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Emily Clark   April 8, 2013

The Edge Effect: Irish Borderlands and the Unnatural Geography of Partition, 1920-1925

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Emily Clark

In many ways partition is a natural feature of the Irish landscape. Leading up to the 20th century, the coincidence of geographic and demographic phenomena created a distinct frontier that interceded between the northern and southern poles of Ireland. This borderland region can be understood as an example of the ecological principle of edge effect in both the literal scientific sense, as the transition between contiguous ecological regimes, as well as on a more metaphorical level, as a description of the meeting of different ethno-national traditions. The interstitiality of human and physical geographies was a culture in its own right that belonged to neither Protestant-Unionist nor Catholic-Nationalist tradition. However, between 1920 and 1925, the partition process entrenched an *un*naturally sharp division between the two. The Irish border has since been invested with such symbolic significance, that it has lost its qualitative dimensions. It is important to look beneath the high politics of partition to rediscover the border as a situated phenomenon. This thesis approaches the border from a geographical perspective by examining elements of the physical environment, engaging with public opinion and the dynamics of local communities, as well as evaluating the survey methods and conclusions of the Irish Boundary Commission. Original maps have been created using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, archival sources, and statistical databases to recreate the different visions of the partition and to help draw conclusions on the conformation of Ireland's border heritage.

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INTRODUCTION

In many ways Ireland is an idea more than it is a place. Wars have been waged over competing claims to its symbolic empire as much as, if not more than, campaigns for actual, administrable territory. Proprietorship of Irish identity has fraught relations among what has historically been a population of dual nativity: between the "ethnic Irish" and their foreign colonists, whether they be tribal Gauls, Viking marauders, Scottish planters or English lords. Yet the main current of Irish history has been a struggle on a plane somewhere above and beyond the Irish land itself. Many have striven to avenge the heritage of the emerald isle, but those famous green hills have remained untouched and unfamiliar in reality. The idea of Ireland has taken on a life of its own that cannot be fully contained or explained by geographic spaces. In the political and social upheaval of the early 20th century, this disconnect between land and landscape in Ireland was brought into sharp relief.

The concepts of space, place, land and landscape are central to the story of the Irish partition. Geographer Jeremy W. Crampton has defined "place" as experienced space.[1] Landscapes and land can be understood in the same way. If the land is the physical setting, landscapes are the peopled environment and the cultural experience of geographic space. The Irish border which was drawn in 1920 and crystallized in 1925 operated simultaneously on these different levels. It was an attempt to divide Ireland into north and south poles in such a way that would reflect an underlying pattern of discrete religious, political, and historical partitioning. The particular coincidence and dissonance of these boundaries suggest a landscape that was more variable than the simple reduction of identity to space would allow. Instead, the region in which

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1. Crampton, Jeremy W. "Governing with Maps: Cartographic Political Economy in Mapping," in *Mapping: A Critical Introduction to Cartography and GIS* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 72.

the border was emplaced constituted a sort of geographic Venn diagram that merged areal elements of the geographic north and south as well as cultural aspects of northerners and southerners.

There is a principle in ecological science that describes such a relationship between two adjacent ecosystems known as the edge effect. The phenomenon occurs where adjacent ecosystems converge producing a natural and gradual transition between the two, called an ecotone, that is a third distinct ecosystem. This gradient space is characterized by a hybridization of the attributes of either side into something entirely new. Such is true of the landscape of the border region on more than one level. It is true in the literal, scientific definition as the transition between two different ecological regimes, the mountainous highlands of the north and the shallow, flushed plain of Ireland's midlands, as well as in the more metaphorical sense, as a locus of encounter between two different populations, the largely Protestant north and the predominantly Catholic south. The anomalies of traditions, history and identity in this region made the positioning of the border there especially complicated and significant because the highly mixed border region is a nexus of interrelated frontiers networks that long predate partition.

Though the potential for partition was usually just under the surface of Irish affairs, and indeed the Irish land itself, it was only in the early decades of the 20th century that a new political geography was finally entrenched. However, in the early stages, the form it would take was by no means inevitable. Since the 1801 Act of Union, Ireland was formally integrated into the United Kingdom and criticisms of British rule were immediate and persistent. However, the dissenting Nationalist voice initially called only for legislative devolution, not independence. The Home Rule movement was the motor for a nationalist program of Irish autonomy that

defined itself by the geographic boundaries of the island of Ireland. Failed attempts to institute

Home Rule in 1886 and again in 1893 were met with Unionist fear of complete separation from

the protection of British rule. In 1912, the Government of Ireland Bill, or the Third Home Rule

Bill, was introduced and modestly proposed the restoration of an Irish Parliament within the

purview of the Imperial Parliament at Westminster.[2] As Irish historian Kieran J. Rankin

explained, "as far as the concept of partition was concerned, there persisted the bipartisan belief

that Ireland, according to the doctrinaire visions of unionism and nationalism, could not be

partitioned at all."[3] The struggle was between the primacy of Irish national identity and British

imperial identity.

The outbreak of the First World War suspended the Home Rule Bill indefinitely. What

began as a call for a devolved government within the United Kingdom at the war's outbreak

emerged bitterly from the conflict as a call for an independent Irish republic outside of the

British Empire.[4] What is more, there was increasing consideration by the tripartite governments

of the possibility of a "statutory Ulster" that would be excluded from Home Rule.[5] The

geographic and temporal bounds of this separate Ulster were unclear. Initially all nine counties

of the historic province were included in the concept of Ulster but Unionists lobbied for a more

compact, homogeneous bloc that represented the most favorable ratio of territory to Unionist

majority. This resulted in a six-county unit of Protestant majorities consisting of Down, Antrim,

Londonderry, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Armagh while Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan were

allocated to the South. The enactment of the Government of Ireland Act in December 1920

contained within the new Northern Irish state a substantial minority of Catholics. As Rankin

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2. Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-2.
3. Kieran J. Rankin, "The role of the Irish boundary commission in the entrenchment of the Irish border: from tactical panacea to political liability.," *Journal of Historical Geography* 34 (2008): 424.
4. Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland*, i.
5. Rankin, "The role of the Irish boundary commission," 424.

described, "Either side of the new boundary, the respective new minorities were substantially different in terms of the religious balance of the population, with Catholics comprising approximately one-third of the population of the new Northern Ireland and Protestants one-tenth of Southern Ireland."[6]

At the signing of the Act, the border was established as a purely temporary provision. It was clear that the border was determined only on the basis of a sectarian headcount and had relatively little to do with the geographic distribution of nationalists and unionists in the border region. Hostilities over the border continued to simmer and in 1921 talks of a reconciliatory Boundary Commission were underway. Adjustments to the border were tactically devised and negotiated by both sides in the hopes that, for nationalists, the border would be removed entirely, and for unionists, that it would become more fixed. On 6 December 1921, the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, or the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was drawn up as an amendment of sorts to the 1920 Border. The Treaty included within it a boundary clause described by the Delphic Article 12:

> A Commission consisting of three persons, one to be appointed by the Government of the Irish Free State, one to be appointed by the Government of Northern Ireland, and one who shall be Chairman to be appointed by the British Government, shall determine in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions, the boundaries between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland, and for the purposes of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, and of this instrument, the boundaries of Northern Ireland shall be such as may be determined by such Commission.[7]

The nearly three years that passed between the legislative provision for the Irish Boundary Commission and its actual formulation allowed the Irish border to become entrenched. As Rankin described, "while its position was still to be finalised, its functional dimension had

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6. Rankin, "The role of the Irish boundary commission," 428.
7. "Treaty Between Great Britain and Ireland." December 6, 1921. London. The National Archives of Ireland. Online.

actually been underscored by the Free State with its imposition of a customs barrier in April

1923."[8] What is more, civil war between two factions of Irish nationalists, supporters and critics

of the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was won by the pro-treaty Free State forces which

confirmed the legitimacy of the border. The appointment of members to the Commission

commenced at the war's end with the nomination of Free State representative Eoin MacNeill.

The British government appointed Richard Feetham, a South African Supreme Court judge, to

serve as Chairman of the Commission and representative of the Imperial government. Northern

Ireland's policy of non-recognition of Article 12 delayed the progress of the Commission and

obliged the British government to select the Northern Irish representative as well. The

appointment of Joseph Fisher on 24 October 1924 completed the roster of the Irish Boundary

Commission and its investigatory proceedings began weeks later.

The plurality of borders nested within the formal Irish partition should be studied as an

integrated, or at least comprehensive, system. As British geographer H.J Fleure explained,

"Geography, history and anthropology are a trilogy to be broken only with a severe loss of

truth."[9] Any view of the Irish border should include these different elements. The trilogy Fluere

suggested provides an ideal framework for study of the Irish border, but what is more, modern

technology in the form of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can replicate and enhance this

multidimensional approach. The Irish partition is not only a story that is best told by maps, but it

is also a story about maps and mapmaking. As Crampton has said, maps can be understood not

only "as efficient documents recording the truth of the landscape, but as active instruments in the

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8. Rankin, "The role of the Irish boundary commission," 434.

This economic frontier was an assertion of the Free State's independence as well as a means to apply economic
pressure on the Northern administration although it contradicted the Free State's goal of removing partition.

9. H.J. Fleure quoted in *An Historical Geography of Ireland,* eds., B.J. Graham and L.J Proudfoot (London: Academic
Press Limited, 1991), 1.

very production of that truth."[10] Throughout the saga of partition, maps were used to illustrate

public opinion, wielded as tools of political propaganda and suppressed for fear of the unrest

they might inspire. Indeed, cartography is an important yet neglected feature of the partition

narrative. How and why Ireland was divided is a geographic issue and it is best understood

through a geography-oriented methodology.

I have produced my own maps to illustrate, as much as the available data will allow, the

different faces of the Irish border: the geographic, the anthropological and the historical. From

the ancient geological fusion that wrought Ireland's physical topography, to the population

trends of the border region's demographic complexion, and the territorial transfers recommended

by the Irish Boundary Commission's 1925 Report, the various representations of the border

expose a land and landscape that is intrinsically dissected. However, these three different

cartographic visions of the Irish border also demonstrate three different forms of the edge effect

phenomenon. Narratively and graphically, this methodology tempers what beloved Irish

geographer E. Estyn Evans called the document-bound crutch of historians with the empirical

interpretation of the natural sciences, and the charm of the *shanachie*[11] tradition of Irish culture.

The trilogy of the Irish Borderland, Borderlanders and Borderlandists is a comprehensive model

of the processes and implications of the geography of the Irish partition. These different visions

of the Irish border, as a construction of physical geography, a reflection of demographic trends,

and the political product of the Boundary Commission's survey, tell the story from different

perspectives and help to understand the entrenchment of the Irish partition as both a natural and

an unnatural phenomenon.

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10. Crampton,*Mapping*, 86.
11. *Shanachie*, Gaelic, a skilled teller of tales or legends; described by Seumas MacManus in *The rocky road to Dublin* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1947).

THE BORDERLAND

The physical setting of the Irish border is an environment stratified in meaning. The 256-mile frontier that staggers across Ireland's northern quarter, through pulpy bogs, and over cogglesome mountains, is an expression of the human story of partition, but also a response to the geographic conditions of the land itself. Rarely does the physical environment feature in discussions of a political or ideological kind, but it is the native soil which nourishes these aspects of civilization giving them a particular indigenous quality. The Irish border is what and where it is because of the Irish land that underlies it. In many ways the border is an arbitrary demarcation of abstract ideas like ideology, religion and nationhood, but the frontier between north and south is also a real geographical phenomenon that long predates the 20th-century border.

The history of partition never existed exclusively in the human realm. Irish environmental scientist and natural historian John Feehan argued, "We cannot…speak of the island of Ireland in the geological past, for it did not exist as such."[12] The Irish land has had a life all its own and has been broken apart and put back together more completely than any political suture has ever done. Still, the transition between geographic regions is imprecise at best. There is no abrupt end to a flushed plain, no sudden uptake of the highlands. Between the two there is a gradual exchange of influences so that a third, liminal region is produced. A principle in ecological science, the edge effect, describes this phenomenon. The edge effect refers to the zone of habitat transition, called an ecotone, between two or more ecological communities or

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12. John Feehan, "The Heritage of the Rocks," in *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 3.

landscape gradients and the tendency for increased diversity of organisms belonging to each of the overlapping communities as well as species exclusive to the ecotone region.[13]

On a grand scale, the Irish Borderland exemplifies this principle of interstitiality. The situation of the border geographically roughly corresponds to the edge effect in Ireland on a national scale so that ecological regimes overlap with political sovereignties. Irish geographer E. Estyn Evans observed, "In geology as in history, it is difficult to consider Ireland apart from Britain…A brief summary will reveal a geological story as troubled as its political history."[14] A geographical understanding of Ireland can serve as a parallel to reinforce the political dimensions of the border, but it can also stand on its own as an independent description of the Borderland that is free from anthropogenic consequences. A survey of the land for its physical features reveals a more dispassionate version of the traditional Irish border through the unrecorded history of the natural world. This history is transcribed in hills and valleys, rivers and sea coasts, and is a commentary on real physical differences between two distinct geographic realms, but just as plainly, the edge effect of the Borderland that blurs the sharp lines of division.

