

Defoe Daniel

**A Short Narrative of the Life
and Actions of His Grace John,
D. of Marlborough**



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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

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INTRODUCTION

Opinion is a mighty matter in war, and I doubt but the French think it impossible to conquer an army that he leads, and our soldiers think the same; and how far even this step may encourage the French to play tricks with us, no man knows.

Swift's *Journal to Stella*, 1 January 1711

... the moment he leaves the service and loses the protection of the Court, such scenes will open as no victories can varnish over.

Bolingbroke's *Letters and Correspondence*,

23 January 1711

The career of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, reflects the political battles of nearly thirty years of English politics. In an age when duplicity, intrigue, personality, and an immediate history of violence characterized politics, John Churchill was a constant, steady military success even while his political and personal fortunes alternately plunged and soared. His military ability insured his importance to the Grand Alliance and his victories brought the reverence of the European powers opposing Louis XIV as well as that of his own people, but, at the same time, his successes also assured his involvement with the fortunes of nearly every major English political figure and movement in the years 1688 to 1712.

Marlborough's military career spanned two periods. Aware of the danger of the "exorbitant power of France" and the corresponding danger to the Protestant religion, disgusted with James's actions at the *Gloucester* shipwreck and in dealing with Scottish Protestants, Marlborough had joined the bloodless shift to William of Orange. For William, he led the English forces in Flanders in 1689 and in Ireland in 1690; in 1691 he was in charge of the British forces in Europe with the rank of lieutenant-general. In January, 1692, however, Marlborough was dismissed from all of his offices for a combination of reasons, each insufficient in itself but all too typical for him – open opposition to William's Dutch dominated army, rumors that he and Sarah, his ambitious and sometimes presumptuous wife, were plotting Anne's usurpation of the throne, and dissension aroused between Anne and her sister Queen Mary by the quixotic Sarah. When rumors of a Jacobite uprising began, Marlborough spent six weeks in the Tower.

Although Marlborough was restored to political favor in 1698 partly as a placatory gesture to Anne, it was 1701 before he resumed his military career, this time as William's Commander-in-Chief and Ambassador Extraordinary to the United Provinces. In this second phase of his military career, he won every battle, took every fort that he besieged, held the Grand Alliance together, broke the threatening supremacy of France, and established England as a major power. Yet, during these ten years, Queen Anne's ministry and Parliament underwent several major upheavals: the resulting shifts in policy and personalities alternately inconvenienced and vexed Marlborough. The year 1711 marked the culmination of warring factions and clandestine arrangement, and Daniel Defoe's *A Short Narrative of the Life and Actions of his grace, John, Duke of Marlborough*, published 20 February 1711, originated in this battle. (For discussion of authorship, please see Appendix.)

Much that happened in these years can be unraveled back to Harley, Earl of Oxford. His influences and circuitous dealing emerge wherever a close examination of politics is made.¹ Hiding his activities from even his closest associates, employing spies and journalists whose purposes seem contradictory, manipulating the House of Commons' radical October Club while preaching a "broad bottomed" moderate government, and buzzing in the Queen's ear in a variety of ways, Harley was ready for any exigency. England had wanted peace since 1709 when their insistence on "no peace without Spain" and on the XXXVII Article asking for guarantees of three Spanish towns had rallied the French behind the war;² Marlborough's pleas that peace be made and Spain be dealt with later were ignored. Although Parliament voted Malplaquet a triumph, Marlborough's power and prestige were systematically shorn away, and embarrassing decisions contrived to force his resignation were effected.³ Should Marlborough resign, a scapegoat for defeat or an unfavorable peace would be assured. By 1710, foreign policy had changed – a growing interest in trade and colonization urged Parliament to end a costly and now unnecessary war and had united the Tories, Jacobites, the Church party, as well as such diverse men as the Dukes of Argyll, Somerset, Newcastle, and Shrewsbury, a Whig. With the election of the radical Tory majority (240 new members were seated) to the Commons in 1710 and the creation of twelve new peers,⁴ Harley's job of using diverse elements to form a moderate government became more complex. He found it expedient to establish and maintain influence with groups ranging from the radical Tory October Club to Swift's country squire and clergy *Examiner* readers to moderate Whigs such as Shrewsbury. Moreover, Defoe had impressed upon him the importance of assuring the nation that moderate and sensible men were at the bottom of all of the political changes.⁵ Harley, therefore, prepared for at least three apparently exclusive possibilities – prosecuting the war for several more years, negotiating a peace with the Allies, or making a separate peace with France without the Allies. To keep all these possibilities alive, Harley had to remain in harmony with Marlborough. The general's popularity with the soldiers and the European powers and France's awe of his military prowess necessitated the appearance that Marlborough's command was secure. While the *Examiner*, with its Tory audience and its emphasis on pressure for peace, was essential to Harley, so were Swift's and Defoe's appeals for moderation at a time when sympathy for Marlborough was rampant and the call "no peace without Spain" was still defended even by the October Club; for the same reasons he was glad to have Bolingbroke openly associated with the *Examiner*.

