

Siobhán Campbell



Crossing the Lines: Borders, Transgressions, and a Spot of Smuggling

Although I grew up in Deansgrange on the south side of Dublin, I was never let forget that we were blow-ins to the big smoke. My mother from Collooney, County Sligo, and my father from Warrenpoint, County Down, made sure that their respective counties and provinces loomed large in a childhood that seemed full of borders.

There was the one created by the Shannon, which, when crossing, my mother would say “to hell or to Connacht, here we come!” and there was the more serious one between North and South. That one created a place that others called “Southern Ireland,” a place we were deemed to be from by visitors from England and further afield. But I knew it as a place that did not exist in any legal entity, but one nonetheless that made the south “Southern” even though it remained more northerly in parts than some places in what we called “the North.”

There were other borders, like those that were drawn around the idea of Irishness, which I was emphatically not to cross. These were defined by my dad who said he’d turn in his grave at the thought of me marrying an Englishman or going to Trinity College.

And then there were others, subtler and sometimes hardly visible: the borders of behavior, when people seemed to cross the apparently fixed tribal boundaries with ease, or the implied transgressions on the edge of the family stories. Had we really converted from a Scottish Lutheran sect to Roman Catholicism as my grandmother sometimes hinted? And had we done so in order to run betting on horses and gambling on cockfights, and to convene the occasional nighttime hare coursing event?

One thing was clear—the Ireland I grew up in was full of sleights of hand, sideways glances, and statements that meant the opposite of what they seemed. My small family of two adults and two kids was Dublin-based. But to reach any relatives, we had to go west—to Sligo and the coast—for unfamiliar people my mother, a Kelly, and her aunt, a Helly, made us call “uncle.” As an only child she had few blood relatives, save those who lived in America and rarely returned. Or we had to go north, to the large extended family of my father’s home place in

Warrenpoint and their next-generation outpost in Newry, both in County Down. These were the exotic relatives—Gran, my father's brothers, and sometimes his sisters back from London where they worked, and their various spouses and offspring. Their different accent and their way of expressing themselves by not quite saying, but implying, what they meant, left a big impression. These relatives seemed the repository of histories that we never heard in the South.

Crossing the border over and back to spend time with them became the punctuation points of my growing up. Each summer trip as I changed from 'tween to teen, and each New Year trip in the cold and the sleet was both different and the same.

Back then, in the early 1970s, going north meant Cadbury's Aztec caramel bars and multicolored Opal Fruits, sweets we couldn't get down south. There were soda farls off the griddle that left a strange floury feeling in the mouth and there was always baked ham cut off the bone and piled onto white buttered toast. We ate this off blue willow-patterned plates that my grandmother minded with a fierce determination. She remembered the story of each chip and crack, including those the fault of Uncle Hugh, who'd chipped her last precious serving bowl when he bumped the dresser on his way in when drunk. It was special, she said, because instead of the flying blue bird appearing inside the willow pattern frame around the edge, this one had an errant bird, an escapee who had broken out of the ordered pattern but who was now wingless forever. It seemed a metaphor for her own life. She was a rare bird, interested in fashion and in style as a way of self-definition.

For Granny Elizabeth, leaving the house was to step out onto a self-made catwalk. She kept a bowl of hat pins on her dresser to secure the hats she always wore. Beside that bowl, there was a small Chinese wooden box with scarf pins, one of which went on every time to fix her scarf, which she called a "cravat." She brushed down her two outdoor coats whenever worn. They had come to her from her mother, one for summer—a kind of gabardine green, almost a mackintosh in style, and the other a tweed coat from Donegal that she said would probably go on forever. They made her look as if she was visiting from the earlier years of the century. To me, she was magnificent: her back ramrod straight, her walk like that of a dancer. Her ability to stop any of her children in their tracks, silencing them with one imperious look, was thrilling.

