British Journal for Military History

Volume 9, Issue 2, July 2023

The Journal of Major General Robert Stearne of the Royal Regiment of Ireland

Justin Saddington

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 31 July 2023

Citation: Justin Saddington, 'The Journal of Major General Robert Stearne of the Royal Regiment of Ireland', *British Journal for Military History*, 9.2 (2023), pp. 13-30.

www.bjmh.org.uk

The BJMH is produced with the support of Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The Journal of Major General Robert Stearne of the Royal Regiment of Ireland

JUSTIN SADDINGTON*
National Army Museum, UK
Email: jsaddington@nam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT
This article contains an analysis of Major General Robert Stearne's journal of his service with the Royal Regiment of Ireland between 1678 and 1717. The article examines the provenance of the manuscript and addresses a major problem regarding its authenticity and relationship to the published accounts written by his regimental comrades. In so doing, it attempts to bring greater clarity to the question of its originality and to the sources that may have been used in its production. It then addresses the place of the journal within the historiography of the period and explores some of the new information that it contains.

The journal of Major General Robert Stearne, kept at the National Library of Ireland (NLI), is an important and little-known memoir which documents Stearne's remarkable forty-year career as a regimental officer from 1678 to 1717.[1] The journal is amongst a comparatively small number of memoirs written by soldiers of this period and this fact alone is a testament to its value. However, Stearne's work is also notable for being one of a quartet written by members of the Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland, a number unequalled by any other regiment of this era.[2] Yet, unlike those of his comrades, Brigadier General Richard Kane (1662-1736), Sergeant John Millner (fl.1701-36), and Captain Robert Parker (c.1665-c.1745), whose long availability in print has enabled them to become deeply embedded in the historiography of this period, Stearne's journal has suffered the misfortune of being unpublished and so has

*Justin Saddington is Archives and Library Curator at the National Army Museum, UK.
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i2.1708

[1]The National Library of Ireland (hereinafter NLI) MS 4166, Account by Brigadier Stearne of his career with the Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland and of the various campaigns and engagements in which he was involved in Britain, Ireland and on the continent including those of the Boyne, Aughrim, Limerick, Blenheim and Ramillies, 1678-1717 (subsequently Stearne, Journal).

[2]Richard Cannon, *Historical Record of the Eighteenth, or The Royal Irish Regiment of Foot,* (London: Parker, Furnival & Parker, 1848), p. 2.

remained in comparative obscurity. Given the great time span of his service, and that he participated in many of the great events of his age, this represents a significant loss for historians.

This article provides an outline of Stearne's life and military career. It then examines the provenance of his journal and addresses an important question regarding its authenticity resulting from its similarities to the memoirs of his regimental colleagues. It reaches the tentative conclusion that, in its production, Stearne drew upon a journal kept by Parker during his military service. The article then assesses the place of the journal within the historiography of the period revealing that, despite its extensive use by two regimental historians, it has made little impact upon more recent scholarship. Finally, the article explores the potential of the journal to enrich or clarify our understanding of the historical narrative of the period and suggests how it could be utilised in wider historical analysis.

Stearne was born before 1658, most likely on his father's estate at Tullynally, County Westmeath, Ireland.[3] His father, also called Robert (d. 1658?), was a substantial land holder and a military man who saw service as a Captain in Lord Charles Fleetwood's Regiment of Foot. The Stearne family was wealthy and well-connected and produced several noteworthy figures, including John Stearne (1624-69), the founder of the Irish College of Physicians and John Stearne (1660-1745), Bishop of Clogher. Stearne also seems to have been a distant relative of the novelist, Laurence Sterne (1713-68). The two became acquainted in 1722 when Laurence's family came to stay with Robert at Mullingar and it seems probable that Robert provided the inspiration for the character 'Uncle Toby', a gentle old soldier obsessed with recounting his military anecdotes, in 'Tristram Shandy', Laurence's most famous work.[4]

Stearne joined the Army in 1678, becoming an ensign in John St Leger's company, one of the many independent companies of foot that comprised the Army in Ireland at that time. The following year he was promoted to Lieutenant and married Elizabeth Tuckey (1657-1739). The couple enjoyed a long marriage, but she bore him no children. In 1684 the independent companies were amalgamated into regiments and Stearne's joined the Earl of Granard's Regiment, a unit destined to enjoy a long and illustrious

[3]For details of Stearne's background see Richard Caulfield (ed.) *The Journal of the Very Rev. Rowland Davies, LL.D.: (and Afterwards Dean of Cork) from March 8, 1688-9 to September 29, 1690,* (London: Camden Society, 1857), p. 116. His family tree can be found in the *Dublin Quarterly of Medical Science*, XXXIX, February and May 1865, p. 448.

[4]Ian Campbell Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 28.

history as the Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland, the 18th Regiment of Foot and, finally, the Royal Irish Regiment.

Early in his career Stearne bore witness to the religious and political turmoil of the reign of King James II. His regiment was present in England during the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685 but took no part in the Sedgemoor campaign. On its return to Ireland, it was embroiled in the purge of Protestants from the Army in Ireland carried out by Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnell, during 1686-1687. Largely through the efforts of Lord Forbes, Granard's son and successor, the regiment, alone, managed to retain many Protestants. It returned to England in 1688 during the 'Glorious Revolution' and its Protestant core enabled it to become the only Irish regiment to survive the ensuing regime change.

