FOR MORE THAN KING AND COUNTRY:

REFLECTIONS ON THE MERCENARY TRADITION IN EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SCOTTISH MILITARY HISTORY

This volume seeks to consider the history and significance of one of the most important and inspiring aspects of Scotland’s contribution to the British Empire - the performance of the army’s Highland regiments. Among other things, discussions of their exploits in the Seven Years War, the American War of Independence, the Napoleonic wars, and India, will serve as noteworthy samplings of the range of their services. And yet, as impressive as the records of the Highland regiments clearly are, their very emergence as key components of the British military in the generation after Culloden presents certain ambiguities, particularly when one considers the factors that might have prevented such a scenario from developing.

Is it not puzzling, for instance, that the Highlanders would become such effective instruments of a state, and of institutions, that had worked diligently for nearly a century and a half, to suppress their very culture and way of life? This development appears to have been even more surprising when we consider that the eventual Highland companies were drawn from many clans that had been supporters of the exiled Stewarts. As mark of this, they had nearly succeeded, twice in the first half of the eighteenth century, in toppling the dynasty which they were now pledged to serve. Were Highland fighting men of the later eighteenth century thus turning their backs upon the principles of their forebears, merely to “take the king’s shilling”?

For its part, the British government can also be seen to have undergone a substantial change in attitude in its decision to
recruit fighting forces from Jacobite areas of the Highlands after 1756. This was a government that had worked to smash the clan system, and disarm the Highlanders in the wake of its victory at Culloden in 1746. What had happened to cause this official reversal? The apparent paradox created by these alterations would seem to beg two obvious questions. Why was it that the Highlanders came into the military service of a regime that had previously treated their society as a pariah, and why did it happen so quickly? Traditionally, an explanation for this bold, but ultimately successful arrangement, has been sought in the convergence of two enabling factors.

The first reflects the changing international situation which faced the British government in the 1750s. As it happened, war ultimately necessitated an expansion of the British army to fight in a variety of theatres. The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle of 1748 had left numerous issues unresolved in Britain’s stormy mid-century relations with France, and this meant that the United Kingdom would remain more or less on a war footing. Between 1750 and 1756, commercial disputes in North America escalated into a series of conflicts, centered mainly in Nova Scotia, in the Great Lakes region, and in the Ohio Valley. Meanwhile, the duke of Newcastle’s bumbling attempts to forge a continental alliance against France merely had the effect of committing Great Britain to provide military support to her German allies, in the event of war in Europe. When war with France finally came in 1756, the government thus found itself in the difficult position of having to provide significant numbers of land forces for service on both sides of the Atlantic. This made it imperative that new soldiers be found.

Back in Britain, Jacobitism was now considered to be a spent force because ten years of repressive social engineering had largely succeeded in pacifying its most fertile area in the Scottish Highlands. Under the circumstances, William Pitt, the new secretary of war, was prepared to act upon the prompting of the 3rd duke of Argyll, who urged that men from the Highlands be raised for service in America. By the end of 1756, some 1400 men from Fraser estates and surrounding territories were organised into a regiment for service in America under the command of
the former Jacobite, the Master of Lovat. Thus, a new chapter in the history of the British army had been written as men from formerly Jacobite areas were recruited for government service.

These events, however, only explain part of this new equation, for even though they provide some insights into why the government needed new recruits, they do not explain why the Highlanders began to enlist themselves to government service. For the men in government who made the decision to recruit Highlanders, however, and for many later historians, the explanation for tapping this resource has tended to find its roots in a rather crude conception of the Highlander as an individual who was bred and conditioned to fight.

