INTRODUCTION:

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF SCOTTISH REGIMENTS

Highland regiments or regiments of the line of Highland origin have long excited the imagination of writers, historical and literary, and readers alike, a romantic relationship that dates from the Napoleonic wars. The poetry, literature and painting that in the wake of the Allied victory over Napoleon at Waterloo enshrined it as an historic moment - it is one of Sir Edward Creasy's fifteen decisive battles and commemorative medals were issued to all troops involved for the “first time in the history of the British army” - also elevated the Highland regiments to new heights in the British popular imagination. The image of the Highlanders' square bristling with cold steel, the Scots steadfast as the French cavalry bears down on them, the piper playing “Cogadh na sith” within the square, captured the hearts of the English and quelled any lingering doubts about the loyalty of the Scots to the political entity that was the United Kingdom. With the entry of Ireland into the union in 1801, the pacification of one segment of the “Celtic fringe” was of no small import.1

Since Waterloo, the image of the Highland regiments has changed little; regimental fortunes have waxed and waned but they have maintained for themselves an image as an elite force, embodying the martial and tribal aspects that many would describe as central to the Scottish experience and perhaps, more importantly, have come to represent the maintenance of Scottish identity in the face of numerous pressures for acculturation.

The articles in this special issue suggest that the Highland regiment experience is much more complex. Regiments represent a variety of military experiences, both collectively and for the individual. The importance of understanding the regiment in
the context of the mercenary tradition rather than that of the clan or the prism of nation building is highlighted by Andrew Nicholl’s “For More than King and Country.” That the regiment is a useful unit for measuring social change as much as tradition and continuity is evident from Scott McLean’s “An Officer and a Gentleman”. The Scottish and British political experience is also a fruitful area to explore through the prism of recruitment. Was the recruitment of Highlander manpower a grand experiment in nation building or an extension of an intrusive state? These are some of the issues addressed by Ron Sunter and Andrew McKillop respectively.

The topic of state building suggests the utility of examining regiments. The growth of the state, and nations, was an important development during the modern period. One could argue that the experience that the Highland regiments most clearly embody is the reduction of the Highland and Scottish culture during the 18th and 19th centuries by the British state and then that culture’s reconstruction within a new British Empire framework. Some suggest that the Highland regiments indeed represent a tremendous success story in the building of a national identity: a British identity. The paradox of the Highland regiments is that they can represent both the maintenance of the older culture while being both a key agent and a prime example of acculturation.

Perhaps if there is one central theme that runs through the establishment of the Highland regiments it is that of the evolution of the British state and the gradual development of identifiable symbols of that state, shared symbols that would provide the framework for a national identity. In some ways Highland regiments represent what C.A. Bayly defines as “tributary patriotisms,” national identities based on a rediscovery of indigenous languages, literatures or customs, all encouraged by the state and compatible with the new identity. Fostering a subordinate form of nationalism within the United Kingdom by the rediscovery, or construction, of indigenous customs was assimilation by patriotism: if the empire and the monarchy became the symbols of the new British national identity in the 19th century, the army and empire were the tangible forms of
that identity, particularly for the Scottish “proprietary elite”, a point well-made in Andrew McKillop’s article.2

“Ever since the Union,” writes Linda Colley, “the British army had been one of the few departments of the state open to Scottish ambition.”3 For ambitious Scots, the army and empire provided opportunities for wealth and position unavailable to them in the British Isles. For the less ambitious, the army provided food and shelter when the economic foundations of a changing Highland culture were destroyed. It seems evident that the army was for the Highlanders in the 18th and 19th century a viable, even attractive, avenue. Was this in fact the case? Andrew Nicholls argues that the nation-building paradigm needs to be understood in the context of Scotland’s long tradition of mercenary service. To fully understand the issue, several of the authors suggest that a key question remains: why would the British government recruit, train and arm those who had been among its most ardent, if not most dangerous, opponents?

