

An Ulsterman considers his passport

Introduction

As the abstract for this talk announced, the title inserts John Hewitt's preferred identity or at least the bedrock of it – *Ulsterman* - into Bernard Crick's celebrated essay on nationality and allegiance: 'An *Englishman* considers his passport'. Both the identity and the essay now sound rather quaint.

Hewitt's 'Ulsterman' - *steeped in the traditions of this place* - was once common, if contentious, usage (for example, Seamus Heaney thought using it would betray his identity). Today, the term is heard less frequently and confined mainly to sport – for example, the Ulster rugby team for whom we are supposed to stand up.

Crick's essay appeared in *The Irish Review* in 1988. His passport designated him a *citizen* of 'The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. That designation, Crick argued, did not sort out the existential question of the hotel register: his *nationality*. He had this to say about the *Irish* response to the hotel register:

'when those with an address in Northern Ireland write "British" one reasonably assumes that they are Protestant and Unionist. And a few with similar addresses boldly write 'Irish', and some of those even carry, quite legally, an Irish passport instead of or as well as a United Kingdom passport. Once or twice I've seen entries which slide around the question and write Citizen of the United Kingdom'... Crick assumed the latter were Alliance Party voters.

Times change. The idea of signing an *actual* hotel register – with intimations of Mr and Mrs Smith on an illicit weekend – seems rather archaic as does the assumption that only nationalists would have an Irish passport.

After the EU Referendum – and following Ian Paisley Jr’s advice - a *Banx* cartoon depicts a wife, holding the latest post, addressing her husband wearing a bowler and an Orange Sash: ‘*Look*’, she says, ‘*our Irish passports have just arrived*’. As Sammy Wilson confirmed to the House of Lords EU Select Committee earlier this year, Unionist applications for Irish passports is more than just hearsay.

In my own case this isn’t new. From 1981-1991, I held an Irish passport as well as a British one. The reason wasn’t divided allegiance but instrumental calculation. I was travelling frequently across what used to be known as the ‘Iron Curtain’ and thought that an Irish passport could make things easier.

Maybe it did. The fact that I was never approached by any East European security agency to be a spy may be proof enough (I’m loath to admit my own insignificance).

By 1991 - referring to the poetic theme of this year’s Hewitt Summer School - European borders and allegiances had shifted; the world appeared to have changed and changed utterly. If you recall, ‘the end of history’ was proclaimed. Even my old politics tutor at Queen’s, Mick Cox, argued in *Northern Ireland: The War That Came in from the Cold* that the peace process in Northern Ireland was also a product of that change.

Here was both a literal and ideological frontier crossing – the fall of the Berlin Wall, German re-unification and the Treaty on European Union signed in Maastricht in 1992. I assumed two passports to be redundant. Here is that old passport – a historical artefact now. The change from this national format to this common European one coincided with the events just mentioned. I took Paisley Jr’s advice. In the spirit of that *Banx* cartoon mine arrived on 11th July – maybe there is a joker in the Irish passport office.

When I consider this old passport, Hewitt's poem *The Frontier* - with its small men in uniform, its thumbing of passports, its bracing for change – sounds familiar. When I look at the border stamps, it is like reading the story of Europe's changing history.

Austria/Vienna

A stamp dated 1981 reads Wien Schwechat – Vienna's international airport. One of Prince Metternich's celebrated remarks was that '*Asia begins at the Landstrasse*' - that his summer house in Vienna marked '*the frontier of civilisation*'. If this was (partly) a jest, remember that a Berlin Cold War saying was '*Siberia begins at Checkpoint Charlie*'. In 1981 it *did* feel that a different world began at the Landstrasse. I saw road signs for Budapest, Bratislava and Prague – that other, ideological, East bequeathed by Yalta in 1945.

