The Highland Soldier: Of Myths and Men

“t’s nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us,” observes one of the Irvine Welsh’s more astute wretches in *Trainspotting* a fictional novel of Edinburgh’s drug and drink-addled underclass, “We are colonized by wankers...We can’t even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonized by...What does that make us?”

Good taste precludes a repetition of the answer but in so raising the question, Irvine neatly turns on its head the present romanticized vision, fuelled of late by Hollywood and sport, of the noble Gaelic warrior, struggling against oppression (read the English), often winning against long odds, ultimately beaten by superior technology but never defeated. Central to this image is the kilted Highland warrior, whose martial skill, fostered in unending clan feuds, first held at bay for centuries the English and then, in turn, secured for the same an empire on which the sun has only recently set.

The truth, as usual, is slightly more complex than either extreme suggests: the reputation of the Highland warrior has its roots in a culture and circumstances that made no distinction between soldier and civilian, that produced a fighter proficient in arms and whose value system was intertwined with his skills as a combatant. The Highland culture was also one whose system of social organization - the clan - inhibited the development of a political state and a concurrent military institution, a failing which would prove fatal in its struggle with its neighbour. Indeed, in
few places was the disparities between the two cultures more apparent than in their respective war making traditions.

There is certainly no lack of books on the subject of Highland martial exploits but relatively few have systematically examined them as either a social or cultural phenomenon and even fewer have attempted to address why the theory that the Scots’ fighting ability surpasses that of other nations has become such an important component of Scottish nationalism. There, in fact, is a long history of more advanced cultures using the ‘barbarous’ on the margins to assist in fighting their wars: the Cossacks are one of the more obvious. The question becomes perhaps why these cultures never absorbed the changes that allowed nations like the English to first overcome them by the 17th century and then to maintain that grip in the face of numerous revolts. The answer lies in the fact that the Scottish approach to warfare was rooted in its culture and it was only when that culture was threatened and broken that a different approach to war could be taken. The raising and incorporation of the Highlanders into the Regimental system reflected the diminishment of their culture and the related phenomenon of the rise of the state that was Great Britain.

The three works under review, to a greater or lesser extent, each address soldiers and soldiering as a social and cultural phenomenon; taken together they suggest that the seeds of the decline of Highland culture were planted from within and that its resurrection in a romanticized form was the product of the very institution that pushed it over the edge.

James Michael Hill’s Celtic Warfare, 1595-1763 is the most traditional of the three; his book would have rested comfortably on a 19th century shelf between Sir Walter Scott’s Rob Roy and a volume of Burns’s poetry. The author argues that there was a continuity in Celtic strategy and tactics over several centuries which centred on the prowess of the individual and the weapons adapted for hand to hand combat. The result was a Celtic ‘way of war’ that centred on the Highland or, as Hill characterizes it, the
Celtic, charge based on harnessing the fury of the Highland warrior in a massed attack, quickly closing with the enemy and bringing him to individual combat. He develops his argument by detailing how the tactics, weaponry and leadership of the Celtic peoples - the Irish and Scots - shaped conflicts from the Irish Wars through to the Seven Years War in North America. The author contends that Celtic tactics allowed them to dominate the battlefield for most of the 17th century but their continued reliance on 'primitive strategy, tactics, logistics, and weapons as their forebears' ultimately proved their undoing as the British state evolved a military machine that was capable of withstanding the charge. He concludes, however, that Celtic warfare lived on in the Highland regiments and in the chivalric code of the Antebellum Southern United States.

Hill's study raises some critical questions, and answers some, but does not address the one that emerges as central to his whole study. He offers exhaustive proof that the Highland charge became a definitive aspect of 'Celtic warfare' over several centuries - was there ever a doubt? - but the next question is why were they unable to adapt to the changes being wrought by the technological and political developments that were altering the face of armies throughout Europe. The obvious answer, of course, is found in the nature of Scottish society, Highland and Lowland, the regional diversity and the clan system but these are not explored despite their importance in defining the nature of Celtic warfare.

There are other problems with his thesis. Clearly, the type of warfare practiced by the Highlanders and the Irish was best suited to the offensive, as the troops, at least in the examples he uses, tended to be ill-disciplined, and disinclined to either fight on the defensive or undertake sieges. The main point that emerges is that the Highlanders, at least, needed resolute leadership at all levels to achieve success and even then it was not always enough. This is not always evident because the author is very selective in the battles he analyzes, choosing victories which suggest the
dominance of the charge or its constant use. In so doing, he does a disservice to the reader and even to his own thesis. He leaves out the two most dramatic losses of the English Civil War, for example, at Dunbar on 3 September 1650 and at Worcester, the same day one year later. The Highland victory at Sheriffmuir in 1715 was a pyrrhic victory. Similarly, while acknowledging the role played by logistics and the numerous other factors that shape a battle’s outcome, they are not systematically studied in relation to the Celtic approach to war. Did Culloden turn, for example, only on the fact that Jacobite tactics were anachronistic or was the battle lost when the French army failed to land and the countryside failed to rise up in support of Bonnie Prince Charlie? Naturally, success or defeat depended upon a number of these factors but these are minimized in pursuit of the author’s thesis.²

