

The Third Kingdom:

William of Orange and the Conquest of Ireland

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1. Meeting at the Boyne

It was a most unlikely, and most unhappy, family reunion for the uncle and nephew who eyed each other across the sluggish waters of the River Boyne. The man on the southern shore was a deposed king. On the far bank stood the person who had taken his throne. After years of betrayal and bitter enmity they were finally within hailing distance. Both could remember better days. The older man had bounced his young relative on his knee at the moment of their family's greatest triumph. He had even allowed the boy to marry his daughter. But here they were, far from home, among damp Irish fields, preparing to fight.

The two men were King James and King William. The battle on the following day would settle once and for all their rival claims to the triple crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland. James was in his early fifties, William in his late thirties. They hated each other. The nephew, the son-in-law, had invaded the country James believed was granted him by divine power. The old king had been evicted from his throne and chased out of the land of his birth. He wanted revenge.

William, in the company of his senior officers, intended to enjoy a picnic lunch at the riverbank. Unable to bear the sight of his rival James ordered his men to wheel cannon down to the shore. Charges were lit and gunpowder fizzed. The lunch party, realising rather late in the day that they might be in some danger, rose and made for their steeds. But it was too late. A first cannonball

flew over the water and ploughed into the retreating enemy. Several horses and one officer were struck dead. The others attempted to gallop away but a second shot was already in mid-air. The projectile bounced on riverside mud before smacking into the right shoulder of William. The young king was thrown from his horse. Officers rushed to drag their leader to another mount and hurry him away.

It was one of those chance incidents on which the course of an entire war can turn. James and his troops had marched to the Boyne in some trepidation. Their enemy was more numerous, and better equipped. But if William really was dead, and his army shorn of a leader, then perhaps the battle could still be won. Letters were dispatched to inform the King of France that William had been eliminated. The Parisians were delighted by the news. Guns along the walls of the Bastille fired in celebration. Drunken citizens danced in the streets, dragging straw replicas of William to the guillotine so they could repeatedly chop off his head.

But William was not dead. Shaking off his bruises he rode around camp in a stirring display of unquenched energy. On the next day he would take command of his troops as they marched into the Battle of the Boyne. And this would prove no ordinary battle. Over time the clash at the Boyne was to be remembered as the ultimate expression of the Protestant will to survive and dominate in Ireland. All of the founding myths of Loyalism began in the events of 1689 and 1690. And today, more than three centuries later, the showdown between William and James is still celebrated as a grand story of defiance, and ultimate triumph.

2. In the Last Ditch

William was born into a world of privilege, and danger. The boy was altogether Dutch but his mother Mary was an English princess, the eldest daughter of the first King Charles. Her father created the new title of Princess Royal for a child he intended to employ as a pawn in the shifting game of European power politics. He did not wait long. When Mary was only

nine she was betrothed to fourteen-year-old William, the heir to the most important province of the Dutch Republic.

The Netherlands were an extraordinary coalition of upwardly-mobile statelets that had come together to throw off the yoke of the Spanish empire and win the right to exercise their Protestant faith. During the eighty years they took on the world's most powerful nation the Dutch provinces attained a Golden Age. They surpassed their Spanish masters to become a world-leading centre of trade, learning and the arts. The Dutch were a progressive people and, by the standards of the seventeenth century, uniquely civilised and tolerant.

The Dutch provinces were proud of their hard-won independence, and committed to maintaining an equality among the federated states. One family, however, was more equal than others. During the long war with Spain the leadership of the Dutch was provided by the House of Orange. And when William II, Prince of Orange, succeeded his father in 1647 he also became leader of the United Dutch Provinces. The young man proved to be a short-lived ruler, dying from smallpox after only three years in power. He left a pregnant, nineteen-year-old English wife who gave birth to a son, another William, only eight days after her husband's death. This infant, fatherless Prince of Orange would one day rank among the greatest statesmen of Europe.

The young William was not a particularly happy child. His English mother, never fully at home in Dutch society, made frequent trips to London leaving William in the care of governesses. When the boy was ten his mother died, making him an orphan. William was an unhealthy youth, afflicted by the chronic asthma that would trouble him throughout his life. He was of short stature, with a back so humped that he had to wear a leather harness inside his clothing. As a young man every outing on horseback required him to first squeeze into a metal corset. The weak and sickly orphan prince was a lonely child who grew into a rather dry and withdrawn young man.

