

Loyalist Myths

King Billy Revisited

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It is often said that history is written by the victors. It is probably more true to say however that history is written by the rulers or by those with ambition to rule. In this talk I want to look at the events of a period of Irish history which has had a profound effect on the events of the three centuries since and which is the source of many of the sectarian myths which people - especially those in the Six Counties - are still suffering the consequences of. Over three hundred years ago two contenders for the English throne fought their way around Ireland. Nationalist historians extol the virtues of the "Patriotic" Irish forces and their French allies which fought with King James II in defence of Catholicism and Ireland. Unionist politicians and historians on the other hand praise the memory of King William of Orange and his great victory at the Battle of the Boyne in defence of "Civil and Religious Liberty". The truth however is vastly different.

The Orange Parades on and around the twelfth of July have long been a bone of serious contention and indeed a source of sectarian conflict in the Six Counties. Members of the Orange Order demand their unalienable right to march the Queen's highway, as their forefathers before them have done, in commemoration of the victory of King William of Orange at the battle of the Boyne - a victory (as the Orangemen see it) for religious and civil liberty. Nationalists, on the other hand, see the Orange Parades as nothing more than a coat-trailing exercise designed to keep the Catholic population in their place and to pound forward the message that Northern Ireland is an Orange state and that nationalists are and will always remain second class citizens in that state.

It is interesting in this context to look back at the events of just over 300 years ago and to analyse exactly what was involved in the war between William of Orange (King Billy as he is popularly known) and James II of England. This war - popular mythology would have us believe - was a struggle to defend the Protestant religion against the Roman Catholic Church. In reality, however, the Williamite War - in Ireland - was effectively a war between two factions for mastery over the Irish people. And far from being a war to defend Protestantism against the Catholic Church, William of Orange counted among his allies none other than the Pope of Rome - the head

of the Roman Catholic Church!! The Pope and King Billy were in fact political buddies engaged in a bitter European power struggle in which Ireland's people - both Catholic and Protestant - were mere sacrificial pawns.

England - and even more so Ireland - were for William of Orange (the ruler of Holland) simply useful tools in his campaign to free Holland from French domination. James II of England had fled to France and to the protection of Louis XIV following an unsuccessful attempt to give all chief state offices in England to Catholic aristocrats. An alliance composed of wealthy landowners and merchants and the Church of England - alarmed by James' actions - invited his son-in-law, the ruler of Holland - William of Orange - to take over!

On November 5th 1688, William landed in England and James found himself deserted by his army, navy, court functionaries, the Law, the Church, the City and even his own family. Fearing for his life, he fled to France and the safety of the Court of Louis XIV. William and his wife Mary were installed as joint monarchs of England after they had agreed a Bill of Rights and an Act of Settlement (which limited the royal succession exclusively to Protestants, even marriage to a Catholic being a disqualification).

In order to understand the effects of all this on Ireland, we must first of all understand what was going on in Europe at the time. We must ask why did William, a Dutchman, come to England, and why did James seek political asylum in France? Louis XIV, autocrat of France and supreme representative of feudalism in Europe, was busily engaged at the time in spreading French dominance in the western world. In the struggle to achieve control Louis required allies, and to upset the balance of power he needed England on his side. James' flight to France was thus mutually beneficial for both the French monarch and the deposed English monarch. James saw his alliance with Louis as a means whereby he could re-establish his dominance at home whereas Louis saw the potential of a re-installed James in terms of his own efforts to dominate Europe.

William of Orange, on the other hand, was fighting for the independence of Holland against Louis and as such was very interested in having England on his side. Thus William's view of the throne of England was its usefulness in defending the national independence of Holland.

It is because William - a Protestant - came to England at the invitation of the Whigs to help them defeat James - a Catholic - that the Williamite war has since been described as a struggle to defend the Protestant religion against the Roman Catholic Church. However the historical realities of the alliances formed in Europe at the time explode this Orange-Unionist-Protestant myth. In fact Catholic Spain was one of William's main allies in the fight against the spread of French dominance. And - wait for it - the Pope - as temporal monarch of Italy - was a fervent supporter of William's claim to the English throne and a military ally in the fight against Louis and France. When William and his army arrived on English soil, he brought with him a Papal blessing and a banner proclaiming the support of Italy and the Pope!!

The maintenance of Protestant England's independence thus coincided with William's interests which in turn coincided with the interest of Catholic Spain and the Pope himself. For Ireland the story was somewhat different. Whoever won the power struggle between William and James the mass of Irish people stood to lose. The events in Ireland during James' attempts to win back the English monarchy proved that neither William and his allies, including the Pope, or James and his ally Louis XIV were in the slightest bit interested in the welfare of the Irish people.

In Ireland the accession of the Catholic James II to the throne of England had excited great interest among the Catholic landlord class. This loyalty to James was purely economic in base with many of them hoping that the Cromwellian settlements would be revoked enabling them

to return to ownership of lands which they, or their ancestors had owned in pre-Cromwell times (having, of course, robbed them from Irish people in a previous settlement). Over two-thirds of Ireland's good arable land was at the time owned by less than one-sixth of the total population, the land-owning minority being almost completely members of the Protestant landlord class. Thus the Catholic landlord class welcomed James, the Protestant landowners feared him and for the mass of Irish people whoever won nothing was likely to change.