Thereafter, Stearne saw extensive service in Ireland and continental Europe under King William III and the Duke of Marlborough. He was present in many of the most famous battles and sieges of the age including the Boyne (1690), Limerick (1690 & 91), Athlone (1691), Aughrim (1691), Namur (1695), Schellenburg (1704), Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706), Menin (1706), Oudenarde (1708), Lille (1708), Tournai (1709), and Bouchain (1711). However, as we shall see, a question mark hangs over his presence at Malplaquet (1709). Stearne enjoyed a steady, if unspectacular, career, becoming a Captain in 1689, Major in 1691, Lieutenant Colonel in 1695, Colonel in 1706 and Brigadier General in 1711. He was appointed Colonel of his regiment in 1712. While often referred to as a Brigadier General, he achieved the rank of Major General in 1730.[5] Stearne left his regiment in 1717 and, thereafter, served as Governor of Duncannon Fort (dates unknown) and as Governor of the Royal Military Hospital, Kilmainham, in Dublin, a post he held from 1728 until his death in November 1732.[6]

As to Stearne's character, alas little can be said. The art of the military memoir had not yet come of age in this period. In a similar vein to those written by his regimental colleagues, Stearne's journal has very much the feel of a general history of the age and contains comparatively little by way of personal anecdote or insights into his thoughts, feelings, and personality.[7] At most, his journal conveys the somewhat simplistic impression of an honest and down-to-earth soldier, who, like his comrades, held his commander, Marlborough, in the highest esteem. It would be tempting to build upon

[5]Caulfield, *Journal of Very Rev Rowland Davies*, p. 116 and NLI Ms. 11E, Copy of Confirmation of arms to Capt. Harman Richard Tighe, 5 July 1934.
[6]E S E Childers and Robert Stewart, *The Story of The Royal Hospital, Kilmainham,* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1921), p. 84.
[7]For a discussion of this see Harari, Yuval Noah, 'Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Middle Ages to the Late Modern Era', *War in History*, 14, 3 (2007), pp. 289-309.

this by drawing upon the literary portrait of 'Uncle Toby'. Certainly, the connection is there. The most obvious being that the two served at Namur in 1695. However, it seems certain that Lawrence also drew upon others, most notably a Colonel Thomas Palliser, in developing this character.[8] Therefore the degree of correlation between Toby and Stearne is currently a matter of speculation, although further research may prove fruitful here. A sketch of Stearne's character can be enlivened a little by evidence of his apparent interest in astrology and astronomy, found within one of his manuscripts, which must now be presumed to be lost.[9] To this we can only add the insights of his long-term comrade, Robert Parker, who commented on Stearne's courage, gallantry, and good fortune.[10] The latter quality is certainly worthy of emphasis. Unlike Parker (and indeed Toby), Stearne came through his long career entirely unscathed. Just how remarkable this career was is best summed up by Stearne himself:

> In the month of May, 1717… His Majesty was pleased to give me leave to resign my regiment to Colonel William Cosby. After having served six crowned heads of England, had been forty years to one company without being ever re-moved from it, having made 21 campaigns; having been in 7 field battles, 15 sieges, 7 grand attacks on counterscarps and breaches, 2 remarkable retreats, at passing 4 of the enemy's lines besides several other petty actions on parties; and through God's providence, never had one drop of blood drawn from me in all those actions.[11]

Before we can turn our attention to the content of the journal, we must first address some problems associated with its production and history. To begin with it is helpful to clear up a minor problem relating to the different versions that are in circulation. Alongside the original there are three known transcripts. One of these is also held at the National Library of Ireland and the other two are held by the UK's National Army Museum (NAM).[12] One of the NAM's is itself a transcript of the NLI's transcript, and

[8]Arthur H Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, (London: Methuen & Co, 1975), p. 2, p. 9, p. 18 & p. 190.
[9]Caulfield, *Journal of Very Rev Rowland Davies*, p. 116.
[10]Robert Parker, *Memoirs of the most Remarkable Military Transactions from the Year 1683, to 1718,* (London: S. Austen, 1747), p. 202.
[11]Stearne, Journal, p. 177-178.
[12]NLI MS 1583, A History of the 18th (The Royal Irish) Regiment of Foot [renamed and from 1881 to 1922 as The Royal Irish Regiment], by Brigadier-General Robert Stearne. The National Army Museum (hereinafter NAM) 1970-09-13, Journal of Brigadier General Robert Stearne of the Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland 1684-1717. NAM 1968-07-392, (a copy of NLI 1583), The Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland: Journal of Robert Stearne 1685-1717.

it is this pair which provide the most scope for confusion. This version is entitled 'The Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland' and so has often been classified as a regimental history rather than as a journal or memoir. It is unsigned and undated, but it contains introductory passages in which the author mentions that they were in possession of Stearne's journal and provides strong hints that it was produced during the nineteenth century and possibly after 1836.[13] The main body of the transcript strongly correlates with the 1726 original. However, it has been significantly altered, not only for style and legibility but also by the occasional alteration of factual details.[14]

These differences raise the question of whether this transcript was based upon the 1726 original or some other, now lost, version. This notion receives some support from a hint contained within Richard Cannon's history of the 18th Foot that an alternative version of Stearne's journal existed, and also by the broader question of why a later author would wish to make such alterations and thereby compromise the integrity of a historic text.[15] However, the provenance of both manuscripts strongly indicates that the NLI's transcript was indeed based upon the 1726 original, with the two being kept together for long periods. Therefore, it seems likely that embellishments and alterations in the transcript are entirely the later author's own.

