

War in England 1642-1649

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The New Model Army's Declaration of 14 June 1647 famously stated that 'We were not a mere mercenary army, hired to serve any arbitrary power of state'. This phrase, a favourite of historians of the period, captures the fateful politicisation of Parliament's army; an event that ultimately catapulted England into its dalliance with regicide and republican government. The New Model's denial that they were mercenary soldiers, however, begs questions of honour and the nature of 'soldiers for a cause' that has long demanded further enquiry. Ian Gentles' ambitious *The New Model Army* ([1](#)) can be seen as one of the first attempts to explain the cultural underpinning of this particular Army. Barbara Donagan's *War in England 1642-1649* goes further and presents an ambitious attempt to provide a cultural history of warfare in the English Civil Wars that is informative for non-military historians as well as the educated general reader.

For non-military historians of the period questions about soldiers and armies have been intrinsically linked to the political revolution heralded by the New Model's entry into the political sphere in the late 1640s. This has ranged from 1950s and 60s interpretations that, at their most excessive, saw the New Model as a mixture of soldier soviets and millenarian saints in arms. For the so-called revisionist historians of the 1970s and 80s, most notably Mark Kishlansky and John Morrill, the New Model's entry into politics came from a more conservative bedrock: that of an army concerned with the material factor of pay but also the retention of its honour and honour's legal concomitant, indemnity. In addition to histories that have focused on the New Model, historians led by the pioneering studies of Ian Roy and Ronald Hutton have also examined the royalist armies and soldiery, causing historians to talk of distinct 'royalisms' in the plural rather than a uniform 'King's Party'.

In recent decades, military historians of all periods of European history, often unfairly caricatured as having

a 'toy soldier' approach to history concentrating on tactics, battles and troop formations with the politics taken out, have moved away from discussions of pure military concerns to a more encompassing cultural approach to the history of warfare. *War in England 1642–1649* can be located in this trend towards a new military history. In adopting the cultural approach to the history of warfare, Donagan attempts to capture the background and structure of military discourse in the middle decades of the 17th century to show how this discourse informed the day to day life of armies and soldiers in England's 'Mad Warre'.

Donagan's use of sources is impressive, ranging from the printed word such as Richard Elton's soldier's manual *The Compleat Body of the Art Military* or William Gouge's pre-war collection of sermons *God's Three Arrowes*, to visual images such as maps and pamphlet frontispieces. Donagan also draws on a wide range of manuscript reports of battles and sieges, legal records and soldiers' memoirs. Her use of sources is always sensitive and appropriate, never falling into the 'one damn fact after another' approach that can often mar accounts of the *mentalité* of a period. This is helped by a writing style that, whilst densely packed, is never turgid.

Unlike many previous studies, *War in England 1642–1649* encompasses a study of the growth of both Royalist and Parliamentary military culture over the 1640s. The book itself is structured into five unnumbered sections. The first section 'Before the War' deals with the shared attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of the English to war and warfare prior to the outbreak of the Civil Wars. Donagan shows how military manuals and sermons published in England in the 60 years or so before the coming of civil war had grappled with the complex question of when war in a Christian society was justified. The causes of this discourse were the continental European wars of the early 17th century, especially the Thirty Years War. Donagan shows that the stock of rhetorical figures concerning warfare commonly expressed by both sides in the 1640s were laid down by the reporting of, and reflections upon, these European wars. The expansion of print and news media and the reporting of the sorry condition of Protestants in Germany and France meant that the facts, as well as the tropes, of warfare had become part of the cultural lexicon of the English when war broke out in 1642. Added to this was the fashion for printed military manuals and for gentlemen to experience some form of military training, whether through the exercises of home grown private militias such as the Honourable Artillery Company or by real service in the armies of the Continent. Donagan shows how family traditions of service arose amongst gentry and noble families, with many of the commanders of the Civil War armies having acquired their skills on the battlefields of Europe in the 1620s and 1630s. Donagan argues that these factors 'conditioned the nation for war' (p. 52) even during its long period of peace, so that England was to some degree ready for war once it eventually broke out.

The second section of *War in England 1642-1649* entitled 'The Texture of War' discusses the contingencies of the soldiers' life once war started. Donagan's main concerns in this section are with logistics, military technology and intelligence. She makes it clear just how inefficient the often poorly equipped armies of the Civil War were and how soldiers were often at the mercy of forces beyond their control such as the weather, terrain or disease. In light of the highly imperfect nature of early modern military technology, intelligence became vital to armies from the use of printed maps to hired local knowledge and the information gathered from prisoners of war. Donagan suggests that the progress of war meant that spies and intelligence networks became pervasive throughout the country and the continual search for information on the movement of the enemy, led England to become a nation under surveillance.

