THE PROBLEMS OF RECRUITMENT FOR
SCOTTISH LINE REGIMENTS DURING THE
NAPOLEONIC WARS

The great war which Great Britain waged against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France drained Scotland of manpower long before the ultimate overthrow of the Emperor Napoleon I at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. Britain emerged from this struggle with enhanced prestige and clearly had little inclination to question the methods employed to provide the soldiers who gained that victory. A closer examination of recruiting methods which were practiced in Scotland however suggests that the political leadership of Great Britain was extremely fortunate to have obtained a successful outcome. The administration of William Pitt, encouraged by his Scottish colleague, Henry Dundas, and its successors, attempted to raise far too many soldiers in the northern kingdom for its population to support without conscription.

The administration was supplied with totally inadequate forces for the task which confronted them when war broke out in 1793. The strength of the army which had fought in America had been so reduced that it was capable only of providing garrisons for the empire and undertaking supplementary police duties within Britain itself. Obviously additional battalions would be necessary, for most of the line regiments consisted only of a single battalion, and these would have to be supplemented in the traditional style by the formation of new regiments if the army was to undertake any major operations. The first line of defence was of course the ships of the Royal Navy, so the fleet also began to make tremendous demands on the available manpower, as vessels were placed in commission and full crews were required to man them in place of a maintenance party, and the press gangs were soon active in all the major seaport towns.
Many of the new military units together with reinforcement drafts for existing corps were nominally recruited in northern Scotland, for the government was now fully aware of the fighting potential of the Highland soldier. Recruiting parties were active throughout Scotland, competing with one another for every potential recruit. Scotland, moreover, posed unique difficulties for the recruiter. In England home defence was entrusted in the first instance to a militia, a force of troops raised for home service by conscription. Scotland at the commencement of the war lacked such a force, since the militia tradition had been allowed to fall into disuse during the eighteenth century fear of Jacobite insurrection. The Jacobite cause was now dead, and a militia on the English model was long overdue and in fact a small militia force was raised in Scotland during the course of the war. By the time that decision was made the Scots had become accustomed to raising troops by the existing methods of voluntary recruitment and concluded, correctly, that the new militia had been put in place only to reduce expenditure at the expense of the poor.

The lack of a force for home defence in Scotland made life very difficult for the officers charged with raising new line troops in the north, and their problems appeared to be misunderstood or ignored by the administration. Was Scotland, particularly Highland Scotland, not a veritable reservoir of manpower eager to serve the crown in arms? Certainly the Highland counties were densely populated, for the Clearances still lay in the future, and in spite of considerable migration to North America before and after the American war, a considerable portion of the Highland population could be considered underemployed. The Highlander had a tradition of bearing arms, though the government had long been zealously discouraging the practice in the aftermath of the eighteenth century Jacobite risings. Many Highlanders were now resident in the Lowlands for all or part of each year, as they migrated in search of work, but they could nonetheless reach a bargain with a recruiter in the streets of Edinburgh or Glasgow as easily as at a northern fair.

If the line regiments were needed elsewhere an alternative home defence force would have to be provided for Scotland
and the government chose to follow the methods used in the American War and was reluctant to use compulsion. The administration authorized the formation of what were called fencible regiments for Scotland rather than employing a militia. Fencible troops had been employed in previous wars, but the fencible soldier was not the equivalent of the English militiaman. Where the militiamen were chosen by ballot from the population at large, the fencibles were not conscripted. Fencible soldiers were essentially short service regular troops who would be disbanded at the conclusion of the war, if not earlier. Fencible regiments were regular formations whose service was confined to the war years, they were uniformed and equipped similarly to the line regiments and paid at the same rates, while like the line soldier he received an enlistment bounty. Unlike the line soldier, however, a fencible could not be sent out of Scotland except in the case of an actual invasion of another part of Great Britain, or with their own consent. Unlike the line soldier, a fencible man could not be drafted against his will into another corps than that in which he was enlisted, unless by sentence of a court martial. There were fencible formations which did extend their services. Scottish fencible regiments served in Ireland during the insurrection of 1798, and others agreed to reinforce overseas stations, one battalion serving in Gibraltar for example, but this was always a matter for their own choice. Attempts to extend the service of a fencible corps unilaterally could, and did, provoke mutiny. Within their limits, however, the fencible regiments continually changing station throughout Scotland and assembling in training camps for brigade exercises in conjunction with such line troops as were available, became a very efficient force, as had the earlier fencibles of previous wars. In the American war, when so many line troops were engaged on the other side of the Atlantic, the fencibles protected the coast against landings from enemy warships. The number of United States vessels which could cruise off the Scottish coast was however small, and even with the reinforcement provided by French cruisers the threat of invasion was fairly slight, and the internal danger was even less, and relatively few fencible regiments were authorized.

