CONTINUITY, COERCION AND MYTH:
THE RECRUITMENT OF
HIGHLAND REGIMENTS IN THE
LATER EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The British army’s Highland regiments have proven to be one of the most resilient and enduring institutions to emerge in post-Union Scotland. While the empire that created them has come and gone, both literary and popular interest in many aspects of the Highland regimental tradition remain strong. This ongoing attraction is due largely to the flexible nature of the regiments themselves and the larger cultural issues that find expression through them. Although initially sanctioned in the 1740s and 1750s to maximise the use of Highlanders as cannon fodder, their role has nevertheless continually evolved. Later in the same century they were promoted in order to rehabilitate leading Jacobite families and ensure the social and cultural acceptance of the region’s elite by the rest of Britain’s landed establishment. More generally, it has been argued that the positive shift in perceptions of the Gael from an alien barbarian in 1746 to a loyal and morally upstanding Briton by 1815 was due in large part to his conspicuous service in such levies. In the nineteenth century the role of Highland regiments adapted yet again, and the tartan warrior became a wider symbol of Scotland’s martial past and of its equal, not to say disproportionate, role in the Empire. This perception was driven by the country’s anxieties over its place and importance within the domestic British Union. Faced with the need to counter their nation’s patently junior status, Scots - both Lowland and Highland - used such regiments as a pan Scottish badge to prove their country’s value and worth to the United Kingdom.
Yet such units also answered what could have been a potentially contradictory desire to celebrate Scotland and Scottishness. Their existence enabled Scots to envisage an effective and enduring imperial institution that was not reliant upon England for its historical antecedents. Therein lies their past and indeed present popularity. Highlighting their Scottish character had become all the more important by the Victorian era given that urbanisation and industrialisation had transformed Scotland and made it appear indistinguishable from England in many fundamental respects. This ability to fulfil multiple cultural concerns survived into the twentieth century. Despite the ongoing recruitment problems and amalgamations encountered by the regiments themselves, the image of the kilted soldier continues to act as an extremely successful marketing aid within the highly competitive global tourist industry.

Clanship and Continuity: The basis for Highland regiments?

Two particular strands within this celebrated regimental tradition are continuity and authenticity. From their very inception the regiments were seen as somehow representative of wider Highland society. The erstwhile Master of Lovat, Simon Fraser, whose upwardly-mobile career in military service was an example to every broken Jacobite family, is particularly important in this regard. In 1757, as part of his rehabilitation under the aegis of Archibald Campbell, third Duke of Argyll, Fraser raised a battalion of 1,400 men to serve in North America. This regiment is a particularly useful example in demonstrating the perceived continuities with pre-Culloden society that supposedly characterised the recruitment of Highlanders in the later eighteenth century. That it was raised under the direction of the Argylls - whose historic reputation is based primarily on their leading role in the destruction of clanship and is to point to merely the most obvious weakness in the continuity argument. Yet this has not prevented Fraser’s 78th Highlanders being the subject of extravagant romanticisation and assertions that it was, in some way, a clan regiment. For example, a nineteenth century historian of the Highlands noted; ‘Though not possessed of an inch of
land, yet, such was the influence of clanship, that young Lovat in a few weeks raised a corp of 800 men. Thus an essentially imperial levy was linked to a distinctly Scottish past, and clanship effortlessly stitched into the infrastructure of the empire that had helped destroy it. The image of ongoing clannishness that underpins the reputation of Fraser’s first battalion subsequently became evident in the portrayal of the numerous regiments that followed it. Regimental histories emerged as a particularly effective medium that stressed the links with the old values of chieftains, kinship, and unquestioning loyalty. The impression created by such histories is that, despite its social and economic obliteration, clanship was preserved in the units of Highlanders raised for British service. Thus a typical nineteenth century history noted that when the Reay Fencibles were raised in 1794 it was because the government had ‘made appeals to their noblemen to arm their clansmen’. The powerful imagery of old loyalty and clan power was further reinforced when it was recorded that ‘the Mackays came cheerfully forward at the call of their chieftains’. Regimental histories obsessively emphasised ‘the true Highland spirit’ of the post Culloden levies, with the kilt and distinctive ‘martial spirit’ being highlighted as defining characteristics. This mentality ensured the vigorous defence of regiments when their historical authenticity and Highland character was questioned. Assertions that the Highlander tended towards pacificity, or that kilted units differed little from other British regiments in their social makeup, usually brought swift rebuttal. It was pointed out that:

> It has, indeed, often been a matter of surprise to those acquainted with the truth, how the assertion that the Highland regiments were destitute of Scotsmen, and principally composed of Irishmen, could be so generally believed ... even now the martial spirit exists in Scotland to a greater degree than either in England or Ireland.

Such assertions were all designed to support the central argument that the Highland regimental tradition was unique because
it provided a rescue channel for an increasingly threatened Highland culture and lifestyle. One of the most recent and detailed studies on the social composition and role of such levies has summarised this generally accepted historiography, and argued that as early as the last half of the eighteenth century.