The Highland regiments’ origins were rooted in the practicality of manpower needs in a century characterized by almost continuous warfare and the state-building process that was central to 18th and 19th century Britain. The use by more organized societies of ‘barbarous’ peoples on the margins to assist in fighting their wars has a long history: the Cossacks in the Russian army are one of the more analogous examples. Indeed, it was in the need to forge ties of loyalty between the governing classes and those fighting for them that the origins of “regimenting” are found in seventeenth century Europe as the rulers of the emerging nation-states sought a means of replacing the feudal landholding system of military service and social organization that had collapsed under the pressure of the near endemic warfare. Two centuries earlier the Italian city-states had developed a system that gradually subordinated the mercenary companies to the government by increasing the dependency of the individual officer for advancement on civic officials. Charles VII of France followed suit and by the early 1600s, colonelcies of the “regiment” or command were being granted by the monarch, completing the link between the military organization and the state.4 As such, the regiment was an essential element of the growth of
modern nation-state. It secured “the control of armed forces to the state” in response to the inadequacy of the traditional landholding basis for raising armed forces. As a social institution it was designed to ensure that loyalty was transferred from the local lord to the state; on an individual level, it harnessed the value system of the individual warrior but transferred those values from the individual to the unit. The regimental system’s success lay in the fact that its foundations were those of its own history; tradition and ritual ensured loyalty and continuity and, in the 19th century, a pool of experience and expertise that formed the professional core of the British army. Scott McLean discusses some of the tensions between the older and newer traditions, suggesting as well that the regiment is a useful way of examining social changes in Scotland and Britain.

The general characteristics of the regiment in the British army in the 18th century ensured that it became an agent for transmitting a new identity to the individuals who joined at the same time as it provided a vehicle for reconstructing the old one to fit the requirements of the regimental system. This process was also shaped by the logic of recruiting in the Highlands and the state’s perception of the utility of Highland regiments of the line.

Highlanders were first formally recruited by the government, represented by the second Earl of Atholl, in 1667 to police or “watch” themselves and their country. Their purpose reflected the mistrust with which they were viewed by the British government. The Watch was not a success; the loyalties and hence the goals of the various companies were those of the “ceann-cinnidh” who had raised them. The fundamental failure to transfer loyalty to the state was exemplified when many who had taken part in the ’15 were untroubled by their role, following as they had their chieftain’s decision. The government took a different view and disbanded the regiments in 1717.

The concept lived on, however. Major-General George Wade believed that it was for “want of being put under proper regulations” that the experiment had failed. His entreaties through the 1720s to the King to raise more companies of Highlanders were couched in terms that reflected his personal
belief that the companies should be treated, as were other army units and that elements that suggested individuality and loyalty other than to the regiment should be extinguished. Hence when a new Watch received the King’s authority in 1725, the choice of plaid was, under orders, a green and blue; it reflected not a “clan tartan” affiliation but an attempt to break down the individuality of the clansmen, an individuality that was an anathema to the regimental system of discipline.7

Over the next decade and a half, six more companies were added to the Highland Watch. The most significant addition came in 1739 when a Royal Warrant added four companies and changed them from Independent Companies charged with policing the Highlands to a line regiment, 43rd (later 42nd) in precedence, in the service of the British state. The mutinies that followed in 1743, when the 43rd were to be used outside the Highlands, suggested that the Highlanders were not aware of the distinction although their officers most certainly were, an illustration that the loyalty to the British state, or to the allegiance which best furthered their own interests, of the upper classes was secured. Indeed the army became an important agent in the creation of a new Anglo-British elite.8

Despite the mutiny of the 43rd, this decision to regiment met with markedly more success. If the Highlanders who filled out the ranks did not appreciate the point, from 1739 it was also more clearly an attempt at nation building and its success was partially due to the appeal of the regimental system itself. While creating a community of interest between the Highlanders and the rest of Britain, the Highland regiments were more than just a result of a new relationship being forged between these cultures and peoples; they were also important catalysts shaping and promoting a new identity not just for the Highlanders but both for the British and the Scots.

