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Swift's Bare Platform

On the 19 February 2020 the Irish journalist Philip Boucher-Hayes tweeted from North Wales: 'Missed ferry. Stuck overnight in Holyhead. Completely resistant to my attempts to knock any craic out of the place.' The post was accompanied by a gloomy photograph of the Stena Ferry, sitting behind the Holyhead breakwater, under a dense cloudy sky.

Boucher-Hayes hosts an RTÉ radio show called *Hot Mess*, aimed at measuring the gap between Ireland's climate aspirations and its actions, so he may have been taking the boat for environmental reasons. There are only so many journeys by road and rail that we can accomplish on our small island and the ferry can be a stepping stone to less carbon intensive travel. But Boucher-Hayes's complaints about Holyhead have a long lineage, one that predates our current inflection point. Perilous Irish sea crossings are one part of the story: the sandbanks along the east coast between Dublin and Wexford and on the Welsh coast off Anglesey have caused the wreck of many ships over the centuries. The sea is choppy, too, as strong tidal currents get whipped up by south westerly winds and steep waves break in deep water. To this day, the prevailing south westerlies mean that boats are more commonly trapped in Welsh rather than Irish ports. And the Irish sea is getting rougher as climate change brings more frequent storms. But Boucher-Hayes was not delayed by weather but rather, as he reported, by 'roadworks at Watford Gap, Milton Keynes, Coventry, Birmingham etc. etc. They're digging everything up.' His predicament was simply a tedious wait in a ferry terminal located in what fellow Irish journalist Ronan McGreevy described in the replies as 'the most miserable town in Britain.'

When Jonathan Swift got stuck in Holyhead in September 1727, he also communicated his views on finding himself 'in the worst spot in Wales under the worst circumstances'. Weather was to blame on this occasion and over the six days that he waited on better weather, Swift wrote his *Holyhead Journal*, likely intended to be read by a small coterie of friends in Dublin including his godson the actor Thomas Sheridan, father of the playwright and politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan. The journal was written on paper that Swift said he had stolen from the Right Honourable George Dodington Esquire, one of the lords of the Treasury. While in London, Swift had used the front pages to note 'memoranda of things to be done in city'; meanwhile, the blank pages at the back were fated to record things to be endured in Holyhead.

Within that same week, Swift also wrote 'Holyhead. Sept. 25. 1727' with its famous denunciation of 'mouldy ale and muddy bread' and another poem titled 'Ireland': 'Remove me from this land of slaves / Where all are fools, and all are knaves.' Aged fifty nine, just three months off his sixtieth birthday, Swift may have been even more than usually cross and anxious as he waited to hear more about the fate of Stella, his lover and former pupil, Esther Johnson, who lay dangerously ill in Dublin.

Travelling with his servant Wat, a guide and their horses, Swift set out from London to Chester, intending to depart from Parkgate on the River Dee, then a major embarkation point. The neighbouring quays at Nesson were, as Daniel Defoe remarked in 1724, the launching point for the 'grand Expedition' of William of Orange. Like many others on the same route, Swift probably preferred to take the good road to Chester, rather than go by the mountainous passage to Anglesey, via Capel Curig and the daunting Ogwen Valley. But news of bad weather on the sea meant a diversion to Holyhead, by the coast road, and so by a precipitous route at Penmaenmawr. As the journey commenced, Swift marked the passage of time, starting with the date of departure: 'Friday, at 11am in the morning I left Chester. It was Sept. 22^d 1727.' He stopped at an ale-house after seven miles of riding and went on a further fifteen miles to Rhuddlan, where he stopped for the night, dining on 'bad meat, and tolerable wine'.

Between Chester and Holyhead however there are no dates and there may even be some errors in the order of the places through which he passes: historian Clive Probyn's 'Commentary on the Journal' notices that Swift places Conway after Penmaenmawr rather than before it. Crossing over the mountain pass of Penmaenmawr was a terrible hazard in the years before Thomas Telford's work on the route, but Swift only remarks on a personal connection — an inn where two couplets of his were inscribed on a sign was moving to a new location and the verses too would have to move. One couplet appeared on a sign on the road down from Penmaenmawr heading towards the ferry crossing at Bangor while the other addressed travellers heading up the mountain and away from Holyhead. But Swift need hardly explain all this, so deeply understood are the routes. In either direction, Ireland is the reason for the journey.