But William was intelligent and possessed of a keen sense of duty, qualities that compensated for his physical limitations. He received a princely education, learning to speak English, Dutch, German, French, Latin and Spanish. And from the beginning, as a child with unrivalled connections at the very highest level of society in both England and the Netherlands, William was regarded as a person of some importance. His formal education was matched by a practical immersion in the world of politics. As a child he was with his English uncle as he entered London to retake the throne as King Charles II. Just a few years later William watched from the sidelines as the Dutch states fought out a brief and inconclusive war with England.

William's father had led the Dutch through the final stages of their long struggle for independence from Spain. But the Spanish empire was in decline and France was becoming the new centre of Europe under the determined leadership of the Sun King, Louis XIV. In England King Charles wished to maintain cordial relations with the French superpower. He wondered if his young nephew William would act as a puppet King of the Dutch, a malleable relative ready to follow the lead of his elders in England and France. William was summoned to London to be sized up for this new role. But Charles found the boy to be a rather prim, and deeply patriotic, Dutchman who had no intention of acting as anyone's puppet. William left London with a newfound contempt for the squalor of the English court and the philandering lifestyles of his royal uncles.

The Dutch Republic was immensely wealthy, and civilised. But it was a small country, with a small army and seemed a ripe target for the French king. In 1672 Louis dispatched an army north to bring the Dutch under his rule. William was still a young man, still in his early twenties, but as Prince of Orange, he was the obvious choice to act as leader of the Dutch resistance. William proved a determined and able commander, ordering the dykes around Amsterdam flooded to slow the advance of the French. From England his uncle Charles advised William he could pacify King Louis by ceding part of the Netherlands. William, replying in the spirit that would

mark the rest of his life, said he would rather “die defending it in the last ditch”. This was a grand defiance, and it made him a hero to the Dutch.

Although Louis was frustrated in the Netherlands the French ruler continued to have designs on other parts of Europe. Lesser nations, unwilling to become vassals of the Sun King, banded together in an oppositional alliance. It was an unlikely multi-national and multi-faith combination that included Austria-Hungary, Spain, Sweden and several German states. The Pope, at that time no friend of Louis, offered the support of his church. The alliance, and the fight against French domination in Europe, was the great cause of William's life. And he would become the most important figure in the Alliance. All of his subsequent actions, including his dramatic invasions of both England and Ireland, were essentially moves in a much larger game that was played out over decades between William and Louis.

3. The Succession Problem

When William came to the River Boyne in Ireland he faced an opponent who was a weak and troubled man. James, or King James II of England as he had been styled until the Glorious Revolution, had seen just as many great events as William. The experience had not done him as much good.

In childhood James rode at the side of his father Charles I to witness the terrifying blood-letting of Civil War battles. When he was a youth of sixteen his father was executed by the Puritans. With Charles dead and Cromwell in power the Stuart dynasty seemed to have come to an end. James went into exile, spending years in both Spain and France. In those countries he naturally gravitated towards the dominant Catholic faith.

Two years after the death of Cromwell James returned to England and joined in the celebrations as his older brother Charles retook the throne. James seems to have enjoyed the thrillingly liberated atmosphere of the restoration court and to have emulated the lifestyle of Charles who was one of the most amorous monarchs in British history. The new king was

expected to produce plenty of heirs. But although Charles maintained a string of mistresses and did father a good many sons, his legal wife endured a heartbreaking series of miscarriages and stillbirths. As time passed, and no legitimate male heir appeared, the nation began to wake up to the uncomfortable fact that it was brother James who was first in line to the throne.

Many in England abhorred the idea of James becoming king. He had returned from exile in Europe, it was believed, as a convinced Catholic. Suspicion of his religious sympathies only deepened when Parliament passed a law requiring all office holders to publicly reject articles of Catholic faith. James refused to comply. The crisis was compounded when he married a fifteen-year-old, and very Catholic, Italian princess. The young bride was welcomed to England with furious public demonstrations and burnings of her effigy.

Not many years had passed since the Civil War. The Protestant powers, and the Protestant people of Britain, were increasingly uneasy that the presumptive heir to the throne was a Catholic. Unlike his brother, James did have legal children, three daughters from his two marriages. And so, in an attempt to assuage the anti-Catholic mood in the country, King Charles insisted on his nieces being raised as Protestants. Although the girls were still young, the king began to scour Europe for husbands who were suitably Protestant.

Prince William of Orange was a perfect match. Of English blood, through his mother, William was indisputably Protestant, and keen to marry into the British monarchy. He had long hoped to put an end to the political dalliance between King Charles and King Louis. And it was clear that access to the power and wealth of England would benefit the Dutch Republic. Ever mindful of his duty, William was more than willing.

