

Drifting the Bann
a film by Barbara Freeman
with notes by David Brett



We ought to think of the Bann as having a source in the nunatak of exposed summits that poked up through the surrounding ice sheet when, around 20,000 years ago, the ice began its latest retreat.

We ought to imagine the central part of Northern Ireland as a great bowl of slush, ice flows and open water contained on the east by the low icecap of the Antrim Hills, and on the west by similar territory in what we now call the Sperrins. Both these zones contain small moraine ridges, terminal and lateral.

To the north, Scottish ice was flowing into what was to be the North Channel and building up a series of moraines around Armoy. These too, are easily traced on the map or on foot, and they probably blocked any egress to the north. But to the south there was really no containing barrier; what we now call Lough Neagh over-topped the low ridge on which Portadown is placed, and flowed southward over and under the melting ice toward Carlingford Lough.

The map today locates a geographic source on OSNI Sheet 29 at Grid Ref. J 276 257; but in reality this is not a precisely definable point, but a boggy zone. The size, scope and character of this zone depends upon how much it has been raining.



On the undulating slopes above the road looking down on Lough Spelga... Above the zone, the slope steepens and takes on a mountainous character, with outcroppings of rocks and boulders. There are no, or very few, continuous runs of water. Below the zone, the swampy hillside becomes dissected by a sequence of rills and trickles, none larger than any other, until they coalesce sufficiently to form what, depending on the amount of water on the slope, you can describe as a stream that runs, in rocky gutter, toward the road and the lough below the road.

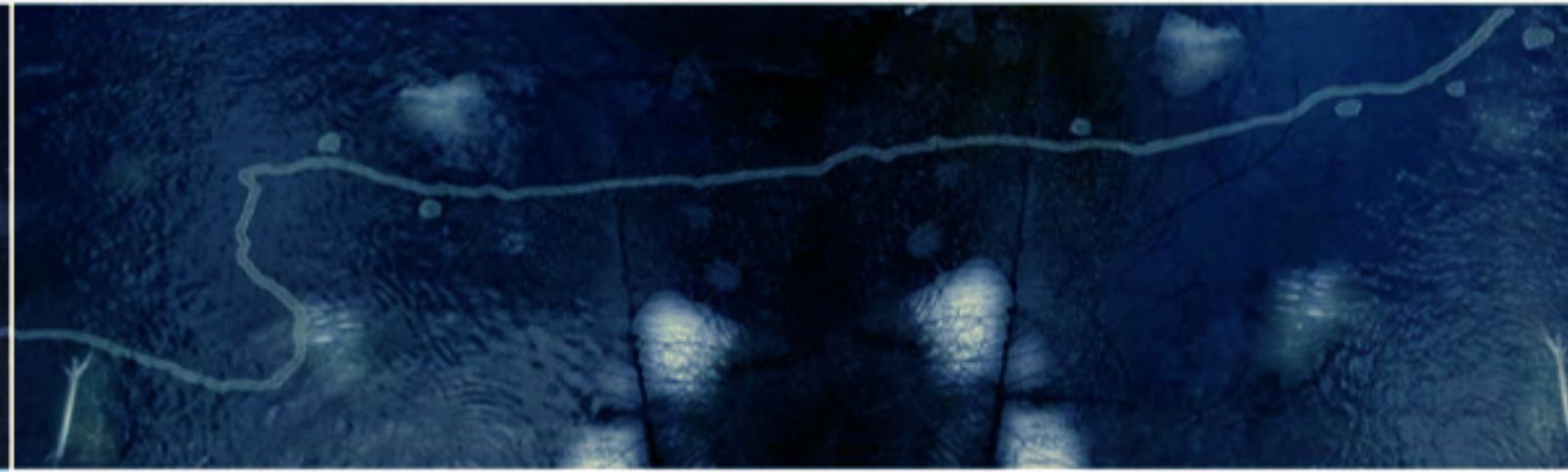
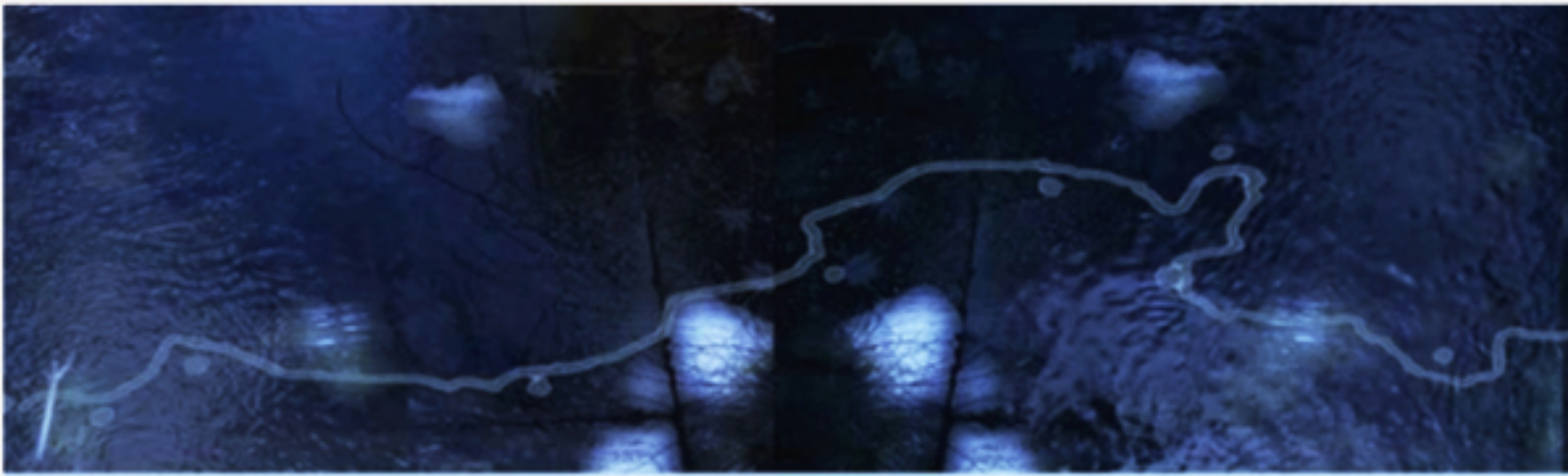
The stream has not made the little depression it runs in. This has been created in the solid rock, by a shallow fold or crease that is lightly obstructed by small boulders and banks of fragments. The rock fragments are not pebbles because they have not been rounded by the usual scouring action of water or ice, but angular fractions and blocks of raw stone.