The Highland regiments formed an elite, proud of their service, second to none and would have greeted any suggestion of abuse with anger and disdain. The best qualities of Highland men had been brought to their full potential in these regiments. It is difficult to understand how this could have been done if the Highlanders had not had their hearts in the business . . . These were all raised by eminent Highland men, drawing up the loyalties and discipline of the clan system . . . Highland regiments were close and elite societies which seemed in many ways seemed to mirror the society from which they originated.8

Thus the British army that at Culloden broke not just the clans but also, according to popular perception, the entire society they represented, now became the vehicle whereby the most visible traditions of that culture survived. The undoubted success of British recruiting in the region, therefore, appeared to be that it offered a logical outlet for the Gael’s supposed cultural preference for wearing arms as well as his propensity to violence. In summary, the basic appeal of the eighteenth century regiments lay in the fact they offered continuity in an age of intensive, not to say revolutionary, change. During the twentieth century this version of British army recruiting in the region has been countered by a radically alternative historiography. This asserts that the excessive military use of Highlanders amounted to little more than the institutionalised and cynical exploitation of a peripheral and subordinate people by an aggressive and imperialistic ruling elite.9

There is, on the face of it, considerable evidence to support the view that these regiments were indeed a natural recourse for the culturally disorientated and morally dejected Gael. This
involves recognising the sheer scale of the region’s contribution to Britain’s imperial expansion and entrenchment in the last half of the eighteenth century. Even allowing for the nominal amount of Highlanders within many supposed ‘Highland regiments’, the involvement of Gaels in the British army was disproportionate to say the least. Twenty-three regiments of line and twenty-six fencible units were raised between 1756 and 1815, giving a rough estimate of 48,000 men enlisted. Others have calculated that between 1793 and 1808, 70,000 Highlanders were recruited into the armed forces, although this is certainly an exaggeration. With an approximate regional population of between 250,000 and 300,000 however, even the lower, more realistic estimate represents an extraordinary level of military recruitment. With such enlistment figures it is not surprising that within ten years of Culloden Highland regiments had already emerged as a substantial element within the British army. Overall, this impressive record of successful recruiting does seem to suggest the survival of military endeavour and the continuance within Highland populations of the ingrained bellicosity traditionally associated with them. It was this short period of intense and relatively disproportionate enlistment between 1756-1800 that established the long-term reputation, both real and romanticised, of the Highland regiments. However, in light of the radical changes that occurred in the political, social and economic position of the region it remains debatable whether this recruitment phenomenon really represented the continuance of the older clannish society. Indeed, to understand the forces that created the eighteenth century Highland regiments it is surely more constructive to move beyond notions of clanship and martial tendencies and examine the essentially external recruiting pressures of empire, government, and economic under-development.

**The Martial Highlander?**

As one of the central historical myths surrounding Highland regiments it is necessary to clarify the exact role of clanship. In the new set of commercial circumstances clearly evident by 1750 clanship’s military aspects were not enough, in themselves, to produce the levels of enlistment evident in the region.
Nonetheless, it is easy to understand why this connection with clanship has been made. After all, clans and warfare are all but synonymous with each other. The era of feuding was matched, if not surpassed, by the clans’ performances during the Scottish civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century, and later by the dramatic, if spectacularly unsuccessful, Jacobite campaigns. However, while entirely valid, this perspective has distorted and prevented a fuller understanding of the multiple functions of what was a complex political, social and economic arrangement. Increasingly, historians have stressed how rivalry between clans cannot be divorced from the broader economy, nor, indeed, that land can be portrayed as merely a reserve for military manpower. While fully accepting the Highland’s capacity for rapid and often devastating military activity, recent analysis has stressed that clanship was ultimately about control of local subsistence resources. Thus, for instance, its focus was much, if not more, to do with securing *beathachadh boidheach* (*comfortable subsistence*) as maintaining the emphasis on military preparedness. 

With their *raison d’être* re-configured to involve the objectives of arable and pastoral management, the clans’ ability to make war has been de-emphasised, though by no means dismissed by historians. This new perspective helps explain one of the main characteristics of British recruiting in the region: namely, the severe reluctance on the part of ordinary clansmen, both before and after Culloden, to get involved in military activity. It is not necessary to highlight the 1790s and 1800s, when most historians accept that the impact of commercialism had begun to take effect, to find evidence that calls into question the Gaels’ supposed zeal for army service. There is now little doubt that by the first half of the eighteenth century clanship’s military ethos was in rapid decline. One indicator that most effectively demonstrates this shift is the severe coercion and, indeed, outright brutality that characterised the mobilisation of manpower during the 1745 rising. It has been argued that an element of compulsion had always been a feature of military activity in the Highlands. However, the severe and apparently unprecedented use of threats and intimidation severely undermine accepted notions of the Highlander’s ‘ancient enthusiasm’ for armed
service. Even that most celebrated clan figure, Donald Cameron, younger of Locheil, required the threat of township destruction to procure the mobilisation of various kin groups under his control. This was especially true of tenantry, such as those in the Rannoch Moor area, that lived outside his father's estate.\textsuperscript{15} It can be argued that such instances of brutality represent the type of negative propaganda deployed by both sides during the bitter and divisive affair of 1745. There is undoubtedly an element of truth to this; but there remains a solid case for arguing that substantial numbers of Highland troops fighting on the Hanoverian and Jacobite sides had been obtained under conditions of severe duress. The Mackenzie of Cromartie family, for instance, deployed the threat of violence to mobilise around 200 men from their Ross-shire estates for the Jacobite army. In a private letter, not intended in any way for propaganda purposes, the Easter Ross laird, John Mackenzie of Belmaduthie, informed the Edinburgh lawyer, John Mackenzie of Delvine, that a mutual kinsman from the Mackenzie of Kilcoy family had been recruiting for John Mackenzie, Lord Macleod, heir to the Cromartie earldom. Belmaduthie noted that harsh means had been used to take men from his own estate, and that 'it is true the party forced away five or six cottars and servants off my grounds'.\textsuperscript{16}