The Dutch prince was married to his cousin Mary on his twenty-seventh

birthday. She was a girl of fifteen who barely knew her prospective husband. He was not a particularly handsome man, was notably shorter than Mary, and had a thin, pock marked face. William was heedless of fashion, often committing the social faux-pas of failing to put on a wig. The wedding ceremony with this unprepossessing stranger reduced Mary to tears. She was then subjected to a stern lecture on her conjugal duty to the nation from the three most senior female royals. Finally she was led, trembling, to the marriage bed where Charles was waiting to offer his blessing. The king closed the curtains around the uncertain couple while bellowing this encouragement: "Now nephew, to your work! Hey! St. George for England!"

It was an unpromising beginning to a shared life. But William and Mary were destined to fall in love and, by the standards of seventeenth-century monarchy, to become a most devoted couple. William did not much care for England, liking the grimy palaces of London no more than he had as a teenager. As soon as it was decent he escorted his young wife home to the Hague. Mary, unlike her mother-in-law, took happily to a new life in well-ordered Holland. And William was free to return to his great interest, the ongoing struggle against the expansionist plans of Louis.

4. The Glorious Invasion

The second King Charles died in 1685. For all his high living, and high-church instincts, the king had been assiduous in keeping Parliament and the Protestant hierarchy in his camp. Younger brother James was not blessed with such caution. In the weeks that followed his ascension to the throne he set about loosening restrictions on Catholic worship. He also raised several prominent Catholic nobles to positions of power.

James was to be the last Catholic king of England. For a while the Protestants believed it might be possible to tolerate the man. The king was, after all, in late middle-age, and his daughters were irreproachably Protestant. Before long the king would die, to be succeeded by his daughter Mary. However, the nation received a most unwelcome shock when the

king's Italian wife suddenly produced a son in 1688. The next monarch was not, after all, to be a Protestant princess, but a Catholic prince. Suspicious rumour swept the country. The queen was barren, it was said, utterly incapable of giving birth. A surrogate infant had been smuggled into her bedchamber.

William was maintaining a close watch on events in England. And before long, as he hoped, a group of British Protestant aristocrats arrived in the Hague. They implored William to bring his army to England, to intervene to save them all from James. William, keenly aware that the power of England could be turned against France, was happy to comply.

On November 5th, Guy Fawkes Day, William landed in Devon at the head of an army of thirty thousand soldiers. No one was present to obstruct the foreign invader. James had not been king for long, and his military control of the land was still uncertain. As William marched east toward London a series of risings broke out in his support. The English army, in which the majority of officers were Protestant, began to disintegrate.

James was both frightened and confused by William's arrival. As the foreign army approached London the king's nerve broke. He embarked on an escape by rowing boat so frantic that in mid-river he dumped the Great Seal of the Realm into the murky waters of the Thames. James made it as far as the coast but there he was seized by unsympathetic fishermen and sent back to London. William, who had no desire to make a prisoner of his uncle, turned a blind eye when James made a second, and more successful, escape. The deposed king was never to set foot in England again.

As William marched into London not a finger was raised to prevent his progress. Parliament welcomed the Prince of Orange, offered profound thanks for his peaceful invasion, and announced their intention to crown his wife Mary as the new monarch. William, who did not relish the prospect of being outranked by his wife, asked Parliament to think again. The outcome

was the extraordinary decision to appoint both husband and wife as joint monarchs. William took the traditional throne in Westminster Abbey for his crowning. A new throne, and a new crown, were hastily produced for Mary. The ensuing reign of William and Mary was a key turning point for Britain. The monarchs had been appointed at the invitation of the establishment. Their successors would be subject to increasing political supervision. And a Catholic would never again sit on the throne. Parliament passed a Bill of Rights stipulating that Britain must forever be ruled by a member of the Church of England.

From his refuge in France James excoriated this turn of events. He wrote to his daughter to let her know that “the curses of an angry father will fall on you.” William and Mary ignored the threats and made an effort to settle in a city they disliked for its filthy air and noisy politicians. But their position remained very far from secure. Although William was now king of England, he was an unknown quantity, a foreigner, with enemies throughout Europe.

5. A Catholic Island

Earlier in the century Cromwell had done his wrathful best to make Protestant rule in Ireland permanent. But four Irish persons in five were Roman Catholic and anger toward the privileges of the minority was widespread. In Dublin Irish Protestants comprised an important, and wealthy, section of the population. It was, however, only in Ulster where Protestants made up more than half of the population and even here they were not yet entirely united. Many identified as English Anglicans while others saw themselves as Presbyterian Scots.

