

Political Freedom and the Siege of Derry

*Was the
Closing of the Gates
by the Apprentice Boys
the starting point of
Constitutional Government
and Religious Liberty?*

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INTRODUCTION

What kind of historic event do the Apprentice Boys commemorate each August? It is time that some attempt was made to give a straight answer to that question.

One hears it said that the Closing of the Gates of Derry to the King was an act of rebellion that led directly to the establishment of Constitutional freedom. If what the Apprentice Boys commemorate annually is the birth of Constitutional freedom, why is the commemoration resented by most of the people of Derry?

But the idea that the Closing of the Gates had something to do with the establishment of Constitutional freedom needs more explanation than has yet been given by anybody who holds that view. If the Closing of the Gates marked the birth of freedom, why did Derry itself have to wait until the 1970s for a local government based on the majority? And does not the political history of the city from 1689 to the 1970s suggest the Gates were Closed in the interest of establishing the dominance of an intolerant sect over the mass of the people?

These are important questions. If the Apprentice Boys commemorate the birth of freedom, socialists should use their influence to discourage opposition to their parade. But if what they commemorate is sectarian supremacy, then it is their activity that should be discouraged.

We begin a discussion of this serious matter by reprinting an article from the *Irish Political Review* (October 1996).

Pat Muldowney
August 1 1997

THE DOCTRINE

[On August 11 1996, Radio Ulster brought on Jonathan Bardon to explain why the Siege of Derry was a great event in the progress of humanity towards whatever it is progressing towards. Bardon's exposition was followed by a discussion involving Gregory Campbell of the Democratic Unionist Party and others. Bardon, a College lecturer in Belfast, is of Ascendancy background, which is not the same thing as Ulster Unionist background.]

There was a time when the Ascendancy looked down with contempt or embarrassment on Protestant Ulster. But Bardon appears to be entirely in sympathy with it. And Gregory Campbell responded to his sympathy with a due, but nevertheless surprising, nod of deference.

We give below an extract from the start of the discussion, followed by a comment on it from the historian Brendan Clifford.]

Question: If Derry had not resisted, what would the outcome have been, and I'm thinking not just about Ireland but about the Glorious Revolution as a whole?

Jonathan Bardon: If Derry had not resisted, then King James could have brought all his forces to bear on Enniskillen and I very much doubt if Enniskillen could have held out. Had Derry been taken then the whole island would have been in the hands of King James. There would have been no foothold for William. If James had been successful then you might not have had full Constitutional government established in Britain. So the victory at Derry and subsequently at the Boyne and Aughrim and Enniskillen, those victories secured for Britain a Parliamentary system of where the King couldn't do what he liked, he had to get the permission of Parliament. And for Europe as a whole, it prevented Louis XIV, the most powerful monarch in the world, from achieving his ambition of dominating the whole of Western and Central Europe. And the result of that was that Holland was saved, that Austria was on the side, Catholic Austria was on the side of King William, and indeed a Te Deum was sung in celebration of the victory at the Boyne. So the British would have said that the Balance of Power was duly maintained by the victory at Derry.

Q: And one last question Jonathan, because it's germane in a sense to what happened yesterday. How many of the people of Derry, how many of those 13 Apprentice Boys would have been conscious of the wider implications of what was happening when they closed the City gates?

J. Bardon: I think they were extremely conscious of what they were doing. They knew that everything hinged on their resistance. They knew that Coleraine and Belfast had been taken, that the Planters' Army had been defeated at Dromore in County down. And many of them in fact kept diaries and, as soon as the Siege was over, one of the replacement Governors, the Rev. George Walker, he published very quickly a full account of the Siege of Derry, which became a best seller. And there were several other accounts. So they knew how important it was.

Q: Let me ask you, Gregory Campbell, based on that fascinating account of what yesterday was all about, do those legends and those memories linger on? Are they passed on? Are they part of what drives the Apprentice Boys, what still drives Unionists in terms of what they would claim to be a victory for civil and religious liberties?