Ireland has long been defined by its sea-girt. The maritime borders and periphery of coastal mountains have served to isolate it from foreign influence while intensifying the differences in Ireland's internal geography which, at its modest scale, is amenable to division into distinct districts. North and south are the most immediately apparent of these divisions. The island of Ireland is situated in the middle latitudes of the European continent and, as Evans described, shares "the converging mountain systems of north and south, the older axis of Scandinavia dominating the build of the north of Ireland while the younger axis linked with

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13.Eugene P. Odum and Gary W. Barrett, *Fundamentals of Ecology* (Belmont: Brooks/Cole, 2005), 386-388.
14. Estyn E. Evans, *Irish Heritage: The Landscape, the People and their Work* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1942), 16.

France and Spain prevails in the south."[15] Thus, at the very basic level, the geological compositions of these two regions are fundamentally different. The old, "gnarled and crumpled sediments," to which Evans referred, build up the north's relief of hardened sandstone while the south is floored with soft limestone.[16] As John Feehan illustrated, each part of Ireland's geological jigsaw "is unique, not only by virtue of the distinctive rocks of which it is formed, but because it has a distinct spirit, with which the rocks have much to do. The nature of the surface, the character of life on the surface, are profoundly influenced by the framework of rock beneath."[17] Indeed, the topography of the north of Ireland expresses underlying differences so that even a basic relief map will show the contrast between these two geographic blocs: the ample and shallow interior plain of the south and the ring of northern highland groups that encircle a wide depression. Fitzgerald classed these as the Central Plain and the Ulster Basin respectively.

In addition to terrestrial separations, the water features of the north of Ireland contribute to its geographic partitions. Again, the peripheral sea boundaries that cordon off the Irish coast are the most immediately significant. For the area of land that constitutes the geographic north, there is a far greater maritime presence per surface area. In the north the sea is always close at hand and the sense of insularity is more pronounced. To the south and west of the northern region, the lake basin of the Erne forms a deep cleavage between the western mountains, fragmenting it into northern and southern ranges. To the east and west, Carlingford Logh and Donegal Bay pinch in the coast's margins. The Blackwater's sharp westerly turn prevents access to the north's vulnerable center as it drains from Lough Neagh.

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15. Evans, *Irish Heritage*, 15.
16. Ibid., 18.
17. Feehan, "The Heritage of the Rocks," 3.

Fitzgerald's regional classification of Ireland makes one exception to the northern district, however. Abutting the western edge of the Ulster Basin, there is a geographical feature Fitzgerald called the North-Western Massif. He described this territory as "one of the most clearly-marked physical divisions of the island," a "rugged upland, whose configuration is that of a deeply-dissected plateau, is limited on the south and south-west by the lake-basin of the Erne, on the east by the wide lowland of the Bann, while on the north and west the high moorland meets the sea [*sic.*]."[18] This harsh, barren and dramatic land does not quite resemble the rest of the north, but it tallies even less with the features to the south. As Fitzgerald observed, "On the south and east the descent from the rim of the Massif to the lowland of the Ulster Basin is comparatively abrupt."[19]Donegal-born writer Seumas MacManus reflected, "'tis in [Ireland's] high shoulder," distinct and peculiar. He remembered the rigor of the Massif's environs as a "wild and rugged, barren country, its only trees in infrequent fertile valleys."[20] This north-western region stands apart, an aberration in the otherwise marked north-south schism, but the environmental heritage of the Massif locates it within the purview of the northern regime.

The geographical partition of Ireland is a permeable one, eased through by edge effect spectrum. Fitzgerald did not restrict his regional taxonomy by fixed bounds. He made note of the fluidity between ecosystems which produced a frontier that is a locus of encounter rather than one of stark separation. In the border region, Fitzgerald described how the glacial retreat left behind a residue of clay which piled into steep-sided hills called drumlins. He explained:

> These drumlins, or 'little hills,' give much of the border country, from south Down through Armagh and Monaghan to Cavan, Lough Erne and Donegal Bay its characteristic scenery. Their steep sides and the confused drainage of winding streams and lakelets to which they rise long made the drumlin country a considerable obstacle to movement; and

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18. Walter Fitzgerald, "The Historical Geography of Early Ireland," *The Geographical Teacher*, no. 1 (1925): 14.
19. Fitzgerald, "The Historical Geography of Early Ireland," 16.
20. Seumas MacManus, *The rocky road to Dublin* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1947), 4.

with other physical factors it helped to isolate the north from the rest of the country in early times.[21]

This district of low hills, fortified by rivers and pitted with bogs, marks a definite separation between the north and south of Ireland that is an imperfect mixture of the surly northern climate and the mellowness of the south furrowed into something that is both and neither at the same time. Evans described the geological formation of these Borderland features as a product of the advance and retreat of ice during the glacial epoch. As he told it, Ireland took its final shape from "the invasion of ice" which in the north-east was, "true to tradition", Scottish ice.[22]

If the division between the northern and southern reaches of Ireland seems entrenched down to very basic geology, it is important to note that there are few hard lines in nature; what does not bend, or blur, will surely break. Fitzgerald and Evans both note the prevalence of distinct northern and southern hemispheres, and indirectly reference an ecotonal transition between the two. The Borderland is also perforated by corridors linking north and south. In the west, south of the mountainous Slieve Beagh region, Fitzgerald observed an "important lowland corridor connecting eastern Ulster with the Central Plain."[23] To the east of Slieve Gullion in southern Armagh, "a narrow but important pass leads northwards from the plain of Louth into the Ulster Basin."[24] North of Carlingford Lough, this gap is known as the Myory Pass and as Fitzgerald emphasized, it has "formed one of the most outstanding factors of the historical geography of Ulster."[25] In the same way that terrestrial borders have both divided and connected disparate regions, the coastal borders have insulated the majority of the Irish coast but a few locations have brought it into commercial and cultural intercourse with Britain. The north-eastern coastal district of County Down and the peninsula of Ards is, as Fitzgerald described,

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21. Evans, *Irish Heritage*, 19.
22. Ibid.,18.
23. Fitzgerald, "The Historical Geography of Early Ireland," 51
24. Ibid., 51.
25. Ibid., 52.

"fertile lowland, open to the sea" where the Irish and Scottish coasts are separated only by "the narrow straits of the North Channel."[26]

The contrast in ecology and topography in Ireland has created discrete regions which have contributed to the demographic patterns addressed by partition. The north-south channels that intersect the frontier stretching from east to west create confluences which pool opposite conditions together to create ecotonal hotspots where the edge effect is at its highest expression. In these unique locations, physical and human geography coalesce producing a hybridization of features both geographical and cultural. Raymond Gillespie and Harold O'Sullivan commented that "the real significance of the Ulster border is not so much in its current political and administrative reality but rather that a variety of forms of boundary there persisted for so long in men's minds."[27] The plurality of boundaries is interesting not because of the quantity, but in the way boundaries of different kinds coincide with one another. The aforementioned physical divisions help to predict the spatial distribution of social patterns, though they certainly cannot explain them entirely. Irish geographer F.H.A. Aalen has said, "the cultural landscape is in no sense an inevitable 'response' to physical environment"; rather it is the product of the selective use of particular resources according to preexisting cultural preference.[28] Although the directionality of such relationships must always be reciprocal, a certain amount of environmental determinism can be useful in interpreting the cultural edge effect of the Borderland.

In many ways the settlement of the Borderland was dictated by environmental factors. These communities, over long periods of time, compounded patterns of social behavior which were enforced by the native climate and the geo-politics of their spatial distribution. Just as the

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26. Ibid., 53.
27. Raymond Gillespie and Harold O'Sullivan, eds., *The Borderlands: Essays on the history of the Ulster-Leinster border* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies Queen's University, 1989), 3.
28. F.H.A. Aalen, *Man and the Landscape in Ireland* (London: Academic Press, 1978), 2.

frontier between northern and southern Ireland is a more physically entrenched divide than was indicated on 20th-century maps, Fitzgerald argued that the division between inhabitants is also an ancient phenomenon. Long before partition took shape, there were significant contrasts in anthropological patterns between northern and southern societies. He observed that "distribution maps of archaeological monuments repeatedly show contrasting patterns between the northern and southern parts of the island."[29] In more recent decades, Graham and Proudfoot argue that the distribution and varying levels of "resource endowment of different geographic localities ensured that they were perceived and developed in different ways by groups of varying social provenance, technological ability and economic resource."[30]

Communities arranged themselves according to the environmental potential of the Irish land, and it was in the Borderland that the high degree of ecological and geographical diversity produced by the edge effect attracted a diversity of cultural groups. Graham and Proudfoot have said that such developments "seem to point to a new equilibrium between the several cultures in Ireland. A modified Anglo-Irish society had emerged which had obviously adjusted to the ecological possibilities and constraints of the Irish habitat and which had sometimes adopted Gaelic-Irish kinship strategies in dealing with the complex problems of both managing border territories."[31] It was the dialogue between regions and cultures along the border that gave it both its productive and its destructive potential. The meeting of opposites produced rich exchanges in social and ecological legacies and pockets of hybridization. On the other hand, environmental factors could preserve cultural isolation. The physical distinction of the North-Western Massif helped to reinforce the character of its humanized landscape. Its forbidding highlands, known

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29. Fitzgerald, "The Historical Geography of Early Ireland," 2.
30. B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, eds.. *An Historical Geography of Ireland* (London: Academic Press Limited, 1991), 186.
31. Graham and Proudfoot, *An Historical Geography of Ireland,* 415.

historically as the land of Tirconnell, became the homeland of a tribal confederation which remained detached from the affairs of its northern kinsmen. Fitzgerald noted that "even at times such as the late tenth century when the island appeared to be passing under unified control," Tirconnell was fiercely independent. Even when the seat of high-kingship of all Ireland was held by the northern princes of Tirown, the Tirconnell tribesmen, secure in their mountain strongholds, maintained their autonomy. Indeed, Fitzgerald argued that "the men of the North-western Massif were, until a late period in the English conquest, a very real menace to the security of the foreign colony."[32] Eventually, these socio-cultural patterns became just as entrenched and native as the very geological composition of the Irish land. However, over time, the coincidence of physical, social, and political boundaries became misaligned. Graham and Proudfoot discerned that there "developed a lack of congruence between the geographic reach of the new southern state and the wider geographical distribution of a population feeling a sense of belonging to this nationalist community; for the Unionists the problem has been that their distinctive sense of identity fails to extend even as far as the state boundary."[33] The dislocation of identity and place is a geographic tragedy that exaggerates the differences between groups even when they are only a little askew.

Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned from the geographic heritage of Ireland. As Feehan described,

> This small island has been, at different times in the earth's past, a place where oceans were born and grew, and other oceans narrowed and ceased to exist; there have been mountains as great as those which bring earth today closest to heaven, and rivers on the scale of the Niger, and deserts and great lakes. And glaciers such as those of Greenland today, not only during the most recent period of geological time, but in the most ancient as well, at the time our oldest rocks were taking shape.[34]

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32. Fitzgerald, "The Historical Geography of Early Ireland," 20.
33. Graham and Proudfoot, *An Historical Geography of Ireland,* 433.
34. Feehan, "The Heritage of the Rocks." 3.

It may be that the thing that held these volatile elements of land together so completely was the capacity of the edge effect to produce compromise over time by tempering the more extreme environmental elements. These buffers cushion the confrontation of opposites so that they do not grate so sharply against one another as do the harsh edges of political partition. As much as they confirm the existence of real divisions, the physical features of the Irish land can also remind us of those things in Irish culture that transcend division. A young Seumas MacManus was aware that every feature of the Irish landscape "was passing rich in tradition and legend… There was hardly a bush where on a tale did not hang, nor rock on the hillside. Every loch and every *cnoc*[35] had its own story—the tragic, poetic, romantic dramatic—every cave, and every cairn."[36] The heritage and spirituality invested in the 'mother isle' by all Irish people forge a sense of belonging to a common Ireland that is greater than its internal differences whether they be superficial or rooted in the very land itself. As Borderlander John O'Hagan's prophetic poem counsels:

> When comes the day all hearts weigh,
> If staunch they be or vile,
> Shall we forget the sacred debt
> we owe our mother isle?
> My native heath is brown beneath,
> My native waters blue,
> But crimson red o'er both shall spread
> Ere I am false to you, Dear Land![37]

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35. Gaelic, a hill, knoll, eminence, mound; described by MacManus in *The rocky road to Dublin*.
36. MacManus, *The rocky road to Dublin*, 131.
37. Quoted in MacManus, *The rocky road to Dublin*, 131.