Richard Caulfield mentions that a sale of Stearne's books was held in Cork in around 1830 and it is possible that the 1726 original was part of the sale, and that the purchaser was the author of the transcript. This is highly speculative but fits with the post-1836 production date. In any case, both were kept together in the collection of Sir William Betham and, following his death in 1853, were acquired by Sir Thomas Phillipps.[16] On the break-up of Phillipps's collection the transcript found its way into

[13]The transcript mentions the requirement for regiments to supply headquarters with an account of their service, which is possibly a reference to the official order of 1836 which underpinned the *Historical Records of the British Army* series produced by Richard Cannon.

[14]A notable example relates to the regiment's role at Ramillies in which Stearne's original comment that 'our regiment was greatly mauled during the attack on Ramillies village', has been changed to 'one brigade was greatly mauled…' in the later transcript.

[15]Cannon, *Historical Record of the Eighteenth Foot*, p2. Cannon describes the version of Stearne's manuscript that he used as covering the years up to 1719, rather than 1717, and as having been extended until 1759 by another officer of the regiment.

[16]A N L Munby, *The Formation of the Phillips Library from 1841 to 1871,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 74. Munby notes that both manuscripts were purchased by Sir Thomas Phillipps during the Betham sale in 1854. Both are inscribed with Phillipps MSS Nos: 13285 (1726 original) 13234 (first transcript). The first transcript also bears a Betham bookplate. Caulfield also discusses the provenance of the manuscripts, although the picture he presents is not clear and only partially tallies

the collection of Sam H Brooks of Slade House, Manchester. In 1895 Brooks copied it verbatim, creating the version that was acquired by the NAM in the 1960s via the Royal United Services Institution. The 1726 original was acquired by the Royal Irish Regiment. It was used extensively by the regimental historian, Lieutenant Colonel George Le Mesurier Gretton, who described it as being one of the regiment's most 'valued possessions'.[17] The NAM's other transcript was made at this time, by a Lieutenant Colonel A R Savile in 1911, as a gift to the men of the 2nd Battalion. It presumably came to the Museum as part of the regimental legacy it inherited from the Royal Irish following their disbandment in 1922. Saville also took the liberty of making minor edits and revisions for style and legibility although refrained from altering factual details. It is unclear when the 1726 original and the first transcript came into the collection of the NLI, but it is likely that they were acquired at different times as they have been catalogued on different systems.[18]

Beyond the problems surrounding the different versions of Stearne's journal and their provenance, there is another, more serious, difficulty concerning its authenticity that must be addressed. In the introduction to his edited volume of the memoirs of Robert Parker and the Comte de Mérode-Westerloo, David Chandler discussed a problem that was first identified by Christopher Atkinson and then touched on by Winston Churchill regarding the marked resemblance between the memoirs of Richard Kane and Robert Parker.[19] Both contain similar passages and phrases that are far too numerous to be coincidental and this raises the question of which of the two should be regarded as truly authentic.

In his analysis, Chandler dismissed the possibility that either man can be accused of plagiarism for the sake of literary fame. Both books were written for private use and were only published posthumously. He then outlined the case that could be put forward in support of the originality of each. In Kane's favour are his seniority in rank and the fact that his book appeared slightly before Parker's (1745 as opposed to 1746), which could leave open the possibility that Parker's son, who oversaw the publication

---

with what is known from Munby; see Caulfield, *Journal of Very Rev Rowland Davies*, p. 29.

[17]George Le Mesurier Gretton, *The Campaigns and History of the Royal Irish Regiment, From 1684 to 1902,* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons), p. 425.

[18]An enquiry submitted by this author to NLI 29 March 2021 received the reply that the NLI was unlikely to hold any provenance information about the manuscripts.

[19]Christopher Thomas Atkinson, *Marlborough and the Rise of the British Army*, (London: G P Putnam's Sons, 1921), p. ix; Winston Churchill, *Marlborough His Life and Times,* (London: George Harrap, 1947), book one, p. 489; David Chandler, ed, *Military Memoirs: Robert Parker and Comte de Mérode-Westerloo: The Marlborough Wars,* (London: Longmans, 1968), pp. xv-xviii.

of his father's book, plagiarised Kane's book as soon as it appeared to augment his father's account. In support of Parker's claim, it can be asserted that his book contains far more original material than Kane's and that his alone contains an account of how it came to be written, with Parker describing how it was based upon a journal that he kept from 1689.[20]

Chandler's primary conclusion is that it is impossible to get to the bottom of what has happened. Nonetheless, he quite rightly gives the idea that Kane's seniority makes his claim the stronger short shrift. Rank or social status can have no bearing upon the question of who is the original author. He is also surely correct in dismissing the argument that the earlier publication of Kane's book also lends weight to its claim to originality, on the basis that the style of Parker's book provides no evidence of it being a hotchpotch of two works hastily brought together by Parker's son. Indeed, the curious proximity of the publication dates could be better explained by Parker's son reacting to what he saw as an act of plagiarism on the part of Kane or his publishers and realising that he needed to move fast to establish his father's work in the public sphere. This is perhaps supported by the curiously defensive line on the title page of the second edition of Kane's work (published 1747), which reads 'the book was copied from a manuscript in General Kane's possession which can easily be made to appear when required', does this provide a hint that the book had been subject to a challenge by Parker's son?[21]

Where Chandler's analysis begins to go awry is in his failure to give due weight to the evidence in support of Parker's claim to originality. The whole tenor of his argument in fact leads this way and, to it, we can add the broader point that Parker's work has the greater feeling of integrity with a down-to-earth first-person style that would make the revelation that it was a fraud far more disconcerting than that of Kane's. Instead, Chandler lends his tentative support to a theory postulated by Winston Churchill, which is that both men had access to a common source, a kind of regimental diary, and that this best accounts for their similarities.