A sense of this can be read in William Pitt’s remarks in a 1766 speech on the mounting troubles with America. For his part, Pitt harboured no doubts that the enlistment of the Highlanders to the cause of empire was an act of sheer brilliance, and that he alone was owed the credit for creating this new fighting force. He said in his speech:

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 of men, who, when left by your jealousy, became prey to the artifice of your enemies, and had gone nigh to have overturned the State in the war before the last. These men in the last war were brought to combat on your side; they served with fidelity, as they fought with valour, and conquered for you in every part of the world.¹

This claim of Pitt’s, that his boldness and temerity transformed the Highlanders from simmering enemies into valiant allies, has not been without its adherents among later commentators. Sir Winston Churchill, who certainly knew something about assembling fighting forces out of diverse interests, wrote that: “…Pitt, canalized the martial ardour of the Highlanders into the service of his Imperial dreams. Highland regiments,” he
recorded, “brought glory to Scotland under Wolfe at Quebec, and ever since have stood in the forefront of the British Army.” In a popular study of the regiments themselves, even a sympathetic historian has stated that the Highlanders enlisted in the new regiments as: “…an outlet for their natural martial ardour…”

This theme has continued, and more recent scholarly works have pointed to the actual and symbolic importance of the imperial wars of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in finally breaking down the cultural barriers that divided the peoples of the British Isles, and retarded the emergence of a British nation. Linda Colley has been most assertive in suggesting this link between external military tests, and a decline in internal hostilities and suspicions, by calling the British nation an “…invention forged above all by war.” “Time and again,” she has written, “…war with France brought Britons, whether they hailed from Wales, Scotland, or England, into confrontation with an obviously hostile Other, and encouraged them to define themselves collectively against it.”

Now perhaps it is just me, but somehow this apparently happy mix of an ingrained fighting spirit within Highland society, coupled with new opportunities for putting it to constructive use in the four comers of the globe after 1756, seems a rather pedestrian and old fashioned way of treating these soldiers. While it may be useful in terms of dating the emergence of Highland regiments in the British army, it still seems to fall somewhat short in terms of explaining an apparently bold, and new relationship, between former enemies. It fails to consider, for example, that the Scots in general, and the Highlanders in particular, traditionally opted to undertake military service for the soundest of personal reasons in the early modern period. This tradition stands in stark contrast to a belief that the Highlanders’ possessed some ingrained spirit of martial ardour which constantly needed to be canalized. Simply put, Highland fighting men generally fought when it was pragmatic to do so, and they often did their fighting in the service of persons who were offering them a viable return. Therefore, if there was any novelty to the post-1756 Highlanders’ service, it lay in the fact that they were offering it to their state, rather than to some more localized entity, or foreign sponsor.
What would not change was the tendency of the Highland soldier to use military service as a means for personal survival. In order to understand how service to the state thus stands as a natural progression for these soldiers, several general points must be established surrounding the opportunities that were open to Highland fighting men in the early modern period.

It is axiomatic that the clan system stood at the heart of Highland society, and that fighting was related to this. Clanship offered a model for dividing lands; it afforded protection for one’s lands; and it provided an opportunity to grow richer through raids against neighbouring lands. It also created a unit that could be mobilized to exact vengeance if an individual, or the clan itself, was perceived to have been attacked or wronged. Clearly, there was a quasi-military character to this system, and this factor has contributed to the popular perception of the Highlander as a born soldier. What must be remembered, however, is that notions of the clans as cohesive, family units, with absolute loyalties to their particular chiefs, have by now been largely discredited. Rather than seeing the Highland warriors as the unthinking tools of their particular chiefs, research has now shown that clanship was elastic, and that loyalties shifted. Indeed, the survival of smaller clans often hinged upon striking the most beneficial bond possible with a neighbouring magnate. Rights of plunder following conquest, and the prospect of booty, were understood components of pledging one’s service. Under the terms of such arrangements, it would seem clear that military service was a commodity which the Highlanders used as a form of social barter, and thus, it was not a one-dimensional expression of blood lust.

Promises of military assistance did not run for indefinite periods, either. In fact, loyalty to a chief or commander might be cut short if the fighting men believed that they were not receiving their due, or that a cause was lost. Two famous examples may serve to demonstrate this. On 15 August 1645, the Marquis of Montrose routed what appeared to be the last of the Covenanting armies, and capped a spectacular year of victories at the Battle of Kilsyth. Triumphantaly, he marched into Glasgow at the head of an army comprised mainly of Highlanders and
Irish Gaels. Scotland seemed to be on the verge of being retaken for the royalist cause. And yet, within a month, Montrose saw his army dissolve, and his own fortunes turn at the battle of Philiphaugh. In the wake of Kilsyth, he had tried to prevent his Highland troops from plundering the Lowlands, something they considered to be their right of conquest, and a due return for their services. In reaction against this, and using the excuse that their homes and families needed tending, some 3,000 Highlanders, mainly MacDonalds and Gordons, deserted Montrose, and thereby sapped his army.6

