

A house divided: the Murrays of the border and the rise and decline of a small Irish house

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Ireland's right to unity (Dublin, 1949)

John Murray left more formal records than did many of his family.¹ Born in 1870, his death at home in 1953 was attributed to the senility in old age for which, he is still just about remembered.² He was married twice, first to Catherine Seery, in 1895, in the County Fermanagh hamlet of Teemore.³ Almost twenty-three years later, he stood at the same altar, and married Margaret Fee.⁴

He was widowed twice as well. Tuberculosis (phthisis pulmonalis) took Catherine in the summer of 1910.⁵ She had been certified with the illness just five months earlier, weeks before the birth of their fifth and final child – her third son, John Joseph.⁶ Catherine Murray's was one of a little over ten thousand Irish deaths attributed to the disease that year.⁷ Although it could and did afflict all classes, it was and is primarily an illness of the poor and under-resourced.

By the time that Margaret Murray died in 1953 her husband's memory had already gone.

As the owner of land, his name appears in valuation books, as it does in both of just two Irish censuses that are extant and currently available – 1901 and 1911. He was listed first as a farmer's son, and then a farmer, who was able to read and write.⁸ By then a 'head of household,' the second census contains a carefully scripted signature in his name, as indeed do both his wedding certificates, alongside those of his wives.

Signing by name was increasingly common among Irish newlyweds in the early twentieth century – a fact celebrated as heralding the onward march of elementary education. By 1918, some ninety-six point two per cent of grooms and ninety-seven point six per cent of brides were recorded as having done so.⁹ But even to a layperson, the handwritings in which these three signatures were made do not come close to matching. And when he registered Catherine’s death in 1910, John Murray only managed to sign by mark.¹⁰

Being a twice-married male householder, John Murray produced a bigger paper trail than his parents, wives or children but, were it not for his second marriage, it seems unlikely that any of them would have left many real written records of their lives beyond the scant (and possibly misleading) details contained in these official documents. But the private and domestic lives of the Murray family would enter into an extraordinary constellation with the public and constitutional transformation of twentieth-century Ireland.

The house in which Margaret Fee was born – where she and John would live for thirty-five years, raising their four children into adulthood – stood directly on the dividing line between Fermanagh and County Cavan. The Government of Ireland Act, 1920 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 elevated this hitherto quite unimportant boundary into a border between states. With one part in Northern Ireland (and, therefore, the United Kingdom) and another part in the Irish Free State, the Murray’s house would in time attract the attention of propagandists, journalists and travel writers, and bring the Murrays into contact or, in the last instance, correspondence with politicians, foreign visitors, and the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II.¹¹

This paper concerns the remarkable story of this otherwise unremarkable family and their home. In describing it as a ‘small house,’ I have deliberately sought establish a connection to the historiographical treatment of the Irish ‘big house’ or stately home. In addition to an assertion of democratic equivalence, this signals a similar intention – to locate the fortunes and relations of family and social class, alongside the practical and symbolic functions of the house itself, within a changing economic, political, and physical environment. Lacking in estate papers, it is reconstructed primarily through two clusters of sources. The skeletal state records of common Irish people, the stuff of genealogy – deeds, valuations, surviving census returns and certificates of births, deaths, and marriages – are gradually brought into a dialogue with the memories and first-hand accounts that were

jotted down and typed up by those who visited the Murrays and spoke to them over the course of approximately four decades, during the mid-twentieth century. It is the story of a once 'famous,' and now largely forgotten, small Irish house.

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In January 1949, the then Irish Minister for External Affairs, Sean MacBride, convened a conference in the Mansion House in Dublin. The All-Party Anti-Partition Conference met at a moment of apparent ferment. The previous year a new interparty government had been created, displacing Éamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil after sixteen years in power. It was a curious coalition united only by a desire to be rid of the previous incumbents. Its largest component, Fine Gael, led by Taoiseach John Costello, originated in the pro-Treaty faction in the Irish Civil War of 1922 combined with the rightwing street movements of the 1930s. It was joined on the government benches by leftists and republicans (including MacBride himself, a former Chief of Staff of the IRA), two Labour parties, a farmers' party, and a collection of independents.

Once out of office, de Valera had promptly embarked on an anti-partition speaking tour of the United States – positioning himself as the leading voice in favour of a united Ireland.¹² Not to be outdone and eager to demonstrate its own national credentials the new government passed the Republic of Ireland Act, 1948 coming into effect on 18 April 1949. Severing ties with Britain and the Commonwealth, this largely symbolic measure formalized what was already in essence the relationship established by the passage of the Irish constitution in 1937 and Dublin's decision to stay neutral during the Second World War.