This is an important point and one reason that examining the regiments is important. Nation building was a two-way street. Fontenoy may have proved the battle-worthiness of the Highland regiments, but it took longer to dispel the suspicions fostered by rebellion and centuries of mutual antagonisms. “To remind themselves of Scottish depredations,” notes
Linda Colley, “Englishman had only to . . . glance at the beacon towers strung along the hills of Cumberland and Westmoreland, erected over centuries so as to give warning of impending Scottish raiders. As for Scotsmen, the genocide that had reputedly followed the Battle of Culloden was reminder enough of the English capacity for racialism and hate.”9 There was at this time also a widespread concern, culminating in the narrow English patriotism of John Wilkes in the 1760s and 70s, that Scots were alien to English political temperaments. The populist nature of the Scot phobia that gained currency was partially a result of the government’s campaign to secure the allegiance of Scots through government and royal patronage. In the late 18th century, peerage appointments of Scottish, and Irish, nobility increased dramatically.10 It was also a product of the tenacity with which many Scots were promoting the notion of Briton as an identity based on a commonality of political and moral characteristics, a decidedly Lowland initiative that did not have a great impact in the south.

The conspicuous success of the Highland regiments during the Seven Years War was a primary factor in the decision to raise further regiments. It also did much to quell the suspicions that had characterized attitudes towards the “barbarous” peoples of the north up until that time. The success of the Highland regiments in promoting a new feeling of harmony was, however, only made possible by the extinction of the culture and threat that they represented. In the aftermath of the ’45, the British government, with its attention drawn to the Highlands by the successes of the Rebellion, effectively embarked on a two-fold program of destroying the underpinnings of the Highland society and rebuilding it on a basis more suitable to the burgeoning commercial nation that was England and increasingly Lowland Scotland. In the former they achieved rapid success; the latter took longer.

The Disarming and the Heritable Jurisdiction acts of 1746-47 were only two of the numerous pieces of legislation that were designed to replace allegiance to hereditary lords and the Stuarts with allegiance to the state and the monarch. More substantive measures included the subsidization of certain primary industries
and the establishment of schools for teaching English and the industrial trades.\textsuperscript{11}

None of this proscribed the future of the Highland way of life; neither in perception nor reality was the Highland way of life expected to survive much less shape the image of the whole of Scotland. Indeed, the Highland Scot prior to the ’45 was as often the butt of humour as the root of fear. The image of the Highlander as “fool, rogue or beggar” was pervasive through the early 19th century and is not completely absent from the novels of Sir Walter Scott.\textsuperscript{12} The late 18th and early 19th century witnessed not only the triumph of the image of the Highland Scot as warrior but the transmission of natural martial virtues to all Scots, a transmission made easier and facilitated by the romanticization of the “noble savage” and primitive peoples across Europe and the concurrent decline of the threat they posed to their more civilized neighbours.\textsuperscript{13}

If the Rebellion both brought the Highlands as a region and as a people to the attention of the British and finished them as a real threat, the Disarming Act proved the catalyst for the association of the Highland regiments with the development of 19th century Highland traditions. From the beginning, the importance of maintaining Highland “traditions” became central to the mandate of the regiments, not least because of the proscription against the use except in the Highland regiments in the British army abroad of the incidental symbols of Jacobitism and Gaeldom like the belted plaid and the bagpipes. The Disarming Act, by specifically excluding the Highland regiments, ensured that for the twenty-five years that the ban held, the Highland regiments not only retained the remnants of the Highland martial tradition but more importantly changed it forever. The next century then saw the Highland regiments as one of the key factors in popularising and spreading the traditions that they had helped fashion.

Instrumental in fashioning this role was Prime Minister William Pitt. He supported the raising of ten regiments in the period 1757-1760. All but the renumbered 42nd Royal Regiment of Foot were disbanded. Their influence survived them. Pitt himself characterized the new image of the Highlander:
I sought for merit wherever it was to be found; it is my boast that I was the first minister who looked for it, and found it, in the mountains of the North. I called it forth and drew into your service a hardy and intrepid race. 