Also on the dresser beside the other containers on a lacy runner was a little wooden box with a lid that hinged up, a mini-treasure chest. I somehow understood that this box was off limits, and that while I could look through the sparkly hair clips and lapel brooches, this box held something quite different. So of course when Granny was bathing one day, I opened it and went through the contents. It held strange little pillow items, joined by colored ribbon and sewn with tiny writing, embroidered with symbols I didn't understand.

She caught me. Coming back from the bathroom in her chenille robe, she stood in the doorway and my heart skipped a beat.

“Child,” she said, “sit here,” motioning to the bed. Then she proceeded to lay out the items side by side between us.

They were devotional scapulars, which are cloth pendants associated with one religious order or another. Gran tolled off the particulars. “The White Scapular of Our Lady of Ransom. The Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.” Her voice in this strange litany became mesmeric. “The Red Scapular of the Passion of Our Lord and the Sacred Heart and Jesus and Mary—sometimes called the Scapular of the Passion.” These were mysteries to me. Gran went on to explain that each scapular had a confraternity associated with it and once you had one, you were meant to wear it continuously, using the ribbon to hang one of the little pillows to your front, the other to your back. But she would never wear them, she said, because they were used for indulgences, or to book places in heaven, “as if you could do that! It’s only the Catholics who think that’s okay, you know.”

At this point, I had an inkling something important was being conveyed. She took out the final one. “A Lutheran scapular” she said. “Extremely rare. Don’t tell anyone.” I shook my head. What were we really talking about?

“We are all mongrels, never forget that. We all have mixed inheritance if you go back far enough. My side of the family came with the tides for the fishing and stayed to work on the land. But they had to convert.” Someone was coming up the stairs. Gran quickly swept the scapulars back into their box.

With those words the conversation was over and we never spoke this way again. But her words fueled my sense that more borders were being crossed in this house than I had ever imagined.

You would think, with that sense of transgression as a way of life, I’d be able for the petty smuggling. But I wasn’t. My parents insisted on buying booze, as well as anything else that was cheaper when we were north, making the border crossing back to the south a white-knuckle moment for me in the back seat. Depending on where you crossed, there were two sets of official guards in their huts, the British soldiers on the one side and gardaí on the other. The big difference though were the guns on the north in plain sight, carried by the soldier who spoke to us through our lowered window and by the ones we could see walking or crouched along the road toward the crossing.

My father was clear that the soldiers were only allowed to ask two questions as we drove up: *What is your name?* and *Where are you going?* I wondered what he would do if they asked a third, dreading his likely escalation of that into a heated row. On the way back down when I was around ten-years-old, I was sitting on a rug in the back trying not to move as there were two huge bottles of vodka tucked under it, one between my knees beneath the *Beano* annual

I pretended to read, and one between me and the side of the car. Dad rolled down the window on the five-mile-an-hour approach to the post. He never greeted the soldiers there, but waited for them to speak.

“Good morning—traveling south sir?” said the fresh-faced boy, who looked about eighteen. “What is your name?” Dad gave his full birth name, John Edmund Campbell.

Suddenly the soldier’s face softened. “Campbell,” he said. “Sure I’m a Campbell from Ballycastle.” My father took a second to respond. I thought he might do so horribly. “Ah,” he said, “I didn’t think they’d post you here at home, thought they sent all you local chaps away.”

“Short staffed,” the soldier said and waved us through without even looking in the boot where the whiskey bottles were tucked around the carefully repackaged new lawn mower. Whew—another crossing completed without arrest. And double whew: my father could be civil when a fellow Northern Irishman was in the picture. Just as we drove away he said, “Misled or misguided, that young fellah . . . he’ll learn,” but he seemed to speak with something approaching understanding. I thought of that exchange years later, during the outbreaks of Mad Cow Disease when then-MP Ian Paisley said that the people may be British, “but our cows are Irish.” Maybe our people could indeed be islanders first, and divided by other things second.

