here is considerable controversy regarding the professional state of the British Army following the Napoleonic wars. More specifically, the debate centres around the extent of reforms prior to the Crimean war. Generally, the British Army has been characterized as impervious to reform, caught between the ‘greatness’ of the Duke of Wellington and the dead weight that was the war ministry. There were few incentives for officers to improve themselves or the army in general. This interpretation has, however, been challenged by a number of historians. Hew Strachan has argued that there were a number of military journals supporting improvements, and a growing number of officers who sought to both professionalize the officer corps - the prerequisites of officership being a background as a gentlemen rather than a professional field of study - as well as to promote innovations at the regimental level.¹ The promotion of innovations was particularly relevant to service in British North America, where commanding officers were confronted with a variety of problems: boredom, poor living conditions and the lure of a better life in the United States which induced so many to desertion.

The Highland regiments were not immune to the problems which were plaguing the British Army as a whole, and commanders of Highland regiments stationed in British North America were often at a loss when it came to stopping the flow of recruits south of the border. For a small number of officers the answer lay in reforms which they believed would make the military
more attractive, or at least more bearable, for the average recruit. The 93rd (or Sutherland) Highlanders, which served in British North America during the decade following the outbreak of rebellion in 1837, provides an opportunity to examine the application and impact of reforms upon a regiment serving in British North America. The regiment’s commander, Colonel Robert Sparks, is representative of the newly emerging officer who took an active interest in the welfare of their men, adopting many of the innovations put forth by Lord Howick and others.

Without question the single most difficult problem facing regimental commanders in British North America was desertion. Despite desertion being considered “the most heinous and shameful crime a soldier could commit in peacetime,” several thousand rank and file fled from army life each year. Commanding officers in the Mediterranean, Australia, the Cape or the West Indies had little problem with desertion, either because of the desirability of the location (the Mediterranean) or the remoteness of the garrison (Australia and the West Indies). Such was not the case with British North America where a long border with the United States, which offered the prospects of cheap land and high wages, made desertion both easier and desirable.

From January 1st 1839 to January 1st 1847 no less than 2,228 men deserted from British regiments stationed in Canada. Commanding officers of the period seem to have been at a loss as to how they could effectively control the number of deserters. In a letter regarding the prevention of desertion one officer stated that,

In his opinion it would be extremely difficult to adopt any measure for preventing desertion owing to the country, bordering as it does on the long line of frontier of the United States, which not only holds out great inducements to the soldiers from the constant ideas indulged in by them of bettering their condition from the high rate of wages supposed to be given them there . . . particularly those who have been brought up to any trade.

Another officer blamed the high rate of desertion on the Irish who, “. . . are induced to desert from their having relations
and friends settled in various parts of the U.S. and no doubt many Irish enlist for no other purpose than that of ultimately affecting this objective, and being brought to America free of expense." There is no doubt that many Irish joined with the intention of escaping the grinding poverty they faced in Ireland. The decades leading up to the outbreak of the Potato Famine were difficult and there were few prospects at home. However the Irish were clearly not the only ones joining with the intention of gaining free passage overseas. In 1839 one writer commented that “no cause can be figured out for desertions except that it’s greater after drafts from England.” New recruits, regardless of nationality, were more likely to desert.

The 93rd, known for its discipline in the early decades of the nineteenth century, did not escape the increase in desertion. During the decade the regiment spent in British North America desertion remained a constant concern. In October of 1839 eight privates are listed as deserting from Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island. The problem reached serious proportions in June of 1840 when eighteen men deserted in the same week. Perhaps most disconcerting was the fact that “…the last two that deserted were picked soldiers, and were at the time employed as Police Men to prevent this very crime.” Lieutenant Governor Sir George Arthur had feared that the 93rd, a regiment he described as one of the best Corps, would see a rise in desertion when the regiment was sent to the frontier. His reasoning was simple: “They are generally farming Men; and, at a short distance from the Niagara frontier is a Scotch settlement from whence I have not a doubt many allurements will be held out.” In each year which followed a small, but significant number of men deserted from the regiment. It was not until June 1848 that desertion ceased to be a problem as the regiment received orders to return to Scotland in September. The number of deserters each year created a great deal of concern amongst commanding officers struggling to find more effective ways of maintaining discipline and the strength of their regiment.

