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Wellington's Men: the British Soldier of the Napoleonic Wars

This year sees the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo, which is being marked by numerous exhibitions, conferences and re-enactments. Waterloo has a huge status historically, since this decisive battle on 18 June 1815 brought to a close over two decades of conflict. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were unprecedented in their scale and human cost, and in so many ways left an indelible mark on the modern world. It is likely, however, that the Waterloo bicentenary will be overshadowed by 2014's commemoration of the outbreak of the First World War, a conflict that evidently has much more resonance for the British public today.

It is worth remembering that, prior to 1914, it was the conflict of 1793-1815 that was Britain's 'Great War'.¹ In 1900, the journalist and educator W. H. Fitchett contrasted 'the great battles of a century ago' with the warfare of his own time: 'Khaki kills the picturesque. Battle has grown grey, remote, invisible.' In order to evoke this more colourful and romantic era of warfare, he republished four soldier autobiographies that had then fallen into obscurity, under the title *Wellington's Men*.² Fitchett's approach had much to commend it. His aim was to give the reader 'some pictures of famous battles ... as seen by the eyes of the men who fought in them'. He was interested in the feelings, faces, hardships and excitements of 'each human atom'. For Fitchett, this approach contrasted with that of the orthodox historian, for whom 'the private soldier is a mere unconsidered pawn in the passionless chess of some cold-brained strategist': 'History treats the men who do the actual fighting in war very ill.'³

Wellington's Men had a point here, and in many ways it still does. Military history is of course a rich and diverse field, but it can be depersonalised: it often operates at the levels of grand strategy or battlefield tactics, or concerns the study of issues such as institutions, intelligence or technology. Where it does engage with the perspective of the soldier, such as

in the ‘face of battle’ tradition, it is concerned with instrumental issues such as group psychology and morale: the goal is to learn about combat effectiveness rather than the soldier experience in its own right.⁴ In theory, the ‘war and society’ tradition should have addressed this, given its social history ethos of studying the past ‘from below’.⁵ In practice, however, ‘war and society’ has often focused on wartime civil society, telling us about the impact of conflict on the economy, culture and politics, but little about the serving combatant himself.⁶ Social history itself tends to leave the military well alone, preferring to focus on challenges to the establishment rather than an institution that has traditionally propped it up. For example, it usually ignores the fact that a large proportion of working-class radicals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served in the military at some point in their lives.⁷ Some works that do claim to be social histories of the military concentrate on the world of the officer, for whom primary sources are admittedly more copious. Nick Foulkes’s recent *Dancing into Battle: A Social History of the Battle of Waterloo* is an account of Regency high society, where the common private appears but rarely, and his testimony is merely ‘charming’.⁸

This historical disregard for the common soldier was not shared by the victor of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington. He is often quoted as referring to the redcoat as the ‘scum of the earth’, but this is rarely taken in its proper context. He once used the phrase to allude to their humble social origins, but then immediately followed it by noting, ‘it is really wonderful that we should have made them the fine fellows that they are’.⁹ This both commended these unpromising recruits for becoming ‘fine fellows’, and the army that ‘made them’ that way. Shortly before Waterloo, the MP Thomas Creevey encountered Wellington in a park in Brussels, and they discussed the military situation. When asked if the British were counting on foreign allies in the fight against Napoleon, Wellington reacted with contempt. He pointed to a British private soldier and declared, ‘it all depends on that article whether we do the business or not. Give me enough of it, and I am sure.’¹⁰

In the last decade or so, the experience of the common soldier has come back into focus. The social and cultural history of war has been a significant growth area in the Age of Revolutions.¹¹ This is arguably following the agenda set by historians of the First World War, who pioneered the study of questions such as masculinity, the body, national identity and cultural memory in the military sphere.¹² Instead of treating ‘war’ and ‘society’ as two separate domains, this work uses methodologies from social and cultural history in order to shed light on the experience of the combatant. In this article we will survey some of this recent work and will show how it has enhanced our understanding of the type of common soldier who fought at Waterloo. We will begin by thinking about how social history can inform our understanding of the composition and nature of Wellington’s armies; and we will then explore how cultural histories of identity and narrative have helped historians to think about the common soldier’s perspective on these momentous events in which he played such a key role.

