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Citizen Soldiers. The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War

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Although the First World War ended almost ninety years ago, it has become a truism to note that the echoes of that conflict continue to resound in Western culture. In any given year, there will be numerous academic and journalistic books and articles, novels, museum exhibitions, television programmes, and websites dedicated to re-examining the history of 1914-1918 to meet the seemingly insatiable public appetite for information about, and representations of, the war. Much of the academic material is dedicated to the re-examination of already familiar archival sources, and to the reconsideration of existing debates about particular aspects of the war, such as the ongoing debate about the character and ability of those in charge of British military policy, or the discussion of women's role in the war. Additionally, academic work on the war continues to be divided by discipline, with military histories largely remaining almost entirely distinct from cultural, political, economic, and social histories of the period. *Citizen Soldiers* is one of the rare publications to breach this divide, combining detailed knowledge of military organization and structure with a careful consideration of the impact of the war on society and class and regional identity. McCartney's study, whilst it contributes to debates both about the experience of the combatants, and to our knowledge of the impact of this first 'total war' on the home front, does so by examining one of the less well known aspects of the war; the experience of the Territorial forces.

The British Army of 1914 was composed of three types of infantry battalion: regular, territorial and service.

From the late-nineteenth century onwards, Britain became increasingly preoccupied by issues of imperial and home defence. Numerous organizations dedicated to organizing for this defence, such as the Navy League in 1895 and the National Service League of 1901, sprung into being as patriotism and militarism became intertwined in an increasingly militarized society. By 1903, over 8 per cent of British men had undergone some form of military training, many of them with the Volunteer Force, the precursor of the Territorial Force, which had become popular during the invasion scare of the mid-nineteenth century. The Territorials were established by Lord Haldane, Secretary of State for War, in 1908 to act as a reserve force which could be called upon to support the regular army, whether in home defence or abroad. However, as McCartney demonstrates, the public, as well as the majority of Territorial members, continued to view the force as essentially an organization for home defence—a legacy of its origins as a bulwark against invasion—and defence of the home and the local region was both used as a recruiting tool and functioned as a motivational force amongst members of the Territorials. These locally-raised battalions, initially raised to defend the home, McCartney argues, largely maintained their civilian identity during the long years of war.

The regional nature of the Territorials gave them a distinctive character, which McCartney examines in order to support her contention that soldiers in these battalions maintained their civilian character throughout the war, drawing on shared belief systems, and local, often class-based, identities to retain a civilian, as opposed to a military, identity throughout the four years of war. McCartney focuses on two specific Territorial battalions: the Liverpool Rifles and the Liverpool Scottish. Both of these were primarily formed from the Liverpool mercantile middle class, and their members were drawn from both the wealthy merchant families of Liverpool and from the professions and other white-collar occupations. They also often shared ‘a middle-class web of sociability’ (p. 26) in which members not only frequently worked together and lived in the same districts of the city, but took part in shared leisure activities, and often worshipped at the same churches. The middle-class nature of the two Liverpool Territorial battalions examined here resulted in a wealth of archival material—used by McCartney to good effect—such as letters, diaries, scrapbooks, and memoirs. Whilst McCartney makes excellent use of this archival material to explore the lives and experiences of these soldiers, the material also fascinates on a cultural level, first because it allows us some access to the experiences of the citizen soldier of the First World War, and secondly because it provides an important example of a class- and regionally-based body of writing dating from that time. The soldiers often express a strong sense of class and regional identity that did not always transfer successfully to military life. For example, at the outbreak of war both battalions saw large numbers of men of high social status enlisting as privates rather than as officers. This led to some tension in the battalions as opportunities for promotion could not always match demand, so that ‘civilian standing was no longer commensurate with military authority’ (p. 48). As a response to this, the battalions often operated with a more relaxed approach to discipline and relations between the ranks than found elsewhere. Discourses of social class and of regional identity were thus transferred to military life, leading, as McCartney argues, to a continuity of pre-war civilian identities amongst the members of the two Liverpool battalions she studies.

The book is divided into three sections. Following the Introduction and a brief but illuminating survey of Liverpool and its Territorial Forces before the war, section 1 examines the characteristics and morale of the Territorial soldier. Emphasizing the shared social class of most members of these battalions, this section explores the relative stability of these soldiers’ pre-war identities during wartime. Section 2 discusses the impact that the social characteristics of the battalions had upon the experience of trench warfare, particularly in relation to the systems of command and methods of punishment and discipline used. The final section focuses on the experience of trench warfare for the battalions and then briefly examines the postwar memory of the war in Liverpool, arguing that most of the survivors ‘successfully merged back into civilian life, their pre-war ambitions and interests substantially intact’ (p. 257). This final section is fascinating, and it would have been interesting if it had been expanded to consider current debates on sites of cultural memory, and work on the interaction between experience and memory such as Janet K. Watson’s *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain*, also published in this series (1).

