

EXTRACT FROM *HARD BORDER: WALKING THROUGH A CENTURY OF PARTITION* BY DARACH MacDONALD

I was a toddler when huge steel girders were driven deep through the road's surface at the Aqueduct Bridge on the Ulster Canal at the edge of town. Other cross-border routes were also 'spiked', including at Kilrooskey, a Fermanagh townland that loops into Monaghan just north of the town, cutting off my uncle Eugene McCabe's farm. I have a memory of him building a small link road through a corner of a field to provide a circuitous escape route to town. He called it the Khyber Pass, in memory of another north-west frontier road. It is still there today, skirting the house where my maternal grandmother settled for her final years between two daughters and their growing families. The house is divided by the border, and that proud County Clare woman relished my dad's cheeky observation that she slept 'with her head in the Free State and her backside in the North'. When Donald, one of my brothers, came home to work in the family drapery business, he moved into the house with his young Dublin wife at a time when the security situation was hot again. Gillian lived in dread of the helicopter swoops and the voices of British squaddies on reconnaissance patrols in the dead of night. They moved into the town as soon as they could.

The spikes circumscribed my childhood world in a ring of steel. They were unnatural barriers between neighbours, friends, family. Like Uncle Eugene, we found ways around them, but they were constant reminders that our freedom of movement was curtailed by a line we could not otherwise see. So from my earliest age, I realised we lived in a frontier town, and these steel impediments marked the border even more forcefully than the customs posts on the Newtownbutler Road where motorists had to have their passbooks checked. Yet there were some marginal benefits of living right on the cusp of another jurisdiction, such as the border shops that offered Opal Fruits, Mars bars, Spangles and other confections unavailable on our side. We had television for a full decade before RTÉ began broadcasting down south. Initially, it was just BBC, but when UTV went on air from Belfast's Havelock House on Halloween 1959, we found a use at last for the rotary channel switch on the Murphy TV set. By then, we were thoroughly immersed in the culture, current affairs and social mores of Britain and its outpost in the north of Ireland. When RTÉ came along, it seemed amateurish, parochial and dated by contrast with Cathy McGowan's *Ready, Steady, Go* on UTV, BBC's *Juke Box Jury* and, of course, *Top of the Pops*. We were there for the gritty start of Granada TV's *Coronation Street* and TV hosts such as David Frost inured us against Gay Byrne's *Late Late Show* from Dublin.

Our cultural influences and sense of the world transcended a line on somebody else's map. We may have been living in a small rural town, but our aspirations were of cosmopolitan sophistication. Even Bobby from Brookeborough, on the fringe of our Fermanagh hinterland in the 1960s, regarded Clones as 'an outpost of American glamour and Sunday freedoms'. While outsiders saw us inhabiting the outer extremity of their world, our parish universe straddled two counties and two states, and we forged from this a common identity as borderers. So we were affronted by the new impediments imposed on our lines of communication. Yet our border was always hard, because it intruded politically in communities that are almost indistinguishable, differentiating people with the same beliefs and allegiances, history and traditions, culture and attitudes. For a century, we were branded as different, corralled into political entities not of our choosing and condemned to peripheral neglect.

This is the part of Ireland through which the Ulster Canal ran, long before the border was even conceived. It is the route through which I have chosen to tell the story of a century of partition. For this is where the border pokes north Monaghan into the soft underbelly of Northern Ireland, a salient that British military strategists dubbed 'the spur'. Its history as a border region began in turmoil a century ago, and it has rarely quietened since. The border lies within 10 kilometres of everyone who lives in this place, intruding in their daily lives, and creating tiny communities that defy the narrative of separate people and places.