In summoning the conference, MacBride sought to bring together government and opposition under one umbrella, generally known as the Mansion House Committee. It was decided to commission a short publication – to be written by editor of the *Irish Press* and de Valera's media ally Frank Gallagher.¹³ Intended to push the case at home and abroad for the political reunification of the island, this project received fresh impetus that spring with the passage of the Ireland Act at Westminster. Responding to Dublin's declaration of a republic, the Labour government in London risked the possible wrath of Britain's Irish population, and asserted that there would be no change to Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom without the consent of its parliament.

The first edition of *Ireland's right to unity* appeared in October 1949 – a ten-inch by eight-inch pamphlet 'of 16 pages finely printed on art paper in four colours and fully illustrated.'¹⁴ The arguments were simply put – partition was a British crime and had to end – but the production was considered impressive at the time.¹⁵ Dublin firm Browne and Nolan – publisher of Catholic literature, children's spelling and tables books, and anti-communist and other political outputs – was chosen for the quality of its work, despite being considerably more expensive than a rival bid.¹⁶

Inside, a series of maps and tables pointed out the perniciousness of partition – discrimination and gerrymandering in the North, the perfidies of British and Unionist politicians, and the disenfranchised nationalist and Catholic majorities of Northern Ireland's border counties. Featured on page six standing in the street outside their home, John and Margaret Murray and their daughter, Maggie Ellen, were the only private citizens whose names or images appeared.¹⁷

Their selection served several related purposes. Firstly, the border house underlined a serious and central argument – that the Irish border was 'unnatural.' This idea drew on the notion of an indivisible island but that was relatively easy for Unionists to dispense with. A *Northern Whig* editorial comment in direct response to the publication, for instance, pointed to the fact that any border by definition divides an existing land mass.¹⁸ It was more difficult to deny the problematic nature of partition on the ground.

The circumstances in which the Murrays lived were certainly extreme, but were not entirely different from those of many others. The border was created along the lines of the old county boundaries which, in the divided northern province of Ulster, had been in place since the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. They had grown in significance following the 1898 Local Government Act, but before partition had had little impact on everyday life.¹⁹

Although it remained a divisive question on the nationalist side, and was evaded in *Ireland's right to unity*, the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 had provided for a Boundary Commission, intended to redraw the Irish border, in line with the wishes of the inhabitants as well as geographic and economic considerations. This body was expected to resolve such issues, and the Irish delegation had believed it would also deliver substantial population transfers. Its acrimonious collapse in 1925, and subsequent agreements between the respective governments, had left the boundary as it was.²⁰

The Murrays' was one of 1,400 holdings that the border cut through,²¹ while the road outside was one of 180 that officially ran across it.²² So erratic was the borderline that it was said, for instance, that the Murrays' gable wall in Northern Ireland was geographically further south than was the other side.²³ This appears not to have been true but it was nevertheless entirely plausible.

Drummully – a small area home to sixty families in the South – was completely inaccessible by road or rail except through Northern Ireland,²⁴ while the settlement of Pettigo – with fewer than four hundred inhabitants – was divided along the line of the river running through it.²⁵ During World War 2, one portion of that village had at night been subject to the blackout, 'while the [other], in the Free State, glittered brightly'.²⁶ The partitioning of familiar space, as represented by the Murray house, was deployed in order to give the lie to unionist claims that the border was inevitable, or that it marked a rational or practical boundary between distinct peoples or even nations.²⁷

Secondly, the house served as a symbol of Ireland itself. Constructed in the typical elongated vernacular Irish style, whitewashed walls of stone and mortar supported a sharp-angled gabled roof of a type found throughout the country, but especially characteristic of the north and west.²⁸ Although he was out of office, it was entirely in keeping with the simple, rural, traditional Ireland that de Valera famously 'dreamed of', in which 'a people...satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit.'²⁹ Neatly thatched, it also had a picture postcard quality.

While one aim was to better inform the Irish public, the intended target for *Ireland's right to unity* was primarily overseas. The Murrays had previously been mentioned or appeared in local and national newspapers both in Ireland and abroad, but this was exposure on a different scale. As soon as it was returned from the press in October 1949, the Information Division of the Department for External Affairs – then under future politician and writer, Conor Cruise O'Brien³⁰ – set about distributing copies to Irish embassies around the world. These ranged from Egypt to Finland, to India and the Holy See,³¹ where dutiful diplomats busily sent them on to politicians, men of the cloth and the editors of major newspapers.³²

But the mass audience, for whom roughly 600,000 copies were printed between 1949 and 1953, were what we now call the Irish diaspora – Irish emigrant communities in Britain, the antipodes, and above all the USA where the 'widest possible distribution' was

sought.³³ They were to be reached both through associational networks of Irish organisations and the dense personal networks of family and friends. In March 1950, for instance, a series of newspaper advertisements urged people to purchase copies at 6d, pre-packaged in an envelope with a St Patrick's Day greeting card, 'for sending to your friends abroad.'³⁴