Although James had lost his position as king of England, he was still regarded as king in Ireland. In happier times James had appointed the Duke of Tyrconnell to be his viceroy in Ireland and this turned out to be a wise decision. Tyrconnell was a proud Irishman, of Old English stock, a convinced Catholic who had fought against Cromwell. He was deeply loyal to James.

In the months after the Glorious Revolution Tyrconnell concluded that a period of open war between Protestants and Catholics had become inevitable in every part of the British Isles. In faraway Ireland he was free to act. He began to replace Protestant civil servants, judges, and military officers with loyal Catholics. Seven thousand Protestants were demobilised from the Irish army. Similar purges were taking place on the other side of the sea. Catholics were stripped from the ranks of the English army and placed in internment camps.

Although William was fully in control, for the meantime, of Britain, Tyrconnell took the view that James could continue to rule in Ireland, his third kingdom. From Dublin Tyrconnell dispatched army regiments to establish Catholic control over the northern towns. Carrickfergus Castle quickly fell to the Dublin troops. Before long only three Ulster outposts — Coleraine, Derry and Enniskillen — remained in Protestant hands. A new fear of sectarian violence was spreading, particularly among the northern Protestants, some of whom could remember the massacres of 1641. Those who could afford the fare boarded ships to the safety of England or Scotland. In the Ulster countryside thousands of less-wealthy Protestants abandoned their homes and streamed in anxious crowds toward the strongholds of Derry and Enniskillen.

James had never taken much interest in Ireland. And he was reluctant to abandon his comfortable retirement in France. But his patrons were keen to make trouble for the new Dutch-English alliance. King Louis hoped to provoke a rerun of the English Civil War. Failing that, opening a second front in Ireland would distract William from the impending battles in Europe. And perhaps, someday, Ireland could be used as a staging ground for a counter invasion of Britain. Louis sent thousands of guns and large sums of money in support of the Irish. He also dispatched James, with a fleet of French ships, to lead the struggle.

6. No Surrender

As Irish troops moved through the countryside of Ulster it was the powerful walled town of Derry on the north coast that represented the last hope for Protestant survival. The fierce resistance of the citizens of Derry, and their eventual liberation, was to become the great foundational narrative of Ulster Protestantism.

In 1688 no one imagined that Derry would play such an important role in the evolving drama. Other centres of resistance in the north had surrendered to Dublin without much of a struggle. Toward the end of the year Tyrconnell dispatched a regiment of Catholic troops to relieve the garrison at Derry. The walled city was expected to comply without question. But a radical change of mood had taken hold of the town on the banks of the River Foyle. Many of the wealthier, more conservative citizens had already departed, and a tougher, more self-consciously British element was coming to the fore.

The Irish soldiers, expecting nothing more rousing than a ceremonial changing of the guard, rowed across the river to the lower gates of Derry City. Behind walls rising directly from the waterside hundreds quietly watched their approach. As the soldiers disembarked outside the gates a group of nine young Derrymen, later memorialised as the Apprentice Boys, engaged in a scuffle with the official guards of the city. Brandishing swords the nine men took charge of the keys to the gate, pulled up the drawbridge, locked the gate and hurried to do the same at other gates around the walls.

Not everyone in the city approved this kind of behaviour. It was said that serious affront had been given to representatives of the King. Fierce arguments broke out in the streets. A Catholic citizen who shot one of the Apprentice Boys was lucky to escape with his life. Supporters of the Apprentice Boys clustered on the walls, shouting insults down to the Irish troops, telling them to go home to Dublin. In some confusion the soldiers looked up at the impenetrably high walls of the city, shrugged their

shoulders, and rowed back across the river. Their equally baffled commanders, having no alternative instructions, ordered a withdrawal from the Derry area. This turned out to be a mistake. Inside the city there were only three hundred men with any kind of military experience and only half of those men had working guns. A determined assault by the much larger Irish force would have crushed the embryonic rebellion.

Stories of the defiant scenes at Derry spread throughout Ulster. Crowds of Protestants from the surrounding countryside, suddenly mistrustful of their Catholic neighbours, began to walk the lanes toward the relative safety of the city walls. Inside Derry all remaining Catholics, including a contingent of Dominican friars, were encouraged to depart. As people streamed back and forth a second detachment of Irish soldiers, under the command of Robert Lundy, arrived at Derry's walls. They had orders to replace the garrison and were given a welcome no warmer than the first detachment. But Lundy listened to the grievances of the Derry citizens and agreed to lessen their fears by expelling all Catholics from his regiment. A reduced force composed entirely of Protestant soldiers was thereby allowed to enter the city. The Apprentice Boys had been sufficiently mollified to regard Lundy as their saviour. He was presented with the keys to the gates, and installed as the military commander of Derry.

