



# PATRICK SARSFIELD

PART ONE BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

**P**osthumous deification is always a danger, particularly with someone who is the very stuff of legend. Even in his mid-forties, Sarsfield was legendary. By the time he died, he was already securely placed in the Irish Pantheon. Today, he is still up there with the greatest:

*Mindful of our great instructors,  
Sarsfield, Emmet, Davis, Tone,  
On our own right hand relying,  
In ourselves we trust alone.*

But even with the gods, there are detractors and those who think they may have feet of clay. In his *Jacobite Ireland*, J.G. Simms writes that Sarsfield was lacking in subtlety and as some people thought, in brains. The Duke of Berwick, who fought alongside Sarsfield in Limerick, described him as 'a man of an amazing stature, utterly devoid of sense, very good-natured and very brave'. These sentiments were confirmed by James II, who told the French diplomat, Comte d'Avaux, that 'Sarsfield was very brave but had no head'.

What then, is his claim to fame? Never was he in supreme command of the army, but he was idolised by his soldiers and respected by his enemies. Why was it that he, who was so distrusted by his superior officers and whose achievements were so meagre, should have such a claim on the popular mind? The password is still 'Sarsfield'.

He was born about the year 1650, probably at his father's estate in Lucan, Co. Dublin. It is strange that there is no record of the place or date of his birth but, as Alice Curtayne points out in her study of him, much of the man is lost in the mists of time:

*It may be objected that Sarsfield almost disappears behind the smoke of battles and that his voice is lost in their uproar. He recruits and commands; he inspires the people of Ireland, and becomes the idol of their common soldier; alone among the native race, he is feared by the army of invaders. He dies in the same cause to which the effort of his life was directed. Yet his personality remains very obscure.*

Sarsfield's father, Patrick, and his mother, Anne, had three children, William, Mary and Patrick (although there is mention of another daughter in the memoirs of Captain Peter Drake). The Sarsfields were of Anglo-Norman stock, and many of them were lord mayors of Dublin in the sixteenth century. Having been around for about 500 years, they would



Patrick Sarsfield, attributed to John Riley. National Gallery of Ireland.

have been regarded as 'Old English', that is to say, settlers who had become more Irish than the Irish themselves through inter-marriage, etc. This is particularly true in the case of the Sarsfield family of Lucan, as Patrick's mother, Anne, was the daughter of the famous leader of the 1641 insurrection, Rory O'Moore or Rory of the Hills, who gave us the slogan: 'Through God, Our Lady and Rory O'Moore!' Anne, who taught her children Irish, outlived her son and died on the Continent many years after he did.

The years immediately preceding and following 1650, about when Sarsfield was born, were traumatic times. The social order was in convulsion. King Charles I of England had been beheaded by Cromwell early in the previous year. Then the peace which had been concluded with the Kilkenny Confederation was broken by the parliament that had driven him to death. Cromwell's massacres at Drogheda and Wexford were still very fresh in people's memory and the terror continued through 1650

and after. Millions of acres of land had been confiscated, tens of thousands of Irish boys were shipped off to the West Indies; priests were banished and all professions were closed to Catholics. Education of children was a grave problem, as it was permissible for magistrates to send them to England for education.

As Patrick Sarsfield was a second son, he was not in line for inheritance. His parents, therefore, decided that he would become a soldier. So he was enrolled at a French military academy and received his first commission in the Duke of Monmouth's regiment. This, in fact, was a case of getting on through 'who you know', as Monmouth was related to the Sarsfields through marriage. William, Patrick's eldest brother, had married a sister of his. Monmouth (known rather unkindly as the 'Royal Bastard') was the son of the exiled Charles II (whom the Scots had crowned) and nephew of Louis XIV, for whom he now fought. The young Sarsfield accompanied him as ensign in France and Flanders, no doubt, as Macaulay says, 'fighting gallantly'. While with the French, he supposedly received the best training in arms that could be found in Europe at the time, learning much from Louis' famous master of military science, General Luxembourg, the hunchback.