There is very little in the way of soil or peat. I suspect there never was much in the way of bog.

A slope swept bare by ice.

Only lately colonized by thin vegetation.





Geography has been described as the study of the distribution of phenomena on the earth's surface; the mode in which this study is developed is visualization. In particular those visualizing conventions known as maps. 'Visualization is the specifically geographic mode of thought and the map is the geographic mode of record. By comparing maps of different kinds of phenomena we interlock our visualized generalizations. Correlating shapes is the geographical mode of research.'

H.J. Mackinder, in proposing the correlation of shapes as our principal geographic mode of research is, in fact, presupposing the scientific ontology of this topic, in which inexhaustibly complex real shapes are projected by means of planar projection onto flat surfaces (typically onto paper) and so abstracted away from sense experience. The map is not the territory.

The territory is ungraspable, because the territory is fractionally incommensurable. Because being incommensurable, it is unpictureable: reality is unknowable except as a manifold of conventions.

All that we see is our cage.

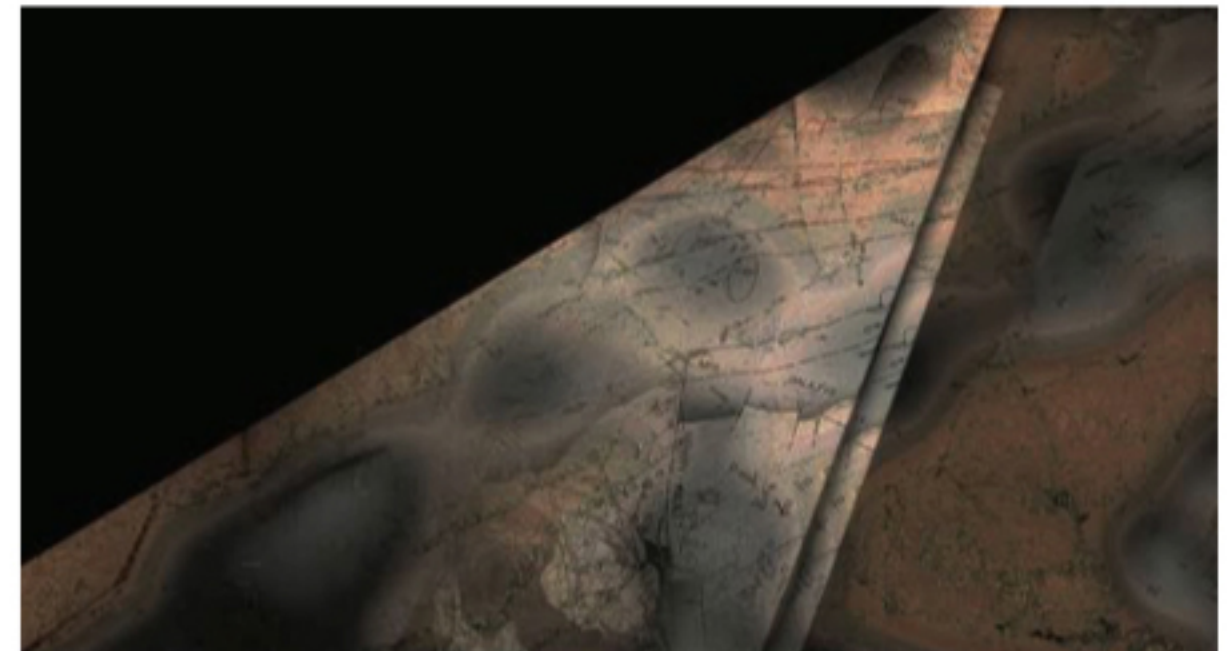
And the visual conventions that here describe the field are no more and no less than the visual correlations of shapes and concepts; therefore of ideological constructions and technical limitations.