Lundy was to become a hate figure for Ulster Protestants. A Scotsman from Dumbarton, he had served with distinction in several armies. Contrary to his later reputation Lundy was no deceiver, but he was a pragmatist. As he noted the shift of mood in Derry Lundy decided it was time to transfer his own allegiance to King William. He set about strengthening the city defences and reorganising the defenders.

Derry was not entirely alone. The village of Enniskillen, commanding a key position at the confluence of Upper and Lower Lough Erne, had nothing like the great stone walls of Derry. It was, however, entirely surrounded by water. The village was small, boasting no more than a hundred houses and

only a few hundred citizens.

As the Irish army approached Enniskillen with orders to assert control the local population engaged in the same heated debates that had so divided the citizens of Derry. Rows broke out in the streets between appeasers and radicals. In the end, the argument was won by a group of younger, Presbyterian men who made a successful case for resistance. A small party of Enniskilleners rode out to with the intention of harrying the much larger Irish army detachment. Astonished by this unexpected bravado the Irish commanders abandoned half-eaten dinners and rode away in some haste.

From the countryside of west Ulster starving and unkempt Protestants straggled into Enniskillen. Two hundred families were squeezed into the church while others found room in the courthouse and the school. A volunteer force was assembled and was equipped with whatever weapons had been taken from the Irish troops, or with farming tools when there were no more guns. Enniskillen had no real walls to offer protection. The villagers would only be able to defend themselves by launching aggressive attacks on any enemy force that attempted to draw near.

Derry and Enniskillen were flying the flag of Protestant resistance. But outside these two small towns King James had taken full control of the island. From his new home in Dublin Castle he passed laws to reverse the Cromwellian settlement, laws that caused a good deal of land to be stripped from Protestants. Ulster, however, was continuing to be a thorn in his side. And so, in April 1689, James rode north to personally sort out the trouble at Derry.

The city had been built under the orders of James' grandfather, the first Stuart king. It was designed to withstand sieges, with natural springs, impenetrable walls, and direct access to the sea. But the defenders had little cause for optimism. Their city was already surrounded by Irish troops who controlled both banks of the River Foyle. And there had not been time to

build a stock of supplies inside the city. Only ten days of food remained to feed the military garrison.

The leaders of Derry were divided. Their city teemed with new arrivals from the countryside who offered nothing but a drain on city resources. Some argued that the only rational course was to submit peace terms to King James. Others refused to consider a surrender. Once Derry fell, they said, the entire Protestant cause in Ireland would be at an end. Lundy took the side of the appeasers. No single town, however strong, could resist the might of the Irish army.

As the debate raged King James arrived within sight of the walls of Derry at the head of a substantial armed force. Sending his personal staff to make terms with the citizens the king waited to receive a surrender party. To his great surprise he saw the city gates swing shut. Cannons began to fire from the walls, killing several of the king's representatives. Many of those who were watching from inside the city were horrified. Several prominent citizens sent out a letter of apology to the king. But James had seen enough, and rode away.

The wavering spirits of the Derry citizens were steadied by the arrival of Adam Murray, a local farmer who had seen action as a captain in the roving Protestant militia, the Army of the North. Murray brought one thousand troops and was spirited over the Derry walls in a basket. He was a vigorous and determined leader, a true Protestant militant who offered new courage to all those who wanted to resist. Murray decorated his supporters with white arm bands and led them in a quick seizure of power from the vacillating city leaders. Lundy was forced to make a humiliating escape from the city that had once welcomed his arrival. There would be no surrender.

Derry was now prepared to fight. But it was a chaotic scene. The huge influx of rural Protestants had turned the city into an overcrowded refugee camp. Some thirty thousand souls were struggling to find any corner to live and

sleep among the city's cellars, doorways and churches. Those of them willing to serve in the defence of Derry were organised into democratic companies whose ranks grew to around seven thousand men.