Gregory Campbell: Yes. I'm actually very pleased that Jonathan Bardon did that piece, because had, I suppose, a Unionist like me or John Adams or someone else did it, we could have been accused of gilding the lily. But that is exactly what it is about. The memory of this lingers on--not lingers on, it's deep within the Protestant psyche--because of those reasons. The Protestant community look upon that momentous event in a light, not just of a small parochial battle in the Northwest of Ireland, but about the beginnings of the battle which subsequently led to the Boyne, and then eventually gave us our Parliamentary democracy. It's as deeply ingrained as that. So, therefore, whenever you do see the almost re-enactment each year of thousands of people coming here, it's not an invading force. I know that it is sometimes indicated or inferred by Nationalists that this is in some way a triumphalist commemoration and a sort of a rubbing it in to the Nationalist community that we're still top. To Protestants that's--

Q: There's still a lot of that involved in it though.

G. Campbell: It's nonsensical. It really is. I was out all day yesterday, with my collarette on, and never once did it cross my mind, nor anyone I met, that we were in some way top dog. Because we're bottom dog every other day in this city. What we were saying was, this is a tremendous day, it's our day, we're commemorating an event that has to be maintained and has to be perpetuated, because everyone benefits.

THE TRUTH

So Londonderry was the birthplace--the delivery room--of civil and religious freedom, Constitutional government, and Parliamentary democracy 307 years ago! And the apprentices who closed the gates were conscious agents of the historical process. They knew that the world of liberal democracy would be stillborn if they did not do the bidding of a Calvinist minister and close the gates against the Papists. And the very Pope himself applauded their action, and had idolatrous ceremonies performed in their honour when the Papist army was routed at the Boyne the following year.

How then, can it be that the Bogsiders still cannot see what the Pope himself saw three centuries ago--that the closing of the gates was a fine thing, motivated by a concern for the general welfare of humanity?

Alternatively: How could it be that civil and religious liberty did not come to Londonderry itself until it had reverted to its ancient name of Derry, almost three hundred years after the closing of the gates? How could it be that twelve generations of descendants of the Apprentice Boys, annually commemorating that historical act which was designed to usher in the era of liberal democracy, neglected to make Londonderry itself either liberal or democratic?

Jonathan Bardon's version is historical gibberish. Or, to put it academically, it is revisionist. Revisionism is the invention of history to serve a current line of politics.

But, for better or worse, humans are not produced in academic mind factories. They cannot be re-programmed by taking out one floppy disc and inserting another. Social experience transmits from generation to generation with little reference to academic fashion. Actual historical events have ongoing consequences in their own crude actuality in the real world out there beyond 'perceptions' and nuances and revisions.

We have been living for the past quarter century in the consequences of that very crude event of August 1969 when the state apparatus of which the Apprentice Boys formed a part went berserk. The respectable historians deplore the consequences while rarely dwelling on the cause. They might have some influence in modifying the consequences if they did dwell on the cause. As it is, the world rolls on regardless of all the waste paper they produce.

WHY THE GATES WERE CLOSED

The gates of Derry were closed for the same reason that the gates of stockades in the frontier regions of the United States were closed in the mid-19th century when there were natives in the vicinity.

Londonderry, as the name suggests, was an English city in Ireland. The English people of Derry lived in relations of antagonism with the Irish, whom they regarded as savages. The gates were closed because there was a pack of savages in the neighbourhood.

The closing of the gates was an act of rebellion because the savages had a commission from the King. But Londonderry was only biding its time to rebel, because the King was a Papist, and was therefore close to being a savage himself. It would have been more convenient not to rebel until the new usurping king had arrived in Ireland, but that did not prove possible when the savages turned up with a commission from the lawful King to occupy the city.

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

The Rev. John Mackenzie, Presbyterian chaplain to the regiment commanded by the Anglican Rev. George Walker, who was in Derry throughout the Siege, commended the defenders for "*their zeal for the Protestant religion, and their attachment to the present Government*". (This was written in 1690, when "*the present government*" was the government set up by the aristocratic rebellion of 1688.)

