



# My Testimony

Harry McDermott





## Foreword

Harry, in his later days, felt constrained to write a condensed story of his life in the hope that it would encourage others. We all tread our pathways in life interwoven with others but in the end of our allotted span we must part our ways and journey alone into eternity. Harry was a good husband and friend; both of us discovered Jesus, the best friend of all Who not only walks with us in time but carries us to our heavenly abode in eternity.

I hope Harry's last witness will be read by many and bring spiritual enrichment to those who read it.

*Irene McDermott*



## Your Place and Mine

My name is Harry McDermott, approaching 43 years of living with Irene, my dear wife, guide and companion. I wish with the reader's good pleasure to weave little snippets of my culture, faith and heritage into my life and times. We happily reside at 135 Bushmills Road, Coleraine; after moving from a residence in Brook Street, Coleraine, where we lived for over 7 years. At our wedding in Kilrea Baptist Church on Saturday 31st July, 1971 Irene Linton and I took our vows which I can truthfully say we kept. While we had our measure of joys and sorrows we had a very happy marriage.

Coleraine is a town of 57,000 people with a catchment area of 200,000 residents. It straddles the River Bann which flows some 5 miles in the North Coast to the Atlantic Ocean. Coleraine Borough Council, our elected local government, is currently engaged in regional reform when it is planned to join with the councils of Ballymoney, Moyle and Limavady in shadow form until May 2015, when 26 councils will be reduced to 11 new super councils for Northern Ireland. Our Borough is part of the Causeway Coast and contains many beautiful and historical assets. It is visited by some 2 million tourists, keen to enjoy the sights and activities every year. I feel the open door to tourists and visitors from many parts of the world protects us from becoming insular and benefits our culture. Many friends were created and doors were opened for some of our young people to visit abroad.

The Borough's Coat of Arms reflects its Royal Charter connecting it to London's Coat of Arms, St Patrick, its fortress history, fishing and farming industries. The Mayor's chain depicts our history. The Town Hall contains a stained glass window commemorating in 1914 the role of the London companies, currently represented by the Right Honourable the Irish Society in the town's development. It also features a new stained glass window commemorating Her Majesty the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002. Some people may not know that our current County Londonderry was once named County Coleraine. In 1585 Sir John Perrot, Lord Deputy of Ireland, during the reign of Elizabeth chose the terrain between the Rivers Bann and Foyle for this title. The original layout of streets in the town from which the county borrowed its name has not changed. The actual buildings erected in the 17th century had wooden frames made from trees in a forest farther up the River Bann. Many were replaced during the Victorian Period 1839-1901 in new building materials and style. When referring to Queen Victoria I always found the painting of the 'Secret of England's Greatness' by Thomas Jones-Barker depicting her presenting a Bible to an unnamed African King interesting. I am sure there are many different views regarding this but it invites us to pause and consider where we place God and His Word in our lives today. Nowadays the world is occupied with celebrities who make the headlines in the media. The worship of some can be almost religious, while material wealth is worshipped. In 1859 our Town Hall was to be officially opened but, because of a great spiritual revival, it had to be cancelled to deal with crowds of people in distress of soul. Amazingly, it was not opened until 2009, 150 years later. The local Churches Council also mounted a plaque in memory of the 'great '59 revival' I long for a new thirst for God among all of our citizens.

Historians record our town as the first settlement in Ireland. Its name is an anglicised form of Irish with two schools of interpretation, i.e. one holds that it means - corner of the ferns, while the other holds that it means - little fort on the corner, referring to an ancient high mound at

Mountsandel. Which ever meaning you favour, the main concern today is how we live and treat each other.

Our Council is currently making preparations to celebrate 400 years since immigrants arrived in Ulster from England and Scotland during the 17th century, famously called 'the Plantation of Ulster'.

When thinking of history, we should remember its setting within a wider context and as an ongoing story. It is recorded that during the 18th century some 250,000 descendants, mostly from Scottish Presbyterians who previously settled in Ulster in the 17th century, emigrated to the British Colonies in North America. Many people from our Borough played a significant part in this life changing event. Local friends tell me when visiting historical sites in USA, tourist escorts inform them that Irish immigrants from here fought in the war of American Independence, a strange turn for 'King and Country'. In our modern society many people, especially our young, emigrate to other lands where employment and opportunity are available. Modern air and sea transport permit our resident population to enjoy vacations abroad. I am proud to be a native of such an historical and attractive place.