Swift crossed the Menai Strait, notorious for its strong currents, between Bangor and the island of Anglesey. Departing for Holyhead at four in the morning, he wanted to visit Owen Tudor's grave at Penmynydd, the home of the house of Tudor and subject of famous ode written by Iolo Goch in the fourteenth century. The guide though was uncooperative and Swift failed to see this monument to the Tory past. Travelling for two days already, Swift was

tired and out of sorts so that, with seven miles still to go, he stopped at Llangefni for a two hour rest. An earlier resolution to attend church in Holyhead faded from view. Both Swift and Wat had problems with their horses and had to walk some of the remaining few miles 'on the rocky ways' before finally meeting a blacksmith. With three miles to go to Holyhead, they left horses and guide behind 'and walked to a hedge Inn 3 miles from Holyhead' from where they went 'by Sea and Sayl in it to Holyhead.' That evening, a Sunday, Swift slept in Holyhead and his notorious condemnations of dismal food and miserable walks begin in earnest.

So too does a more formal marking of time and space. Headings in the *Journal* include : 'Tuesd. 26th'; 'Sept^r 26th'; 'Wednesday'; 'Thursday'; 'Friday, Mich^lmas day.' The last date that we read concerns letters that Swift has sent during his journey back to Ireland: 'You all know well enough where I am, for I wrote thrice after your Letter that desired my coming over; the last was from Coventry, 19th instant, but I brought it with me to Chester, and saw it put into the Post, on Thursday, 21st, and the next day followed it myself, but the Pacquet boat was gone before I could get here: because I could not ride 70 miles a day.' The *Journal* ends on this curious and recursive moment, which returns us to the beginning of the journey via letters and invites us to imagine the author and his correspondence in a kind of unbearable, intolerable competition to get to the mail boat. But the journey is also impossible in the most material of ways: Swift 'could not ride 70 miles a day' and so did not and the *Journal* can only record the painfully slow progress he and his party made as they inched across rocky Welsh ground.

In Holyhead, Swift stayed at an inn run by an old acquaintance, Mrs Jane Welch, where he heard rumours that the packet might not sail. Previous passengers to Ireland — 'a vast number' — have 'drank out all the wine' but the incoming boat from Ireland makes a welcome arrival, bearing as it does '18 bottles of Irish claret'. Strong winds though continued to prevent the journey west and within a couple of days, all three of the packet boats (the Grafton, the Carteret and the Prince Frederick) were confined to port, unable to sail. A strong longing for 'a dozen bottles of deanry wine and a slice of bread and butter' set in with only dreary coastal walks to fill Swift's hours.

Having made quick, circumstantial entries for 25th and 26th September, Swift then commences a second entry for Tuesday 26th with the rather more grand title of 'Thoughts upon confinement in Holyhead'. Time expands in dramatic fashion as he speculates on a lifelong 'settlement' in this place of transit. It is on Tuesday too that Swift begins to invoke the seasons as a way to map time and space: it is now Michaelmas, 'the worst time in the year

for the Sea'. As the days go on, Swift notes the fall off in his twice daily walks and the increase in 'the unwalkable hours' before bed. Recording these long dull days, the *Journal* sometimes seems to speed recklessly forward in time: 'I reckon myself fixed here: and have a mind like Marechall Tallard to take a house and a garden. I wish you a merry Christmas.'

This reference is to a French prisoner of war, taken to England following the Battle of Blenheim and housed in some style in Nottingham for eight years. The *Journal* settles briefly into this mood of gloomy resignation as Swift imagines Holyhead as a place where he might live 'with two or three friends in a warm house and good wine, much better than being a Slave in Irel'd.'

