

Captain John Deane: Mercenary, Diplomat, and Spy

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Le Capitaine John Deane est reconnu pour sa participation à un incident de cannibalisme après le naufrage du navire qu'il commandait sur les côtes de la Nouvelle Angleterre en 1710. Cet article s'adresse à sa carrière ultérieure à peine moins remarquable. Il a participé à de nombreux combats en tant que capitaine dans la marine russe, a servi en tant qu'espion pour le gouvernement britannique et de consul britannique à Ostende en Flandre à une époque de grande tension diplomatique dans ce centre important de commerce international.

In 1710 the trading vessel *Nottingham Galley* set out from London bound for Boston on a perilous late season voyage. Before making port, it encountered severe storms and struck Boon Island, a desolate rock off the Maine coast. While all hands got ashore, the ship and cargo were lost. Devoid of food, shelter, and fire the crew suffered terribly and they were finally forced to cannibalize a dead man just before being rescued. In his account of the disaster, Captain John Deane later wrote, "We were now reduced to the most deplorable and melancholy circumstances imaginable . . . no fire, and the weather extreme cold, our small stock of cheese spent, and nothing to support our feeble bodies." Faced with starvation, with no hope of relief, they reached what he described as "the last extremity . . . to eat the dead for support." The Captain recalled, "After discussing the lawfulness and sinfulness of our situation, [we] were obliged to submit to our craving appetites." Captain Deane dressed the body, disposing of those parts that distinguished it as human, and renamed it beef. The enterprise was all the more grisly because there was no fire.¹

After twenty-four days the crew of the ill-starred ship was rescued and taken to Portsmouth, New Hampshire where the mate, Christopher Langman and two others made depositions critical of Captain Deane's conduct. Later in England, Deane and Langman published contradictory accounts of the voyage and the shipwreck, which created a

¹ "A Narrative of the Sufferings, Preservation and Deliverance of Capt. John Deane and Company in the Nottingham Galley of London, cast away on Boon-Island, near New England, December 11, 1710," in Kenneth Roberts, *Boon Island*, including *Contemporary Accounts of the Wreck of the Nottingham Galley*, Jack Bales and Richard Warner, eds. (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1996), pp. 29, 30, 34.

sensation.² With his reputation in jeopardy, Deane welcomed an opportunity to enter Russian naval service, where he disappeared for eleven years. In a new career in a new country, Deane distinguished himself as a combat officer and, more important for posterity, he chronicled the rise of the Russian Baltic fleet in the era of Peter the Great. When he entered the Tsar's service in 1712, Peter had just consolidated his conquest of Livonia after his great victory over Sweden at Poltava.³ To protect his new port at St. Petersburg and to carry the war to Sweden, in Finland, and on the Baltic, he recognized the need for a deep-water fleet and launched a frantic effort to build ships, to purchase others abroad, and to man them with qualified officers.

On another harrowing late season voyage in 1714, Deane brought a fifty-two gun man-of-war from Archangel to the Baltic. Half of the crew perished on the winter passage around the North Cape. The next year Deane was promoted to captain and placed in command of the thirty-two-gun frigate *Samson*, in which he earned a reputation as a successful and daring combat commander. By 1719 he had captured twenty prizes as a commerce raider in the Reval squadron and won the admiration and patronage of Admiral Apraxin, the head of the Russian Admiralty.⁴

In 1717, the *Samson* took two Swedish merchantmen in the Gulf of Danzig. While dividing the crew, an English frigate and a Dutch man-of-war appeared and demanded the release of the vessels. Out-manned and out-gunned, Deane was compelled to surrender the prizes. The incident did not provoke immediate judicial inquiry. Indeed, the following year he was promoted to first rank captain. However, two years later he was called to account for the Gulf of Danzig incident and was falsely accused of taking a large bribe for yielding the prizes. Though Deane and eleven officers and under-officers of the *Samson* testified that he had not served his own interests, he was found guilty. He was dismissed from service and was sentenced to a year in prison, which the Tsar himself reduced to demotion to lieutenant and assignment to timber transport in remote Kazan. Like many other officers of foreign origin, Captain Deane was the victim of the jealousy of Russians who coveted rank and command. During the trial, Admiral Apraxin attempted to assist Deane by granting him a passport "releasing him from service at his own request

² The Langman and Deane accounts are both reprinted in *Boon Island*, with an examination of numerous reprinted accounts by Richard H. Warner, "Captain John Deane and the Wreck of the Nottingham Galley," pp. 3-21. This first appeared under the same title in *The New England Quarterly* 48, no 1 (March 1995), pp. 106-117.

