

The Border Interpretive Centre

Directly on the borderline, where it crosses the first major north–south road, stands a child’s drawing of a house made real. Four walls, one doorway, two windows and a roof, it could hardly be a simpler structure. No door and nothing inside but a single small room. Housemartins have made mud nests in the rafters. I step in, look out of the windows and then step out. There is nothing else to do.

Only a few feet from the doorway an articulated truck trundles by, raising dust and making the roadside litter dance. Every minute or so another truck goes by, straight over the border. I am standing between Ireland’s north and south, a place now set to become the European Union’s in and out. This tiny house is the only structure here. There are no immigration checkpoints to delay the drivers, at least not yet.

Once a grocery shop stood on this spot but it was burned down in an arson attack. The owners did not rebuild the shop but they knew that leaving the site vacant would mean reapplying for planning permission if they ever did want to construct something here again. So this was quickly put up, a placeholder, just enough to ensure a building lineage is maintained on the site. This is a structure with no purpose other than to simply *be*.

In 2000 an artist called John Byrne borrowed this building. What he did with it was the manifestation of an idea

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born on the fly, in the middle of delivering a standup comedy routine. Suppose, John wondered aloud, we actually encouraged people to visit Ireland's border? People go to see stranger things – tombs, bridges, old walls. Couldn't the border be a tourist attraction? John Byrne had an idea: put an interpretive centre on it. A proper tourist attraction always has one of those.

No one else was going to do it, so Byrne did. He set up and staffed the Interpretive Centre himself. It was an information bureau and shop. You could buy T-shirts and badges saying 'Good Luck from the Border'. Byrne sold postcards featuring photographs of military forts. But these were not the ruins of Norman or Elizabethan castles normally found on postcards, their bloody aspects now safely historicised. Byrne's postcards featured modern military watchtowers, installations built by the British army in response to a terrorist threat on the borderland, a threat that was still ongoing. This zone was militarised at the time. The watch-

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towers were still staffed and operational, steel structures bristling with cameras, aerials and spotlights. From anywhere along this stretch of the border, the eastern end, you could see at least one of them. And its cameras could see you, watch you cross the border, read your car's number plate.

The border was a troubled place when Byrne opened the Border Interpretive Centre, and had been contested for all its existence. The borderland itself is thinly populated, often tranquil, but the twisty line that divides the island on the map is a symbol that divides opinion. The line on the map offers no space to meet so it was smart of John Byrne to make room here on the ground. The Border Interpretive Centre stood directly on the borderline, proving it was not just a symbol, it was also a patch of earth, a living place where things happened. A busload of people came to the official opening of the Border Interpretive Centre. They stood around, remarking on the weirdness of what they were doing. Rather than driving over the line they had stopped to look at it, to take it in. They were pioneers of a sort, they were visiting the border. They could take some home with them; sods of border soil were for sale in ziplock bags. A Northern Irish comedian gave a speech at the event. He noted that although Ireland's border was small, and despite having viewed many other borders, he still felt it to be 'the best', 'something that unites the whole country'.

I meet John Byrne long after his time on the border. I walk up to him in a Belfast bar, introduce myself, and we get chatting about the Border Interpretive Centre. The pub is overcrowded and I suggest we go out with the other drinkers who have flowed out into an alley but John refuses as that would mean drinking from plastic cups instead of

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proper pint glasses. I like this commitment to doing things correctly. John says he was a ‘border worrier’ – not meaning he actually fretted about it, but that he couldn’t leave it alone. He felt compelled to poke at the border, get under it or look at it from original angles.

I too, I realise, am a border worrier, and I’m glad to meet another. I tell Byrne my plan. I am about to begin a long walk, travelling Ireland’s border from end to end. I want to see the entire line, following it no matter where it brings me. Some of the border is water, so I’ll have to borrow a boat occasionally. Most travellers are only on the border for the blink of an eye; it is something to go over on the way to a destination in the north or south. But the border itself is my destination and I will follow it east to west, come what may.

‘Will you record it?’ he asks.

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘I’m going to make a map of it.’

John goes on to tell me about an idea of his own. ‘Do you know, on TV nature documentaries, the landscape fly-over footage that they use, if they’ve got the budget?’