The frustrations of weather-bound travel fell especially hard on a man with an intimate knowledge of the contradictions of Ireland's status as both kingdom and colony. Swift too had just recently experienced huge success with *Gulliver's Travels*. His return trip to Ireland followed weeks of being feted among London society with visits to Alexander Pope at Twickenham and Lord Bolingbroke at Dawley. But in Holyhead there is only Jones, the captain of the boat who 'hath not treated me with the least civility, altho Watt gave him my name.' Swift is enraged to come 'from being used like an Emperor to be used worse than a Dog on Holyhead.'

As the possibility of embarking for Ireland recedes, so too does Swift's sense of his self, scaled down to the level of a county Cavan rector: 'I am as insignificant here as parson Brooke is in Dublin; by my conscience I believe Caesar would be the same without his army at his back.'

If everybody is a nobody in Holyhead, fury shores up Swift's old self. Strange dreams beset him during these autumn days. First, a dream of '20 falls' from his horse recasts the rough going from Chester to Anglesey, much as travellers by sea sometimes report the continuation of rocking sensations on land. A second dream is only filled with an 'abundance of nonsense'. The third dream, on Wednesday 27th, sees mundane experiences and fears take a turn for the surreal as Swift cannot find his surplice in St Patrick's Cathedral. He is to give a sermon for which his friends Lord Bolingbroke and Alexander Pope are in the gallery. Finding the stall broken, he is 'squeezed among the Rabble' to hear his ambitious and irreligious friend Bolingbroke give a sermon in which he mentions the racy Restoration playwright William Wycherley.

That same strange power of indignant imagination rallies itself once more when, his spirits low, Swift hits upon a method of turning his face 'towards Ireland in hopes by my breath to push the wind further'. The *Journal* moves into excremental mode as Swift

acknowledges the failure of his puffing plan: 'But now I give up. However, when upon asking how is wind, the people answer, Full in yr teeth, I cannot help wishing a T— were in theirs'. T— stands for turd. Filth was on Swift's mind in Holyhead: his clean shirts went with the heavier luggage by carrier to Chester and he was afraid to send any clothing to be washed in case the boat decides to sail before they are returned to him. And so he adds 'lousy' and 'foul' clothing to the bill of suffering at Holyhead.

Many critics have followed Carole Fabricant in thinking of the *Journal* as 'a kind of prison diary'. David Nokes imagines Swift 'becalmed' in a 'Welsh no man's land', 'marooned there, mid-way between England and Ireland' and Michael Rosenblum's conceives Wales as 'narratively and descriptively a blank' in the *Journal*. But Holyhead is a deeply storied place, the complex histories of which Swift's writing barely begins to comprehend. Named Bretland by the Vikings, known as Mam Cymru or Môn Mam Cymru, the island of Ynys Môn or Anglesey has a special place in the Welsh imagination as a place of legendary plenitude. Edward I starved the Welsh princes by cutting off supplies from Anglesey, the bread basket of Wales. Tacitus drew his account of the Welsh druids from there. And the Neolithic tombs at Bryn Celli Du and elsewhere on the island vividly remind us of the function of the Irish Sea as 'the great unit of Celtic civilization' in Nora Chadwick's classic account. With an economy oriented to the sea and rich natural resources, north-west Wales was, by 1750 set to become one of the cradles of the industrial revolution, with the copper mines of Anglesey linked to smelters on Deeside and Merseyside and from there to the Atlantic trade. New seams of copper were found in the 1760s and later Irish visitors regularly called to Parys and Mona mines to gaze on the Welsh industrial sublime.

Proximity to Ireland means that Holyhead has often been understood only as a place of passage. Already in 1675, in John Ogilby's great topographical work, *Britannia*, Holyhead was described 'a scattered town consisting chiefly of houses for entertainment of such persons as either are bound for Ireland or lately arrived thence.' Such a writing of Holyhead in transitory mode finds many echoes in the twentieth century, from James Joyce onwards. Swift might even be seen to inaugurate a kind of archipelagic tradition of writing of place in terms of transit, blocks and delays. Bernard O'Donoghue's poem, 'Westering Home', imagining as it does a drive through south Wales to one of the ferry terminals in the west, captures this well: 'the whole business /Neither here nor there, and therefore home'. Or 'The Rainmaker', also by O'Donoghue which opens on the platform at Crewe and captures the ordinary magic sea and land along a section of that same North Wales coast traversed by Swift. A resolutely negative mode also finds resonances: Andrew McNeillie's 'On Not

Sailing to St Kilda' finds its theme in a journey forbidden by the winds. And is hard not to think of the greatest of all poems of travel as an experience of stopping rather than going, Edward Thomas' *Adlestrop*: 'No one left and no one came / On the bare platform.'