³ Deane's record of service is in F. Veselago, ed., *Obshchii morskoi spisok* [(General Naval List], (St. Petersburg, 1885), vol. I, pp. 131-132.

⁴ Russkii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv voenno-morskogo flota (The Russian Governmental Archive of the Navy) St. Petersburg, RGAVMF, fund no. 233 comprise the papers of Count Apraxin, head of the Admiralty. There is much unpublished material on Deane's career. Sixty-six letters, orders and dispatches relating to Deane have also been published in F. M. Elagin, *Materialy dlia istoriia Russkago flota* [Materials for the History of the Russian Fleet] (St. Petersburg, 1887), vol. I. For more details and specific references see my "Captain John Deane; Mercenary, Diplomat, and Spy," in *People of the Sea*, Lewis Fischer and Walter Minchinton, eds. (St. Johns, Newfoundland: International Maritime History Association, 1992), pp. 157-173.

to return to his homeland." He never got the opportunity to use it, but a year later after the peace of Nystadt, he was formally dismissed from service and expelled from the country with the ominous warning that he should "never return to Russia." Curiously, Apraxin interceded again with a letter and passport that described him as "Captain Deane." This last act of generosity permitted him to make an honorable departure with the rank that he used for the rest of his life.⁵

When Deane reached England he was penniless, but he was rich in the knowledge of the Tsar's naval affairs, which he detailed in a manuscript entitled "A History of the Russian Fleet during the Reign of Peter the Great."⁶ He used this account to promote himself in powerful political circles and caught the attention of the prime minister, Robert Walpole and Charles Townshend, secretary of state for the Northern Department. Both were haunted by the spectre of a European-wide, Jacobite conspiracy and after the recall of their ambassador in 1722, they felt particularly deficient in intelligence from Russia. Deane was appointed commercial consul at St. Petersburg, which Townshend described as "a colour, [for] his true business is to transmit hither what intelligence he may be able to get for His Majesty's service." The captain had entered a new career as a spy and returned to the Russian capital in 1725.⁷

Captain Deane's spy mission lasted only sixteen days before he was expelled, but it yielded two illuminating reports. The first, "An Account of Affairs in Russia, June-July 1725," was a detailed analysis of the political situation after the death of Tsar Peter. The second, "The Present State of the Maritime Power of Russia," was an intelligence report on the standing of the Baltic fleet. Deane felt that he had failed because his superiors were most interested in the activities of Russian Jacobite émigrés and sympathizers. He was convinced that they were responsible for his failure to receive accreditation and wrote Townshend that "my enemies are gathering to blacken my name . . . [and] you will think me a monster." He feared that he had lost his opportunity to enter government service, but he had succeeded better than he knew.⁸

⁵ All materials relating to the incident in the Gulf of Danzig and Captain Deane's trial are located in RGAVMF, fund 1720/60/II/702 *Samson* Log; RGAVMF, no. 212/1720/60/11. These include: "Testimony of the Officers and Men of the *Samson*, 8 January 1720"; "Reason why I went aboard the Dutch Man-of War"; "Admiral Siever's Examination of Captain John Deane" and "The Final Statement of Captain John Deane at his Court Martial, 9 July 1720."

⁶ *A History of the Russian Fleet during the Reign of Peter the Great by a Contemporary Englishman, 1724*, Admiral Cyprian A. G. Bridge, ed., Navy Records Society Publications, vol. 15 (London, Navy Records Society, 1899). The original manuscript is located in the collection of the London School of Slavonic Studies. Also see: "The Authorship of the History of the Russian Fleet under Peter the Great," *Mariner's Mirror* vol. 20 (July 1934), pp. 333-336.