Mackenzie says that they suspected "*a general design of the Irish Papists against the British Protestants*", particularly by "*Ultoghs*", who were cruel and bloody. These Ultoghs, "*who were the very scum of the country had the hereditary inclinations, as well as the blood of their ancestors running in their veins*". And the great crime of those ancestors, as Mackenzie reminds his readers, was that they had tried to get their country back in 1641--in the generation after they had been ethnically cleansed from it.

Mackenzie's Narrative Of The Siege was published in refutation of the Rev. George Walker's True Account. Walker hot-footed it to London when the Siege was lifted and published a version that left out the Presbyterians. Mackenzie showed that it was a Presbyterian Minister who had persuaded the Apprentices to close the gates, and that Walker was a braggart. But Walker's bragging got him a Bishopric from William. He did not enjoy it for long, however, because his vocation was military and he was killed at the Boyne.

Walker was particularly valuable to William because he was an Anglican, and many of the Anglican clergy had difficulty understanding how William could be their legitimate King, seeing that he was an invader and usurper, and how he could absolve them from the oaths of loyalty they had taken to James. And, on top of that, they were half Papist themselves and therefore did not quite see Papists as savages. So, an Anglican clergyman who could easily shrug off an oath of loyalty, on the ground that no faith need be kept with Papists, was particularly valuable to William.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Neither the Siege, nor the Revolution of which it was part, had anything whatever to do with democracy or religious freedom. It was a Revolution in that it was a breach of established law in the governing of the state. Its outcome was that it established Parliamentary dictatorship (Parliament being the governing body of a tiny fraction of the population, the aristocracy and gentry) and brought in the comprehensive Penal Laws against religious freedom. Even among Protestants it only established a narrow tolerance of religious practice, accompanied by civil disabilities on any who did not take communion in the Church of England/Ireland.

It was James who stood for religious freedom in the 1680s. His introduction of a broad religious freedom offended the Protestant zealots, for whom religious freedom was incompatible with tolerance of Catholicism. The national religion of England is better described as anti-Catholicism than as Protestantism. And the politicians of the Glorious Revolution toppled James by whipping up the lowest level of anti-Catholic irrationalism. They were themselves 'enlightened' in private, but they gained political power by manipulating religious bigotry.

(The "United-Kingdom-Unionist-Robert-McCartney Party" politician, Conor Cruise O'Brien, looks to these sceptical manipulators of bigotry as his model. In his recent book on the Millennium he says that Enlightenment has no popular force in its own right, and must harness itself to some force of popular bigotry in order to acquire power. That was presumably what he was trying to do when he linked himself with Cedric Wilson.)

'Freedom' is a word without definite meaning. The freedom of one force, the achievement of unobstructed power by it, is usually accomplished through the destruction of another force. The zealots of 17th century Protestantism saw Catholicism as an idolatrous blot on Creation which had to be wiped out. Toleration of idolatry was incompatible with the freedom of true religion.

The advocates of true religion were convinced that Providence was behind them in their efforts to wipe out Roman superstition, and they saw the Penal Laws as a secular means for advancing the Divine purpose of establishing the freedom--i.e., the unobstructed power--of true religion in the world. But the impulse of the Reformation was all but spent by then. It was only in the Scottish Highlands that it made a further advance, helped by a reign of terror. Therefore the Penal Laws stand in history as a crime against humanity implemented by the Glorious Revolution.

DEMOCRACY

"Had Derry been surrendered, the whole kingdom of Ireland had been entirely lost, and particularly the brave people of Enniskillen had been unavoidably exposed as a sacrifice to the fury of the Irish. King James might have poured so considerable a force into Scotland as would not only have embroiled that kingdom (for that was done by a few), but in all human probability either overrun it, or at least turned it into a field of blood; and how difficult a task it would have been in those circumstances to have acquired the peace of England, where there were so many dangerous symptoms of disaffection among too many, and a strange ferment among all, is too easy to imagine. But the defence of that place, as it obviated all these dismal evils, so it has in a great measure blasted all the other designs of the Popish faction against Britain, and facilitated the reduction of Ireland" (MacKenzie).

