

This Seat of Mars: War and the British Isles 1482-1746

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Charles Carlton's lively and readable book is an attempt to discern 'how war ... affected the history of early modern Britain' (p. xx) between the battles of Bosworth (1485) and Culloden (1746). The latter, as the last battle fought on British soil, marks an evident terminus; but Bosworth is a less than obvious place from which to start, notwithstanding Carlton's protestations that it marked 'the end of a military and political system that has been described as feudalism' and that 'the battle completed the building of the English nation' (p. 3). The former seems simplistic, while the latter ignores scholarship on the contested nature of Englishness in the sixteenth century or the extension of the Tudor state over its borderlands.⁽¹⁾ The book is in two parts, one looking at the impact of war at what Carlton calls the 'macro' level (p. xx), a chronological account of wars, battles, the growth of the navy (from Tudor times) and of a standing army (from the later 17th century) and their inter-relation with the state. The second, 'the micro effect' (p. xxi), examines the impact of war on individual soldiers and sailors. In an interesting attempt to connect these two approaches, they are interleaved, so that a first chapter on early Tudor warfare from a macro perspective is followed by a chapter on the experience of soldiers joining and training; the macro-level chapters proceed chronologically, while thematic chapters on the experience of soldiering follow the life-cycle of a soldier (and, more rarely, a sailor) from recruitment through motivation, campaigning and killing, to discharge (or death).

The chronological accounts provide a standard narrative of military engagements, great and small (though mainly the former, with maps detailing the deployment of forces at the battles of Bosworth, Edgehill, Marston Moor, Naseby, the Boyne, Blenheim, and Culloden, and during the Armada) with brief accounts of each battle that do little to explain why a battle was fought, why one side won, or the consequences of each engagement. Warfare is seen in very personal terms – Henry VIII's 'craving for honour' (p. 10), Charles I's

determination to teach a rebellious subject a lesson determining his attack on Gloucester in 1643 (rather than any strategic role the city may have had as a route between the king's headquarters in Oxford and the recruiting grounds in south Wales), or the role of the duke of Marlborough enabling Britain's 'magnificent performance' during the War of the Spanish Succession (p. 216). Here, Carlton's book resembles many other armchair studies of decisive battles, the heroic deeds of great men, and the less than heroic exploits of the incompetent, a traditional military historiography that goes back to Julius Caesar. This approach is married by Carlton to more recent trends in military history, including an attempt to assert the importance of warfare and military developments to social and political change. Without the great expense of Henry VIII's wars, which forced the crown to call parliaments to raise taxation, England may 'have followed the French or Spanish model by becoming absolutist' (p. 19), a judgment that ignores Bourbon and Habsburg paths to absolute rule through the costs of war and greatly increased military establishments. The broad outlines of Carlton's argument are shaped by earlier work on state building and the military, but unlike Wheeler or Braddick, for example (2), Carlton places the key changes in the late 17th and early 18th century, not the 1640s and 1650s. For Carlton, it was the Glorious Revolution that 'virtually completed the formation of a British state', helped consolidate an empire, and 'made a standing army acceptable for both civilians and officers' (pp. 231, 233). For those versed in recent historiography, Carlton draws too straight a line from 1688 to 1707.(3) Moreover, though the aim is stated to be the history of warfare in the British Isles, this is an Anglo-centric history, with little place for intra-Irish or intra-Scottish conflicts. The 16th century is seen in terms of England's wars. There is nothing here on the militarization of Gaelic society with its kerne and gallowglasses, or of military ventures by the Scottish crown against the clans of the highlands and islands, or of the impact of war on the Scottish crown. Carlton's account does show, however, significant military change in the late Stuart era including the decline of cavalry warfare, a standing army with a professionalized officer corps, the replacement of pikes with bayonets, and the adoption of platoon firing, with a corresponding dramatic increase in infantry fire power (kill ratios rose from one fatality per 250–400 rounds fired to a chilling one enemy killed for every 15 musket balls fired at Malplaquet in 1709, p. 225). There are similarities between his arguments and those of Black for a military revolution in the century after 1660 (4), but Carlton does not draw the parallels. Indeed, he eschews all discussion of a military revolution as 'fruitless' (p. 276, n. 106).

