

PETER DRAKE, 1671-1753

The *Memoirs of Captain Peter Drake* were published in Dublin in 1755. Copies, nine of which are known to exist, have always been rare. Drake's relatives tried to secure the whole printing in order to suppress publication, and had considerable success. Fortunately a few copies survived. In 1960 the *Memoirs* were reprinted and are at last more widely available.¹

The work deserves celebrity. It is a delight, and reminiscent of William Hickey. The story is of a remarkable career spent in French, Dutch, Spanish and English regiments during the Nine Years War (1688-97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13). The author is immensely likeable. He is intelligent, resourceful and courageous. He is broad-minded and frank. He enjoys comradeship and wine, has a passion for gambling (at which he is generally fortunate) and is amorous. Though he shuns marriage, his behaviour is more or less honourable. For all his frankness, he is not indelicate. In reduced circumstances, he remains withal a gentleman. Drake might be a romantic hero of Sir Walter Scott; but he is not. He is real, and the epitome of a stout-hearted eighteenth century soldier-of-fortune.

Drake belonged to an Old English family, originally settled at Drakerth near Kells in County Meath. His father had a handsome house near Celbridge, where Peter grew up. He was nineteen years of age when the Jacobite War forced the family to leave home and take refuge in Limerick. He left from there with the fleet which transported the Irish army to France in 1691. He learned French as the guest of a marchioness in Brittany and lived for some time on the generosity of family friends, among them Patrick Sarsfield's mother and William Dongan, earl of Limerick. Drake's first military experience came in 1696 when he enlisted as a private soldier at 4d a day in the Queen's Regiment of Dragoons, a Jacobite regiment then at Perpignan. He was disappointed not to get a commission. In this he was the victim of circumstances. There were too many men of gentle birth, especially Irishmen, for the commissions available. Drake never became an officer. He was a captain only by courtesy. He served with his regiment in Spain and was at the siege of Barcelona (1697). In July 1699, seeing no prospect of advancing his fortune, he made up his mind to desert and return to Ireland. At Rouen, where he looked for a captain to take him home, he ran out of money. Hearing a drummer beating up for recruits for the local French regiment, he decided to enlist. He made the recruiting officer believe he was a Breton, to account for his unusual accent when speaking French, obtained the enlistment bounty of four *lois d'ors*, and by a happy stratagem managed to escape from the party supervising him and get on board ship.

Travelling on the same vessel were five Irish priests, who had previously been banished. When the ship arrived at Cork the identity of the latter became known and Drake fell under suspicion of being a priest also. For six months he was imprisoned at Cork. At last, with the aid of a fellow prisoner, a friendly visitor and a smuggled saw, he broke out and made his way to his relations at Celbridge and Drakerth. He stayed over a year in Dublin until his money ran out and he grew restless to be gone. He enlisted in a regiment that was being newly raised for the service of Holland. The Dutch regiment was a cosmopolitan unit. The recruits were Irishmen of both nations; the drum-major was an Englishman; and the captain a Huguenot officer. They sailed from Ringsend to Willemsted in May 1701, and Drake did not return to Ireland for thirty-seven years.

During the next five years he was in and out of more regiments than you can count. Discharged after a few months from the Dutch regiment he had joined in Dublin, he

went to London thinking vainly that it was a place to make a fortune. To get back to the Continent he enlisted in the English 24th Regiment, which was on its way to Holland. Suffering ill-treatment from a sergeant, he daringly deserted across the frontier into the Spanish Netherlands, where he joined a Flemish nobleman's guards. Not long afterwards in Brussels he encountered Irish officers enlisting their countrymen in the Irish Brigade. Drake got permission to join them. In 1703 he served with the Irish Brigade in Italy. Always looking out for patrons who might get him a commission, he chose to transfer from the Irish Brigade to other French regiments. He took part in minor actions in Flanders until the end of 1706 when he left the army, went to Dunkirk and joined the crew of a privateer. The unlucky privateer was captured on her first voyage by an English yawl. Drake was recognized as an Irishman, and therefore a subject in arms against the crown. He was brought to London, and held in the Marshalsea Prison and later in Newgate. At his trial in the admiralty court, he was convicted of treason; the case can still be found in the judicial records. Fortune rescued him in the shape of his brother, Patrick, who was steward to the countess of Arlington. That lady was persuaded to use her influence to get a royal pardon, which duly arrived in July 1709. In prison the time had been made easier through the efforts of Patrick and by the friendships Drake made, especially that of Mrs. Goodman, who belonged to the family running Newgate and whom Drake made his mistress.

