



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

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.*

Chapter 4

The siege of Derry

Great weights may pivot on small points. Great events in history often turn on small and insignificant events. The finding of the Comber Letter in December 1688, addressed to the Earl of Mount-Alexander, in which was contained a warning, from an apparently ill-educated person, of a massacre of Protestants planned for Lord's Day 9th December, was just such an insignificant event. Whether this letter warned of a genuine plot to slaughter Protestants or whether it was a fraud or whether the actions the letter sparked off forced a cancellation of the massacre will never be known. In the end, there was no general slaughter of Protestants but actions were precipitated which saved Ireland from James II and frustrated his plans to Romanise the United Kingdom.

Coincidence

Copies of the Comber Letter were circulated throughout the Province. A copy reached Derry on the 7th, but two days ahead of the fateful 9th December. By a strange coincidence a letter arrived from Limavady the same day announcing the approach of a regiment of Roman Catholic soldiers under the command of Lord Antrim. This news, linked with the warning in the Comber letter, caused great alarm in the Maiden City. It was generally believed that the purpose of the approach of Antrim's regiment was to take part in the Massacre planned for the 9th. Memories of the part played by Lord Antrim's brother in the infamous 1641 rebellion heightened the fears of the Protestants. But what was to be done? The citizens were still discussing this matter when the first of the troops were seen crossing the Foyle by ferry on their way to the city. The city fathers were in a quandary since to refuse the troops entrance was to defy the King and that was treason and rebellion. Yet to allow the troops to enter could mean suicide if the warning missive from Comber was correct. As usual, opinion was sharply divided. The Episcopalian Bishop of Derry, Ezekiel Hopkins, said that the soldiers must be admitted. To refuse was to defy King James, the Lord's Anointed. Citizens should be subject to their King in all matters. The Presbyterian minister of Glendernmot, Rev. James Gordon, was of a different opinion. "Shut the gates and keep them out", was his advice. The deputy Mayor, Alderman Tomkins, did not know which counsel to act upon. While he dithered, others acted. Rev. Thomas Hamilton relates the momentous events which followed. But there are times when aldermen and bishops, and all such importances, if they choose to oppose themselves to common sense, must be quietly left standing in their dignity, while others, who, though they may have no titles to their names, have got the gift of mother wit, act. Five minutes will settle the matter now one way or another, for the Redshanks are by this time within sixty yards of the Ferryquay Gate. Fortunately for Derry, for us all, the wise advice of the Presbyterian minister was taken. Eight



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or nine young men, apprentices of the city, ran to the gate, at which the measured tread of the advancing troops could already be heard. In a trice they had raised the drawbridge, shut the gate, and locked it, leaving the astonished Redshanks to stand outside in wonderment at their boldness, and Bishop Ezekiel Hopkins to go to his palace astonished too, and in sore dudgeon at the disrespect shown to his reverend authority, — the authority of the consecrated bishop, and to his royal master King James.

But Antrim's men are still at the gate, and showing no disposition to retire. They must be got out of that. 'Bring a great gun this way!' cries James Morrison, one of the citizens, loud enough for the Redshanks to hear. The hint is enough. In the twinkling of an eye the whole party are seen scampering down the hill, scattered by the bare mention of a shot. It is a race who will reach the ferry first, to be out of the reach of those determined Derry men.

No reader will grudge the little space required here for a record of the names of the thirteen Apprentice Boys (for three or four joined the eight or nine who actually closed the Ferryquay Gate, and assisted in securing the others). They deserve to be held in honour by all Ulster men, by all Irishmen, the world over. They were: Henry Campsie, William Crookshanks, Robert Sherrard, Daniel Sherrard, Alexander Irwin, James Steward, Robert Morrison, Alexander Cunningham, Samuel Hunt, James Spike, John Cunningham, William Cairns, and Samuel Harvey. No wonder their memory is cherished in the Maiden City, and far beyond it. It should be specially cherished by all Presbyterians, and more than one Presbyterian minister has been proud to be able to trace his ancestry to a Derry 'Prentice Boy.

But the Bishop has not yet got over his horror at the temerity of these Presbyterian lads. So he comes down to the Diamond and makes a speech, descanting on the enormity of what has been done, and on the want of reverence for 'the Lord's anointed' of which the 'Prentice Boys have been guilty. The people, however, are in no mood for hearing him. 'My lord,' cries young Irwin out of the crowd, 'your doctrines are doubtless very good, but just at present we can't hear you out.' Alderman Tomkins sides with the Bishop, and tries to get the brave deed undone. Fortunately in vain. The gates are kept closed. The Apprentice Boys mount guard upon them. They arm themselves from the magazine. Next day Bishop Ezekiel finds he has been long enough in Derry. Remarkable to relate, the city was able to get on without him.