In and after 1793, however, it appeared to the administration
that the threat of insurrection in the event of an actual invasion was very serious. The French Revolution and its ideology appeared to the responsible ministers to have struck deep roots in the Scottish population. Fear of revolution was endemic even if in retrospect these fears seem exaggerated. Thus, the government was not content to re-establish the handful of fencible formations which had garrisoned Scotland in the previous conflict. By 1797 the army list contained no less than twenty-three battalions of Scottish fencible infantry and eight regiments of fencible cavalry. Forming and maintaining this fencible army, in addition to Scotland’s large contribution to the line army, the marines, and the navy, stretched Scotland’s manpower to the breaking point. Ministers of the crown made a serious error in trying to secure so many troops from Scotland’s limited resources. The traditional pool of young men fit for service was always limited, and too many fencible regiments were formed at the beginning of the war which absorbed many men of military age and with an inclination to serve into regiments enlisted for home service.

Competition between recruiters was immense, with a score or more recruiting parties in attendance at a single market or fair. The recruiters for the line were authorised to pay higher enlistment bounties than the fencible officers, but the difference in the bounty was insufficient to induce many a canny Scot not to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the two forms of service. Fencible service had too many advantages not to be attractive to the more thoughtful soldier. Essentially fencible soldiers formed an army awaiting an invasion which never came. Such men could be injured in action against rioters or smugglers, and the death rate for disease was often high as men recruited in rural areas were moved from one town to another. Casualties among line soldiers were however much higher, whether in combat or from disease, for they could find themselves in the fever ridden West Indies. Fencible soldiering offered a young man an opportunity to try the military life, with the certainty that if he did not find it agreeable he could return to civil life when his regiment was disbanded. Should he like the military life, trained soldiers discharged from fencible regiments were always
in demand. Many former non-commissioned officers who could be persuaded to volunteer for a line regiment were permitted to take their rank with them into the new corps, and any former fencible soldier already possessed many of the necessary accouterments, assuming they chose to enlist in the same branch of the service. The fencible regiments however attracted men who might not have found the line units attractive. Married men were commonly found in most fencible regiments, because their wives and children could accompany their regiment as it changed station within Scotland, whereas only a small proportion of the married personnel of a line battalion could hope to secure passage on a transport when their regiment embarked for overseas service. In some fencible formations the number of married soldiers approached fifty per cent of the total.2

The single advantage which the line battalion had over a fencible unit was permission to offer a higher bounty to a potential recruit. The rates were established from time to time by the Secretary at War, the responsible minister, but in view of that politician’s repeated threats directed at fencible officers calling upon them to refrain from paying sums in excess of that authorized it is obvious that the regulation was ignored if the matter was sufficiently pressing.3 In some areas of Scotland competition between recruiting parties became so fierce that a good potential recruit could often strike his own bargain, if his height and physical appearance were desirable, and particularly if he had previous service in a former fencible regiment or the line. When the strength of the Perthshire Fencible Cavalry was being augmented, the commissioned officers put money into a common purse to meet the expense of recruitment in excess of government regulation,4 and that too for a mounted regiment which had its attractions in Scotland which only had a single line cavalry regiment, the North British Dragoons, upon the establishment. Without such unofficial additions to the authorized bounties no regiment could have been completed within the time constraints imposed by government.