Other families had stories of smuggling that also fueled my fears when approaching the customs. One girl at school told of her aunt’s place in Dundalk, just off the main road, one of those barracks-style farmhouses that look as forbidding in sunshine as in rain. She said her aunt had several freezers in the garage, big chest freezers that could hold three sides of bullock in portions of steak, mince, chops, and even tail. All repackaged from the bullocks smuggled over by those who worked at abattoirs in the North. The path to her house was well worn as it meant you got your meat at almost the price it was up north but without having to cross the border. This aunt was clearly a clever business woman; she kept the garage divided in two with a front freezer ready to show anyone who might investigate. She wore fringed scarves in many colors, like an out-of-work art teacher, and skirts with bits hanging off them. She’d bring in anyone who came to check things out and offer them absinthe, we heard, and if necessary she’d show them the display-freezer, opening it up to reveal her long-frozen Alsatian dog, its fur stiff with ice in an attitude of permanent alertness. “Ah poor Lassie,” she’d say. “I keep him here in case his soul ever returns. Do you think it will?” This was enough to get rid of whoever dared to snoop or ask questions.

In the 1970s, at home in Dublin, we listened to the news of the North with a sense of shock at the savagery reported each morning. In those years, we didn’t bring our car north; having a southern registration number might be a liability.

Instead, we parked at Omeath and took the ferry to Warrenpoint. To my mind this was taking our lives and handing them over to whatever ferryman was on duty that day. Carlingford Lough was notorious for whipping up a micro-storm, and though the journey was only a couple of sea miles, we were told how they had to add to our time on the water, going out aways to come back in—ostensibly to make docking easier but probably to justify the cost of the ticket. Whatever the reason, it gave more time for growing concern about disembarking, as that could be tricky.

Granny was sniffy about the ferry, but I was not sure why. She told of earlier times when wartime rationing, rather than the difference between sterling and punts, determined what would be smuggled. The girls would wait, she said, for the silk stockings, the chocolates, and the occasional orange during the war years—and after that, too, when rationing continued in the North. You'd send a list down to Dublin with some lad who was travelling south to work, and you wouldn't mind it if he had to wear the stockings himself under his trousers—as long as he was a young lad with thin legs, or if he was your sweetheart. "Some of them got to like it," she said with a twinkle in her eye that I didn't understand until much later.

Her husband, my grandfather whom I never met, was a contract welder in Newbridge. He'd bring her the most prized item of all, creamery butter, freshly churned, made with full cream milk and yellow as buttercups. That was, she said, until one fine day the ferry was delayed by a freak storm in the middle of the lough and by the time he got off and could retrieve the smuggled butter wrapped in grease-proof paper from where it was strapped to his back, it had mostly melted, ruining his work pants and staining his steel toe boots. "With a stain," she added, "I could never get out. I never asked him for butter again after that."

Wherever you've a border, you create gray areas, clandestine traffic, and some kind of black market. It seems to bring out the anti-establishment smuggler in people, linking them with the aim of pulling a fast one.

I'd heard about the previous free movement—stemming from the Common Travel Area between the UK the Irish Free State that dated from 1923. Passport checks though didn't begin until the second world war and they ended again in 1952, though quite a few customs checks continued. The wartime passport checks were partly to catch out the few desperate Europeans who might be traveling without papers, escaping from God knows what. They tell the story in Warrenpoint of the ice cream maker Tony Malocca, who was interned during the war for nothing other than probably being Italian. The way the older folk spoke of his cones though, his prowess had clearly entered the sensibility of Sunday trippers to the Point in ways that meant they looked to Europe with envy. "His lemon gelato—you would think you had plucked a fruit right off a tree in Rome!"

Attempts to control the porous Irish border reached their height in 1970, when only some of the hundreds of crossings were approved and when some fifty-one different back roads were closed with spikes designed to ruin tires. This suited nobody, certainly not the farmers and local shop owners who could be crossing several times daily. People of all sides and of none ripped up the spikes at night. As quickly as the authorities would close a road, “the boys” would open it up again. Someone called Mabel Beckinridge, my father said, famously made a necklace of spikes. But then she was a widow and may have felt it supported the fear she’d put on you of her widow’s curse. She could turn your balls to shriveled prunes it was said, if you didn’t help her harvest her hay to feed her few cattle through the winter.