Physical Geography of the Irish Borderlands

Scotland

Atlantic Ocean

North Channel

Lough Swilly

Lough Foyle

River Foyle

North-Western Massif

Sperrin Mountains

River Bann

Main River

Ulster Basin

Lough Neagh

Strangford Lough

L.Lough Erne

Blackwater River

U. Lough Erne

Mourne Mountains

Irish Sea

Central Plain

Elevation (meters)

0   50   100   150   200   250

Miles

0   5   10   20   30   40
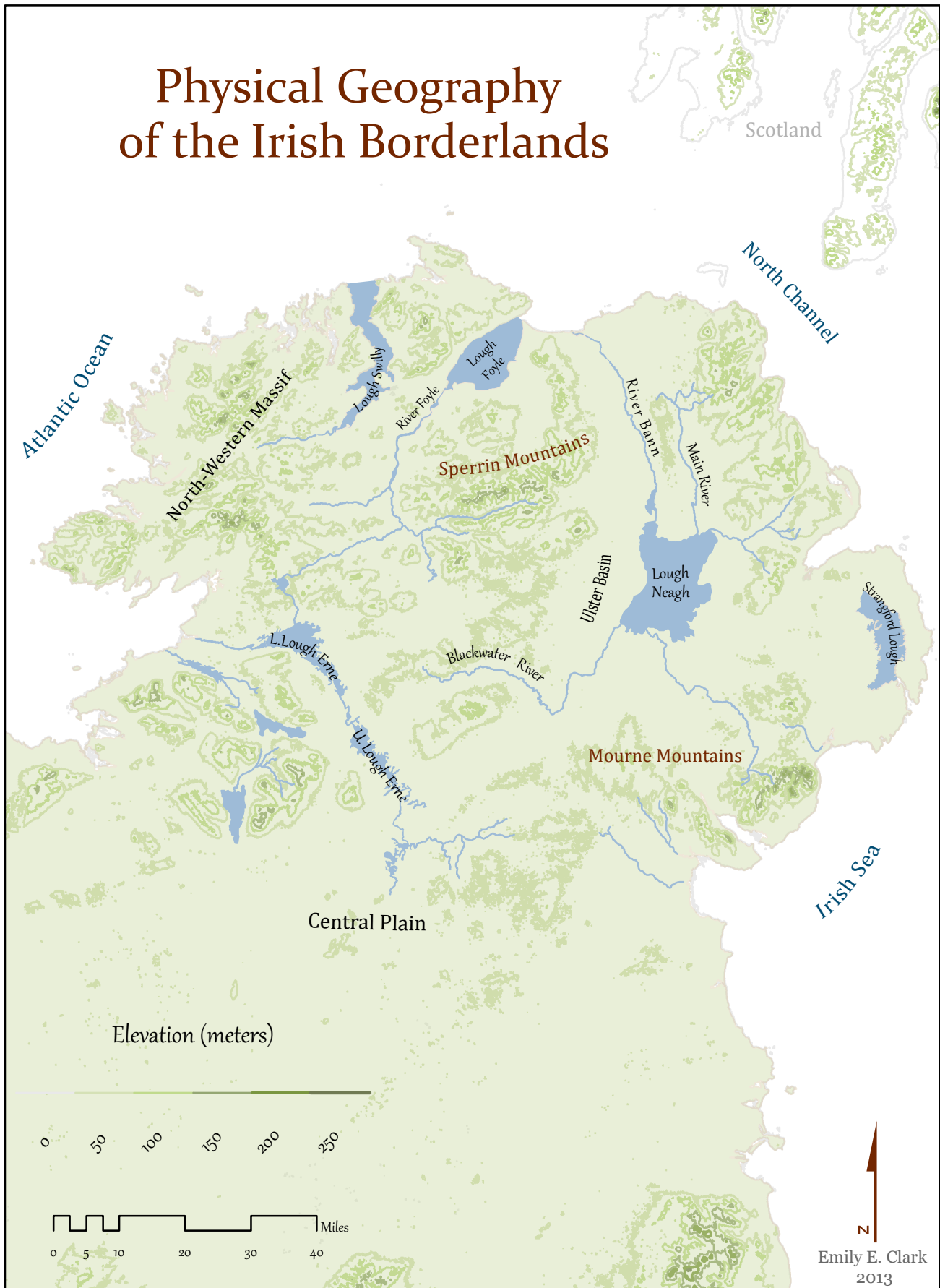
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Figure 1. Physical Geography of the Irish Borderlands

This map illustrates the physical geography of the Irish borderlands. The contrast in elevation and the divisions formed by various water features[38] naturally distinguish the northern region from that of the south. The ecological edge effect is perceptible in the transition between the lowlands of the Central Plain and the highland mountain chains of the Mourne, Sperrins, and the North-Western Massif.[39] A gradient of mid-level altitudes intercedes and creates a moderate mixture of the two regimes and a discrete geographical habitat that is highly localized. Similarly, the rivers that wind and pool in the valleys between mountain ranges are at times barriers between the north and the south, and at others times, corridors linking the two. The westward-flowing Blackwater River divides north from south, while the river-lough system of the Erne flows from north to south providing a medium for interaction between habitats. Other natural borders are shown to serve both functions. Just off Ireland's north-east coast, the North Channel separates as well as connects Ireland and Scotland. The sea strait is a clear division between the two landmasses, but its narrowness connects them to a much greater degree than the Irish Sea does Ireland and England.

Although the Irish border is often thought of as a completely arbitrary division, the geographical features of the region suggest a real boundary, or boundaries, that long predate the 20th-century partition. By removing the human element, the divisions between the north and south are, in many ways, more obvious. Conventional political depictions of the partition often neglect this environmental aspect. A geographical representation, however, focuses attention on the natural features that have imposed their own borders on the Irish land. These features are

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38. Swanston, G.H., Fullarton, A. & Co., "Ireland According to the Governmnet Survey," (Edinburgh: 1872) David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

The hydrography data was extracted from a historic topographical map and used to create an original dataset for the loughs and rivers of the Irish border region.

39. Reverb/ECHO NASA Aster Imagery was used to create an original dataset of contour lines for the elevation of the Irish border region.

important examples of the physical partition that exists between north and south, as well as

representations of the incidence of hybridization between the two regions. This illustration of the

edge effect in its literal, ecological form provides a comfortable foundation for more conceptual

descriptions of the edge effect as a cultural and demographic phenomenon.

THE BORDERLANDERS

The 1920 border was established as a provisional description of religious populations at the county level, and was met with general bewilderment and indignation. In what amounted to a contrived sectarian headcount, the crude tally that decided the split missed an important spatial dimension in its calculations. This unspontaneous oversight allowed politicians to contain within the limits of Northern Ireland the most territory that a bare majority of Protestants would allow. The result was that an unlikely number of Catholics were annexed into the newly created entity so that they constituted almost thirty percent of the newly created Northern Irish population. The same phenomenon of national dispossession occurred on the southern side of the border as well, though to a substantially lesser extent, as Protestants there were excluded from their political homeland. This reconfiguration of majority-minority ratios disrupted the coherence of Borderland communities which relied on the maintenance of a more or less neutral confessional and party spirit. The unique natural history of the region and the rural character of the land through which the great length of the border ran had allowed for, indeed necessitated, the cooperation of dissimilar ethno-national groups. The fact of a distinct North and South is a phenomenon that has long predated partition. Religious, political, and ethnic identities naturally pool in the frontier in between the two hemispheres, and have produced a habitat for hybridization.

For nearly 800 years, there had been a Protestant presence in Ireland. Over centuries and incubated by rural insularity, the Catholic and the Protestant of the in-between region have lived, loved, suffered and toiled side by side, and that is a culture in and of itself. The confinement of this culture locally is expressed by Downpatrick-born writer Lynn Doyle who wrote:

> None but an Ulster man can fairly criticise an Ulsterman. The foreigner, looking at the surface of things, judges both sides too hardly. There was a good deal of convention in our attitude towards each other in those days…In theory we hated each other bitterly, but practice did not follow at theory's heels…We possess in the North one great corrective of bitterness, that dry sense of humour that is so often infused with self-criticism. We are conscious of our bitterness, and see the ridiculous side of it now and then.[40]

The 19th-century prologue to partition was a defining era for religious prejudices, because, as

Marianne Elliott explains, "of the developments in politics and organised religion" and an

increase in sectarian conflict. However, she contends that in the border regions of the North, a

sense of "heightened mutual awareness, suspicion and, at times, fear, tempered by genuine

friendship and neighborliness and an ability to laugh at their prejudices," would have persisted.[41]

Even verging on the 20th century, playwright Seamus MacManus recalled that in his Fermanagh

school, the intermingling, and at times confrontation, of opposite traditions engendered a sense

of tolerance that crossed the divide long before partition was on the horizon.[42] MacManus

recalled the quarrels between schoolmates, the "anti-Irishmen" against the "Fenians," which

would erupt like the Battle of Aughrim.[43] The boys slipped into their ethno-national roles

exchanging historical taunts like cannons hot and fast.[44] Still, MacManus remembered that

although they "could fight like a flock of badgers upon Irish-English questions, [they] were, back

of it all, good humoredly tolerant of one another's views."[45] Indeed, as an outsider from County

Donegal, the young MacManus was comforted by some Protestant senior students who, knowing

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40. Lynn Doyle quoted in *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* by Marianne Elliott (London: The Penguin Press, 2000), 338.

41. Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London: The Penguin Press, 2000), 338.

42. MacManus, *The rocky road to Dublin*, 204.
Partition was initially conceived of as a temporary solution. When England declared war on Germany in 1939, the Home Rule Bill was suspended indefinitely. The tumult and shifting politics of the war made unification an increasingly distant possibility but it was still only in 1924 that JR Fisher of the Boundary Commission was credited as the first to pursue permanent partition.

43. Ibid., 200.
Refers to a decisive battle in the Williamite War fought on 12 July 1691; known in in Irish as *Cogadh an Dá Rí* "The War of Two Kings."

44. Ibid., 200.
45. Ibid., 201.

how the "funny mountain boy" was fond of ballads, brought him sheets and books of music. Their gifts turned out to be mostly Orange ballads, given innocently to a "Fenian." One of the senior boys, John Irvine, a "loud Orangeman" and a drummer in an Orange band, developed a fondness for MacManus and taught him drumming during off-hours at school.[46] The two boys used the school's revolving globe to practice, and as MacManus played the Orange tunes, *The Boyne Water,*[47]*The Protestant Boys*, and *We'll Kick the Pope Before Us*, he smashed away impishly on the red territories which indicated the British Empire.[48] 'Orange Johnnie' did not object, encouraging drolly, "It's alright. Keep at it. It'll let the Fenian venom out o' your system."[49]

As Elliott insists, it is "crucial to recognise that even in the worst of times Ulster communities were never totally polarized."[50] There was just too much shared history and mutual dependence to logically or neatly deconstruct the networks that bound this region. When the Boundary Commission announced its plan to survey the border region and consult with the general population to ascertain "the wishes of the inhabitants," the submissions of evidence and the interviews during the "sittings", would overwhelmingly support this high degree of integration, even if acknowledgment of this mixing was veiled with sectarian language. If the larger, national Irish audience understood sectarian conflict to be the reality and the border its symbol, the Borderlanders were the inverse. For them, the border was the devastating reality and its symbolic dimensions were expressed as sectarian divisions. What they said about the border

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46. Orange Order tradition of marches and parades… Most militant expression of Protestantism.
47. The Boyne Water commemorates the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James in the Battle of the Boyne on 1 July 1690. The lyrics declare:

> *So praise God, all true Protestants, and I will say no further,*
> *But had the Papists gained that day, there would have been open murder!*

48. MacManus, *The rocky road to Dublin*, 204, 214.
49. Ibid., 215.
50. Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 338.

has to be read carefully for what they actually meant. The documents do not suggest that religiosity or party politics was absent from this region, only that there were additional, often more concrete loyalties, to business, tradition, and community.

Starting in County Londonderry in February 1925, the Boundary Commission proceeded south and east along the border to conduct over 200 sittings with local administrations, individuals, and business groups. Inhabitants of the border region were invited to submit written evidence as well as meet with the Commissioners in person to discuss the local impact of the border and offer their suggestions for improvement. At first glance, the majority of evidence seems to conform to a blatantly sectarian rubric. The Boundary Commission Report quotes a man admitting, "In this County every man votes as he is born."[51] As Elliott indicated, a sectarian feeling was not absent from the North of Ireland or especially from the border region. Sectarianism was simply that it was tempered by constant interaction with the "other" so that Borderlanders were forced to confront their similarities as much as their differences. When a highly politicized issue like partition is put on the table, the traditional stereotypes easily come to the fore. Borderlanders of both creeds agreed to accept the 1911 Census' tabulation of religious statistics as a source of proxy data for "the wishes of the inhabitants." Feetham noted, "The Commission has been invited by both parties to the boundary controversy to rely upon the census returns of 1911, showing the religious denominations to which inhabitants belong, as affording an indication of the wishes of the inhabitants."[52] All Catholics were assumed to be unanimously in favor of inclusion in the Free State, while Protestants were unanimously Unionist.