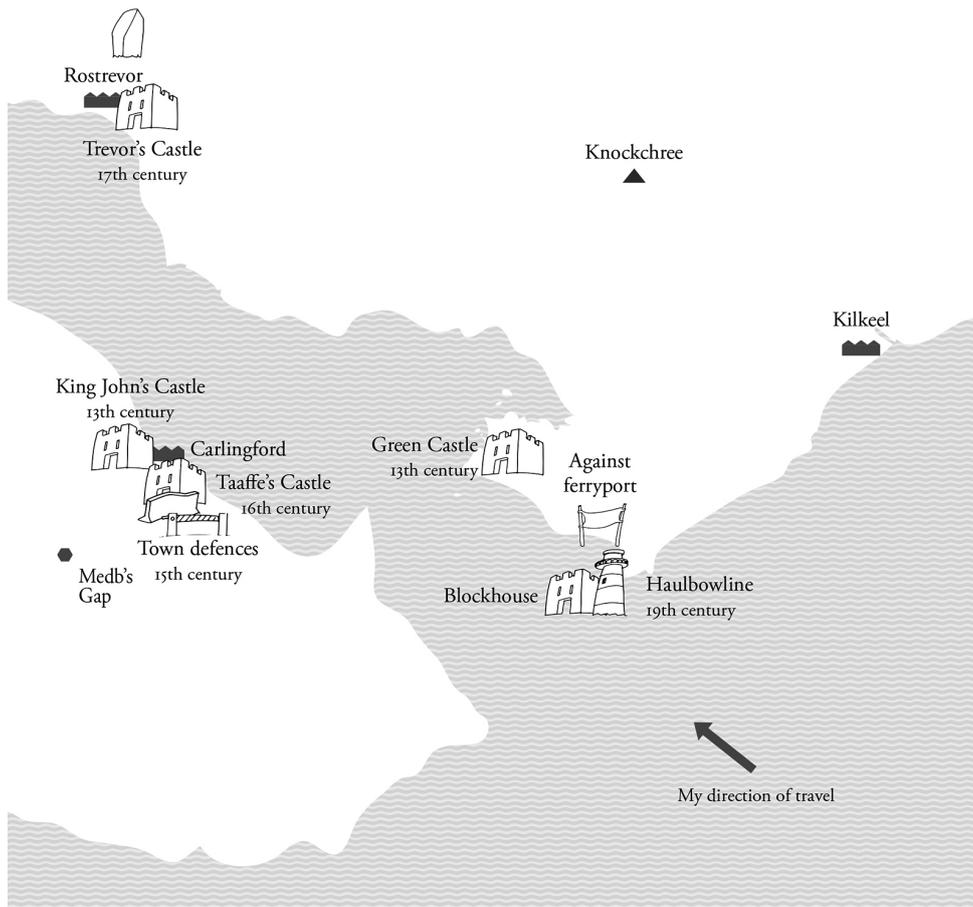
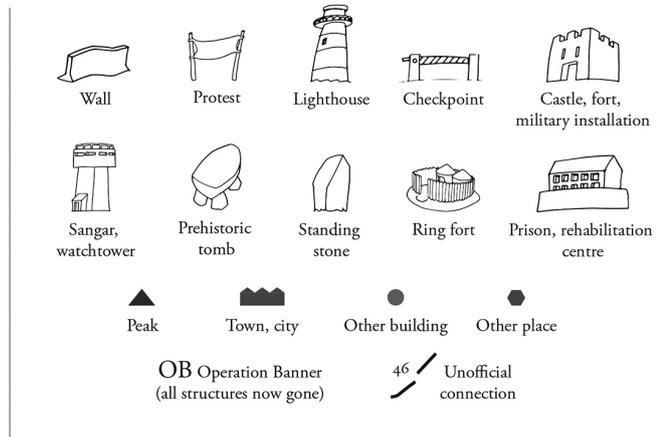
I know the sort of thing, and can imagine it’s expensive to capture. Headlands, peaks or savannah seen from above in smooth tracking shots, filmed with a Steadicam slung under a helicopter.

‘I want to make a film with footage like that,’ he tells me, ‘make a film featuring a fly-over of the border.’ His eyes drift to the ceiling as he describes the idea. He wants to get a camera and a helicopter and cruise the borderline, filming it from high above. Perhaps fly on summer evenings, catch it in golden light, give the border an epic sheen. I love the idea immediately. Such footage is often shot of coastlines, there is drama in the clash of land and sea, but John wants to capture the drama of two countries striking against each

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other. Instead of land and sea it will be land and land, think of it as two edges for the price of one.