What then, was the cause of the growing trend towards desertion? The intention of fleeing to friends, family and better prospects in the United States was certainly a major factor. More
important however, is the fact that the composition of the Highland regiments was changing. They no longer drew primarily upon the Highlands, or even specific localities, for their rank and file. Highland regiments increasingly drew upon Ireland and England, and perhaps more importantly, they drew heavily from urbanized areas where unemployed tradesmen and laborers might be found.

R.H. Burgoyne, in writing his history of the 93rd Highlanders in 1860, stated that,

A census having been made of the disposable population on the extensive estates of the Countess of Sutherland, her agents lost no time in requiring a certain proportion of the able-bodied sons of the numerous tenantry to join the ranks of the Sutherland regiment, as a test at once of duty to their feudal chief and to their sovereign.

He goes on to add that,

The appeal thus made to the patriotism of the men of Sutherland was very generally responded to, and though discontent was occasionally manifested by individual parents at the arbitrary proceedings to which in certain cases it gave rise, yet the young men themselves never seemed to question the right that was assumed over their military services by their chieftain.12

These two statements bring up a number of interesting points. First, that the majority of men recruited were from the tenantry of the Sutherland estate and were therefore agricultural laborers. Secondly, it brings up the question of recruitment and its relationship to the Sutherland Clearances. The social implications involved in the Sutherland tenantry losing four hundred and sixty men, many between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, is certainly worthy of further study. Burgoyne saw this type of recruitment in a positive light, arguing that it instilled a high level of character:
Not only were many of the non-commissioned officers and privates the children of respectable farmers, but a certain proportion of the officers themselves were gentlemen associated with the counties in which the regiment was raised. Therefore both they and the soldiers regarded the regiment as one large family bound together by the strong ties of neighbourhood, and even relationship.¹³

In such a regiment individuals not only felt accountable for their own actions, but for the conduct of their comrades as well. These bonds were strengthened by different companies of the battalion being classified by parish. Many of the men serving together would have been acquaintances, longtime friends and relatives, and would therefore be less-likely to damage the reputation of the regiment through desertion or other negative actions.¹⁴

By the 1820s the 93rd, like all regiments of the period, was going through a transition which changed the social composition of the regiment. Diana Henderson’s work on the Roll Book of the 93rd Highlanders has shown that the composition of the regiment changed significantly from its first establishment to the 1830s. In 1799 the regiment was comprised predominantly of Highlanders, with the majority of NCO’s and Sergeants being drawn from Sutherland. Enlistment figures for the 1820s show that while Highlanders still predominated, there was an increasing trend towards enlistment from outside the Highlands, with Sutherland supplying few new recruits.¹⁵ The 93rd was not alone in this respect, as all Highland regiments of the period were forced to look outside the Highlands for recruits, and increasingly to urban, instead of rural environments.¹⁶ The impact this could have upon a regiment was considerable. As Henderson notes, the “...wider spread of recruiting, the lessening of the more personal aspects of recruiting, the alcoholic temptations of garrison service,... and the intake of unconnected and unenthusiastic general service men, all combined to change the character of the regiment...”¹⁷

Such changes presented new challenges for commanding
officers who could no longer rely upon the traditional means of
discipline and deference to superiors. From the early 1830s there
was continued pressure from the public, the British press and
radicals to end practices such as flogging, the traditional form
of discipline. The public generally condemned flogging as
barbarous and totally out of touch with the more humane spirit
that was prevalent in Britain. The monarch, many military
officers, Tories and most Whigs continued to defend flogging
as essential to military discipline, but had to concede ground
and gradually reduce the number of lashes which were given out
for various punishments.18

Faced with the prospects of commanding a different type of
regiment in a rapidly changing world, an increasing number of
officers began to professionalize, to move away from the tradi-
tional methods of command which stressed harsh punishments
and a reliance on the traditional deference of the men to their
superiors. The new breed of officer took a more active role in
maintaining the morale of his regiment by looking more closely
after the needs of his men. In the 1820s a small but growing
number of people within the military pressed for reforms they
believed would make the military a more attractive career.
Changes argued for included higher rates of pay, better living
conditions and the abolition of flogging. It was however,
not until Lord Howick became Secretary of War in Lord
Melbourne’s ministry in 1835 that any real success at initiating
reforms was realized.