One particular method whereby large numbers of men could be obtained through force can be illustrated by the order sent from the Jacobite High Command in September 1745 to John Campbell, second Earl of Breadalbane.

The men of Deshoir of Lochtay and Glenlochy are ordered to be at the Port of Kenmore with their best arms and accouterments against twelve of the clock, Tuesday - a man out of each merkland, under pain of rebellion.\textsuperscript{17}

The last section of this order reveals the implied violence that was in all likelihood an integral part of recruiting during the era of Scottish clanship. Had the Jacobite army remained in order to intimidate Lochtayside, instead of moving south to capture Edinburgh, around 310 men could have been obtained.
Indeed, even the Campbells, noteworthy for their relative cohesion and correspondingly formidable military capability, found it difficult to raise their own men. John Campbell, Lord Glenorchy, heir to Breadalbane, stressed in a revealing series of letters how his Perthshire tenantry preferred to avoid mobilisation of any kind. He intimated that they would only join in a military effort if the Jacobites actually devastated their farms. Glenorchy learnt that even on the family’s Netherlorne estate in Argyll, where the tenantry were relatively safe from Jacobite violence, it was necessary to concede various provisos on the nature and length of military service. This scenario was also evident in Skye where the equivocation of Sir Alexander Macdonald of Sleat was surpassed only by his tenantry’s aversion to the prospect of involvement in any military campaign. Instead of a natural and deep-rooted willingness by his tenants to form a clan levy, Macdonald found he had to agree to their estate concerns before they would consider mobilising in any numbers. Indeed, it was noted six years later that ‘many deductions were claimed by the tenants for their services in a military way’. This intense hostility amongst Highlanders towards armed service can be best summed up in the observations of Lieutenant-Colonel John Campbell of Mamore, who was recruiting for Lord Loudoun’s Highland battalion in the late spring of 1745.

The strange songs the country people have heard from Flanders have struck such a terror among them that several young fellows have quitted the country upon my arrival. In short, the western Highlands are like to make but a bad figure in this affair.

What is particularly striking about this quote, coming as it does from the age of militarised clanship, is how it finds resonance in the reaction of Gaels in the last half of the century to the same prospect of military service. Examination of the private papers, as opposed to the formulaic public proclamations, of Highland landlords reveal a population just as reluctant to enlist as their supposedly more pacific Lowland neighbours. This hostility was particularly evident in Atholl. Given the recruitment
methods practised at the time it is not surprising that the 1745 rebellion helped entrench non-martial sentiments amongst the population. The Atholl Brigade in Charles Edward Stuart's army was raised against a backdrop of deep family division. This created an atmosphere of implied and actual recruiting violence so severe that it engendered a tradition of bitter folk memory which was still evident in the area over 112 years later. John Murray, fourth Duke of Atholl, was forced to admit this reality when, in 1797, he told no less a person than Henry Dundas that his tenantry had a real and intense 'dread' of military service.20 During February and March 1778, at the height of the duke’s earlier efforts to complete a regiment for the war against the Americans, the true depth of these community feelings were revealed. The property of the Robertson of Lude family, which bordered the Atholl estate, was inundated with people fleeing the prospect of forced military service. The Robertsons’ correspondence reveal what can only be described as a kind of inverse Highland charge.

How thankful am I that we [the Robertson family] have nothing to do with the Atholl regiment, things are drawing on terribly badly here. The Duke is to be up this night . . . sad work is expected amongst his people, you never saw such a time, grief and terror painted in every face, they all ran here, poor things, and nobody can help them.21