This is the authentic language of the Siege. In it Derry and Enniskillen, two cities located in Ireland, are counter-posed against *"the Irish"*; the triumph of the Revolution involved *"the reduction of Ireland"*; and England was rife with *"many dangerous symptoms of disaffection"* from the new regime. To speak of democracy in these circumstances, if you know anything of the circumstances, is deception. Neither the theocrats of true religion, nor the sceptical manipulators of fundamentalist beliefs, thought that their purposes could be accomplished democratically. And the Enlightened political elite were determined that this time, unlike the 1640s, the people should not be drawn into politics. Even half a century later, at the time of Bonnie Prince Charlie, Samuel Johnson reckoned that, if the issue had been put to the people, even in England they would have supported a Stuart Restoration.

There was therefore no question of issues being resolved by the counting of heads. The only heads that counted were those of the landlord/aristocratic oligarchy and the Protestant zealots.

A hundred years after Derry and the Boyne, Britain fought a 20-year war against France which was a war against democracy, for the restoration of "legitimacy". Legitimacy meant monarchy controlled by aristocracy.

Britain put the Bourbons back on the throne of France, and restored the Pope to absolute sovereignty in the Papal States--it was Wolfe Tone, not the Orangemen, who exulted when the Papacy was taken down a peg by revolutionary France in 1798.

A hundred years after Derry and the Boyne, the Apprentice Boys were still completely opposed to democracy, and the Orange Order was founded as the irregular fighting arm of a comprehensively anti-democratic state. "Papists" was the name given to the people of Ireland to inject a special venom into the Ascendancy terror that was directed against them.

Modern democracy does not begin with the Glorious Revolution. It begins with the French Revolution.

Although France was defeated in 1815, it had during the preceding 25 years destroyed the foundations of Monarchical/Aristocratic 'Legitimacy'. The old order was restored only to start crumbling immediately. And, even in Britain itself, the old order had been undermined by the long anti-democratic war against France. The regime of the Glorious Revolution was compelled to make a major concession to the democratic principle with the Reform Act of 1832. A middle class democracy was established in 1832. It was not until 1918 that a majority of the adult population got the vote.

The Belfast News Letter, an upholder of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, unexpectedly supported the Reform movement in 1832. Its reasoning was that anti-Catholic sentiment was so widespread in England that democracy was a more secure basis for the maintenance of the Protestant order of the state than the Glorious Revolution oligarchy was. It reckoned that, if the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) had been delayed until after Parliament had been Reformed to represent the middle classes, it would never have been passed at all.

FRANCE THE SOURCE OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious freedom, like democracy, came to Britain after the French Revolution and as a consequence of it.

Irish Catholic reformers pointed to the practice of religious freedom in a number of Continental states, especially Prussia, as proof that religious freedom was possible. But reason was wasted on the regime of the Glorious Revolution. It was not until the French Revolution proclaimed a general freedom of religion, and Britain decided to make war on France, that the first substantial measure of religious freedom was introduced--the Catholic Relief Act of 1793. Religious freedom began in Ireland for the purpose of reducing French influence.

CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT AND HOW IT CAME ABOUT

As for "Constitutional" government--it is an elusive concept in 17th century Britain. For sixty years prior to 1688 there was no settled order of government, and a settled order is really all that is meant by 'Constitutional' in the English context.

After 1688--long after it--Constitutional government came to mean government by an aristocracy acting through a monarch. This was hammered out into a workable arrangement during the thirty years after 1688, and all that made it Constitutional was that it worked. There is not, on the face of it, anything inherently Constitutional in the governing of millions by a regime based on a couple of thousand large property-owning families.