Then I knew little about Vienna or Austria. What I learnt quickly was a lesson in shifting borders and allegiances. Vienna had lost its Empire after 1918 and its hinterland after 1945. I experienced then a city of nostalgia, living on the romance of the old Habsburg dynasty – romantic, so long as one didn't look too closely at its history. Even Bruno Kreisky, then Socialist Chancellor of Austria, lamented that the old Empire had not survived as a supra-national community in Central Europe, nationally diverse but retaining its basic unity. I felt it a melancholic city because that mythic order was gone and Vienna seemed condemned to provincialism.

What was that romantic Austrian myth? You may know Hugo von Hofmannsthal best as the librettist for Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. But he was also an advocate of a certain *Austrian* idea of Central Europe. Coincidentally, he was born in *Landstraße*. In 1917, he defined that idea:

'to be at once border march, border wall, and settlement between the European empire and an always chaotically moving mixture of peoples camped before its gates, half Europe and

half Asia, and at the same time a flowing border, a point of departure for colonisation, for penetration, with cultural waves propagating toward the East, but also receiving and ready to receive the counter-wave striving westward.'

This rosy view of benign co-existence in the Habsburg Empire – albeit with Germans playing the leading role - seemed forced in 1917. In 1918 the Empire collapsed. The original telly-historian AJP Taylor's judgement was cruel: only poets imagined it as '*a device for enabling a number of nationalities to live together*'. He chose to call it a '*vast collection of Irelands*' – by which he meant permanently in crisis.

After its collapse, frontiers went up in the name of national self-determination (as in Ireland) and Hewitt's '*small men in uniform*' appeared. For those in former Habsburg territory who were to experience ethnic nationalism, Nazism and Soviet Communism was it any wonder a romance of the past lingered, even if confined to old coffee houses and to literature?

Take two chroniclers of change after World War 1: Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig. In Roth's novels one finds that mix of nostalgia and melancholy for a lost world but also horror at the world coming into being, a world of ethnic exclusiveness with no place for people like him.

Equally, Zweig's famous *The World of Yesterday* evokes, like Hofmannsthal's, an idea of Europe out of Austrian experience. However, his words could be those of Emanuel Macron today: '*The European idea is not a primary emotion like patriotism or ethnicity, it is not born of a primitive instinct, but rather of perception; it is not the product of spontaneous fervour, but the slow-ripened fruit of a more elevated way of thinking*'.

To use David Goodhart's terms, after 1918 Roth and Zweig had become *anywheres* who had lost their *somewhere*. Both died in exile - Roth of drink in Paris, Zweig of suicide in Brazil.

One is tempted to say – an epitaph for an idea.

A book that made a big impact in the 1980s, particularly in Ireland and a favourite of the Hewitt Summer School, was Claudio Magris' *Danube*. Like the meandering course of that river, he explored the diverse currents of Central European civilisation. It's appeal here as elsewhere was obvious. Though lingering on worlds that had gone, he gave hope that things could change – in short, that eventually life would overcome ideology. People beyond Landstrasse wanted that. People here wanted that. At the time, it just didn't seem possible.

Magris described the old myth as an art of flight, waiting for a country '*forever sought and foreseen but never known*'. Vienna he described as '*a crossroads, a place of departures and returns*' where '*history gathers together and then disperses*'. That is how I sensed the country and the city in the 80s – waiting for history to gather itself again. If Magris felt at home in that world, maybe it is because he is a native of Trieste (James Joyce's old haunt), a city of shifting borders and allegiance.

Frontiers are lines on a map but they are also acts of political will – in the minds of men as the Irish historian JC Beckett wrote in 1966 or *Mauer im Kopf* as Berliners put it. Reading Hewitt's poem *The Frontier* in the light of Magris – especially his later work *Microcosms* – there is a kindred spirit. Magris' reflection that no frontier is final echoed Hewitt's implicit poetic appeal: '*Perhaps the only way to neutralise the lethal power of borders is to consider oneself and to put oneself on the other side, for ever*', an act of imagination even more important when the mental border runs *within* rather than *between* territories.

