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Walking the Border

A Journey Between Scotland and England

Written by Ian Crofton

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Walking the Border

A JOURNEY BETWEEN SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND

Ian Crofton



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ONE

CONUNDRUM

Borders, barbed wire and bonny bairns

It's, well, a more or less borderless world. And that's as it should be.

Except for the borders where they check your passport for hours, the child's small voice says from the other end of the table.

– Ali Smith, *There But For The* (2011)

I don't know how many times I've crossed the Border. Maybe a few score times, maybe several hundred. I never counted. Sometimes I've known the moment, sometimes not. No one's ever stamped my passport.

The first crossing would have been some cold spring night in 1955 or 1956. Every year my mother would take us south from Edinburgh to spend Easter with our grandparents in the Isle of Wight.

In what felt like the middle of the night we'd be stirred out of bed with low lights and whispers. Still in our pyjamas we'd be bundled into jumpers and coats and a taxi, and drive off into the urgent dark.

Waverley Station in the steam age was a cavern of black walls, black girders, blackened glass. Even the locomotives were soot black, not the red, blue or green of engines in picture books. Yellow lights glared through smoke and steam. Everything was in motion, nothing certain. The air shook with shouts, whistles, hisses, the din and clang of metal on metal.

Tottering along the platform half asleep, one hand in my mother's, my other hand let go its burden. Panda slipped between train and platform. The loss was incomprehensible, irrecoverable, complete. I was too tired to cry.

Once in the tiny sleeping compartment, my mother pulled down the blinds, lowered the cover over the basin, tucked me and my sister toe-to-toe in the bottom bunk, our heads at either end. Foot-fighting soon gave way to half sleep, rocked by the jerk and rattle of the train. And so, sideways, we travelled southward. And somewhere, at some point in the dreamlike dream of sleeping and waking and sleeping through a night punctuated by the rhythm of rails, sleepers, points – somewhere, at some point, I crossed the Border for the first time.

When the sleeper attendant knocked in the early morning with

tea and biscuits, he told us we would soon arrive in London. I had no idea what that meant.

Other crossings have followed: by rail on the East Coast Line or the West Coast Line; by road on the A1 north of Berwick, or by Coldstream Bridge over the Tweed or the hill pass of Carter Bar, or the A7 south of Canonbie, or over the Sark on the M74 as it flows imperceptibly into the M6. In the days I worked for Collins Publishers in Glasgow, I would sometimes take the early morning shuttle to Heathrow, changing countries somewhere high above the Solway Firth or the Irish Sea. 'Anything to drink, sir?' a flight attendant would ask. 'Coffee, please. Black.' I'd've been up too early for breakfast, could only cope with a coffee. Some businessmen on the flight would order a double vodka.

Hurtling towards Edinburgh on the East Coast Line, you've got to have your wits about you to spot the England–Scotland Border. There is a sign, but it flashes past in an instant. The guard makes no remark, the passengers remain unmoved. North of here you won't pay for your prescriptions or your university education or your care in old age. You can walk where you want without fear of prosecution. And if you find yourself in court for some other misdemeanour, a jury may judge you neither innocent nor guilty, but conclude instead that the case against you is merely 'not proven'.

In contrast to the rail routes, all the main road crossings have enormous signs welcoming you to either Scotland or England, the former streaked with the Blue Saltire, the latter adorned with the Cross of St George. 'Welcome to Scotland', the former says. 'Fàilte gu Alba'. No one has spoken Gaelic in these Border regions since the Dark Ages – if then. In the west it might have been Welsh, in the east Pictish or Anglo-Saxon.

The summer of my walk, as the temperature rose in the independence debate, small posters began to appear on the back of road signs on the English side. They bore a Cross of St George and the slogan 'HOME RULE'. The local authorities were incensed. They'd have to pay taxpayers' money scraping them off. The English Defence

League was suspected, but did not claim responsibility. Nothing they'd like better, one suspects, than to cut off the Celtic Fringe.