A century after the great migrations attendant on the Famine and its aftermath, it was in dwellings such as this that Irish-Americans had come to picture their forbears having lived. To the many thousands who had flocked to the recreated model villages, that featured in the World Fairs and Expositions held in major American cities, whitewashed thatched cottages had signalled 'Ireland,' since the late nineteenth century.³⁵ Since its establishment in 1939, the Irish Tourist Board had been serving similar fare,³⁶ and in the years following Robert Flaherty's 1934 ethnofiction 'Man of Aran', movie-goers had likewise been informed.³⁷ As James FitzPatrick, the so-called 'Voice of the Globe,' narrated in 'Glimpses of Erin,' a short travel documentary 'filler' screened the same year, the Irish lived in 'picturesque thatched-roofed cottages' and in 'humble but happy circumstances' where 'a stranger needs no introduction for he is always a welcome guest.'³⁸ Modest, yet more dignified than the one- or two-roomed cabins that many had likely left, here was that same untouched and unchanging Ireland-of-the-mind, were it not despoiled by the intrusion of an unnatural border.

Finally, the inclusion of the Murray house brought a softer, human – and even humorous – dimension to an otherwise dry and overbearing polemical tract. 'The door at which Mrs Murray and her daughter are standing,' read the caption beneath the photograph, 'is in the Six Counties. Behind Mr Murray's left shoulder is the door leading to the Twenty-Six Counties. The dog is half-in half-out both areas.'³⁹

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Thirty-one years earlier, on 11 February 1918, two people had been legally joined together under the auspices of Roman Catholic Curate John Brady, in the parish of Knockninny in the south Fermanagh district of Derrylin. There, thirty-year-old Margaret Fee married forty-eight-year-old John Murray from the townland of Derryhooley.⁴⁰

Less than two miles as the crow flies from where her new husband lived, the thatched farmhouse of the Fee family dated from at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Her grandfather, James Fee, and grandmother – also Margaret – had set up home in the five-roomed dwelling. It was a short distance downhill from his native district, Doon, on the northern slopes of Slieve Rushen (or Slieve Russell) mountain, which still dominates the local skyline.

Margaret and James Fee lived and died before the systematic certification of major life events, in a time for which, few Irish census records are extant. But according to subsequent family lore, he had returned from America with enough money to marry and settle down.⁴¹ This, and the birth of a son, Patrick Fee, in 1856, suggests that the new Mrs Murray's grandfather likely fled the Great Famine and spent perhaps as much as a decade in the United States.⁴² He had not made a vast amount, but seems to have done reasonably well.

Upon return, Fee purchased the rights to a long lease that had originally been granted to local Protestant farmer and soap-maker,⁴³ David Ross, in 1826 and that was set to last for the lifetime first of Princess, later Queen Victoria.⁴⁴ The house stood on roughly six acres of dry and gravelly soil, fatefully consisting of four acres, one rood and five perches in the Fermanagh townland of Gortineddan and one acre, two roods and twenty-four perches in neighbouring Scotchtown or Gortawee, in County Cavan.⁴⁵ The Fees also took an 'out-farm' of nine acres of land some distance from the home, further into Fermanagh at Carrickaleese.⁴⁶

The house was first 'partitioned' – in 1857. Like almost all occupants of small houses in nineteenth-century Ireland, the Fees lived in the shadow of the 'big house'. Built on land owned and let from George Montgomery, a declared 'lunatic,' whose family had occupied Ballyconnell House since 1724, it had passed upon his demise in 1841 to a cousin, James Hamilton Eney, of nearby Bawnboy. It was with his death in 1854 that the complications of what was then the Fee place began.⁴⁷

Much of Eney's estate, continued in the name of his young daughter, Constance Isabella, was transferred to the Encumbered Estates Courts. Established by Act of Parliament in 1848, this body served to organise the sale of those Irish lands that were long overburdened by debt or other obligations, and which had in many cases reached crisis point during the Famine years. Among Eney's former properties auctioned by lots in Dublin

on 19 December 1856, were Ballyconnell House itself and the townland of Gortawee. The sale, completed and registered the following year, saw the ‘big house’ go to George Roe, while the land on which the Cavan portion of the Fee house stood was sold to James Benison, a local mill owner and magistrate.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, other holdings, including the townland of Gortineddan, were retained and placed in trust for Constance Eney.⁴⁹ This split the house between two landlords. The total annual rent of £3 19s. 7d. was divided by order of the Encumbered Estates Commissioner, with £1 3s. 1d. apportioned to the Cavan plot. Both amounts were payable in two instalments each, due on the traditional ‘gale days’ of 1 May and 1 November.⁵⁰

By mid-nineteenth-century Irish standards, fifteen acres in total was by no means a small farm. If ranked according to size, it was just beneath of the upper third of all holdings in 1844, while a general process of consolidation during the Famine years left it somewhere around the median mark by 1851.⁵¹ But James Fee, typically of returning Irish migrants, did not principally aspire to land. While his wife Margaret spun wool for sale from an outbuilding,⁵² the house itself was originally a public one, situated in a prime location between Derrylin and Ballyconnell.

