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The Apprentice Boys and the Relief of Derry Parades

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It is one of the paradoxes of modern Irish history that the collapse of unionist authority in Northern Ireland was ushered in by the event held to commemorate the most historic event in its tradition, the annual parade held by the Apprentice Boys of Derry to celebrate the city’s relief from its historic siege in 1689. On the afternoon of 12 August 1969, as the final Apprentice Boys’ clubs were passing through the city’s Waterloo Place, missiles were thrown at the police and the marchers by nationalist youths from the nearby Bogside. This triggered rioting of such dimensions that two days later British troops had to be deployed in the streets of Londonderry and Belfast, fatally undermining the authority of the unionist-dominated Stormont parliament which had ruled Northern Ireland since 1921. These events were themselves unfolding in the context of a winter of demonstration and counter-demonstration which followed the banning of a proposed civil rights march from the predominantly Protestant Waterside area of Derry on 5 October 1968. By 1972, such was the subsequent pace of events as the Provisional Irish Republican Army mounted a campaign of growing intensity against the state, that the Stormont parliament itself was suspended by a British government desperate to find a way forward. Here, too, what happened in Derry was crucial to the turn of events, since the fall of Stormont followed only weeks after the tragedy of ‘Bloody Sunday’ in the city. Northern Ireland’s second city was forcing the pace, or at least its nationalist residents were. In a sense, the Relief of Derry parade of 1969 was an unexceptional affair; such celebrations had been taking place since at least the late eighteenth century, their nature changing and adapting over time, but with the same essential purpose, namely the preservation of the memory of the siege of 1688–89, when the Protestants of Ulster had defended
themselves against the forces of King James II. But in the circumstances of 1969, the parade brought to the surface all the simmering tensions of Ulster society.¹ In 1995, when Northern Ireland was embarked on a search for a peaceful constitutional settlement, the Relief of Derry parade once again proved to be the focus of deep-seated tension both within the city and beyond.

There is no doubt that the man chiefly responsible for keeping alive the traditions of the siege was Colonel John Mitchelburne, who had succeeded Major Henry Baker as Governor. From records which are no longer extant, it is possible that in 1714 Mitchelburne formed a club of Apprentice Boys. What subsequently happened in the eighteenth century is not clear, but since a parade was held in 1759 to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne it is likely that the siege was also publicly marked. The first clear indication of a siege commemoration, in the *Londonderry Journal* of 5 August 1772, confirms that this was not a new event.² There are extensive accounts of the centenary events of 1788 and 1789, when public processions were held in the city, which was still largely Protestant in character. Such was the spirit of the times that these were joined by the Catholic bishop, Dr McDevitt and his clergy, but this was not a tradition fated to last. By the early nineteenth century, the events of 1798, the Acts of Union and the campaign for Catholic Emancipation had brought a new tone to Irish politics which had little place for the politics of accommodation. The hitherto Protestant city of Londonderry was also changing very rapidly, as Catholic workers from Donegal came into the city to take advantage of its growing industries. By the 1851 census, Derry had a Catholic majority, for whom the traditions of the siege meant nothing, or if they did it was as the prelude to the period of the Penal Laws and the Protestant Ascendancy. In these circumstances the Protestant community increasingly turned to the traditions of the siege for inspiration and a sense of identity, symbolised by the completion of the Walker Pillar, or Testimonial as it was called, on the city’s walls in 1828. The Pillar overlooked the growing suburb of the Bogside, home to the large numbers of Catholics who were flocking into the city at that time. As a symbol of Londonderry’s Protestant traditions it could not have been bettered. From its plinth, reached by a narrow winding staircase, the statue of Governor George Walker beckoned northwards towards the relieving fleet on Lough Foyle.

Apprentice Boys’ clubs flickered into existence, called after the heroes of the siege. In 1814, the first Apprentice Boys of Derry Club was formed, at a time of some tension in the city when the authority