Once out of prison Drake returned to the Continent. In France he enlisted in the *Gens d'armes*, a corps of gentlemen privates. He fought with them at the battle of Malplaquet. In the lean winter of 1710 dilatory payment in France led him to resign the service and try his luck with the Allies. He found the duke of Marlborough's camp before Bethune, made much money in the dangerous work of placing gabions, and joined an English regiment. After one further change of regiment, whereby he left the infantry for the cavalry, his military career came to an end in 1712.

He was then forty, and had as many more years to live. He made London his home. Living with a Dutch widow, he ran successively a coffee house and a tavern. He was maintained by the largesse of the women he cultivated. For over twenty years he stayed in the capital with a faithful mistress. He would go each year to Bath to play the games of *faro* and *hazard*. In 1738 he visited Ireland; and in 1745 he came back permanently. Paying extended visits to generous hosts, notably to Lord Trimlestown to whom the *Memoirs* are dedicated, he must have been a popular guest, valued as a splendid raconteur and acclaimed as a wise old man. The *Memoirs*, written no doubt at the prompting of his friends, are notable for their simple and elegant mode of expression and for their author's exceptional power of recall, which makes the work so detailed, colourful and exciting. His description of himself in the *Memoirs* is as follows:

My height is exactly five feet ten inches and three quarters, my limbs neither athletically clumsy nor finically delicate, but rather that due composition of both which constitutes the appearance of a strong, well-proportioned man; extremely active, and so indefatigable in point of bodily labour, that I never knew, or scarcely ever heard of any who was capable of undergoing more; and to this advantage I have often been indebted for life, as nothing under Heaven, but the most robust constitution, could be capable of supporting the numerous hardships I have so often and so bitterly encountered.—The regularity of my features were such as induced the world to call me a handsome man, and indeed, in my youth, the testimony of my glass, joined to many successful amours, has made me vain enough to think that it did not altogether flatter me.

Such was the body which inclosed my mind, steady in adversity, yet volatile

in prosperity, a sound judgment, and a deep discernment, yet a slave to passion, and blind to danger; a memory most extensive, yet the recollection of one past folly could never dissuade me from the pursuit of another. Humane and benevolent, generously affected with the misfortunes of others, though so hardened and insensible to my own, that when under the sentence of death, I cannot recollect it to have given me the least concern.—In short, I had not one good quality that was not in a great degree allayed with something like its reverse, and to a constitution of mind formed of such discordant principles can I alone attribute that incorrigible madness, and inconsistency of conduct, to be found almost everywhere in my story.

His description of his surrender at Malplaquet is also worth quoting:

I could see nothing round me but the enemy, and having lost much blood, I resolved to surrender myself prisoner. In order to this, I took my carrabine, cocked it, having my sword hanging at my wrist, and took the reins of my bridle in my mouth, and thus marched up to a fresh squadron, just marched within the entrenchment: I rode up to the commanding officer, and begged quarters. He had a pistol cocked in his hand: told me in the German language, which I understood, calling me a 'French houndsfoot'; that he would give me quarters with a brace of balls, lodging the muzzle of his pistol on my right shoulder, and firing at the same time; I was resolved not to be behind hand with him, and to sell my life as dear as I could. As soon as I heard the word, I fired my carrabine; so that his shot and mine went off instantaneously. I shot the upper part of his head, and he tumbled forward: I saw his brains come down; his ball only grazed my shoulder, and tore the flesh a little; but the powder blew off and burnt the breadth of an oyster shell off my coat; and the wadding, which was tow, lodged between my waiscoat and shirt, setting them both on fire. Most of the front rank of the squadron, if not all, fired a volley at the same time; so that I had eleven shot fairly marked on my cuirass, or breastplate, and two through the skirts of my coat. Though the relating of this catastrophe takes some time, yet it was done in an instant: I immediately turned about, clapped spurs to my horse, and galloped towards another squadron of the same regiment that was marching in. As I went along, I cocked my carrabine again, though there was nothing in it, and went up to the commanding officer of this squadron, in the same posture as before, and demanded quarters, who, in a gentlemanlike civil manner, assured me I should have good quarters.

