

## History of the Bogside (Derry)

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



the panoramic view over the Catholic Bogside tinderbox of the modern Troubles in Northern Ireland. The history of anti-Catholic discrimination in this Northern State is originally underwater. The river Foyle flowed round the city, but the river was diverted. It dried out into marshland: hence the name Bogside.

The Bogside was attacked and destroyed by Donegal chieftain Hugh O'Neill through the bog. During the siege of 1688-1689, the Bogside, Brandywell, and Creggan – the first recorded settlers in the Bogside were 61 “British” who at the time typically ignored any Irish inhabitants.

The Bogside is characterized by the relationship between two communities: one poor, and powerful; one without – powerless, and dependent. The Bogside exists throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which increased the Catholic population in Derry. Since Catholics were forbidden from living within the walls, most settled in the Bogside. The steady growth of Catholic population was reflected in the construction of the city’s first Catholic church, Long Tower (1784), and St. Eugene’s Cathedral (1851).

From the beginning, the relationship between the Bogside and the walled city was antagonistic. As a result, sectarian tension flickered throughout the 1800s. In 1869, three people were shot dead during inter-communal trouble. That same year the Catholic Workingmen’s Defence Association was set up to protect the Bogside. This is the beginning of when the Bogside community thought about taking control for their own defense.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Catholics had a clear voting majority in Derry but no corresponding political power. The Londonderry Improvement Bill (1895), the first gerrymander of the city, ensured that Catholics could elect only 16 of the 40 members of Londonderry Corporation.

Tensions rose across Ireland during the 1919-21 War of Independence. In the spring and summer of 1920, 40 people were killed in the city in clashes between republicans and an alliance of loyalists and British forces. When the Government of Ireland Act was passed in 1920, Derry remained a part of the north of Ireland. When partition became a reality in 1921, nationalist Derry felt abandoned, and a very reluctant part of the north.

After partition, the Unionist Party set about creating a ‘Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State.’ Unionist leaders ran the north on the basis that to give something to the Catholics was to take it away from Protestants. Working-class Protestants were urged to see equality for Catholics as a threat to their position. Catholics were excluded from government jobs while private employers were urged to employ only “loyal men and women.”

No effective opposition to the Unionist government was permitted. The Special Powers Act used the police and the Special Constabularies as sectarian political tools. At one point, there was

one police officer for every two Catholic families in the north. Over the 50 years of Stormont rule, successive British governments retained ultimate authority over the north.

Derry was the starkest example of anti-Catholic discrimination in the northern state. Gerrymandering ensured that the nationalist majority could elect only 8 of the 20 members in the Londonderry Corporation. Nationalist voters were corralled into one of three electoral wards –creating overcrowded neighborhoods in the Bogside community. A much smaller number of unionist voters in the north and waterside wards could elect twelve. The Unionist way of thinking was “to give someone a house was to give them a local government vote.” Preserving the sectarian arithmetic that ensured continued unionist rule was the key factor in who was housed and where. All housing allocation was in the hands of one person – the unionist mayor.

Derry also suffered from massive discrimination in employment. Unionist politicians directed industries to unionist areas. The average unemployment rate for the north was 8%. In Derry it was well over 20%.

The time had come to demand change.

In the 1950s oppressed people around the world began to demand civil rights and change. Inspired by events occurring in the United States and South Africa small groups in Derry were taking to the streets to demand action on housing, jobs, and votes. ‘We shall overcome’ became the anthem of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland.

A march was planned for Derry in October 1968. Despite the march being banned by the Unionist government, the protestors went ahead. On October 5 the marchers were confronted by police and were physically battered off the streets. By chance a single television cameraman had filmed the incident and the truth of unionist abuse of power was splashed onto television screens around the world. An upsurge in support for the civil rights protest led to a series of reforms from the unionist government. But it was too little too late. The civic atmosphere in the north of Ireland had changed forever.

In early January 1969, as police attacked the Bogside, the slogan ‘You Are Now Entering Free Derry’ was first written on the gabled wall. It was inspired by sit-in protests at Berkeley University, in California. British and Unionist politicians fumed at the existence of Free Derry. To make matters worse, when the British introduced internment (imprisonment without trial) it enraged nationalist Derry. Angry protests became an everyday occurrence. A campaign of civil disobedience was undertaken. More than 130 non-unionist councilors (elected member of local government) withdrew from district councils. But internment had stiffened the nationalist community’s resolve. An anti-internment march was planned for January 30, 1972. The Bloody Sunday march began shortly after 3pm. A little over an hour later 13 people lay dead – innocent and unarmed marchers shot down by members of the British Army’s Parachute Regiment. Between July 1969 through July 1972, 53 Protestants and Catholics from both sides of the conflict were killed in the small area known as Free Derry. The Battle of Bogside, Operation Demetrius (AKA Bloody Sunday) and Operation Motorman, designed to retake “no-go” areas were complete failures on part of the British Government.

The Northern Ireland Civil Right Association found that Derry’s politics were “built on a foundation of sectarian discrimination, biased administration and a barrage of totalitarian legislation, which both protected unionism and instilled a deep sense of social injustice in the non-unionist population.”

Derry has come a long way from those days of sectarian discrimination and injustice. Voting districts now ensure the proportionate allocation of council positions. Catholics now have majority council representation in Derry and at Stormont (Parliament of Northern Ireland). However, Northern Ireland’s Catholics and Protestants continue to live mostly separate lives. More than 90% of the children go to schools segregated by religion. It will take many years for the hardliners who had lived through the Troubles to die off before their society becomes truly integrated.