In Ireland the struggle known as the Williamite Wars was effectively a fight between two factions of landlordism to decide which of them should have the right to exploit the Irish people. As James Connolly was to write in "Labour in Irish History" in 1910

"Éall the political struggles of the period were built upon the material interests of one set of usurpers who wished to retain, and another who wished to obtain, the mastery of those landsÉ"

In March 1689, James II landed at Kinsale in Co. Cork with a small army comprised of French and Irish troops to launch his bid to win back the English crown. James had in fact little or no interest in Ireland but hoped to use it as a landing post to get to Scotland. On 7th May James called together a parliament to meet in Dublin - a parliament which, because it declared that the English parliament was incompetent to pass laws for Ireland, was to become known as the "Patriot Parliament".

The extent of the parliament's "patriotism" soon became clear however. The problems of the Irish people as a whole were ignored completely as this parliament quickly set about the task of attempting to secure ownership of the lands of Ireland for the landlords assembled in parliament and to prevent further displacement by other adventurers from England. The landlord class who controlled the parliament used the occasion to carve up Ireland for themselves, ignoring the mass of people and leaving them landless. To quote Connolly again:

"The so-called Patriot Parliament was in reality, like every other that sat in Dublin, merely a collection of land thieves and their lackeys; their patriotism consisted in an effort to retain for themselves the spoils of the native peasantry; the English influence against which they protested was the influence of their fellow thieves in England hungry for a share of the spoilÉ"

William of Orange sent his first battalion of troops to Ireland on August 13th 1689 and William himself arrived over on 14th June 1690. With an army of 36,000 men he left Belfast on the march to Dublin. Despite the myth, the actual Battle of the Boyne was of little significance as it did not end the war. Indeed we should also remember that, despite the fact that he was supposedly fighting for England and Protestantism, the English parliament was extremely reluctant to give William the army he needed to conquer Ireland saying that he had plenty of Dutchmen anyway. So when William did cross the Boyne on July 1st 1690, he had an army consisting of the riffraff of Europe's mercenaries. His army was made up of Dutch, Danes, Swedes, Prussians and French Huguenots plus a few English, Scottish and Ulster regiments.

William's army was slightly superior in numbers to James' and indeed the most capable soldier on James' side - Patrick Sarsfield advised against entering battle on the Boyne. James, however, overruled the advice, was overrun and beat a hasty retreat to Dublin where he immediately set sail for France, leaving the Irish people to suffer the consequences of his actions.

William's victory at the Boyne was greeted with enthusiasm in Rome. The Pope welcomed the victory of the "European Alliance" forces and Pontifical High Mass was celebrated in thanksgiving for the deliverance from the power of the Catholic Louis XIV and the Catholic James II. Meanwhile King Billy marched on and on July 7th entered Dublin. In rapid succession Drogheda, Kilkenny and Waterford surrendered but William's troops were repulsed at Athlone.

James' army, under the command of Patrick Sarsfield had fallen back to defend the line of the River Shannon. William laid siege to the city of Limerick, and leaving his army under the command of baron de Ginkel, King Billy left for England. The war between the two armies - both of whose "leaders" had fled the country was to continue until October 1691 with significant battles taking place at Athlone, Aughrim Galway and, of course, Limerick. On October 13th 1691 the Articles of Capitulation - to become known as the Treaty of Limerick - were signed and King Billy's victory was assured. Over 20,000 Irish men fled to France (becoming known in history as the "Wild Geese") and entered the service of the King of France where they formed the "Irish Brigade" and indeed it is reckoned that over the next fifty years 450,000 Irishmen died in the service of the King of France.

Thus an inglorious period of Irish history came to an end - a period around which there have been more myths propagated than Hans Christian Andersen or any other great storyteller could have dreamt of. It is a period of Irish history which the history books portray variously as a war between Protestantism and Catholicism or as one between the English King Billy and Irish patriots supported by King James II and the French. For a true perspective on these events, however, James Connolly's "Labour in Irish History" explodes the myths and I would in conclusion like to quote extensively from it.

"It is unfortunately beyond all question that the Irish Catholics shed their blood like water and wasted their wealth like dirt in an effort to retain King James upon the throne. But it is equally beyond all question that the whole struggle was no earthly concern of theirs; that King James was one of the most worthless representatives of a race that ever sat upon the throne; that the "pious, glorious and immortal" William was a mere adventurer fighting for his own hand, and his army recruited from the impecunious swordsmen of Europe who cared as little for Protestantism as they did for human life; and that neither army had the slightest claim to be considered as a patriot army combating for the freedom of the Irish race."

"The war between William and James (Connolly continues) offered a splendid opportunity to the subject people of Ireland to make a bid for freedom while the forces of their oppressors were rent in civil war. The opportunity was cast aside, and the subject people took sides on behalf of the opposing factions of their enemies. The Catholic gentlemen and nobles who had the leadership of the people of Ireland at the time were, one and all, men who possessed considerable property in the country, property to which they had, notwithstanding their Catholicity, no more right to title than the merest Cromwellian or Williamite adventurer. The lands they held were lands which in former times belonged to the Irish people - in other words, they were tribe-lands."

Finally from Connolly:

"The forces which battled beneath the walls of Derry or Limerick were not the forces of England and Ireland but were the forces of two English political parties fighting for the possession of the powers of government; and the leaders of the Irish Wild Geese on the battlefields of Europe were not shedding their blood because of their fidelity to Ireland, as our historians pretend to believe, but because they had attached themselves to the defeated side in English politics. This fact was fully illustrated by the action of the old Franco-Irish at the time of the French Revolution. They in a body volunteered into the English army to help put down the new French Republic, and as a result Europe witnessed the spectacle of the new republican Irish exiles fighting for the French Revolution, and the sons of the old aristocratic Irish exiles fighting under the banner of England to put down that Revolution. It is time we learned to appreciate and value the truth upon such matters, and to brush from our eyes the cobwebs woven across them by our ignorant or unscrupulous history-writing politicians."

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