### Family Life

I was born on 3rd September 1931, in the townland of Camus (now Curragh Road, Coleraine) in the Parish of Macosquin and Barony of Coleraine. I had one brother and two sisters. My brother died on 18th June 1998 and a sister on 14th May 2013. I was privileged to have a father who owned his farm. Up to the late 19th century most farmers in Ireland were tenant farmers on landed estates and part of their farm produce went to pay the rent. Failure to pay could lead to eviction, the fear and threat of eviction often resulted in conflict between landlord and tenant.

In early 20th century Ulster small farms were common, partly as a consequence of a successful linen industry which allowed farmers to work in both. I was fortunate to have a happy childhood even though modern conveniences were not available. Most farms, like my own, were small and largely self-sufficient. Families provided nearly all of the labour and hired workers were unusual except during harvest. Management and ownership was traditionally handed down from one generation to the next and always to males. Crops were varied. A typical farm would grow corn, wheat, barley, oats, hay and grains used for feeding livestock. Farms generally had a few milking cows, sheep, horses, a large flock of chickens for eggs and meat, and sometimes a few turkeys, ducks, and geese. Manual labour was intensive using hand held implements such as scythes, shovels and spades as well as horse drawn equipment such as ploughs, reapers, binders and farm carts. The planting and harvesting of crops was generally back-braking as workers stooped or kneeled in the fields. Tractors and other mechanically powered machinery did not come in until later.

My first experience of serious illness occurred before a National Health was available. I was 13 years of age and received a small cut in my knee that gradually made me ill. Our family doctor took me in his car to the former Ratheane Hospital on the 12th July 1944 where my condition was assessed as having tetanus, a condition that can prove fatal. One month later I was discharged on the 12th August, two dates that would be important to me during my adult life. Thankfully today there are a wide range of vaccines available to the population to prevent various illnesses so I encourage people to take advantage of them. It was 52 years before I became a patient in hospital

again. Our family doctor made arrangements for me to have major life saving treatment.

In 1949 my father sold the farm and moved into business life in the town. Our first urban residence was in Mount Street, Coleraine where we lived for 12 years and then moved a short distance to Beresford Place which is now part of the Tesco supermarket site. You can imagine that life in the town for me was very different. I could no longer take employment for granted with no family farm. I looked for a job, and with my agricultural background, was able to secure employment in a local mushroom factory.

### Education & Opportunity

I began my education in Castleroe Elementary School, Coleraine. Previous to this in the 19th century the educational system in Ireland adopted nondenominational education for all children in the belief that if they learned together they could live in peace as adults, a debate we hear today 183 years later. Education, in whatever period of history, has been a contentious issue bringing church and state into conflict on numerous occasions. I attended school until I reached 14 years of age. The teachers were Master Millar, know to all as 'Curly Tam' and his assistant Miss Winifred Murdock affectionately known as 'Winnie'. I was taken to and from school in a covered horse drawn carriage owned by Andrew Lamont. In those days there were no computers, libraries, televisions, and interactive white boards, the teacher had to do with chalk, board, duster and cane. Apart from the discomfort caused by the cane, I could never understand how it helped someone with lesser ability than others. Children brought their own lunch to school and were glad to gather round an open fire in cold weather. Some lessons were learned by memory such as tables and poetry while mental arithmetic, in open class, proved a challenging and competitive time as calculators were unheard of. There was less access to books and writing paper than today. The curriculum was largely based on the three R's.

Educational reform in 1944 provided a choice of secondary, technical or grammar school and came much too late for me as I was leaving school in 1945. Master Tam was a man who took an interest in new inventions and told us that one day we would be able to buy a television and watch pictures in our own home. In those days we had very large radio sets so he seemed to think that a television would sit on top of the radio and be plugged into it. The fact that he was abreast of the times was more to his credit than any misunderstanding of actual technology. When leaving school I had mixed feelings as I left my friends to work happily for several years on our farm.