It is hard to equate arguments that stress the sense of pride and favoured elite status felt by the eighteenth century Highland soldier with the obvious distress described above. Clearly, the undeniable esprit de corp of the units themselves has too often been celebrated without reference to the fact that their creation was deeply resented, even rejected by townships from which the manpower was drawn. Moreover, the situation in Atholl cannot be dismissed as an isolated instance of unorthodox recruiting. There is sufficient evidence from across the Highlands to suggest that such an extremely negative response was in no way unusual. As early as February 1756, less than a decade after Culloden,
military officers recruiting on the estate of Sutherland highlighted the backwardness of the male population. This was confirmed a year later by General James St. Clair, a close relative and tutor to William Gordon, seventeenth Earl of Sutherland. St. Clair admitted that men from Sutherland would not be easily recruited for the two battalions of Highlanders recently commissioned by the crown. Given the county’s impressive reputation as a recruiting district for the British army this relatively early reluctance may seem surprising. However, its existence was confirmed in a report of March 1763 by Captain James Sutherland of the first Sutherland fencible regiment. Similarly, in December 1775, the Campbell of Glenure family were informed that, across the entire county of Argyll, many young men were extremely averse to military service. This sentiment had also been evident around twenty years earlier. In December 1757, while recruiting for a kinsman, the Glenure family noted that the populace were totally unresponsive to their requests. One of those attempting to acquire men added; ‘I did all that lay in my power with them to enforce the reasonableness of your demand but they are determined to do nothing as far as I understand’. On the Badenoch estate of the Gordon family in 1778 it was reported that, as with their counterparts in Atholl, the tenants were ordering their sons and close relatives to remove to bordering districts like Strathspey in order to avoid enlistment in the duke’s fencible regiment. Meanwhile, during the same year, it was reported that in Strathnaver ‘the men in that country had lost the spirit of enlisting’. Non-martial sentiments were also apparent on the large Mackenzie of Seaforth estate in Lewis. When news reached the island that recruitment was to be initiated for the earl’s new regiment it was noted; ‘there is a great clamour through the country about this affair’. Several early nineteenth century authors, such as the pro-emigration theorist Thomas Douglas, fifth earl of Selkirk, and Sir George Mackenzie the noted Ross-shire sheep farmer, did question the military reputation of the Gael. However they did so for their own particular reasons. Both needed to counter the accusation that their ‘improvement’ policies threatened Britain’s best per capita recruiting district. For this reason it is
possible that some contemporary observations regarding the Highlanders’ aversion to military service were nothing less than self interested exaggeration. However, the confidential correspondence of families as diverse as the Dukes of Gordon, the Macdonalds of Sleat, and the Campbells of Glenure, suggest that the pacificity of the Highlander was not merely the assertions of improvers eager to remove population. Indeed, a profound fear of the military seems to have been a widely acknowledged feature of Highland communities. Moreover, it is deeply significant that a contemporary of Selkirk and Mackenzie, James Macdonald, who wished to retain population and increase recruitment levels, nevertheless accepted that many Highlanders detested the whole notion of army service.

They have no longer any predilection for the military life, on the contrary, their abhorrence of it is deep rooted and inveterate. This is the fact, whatever may be the cause of which we may impute it. The same antipathy exists against the naval service of their country: so that we need not look for any voluntary levies from these Isles.

These examples of anti-recruiting sentiment both before and after 1746 suggest that if any continuity existed at all between the attitudes of pre- and post-Culloden Gaels it was their antipathy towards military service, not their supposed zeal. It would appear, therefore, that beneath the myth of the Highland warrior lies a far more complex picture involving an obvious contradiction. On the one hand there existed an intense dislike for the army and, on the other, a simultaneous and disproportionate involvement within it. In light of the strong case against the notion of a naturally martial Highlander, why did such a pattern of disproportionate military service nonetheless emerge in the area?

The Impress Acts

Conscription legislation demonstrates how external forces interacted with local economies and cultural attitudes to provide a new and highly effective context for the enlistment of substantial
numbers of Highlanders. The background to the Impress Acts lay in a series of mundane government initiatives that centred upon the construction of a comprehensive network of local J.P.s and Sheriffs within the region. These policies constituted a major intrusion by the British state into what been a relatively isolated part of Great Britain. Successive Commanders-in-Chief of the army in Scotland co-operated with senior Scottish legal figures like the Lord Advocate and the Lord Justice Clerk in ensuring that a reliable and effective system of local government officers was built up in the north. Efforts were made, though not always successfully, to encourage local gentry and resident half pay officers to become J.P.s on the explicit understanding that their presence would facilitate recruitment. These developments may appear innocuous but it is important to understand the umbilical relationship between the military and the judiciary. In order to avoid charges of unorthodox and oppressive recruiting it was vital that officers were able to avail themselves of nearby J.P.s sympathetic to local conditions and the difficulties of acquiring men. Nothing demonstrates this better than the contrasting degrees of success experienced by the Press Acts instituted in Scotland in 1744-45 and in 1756 to 1758.

While only seeking a small amount of men the Press Acts passed in Scotland prior to the 1745 rebellion nevertheless failed to achieve any real success. Only 92 men were raised throughout the entire country, and only two conscripts came from the Highlands. It was noted at the time that one reason why the Act failed was a lack of interest amongst military officers, as well as the fact that local gentry were hostile towards the legislation. However, the situation had changed radically by late November 1756 when an Impress Act was passed as part of Britain’s mobilisation for the Seven Years War. There were now in place local Sheriff-substitutes and J.P.s that had a clear and formal authority to expedite the whole conscription process. Indeed, the normally Scotophobic military high command north of the border understood their importance and proceeded to practise some uncharacteristic diplomacy in order to solicit assistance from national and local legal authorities. Lieutenant General Bland informed the Secretary of War; ‘I may venture to assure you that the
success of it, will in great measure depend on the countenance it meets with from the people of distinction in this country. The Act was designed to raise fifteen battalions across the United Kingdom, with Scotland being responsible for three, or 1,830 men.

