A book about Staughton July 2019

The Handasyde memorial

Thomas Handasyde, the father, was born c. 1645 and, like his son Roger, lived in 'Gaines Park' in Great Staughton. Thomas spent his life as a professional soldier, serving his sovereign, William III, in campaigns in Ireland and Flanders. The summit of his achievements as a military man was undoubtedly his appointment, in 1702, as governor of Jamaica, then a key territory in the expansionist British empire.

By the time he was appointed governor, Handasyde already had a distinguished career in the service of king William III. It began in 1688, the 'Glorious Revolution', when the Catholic James II was deposed in favour of the Protestant William of Orange who took the crown in that year as William III. The brutal removal of the Catholic king of England did not escape the attention of the Catholic kings of France and Spain, and a bitter 'Nine Years' War' broke out between these kingdoms. One of the first tests of strength for William III was the rebellion in Ireland, when an army sympathetic to James II was defeated at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

The campaign in Ireland must have enhanced Handsayde's reputation, for he was promoted to major and in 1697, he joined the regiment commended by Colonel John Gibson which was ordered to Newfoundland to re-capture the fort of St John's, a stronghold of the French in Canada. The regiment arrived to discover that the fort had been destroyed and abandoned by the French. St John's was an important strategic base and Gibson ordered his men to set to work rebuilding and strengthening the fort. Unfortunately for his plan, provisions were insufficient to maintain a garrison of several hundred soldiers, and Gibson therefore took the decision to withdraw the bulk of the regiment, leaving the work of rebuilding in the hands of Thomas Handasyde and 300 soldiers, describing his comrade-in-arms as 'a good, worthy man, of courage and conduct, who has served the King 24 years.' Handasyde successfully accomplished his mission, although 'worthy man he might have been,' he did have to report, on his return to England in 1698, that, in the course of the work, no fewer than 214 of his men, out of a total of 300, had perished due to illness and malnutrition.

The experience did Handasyde's reputation no lasting harm, and on 20 June 1702, he was commissioned Colonel of the 16th Bedfordshire Regiment of Foot, and at the same time appointed lieutenant-governor of Jamaica, following the death of the previous incumbent, Major-General Selwyn. During the reign of Queen Anne, the 16th Regiment remained on the island, to thwart any hostile attempt to secure this strategic outpost. Described as 'one of the best infantry officers we have,' Handasyde also demonstrated a humane side to his character during his governorship. The British navy was engaged in what turned out to be an ill-fated expedition against the French-held port of Plaisance in the bay of Placentia in Newfoundland. A naval squadron was sent out under Vice-Admiral Grayson to capture the port and the fleet put in to the harbour in Jamaica to take on men and provisions. It did not go well. Handasyde responded to Grayson's demands. He quickly ensured that sufficient provisions were efficiently loaded and assisted the Vice-Admiral with the embarkation of the men, but at this point Handasyde grew increasingly angry at Grayson's brutal methods in conscripting men as soldiers. Handasyde was not alone in his disgust; ship-masters and merchants were moved to write to the governor to protest at Grayson's high-handed attitude. Handasyde immediately wrote directly to Grayson to express his displeasure and when this had no effect, he passed on all the complaints in a despatch to the Council of Trade and Plantations in London.

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