In his effort to maintain his thesis, he extends the study to the Highland regiments who fought in the New World and concludes that the Celtic way of warfare remained at the heart of Confederate warfare through the U.S. Civil War. That the Highland regiments were used extensively overseas is well-documented; that it was due to their familiarity with the irregular warfare conditions that characterized the French-Indian wars of the 18th century is not as straightforward. The indiscipline of the Scots frustrated Wolfe, the British commander at Quebec, to no end. And it was not the Highland charge that won the field, and the British the continent, at Quebec. It was the disciplined company by company volley fire which broke the French ranks: the British line stood fast and fired twice, volleys, which combined with devastating effect with the lack of cohesiveness of the mixed militia and regular French force.³ Here, the problem is relying on dated sources. With regards to his final conclusion, the ‘Celtic’ influence on southern warfare is an interesting premise but is largely unsubstantiated and seems to have been included either to make the book more palatable to an American audience or to rationalize why the study of Celtic
warfare is important. In either case, it detracts from the book.⁴

There is something wistful about Hill’s approach; he takes pains to show that the Highlanders were valued above others as soldiers and that their defeats came as a result of an adherence to a outdated chivalric code and the belief in war as an art. Implicit in this, of course, is that those fighting with modern weapons in a disciplined system were not motivated by the same sense of honour and chivalry. Battles like that at Flodden suggest that neither side had a monopoly on bravery and comparing the Highlanders to the eager London weavers who volunteered to assist Cumberland in 1745 does no justice to either side.

His thesis that the Highland regiments retained the ethos of their warrior-society is an important concept. No one has really answered the question of how, if the Highlanders were not amenable to disciplined warfare, they took so well to the discipline of the regimental system in the regular British army. A more systematic study is needed but there were examples during the period cited and beyond that they could perform more sophisticated tactical maneuvers. In between the rebellions of 1715 and 1745, for example, Highlanders were recruited into the Black Watch specifically to keep order in the Highlands, and despite some discontent over their employment in Europe in 1745, performed well. At Falkirk in 1746, the clansmen showed a ‘cool discipline’ in dispersing the charge of General Henry Hawley’s dragoons. None of these examples challenges the centrality of the Highland or Celtic charge but they do suggest that a more comprehensive approach to understanding Celtic warfare is required.⁵

Grant Simpson’s The Scottish Soldier Abroad, 1247-1967 provides a possible answer to the question of why the military organization of the Highlands remained largely unchanged: the diaspora and absorption into the British army of many of Scotland’s finest military leaders and rank and file could not help but have influenced the development, or lack thereof, of the
Scottish military and indeed the Scottish state. Certainly the book itself suggests that the Highland Scots did not represent the only Celtic way of war.

Simpson’s work bridges the gap between Hill’s and Henderson’s, its’ articles a series of ‘snapshots’ from ‘the extensive album of Scottish military service overseas during a period of some seven centuries.’ His introduction tempers the expectations of what seems an overly ambitious project by directing the reader to a number of questions that the collection raises but does not completely answer. Foremost among these are why the Scots began to fight on the continent in such large numbers from the 14th and 15th centuries and the impact that this had on Scotland itself as well as the impact the Scots’ expatriates had on the European countries in which they settled. The articles in this volume, with varying degrees of success, address these social and cultural questions; as its’ title implies, it is about soldiering, not wars and battles, and not about the impact of war on Scotland itself. The tone is set in the brief introduction when Simpson notes that it is ‘unwise to try and in enunciate any theory that the Scots have been throughout their history pre-eminent fighting men notable above all others.’ Nevertheless, ‘they have certainly been active as fighters.’ And they have enjoyed a high reputation as soldiers, a point which, as several of the articles suggest, is inextricably linked with the series of military campaigns that the Scots have engaged in on the continent from the earliest days of the Kingdom.

The strength of this volume is that it avoids grandiose generalizations; instead it draws on individual experiences to portray how vastly disparate were the experiences of the Scots soldiering abroad. How they were affected and they in turn affected the societies in which they found themselves are addressed but the former receives by far the most and, generally the better quality, attention. The best articles place the individuals in their social and cultural context, thus tackling broader issues.
Military history can often become impersonal, driven by the need to forge a narrative that neither does justice to the reality of the battlefield or the individuals place before, during and after. Ian Morrison’s “Survival Skills” is a useful corrective to this, as it was designed to be, although its emphasis on the mechanics of fighting will not interest everyone. It does, however, suggest both the limits and strengths of Scottish reflections on war and soldiering historically, emphasizing that their individual skills often came at the expense of tactical and strategic sophistication. The question again is why?

The book’s, or rather the conference’s, stress on soldiering has resulted in some pieces that read as annotated memoirs rather than articles on the subject; others are not particularly insightful, suggesting that earnestness is no substitute for analysis when narrating regimental achievements. Several however are very good. Ian MacDougall’s “Scots in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939” points to a twentieth century renewal of Scottish nationalism but in a particularly international or, perhaps more specifically, European context, not unlike that which characterized their soldierly endeavours before the 17th century.