* H.J. Mackinder "The content of philosophical geography" in *The Proceedings of the International Geographical Congress*, Cambridge, July 1928. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1928.)

The trouble with Mackinder's definition is that it is entirely spatial. But you cannot step in the same river twice. The river exists in time, altering. And if time, then why not the other dimensions of colour and sound.

Geography and the map show us the world in space: text and story operate in the domain of time. There are two trajectories of time: our inner time, which is filled with our thoughts and our experiences, and the more literal measured time. We hold within us a treasure of impressions, entangled in knots, each with its own flavour, formed from history and our own memories.

Sometimes we look with our ears and listen with our eyes.





Below Hilltown, the stream turns abruptly north-westwards and, flowing across a gently rolling plain, takes on the character of a river contained within constructed banks and between pastures. The map reveals a criss-crossing network of dismantled or abandoned railways, drovers' ways, raths and ancient fortifications.

The nearer we get to Banbridge the more crowded these become, until between that town and Gilford the course of the Bann is continually obstructed by small weirs and other constructions. Many of these fed directly into small water mills, others into scutches in which the rotted down flax was hammered into readiness for processing.

At first the weaving was carried on by hand-loom throughout the thickly populated country districts and bleaching flourished along the banks of the Bann.

The river and its tributary streams had, by 1830, become an industrial resource, feeding the growing flax and linen trades which used the river's soft water to power the machines spinning the linen thread and weaving and finishing the linen cloth.

What started off as a small-scale cottage industry with a multitude of bleaching greens throughout the countryside had rapidly developed into large-scale manufacture with several huge mills constructed along the banks of the Bann.

Only in Banbridge itself is there a descendant of the linen industry still at work, where tents of thread rise up, shaking and quivering into the rafters, building form out of line.

Almost nothing else of this remains, except an immense mill at Gilford which stands in a wilderness of thorns and giant hogweed, a plant that is highly invasive and grows mainly on river banks and derelict or abandoned wasteland.



Portadown was the centre of the 'Oneiland Barony' that had been set aside for settlement from England. It was, by some way, the most prosperous region of central Ulster and it occupied a strategic position. The town's bridge was a construction over which everyone without a boat would have to cross; it may have demanded a toll. And the existence of a broad main street in the present town still, indicates the long-standing status of a market.

This market was accessible by boat across Lough Neagh, and this accessibility is indicated by the name, the Port of Down. The town in 1641 was a principal location for the whole of eastern Ulster.

