

## Aston, Sir Arthur

by Jim Burke

Aston, Sir Arthur (c.1590–1649) royalist army officer, governor of Drogheda, was the younger of the two sons of Sir Arthur Aston, knight, of Fulham, Middlesex, and his first wife, Christiana, daughter of John Ashton of Penrith in Cumberland. There is nothing on record concerning his education and early career. It is known that he travelled to Russia about 1613, accompanied by other English soldiers, and bringing letters of recommendation from King James I. He fought in Russian service against the Poles until the truce of 1618 when he returned briefly to England. He then quickly entered the service of his recent enemy King Sigismund III of Poland, in his war against the Turks. Aston received a testimonial from Christopher Radzivil, general of the Lithuanian forces, from Vilna, dated 1 January 1623, complimenting him on his role in the recapture of the castle of Mittevia from the Swedes. King Sigismund granted him a pension of 700 florins a year in 1625. He continued in Polish service until 1631 when he returned briefly to England.

Having raised a company of English soldiers, Aston entered the service of Gustavus Adolphus with the rank of lieutenant colonel, and fought in the campaign against Tilly. In 1640 he returned to England with many soldiers, to offer his services in the war against the Scots. On 8 April 1640 the earl of Northumberland appointed him sergeant major general of a force at Newcastle commanded by Viscount Conway (qv). On 7 September the new commander of the king's forces, the earl of Strafford (qv), appointed Aston colonel general of a brigade. From 17 September until the retirement of the Scottish army he served as sergeant major of the Yorkshire trained bands.

Although he was knighted on 15 February 1641, his offer of service to King Charles at the outbreak of the civil war was initially rejected because of his papist reputation. The king is alleged to have relented after Aston made a similar offer to the general of parliament, Sir Thomas Fairfax. Aston was initially appointed colonel general of dragoons and performed well in that role at the battle of Edgehill in 1642. Later that year he was made commissary general of horse.

On 21 November 1642 the king appointed Aston governor of Reading. His long experience of European battlefields was employed to good effect in the defence of the town against the forces of the earl of Essex. However, after repelling three assaults he was knocked unconscious by a falling tile. He was evacuated on a horse-litter to Oxford after Colonel Richard Fielding surrendered the town on 27 April 1643.

Aston made a full recovery and, with the assiduous support of the catholic queen, he was appointed governor of Oxford in August 1643. Although the university conferred

on him the MD degree in May 1644, he was a most unpopular governor and there was little popular sympathy when he fell from his horse on 19 September 1644 and broke his leg. The leg turned gangrenous and was amputated and replaced with a wooden leg in December 1644. On Christmas day 1644 the king removed him from his command and awarded him a pension of £1,000 per annum.

Aston travelled to Ireland in 1646 and served with the marquess of Ormond (qv) until the parliamentary takeover of Dublin in 1647. After the execution of the king he returned to Ireland and in July 1649 he was a member of a council of war convened by Ormond. Aston was appointed governor of the key royalist town of Drogheda, where he vigorously began a programme of improving and strengthening the town's defences. On Oliver Cromwell's (qv) landing he was well aware of how precarious his position was, particularly from the shortage of artillery and trained gunners, and he wrote in vain to Ormond seeking reinforcements. Cromwell moved rapidly against Drogheda with an army of 17,000 horse and foot, and began a siege on 3 September 1649. Aston, despite having a force of just 3,000, rejected all demands to surrender.

Cromwell was able to land his heavy artillery by sea and began a heavy bombardment on 10 September. On 11 September, Cromwell ordered an assault through the breach. Despite stiff resistance by Aston's troops, Cromwell's infantry broke through into the town at the third attempt. Even then Aston tried to continue resistance by retreating to the Millmount area, probably to seek terms for quarter. There is some evidence for negotiations at this stage between Aston and a parliamentarian officer, Lieutenant Colonel Axtell (qv). Aston and many of his officers were alleged to have been persuaded to enter a mill on the Millmount, where they were slain approximately one hour after being offered quarter. It is said that Aston's brains were beaten out with his wooden leg, possibly in the belief that his leg concealed treasure. His head was sent to Dublin along with those of another fifteen senior officers, to be set on poles.

Although he was widely reputed to be a catholic, there is no record that he admitted this, and indeed he is said by Clarendon to have denied it. Clarendon also said of Aston that he 'had the fortune to be very much esteemed where he was not known, and very much detested where he was; and he was at this time too well known in Oxford to be beloved by any'.

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*A continuation of special passages*, Thomason tract E 101.7; *The moderate intelligencer*, Thomason tract E 5733–18; *Two great fights in Ireland* (London, 18 September 1649), Thomason tract E 574.3; *A perfect diurnal* (London, 8 October 1649), Thomason tract E 533.17; *A letter from Sir Lewis Dyve* (The Hague, July 1650), Thomason tract E 616.7; Gilbert, *Contemp. hist., 1641–52*; DNB; Clarendon,

*Rebellion*, bk xi; Anthony à Wood, *The life and times of Anthony à Wood*, abridged from Andrew Clarke's edition by Llewelyn Powys (1932); *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. W. C. Abbott (4 vols, Cambridge, Mass., 1937–44), ii, 124–42

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