Political Geography 51 (2016) 100–103

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Review Essay

Towards a retrospective political geography of border studies: Partition and division in Ireland

Troubled Geographies: A Spatial History of Religion and Society in Ireland, I.N. Gregory, N.A. Cunningham, C.D. Lloyd, I.G. Shuttleworth, P.S. Ell. Indiana University Press, Bloomington (2013).

Partitioned Lives: The Irish Borderlands, C. Nash, B. Reid, B. Graham. Ashgate, London (2013).

Ireland's Violent Frontier: The Border and Anglo-Irish Relations During the Troubles, H. Patterson. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke (2013).

The expanding canon of border studies among geographers continues to stimulate commentary that has expounded new evolving concepts as changes in political spaces, contexts, and technologies have taken effect. Recent contributions such as Johnson and Jones (2011), Sidaway (2011, 2015), and substantial edited collections dedicated to border studies (Wastl-Walter, 2011; Wilson & Donnan, 2012) have served to survey and take stock of a proliferating and dynamic border studies field, which has also extended to conceptualizations and consequences of the 'biometric border' (Amoore, 2006). However, one dimension that has been overlooked more than others is the historical. This may perhaps be attributed to the early twentieth century heritage of border studies being overshadowed by traditional state-centric investigations of linear aspects of boundary-making with associated typologies and functions. Yet, the origins of the border as a spatially oriented concept are well-founded. Ratzel's observation – '*Der Grenzraum ist das Wirkliche, die Grenzlinie die Abstraktion davon*' (Ratzel, 1903, p. 538) – and de Lapradelle's '*le voisinage*' (1928) concept had already indicated the conceptual nuance distinguishing the boundary and the border that were the forerunners of the observations of Minghi (1963), Prescott (1965), House (1981) and more latterly Martinez (1994). Given the evolving conceptual and methodological tools which geographers can deploy as well as the increasing opportunities to work in multi- and inter-disciplinary collaborations, it is welcome that the historical origin and evolution of borders over time are becoming more recognized as fertile ground in which to re-evaluate, and indeed recalibrate, the impact of borders. In this context, this review surveys the methodologies, empirical evidence and conclusions presented in these three books that provide diverse retrospective and methodological angles on the same individual phenomenon – the Irish Border.

The Irish Border offers a wide scope for analysis as the product of a partition that fomented as much as ameliorated religious and political division, and whose enduring legacy was the violent conflict concerning the disputed constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom (UK). While parallels have been drawn with British experiences in Palestine and India and even with the reconfiguring of European boundaries that followed the post-World War I treaties of the 1918 Paris Peace Conference, the tripartite foundation of Anglo-Irish relations (with the UK state acting as both a North–South arbiter and an East–West protagonist) have meant that Ireland's partition of 1920–22, resulting in the UK's lone territorial boundary with another state, eludes straightforward classification as a type (see Rankin, 2007). However, until recently, geographical studies of the Irish Border made only sporadic appearances in a partition literature hitherto dominated by political scientists and historians. Using the wealth of empirical source material, and equipped with germane concepts and methodologies, geographical aspects of the Irish Border have now attracted overdue academic coverage.

Although not explicit in its title, the Irish Border serves as a key thematic pivot throughout Gregory et al.'s 'spatial history' of religion and society in Ireland that spans the early nineteenth century to the twenty-first. In applying the innovative methodologies of GIS and associated technologies, the authors distinguish the quantitative dimensions of 'spatial history' from more orthodox exponents of historical geography but proceed to harmonize vivid presentation of spatial analysis with a concise narrative supported by judicious use of secondary material to provide historical context. Meriting classification as an atlas, it necessarily prefaces its account by outlining the religious and social change precipitated by the plantation of English and Scottish Protestant settlers alongside native Catholics in Ireland's northern province of Ulster in the early seventeenth century. It adapts census and other primary sources to detail nearly 200 years of change in almost 200 maps, of which many include the outline map of Northern Ireland superimposed in bold. This serves to compare and contrast complex religious and social patterns with a single line of division – the Irish Border – that came to be 'defined by the religious, social, and economic geographies that preceded it and has helped to redefine and reinforce these geographies ever since' (p. 9). Further to partition and the subsequent secession of the Irish Free State in the early 1920s, these geographies came to be punctuated by prolonged convulsive traumas such as the Great Famine (late 1840s) and the Troubles (late 1960s–late 1990s) that interacted with more generic dynamics of industrialization, urbanization, and demographic change.

