



O'Carroll, Dan. "Bordering Heritage"
Transnational Literature, Vol 13, Oct 2021
Special Edition: Follow the Sun
URL: <https://transnationalliterature.org/>

Bordering Heritage

Dan O'Carroll

Penryn rail station in Cornwall, England, is so small it has only four advertising panels, with two of them facing the steps and access ramp to the platform. Today of all days, as I head off for six weeks round Britain and Ireland in search of something as intangible as my own heritage, one of these panels happens to have a fellow that went to my school on it, Ciarán Hinds. Under the *National Theatre* branding and five large stars, he stands there all serious beneath a broody Irish sky, with his thick greying hair, dangling curls, and a beard of scruffy distinction. 'Flawless,' reads the quote, 'A culture-clash masterpiece,' *The Guardian*, with another pair of five stars sitting like halos above the heads of Ciarán's co-stars, Judith Roddy and Fra Fee. '*Translations*, by Brian Friel,' it says: 'must end 18 December.' And underneath it all in the centre is the Arts Council England stamp they need to include because of the funding.

I check the newly installed digital screens for the expected time of the train, as a woman passes me with her brown and white dog on a leash, and I figure I might as well take the rucksack off and relax for a bit. But I can't, of course. I'm thinking about M., as I'm sure she's thinking about me. And I'm sure she's still worrying, as she has been worrying for the last three years since the Brexit vote, about what exactly might happen in the next ten days or so. Because M. is French, you see, and we are not married, so although I have the one internationally recognised benefit that comes with being born in Northern Ireland (at least for now)—dual citizenship—she, as a French national, does not. And, in keeping with many of the choices we made over the years, we chose the wrong time to go and look after her sick father, because it meant that she has not now been resident in the UK for the last five years, even though she has taught children, paid tax, and brought a smile to the faces of anyone in her company for the previous fifteen. She has to *apply* for citizenship status to the country she thought was her home, and which has now told her, in one way or another, that she is not welcome. It opens old wounds in me. Wounds that Brian Friel's *Translations* knows all about. And I wonder to myself that sometimes the gods lay it on thick.

The train arrives and a magpie whooshes over my shoulder and up into the oaks on the opposite siding. The little brown and white dog skips into the other carriage ahead of its owner and

I thud my rucksack onto the floor then quickly up onto the luggage racks. My head is full and tired after a busy few months, and I lie back against the seat and unzip my jacket as the train doors close and the train pulls out. My eyes notice for once the station sign, with its Cornwall Council logo, and its drying seagull shit, and its little blue square in the corner with the halo of golden stars on it. European Regional Development Fund, it says. Extra money for a branch line that couldn't pay for itself.

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By half two the next afternoon, I'm heading out of Belfast's Europa bus station on the 212 to Derry. There are two building cranes to the north of the station (Belfast has grown a bit since I lived here), and the sky is the colour of paintbrushes in water. I have a double seat to myself, I can see the reflection of the blue point-lights on the ceiling of the bus reflected in the sky through the bus window, and my tired mind begins to drift off by the time we've made it onto the motorway and out of the city.

There are layers to the reasons that I'm on this trip, and we'll start with the simplest: I've got work to do. After going back to school and finally getting a degree at the tender age of forty, I thought I'd chance my arm and go for a masters, which was hard work but great fun and then what the hell, in for a penny, I applied for PhD funding off the back of that and, more fool them, they gave it to me, and so here I am. Forty-six and heading to Derry for a two-day conference on 'Border Heritage'. The event is taking place two miles from the border with the Republic of Ireland less than a week before Northern Ireland, along with England, Scotland and Wales, whether they like it or not—the Scots and Northern Irish do not—are due to leave the European Union. There'll be history and heritage scholars at the table. Artists. Writers. Geographers and ethnographers of all descriptions. If nothing else, it'll be informative. And I'm there more as an observer than a participant. I was too late discovering the conference to try and present something at it myself, but that means the pressure's off and I can watch and wonder and let myself enjoy the first night's drinks. And believe me, I do. This whole academic thing: the fact that you can get paid to read and write and think and talk to people about things you find interesting blows me away. I didn't have the sense to see it as an avenue when I was a kid because I wasn't aware that it *was* an avenue. Ours was the first generation to go to university at all.

Anyway, we're barrelling down the M22 towards the park-and-ride at Toome, and I'm thinking about intention and reception. I've been thinking a lot about those two words recently, and for some reason I'm not yet aware of, they are playing on my mind again. And I am remembering things I didn't even realise I had run away from until years later when I started to see, clear as day, things only apparent because they were no longer there—in me, not in the world of the tangible—and how heavy and all-pervasive these things had been once upon a time.