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51. Irish Boundary Commission, 1924-1925. "Irish Boundary Commission (Feetham Commission): Records." *Report* of the Irish Boundary Commission. The National Archives, Kew. Digitized, 35.
52. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 16.

This comfortable political division was easy to evoke as it was merely superimposed on long-established historical and religious divisions, and traditional mockery. It is true that in theory, politics and religion coincided. There were very few Catholics who came forward expressing a desire to join Northern Ireland and visa versa. Still, the Borderlanders did not use the intolerant sectarian rhetoric that might be more common far North or South. Indeed, many witnesses assured the Commission that in private conversation, their friends of a different religion had expressed the desire to remain under the existing authority although it contradicted their political aspirations. In an interview with General Montgomery and Mr. Hardman in Belssingbourne, Fivemiletown County Omagh, the Commissioners questioned the two men on this very issue:

> Feetham: "As regards the feeling of your district, I suppose you would tell us the Protestant voters are all agreed as to their wishes, to remain where they are.
> Montgomery: There is no doubt about that.
> Feetham: Might we take the Catholics as equally agreed on the opposite side?
> Montgomery: I do not agree with that. I think they would tell you so; but I have heard private conversations where they tell me they would prefer to remain where they are…I do not think there is any agitation to go to the other side. It never comes to the surface except in election times."[53]

Mr. Hardman agreed with Montgomery, assuring the Commissioners, "The district is very peaceful and there is practically no party feeling among the people."[54] Montgomery insisted, "The politics in our area do not amount to very much—it is chiefly talking; whereas the business is an important matter [*sic*.]."[55] Another interview in Knock-Na-Moe, Omagh, advances the same paradox between public and private spheres, politics and personal interests. The Commissioners heard from Mr. J.J. Rae who described the private conversations he had with his Catholic friends in which they expressed their desired to remain in the North in order to access Aughnacloy, an

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53. Irish Boundary Commission, *Submissions*, Clogher Rural District Council, 15-16.
54. Ibid., 16.
55. Ibid., 20.

important market center. Rea said the Catholics would prefer go to Aughnacloy than the

Monaghan markets in the Free State for business and logistical reasons. It was a long way to

Monaghan, he said.[56] The Commission clarified that the Catholics Rae spoke of desired to

remain in Northern Ireland for business reasons, but asked if "their political idea would be to

carry them opposite?"[57] Rae agreed, asserting, "It is one thing for a man on the Monaghan side to

say he wishes to stop there, and it is another thing for him to say I want to leave the Free State

and be in Northern Ireland."[58]

     That personal and political interests were incompatible to some degree in the border

region is readily apparent. Ostensibly this region was unremarkable for its sectarian divisions.

Although there were certainly individuals whose views would align with radical understandings

of the border, there were even more whose partisanship was tempered by personal relationships,

even if they were only hinted at. The idea that Catholic and Protestant Borderlanders interacted

on these different levels, public and private, is suggestive of their integration as a community.

Even at the lowest level, their private friendships, business dealings, or casual acquaintances

were often enough to mitigate the public political discourse. Again, as Lynn Doyle observed

before partition, in the north "practice did not follow at theory's heels."[59]

     Just under the surface of this sectarian posturing, another class of interviews reveals a

deeper level of integration by way of interviewees' rootedness to specific places and groups. In

interviews, the Borderlanders often spoke of their desire to "move" to Northern Ireland or "go"

to the Free State. Their language might appear to imply a willingness to dislocate themselves

from their current situation and transfer to a new one. However, they did not mean migration at

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56. Ibid., 25.
57. Ibid., 25.
58. Ibid., 25.
59. Doyle quoted in *The Catholics of Ulster,* 39.

all. In fact, the Commissioners almost always inquired as to the local demographic trends,

whether the Catholic versus the Protestant population was growing, whether there was

emigration out or migration in that might have affected the proportions indicated by the 1911

census. Interestingly, there was very little movement out of the border region during the period

of partition. The Boundary Commission was sure to inquire about local demographic trends.

When asked, the Borderlanders almost always indicated that their local populations were

relatively stable, but if they had to guess, they imagined their side was probably growing in

number. When they talked about "moving" to one state or another, they imagined that their entire

community and market centers would go with them. Indeed, the Committee of Armagh

inhabitants met with the Boundary Commission on 6 March 1925 and presented the

Commissioners with a map they had drawn to illustrate their vision of the revised border. In a

conversation with Mr. Patrick Lavery, Feetham replied to the map the men had produced:

> Your proposal, I understand, is that we should take South Armagh which should go into
> the Free State, that is your suggestion, and then the city of Armagh should also go into
> the Free State, and it should be connected to South Armagh by a little corridor running
> through by a string of townlands to which you refer. So that you would then have
> Armagh as a sort of island connected to the Free State by a narrow isthmus."[60]

Often when Borderlanders imagined adjustments to the border, it reflected the contours of local

networks which defied cartographic logic. The Armagh isthmus was a bizarre gerrymander

geographically, but it reflected the underlying social and cultural currents of the border region.

Indeed, Feetham reflected on this tendency in his Memorandum:

> When witnesses said they wished to be on one side or the other of the border it was clear
> that in almost all cases they were assuming that their homes and market centres would be
> on the same side. In cases where the point was expressly raised that the satisfaction of a
> claim made on political grounds might involve separation from a convenient market
> centre, the witnesses showed signs of being presented with a dilemma which he had not
> thought out.[61]

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60. Irish Boundary Commission, *Submissions*, Committee of Inhabitants of City of Armagh, 9.
61. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 37.

This dilemma was expressed in other ways. Factory owners who argued for inclusion in Northern Ireland imagined that their factories would also be included, and along with the factories, the workers. Usually, a Protestant foreman would employ a predominantly Catholic workforce. In-built in the factory environment was the same interdependence the men of south Armagh had with the market in Armagh City. The nested effect of factory, factory owner, factory workers, and customers in the border region illustrates not only interstitiality of religious and political identities, but the contentment and desire of business networks to remain integrated. Trevisa Clarke, managing director of the North of Ireland Shipbuilding Co. Ltd. in Derry City, explained that he did not know and had never considered the religious opinions of his local labor force. It is easy to guess, however, based on his distinction between local laborers and Anglo-born craftsmen, that his ratio of 2:1 reflects the proportion of Catholics to Protestants.[62] His argument for Derry's inclusion in Northern Ireland was not religiously or politically motivated, however. His recommendation would have meant the transfer of a disproportionate number of Catholics to the North, but it would also mean the continued prosperity of his business. It was the economic considerations which drove his argument, not the sectarian elements.

In fact, no argument was made for inclusion in either the Free State or Northern Ireland that was based on a desire to be separated from a religious and political other. The inhabitants of the border region were invested in their communities, their local economies, and their personal relationships, all of which included a mixture of Catholics and Protestants. Again, Borderlanders of both persuasions insisted to the Commissioners that in private conversation, they were in solidarity with their friends on the other side of the house. Feetham noted in his Report, "If a vote could be held on the boundary issue alone economic considerations would influence a considerable proportion of the voters, such as the desire to be in the same jurisdiction as their

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62. Irish Boundary Commission, *Submissions*, Trevisa Clarke Interview, 8-9.

market town or their market area."[63] The majority of Borderlanders did not want to be separated

from their neighbors whatever their religion or politics, but given the opportunity, they would

argue for those relationships to continue under the jurisdiction of their preferred authority.

Amid the symbolic sectarianism and the border-bending visions of reform, there were a

few strikingly candid and complex opinions expressed in the interviews. The individuals who

came forward and commented freely represent the Borderlander identity most completely. The

same conflicts of private and public interests color the responses of these witnesses; however,

their wariness of sectarian rhetoric seems to have freed them from following party lines. There

were calls, from Donegal to Armagh, to rid the border of sectarian and partisan considerations.

Witness William J. Larkin exclaimed, "Clear out all men of greed—men of empirical tendency,

and leave Ireland to those whose souls are on the heights of true patriotism men who love the

land which bore them [*sic*]."[64] Others expressed their indifference to the political situation of the

border, as long as it did not sever the networks of their livelihoods. A witness from Donegal

revealed, "What I should like is that either Derry should be in Donegal, or Donegal should be

with the Six Counties. Either would suit me."[65] The layers of meaning attributed to the border

became apparent in such interviews. It was at once a political maneuver that could include or

exclude Borderlanders from their political and religious aspirations, an economic frontier that

could be either boon or burden, and a sentimental marker that could affirm or dispossess citizens

of their ethno-national identity. The square-peg-in-a-round-hole dilemma of these interviews is

suggestive of a population that defied being separated. A wholesale trader, when asked whether

he desired his town to be in the Free State if his market center remained in Northern Ireland,

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63. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 36.
64. Irish Boundary Commission, *Submissions*, Letter from William Larkin, 3.
65. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 37.

said, "as an ex-politician, yes. As a merchant, no. That is a frank answer."[66] Imposing the partisan-sectarian framework on Borderlander communities was asking all the wrong questions. The Borderlanders were being pulled in different directions by mutually exclusive identities, expectations which had become hybridized in the border region. Catholic, Protestant, Free Stater, or Northern Irish, the Borderlanders were all of those things and none of them at the same time. No one represented this mixed identity as much as a schoolmaster from Killyhevlin, County Fermanagh.

On 2 May 1925, Mr. J.M. Judge gave one of the most candid, amusing and intriguing interviews the Boundary Commission heard. Mr. Judge had a vision of the Irish border that was decidedly inter-sectarian, followed neither party line, and expressed a tremendous degree of tolerance that was the highest expression of the middle-line view of Borderlanders. Mr. Judge began his interview by asserting, "I wish to make it clear that so far as I am conscious I have no religious prejudice and very little political prejudice either."[67] When questioned further, he admitted, "I am known to belong to the R.C. Church; but I think it is better not to say what my personal opinions are…I hold a more or less open mind on these questions."[68] From historical consideration of the legitimacy of Protestant presence in Ireland to the units of territorial transfer, the geography of the border and the underlying prejudice of partition politics, Judge gave an honest, insightful and brazenly logical assessment of the border. He defended the Protestant population's right to Irish citizenship, saying, "although these people got into the country wrongly they continued living in it and their children and grandchildren—it was not their own fault."[69] He understood, contrary to Nationalist theory, that the county as a unit of transfer was

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66. Ibid., 38.
67. Irish Boundary Commission, *Submissions*, J.M. Judge, 5.
68. Ibid., 5.
69. Ibid., 5.

"wrong in principle" and the "ideal thing would be that a smaller area…should be chosen, because that would leave a greater number of people satisfied."[70] He denounced the gerrymandering wishes expressed by some, noting that were such wishes to be granted, they would create political islands. As a schoolmaster on the Leitrim side of the border, Judge also expressed his feeling that teachers and other professions should retain their vested rights in the event of territorial transfers. He explained, "It so happens that teachers in the Northern Areas are paid better salaries than in the Free State."[71] The case Judge presented to the Boundary Commission was a peculiar mix of personal welfare, logistical insight, and moral authenticity.