Located in County Cavan, just two miles away from Fees, Ballyconnell was the larger of the two settlements. Nestled beneath the mountain, it was ‘a small market and post town’, boasting a courthouse, a Church of Ireland and a Methodist Hall. A Catholic chapel lay a quarter mile south.⁵³ In 1851 its population had broken 500, as refugees from hunger left the countryside. After that, it entered long term decline from which it would not recover until the later twentieth century.⁵⁴

Like the farm, the house itself was no mean abode, albeit modestly dimensioned given its originally joint domestic and commercial functions. The ground floor consisted of three rooms – identifiable from the three front windows – each occupying the full width of the house, and opening directly one onto the next, rather than through a corridor or hall. The main front door led from the ‘street’ into the central – later the ‘border’ – room, with a kitchen and bedroom located at either end. Upstairs (as indicated by a more uncommon gable window), two further rooms filled the high loft, one of which, Mrs Murray would use to keep ducks.⁵⁵ In her later years, Mrs Murray would recall hearing that the house was newly built by a local builder named Pat Drumm⁵⁶ – a popular name in the locality. But comparison with the 1830s Ordnance Surveys suggests that an older dwelling was extended

with at least one outbuilding or 'office' also added.⁵⁷ This improvement seems to have included the barroom, with a door and window of its own, adjoining what would later become Prior's border shop.

But the site that James and Margaret Fee selected, positioned at a crossroads in the shadow of a large oak plantation, was already at that time a regular rendezvous for large numbers of young people attending open air dances. To those who came from the two villages as well as surrounding districts, to celebrate weddings or seasonal festivals, both woods and pub afforded shelter, with the latter serving refreshments while the former provided privacy.⁵⁸ Inside, the shelves that held the spirits and beer were located in one county, while the public parts of the bar were in the other.⁵⁹ Although it was no accident, therefore, that this house occupied an 'in-between', or even a liminal location, none could have foreseen at the time of its construction the meaning and significance that this would later acquire.

Patrick Fee had also lost his wife in 1910 – at the age of fifty-seven, the day before Christmas Eve, and twenty days after a paralytic stroke for which she had received no medical attention.⁶⁰ In 1883 – then aged twenty-seven, he had married a then thirty-year-old Ellen McKenna, in the chapel in Derrylin.⁶¹ Margaret was the younger of their two children. Although her older sister Mary was with their mother at the time of her death, she herself had already married and left home. Like her grandfather, James Fee, Mary's husband Patrick McBrien seems also to have returned from the USA. And like her sister's husband, he too had a previous family.

By the time the census was recorded in 1911, Mary McBrien, still only twenty-five, was living without her husband, but with three of his sons, aged from twelve to eighteen. She may have been struggling to cope. Six years earlier in November 1905 she had essentially been blamed for the loss of her second child, a baby, Patrick. The cause of death was attributed, to 'misadventure, probably by overlying' (suffocation while asleep), after a neighbour woman who was called to help reported finding black marks on the baby's body.⁶² Her surviving seven-year-old daughter, Maggie, was living with her father, as was another of her husband's American-born sons. Both children were still at school.⁶³

Widowed, Mary McBrien, would become – like her sister – Mrs Murray at the age of thirty-five upon her second marriage to a local servant named Pat.⁶⁴ But it was Mrs Margaret Murray, the younger of the two, who would continue to occupy the old family home.

Margaret and John were, on the face of it, a somewhat unlikely match. Primogeniture would not have been automatically presumed and men often married substantially younger women.⁶⁵ But spousal selection in this district, as with other parts of rural Ireland in the early twentieth century was, in large measure, a transactional affair. No man, it was said, owning or expecting to inherit a farm would marry a woman without what was called a ‘fortune’.⁶⁶ Equally, few women expecting to inherit would marry a man without land, and parents, who were generally required to supply this dowry – in the form of money or assets – were anxious to ensure their daughter’s prosperity as well as their own status, with fathers in particular liable to want to inspect a suitor’s land and stock.⁶⁷ John Murray owned thirteen acres at his home-place in Derryhooley which he had inherited upon his father James’s death in 1905.⁶⁸ But he also had five children, three of whom – two daughters and a son – were already by now young adults.