Take, for instance, this. I was waiting in the queue at the bus station and there was only one person in front of me, and it was my fault, yes, I'm always cutting things fine, but I was in a hurry and this fella in front of me is taking his sweet, bemused, time enquiring of the lady at the desk about bus times, not for today, but for Friday *next week*. And I am trying my best to relax, and eventually the fella moves on but there are only a few minutes before my bus is due to leave and I've scanned the screens to see which stand I'm supposed to head for as soon as I have the ticket in my hand. The lady calls me forward and then this happens: I start wondering whether she is possibly a bigoted Protestant and if so, whether she can tell that I'm a Catholic and will therefore take as much time as she can issuing the ticket, thereby making me miss my bus so I have to wait another half hour in the draughty concourse for the next one. Have I any reason to think that she, herself, is indeed a Protestant? Well, no. And have I any reason to think that even if she is, that she is also bigoted to the point of spite in her daily job role? Well, no to that one too.

But I'm still in the middle of the thing now and, even if you're watching your thoughts and thinking on some other layer that that first layer doesn't make any sense—that in fact it's not really based on any data that's coming in from the world—it's hard to stop that first layer of thoughts, and mine, true to form, press on with another discombobulating revelation. And that revelation is: You are going to Derry. *Derry*, for god's sake. As in Derry/Londonderry, the only place in these islands with two names, and as soon as you open your mouth the listener knows which boot you kick with and that's that, game over. And – get this – some really, really old machinery starts whirring away that I have not heard clanking into gear since childhood. And it says something like: does she *look* like a Protestant? Because if she does, just throw pride to the wind and go practical with *Londonderry*, sure who's going to know. And if she doesn't, just say *Derry*, loud and proud, with a conspiratorial glimmer of revolt in your eyes.

I step forward and she says, 'Hello. How can I help?'

South Belfast. Slightly oiled sound to the 'o' in 'Hello.' Probably Protestant.

'Can I have a return ticket for the 212 express, please?'

'Return to Derry, is it, sir?'

'Yes, it is, thanks a million.'

Oh, the shame. I can hear my ancestors tutting.

'There you go, sir. That'll be ten pounds fifty, please.'

And she says the 'ten pounds fifty, please' with such gentle music that I miss my Irish life and I miss my family and all the years I haven't been here and watched my sister and my nephews and nieces grow up and my friends marry and my parents age and I just want to cry, I really do. But I don't cry. I say, 'There you go,' and I tap my card to the screen and take my ticket and make my way, briskly, onto the bus.

Derry, then. The epicentre of the Ulster plantation. Its famous walls and 105-day siege in 1689. The hub of the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement and birthplace of Nobel laureate, John Hume. Bloody Sunday and the Bloody Sunday inquiry and, well, the second Bloody Sunday inquiry. A three-dimensional bricks and mortar parallel to one dimension of life in this difficult country, this difficult place. You can walk the city walls in fifteen minutes, one side's murals announcing oppression and resistance, the other's protesting that it is under siege. For a city that is undoubtedly one of the friendliest on earth, there is still a shadow in every mind that categorises everything as in / out; us / them. And who can blame them?

The conference in the morning comes at me thick and fast. I notice, to my shame, that it is the first time I have been at an event where there are PowerPoint slides written entirely in the Irish language. I take a pride-by-association in the pokiness and lucid, radiant wit of the questioners and presenters. There is a playful and wrestling battle of wits that happens, both lively and mercurial, respectful and vicious, and I have to temper the giddy glee of realising what I have missed in attending buttoned-down heritage conferences in England for the last three years. Eyebrows raise as I chuckle. This is normal, the eyebrows say. Have you forgotten where you're from, they say. These people *care*. They care deeply. And they will take you down with facts.

I have been away too long, I think to myself during the coffee break. I have forgotten what I have loved.

But minutes later I am reminded of one of the many reasons I left this place. An Indian woman (after thanking the speaker and introducing herself in fluent and, I'm told later, extremely articulate Irish) asks a question about race-hate in relation to social organisations and policy-making groups that may not be as inclusive as they purport to be. And I see a white middle-aged man *wink*, clearly, at another white middle-aged man, both from one particular side of the political fence. I see it happen twice, when the winking man thinks no-one else other than the winked-at man is looking (and I have the not-moving-your-head-a-millimetre thing down to a 'T', perfected in Belfast so that people around you stop taking you into consideration in their spatial awareness). The left-eye micro-second wink is like an eye-roll—oh, look, here we go again with the race thing—each time the woman nails home a clear and difficult point. Both men are, say, mid-60s. The woman is maybe mid-40s. These tiny, nasty little micro-messages are mostly unseen, but when I see the first one I think yes, I have seen this before, these men who 'know the territory', who 'know (and control) the score' internally looking down their noses at someone by giving a wink – hey, look at thon, would you ever?[1]. And after that second eye-wink, god help me, I wanted to get up from my seat right there, right then and ...

I didn't. Obviously.

I waited.

In turn, I listened to this other man's talk, the winked-at man and I asked myself the question... could a racist deliver this talk? The answer was a clear 'yes.' In fact, I heard what I might not have heard had I not asked that question, or held up that filter in advance.

Shit, I thought. How must it feel to live like that *all the time*?

There are worlds within worlds. Injustices within injustices.

Conversations continue. Panels are picked apart on everything from interwar border security to peace journalism and the possible effects of Brexit on already vulnerable and marginalised border communities. Professional courtesies are expressed. Low level resentments are tapered and mollified with good coffee and pastries from the bakery at the bottom of the hill.