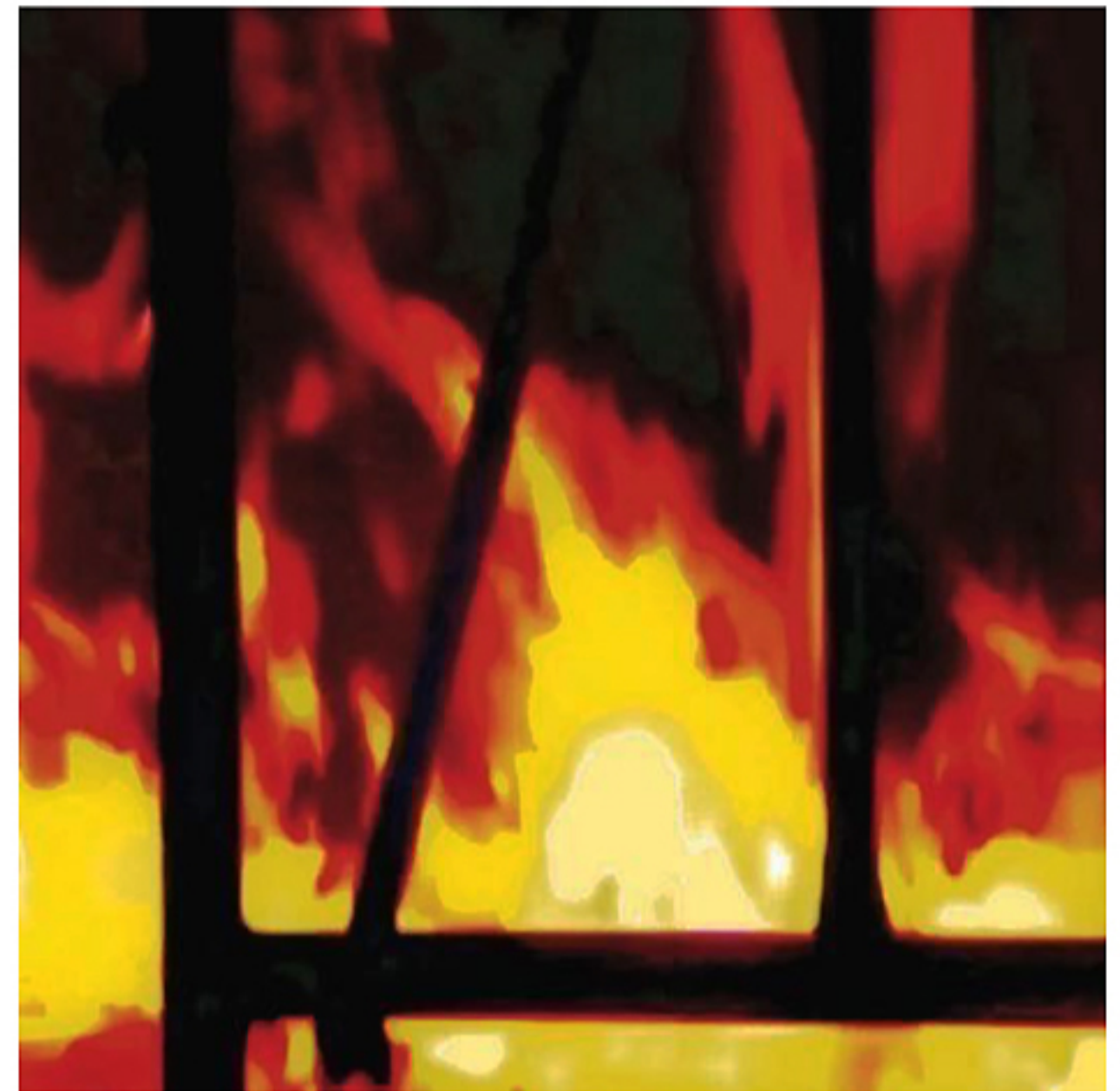
Accounts of the atrocity vary wildly, as they do for similar events everywhere. The principal source of them is *The Depositions* in which evidence was collected in the next year, in the Portadown case from 28 witnesses. The accounts have formed - and continue to form - a grim item in popular memory. However, only one witness was actually present; 18 other witnesses relied on hearsay. Another five lost family members in the general mayhem. 'Violence in County Armagh, 1641', a study of the *Depositions* by Hilary Simms is contained in Mac Cuarta (1993). Simms reasons, having compared all accounts and assigned an order of reliability to them, that between 80 and 100 people lost their lives, probably by the agency of a group of local Catholic Irish insurgents.

There are strong indications that the victims were being transported to Lisburn prior to deportation back to England, in a more or less orderly fashion. They had been confined in the protestant church in Loughgall, a few miles away. When the convoy reached the bridge, it was set upon. A British army officer in a locally raised regiment reported 'the most that were there drowned and murdered exceed not ninety persons'.

The number of alleged victims grew as the years passed, so that by 1652 the figure of 308 is recorded. It was then inflated further into part of a general conspiracy, written by partisan 'historians' and polemicists, to kill all English and Scots Protestant incomers. For this there is no evidence that would pass muster today, though it was widely believed in England and Scotland, and still forms part of the half-conscious motivation of extreme 'loyalism'.

The drownings at Portadown in the winter of 1641-42 figure in the dismal, continuing litany of 'atrocities stories'; we should not imagine we are immune from their echoes, which are heard again in Belgium in 1914, in France in 1944, in Kuwait (1992) and in Bosnia (2000) and will be heard again because we are not dealing with veridical accounts, but permanent tropes of political rhetoric, the details of which vary according to circumstances.