⁷ The correspondence dealing with Deane's employment are located at Kew, United Kingdom, The National Archives, State Papers (hereafter TNA SP) 43/91, pp. 239-240 and pp. 387-388, Tilson to Townshend, 17 July 1725 and Deane to Townshend, 26 May 1725. This quotation is from Townshend to Points, 7 July 1725, TNA SP 95/37, pp. 211-212.

⁸ "Captain Deane's Account of the Affairs In Russia," TNA SP 91/107. This is a miscellaneous

Through an intermediary, Deane had met a young Irishman named Edmund O'Conner, a courier for the Russian Jacobites, who was commissioned to carry secret correspondence to John Archdeacon, an agent in Rotterdam, for further distribution in France and Spain. Deane persuaded O'Conner to betray the cause for a promise of financial reward and a King's pardon. Townshend immediately advised Captain Deane to intercept O'Conner in Amsterdam. O'Connor stood by his agreement and the letters were copied and resealed for delivery to Archdeacon. They confirmed the worst suspicion of the government -- that the Jacobites were planning nefarious activities in the spring. Various arrangements were made to use O'Conner to penetrate further the Jacobite system of correspondence, but they were judged too risky. He was pardoned and rewarded with £100. Pleased by what he called "Captain Deane's great service," Townshend notified him, "You may depend on being well rewarded."⁹ The captain had found his patron, a statesman who did not forget those who served well.

The following spring, 1726, Deane was assigned to Sir Charles Wager's squadron, which was dispatched to the Baltic to observe the Russian naval activity in the Gulf of Finland. He served aboard the admiral's flagship as a political advisor on Russian and Baltic affairs. The squadron anchored at Nargen Island outside the harbor of Reval and remained for most of the summer. From there Deane acquired current intelligence about the Russian fleet and attempted rather unsuccessfully to recruit agents to supply future information. He wrote a number of dispatches and seems to have influenced, or written, "The Present State of the Danes, Swedes and Russians in Respect to One Another and the English Fleet in the Baltic in the Year 1726."¹⁰

After his return to London, Deane released a new edition of his account of the wreck of the *Nottingham Galley*, which he fashioned as a third person narrative to depersonalize the account, portraying himself as less the actor and subject than the author. Unable to avoid his notoriety, he used the narrative to define himself as a person who had faced adversity with courage and commitment.¹¹ He promoted himself for fresh employment in governmental service and, in 1728, Lord Townshend rewarded him with the post of commercial consul at Ostend for the ports of Flanders.

Flanders was a very contentious place. It had long been under Spanish rule and had suffered heavily during the protracted wars against Louis XIV. After the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, it became part of the system of containment against France. The Dutch

box, which also contains Deane's dispatches for his 1725 mission. The British Library (BL) map collection holds the other report, "The Present State of the Maritime Power of Russia," BL, K.Mar 11.51.5.

⁹ TNA SP 84/579. Deane's correspondence with Lord Townshend from Holland for September and October of 1725 recounts the whole affair with O' Conner. The citation is from Townshend to Deane, 4 October 1725, TNA SP 84/579, pp. 141- 142.

¹⁰ Deane wrote seven dispatches while on the cruise from 26 April to 11 October 1726, which located with Admiral Wager's report, "The Present State of the Danes, Swedes and Russians in Respect to One Another and the English Fleet in the Baltic in the Year 1726," in TNA SP 42/77.

