

EVERYMAN

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Editorial

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JOHN HUME'S DERRY

*The text of the controversial
Radio Telefís Éireann documentary
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THE city of Derry is the heart of the Irish problem, a place where Ireland's two traditions meet in strength.

On the one hand there is a Unionist and largely Protestant tradition, and for them it's a place where their battle was fought. On the other there's an Irish and largely Catholic tradition, and for them it is the place where their battle is being fought. For that is what the problem of Derry, and indeed the problem of Northern Ireland is about, the domination of one tradition by another. That's what it has always been all about 'till October 5, 1968—a date which set off a chain of events which culminated in the Battle of Bogside, August 12th, 1969.

The intervening year has produced a situation in which the raw elements and forces of history have been laid bare.

Derry is the birthplace of the Protestant tradition as we know it in the North of Ireland, a place which is hallowed in Unionist tradition . . . a Mecca. Like all colonial traditions its foundations were a mixture of the bible and the sword, and the symbolism of this mixture of violence and prayer is everywhere in evidence, and is the root explanation of the militant Protestant of the 20th century. The man or woman who has never forgotten, whose views have never shifted for three hundred years. For Derry was the first colony of London. It was colonised in the early seventeenth century

as part of the overall plantation of Ulster by James the First, and carried out in Derry by the merchant companies of London. The connection is still strongly visible, its symbols are everywhere, and it expresses itself in its exaggerated attachment to the Imperial tradition. It is a tradition where the strongest memories are of war and violence; a tradition that has given the city as a key centre in two world wars, and takes great pride in the part it has played.

It all began with violence. The Siege of Derry is their longest memory. It was fought in 1689 between the forces of James the Second and the Protestant Defenders led by the Apprentice Boys. The extent of this siege is a matter of historical dispute, but there is no dispute in the minds of the Protestant people of the North of Ireland. It was a battle for their heritage, a battle, as they say, for civil and religious liberty, and one which they will never allow themselves, and are never allowed, to forget. The unfortunate aspect for the whole North of Ireland community, is that the siege commemoration persists in a siege mentality on the part of a large section of the Unionist community. A mentality which regards those not of their tradition as enemies on the other side of the stockade, as people who can never be trusted. Its most unfortunate aspects are to be found among the working class people in these little streets. The depth and strength of their feelings is represented in the way in which they cling to their

been part of the reason for the buildup of frustration of recent years. The feeling of neglect, again rightly or wrongly, is bitterly blamed on the attitude of an unfriendly Government.

Emigration has drawn the youthful lifeblood from the city, a perpetual drain, inflicting suffering on the minds of the people. A son in Australia, a daughter in England, the family scattered. In my own street there were 42 young men of my generation, only 17 remain, all the rest have gone away. Jimmy Conaghan is one of Derry's unemployed, and yet he can make music from an ivy leaf. Male unemployment is one of Derry's chief problems. Much of the burden of the city's economic development has fallen on its women. Derry's women have built the city. Since its foundation in the middle of the 19th century, the shirt industry has been the backbone of any economic prosperity that Derry has had. And in the days before the welfare state the women were largely the breadwinners. Older Derry women have memories of beginning work at 12 years of age in a shirt factory. Of rearing families in hard times and of making shirts in their homes when the children had gone to bed.

Derry's women have given strength to the character of the city, for they have borne many of its burdens, they have felt the human side of male unemployment, of bad housing, and of the suffering born of the emigration of sons and daughters. Someone has said that the suffering of Derry can be read in the faces of Derry's women, and so it can. For the men, one out of five of them are out of work, tearing the soul from the city, shrouding it in hopelessness, and giving birth to the apathy, born of years of idleness and frustration that has been Derry's sickness down the years.

Allied to unemployment, housing is one of Derry's root problems. The key factor in political control in Derry has always been housing, and the allocation of houses, and over the years this has been controlled by the party in power.

They have used their power to segregate the population on a religious basis. But this has meant that only one area of this city was devoted really to the housing of the larger sections of its population, and as the 1960's progressed, this area dried up, and houses started to become more and more scarce, because houses mean votes, votes mean power.

The results were that by 1968 one out of ten people was without a home.

Bad housing is one of the deeper factors in creating the personality of Derry.