January of 1711 brought the decisive defeat at Brihuega which effectively took the issue of Spanish succession away; in the ensuing witch hunt, Almanza and the peace talks of 1709 were revived to distract the people. While these inquiries proceeded, England received word that France was ready to discuss terms. The delay between this (8 February) and France's formal proposal (2 May) was an anxious time for Harley and his schemers. Defoe was busy setting the stage for the outcome.

While Swift, the high Tory, could easily set about discrediting Marlborough, the hero and standard bearer, and, by so doing, weaken the Whig's position, Defoe's readers required different handling. His most effective writing at this time was in pamphlets which reached a wider audience and which were not bound by the consistency of the Review. Defoe and Swift, primed with the

¹ Harley as a "trickster is a doctrine as deeply rooted in historical opinion as the military skill of Marlborough and the oratorical accomplishments of Bolingbroke." John Hill Burton, *A History of the Reign of Queen Anne* (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1880), iii, p. 71. See also Elizabeth Hamilton, *The Backstairs Dragon: A Life of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969).

² Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough; His Life and Times* (New York: Scribner's, 1938), vi, pp. 85-6.

³ Marlborough was systematically deprived of the men upon whom he relied most. The ministry took over Army promotions and dismissed existing officers under the guise of protecting the Queen. Churchill, vi, pp. 334-5.

⁴ Burton, iii, pp. 92-3.

⁵ Defoe to Harley, July 28, 1710. George Healey, ed., *The Letters of Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).

Minister's inside knowledge, set about to discredit the Whig ministry in basically the same way. In the 15 February *Examiner*, Swift wrote,

No Body, that I know of, did ever dispute the Duke of Marlborough's Courage, Conduct, or Success; they have been always unquestionable and will continue to be so, in spite of the Malice of his Enemies, or which is yet more, the Weakness of his Advocates. The Nation only wished to see him taken out of ill Hands, and put into better. But, what is all this to the Conduct of the late Ministry, the shameful Mismanagements in Spain, or the wrong Steps in the Treaty of Peace...⁶

Defoe remarks, "our General wants neither Conduct or Courage" and describes his greatest successes as "daughters to preserve his Memory" while dissociating him somewhat from the Jacobites, Whigs, and "business of [making] peace and war." When the *Review* finally discusses Marlborough's fall, Defoe suggests that the "greatest Guilt ... is the Error in Policy, and Prudence among his Friends."⁷ Both writers presented the Duke as a means to an end and discredited him on personal grounds (avarice, ambition) thereby protecting the military hero and the newborn glory of England fathered by his victories.⁸ Faced with Dissenters and moderate Whig readers, Defoe's *Review* had to seem to oppose Swift's *Examiner* with its sneers at trade; not only must it be consistent but it was obliged to shift its readers' attention more slowly to the earlier failures of the Whig ministry and the rich commercial advantages gained in the separate peace.

The *Life of Marlborough* is part of a stream of pamphlets which Defoe wrote supporting the Harley administration; *A Supplement to the Faults on Both Sides*, a discussion of the Sacheverell case by two "displac'd officers of state," *Rogues on Both Sides*, a study in contrasts between old and new Whigs, and old, high flyer, and new Tories, and *A Seasonable Caution to the General Assembly* were published immediately before and after. That same year, his pamphlets discuss the October Club, the Spanish succession, "Mr. Harley," and the state of religion. By summer when the peace was nearly assured though still secret, Defoe was writing *Reasons for a Peace; Or, the War at an End*.

