



# A WAYWARD WILD GOOSE

## PETER DRAKE'S MEMOIR OF THE SIEGE

BY JIM KEMMY

**A**mong the thousands of Jacobite followers who took refuge within the walls of Limerick in the summer of 1690 was a resourceful nineteen year old young man named Peter Drake. Born in 1671, he was the son of George Drake and a member of an Old English family, which originally settled in Co. Meath. His father fled to Limerick, but became ill and died before the siege ended. Peter himself had a close brush with death, when a Williamite cannonball demolished the wall of the bedroom where he had been sleeping just seconds before. This was the first of many close calls he was to have, on and off the battlefield, during his long life. After the second siege of Limerick, he left with the fleet which transported the Irish army to France in 1691. Through the intercession of Lord Trimlestown, he became a guest in Brittany of the Marchioness of Catulan, who also taught him French. He later lived 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, then at Perpignan. He served with this regiment in Spain and fought at the siege of Barcelona in the war of the Grand Alliance (1689-97). Seeing little prospect of improving his position, he deserted in July, 1699, and returned to Ireland. Travelling with five Irish priests, who had previously been banished, he was arrested and imprisoned in Cork on suspicion of being a priest. After six months, he escaped and made his way to Dublin, where he stayed for a year. He decided to become a soldier-of-fortune

and enlisted in a regiment which was being raised in the service of Holland. He sailed from Ringsend to Willemsted in May, 1701, and did not return to Ireland for thirty-seven years. During the war of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713), he fought with the Dutch, Spanish, French and British forces. In 1703, he served with the Irish Brigade in Italy.

In May, 1706, he fought at the battle of Ramillies in the bloody cockpit for the Spanish Netherlands. French morale was low and he had a close view of its retreating troops. The French, he later wrote, 'acquitted themselves shamefully, and fled like frightened sheep'. The men of the King's Regiment surrendered like 'paltroons' without firing a shot. Only Lord Clare's Irish Brigade held firm and suffered great losses.

At the end of 1706, Drake left the army and switched to the sea to join the crew of a Dunkirk privateer. However, his new career was short-lived, as the ship was captured by an English yawl on its first voyage. He was brought to London and, in February, 1708, was convicted of high treason. He was held in Marshalsea and, later, Newgate prisons. Again, luck came to his rescue. His brother, Patrick was employed as a steward by the Countess of Arlington, and was persuaded to use her influence to secure a royal pardon for Peter. Inexplicably, by the summer of 1709, he was once more back in the service of the French, this time in the elite ranks of the *Gens d'armes*.

On 9 September, Drake was severely wounded and made a prisoner on parole at the battle of Malplaquet. He spent the bleak winter of 1709-10 at a village near Roven in Normandy, in what was to be his last campaign in French service. On his way home from the war, he changed

sides again and enlisted in the English regiment of Colonel Pocock. At the end of a year's campaign, he spent the winter in London, living the pleasant life of a gentleman about town.

In March 1711, he was back in Flanders, where he took part in Marlborough's last victory at Bouchain. A dispute over accounts led to his departure from Pocock's regiment and, in the autumn of 1711, he returned to London for another leisurely winter's leave. A casual meeting led him to join the regiment of horse of the Marquis of Harwich for the last phase of the war.

He spent part of that winter and the early spring of 1712 at Ingateston and Harwich, where he pursued the happy-go-lucky life of a cavalry trooper. His military career came to a close later in the same year with the ending of the Spanish War of Succession and he returned to civilian life.

His subsequent career out of uniform was no less colourful than his earlier life.

He was then 41 years old and was just half-way through a life which had straddled the two centuries. He made London his home for the next 33 years. With a Dutch widow, he successfully ran a coffee-house and a tavern. He then became a professional gambler and, mixing with a variety of knaves and gentry, travelled regularly to Bath to play games of *faro* and hazard. Fortunately for him, his gambler's luck held out to the end of his life.

He visited Ireland in 1738, and met the Earl of Fingall at a holiday resort. This chance acquaintance re-opened a wide circle of friends among the Irish gentry, who invited him to return to his native country and to spend the rest of his days as their house-guest. In 1745, at

the age of 74, he came back to live permanently, as an irregular pensioner, with his hosts, notably Lord Trimles-town's family.

But he did not spend all his time in idleness. In 1753, the year of his death, he completed a book of his memoirs. In 1755, the work was published in two

volumes by the firm of S. Powell, Crane Lane, Dublin. Some 267 wealthy subscribers had guaranteed to purchase at least 332 copies. All went well with the venture until Drake's family intervened. They objected to the book's revelations and to the frankness with which Peter had documented his sexual relationships. They went further and managed to suppress the book by buying up all available copies from the printer. But once again, fortune smiled on the dead Drake. Nine copies managed to elude the clutches of the enraged family and these copies were subsequently scattered throughout the world. News of the existence and contents of the work slowly percolated into the literary world, and the book became a much sought after collector's item.