On smaller roads, the Scots keep up the national welcome, but on the English side you're more likely to be welcomed to Northumberland or Cumbria, with no mention of the country you're entering. The only place there's any real fuss is at Carter Bar, where there's a magnificent view north over Scotland, a snack bar in a caravan, and a man in a kilt who stops picking up the litter when a coach party appears, hoists his bagpipes aloft and bursts into a medley of popular tunes. He has a sign:

This is my livelihood
Please leave a tip.

The Italians and the Americans and the Chinese queue up to have their photograph taken with him. His face is as stony as the Border Stone beside him. Only the tourists smile.

One of the last walks I had with my father, in his nineties, was up the path from Holyrood to Salisbury Crags. It was a grey, damp, winter day. I kept my eye on the old man as he negotiated the wet paving stones, stick in hand. We slowly rose above the newly-opened Parliament. He was a fan of the building, I was not. It was too fussy for me, with too many unnecessary ornamentations, though it sat well in its setting. But my father was always thrilled with 'modern architecture'. In the 1960s he'd drive us out to see Livingstone New Town when it was still being built, show us the new Napier College, its glass and steel and concrete enveloping the old stones of Merchiston Tower. He'd taken us to see Basil Spence's new Coventry Cathedral, built next to the charred ruins of the medieval cathedral that had been blitzed in November 1940. It was a symbol of postwar reconciliation, he told us. His sister had married a German just after the war, and he'd introduced his German nephew to mountain-climbing. He was of the generation of 1945, the generation that looked forward to a new and better world, a world in which the modernist, collectivist, internationalist project in architecture was to play its part. He shared in the vision of a united Europe, one that would succeed the

old empires and prevent the 'balkanisation' of the continent, in which smaller and smaller groups of shriller and shriller nationalists would insist on their separation from (and superiority to) their neighbours.

And yet – if it is an 'and yet' – he was very much in favour of Scottish devolution, and of the Scottish Parliament as an institution as well as a building. Scotland was not his country, but it was the country he and my mother adopted before I was born. They loved Scotland – its landscapes, its people, the richness of its past – and saw the Scottish Parliament as a revitalisation of a country that had been demoralised and impoverished under Thatcher. But at the end of the day, if he had still been alive, he would have voted for maintaining the Union come September 2014. Complete independence would have been a balkanisation too far. Had he lived, he would have had the opportunity to vote. His son, exiled in London for a quarter of a century, won't need to make that difficult decision.

I have never been prevented from crossing a border. The nearest I've come to it was in 1970. I was fifteen and driving with my older brother into Derry/Londonderry at the end of a family holiday in Donegal. At the edge of the city, just inside the border between the Republic and the North, there was an army roadblock. The barrier was down. Soldiers armed with FN automatic rifles ordered us out of the car. We stood at the roadside half-thrilled, half-terrified, under the watchful gaze of a lance-corporal up on a grass embankment. He was shielded behind sandbags and had his finger on the trigger of a Browning medium machine gun. The soldiers searched the car. Boot, bonnet and glove compartment were opened, door-pockets rifled, seats lifted. Even my brother's spectacle case was opened. Then they waved us on. No smiles, no thank-yous. I'm not sure if they said a single word. It was all done by gestures. Now I knew what it was like to be under armed occupation.

In the past, borders right across Europe were manned by armed guards. They still are if you are arriving from outside Europe. The combination of uniforms and guns, or even uniforms on their own, can be intimidating. It is dehumanising for anybody who comes

under scrutiny. Are you who you say you are? And even if you are, will we allow you to pass? Or will we put you in handcuffs, hold you uncharged in a cell, send you back to where you don't want to go?

Five years after my visit to Northern Ireland I was travelling alone on the overnight train from Munich to Belgrade. I shared the small old-fashioned compartment with an elderly peasant couple. He wore a black suit, white shirt and no tie. She was also dressed in black, and kept her hair wrapped in a red headscarf. In those days many Yugoslavs worked as *Gastarbeiter* in West Germany, so I guessed this elderly couple had been visiting their children, maybe even their grandchildren. The separation must have been painful, but no doubt the money sent home was welcome.