But if John ever raises the large amount of money it will take, watching the film will still not be a substitute for my walk. I want to see the line up close. I want to see how the land and its people have reacted to the border, and the ways in which the line is made manifest. First it just demarcated counties, then countries and will next be where the United Kingdom and the European Union touch – this line has a lot of responsibilities. In 2016 the UK voted to disentangle itself from the EU, while the Republic of Ireland remained a committed member. It was striking how little the possible effect on Ireland was discussed in the lead-up to the referendum on EU membership. You might have thought the border between the UK and the EU was going to be the English Channel. But it won't be, it's here, and it's as thin as wire. It turns out that I will see the border in a peaceful yet fragile moment. Looking at the border will also require thinking back in time, charting its past. So far my map is just a large sheet of paper with nothing on it but the border's crooked course and an X representing the Border Interpretive Centre. I'm not sure what else I'll find. As a symbol the border divides, but I'm going to see what it is doing on the ground, and in the water.



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We pick up the border from the open sea, approaching it in a twelve-foot canoe. Rain is coming down so hard it seems there are no individual drops, just thick cold saturation. I am accompanied by Paddy Bloomer. He will journey with me a few times, wherever the border travels open water like it does here on Carlingford Lough. I am kneeling in the bow, pulling us forward with a paddle. He is sitting to stern, at the tricky business of steering and keeping us right with the waves. Paddy is an artist, engineer, barn-raiser and recycler. His practice involves taking junk and transforming it into things of beauty and usefulness. He is also a canoeist, this vessel and the knowledge to handle it belong to him. I've never been in one before, I just do what I am told, the mindless engine, pulling us forward – reach, dip, tug, reach, dip, tug . . .

‘The oar is cutting into my hand,’ I complain.

‘It’s called a paddle,’ says Paddy.

Ahead, tall and grey in the sodden atmosphere, is the border’s first monument. Haulbowline Lighthouse stands off shore. Waves crash at it from all sides. I think of it as the beginning because this lighthouse – smooth stone, seamless from a distance – is a fine spool from which to unwind the border. I imagine the line as three hundred miles of oily black cable, wrapped around the lighthouse, waiting to be drawn out.

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When Ireland's lighthouses were staffed, the keepers were usually relieved every fortnight but Haulbowline was so grim a confine that its staff were relieved twice a week. You can't stroll around Haulbowline, you can barely take a step. The tower completely smothers the rock it stands on. Paddy and I slip into the lighthouse's orbit. Currents slap about unpredictably but we paddle closer and experience its immensity. I am soaked, rainwater runs from my wrists and down my sleeves, but I feel no hurry. There is something comforting about the lighthouse, something paternal about the way it dominates our small craft. There is elegance here too, Haulbowline's body tapers out smoothly, granite made graceful. As the foundation is out of sight it is easy to imagine the lighthouse's body continuing to curve under the water, an upside-down funnel, getting wider and wider, until it might slide against the sea floor in a disc the size of a racetrack. Above the water, the structure is nothing but solid blocks for at least twenty courses, a mighty stump giving the lighthouse a low centre of gravity. Each block is wedge-shaped and a perfect fit to its neighbours, so tightly packed not even damp can enter. Haulbowline was designed to deny the sea any bite because even a tiny space between blocks would have been eaten at and widened, weakening the structure, eventually pulling the lighthouse down. Without a nook or cranny for waves to pick at, Haulbowline has been standing since 1824.

A short distance away, on one of Carlingford Lough's tiny islands, we see what waves can do. The island is all black rock slabs and seaweed, the highest point only a few feet above water level. Paddy and I pull the canoe up onto it and tramp about for a few minutes. Waves of seaweed cling to our ankles. A bunker-like fort was built here in the sixteenth

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century, or maybe it was later, nobody knows for sure, so it might have been to defend against Spaniards or Scots, Cromwell or Napoleon. Someone was always threatening the land and Carlingford is a deep inlet, a good way in. The fort walls are four feet thick, an attempt to stand up against the sea by means of simple heft. The attempt failed. The fort is in pieces now, two-ton chunks scattered wide.

‘When we were kids we were told an escaped prisoner hid out in the blockhouse for weeks,’ Paddy tells me. ‘He survived by creeping out after dark to eat mussels and seaweed.’

We walk from one lump of masonry to another. Some are hard to distinguish from the island rocks. It stops raining and the breeze whips the damp from our clothes. I walk down to the shore, take my camera from its ziplock bag and photograph Haulbowline.

The need to create an impervious structure is what gave

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Haulbowline its curve. This design was perfected in Scotland, where Haulbowline's closest relatives are found. Scotland is only a few wet miles away; at night the flash of several Scottish lighthouses can be seen from here. It was an engineer named Robert Stevenson who began building these curved towers. He was the founder of a lighthouse-building dynasty although one grandson turned away from engineering and became a writer instead. Think of the salt water washing around Robert Louis Stevenson's paternal line and you understand something of where *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* came from. He also held his grandfather in high regard, writing: 'He was above all things a projector of works in the face of nature, and a modifier of nature itself . . . The rains, the winds and the waves, the complexity and the fitfulness of nature, are always before him.'