Holyhead is Swift's 'bare platform': on it, he stages his measuring of self and society in terms of travel and transport. In the process the *Journal* brings into view the economic and political significance of what Chris Harvie calls the 'kinetic' energies of the 'indeterminate world of the inland sea': the coastal edges of Ireland or of Wales and also the central marine arc, connected to the Atlantic and the wider world, along which much of our island histories have been made.

Swift concluded the *Journal* before the journey's end: the final entry, for 'Friday, Michaelmas', finds Swift back on land following a rough night spent on board in the harbour, once more waiting for the weather to change. He finally arrived in Carlingford in early October, 1727. Later that month he told Alexander Pope that his 'flesh and bones are to be carried to Holyhead, for I will not lie in a country of slaves'. But Swift was never to make the sea crossing again and did not get a second opportunity to 'knock any craic' out of Holyhead. Instead, we are left with a remarkable piece of occasional writing that captures the imprint of individual misery and rage while it also makes legible the reliance of Irish elites on regular sea-born communication with the larger island.

A foundational classic of waiting-in-the-ferry-terminal literature, the *Journal* expresses a familiar, painful and vividly-realised relationship with waves and weather that Swift and practically every other Irish writer up to Elizabeth Bowen lived regularly and knew well, as they made their way across the Irish Sea. But few of those writers mention Wales or spend time thinking about its meanings. Swift ventured into 'a welch cabin almost as bad as an Irish one' and found only an old woman who spoke Welsh. Maria Edgeworth, too, some seventy five years later, found 'nothing new or entertaining from Holyhead to Bangor.' Her sister Charlotte, an accomplished artist, took sketches of some locals in Bangor but there was no conversation to be had: 'we tried to talk to them, but Dumsarzna, or words to that effect, "I don't understand English," was the constant answer, and the few who could speak English seemed to have no wish to enter into conversation with us; the farmers intrenched themselves in their houses and shut their doors as fast as they could when we approached.'

If the Edgeworths' story of Welsh reluctance to speak to tourists sounds all too wearily familiar in our ears, then the 'dim Saesneg' with which they were greeted on the road through Bangor should strike a note of caution. How better to sound that note than by turning to the writings of Holyhead native R.S. Thomas, whose 'Memories of Yeats Whilst Travelling

Through Holyhead' imagines the potential 'disdain' of the elderly Irish poet for a 'dumb' and 'shy' great Welsh writer in the making. The poem acknowledges Yeats as 'one long impervious and cold to the outward scene' but behind this austerity there hides the likely impossibility of a meeting. Most Irish writers hurtled through Wales by rail or road, only stopping to acknowledge the force of wind, weather or road works. An exception might be found in the work of Edith Somerville and Martin Ross, who took a tour of North Wales on horseback in the 1890s. They made drawings and wrote up their impressions of the place, heard the sounds of 'the guttural, shrewish Welsh tongue' in Welshpool and worshipped in Mallwyd under 'a dark stream of Welsh'. But they too found themselves stuck in Holyhead: the book ends as their luggage fails to arrive, so that the final image is one that Philip Boucher-Hayes and Jonathan Swift might recognise: 'the Kingstown boat moved out on an oily sea into a murky west, and the rain began to fall'.

The nineteenth-century breakwater shown in the photograph that accompanied Boucher-Hayes's tweet is currently being restored thanks to twenty million pounds from the Welsh government. Holyhead needs all the help it can get. In the 1920s, R.S. Thomas's father, who had a master's certificate and had sailed the seven seas, became a second mate on the Holyhead to Dublin ferries when times were hard after the war. Holyhead took another hit after the founding of the Free State, when customs barriers were introduced. And now, thanks to Brexit, the long standing Irish disregard for the Welsh ports that shaped our history has become UK policy.

