

Borders

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I took this picture last week. It was taken from the harbour in Lower Town, Fishguard, in Pembrokeshire. I was looking towards the new port built around 1900, nearly two miles across the water. That new port is still the location from which the ferries for Ireland depart. What I was looking at, as a result, was a border, even if that is not immediately apparent from the photo.



I think that lack of obviousness is a part of the relevance of this photo. Borders matter, and yet very often we need to be told that they exist. Their location is otherwise very far from obvious.

This is most especially the case with land borders. I have crossed many of these in my time. Frequently the only way you know you have crossed a border is because a sign informs you of the fact.

In the case of Fishguard, the situation is more complicated because the nature of the border here has changed considerably over time.

When the port I was looking towards was built, the Irish destination that the port serves at Rosslare, County Wexford, in Ireland was part of the UK.

In 1922, that ceased to be the case. The port became an international border with Ireland.

During World War II Ireland was neutral. The boundary took on a different meaning.

The border changed again in 1973. In that year, both the UK and Ireland joined the EU. Under the Single Market and Customs Union, this border virtually ceased to exist.

Brexit changed the nature of the border, yet again. It now has much more significance again.

Borders are, then, to some degree human creations.

And yet, they also are not. There is a very obvious physical border at Fishguard. It is the Irish Sea.

There is also another dimension to this. The Irish are not Welsh, any more than the Welsh are English. Some borders are definitely defined by the subtle, and yet simultaneously glaringly obvious, distinctions that such distinctions create.

In that sense, Fishguard is a natural border, but despite that, it is still one whose nature has changed massively in little over 120 years. Unless we bother to understand these things, we cannot appreciate just what borders, and so defining and then defending them, really means. We get such things wrong at our peril.