Then remarkably - after 1989 - change *did* happen, more suddenly than anyone ever imagined. A new country did appear. Austria became a member of the European Union; Vienna recovered its hinterland if not its old empire; the frontier to 'Asia' opened up again. Revisiting the city recently my *first* thought was: Vienna today would be more familiar to

Hofmannsthal, Roth and Zweig than the Vienna I experienced in 1981. Here, it appeared, was that idea - sought, foreseen and now known.

The *second* thought was: Vienna had a new *elan* and Austria a new role in Europe. However, the problems that the old myth suppressed – ethnic animosities, racial tensions, religious segregation – had returned. Frontiers are again at the heart of Vienna's diplomacy. The Austrian Interior Minister recently announced a strategy called *Proborders*, declaring a state that '*can't protect its borders effectively, loses its credibility*'.

Last year, moreover, Ivan Krastev's book *After Europe* argued that the migration crisis reignites an older imaginative split in Europe - Zweig's *primary emotion* (nationalism) against *elevated way of thinking* (cosmopolitanism). His conclusion has a familiar echo. He thought that the EU's strength is its capacity to survive. Why familiar? It is the historians' judgement of the Habsburg Empire...until it collapsed.

Alpen-Adria

Those who visit Vienna will know that a popular museum exhibition concerns the defeat of the Turks at the siege of Vienna in 1683. A sense of siege has returned - to paraphrase Hofmannsthal a border wall, against a chaotically moving mixture of peoples camped before its gates *preventing* the wave striving westward. It is not just Austria - Journalist Tim Marshall writes that *We're Living In An Age Of Walls* in which the cry 'tear down this wall' is being replaced with 'fortress mentality'. How does one explain this?

Consider another set of stamps in the passport: Thoerl-Maglern, Coccau and Ratece.

Throughout the 80s, I spent time in the Austrian village of Thoerl-Maglern in Kaernten, directly on the border with Italy at Coccau in Friuli. Drive over that border for a few miles and you reach Ratece in what was then Yugoslavia, now Slovenia. The local name for this Alpine region is *Dreilaendereck* or three country corner. It felt very cosmopolitan to have

your breakfast in Austria (non-EC, neutral), lunch in Italy (EC, NATO), dinner in Yugoslavia (Communist, non-aligned) and back home before bedtime.

In terms of Hewitt's poem, in each place were new postage stamps, prices, manifestoes. The cultural changes were obvious: drink beer in Austria, wine in Italy and schnapps in Slovenia I was advised. But the landscape did not alter. You were always in '*these mountains*'.

All three were formerly part of the Habsburg Empire and ethnically mixed. War and frontiers have made each part ethnically homogenous though relationships are good. Today the region designates itself *Alpen-Adria*. Old borders have become – to use current jargon – 'frictionless'. No one mans the old posts; there are no more stamps; all three are in the EU and Schengen. When I was there last, I saw a new book with the subtitle: *Zwei Flüsse, drei Kulturen, vier Sprachen* (the fourth is Friulian) – very Habsburgian indeed.

Magris thought borders are '*a need, a fever, a curse*'. In Alpen-Adria the borders remain – the stamps, prices, manifestoes too – but they are no longer a curse, at least for residents and tourists. Yet fevered concern has returned as fear of invasion at the gates. Here is my explanation.

I recall waiting for a local train in Thoerl Maglern and looking at the timetable. I calculated that – with one or two changes – I could be in Belgrade, Prague, Warsaw, Budapest or Zagreb. As an island-dweller, I thought this marvellous. Then an epiphany: I realised that people from there could also come here - and possibly with an army. At that point, much of European history suddenly made sense.

For example, I enjoyed the multi-national experience as an array of cultural goods. Yet between 1915-18 over one million Italian and Austrian soldiers died in those mountains. Between 1940-45 they were the scene of bitter conflict between Nazis and Yugoslav partisans.