I

The social history approach has been adopted by scholars of the British Army’s ‘horse and musket’ era as an antidote to the ‘great man’ histories of its campaigns and battles. As mentioned above, the thousands of soldiers who served under Wellington (and other commanders) in the British Army have often been reduced to mere numbers subsumed into regiments and the orders of generals, even if their actions were dramatic and sometimes heroic. Selecting one author who wrote in this style is an unfair characterisation of this approach, but Sir William Napier’s description of British infantry at the Battle of Albuera (16 May 1811) is a celebrated example:

Nothing could stop that astonishing infantry. No sudden burst of undisciplined valour, no nervous enthusiasm weakened the stability of their order, their flashing eyes were bent on the dark columns in their front, their measured tread shook the ground, their dreadful volleys swept away the head of every formation, their deafening shouts overpowered the dissonant cries that broke from all parts of the tumultuous crowd, as slowly and with a horrid carnage it was pushed by the incessant vigour of the attack to the farthest edge of the hill. In vain did the French reserves mix with the struggling multitude to sustain the fight, their efforts only increased the irremediable confusion, and the mighty mass, breaking off like a loosened cliff, went headlong down the steep: the rain flowed after in streams discoloured with blood, and eighteen hundred unwounded men, the remnant of six thousand unconquerable British soldiers, stood triumphant on the fatal hill.¹³

Looking beyond this stirring, even nationalistic, account of the event, questions about this ‘astonishing infantry’ begin to stir in a social historian’s consciousness: who were these men? What were their backgrounds? Why did they join the army? And what was their experience as a soldier? What happened to them after they left the army? Fortunately, military records from the period give us substantial material to work with to answer some of these questions. Although complete service records of every individual are not extant, nevertheless there is enough contained in the War Office records held in the National Archives at Kew, along with material at local and regimental archives, to reconstruct the lives and experience of soldiers.

A principal line of inquiry has been to examine the social origins of men recruited into the army during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and the mechanisms and factors for recruitment. This research springs from the fact that the British Army was recruited by voluntary enlistment, and so those who joined the army were not representative

of British society in a way one would expect in a conscript force. Although boys were sometimes recruited into the army, most of the recruits were men aged 18 and over, so scholarly attention has focused their social status before enlisting, along with the economic and personal circumstances that led then to this decision. T. H. McGuffie's early articles in the *Journal of Army Historical Research* combined a study of recruits and the recruitment process.¹⁴ The movement of men into the army has been characterised by a set of push and pull factors. The symbiotic relationship between downturns in the economic cycle and recruitment into the army features heavily in Edward Coss's impressive analysis of a sample of 7,000 recruitment records, presented in his monograph *All for the King's Shilling*.¹⁵ Alongside this, the present author's [ANONYMISED] has highlighted some of the pull factors into the army, with regular pay, rations, accommodation (all the more significant in an era of inflation), prospects for promotion, travel and, of course, military action also playing their part.¹⁶

Analysis of the social background of the soldiers in Wellington's army has done much to dismiss their reputation as the dregs of society. Research has shown how the army recruited a significant proportion of its men from the artisan classes, indeed sometimes from particularly respectable trades, alongside those utilising the ubiquitous claim of being a labourer. That is not to say that in their economic prime men opted for the army, as Coss's work on the economic cycle demonstrates, but nevertheless there was a degree of agency in their choice to enlist. This has broadened the exploration of this topic from a simple economic transaction to one that considers broader factors, such as regimental links in the region, and the prestige of particular corps (the 95th Rifles epitomising this).¹⁷ Such factors operated at both a macro and micro level. On the former, J. R. Western's unpublished PhD thesis noted the serious downturn in recruitment into the army – to the point that it was almost negligible – during the mid-1790s as a result of damaging recruitment practices in the

early part of the war and the catastrophic losses of the army whilst campaigning in the Caribbean.¹⁸ The regional and local dimensions to recruitment have been particularly explored in regard to the Scottish highland regiments of the army. Work by Andrew Mackillop has done much to strip away the romanticised vision of highland regiments as mirrors of clan society, and exposed the competitive and complex motives for the mass of highlanders who joined the British Army, particularly the desire of the region's gentry to demonstrate their loyalty or seek favour from Westminster through levies of soldiers.¹⁹