¹¹ See my "Captain John Deane and the Wreck of the Nottingham Galley."

garrisoned the barrier fortresses on the French border and Flanders was transferred from Spanish to Austrian rule. Emperor Charles VI was intrigued by the maritime potential of his new territory and launched a company at Ostend to enter the lucrative East India trade. France and Spain assisted the enterprise with commercial treaties and the stock of the Ostend East India Company soared. Austria's erstwhile British and Dutch allies were alarmed by what they regarded as an intrusion into commerce that was their special preserve and obliged her to abandon the company. Austria agreed to liquidate it over a seven-year period in order to allow investors to redeem their stock with two voyages per year. To insure compliance, Walpole and Townshend were determined to place someone in Ostend as commercial consul to be their "Watchful Eye." The situation in Ostend was complicated by the large number of British expatriates, most of whom were Irish Jacobites, who were engaged in all forms of trade, including smuggling. Many had been employed by the Ostend Company and had disguised its trade with their own enterprises, legal and illicit. Captain Deane was a perfect choice for the post. He was a proven intelligence operative, thoroughly versed in maritime and political affairs and he shared his superiors' obsession with the Jacobite menace.¹²

Captain Deane arrived in Ostend in April of 1728 and was received well by local authorities. His appointment was praised by Robert Daniels, the English minister in Brussels, who wrote confidently, "He will put things in good order in the ports."¹³ The merchant community did not share his opinion and complained bitterly about the appointment and immediately challenged Deane's right to collect consulage. Consuls were not paid salaries, but were instead allowed to collect consular fees from all British vessels trading in Flemish ports. The income was always insufficient and collection was difficult, for merchants resented government interference and supervision of their activities. This was a point of view generally shared by previous consuls, who made little effort to collect fees in order to placate their associates and who instead used the office to serve their private interests.

Captain Deane's appointment was quite different. He came to Ostend to maintain close supervision over all shipping and insisted on the most scrupulous collection of consulate documentation, using it as an instrument for detecting irregularities. The merchants closed ranks to defend their economic interests, arguing that the new consul was commissioned to suppress all forms of trade. They were in part correct, for the volume of trade declined seriously during the next several years, which ironically made it more difficult for Deane to sustain himself on consulage. He wrote his superiors that the mayor and the merchants promised "considerable additions to my emoluments, if I go hand in hand with them." But he argued, "It is impossible to join one finger with them without joining I my never be brought to exclude the government's interest in favour of

¹² The numerous dispatches Deane wrote as consul are contained in TNA SP 77/75-86. The most useful secondary sources for this subject are: Paul S. Fritz, *The English Ministers and Jacobitism between the Rebellions of 1715 and 1745* (Toronto, 1975); J. F. Chance, *The Treaty of Hanover: A Study of British Foreign Policy in the Last Years of George I* (London, 1923); and Gerald Hertz, "England and the Ostend Company," *English Historical Review* XXII (April 1907), pp. 265-282.

¹³ Daniels to Townshend, Brussels, 13 May 1728, TNA SP 77/76.

my own."¹⁴ The government responded by arranging to pay him a rather good salary, £200 per year and expenses, plus whatever consulage he could collect. This stands as evidence that the consul's role had been redefined and that Deane's activities in the suppression of the Ostend East India Company were valued.

The captain provided carefully documented information about the movement of Ostend Company ships and about the business activities of the principal officers of the company. Chief among them were the merchants known as Ray and Lee, whom he referred to as "Papists" and "Irish Furies." He reported that "my adversaries have industriously spread a report that my business here is not to protect or support our trade, but as much as possible to destroy it." He countered the accusation with one of his own identifying his opponents as Jacobites, as "Our Hybernians here, [who] with a few of our own nation, not less our enemies, have stuck to the cause day and night."¹⁵

In 1733 Captain Deane could look back with satisfaction upon five difficult years of service in Flanders. The Ostend Company was defunct and the reason for his assignment in Flanders was over. As he continued to see old enemies lurking everywhere in new guises, his zeal and commitment became embarrassing. His confrontational style had worked well earlier but was no longer appropriate. In a bizarre dispatch, he wrote Lord Harrington that "It is the duty of all true friends of His Majesty and the Protestant Interest to be watchful in detecting and countering the designs of the implacable enemies of our nation." He described himself as beset by enemies and explained that "in my present situation, I stand alone in the defense of my King and Country."¹⁶ This brought him into conflict with Ambassador Daniels, the immediate cause of which was a theft on an English trader, the *Devonshire*. Deane quickly faulted the local magistrates in Ostend, while Daniels moved cautiously when complaints came to him of Deane's behavior. Outraged, Deane wrote that while he served "with zeal and faithfulness day and night," he would have to be excused "for interrupting [the ambassador's] repose."¹⁷ Daniels responded caustically that "there is not anybody he has not made himself insufferable to."¹⁸ As the conflict developed, Daniels brought up other incidents of the captain's intransigent behavior. There was finally a reconciliation of sorts, but the whole affair injured Deane irreparably. He had become a liability and retired in 1736 with a comfortable stipend to his home in Wilford, Nottinghamshire.