The grand objective of European integration, of course, is to open borders by removing the fear of invasion. Recently, that objective has become part of the problem, with the migrant crisis falling under military-sounding objectives like ‘closing off the Balkan Route’.

Some doubt it *is* a crisis, given the falling numbers of asylum-seekers. Perhaps – but I think much can be explained by an older tension between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that long predates Yalta. It is the ‘German problem’. In the post-war revision to his history of the Habsburg Monarchy, AJP Taylor argued that if Russia withdrew from Europe the result would be ‘restoration of German hegemony’. He meant that the states of Central Europe could only exist as independent nations in a German system. European integration was also intended to solve that problem. In 2015, Angela Merkel’s unilateral decision on migrants– however much motivated by genuine humanitarian concern – revived deep historical concerns.

Czechoslovakia

In Hewitt’s poem, the train from France to Switzerland slows to a stop at the frontier; uniformed officials drift down the corridor inspecting documents; customs officers chalk the bags but leave passengers to shut them. Travelling across Central Europe’s former ideological frontier was even more intrusive.

There is a visa for Czechoslovakia. The border stamp is Breclav, dated 1984. The train from Vienna did not stop *at* the frontier. It stopped in no-man’s land. Iron gates closed behind it. Alongside – the old corridor carriages as Hewitt describes – armed guards patrolled with dogs.

The first men in uniform searched under the seats and above in the luggage racks. The second checked passports and visas. The third went through bags thoroughly and left you to shut them. But there was a fourth with two armed companions. His job was to exchange currency – good Austrian Schilling for worthless Koruna.

I may have mis-remembered, but I believe the rate was one to one. What I do remember thinking was: here is the state operating a blatant protection racket. Not a good impression. My impression of Prague was even worse.

Prague today is hen/stag do capital of Europe for partying Irish and Brits. Then it was drab, claustrophobic and, as Vaclav Havel described it, *demoralised* by the failed Prague Spring of 1968. If Vienna seemed to be waiting for times to change, Prague appeared to have given up hope, resigned to cultural and political suffocation. Milan Kundera's celebrated essay of 1984 '*The Tragedy of Central Europe*' claimed that politicians in the west were happy to abandon the east – or really did think Siberia began at Checkpoint Charlie.

Kundera's recovery of the term Central, rather than Eastern, Europe was not nostalgia for the old order but hope for a non-communist future. In 1984 it appeared beyond hope. Then the 'Velvet Revolution' in 1989 proved otherwise.

Of course, Czechoslovakia, a successor state to the Habsburg Empire, no longer exists. Like Yugoslavia - originally the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – it split into its national parts. Unlike Yugoslavia, it did so peacefully. Borders go – and also appear.

In 1993 Timothy Garton-Ash asked: *Can Central Europe be put together again at the very point where it has most often been divided?* – in other words, can it avoid the clash of populisms which once produced *that vast collection of Irelands?* Today, beyond the Landstrasse, we have the Visegrad Four – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – with Austria on the edge, as ever pulled two ways. Its collectively populist position is not the liberal Central Europe many dreamed of in the 1980s, like the Croatian author Slavenka Drakulic's imaginary *Café Europa* where Europe was as much a mythic place as the romance of the Habsburg Empire. How that new/old East/West tension plays out we cannot say.

Hungary

What of that other part of the Habsburg Empire which, after 1867, had become the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary? I have a number of Hungarian visas in the passport mainly for journeys to Budapest. But there is one stamp which is notable. It is Kophaza and dated 1988, a border post near Sopron – and not a name that suggests a ‘world-historical’ role in the transformation of European frontiers. Yet it was.

Yet here in 1989 occurred *Der erste Riss in der Mauer* - The First Crack in the Wall - as Andreas Oplatka’s book calls it. What happened?