It was on a Friday that Derry thus took up her determined attitude. The following Sabbath was the date named in the Comber letter for the massacre of the Protestants, and we may imagine the dread with which its approach was awaited all over Ulster. But the day passed without the expected scene blood. The warning of the Comber letter proved happily false. But, whatever had been the purpose of its author, it had the effect of closing gates of Derry. (History of the Irish Presbyterian Church, pages 86 - 87.)

The act of closing the gates of Derry proved providential in that it retained, in Protestant hands, the one city best suited to providing a refuge for the Protestants in the east and north of the Province.

Lundy

The Earl of Tyrconnel angrily ordered Lord Mountjoy and Colonel Lundy to Derry with troops to occupy the city. Colonel Lundy, being an Episcopalian was allowed in as Governor along with two companies of Protestant soldiers. No Roman Catholic troops were admitted into the city by the defiant Derrymen. They had formed their own guards believing it necessary to take the protection of the city into their own hands.

The news from England of the landing of William at Torbay and his triumphant march to London and James' flight from England meant that sides must be taken in Ireland. James arrived in Ireland at the end of March and his army commenced its northward march to gain control of the whole of Ireland in order to make it a base from which to prepare an invasion of England and the retaking of the throne from William. At the Break of Dromore in Co. Down, the Williamites were beaten back and forced to flee in disorder before the army of James. Hillsborough, Lisburn and Antrim were plundered by the Jacobites in their steady northward march. The Protestant troops fell back to Coleraine but soon it became necessary to evacuate Coleraine as it was not suitable for defensive purposes. On 7th April 1689, the Protestant force set out over the mountains to



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Derry, destroying all that would be useful to the enemy as they went. Derry now became the citadel of Irish Protestantism. The fate of Protestantism depended upon the outcome of the impending siege. Should Derry fall, then Ireland belonged to James and, with the aid of France, England would soon follow.

Siege begins

The siege began proper on 15th April with the arrival of Lieutenant-General Richard Hamilton at the head of the forces of James. He was a traitor to King William having been sent over to Ireland by William to offer terms to Tyrconnel only to change sides and accept the command of the Irish army. He had been harrying the Protestants since he defeated them at Dromore. He now had them bottled up in the city of Derry and it seemed a simple matter to crush finally all resistance. The matter seemed all the more straightforward with Colonel Lundy in charge in Derry. He was a Jacobite at heart even though a Protestant and now a professing Williamite. His treachery surfaced immediately when he permitted Hamilton's forces to cross the river without firing a shot. That same day he turned away two English regiments which had arrived in the River Foyle, having been sent over by William to support the Protestants of Derry. Lundy persuaded them to sail away by telling them that the city could not be held.

When King James arrived in person on April 17th he demanded the surrender of the city. Lundy sent out representatives to hear the terms of surrender. On 18th April, Captain Adam Murray approached the city with a cavalry force but Lundy ordered him not to show himself and his men to the defenders of the city. Murray had refused Lundy's order and tried to enter the city but was not permitted. The sight of Murray and his men caused a Captain Morrison to defy Lundy's orders also and he opened the gates and admitted Murray's cavalry. Murray went straight to the Council chamber where Lundy and his council were discussing surrendering. He confronted Lundy and accused him of treachery.

A change of command took place that day. Murray addressed the people and the keys of the city were seized and taken from the Lundyites and strong guard was mounted on the gates and walls. Murray was offered the Governorship but declined. Major Baker was then chosen with Episcopalian Rev. George Walker placed in charge of the stores. Lundy stole away from the city in disguise and fled to Scotland.

The siege began in earnest on 20th April. The forces of James amounted to 10,000, rising soon to 20,000. The besieged city had 20,000 inhabitants of which 7,000 were capable of bearing arms. Rev. David Stewart relates in his book the progress of the siege. The first contests were chiefly sallies, where Adam Murray was always captain in the field. Weeks rolled on and food ran low. At length famine came, when dogs, cats, rats, and mice were eaten greedily. Still the garrison refused to surrender Matters daily grew worse. The city was filled with hunger, disease, and death. For weeks ships, laden with stores and ammunition, could be seen lying in Lough Foyle. Their timid commander was afraid to attempt the passage to the city. The fort of Culmore dominated the Lough at a narrow place, and half way between this and the city a great boom had been thrown across the river. Commander Kirke had made a half-hearted attempt to pass, but the guns of Culmore drove him back. Then he lay for weeks inactive.

