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THE ULSTER PROTESTANT AND THE WILLIAMITE WARS IN IRELAND

Introduction.

I was invited by Rev Ian Harris, minister of Carrickfergus Free Presbyterian Church, to hold a week of meetings in his church in June 1990. The theme was the events in Ireland during the Glorious Revolution. Carrickfergus, the town in which William, the Prince of Orange, landed on his way from England to the Battle of the Boyne, was to be the main venue for activities to mark the tercentenary of the Glorious Revolution. Consequently, Rev Harris and his congregation were anxious to set before the town the spiritual significance of the events of 1690.

I began the week of meetings on Lord's Day, June 3rd and continued until Friday 8th. During the activities in the town, most of which were organised by the Orange Order, the Free Presbyterian Church distributed 20,000 gospel tracts and leaflets. The messages I delivered in the church were later published in *The Burning Bush*, a magazine which I edit. Following their appearance in the magazine, I was asked to consider printing them as a booklet. Hence this publication.

ULSTER - THE BATTLEGROUND FOR A PROTESTANT KINGDOM

Chapter 3

Whatever concerns Protestants leaders had for future wellbeing of the nation and the Protestant faith under Charles II, these were greatly heightened under James II. While his brother Charles was still alive, attempts had been made to remove James from the king's councils because he was an openly avowed Roman Catholic. In 1678 Charles persuaded his brother to cease attending privy council meetings. He also assured the House of Commons and the House of Lords that he was ready to join with them in all the ways and means that might establish a firm security for the Protestant religion. {Lord's Journals XIII. 345.}

It was at this time that an act was passed requiring an oath of those who sat in the two Houses of Parliament which effectively excluded Romanists from sitting in either house until 1829. Agitation over the succession of James to the throne continued until the death of Charles.

When Charles was dying he was attended by a priest called Huddleston. He ceased his pretended Protestantism, received the popish rite of absolution, and died a Romanist. It is said that Huddleston was admitted to the king's Royal chamber by the back door. {The Later Stuarts, G.N. Clark, page 110.} Rome was entering upon more than the King's royal chamber by the back door. It had its eyes upon the Throne of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Its ambition was fulfilled with the accession of James II. He had been openly professing his Romanism for a long time. A sign of things to come was given when the new king, on the second Sunday of his reign, partook of the mass in the chapel at his Whitehall palace. The doors of the chapel were left open for all to witness this scene. The king's policies matched his open mass-taking. He warned the Archbishop of Canterbury against allowing the ministers of the Church of England to preach against the dangers of popery. Archbishop Sancroft was an old and peaceable man but the Bishop of London, Bishop Compton, who was likewise warned, was not so mealy-mouthed and did not take with such threats. The scene was set for confrontation. The king was openly advancing the cause of Romanism in the land. Institutions were established: a chapel in the City of London, a Jesuit school at the Savoy, a Roman Catholic girls' school in St. Martin's Lane, a Franciscan friary in Lincoln's Inn Field and one for the Dominicans nearby, a Benedictine house at Clerkenwell. A papal nuncio was received at court and an ambassador appointed to the Vatican. The Roman Catholic hierarchy was revived with the consecration of new bishops. There were numerous conversions among peers and lawyers, mayors and place-holders of every kind. The attack upon the Church of England followed soon. It had to be broken if Romanism was to be established again. James acted so outrageously that even the pope was alarmed at the pace he was setting. The Vatican thought him likely to do more harm than good to its cause



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by his rushing of the nation headlong into the arms of the Roman Catholic church. The pope was right!

The Bishop of London, Compton, was suspended because he would not follow the king's command and order discipline to his pleasing. James' actions had begun to alienate seriously the Church of England and he sought support from Non-conformists. He did this by issuing two declarations of indulgence, one in 1687 and the other in 1688. The second one was to be read on two successive Sundays throughout England. Archbishop Sancroft and six other bishops petitioned the king requesting him to withdraw the order as it appeared an illegal step. An angry James ordered the prosecution of the bishops for publishing a seditious libel against his majesty and his government. This proved to be the spark that ignited the charge. After some dithering a verdict of not guilty was brought in.

