

# Victors or Victims?

The 300th Anniversary of the Boyne - 12th July, 1990

## Introduction

The 300th anniversary of any big event is certainly something to be marked. But for many Unionists in Northern Ireland the Boyne does not simply represent something in the past. It is a symbol of their values, of how they see themselves today. Three hundred years after the battle the conflict continues.

'It's near time that some small leak was sprung  
In the great dyke that Dutchman made  
To damn the dangerous tide'  
Seamus Heaney, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*).

## A Christian Response?

What would be a Christian way to remember the Boyne? Christian remembering needs to be based on what God has done for us and therefore what we must do ourselves. This should challenge us to respond in a new way. Remembering the past as a Christian means remembering with a desire to forgive and a will to change things for the better today. The way that the phrase 'one of ours' is used in Northern Ireland often excludes 'the other side'. If we are really going to follow Christ we need to include the other. We need to enter into a new relationship with each other.

On the Cross Christ died to form us all into a new community of respect. The Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, is the memorial of Our Lord's self giving. By taking part in it we are committing ourselves to work for this new community. This means repenting of our own sins and offering forgiveness to our enemies. It also means working to remove those injustices from which both Catholics and Protestants suffer. The Eucharist reminds us that we cannot hope to be part of Christ's community unless we try to remember our past events in ways that help forgiveness and the forming of a new community of respect. What does this mean for Protestants and Catholics today?

## Questions for Protestants

The Battle of the Boyne was a Protestant victory. It helped to ensure that Protestants would hold on to the position that they had gained in Ireland. Protestants owe their position in Northern Ireland today, in part, to that event.

The Boyne was also a Catholic defeat. Defeated people are dangerous unless they are destroyed absolutely. That never happened in Ireland. Protestants can never hope to feel secure on this island unless Catholics also feel secure. Are Protestants therefore going to remain in a siege position for ever? Can the Boyne be celebrated - or better, commemorated - without Catholics being, or feeling, humiliated? Do all their great events lie in the past, and must they always fear the future? Can they come to the stage where they accept the facts of the past, leave them behind and begin to seek a creative future?

## Protestant Fears

The history of the last two centuries shows a decline in the numbers and power of Protestants on this island and also how they gradually moved towards the North East. Many Protestants have been afraid that they will be driven out of Ireland. In part they feared the loss of their political and economic position. But they also feared for their cultural and religious values as they saw the Roman Catholic Church grow in power and influence and as more Catholics chose to support independence. They were afraid of being forced into what they saw as a Catholic, Gaelic dominated state. That fear has persisted since 1921 because many Protestants perceive in the people of the Irish Republic a desire to take over Northern Ireland.

Many Catholics do not understand these fears. For them Protestants are the group with power. To Protestants such views seem incomprehensible, because they know how much power they have lost since 1969. But each group in Northern Ireland sees the other in ways that are very different from how that group sees itself. Can Protestants therefore find better ways to communicate their fears to Catholics?

Can the Roman Catholic Church be acknowledged as an authentic Christian Church? Is it still a threat to Protestant religious and civil liberty? If so, in what way? Do Protestants accept that changes have taken place in the Roman Catholic Church in the last twenty-five years since Vatican II?

Are Protestants as committed to showing civil and religious liberty to Catholics as they are in demanding them for themselves? How can the commitment that all Orangemen make to 'cultivate brotherly kindness and charity...concord and unity' be reconciled with Orange marches through predominantly nationalist areas?

### **Questions for Catholics**

Many Catholics take the view that the easiest way for them to handle the commemoration of the Boyne is to ignore it, because for them it is a symbol of humiliation and defeat. Catholics suffered economic, social, cultural, and religious oppression as a result of the Boyne. This oppression lasted throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within Northern Ireland today, despite welcome changes in legislation, Catholics still remain in a disadvantaged position.