Howick energetically set about tackling the problems of
desertion, drunkenness and general apathy for military life
common amongst the rank and file and showed a particular
sympathy for the challenges faced by commanders of regiments
serving in British North America. Howick struggled against years
of tradition and prejudice which held that any attempt to make
the soldier’s lot in life more bearable would undermine military
discipline, the very glue which traditionalists believed held the
military together. In contrast to this view, Howick believed that
with the application of the right reforms the army would be able
to attract a better class of recruit and even make a career in
the military desirable. A strong argument could be made for the
necessity of reform in British North America where desertion had reached alarming proportions. Harsh discipline in the form of flogging appeared to have little effect in stopping the flow of recruits to the United States and may well have been a factor in promoting desertion as many may have fled their regiments to escape the harsh punishments inflicted for minor offences. Howick therefore looked to implement a wide range of reforms, from rewards for good behavior to the more controversial establishment of Savings banks and Regimental Libraries, in order to make military life more attractive.\textsuperscript{19} Lord Howick’s reforms were adopted slowly, yet influenced a growing number of officers.

The records available for the 93rd Highlanders during the regiment’s decade of service in British North America demonstrate that Colonel Sparks took an active interest in the well-being of his men and was willing to go out of his way to ensure that they had necessary articles such as warm clothing. Until 1830 troops received funds to help cover the cost of warm winter clothing - flannel shirts, mitts, cloth coveralls, boots, great coats and cloaks. In 1830 the government, in an effort to save, no longer supplied such articles free of charge, instead opting to deduct the costs from the soldiers’ pay. Howick demonstrated that since this practice had been put in place desertion rates had increased, yet he still had a difficult time convincing the treasury to free up money for winter clothing. Colonel Sparks took great pains to acquire the necessary clothing for the men of his regiment. In a letter of April 1st, 1840, Colonel Sparks asked the Lieutenant General for funds to have two hundred and fifty great coats made for his men. This letter is one of a series concerning the need for both great coats and boots. On 5th October, 1843 Colonel Sparks ordered an additional one hundred coats, and in a later letter he requested the use of old great coats which he wanted so that his men could make capes to be used on guard duty.\textsuperscript{20} The need for proper winter wear was an ongoing concern and one which had the potential to alleviate a considerable degree of hardship and discomfort.

The founding of regimental savings banks, a popular innovation outside of the military, held out much promise as a way to better the lot of both the men and the military in general. It was
believed by Howick and others that if the rank and file could be convinced of the benefits of putting some money away they would be in a better financial position upon leaving the military and also be less likely to attempt desertion. There was considerable opposition to the idea. “Has a soldier in the Army more pay than he requires?” enquired Lord Fitzroy Somerset, military secretary to the Commander-in-chief, in 1827. “If he has the soldier’s pay ought to be lowered, not to those now in the service, but to others enlisted hereafter. I don’t think it desirable to encourage our soldiers to become over thrifty.”

The 93rd was one of the first to organize a savings bank. As early as November 1839 a large number of Non-Commissioned Officers and men of the regiment had requested permission to establish a savings bank, a request which Colonel Sparks wholeheartedly supported. The Savings bank was established in January 1840, before legislation on the matter had been passed, with fifty-eight men depositing small sums of money. The benefits of this innovation caught on quickly and within a year of its establishment one hundred and twenty one ‘thrifty’ soldiers had deposited £605.

The savings bank was believed to have had a very positive effect upon the regiment. Colonel Sparks wrote that “the savings bank has been productive of many good effects and I am not aware that any evil has resulted from it…Many of the Depositors who were formerly of intemperate habits are now of sober character.”