Contrary to General Stewart of Garth’s near contemporary account of the Highlands,5 many of the soldiers of Highland regiments were recruited where they could be found, and often
that was not within the Highlands. The occasional regiment was fortunate enough to find the bulk of its men within the area designated by its title, but few could claim as much. In general the designation of a Highland regiment during the Napoleonic wars gives a misleading impression, their soldiers coming from every part of Scotland and beyond. Scottish regiments, moreover, were not the only corps to actively seek recruits in Scotland. The Royal Artillery had many Scots drivers and gunners, and although there were few regular artillery batteries in Scotland at this time, that corps found it worth while maintaining recruiting parties not only in the Central Lowlands but in North-Eastern Scotland where their recruiters actively competed with the newer infantry battalions for men. To further complicate the picture, the Scots Brigade, which had long been in Dutch service, was brought home and placed upon the British establishment and was actively seeking recruits, apparently to no avail for the Scots Brigade ended as part of an Irish regiment, the Connaught Rangers.

Some of the newer formations did not have a long life. The 97th (Inverness-shire) Highlanders lasted only three years as a battalion strength formation, being mustered at the town of Inverness in 1794 and disbanded in 1796, when its commissioned officers went onto half-pay and the rank and file were drafted into other regiments. The 97th was raised and commanded by Colonel Sir James Grant of Grant, the chief of Clan Grant. Sir James was simultaneously the commanding officer of the 1st or Strathspey Regiment of Fencible Highlanders, a formation whose service was restricted to Scotland, and in which much of the available Grant manpower was enlisted. Colonel Grant’s 97th was one of six new line battalions being recruited in Scotland in 1794-5 and Sir James, as an experienced fencible colonel, can have been under no illusions about the difficulties which faced him.

By 1794 many of the underemployed and adventurous had already been taken for the army or the fleet. Those who remained and could meet the age and physical requirements for military service were well aware of their own value, and recruiting was certain to be a costly venture, with potential soldiers
insisting on enlistment bounties far in excess of what had been authorized by government. Moreover, the last war was a recent memory in the community. When the American War ended, the government had disbanded the higher numbered regiments along with the American provincial corps as an economy measure. The officers were of course placed on the half-pay list until the next expansion of the army, but this had not meant that the soldiers were necessarily discharged. A soldier in a line regiment could be, and often was, transferred to any other regiment which was under strength and in need of augmentation. Not surprisingly such regiments were often serving in undesirable stations, such as the West Indian colonies, where the death toll from tropical fevers was enormous. Drafts from disbanded regiments could be shipped to such a station, and much of the population of Scotland was fully aware of the dangers of the West Indies, where entire battalions of European troops could be dead of disease within a few years.

Sir James Grant, having obtained his regiment of the line after much lobbying of government, now had the task of mustering approximately one thousand soldiers for the 97th Highlanders, and this in competition with many other officers and with much of the desirable manpower locked up in home service regiments. At the outset Sir James determined that in spite of its name, the Inverness-shire Highlanders should find the bulk of its recruits out-with that county. Sir James, who was also Lord Lieutenant of Inverness-shire, was concerned that further recruitment would gravely harm the county, and his own estates in particular. This supposedly Highland regiment, with its headquarters at Inverness, found its recruits in the cities and towns of Lowland Scotland and England, and even had a recruiting party operating with some success in Belfast in Northern Ireland. Many of the soldiers of the 97th were found in London and Bristol, a very long way from the Highlands of Scotland.

Most of the underemployed young Highlanders had already been swept up by the armed forces, and in spite of having a colonel who was an important Highland proprietor, Sir James Grant and his officers were obliged to use the services of crimps, who provided recruits for a fee. Crimps generally operated in
the major urban centres, where they had long been used to provide seamen for the fleet, but in this period of rapid military expansion they also provided soldier-recruits if the price offered was attractive.

Many of the soldiers enlisted for the 97th, as their individual attestations show, had been born in the Highlands but were now residents of Paisley, Glasgow or Edinburgh, but many more had no connection with the Highlands or even with Scotland prior to their enlistment. These were generally men collected by the London crimps, a considerable proportion of whom were actually aliens.