In 1960, the work was re-published in one volume, under the title *Amiable Renegade: The Memoirs of Captain Peter Drake 1671-1753*.

In his foreword to the new edition, Paul Jordan-Smith wrote:

*Peter Drake, for all his vices, must have been a thoroughly entertaining and personable fellow to have inspired so bountiful a welcome for so many years. But if that were his only virtue, it seems improbable that even his friends could have endured him for ten years and then made it possible for him to put his story into a book. And what, now, may one say of the book? In the first place it is an engaging narrative, written with no little gusto ... his stories of life behind the lines in France, Belgium, Holland, and elsewhere are most illuminating. Few books known to me give such detailed accounts of manners and morals in the European military camps during the first half of the eighteenth century. Just as detailed are his accounts of life in the towns among civilians. Having, through choice, and by force of circumstance, become an opportunist, he had to develop powers of quick observation.*

The Wild Geese who left Limerick with Sarsfield in 1691 have been invariably treated with reverential respect and presented as noble, high-minded idealists or as dashing, romantic heroes, who fought and, sometimes, died in lonely exile, for faith and fatherland. But Peter Drake was a Wild Goose with a difference, an irrepressible anti-hero, as the title of the second edition of the book *Amiable Renegade* acknowledges. In his valuable introduction to the re-published work, S.A. Burrell reflected on the man and his story:

*The story Drake had to tell was absorbing enough to make him welcome anywhere, but particularly in the houses of the Irish gentry ... Such a varied experience, unusual even in an age when national loyalties were less binding than they are now gave and still gives to Drake's narrative unique historical value ... Here we learn nothing of grand strategy and little of tactics but a great deal about the*

# THE MEMOIRS OF

## Capt. Peter Drake.

CONTAINING,

An Account of many Strange and Surprising Events, which happened to Him through a Series of Sixty Years, and upwards; and several material Anecdotes, regarding King WILLIAM and Queen ANNE's Wars with LEWIS XIV. of France.

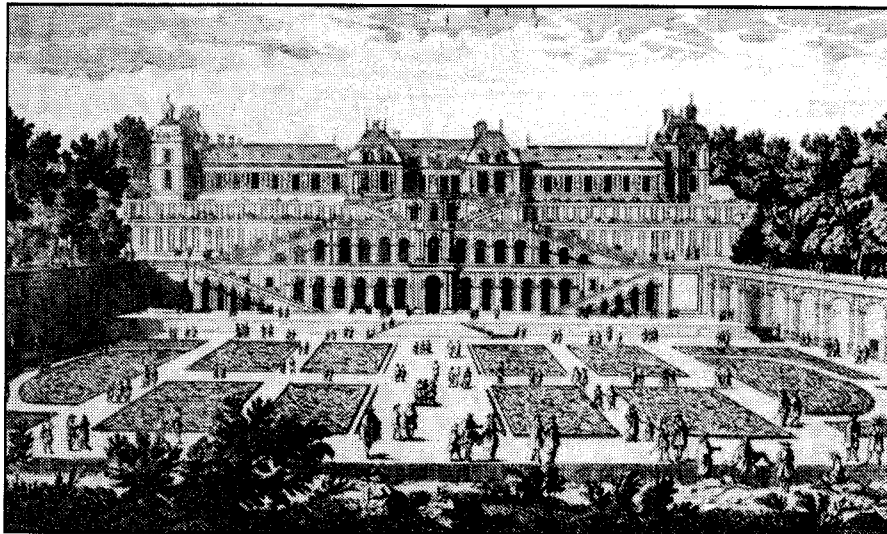


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Printed and Sold by S. POWELL in Crane-Lane,  
for the AUTHOR.  
MDCCLV.



seamy side of camp life, the curiosities of military organisation, and the habits of the ordinary soldier ... Curious as it may seem, the great virtue of the memoir arises from a combination in Drake's personality of shrewdness and ingenuousness. He was intelligent enough and wise enough in the ways of the world to report what he saw with great fidelity and a large measure of human insight ... He understood quite clearly what he wanted from the world and how to go about attaining it. Seldom did he fail to act with cool rationality where matters of his own interest were concerned. He did not, after all, have to pretend to the point of hypocrisy that he was something which he was not ... he makes no bones about some of his own raffish motives or experiences, even though he knows that they will come under the eyes of gentle readers.



