all intents and purposes, but coming into view depending on your source of information. The weather forecast on RTE understands that the clouds do not respect the line of the border, whereas the BBC seems to think they do, editing out the counties beyond it.

This way of looking and understanding the border, at what scale and from what distance you see it, is of paramount importance. It's a question of where you look to, and where you look from. Can a town or village have a point of view, an outlook or perspective in the way people do? Can a hill or mountain suggest a way of thinking? As I walk on I hope to be able to see if it does. The myth of the land made real in mortar and brick.

Garrison, Co. Fermanagh.







Turf, Rushen, Co. Donegal.

Tober, Co. Donegal.