The arrangement was made workable by the political elite through a series of lucky accidents. The first was that William did not settle down to govern his new kingdom. His primary interest was in war with France. The aristocratic conspirators who had offered him the Crown facilitated him in this enterprise, and he left the governing of his new kingdom to them. He was the first absentee King since the Middle Ages.

The second lucky accident was that Queen Anne didn't have an heir of her body, and that when she died in 1714 a family of minor German Royalty was imported. A major split in the oligarchy over the Hanoverian succession might easily have resulted in a second Civil War. But the Whig faction acted decisively (though hardly 'Constitutionally!') against the Tory faction and imposed their will on the body politic. (To accomplish this, the Whig majority in Parliament, knowing that they would lose an election on the Hanoverian issue even in the minuscule electorate of the time, warded off an election by arbitrarily extending the life of the 1714 Parliament from three years to seven.)

If Queen Anne had had an heir of her body, groomed for power, it is unlikely that the arrangement of "Crown in Parliament" would have stabilised in the form in which it did. The condition under which that happened was a Crown consisting of minor German Royalty, speaking no English, obsessed with family feuds, and knowing little

of English politics beyond the fact that they were widely disliked in their new kingdom and so had better accept the guidance of the Whig faction that had put them on the throne. This was the Crown with which Sir Robert Walpole established the "Crown in Parliament" system of "Constitutional government" long after 1688.

And even so, when the first English Hanoverian, George III, came to the throne in 1760, it was touch and go whether the 'Patriot King' would fail in his attempt to reduce Parliament to a pool from which the Crown would select its Cabinet. It was in the conflict between a Whig faction in Parliament and the King that Edmund Burke made his famous declaration that representative government could only exist in the form of party government--and he was only referring to representative government for the aristocracy and gentry.

The first English election that could be said to have been contested by a party was that of 1641. Although party-politics never ceased thereafter, they were seen after the Restoration (1660) and after 1688 as an accidental consequence of the Civil War division which would disappear as soon as the country had settled down for a generation. It was not until the 1760s that they were declared to be a necessity of representative government. A politically competent King, with a Parliament which was a miscellaneous assembly of individual Members, would be able to govern as well as 'reign', and the relationship of Crown and Parliament would be likely to revert to what it was under the Tudors. It was only when party politics became Constitutional, and when the Crown was confronted in Parliament with a party which had been elected to govern, and with a settled opinion amongst those who counted that this was how it should be, that Constitutional Government as the term is now understood was established.

And it still has not come to Londonderry!

A new system of government was constructed by the aristocracy over a period of generations after 1688. Without the disruption of 1688 it is unlikely that it would have developed. But, without William's primary interest in European War, and without the importation of German Kings, it is also unlikely that it would have developed.

The core of that system is representative government by parties. And, although the last thing in the minds of its creators was the establishment of democratic government, it was through the party system of representative government that democracy was made functional after the French Revolution had made it inevitable. But that belongs to the 19th century--or in the case of Northern Ireland, to the 21st century --and has absolutely nothing to do with the purposes of the Apprentices or Calvinist preachers or Anglican clergymen in Derry in 1689.

In England it might be reasonable enough as a kind of shorthand to project a subsequent development backwards onto 1688. But it is not reasonable enough in Ireland, where the subsequent development was of a drastically different kind, and belongs to the history of 'war crimes' and 'crimes against humanity', rather than the history of Constitutional government.

The reason there must be an accommodation between the Protestant and Catholic communities is because the Protestant community exists, and not because it stood for any kind of popular freedom in Ireland three hundred years ago. What it stood for three hundred years ago was conquest, plunder, genocide, and Protestant theocracy.

Read **Derry & the Boyne**, by Nicholas Plunket; a contemporary account of the Siege of Derry, the Battle of the Boyne, and the general condition of Ireland in the Jacobite War; published by Belfast Historical and Educational Society, 1991, 132 pages, £7.50.

Available from NorthWest Labour Publications, 2 Belmont Crescent, Derry BT48 7RR.

Title: Political Freedom and the Siege of Derry
Organisation: Northwest Labour Publications
Date: 1996

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