But Patrick Fee’s situation was also much diminished. Success abroad once had offered Patrick’s parents a potential gateway into that class around whom a new Ireland was already being built. Through the nineteenth century, especially the second half, a largely Catholic ‘shopocracy’ – of storekeepers and publicans – had increasingly asserted itself in much of rural Ireland. They served as a cornerstone of the emergent nationalist movement, bolstered by the conflicts over Irish land which saw both, the elimination of the smallest holdings and, eventually, the transfer of ownership, mostly to the stronger former tenants. The Fees had even become petty landlords themselves by sub-letting out a house and garden.⁶⁹ But by choosing for his public house a country crossroads, James Fee had hitched his prospects to the Ireland he had left. Both culturally and demographically it was already on the wane.⁷⁰

By the later nineteenth century, two rural Irelands were essentially in conflict – one, dominated (numerically at least) by a dense populace of labourers and just above subsistence cottiers, the other, by market farmers and other commercial players. As the first gave way to the second, rural populations were in decline and many local customs – dancing at crossroads amongst them – were beginning to fall foul of a newly strident moral order.

Between 1841 and 1901, the number of inhabitants of the two townlands – Gortineddan and Gortawee – had been reduced by more than half, and was still falling. The old oak wood was felled and sold as timber, the dancers stopped coming, and the pub closed down.⁷¹

Patrick Fee appears to have developed financial problems and possibly a degree of incapacity. Having borrowed £150 under the Land Purchase Act in 1900 to buy the two parcels that he had long leased and farmed, most of the land at Carrickaleese, the more valuable of the pair, was by 1909 listed in the valuation records as being in the possession of a local widow who, by marriage, shared his wife's maiden name – Ellen McKenna.⁷² In 1914, he sold the portion of the plot adjacent to his own house, that was situated in Gortawee, County Cavan, back to his former landlord Benison.⁷³ This left him with not much more than four acres.

So small a holding might have struggled by itself to turn a son into marriageable material, but Fee had only one unmarried daughter left, and a female heir to a house and farm of any size would not have escaped the attention of many younger, potentially wealthier men, without dependants. Despite their difficulties, on paper, both Patrick and Margaret Fee might still have hoped for better.

Notwithstanding the power that this system of ownership, dowries and inheritance afforded to parents over their offspring's choice of partner, they could not always control the pace of events, and there is the slightest hint of another possible consideration. So-called 'runaway marriages' were not uncommon – less likely involving straightforward elopement, than a young couple taking up together at the house of a friend or neighbour in the hope of pressurising the woman's family to avoid the public shame, by consenting to the match and paying up. It was a major gamble for the woman involved who, should the man then refuse the sum on offer, would be sent to America, or worse.⁷⁴

The groom in this case was well past the first flush of youth, but Fee may have faced a similar predicament. Whatever the precise circumstances, the couple were married in a ceremony witnessed by her older sister Mary and a neighbour John Donohoe. Entrusting his younger children to the care of their older siblings, it was into his wife's house that John Murray moved. On 6 October 1918, less than eight months since her wedding day, Margaret gave birth to her first son. Registered as James, he would bear his father's name, and was always known as John.⁷⁵

In February 1958, journalists reporting on the recent closure of cross-border roads paid a by then customary call to the home of two bachelor brothers, John and Phelim Murray⁷⁶ – the eldest and the youngest sons of Margaret and John senior. John had been followed in 1920 by Edward, known as Ned.⁷⁷ Both were born before the border. By the time Phelim – registered as Felix – came along in September 1923,⁷⁸ partition was not only politically in place, it had ‘hardened’ into a customs barrier.

The fourth and final sibling, Maggie Ellen, born in March 1925,⁷⁹ had died at the age of twenty-seven of a brain haemorrhage.⁸⁰ Their mother might have hoped – as her grandmother had done before – to outlive her older husband and become a farmer in her own right and the owner of what had been her father’s house and land. But in 1953, still in her mid-sixties and, like her mother following a stroke, she predeceased him by several months. She, at least, had seen a doctor.⁸¹ Following his parents’ deaths, Ned, who like his brothers would remain single, had left home to work in England.

In response to an ongoing IRA campaign against partition – the so-called ‘border campaign’ from 1956-62 – the Northern Ireland government had launched a crackdown in border areas. Homes were searched with one woman questioned as to why she had a cut-out picture of the Murray house, an apparently seditious item that she described as being ‘of permanent interest.’⁸² At the behest of Stormont, the British army had sealed a large number of border crossings.⁸³ The vast majority of cross border roads lacked customs facilities and were not, therefore, ‘approved’ for carrying dutiable goods across. It was many of these ‘unapproved routes,’ including the road outside the Murrays house, that were earmarked for closure. There had already been two attempts to create a large hole (or ‘crater the road’) using explosives – causing, so the brothers would later allege, damage to their property.⁸⁴ As had also happened elsewhere, these efforts had been thwarted by local people filling it in.⁸⁵

This time around they had been ‘spiked’ – lengths of metal (usually pieces of railway track) – were set in concrete at intervals across the carriageway. The Murray brothers did not drive and could still get in and out by bicycle, but it was causing problems with access for farm machinery. In a worse predicament was their neighbour, Seamus Gallen, who lived just inside Cavan, but was cut off from the rest of that county.⁸⁶ His only way in or out was

now through Northern Ireland which he was unable to enter owing to an outstanding warrant for his arrest relating to a twenty-one-year-old smuggling charge from 1936.⁸⁷

As usual the Murrays provided extra colour for the piece. Reporters and other visitors of this kind had become a familiar sight in the border house in the almost ten years since *Ireland's right to unity*.⁸⁸ The original photographer, Joseph Gormley, from the Fermanagh county-town of Enniskillen, had done well supplying duplicates to foreign journalists and others, eventually it was said, running into hundreds of copies.⁸⁹ But those who ventured out to Derrylin themselves were treated to a show.