Diana Henderson’s “The Scottish Soldier Abroad: the sociology of acclimatization” provides important insights into the methods by which the Scottish soldier adapted to his new circumstances. In addition, it hints at the British army, or more specifically, the regiment as an important agent of emigration and acculturation.

It is at this point that the work of the three authors dovetails: the regimental system as a means of studying the clash of two cultures. The regiment was an essential element of the growth of modern nation-state. It secured ‘the control of armed forces to the state’ in response to the inadequacy of the traditional landholding basis for raising armed forces. As a social institution it was designed to ensure that loyalty was transferred from the local lord to the state; on an individual level, it harnessed the
value system of the individual warrior but transferred those values from the individual to the unit. This was not an easy process; the mutiny of the 42nd Regiment of the Line, the Black Watch, in 1743 occurred when it was perceived that the British government was not honouring the terms of enlistment - local defence. In 1779, the West Fencible Highlanders forcibly resisted the introduction of ‘cartouches’ as they were not considered traditional. The origins of successive mutinies suggest that martial ardour was not the primary reason for enlistment at least from the perspective of the Highlanders themselves. Neither was it the sole reason from the British perspective. Despite the romance attached to the regiments in the 19th century - the Battle of Waterloo was critical in prompting this - the ‘regimenting’ of the Highlanders in particular was viewed as ‘very significant experiment’ in nation-building.  

Diana Henderson’s Highland Soldier picks up the story once the Highland regiments have already become romanticized. Hers is the best of the three books, in this author’s opinion, both because of her use of the regiment as a social unit and because she does seek easy answers to questions about the esprit de corps of the Highland regiments. She examines the regiment as the central unit shaping the Scottish military experience through the 19th century. Based on extensive documentary evidence, the book uses a combination of statistics and anecdotal material to detail the regimental life as it was experienced by the other ranks and officers of the five Highland regiments and the five regiments of the line with Highland origins: from recruitment through to regimental music, the reader is provided with numerous insights into both the regimental experience and what it reveals about the Scots themselves. She concludes that the Highland regiments were unique, not because of any one aspect but due to the combination of a number of factors, including territorial recruiting, music, location, language, leadership, dress, the character of the commanding officers as well as historical, national and
geographical considerations.\textsuperscript{12}

Among a number of important conclusions one that stands out is the interpretation that regiments either Highland or Highland in origin were unique, not least because they had a strong esprit de corps which came from the men themselves. The latter is not uncommon amongst regiments in general, and while, as Henderson notes, it is difficult to render judgement without comparable studies of English or Welsh territorial regiments, it is safe to generalize that each regiment is unique in its own right. Indeed, the regimental system’s success lay in the fact that its foundations are those of history, tradition, ritual and loyalty - these ensured continuity and, in the 19th century, a pool of experience and expertise that formed the professional core of the British army. Nevertheless, that the Highlanders have, the author argues, maintained a unique regimental identity in the face of the numerous homogenizing pressures produced by modern warfare suggests that the national, historic and geographic differences have produced something different.

It may also suggest something else: one of the paradoxes of the Highland regiment’s retention of certain aspects of what became defined as traditional garb and music is that the expansion of regimenting also represented the expansion of the British state and the successful management of one culture by another.\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps the regiments harnessed the Highlander’s martial ardour but they also represented an attempt, or at least a step on the road, to extinguishing the culture that produced it. By the second decade of the 19th century, the monarch could hardly have found more loyal subjects. This is supported by Henderson’s conclusion that the stereotype of ill-treatment suffered by the Scottish soldier has no general basis in fact; rather they seem to have become an elite which would mean they responded better to discipline than the average British soldier. One author suggests that Scots made particularly good soldiers in the service of the British army because ‘Scots were sometimes credited with being more easily
sheperded than Englishmen.’14 ‘Imagination and sentiment ... are a dangerous medium... through which to approach the subject of battle.’15 Likewise to approach the subject of soldiering. Culture plays an important part in attitudes towards war and fighting; how that warfare is organized and perceived also reflects the society. The studies examined above all, through examining soldiers, shed some light on Scotland itself; more are needed.

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Endnotes
1. Irvine Welsh, Trainspotting (London: Minerva, 1996), 78
2. See, for example, F.J. McLynn, The Jacobite Army in England (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983)
3. The best by far on the military aspects is C.P. Stacey, The Siege of Quebec
4. For a more comprehensive and balanced interpretation of Gaelic warfare read Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffrey (Editors), A Military History of Ireland (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
5. A good survey is John Baynes with Hohn Laffin, Soldiers of Scotland (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1988)
7. See the recent Scotland and War, AD79–1918 edited by Norman MacDougall (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1991)
11. An interesting 19th century perspective is provided by an 1880 compilation entitled The Story of the Good Ship Bounty and her Mutineers and the Mutinies in the Highland Regiments, n.a.; a more modern perspective is provided by John Prebble, Mutiny: Highland
Regiments in Revolt, 1743–1804 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975)
15. Keegan, The Face of Battle, 30