

## History of a “Legend-Derry” Irish City

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Now considered a great tourist destination with the best city walls in Ireland, during the 20th century sectarian struggles plagued Derry. When Ireland was divvied up between North and the Republic in the early 1920s, Derry’s water way – the River Foyle – was a logical border. But, for sentimental and economic reasons, the Protestant North kept all this predominantly Catholic Nationalist city. Subsequently, the two sides have fought over its status. Even its name has been a source of dispute. It is “Derry” to the Catholics and “Londonderry” to the Protestants. It should be noted that most inhabitants call it Derry.

The name has a good pedigree, dating back to 546 in Catholic Ireland. In that year, the holy St. Columba established a monastic citadel here. He chose a hilltop site in the middle of an oak grove or “doire.” The name stuck.

Now fast-forward a thousand years to 1613, when the English arrived. To establish a Protestant toehold in this Catholic part of Ireland, they began the “Plantation of Ulster” the region with loyal Protestant colonists imported from Scotland and England. Since many were financed by wealthy London guilds, they changed the name to “Londonderry.”

To keep the Irish out, who have been forced onto less desirable land, the English surrounded the city with a stout defensive wall which was constructed between 1613 and 1618. Today those walls make Derry one of the best-preserved fortified cities in Ireland. They stand almost 20 feet high and nearly as thick, with 24 cannons standing sentinel.

The walls proved their worth in 1688-89, when the Catholic King James II and an Irish army besieged the city. Derry’s determined Protestant defenders, the Apprentice Boys, took the keys for the city’s gates and slammed the town gates shut. The Protestants successfully outlasted their foes for 105 grinding days. The Apprentice Boys made the Walls of Derry an iconic emblem of Loyalism and Unionism.

There are two main celebratory parades held in Derry city every year: The first parade called the “Relief of Derry” parade is held on the second Saturday in August to commemorate the ending of the 105-day siege of the city in August 1689. It took place against the background of an attempt by deposed Catholic King James II to regain his crown from his Protestant son-in-law, King William III. Also known as William of Orange, or King Billy, the new monarch was supported by Protestants in Derry, who shut the gates of the walled city to keep out the advancing Jacobite army. The ending of the siege is known as the Relief of Derry. It is considered the biggest loyal order parade in Northern Ireland making their way around the city’s historic walls as part of the parading of the walls ceremony. This year 5,000 members of the loyal order are expected to take part in the commemoration, accompanied by 130 bands.

The second parade held each year on the first Saturday in December is the “Shutting of the Gates” parade commemorating the actions of 13 apprentices who shut the City’s gates in 1688 and set in place the events which led to the Great Siege. The day concludes with the traditional burning of an effigy of the siege traitor Colonel Robert Lundy.

Sectarian violence in Ireland has given way to a settlement that is working. Both sides have come to the position that “an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind.” In Derry, the growing hope for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland is expressed in a powerful public-art sculpture of two figures extending their hands to one another. These days, the once divided city sees itself as a shared city. The symbol of that recalibration is the Peace Bridge across the River Foyle. This pedestrian span, built with European Union funds, is intended to bring the two sides together: east bank and west bank, Irish and British, Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist. And to the surprise of locals, it is working.

In a sign of the times, a British army base that once occupied prime real estate near the old city wall has been transformed into an outdoor concert venue and a gathering place for all of Derry. It is an emblem of what has happened here; you will find that now the long-divided communities love their “legend-Derry” Irish city.