Last night arrived by sea from London, forty-seven men for the Invs.Shire Regt., the depot commander reported from Inverness. The man who came with them in the character of Serjeant . . . was employed by Whiting the crimp to bring & deliver them - having only been employed for the job . . . They are young, but low, a strange mixture, some Italians, Portuguese etc., so you may believe we shall have some employment in keeping them in order.  

Quite apart from the obvious language difficulties, with most of the non-commissioned officers being Gaelic speaking Highlanders, the presence of such men illustrates the extreme difficulty of finding suitable recruits even when willing to pay twenty-four pounds a head. The 97th were dressed as Highlanders and it is supposed that some at least of the recruits were in for a surprise when they joined their battalion.

Sir James Grant, unlike some of his rivals, did not recruit from his own fencible regiment for the 97th. Many fine Highlanders were serving in the Strathspey Fencible Regiment and were now fully trained soldiers, and might easily have been induced to enlist in their chief’s line regiment with the offer of a small additional bounty. Grant, however, refused to reduce the strength of his fencible battalion in this way, although he did permit enlistment of Strathspey soldiers for the Fraser Fencible Regiment, a new formation whose service extended beyond
Scotland and which served in the suppression of the 1798 Rising in Ireland. One of Grant’s fencible officers advised him that he could get “ten to one that will enlist in the Strathspey Fencibles that will not go into Regiments going upon service.” But he also insisted that “one third of your fencible regiment would volunteer it, & they could be made upon a month’s time. Was this permitted I am certain it would forward the service much.” He was undoubtedly correct in his assessment, but Sir James declined the advice and retained the trained soldiers in his fencible battalion. Other commanding officers were not as reluctant. The 93rd (Sutherland) Highlanders, for example, was formed around a nucleus of 269 men discharged from the Sutherland Fencible Highlanders. Obviously a regiment like the 93rd, with a strong contingent of made soldiers in its ranks, would be ready for service before a completely new regiment like the 97th, which had few experienced soldiers in its ranks. Those few who were discharged from the Strathspey Fencibles were very doubtful assets for their new regiments. One who went was Drum Major Waddel, a non-commissioned officer whose departure was universally welcomed by the fencible officers, for besides being an excellent drummer the man was rarely, if ever, sober.

Competition for men led to the enlistment of soldiers who were truly unfit for active service. Lieutenant-Colonel Onslow, who commanded the 97th for Sir James Grant, sought his permission to discharge no less than eighty of the oldest men, while he complained that others were so young that they were unable to bear the weight of their arms and equipment on the march. But whatever Onslow’s wishes, Sir James could not afford to discharge men who had passed inspection by a general officer. The establishment of the new battalions was a thousand other ranks in addition to the commissioned officers, and none had reached that figure. All the colonels of new regiments recruiting in Scotland had been obliged to petition for permission to have their regiments inspected when their strength exceeded six hundred men, and the War Office had conceded that this might be done while at the same time optimistically insisting that recruiting should continue beyond the date upon
which the regiments were placed upon the establishment. Suitable recruits were not to be obtained, no matter what bounty was offered. Alexander Grant, who supervised recruitment for the 97th at Edinburgh, remarked that his ill-success was due to “recruiting parties bidding as high as ever” but with few men forthcoming “except for cavalry & internal defence . . .”

The subsequent fate of some of the new regiments of the line raised in Scotland was not such as to encourage further recruitment. The 109th, or Aberdeenshire Regiment, raised by Colonel Leith-Hay in direct rivalry with the 92nd Gordon Highlanders, with many of its soldiers coming from the same region as the Gordons, will serve as an example. No sooner was the 109th embodied and moved to England than it was disbanded, its officers placed on half-pay, and its rank and file given to the 53rd Regiment, later called the Shropshire Light Infantry. This transfer was made in direct violation of the terms upon which the soldiers of the Aberdeenshire Regiment were enlisted. The recruits of the 109th had been given a written promise that they would not be drafted, and that in the event of their regiment’s reduction they would be discharged in the county in which their regiment had been raised. The government did not consider itself bound by Colonel Leith-Hay’s promise and in spite of his protests the 109th Regiment was reduced in England and the soldiers continued their service in an English regiment of the line which had been experiencing recruiting difficulties.