Pitt, however, was also desperately short of men and conscious that Highland manpower had been turned against the state in the not too distant past, fallen "prey to the artifice of [its] enemies." Major, later General, James Wolfe, immortalized on the Plains of Abraham, was less oblique, writing in 1751 that "They are hardy, intrepid, accustom'd [sic] to rough Country, and no great mischief if they fall." Interestingly, he illustrated the dynamic attitude towards the Highlanders, noting that the public would think his ideas "execrable and bloody". Pitt was neither the first nor the only state servant to envision large-scale recruiting among the Highlanders; Lord Barrington the Secretary for War in 1751 told Parliament:

I am for having always in our army as many soldiers as possible; not that I think them more brave than those of any country we can recruit from but because they are generally more hardy and less mutinous.

There were thus numerous rationales for recruitment but not least was the desire to increase the number of loyal subjects as a proportion of serving soldiers. It has been estimated that between 50-60% of soldiers in the British army at the beginning of the 18th century were foreign subjects or mercenaries. By the end of the century that figure was probably less than 20%. That the themes of obedience and loyalty frequently recur suggests that the attempt to recreate a Highland identity in a less threatening fashion was also part of a larger objective of promoting patriotic service to the British state. Certainly contemporaries viewed the Highland regiments as a "very significant experiment" in nation building.

None of this explains why the Highlanders answered the call or how they gained widespread acceptance as an embodiment of
the Scot as warrior. On these questions we can use the regiments to illustrate that the two issues are intertwined. The former question is beyond the scope of this essay but the soldiers who enlisted must be remembered as individuals coming to grips with the decline of their society on an economic and cultural level, with the traditional social elites either rendered helpless or actively accelerating the process. Martial ardour does not provide a useful explanation. The ambivalence of the Scots’ reaction to the whole process is reflected in McKillop’s discussion of the difficulties they obtained in raising a full complement of men as well as other studies of the mutinies of the regiments through the later 18th century. Ron Sunter’s article sheds light on the practice of recruiting and what this suggests about the recruits. Certainly the upheaval in the aftermath of the failed rebellion explains the appeal of the provisions of the Disarming Act, as was surely the objective; also critical was the maintenance of the loyalty of the chieftains who retained their influence and saw in regimenting a chance to both rid themselves of tenants and a way to curry status and favour when opportunities for advancement in the new order were still limited. Thus when the decision was made during the American Revolution to once again expand regimenting amongst the Highlanders, and they proved their worth in the service of the state, the place of the Highland regiments in the British Army was cemented. This positioned them to influence the image of the Scots in general.

The importance of the Highland regiments in this process is now well documented. Between 1777 and 1800, twenty regiments were raised and half were retained on the establishment of the British Army through the early 19th century. These regiments adopted the revisions that had been made in the traditional Highland costume. The kilt proved more practical than the plaid cloth worn from the waist to the knee. While there is some dispute as to the origins of this innovation, it replaced the belted plaid in the aftermath of the Disarming Act. Until 1782, when the act was repealed, the Regiments were the main repositories of the traditional garb albeit in an altered form. The same forces that had brought like-minded Scots together in the Highland Society in London in 1777 to promote a Gaelic cultural
revival also prompted a renewed interest in the wearing of the beltled plaid and kilt, not amongst the traditional wearers of such costume but among the Lowland upper and middle classes. Reactions to attempts to promote the trews as more traditional than the kilt during the late 18th and early 19th century suggest that the kilt was not assured a victory. In 1794, Sir John Sinclair dressed his Rothesay and Caithness fencibles in tartan trews. In contrast, in 1804 the War Office considered a wholesale change, an idea that was firmly rebuffed by the officer corps of the Highland regiments who argued forcefully against any attempt to strip them of their native garb.18

The regiments as medium also ushered in another innovation that would soon take its place among the pantheon of traditional symbols: the tartan. As the number of regiments increased so did the need for new patterns to differentiate them and create the distinctiveness so central to the regimental system. All new regiments, with the exception of the 79th Regiment of Foot (Cameronian Volunteers) whose tartan was designed by the mother of the founder of the regiment Alan Cameron of Erracht, modelled their tartans on the Government or Black Watch design. The degree to which this was rooted in clan tradition is debatable but its commercial potential was obvious, particularly in the climate of a resurgent interest in Gaelic culture. Consequently, at least according to Trevor-Roper, clan tartans rapidly multiplied and were certified legitimate just as rapidly by the Highland Society. The idea was popularised by a retired Black Watch officer, Colonel David Stewart, who took his regimental tradition for history.