A 17th-century view of St. Germain's, the French refuge of King James II.



Prince Eugene of Savoy (left) and the Duke of Marlborough. A detail from Peter Decker's engraving of the battle of Malplaquet.

Here was no wild-eyed romantic so familiar in song and story on the Wild Geese. Drake was a tough, professional soldier who knew all about the horrors and brutality of war. S.A. Burrell examines his change of sides:

One cannot say that Drake was either completely immoral or amoral, though he probably came closer to the latter than the former. Given his social aspirations, which were, as we have seen, those of the gentle classes into which he had been born and whom he not always successfully strove to emulate under the direct circumstances, he had to make his way as best he could. Once he chose the army as a career, there were few courses by which he could improve himself economically or socially without resort to chicanery or speculation ... As a rootless Irishman whose family had suffered for their Catholic faith and their loyalty to the Stuarts, he endured all the disabilities of one who must prove himself wherever he goes ... Few Englishmen could love him for these patent evidences of disloyalty, and it must be confessed that his willingness to serve either master with equal ease of conscience makes him look the opportunist almost more than anything else. By ever principle – as an Irishman, a Catholic, and a Jacobite – the French cause was his own. Yet he finally adhered to England and became an Englishman in all but name. In large part his switches of allegiance are intelligible if we try to understand the hard lot of the exile in any period of history. Principles made cold eating for a man who loved the good things of life as Peter Drake did.

Nonetheless, the peculiarities of his picturesque career cannot be laid entirely to his own whims or calculations. Opportunist he was, but he had been made so, as had many another ...

Drake gives this description of himself in the Memoirs:

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 ...

For all his passion for wine, women and gambling, Peter Drake was an intelligent and courageous man. He was a wayward Wild Goose, but his book is a most valuable account of the life of one Irish soldier who left Limerick in 1691.

## THE MEMOIR

My father had ... with his family, settled in the County of Kildare, having taken some lands from William, Lord Dongan (to whom he had the honour of being related) at Kildroughet, now Celbridge, where he built a handome house. Here he continued till the Revolution, when his affairs took a new turn.

Some time before, or about the beginning of the Troubles, Lord Dongan was created Earl, and, if I remember right, Governor of Limerick. Thither he repaired, taking my father with him, whom he soon after promoted: he was appointed one of the Commissioner of the Customs, and chief Comptroller of the Mint. As soon as King James came to Dublin, and called a Parliament, my father was put in the Commission of the Peace for the County of Kildare, and declared himself candidate for the Borough of Navan. He was at the same time restored to the remainder of his estate; after which he returned to Limerick, to act in his employments.

In June, 1690, he came to visit his family and settle his affairs; but the loss of the Battle at the Boyne (which happened the first of July following) obliged him with all expedition to move off with his family for Limerick, staying but one day after the battle to inter Lord Dongan, only son to

the Earl of Limerick, who was that day killed by a cannonball and brought to Castletown, the Earl his father's seat. This melancholy affair being at an end, the next day we set forward on our journey.

Arriving at that city, we found all hands employed in repairing the old, and throwing up new works, for the defence of the place, which was soon after besieged; the particulars of which are so well known already, that it would be needless to descend to a minute relation: I shall therefore say no more than mention an instance of the interposition of divine Providence in my behalf, by which I have been so often since rescued from calamity and the jaws of death.

There was between our house and the town wall a large magazine. The besiegers ordered two pieces of ordnance to be levelled at this building; and several shots passed through, and hit other gable-end, within which was the apartment where I slept with one Captain Plunket, of Lord Gormanstown's Regiment. This gentleman was to mount guard that day, and going out very early, left me abed. About two hours after, I went out to speak to one of the servants to get me a clean shirt, and before I had time to return, a ball had beat down the wall, a great part of which had fallen down, and

demolished the bed. It then passed through my father's bedchamber, broke the posts of the bed where he and my mother were asleep, but, thank Heaven, had no worse effect than putting the family in a consternation.

When the siege was at an end, Lord Trimlestown did my mother the honour of a visit, to condole with her on the loss of my father (who, though he escaped the many dangers of a battle, was snatched by the irresistible hand of death from this life to a better) and made her a tender of his friendship, promising to provide for my brother; and added, that if she was willing to suffer me to accompany him to France, he would take me under his protection. This kind offer she thought was not to be refused, and immediately consented, at the same time thanking that generous nobleman for so singular a kindness.

### SOURCES

*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.

'Peter Drake, 1671 - 1753' by Kenneth Ferguson, *The Irish Sword* Vol. XIII, Winter, 1977, No. 51.