Chandler's reluctance to reach a firm decision and attendant adoption of this somewhat charitable theory seems to have been influenced by an unwillingness to impugn the reputations of either man. Yet this is a dilemma that cannot be avoided. While Parker must have used additional sources to fill gaps, such as the history of his regiment prior to his joining it, he makes no mention of using such a shared diary.

[20]Parker *Memoirs* p. 1-2.

[21]Chandler suggests that Parker's son held back publication until the 1745 death of the Duke of Ormonde, of whom Parker had been critical, this seems plausible, but the proximity of publication dates between Parker's and Kane's books also suggests a connection of some sort. Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p. 10.

Given the extensive use that he would have to had made of such a document to account for the similarity between his and Kane's works, any suggestion that he did constitutes a serious attack upon the claim that his book was based upon his own journal.

This mystery is given another layer when Stearne's journal is added to the equation. Atkinson also appreciated that Millner, Stearne, Parker and Kane tended to report the same things.[22] However, he did not discuss this further, nor did he give a reference for the source that he used for Stearne. Seemingly unaware of Atkinson's observation, Chandler absolved both Stearne and Millner of being embroiled in this difficulty. While in Millner's case this assertion may stand up to scrutiny, it was a somewhat rash judgment regarding Stearne because, as Chandler admitted, he had not succeeded in identifying the whereabouts of Stearne's manuscript and was basing his conclusion solely upon the extracts that he had found in Cannon's regimental history.

In fact, a close comparison does reveal that Stearne's memoir has significant similarities with both Parker's and Kane's. This, combined with the shortcomings identified in Chandler's analysis, compels us to re-open this question afresh. A first conclusion we can draw is that this similarity quashes any lingering doubts as to whether Parker's son plagiarised Kane in 1745 – clearly the problem goes back further than this. We should also disregard any judgment in favour of Stearne on the basis that his journal exists in the original and can be dated to 1726. Just because the original works of the other two have not survived does not mean that one or both do not predate Stearne's. Moreover, another question mark hangs over Stearne's journal. Much of his account of the battle of Malplaquet looks to have been copied from Millner's journal.[23] Perhaps this makes Stearne's the least likely of the three to be the original but, in his defence, it can be asserted that the similarities between his and Parker's and Kane's are far less pronounced. Indeed, if Stearne is guilty of plagiarism it would certainly seem that he made a considerable effort to rework the text and insert original material. Nonetheless, his journal remains peppered with tell-tale phrases and often follows the same broad narrative structure as the other two.

Alternatively, the similarities between the three could be said to support the regimental diary theory. It would surely make more sense that they all had access to

[22]Christopher Thomas Atkinson, 'Marlborough's Sieges', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 52, (1934), p. 201.

[23]John Millner, *A compendious journal of all the marches, famous battles, sieges, and other ... begun A.D. 1701, and ended in 1712*, (London: William Bower, 1733), p. 274-275, compare with Stearne, *Journal* p. 135. To have copied Millner, Stearne must have seen his book before it was published. The possibility that Millner copied Stearne cannot be entirely ruled out, but this would be a variance the overall integrity of Millner's work.

a common document than to suggest that they copied each other in turn. However, we have already seen that the idea that this was a regimental diary seems improbable. In addition to the attack that this theory makes upon Parker's own specific claim to originality, we may also question the plausibility of the existence of such a document on the basis that, as noted earlier, all their works possess rather more the character of general histories. Indeed, they are often frustratingly lacking in regimental details, particularly those relating to the regiment's role in major battles. More broadly, there is nothing in any of the three works to indicate the existence of such a diary and so it must remain pure speculation. One thing we can say is that the common source is likely to be a document written during the wars themselves. Stearne, as we have seen, returned to Ireland and remained there until his death. Parker's later life is something of a mystery, but it also seems likely that he too returned to Ireland and settled in Cork. However, in 1710 Kane left the regiment, first taking command of a regiment of his own and then, in 1712, being posted to Minorca, where he served as Lieutenant Governor, and then Governor until his death in 1736. His biographer makes no mention of his ever returning to Ireland in this period. Considering this, the document which formed the basis of his book must, in all probability, have been created before the period 1710-12 for it to have been shared between the three.[24]

The only document that fits the bill as a common source is Parker's journal. This is the only record that we know of which was created at the time. Parker also indicates that he shared it with his friends, and we should certainly include both Stearne and Kane, his long-standing comrades in arms, amongst them.[25] This speaks to a wider point, that it is also reasonable to suggest that all three men often reminisced together and may even have deliberately picked each other's brains on occasion. While any answer to this question must remain tentative and speculative, a natural process of oral cross-fertilisation underpinned by Parker's journal as a core shared narrative document seems the most plausible and satisfactory explanation. However, as a final note on this problem, emphasis must also be placed upon the differences between them. The most obvious examples include details such as the size of armies and sub-units and the casualties incurred in various battles, where they often diverge. This indicates that whatever collaboration took place between them was informal, that they each used additional sources, and that they ultimately worked alone.