Though I had no Serbo-Croat and they had no English, we understood each other well enough. The man cut chunks off a cold leg of lamb with a fierce-looking knife and offered them to me. I passed round the bottle of Swabian red my aunt had given me for the journey.

The old couple were canny enough, when darkness fell, to stretch out on the banquette seats facing forward and facing back. I'd been out in the corridor, a daft laddie peering up at the mountains as the moon rose. So I was left with the option of either sitting upright on one end of a banquette, or the floor. I chose the latter, and so spent the night sideways, in and out of sleep, rattling through the Alps and into what was then communist Yugoslavia.

I woke in bright early morning light with a boot pressed on my head. 'Bassbort,' a mouth way above the boot demanded. Between the boot and the mouth there was a shiny brown leather pistol holster. Careful not to make a sudden move, I extracted my head from under the boot and dug out my passport. In those days I had long hair. The guard looked at my photograph, then at me, then at the photograph. My hair had grown several decadent Western hippy inches since the photograph had been taken. He looked like he'd just found something deeply unpleasant on the sole of his boot.

Although in those days all the ports and roads and railway lines

between European countries had border and customs controls, there were still places you could cross frontiers without anyone paying you any attention. In the Alps the borders often follow the crests of high ridges, and on mountaineering trips I have often crossed between France and Switzerland, or France and Italy, or Italy and Switzerland without noticing. On occasion, when climbing a ridge, I have followed the actual border for hundreds of metres with one foot in one country and warm sunshine, and the other foot in another country and icy shade. The only marks of man are metal crosses on summits, or, lower down, cairns and flashes of paint marking a path. In those days, when there were still border controls on the roads, if you descended to a mountain refuge or a village in a different country from the one where you'd started your climb, no one asked to see your passport, no one asked whether you had anything to declare.

Since the creation of the single EU market in 1993 and the borderless Schengen Area in 1995 you can travel from Spain to Finland, from Norway to Sicily, without being stopped at a single frontier. In the whole of western and central Europe, only Fortress UK (bound together in this instance with the Republic of Ireland in the 'Common Travel Area') maintains border controls with its continental neighbours.

Perhaps it's living on an island that makes Britons so untrusting of outsiders. Ironically, we were all once outsiders. We think of the Celts – ancient Britons, Welsh, Gaels, Picts – as the aboriginal inhabitants of these islands, but there were people here long before they arrived, some of whose languages may survive in certain ancient river names, including that of the River Tweed. After the Celts came the Romans, then the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, the Vikings, the Normans. In later centuries there were French Huguenots and Central European Jews, Italians, Irish, Germans and Poles, Jamaicans, Barbadians and Guyanese, Indians and Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Cantonese.

There's always been resentment of the incomer, fear of the other, emotions that politicians the world over have been quick to exploit.

There's nothing like wrapping yourself in the flag of nation or race or ethnicity to whip up support, gain power and make a few quid on the side.

In the UK today, few in the political and media establishments are prepared to depict immigration as anything other than a problem. A huge apparatus of state bureaucracy has been assembled to close the door; a state bureaucracy that, in obeisance to the fetish of the free market, has handed over the power to deprive individuals of their liberty to the likes of Serco and G4S. Such private corporations profit from running a series of 'Immigration Removal Centres', where people who are not EU citizens and who do not have the right paperwork can be held indefinitely without trial, wondering every day if this is the day they are going to be deported – to face uncertainty, or impoverishment, or shame, or persecution, or even death.

Too few people pause to ponder the ethics involved. What moral justification can there be for treating somebody differently just because he or she was born on the other side of a border? To attempt to justify such discriminatory treatment would involve lending an arbitrary line on a map some kind of moral authority: on this side of the border live the deserving; on the other, the undeserving.

This is not just an idle philosophical question. There are thousands of human beings – men, women and children – who have come to the UK to escape poverty or persecution, to make a better life for themselves. All too often they find their dream goes sour. They cannot – for one reason or another – go back to the place they came from. But if they stay they become non-persons. With no papers, no recognised status, no right to work and, in the official phrase, 'no recourse to public funds', they cease to be officially human. They are rendered invisible.