The success of this new approach can be gauged from the figures in Table 1. Indeed, within two months of commencing conscription Scotland had largely completed its required quota. Moreover, the second battalion of the 32nd Regiment, assigned to collect the pressed men from Highland counties, was completed within a month. The sole reason for the deficiencies evident in Highland quotas came from the fact that recruiting officers, such as Captain Aeneas Macintosh of the 42nd Highland Regiment, tended to appropriate conscripted men for their own purposes. He informed his superior officer that ‘I shall send all the good pressed men I can get that they may pick and chuse for the Highland Regiment’.

Table 1: Number of Required Men and Those sent by the Commissioners of the Impress Act in Scotland, January-March 1757 (S.R.O., Fletcher of Saltoun, MS 17505, f. 98; P.R.O., W.O. 1/974, f. 485)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Expected total</th>
<th>Total conscripted</th>
<th>Still required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caithness</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutherland</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cromarty</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inverness</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scotland</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,836</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,733</strong></td>
<td><strong>151</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notwithstanding the poaching of such men into Highland units supposedly consisting exclusively of volunteers, it was evident that excess numbers, over and above the national quota, would soon collect in Scotland. In 1758 another quota of 1,400 men was successfully ordered from north of the border. The scale of Scottish success becomes clear when these figures are contrasted with those of England. In the same period, England, with a substantially larger population, only managed to recruit around 400 men by means of the Impress Acts.

Several points, however, need to be clarified. While the 1757 Impress Act was a startling success, as, indeed, was the Act passed in 1758, the numbers involved were never particularly substantial, always under 2,000 men. Yet simply highlighting the numbers actually conscripted is to misunderstand the way in which the legislation operated and, moreover, seriously underestimates its ability to procure much larger numbers of men. While the Acts had specific quotas, they, along with the measures passed in 1778-79, were basically intended to aid the normal practice of recruiting volunteers. Notices published by county commissioners in 1778 and 1779 made it clear that persons targeted under the stipulations of the Press Act would be given a £3 bounty and the promise of a discharge if they volunteered. If they refused and were forced into the ranks they received no such benefits. Essentially, the Acts were a stick deliberately designed to make the normally unpalatable prospect of voluntary enlistment seem like a carrot. The Acts also sought to complement the local economy by removing those perceived to be economically and socially expendable. It targeted specific social groups such as beggars, those that refused to work as day labourers, those that migrated seasonally for higher wages and so produced labour shortages in their own parishes, as well as persons that could generally be described as lacking continuous employment. As such, the agrarian labour cycle of the Highlands, with its structural dependency on temporary migration and its long periods of under-employment, left entire communities of Highland males especially vulnerable. As landlords clarified and vigorously defended their rights of ownership over estate resources, those that had committed crimes of
property such as stealing and wood-cutting often became targets for impressment. Thus, new commercial changes actually helped to facilitate the traditional search for soldiers. Other targets included those who were suspected or previously convicted of wearing Highland dress. It is deeply ironic that recruitment for Highland regiments, traditionally seen as preserving the plaid and tartan, actually ensured it was in the best interest of Highlanders to rapidly abandon their traditional apparel and so avoid the attention of the army. Thus, in 1778, a tacksman on the Duke of Gordon's Strathavon estate in the eastern Highlands noted that ‘In order to prevent giving recruiting parties any handle for trouble I have caused my servants and others to lay aside evidence of Highland garb’.36 This is one instance at least where the celebrated role of Highland regiments in preserving Highland culture can, at best, be described as a severe distortion.

The Impress Acts were not, therefore, a crude conscription tool: rather they represented a flexible method of ensuring maximum levels of recruitment while causing minimal economic damage. Moreover, in light of the number of officers recruiting in the region, when coupled to the nature of the region’s economy, they were particularly suited to applying intense pressure in Highland localities. In May 1778, tenants on the Gordon estate panicked when confronted by officers offering the stark choice between high bounties for volunteers or conscription without payment. Throughout 1778 and 1779 such tactics on Skye facilitated the voluntary enlistment of men into Lord Alexander Macdonald's 76th Highland Regiment. The extent to which Press Act legislation was used to intimidate populations can be seen from the comments of Alexander Campbell, a son of the Argyllshire laird, Duncan Campbell of Glenure. In 1757, after finding that a tenant on the estate would not accept a particular farm it was decided that the best strategy was to; ‘fright[en] him with the story of the Press which I find is a prevailing argument’.37 Such comments suggest that the selective use of threatened conscription was common throughout Argyll and was being used to maintain social order even within a wholly civilian context. The atmosphere of coercion created by this policy should not be underestimated. There is, for instance, definite
evidence that the intimidation was consciously designed to tap into cultural and social taboos. Forcing men from small close-knit townships into the army without any semblance of negotiation or recognition of mutual responsibility attacked the community’s sense of order and status. Indeed, even the recruiter, if he came from an estate small enough where those involved would be known to him, could find the business objectionable in the extreme. In early 1759, after forcing the son of one of his father’s own tenants into the first Argyll fencible regiment, Alexander Campbell of the Glenure family highlighted how recruitment placed real strain upon traditional social ties. He informed his father that;

