



Video Story Transcript

Standing on the Wall of Derry: An Irish American Confronts the Irish Conflict

By: Storyteller Margaret Burk
www.margaretburk.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYmLLAiyDQM>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Margaret Burk and this is a story about an experience I had on a trip to Ireland in 2013. I was standing on top of the stone wall 20 feet high and 20 feet wide, that surrounds the old part of the city of Derry, in Northern Ireland. I didn't want to be here, in Northern Ireland. I had signed up for a tour that advertised visiting sites in southern Ireland only. I'm an Irish American, I have always wanted to come to Ireland, Southern Ireland, home of my ancestors. So, what was I doing in Northern Ireland? You have to understand that Ireland is divided into two countries. Southern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, is free and independent. And Northern Ireland is part of Great Britain. Our tour directors decided that we had to take this historical tour of the wall of Derry because they heard the guide was fabulous. "No, I protested. Northern Ireland was not on our itinerary."

I was actually surprised at the intensity of my emotions, as this ancestral anger rose up. And then. and then, it was like I was 12 years old again and the memories just came flooding back. And me and my cousins were sitting at the feet of Uncle Tom listening to his stories. Uncle Tom had emigrated from Ireland and married my Aunt Mabel and joined the Terre Haute, Indiana Irish Curly Clan, my family. He had come from Ireland shortly after the war of independence in 1921 that divided Ireland into south and north.

At family gatherings, birthdays, holidays, after dinner, we'd sing Irish songs. And then we kids would beg Uncle Tom to tell us stories true stories of Irish history. My mom told stories about the lives of the saints but Tom told stories about battles and villains and heroes. And whether he was telling about the rebellion of 1789 or

the fight for Vinegar Hill or the Battle of the Boyne, I loved them all. The stories about Irish fighting for their freedom from English rule. Uncle Tom was a gentle, soft-spoken man but when he settled into his chair to tell, he changed; his jaw tighten, his fist clenched, and his face reddened with the anger of it.

And that's just how my body felt when we were talking about going into Northern Ireland. But I was outvoted. I sulked in the back of the van as we crossed the border from Southern Ireland to Northern Ireland. I felt like I was betraying my family. The weather echoed my mood. Cool, cloudy, and drizzling.

When the tour of the wall of Derry began, I hung out in the back of the crowd and the guide, Martin McCrossan, 60's, baldish, ruddy complexion, had a voice as loud as a carnival barker.

"This wall was built in 1601 by the first English settlers to protect themselves against the attacking displaced locals."

My neck, red, "Displaced locals. I'll show you a displaced local."

Those were Irish people who had had their land stolen by the invading Brits. Uncle Tom had told me the stories. How British armies ravaged the land, British laws in power impoverished the people, I knew the stories. And then, Martin hurried us out a hundred yards down the wall, to the side of an old church outside the wall. St. Colum's. And then he pointed to the backyard of the church, where there was this odd hill. It was like a grassy mound, like 12 or 15 feet tall, in a space, not much bigger than my backyard, in Oak Park, Illinois.

"1689. This church was the stronghold for the Irish forces trying to gain back the city of Derry from the English settlers. The siege lasted for 105 days. But the Irish couldn't breach this wall. Three thousand Irish died outside the wall, 6,000 English inside the wall, mostly of starvation. That mound is the burial place of the dead."

Huh. Six thousand English died? Starvation? I looked at the cross on top of the mound and thought of the dead on both sides. I knew many of the English settlers were poor peasant farmers who had come with the hope of a better life. I thought of the women and the children. I'd never heard stories of the English side. Then, Martin directed us down the wall to our next stop, that, which was near a tree. The rain was intensified and I thought, "Was he oblivious to the rain?" I called out, "You know, we can just listen from underneath this tree over here."

He turned and looked at me, not harsh but firm, and said, "No, you have to stand over here," and waited patiently until I complied.

Pointing to the hole in the wall, down, he said, "Bloody Sunday, January 13th, 1972. Ten thousand Catholics, supporting the movement for a unified Ireland without English rule, and inspired by the civil rights movements of the United States, were marching peacefully on that street below. English troops... troops shot into the crowd killing, injuring, starting the violent civil war between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland that lasted for 26 years."

Hmm. I, I remember. I watched that on TV. It was bad. But the fight wasn't about religion, it was political. It was about who ruled, who made the laws, who owned industry, who could get a job. And Martin pointed across the way to a mural. A mural that, that was the whole side of a six-story building. It was of young, school girl. She had like, you know, shoulder length, black hair and a white blouse, a green skirt.

"Twelve-year-old Annette McGavigan, the 100th person killed in the conflict caught in the crossfire between the opposing sides." And then Martin spoke more slowly and I could hear the emotion in his voice as he said, "That rifle beside the girl, when the mural was painted in the midst of a conflict, that rifle was pointing down - a call for peace. And that butterfly above her head. It was only an outline-a sign of hope. And when the peace agreement was finally signed in 1989, and the violence ended, the artist repainted that mural. Now that rifle is broken into two pieces and the butterfly is painted with all the colors of the rainbow." He paused to let us take it in. A six-story mural, a young school girl, a rifle broken in two, a rainbow-colored butterfly.

“Come,” Martin said. And he led us through an opening in the wall, down a few steps, into the back door of St. Augustine Church. The social hall was, was filled with weaving looms and women busily weaving. And on the wall, were hung like a dozen, three foot by five foot exquisite murals.

Mary Cullum explained proudly, “These tapestries tell that the history of Derry and were given one to every church and civic organization, Protestant and Catholic, even to the Orangemen.” I knew that the Orangemen still lead a parade provocatively through the Catholic section of Derry every year on July 12th.

But for these weavers, it was important that everyone, even the Orangemen, knew the history of Derry from all sides. As we ended the tour outside St. Augustine’s, on the on the stone patio, Martin looked at every one of us and spoke with heart felt emotion. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for coming to Derry. You are part of our peace process. Go home tell your friends and your family to come and to know our story.”

“Am I part of the peace process?” I thought. I didn't want to come here. I didn't want to hear these stories. But now that I had, I, I discovered I was holding onto an old hostility that had been passed down to me. But the people here were trying to move on, to build something that we all want - a place to live together peacefully. And I could feel Uncle Tom's stories mixing with these new stories, creating possibilities in me. Possibilities for new ways of thinking and new ways of feeling. Hmm... And that is the path to peace.