In 1992 it was reported that barbaric Iraqi troops switched off the life support system of sick children in Kuwaiti hospitals; in Belgium, 98 years earlier, savage 'Huns' impaled them merely. In 1641 bridges figured in many reports - from Newcastle to Belturbet.



The Lower Bann flows from the lough to the sea and the river channel is an important conduit for migrating eels. The quarter-inch-long larvae of the Lough Neagh eel originate from the spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea, where they are moved by currents and winds on the North Atlantic Drift eastwards to Europe. After a year and a half they reach the continental shelf and are now called elvers or glass eels and have grown to about three inches long. By the time the young eels reach the Irish coast they are slightly pigmented and pencil shaped. Male eels stay near the sea while the females travel on up the river inland for about one year until they reach Lough Neagh.



The elvers enter the estuary in the autumn and in the spring many of them swim upstream aided by special elver ladders at sluices and weirs. The eels mature in the lough and the Fishermen's Co-operative harvest as many of these silver eels as possible using fixed eel traps at Toome. They are harvested in the evening and at night when it is dark. There is a 'Queen's gap' at each trap to allow a proportion of the eels to escape and these descend the river as silver eels to return to the Sargasso Sea.

And with the continents the eels
evening on the eel traps at Toome
dark walkways and iron ladders over the swift black river
weak lamps and heavy boots on the boards
hatches opening
black ochreous and silver squirming
snake slime
disgusting foreign ambiguous ambi-everything
salt-fresh, sea-land sargassan swarm-spawn



In 1848, the water level in Lough Neagh was lowered artificially for the first time, and Oxford Island, first an undulation of reed beds and grassy ridges, became a peninsula and has since been designated a nature reserve.

Thousands of trees were planted and have seeded themselves into a rich woodland which is intermingled with old hay meadows and the remnants of cottage gardens. The meadows have largely reverted to species-rich grassland and the shallow wetlands on the lough shore, where the water table is at or above ground level for most of the year, provide nesting places for waterfowl and warblers among the reeds.

The ancient apple trees are now mixed in with ash and alder. In the spring, bluebells fill the woodland floor – as if the sky had fallen to earth – and in the summer the meadows are filled with the colours of wild flowers such as red campion, buttercup, orchid and gorse, mixed in with clumps of scrub.

There is a profusion of wildfowl of every kind, augmented in winter by visitors from Iceland, Scandinavia and Siberia.



"There used be so many ducks, all coming from Russia in the winter. Then they stopped coming. Some said it was global warming or whatever, but he reckoned it was foxes. There were no foxes on the island until that very cold winter. Then the lake froze. It was cold frozen enough to drive a tractor on it. And the foxes got a whiff of the ducklings. And it was February when they were all hatching. You never in your life saw so many ducks in one place. The noise would deafen you. Before the foxes could both hear and smell and now they could go out to the island upon the ice. First they killed and ate our chickens then they got started on the ducklings. I swear they must have been killing nigh on a hundred thousand, and ate them all up. They chewed their way from one end of the island to the other. And they took most of the rabbits too. Since then, the ducks have stayed away. We have seen hardly one duck this year. Mallards, they were.

"And what happened to the foxes when the ice melted. And they were well fed. Can your fat fox swim? I think he cannot. Well Reggie fetched his dog and his gun and shot them all and now we got no foxes, but we do still have the rabbits that survived."

And now the rabbits are a plague because they eat all the tree shoots, except the sycamores. If the rabbits have their way they will kill off all the oaks. There are no oak saplings left. The oaks are dying.



Nestling in the trees above the east bank of the River Bann we see Mount Sandel, one of the most important mesolithic sites in Ireland with artifacts from between nine and a half to 10,000 years ago.

The early inhabitants were hunter-gatherers and built their camp on a site surrounded by dense forests full of wild pig and close to the river abundant with fish. The fish remains found there included species such as salmon, trout and eel. The fish were probably caught using harpoons, nets or baited lines, and wooden racks were used to dry and smoke the fish for long-term storage.

And now, the distant past mingles with the future as we approach the open sea...

Past the sand dunes, salt
where the migrating geese
heard but not seen
huddle from westerly gales
where the redshank haunts the marish
sea areas Malin Rockall
over the Islay Shelf
and the curlew spirals
the sea is dark and turbid
and beaches shift off to the west
overnight.



BARMOUTH
THE CUTTS
MOUNT SANDEL
FIVE LOCKS
NEW FERRY
TOOME
RAMS ISLAND
BANNFOOT
OXFORD ISLAND
PORTADOWN
BANBRIDGE
HILLTOWN
SPELGA DAM
MOURNE MOUNTAINS



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