The prisoner is crying like a child and says you was [sic] the last man on earth that he imagined would use him ill. For heaven’s sake dear Sir, if you can anyway avoid it, give no more men to the Fencibles, this is certainly the damndest work that ever man took in hand. If I see but little more of this work for Peace’s sake I will [en]list in the Fencibles myself.38

Such extreme reactions show how conscription undermined the population’s sense of social standing and security. As such, it was the ideal method for prompting voluntary enlistment. Conscription measures sanctioned by the British legislature thus represented a major new lever of pressure that could be added to older recruiting mechanisms traditionally practiced in the region. As noted above, Highlanders had a clear dislike, even hatred of enlistment. However, as was probably true across most of Britain, some forms of military service were more disliked than others, and the Impress Acts were deliberately designed to play upon the differences. Their true impact sprang not from direct compulsion, but from the fact they exploited deeply held cultural attitudes. In the Old Statistical Account of the 1790s the minister of the parish of Duirinish in Skye revealed that the population ‘are averse to the naval and military services, and are extremely disgusted with the idea of being pressed’.39 The difference in intensity is clear. To be conscripted meant social stigmatisation;
while even the appearance of voluntary enlistment brought some cultural kudos within small communities where status and reputation remained an important pre-occupation. Therefore, one result of this hatred of military conscription was, paradoxically, a tendency on the part of Highlanders to enlist before compulsion could be brought to bear.

In 1757, Hugh Rose, Laird of Kilravock, noted how he had gained several recruits from a neighbouring estate where the landlord had simply adopted conscription methods. In an obvious demonstration of disgust and protest two tradesmen came to Rose and stated that they had no wish to be in the military, but as their own landlord offered no terms they came voluntarily to him on certain limited conditions. Exactly this type of protest mentality was highlighted in 1778 on the estate of Alexander Gordon, fourth Duke of Gordon. The duke was informed that if the tenantry perceived that they would be forced into the army they would, as in former times, deliberately enlist in another corp. In 1778, this attitude was exemplified in Sutherland when the imposition of the Impress Act allowed the military to intimidate the populace. As a result of such tactics by a lieutenant in Seaforth’s regiment the factor noted that; ‘you may depend upon it that the people will enlist rather than be dragged from their beds under silence of the night’.

This seemingly paradoxical form of protest could often involve substantial numbers of men. In April 1756 Captain Aeneas Macintosh of the Black Watch explained his manipulation of the general fear of impressment.

As there is such numbers of idlers in Lochaber, I am to tell them [the local commissioners for the Press Act] if they do not fall upon proper means to secure those idlers to complete our regiment as soon as possible, that I shall take care to let it be known I have proclaimed at all the parish churches that for a fortnight after the Act takes place I will give two guineas and a crown to any that will come willing to me . . . The common people here have taken it in their head that the press was for the Highland Regiment which
makes a good many handsome fellows go to the Cameronians as they think they are to stay in the country.41

This method was very successful and, by 6 May, Macintosh had recruited 92 men, concluding that; ‘If the Press Act had continued longer I believe we would have got a regiment’. The surprisingly large amounts of men that could be raised through the concurrent imposition of conscription and voluntary recruiting can be sensed from the successes of Mungo Campbell, factor on the forfeited estate of Locheil. By April 1757 he had pressed eight men from the parishes of Kilmonavaig and Kilmallie, yet also gained 41 volunteers - a ratio of over five to one.42 From these examples it is clear that the systematic use of coercion was evident across whole swaths of the Highlands. Moreover, while it is impossible to accurately quantify the number of soldiers gained in this way, the general consensus amongst Scottish gentry concerning the expediting role of the Impress Acts was made clear in late 1758.

The recruiting of those nine companies will be a matter of difficulty at this time, unless the Press Act is enforced, for though it may not be used, yet to say the truth, the terror of it was a main cause of that recruiting going on so successfully for the Highland battalions.43