An offshoot of examinations of soldiers' economic status has been an analysis of the biometric information contained in War Office records. Enlistment registers and regimental books were often fastidious in the collection of data such as age at time of enlistment, height, and physical description, partly in case they deserted but also for identification more generally. Demographic studies of human height, for example, are heavily reliant on military data because the military was the only institution in this period to create long-term, comparable datasets.²⁰ Data mining this information is, necessarily, a recent phenomenon that required access to computing power to process this information, and the technical skills to translate this raw material into something that could be processed. Initial forays into this have revealed indicated the demographic stability of the army and the high physical standards, such as minimum height requirements, that were maintained during the wars.²¹ The recent digitisation of Chelsea Pensioner records provides further scope for research into a sub-set of soldiers in the period.²²

This focus on the social groups from which the army drew its recruits tends to obscure the experience of soldiers once in the army. As the present authors have pointed out in [ANONYMISED], there was a lot more to soldiering than the experience of battle, as this was a temporally a minor part of soldiers' lives.²³ Coss has sought to redress this by focusing on the campaigning experience of British Army, particularly during the Peninsular War in

Spain and Portugal. By examining diet, living conditions, and small-group dynamics, Coss has provided an in-depth examination of what kept soldiers going and the ‘rules’ they developed in order to survive and cope.²⁴ Alongside this, Andrew Bamford’s *Sickness, Suffering and the Sword* has focused on the preservation and loss of military manpower outside of battle, revealing why some units were able to maintain their strength whilst on campaign whilst others withered.²⁵ Considerations of the lifecycles of soldiers have extended beyond their service in the army. Jennine Hurl-Eamon’s *Marriage in the British Army* demonstrates that some of the soldiers in the army were husbands and fathers too, but with particular economic, social and cultural issues to navigate, which were generated by their service.²⁶ Additionally, historical focus has turned to former soldiers, in particular military pensioners, a group with a rich archival presence. With so many men passing through military service, the number of army pensioners in society burgeoned. John Cookson examined the case of Scottish soldiers and military homecoming, refuting the view that these men were a marginalised, if not dangerous, group in society. They often returned to familiar surroundings, and settled back into civilian life as law-abiding citizens.²⁷ Caroline Nielsen studied the representation of former soldiers in print, using it as a lens to understand ‘veteran’ status and how these figures brought the conflict and the experience of being a soldier back home.²⁸ Cookson’s and Nielsen’s work brings the social history of the army full circle, and shows how far historical research has come from the anonymous numbers of soldiers sometimes portrayed in operation-focused military history.

II

Recent cultural histories of the French Wars have similarly shed light on the humble redcoat. If social history is concerned with experience, cultural history tries to think about the

meanings of those experiences. One way to do this is by exploring the cultural resources through which people in the past rendered their world meaningful, and a particularly fruitful line of enquiry has been to think about soldiers as readers and writers. Rather than using sources by soldiers in an empirical way, it is revealing to think about the narratives that soldiers constructed of their life experiences, and how these shaped and were shaped by the wider cultural context.²⁹ Although as we have already noted, writings emanating from the ranks are less abundant than they are for officers – due to obvious issues of literacy and cost – a striking number of them did compose letters, diaries and memoirs. After the Battle of Waterloo, the field was covered with scraps of paper which, one observer noted, ‘literally whitened the surface of the earth’.³⁰ Additionally, more of this material has been passed down to us than for other sections of the working class, partly because writings by soldiers have often been preserved in archives and military museums, but also due to the demand for soldier memoirs from the nineteenth-century public.

Given the prominence of military autobiography in the publishing industry today, it is remarkable to note that this was a novel genre in the early nineteenth century. Soldiers had written about their experiences before, but common soldiers did not publish memoirs unless they were in particular genres such as the spiritual autobiography. (Indeed, the format of the spiritual autobiography continued to inform soldier writings, and many a god-fearing soldier emplotted their life as a Protestant progress from youthful temptation to salvation: as one might imagine, life in the military provided much promising material for this.³¹) Whereas such works would formerly have been dismissed as being unliterary and narrow in perspective, after the Napoleonic Wars a glut of memoirs by common soldiers were published. This can partly be explained by public interest in the military and a dramatic rise – from a pretty low base – in the public reputation of the common soldier after Waterloo. Neil Ramsey also argues that we also need to locate these works in the context of Romanticism,

since for the first time the perspective of the common soldier was validated as authentic and uniquely insightful. Some of the early works in this tradition were infused with the language of sensibility, which highlighted the soldier's suffering on campaign and at the hands of his superiors, so the genre was potentially radical in its politics.³²