In 1989, Hungary had a different migrant problem. These migrants were German. Its liberalising policy provided a refuge for thousands of East Germans who saw an opportunity to escape west. In August 1989, Sopron was to be the venue for a so-called Pan-European Picnic, symbolising the free transit of peoples, east and west.

There is a delicious historical irony. One of the organisers was Otto von Habsburg, son of the last Emperor of Austria. (There is a local connection of sorts. The year before in the European Parliament he had scuffled with Ian Paisley during the Northern Ireland MEP’s protest against Pope John Paul II’s visit).

During that picnic around 600 East Germans crossed the open border at Kophaza. In September 1989 about 10,000 East Germans took the open route through Austria to West Germany. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November, Hungary proved the game was up for the East German regime.

Otto von Habsburg’s vision of a borderless Central Europe appeared to be born on the border of Austria-Hungary. But fast forward 30 years. There is another irony. In his eyewitness account of 1989 in his book *We the People*, Timothy Garton-Ash introduces Viktor Orban as a liberal hero.

Orban is now Prime Minister. His spokesman argued recently '*Hungary considers migration a matter of national security, and we take seriously our obligation to protect that border*'. No form of '*asylum tourism*' is acceptable. What commentators call 'populist' politics suggests a general European mood with a Brexit echo: borders require control. But where should those borders be?

Conclusion

In 2013, Seamus Heaney thought that the world had become 'a big Ulster'. Even as an obvious exaggeration you can identify an important truth. The problem of Northern Ireland - it used to be said - was that it was dominated by questions of the border, terrorism, identity. Today across the EU, *Eurobarometer* polls show that the two most important issues are migration (*borders*) and terrorism (*security*). As a recent Chatham House publication argues, central to Europe's agenda today is *identity* politics. That sounds very familiar to us here.

And who would have thought two years ago that the Irish border would be at the heart of European politics? Given all the crises attending borders elsewhere in continental Europe Ireland was a model of frictionless-ness. The Irish border exists – but it has mainly been a crossing rather than a barrier. Even that border which was the sub-text of Hewitt's poem - the border in the mind - appeared to have been crossed.

For unionists, north/south institutions, a former obsession, had fallen off the radar. For nationalists, the border seemed out of the island. If the Field Day idea of the 'fifth province' or John Hume's 'agreed Ireland' had any imaginative relevance outside nationalism, it was here. The EU referendum in 2016 changed all that.

Last year, Hewitt's poem returned as the text of an anti-Brexit polemic in the *Irish Times* by Fintan O'Toole. He argued that what we take for granted is subject to the '*capriciousness of history*'. Security, stability and order are not natural unlike the landscape in Hewitt's poem.

They are an artifice of politics. When politics – local, European and global - seem out of joint it is easy to fall into despair.

I was struck recently by a report in *Der Spiegel* that Angela Merkel – *Apocalypse Angie* as the sub-editor put it – now refers frequently to the Peace of Augsburg of 1555. That treaty established – perhaps there's a local hint - a *modus vivendi* between Protestants and Catholics. It seemed the 'end of history' in its own time. A half-century later and the 30 Years War would devastate large parts of Central Europe. Setting aside a literal reading, the moral is that our own 'old order' can fall apart too - not by design and for no good reason.

That is the theme of Margaret Macmillan's current *Reith Lectures* - since 1945 most of us have experienced 'the Long Peace' but fear it may be coming to an end. Krastev calls this the 'déjà vu' mindset – haunted by the conviction that we are experiencing a repetition of a previous historical moment (a feeling well-known here too). If Frau Merkel thinks it's the 17th century, much journalistic commentary suggests the 1930s. I tend to think of the last years of the Habsburg Empire.

The European narrative of change from old passport to new is one where resolving the discrepancy between what exists (division) and what might be (cooperation) has been generally positive. Today one is less confident of that story.

The Austrian satirist Karl Kraus once joked that it is difficult to translate practice into an idea. He has a point. What we need in all the practical details about borders, migrants and passports is the idea of civilised relations that got us to this point.