Bill Rolston August 28th, 2019

The Troubles: five historical back stories

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This year much has been made of the fiftieth anniversary of the start of 'the troubles'. These fifty years are bookended by two events involving an organisation known as the Apprentice Boys. To understand the intricacies of what happened and the current politics of Ireland, Professor Bill Rolston looks at five historical 'back stories', essential elements of the full story as part of the Gender, Justice and Security Hub research.

The Siege of Derry

In 1688 Catholic King James 11 of England was overthrown by his son-in-law, William, Prince of Orange in the Netherlands. James put together

an army to challenge William. He captured Dublin and set off for Derry in the north-west of Ireland. When the army arrived at the gates and demanded entry, the leading citizens were about to comply. But 13 young apprentices rushed forward and closed the gates of the walled city, declaring that they were for William. A 105-day long siege ensued in which thousands died. The siege was finally lifted by the arrival of an English ship which broke the boom across the river and liberated the inhabitants on August 1st. In 1814, an organisation known as the Apprentice Boys of Derry was formed. One of its main functions is to parade each August to commemorate the events of 1688.

The Larne gun running

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries there were major moves by Irish MPs in the UK parliament to pass a Home Rule Act for Ireland, in effect giving Ireland dominion status. In 1912, the third such Bill began its passage through parliament; unlike the previous two Bills in 1886 and 1893, it looked like this one might succeed. So the unionists of Ireland – those determined to maintain their union with Britain – organised against Home Rule. A key element in their plan was the formation and arming of an illegal army, the Ulster Volunteer Force. In April 1914, the unionists managed to bring in 25,000 rifles and 5 million rounds of ammunition from Hamburg on a ship named SS Clyde Valley, much of which they landed at the port of Larne, north of Belfast.

Derry 1969

The walls of Derry were built in 1618, as part of the plantation of Ulster, when thousands of incoming Protestants were settled on land taken from the native Catholic Irish. For hundreds of years the area within the walls was exclusively or mainly Protestant. The displaced Catholics lived outside the walls on the western side in an area called the Bogside. With the formation of the state of Northern Ireland and the consequent monopolisation of power by the Unionist Party, the Bogside,

already impoverished, was politically disenfranchised. A majority of the population of Derry, the Catholics, were a minority in terms of political representation and governance in the gerrymandered city.

Each August, the Apprentice Boys of Derry paraded around the city walls to commemorate the lifting of the Siege in 1688. In August 1969, there was confrontation between the marchers and the people of the Bogside, said to have been triggered by Apprentice Boys throwing coins over the walls into the Catholic area and mocking the residents. The police moved in to target the Bogside residents, who refused to be cowed. They fought back, built barricades, prepared petrol bombs and kept the police out for two days in what became known as the Battle of the Bogside. On August 14th 1969 the exhausted and frustrated police were withdrawn and the British army was called in to restore order. The following day the troops were also deployed in West Belfast after a number of streets were burnt to the ground by unionists and off-duty police. If 'the troubles' could be said to have had a starting point, this was it.

Bloody Sunday

In 1971 the Unionist government introduced internment without trial. In August almost 400 men, all but one Catholic, were arrested in dawn raids. On January 30th 1972 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement organised a major anti-internment protest march in Derry. As speakers such as Bernadette Devlin and Fenner Brockway prepared to address the large crowd from the back of a truck, British paratroopers opened fire. When the gunfire ceased, 13 men lay dead and 13 people were injured. One man died of his wounds six months later. This was Bloody Sunday, the day on which not only the peaceful marchers but also the non-violent civil rights campaign died.

A whitewash public inquiry under British judge Lord Widgery agreed with the initial press releases of the Parachute Regiment, that the dead

had all been gunmen and nail bombers. After a sustained campaign by relatives and others, the British government established another inquiry under Lord Saville. In June 2010, the Saville Report exonerated the dead. In a speech in parliament broadcast as the report was released, Prime Minister David Cameron stated that the actions of the Paratroopers on Bloody Sunday had been 'unjustified and unjustifiable'.

Bloody Sunday relatives and campaigners break through a banner of the Widgery Report front cover on the way to the launch of the Saville Report, Derry, June 2010. Image credit: Bill Rolston

Subsequently the police have announced that one soldier, known as Soldier F, will be prosecuted for killing two of the civil rights marchers. Previously, in February 2016, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Theresa Villiers condemned the "pernicious narrative" that sought to portray state forces as criminal. The Soldier F case has heightened this rhetoric. Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Karen Bradley stated in parliament in June 2019 that former British soldiers

who had killed people in Northern Ireland had acted in “an appropriate and dignified way”. In one of his first speeches as Prime Minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson said that the persecution of veterans facing historical allegations over their conduct in Northern Ireland had “got to stop”. And the Tory Party is seeking to introduce a Statute of Limitations to ensure no former soldier could be charged for offences over ten years old. Meanwhile, unionists in Northern Ireland began erecting banners over roads indicating support for Soldier F.