These seven thousand were the lucky ones. They were allocated first choice of the scant accommodation and the best share of the dwindling food supplies. Each soldier received a weekly ration of one and a half pounds of river salmon, two pounds of beef and four quarts of oatmeal. Everyone else had to fend for themselves. Before long there was a severe scarcity of food within the walls that created a busy market for dog meat and horse meat. At the height of the siege a cat carcass could be sold for the sky-high price of four shillings and sixpence while a dead mouse was worth sixpence. Derry did have water within the walls but with so many new arrivals even this essential was running out. Diseases spread as the weather warmed. And worst of all was the constant cannonade that arrived from siege guns outside the walls. Great bombs weighing more than one hundred kilograms landed in the streets, killing many.

At the beginning of June the Irish forces constructed a powerful boom of spruce logs linked together by iron chains. This closed off the River Foyle to water trade, making resupply of the city impossible. Throughout the summer of 1689 the defenders became increasingly desperate as their food supplies diminished. People were falling dead from hunger in the streets. Irish army officers increased the agony by rounding up Protestants from the surrounding countryside, forcing them to stand, unsheltered and unfed, before the walls. Such a piteous sight, the attackers reckoned, would bring the defenders out onto open ground where they could be killed. It was a cruel ploy that failed. Some of the Protestant wretches shouted encouragement to the defenders and urged them to hold their ground.

It was not until the end of July that a heavily armed fleet of ships arrived from England to smash through the boom. Dropping anchor at the city gates the English ships unloaded tons of flour, beef and biscuits. Derry could no

longer be starved into submission. The Irish forces, exhausted after months of waiting for a surrender, withdrew. The siege had been a narrow thing. In the city the defenders were at the end of their strength. One third of their number had either died or deserted. Thousands of civilians had also died. But Derry was alive, having survived a siege of more than one hundred days. From now on the place would be known as the Maiden City, those thick walls never breached by enemy. The Protestant cause in Ireland was not yet finished. But it had survived by the skin of its teeth.

7. Winter Stalemate

From England the rise of Catholic power in Ireland was viewed with mounting alarm. There was a feeling that it was time for another great expedition on the scale of Cromwell's invasion forty years earlier. Parliament raised the huge sum of two million pounds and handed it to William to fit out a suitably irresistible army. William was not anxious to make war in Ireland. But it was obvious to everyone that his arch-rival King Louis wanted to stir up trouble in the third kingdom. Something needed to be done.

At that time the English military was still in poor shape after the turmoil of the Glorious Revolution. The ranks were confused and demoralised. William imported trusted Dutch regiments to add steel to the English forces and placed the Duke of Schomberg at the head of a new army for the invasion of Ireland. Schomberg had been at William's side during the overthrow of James. He was a veteran's veteran, well into his seventies, and had as much combat experience as any general in Europe.

In August 1689 Schomberg sailed into Bangor Bay with a fleet carrying twenty thousand troops. Marching his army through a welcoming Belfast he laid siege to Carrickfergus Castle, a Norman redoubt overlooking the entrance to Belfast Lough which had been taken by the Jacobites. For several days Schomberg attacked from both land and sea. The heavily outnumbered Catholic defenders submitted to a treaty that would allow them to exchange the castle for safe passage and freedom. As they emerged from

the gates, however, a local mob of enraged Protestants violently attacked the Catholic column, stripping clothes from the women and guns from the men. Schomberg had to intervene swiftly to prevent a embarrassing massacre.

Derry had refused to fall and now a powerful army from England was winning ground in the north of Ireland. The position of James was suddenly weakened. Several of his advisers urged him to retreat to more easily defended territory in the west of the island. But James was disinclined to leave Dublin. The city was, after all, the only real centre of civilisation in the country. And so James decided he would make a stand, marching north to array his forces on the coastal plain in front of the city. There he waited for Schomberg to march south. But the old Dutch general did not come. He was an exceedingly cautious tactician who led his soldiers half way to Dublin and then halted, pitching camp on open land. It was a wet, boggy, and rather wild place, very different from the orderly fields of northern Europe. Unsure how to proceed, Schomberg waited for an attack from James, worrying that the deposed king might turn out to have the more powerful army.

Europeans winters in the seventeenth century made outdoor combat impossible. The weather was simply too cold and wet for men to survive. By October the fighting season was already drawing to a close. In his camp a good distance north of Dublin Schomberg saw his troops grow weaker by the day. In the end he simply gave up on the capital and retreated to safer winter quarters at Lisburn, close to Belfast. This did not improve matters. The Dutch section of the army were toughened veterans but the English regiments had little idea of how to spend a winter on open ground. They could not lay hands on enough food, clothing or blankets. One third of Schomberg's entire army, around seven thousand men, died that winter of exposure, gangrene, and pneumonia as they waited for the cold, damp weather to pass.