The particular value of Ireland as a case study lies in the volume and availability of data over an extended period. However, distilling or calibrating such data is complex and beset by inconsistency. Ireland's spiralling scale of territorial units can range from the province, the ecclesiastic diocese, the county (the aggregated basis upon which the Irish Border was ultimately drawn), the obsolescent barony and poor law union, urban and rural local districts, district electoral divisions, to urban wards and rural townlands. The authors caution over comparing differing scales over time but identify the influence of the Ulster plantation not only in priming the subsequent religious geography in binary Catholic/Protestant terms

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.07.003
0962-6298

but also in intra-Protestant terms between Presbyterians and Episcopalians (Church of Ireland). So much so that the authors claim that by the time of Great Famine 'the religious map of Ireland was a stark triptych reflecting the peculiar and partial impacts of colonization as a result of geopolitical imperatives' (p. 30). The most general discernible pattern at this stage was the heavy concentration of Presbyterians in the eastern sections of Ulster closest to Scotland, the wider distribution of Episcopalians in Ulster and along Ireland's eastern littoral, and the extensive domination of the remainder of the island by Catholics. The variable geographical impact of the Famine further accentuated already growing regional disparities based on rapid industrial, urban, and demographic change but its immediate aftermath had radically cut Ireland's total population from 8,175,124 in 1841 to 6,552,385 in 1851 and it also accelerated a longer term trend in emigration that largely underpinned the worldwide spread of the Irish diaspora.

Discontent over British administration became expressed in a land reform movement which became subsumed within a nationalist campaign for devolutionary 'Home Rule' within the United Kingdom. Political faultlines substantially aligned Home Rulers with Catholicism, and Unionist proponents of the constitutional status quo with Protestantism. Emboldened by claims of 'Rome Rule' and appeals that 'Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right', religious division became refracted through ever-polarizing political lenses. The political dynamics and tactical manoeuvrings that presaged the establishment of the Irish Border are difficult to convey in cartography and the electoral mapping of the book (pp. 87–92) does not quite succeed in overcoming this challenge. While the authors assert that 'Ireland changed more during the short period between 1911 and 1926 than at any other time during the span covered by this book' (p. 87), the combination of the electoral mapping and the accompanying narrative does not match the standard in the array of other maps. The results of both the December 1910 and 1918 general elections to the London parliament were indeed geographically stark and are graphically rendered so but significant contingencies such as several unopposed constituency contests, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system, the operation of an electoral pact in Ulster between moderate nationalists and the separatist Sinn Féin party in 1918, and the qualified nature of the franchise are overlooked in the text. When possible, such mapping is greatly enhanced by adding gradations and 'drilling down' into composite votes to the headline party seat totals.