There's hardly a family in the Catholic districts who have not had to spend the first six years of their marriage in poor housing conditions. The psychological effect on children, and on their future outlook on life and society in general is something which cannot be measured. The first four or five years of their lives, in which they ate, slept and lived in cramped conditions has left its mark.

The human problems that have affected Derry have always been seen by the majority of its citizens as a result of the political system under which they live. Catholics represent, and have always represented two thirds of Derry's population, and have been united politically only in their opposition to the Unionist party. For normal politics have not been possible in a situation where religion has always been the major political weapon. The one third Unionist minority has always controlled Derry. They needed their Mecca.

What they have they hold, and they must always hold the place where their battle was fought. They did so by means of an invidious system now widely known as gerrymander.

It was accomplished by a combination of cleverly drawn electoral boundaries, segregated housing—housing estates are either 90% Catholic or 90% Protestant, in Derry—and by an outmoded and undemocratic voting system. In addition, Derry has seen itself as the symbol of all areas opposed to Unionism.

In recent years, a series of events combined to build up a picture of a new plantation of Ulster, designed to further strength in Unionist areas, areas of existing economic prosperity, to the detriment of Derry's high unemployment. It seemed no coincidence to the people of Derry, that the areas of highest unemployment coincided with areas traditionally opposed to Unionism. The closure of the shipping lines from Derry. The severing of one of its rail links. The creation of the new city of Craigavon instead of the existing second city. The loss of Northern Ireland's second University. All these were seen as part of a plan to further downgrade a city that had already had enough.

These factors combined with the internal problems of Derry combined to create a combustible situation. A situation seen by the majority of Derry citizens as a cynical political exercise. The pawn

past, and in their outpourings of folk art on their gable walls; lest they ever forget.

These people are fundamentally no different from their fellow Catholic citizens. They are no richer, but what they have, they hold, and they believe that what they have is due to their heritage, and to its political slogans of no surrender, and not an inch. For these people are afraid. Fear is at the root of their prejudice . . . fear of Rome, fear of the Catholic Church, fear of a united Ireland. And, however unreasonable it may seem in the 20th century, it is a fear which is genuinely felt, and genuinely exists, and the assuaging of these fears represents a real challenge to those who wish to create equality in the North of Ireland. Their fear expresses itself in prejudice and domination, and is most clearly seen on the night of the 11th of August, the eve of the commemoration of their great event. Apart from the ever present symbols they commemorate their siege annually, in an exhibition which is at worst, tribal and elemental, and at best a colourful tourist attraction. Sadly there is little evidence of a past which bedevils the North of Ireland being forgotten. The 12th of August commemorates the relief of Derry from its siege. The city of Derry fills with people from all over the North of Ireland as they make their annual pilgrimage to the shrine, pounding home the memory of their past victory, insisting on their superiority. Unfortunately, it is passed on, for the children participate, and the memory is insured for future generations. It is a position with which one can have sympathy, if not agreement, for they are victims of a past which they did not create.

Below the cannonated walls of Derry, the cannon pointing as it has done for three hundred years, ever present symbols of past defeat, lies Bogside, the heartland of Derry's Catholic community, and the district in which most of Derry's Catholics find their roots.

The differences with their Protestant fellow citizens are not only religious, for as people they are Irish in both culture and outlook, and they have never shared in the prosperity that has been the lot of large sections of the dominant community.

The division sharpened with the partition of Ireland in 1921, when Derry lost its natural hinterland in Donegal, and as a city became not only the heart of the Northern Ireland problem but the

Achilles heel of Unionism — their indefensible position, and the people of Bogside became the living symbols of the injustice of the Northern Ireland state. Catholicism is the only factor which unites the people of Bogside. Unlike the Protestant people they are divided in their politics and united in their religious beliefs. Theirs is a religious tradition which has deep roots, founded in 546 A.D. by Columba, the founding saint, whose monastic oakgrove gave Derry its name. He is remembered still, in the old Longtower Church, the founding spot. He is remembered in the street names and in the holy wells of the district. Their religious faith is simple and strong. It has given them their community sense, their community activities being geared around the churches, the schools, the youth clubs, and in their close identification with parish districts. It has been a strong factor in moulding their endless patience in the face of adversity. It has been the badge which has enabled their political opponents to identify them easily—the family names, the school attended are reliable guides to one's politics in the North of Ireland.