However, the theme of Irish history for nearly three centuries, especially in what is now the Republic of Ireland, and to some extent within Northern Ireland, has been the recovery of Irish Catholics. This was helped by the development of parliamentary democracy and the wider franchise throughout the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century. William's victory at the Boyne helped to give Britain the beginnings of parliamentary democracy and further weakened the absolutism of the monarchy. Paradoxically Catholics in Ireland benefited from these developments in Britain.

As Catholics improved their position, however, Protestant fears grew. Many Protestants ask: what space do Catholics give to Protestants who want to be Unionists and who do not want to give up the link with Britain? What concrete reality is there in the undertakings given to Unionists by the Forum for a New Ireland?

Catholics may feel that Protestant fears are exaggerated, but even if this is the case, how are Protestants to be reassured? Is there not all the greater need for Catholics to work at communicating their real desires to Protestants?

Many Catholics find it difficult to answer these questions because of injustices from which they still suffer. All Christians should struggle against injustice. However, loving our enemies means taking account of their basic needs and identity, and moving together towards a new and more just relationship. Just as Catholics will never allow Protestants to be secure in Northern Ireland until they themselves feel secure, so also Protestants are powerful enough to prevent changes which they believe will undermine their basic interests. Each community has to take the reality of the other community into account.

Can Catholics therefore hope for any real change in their grievances unless they are open to sharing responsibility for creating new political institutions, including the finding of new agreed ways to police our community? Will Catholic complaints about what is wrong in Northern Ireland be taken seriously unless they are willing to do this?

### **Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Tasks for Both Communities**

*a) Faith and Politics:* Is there not a need for both Protestants and Catholics to look at the way they relate their faith to politics? Among Protestants are there not distortions of the Gospel in the way many at present do this, for example in the phrase 'for God and Ulster'? Is God not seen by many almost as an Ulster Unionist? Among Catholics has the phrase 'We will take our religion from Rome and our politics from home' so penetrated the consciousness of many that their faith and politics are kept in separate compartments? How can any of us who are Christians say the 'Our Father' without being challenged to work at forgiveness and at developing a new relationship with our enemies? What issue on this island is more important for those who want to follow the Gospel than that of just reconciliation?

*b) Social Issues:* The story is told of the humble boat man who rowed King James to safety across the Boyne after the battle. 'Sire', he asked timidly, 'Who won the battle?' James replied: 'Put it this way, my man, you'll still be a boat man tomorrow.'

Deprived Protestants and Catholics might both reflect that neither victory at the Boyne nor the armed struggle has brought them social justice.

*c) Facing Our Own Shame:* Sometimes people are blocked by anger and shame from recognising the harm their own community has done. Someone from 'our' community does some terrible deed. We ourselves had no part in this. Yet we feel ashamed, and at the same time we feel angry that we are ashamed without any apparent reason. One reaction to this is to turn our shame on the other side and blame them for atrocities that have been committed against our people. But we need to face the reality of our own communities and traditions, and to accept responsibility for our own part in the conflict.

*d) Christian Communities?* Protestant and Catholic Churches have been highly successful in creating community and this is one of the main tasks of Christian Churches. But have we created a Christian community or have we instead helped, often inadvertently, to create mutually exclusive communities?

### **Our Legacy to the Future: Victors or Victims?**

The history of the 17th century shows Catholics and Protestants fighting each other: some of them were natives of this island and some were immigrants or invaders. But all claimed to be Christians. The Protestant victory at the Boyne has left us all - both Protestant and Catholic -

victims, with a legacy of bitterness, fear, division and enmity. If we do not want to leave this same legacy to our descendants, our only alternative is to create some form of new relationship of respect with each other. In the end all of us will either become victors in Christ through a new partnership, or else we will all remain victims of our enmity with each other.

## **2 1916: USES AND ABUSES OF THE MEMORY**

In the life of every community certain events and experiences stand out as seminal. They become invested with a particular significance for community identity. These we call myths, not in the sense of old stories with no foundation in reality, but in the other infinitely more powerful sense of the word as symbols of fundamental meaning. Every community, every society, every religion, has such myths. The Exodus from Egypt, Mao Tse Tung's Long March, the Crusades, the opening up of the West in the United States, certain incidents in the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, are examples of experiences which have become potent myths. Such in Ireland is the 1916 Rising.