### Faith & Practice

I was reared in a God-fearing home where regular church attendance was practiced and the Lord's Day strictly observed with only works of necessity being performed. It reminds me of an occasion when a visiting preacher to my church told of his upbringing not to watch television on the Sabbath. Some Sunday School children asked me later how things were in my day. I replied there were no televisions in the country at that time and even if there had been we had no electricity to power one. They seemed surprised by this and asked me if my parents were missionaries. I felt that they thought I was no better off than those in a third world country. My parents ensured that I knew in particular the Way of Salvation in the finished work of Christ without any reliance on church or tradition. I used to attend

gospel missions on many occasions. These were often interdenominational in nature. It is therefore no surprise that I developed an interest in Bible teaching.

My favourite Bible translation has always been the King James Version (KJV), commonly referred to as the Authorised Version (AV). Subjects that attracted me were: creation, old testament history, prophecy, miracles, the work of redemption, the birth, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the history of the early church, the Protestant Reformation and various religious awakenings and revivals.

The world would think that with all this I was a real Christian, a born again believer if ever there was one. After all, I lived a clean life, was keenly interested in the work of the Evangelical Protestant Society and had good knowledge of the reformed faith. On one occasion I explained the way of salvation to a colleague at work. He told me he was interested in these things so I told him what he needed to know, advising him of an opportunity to attend the Christian Police meetings in Portrush, or a gospel mission in Coleraine Gospel Hall. I was surprised when he later told me that he accepted Christ as his personal Saviour when in Portrush. He was keen to know when I became a Christian and was astonished when I told him I was not yet saved. You see, I had a head knowledge with no heart experience.

It was later in May 1955 that my appetite for reformed teaching found me in Drumaheagles Orange Hall to hear Norman Porter, who later became a Member of the Northern Ireland Parliament. He unseated a Minister of Education in a surprise victory. Monica Farrell, who was also at the meeting, gave her testimony. Not unlike Luther, the great reformer, it dawned on her from a straight reading of the Scriptures that all the demands of her Roman church, that required the sacraments and tradition for salvation, could not save her soul. Her salvation came through faith in Jesus Christ alone as the only Mediator between God and man, by trusting in His Work alone, by Grace alone, through Faith alone. After experiencing a new spiritual birth she sought fellowship elsewhere with like minded believers. During the meeting I was stirred in my soul and began to see my lost estate. Here I was, a proud religious Protestant being challenged and convicted by the witness of a former dear Roman Catholic sister who had a real heart experience and a living relationship with her Lord. That night my self assurance was broken and I knelt at the foot of the old rugged cross, a sinner that needed to be saved, submitting myself in simple faith, to my saviour the Lord Jesus Christ. Some people's testimony, include how they experienced a transformation in their behaviour such as the drunkard became sober, the thief became honest, the blasphemer stopped swearing, and the abuser became caring.

As for me, I had lived a clean life all along so that my outward behaviour barely changed. The local public would not have seen much difference. However, I knew I was inwardly changed as the Holy Spirit Who witnessed to my spirit that I was born of God. Good behaviour can be evidence of an inward change but is not the means of salvation. The new birth experience is the result of a sinner admitting his lost estate, confessing his sin in prayer to our Lord Jesus Christ, is willing to turn from his sin, accepts the finished work of Christ as the only means of redemption, and asks Christ to forgive him and come into his heart.

Millions down the centuries have done this and experienced the assurance of salvation as the Holy Spirit of God entered them and creating a new fellowship with God. In 1957 I joined a newly formed Free Presbyterian Church in Coleraine and was placed onto the church committee. In 1985 I was elected as an Elder jointly responsible with others for the spiritual leadership of the congregation.

## Employment

My first employment commenced in January 1950 with JB & SW Young. Their most prominent trade was in mushrooms, although they also grew tomatoes and flowers. The factory site was where the new court house is today on the Mountsandel Road, Coleraine. The work entailed a 12-hour day and was labour intensive. I hear some people talk today about working 12 hour rotas sometimes termed 'continental shifts'. Well! we had to work long hours before now.

I look back at my employment in Young's factory as some of the happiest days in my employment. Sadly, because of a downsizing in business, I had to seek a new job. In August 1966 I went to work with ground staff at the University of Ulster, Coleraine. Again because of my experience in agriculture and plant production I soon found myself in high demand to work on flower beds and lawns. This entailed maintaining a good arrangement of flowers and plants while keeping lawns to enhance the image of the university. Many important people visited the Vice Chancellor and took strolls through the grounds. After 8 years with the university, another opportunity occurred for employment with Coleraine Borough Council's Parks Department. This was a much larger scale operation and I succeeded in being appointed.