He confessed, "I consider that Ireland is such a very small petty country as compared with other countries of the world, that it must be a sort of laughing stock to see a small, petty, twopenny-halfpenny country like Ireland divided in two parts."[72] Those two parts, Catholic and Protestant, Free State and Northern Ireland, were combined rather than intensified in the borderland. Mr. Judge ended his interview at the strike of the clock. He declared, "I may be inclined to hope that that clock is tolling the death knell of the boundary in this country."[73] This was very much the same sentiment expressed by Borderlanders, even those who spoke less freely than Mr. Judge. The Commission reported, "Witnesses on both sides freely said that their real wish was that there should be no boundary either political or fiscal."[74] Indeed, when questioned, a little cynically, on his proposed "cure" for the trouble of Ireland, Judge asserted, "More education, less politics and less fettishism…That is as far as I can go. It is of no use going too near the wind; but it is of no use my coming here without saying what I mean."[75] Many on the border were more hesitant to breach the religious-political framework, but in sum, the opinions

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70. Ibid., 6.
71. Ibid., 9.
72. Ibid., 8.
73. Ibid., 8-9.
74. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 37.
75. Irish Boundary Commission, *Submissions*, J.M. Judge, 10.

were distinctly borderline in nature, conforming to neither polarized category. The variation of views, from those which expressed ostensible sectarian aspirations, to the ones that bent a sectarian border to accommodate cross-confessional networks, and finally the true hybridization and reconciliation of opposites, the Borderlanders' understanding of partition, exemplify the diverse characteristics of edge-effect environments.
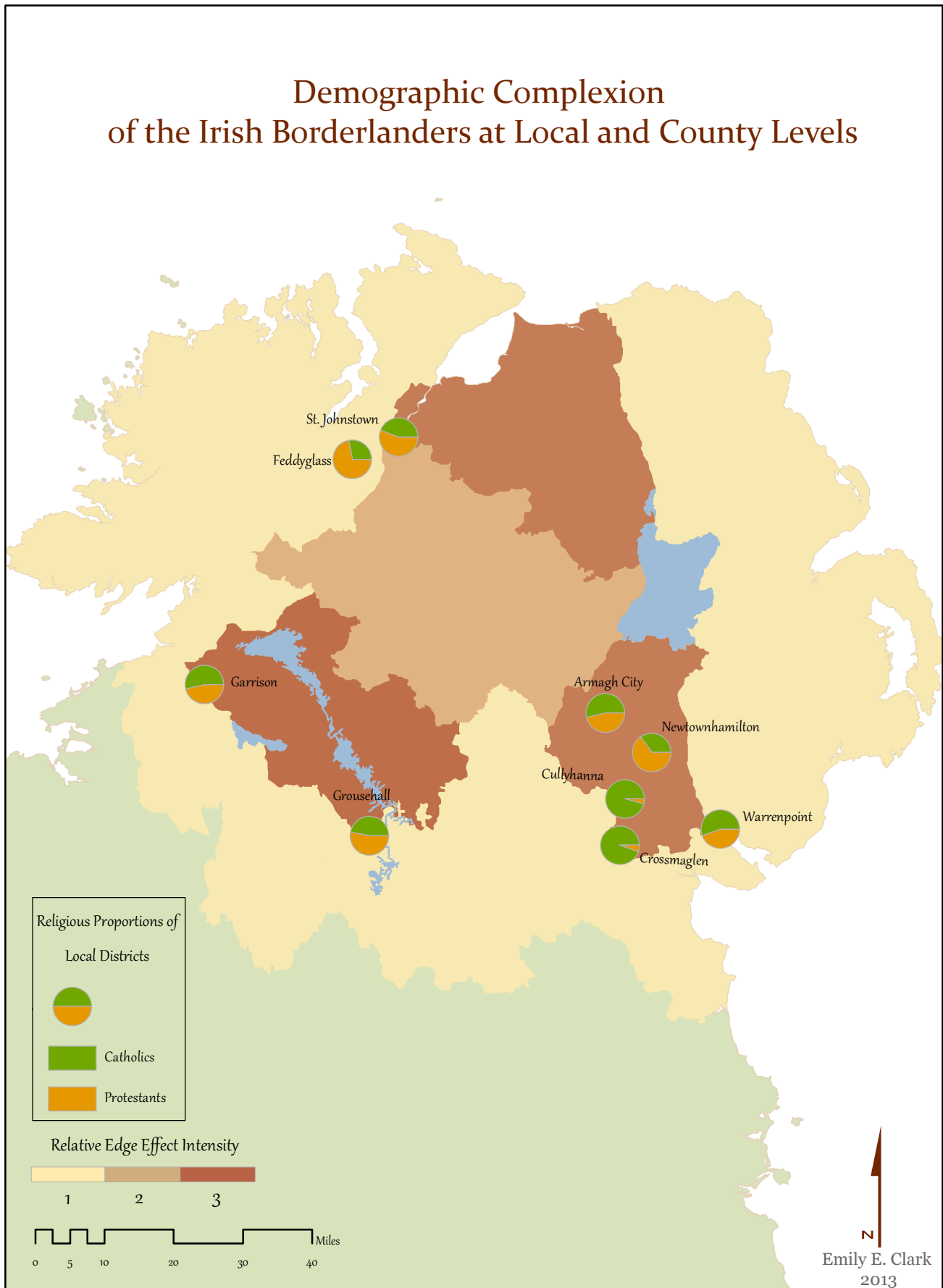
Figure 2. Demographic Complexion of the Irish Borderlanders

This map represents the intensity of the edge effect as a demographic phenomenon in the Irish border region. Statistics describing political voting behavior and religious identity at the county level were calculated to reflect varying degrees of mixing. Political opinion was calculated by averaging four ten-year intervals, between 1901 and 1931, of voting statistics for either the Conservative or the National party. Similarly, religious affiliation, either Catholic or Protestant, was calculated as the average of four samples taken at the same ten-year intervals.[76] In order to represent the edge effect tendency for hybridization, these two sets of statistics were analyzed for their ratios to one another: Catholics to Protestants and National Party Votes to Conservative Party Votes. A range of values was defined for each pair that represented roughly equal proportions of the two variables. The closer to 50/50 mixing, the higher the intensity of the edge effect is believed to be. After the intensity of the edge effect was determined for the religious and political statistics separately, the two were intersected to show the coincidence of religious mixing, and political mixing together. Again, the more equal the mixing the higher the edge effect intensity appears. Separately and together, the counties with the highest incidence of edge effect culture are Londonderry, Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Armagh.

In order to represent finer distinctions in the demographic landscape, several administrative districts were statistically analyzed. Since statistics at the county level are very generalized and do not show the spatial distribution of characteristics, these districts help to clarify local variations in the border region. Tabulations of religious statistics were included in the 1925 Report of the Irish Boundary Commission, though consistent data on political voting behavior was not compiled. If it can be assumed that religious identity is strongly correlated to political affiliation, as was frequently and vehemently argued in the interviews of the border

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76. Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism Study: National Integration in the British Isles, 1851-1966*, ICPSR07533-v1 (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2001).

region inhabitants, then religious ratios of small-scale districts can give a fairly accurate representation of local demographic variation. These simple comparisons do a lot to illustrate the edge effect's tendency for hybridization. Many districts, such as Garrison, Grousehall, and St. Johnstown, are more or less evenly mixed between Catholics and Protestants. Others, however, express clear majority-minority relationships. Districts such as Cullyhanna and Crossmaglen in South Armagh reflect overwhelming Catholic majorities. Similarly, Feddyglass in eastern Donegal shows a significant Protestant majority.

These pockets of clear majorities along the border do not disprove the validity of the edge effect; rather they are a confirmation of the presence of opposing influences in the same region so that when there are areas of equal mixing, it is all the more significant. In the same way that the interviews of the Borderlanders were classified according to the degree of inter-sectarianism their views represented, these local districts show important variations in demographic composition that are unique to the border region. It would be unrealistic to assume that this, or any, territorial region contains a population that is completely unified according to a certain characteristic. The border region is not meaningful because of the total integration of every community religiously and politically; that would indeed be phenomenal. Rather, the significance of the edge effect in the border region is that the integration of ethno-national identities is a quality that constitutes a majority over sectarian identity. It is not an absolute majority but it is a majority, whereas in the north or south the inverse would be true. This map analytically teases out the edge effect as it existed at different scales: at the county level, at the local level, at its lowest intensity and at its highest expression. The importance of these variations is what necessitated the Irish Boundary Commission and what made the survey and rectification of the 1920 border so difficult.

THE BORDERLANDISTS

The endeavors of the Irish Boundary Commission followed a long and storied tradition of defensive struggles that existed in the north of Ireland. Irish legend has long told of the giant, Finn McCool, whose fierce and cunning stand on the shores of County Antrim left behind the rock formations of the famous Giant's Causeway that defy Scottish intrusion. Another tale recounts the creation of ancient earthen barricades by a gargantuan black pig that is said to have rutted its way along Ulster's southern limits to obstruct inroads of invaders.[77] Cuchulainn, champion of Ulster lore, is celebrated for having single-handedly defended the north against the Queen of Connaught to secure Ulster's south-western edge along the Shannon River in the war-epic, the Cattle Raid of Cooley.[78] The heirs to this ethos of territoriality were three very ordinary men: Eoin MacNeill, Joseph Fisher, and Richard Feetham. In a single year, they did more to entrench the boundaries of Ireland than any fabled beast or intrepid hero had done before.

Unlike the mythological perimeters, however, the boundary MacNeill, Fisher and Feetham left behind was a largely intangible one. Not fortified in stone, executed in striking trenches or expressed by natural geographical features, theirs was indeed a partition rather more than a border.[79] The effect of their work was to create an impression on the hearts and minds of Irishmen that suggested a divide more absolute than it really was. Like the 256-mile frontier that staggered across Ireland's northern quarter, invisible but for the occasional customs post, the Boundary Commission itself proved to be an equally shadowy and largely forgettable presence,

77. William Francis De Vismes Keane, "The Black Pig's Dyke: The Ancient Boundary Fortification of Uladh," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C, Archaeology, Celtic studies, history, linguistics, literature* 27 (1908).
78. Robert Welch and Bruce Stewart, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91.
79. The difference between a border and a partition can be understood in terms of their effect on the two populations they define and how the two sides understand one another. A border is a physical object that can serve two functions; as both a locus of encounter and an expression of difference. They describe the meeting of two things as much as, if not more than, their separation. A partition is much more decisively dividing. It occurs on an ideological level and is abstract in form rather than concrete.

to the detriment of Ireland's cultural memory. In another era these men could have been commemorated in legend, cautioning future generations to the failings of the past. Instead, the peculiar and tragic episode of the Boundary Commission was usurped by the larger, cynical narrative of Irish conflict so that its significance has been largely overlooked. What stories should have been told of its rendition of the Irish border saga and what can it reveal about the emplacement of partition?

The frontier that polarized Ireland in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act represented the symbolic fault line of hostilities, yet situated knowledge of the border itself was conspicuously lacking. From 1924 to 1925, the proceedings of the Irish Boundary Commission brought, if only for a brief time, focused and quantifiable attention to the unique landscape that existed in the border region. Tasked with determining "in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions, the boundaries between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland," [80] the Boundary Commission took upon itself the weight of centuries of unresolved grievances between the native Irish and the ubiquitous foreign presence. The parameters of its responsibilities, expressed by Article 12 of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, were hinted at more than they were precisely enumerated. As Paul Murray has argued, "it is difficult not to suspect that the ambiguity surrounding the meaning and effect of Article 12 was a calculated thing" and that its "very ambivalence was its greatest asset in the view of British politicians who negotiated the Treaty."[81] The obliqueness of the Treaty, whether deliberate or not, did make it possible for both Unionists and Nationalists to claim that the Treaty was essentially in line with their respective views.

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80. Government of Ireland Act, 1920.

81. Paul Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins, 1886-1925 (*Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2011), 209.

In the interlude between the signing of the Treaty in 1921 and the creation of the Boundary Commission in 1924, expectations for the border's revision began to take definite shape in the mental maps of Irish citizens on both sides. The three basic factors, economic relationships, geography, and the wishes of the inhabitants, could be arranged in a number of ratios that would justify the desired outcomes of the parties involved. In the preliminary deliberations, the Chairman of the Boundary Commission, Richard Feetham, an English-born judge of the South African Supreme Court, was sensitive to this amalgamation of interests and made particular note of the existence of a mixed population. He asserted that "the fact that there was a 'mixed population,' that is a population divided by political and religious differences, on the Southern side as well as on the Northern side of the border, was a notorious fact established by successive elections and by the census returns."[82] However, the phenomenon of this mixing goes deeper than the Chairman acknowledged. It was not the mere interspersal of confessional identities that made the region unique, but the synergistic relationships they had with one another.

Like the ecological edge effect, the hybridization of traditions, history and identity in this region made the positioning of the border here especially problematic. Without any clear lines dividing populations, no physical expressions of division, and only the vague description of Article 12 to go on, the Boundary Commission as an entity became the single tangible manifestation of the border conflict, to which all of the competing views were directed. The Commission was the common denominator in the contrasting visions of the Irish border and becomes an invaluable cypher to understanding the origins of blinkered conceptualizations of the border. Seen from different perspectives, the Irish Boundary Commission is at once a negligible blip in the narrative of Irish history, a Janus-faced promise to settle sectarian grievances, and a

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82. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 24.

self-conscious institution that confronted an endemic historical impasse. The proceedings of the

Irish Boundary Commission have been condemned by critics on both sides of history and both

sides of the border, but it is precisely that reputation that should point even more compellingly to

the importance of its work. As such, the role of the Boundary Commission is best understood

through a mosaic of perspectives: the way historians have evaluated the Boundary Commission

retrospectively, the way the Commission was understood by its contemporary Irish audience, and

finally the way the Commissioners themselves interpreted their task. These three visions of the

Irish Boundary Commission reveal a shocking degree of ideological elasticity regarding

partition, and the importance, yet overwhelming neglect, of place when assigning borders.

For something so representative of the Irish sectarian struggle, the Irish Boundary

Commission has been largely disregarded by historians. It was only in 1969 that the

Commissioners' Report was released to the public after decades of deliberate concealment, and

scholars were quick to dismiss it as a "nonevent"[83] and an episode that is "well known and

quickly told."[84] The impermanence of the territorial recommendations and the Commission's

devolution into clichéd sectarian hotheadedness make the year unremarkable in the Irish

historical narrative. It is easy to dismiss the Commission as another iteration of the centuries-old

struggle between rival populations in Ireland. Historical analyses of the Commission tend to

concentrate on the high-politics of the partition process: election results, propaganda campaigns,

Dail debates and Parliamentary intrigues. Indeed, the scholarship is decidedly tripartite with its

historiographical epicenters in London, Belfast or Dublin. These seats of government certainly

produce the loudest sources: the heated negotiations, the pompous personalities and the artful

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83. T.K. Wilson, Review of *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins* by Paul Murray in the *Journal of British Studies*.