If the desertions from Montrose’s army offers one example of the Highland soldiers’ understanding of their best interests, and their perceived notion of rights through service, then the lack of cohesion shown by the small Jacobite army of some 2,000 men in the wake of the Battle of Killiecrankie in July 1689 demonstrates another. In this case, Viscount Dundee’s successor, Colonel Alexander Cannon, proved unable to exercise his authority over the ranks of Keppoch MacDonalds, MacIans of Glencoe, and MacGregors, who made up much of his force. Deprived of their leader, sensing that opportunities for plunder had passed, and perhaps seeing that defeat was imminent, this force soon went down to defeat at Dunkeld, and temporarily diminished the Jacobite cause in Scotland.7

These famous examples illustrate at least some of the tradition which saw military service offered in anticipation of some form of material reward. To be sure, the behavior of the respective warriors, even at the moment of victory, ought to cause us to question the notion that these men served under Montrose or Dundee, simply to satisfy their natural “martial ardour”. Nonetheless, these were peculiar circumstances brought on by civil war and revolution, so they do not tell us as much as we need to know about the more regular kinds of military service that were open to the Highland soldiers.

It must be remembered that notions of service to one’s state were developing very slowly throughout Europe during the early modern period. For most fighting men in the Scottish Highlands in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an understanding that they might be asked to serve their state would have been a
virtual anathema. Thus, we must probe the influences and opportunities that could cause them to fight for more immediate and understandable motives or masters. The first point which requires our consideration surrounds the military capacities of the early modern Scottish state, particularly after the union of the crowns in 1603. Briefly, Scotland lagged behind most of its European counterparts in nationalizing its fighting forces during the seventeenth century. Where states such as France, Spain, England and Sweden had succeeded in bringing coercive forces under the control of their respective central governments, fighting men in Scotland continued to face a host of alternatives in terms of where they could offer their services, throughout the seventeenth century. They were bound, for instance, to provide their services to their clan chiefs. This fact in itself has often been used to exemplify the “fighting spirit” of Highland society, but it is now largely understood that military service was in many cases a portable commodity, which might be transferred from one master to another, depending upon a chief’s capacity to sustain his fighters. The options open to fighting men from Scotland were broader than this, however.

James VI was the first Scottish monarch of the early modern period to attempt to make such institutions as the administration of justice national in scope, and here, a recognition of the need to minimize the violence present in various regions of Scotland was at the centre of his ambitions. In particular, he sought to curb the practice of blood feuds among the clans of the Highlands, and made a number of attempts to restrict the capacities of the clan chiefs to make war on each other. And yet, it would be wrong to suggest that James held any illusions that an outlet for the “war-like spirit” of his subjects, especially in the Highlands, could be found in their recruitment for national enterprises. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who were harnessing the regional and hereditary loyalties of fighting forces in the name of creating state armies, James possessed neither the financial, nor the coercive resources to achieve such an undertaking. Indeed, while he sometimes expressed a desire to pacify the Highlands by force, James showed time and again his understanding of the central government’s limitations.
Thus, while an uneasy peace was enforced in Scotland’s more remote regions, only the Borders were pacified through the agencies of the central government. Even here, the success of the Commission of the Middle Shires was reflective of a British, rather than a purely Scottish initiative; something which had been facilitated by the union of the crowns after 1603. In the far north of Scotland, in the Hebrides, and in the western Highlands and Islands, order was established by proxies such as the earls of Huntly, the Mackenzies of Kintail, or the earls of Argyll. Ironically then, James’ efforts at curbing the private military capabilities of his subjects depended upon the personal resources of a few, select lieutenants, whose actions can more accurately be described as policing for profit, rather than enlistment to a national cause. Here, the essentially mercenary character of service to the sovereign was alive and well.