The Regency period's newfound interest in the perspective of the common soldier relates to wider developments in the history of war. David Bell and others have argued that the Napoleonic Wars were 'the first total war', involving a shift in the relationship between the spheres of war and society. Before the 1790s, Bell argues, war had been a limited business, and there was much crossover between the world of the officer and that of the gentleman amateur. After this period, however, war becomes unlimited, as it exacts unprecedented demands and depredations upon the civilian population. Indeed, the categories of 'civilian' and 'military' are separately defined for the first time, and the latter comes to be professionalised, politically dominant and confident in its self-identity.³³ The soldier memoir is therefore a symptom of modern war, where warfare is unique, revelatory and, in Yuval Noah Harari's phrase, 'the ultimate experience'.³⁴ It is also a reflection on a change in the role of soldiers in battle itself, away from the 'clockwork' formations of the Enlightenment towards a model of battle which co-opted the initiative of the soldier himself.³⁵ It is no coincidence that so many of these memoirs were composed by members of the famed 95th Rifles, since the light infantry epitomised this individualistic ideal. The most famous of these authors was John Kincaid, whose *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade* (1830) was a model for Bernard Cornwell's fictional Sharpe.

If we think about sources such as memoirs, letters and diaries as 'ego documents', then they can shed light on the identity of the soldier. Cookson has studied the self-contained world of the regiment and has argued that this was the primary collective identity for soldiers, superseding even British national identity.³⁶ Nevertheless, histories of war have contributed a

great deal to our understanding of nationhood. The backdrop to any discussion of this is Linda Colley's pioneering *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*. For Colley, war with France was central to the process by which English, Welsh and Scots came to see themselves as 'Britons', since France was the 'other' that underlined what they had in common. The wars against the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes were the climax to a century of conflict, which decisively defined Britain against everything the French apparently stood for, and yoked patriotism to the monarchy and the establishment. In particular, the invasion threats of the 1790s and the 1800s focused the mind, and prompted a large proportion of civilian men to pledge their service in Britain's defence.³⁷ War therefore drove national integration, and the armed forces became a symbol of unity and an inclusive melting pot. In practice, however, Colley had more to say about the auxiliary forces than the regulars, and rarely took soldiers' own perspectives into account.

Subsequent studies have thought about the agenda set by *Britons* in relation to soldiers, and have added much to our wider understanding of British national identity as a result. Catriona Kennedy has integrated Ireland into her account of British wartime culture, and thinks about the experiences of Irishmen in the armed forces and the role of the British military in the 1798 Rebellion. She argues that Irish and Scottish soldier writers appeal to 'Britishness' more frequently than their English counterparts, suggesting that 'the idea of Britishness resonated most at the margins, rather than at the centre of the Union'.³⁸ Gavin Daly considers the experiences of soldiers during the Peninsular War. Although at times the British celebrated their allies' patriotic war of liberation against the French, they also found an 'other' in the Spanish and the Portuguese: the latter may have been Britain's oldest military ally, but redcoats regularly looked down on them as being uncivilised, superstitious and tyrannical. The French, by contrast, were fellow professionals, whom they admired for their urbanity and gallantry.³⁹ Indeed, whereas studies of civilian national identity tend to

emphasise national differences, soldiers from opposing nations could share a common sense of professionalism and common ways of doing things.⁴⁰

A further reference point for the British national identity was the German. Whereas in public commentary the German represented the worst excesses of militarism and absolutism, Mark Wishon argues that ordinary British soldiers had a more nuanced and positive view, based on first-hand experience rather than just stereotypes. This was due to the sheer extent of Anglo-German military cooperation in this period, with soldiers from German states serving as allies, as auxiliary regiments and even in the British service itself, such as the King's German Legion. Indeed, if you count the predominantly-German foreign troops in Wellington's army, plus their Prussian allies, then only about a fifth of the troops who fought Napoleon at Waterloo were actually British.⁴¹ If nothing else, this fact should provide a corrective to Britons today who may wish to harness Waterloo to a chauvinistic national identity.