While I was researching this book, I was anxious to find out what borders meant to a range of different people. A friend suggested I come along to the migrant drop-in centre she was involved in. I'd hear some stories from the visitors there, she said, that'd tell me all about what borders can do to people.

The centre sets up its stall in a church hall one day a week. The hall is filled with tables spread with brightly-patterned cloths and laid for lunch. At the far end of the hall a few volunteers are working in the kitchen, chopping up fruit and vegetables donated by local shops. There is a smell of garlic and cooking oil, onion and spices. Someone's bashing a halved pomegranate with a wooden spoon to extract the sweet seeds. The volunteers range in age from students to retired professionals. Some are migrants themselves.

The visitors come from all over: Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, Congo, Latin America – even as far as Mongolia and China.

As well as lunch, the centre offers advice both on immigration and on welfare. Volunteers try to identify in what ways the centre might be able to help. Do they have somewhere to live? Do they have a GP? Do they have family here? Are they homeless, destitute? Difficult welfare issues are dealt with by a highly-trained adviser, while immigration questions are referred to one or other of the lawyers who work at the centre pro bono.

There is an atmosphere of warmth and welcome, quiet calm and efficiency, sometimes livened up by a toddler on the rampage. Some of the visitors are cheery, but many are at the end of their tether – stressed, anxious, depressed. Some are in 'regular' accommodation, though this can mean the only bathroom they have access to is three floors away, a problem for a mother with a young child. Many are sleeping at a friend's house, often in overcrowded conditions. Too many are street homeless. You can tell the ones who're sleeping rough from the acrid smell of unwashed clothes.

Fear makes many withhold key details of their stories. Sometimes they change their accounts as they begin to trust you. They've had enough of what officials will do to you if you tell them too much of the truth. They'd been made to feel they didn't belong where they'd come from. And once they'd got to the UK – some of them smuggled, some trafficked, some on temporary visas – they'd been made to feel that they didn't belong here either. If they did claim asylum,

the whole system is geared to finding any chink of a reason to refuse them.

So these borders, these arbitrary lines that we invest with moral agency – where are they? What are they?

The world's longest land border between two countries is that between the USA and Canada. It runs for 5,500 miles and is marked by a twenty-foot-wide strip or 'no-touching zone' cleared through the forest and prairie. For a considerable proportion of this distance the Border is dead straight, following the 49th Parallel, ignoring topography and traditional tribal lands. It is technically illegal to cross the border anywhere there isn't a border control – but there is nothing to stop you. Unlike the 'Demilitarized Zone' between the two Koreas, the no-touching zone doesn't have a minefield. There are no guard towers with machine guns, backed by heavy artillery and tanks. There isn't even a fence.

In contrast, the USA's southern border with Mexico is guarded by 17,000 members of the United States Border Patrol. There are nearly seven hundred miles of double chain-link and barbed-wire fences and solid steel walls. In places the fences run through the middle of towns. The remaining 1,300 miles of border – much of it wild and tractless – is monitored by towers, cameras, sensors and aerial drones. Many would-be migrants now avoid the fence by seeking out remote trails through the desert mountains. Unprepared, hundreds die of thirst or sunstroke. Their bodies sometimes lie undiscovered for months. Some have hanged themselves from trees to hasten the inevitable end.

Similar barriers have appeared over the centuries wherever the rich world has found itself cheek to cheek with the dispossessed. The Chinese protected their 'civilisation' from the 'barbarians' beyond the gates with the Great Wall. The Romans built Hadrian's Wall to mark the edge of the Pax Romana. The Warsaw Pact ostensibly built the Berlin Wall to keep socialism safe from destruction at the hands of the Western capitalist marauders – although the real reason was to stem the haemorrhage of skilled workers to the consumer utopia of the German Federal Republic.