In 1678, we find Sarsfield named in the military lists as being a lieutenant in Monmouth's regiment of Foot. He was then about 28 years of age. Louis was in power in France, and his friend Charles II was already rumoured to be a Catholic. Sarsfield transferred to London, obtained a commission in the King's bodyguard, an aristocratic regiment comprising of men of 'good' families - even the privates being styled 'gentlemen of the Guard'. While in England, he received a captaincy in Colonel Dangan's regiment, 'which Commission was delivered to him by Lieutenant-Col. Dempsey or Mr. Trant "they being together at Crown-and-Scepter Tavern in Pick-a-Dilly"', as Todhunter, another biographer, tells us. Sarsfield would have been in London for the excitement of the 'horrid Popish plot', designed to topple Charles, reported by Titus Oates in 1678 and which resulted in the deaths of many Catholics. Three years later, bitterness about the affair persisted, as Narcissus Luttrell noted in his diary that a tall Irishman called Captain Sarsfield took exception to the insinuation of perjury against Catholic witnesses in connection with the plot and challenged the author of these insinuations to a duel. Nothing came of it, but Sarsfield was taken into custody from which he escaped shortly afterwards. A few months later, he was in the dueling business again, this time as a second and got run through for his troubles. He was seriously injured but survived.

Charles II died in 1685, having



*Richard Talbot, Duke of Tyrconnell. National Gallery of Ireland.*

reigned over a period of peace and relative prosperity for Ireland. However, many Catholics felt that he had not gone far enough, and the old chestnuts of land and religion persisted. Now it was James' turn, as he mounted the throne to rule the kingdom. But James had neither the talent nor the vision of Charles.

Things got off to an exciting start when Sarsfield's former commander in France, Monmouth, arrived from France and challenged James for the throne. It was a paltry challenge though, for his army was easily beaten off by James'

men, amongst whom was Sarsfield, who was severely wounded in the affair. Poor Monmouth was beheaded for his troubles, on Tower Hill in July, 1685.

Next year, we find a grant of lands in the Barony of Offaly, County of Kildare, to a Patrick Sarsfield. It is in the Record Office in Dublin, dated June 8, *Anno Secundo Regis Jacobi*. Also, in 1686, Sarsfield appears in Dalton's List as Lieutenant, and Lieutenant-Colonel, in the Fourth Troop of Horse Guards. In one of the earlier lists he is noted as a Catholic not conformed under the Test Act.



James was resolved to restore Catholicism thoroughly and pervasively. He set about this task with vigour and pace. The Protestants became alarmed. In Ireland, they were even more terrified when Tyrconnell was appointed Lord Deputy. This was an interesting appointment, as Tyrconnell was a great friend of James. He was also one of the few survivors of Cromwell's Drogheda massacre and had an intense hatred of the parliamentary regime in England. His real name was Richard Talbot. Reportedly, Trinity students plotted his assassination in advance of his arrival, and the balladeers too were busy:

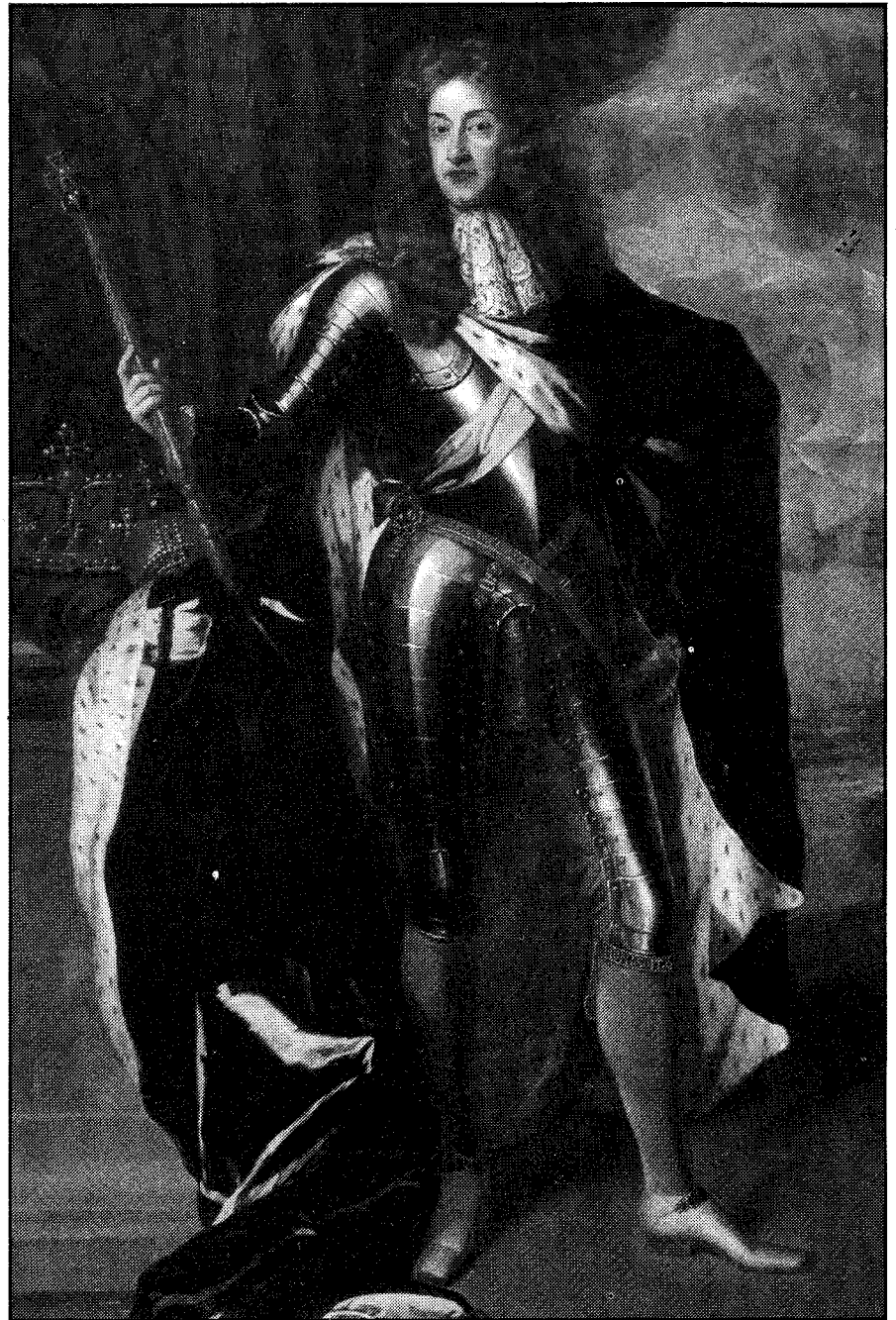
*Ho, brother Teig, dost hear the decree  
Dat we shall have a new debittie;  
Ho, by my soul, it is a Talbot,  
And he will cut all the English troat.*

He was known as 'Lying Dick Talbot' when he was at Charles' Court, where he was a close friend of James. In fact, James, then Duke of York, tried to get rid of his wife, Anne Hyde. Talbot reportedly supported him by offering personal evidence of the lady's indiscretions. The plan did not work out. He was known as a cynic and an opportunist. On James' accession, he was paid well for his services and was created Earl of Tyrconnell. His appointment as Lord Deputy in Ireland meant that James would be guaranteed a Catholic army and a Catholic administration.

Tyrconnell travelled to Ireland in early 1687 and took no time before beginning a purge of Protestant officers from the army. Sarsfield was now serving in Ireland, actively assisting Tyrconnell in remodelling the army along Catholic lines. By this time, he had inherited the Lucan estate, as his brother, William, had died childless. He seemed to have used the rental from the estate chiefly in recruiting an army on behalf of James.

The king was soon to need all the support he could get. His zeal in pushing through the reorganisation of the army and parliament alienated Church and State. It even alienated his family. There is a story told about his son-in-law, George, the Prince of Denmark, who, on receiving news of daily defections from the king's side, used to comment 'Est-il possible?' One day, the news was reported to the king that George was missing, which caused the king to ask 'oh, is est-il possible gone too?' That was not the worst, however. One day, his daughter Mary left him. She was married to the Protestant William, Prince of Orange, a soldier of great determination and valour. The king was now in trouble, as Mary was the one reason why he was tolerated – she, a Protestant, was next in line for the throne. Now she was gone, but not for long.