Conclusion

We know a lot more about the ranks of redcoats who faced Napoleon's army at Waterloo than we did at the 150th anniversary of the battle. The adoption of social and cultural approaches to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars has enriched our understanding of the men who served in the ranks of Wellington's army. The careful use of archival military records and printed contemporary material, particularly soldier memoirs, has resulted in a much fuller appreciation of the soldier's experience and identity during this period. This has ranged from his social and economic background before he enlisted, explorations of his behaviour during service, his identity as expressed through his attitudes towards civilians and other soldiers (both friend and foe), to society's opinion of soldiers.

This has reintegrated the history of the British Army and its men into wider historical debates of the long eighteenth century in Britain, with Wellington's men becoming a fulcrum to examine broad themes such as civil-military relations and ideas of Britishness, alongside ideals of masculinity and views of disability.

As with the tendency of operational military history to anonymise soldiers, so too do examinations of the soldiers of the British Army have to be careful not to generalise or extrapolate from incomplete or partial sources. The best scholarship on this subject has recognised the particular and the peculiar, whether it is individual stories, the interplay between a group or region's own history and the events they participated in, or the framework in which recollections were made. This has deepened as well as widened our appreciation of the redcoat's world. Wellington once likened the history of a battle to the history of a ball, in which an individual may recollect all the little events they experienced but no one can recollect their sequence and significance overall. In some ways this is still valid as we cannot reconstruct the totality of the individual lives who served in the British Army and collate them into a master analysis; but at least now we have a much better sense of the guest list, what they went through, what happened to them afterwards, and the legacy they left us.

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¹ Kennedy, *Narratives*, 1.

² Fitchett, *Wellington's Men*, 15.

³ Fitchett, *Wellington's Men*, 2, 1.

⁴ Keegan, *Face of Battle*.

⁵ For example: Emlsey, *British Society*; Stone, *Imperial State*.

⁶ Linch and McCormack (eds), *Britain's Soldiers*, 3, 9.

⁷ Mansfield, 'Military radicals'.

⁸ Foulkes, *Dancing into Battle*, 52.

⁹ Quoted Haythornthwaite, *Wellington*, 52.

¹⁰ Mercer, *Journal*, 119.

¹¹ For example, witness the book series 'War, Culture and Society, 1750-1850' by Palgrave and 'War, Society and Culture' by Pickering Chatto.

¹² For example: Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*; Jay Winter, *Great War*.

¹³ Napier, *History of the War*, vol. 3, 170.

¹⁴ McGuffie, 'Recruiting the Ranks'.

¹⁵ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*.

¹⁶ [ANONYMISED].

¹⁷ Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 90-91;

¹⁸ Western, 'Recruitment of the Land Forces'.

¹⁹ MacKillop, 'For King, Country and Regiment?'; 'Continuity, Coercion and Myth'; *'More Fruitful than the Soil'*.

²⁰ See, for example: Floud et al, *Height, Health and History*.

²¹ Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*.

²² The records are from the series WO97 held in the National Archives, covering 1760-1913.

See <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14305> (accessed 1 March 2015).

²³ [ANONYMISED].

²⁴ Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*.

²⁵ Bamford, *Sickness, Suffering, and the Sword*.

²⁶ Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage in the British Army*.

²⁷ Cookson, 'Early Nineteenth-Century Scottish Military Pensioners'.

²⁸ Nielsen, "“Continuing to Serve?””.

²⁹ Kennedy, *Narratives*, 7.

³⁰ Kennedy, *Narratives*, 187.

³¹ McCormack, *Embodying the Militia*, ch. 9.

³² Ramsey, *Military Memoir*.

³³ Bell, *First Total War*.

³⁴ Harari, *Ultimate Experience*.

³⁵ Lynn, *Battle*.

³⁶ Cookson, 'Regimental Worlds'.

³⁷ Colley, *Britons*, ch. 7.

³⁸ Kennedy, *Narratives*, 85.

³⁹ Daly, *British Soldier*.

⁴⁰ Conway, 'Eighteenth-Century British Army'.

⁴¹ Wishon, *German Forces*.