It remains for us to clarify how Stearne's journal has been used by historians and then to ask what, if any, new information does it contain? Through its extensive use in the

[24]Bruce Laurie, *The Life of Richard Kane: Britain's First Lieutenant-Governor of Minorca,* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), p. 111.
[25]Parker, *Memoirs*, p. 2. See also The British Library (hereinafter BL) Add MS 23642, Miscellaneous papers and correspondence of Lord Trawly; 1679-1759; No. 5. [Captain] Rob[ert] Parker to Colonel; Dublin, 13 Sept. 1708, f. 35.

works of Cannon and Gretton, Stearne's journal certainly has a foothold in the historiography. This facilitated its limited exploitation by Chandler and possibly also by Atkinson. Beyond this, Stearne has been entirely missing from all other mainstream histories. His absence is particularly glaring in Winston Churchill's multi-volume history of his ancestor, Marlborough, particularly as Churchill lauded Stearne's three Royal Irish comrades, commenting that, without them, 'it would be difficult to paint a lively picture of these memorable campaigns'.[26] Perhaps even more striking is the fact that no trace of Stearne's journal can be found in the much more recent works of James Falkner, who would have been far better placed to encounter or track it down than Churchill.[27] A few mentions of Stearne can be found in Brigadier A E C Bredin's 'A History of the Irish Soldier' although, as a broad overview of the subject, this work adds little if anything to the scholarship of this period. [28] It seems that the only major historians of recent years to have made use of Stearne are John Childs and David Blackmore. Childs' use is negligible and constitutes only a couple of brief references, one in relation to the purges of Tyrconnell and the other regarding the Williamite War in Ireland. [29] Blackmore lists Stearne amongst the sources used for his book 'Destructive and Formidable', which charts the development of British Army musketry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here Blackmore posits the highly plausible theory that the Royal Regiment of Ireland played a crucial role in the development of the cutting-edge 'platoon fire' tactics employed by Marlborough's' army. But while Blackmore credits Parker, Kane and General Ingoldsby (the Regimental Colonel) for this accomplishment, Stearne is, again, conspicuous by his absence. This can be explained by Stearne having little to say on this subject but, as the regiment's commanding officer, he must have also played a prominent role.[30]

If not virgin territory, Stearne's journal certainly constitutes an underused source. Considering this, we should now turn to our final question and enquire what, if anything, it can add to our understanding of this period? Given that the narrative of these wars is a well-trodden historical path, and that the journal, as we have seen, is neither wholly original nor wholly unknown, we should not expect the information that it contains to be of a revelatory character. An analysis of Stearne's work will thereby be more a question of panning for nuggets of information which in small and

[26]Churchill, *Marlborough*, 1947 edition, book 1, p. 490.
[27]Stearne's absence is particularly notable in Falkner's, *Marlborough's Wars: Eyewitness Accounts,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2005).
[28]A E C Bredin, A History of the Irish Soldier, (Belfast: Century Books, 1987).
[29]John Childs, *The Army, James II and the Glorious Revolution*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 61 and *General Percy Kirke and the later Stuart Army,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) p. 184.
[30]David Blackmore, *Destructive and Formidable: British Infantry Firepower 1642-1765,* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2014), pp. 103-104.

subtle ways may deepen and enrich our understanding. Space here allows for the citing of only a few examples, but these should help to lay the groundwork for further research.

The Siege of Athlone in June 1691, during the Irish War of 1689-91, provides a good starting point. Athlone formed a key anchor point in the Jacobites' defensive line along the River Shannon, to which they had fallen back following their defeat on the Boyne. The early phase of the siege went badly for the Williamites. They had been repeatedly checked in their attempts to storm the fortified town on the western bank and found themselves facing a crisis when a major assault planned for the 29 June had to be aborted when it became clear it could not be attempted without the element of surprise. The two most detailed histories of the siege describe how the Williamite's sought to capitalised on the false sense of security to which the Jacobite's succumbed in the wake of their success in having seen off this Williamite attack through a mere show of force.[31] To do so, the Williamites immediately prepared a fresh attack under the cover of a deception plan. They first sought to give the impression that they were about to draw off their army and attempt a crossing elsewhere. At the same time, they kept their assault force in readiness for an attack to be mounted the following day during the changing of the Jacobite guard. To ensure secrecy, guards were posted to the hills nearby to ensure that local people would not be able to view what was really happening and so report it to the Jacobites. The Williamite ruse was a complete success, enabling them to cross the river and storm the town with minimal opposition.