For James events had taken a turn for the better. He was still in control of Dublin. True, a good deal of ground had been lost in Ulster. The retreat from

Derry was compounded by a series of defeats around Enniskillen. But the Catholic army of James could be sure of popular support in most of the island. He had everything to fight for.

8. The River Battle

William received the dispiriting reports from Schomberg's failing invasion with some alarm. The last thing he wanted was to get even more involved in Ireland. All of his martial aggression was directed toward the prospect of an attack on northern France. But William understood that his own position as King of England was far from secure. Many of the locals distrusted their new foreign ruler. Even the Protestant lords who had sponsored his invasion were muttering quiet criticisms. William needed to prove his mettle. And so, in June 1690, he personally took charge of the Irish war, sailing to Carrickfergus at the head of fifteen thousand fresh troops who were again stiffened by Dutch regiments and Danish mercenaries.

As soon as he arrived in Ireland William felt like a new man. At court he could be a cold fish but among the troops his warlike energy came to the fore. He was brisk and encouraging, delighted to have escaped the London smog and to be close to the action. And William was a very different commander from the cautious Schomberg. He was daring, occasionally reckless. Deciding there could be no more delay William moved his army south, aiming to drive James out of Dublin.

And so the two armies came together at the River Boyne on the first day of July 1690. The battleground was a day's march north of Dublin and just a few miles distant from Drogheda, where Cromwell had notoriously begun his bloody Irish campaign. James arrived first, occupying a stretch of high ground that was protected on three sides by a long loop in the river. He was in command of twenty-four thousand men, a number that included several thousand experienced French troops. It was, however, a somewhat disorganised army. Many of the Gaelic Irish fighters in the ranks owed greater loyalty to their own clan chieftains than they did to James.

William headed the larger force, a multinational army of around thirty-five thousand that contained large detachments of Dutch, Danish and French Protestant soldiers. Also present were battle-hardened troops from Derry and Enniskillen, committed fighters for the Ulster Protestant cause.

War in the eighteenth century was a gruesome affair. Fighting was dominated by ranks of musketeers who marched in lines to within fifty metres of the enemy. Each gunman let loose a single shot before kneeling to begin the cumbersome, minute-long process of reloading. William's troops had the better equipment. They carried flintlocks which were more reliable and quicker firing than the outdated matchlocks of the Irish.

William, seemingly recovered from his injuries of the previous day, resolved to attack at nine in the morning. This was, he knew, the hour when the tide would be out and the shallow waters easiest to ford. He made his first move by dispatching the right flank of his army around a bend in the river to a crossing point well to the rear of the Irish army. This manoeuvre at one stroke undermined the fragile confidence of James. Fearing an encirclement that would cut off his line of retreat to Dublin, James sent a large force to his left to counter the flanking move.

These early dispositions left the Irish regiments heavily outnumbered in the middle ground. And this is where William sent his strongest forces into battle. Intense fighting broke out on midstream islands and on the southern bank of the river. The Duke of Schomberg, who had plenty of personal courage despite his timidity as a commander, was killed during this attack, as was George Walker, who had been governor of Derry City during the siege.

As the battle raged William personally led the left flank of his army in another sweeping move, charging into a ford across the River Boyne to challenge the right flank of the Irish. He would be the last English king to ride into a fight among his troops. Half-way across the river William was thrown from his horse. He regained control of his mount but floundered in

the deep water and, in his excitement and exertion, experienced a severe attack of asthma. One of the Enniskillen defenders turned back to rescue his breathless king, dragging both man and horse to shore. William's peril was not yet at an end. He was struck in the foot by an enemy bullet that ricocheted harmlessly from his boot.

In the face of attacks that were closing like a pincer on his flanks and a determined assault in the middle James, who had little of William's bravado, retired from the battlefield and moved south toward Dublin. Behind him he left a confused scene as his widely-dispersed army of many nations struggled to distinguish friend from enemy. Hearing that their leader was gone the fight went out of the Irish, and the entire force began to withdraw. In the end, the Battle of the Boyne was not a major defeat for the Irish, but it was an embarrassment. The retreating army avoided severe losses, leaving the field with no more than one thousand casualties. But it was more of a panicked flight than a planned manoeuvre. Some Irish soldiers tossed aside uniforms and weapons as they fled. Others discovered hidden stores of alcohol and set about drowning their sorrows.

James reentered Dublin in a filthy mood, blaming the locals for his humiliation at the Boyne. "I nevermore determine to head an Irish army," he moaned. On the following day he rode further south to a harbour from where he set sail for France in the company of his French officers. He would never return to the British Isles. Without their king the remainder of the Irish army set out on a long and sombre retreat to the west.