The union of the crowns itself proved to be another complicating factor that retarded Scotland’s capacity to nationalize its military capabilities. Instead of following the trend present in other independent states, which entailed a growing sense of national interests, and a corresponding development of national forces with which to assert them, Scotland was placed in the new position of finding its interests and foreign policy tied to England’s. Except during the ascendency of the Covenanting regimes in the middle of the century, Scotland’s relations with the wider world were inextricably tied to, and defined by, English preoccupations. I would suggest, therefore, that in terms of describing the effect which this had upon the military talent and capabilities present in Scotland, we can identify four distinctive alternatives that were open to Scotland’s fighting men, which took the place of service to the state. Each, in their own ways, will demonstrate that personal factors, not demonstrations of martial ardour, were the soldiers’ primary motivations.

The first example involves fighting men who provided direct services to their sovereign in the early modern period. At the officer level, this proved to be an especially important development which saw men drawn from the Scottish aristocracy rise rapidly in the military profession over the course of the seventeenth century. By the end of the century, this had
contributed to the creation of a cadre of leading rank officers who had earned their commissions through loyalty to the British, rather than the Scottish state. They were to prove to be ardent opponents of Jacobitism after 1688 and pivotal supporters of the Union of 1707. The entire phenomenon has been well described by Keith Brown as the transformation of Scottish lords into British officers.\textsuperscript{15}

The second example illustrates how the Scottish state was lagging behind other European states in developing a tradition of national military service. This alternative involved the large numbers of officers and men who served as mercenaries on the continent during the seventeenth century, particularly during the Thirty Years War in the first half of the century, and during the wars of Louis XIV in the second half of the century. Some of Scotland’s most celebrated commanders such as Alexander Leslie and John Graham of Claverhouse gained their military experience on the continent, fighting as paid mercenaries. Even more significant was the large number of ordinary soldiers who fought abroad for pay, under various national flags, during this period. In what stands as a remarkable proportion, it has been estimated that over one in ten Scottish males served in the armies of other European states during the first half of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{16}

A third alternative, by contrast, did go some way toward making military service more of a national enterprise. This entailed the enlistment of men into local militias which were usually commanded by leading local magnates. While this did provide some spur toward seeing militia service as a duty owed to one’s shire, and by extension, to one’s country, the reality was that local defences were poorly funded, led and organized over the course of the seventeenth century. Except for the years of the wars of the Covenant, local militias often operated according to a convenient myth - the notion that a common monarch precluded the need for defence against England. While this cut both ways, as Charles I learned to his horror during the Bishops’ Wars, the nascent system of local defences in Scotland still signaled a lack of emphasis upon national defence, or a clear definition of national needs.\textsuperscript{17}
The final alternative was rooted in the history and traditions of the Highland clans themselves and the resonance of military capabilities among clan chiefs. Despite the efforts of the central government, the Highland nobility continued to wield significant coercive power throughout the century, and in times of crisis or need, the government was not above utilizing this. It is this mercenary nature of service within the Highlands which makes a comparison with the other three alternatives I have noted rather important. At every level, military service in Scotland assumed that maximum credit would be obtained for one’s efforts. None of these alternatives, (with the possible exception of militia service) achieved a great deal toward providing Scotland with a tradition of national service. Each entailed the pursuit of personal, and in many cases profit-oriented motives, and indicated a resonance of mercenary objectives. Thus, the overwhelming emphasis among fighting men in early seventeenth century Scotland seems to have been upon personal, local, or clan interests, but almost never upon expressly Scottish interests.

Against the range of factors that might have caused a Highland fighting man to serve a variety of masters prior to the suppression of the clans, the zenith-like rise to prominence of the Highland regiments of the British army in the later eighteenth century, gives the appearance of a new kind of control. On the surface, we might indeed be led to the conclusion that the martial ardour of Highland society could be channeled in the service of a national cause. Stereotypes die hard in history, and the cartoonish view that so many have sketched of the Highland soldier, is one that ought to be breathing its last gasps. It is hoped that the essays which follow will help with that process, and will further demonstrate that the men of the Highland regiments were fighting for something more than king and country.

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Endnotes