Thank you Robert Louis, you've put your finger on it. A lighthouse is the product of optimism, applied with cold rationality. Haulbowline is built on rock and the belief that technology will make our lives fuller and longer. We need not be shoved around by nature; we can build things to help us hold a place in it. I realise that, just like a castle or a fort, a lighthouse is defensive architecture. Haulbowline defends cargo against fog, fishermen from heavy weather and, in some broader way, lighthouses stand against general chaos, the violence tossed up by a world at spin. Haulbowline guards a different border than the one on the map, it holds the line between order and chaos.

The lighthouse got its name from the rock it is built on. The rock got its name from Viking raiders, *Aale-bolig*; Place of Eels. So the name's nautical feel is not from its etymology, but nor is it coincidence. The Vikings left the name *Aale-bolig* behind but no one here understood it so it began to

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drift about, a foreign word that needed to be made to fit. A process of Chinese Whispers gradually drew the name closer and closer to the language used around it, a language fixated on boats, tackle and rigging. *Aale-bolig* . . . *Haul-bowline*.

This entire inlet got its name from Vikings. They sailed in and saw that although the waters were relatively narrow they extended far into the country. This made them feel at home – it was a *fjord*. Working their way around the coast, Vikings put the *fjord* into the names of many Irish bays. But unlike many others, Carlingford truly is a fjord; carved by a glacier, it fits the typical geological definition. As glaciers slid out to sea their undersides melted and released tons of sand. Now Carlingford's bed is a layer of sand many feet thick. Paddy and I see it below us later as the weather improves and the sun comes out. We are paddling along the southern shore towards a village and the white sand below makes the water glow turquoise, a colour I associate with the equator, not the border. I almost expect to see nut-brown children splashing about. Instead, on a jetty, are a bunch of pasty boys in fluorescent lifejackets waiting for a kayak lesson.

'Lunch?' I say to Paddy.

'Food, aye,' he says, surveying the settlement.

It could be the steady work of the paddle, or it could be Paddy's beard, but as we clamber ashore at the village I feel like we're Viking raiders, here to pillage. We want carbohydrates, lots. Carlingford town is full of picturesque ruins, the streets are tidy and postcardish. The cafes are too cutesy for Paddy and me, our wellington boots and raw needs, but we have to choose one. It has tablecloths, and amateur watercolours of the town's ruins on the wall. Paddy eyes the

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paintings wearily but concedes they've done a good job on the framing. We order food, gobble it down, then order coffee. It comes in china receptacles only slightly bigger than egg cups. Perhaps they were egg cups. They're gone in a gulp. Luckily for the cafe's owners, we have left our axes in the boat.

Back on the water, back to the border. As we paddle inland, mountains rise to port and starboard. South are the Cooleys. North, the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea. The Cooleys are ruffled and pitted, the Mournes taller and polished smooth by glaciers. Mountain ranges of differing personalities and this wide band of water between; I sense the edge of kingdoms.

'It's a good place to put a border,' says Paddy. 'I mean, if you have a border and need a place for it.'

Carlingford Lough's deep chink brought Viking raiders far inland before they had to leave their vessels. The landscape would have been greener with trees then, and would have looked promising. The people here were raised on milk and steak. There were plenty of broad-backed slaves to be had and maybe fine metalwork too if the raiders found one of the new monasteries. I picture them as spirited freebooters, laughing, goading each other, becoming increasingly excited as they get deeper inland and finally disembark. They are like a bunch of boys loose in an orchard.

Twelve hundred years later, the Danish culture minister will visit Ireland and apologise on their behalf.

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The lough narrows into the mouth of a canal, the border goes with it. I look out for a good campsite along the shore.

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‘Trees, ferns, it’s all gorgeous,’ says Paddy. He doesn’t care, he’s going home.

Just before landing, Paddy and I encounter two more lighthouses. Neither of us has seen anything like them before. Very different from Haulbowline, these lights are low to the water and the stonework is crude. There is no need for watertight masonry here, we have travelled away from the open sea, big waves will not trouble these towers. The designer was free to do whatever they wanted and they decided to borrow from Ireland’s medieval architecture. The lighthouses have been styled like monastic refuge towers, complete with limpet-shell roofs.

The structures that inspired the style of these lighthouses predate them by over a thousand years. They stood in the grounds of monasteries and are often simply called round towers. When I was in school we were taught that monks built the towers as a place of retreat during Viking raids. Hence a single doorway high on the side; at the approach of



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trouble the monks would gather armfuls of valuables and withdraw inside the tower, pulling the ladder up behind them. I drew such scenes with colouring pencils in my exercise books, but this conjecture is now doubted. No raider would row all the way from Dublin or Denmark then give up on slaves and a silver crozier just because a door was inconveniently high. Some archaeologists now think round towers were simply predecessors of today's church spires; a statement of power, a marker, and useful for projecting the clang of a bell.