9. Protestants Ascendant

William entered Dublin hard on the heels of his rival. It was a triumph as open and untroubled as his first arrival in London. Not a shot was fired. Instead he found the same enthusiasm that had greeted Oliver Cromwell forty years earlier. Cheering crowds thronged to light celebratory bonfires. William pressed on to Limerick in the south-west where he attempted to besiege the Irish army. Failing to achieve a rapid victory, and conscious of

more pressing business on the European mainland William decided he had seen enough of Ireland. He sailed back to England with a newly-burnished reputation as a conquering hero.

William was not inclined to crush his opponents in the manner of Cromwell. He favoured freedom of worship for Irish Catholics and allowed the Irish troops he had defeated to escape overseas unmolested. William's victory at the Boyne was famously welcomed by the Pope who was delighted by this proxy defeat of the French. The uncomfortable truth that King Billy had been supported from the Vatican was something that Ulster Protestants managed to overlook for almost two and a half centuries until, in the 1930s, the vehemently anti-Catholic government in Belfast purchased, sight unseen, a large Dutch painting of King William on his way to the Battle of the Boyne. When the painting was unwrapped the local officials were startled to see a depiction of the Pope gazing down approvingly from the skies, the Papal hand stretched forward in blessing for William and his white horse. The expensive and embarrassing painting was eventually hidden away for another fifty years in a dusty storage room.

William never returned to Ireland. From that point onward his life would be balanced between summer battles in Europe and winters in England. The king continued to put himself in the way of danger. Three years after the Battle of the Boyne William survived another narrow escape when gunshot passed through his wig and his sleeve.

The most significant, and final, clash between the Irish and the English armies took place one year after the Boyne, at Aughrim in the far west of Ireland. On the twelfth of July, a date sanctified to this day by Orangemen, the two armies met near Galway. Their battle, fought over waterlogged bogland, was a chaotic affair. At first the sides seemed evenly matched. But then St. Ruth, the commander of the Irish, had his head cleaved from his body by a cannonball. It was a horrific incident that unsurprisingly caused a sudden loss of morale among the Irish troops. Many broke and ran but their

retreat was over rougher ground than at the Boyne. The Irish fighters were ruthlessly chased down here and there among the bogs. Thousands were killed in what may have been the bloodiest, and most decisive, battle ever to be fought in Ireland. Piles of human bones were left untended on the rough grass for years. Ireland's army had been destroyed and its people were once again helpless to resist the power of England.

Cromwell had imposed a harsh settlement on Ireland that shifted ownership of most of the land into the hands of Protestants. Some of these measures were relaxed during the reigns of Charles and his son James. And William was no zealot, he was not determined to punish the Irish. But extreme Protestant voices were coming to the fore in England. France was now a major threat, and the Pope had recently shifted his support to France. An upsurge in anti-Catholic feeling throughout Britain resulted in a series of Parliamentary assaults on religious freedom such as the Popery Act of 1698, a law that essentially placed a bounty on the heads of Catholic priests.

In Ireland, where most of the population was Catholic, sectarian oppression was even more extreme. From Dublin the Irish Parliament passed a series of Acts that excluded Catholics from access to every vestige of power and society in Ireland. Catholics were barred from public office, from the legal profession, from voting, and from participation in politics or teaching. They were forbidden to buy land. On the death of a Catholic landowner his holdings were subdivided among his sons in order to reduce the size of the few remaining Catholic owned estates. Catholics were not allowed to own better quality horses, to join the army, or to build churches from stone. These laws were enforced with differing severity in different parts of the country. But their purpose was clear. Irish Catholics were to be kept under the heel.

During the seventeenth century the Irish fought three wars of liberation against English rule and for religious freedom. These three great struggles, at the beginning, middle and end of the century, ended in complete defeat.

Control of the land passed to Protestants. In the early years of the eighteenth century this process culminated with only five percent of Irish lands remaining in the hands of the Catholics who represented the bulk of the population. And there was widespread cultural repression. Priests were required to take an oath of loyalty to the English crown, and were subject to arrest and execution if they refused. The Irish language was suppressed. From Dublin a group of upper-class Protestant politicians held sway over the entire island for the succeeding two hundred years, a period of rule that would later be remembered as the Ascendancy. In Ulster, new waves of Protestant settlers streamed in from England and Scotland. Ulster Protestants had established themselves in a firm majority, and their position was secure.

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keyword William of Orange, Siege of Derry, Battle of the Boyne.