84. R. Fanning quoted in Rakin, "The role of the Irish boundary commission in the entrenchment of the Irish border," 423.

speeches. What is missing, however, is the actual, geographic border. None of the governments concerned are proximate to the border region and as such their understanding of it, and consequently the sources they produce, are abstractions. Anglo-Irish politician, social reformer and partition historian Baron Frank Pakenham shrewdly acknowledged, "Ulster indeed will come to concern our story less as an area or a people than as a strange abstract factor in tactics, its importance derived from its reactions on the central conflict."[85] Like many discussions of the genesis of the Boundary Commission, Pakenham's celebrated narrative is partisan, not in that he necessarily favors one side over the other, but in that he understands the story as one best told in those terms.

Similarly, historian Paul Murray's definitive analysis on the origins and operation of the Boundary Commission has certain partisan compulsions. However, Murray's authorship has a distinct Nationalist bent. His evocation of the Boundary Commission saga is a critical inspection of the doomed Nationalist cause through the legislation that maneuvered it. He concluded, "the *realpolitik* of the situation was that whatever way the territorial awards went, Nationalists must invariably lose out."[86] Both Murray and Pakenham described masterfully these operational mechanisms of the Commission, the historical context from which it emerged, and the intellectual angles of its authority. They are representative of the dominant trends in Commission history that imagine the border dispute as a contest on the national scale between two incompatible political agendas. There is no attempt to look closer at the implications of the Commissioners' work and consider that the partition scheme wrought a barrier which inserted itself into the lives of real people. Divorcing the Boundary Commission and the border from the landscape of the Borderlands, shows that the historical narrative is missing an important spatial

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85. Frank Pakenham, *Peace by Ordeal: An Account, from first-hand sources, of the Negotiation and Signature of the Anglo-Irish Treaty 1921* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1935), 109.
86. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins,* 316.

dimension. As Éamon De Valera observed, "This Ulster is a thing of the mind only, non-existent in the world of reality…Those who believed it existed must have received a shock when they discovered that this vivid entity of their thought, whose territorial outline on a map of Ireland they believed they themselves could trace in a few minutes, could not be determined by the British Prime Minister."[87] Historians who relegate the border and the Boundary Commission to the abstract realm of diplomacy, legislation and symbolism miss the rootedness of the Boundary Commission to the physical reality of land and other tangible expressions of territory, identity and community.

Irish citizens' understanding of the border was, and remains today, a largely abstract and emotional reckoning that is more often expressed symbolically than it is with precision. There is a custom in the North of Ireland that historians and anthropologists have described that reflects this allegorical understanding of the border. Andrew Finlay was the first to describe this practice which he called "telling." According to conventional Irish wisdom which advises, "Whatever you say, say nothing," the art of "telling" relies on a series of clues and indicators, like pronunciation, physical characteristics, and one's surname, to estimate the likely sympathies of an acquaintance. As anthropologists Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan have determined, "acts of recognizing members from non-members…are always acts of symbolic violence and selective knowledge."[88] Irish literary historian David Lloyd has expressed a similar analysis. He described "telling" as a discrimination-based practice that relies on "a repertoire of popular epistemological marks" which help to "convert a conceptual system of conventions into a system of synecdoches, of expressive symbols naturally related to a prior underlying essence."[89] In this

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87. Eamon De Valera, Eamon, "The Foundation of the Republic of Ireland in the Vote of the People: Results of the General Election of December 1918; a National Plebiscite held under British Law and British Supervision," Internet Archive. Online.

88. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, *The Anthropology of Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 122.

89. David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 141-142.

way, the Irish Boundary Commission could be understood by the Irish public as a personification

of this practice which would geographically "tell" the difference between two entities based on

national stereotypes.

The border's geographic oversimplification of Ireland into North and South was

reflected socially in the way it was negotiated by the Irish public which reverted to a sectarian

rubric to imagine the border. Beyond the border region, the wider Irish audience was invested in

these ideological and sectarian angles of the Boundary Commission, but as far as its actual,

geographic dimensions, a mile this way or that could not have mattered less. As Bernadette

McAlisky[90] has observed of the border, "Those who live away from it may see it only as having

two sides, 'ours' and 'theirs'. Those who live along side it know its length, its every nuance, its

every bizarre twist and turn across field and river and street."[91] Indeed, for Irish citizens living in

Limerick or Antrim, say, the Boundary Commission was never going to redefine their statehood.

Indeed, Paul Murray has described "an understandable apathy towards the Boundary

Commission in north-east Ulster" where Irishmen east of the River Bann had no hope of being

transferred.[92] For it to matter, a far-flung border which was even invisible as a physical object

had to be made visible as a familiar social construct.[93] By distilling the border region down to its

sectarian elements, the Irish public invested in the Commission two divergent political visions of

Ireland, Nationalist and Unionist, which was a more widely relevant and engaging debate.

At this level, the Commissioners were imagined by the larger Irish audience as actors in a

sectarian scheme which was measured in net gains and losses. The Nationalist camp called for

the Commissioners to transfer enormous units of territory to the Free State that would reduce

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90. Former Westminster Member of Parliament ,1969-1974
91. Bernadette McAliskey in *The Border: Personal Reflections from Ireland, North and South*, ed. Paddy Logue (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1999), 75.
92. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins*, 314.
93. Fred Halliday in *The Border*, 43.

Northern Ireland to "unworkable dimensions"[94] effectively removing the border entirely, while

Unionists insisted on the retention of territory in the hope of entrenching a more secure and

permanent border. Both sides, Northerners and Southerners, revealed overwhelming insensitivity

to the native character of the border landscape and the serious grievances suffered by their own Borderlander constituents. They based their territorial claims on a conflation of religious and political identity, a Protestant-Unionist versus Nationalist-Catholic contest.

Anderson and Bort have described the time between the first Home Rule Bill of 1912 and the collapse of the Boundary Commission in1925 as the

Figure 3. North Eastern Boundary Bureau Recommendations of "maximum" and "minimum" territorial claims to be made under Article 12.

Rankin (2008).

"Partition decade." From this point of view, the Boundary Commission is the epilogue of the

story. By the time the Commission had assembled, opinions as to its function had already been

crystallized. It was the negotiations and interpretations that anticipated the Boundary

Commission's Report that are most revealing of public opinion. Indeed, once the survey had

begun, there was a confidence on both sides that the Boundary Commission was acting

exclusively for 'their' benefit.

During the negotiations of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, Irish statesman Ernest Blythe[95]

explained, "There can be little doubt that without the prospect of major boundary adjustment
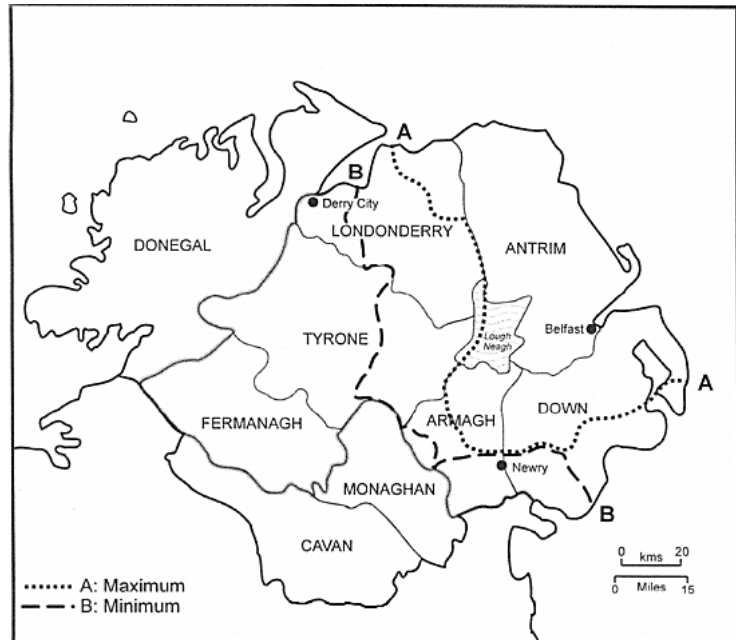
94. Dennis Gwynn, *The History of Partition: 1912-1925* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan Limited, 1950), 205.

seemingly intended by Article 12, the Irish delegates would not have signed."[96] Nationalist "faith in the optimistic interpretations of what the Boundary Commission held in store for them"[97] allowed them to employ a policy of non-recognition towards Northern Ireland and the Belfast Government. In a 1922 memorandum, "Policy in Regard to the North-East", Blythe defended the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the arbitration of the border. He assured Nationalists that the Treaty was in their favor and their support would ensure Nationalist gains. He asserted, "The Treaty gives us a clear claim to at least two and a half counties of the Six and we must make it clear that just as we shall give all it binds us to give so we shall use every means to secure the last tittle of what the Treaty entitles us to."[98] He urged Nationalists that acceptance of the Treaty and cooperation with the Boundary Commission were necessary to produce peaceful conditions in which "Northern people will be collected enough to realise that the loss of a big stretch of territory is certain if they opt out."[99] Similarly, Michael Collins' meeting with Lloyd George presents the Treaty and its boundary clause as what Ged Martin has referred to as "a stick to beat the North."[100] Nationalists accepted the idea that the Treaty was essentially in their favor.

The fervency of this belief is evident in the bewilderment and outrage when this faith proved to be misplaced and precipitated the downfall of the Commission. When on 7 November 1925 a Free State newspaper, the *Morning Post*, printed a map forecasting the decisions of the Boundary Commission, the public outcry was immense. The map, whose source of information

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95. Ernest Blythe is one of the most fascinating and complicated characters in the story of Irish partition. He was the son of a Protestant, Unionist farmer, and was educated locally in County Antrim. At the age of fifteen he started working as a clerk in the Department of Agriculture in Dublin. Blythe joined the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He also joined the Gaelic League, where his Irish teacher was Sinéad Flanagan, the future wife of Éamon de Valera. Blythe was a strong supporter of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and in 1923 he became Minister for Finance in W. T. Cosgrave's first government.

96. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins*, 100
97. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins*, 314
98. Ernest Blythe, *Policy in Regard to the North-East*, Memorandum sent to J.J. Walsh, Eoin MacNeill, Patrick Hogan, August 9, 1922, Documents of Irish Foreign Policy Online.
99. Ibid.
100. Ged Martin, "The Origins of Partition," in *The Irish Border: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. Malcolm Anderson and Eberhard Bort (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 71.

remains unknown, was a relatively accurate representation of the proposed territorial transfers.

Suspicion of the Boundary Commission was always just under the surface of Nationalist

optimism, and seeing a map in print brought it rushing madly to the surface. To a disinterested

observer, the map is somewhat underwhelming given the modest transformation depicted, and as such the Nationalist reaction seems wildly disproportionate. It was this publication that likely precipitated the resignation of Commissioner and Free State representative Eoin MacNeill on 20 November 1925, less than two weeks after the 'Morning Post Line'[101] was published. Though he never cited the
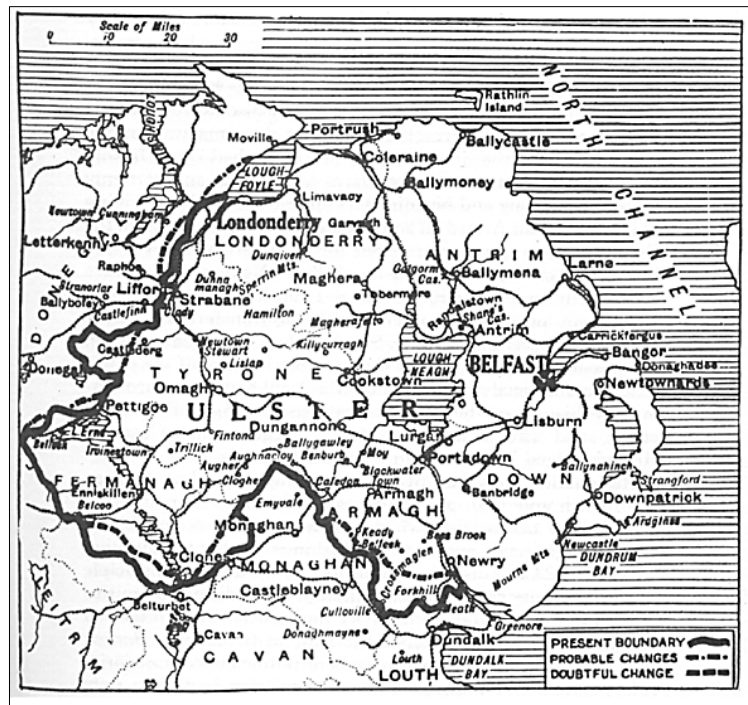

Figure 4. The Morning Post Line, 7 November 1925.