At length, the Rev. James Gordon, already mentioned, somehow got on board, and exhorted Kirke to attempt the passage. It was undertaken on Sabbath, the 28th July. The 'Dartmouth' frigate and two store ships formed the expedition. The frigate ran in between the fort and the provision ships, and received the fire from the guns. With a favouring wind and a rising tide, the store ship struck it, quivered, and ran aground. A broadside was fired from her guns, and the recoil, coupled with the rising tide, floated her again. Once more she headed for the boom. Meanwhile, the 'Swallow's' longboat, armour-clad, had come up, and the men, with their axes, had been hewing at the boom. The 'Mountjoy' crashed through and sailed slowly for the city. The 'Phoenix', however, was the first to arrive, having been taken in tow by the 'Swallow's' longboat.

The Irish clung to their trenches two days longer. On the first of August they burned their huts and fled. Thus ended this memorable siege, after one hundred and five days of resolute endurance. In the city only a few were slain in battle, but ten thousand perished from disease. James' army lost nine thousand men, largely on the field. (The History and Principles of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.)



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Cruel measures were employed against the city in order to force its surrender. Hamilton's History records one such measure. In June, General Rosen was sent by James, who was growing impatient, to take the command, and push forward the siege with greater vigour. His name will be for ever associated with an act of horrible barbarity, of which only a fierce savage could have been guilty. Infuriated at the refusal of the garrison to yield, he ordered a message to be shot into the city in an empty shell, informing the Derry men that if they did not open the gates within twenty-four hours, he would gather all the Protestants on whom he could lay hands in the surrounding country, sparing neither age nor sex, and drive them under the walls, leaving them there to die in sight of their friends. It was a terrible threat, well calculated to stagger brave men. No great wonder if it had proved unendurable. But the answer was a stern refusal. Perhaps there was some lingering thought that cruel and relentless as Rosen was known to be, he would yet not carry out his proposal in all its force. If this idea was entertained, the Derry men were soon undeceived. One Monday evening they descried from the walls a motley crowd advancing towards them, with a gang of soldiery behind, driving them on. It was a piteous sight to see the aged patriarch tottering wearily along on his staff - the mother with her infant in her arms - and to hear the cries of the poor children, as hungry, and tired, and terrified, they clung to their parents; and still more piteous to watch them as darkness fell, lying on the bare ground without shelter, and to hear their cries all through the night. Next morning a still larger crowd of a similar kind appeared, until altogether some twelve hundred hapless people were massed together round the beleaguered city. What made the sight more trying, was the fact that, looking down from his guard-post, the soldier could recognise in that throng the face of his own aged mother or father, or his sister, or his wife. It was an awful trial; but, melting as the sight was, it did not move the men of Derry from their stern watchword of 'No Surrender!' And to the honour of their friends be it told, from that miserable crowd itself went up a cry to the garrison on the walls, begging them not to be moved, out of pity for them, to yield. So those nights and days went on - the starving Protestant garrison within, their starving mothers, and wives, and sisters, and children without, and the cruel enemy all round. But still no man suggested surrender.

What did the Derry man do? They raised the biggest gallows they could build on one of the bastions, in full view of the Romish army, and told some twenty prisoners whom they had captured to prepare for death. The prisoners ask leave to write to Rosen, and a letter goes out signed by five of them in the name of all, begging the general not to have them put to a criminal's death. The determination of the garrison wins the day. The cruel stratagem, which would have disgraced a Turk, is abandoned. The poor people are allowed to go home; and when the last of them is seen safely on the way, the gallows comes down from the Double Bastion. It had done its work well, though not a victim had swung from it. (Pages 92-93).

Testimony

At the end of the siege and the Williamite wars in Ireland the veterans of those stern days looked back upon the battles. Who would gain the credit for the undoubted victory? One man's testimony is recorded. I am sure it is the testimony of thousands of Bible-believing Protestants who lived through those dark days of struggle and brighter days of deliverance. "Oh, none will believe", says John Hunter of Maghera, who served during the siege, "but those who have found it by experience, what some poor creatures suffered in that siege... I was so weak from hunger that I fell under my musket one morning as I was going to the walls, yet God gave me strength to continue all night at my post there, and enabled me to act the part of a soldier, as if I had been as strong as ever I was. Yet my face was blackened with hunger. I was so hard put to it by reason of the want of food, that I had hardly any heart to speak or walk; and yet when the enemy was coming, as many a time they did, to storm the walls, then I found as if my former strength returned to me. I am sure it was the Lord that kept the city, and none else, for there were many of us that could scarcely stand on our feet before the enemy attacked the walls, who, when they were assaulting the out-trenches, ran out against them most nimbly and with great courage. Indeed it was never the poor starved men that were in Derry that kept it, but the mighty God of Jacob, to whom be praise for ever and ever!