Taken in chronological order, Defoe's 1711 pamphlets indicate two emerging directions: first, the reasons for ending the war become more positive and entirely unconcerned with the General, and, second, Defoe's comments about the Duke become less wholeheartedly admiring, especially in *No Queen; Or, No General*. *Rogues on Both Sides* is witty praise for moderate men who act "according to English principles of Law and Liberty regardless of People and Party" rather than believing any demagogue who "cries it rains butter'd Turnips." After this, the pamphlets become more informative and solemn – Defoe demonstrates Whigs and Tories want the same things and that the country bleeds to death. *Armageddon; or the Necessity of Carrying on the War* (30 October 1711), *Reasons Why This Nation Ought to put a speedy End to this Expensive War* (6 October), and *Reasons for a Peace: or, the War at an End*, for example, catalog the economic ailments – taxes, pirates, hard to replace sailors and soldiers killed, but far worse, a decline in trade resulting in closed shops and declining manufacturing increasing unemployment – "the whole Kingdom sold to Usury" and "Consumption of the Growth of the Country." As the year passed, Defoe mentioned Marlborough less and less, but the General's possible mistakes were progressively forced into balance with his victories. While seeming to be moderate, Defoe both tempers his readers' opinions of the Duke and turns their attention to other issues.

⁶ *Examiner*, February 15, 1711. Herbert Davis, ed., *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940), p. 87.

⁷ Defoe's *Review*, January 22, 1712.

⁸ Cf. discussions of this in John Ross, *Swift and Defoe: A Study in Relationship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941); Richard I. Cook, *Jonathan Swift as A Tory Pamphleteer* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), and Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works and the Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), ii, pp. 450ff. and 526ff.

The techniques and movement in *No Queen: Or, No General* (10 January 1712) parallel the techniques and movement in the 1711 pamphlets. In this 1712 pamphlet, Defoe's double-edged balance sheet is most obvious; in the first six pages he lists the charges against the General which he will not discuss – this reminds his readers of every possible failing and, because of the language ("I'll forbear to lessen his Glorious Character by Reckoning the Number of the Slain, or counting the Cost of the Towns"), the significance of each "ignored" charge is increased. Defoe recounts the economic issues at stake and insists that when Marlborough's "blinded party" made him its representative, regardless of his intentions, he became a formidable threat to the Queen and had to be removed. The pamphlet gradually turns to the destructiveness of party factions and by the patriotic ending ("Alas, what a Condition were Britain in if her Fate depended upon the Life, or Gallantry, or Merit, of one Man"), Marlborough is no longer an issue.

In the *Life*, Defoe defends the general from the charge of avarice, the most plausible charge that the journalists were propagating. Marlborough's courage and skill had also been called into question in such papers as *The Post Boy*, and a spurious debate raged which could only injure Marlborough over the gratitude of the nation. Defoe alludes to pamphlets which impugn great men and represent them as "unworthy of the Favour of the Prince" slanting the charge that Marlborough had been rewarded perhaps too bountifully in order to imply that such writers were malicious, uninformed, and ungrateful. Furthermore, Defoe says, Marlborough deserved his reward, having bought it at a dear rate, and it was no more than what "in all Times belong'd to Generals." Indeed, Marlborough's successor, the Duke of Ormond, received the same bread perquisite and percentage of foreign pay, but Defoe chooses to "defend" Marlborough not with comparable facts which would destroy the credibility of the attacking group, but rather with passing references to the two other generals with whom he had to divide the money and with the profits of sea captains and petty clerks in yards and stores! With descriptions of the fitting appearance for generals and Marlborough's sobriety in the field, Defoe tips the scales in Marlborough's favor. That he ends the section with