The levies of 1757-58 have traditionally been portrayed as the result of a residual clan loyalty that survived Culloden. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise, and that external ‘British’ factors were also vital to the process. The example of Captain Macintosh, as well as those of the Sutherland and Gordon tenantry, explain the apparent contradiction between the known aversion of Highlanders for military service and the large numbers that eventually entered the British army. The Acts of the 1750s and 1770s produced a reasonable amount of soldiers in themselves; but, in reality, these men were only the tip of a far more subtle conscription iceberg. Moreover, coercion remained
an underlying theme through the remaining decades of the eighteenth century. In 1775, just as the first Highland battalions of the American Revolutionary War were being raised, a militia scheme was proposed for Scotland. Taking account of each county’s population, it involved conscripting 923 men from Argyll, Sutherland, Ross, Cromarty and Inverness. The scheme never materialised but, as was common with all proposed or potential levies, the rumours sparked by it provided a suitably threatening atmosphere. This provided the ideal context that allowed recruiters to play upon the population’s fear of conscription.\(^{44}\) As in the 1750s, the sense of confusion and intimidation induced by pressing often drove recruits, however reluctantly, into the regular regiments staffed by local officers with whom they had some connection.\(^{45}\) Again, at the commencement of the French Revolutionary War in 1793, a militia scheme involving conscription was widely rumoured for Scotland, though intense opposition from Scottish M.P.s prevented it being made law. In 1795, a Press Act was passed for a quota of sailors from across all parts of Scotland. In Lewis, the Earl of Seaforth threatened tenantry with the prospect of naval service in order to gain recruits for his levy. As the sentiments of Lieutenant-Colonel John Campbell of the second Argyll Fencible Regiment make clear, the naval press was ideal for intimidating populations and expediting army recruiting. Regarding conditions in Argyll during 1795, he noted:

> Neither money nor flattery can persuade the lower ranks of the natives in this quarter to become soldiers either in line or fencible corps. Nothing but a Comprehending Act will bring them forward.\(^{46}\)

Finally, in 1797, the intermittent and ad hoc use of compulsive methods to complement voluntary recruiting in Scotland was formalised by the creation of a national militia. This provided Highland landlords like the Maclaines of Lochbuie and the Campbells of Breadalbane with additional coercive leverage when seeking men for their own volunteer companies. Thus, in April 1797, Breadalbane’s tenantry were informed that if
they did not come forward in sufficient numbers to complete a volunteer regiment they would simply find a compulsive militia would be instituted instead.47

The element of coercion inherent within the recruiting system operating in the Scottish Highlands after Culloden helped to create and define the region’s involvement with Britain’s military. Moreover, it is worth reiterating that such arrangements did not constitute some vague remnant from the era of clanship. The Impress Acts of the 1750s and 1770s represented the new forces gripping the Highlands. Instituted by British governments that had acquired unprecedented influence in the region after 1746, the Acts show the extent to which the Highlands had been fully assimilated into the United Kingdom. Moreover, the success of this legislation reveals that leading gentry and elite families had bought into this new British agenda. Their willingness to implement conscription in the 1750s and 1770s explains why, in contrast to the 1740s, the later Impress Acts produced a healthy return. This new-found zeal needs to be put in its proper context and fully understood. The readiness to raise men was undoubtedly a method whereby Highland elites attempted to redeem their Jacobitism. Indeed, the extent of the backlash against Scotland after the events of 1745-6 meant that the country as a whole needed to demonstrate its loyalty in an irrefutable manner. Understandably, many felt that by exerting themselves in the ultimate patriotic activity of recruiting they could begin to actively establish their British credentials. Thus, in May 1757, a Highland officer noted that ‘there is so much expected of us here and in England that I pray God we may answer their expectations’.48

It was not, therefore, the direct coercive power of the British state that successfully managed the Impress Acts or, indeed, recruiting in general. Neither was it old clan values that set the context for successful levying. Instead it was the desire amongst Highland gentry to prove their Britishness that provided central government with their best coercive tool. While new, not old, influences ultimately created Highland regiments, the role of other factors must not be forgotten. There is little doubt that in the 1790s and early 1800s the influence of commercialism
helped to maintain the flow of Highland troops. While conscription legislation had provided an effective recruiting lever in the 1750s and 1770s, the declining economic value of Highland tenantry provided landlords with increased coercive powers in the 1790s. No more convincing demonstration of this fact can be found than an incident which occurred in Sutherland on 14 September 1799 during the raising of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders. Finding the population unco-operative, an estate official related the plan he had devised to frighten the tenants into giving up the men required. This simply involved giving a hint of tenurial change.

I then on each farm concluded with a question that could not but come home to their minds and speak more strongly to their feelings than any address of mine. It was “What rent would this farm fetch if in the hands of one tenant?”