The result has been amongst Catholics an intense distrust of all things Unionist, while the problem for non-Unionist politicians in breaking across religious barriers is one of removing the fears of Protestants, the problem for the Unionist politician who wants to solve the problem is one of almost absolute distrust which he faces from the Catholic community.

Derry's graves tell their own story of a difficult past. James McKenty who emigrated to Philadelphia 90 years ago inscribed on his parents' headstone the poignant message: "This stone is not to be removed until I return". In short, I will earn my bread in another land, but I will return when I die. Derry's newspapers in the 19th century carried full pages of newspaper advertisements offering safe passage to North America, to Philadelphia, to New York, to Boston, to St. John's, Newfoundland. For the human being has always been Derry's principal export. Emigration has drawn the life blood from Derry down the years. Today, the people still go—their destinations are different, but even the ships which took them ten years ago are no longer there. Derry's dockland which is such a strong part of the employment tradition of Derry's Bogside is today in decline and decay. The shipping lines to Glasgow, to Liverpool, to Heysham have closed and the decline has

of this system of political control were houses and jobs, and its victims were people. Generations of men, women and children. A legacy of frustration was building up over the years and was close to the point of explosion. Explode it did on October 5th, 1968 when a group of young people took to the streets. From now on the Unionist Party was being met by its own slogans of "No Surrender" and "Not an Inch"—the people of Bogside had had enough. The emergence of the people in the streets, and the form of their protest was far removed from the violence that we now see.

The people marched under the banner of the Civil Rights Movement, and under a policy designed not to replace one domination by another, but to simply achieve equality in the North of Ireland.

Unfortunately the old distrust and the old fears have emerged again.

The culmination of last year's activities has been, ironically, that on the anniversary of the first siege of Derry, the second siege, the siege of Bogside took place. Now the raw elemental forces of history are laid bare, and our community faces its greatest challenge, and the problem has been thrown into the Westminster arena, the place where the final responsibility has always rested. The sights we are witnessing are not new to the North of Ireland, they are a repetition of history. The question is: are the results going to be a repetition as well?

British troops are on the streets, and British Cabinet Ministers have at last come to Bogside.

But where now? Is the North of Ireland capable of living with justice and equality? Is a state which has lived off injustice capable of living with justice? Will the Right Wing of Unionism, will it even agree to justice? For the dispassionate student of history of Northern Ireland must agree, must clearly admit that the root of the Northern Ireland problem has always been the Right Wing of Unionism.

They are the people who have held us in a grip of "no change" for 50 years. They are the people who still oppose change, and their failure to submit to change leaves a fertile field for anyone who wishes to exploit the situation for any end.

Will history repeat itself yet again, this time proving the old saying that historical events begun as a tragedy repeat themselves as a farce?

Are we about to witness Carson's forecast of Ulster's last fight?

Those are the questions. The answers are less clear. One thing is certain, we may have new laws. We may have change in the structure of Government, but we must realise that there is no real change without a change in the minds and hearts of people.

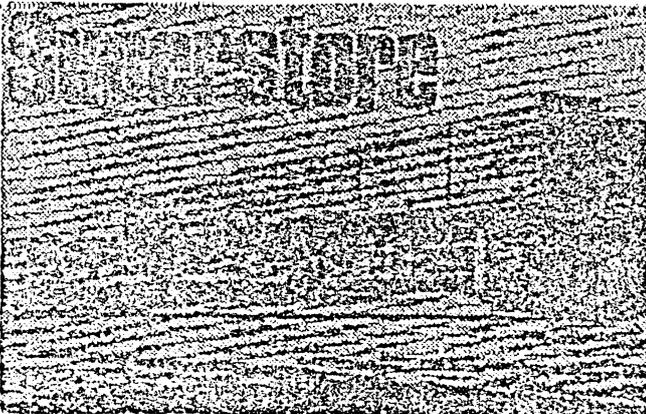
We must remove Religion from the field of Politics, Prejudice must end. Or else. People of the North must live together in peace, and justice, for whatever the outcome we will be side by side for a long, long time. As for Derry, the two traditions must meet. Derry has no future unless there is a change in the minds and hearts of people, for Derry is the mother of us all.

H. Williams

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