No myth remains static in its significance. It changes in the light of reflection and of other experiences, and as perspectives change with the passage of time. Maturity can be accomplished without coming to grips with our own earlier history and experiences. This is part of the process of liberation, of struggling to understand our personal story, of the never-ending search for meaning and identity. Neither personal nor communal maturity can be accomplished without coming to grips with our own earlier history and experiences.

Societies and communities do not die as individuals do. Though one human generation inexorably succeeds another, there is a sharing and a transfer to one generation of the culture, tradition, mindset, myths and world views of the generation that preceded it.

At every moment the elements that make up the life, experiences and identity of a society, its story, are both the same and changing. No generation comes into the world without an inheritance of myth, but there is none which does not work on what it has inherited, changing and adapting it under the impulse of many factors.

The importance of myths in this sense is manifold. They give identity to groups. They provide a source of values whether positive or negative. They help to endow a group with its specific cultural distinctiveness. They enter into the collective subconscious in a hundred indefinable ways. Their potency is greater the more they do so.

The existence and power of myths in this sense are ignored at our peril, and only by those insensitive to the richness and many-layered reality of communal life. As history shows, powerful national myths may be submerged for years, even centuries, only to re-emerge unexpectedly and even violently. The surprising strength of reaction to attempts to change societies is often explicable by a failure to take account of myths that are still powerful and the values they embody. It is because of the reality of myths that political and social change operates not only at the rational, technocratic, conscious level but very much also at a mythological, sub-conscious level. If politicians appear to their opponents as obviously wrong but inexplicably successful, it is likely to be because such politicians have an instinctive feel for the elements of importance in the mythological life of the group they represent or draw support from.

Every healthy society has and needs its myths in the sense we have defined. But myths are not fixed and immutable. If not re-examined by each succeeding generation, they may become sterile or oppressive. If, on the contrary, myths are prematurely discarded or treated with undeserved contempt, then the sort of reaction mentioned above may burst forth.

For a healthy society, the task is to know its myths but not to be tyrannised by them, to adapt them without despising them. If necessary we have to emancipate ourselves, without bitterness if possible, from those elements of our myths which no longer promote the values of justice, peace and human development. In so doing we of course create new myths, which will feed and sustain those who come after us.

## **New Myths**

The task of politics at its best - the reconciliation of different interests, the definition and promotion of the common good, the improvement of living conditions, the maintenance of security of life - is carried out both at the rational and unconscious levels of community life. It cannot operate successfully at the purely rational level; it must never be totally and purely at the unconscious level, since it would drive out rational discourse. At turning points of community history, and in crucial areas, one of the most important tasks of politics is to sense and then to articulate when and how the community myths should and could be reassessed so that they continue to feed the springs of national life in a healthy manner. Rarely does this happen without anguish, recrimination, confusion and regret, yet it is necessary for the growth and maturity of every society.

The 75th anniversary of the 1916 Rising in 1991 coincided with the start of a third decade of unbroken community conflict in Northern Ireland. It was an appropriate moment to reflect on the nature and contemporary meaning of the myth represented by 1916. To such a reflection can be brought the experiences of two generations, the perspective of three-quarters of an eventful century, emphasising vast changes in the national and international situation. 1916 did happen. What is important for the future of the island is the meaning we assign to it now and in the future. If 1916 is to continue to be a key Irish myth, it should inspire and liberate, not oppress. The spirit of 1916 must be retained, but its ghost exorcised.

In the context of a divided Ireland, 1916 as a myth operates as a source of oppression rather than liberation, so long as it remains undifferentiated, uncriticised, unchallenged, unreformulated. In its time, the Rising and its aftermath inspired many as the struggle of a whole risen people against a mighty empire. But in itself it set in train a series of events which have changed the island of Ireland irrevocably. To attempt to reinsert the vision of 1916, especially in regard to its justification of the recourse to armed struggle, into the reality of three-quarters of a century later, is to have failed to see how radically the very definition of national liberation has changed. It is this failure, not to abandon but to reinterpret the myth, which has clouded political vision in recent decades.