Andrews (1960).

map as a reason for his resignation, MacNeill's involvement in a plot that allowed for two-way

transfers of territory, however minor, was fundamentally against the Nationalist belief in the

Boundary Commission. According to the notes of a London conference on 2 December 1925,

William Cosgrave reported to Austin Chamberlain and Stanley Baldwin that the *Morning Post*

publication had "created a furore."[102] He explained, "There had been a reasonable expectation of

additions to the Free State from the first two counties…With the publication of the forecast in the

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101. Free State President William Cosgrave referred to the map as the "Morning Post Line."
102. W.T. Cosgrave, "Draft notes of a conference held in the Board Room, Treasury Chambers, Whitehall, London," December 2, 1925, Documents of Irish Foreign Policy, Online.

'Morning Post', the confidence reposed in the Commission had broken down."[103] Nationalists

had been assured that the Boundary Commission could rule only in their favor, as they had what

Blythe and others had assured them was a "clear claim" to substantial territorial acquisition.

Indeed, Blythe had described Northern Ireland's "loss of a big stretch of territory" as a certainty.

Nationalists expected dramatic gains for the Free State and were sorely disappointed. That the

Boundary Commission had gone entirely against the aspirations of the Nationalist public is clear.

The same confidence in the Boundary Commission's loyalty to their side is evident

among the Unionist public. From the very beginning, Ulster Unionists had more cause to believe

that a Commission composed of a Northern Ireland representative and a Chairman both

appointed by the British government would tip the balance in their favor. The negotiations of the

Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 were fraught with double meaning and deliberate word-smithing on

the part of the British signatories who deliberately encouraged the Irish delegate's self-serving

interpretation of the boundary cause. The Earl Birkenhead played a significant role in shaping

the expectations of Ulster Unionists prior to the Boundary Commission's survey. In a

confidential letter to Lord Balfour on 3 March 1922, Birkenhead assured Balfour that he and his

fellow negotiators had not betrayed Unionist interests and that only modest adjustments of the

border could be expected. What is more, this secret letter was doctored by Winston Churchill and

sent to the press in order to sensationalize and ridicule Michael Collins' claims to comfort

anxious Unionists. In the published letter, Birkenhead denied that the Irish delegates had been

deliberately deceived, claiming that what Collins was promoting had no basis in fact "except in

his over-heated imagination."[104] The international press reported that Birkenhead's letter

described "only minor frontier modifications" and assured Balfour that he "could not imagine

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103. Ibid.
104. Earl Birkenhead quoted in *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins*, 115.

that the eminent South African judge… would come to any unreasonable decisions that would tear up Ulster's territory."[105]

Reflecting back on the deliberations at a sitting of the Lords on 9 December 1925, however, Earl Birkenhead explained:

> It has been said, and with great truth and justice, that there were Articles in the earlier Treaty which were so obscure as to be dangerous…I state plainly to your Lordships that there was no signatory of that Treaty but knew that in Article 12 there lurked the elements of dynamite. We knew it well. It was forced upon us in this sense, that whether it was for good or for bad that that Treaty should be signed, it never could have been signed, it never would have been signed, without Article 12, and I can tell your Lordships, if we are to refer to the historical psychology of this matter, that we, the English signatories, took a clear view…Supposing that we had proposed to those who sat on the other side of the table at No. 10, Downing Street, to stereotype the existing boundary, what do you think the prospects would have been of a settlement? […] We took the risk of supposing that it might be possible for our successors to approach the determination of the boundary in a calmer spirit, and in an ampler atmosphere.[106]

The Irish delegates had no doubt been encouraged to believe that the Boundary Commission would be able to transfer large tracts of territory to the Free State and the Unionists convinced themselves that they had the upper hand. All the while Unionist publications assured the Protestant public that their interests would be well protected.[107]

Both sides believed, and with good cause, that the Boundary Commission represented their interests. It was largely the cunning of Lloyd George who was notorious for what Denis Gwynn has called "an extraordinary talent" for persuading each side that "its interpretation of his formula was correct."[108] The Commission knew it was faced with an impossible task. It could

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105. "Irish Boundary, Birkenhead Letter," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1924, Trove Online.

106. United Kingdom, "Ireland (Confirmation of Agreement) Bill." Sitting of the Lords, vol. 62 (December 9, 1925).

107. Gwynn, *The History of Partition*, 233.

Despite the agreement among the Commissioners to refrain from any disclosure of information until the official report had been published, J.R. Fisher sent regular letters to the wife of a Unionist M.P.'s for County Down assuring her that "the more extravagant claims have practically been wiped out" and the alterations would almost certainly be "a matter of border townlands."

108. Gwynn, *The History of Partition*, 202 and 198.

not possibly satisfy the two mutually exclusive political agendas and meet the expectations of the national Irish audience. Indeed, Feetham predicted in a meeting on 3 December 1925, after the resignation of MacNeill, "the Award would disappoint many, it also meet the wishes of many on the Border, and remove difficulties which were severely folt [*sic*]."[109] He believed,

> The new Boundary as proposed would produce great improvements on both sides. While the Governments had to decide their action on larger and broader grounds than the Commissioners, he hoped that their findings would not be strictly disregarded, and that a way would be kept open for the removal of the more acute anomalies revealed by the enquiry.[110]

The contrast between how the Boundary Commissioners interpreted their task and how the national public understood it was clear. The Commissioners had become acquainted with the incontrovertible reality of a mixed population whose needs were complex while the public mind remained convinced of only sectarian affairs.

The Boundary Commission's legacy as a self-examining institution provides a rare insight into the way the border region was understood at a specific moment in time. The way that the Commissioners framed the issue, the questions they asked, and the methods they used provide a rare quantitative analysis of a landscape that was largely misunderstood. The accumulation of correspondences, personal notes, statistical tables, and meeting minutes in their records is a glimpse into their experience. It is precisely this self-reflective documentation that makes the Boundary Commission such an important resource by which to understand the Irish partition. Along with the papers from the proceedings, the unofficial report that was produced immediately prior to the abortion of the Boundary Commission in December 1925 makes clear the astounding degree of agency the Commissioners had to interpret their responsibilities and

At the same time, Lloyd George assured Carson that he would resign as Prime Minister rather than agree to a truce with the Sinn Féin and promised Collins and Griffith that he would resign if Craig and the Ulster Unionists refused to cooperate.

109. Irish Boundary Commission, *Minutes*, 156.
110. Ibid., 156-157.

authority. Substantial portions of the report are devoted entirely to addressing the uncertainties

the Commissioners faced and the reasons for their decisions. A careful evaluation of the

Boundary Commission, through its own words, reveals a much more sensitive and native

understanding of the border region than that of either Irish citizens outside of the disputed

territory or many historians who have commented on the border. The decisions they made

regarding the area that would be surveyed, the units of territorial transfers, which inhabitants

were concerned, and the directionality of transfers, may have been extralegal interpretations

according to Article 12, but in fact they properly addressed the nuances of the landscape which

were missed by the architects of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and ignored by a partisan public.

 One of the very first points to be settled by the Commissioners was the integrity of the

1920 border. Either the existing border would serve as a starting point that would be adjusted by

the Commission where appropriate, or it would be void and the Commission would create an

entirely new border with no regard to the 1920 limits. The Free State's call for the nullification

of the 1920 border was upheld by strong evidence. Feetham sympathized with its position,

acknowledging in his report:

> This particular boundary has none of the sanctity which would ordinarily attach to an
> existing state boundary. In support of this contention it has been pointed out that this
> boundary is not an ancient historical boundary, but only dates from the Act of 1920, and
> that this Act which first established the boundary was lacking in moral authority, because
> the inhabitants of the country were not directly consulted, the great majority of their
> representatives were actively opposed to it, and the minority only gave a tardy and
> reluctant acquiescence.[111]

Still, in his memorandum of September 1925 he reasoned that the decision to rectify the existing

border rather than devise a new one was supported by the references to 'Northern Ireland' and

the 'rest of Ireland' in Article 12 and the prescriptive rights the border obtained in the four years

since its creation. He argued in his report, "the Commission is not dealing with vague

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111. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 27.

geographical abstractions but with two ascertained territorial entities consisting, respectively, of 'Northern Ireland' and 'Southern Ireland'."[112] He further asserted that "it is the boundary between this 'Northern Ireland' and 'the rest of Ireland' which is to be 'determined,' or in effect, as there is already an existing boundary, redetermined."[113] Indeed, in a letter to Stanley Baldwin dated 7 December 1925, Feetham explained that the Commission had to treat that boundary as "holding good" if no sufficient reason could be found for altering it.[114]

Paradoxically, perhaps, by starting with the existing border and two distinct sovereignties, the Commission allowed the survey to be determined by the border region and not at the national level. If the Commission had removed the existing political boundary and taken for its survey area the entire island of Ireland, the conversation about the border's placement would have been dominated by the vestigial governments of the Free State and Northern Ireland and the sectarian will of populations far removed from the site of partition. Instead, keeping the existing border narrowed the focus to the local level which prevented the border negotiations, as much as possible, from become entangled in affairs of state. Northern Ireland and the Free State were always going to exist after the new border was drawn despite the wishful thinking of many Nationalists. The Commission determined early on that:

> Northern Ireland must, when the boundaries have been determined, still be recognisable as the same provincial entity; the changes made must not be so drastic as to destroy its identity or make it impossible for it to continue as a separate province of the United Kingdom with its own parliament and government for provincial affairs under the Government of Ireland Act. The same principle applies mutatis mutandis to the 'rest of Ireland,' which must, after the determination of the boundaries, retain its identity as the Irish Free State as constituted under the terms of the Treaty, and be in a position to function as a self-governing Dominion 'in the Community of Nations known as the British Empire'."[115]

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112. Ibid., 25.
113. Ibid., 19.
114. Irish Boundary Commission, *Minutes*, 181
115. Irish Boundary Commission, *Minutes*, 181.

Indeed, Feetham suggested, "I think…the duty of the Commission is not to reconstitute the areas of Northern Ireland and of the Irish Free State, but to provide a better boundary between them."[116]

The Commission's Report includes a map which defines its survey area as a buffer zone on either side of the 1920 border. What this illustrates is an implicit understanding of the 'edge effect' phenomenon. The Commissioners identified what was essentially the Irish ecotone and selected it as the appropriate survey area. This decision, then, limited the size of territories that could be considered for transfer. Such a narrow survey area implied that modifications would be based on acute discriminations. As the Commission described in Chapter 3 of its Report, entitled "Article 12: Interpretation and Principles of Application", the survey was to be concerned only with "those areas which are recognised as falling within the range of boundary variations" and should therefore operate in units ascertained by "the smallest area which can fairly be entitled, having regard to its size and situation, to be considered separately, and with regard to which separate data are available."[117]

The Commissioners rightly understood that the adoption of larger areas as "indivisible units", such as the County, would compel them to "refuse to treat separately particular portions of a county or union where the inhabitants differed from the majority in the county or union as a whole, and therefore to override the wishes of the inhabitants of such portions."[118] What is more, they did not restrict themselves to any sort of administrative considerations and assumed license to "mark out, for the purpose of its work, as occasion requires, convenient units of area."[119] This keen sensitivity to the nuanced local complexion was a quality entirely missing from the

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116. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 26.
117. Ibid., 16.
118. Ibid., 16.
119. Irish Boundary Commission, *Minutes*,183.

perspectives of Irish citizens living outside the border region, and certainly by the delegates of

both Irish governments.

The Commissioners' experience, on the ground as it were, revealed the distinctiveness of

this liminal landscape and the necessity of evaluating it independently. Importantly, the area they

defined was adjacent to the 1920 border on both sides, north and south. Continuing the

discussion of what it meant to determine the boundary, Feetham explained that since the

Commission assumed the 1920 border as its starting point, the directionality of territorial transfer

did not appear to "offer any difficulty so far as this point is concerned." He reasoned, "Power to

'determine the boundaries' between two already ascertained areas A. and B. clearly includes, in

the absence of some indication in the context to the contrary, power to vary in either direction

any existing boundary between such areas; that is, power to shift the boundary so as to give

either to area A. portions of area B., or to area B. portions of area A."[120] The Commission's

attention to the wishes of the inhabitants must have further supported this interpretation of two-

way transfers.

As historians like Paul Murray have argued, the terms of Article 12, though otherwise

inscrutable, did seem to indicate clearly that territory could be transferred only in one direction,

from North to South. It should be noted that the sections of the memorandum in which this point

was raised indicated that Eoin MacNeill was alone in this interpretation. The preface to the

memorandum reads:

> Dr. MacNeill at a later stage furnished to the Chairman and to Mr. Fisher in a similar
> informal way copies, not signed, of an Opinion, stated to have been obtained from a high
> legal authority, in which the following question was discussed:—'Can the Boundary
> Commission transfer any part of the area now within the jurisdiction of the Government
> of the Saorstat [Irish Free State] and add such part to the joint jurisdiction of the

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120. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 19.