Indeed Generals, tho' the most accomplish'd Heroes, are but Men, they are not Infallible, but may be mistaken as well as other Mortals, they are subject to Faults and Infirmities as well as their Fellow-Creatures; but then their great Services for the good of their Country ought to be cast into the Ballance, against their humane Mistakes; and not only Charity, but Self-consideration should give them very good Quarter, unless their Faults are prov'd to be Wilful and Contumacious.(38)

is a paradigm of his technique. Coming immediately after this defense, the argument that his victories should be "cast in the Ballance" is somewhat degrading and implies that Marlborough may have been mistaken in what he did and even leaves the question open with the phrase "unless their Faults are prov'd Wilful and Contumacious."⁹ The following paragraph, however, opens the subject of Marlborough's invincibility. Under the guise of wondering what an ungrateful nation would do should he lose a battle, Defoe brings Marlborough's perfect record, his piety, and the esteem France and his soldiers had for him to our attention. The paragraph before, then, may be taken to introduce Defoe's concern – even Marlborough could be mistaken in battle and lose, and what would such a nation do then? The paragraph on the whole reflects on the nation and is an eloquent defense of the Duke – he is human, human beings make mistakes and his great good should excuse him even more than an ordinary man's mistakes should be forgiven.

⁹ This is similar to an argument Defoe uses to distinguish between types of debtors in the *Review* (iii, 83-4 and 397-400). Whether or not the crime was "Wilful" was very important to Defoe; perhaps his revised opinion of Marlborough as most obvious in his tribute to him at his death is the result of his change of opinion about Marlborough's motives and removing him from the list of heroes who possessed the "courage of honor" as described in *An Apology for the Army*.

Harley knew that Marlborough was essential until peace negotiations were secured. Marlborough had distrusted Harley throughout 1710, but he also knew that Harley's stakes in a moderate government were great. In 1711, Rochester and the October Club began to challenge Harley, and their demands alarmed even Queen Anne. The Queen, Bolingbroke, and Harley all wrote Marlborough conciliatory letters. Marlborough answered in kind and his letter after Harley was stabbed expresses deep concern. Harley became increasingly convinced that only peace would preserve his power, and Marlborough's power and reputation were essential for an acceptable peace. As late as July, Harley's letters to Marlborough are respectful and deceitfully warm:

My lord; I received from the hands of lord Mar, just as I came from Windsor, the honour of your grace's letter, and I am not willing to let a post pass, without making your grace my acknowledgments. It is most certain, that you can best judge what is fit to be proposed upon the subject you are pleased to mention...

I hope it will be needless to renew the assurances to your grace, that I will not omit any thing in my power, which may testify my zeal for the public, and my particular honour and esteem for your grace; and I doubt not, but when the lord you mention comes, I shall satisfy him of the sincerity of my intentions towards your grace.¹⁰

Harley's perfidy allowed him to assure Marlborough he would "never do any thing which shall forfeit your good opinion" while pretending to plan to restore Marlborough to the Queen's confidence. Further, when Marlborough appealed to him to silence the libellous attacks by journalists, Harley replied, "I do assure your grace I neither know nor desire to know any of the authors; and as I heartily wish this barbarous war was at an end, I shall be very ready to take my part in suppressing them."¹¹ Details about the financing of Woodstock and mutual friends crop up in the letters. So successful is Harley's deception that when Sir Solomon Medina accuses Marlborough of graft, Marlborough writes Harley:

Upon my arrival here, I had notice that my name was brought before the commissioners of accounts, possibly without any design to do me a prejudice. However, to prevent any ill impression it might make, I have writ a letter to those gentlemen ... and when you have taken the pains to read the inclosed copy, pray be so kind as to employ your good offices, so as that it may be known I have the advantage of your friendship. No one knows better than your lordship the great use and expence of intelligence, and no one can better explain it; and 'tis for that reason I take the liberty to add a farther request, that you would be so kind to lay the whole, on some fitting opportunity, before the queen, being very well persuaded her majesty, who has so far approved, and so well rewarded my services would not be willing they should now be reflected on.¹²

Defoe points out that criticism of the Duke "may prove Dangerous and Fatal" and the joy in the French court at each step in Marlborough's fall reinforces Defoe's and Harley's opinion¹³ Defoe recounts Marlborough's greatest military victories beginning as far back as his campaign in Brabant (reminding his readers of possible wealth gained through a shipwreck and of the betrayal of Dunkirk as he goes along), includes descriptions of his exemplary behavior including regular

¹⁰ William Coxe, *Memoirs of John, Duke of Marlborough with his Original Correspondence* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1820), vi, p. 48.