Drunkenness, the source of many discipline problems at colonial garrisons, was reduced as men invested their extra shillings. But more significant, and not unrelated, was the apparent drop in desertion. Colonel Sparks attributed a drop in desertion in 1840-41 to the founding of the bank and others soon came to the same conclusion.

Whatever objections may exist against Savings Banks elsewhere, in Canada they possess a strong recommendation, and, under good arrangements, carefully observed, any possible bad consequence may be avoided. If the Soldiers can be prevailed upon to lay up a portion of their Pay, it will operate as a powerful
counteracting influence against desertion. During the two months after their arrival at Niagara, eighteen men deserted from the 93rd Regt., but of those not one had any stake in the Savings bank.25

Soldiers investing in a savings bank may well have thought twice before deserting as it now carried more than a stiff penalty if caught; it also meant the loss of any money placed in the bank.

Colonel Sparks was also one of the first Commanding officers to establish a regimental library for his regiment. Since the early decades of the century a number of officers had started libraries for their men, but these, like the other reforms, were for the most part viewed as frivolous and suspicious. In 1832 the Adjutant General warned commanding officers that libraries were a threat as they afforded

legitimate pretexts for meetings, and eventually, cabals, which sooner or later must weaken the Authority of the Officer and the discipline of the Soldier...for any institution whose regulations authorize the soldiery to meet, to congregate and to deliberate in their Barrack Rooms for any purpose, or upon any pretense whatever, except in the presence of their Officers is, in its very nature, repugnant to the principles of Discipline and subordination.26

Despite such opposition libraries were established. By 1844 there were thirty-eight libraries in Britain and forty overseas, however it should be noted that great care was taken in ensuring that only books deemed suitable, those that would “...teach the soldiery the value of sober, regular and moral habits..”27 were available. The 93rd was one of the first regiments stationed overseas to establish a library, and its effects would seem to have been wholly positive. The library not only offered an alternative to the tavern, but also allowed soldiers the opportunity to better prepare themselves for life outside the military. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the library was used, however the men appear to have had a considerable interest in education.
In 1840 no less than two hundred men of the regiment were voluntarily attending a school which had been formed. The men of the 93rd were described by Lieutenant Governor Arthur as “...altogether a different Class of men...younger, and more amenable in the way of learning...”

Colonel Sparks could also be very accommodating towards his men, particularly where family was concerned. When the regiment returned to Upper Canada from Halifax in 1838 there were among their numbers thirty-eight women and fifty-six children; therefore issues surrounding the accommodation and maintenance of the families of married soldiers would have affected a large number of men of the regiment. When Private William Macpherson died, leaving behind a wife and five children, Colonel Sparks wrote headquarters asking that rations continue to be supplied until support for the children could be arranged. Such actions must have been greatly appreciated by the men of the regiment. Leniency was also on occasion extended to deserters. The story of Private James Traille is a case in point. Private Traille had deserted the regiment and then given himself up. Colonel Sparks wrote a letter asking for leniency as Traille came from an honest Protestant family and regretted what he had done. Colonel Sparks would no doubt later regret writing the letter as troubles with this particular recruit would continue.

The impact the adoption of these various reforms had upon the 93rd during their time in British North America is difficult to ascertain. Colonel Sparks was innovative and clearly looked out for the well-being of his soldiers. He adopted a wide-range of reforms which he believed would make army life more bearable, and perhaps more importantly, lessen the appeal of desertion. It would appear that the rates of desertion from the regiment remained low throughout the 1840s, and that many of the desertions that took place can be attributed to new recruits. Many of these may have joined with the intention of deserting to the United States, and given the geographic location of the 93rd, stationed primarily along the St. Lawrence, those wishing to desert would have ample opportunity. It would therefore appear that the reforms implemented by Colonel Sparks had a positive impact upon morale and garrison life in general.
But not all were enthusiastic over the changes being implemented, and at least one officer of the 93rd found the new approach to command to be difficult to accept. Lieutenant Andrew Agnew, who had joined the regiment in 1835 as an Ensign, found Colonel Sparks style of command not to his liking. Like many officers of the day, Lieutenant Agnew came from the landed class and looked upon the military as a means of advancement, travel and adventure. After the excitement of the Battle of the Windmill at Prescott, the only action the regiment would see in its ten years in British North America, Lieutenant Agnew grew restless, and after an extended canoe trip through the Great Lakes, believed he had seen all that there was to see and began to think of transferring to another regiment. He believed the 16th Lancers would be a perfect fit as:

I should have a free passage of course and see much of India, perhaps a little service which now a days is a great object indeed, the regiment went abroad in 1822 so that it should return to England at the latest about 1844; when I should of course be brought back again gratis after having seen an immensity of the world... It would seem that military life in the colonies no longer offered Agnew the excitement which he craved.

There was, however, another reason Lieutenant Agnew began turning his mind to transferring out of the 93rd. Agnew’s private correspondence with his father demonstrates that he found life in the regiment ‘lacking’. For him there was “…no recommendation in the way of society, polishing to the mind or manners...” More significantly, he had developed a certain uneasiness with the regiment, which he found lacked ‘gentlemen’. Lieutenant Agnew got along ‘tolerably well’ with Colonel Sparks, but also found him lacking in civility. Colonel Sparks was not, Agnew would write in strictest confidence to his father, “born a gentleman.”

Lieutenant Agnew clearly disliked Colonel Sparks and was one of a number of officers who as early as 1839 complained
about aspects of his command. Agnew and the other like-minded officers may well have been reacting against the new style of officer Colonel Sparks represented, one which took greater interest in the well-being and day to day lives of their men. The changes implemented by Colonel Sparks, while perhaps grating upon the sensibilities of his “gentlemanly” officers, must have had a positive impact upon the regiment as a whole. Lieutenant Governor Arthur, in addressing the subject of Colonel Sparks Command wrote that,

With regard to the management of the 93rd Regt, I have certainly heard that some of the officers fancied that Lt Colonel Sparke [sic] was not so kind and considerate as he might be in some unimportant particulars, and a hint to this effect was given to him some time ago; but there is nothing approaching to a want of unanimity; and with the noncommissioned officers and soldiers no commanding Officer can be more liked. His influence over them is most decisive… My Conviction is that Sparke is an honest, straightforward, sober-minded soldier…

Colonel Sparks was clearly an effective officer who actively introduced new reforms in an effort to curb desertion and provide better care for the men of his regiment. He was well-liked by the non-commissioned officers and rank and file, and desertion, although a problem throughout the period, subsided after 1840 when many of the reforms had been initiated. The decades before the Crimean War were, however, a transitional period where many refused to accept the necessity of military reform. For many officers it was still necessary that an officer be a gentleman in the traditional sense, that they have the correct bearing and breeding, and in this respect it would seem Colonel Sparks fell short of at least some of his officers’ expectations.

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Endnotes


2. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Sparks had a long career in the 93rd Highlanders. Sparks joined the regiment in 1807 at the rank of Ensign. He served with the regiment in America and took part in the Battle of New Orleans, where he was wounded. He made Captain on 17th February 1820, and Lieutenant Colonel on the 28th July, 1838, at which time he assumed command of the regiment in the Canadas. He died in 1852 while serving as Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment. R. H. Burgoyne, *Historical Records of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders*. (London: 1883) 410-411.


4. There were many different possible reasons why a soldier might choose to desert his regiment. The monotony and boredom of garrison duty, harsh discipline, poor pay, indebtedness, and drunkenness were all contributing factors. Many commanding officers complained of Americans who convinced soldiers to desert to a better way of life, high wages and ample employment south of the border. Burroughs, “Tackling Army Desertion in British North America,” 28-36.


6. Ibid.

7. MG13, WO 17. Reel B1577. Vol. 1545. 135. Of course many of these may well have been Irish who had migrated to the industrial centers of Northern England in search of employment.

8. Not a single man of the Light Company is reported to have been punished between 1799 and 1819. Diana Henderson, *Highland Soldier*. (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1989) 60.