The link between the Highland regiments and the resurgence of interest in Highland tradition is not all that remarkable. They moved, however, from vehicles for the maintenance of a way of life to agents for its transmission to the entire nation. The “Highlandization” of Scotland, the identification of Highland symbols and costume with the Lowland Scots, was speeded by the new heights of adulation afforded the Highland regiments, and army in general, following the Napoleonic wars. The identification was cemented during King George IV’s royal visit to Edinburgh in 1822, when “Highlandism” became a fashion
statement. Orchestrated by Sir Walter Scott, as detailed in John Prebble’s *The King’s Jaunt*, Highland traditions were created, legitimised and paraded before the whole British nation as representative of all Scots. “A bogus tartan caricature of itself had been drawn and accepted,” writes Prebble, “even by those who mocked it.”

Sir Walter Scott’s novels were also instrumental in promoting the seemingly contradictory romanticization of the Highlands while bemoaning their backwardness and the need to accept the modernizing forces of progress that accompanied the union. Sir Walter Scott in *Waverley* describes “without sentiment” the vanishing of “much absurd political prejudice” and the many “progressive” changes that have characterized Scotland since the defeat in the ’45. Indeed, Scott’s novels reflect the paradox that while Highland culture was an anathema to many who saw ancient historic Scotland’s culture and roots as quite distinct from the barbaric Highland culture, the identity being formed in the 19th century was rooted in the romanticization of that which they had so long despised. The Lowlands, if one can be allowed a generalization, had rather emphasized the similarities in moral and political characteristics with the south that made for the unique identity of the Briton and it was they who first coined the term North Briton. Scott’s success, balanced on the shoulders of the Highland regiments, the economic success of the union and the creation of a new “British” upper class from the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh, was the that he “built a single Scotland on the territory soaked in the blood of warring Highlanders and Lowlanders, kings and Covenanters, and he did so by emphasizing their ancient divisions.”

The final triumph of the process of Highlandization was the creation and then adoption of a Highland warrior ethos as a characteristic of Scottish nationalism. The reputation of the Highland warrior had its roots in a culture and circumstances that made no distinction between soldier and civilian, that produced a fighter proficient in arms and whose value system was intertwined with his skills as a combatant. The Highland culture was also one whose system of social organization - the clan - inhibited the development of a political state and a concurrent military institution, a failing
which would prove fatal in its struggle with its southern neighbours. From warriors who were expected to fight due to their place in the social order and their culture they were transformed into natural soldiers, a conclusion drawn by their success in the British army. No one has really answered the question of how and why the Highlanders took so well to the discipline of the regimental system in the regular British army. Instead environment and character became linked, clan battles were no longer examples of lawlessness but of the martial spirit evidenced as well by Highland regiments. As Highland regiments began to represent Scotland, Scottish martial spirit became a cornerstone of identity and part of the cornerstone of imperialism and the Scottish role in it. It was as distinct a national characteristic as the kilt and clan tartan symbolic. A “Highlandization” which represented martial ardour as a national characteristic and the kilt, bagpipe and tartan as national symbols could be said to be complete with the decision by the War Office during the army reforms in 1881 to introduce the tartan and Highland costume to the Lowland regiments.