Stearne contributes to this story by describing how a Williamite soldier had gone over to the enemy and reported to their commander, the Marquess St Ruth, that the Williamites were indeed about to withdraw, thereby further confirming them in their sense of security.[32] Stearne was unable to say whether the man was a deserter, perhaps hoping to glean a reward from the Jacobites, or a spy deliberately despatched to plant false information. Both are plausible. The first correlates with the wider deception that the Williamites were weaving and the second with a pattern of deserters from both sides bringing news across the river to their erstwhile enemies. Stearne's information certainly should not be accepted without question. It is uncorroborated by any other source, and this must place a question mark over its veracity. Indeed, as this is one of several stories about the role of spies and deserters relating to the siege, one possibility is that Stearne was either misinformed or has misremembered. That said, Stearne would have no motive to invent it and his uncertainty over the soldier's

[31]Diarmuid Murtagh, 'The Siege of Athlone', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 83, 1, (1953), pp. 58-81 and Harman Murtagh, *The Sieges of Athlone 1690 and 1691,* (Athlone: Old Athlone Society, 1973).

[32]Stearne, Journal, p. 15.

motives gives the story an added ring of truth.[33] If accurate, he has provided us with a key piece of information that helps us to better understand the outcome of this important siege, which, in unlocking the Jacobite's position on the Shannon, proved to be the real turning point of the war. In any case, this information certainly needs to be incorporated into any fresh appraisal of the siege.

A second example concerns the opening moves of the War of the Spanish Succession undertaken to the south of Nijmegen in the Low Countries in June 1702. Here an Allied force commanded by the Earl of Athlone, which included a small British contingent, nearly fell victim to a double envelopment by a French force. It only escaped after a frantic march, punctuated by desperate rear-guard fighting. Stearne, again, adds a crucial detail to this story, recording that, had the French force on the allied right not stopped to pillage the Allied baggage train, they would certainly have been able to complete the encirclement.[34] This time a deeper dive into the primary sources does yield up a corroboration of this information, in an account by Marlborough's Secretary, Adam de Cardonnel.[35] While useful, this should not be taken as the end of the debate. In particular, further corroboration should be sought from French sources.[36] The importance of unpicking this story lies in the fact that Stearne and other contemporary chroniclers are vocal in proclaiming its profound significance.[37] The capture or destruction of Athlone's force would have left the Netherlands exposed to invasion, severely compromising the strategic position of the Allies. Moreover, the loss of the small British contingent would have proved a heavy blow to Marlborough's fledgling army. While more work remains to be done, once again, it seems that we have Stearne to thank for enriching our understanding of an important event, a remarkable escape from the jaws of a defeat that could have seriously altered the course of the war at its very outset.

---

[33]Stearne's story is particularly notable for its absence in George Story's, *An Impartial History of the Wars in Ireland...*', (London: Richard Chiswell, 1693), pp 105-107.

[34]Stearne, Journal, p. 46.

[35]BL Add MS 28918, Vol II. 14 March, 1701/2 -13 June, 1705. Netherlands, United Provinces: Letters from A Cardonnel to J Ellis, from the seat of war in…, letter by Adam de Cardonnel, from Nijmegen, June 1702, ff. 13.

[36]For example, no mention of the baggage is found within one of the most detailed French histories, which instead suggests that difficult terrain accounts for the French delay see J J G Pelet and F E de Le Vault, *Mémoires Militaires Relatifs a la Guerre de la Succession D'Espagne Sous Louis XIV,* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1836), tome 2, pp. 46-47.

[37]Millner, *Journal*, p 17 and Parker, *Memoirs*, p 76 (although this is one of the many phrases that he shares with Stearne) and Adam de Cardonnel, in letter referenced above.

In addition to helping to deepen our understanding of some significant points of campaign narrative, Stearne's journal can also be used to illuminate some contentious points of regimental history. By far the most well-known problem of this type concerns the role of the Royal Irish at Malplaquet. This battle is notorious for being Marlborough's bloodiest. Here his army came up against a determined French force in a well-entrenched position between two patches of woodland. In one of their many shared phrases, Parker, Kane and Stearne, all describe this battle as being the most desperate and bloody in living memory. This engagement also holds a special status as the most celebrated story found in Parker's book and is the only detailed account of the regiment in battle to be found in any of the works of the four Royal Irish chroniclers.

Parker begins by indicating that the regiment formed part of Lieutenant General Withers' force. This was the last to depart from the recently concluded siege of Tournai, and so was late to arrive in the battle area. Due to their late arrival Parker relates that they had to draw up by themselves on the right of the whole army opposite the wood of Sart (or Taisnières). He then describes how they advanced into the wood until they came across a small clearing. Here, in a bizarre twist of fate, they encountered their Jacobite counterpart, a regiment loyal to the exiled King James, which was likewise styled the 'Royal Regiment of Ireland'. Also known as Colonel Dorington's Regiment, this unit was one component of the Irish Brigade – the famous Irish soldiers in exile, known as the 'Wild Geese', who were then in the service of France. In a memorable passage Parker describes how his regiment bested its Jacobite sister unit using their superior 'platoon fire' system; tactics which they seem to have played a key role in perfecting.[38]

This account is widely acknowledged to be of considerable historical significance. Not only does it relate a remarkable and unique all-Ireland clash, but it also provides a key piece of evidence for the tactical superiority that underpinned the success of Marlborough's army in this period. However, while oft quoted, this account is highly problematic. A serious challenge to its veracity was made by John O'Callaghan, a nineteenth century historian of the Irish Brigade.[39] O'Callaghan questioned it on the basis that other evidence revealed Dorington's men to have been engaged on the opposite edge of the Wood of Sart, the centre-left of the French line, where they suffered severe losses engaging Allied forces commanded by Schullenberg and

