

A column about the left

By P. Avakuum

ANTI-FASCIST activists are picketing every meeting of Exeter City Council in protest at the council's decision to celebrate William of Orange's landing in Devon in 1688 on his way to London to become King.

The council, say the activists, is pandering to the Orange Order and to the National Front. *Briefing* and *Workers Press* have voiced their opposition to any celebration of 1688. There has been a long debate in the columns of *Workers Press* on the issue, focusing on what William's landing meant for the Catholics of Ireland.

This is all very strange, but highly symptomatic. The left should celebrate the 300th anniversary of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, and we can do it without in any way adopting the viewpoint or the politics of the Orange Order. In fact it is the anti-Williamites who part company with Marxism, certainly with any attempt to maintain a Marxist view of history.

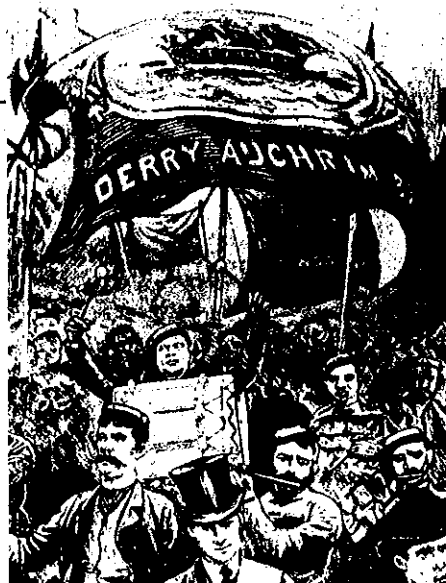
The revolution of 1688 saw off James II's attempt to restore Catholicism and absolute monarchy in Britain and Ireland. It finally settled the issue which had dominated the previous 50 years — who rules, Parliament or the King? Thereafter, Parliament ruled. James fled, to be replaced by Parliament's choice — the joint rule of Queen Mary, James's Protestant daughter, and her husband, the Dutch prince, King William of Orange. James's support melted away, and even those 'Tories' who in principle supported him as the legitimate monarch by hereditary right remained passive.

Apart from some bloodletting and the settling of old scores in Scotland, it was virtually a bloodless revolution in Britain. In Ireland it was different. Backed by French money from the absolute monarch Louis XIV, the bigoted Catholic 'Sun King', James had been building up an army in Ireland for use against Parliament. Ireland became the theatre of war between Parliament, whose chief general was William of Orange, and James's Irish army, to which were added contingents of Louis's French troops.

Catholic Ireland had, of course, much reason for hating the Protestant establishment which James was trying to subvert and overthrow. Protestant Ireland, on the other hand, was militant for Parliament. The Apprentice Boys in what was then the Protestant city of Londonderry stopped the governor, Lundy, surrendering the city to James's troops by closing the gates; and Derry withstood a long siege.

In the 17th century there was a succession of land confiscations as one faction or another got on top in Ireland, and James's Catholic Parliament in Dublin now continued the tradition by widespread confiscation or reclamation of Protestant land. But, in a series of famous battles and sieges, 'Aughrim, Derry and the Boyne', and Limerick, Parliament defeated James's Irish army and his French allies. The last stand of James's Irish army occurred in the besieged city of Limerick, under the leadership of Patrick Sarsfield, one of James's generals.

Sarsfield surrendered on terms which included the right of the Irish soldiers to emigrate and enlist in the French Catholic army, which they did, and promises that Catholics could freely practise their religion. As the nationalist poem puts it, Sarsfield went off to fight and die in Louis's wars, "but 'ere he yielded the Saxon swore, to spoil our homes and our shrines no more". But they did, and with a vengeance. William of Orange, who by the standards of the time was far from being a bigot, was inclined to honour the 'Treaty of Limerick', but the new Protestant Parliament in Dublin had other ideas. They reversed the measures of James's Catholic Parliament, and they brought in a series of savagely oppressive measures against



1688 and all that

the Catholic majority, the 'Penal Laws', many of which bear a striking resemblance to the laws of apartheid. (The difference was that Catholics could convert; many of those with property did).

Protestants who dissented from the established Anglican Church were also discriminated against, though not so much. Until the last quarter of the 18th century, when the Penal Laws began to be relaxed, this system held the Catholics in helotry, without the right to certain property, education, religion, or professions like the law. "They bribed the son to rob the sire" — a Catholic son could take over his father's property if he converted. "Their dogs were taught alike to run upon the scent of wolf or friar"... The Catholics were "Forbid to read, forbid to plead, disarmed, disenfranchised imbeciles".