Government of Great Britain and the Government of Northern Ireland?'—and a negative answer was given.[121]

Even though MacNeill was ideologically outnumbered on this point, and a careful legal analysis of Article 12 very well may support his view, Feetham's insistence on this fundamental aspect of the survey, even if it was an illegitimate one, was a more rational scheme considering the demographics of the area. The idea that the imposition of the 1920 border dispossessed only the Catholic Nationalists of their national identity is an assumption that flies in the face of the widely acknowledged existence of a heavily mixed population.

In response to the Free State's claim, defended by Attorney General John O'Byrne, that "The work of the Commission consists of ascertaining…what portions of that area are entitled to withdraw permanently from the jurisdiction of the Irish Free State," Feetham evoked the incidence of 'mixing' to support his position on two-way transfers. He argued, "The difficulty which suggests itself is that the terms of the Article do not say 'exclude from Northern Ireland.' It says 'determine the boundaries'—which might mean either exclusion or inclusion."[122] The Chairman goes on to propose, "So far as the question of mixed population is concerned, may there not be evidence that there is a mixed population on the other side of the border as well?"[123] As evinced by the testimonials of the inhabitants, the incidence of an 'edge-effect culture' in this region sustained social and economic networks that spanned the border, cultural flows that permeated it and a distinct 'Borderlander' identity that defied it.

The Treaty's reference to the "wishes of the inhabitants"[124] was read by the Commission to be "clearly incomplete."[125] The Commissioners stumbled over phraseology on this,

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121. Ibid., 17.
122. Ibid., 17.
123. Ibid., 23.
124. Anglo-Irish Treaty, Article 12.
125. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*, 19.

deconstructing Article 12 all the way down to the "object of the verb."[126] The deliberations

recorded in the Report reasoned that "the natural reading of the clause is to take the word

'inhabitants' as meaning the inhabitants concerned" and that those concerned were surely to be

inhabitants "whose fate may be affected by the determination of the boundary; in other words,

the inhabitants of boundary regions or areas."[127] The premise of the Commission's assumption

was that "a person can only be an 'inhabitant' in relation to some particular place or territory."[128]

The Commissioners' awareness of citizenship as an expression of nested identity, that a person

could at the same time claim multiple and even contradictory categories of belonging, and that

they were all relative to specific geographic places, is a highly sophisticated perspective for the

circumstances. Borderlanders were understood to be inherently different from their more

Northern or Southern countrymen even if their faith and politics agreed, because of their cultural

acclimatization to a different kind of Irish environment. As anthropologists Thomas M. William

and Hastings Donnings have observed, "No *place* can contain culture fully, but culture has little

meaning if it is not emplaced in some way."[129] The "inhabitants concerned" were the hybridized

citizens of the Irish ecotone.

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126. Ibid., 19.
127. Ibid., 19.
128. Ibid., 19.
129. William and Donning, *The Anthropology of Ireland,* 126.

Figure 5. Territorial Transfers Recommended by the Irish Boundary Commission, 1925

This map recreates the 1925 Report of the Irish Boundary Commission. The Commissioners' maps of territorial transfers were never used to implement their recommendations and the Report was actually suppressed following the resignation of Eoin MacNeill and the collapse of the Commission's authority. The declassification of the Commission's Report in 1969 included four views of the border region that was surveyed, and the proposed territorial Awards. In order to create a continuous cartographic representation of the Commission's maps, the four were mosaicked together and digitized. This dataset adds new information to the administrative history of Ireland. The location of the revised border, the proposed territorial transfers, and the designation of the border region survey area are indirect references to the edge effect phenomenon.

The Commissioners' interpretation of Article 12 based their survey on the geographic and economic considerations of the "inhabitants concerned." Their designation of a border region that extended on both sides of the 1920 boundary acknowledges the meeting of two distinct populations in this in-between zone and the distinctiveness of the interests of its inhabitants. In many ways, this map is a reflection of the previous two maps, the physical geography and the demographic composition of the border region. The interaction between the land and its inhabitants is what produces distinct landscapes. It was the border landscape that was surveyed by the Boundary Commission. Its proposed adjustment of the border is a reflection of geographic factors as well as the local variations revealed by statistical ratios. The Commission maintained the natural geographic boundaries illustrated in the first map, allowing the Blackwater River to continue to define the central arch of the border, and the Foyle River Valley to divide Northern Ireland from Donegal. The Commission's identification of South Armagh as a region to be transferred to the Free State corresponds to the large Catholic majorities expressed by the

religious proportions of the Cullyhanna and Crossmaglen districts in the previous map. The

proposed transfers were informed by both the Borderland and the Borderlanders, and were an

attempt to represent more accurately geographic and demographic complexities in a political

way.

CONCLUSION

The story of the Irish partition that is commonly told is incomplete. The version that has prevailed follows a single narrative arc that focuses attention on restrictive pairings of sectarian and partisan conflict without considering other variables. Instead, as Irish journalist Seamus Kelly reminds us, "perspective and subjectivity and the frailty of memory will always allow you to see at least two and very often more than two sides to any good story."[130] The Irish border has been invested with such symbolic significance that it has lost these qualitative dimensions. It is important to look beneath the high politics of partition to rediscover the border as a situated phenomenon. A survey of the native character of the border region, from the land itself to the communities who lived there, and the geographical setting of the border has shown the landscape to be something more than the sum of its parts and that is a legitimate culture in and of itself. As Éamon de Valera once explained,

> There is in Ireland nowhere any area of size in which there is a solid, homogeneous, political or religious block… Those who believed it existed must have received a shock when they discovered that this vivid entity of their thought, whose territorial outline on a map of Ireland they believed they themselves could trace in a few minutes, could not be determined by the British Prime Minister. [131]

The division of Ireland into Northern and Southern realms was certainly imperfect but it was not entirely imagined.

Ecologically and geologically, the Irish Borderland is a fusion. In the same way, the demographic complexion of the Borderlanders was an amalgam of traditions and opinions. The survey of the Irish Boundary Commission from 1924 to 1925 directly addressed and quantified the interstitiality of the region. The way the Commissioners framed their investigation

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130. Seamus Kelley, "In the Shadow of the New Forest," RTE Radio 1 Website.
131. De Valera, "The Foundation of the Republic of Ireland."

methodologically, the interviews they conducted and the conclusions they drew, suggested a landscape of fine difference. The edge effect phenomenon has made the border region a rich vein of authentic Irish heritage for it represented the diverse influences of history, environment, ethnicity and nationality. In many ways this region defied being separated. Chairman Richard Feetham admitted in his report, "The present Border was an accident. The grievances found at particular places were serious."[132] Indeed, the border severed social networks, truncated economic relations, and dislocated communities. More sinister than the tangible consequences of the border, however, was the entrenchment of a more permanent ideological partition.

Although many have dismissed the abortive mission of the Boundary Commission as a negligible and inconclusive affair, the Commission did a tremendous amount to focus comprehensive attention on the emplacement of the border. In the end, though its Report was suppressed and its territorial awards were never realized, the border and the border region they left behind was fundamentally different from what they started with. The border itself did not change shape, but it changed in meaning. The temporary separation established by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act described a boundary between Northern and Southern Ireland, two provinces of the United Kingdom. However, the Boundary Commission helped crystallize a partition between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, the former a province of the United Kingdom and the latter an autonomous Domain akin to Canada.[133] The edge-effect culture of the border region responded in much the same way the ecological example does to a process called landscape sharpening. The fragmentation of an ecosystem with sharp edges more or less eliminates the natural gradient and ecotone.[134] Diversity subsequently decreases and the two

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132. Irish Boundary Commission, *Minutes*, 156.
133. Irish Boundary Commission, *Report*., 20.
134. Odum and Barrett, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, 26.

adjacent environments become increasingly insular and dissimilar. Indeed, Irish historian

Michael Laffan has commented on the fragmentation of the two Irish states following partition

whereby they developed and intensified "those characteristics most disliked by the other."[135] The

sharpening of division turned a frontier of hybridization into what David Lloyd described as a

"cultural and political faultline along which there [was] a turning away or folding back of

distinct entities, literally, partition rather than contact."[136] The secret labors of the Irish Boundary

Commission left an indelible impression on the geography of the border region as agents, albeit

unwitting, of landscape sharpening.

The use of GIS mapping technology to study the Irish border region helps to quantify the

abstract concept of edge-effect interstitiality and recreate the border landscape before its

fragmentation and decay. Instead of paragraphs of written description or statistical tabulations,

cartography's genius for synthesis combines the art and the science of analytical scholarship with

an easy eloquence. The narrative trilogy of the Irish border, Borderland, Borderlander, and

Borderlandist, is mimicked functionally by the layering capabilities of GIS. The ability to

overlay sets of interdisciplinary data immediately exposes the relationships of separate systems

with one another. As British historical geographer Brain Harley has said, "The map is a

transcription of culture and of individual endeavour as well as a datum line in the social history

of a landscape made by ordinary men and women."[137] The history of the Irish partition is well

trodden territory, but geography is a discipline that reminds us that there are still important things

to be explored, discovered, and marveled at in the world. It is not just about where things are

located, it is about the who and the why of where.

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135. Michael Laffan quoted in Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 134.
136. Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 134.
137. J.B. Harley, "The Map as biography: thoughts on Ordnance Survey Map, Six-inch Sheet Devonshire CIX, SE, Newton Abbot," 2.

The application of ecological principles and the process of mapmaking are different ways of thinking about history and conducting historical scholarship. The environmental sciences encourage an empirical methodology which subjects measurable evidence to specific principles of reasoning. The analysis of the Irish partition as a function of the edge effect phenomenon posits that the communities of the border region responded to their unique environmental, social, and political conditions in a similar way. The production of maps is a way of demonstrating this principle. The process of data acquisition and analysis necessitates active engagement with the source material in a way that is uncommon in conventional historical research. Data should not be viewed as static and are not simply responded to through written narrative. Instead, they can be transformed through calculations and classifications.

In many ways, this process does not just respond to or analyze existing data, but promotes the creation of new information. The calculation of the relative intensity of the edge effect in the Irish border region, for instance, used religious and political statistics that already existed, but were combined, processed, and interpreted in an original way that created an entirely new quantification of a historical phenomenon. The relatively novel pursuit of historical GIS is a fount of creative potential. Cartography is a multifaceted, multidimensional graphic that can be a dataset in and of itself. Historical maps are a rich inventory of information, an expression of a distinct historical point of view, and a reflection of intellectual culture. Modern technology can extract this data and add it to the historical source base. The maps of the Irish border region are all representations of partition. Separately and collectively, they tell the story of the emplacement of a border in Ireland.

It is not the existence of this borderland of physical and human geography that is unnatural, but the entrenchment of a sharp, ideologically-based partition. Irish politician John Hume has observed, "The real division in Ireland is not the line in the map that we call partition…The real border in Ireland lies in the hearts and minds of the people."[138] Partition is indeed a thing of the imagination. It has tangled landscape with mindscape, distorting both and satisfying neither. In the early 20th century, the Irish edge effect was such that it defied being separated. Yet, over time, the borderland fragmented along sectarian and partisan lines according to the division suggested by partition. The symbolic magnitude with which it has been invested was not so much a reflection of differences, but a catalyst for the very creation of those differences. Indeed, partition today may actually make more sense than it did when it was first drafted in 1920. The secret labors of the Irish Boundary Commission remind us of a time when the border region was the highest expression of fluid Irish heritage. As Northern Irish poet Paul Muldoon described in his poem "The Boundary Commission," partition is an absurd interruption of all manner of natural flows. It may have been just as reasonable to divide the Borderlanders as it is to expect to administer the rain:

> *You remember that village where the border ran*
> *Down the middle of the street,*
> *With the butcher and baker in different states?*
> Today he remarked how a shower of rain
>
> Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane
> It might have been a wall of glass
> That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
> To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.[139]

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138. John Hume quoted in "John Hume: The Architect of Peace," Joseph P. Kennedy II, *Fordham International Law Journal* 18, 1994.
139. Paul Muldoon, "The Boundary Commission," in *Why Brownlee Left*, 1980.

The border continues to beguile and bemuse the Irish imagination. In January 2013, talk of a border poll seemed to portend a new chapter in the saga of partition.[140] The proposed referendum would tally public opinion on the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic. Though these discussions were mostly political posturing, they are a commentary on the continued importance of the period of time nearly one hundred years ago known as the partition decade. The border has remained fixed in its 1920 location, but it has transformed in significance in the decades following partition with the ebb and flow of social unrest, the passage of legislation, and the fluctuation of the Irish, British and European economies. The border is a barometer of the Irish times that is part myth and part memory; there is an edifice of intolerance as well as an interface of rapport. However it changes, the partition, and more importantly the border region, will continue to be an expression of contrasting visions of Ireland and a reminder of the nested quality of Ireland's border heritage. It is a frontier that extends back into ancient time, deep down into the Irish soil, upwards into the ideological reaches, and onwards into the future.

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140. David Young, "No plan for Northern Ireland border poll," *Independent*, January 22, 2013.

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