[38]Parker, *Memoirs,* pp. 163-165.
[39]John O'Callaghan, *History of the Irish Brigades in the Service of France*…, (Glasgow: R & T Washbourne, 1869), pp. 267-268

Lottum.[40] O'Callaghan backed up his argument by pointing out that Parker's account was uncorroborated by either Kane or Millner. To this we can add that the story is further undermined by the fact that Parker may not have been present at Malplaquet. Earlier in his book he described how he had been posted to Ireland in a training role in the summer of 1708 and that he held this position for two years. If so, he would only have returned sometime in the middle of 1710 and his account of Malplaquet must be second hand.[41]

However, this question has been considered afresh by several historians and there is also some additional evidence that can be brought to bear upon it, including, of course, that of Stearne. A first problem to be addressed is the failure of his two colleagues to mention this incident and the credibility of Parker as a witness. Both Padraig Lenihan and David Chandler give credence to Parker's account and speculate on why Kane and Millner would choose to leave this incident out of their books.[42] Lenihan's contention that such details do not fit with their works, because they were written as general histories, reads convincingly. However, Chandler's contention that Parker alone had a special interest in tactics is suspect regarding Kane, who wrote a well-known book on the subject.[43] Beyond this, an argument can be put forward that Parker was in fact present at Malplaquet. Not only does his account have the feel of a first-person narrative but we also know from a letter he wrote to Stearne that he was lobbying to return to the regiment as early as the autumn of 1708 and may have been successful in doing so in time for the battle.[44] Moreover, Parker does not provide a specific mention of when he returned to the field army from Ireland and this leaves open the possibility that he simply made an error when writing his memoir. Finally, and of most significance, is the fact that Parker is listed on Charles Dalton's 'Malplaquet Roll'.[45] If Parker was present at Malplaquet the accuracy of his account is greatly enhanced. Even if he wasn't, it would be difficult to explain why he would invent such a story although, if he did receive it second hand, this may help to explain why it fits poorly with what else we know.

---

[40]For an example of primary source that corroborates this see Daniel Penant, 'A French Account of the Battle of Malplaquet', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research,* 97, 390 (2019), pp. 222-228.

[41]Parker, *Memoirs*, p. 148

[42]Padraig Lenihan, 'The 'Irish Brigade' 1690-1715', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr*, 31 (2016). p 70; David Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (Tunbridge Wells: Spellmount, 1989), p. 262.

[43]Richard Kane, *A New System of Military Discipline*… published in the same volume as *Campaigns of King William and Queen Anne.*

[44]BL Add MS 23642, Parker's letter to Stearne, September 1708.

[45]Charles Dalton, *English Army Lists and Commission Registers, 1661-1714, vol VI 1707-1714,* (London: Francis Edward, 1960 reprint), p. 355.

Here we can bring in Stearne, for his account of the battle clearly backs Parker up.[46] While he provides less detail than his comrade, he embellishes the tale with the derisive comment that following their defeat 'our brother harpers scowered [sic] off as fast as their heels could carry them.'[47] However, while a useful corroboration, it is not quite as emphatic as it would first seem. As mentioned earlier, it is by no means certain that Stearne was himself present at Malplaquet. Unlike both Parker and Kane, he is not listed on Dalton's roll, and this is corroborated by Parker who states that Kane commanded the regiment that day. Moreover, as also noted, Stearne seemingly lifted much of his account of this battle from Millner's journal and may well have used Parker as a source for other elements, including the encounter with Dorington's unit. He also makes a curious error regarding the timing of the opening of the battle, giving it as 10 instead of 8 in the morning. All of this adds weight to an argument that he was not there. Against this it can be asserted that he includes details not found in his colleagues' books and that both Cannon and Gretton both credit Stearne as being present, although they provide no source reference.[48] In addition, Stearne makes no explicit statement to the effect that he was not present, and, in the closing passage of his journal, he mentions that took part in 'seven field battles'. Mathematically speaking, this strongly suggests that he was present at Malplaquet, or at least that he claimed to be. Once more we must concede that the jury is out on this question but, again, Stearne would have no reason to concoct or repeat this story without believing it to be true and so, in either case, his substantiation of Parker carries significant weight.

Despite the continuing grounds for doubt, it is reasonable to conclude that we should have confidence in the essence of Parker's story, although some of the details may still be open to question. This brings us to the second, and more intractable, problem which concerns the discrepancy in the position of the two units involved. Winston Churchill, David Chandler and Padraig Lenihan have all posited different theories to explain it.[49] Churchill suggests that the British regiment simply got lost and wandered through the forest towards the noise of the fighting and thereby blundered into their namesake enemy. A minor problem with this theory is the great distance – several miles - that the British unit had to travel to reach this point. More seriously, it doesn't overcome the problem of Parker's depiction of an isolated skirmish seemingly being

[46]Both Cannon and Gretton mention Steane's corroboration of Parker but only briefly and unsatisfactorily, and this has not been picked up by later historians. See Cannon, *Historical Record of the 18th Foot,* p. 37, and Gretton, *The Campaigns and History of the Royal Irish Regiment,* p. 59.

[47]Stearne, Journal p. 136.

[48]Cannon, *Historical Record of the 18th Foot,* p. 86, and Gretton, *The Campaigns and History of the Royal Irish Regiment*, p. 425.

