



Massed Youth for the Empire: the Royal Review of Youth Movements in Belfast.

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In July 1937, their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth paid a state visit to Northern Ireland as part of the celebrations to mark the Coronation of the new monarch. Arriving at Thompson's Wharf in the port of Belfast aboard HMY Victoria and Albert, the Royal procession travelled from Donegall Quay along the High Street to the City Hall where an address was given to a lively crowd of spectators and servicemen. After luncheon was taken, the King and Queen - along with the thousands of spectators in attendance - witnessed a commanding display of strength from the masses of children from the variety of uniformed youth organisations in Northern Ireland. The review (held at the specific request of His Majesty) was attended by a contingent of 4,200 from The Boys' Brigade making it the largest B.B. parade held in Northern Ireland at that time.

The Royal Review of an estimated 20,000 - 24,000 members of youth movements took place at the Balmoral show-grounds on 28 July, 1937. The scale of the review offered an expression of both the strength of the British Empire and the importance of disciplined young people in Northern Ireland. The arrival of the Royal car to the show-grounds was greeted with a fanfare by the trumpets of The Boys' Brigade band and was followed by rapturous cheers from the crowd of spectators. In the course of the afternoon displays were given by the various youth organisations in attendance, with each exhibiting their own individual characteristics. The rally opened with a display of Irish folk dancing by 120 members of the Girl Guides and was followed by a display of PT exercises by 150 B.B. Boys which were, according to the report in The Boys' Brigade Gazette, "of outstanding merit". The performances were well received by their Majesties in what the King described as the largest and most successful youth rally of its kind at which he had been present.

The Royal Review in Belfast was one of many held in large cities in Britain during the course of the 1930s. These included a rally of 15,000 Scouts at Crystal Palace in June 1932, the 8,000 strong Youth Pageant in Belfast in 1935, and the Scout's Jamboree at Raby Castle in 1936. However, it was The Boys' Brigade that "possessed a strong flair for attracting public attention in the 1930s" with the Jubilee celebrations of 1933 by far the largest of these public displays, with over 130,000 in attendance at Hampden Park for the festivities in early September of that year.

These gatherings provide a powerful indication of the strength of the values at the heart of the British Empire at home, as well as illustrating the physical weight of the masses of disciplined youth during this decade. With an emphasis on citizenship, and a concern for the future, these large-scale displays of youth movements during the 1930s, in cities at the heart of the British Empire, are a clear manifestation of their significance to the ways the Empire was viewed at home and overseas. Moreover, it was The Boys' Brigade that was prominent at such events, with His Majesty King George VI leaving Belfast in the summer of 1937 with "no doubts regarding the virility of the movement of which he is the honored Patron".