

A question of narrative history: an analysis of the Derry siege historiography

For this paper, I examined the works that constitute the primary source accounts of the 1688-89 siege of Derry during the Williamite Wars. The main belligerents in this conflict were James II and William III. But on further analysis, it was not just a war between two rival rulers. Rather, the long-running argument of a religious war between Catholics and Protestants, that has long since dominated the social, political and cultural fabric of Derry, hid other conflicts. Firstly, among the Protestant Presbyterians and Episcopalians. This can be seen in the narratives of George Walker and John Mackenzie, who had a long-running pamphlet war as they squabbled over which Protestants deserved the role of the righteous victor and their day-to-day records were continually revised and edited to critique the other.¹ This breakdown of relations was mirrored in the Jacobite forces, as John T. Gilbert's manuscript on the war and Colonel Charles O'Kelly's cryptic Grecian epic display a spectrum of views. The manuscript favours a return to Old English power in Ireland and views the Lord Lieutenant, Richard Talbot as the man to realise this ambition.² Yet O'Kelly's narrative, once decoded from its allegorical language, finds such an idea abhorrent and considers Talbot to be too invested in his position in England to ever be a successful leader in Ireland.³

So, what is the consensus among historians about how the narrative historiography of the siege of Derry should be interpreted? Karl Bottigheimer regards Derry and the revolution collectively as the collateral consequence of an English event, where both sides were as bad as each other.⁴ Similarly, T.G Fraser opines that Derry was not an isolated case but rather a flashpoint in the Habsburg-Valois conflict; otherwise known as the Thirty Year's War.⁵ Furthermore, he discusses the views of Hilaire Belloc and Charles Petrie, who question if the siege ever actually took place. Their

¹ T. G. Fraser, 'The siege, its history and legacy, 1688-89' in Gerard O'Brien and William Nolan (eds), *Derry and Londonderry: history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county*, (Dublin, 1999), pp387-388.

² Anon, in John T. Gilbert (ed), *A Jacobite narrative of the War in Ireland 1688-1691*, (Shannon, 1971), pp 63-87.

³ Charles O'Kelly, 'Memoir of Colonel Charles O'Kelly', in John O'Callaghan (ed), *Macariae excidium, or, the destruction of Cyprus: being a secret history of the war of the revolution in Ireland*, (Dublin, 1850), pp46-48.

⁴ Karl Bottigheimer, 'The Glorious Revolution in Ireland', in Lois G. Schwoerer (ed), *The revolution of 1688-1689*, (Cambridge, 1992), pp235-6.

⁵ Fraser, *The siege*, p.379.

reasoning was that the historiography focused on the poor conditions in Derry, rather than the approaching army.⁶ To take Fraser's point that Derry was merely a factor in European conflict, it would also bring the debate of the Thirty Year's War to Derry. Was the siege a subsidiary of a religious war or part of an international political dispute? R.F. Foster considers it the latter, as the Williamite armies comprised of Dutchmen, Germans and Danes, while the Jacobites had Frenchmen and Walloons among their ranks; all of whom spanned the theological spectrum. It is a valid point, as the war in Ireland is recorded as a defeat for Louis XIV.⁷ Nevertheless, there is also value in a wider examination of the religious element to the siege.

Sam Burnside considers that the post-siege emphasis on its portrayal in drama and poetry meant that the complexities of Protestant identity are not really explored in great depth. He reasons that any doubts regarding the accepted accounts (as this paper argues do exist) would invalidate the moral and spiritual aspects of the siege and consequently their own identity.⁸ The common narrative doesn't allow for a mixed Jacobite army featuring Ulster Episcopalians, Irish and French Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians and German Lutherans. Early commemorations of the siege in 1788 and 1789 involved Catholics and Protestants, a novel anomaly in the long-standing religious tensions in Derry.⁹ Bottigheimer makes a case for this narrow approach; that the reason for so little accurate historical documentation was that it was more important to record what people believed had happened rather than what actually happened.¹⁰ The fact that so many of the records are narrative commentary accommodates the lack of critical examination of the siege, while also giving a reasonable justification for why it is such a pivotal moment for Derry Protestants, but not for the other parties involved.

⁶ Fraser, *The siege*, pp381-2.

⁷R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, (London, 1988), p.148.

⁸ Sam Burnside, 'Irish Booklore: No Temporising with the Foe: Literary Materials Relating to the Siege and Relief of Derry' *The Linen Hall Review*, 5 (1988), pp. 4-9, accessed 5 November 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20534014>.

⁹ Brian Walker, 'Remembering the siege of Derry: the rise of a popular religious and political tradition, 1689-1989', in William Kelly (ed) *The sieges of Derry*, (Dublin, 2001), p.126.

¹⁰ Bottigheimer, 'The Glorious Revolution', p.238.

The remaining bodies of research I used in this paper that consider Derry are all twentieth-century publications. Derry is given a cursory mention in some, while none at all in others. To contextualise this practice, it is important to note that studies on this period are effectively an assessment of events in Britain, as is recorded in British historiography of the long eighteenth century. The focus largely refrains from extending to Irish matters. In general, it may reflect the view that the siege of Derry only became of such importance because of the subsequent dissemination of eye-witness testimonies. They formed the basis of myth and symbolism, intensifying meaning the siege holds for Derry Protestants, but also in Ulster Protestantism as a whole. It developed an identity for them, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the creation of the society of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, who annually commemorate the closing of the city walls during the siege.¹¹

So, how can the historiography of the Siege of Derry be summarised? It is human nature that not every historical source will be without error or partiality, as everyone has a distinct and differing opinion. But in this case, it is perhaps more flawed than most due to the one-sided interpretations available. Across all of the succeeding secondary historiographical work, each relies on the primary narratives that were analysed here, with the exception of Gilbert's manuscript and Walker's first account. Still, there have been revisions and corrections; in Walker's case, self-correction under scrutiny. The narratives serve to highlight the challenges of the people involved on either side; military or civilian, Catholic or Protestant etc. The debate of its importance to Irish, British or even European history is ongoing and varies from one historian to another. Its importance to Derry's history, on the other hand, is assured through its legacy in Derry's society and traditions that have evolved from the siege.

¹¹ Brian Walker, 'Remembering the siege', pp142-144.