As late as the 1840s, the Protestant Irish nationalist Thomas Davis could write those bitter lines and add: "What wonder if our step betrays the freedman born in Penal days". Catholic Ireland would find it difficult to be enthusiastic about Britain's 'Glorious Revolution'.

Yet despite what followed in Ireland, and despite its obvious inbuilt class limitations as a revolution led by, and immediately and primarily benefitting, the English and Scots landed political oligarchy — despite the fact that the common people of England and Scotland had immediately to begin a prolonged struggle with that oligarchy to establish their own rights — the 1688 revolution remains one of the turning points in human history. Essentially, 1688 only consolidated, and for 144 years finalised, the work of Cromwell's revolution of the 1640s, when James's father Charles had lost his head. In its course or as a direct result of it habeas corpus was won, and freedom from previous censorship, responsible democratic government (if on a very narrow property franchise), and many other things still unknown in most parts of the world to this day. Its effects were felt throughout the following century, in America, where those who won independence from Britain in the 1770s looked to it for inspiration, and in France, where opponents of absolutism looked to the 'Glorious Revolution' and the liberties it had secured in the way we look back on the Russian or the French revolution.

Like all the other similar historical events — the English Commonwealth of the 1640s, the American and French revolutions and so on — which increased human liberty, took humankind forward, and helped create the present possibility of socialism, 1688 is *ours*. It belongs to the socialists and the consistent democrats everywhere, even in Ireland.

True, it took an unconscionably long time

for the Catholic people of Ireland to experience its benefits. But it did bring benefits, directly and indirectly. That Irish Republicanism which took shape in the 1780s and '90s under the influence of first the American and then the French Revolutions owed much to it — indirectly and directly too, for the first Republicans were Protestants who identified with the "Glorious Revolution". Today's vigorous and stable Bourgeois Democracy in Ireland is of great benefit to Ireland's workers: it has some of its most important roots in 1688.

That socialists — and Marxists! — should surrender this part of our heritage to the National Front and the Orange Order is extraordinary, but, as I've already said, symptomatic. It is symptomatic of the state of historical materialism in our movement, and of the substitution of a-historical moralism for Marxism or even an attempt at Marxism. It also expresses a profound alienation from our own history. Britain is imperialist, therefore the entire history of the centuries of struggle of the common people of Britain is tainted — that is the underlying feeling and the real logic of it.

A cynical Stalinist historian once described history as current politics extrapolated backwards. That should not be the approach of Marxists! Yet plainly in this case it is. It is all the more inappropriate, because what happened in Ireland at the end of the 17th century was part of a European conflict.

On James's side (and as his paymaster) was Louis XIV, who ended the previous toleration of Protestants in France in 1685 by revoking the Edict of Nantes. Louis's laws against the Protestants had much in common with Ireland's Penal Laws — except that Louis's savage and sustained oppression led to the enforced mass 'conversion' of the sizeable French Protestant community, or to their exile (some of them to Ireland), until the community was all but wiped out. That does not excuse the oppression of the Irish Catholics; it should put it in its historical perspective.

In European terms William and Britain stood for relative tolerance, against the expansionary absolutism of the vile 'Sun King', whose system oppressed the people of France for 100 years more.

As on most questions like this, James Connolly was far in advance of both the Irish Republicans and the Irish and British Marxists.

In the chapter on 'The Jacobites and the Irish People' in 'Labour in Irish History', confining himself severely within an Irish nationalist perspective, Connolly dismisses William as a mere self-serving adventurer and truly says that "neither army had the slightest claim to be considered as a patriot army combating for the freedom of the Irish race". Then he pens the following denunciation of Sarsfield and his associates: "So far from the paeans of praises lavished upon Sarsfield and the Jacobite army being justified, it is questionable whether a more enlightened or patriotic age than our own will not condemn them as little better than traitors for their action in seducing the Irish people from their allegiance to the cause of their country's freedom to plunge them into a war on behalf of a foreign tyrant..."

Connolly was surely thinking of the attempt by James to build up an Irish army for use against Parliament and the British people when he wrote in November 1913 this denunciation of Irish nationalist grudge-bearing, a plea for British-Irish reconciliation:

"We are told that the English people contributed their help to our enslavement. It is true. It is also true that the Irish people contributed soldiers to crush every democratic movement of the English people... Slaves themselves, the English helped to enslave others; slaves themselves, the Irish helped to enslave others. There is no room for recrimination".