¹¹ Coxe, vi, p. 123.

¹² Coxe, vi, 126.

¹³ The advantage France gained from Marlborough's fall and their complete awareness of it is discussed in Churchill, vi, pp. 462-69.

prayers for the Camp, and praises Marlborough as a "finish'd Hero." The conclusion to the pamphlet warns the nation again of Marlborough's importance; his battles are bringing the enemy to "reason," procuring "an honorable and lasting peace." References to the detrimental effect of discrediting the general are found intermittently throughout the pamphlet in allusion to Hannibal.

Defoe, then, served Harley's purposes well. He defended Marlborough and shored up his prestige in a time when it was important for the French to think that Marlborough could prosecute the war freely. As a known employee of Harley's, Defoe furthered Marlborough's impression that Harley could be depended upon.¹⁴ Finally, he began to prepare the moderate Whigs for peace by presenting the economic considerations and disassociating Marlborough from the Queen's and the ministry's "business of peace."

The possibility that Defoe acted independently in this writing cannot be discounted.¹⁵ Defoe had praised Marlborough since the beginning of his career and the extent to which he and Godolphin adopted William's policies added to Defoe's admiration; admiration is clear in this pamphlet. Defoe had worked for Godolphin and Sunderland, and may have used "by an Old Officer in the Army" as a disguise from Harley or even as a means of publishing independently. That Defoe resented attacks on his hero can hardly be doubted – the *Review* and his pamphlets are a catalog of the general's triumphs, and no where does he attack unequivocally; even in *No Queen* he puts chief blame on rumors and on Marlborough's party. Harley's failure to make permanent provisions for Defoe may suggest some dissatisfaction, but even if the possibility that the *Life* was not expressly ordered by Harley is considered, it is noteworthy that nothing in it is offensive to Harley, and, more important, remarkable that it serves Harley's needs and ends at the time so well.

Definitely Defoe's, however, are veiled but telling attacks on Swift and his type. Although the purpose of the *Examiner* was to "furnish Mankind, with a Weekly Antidote to that Weekly Poison,"¹⁶ Defoe parodied this by saying his pamphlet was to "undeceive the People." The "base Pamphleteers" are labeled uninformed and ungrateful; they have no way of making right judgments in the matter of perquisites and soldier's pay; they go out to see a battlefield as they might a well laid-out garden, and, of course, their "Mouths go off smartly with a Whiff of Tobacco" (an obvious ridiculing contrast to the cannon fire of the real fighters).

Furthermore, compared to attacks on Marlborough in libels such as *The Duke of M***'s Confessions to a Jacobite Priest*, *The Land-Leviathan: or, the Modern Hydra*, and *The Perquisite Monger*, Defoe's pamphlet was exemplary in its moderation. Even Swift's attacks are moderate beside the majority of these 1711-12 pamphlets; not even he conjured up memories of regicide and rebellion as did the more numerous and libellous pamphleteers. For example, *The Mobb's Address to my Lord M**** (1710) linked Marlborough to Sacheverell and assured the Duke his "most dutiful Mobb, will use our utmost Care and Diligence to raise all riotous and tumultuous Assemblies, and with undaunted Vigour ... oppose ... all who will keep up the Authority of the Crown." *Oliver's Pocket Looking Glass* (1711) while more erudite was scarcely less inflammatory – shades of Cromwell were called up, a "Colossus" with an "Army compos'd of almost all nations" faced the "body politic."

¹⁴ Coxe, vi, p. 126; Hamilton, p. 172, and *The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough* (London: John Murray, 1845), v.

¹⁵ J. R. Moore, *Daniel Defoe: Citizen of the Modern World* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 255-56; Defoe's *An Appeal to Honor and Justice*; and Chalmers says Defoe wrote what "either gratified his prejudices or supplied his needs."

¹⁶ Davis, "A Letter to the Examiner," p. 221.

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