In November, 1688, William landed in England (with the blessing of Pope Innocent XI) to take the throne from his father-in-law. The Pope viewed James as



*James II by an unknown artist, after Sir Godfrey Kneller.  
Manchester City Art Gallery.*

a mere tool of Louis XIV. Hence his approval for William. Louis had attempted to exercise a dictatorship over the Catholic Church in France and also tried to dictate to the Pope in doctrinal matters. It was felt that William was in favour of toleration and would procure such for Catholics in England.

James' army countered weakly and in a short time many regiments had gone over to William. Sarsfield, now a colonel, had been brought over from Ireland, where he left his wife, the Lady Honora de Burgh, daughter of the Earl of Clanricarde. He fought loyally, but when the squadrons and battalions began to defect to William, he was forced to retire.

Then James fled England, accompanied by his favourite son, the 18 year old Duke of Berwick. William offered to confirm Sarsfield in his rank and estates in order to secure his services in negotiations with Tyrconnell. He refused and followed his exiled king to France. With all the opposition removed, William and Mary were crowned king and queen of England.

Ireland then became the focus of action. As soon as the Lord Deputy heard that William had landed in England, he immediately issued a call to arms. According to the author of *A Light to the Blind*, the call was responded to:

*you may judge of the greatness of the*





*Dutch print of the execution of the Duke of Monmouth, 15 July, 1685.*

affection which the poor people showed to the royal cause by this, that in the space of two months above fifty thousand enlisted themselves for the war, and each company and troop of the whole number was subsisted upon the cost of every captain for three months.

He sums up the objectives which they hoped to attain by supporting James:

*Restoration of their estates, for forty years in the possession of Protestant usurpers. Acts passed by the Irish Parliament, and sanctioned by the Lord Deputy to be absolutely valid, without having to send over previously prepared bills, for the king's approbation. Causes to be determined by the Irish judicature, without appeal to English tribunals. Full liberty to be given to Irish merchants to import and export, without being compelled to send their ships to English ports (thus avoiding iniquitous dock dues, etc.). Studies of Law to be founded in Dublin. The Viceroyalty to be given to Catholics.*

*A mint to be set up in Dublin. The chief State appointments to be conferred on Catholics. A standing army of 8,000 Catholics, a Catholic militia, and a fleet of 24 war ships of the Fourth rate, to be maintained. Half the ecclesiastical livings to be given to Catholics during the*

*lifetime of the present Protestant incumbents, and after their death all to Catholics. Works to be set on foot to make the great rivers navigable, to deepen and defend the ports, and to drain the bogs.*

March, 1689, marked James' triumphant arrival in Ireland. He landed at Kinsale and marched to Dublin amid tremendous scenes of rejoicing and celebration. His friend, Tyrconnell, met him in Cork and travelled with him to the capital, where the exiled king convoked a parliament on May 7. Sarsfield, who had disembarked with James in Kinsale, still commanding his body of dragoons, was nominated a member for County Dublin. He was now nearly forty years of age. Maybe Alice Curtayne was right when she stated that

*... the whirl of circumstance was at last enabling him to devote to the service of Ireland all that military skill acquired abroad. Consumed with his grandfather's passion for justice to his own country, he believed that this could be secured by restoring James to the throne of England, with the co-operation of Louis XIV ...*

However, having lived at the Court of Charles II, and having seen James in action with Talbot (Tyrconnell), one wonders how convinced Sarsfield was of James as an instrument for peace in Ireland and England.

Tyrconnell assured James that he had the loyalty of three provinces, but that Ulster was problematic. He was proven correct when Derry resisted James' siege and recorded the first defeat of the Jacobites. During this debacle, Sarsfield had divided his time between Sligo, where he had a command, and Dublin, where he was a member of parliament. About this time, too, there developed the tradition of the brass farthing, as James introduced a new currency, coined in large quantities out of door-knockers, brass plates, pieces of derelict cannon and even tin kettles. This new currency dealt a death-blow to trade, both internal and external, and disillusioned many in the cause of James. However, the worst was yet to follow.