For a man who enjoyed a certain celebrity, Captain Deane was a private person. Though the extensive records of his public life are well preserved among the State Papers of the Foreign Office, little is known about his personal life before the *Nottingham Galley* shipwreck or after his retirement from government service.

He was the son of Jasper Deane, who is buried in the churchyard at St. Wilfrid's in Wilford. He apparently received a reasonably good education and went to sea as a

¹⁴ Deane to Townshend, Ostend, 22 February 1729, TNA SP 77/78.

¹⁵ Deane to Tilson, Ostend, 2 June 1730 and 10 August 1730, TNA SP 77/78.

¹⁶ Deane to Harrington, Ostend, 2 March 1733, TNA SP 77/84.

¹⁷ Deane to Harrington, Ostend, 11 October 1733, TNA SP 77/84.

¹⁸ Daniels to Harrington, Ostend, 7 January 1734, TNA SP 77/85.

youth. There is no record to substantiate the common local myth that he had attained officer rank in the English navy during the War of Spanish Succession.¹⁹ It is more likely that he served before the mast on naval vessels where he might have attained a rank of master's mate or aboard commercial vessels or privateers. He did acquire the ability to command and to navigate a vessel on a trans-Atlantic voyage and his familiarity with the New England coast indicates that he had made the voyage before.

Captain Deane seems to have been unmarried while in Russia, as his wife, Sarah, is first mentioned in his correspondence in 1725. She was probably the Sarah Hughes who is recorded at St. Mary's, Somerset, London, as marrying a John Dean(e) in April of 1722. They had no children but supported an extended family, which included an unmarried sister and a brother's widow whose relatives kept his household and assisted him in copying and maintaining his correspondence. Unfortunately no copybooks or family records have survived.²⁰

Sometime after his return from Russia, Captain Deane built two fine Georgian houses in Wilford. His correspondence indicates that he made frequent visits there, sometimes for several months, and that he temporarily delegated his duties to a vice-consul in his absence. During his retirement, Captain Deane was a pillar of the Wilford community and of St. Wilfrid's Church. The Annals of Nottingham record his enrollment as a freeman in 1744 and it seems that he maintained his political interest and allegiance. Indeed, in 1745 he was among the largest contributors to the light horse regiment organized by the Duke of Kingston for the suppression of the Jacobite rising in Scotland.

The captain and his wife died one day apart in 1762. He was eighty-three years old, she eighty-two. They were buried together in the churchyard at St. Wilfrid's. The gravestone inscription calls attention to his service "in the fleet of the Tsar of Russia" and as "His Majesty's Consul in Flanders." He memorialized his infamous shipwreck discreetly and sincerely, for in his will he commissioned Miles Whitworth, the son of his deceased comrade on the *Nottingham Galley*, to commemorate the crew's deliverance each year and to republish his account of the disaster.²¹

¹⁹ This has been perpetuated by the juvenile fiction writer, W. H. G. Kingston, in his *John Deane of Nottingham* (London: Griffith and Farrar, 1870).

²⁰ For the sources on the few details of John Deane's family life see my recent entry "Deane, Captain John," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); www.oxforddnb.com/index/101073435.

²¹ The Last Will and Testament of John Deane of Nottingham, 12 December 1755, with a codicil dated 7 Oct. 1757 registered at the Perogative Court of Canterbury, 1 July 1762, TNA PROB 11 882/362-366W.