The type of psychological intimidation deployed in an almost casual manner against Sutherland tenantry was extremely successful. Indeed, supplying soldiers had become one of the few ways Highlanders could justify themselves to their landlords. Ultimately, it was this bargain of land in return for military service that underpinned the eighteenth century recruiting economy in the Highlands. Ironically, this old feudal style arrangement was not in any way a static, declining influence but, in fact, heightened its effectiveness as townships became ever more economically insecure in the face of commercial pastoralism. Operating together from 1750-1800, legislative compulsion and the issue of access to land ensured that recruiting remained effective long after the other social and economic aspects of clanship had died out.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Highland regiments has developed a mythology that is both popular and tenacious. Many of the nineteenth and twentieth century perceptions of these units are based in some way upon supposed eighteenth century conditions. The
regiments raised in the period from 1746-1800 have been portrayed as forming an unbroken link with the distinctively Scottish social institution of Highland clanship. Thus, from the early nineteenth century onwards the regiments came to be perceived as the living embodiment of a historically authentic past. Yet examination of the methods used during the eighteenth century contradict the idea that these regiments were the preferred employment solution for Gaels. It would be highly inaccurate to suggest that every Highland soldier was little more than a reluctant conscript, incapable of seizing the opportunities for social advancement that military service offered. Nevertheless, beneath the apparent close association between clanship and kilted regiments, lay entirely new methods and levels of coercion. While the 1750s and 1770s saw the region produce soldiers on a scale that was comparable to the mobilising power of the pre-Culloden clans, the example of the Press Acts reveal influences that were wholly British and imperial in character. Moreover, Highland recruiting was all the more efficient because of the dual impact of state sponsored impressment and the economic leverage held by the region's proprietary elite. For all the supposed distinctiveness of these units, the landlord families that sponsored them did so as fully paid up members of the Anglo-British elite. While the traditional influences of loyalty and clanship doubtless helped Highlanders rationalise these demands for human tribute, it was, ultimately, British influences that brought these units into existence. Rather than the myth of the Highland regiments as an unbroken link with the clans, their true significance lies in the fact they represented one of the most high profile manifestations of the truly revolutionary changes impacting upon the Scottish Highlands.

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Endnotes

1. A version of this paper was presented at a conference held by the Department of History, University of Guelph in September 1995. I would like to express my appreciation to the Scottish Studies Foundation for their financial assistance. I would also like to express my deep thanks to both Scott McLean and Andy Nicholls for their comments and feedback on the whole issue of Highland regiments.


11. A.I. Macinnes, loc. cit., p.83; D.M. Henderson, loc. cit., p.5.
15. J. Prebble, loc. cit., p.99; National Library of Scotland, Fletcher of Saltoun Papers, MS 16604, f. 64; MS 16610, f. 289.
17. ‘Merkland’ was a method of land assessment whereby the productivity of a farm was judged. British Library, Hardwicke Papers, Add MS 35450, f. 23.
19. N.L.S., Fletcher of Saltoun Papers, MS 16605, ff. 33, 48, 50, 169.
20. The extent to which the population of the Atholl area held distinctively hostile attitudes towards their traditional military leaders and army service in general was evidenced by their reaction to recruiting in 1778 and 1797. See J. Prebble, loc. cit. 212-213. For the maintenance of such anti-recruitment sentiments well into the nineteenth century see Somers’ description of the folk history of Glen Tilt. Robert Somers, *Letters from the Highlands; or, the Famine of 1847* (Glasgow, 1848), pp.22-3; Blair Atholl Muniments, Box 59/4/18. For a similar reaction from tenantry in Ross-shire during the French Revolutionary War see S.R.O., Seaforth Muniments, GD 46/17/3, unnumbered letter dated 19 June 1793.
22. N.L.S., Sutherland Papers, Dep. 313/1089, ff. 22-23; N.L.S., Mackenzie of Delvine Papers, MS 1461, f. 199; MS 1487, f. 112.
23. S.R.O., Campbell of Barcaldine Papers, GD 170/1062/49; GD 170/1681; GD 170/1061/5/2.
27. B.L., Hardwicke Papers, Add MS 35447, f. 27 & 123; Add MS 35448, ff. 49, 57, 110; B.L., Egerton MSS, MS 3433, ff. 1, 109; B.L., Newcastle Papers, Add MS, 32737, f. 375. S.R.O., Campbell of Stonefield Papers, GD14/142. For evidence on the military role played by J.P.s and pensioned officers see S.R.O., Gordon Castle Muniments, GD 44/43/198/21-2; H.B. Macintosh, The Northern or Gordon Fencibles, 1778-1783 (published privately, 1929), p.26.


32. The discrepancy in figures for those expected, those conscripted, and those still required, arises because some conscripts never made it to their designated regiments but, instead, volunteered to join another units. This still left the original quota to be met. See footnote above.


34. Argyll & Butte District Archive, Commissioners of Supply & J.P.s, C 05/1/1/1, p. 266; P.R.O., W.O. 1/995, f. 869.


36. P.R.O., W.O. 4/95, p. 248; N.L.S., Mackenzie of Delvine Papers, MS 1483, f. 145; N.L.S., Sutherland Papers, Dep. 313/1089, f. 34; S.R.O., Campbell of Barcaldine, GD 170/1061/10; Gordon Castle Muniments, GD 44/47/2/1/6(3).

37. S.R.O., Gordon Castle Muniments, GD 44/43/203/11; Clan Donald Trust Library, GD 221/434; B.A.M., Box 65/2/2/; S.R.O., Campbell of Barcaldine, GD 170/1061/1/2.


43. N.L.S., Fletcher of Saltoun Papers, MS 16698, f. 50.
44. S.R.O., Seafield Muniments, GD 248/226/5/12; B.A.M., Box 65/2/23.
45. S.R.O., Campbell of Barcaldine, GD 170/1090/16.
50. For evidence that even contemporaries understood it was the Highlander’s poor economic position that kept heavy recruitment in the region going, see T. Douglas, (Selkirk), *Observations on the Present State of the Highlands with a view of the causes and probable consequences of emigration* (Edinburgh, 1806).