[49]Lenihan, 'The Irish Brigade 1690-1715', p. 70; Churchill, *Marlborough His Life and Times*, (London: The Folio Society, 1991), vol 4, p. 118; Chandler, *Marlborough,* p. 262.

fought out in the bloody epicentre of the battlefield. Lenihan, by contrast, suggests that it was Dorington's which moved later in the battle. While this would solve both problems, in making this assertion Lenihan must have been unaware of the earlier analysis undertaken by Churchill and Chandler. Both contend that the account of General St Hilaire makes it near-certain that the Irish Brigade did not move from its position on the French centre-left, having moved to this position from the centre at some point between 11 and 12 o'clock.

It is Chandler who offers up the most detailed analysis and the most intriguing theory to resolve matters. He suggests that the British regiment was detached from Withers' force and joined that of Lieutenant General Lottum and so was directly employed in the area in which Dorington's was posted. However, this theory presents some serious problems. To begin with, Chandler reads Parker's statement that the regiment drew up on the right of the entire army to mean the right of the British contingent only. This is far from satisfactory. In addition, the problem of the discrepancy in the nature of the fighting is made far worse if we accept Chandler's theory. Churchill's theory at least tallies with Parker's depiction of their isolated advance into the woods, even if the encounter at the end feels somewhat incongruous. However, if part of Lottum's force, the Royal Irish would have been in the thick of the fighting – advancing as part of a thick wedge of troops into the most desperate and hotly contested area of the battlefield, and this clearly jars badly with Parker's account. Much more serious, however, is that Chandler seems to have committed a grievous error in presenting his evidence. He contends that Corporal Matthew Bishop, an eye-witness who fought with Lottum's force, states that the 18th Regiment of Foot were present in his brigade. However, Bishop makes no such statement.[50] How Chandler has made such an error is difficult to understand, especially as this is the linchpin of his argument. The other three sources that he also cites in support are far flimsier. The first of these, Lieutenant General Wackerbarth's eye-witness statement concerning the position of Withers' force is problematic and was also used by Churchill to uphold his theory. The other two, John Fortescue's regimental list in his 'History of the British Army', and Kenneth Moir's 'Corporal Bishop S'En Va-T-En Guerre with my Lord Marlborough' are only unreferenced secondary sources.

Stearne can, once again, be brought to bear upon this matter. Here his evidence delivers a further critical blow to Chandler's theory. To begin with he provides a precious piece of information which enables us to build upon Parker's statement that they arrived late for the battle. Unlike the other units of Withers' force, who had come up from Tournai the evening before the battle, Stearne mentions that the Royal

[50]Chandler references Bishop's *The Life and Adventures of Matthew Bishop*, (London: J Brindley, 1744), p. 207. However, no such reference to the Royal Irish (18th Regiment of Foot) can be found here or elsewhere in this book.

Irish did not arrive until the morning of the battle. This alone makes it highly unlikely that it had time to march the additional distance required to join Lottum's force.[51] He then gives two separate snippets of information on the regiment's location in the battle line. The first of these states that they drew up 'on the right of our Dragoons close by the wood of Sart'. He then corroborates Parker by stating that the regiment was posted on 'the right of the whole army behind the wood of Sart'. The Dragoons mentioned can only be the 10 squadrons from Withers' force under the command of General Miklau. These were posted on extreme right of the Allied line and were tasked with advancing through the wood of Sart to mount a special flanking attack on the French left. The Royal Irish being deployed to the right of this force would correspond with both Parker and Stearne's assertion that they were indeed on the right of the entire army.

Stearne's evidence may be compromised by the question mark over his presence at Malplaquet. Moreover, it does not help us to overcome the problem of the distance his regiment had to travel to engage Dorington's, nor the dissonance resulting from the depiction of an isolated battle seemingly taking place in an area where the fighting was fiercest. However, it provides a strong corroboration that this action did indeed take place and serves to uphold the theory posited by Churchill that the Royal Irish advanced in isolation right through the forest and by chance came across their Jacobite equivalent, making this by far the most satisfactory explanation that we have of this famous action.

Despite the question mark over its authenticity, Stearne's journal must certainly be ranked amongst the most important soldier memoirs of this period. It contains a wealth of detail and can shed light on many of the great events to which he bore witness. As we have seen, it can be used to deepen our understanding of the narrative of events and settle points of long-running dispute. There is also the intriguing literary connection to the character 'Uncle Toby', which may justify further exploration. To these we can add two other areas of potential utility. Although it has a rather dry character the journal can, on occasion, be used to help us paint a more vivid picture of the warfare of the time. A notable example is Stearne's account of the grim subterranean warfare of mine and counter-mine that characterised the bitter and protracted Siege of Tournai in 1709. Secondly, and by contrast, it can be brought to bear on many matters of factual detail. It should certainly be consulted on questions concerning the times and dates of events, the size and composition of armies and the extent of battle casualties. A notable example regarding the latter is the figure of 2,000 that Stearne gives for the Williamite losses in killed and wounded at the Boyne, which

[51]See Chandler's comments on Withers' late deployment, *Marlborough*, p. 257

is more than double the best current estimate.[52] While this, and other examples, should be treated with caution, it seems certain that Stearne's journal can be mined to fill gaps or contribute to debates on many such problems. For these reasons, the journal will surely prove to be an invaluable resource for historians for many years to come and its full integration into the mainstream historiography is long overdue.

[52]See, Padraig Lenihan, *1690, The Battle of the Boyne,* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), pp. 234-238.