But in 1887 round towers were believed to have been refuges from Viking raids, and that was when these lighthouses were built. So, given Carlingford's Viking history, designing them to look like round towers creates a pleasant echo. Raiders rowing in, like a fog rolling in, required the construction of defences. Paddy points out the solar panels on their roofs; these lighthouses are still functional. Their war is ongoing.

Since encountering his lighthouses, I have spent time among archives trying to learn something of their designer, Allan MacDonnell. He is a very different case from the Stevensons. He left no writings and there is little to go on. I'm not even sure how he spelled his name, the records contradict. A museum curator sent me an email that amounted to a shrug; 'It seems MacDonnell is one of history's forgotten.' The few things I can say about him were pieced together by American genealogists who worked from tombstone inscriptions, newspaper mentions and MacDonnell's patents. There are many of these; MacDonnell was an inventive man.

I can place Allan MacDonnell walking through the town of Newry one day in February 1875. The pavements are

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busy. This soon-to-be-border town is a hub of manufacturing and trade, producing flax, linen, iron goods, mineral water, furniture and carriages, all exported by sea, via the canal to Carlingford Lough. Newry is one of the first places in Ireland to have street lighting. Visitors note the town's clean streets and comfortable coffee houses. There are a few beggars but they aren't excessively 'coaxing and wheedling in their talk'. MacDonnell is now forty-seven. I picture him in a coat heavier than most, with fur on the lapels. Ships from all over the world dock at Newry, so you might think he had bought the unusual coat from a sailor. But no, MacDonnell lived in Russia for many years and has just returned to Ireland, land of his birth. In Russia he worked with Alfred Nobel – inventor of dynamite, progenitor of the Nobel Prize – and, by the time he left, had patented a few compounds of his own. MacDonnell is a chemist and an engineer. He is on his way to deliver a public lecture entitled *The Chemistry of Water and Carbon*.

How would he seem as he walked? Abstracted perhaps, a scientist, he is calculating displacement as he walks to the town hall. Or he may have cut a much more political figure, engaged with the street, greeting people, tipping his hat . . . We don't know. But, introvert or extrovert, he walked purposefully. MacDonnell was certainly a doer. He has just filed another patent, a machine for filling and corking bottles. Soon he will oversee improvements to Newry's most vital artery, its canal link to the sea, widening and deepening it to accommodate the future's bigger vessels. To see boats safely into the canal from the lough he will build two new lighthouses. Another designer might place them left and right of the canal's entrance: beacons were commonly arranged like this, like goalposts. But MacDonnell thought

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there was a better way. Goalposts, even when placed close together, can be approached from any angle along a wide arc. MacDonnell will position the towers so the canal will be approached one way, the fastest way, the safest way, the best way.

Learning that Allan MacDonnell was an engineer and inventor reminds us that the evocation of monastic history is only the outer style of these lighthouses. Primarily, they were sensible technology. Travelling up the lough from the sea, a pilot steers so as to keep both lights aligned straight ahead. The tower further back has been built taller to enable this. Following this line of sight leads the vessel straight into the canal system. The lighthouses were styled with some antiquarian amusement but were really shaped by Enlightenment optimism meeting nineteenth-century entrepreneurialism and commerce. They are machines for letting trade flow.

Paddy and I paddle the recommended way, the towers lined up ahead of us. There is something satisfying in this; slotting ourselves into the groove of a fastidious mind. The border too, has fallen into line. MacDonnell's lights guide the border in.

In MacDonnell's time Newry reaches its limits. In the last decade of the nineteenth century the town had all the business its infrastructure could handle. Belfast, which Newry once rivalled, now steams ahead. Allan MacDonnell leaves, never to return, going to Texas and making a new home on the plains. His next mention in the historical record is in 1906, filing a patent for a new kind of land roller and furrower. Four years later he dies.

MacDonnell's lighthouses on Carlingford Lough are hardly famous but they have survived, and are his only

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remaining statement. They still fulfil their role but these lighthouses also have a sculptural quality that, I think, is sweetened by knowing a little about MacDonnell. The trajectory of his life suggests ambition arranged, like these lighthouses, in a westerly direction. Russia, Ireland, America. It is as if MacDonnell put a coded message into these towers: Go West. They certainly advise us to keep moving. You might call it progress or just momentum, but we definitely need to keep moving.