

## Bionic soldier of fortune

by Éamon Ó Ciardha

### *From the files of the DIB...*

C 28016

**BROWNE, George** (1698–1792), soldier of fortune, Russian army officer, governor of Livonia and count of the Holy Roman Empire, was born on 15 June 1698 at Moyne (Castle Mahan), Co. Limerick, son of George Browne of Camas (an uncle of the Austrian marshal Maximilian Ulysses von Browne) and his wife Honora de Lacy. Educated in the diocesan school in Limerick, he left Ireland with his impoverished father in 1723 to enter the Palatine service. Later in the 1720s he joined the Russian army with James Keith, younger brother of the earl marischal of Scotland. He distinguished himself in the Polish, French and Turkish wars, serving under Peter Lacy, 'the Prince Eugene of Muscovy', and Lacy's rival, Count Munnich. He attained the rank of major-general with command of an army of 30,000 men, and served under the Austrian generals Crawford and Wallis against the Turks.

Taken prisoner by the Turks, possibly at Crocyka (1739), he avoided paying a huge ransom by persuading his captors that he was a lowly captain; he served as a galley slave until he was sold to an Albanian merchant. An unnamed Irishman in the Turkish service brought Browne's plight to the attention of the French ambassador, who ransomed him for

Right: Field-Marshal George Browne. (*The Clongownian IV* (1) June 1905)



50 ducats. While a prisoner of the Turks he apparently discovered important state secrets. Armed with this knowledge, he allegedly walked from Turkey to St Petersburg, where the Tsarina Anne rewarded him with promotion to general. He then served with General Peter Lacy during his expedition to Finland in the 1740s. During the Seven Years' War (1756–63) Browne served as a lieutenant-general in the Austrian army, which was operating as an ally of Russia in Serbia and Hungary, taking part in the battles of Lobositz (1756), Prague (1757) and Kolin (1757) under the command of his cousin, Maximilian Ulysses von Browne (1705–57). He was wounded by Prussian officers at Zorndorf in 1758, receiving three pistol shots and losing part of his skull; he recovered, despite having to have his skull repaired with a piece of silver plate, and received the order of St Andrew from Tsar Peter III.

For this service he was named field marshal and given command of the Russian forces sent to invade the

Danish province of Schleswig in 1762. Declaring the war to be impolitic, he was temporarily deprived of his honours, discharged from the Russian service and ordered to leave the country. Peter reversed his decision three days later and appointed him governor of Livonia; he was confirmed in this office by Catherine II. In his 30 years of service as governor he reorganised the legal system, social institutions and schools in the Baltic provinces, built new roads, towns and schools, and deepened the harbour. Refused permission to retire by Catherine, who promised him that 'death alone would rob me of your services', he took a coffin wherever he went in protest and used it as a stand to wash crockery. He died in Livonia on 18 February 1792 at the age of 94. ☒

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