Interleaved with Carlton's chronological account is a social history of warfare in the tradition of the 'new military history' examining the impact of warfare on soldiers. This is ground that Carlton has successfully tramped before in his influential account of the experience of war during the British civil wars (5); here he reprises some of the arguments and examples (and some of the chapter and section titles), but greatly expands the analysis to cover more than two centuries of fighting and killing. Carlton's main sources are 236 printed memoirs and diaries from combatants, from the memoirs of Captain Elis Gruffudd's service in Calais and northern France in the 1520s, to Lt-Col Edward Windus's experiences in 1746. Most relate to the period between the Thirty Years' War and the War of the Spanish Succession; most are from soldiers rather than sailors; almost all were written by officers; only two are by women. From these, Carlton assembles a treasury of stories and quotations about recruitment, training, the boredom of garrison duty, the fear and excitement of battle, the pain of being wounded or captured, the bitterness of defeat, the joys and disappointments of demobilization. Added to these are numerous literary sources (a quotation from Shakespeare heads each chapter, and frequent use is made of ballads and plays to examine civilian impressions of the military). Where the chronological chapters emphasise change, these thematic chapters stress continuity, with quotations from all periods covered mixed together. Carlton defends this approach on the grounds that 'Fear felt no different at Bosworth Field (1485) than it did at Culloden (1746)' (p. xix). Indeed, Carlton goes much further, frequently drawing parallels between early modern and modern experiences of warfare and using evidence from the latter to illuminate the former, so that comparisons are drawn between Ireland in the 1640s and the Eastern Front in the 1940s, or between slaughter at Flodden and in the 1914–18 trenches, and evidence of the psychological impact of combat from Normandy and Burma in 1944 is used to explain the experiences of Edmund Ludlow after Edgehill. Carlton used this methodology in *Going to the Wars*, and as with that work, some readers will be troubled by the lack of chronological specificity, and may feel that the evidence Carlton presents of the changing face of battle might suggest that the psychology and experience of combat are not unchanging. Fear might have been affected by a soldier's

expectations of death (Carlton argues that soldiers facing platoon volleys were more than five times more likely to be killed than those facing other systems of musket fire, p. 225), or by religious belief. Religion plays a shifting role in Carlton's argument. While the Reformation is said to have produced 150 years of religious wars, religion is seen as playing 'little part' in persuading men to fight (p. 19), and Carlton thereafter ignores the possibility of religious motivation, even though others have argued for the importance of religion in making the English fight the civil wars from some of the same evidence, such as the letters of Nehemiah Wharton (wrongly ascribed by Carlton to Henry Foster, p. 26).⁽⁶⁾ Carlton seems uneasy on the place of religion: to make the argument that that it is all-too possible 'to exaggerate the role of religion in making men fight' he approvingly quotes Richard Baxter that the soldiers of the New Model Army had 'little religion' (pp. 76–7), but elsewhere, to show that combat changed men, he quotes another army chaplain, William Erbery, that the New Model was 'the army of saints' (p. 154). Nevertheless, it is Carlton's extensive research in soldiers' memoirs that forms one of the strengths of this book, for it allows the author to portray a wide range of military experiences across the life-cycle of a soldier in vivid and chilling detail and gives the book an immediacy that traditional military history often lacks.

A further aspect of Carlton's methodology and argument stands out: his frequent analysis by statistics to codify military change and military experience. The nature of naval dramatic naval change in the sixteenth century is demonstrated by ratio of weight of canon to weight of vessel, which increased from 3.7 to 7.3 per cent (p. 43); the militarization of society is suggested by the statistic that 30 per cent of the leading literary figures of the period served as soldiers (p. 20); two-thirds of the cost of the navy in the 1590s was offset by the crown's profits from privateering (p. 46); a typical soldier during the War of the Spanish Succession could expect to spend 45 per cent of his time in garrison or on leave, but when campaigning to march 11.25 miles a day (p. 96), at a time when the desertion rate was only 5 per cent a year, desertion when living among a foreign, hostile population proving unattractive (p. 107); only 2.2 per cent of casualties at Malplaquet were inflicted by bayonet (p. 171); in 1644 the survival rate of wounded soldiers at St Bart's hospital was better than at St Thomas's (13.6 per cent dying at the former, 23 per cent at the latter, pp. 244–5); Queen Anne's soldiers were due rations of 4,800 calories a day, a total of 245,274 tons of food for men and horses, requiring up to 441,339 tons of shipping (p. 103). Carlton acknowledges the speculative nature of many of these statistics (e.g. pp. 53, 150, 261–2), but the exactitude with which they are given conveys an air of unwarranted precision. Nonetheless, they represent a handy way of trying to pin down many of the themes of the book about the impact of war on early modern Britain.