NO HEIR

Another factor hastened the king's downfall. He had no heir, his children dying in infancy. William of Orange, nephew of James, was next in line to the throne through his marriage to James' daughter, Mary. This fact restrained those alarmed at the king's action. They felt that his demise would bring William to the throne and the undoing of all James' advancing of Romanism. However, at the end of 1687, Mary, James' wife, was announced to be expecting a child. A son was born on the 20th June 1688. This announcement precipitated an invitation being sent to William in July to come over and take the throne of England. It was delivered by Arthur Herbert, a former vice-admiral of England and one of those who had for some time been in touch with the Prince of Orange. The businesslike invitation announced the beginning of the "Glorious Revolution".

After an attempted crossing was scattered by a storm, the Dutch fleet set sail again at the beginning of November 1688. Providence smiled upon the fleet. William wished to avoid a naval battle with the English fleet, lest the encounter override the undoubted sympathy there was for him and his cause among the English sailors, and memories of former bitter English - Dutch naval battles be awakened. Generations have talked since of the Protestant wind. It blew William's fleet down the channel and prevented James' fleet from getting out from its anchorage. When the English fleet did set sail a sudden calm set in and the fleet lay helplessly for two days. After two days, the wind did arise but it developed into a south-westerly gale and the English fleet had to seek shelter in Portsmouth. William, meanwhile, had landed at Brixham, in Torbay, on 5th November 1688. He had a force of 11,000 foot soldiers and 4,000 cavalry. 4,000 of the foot soldiers were comprised of three English and three Scottish regiments from Holland. William's commander was the famous Marshall Schomberg. The Williamite army made steady and unspectacular progress towards London, meeting no resistance whatever on the way. After a little hesitation popular support began to manifest itself. Desertions from James' own court and army began to increase. Even his own daughter, Princess Anne, joined William's side. James himself decided the issue of what was to happen to the throne. He ran away. This made it a necessity for William to take charge of the nation. Strange to relate, the escaping James was taken from his ship by some Kentish fishermen who felt they were doing a good thing. William, naturally, preferred James to have left England voluntarily. It strengthened his claim to the throne. Consequently, James was 'allowed' to escape to France, where he arrived in time to celebrate Christmas Mass. Such are the ways of politics.

In Ulster, the news of William's landing was greeted with joy amongst the Presbyterians. Rev. Archibald Hamilton of Armagh and Rev. Alexander Osborne, a Co. Tyrone minister recently moved to Newmarket congregation in Dublin, were empowered to appoint a person to go and greet William in their name. The man chosen was a Presbyterian gentleman, Dr. Duncan Cumyng, who had settled as a medical practitioner in Dublin. This was in November 1688. The instruction given Dr Cumyng is worthy of reiteration:

That in our name you congratulate the arrival of the Prince of Orange into England, and his success hitherto in so glorious an undertaking to deliver these nations from Popery and slavery. That you represent the dangers and fears of the Protestants in Ireland, and particularly in the province of Ulster; and humbly beseech him to take some speedy and effectual care for their preservation and relief. That you represent our readiness to serve him and his interests in prosecution of so glorious a design, as far as we have access.



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(Reid's History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Vol. II, pages 354-355.)

It was early in December that Cumyng set out for England. In Ireland, events moved forward rapidly as a result of a simple incident which had a profound effect on affairs both then and ever since. That incident and its effects are described by Reid thus:

On the 3rd of December, an anonymous letter, addressed to the Earl of Mount-Alexander, was dropped in the streets of Comber, in the county of Down, purporting to warn his lordship, as a particular friend of the writer, that a general massacre of the Protestants had been planned by the Irish, to take effect on the following Sunday. Similar letters were addressed to Mr. Brown, of Lisburn, and Mr. Maitland, of Hillsborough, and were dispersed through the neighbouring towns. Copies were immediately despatched to Dublin by Mr. Upton, of Templepatrick, and by Sir William Franklin, the second husband of the Countess of Donegall, then residing in the castle of Belfast. In this emergency, the first persons who were consulted were the Presbyterian ministers of the adjoining parishes in Down and Antrim, who did not hesitate to urge their people to associate and arm themselves, as a necessary precaution for the protection of their lives and properties. Mr. Cunningham, of Belfast, had forwarded a copy of this anonymous letter to Mr. Canning, at Garvagh, and, through Colonel Philips, of Newtownlimavady, it reached Derry on the evening of Thursday, the 6th of December.