One of the most interesting aspects of McCartney’s study is its contribution to the ongoing debate regarding the relationship between combatants and civilians during the war. In chapter 5, ‘The links with home:

communication between the home front and the fighting front during the Great War?, McCartney uses her archival material to good effect to argue, in support of the revisionist thesis put forward by, amongst others, Bourke and Winter, that, contrary to earlier belief, the British public had an all too clear understanding of life in the trenches (2). Whilst soldiers' letters, despite military censorship, often managed to convey a vivid picture of their experiences, letters, magazines, and newspaper cuttings from home enabled soldiers to maintain their interest in home life, and their sense of themselves as citizens over and above their identity as soldiers. Amongst other sources, McCartney examines *Young Crescent*, the newsletter of the Crescent Congregational Church in Liverpool, which was published specifically to 'provide an interchange of experiences between those at home and those whose services are required by King and Country?' (pp. 98-99). As well as acting as an informal support for the bereaved, through its publication of obituaries and letters from soldier comrades of the deceased, *Young Crescent* acted to maintain links between combatants and civilians in the church community by publishing articles and messages which stressed how much the men at the front were missed, and the sorts of activities they could participate in again once they returned. Church services were also described in the magazine, with soldiers being encouraged to write in requesting favourite hymns, and to participate in prayers. Thus the magazine acted to reinforce the sense of group identity which was in danger of being pulled apart by the war, as the experiences of soldiers acted to differentiate them from those who remained at home. On a larger scale, local newspapers, such as the *Liverpool Echo* and *Liverpool Courier*, 'formed a vital link between the home and fighting fronts?' (p. 115), as letters and articles by soldiers and by their family and friends at home, were published together in their pages. Thus, through a variety of means of communication, an interchange of views, news, and information was maintained which served not only to uphold the morale of the men at the front, but also to build a common knowledge of the conflict, shared by combatants and civilians, and, crucially, to preserve the civilian, local identity of members of the Liverpool battalions.

As McCartney acknowledges, the battalions that she studies were fairly unique in the extent to which their local and class-based identity was maintained throughout the war. Unlike some other Territorial battalions, that saw their locally-based character denuded by high casualty rates, and the replacement of casualties by soldiers from outside of the local area, or by the merging of smaller, local battalions into larger, less geographically discrete organizations, the Liverpool battalions examined here managed to preserve, to a large extent, their pre-war character. Although local ties did, inevitably, decrease as the war progressed, the Liverpool battalions continued to be largely composed of men drawn from the wider Lancashire area. As Lancashire was a large, industrialized county, with several high-density urban areas, it had more local manpower to draw upon than smaller, more rural areas, such as Buckinghamshire, whose Territorial battalions, as Ian Beckett has shown, had largely lost their local character by the end of the war (3). In contrast, the regional identity of the Liverpool battalions expanded to encompass Lancashire, with posters of Blackpool being placed in camp canteens, and the red rose, the symbol of Lancashire regional identity, adopted as a divisional badge in 1916. McCartney uses her study of the regional character of these battalions to argue that, counter to established argument, there was no conscious decision to nationalize the British army in the second half of the war. Instead, she argues, the War Office recognized the power of local identities, both as a recruitment tool and as a means of maintaining troop morale at the front, and attempted to preserve the regional identity of the army as far as possible. Nevertheless, as Beckett's earlier study demonstrates, this regionalism was not always retained, as the necessity to reorganize and rebuild shattered battalions overrode the desire to protect local identity. This needs to be borne in mind when considering McCartney's study of the relatively well maintained pre-war character of the Liverpool battalions.

The local nature of McCartney's study is thus both a strength and, to a much lesser extent, a weakness, of this work. The focus on the Liverpool battalions allows McCartney to develop a vivid and focused picture of their regional and class-based identity, but also begs the question of comparison, and of the extent to which the very specific conditions of Liverpool can be applied nationally. Although the local character and identity of McCartney's soldiers appears to have been maintained throughout and beyond the war years, to what extent was this true of other Territorial battalions, particularly those, such as the Buckinghamshire battalions, that were merged with other units from outside of their region? To what extent was the identity of the 'citizen soldier', identified by McCartney, already shaped by the militarism of the Edwardian period?

How far were soldiers from less clearly established backgrounds, and with weaker links between the home front and the war front, able to re-establish themselves in their pre-war positions following the Armistice? It is, however, the job of good historical studies to ask as many questions as they answer. McCartney's careful, detailed and fascinating study of the experiences and identities of the Liverpool battalions in the war years deserves to be accompanied by further regional studies, in order that we may build a more detailed understanding of the lives of those who experienced the Great War.

Notes

1. Janet K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, 2004). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1996), p. 20; J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 36. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. I. Beckett, 'The Territorial Force' in *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War*, ed. I. F. W. Beckett and K. Simpson (Manchester, 1985). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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