And there is one talk from the day's proceedings that sticks out for me, by an artist and researcher called Bryonie Reid. She has spent years considering Ireland's borderlands, recording stories, building up complex and intricate pictures of complex and unusual places. Much of that complexity, she tells us, is lost when shoehorned into the language of the academy. If you hold someone's hand as they weep, she says, mere excerpts lose their power when used to convince journal editors. She speaks of the importance of accepting 'ambiguity and doubling,' the 'mingling of sameness and difference' and the need for 'largeness and suppleness of mind.' She tells moving stories involving cuttings off and belongings, collapses, strange solidarities, and identities overturned in instants. She recalls a sentence from one interviewee, 'It's pretty weird to grow up in a place where people get killed,' and says, at one point, 'what a difficult place this is to call home.' And with that one sentence, belly waves of tears and warmth rise up in me because I know, with an intuitive knowledge, that yes. This is the truth. This is how it is. This, when it comes down to it, is why I left.

That night some of the delegates gather in Sandinos pub, surrounded by pictures of figures from international resistance movements in Africa and South America. Around the tiny table and the clatter of pints I count a member of the Irish parliament, a history lecturer, a Christian conservative business owner, and an archaeologist. More come and go, from different political backgrounds, different classes and walks of life. The conversation is dug deep, heartfelt and sincerely meant. And it strikes me about three hours in that I haven't—not once—seen anyone pick up their phone or take a selfie.

I do love Derry, for all its trouble.

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The next day I hear fascinating talks about how places not thought 'economically viable' were simply not included on the first Ordnance Survey maps of Ireland in the nineteenth century, regardless of how many buildings or people were there. I hear that Irish border galleries are now bursting with the chroniclings of atrocity, whereas the border museums steer clear of anything sensitive or difficult, an external mirroring of internal attitudes about art and history. It is the border, after all: someone might go out for the newspaper one night and not come home.

I gather my things from the warm, dry, and subsidised university accommodation, and recall a fact from earlier in the day that 1400 Syrian refugees have been housed in the last five years

in Northern Ireland. But they have been allocated poor housing stock in sectarian areas where there is already high deprivation, generations of trauma, and historical records of low mental health. The Northern Ireland legislation, it seems, referring as it does to two ethno-nationalist blocs, can't handle the complexity of further difference.

I make for the train station with a buzzing head, and decide to follow the river to the road bridge to clear my head. I send a quick message to M. to check if she is okay: the prime minister, Boris Johnson, has still not formally accepted the EU's offer of an extension to the UK's exit date. A phone box on my route is liveried in blue and white with an information web address and the slogan: Brexit and YOU. Your responsibility, it suggests, not ours. I pass the coffee and pastry shop with people queued out the door, and I pause by the riverside at the carved wooden sculpture of Manannan Mac Lír, the last of the great gods of the Tuatha De Danaan, whose domain is said to be the mouth of Lough Foyle as it heads off into the North Atlantic. Manannan once raced a chariot pulled by three great waves, apparently, from Benone Strand to Magilligan beach, the place where peaceful protesters against internment were batoned in the build up to Bloody Sunday in 1971, and where a prison now stands for many of Derry's own.

'And sure it is yet a most beautiful and sweet country as any under heaven, seamed throughout with many goodly rivers replenished with fish most abundant, sprinkled with many small sweet islands and goodly lakes like little inland seas.'

So said Spenser in 1596. And then came the plantation of Ulster. By the early eighteenth century as much as 120 tons of salmon were being taken from the Foyle each year, the fisheries controlled by a tight anointed few.

I dander along the river, with the sun out and the cold air brightening my mind and shaking it free of the density of facts and information from the last couple of days. An elderly woman with a two-wheel shopping trolley catches my eye as she arrives on this side of the peace bridge, erected in hope thirteen years after the Good Friday Agreement to connect historically opposed communities and improve relations between them.

'Beautiful day, isn't it, son?' she says.

'It is, aye.'

'Enjoy it while it lasts,' she says.

'Don't you worry,' I say, and then she's off, with a nod and a wave over her shoulder as she heads into town.

I check the time and realise that my train leaves for Belfast in twenty-five minutes. Before I set off at a clip, though, I take a final three hundred and sixty degree scan of the small city nestled at the edge of a once-plentiful lough, surrounded as it is by rich arable land to the south, and the wilder rocks and peat bogs of Donegal to the north. No wonder they came here and took it, I think to myself. No wonder. I walk over to the information panel on the Peace Bridge that sits like a Spanish tilde across the river.

The Peace Bridge

Opened June 25 2011

by Johannes Hahn

EU commissioner for regional policy.

There are details of the partnership between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. There are logos for all the contributors who worked hand in hand with the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. And then, finally, inevitably, there's that little blue square again, and its halo of stars in the top left corner. The European Regional Development Fund: Investing in your future, it says.

Which they have to include on panels like this.

Because of the funding, you understand.

[1] 'Thon': a strange word used in the north of Ireland, and loosely meaning 'that'.

Author's note: This piece was written at the tail end of 2019, a few months before the Covid pandemic took hold.

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