The Israelis claim the West Bank Barrier protects their citizens from Palestinian suicide bombers. The Palestinians see the invasive and disruptive maze of fencing and concrete as just one more move in an expansionist land-grab. In 2004 the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion stating that 'the construction of the wall, and its associated régime, are contrary to international law'.

While Fortress UK refuses to become part of the Schengen Area, some EU member states seem set on constructing a Fortress Europe. Spain, for example, has separated its wealthy North African enclave of Melilla from neighbouring non-EU Morocco with razor wire. This has inflicted hideous injuries – or even death – on numerous migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who have tried to cross it.

Some don't make it this far. In October 2013, while I was writing this book, the bodies of ninety-two people, mostly women and children, were found in the Sahara Desert in northern Niger. It is thought they were being trafficked to Algeria and that their lorry had broken down. They were found scattered over a large area – sometimes a mother with her children, sometimes children alone. What motivated these people to attempt such a dangerous journey is not difficult to fathom. Niger comes at or near the bottom of a range of indices of development, including life expectancy, education and income. Save the Children have declared that Niger is the worst country in the world to be a mother.

At the other end of the Mediterranean from Melilla, Greece has built a four-metre-high wall along its land border with non-EU Turkey. Towards the end of 2013 Turkey itself started to build a wall along its border with Syria. Refugees from the conflict in Syria, and other conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia and Eritrea, have tried to get round such barriers by boat. Those landing on Greek islands are kept in conditions that Amnesty International has condemned as 'shocking'.

Some boats don't make it. A popular route across the Mediterranean traverses the straits between North Africa and the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily. In October 2013, the same month as those 92 corpses were found in the Sahara, at least 359 people were

drowned when the 20-metre boat carrying them from Libya to Lampedusa capsized. They'd paid at least $3,000 per head to get a place on board.

There are increasing numbers of reports of EU states on the Mediterranean ordering illegal 'push-back' operations. These involve naval or coastguard vessels intercepting migrant boats in international waters and towing them back to where they came from without finding out whether any of the passengers are entitled to protection under international law.

For too many Britons the sea is also, as Shakespeare wrote, a wall or moat 'Against the envy of less happier lands'. At ports such as Dover sniffer dogs and carbon-dioxide detectors surround disembarked lorries, looking for stowaways from those 'less happier lands'. International airports also serve as borders. Huge queues develop, especially at Heathrow, as each individual arriving on a flight from outside the UK is subjected to close scrutiny by tight-lipped, inscrutable officials. Even for UK and EU nationals it feels like a place where your identity might be doubted, even taken away from you. For most people, going through passport control is the only time they are aware of being put under suspicion by the state.

Britain also has internal borders. Back in the eighth century, Offa of Mercia marked the frontier between his kingdom and the Welsh with his eponymous dyke. Between the Welsh and the English the physical barrier of the dyke – whose course is still broadly followed by the Anglo-Welsh border – was reinforced by difference in language.

The same could not – and still cannot – be said of the inhabitants of southern Scotland and those of northern England. In the Middle Ages they all spoke the same northern variety of Anglo-Saxon, and even today they share many dialect words ('bonny bairns' are to be found as far afield as Edinburgh and Newcastle). The accents are broadly distinct, although, as I was to find as I walked along the Border, they sometimes mingle. Throughout the Middle Ages the Anglo-Scottish Border continually shifted. The question of the

division of the Debatable Lands between Sark and Esk was only settled in 1552 with the construction of Scots' Dike, and in some remote parts the Border was not clearly defined until the nineteenth century. Loyalties were often stronger to relatives and allies across the Border than to the notional authorities in either London or Edinburgh.

It is thus more a matter of historical accident, diplomatic fixing and legal wheeler-dealing that the people of Northumbria and Cumbria find themselves in England, and the people of Berwickshire and Roxburghshire find themselves in Scotland. Berwick itself changed hands thirteen times between 1147 and 1482, finally ending up in England.

On the A1 just north of Berwick, still within England, there is a farm called Conundrum. I'm not sure of the significance of the name (the origin of the word itself is a conundrum), but for me it sums up the whole oddity of the Anglo-Scottish Border – and of borders more generally.