The border cut down the middle of what was now the 'dining-room-cum-bedroom' at the centre of the home, and a favourite trick was to sit on a chair 'in the Six Counties' while eating off 'the table in the Twenty-six', or to pass the salt back a forward between North and South.⁹⁰ Callers could sit on a sofa drinking tea while the border ran straight through them,⁹¹ and one American clergyman was delighted to collect an autograph and pencil written with hands in one state while their owner was seated in another.⁹² This was one of several similar acts that the Murrays would perform including lighting lamps or serving tea in similar fashion.⁹³

Life has been said to imitate art and, in 1916, when the idea of a border was being seriously considered, young Dublin solicitor, Daniel Concepta Maher, sought to lampoon the policy in what appears to have been his only play, *Partition*, a one-act sketch staged at the Abbey Theatre that November. The play centers on the fictional village of Ballynadurgh somewhere on the Ulster-Leinster boundary. When the new border divides the town, it also cuts through the house of Andy Kelly, a local barfly who is heavily in debt. Kelly draws a chalk line across his floor and moves his belongings back and forth in order to keep them out of the reach of the police and bailiffs who call from either side in turn. When both arrive at once, he balances his furniture on the line itself, playing each side against the other until fighting breaks out between them.⁹⁴

Once partition became a reality, border farce focused on the smuggling trade – in livestock, starting with the Anglo-Irish trade war from 1932,⁹⁵ and embracing household goods of every kind during the Second World War. The Murray house was sometimes used to store goods ready to be taken over, or to pen a Northern animal over night before a fair in Ballyconnell. And already by the late 1940s, the image of wily yet relatively harmless

peasants pitting their wits against officials was fairly well established across a range of media.

In the 1946 romantic spy picture, *I See a Dark Stranger*, everything almost goes awry for the central characters when a fake funeral cortege is rumbled and the coffin found to contain contraband. Hero and heroine manage to escape, but lose track of which side of the border they are on.⁹⁶ It was in 1958, that comedian Spike Milligan began to write *Puckoon*, his zany, racist and otherwise objectionable border novel published 1963.⁹⁷ The humour, such as it is, stems from the final meeting of a counterfactual Irish Boundary Commission. Anxious to complete their work before last orders, the delegations agree to finish drawing the border without delay, creating much mischief for the partitioned eponymous village. Funeral gags again feature in attempts to acquire a passport for a body destined for the town graveyard, and coffins filled, this time, with explosives. For much of the book, the town's inhabitants cram into a single small corner of O'Toole's pub, the Holy Drinker, where thanks to the border, beverages are thirty percent cheaper.⁹⁸

The Murrays offered a real-life counterpart to this vein of border comedy and in some cases, may have informed it. In the reporters wake, increasingly came tourists – either tracing their roots in the area, or visiting Ireland en route to Britain or the Continent.⁹⁹ The busy house became a kind of street theatre, complete with props. Inside, one wall displayed a message from Queen Elizabeth II – now lost, but recalled by surviving family as a letter congratulating the Murrays on their unusual living arrangements.¹⁰⁰ The opposite end was adorned with a large drum belonging to the local Ancient Order of Hibernians band – the Catholic fraternal organisation to which all the male Murrays belonged and, with whom, the brothers marched and played.¹⁰¹

Hibernian 'faith and fatherland' politics, represented a particular strand within Irish nationalism which, along with rival ties of place and family, sometimes brought its members into confrontations both with their Protestant rivals, the Orangemen, and the more avowedly secular republicans. But the Murrays were used to living on a tightrope. One unionist visitor described Phelim Murray cleaning the front, 'partitioned' window. With a foot in each state, he diplomatically took care to polish either side to 'shine with equal brilliance.'¹⁰² In the Troubled 1920s, the road was trenched and the Murrays regularly served drinks of water to British and Irish Free State soldiers who came to their respective doors.¹⁰³ During the Irish Civil War, the Arigna mountains to the west provided a fastness for

anti-Treaty IRA ‘irregulars,’ who carried out a notorious raid in Ballyconnell in February 1923. A favourite family story held that on one occasion a group of these republicans, including men named Kenny and McHugh, had called at the house for tea through the door on the Free State side. On entering the border room, they came face-to-face with a company of B-specials – Northern Ireland’s part-time Protestant police militia. Initial tensions were soon dispelled as the two parties – each sticking to its own end of the table – struck up conversation over their refreshments.¹⁰⁴