The road closures affected the thriving village of Omeath in the south. Drivers could no longer get there easily for their Sunday outing or for weekend drinking. Some say that Newry would be empty on a Saturday night as folk flocked south, even though the drink was more expensive; the craic was meant to be better. But the road closures affected all that. And smuggling began again.

Sometimes it was smuggling on a large scale, cattle say, or sheep. I heard of the apocryphal cattle truck that drove straight through the customs barrier at Ferryhill to disappear into the south, never to be seen again. My uncles would tell me of the clever-boots who knew his European law and who would drive his lorry of pigs over one border crossing only to come back north via another the next day so that he could collect the export incentives from all sides. Whiskey and cigarettes came south in large batches, while batteries and razor blades made their way north. Even something like football pools—which were illegal in the Republic—would find their own path. The signed pools forms were smuggled by schoolboys in their satchels as they returned across the border from school. Then they were handed over for a few pennies to the local agent on a street corner that night, ready to be flown to Liverpool for the weekend draw.

Aunt Imelda, one of my northern relatives, insisted—like everyone whom you asked outright—that she “had never heard of any smuggling.” But on pressing her once, I discovered that Gran herself had almost been caught. It happened when she was babysitting an infant cousin and she’d pushed the pram over the border at Kilnasaggart in South Armagh. There were always shops just over in the south doing a roaring trade. She picked up a nice sack of flour, disguising it as a mattress in the pram covered with a baby blanket. She knew that the customs man was not allowed to search the pram of a girl child. But this day the customs man called back into the hut “Don’t we have Mrs. B, here for just this eventuality?”

Gran spent a few tense moments wondering if she’d end up arrested. She knew that he was legally right: a woman would indeed be allowed to search and

to confiscate the flour. But once it became clear that the customs man was bluffing, she found her voice “Good luck finding a volunteer who’ll do that around here,” she said, stalking off with her dancer’s walk, little puffs of flour in her wake.

From the seventies, most southerners tended to cross at the approved crossing points. The tales of cars being confiscated by goodness knows who were too frightening to make crossing at unapproved points worth it, despite the delays and checks that the border entailed. But after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, you could once again cross anywhere. For those that crossed daily over and back, through good times and bad, it was no different in essence. But at least they didn’t have to have a fear of meeting a soldier on patrol in their back field, and they didn’t have to muster up the usual excuses: *Sure, I was just following my cow officer. Ah me, didn’t realize these sheep belonged to the other side. Well, there was this salmon and it was this big*, (giving the worldwide fisherman’s gesture of size), *well there was nothing to do but wade after it downstream.*

We might like to think of ourselves as mainly law-abiding people, but it seems that a border changes the perception of what is allowed and what is not. The story of the wife who bested the customs man would be told with relish. The first time he came to serve a summons on her husband for smuggling, she made an excuse of ensuring the goats didn’t get out, waving the man out a gate she then turned to close. “You can’t serve that summons now, you’re in public ground, not private property,” she said. When he reappeared with a new summons the next time, she gave him a softer face, saying, “Sure, you’ll have to hand that to himself, he’s off up the fields.” Off they went over a few scabbly fields but no sign of the husband. The customs man lost patience. “I can legally give this to you.” he said. “Not here, you can’t.” came her reply, “you’re fifty yards inside the Free State.”

In a way, the work-arounds that local people came up with for living with real borders may have brought a sense of camaraderie that crossed sectarian boundaries. Yet once the train stopped coming to Warrenpoint from Belfast, and once the road closures put paid to easy crossing, there were next to no Protestant visitors to Omeath for their summer outings or days on the pier. The border closes more down than it may seem to at first.