I myself am uncertain about where I belong. Although I was born and schooled in Edinburgh, and then spent the first ten years of my working life in Glasgow, my parents weren't Scottish. They had moved north from London two years before I was born. My father was Anglo-Irish, from Dublin, and my mother born in Liverpool of a Lancastrian father and a Scottish mother. I myself have lived for the last quarter century in London.

So I have my own conundrums, out of which the idea of walking the Border emerged and became something of an obsession. I studied maps in greater and greater detail, fascinated by the wandering course of this random line, and of the names along its way: Sarkfoot Point, Solway Moss, Scotland Gate, Liddel Strength, Skurrlywarble Wood, Harelawslack, Hobbs' Flow, Bloody Bush, Foulmire Heights, Deadwater Rigg, Butter Bog, the Hearts Toe, Wideopen Moor, Gallows Hill, Folly Farm, Meg's Dub . . . I traced the line of the Border along rivers, across fields, through thick conifer plantations, over remote and tractless hills and moors. I could tell from the map

that much of the route was far from picturesque. There were surprisingly few paths. It wasn't an established walking route, like the Southern Upland Way or the Hadrian's Wall Walk. That was part of the attraction. It would be a journey of discovery, of unexpected meetings with strangers, of encounters with the past, whether historical or legendary. It would also be an inward journey, as my intention was to walk much of the way alone.

My original plan had been to walk the entire length of the Border in a single push of seven days. But as the going turned out to be much tougher than I had expected, and the weather as unkind as I *should* have expected, I ended up by doing the walk in three stages – at the end of May, in mid-July, and in November. I also ended up walking in company – good company – for three out of the ten days I eventually took to complete the distance.

In between these trips, back home in London, I continued to visit the migrant centre, collecting stories of what borders can mean to those who are told they are on the wrong side of one of these arbitrary lines.

Many break under the strain. Those lines on the map can turn into mental whips, chains, snares, depriving those caught up in them of freedom and dignity – even sanity.

One failed asylum seeker from the war-ravaged Democratic Republic of Congo was so far deep in depression he could not even remember the age of his young daughter. She was in care in Manchester. Her mother was in a psychiatric ward. He himself was broken by months of living rough on the streets. He'd spent time in jail for trying to leave the UK on a stolen passport to join the Congolese community in France. When the UK tried to deport him to the DRC, he was refused entry. He had to be flown back to Heathrow.

Then there was the birdlike nurse from Iran. The first thing you noticed about her was her huge, frightened eyes. Some weeks after she'd arrived in the UK to study English she'd been told by friends back home that the security forces were looking for her. They'd heard she'd treated an anti-government protestor at her hospital.

Her asylum request was refused on the standard grounds that she hadn't claimed immediately on arrival in the UK.

I spent many months talking to a West African mother of two. She was living in a garage. Her local social services refused to take any responsibility for her baby and toddler, even though their health was suffering and her accommodation had been condemned as not fit for human habitation. Eventually she confided in me that her fare to London on a visitor's visa had been paid by a woman friend of her father whom she knew only as 'Nana'. When she arrived in London Nana took her passport, made her swear a juju oath, locked her in the house and forced her into prostitution. She was told that if she went to the police she'd be put in prison. After three years she managed to escape. She is now in a safe house.

One of the biggest characters at the centre is a small but forceful old man from Belarus, who was born in a labour camp in Siberia. Eventually he and his mother found their way back to Belarus, where he became active in the opposition, first against the Soviet authorities, and then, after independence, against 'the last dictator in Europe'. His activities cost him his front teeth and his family, whom he had to leave behind when he fled. It took the UK authorities ten years to grant him asylum.

These are just a few of the stories I gleaned the year I walked the Border. It has indeed been a journey of discovery. As I zigzagged between Scotland and England, only thwarted by the roughness of the ground, I sought to find what makes us different. I'm not sure I found any kind of answer. Back in the city, though, the city of migrants, I found what makes us the same.