The troops which had occupied this important garrison had been recently removed to Dublin, and the inhabitants were expecting the arrival of a regiment known to be exclusively composed of Catholics, and commanded by a Catholic noble-man, Alexander, Earl of Antrim, whose brother had acted so conspicuous a part in the late rebellion. Such was the state of affairs when the intelligence of the apprehended massacre reached the city. On the following day, the Rev. James Gordon, Presbyterian minister of Clondermot (Hamilton and Witherow in their histories refer to the parish as Glendermot), a parish adjoining Derry, advised the inhabitants to shut the gates, and exclude this obnoxious regiment from the garrison. But the bishop, Dr. Ezekiel Hopkins, on being consulted, strenuously opposed this bold and hazardous measure; and, in common with the majority of the Episcopalian clergy, inculcated the necessity of non-resistance. The alarm, however, during this eventful day was so great, and the rumours of the massacre, though unfounded, were so frequent, that the people could be no longer restrained; and in the afternoon several young men of the city, most of them Presbyterians, took forcible possession of the keys, and closed the gates against the Earl of Antrim's "redshanks", just preparing to enter. Though earnestly entreated by the bishop and the more grave and prudent portion of the inhabitants to desist from so rash an enterprise, these resolute youths, supported by the great body of the population, steadily maintained the ground they had taken. On this sudden and apparently unimportant movement the fate of the three kingdoms ultimately depended. Had Derry been occupied by a Popish garrison, the armies of James would have possessed the whole of Ulster, and thence passed without obstruction into Scotland, where united to the forces of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee, they would have made an easy conquest of that kingdom, and afterwards invaded England with accumulated strength. But this important post was thus, at a most critical moment, providentially preserved, to be the means of defeating the machinations of a despot and a bigot against the religion and liberties of Britain.

The inhabitants of Enniskillen, the only other fortified place in the north-west of the province, having, like those of Derry, received similar warning, adopted a similar resolution. Though deserted by their magistrates, they resolved to shut their gates against the Romish troops which Tyrconnel had despatched to occupy their garrison. In this decisive step they were especially countenanced and encouraged by the Rev. Robert Kelso, Presbyterian minister there, who, like the rest of his brethren throughout Ulster, "laboured both publicly and privately in animating his hearers to take up arms and stand upon their own defence, showing example himself by wearing arms and marching at the head of them when together.

On the 15th December, by a letter from Mr. Kelso, and another from a few of the town's people, they informed their brethren in Derry of their critical circumstances, and entreated their counsel and co-operation. Supported by a company of horsemen, composed of the Protestant tenantry of Major Gustavus Hamilton, the inhabitants a few days afterwards boldly attacked the Romish companies on their march towards the town, and completely routed them. They thus gained time, which they diligently employed in placing their



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garrison in a better posture, and otherwise providing for the future defence of that part of the province.

Though the alarm of a massacre soon subsided, many causes conspired to compel the Protestants throughout Ulster to continue their defensive preparations. Tyrconnel was rapidly augmenting his army by forced levies from the Catholic population; and these half-civilised and half-disciplined recruits began to plunder the Protestants of their arms and horses, while no redress for these insolent outrages could be obtained from any quarter. Their immediate safety and protection, therefore, as well as the prospect of remoter dangers, required them to lose no time in having recourse to additional precautions. The first step taken by the gentlemen of the several counties was to form themselves into Protestant associations.

(Reid's History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Vol. II, page 355-358.)

From the point of view of military strategy, the actions of the Ulster Protestants guaranteed the success of the Williamite revolution. The action of the Western Protestants, assembled at Enniskillen, divided the forces of James and thus stopped him concentrating his resources at Londonderry and bringing the city's resistance to an end. Had that happened then James would have been free, as Reid says, to cross to Scotland and there consolidate his forces, march on London, and a very different conclusion would have resulted for the Protestant cause.

The Comber letter, the action of the apprentice boys, the resistance of a handful of men in Sligo, Leitrim, Fermanagh and Donegal - these insignificant things ended the haughty plans of a haughty prince. As it is in the political and national affairs of men so it is in the Gospel Kingdom of Christ. God, by the insignificant means of the warning letter of the Gospel, arouses sinners to a sense of their danger and directs them to flee to Christ. To the world, the Lord Jesus is a poor refuge. He is not attended by the trappings of earthly power and glory. In the world's opinion there is no safety to be found in Him. How wrong the world is! There is deliverance, pardon, eternal life and victory in Jesus Christ.

To be continued....