The 1920 Government of Ireland Act partitioned Ireland between two devolved Irish entities (Northern and Southern Ireland) and delimited a boundary – the Irish Border of today – which also partitioned the province of Ulster in an attempt to optimize Northern Ireland's territorial size without compromising a putative 2:1 unionist majority over nationalists. While the cartography (p. 91) shows Sinn Féin sweeping the territorial board in the initial 1921 election to the 26 county Southern parliament in Dublin, no votes were actually cast there at all as the party was unopposed in every territorial constituency. Also, the map of the 1922 elections (p. 92) indicates the difficulties of rendering elections based upon proportional representation (PR) over and above the context of a pact holding unevenly between supporters and opponents of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty (the legal instrument which upgraded the South into the independent dominion of the Irish Free State) meaning that no votes were cast in certain constituencies. The results of the 1922 election in Northern Ireland shown on the same map should stipulate that they were to the London parliament on a FPTP basis and not to the then PR-elected devolved six county parliament in Belfast. Crucially, the book does refer to the significantly varied geographical alternatives by which partition could have been executed (p. 104). But while giving headline census-based religious percentage aggregates of four, six, and all nine of Ulster counties, as well as for contiguous districts, the book disappointingly refrains from supplying a detailed cartographical comparison. Based on the 1911 census, the contemporaneous mapping of the Irish Free State sponsored *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (North Eastern Boundary Bureau, 1923) and that of the revoked Irish Boundary Commission (1969) are instructive examples not only of how the pockmarked geography of populations and areas can be rendered at a fine scale but also of how problematic the act of delimiting an Irish Border could be (see also Horner, 2011 for a survey of Irish religious cartography).

Covering the post-partition period after 1925 when doubts over the final location of the Border had been removed, Nash et al.'s contribution compliments Gregory et al.'s cartographical snapshots with more localized accounts of how the Border impacted upon individual experiences of everyday life such as working, shopping, or visiting friends and family. As the new Irish Free State exercised fiscal autonomy and applied a customs barrier, this had a debilitating effect upon what were already mostly rural and economically peripheral areas: what Nash et al. eponymously term the 'Irish Borderlands'. While Gregory et al. show that a greater degree of rural depopulation was evident on the southern Free State side of the Border, those people finding themselves on the 'wrong side' created in political terms 'different issues of minority management for both North and South' (p. 120). This was compounded by the Border becoming the medium through which interstate relations deteriorated when retaliatory tariffs were imposed during the 1930s 'Economic War'. The social and economic impacts of such policies were no more heavily felt than by the 'Borderlanders'. In their chronology of how an 'intensely politically symbolic border has been practised, experienced and materially present in the lives and landscapes of the borderlands,' (p. 1), Nash et al. identify the formative influence the customs barrier had in establishing a new political and economic reality with an ensuing regime of disruptive rules, obligations, and inspections that began to regulate aspects of mobility, communications, and the functioning of local services. This underwrites the book's methodological rationale in its citation of Newman's injunction: 'If we really want to know what borders mean to people, then we need to listen to their personal and group narratives' (Newman, 2006, p. 154). Thus the chief accomplishment of this work, buttressed upon close to 80 interviews conducted with 'Borderlanders' on either side, is the gleaning of incisive personal insights and recollections of border life since the 1950s.

Nash et al. point to how borderland lives were not only heavily influenced by official regulation but also by the overarching economic context and especially the widening disparity between North and South after World War II (in which the South maintained neutrality) and the subsequent establishment of the welfare state in the UK. With motor transport limited to a few approved road crossings necessitating more circuitous journeys as well as the sharp contraction of a once extensive local railway network, the economic decline and isolation of border areas was further exacerbated. Also, the intrinsic relationship between market towns and their rural catchments, as typified by the town and former railway hub of Clones which very closely abuts the Border to the south, was critically damaged. Other emphasized themes that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s include emigration (which is also strongly implied in Gregory et al.'s map of the proportion of Protestant population decline/Catholic population increase over 1911-61), smuggling as a means of economic relief in the face of state imposition on mobility and as a proxy challenge to partition's legitimacy, and identity, such as for those Southern Protestant minorities who within three decades were no longer UK subjects but citizens of an Irish republic that had effectively exited the British Commonwealth in 1949. From the recollection of interviewees, one is made acutely aware that the 'material and symbolic' (p. 53) aspects of the Border engendered senses of 'isolation and restriction' (p. 70), 'risk and threat' (p. 52), and 'alienation and difference' (p. 61). Having existed in a period of 'relative calm' (p. 67) they were all to intensify when violence