Was a new Scottish identity formed within a British framework? Perhaps the better question is could a new identity, given the diversity of Scottish culture, have been formed otherwise? J.G.A. Pocock characterizes the Scottish identity as one “consisting in a continuous movement between alternative roles” and observes that its choices of national identity have always been “open”. How the regiments came to be a key vehicle for Scottishness and at the same time define what it was follows from their successful integration into the state apparatus and the cultural vacuum that the British state created in the aftermath of the failed rebellions. Regimenting itself represented the type of nation building that was transforming Scottish national identity into an uneasy mix of British and national. The Highland regiment’s retention of certain aspects of what became defined as traditional garb and music can also be represented as the expansion of the British state and the successful management of one culture by another. The Highland regiments for many Scots became the embodiment of a culture and tradition that was stateless but a nation nonetheless. Did they also represent an
attempt to extinguish that culture that produced? The success and promotion of the regiments as important agents of the new Highlandization was also a product of the destruction of that culture by the adaptation to commercialisation by their former clan leaders, now landlords. Does then the raising and incorporation of the Highlanders into the regimental system reflect the diminishment of their culture and the related phenomenon of the rise of the British state? Did the regiments harness the Highlander’s martial ardour or did they create the idea in the first place? An examination of the history of the Highland regiments can shed some light on these questions.

The regiment was the central institution shaping the Scottish military experience through the late 18th and 19th century, and as such is a fruitful area for studying Scotland’s soldiers and people. The study of the regiment is not, however, limited to military questions. A much-maligned historical endeavour, the regimental history was held up as an example of the worst excesses of the “drum and trumpet” approach to military history. They were often overly descriptive “battle pieces” which generally provided the framework for the main objective of these narratives: relating the exploits of individual members of a particular unit.25

The regiment, however, provides a wealth of opportunity to examine numerous social, cultural, political and, of course, military questions. The history of imperial expansion, the esprit de corps of the British army, even the social and demographic organization of the country is reflected in the regiment and the regimental system. The regiment is not simply a military institution. Strictly speaking, a regiment is not an operational unit; it has no tactical function. Rather they are parent organizations, recruiting, training and fielding battalions for service as well as, in theory, providing them with reinforcements. Regiments are also a bridge with the past, the embodiment of particular geographic or cultural contributions to military service; as such they can provide a forum for studying a culture or the clash of cultures.

Culture plays an important part in attitudes towards war and fighting; how that warfare is organized and perceived also
reflects the society. In few places were the disparities between
the two cultures more apparent than in their respective war
making traditions. One important question is why, in such a
seemingly warlike society, did the military organization of the
Highlands remain largely unchanged for centuries; perhaps,
as Andrew Nicholls’ paper suggests, the mercenary tradition of
many of Scotland’s finest military leaders and rank and file could
not help but have influenced the development, or lack thereof,
of the Scottish military and indeed the Scottish state.

The mercenary tradition raises further questions about the
centrality of the martial tradition in Scottish history, questions
examined by Andrew McKillop in his paper. While the Scots
became known for their fighting qualities, the adaptation of the
Highlanders to the discipline of the regimental system should
come as a surprise for indiscipline was central to their “Highland
charge”. They resisted recruitment, yet fit in well to a hier-
archical system where their affinity for the symbols of honour
and tradition would be critical to the success of the regimental
system. Did they respond better to discipline than the average
urbanized English soldier? One author suggests that Scots made
particularly good soldiers in the service of the British army
because “Scots were sometimes credited with being more
easily shepherded than Englishmen.”26 Clearly, there are many
questions left to answer.

“Imagination and sentiment . . . are a dangerous medium . . .
through which to approach the subject of battle.”27 They are also
a dangerous way to approach the subject of history despite
the fact that that history may be shaped by those very factors.
The following papers have attempted to shed some light on the
Highland regiments, frequently romanticized, but not always
well understood.

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Endnotes

13. Withers, 150.
16. Ibid, 94.
17. An interesting 19th century perspective is provided by an 1880 compilation entitled _The Story of the Good Ship Bounty and her Mutineers and the Mutinies in the Highland Regiments_, n.a.; a more modern perspective is provided by John Prebble, _Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt, 1743-1804_ (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975).