I joined Council during 1974 were I stayed until early retirement in 1992 on medical grounds. I sympathise with many people in Coleraine today who find it difficult to get permanent employment. Mechanisation, although welcomed because it made work easier, unfortunately resulted in less jobs being available. I believe that access to work allows people to create their identity and self-worth, to provide for their families and create opportunity to lead responsible caring lives. It would be good if firms tried their best to keep jobs at home.

## Loyal Orders

In my generation it was almost automatic in parts of the country for young men to follow family tradition and join the Orange Order. During 1948 at the age of 17 years, I joined Number 5 Lodge in Coleraine and currently served for 65 years. I was awarded my 50 years service jubilee medal. I also achieved 50 years as a member of the Royal Arch Purple. Two years later, in 1950, I joined The Royal Black Institution, also known as the Royal Black Preceptory. I also joined the Apprentice Boys of Derry and to date has served 63 years in both. Again, like the Orange, I received my 50 years service jubilee medals. All four medals are mounted as 50 year jewels.

Dealing with myth and perception is a problem for any organisation. The Loyal Orders are no different and have to tolerate uninformed propaganda hurtful to their character. They are fraternal bodies springing from a common root of defence and struggle against dictatorship while upholding free and religious liberty. They are loyal to the beliefs of the Protestant faith as defined in the teachings of the Protestant Reformation. Each year their tradition of marching is their way of demonstrating the right to open expression and the maintenance of free and civil liberties. People who oppose them should firstly acquaint themselves with what the Loyal Orders actually believe and practice and study their own history before they oppose the right of others to maintain their beliefs as many others do. The Loyal Orders are not harmful to anyone and have played no little part in defence of democracy.

## Dark Clouds

Issac Watts, a great hymn writer of the 17th century, when composing the well known hymn 'Am I a soldier of the cross' asks a difficult question in the second verse 'Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease? While others fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas?'

My wife's favourite text is taken from 2nd Corinthians 12:9 'My grace is sufficient for thee for my strength is made perfect in weakness'. This was a response from the Lord to the apostle Paul's plea to be relieved of a thorn in the flesh that Satan used to buffet him. The context of the verse shows us that by accepting adversity allowed by God, He uses this to make us more dependant upon Him. In our weakness He provides for our needs and helps us to remain strong in Him.

We had our trials like anyone else and proved the Lord's faithfulness throughout. On 28th September 1992, Irene's father, Samuel Linton, left home to distribute gospel literature and never returned. To this day he is on the missing persons list. You can imagine the distress caused not knowing what happened and never seeing him again. We sympathise with others who lost loved ones in such circumstances.

On the 12th March 1994 Irene's mother lost her life as the result of a road accident. Two years later in May 1996, shortly after attending a missionary weekend in Cork, I took a massive heart attack and was admitted to the former Coleraine Hospital. This resulted in having a triple bypass in the Royal Victoria Hospital. During February 2011, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer with an outcome that required visits to hospital for surgery and therapy. I have experienced highs and lows in my emotional and physical wellbeing and appreciate all the visits by nursing staff to my home to provide medical care. Occasionally I was reminded that I was viewed as a 'miracle man' having defied the usual terminal predictions associated with my health problem. From the outset I determined to live life as normal as possible. I have proven my wife's favourite text and felt the presence of the Lord throughout.

I offer you a verse from the hymn titled 'Life at best is very brief'. The third verse reads

Time is gliding swiftly by,  
Death and judgment draweth nigh,  
To the arms of Jesus fly, be in time!  
O I pray you count the cost!  
Ere the fatal line be crossed,  
And your soul in hell be lost, be in time!

Verses like these can be disturbing and gloomy. If someone's house was on fire and I failed to warn them what sort of person would I be? I say to you in Christian love that if you have not yet come to Jesus, do not assume that you have all the time in the world. There is no guarantee of tomorrow now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.

I hope and pray that this little booklet may encourage those who read it and, if you have not yet trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as your own and personal Saviour, that you may see your need to come and trust our wonderful Saviour and Lord.