

King William's gauntlets c.1690



These are no ordinary gauntlets. They belonged to a king. The king's name was William of Orange, and he gave these gauntlets to Sir John Dillon as a thank-you for staying at his home in Lismullin, Co. Meath two days after the conclusion of a great battle in July 1690.

William was probably in a good mood. After all, he had just won a major victory over his rival, King James II of England, at the nearby River Boyne. The giving of a present was, of course, a courtesy and John Dillon would have been delighted to receive a gift from the King himself.

William and James had both fought in the battle. In fact, William had personally commanded the cavalry. Gauntlets were often given as presents in those days and, who knows, maybe William even wore these during the battle as they both show signs of heavy use.

The Battle of the Boyne is probably the most famous battle in Irish history. It was definitely the largest, with 36,000 troops on William's side and 25,000 on James's side.

They were thought to be fighting over control of the island and also over religion. Although both were Christian, James was Catholic and William was Protestant.

James was attempting to use Ireland as a base to take back the throne in England, having been forced off it by William two years earlier. And William was, of course, determined to stop this from happening.

But the war in Ireland was also part of a larger European struggle to resist Louis XIV of France, who was the most powerful ruler in Europe at that time.

So it was all very complicated.

William was fighting for what was seen as the Protestant cause, as he opposed Louis, who saw himself as a great Catholic ruler and enemy of Protestantism. But William's supporters included the Pope in Rome, who was at loggerheads with Louis at this time.

James, on the other hand, was fighting for what was seen as the Catholic cause. But his supporters included a large number of high-ranking Protestants, who weren't happy that a sitting king had been deposed two years earlier.

So Europe was very much involved in this war, which explains the presence in the battle of soldiers from the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Norway, France and Poland, as well as Britain and Ireland.

Added to which, family issues were also at play. William was not only James's nephew but also his son-in-law, as he was married to James's daughter, Mary.

After the battle, James managed to retreat with the bulk of his army. He returned to France (where he'd come from in the first place), leaving most of his soldiers to fight on in other battles.

The Battle of the Boyne was therefore not a decisive battle. It didn't end the war for control of Ireland. The Battle of Aughrim, a year later in July 1691, was far bloodier and more conclusive.

Although not decisive, the Battle of the Boyne has always been viewed as a victory for the Protestant cause and the fact that both kings were present has given this battle a very powerful allure. It has become an almost mythic victory, talked about from generation to generation.