Two categories of statistical evidence stand out as the most significant parts of the book: the attempts to quantify participation in the military, and death rates. Carlton calculates that between c. 1586 and c. 1603, 537,288 English and Welsh men saw some military service, which he estimates to be 55.6 per cent of all males in the kingdom between the ages of 18 and 39 (pp. 54–5). Some observations may be made about Carlton's figures. First, he suggests that the population of England at the end of Elizabeth's reign was 3.9 million, whereas Wrigley and Schofield's estimate for 1603 was 4.2 million.⁽⁷⁾ Second, Carlton's figures for military service include Welshmen (and others have argued for significant numbers of recruits from Wales fighting in Ireland during the 1590s)⁽⁸⁾, but Wrigley and Schofield exclude Wales from their calculations: including Wales would add a further 380,000, bringing the combined population to 4.5 million.⁽⁹⁾ Third, more than half of Carlton's total, 306,000 men, only saw service in the trained bands, militia and feudal levies; very few of these undertook more than a few days training a year, so that elsewhere (when considering how soldiers learned their trade, for example, p. 32) Carlton tends to dismiss the militia and trained bands. Fourth, Carlton's proportion is based on adult males under 40, but service in the militia was theoretically compulsory for males up to the age of 60. All these factors suggest that Carlton's claim that 'During the last third of Elizabeth's reign over half of English males saw some form of military service' (p. 263) is an exaggeration, and that the form of service of most of those was pretty cursory. On the other hand, Hammer has suggested that 275,000 men served outside the realm in a military or quasi-military capacity between 1586 and the end of Elizabeth's reign, against Carlton's estimate of 231,000, to which he adds a further 110,000 for the trained bands and quasi-feudal levies.⁽¹⁰⁾ Carlton's figures may be inflated (and a figure of around a 20 per cent of adult males serving in a military capacity at the end of Elizabeth's reign, or between 25 and 30 per cent if the trained bands are included, might be more representative guesses), but

Carlton's work does show the staggering military commitments of Elizabethan England in the 1590s.

The second category of statistical evidence that stands out is Carlton's work on death rates, revising and extending similar work he undertook for the civil wars. In *Going to the Wars* he suggested that 190,000 died in England, 60,000 in Scotland and 618,000 in Ireland, representing population losses of 3.7, 6.0 and 11.6 per cent respectively. Here, Carlton revises the number of deaths in England to 230,441 and in Scotland to 92,751, mainly by assuming slightly higher numbers who succumbed to disease. After criticism that his earlier estimates for Ireland were far too high (11), Carlton has revised downwards his figures for Ireland (in line with the upper estimate of Lenihan) to 325,000 deaths, representing population losses of 4.6 per cent in England, 9.3 per cent in Scotland (both the text at p. 150 which gives a figure of 9.7 per cent, and table 5 at 9.2 per cent, are in error), and 20.6 per cent in Ireland, or 8.6 per cent across the three kingdoms, making the British civil wars 'the bloodiest conflict in British history' (p. 151). His methodology is extended to all English conflicts before 1603 and British ones thereafter, suggesting 1.2 million Britons died in wars between 1485 and 1746, half of them during the civil wars, and 60 per cent of them across the period from Ireland and Scotland (pp. 262-3). At times, Carlton's comparative approach may seem unsophisticated and his account of major battles old-fashioned, but his researches vividly bring to life the experience of fighting in early modern Britain, suggest the significant military commitments undertaken by the English and then the British crown, and above all demonstrate the slaughter of those wars.

Notes

1. A. Fletcher, 'The first century of English Protestantism and the growth of national identity', in *Religion and National Identity* (Studies in Church History, 18), ed. S. Mews (Oxford, 1982); P. Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2004); S. Ellis, *Tudor Frontiers and Noble Power: The Making of the British State* (Oxford, 1995). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. S. Wheeler, *The Making of a World Power: War and the Military Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England* (Stroud, 1999); M. Braddick, 'The rise of the fiscal state', in *A Companion to Stuart Britain*, ed. B. Coward (Oxford, 2003), pp. 69–87. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. M. Goldie, 'Divergence and union: Scotland and England, 1660–1707', in *The British Problem c. 1534-1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*, ed. B. Bradshaw and J. Morrill (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 220–45; D. Smith, *A History of the Modern British Isles 1603–1707: The Double Crown* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 329–33. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Black, 'A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society 1550–1800' (Basingstoke, 1991). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. C. Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The Experience of the British Civil Wars, 1638–1651* (London, 1992). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For example, P. Gaunt, *The English Civil Wars, 1642–1651* (Oxford, 2003), p. 63; C. Holmes, *Why was Charles I Executed?* (London, 2006), p. 65. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. E. Wrigley and R. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 532. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. G. Williams, *Renewal and Reformation: Wales 1415–1642* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 367–8. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, pp. 10, 566. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. P. Hammer, *Elizabeth's Wars: War, Government, and Society in Tudor England, 1544–1604* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 248. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. For example, by Morrill in a review in *History Today*, 43, 2 (February 1993), 54. [Back to \(11\)](#)

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