

Ulster marching season reopens old wounds

Protestant parades outrage Catholics every summer

By Hannah Hayes
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

BELFAST — The road from Drumcree Church slopes downward for a quarter of a mile and turns left onto the Garvaghy Road. From here it is a scant mile into the mid-Ulster town of Portadown. For three consecutive years, a 10-minute walk down this route has brought Northern Ireland to a standstill.

Houses have been burned, children have died and families have been forced to leave their homes. A mother of three was blown sky-high in a car bomb, and a young police officer died. Hundreds of civilians have been injured — all over the question of a 10-minute parade.

Each year about 3,000 parades take place throughout Northern Ireland during the Protestant "marching season," which runs from April until September. Most are organized by the Orange Order, a Protestant group with intense loyalty to the British crown.

Protestants call the Orange Order a benign religious and cultural organization. Catholics say the marchers cross their neighborhoods as a political statement of supremacy.

"The parades reinforce community identities, whether you're a Protestant or a Catholic," noted Michel Savaric, a visiting fellow at Queen's University. "One community defines itself in opposition to the other, and the parades act to reinforce community solidarity."

According to Savaric, who spent six years studying parades and marches for his study "Symbols of Conflict and the Question of Identity in Northern Ireland," the emotions generated by the parades reflect the current political situation. "They give everyday people a chance to express their feelings, and feel like they have some influence."

Fate of peace accord

In recent years, the annual standoff in Drumcree between the Orange Order and the Catholic residents along the parade route has become the axis on which the Good Friday peace agreement between Catholics and Protestants turns.

According to Orange Order history, the organization dates to

1795, when a group of Protestants and Catholics fought in a fierce battle just three miles from Drumcree Church.

The first Orange parade took place the following year, on July 12, 1796, to celebrate the Battle of the Boyne (1690), in which the victorious Protestant king, William of Orange, defeated the Catholic King James.

From the beginning, the marches provoked the Catholic community, often resulting in violence. Catholics viewed them as "triumphalist," particularly because of the oppressive anti-Catholic laws that came on the heels of King William's victory.

Orangemen insist these parades are legitimate expressions of their culture, and they demand the right to march through the same route taken by their forefathers. They point out that the Drumcree march commemorates those fallen in the Battle of the Somme in the first World War.

Over the past four years, though, Northern Ireland has experienced drastic changes, and the Orange parades have sparked a crisis every summer.

A Loyalist 'victory'

In 1995 the Irish Republican Army had called a cease-fire in its campaign of anti-British violence. Catholic nationalists along the Garvaghy Road agreed to the parade in the spirit of reconciliation, provided it was followed up with dialogue.

But Unionist politicians leading the parade danced and crowed over their "victory" and refused to meet with residents.

The following year, a ban on the Drumcree parade brought about the worst rioting in the province in 25 years. Enraged in part by the end of the IRA cease-fire, loyalists — Protestants loyal to the British crown — blocked roads and train routes and closed down airports and seaports. The government capitulated after five days, and the march went forward.

By the 1997 marching season, a new British Labor government had promised to move on the Northern Ireland question.

But Royal Ulster Constabulary

security forces moved in before dawn and sealed off the entire community, virtually keeping residents under house arrest until after the march passed at 2 p.m.

Despite nationalist anger, the IRA called a cease-fire just three weeks later, and the government announced the beginning of all-party talks.

"It's as if everyone had to wait for Drumcree to pass before they could move forward," Savaric said. "So while the marches act as a barometer, to some extent they control the actions of the politicians as well."

Last year, in the wake of the peace agreement and the establishment of the first self-governing Assembly, the parade again was banned. This time, with the success of the Good Friday accord at stake, British Prime Minister Tony Blair pulled out all the stops. Security forces dug trenches around the field at Drumcree, put up barbed wire and brought in 3,000 troops for re-enforcement.

Three brothers die

For a week clashes between the Order and security forces intensified, with the Orangemen vowing they would stand on the hill for a year until they won the right to march. During the week of violence that followed, 141 Catholics or mixed-marriage families were burned or intimidated out of their homes.

Then, in the early hours of July 12, a firebomb killed three young boys while they slept. The boys were brothers, their mother a Catholic who lived with her Protestant partner in a Protestant district.

Their deaths brought the violence to a halt. The thousands that stood on the hill quickly became dozens, but for 365 days a few diehards have kept the encampment going, and they are determined to march again next Sunday.

The parades "signify the balance of power in Northern Ireland," said Savaric. "For the Protestant community, the struggle is about maintaining an order which ensured the dominance of its symbols, whereas for Catholics it is about overturning this order."

Make-or-break talks for peace in Ulster

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ress, so that horrific outcome doesn't have to happen."

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