9. MG 13, WO 17 Reel B1577 Vol. 1543. Desertions were a particular problem in Prince Edward Island where farmers faced with a labour shortage were only too willing to harbor a fugitive in exchange for work. Burroughs, “Tackling Army Desertion in British North America.” 42.


14. Diana Henderson suggests that the social control supplied through the organization of platoons and companies by parish of origin was an important factor in maintaining discipline within the 93rd. *Highland Soldier*. 60.
16. By 1830 Irish soldiers were 42.2 per cent of the British Army and increasingly a larger proportion of recruits were drawn from the growing urban centres. Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815-1914*. (London: Longman Group Ltd.,1980) 48-49. Scottish soldiers comprised just 13.5 percent and were proving reluctant to join the army. Strachan, *The Reform of the British Army, 1830-54*. 51.
24. Ibid.
31. Private Traille was tried and convicted of desertion and other charges, including disregarding his superior officer’s commands on the line of march, and was sentenced to six months imprisonment. Before being confined he escaped and fled to the United States, where he promptly enlisted in an artillery regiment. Shortly after he deserted from this regiment and returned to Port Colborne, where he was apprehended in connection with a robbery in Buffalo. He was later escorted to Toronto and tried by general court martial. Letters of 13 January, 1841, 86-88; November 30, 1841, 89; 23 January 1842, 91. War Office Records. “C” series. 1007.

32. Lieutenant Andrew Agnew was the eldest son of one of southern Scotland’s prominent families. The Agnews of Lochnaw were substantial landowners in Wigtonshire, and for generations had been actively involved in the political, social and religious development of the region. Agnew’s father, Andrew Agnew Sr., served the county as Member of Parliament and was a vocal advocate for the observance of the Sabbath. See, Thomas M’Crie, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Andrew Agnew of Lochnaw. (Edinburgh: 1850).


34. For a full discussion of this and a copy of the journal kept by Agnew during his trip to Manitoulin for the native gift-giving ceremony see, Scott A. McLean, From Lochnaw to Manitoulin: A Highland Soldier’s Tour Through Upper Canada. (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 1999).


36. Ibid.


38. In 1839 Agnew wrote that some internal differences within the regiment had cemented a small band of the officers together. Henderson, Highland Soldier. 134. The officers Agnew was referring to, and who had similar complaints regarding certain aspects of Colonel Sparks command, were: William Robert Haliday, who exchanged to the 93rd in 1834 at the rank of Lieutenant, and later became a Lieutenant-General; Neil Snodgrass Buchanan who made Captain on the 28th July, 1838; and Captain William Pitt Trevelyan, the last of the officers to be named by Agnew. Burgoyne, Historical Records of the 93rd. 367, 386, 414.

Although there are many one-volume histories of Scotland as a whole, and several good books that deal with one part or another of the Middle Ages, works that take on the entire sweep of the medieval period in a single volume are a rare breed indeed. *Medieval Scotland* by A.D.M. Barrell fills an obvious lacuna in Scottish historical studies, and, what is more, manages to do it very efficiently in a mere 267 pages of text.

This book is a single-volume history of medieval Scotland, concentrating on the period from the reign of Malcolm III 'Canmore' in the eleventh century (1058-1093) to the Reformation Parliament of 1560. Eight chapters cover Early Medieval Scotland; Feudal Scotland; the Transformation of the Scottish Church; the Consolidation of the Scottish Realm; the Wars of Independence; the Stewart Kings; Crown and Nobility in Later Medieval Scotland; and the Road to Reformation. The author's approach to his subject is unashamedly traditional – that is, the book is primarily a political and ecclesiastical study. Several key themes are developed throughout, including the development of the institutions of the medieval Scottish state; crown-nobility relations; relations with external powers; the development of the Scottish church; and the formation of a distinct Scottish identity. Another major concern of the author, and one that mirrors current trends in medieval Scottish and European scholarship, is that of core-periphery interactions.

There is much to admire in this study and little to criticize. The work is valuable not only as a one-volume survey of the