On this occasion, in 1958, John Murray appears to have had something very specific on his mind. Just a few weeks earlier, the County Fermanagh Unionist Association had objected unsuccessfully to his inclusion on the local electoral register on the grounds that he slept with only his head in that county. The rest of his body, the objectors had maintained, lay in Cavan – which was a different local authority area, as well as a different state.¹⁰⁵ Local elections were often closely fought and folded largely along confessional lines. Fortunately for John he paid his rates in Northern Ireland where he worked for the council as a roadman. When the Cavan roll was checked to ensure his name was absent, his right to a vote in Fermanagh was confirmed. And so, before the photographers left, John posed for photographs in bed.¹⁰⁶

Whether the Murrays had anything stronger than tea to offer to their many guests, remains obscured behind tight lips and hazy memories. In 1950, one *Leitrim Observer* journalist described a man sleeping with head and feet in different states in what he or she clearly took to be a bar.¹⁰⁷ At least one shebeen (unlicensed premises), known as ‘Benny the Go’s’ or the ‘Spike Hotel,’ did straddle the border in Louth and South Armagh, but it seems to have been built there for the purpose, with no suggestion that it was a home.¹⁰⁸ And although it had officially long since ceased to be a pub, alcohol cast a shadow over the Murray cottage and its later residents. To varying degrees, the brothers drifted into dependency, and before it was eventually demolished, relatives would find evidence of people drinking in the long-abandoned border house.¹⁰⁹

But if the Murrays had any secrets they were hiding them in plain sight. While John and Ned (who had since returned from England) – spent their last days in local nursing

homes, Phelim drowned in 1989, having fallen into shallow water after a party outside the nearby town of Lisnaskea. The drinking debts he left behind saw the brothers lose their last foothold in Carrickaleese, to a neighbour who had acted as his creditor. But in his youth, he had been a prominent local sportsman, and the death notices that were his last mention in the newspapers, suggest that he was mourned by a community to whom he was well and widely known.¹¹⁰

Two or three years before he died, Phelim spoke to the writer Colm Tóibín who was researching his book, *Walking along the Irish border*. Tóibín was following in the footsteps of actor Richard Hayward who had, thirty years earlier published his *Border Foray*. A unionist and Orangeman, Hayward had travelled the border finding much merit in it. A 'haphazard' borderline, which to all appearances had been drawn by 'some lurching Irish drunkard' was revealed by 'sober history' to have an ancient pedigree.¹¹¹ Manifest not only in the island's two traditions, but also in the different styles of ancient tombs and even aspects of flora, fauna and geology,¹¹² here was just the kind of legitimising myth of Northern Ireland, against which, the Murrays had been so often summoned in evidence.¹¹³ In his 1942 study of James Craig (the first prime minister of Northern Ireland) Belfast writer, Hugh Shearman, told his readers how then as now, 'over two thousand years ago the geological frontiers of Ulster had been frontiers also of human sentiment.'¹¹⁴ It was a suggestion said to have made John Murray laugh in 1949, as he pointed across the street towards the ditch that was its nearest visible marker.¹¹⁵

But it was impossible or irresistible for the writer of a book about the border, to not pay a call to the 'famous border house.' Hayward's description of the Murrays situation as one of the 'curiosities of partition' is, like that of the border, almost entirely positive – entitling them to purchase goods wherever they might be cheaper. 'Good luck to the decent man,' he joked of Phelim.¹¹⁶

In contrast to this benign boundary, Tóibín's 1980s account – reissued under the telling title *Bad blood* – is altogether darker than its predecessor. His border is a frontier, a fracture zone, where confessional rivalries and class combine with an intense mix of intimacy and rural isolation, in deadly animosities. Relatively, this tiny gravel-rich stretch of borderland had prospered economically – boosted by the then-successful gambles of local quarryman Sean Quinn.¹¹⁷ But conflict, having returned, was well into its second decade. It was with real funerals that the border had come to be associated.

Likewise, the house had lost much of its previous romance. In 1958, the thatched roof had been repaired for the last time by James Baxter, described then as ‘one of the few members of his trade left’.¹¹⁸ But in 1963, in expectation of a grant but amid uncertainty as to which government might supply it, the cottage was given the new slate roof to which, the brothers themselves had probably long aspired.¹¹⁹

Locally, nationally and internationally, this had been a moment of optimism. As well as the Beatles’ first LP – which came, perhaps, too late for the Murray brothers – that spring had seen the road reopened, following the end of the ‘border campaign.’ This coincided with the elevation of liberal Unionist, Terrence O’Neill, as Northern Ireland Premier. Reforming Irish *Taoiseach*, Séan Lemass, was already in office in Dublin, and both governments saw themselves as looking outwards, and forwards instead of back, while Britain and Ireland prepared to enter Europe.¹²⁰ Probably at the same time, possibly supported by the same grant, whitewashed walls had given way to pebbledash.¹²¹