Banner supporting Soldier F, Carrickfergus, July 2019. Image credit: Bill Rolston

Agreements on marches

There are over 3000 marches each year in Northern Ireland (population 1.8 million), the vast bulk of which are by unionist groups, most significantly the Orange Order, formed in honour of King William’s

victory over King James. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries a number of these marches became highly contentious as unionist marchers sought to march through or past Catholic areas where locals did not want them. But in Derry the Apprentice Boys negotiated with local residents' groups in the Bogside to agree the route, conditions and behaviour of their march. This is in sharp contradiction to the stance of marchers in other contentious situations who refused to engage in dialogue with nationalist residents' groups whom they rejected as apologists for terrorism.

Since 1998 Derry has become the shining example to others as to what is possible. Face-to-face negotiations between the two sides have led to peaceful and dignified marches being unchallenged by residents. In 1998 the Governor of the Apprentice Boys, Alistair Simpson, said: "This city will not accommodate or tolerate the use of violence or intimidation to further or underscore any cause." Spokesman for the Bogside Residents' Committee, Donncha MacNiallais, said: "We would say to anyone who thinks they are advancing the cause of Ireland or the cause of the residents' group by going to the parade to engage in sectarian banter or provocation, that they should stay away."

Denouement

On August 10th 2019, one of the dozens of bands accompanying the Apprentice Boys as they marched round the walls of Derry was the Clyde Valley Flute Band from Larne. On their shirts they wore badges showing the Parachute Regiment emblem along with the letter F. The police, realising the offence this could cause to Catholics, accompanied the band closely and questioned them after the march. In response to this 'heavy policing', some unionists rioted against the police that night. The following night, nationalist youths in the Bogside rioted after setting fire to a bonfire commemorating the introduction of internment in August 1971; the bonfire was festooned with banners, one of which read, "Burn in hell Soldier F".

The city where these events happened, the occasion – an Apprentice Boys march – the name of the band and its echo of the Larne gun running, Bloody Sunday and Soldier F's connection to it – the hand of history rested heavily on the whole affair. The event cannot be fully understood in all its subtlety and complexity without the various historical back stories recounted above.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to see this simply as history repeating itself. Derry is no longer gerrymandered; nationalists constitute the political majority. The police service, over 90 per cent Protestant in 1969, is now almost 30 per cent Catholic. The Apprentice Boys and the Bogside residents have had a sustained period of fruitful cooperation. Thus, the Governor of the Apprentice Boys, Graeme Stenhouse, read a statement to the media on August 11th 2019: "A lot of hard work has been contributed to ensuring peaceful parades over many years. We wish to continue with this constructive dialogue to ensure that good will and understanding prevails. We also wish to ensure our city continues to lead in promoting reconciliation and is a model of respect to all communities." He said the organisation had no prior indication that the band would be wearing the shirts supporting Soldier F. For their part a Bogside group, the Bloody Sunday Trust, gave a 'guarded welcome' to the statement. "The events of last Saturday are clearly a set-back… In our view there is much more to be done to restore relationships in our shared city. We value relationships and wish to see our city prosper and thrive."

The Clyde Valley Flute Band has vowed not to march with the Apprentice Boys again and has been backed by other bands. Ironically, it would seem that only the marching bands are out of step.

Professor Rolston currently works with a team of researchers from the Ulster University for the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub. Their work focuses on Transformation and Empowerment working on transitional justice, justice reform and the rule of law promotion.

Northern Ireland, unlike most of the societies central to the Gender, Justice and Security Hub research, is not in the Global South. Yet, as a colonised and not fully decolonised society, it shares many features with the countries the Hub is working in. One of these is the way in which the legacy of history continues to have an impact on everyday life and gender, justice and security in in conflict-affected societies.

The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not reflect LSE's or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

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Professor Bill Rolston - Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Ulster. Bill was the Director of the Transitional Justice Institute from 2010-2014. He was also Professor of Sociology in the School of Sociology and Applied Social Sciences at Ulster University from 1977 – 2014. His research interests have been in the areas of popular political culture, in particular, wall murals, and community and voluntary politics in Northern Ireland. Most recently his main research interests have focused on transitional justice and, in particular, the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict and the complexities involved in dealing with the past.

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