Ulster fell into the hands of the Williamites. Sarsfield defended Sligo and scuttled Schomberg's troops there. Then he fell back on the Shannon to defend the river. By now, the French were really impressed by Sarsfield's ability. D'Avaux wrote to a colleague:

*I asked the King of England for a man named Sarsfield for one of the colonels, to go into France and command the corps. The king was so pleased (with his services in Connaught) that when I asked for Sarsfield he told me that I wanted to take*



Statue of Patrick Sarsfield. Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick.

all his officers, that he would not give him to me, and that I was unreasonable, and walked three times round the room in great anger. I bore all this meekly; and meanwhile I had a notion of my own, a very good one, as to Sarsfield; I obtained a promise from him that he would not go to France except to command this corps under the orders of Makarty; so that if Makarty got out of prison he should still have the chief command, with Sarsfield under him, while, if he remained a prisoner, Sarsfield should have the sole command ... Sarsfield will, I believe, be extremely useful, as he is a man who will always be at the head of his troops, and will take great care of them. If Makarty should not get out of prison, you will in any case have in Sarsfield a good commander, whom other first-class colonels will obey well, which they will not do with another.

On June 14, William arrived in Carrickfergus with his army and prepared for war. The issues were complex. The land

question was involved, as was that of religion; also, there was Irish nationality versus English dominion. But closely linked to these were the English revolution of 1688 and the European ambitions of Louis XIV. In fact, the events of the war, no matter how large they loomed in Irish minds, were relatively unimportant manoeuvres in a wider European power struggle, where Germany, Spain, Holland and Savoy lined up against France – with the Pope's approval!

To complicate matters further, there was the House of Orange lining up against a Stuart, using a French army!

William headed south through Newry and Ardee, pushing James ahead of him until they reached the Boyne. There they faced each other, James regretting he had made a stand and the other determined to finish him off. The Williamites were superior in numbers, artillery, experience and leadership. The Irish had an indifferent combination of James - Tyrconnell - Lauzun. Sarsfield was there, but was

detailed to a secondary role. Curtayne describes the early morning scene:

*Early on the morning of June 30, William rode slowly out to examine the Irish lines. He was accompanied by Schomberg, and by Ormond [James Butler, the 2nd Duke of Ormond who was loathed by Irish Catholics]. In their reconnoitre, these officers sometimes approached within two hundred feet of James's camp. When they were satisfied with their inspection, they sat down to breakfast by the river at a point nearly opposite Oldbridge. As they were eating, four figures on horseback appeared on the opposite bank, all of them well known to Ormond, who named them for William. They were: Lauzun, whose position of command made the Williamites smile; Tyrconnell, who had been appointed Ormond's successor as Lord Deputy; the boyish Duke of Berwick, natural son of James II; and the unmistakable towering figure of Sarsfield. The two parties gazed at each other with interest across the river. Then the Irish officers silently signalled up two small field pieces, which they trained on the Williamite group. These sprang to their horses, but they had not retreated before a shot brought Prince George's horse to the ground, and another shot grazed William's shoulder. It was only a flesh wound, but it rendered his right arm temporarily useless.*

James watched the battle from the safety of Donore Hill, having sent his baggage on to Dublin, with half of his artillery guarding it, early in the morning. Sarsfield's Horse - the pride of the Jacobite army - was ordered to the rear of the field, with the best of the French infantry, to guard the road to Dublin. As soon as James saw the day going against him, he set out for Dublin, taking Sarsfield with him. He then made for Waterford and, from there, sailed, via Kinsale, to France, where he remained a guest of Louis. The king, who was once welcomed as Ireland's saviour, was to be known subsequently as *An Rí Séamas a'Chaca!*

After the Boyne, the Jacobites retreated to Limerick. William dispatched three regiments of Horse, two of dragoons, ten of Foot and some artillery to attack Athlone. The siege lasted for ten days, but the Williamites retreated on hearing that Sarsfield was coming to the relief of the town. That he did, and then followed the Williamites to Limerick, where he blocked Tyrconnell's and Lauzun's attempts to persuade officers to capitulate and make peace with William. He became spokesman for the Irish who resolved to fight, in spite of dissension in the camp. Louis, it was felt, was still on the side of the Irish, and they hoped for word from him within a few weeks. With William at their door, they played for time and planned Ballyneety. Though he was to spend much of the siege outside the city, Sarsfield's greatest hour had come.