Only recently, I’ve heard the story that may explain Gran’s strange look whenever we mentioned the ferry. An old boyfriend of hers, from near Roslea, joined the Ulster Special Constabulary, the B-Specials, when they first started up. They were formed after the 1920 Government of Ireland Act which drew out a provisional border along the Six Counties. The Protestant families living along the Fermanagh-Monaghan border in particular were hoping for protection from this group from the threat of the IRA, especially if the provisional border became fixed in place—which happened later, on December 7, 1922, when the Northern Ireland parliament opted out, as planned, of the just-formed Irish

Free State and that provisional border became a legal entity. But in the run-up to this happening, there were some awful events, some that live on almost as if living memory.

Where boundaries abound, memory itself seems to become fenced in and fenced off. I would have thought that one of those boundaries was that of my grandmother dating a B-Special. Surely that would be seen as forbidden, as crossing a tribal line?

But according to family lore, that wasn't the case, at least not until it was seen by all what the Specials were prepared to do. In February 1921, the B-Specials mounted a severe search operation in Roslea, with ten local Catholic families turned out of their homes and several houses burned to the ground. The story, depending on whose telling it differs. In one version, they found arms and ammunition aplenty, thus justifying the raid. In another telling, they terrorized the families, pushing around women and children and leaving them homeless, simply because they could. The reprisal came in March 1921 when sixteen Unionist homes were attacked viciously, with two B-Specials killed. The tit-for-tat that blighted the lives of so many people in the North, down to my own time, was prefigured in this pair of incidents. And my grandmother broke it off with her B-Special, who himself left the Specials shortly after as "he couldn't stomach the violence" according to Aunty Mel. He became a ferryman at Warrenpoint—leading to Gran's odd look, fifty years later, whenever that was mentioned.

If Gran's tale is true, that is. If her own family converted to Catholicism because they were, in effect, displaced Protestants who knew how to read the situation, then it brings into focus how the tribal boundaries became fixed when previously they were more fluid.

And when I think about the Sligo axis of my own family, another tale of crossings and re-crossings emerges. My mother's father was an RIC man but when the Garda Síochána came into existence, he—like others in the force—was given the choice to go north and become a member of the RUC, those who would later be deemed "legitimate targets" for murder in the name of nationhood. If he had gone north then, my own story would have changed forever. These are the strange contingencies that characterize living with a border.

In the late 1970s, my family cut down completely on our trips north. But in 1980, at ninety-six years of age, Gran died, and we had to go up for the funeral. Debates over how to get there, which roads to use, and even where to park once we were there, ensued. I sensed that very real dangers were being discussed; at the wake and funeral, the profuse thanks from relatives for making it up from the south corroborated that feeling. With the gap of years, the cousins had grown up and the women were all made up to the nines, and dressed to the hilt, perhaps in tribute to Gran's own sense of style.

While everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, with lots of gin and

tonic involved, I had one good chat with the husband of my eldest cousin. He was thoughtful in a quiet northern way, and thanked me personally for coming. “We don’t get many southerners now you know,” he said, shaking his head, “We’re a place apart.” He told me how, being a Protestant from North Belfast, he and my cousin Ursula had to answer to the canon of her parish on deciding to get engaged. The mixed marriage was frowned upon by both sets of clergy, but more from the Catholic side: Ursula had to get a dispensation from the bishop himself, and that was only granted when they agreed to bring up any children they would have as RC. “We would get out of here if we could,” he said.

In the coffin, Gran was laid out in her finery, her best lapel brooch on the deep purple velvet jacket, which had a matching gored jersey skirt. They told me she had decided what to wear and had written it out, with strict instructions regarding accessories and jewelry. I felt I was present at the passing of an era, one that was probably already gone but had only come into focus for me at this moment. After this, it seemed, we would probably stay south of the border, creating our own familial maps and, in my case, eventually joining in what can feel the very separate literary map of the south. But the feeling that there was much more to say, much more to unpack, stays with me.

As for Gran, I did wonder if she might have come clean about her scapular collection in those instructions. Perhaps right now she was wearing her Lutheran one along with the Carmelite one under her outfit. Elizabeth Margaret Campbell—transgressive to the last, I hoped. And I hoped to be worthy of her memory in the future, whatever the coming border situation may hold for us all.

 THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
Siobhan.Campbell@open.ac.uk