The 97th (Inverness-shire) Highlanders suffered a very similar fate. The 97th left Scotland for a training camp in England, and subsequently saw duty as part of the garrison of the island of Guernsey close to the French coast. Thereafter, for most of its short history, most of the company officers and rank and file served as temporary marines on board the ships of the Channel fleet, for the Royal Navy’s expansion had far outdistanced recruitment for the corps of marines. Some of these soldiers of the 97th, by virtue of the fact that the ships upon which they were serving had been ordered to distant waters, continued to serve long after their own regiment had been disbanded. The 97th was formally disbanded at Hilsea Barracks, Portsmouth, in 1795, and the men were discharged into numerous other corps.
many of them continuing to serve in the fleet as marines, and a large detachment going to strengthen the 42nd, or Black Watch, the senior Highland regiment. The repeated disbandment and drafting of newly raised battalions had a markedly negative effect on subsequent Scottish recruitment. Perhaps it was as well that there were so many soldiers serving, while the distinguished record of the Scots regiments in the Peninsula and elsewhere kept a steady trickle of the young and impressionable volunteering for the older established corps so long as the war lasted. The government, however, was storing up trouble for the future. Scots have a long memory for abuses and are reluctant to repeat their predecessors’ errors, and enlistment in a high numbered regiment had been demonstrated to be a fool’s game.

The errors of the war government were numerous. Far too many men had been enlisted in limited service regiments, which were much more attractive to good recruits than the line regiments, but a lot less flexible for the administration. The advantages of serving in a fencible battalion were immediately obvious to a potential recruit, who thereby acquired military skills without the need to commit himself to a lengthy period of service. The administration, however, was responsible through its own actions for discouraging the augmentation of the line army. There were English, Welsh and even Irish fencible regiments as well as the Scots units, but in numbers they were considerably smaller and did not cause the same recruiting problems as in Scotland.

Forced to admit its error, the government commenced the disbandment of the fencible troops, starting with those units with the most restricted service obligation. This freed up many thousands of trained soldiers for re-enlistment in the line battalions, receiving an additional bounty for so doing, and many former fencibles participated in the continental engagements. A small force of conscripted militia, reinforced by unpaid volunteers became the main strength of the home defence army in Scotland. Those fencible soldiers who would be unlikely to re-enlist, for example, the large contingent of married men, would still be available to extend the benefits of their military skills to the volunteers. With the fencible competition
withdrawn, the administration should have been able to draw extensively upon Scotland for the line army. Once more, however, they shot themselves in the foot by forming regular battalions in Scotland and as promptly drafting them into the English line. There was a tendency at the opening of the nineteenth century for government and parliament alike to see Scotland as an inexhaustible reservoir of manpower, which it clearly was not, and no other explanation of the attempted formation of so many new battalions and regiments in that country appears plausible. Scotland, in short, was being asked to provide far more men than its population could sustain.

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**Endnotes**

2. Buccleuch Papers, GD224/381.
3. William Windham to Sir James Grant, 11 March 1795. Seafield papers. GD248/689/3
6. Notably the 93rd (Sutherland) Highlanders.
7. See the forthcoming article on the recruitment of the 97th in _The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research_.
9. Major John Grant indicated to Sir James Grant that ten men had been given their discharges to join the 97th, besides recruits not yet joined.
10. Francis William Grant, Sir James Grant’s son, upon his appointment as major in the Fraser Fencibles, obtained sixty men from the Strathspey Fencibles. Other deductions reluctantly accepted were an entire flank company formerly commanded by Captain McDonnel of Glengarry, which went with their chief to his new battalion, the Glengarry Fencibles, and ten men who were given to please the political ruler of Scotland, Henry Dundas.
11. Captain Grant to Sir James Grant, 20 Feb. 1794. Seafield Papers. GD248/685/4


17. One hundred and twelve soldiers were discharged to the 42nd Highlanders and one hundred and ninety-eight to the Marines. Seafield Papers. GD248/698/2.

18. The reduction of the fencible regiments began in 1798-99, with the last regiments being disbanded in 1802.

19. The Scottish Militia consisted of ten battalions each of eight companies.