Another incident was the placing of gabions at the siege of Béthune, 1710:

I took notice that there was at table a gentleman whom they call'd Captain St. Clair; after dinner I saw a good many soldiers of different regiments, giving him their names in writing and promising him to go with him; this rais'd my curiosity to know the meaning; I was told he was captain of the volunteers; that all those people engaged themselves voluntarily to go down to the trenches to place gabions, a service that none was commanded on, but such as went of their own accord were received and paid a crown for every gabion they placed. Hearing this, and being idle, and my money growing short, I thought it a favourable opportunity to replenish my pockets; so without the least hesitation I entered volunteer with Captain St. Clair. That very night I went with him to the trenches before Béthune, where the siege went on briskly, and I had the good fortune to

place eleven gabions without receiving the least hurt, though a good many were wounded, and several lost their lives.

As the major part of my readers may not understand the meaning of gabions, or how the placing of them should be purchased at so dear a rate as a crown each, I shall here define them as follows: a gabion is a kind of a rough, round basket, about the size of a barrel, made with boughs or small branches of trees woven together. When it is dark an engineer, with an assistant or two, goes over the entrenchment, with as much match and line as is necessary to mark out as many places as the work is intended to be carried on that night, which may be four or five hundred paces. The workmen, of which there are always a number equal to the number of paces marked out in the intended work, begin by making a gap in the trench at the end of the line so laid; at the entrance of this gap a man, appointed for that purpose, sits down with a drum before him to serve as a table, having by his side a couple of bags of crown pieces. The volunteers take their gabions and lay them on the line, and return back and receive a crown; those willing to go again, might go as often as their inclination led them, and as often as they returned, they receiv'd a crown; the workmen with their pickaxes and shovels filling the gabions at the same time with earth as fast as they were laid. The noise of this work apprised the French, who immediately made a terrible fire on the quarter, which did some execution. However, I had the good fortune to place eleven gabions and receive as many crowns.

1. *Amiable Renegade: The Memoirs of Captain Peter Drake 1671-1753* (Stanford, California and London, 1960). Paul Jordan-Smith contributed a foreword, and Sydney Burrell an introduction and footnotes. The publishers in 1960 knew of only eight copies of the original edition: those in Trinity College, Dublin; the National Library of Ireland; the British Museum; the Bradshaw collection at Cambridge; and four in America. I have found a ninth copy in the Gilbert collection in the Public Library, Pearse Street, Dublin. This lacks the list of subscribers which appears (in variant forms) in the other copies.

KENNETH FERGUSON.

BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES R. O'BEIRNE

The article entitled 'Irish-born recipients of the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honour' in *Ir. Sword*, xii, 149 omits to mention Brigadier General James R. O'Beirne who was awarded the medal for his service at the battle of Fair Oaks in the campaign against Richmond during the American Civil War. At the time of the action he was a captain commanding C Company, 37th New York Infantry (Irish Rifles). General O'Beirne was born at Ballagh, Co. Roscommon, and was brought to the United States as a child. After the Civil War he held a series of interesting and important positions including secretary to President Andrew Johnson; commissioner of immigration of the United States; commissioner of charities of the city of New York; and ambassador extraordinary from President Kruger of the Boer Republic to the United States.

JAMES H. O'BEIRNE, North Carolina, U.S.A.

ALFRED AYLWARD

Further to the article on 'Alfred Aylward: a Fenian in South Africa' by Eileen McCracken in *Ir. Sword*, xii, 261-9, his death certificate in New Hampshire, U.S.A., states that he died at Littleton, New Hampshire on 25 August 1889 of 'apoplexy'. His age is given as fifty; his occupation is stated to have been mining and he is described as a widower. The physician reporting his death is O.H. Boynton, M.D., Lisbon, New Hampshire.

(Mrs.) F. VAN NIEKERK, city librarian, Kimberley, South Africa.