## **Changes since 1916**

Out of 1916 came a war of independence, partition of the island, civil war, and the construction of an independent state. Since the foundation of the Irish state, changes in the external world have also been immense. An international framework of human rights has been erected, the United Nations Organisation established, and the European continent transformed by the creation of the European Community. Lastly, but not least, the

relationship and mutual regard of the Catholic and Protestant traditions has profoundly evolved.

Thus there is now on the island of Ireland a native, sovereign state, whose Government is the only authority with the legitimacy and democratic mandate to raise an army or wage war. This state and its successive governments, confirmed by electoral mandate, is in peaceful and friendly relations with the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom has confirmed that it would not stand in the way of reunification of the North with the South, should a majority of the North be in favour. The Irish state, for its part, has solemnly renounced any path to unity other than negotiation, persuasion and reconciliation. Thus an uncritical transference of the logic of 1916 to the circumstances of the 1990s leads to inherently perverse results.

Any minority recourse to arms is no longer directed against an outside government; it is a direct rejection of the legitimacy and authority of the state which issued from the aftermath of 1916 itself. Furthermore, it turns its back on the fundamental choice of that state, sanctioned by the overwhelming majority of its citizens, to be and to remain in friendly relations with the ultimate ruling power in Northern Ireland.

Likewise, after partition, any recourse to arms appears less and less as the pursuit of comprehensive national liberation and more and more as directed against a group which, although a minority in the whole island, is a majority in the North. This group has made it abundantly clear that it does not under any present circumstances wish to be incorporated into or reunited with the South. Here again the simplistic transfer of the logic of 1916 appears not as the positive pursuit of freedom but rather as an armed onslaught directly threatening the very existence of the other tradition on the island.

Another point: in 1991 there exists, as there did not in 1916, an international structure of human rights. Both states are bound by the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Covenants, and many other such agreements. States can no longer argue that their internal affairs are a matter for themselves alone; those claiming redress for injustice or violation of right can now appeal as of right over the heads of states to international standards and machinery; the states themselves can take each other to court, as has already happened.

Likewise in the 1990s there exists, as there did not in 1916, the United Nations Organisation, an international political structure embracing more or less all the nations of the earth, of which again both states are members.

Finally, since 1973 both Ireland and the UK, as members of the EC, are part of a supranational entity dedicated to the construction of a single economic, social and political community out of the various nation states of which it is composed. This aim is well on the way to realization. It is, at best, not immediately obvious what conclusions the logic of 1916 points to in face of the democratically secured commitment of the majority of Irish people to construct a single community not only with the former imperial power but with the other states as well, each no less attached than Ireland to its independence.

The determination to make an end to bitterly destructive interstate conflict lies at the very origins of the European Community; at the very moment when the member states are poised to abolish the last centuries-old barriers that defined their economic and political separateness, it is surely inappropriate to tie ourselves to an interpretation of 1916 that emphasizes isolation. An integrist approach to 1916 has imposed a mortgage on the politics

and psyche of Ireland which has been paid off by the deaths of too many Irish people of all traditions for us to accept it without major re-evaluation and restatement. The men of 1916 did not feel obliged by the legacy of O'Connell three-quarters of a century before them. Nor should we be so constrained by the legacy of 1916.

We should admit the positive elements in the Rising: it was one of the factors that brought independence to the majority of people on the island, and those involved made great sacrifices. But we should also admit the negative things to which it contributed: partition, the civil war, and the extent to which the 1916 myth has been used to support violence. The sacrifices that are needed today are those that will build reconciliation and justice for all.

The national task is now one of finding how we can live with the unionist tradition, while safeguarding the rights and promoting the development of the nationalist community in the North; it is not one of extinguishing or attempting to coerce the other tradition.

Unless the myth of 1916 is re-examined to see how it can contribute to these aims, it will become an increasingly negative factor in the national task of promoting peace and reconciliation between all the groups on this island, and of eradicating the spectre of violence for good.