But, since the early 1970s, the crossing at Murray’s house had been the site of several serious incidents. Both the Provisional IRA and British army set up temporary checkpoints on the border, with the latter making a number of controversial incursions into the South.¹²² In late October 1972, four British soldiers were injured in a roadside bomb just yards from the front door.¹²³ Gunfire was exchanged across the border more than once,¹²⁴ as was a rocket which landed in a neighbouring field.¹²⁵ Several attempts had been made to close the road again between 1970 and 1972 but, after loyalist paramilitaries destroyed another nearby crossing at Aghalane Bridge, it was left open in the face of ongoing action by local people. Entering Fermanagh, to work or reach the fields at Carrickaleese, now meant passing through a permanent British army installation – complete with cameras and search facilities – which occasionally brought the brothers into confrontation.¹²⁶

By the time Colm Tóibín arrived, the gas ‘Tilley lamps’ of the 1950s had been replaced by electricity, from the South, that also powered a television set, which – unlike the dog – was licensed in the North. Running water connected them to Northern Ireland while, of the two postmen who still called daily, it was the Southern one who came first. Learned by rote, these quotidian absurdities were rattled off by Phelim, who appears to have lost his earlier enthusiasm:

I sympathised with him for the inconvenience of living in two states.
He said it wasn’t too bad; that wasn’t the worst part of it all. What

was the worst part of it? I asked. He looked across the road to the ditch and the hill beyond the ditch. He left a dramatic silence. The interviewers, he said, the reporters, the television cameras; since he was a child they had come to tell the story of the Murrays cut in two by the border. There wasn't a single day went by but there wasn't a knock at the door. Yesterday a bus pulled up outside and he had 'seen them all leppin' out and taking snaps'.

People had come 'from America and all over' to see the house. They never had any peace, himself and his brothers. That was the worst thing, he said, and looked at me frankly. I understood, I said. I took his point. He went back into the house and I walked back towards Ballyconnell.¹²⁷

Conclusion

The border house outlasted all those who had lived in it, standing for long enough to appear on google Streetview. It was captured twice – along with Fermanagh in 2009 and with Cavan a year later. When it was knocked down thereafter, to extend the forecourt of what is now Cassidy's petrol station by a couple of yards or meters, it might have been taken as a metaphor for the border. For all practical purposes, save for small differences in the price of fuel, the peace process and European integration made it appear – at that time – to be vanishing into memory.

This simple country cottage had long stood in the crucible of modern Irish history. Although itself immovable, its story is interwoven with evolving Irish relationships with Britain and the world; between Britain, Ireland and Europe; and between Ireland and the United states. Having started as a returning emigrant's dream, as an ideal Irish homestead and a piece of propaganda it had re-entered the diasporic flows of people, things, ideas and money to which it owed its origins. Attracting journalists, political visitors, tourists and the simply curious, the Murray home became another kind of 'public house.'

But behind the whitewashed image and humorous outward show, there is perhaps a darker, sadder or just more ordinary and complicated story. It had been a family home with all the human intricacies that entails – births, marriages and deaths (all three both timely and untimely), inheritance, poverty, emigration, addiction and old age. Running through these personal details are the social and cultural questions that have given shape to modern Ireland as surely as its constitutional boundary. But it was not those that made its name.

It had also witnessed dark and deadly days. When Phelim spoke of himself and his brothers having ‘never had any peace,’ it is hard not to detect a double meaning. On the one hand, the border – that defined their world and brought them fame – had been product, site and cause of conflict throughout the twentieth century. On the other hand, while they had clearly enjoyed and toyed with the attention, he at least may have come to lament the loss of privacy that entailed.

If it is useful, at a moment when the bordering impulse is again apparently on the march, to think about its human and very personal impacts, then it is useful also to consider this tension and interpenetration between private and public lives amidst what Alison Light, in another context, has recently described as ‘a boom in the culture of exposure.’ The place between public and private, she suggests, can be both ‘painful, [and] even harmful’ as well as ‘playful and affectionate,’¹²⁸ and it seems that this was true of the border house as well. Partition placed the Murrays’ private spaces at right angles to the public space of states and territories and the policies and conflicts that surround them. From the first newspaper articles to the writing of this paper, it is a boundary that, with their direct or indirect collusion, has continued to be transgressed.

No wonder then, that on that day in February 1958, John Murray junior had been so keen to pose for photographs in bed. In answer to his unionist critics, who sought his exclusion from the public voters’ role, it looks as if he wanted the reporters to help him set the record straight. Appearing in this most intimate of settings, he wanted them to show the world, how when he lay asleep at night, the border ran, in fact, ‘across the heart.’¹²⁹

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