These uncertainties gave rise to the providentialist sensibilities, which readers of the letters and speeches of Oliver Cromwell will be aware. Donagan notes that providentialism was as equally widespread amongst Royalists as Parliamentarians who shared a cultural outlook that stressed an interventionist God whose judgement determined the course of events on the field of battle. Donagan's handling of providentialism is unfortunately brief and in light of recent studies such as Alexandra Walsham's *Providence in Early Modern England* (2), Donagan's book could have discussed the effect of Reformed Protestant cosmology, so pervasive in the Civil War, in greater detail. A further absence from the book is a detailed discussion of the role of army chaplains in maintaining morale and disseminating news although, to be fair, Donagan has covered this topic in her 1994 article.(3)

The third division of chapters in *War in England*, entitled 'Slay in Love: The Moral and Judicial Economy of Civil War' provides an analysis of the moral and legal framework that civil war soldiers' operated in. Donagan analyses the unwritten codes of behaviour and conduct concerning military affairs, drawing on religious and moral norms held by the shared cultural context of a Christian and intellectually Humanist society.

Alongside these unwritten codes derived from religion, honour and duty, Donagan charts the chronological development of the formal laws of war set down in writing by the heads of Civil War armies. These looked back to articles of war dating from the reign of Richard I and also drew on the works of continental armies such as the articles used by Gustavus Adolphus' army in Sweden's forays into the Thirty Years War and theorists such as Gentili and Grotius. Donagan argues, however, that the main development of the English laws of war were the Earl of Arundel's articles drafted for the Bishop's Wars with the Scots and the pragmatic realisation that legal structures were necessary in order to ensure military discipline and to mitigate the propensity for civil war to descend into brutality and anarchy. In her discussion of military law Donagan often draws parallels between 17th-century codes and the development of modern jurisprudence concerning the laws governing conflict such as the Geneva Convention. This is never done in a teleological or anachronistic way and provides a useful frame of reference for development of the laws of war during the Civil Wars.

In dealing with the codes governing internal discipline Donagan reveals a major theme of her work, namely that of the distinctions between Royalist and Parliamentary conceptions of warfare. For Donagan the Royalist military codes betrayed a 'fussiness' and a less discretionary approach to military justice. In some respects the legal codes exemplified the distinctions between Cavalier and Roundhead of popular myth, with Donagan describing a particular concern in Royalist articles for the suppression of duelling. Donagan's caution as a historian (often a wise trait in studies of Civil War armies!) means that she does not speculate much into the cultural and political reasons as to why these differences in legal code existed. One is tempted to see such divisions in the neo-chivalric culture of many parvenu lords and knights on the Royalist side and, for Parliamentarians, the concepts of war inculcated into officers in the sermon driven exercises of those attending places such as London's Artillery Garden. Of course, such neat and stereotypical explanations are always prone to challenge, but Donagan's narrative of real differences in the Royalist and Parliamentary military codes do give rise to questions for historians that are at present not fully answered.

If law, as modern jurisprudence sometimes holds, is a code of normative behaviour, its transgressions illustrate how such norms operated. Donagan charts the development and application of Civil War military codes through the administration of justice in (mainly Parliamentary) courts-martial. Of note is the reticence, as time went on, for courts-martial to order the more gruesome punishments such as riding the wooden horse or having the neck tied to the ankles, and to focus on restorative justice for wronged civilians. Donagan argues that, alongside the predictable failures of legal process when conspiracy (as in Edward Sexby's court-martial), hot blood or negligence prevailed, an ultimately pragmatic and conscientious approach to military justice developed as the period progressed.

England, as Donagan points out, shared a high level of xenophobia common to many European countries in the early modern period. The role of foreigners in Civil War armies, who were recruited to provide both necessary expertise and manpower, is dealt with in one of the best chapters of *War in England*. Donagan points out that xenophobia was not the only source of problems for foreign soldiers, who also suffered detriment due to the absence of patrons to provide support during war's inevitable troubles. The main foreigners involved in the English conflict, however, were not continental mercenaries but soldiers from the Celtic nations that bordered England. Donagan contrasts the differing attitudes of English commanders to Welsh, Scots and Irish combatants. Of particular interest is the discussion of the attitude of the Cornish, an ostensibly English but distinct people, whose Royalist zeal gained them a reputation for barbarism amongst Parliamentarians. Predictably, Irish Catholic soldiers and their female camp followers were put outside the protection of Parliamentary military law by the Ordinance of 24 October 1644. This legislation denied Irish Catholics the right of quarter, although Donagan shows how even this ordinance was pragmatically

applied to suit Parliament's cause by granting mercy to Irish turncoats during the siege of Liverpool.

The fourth section of *War in England 1642–1649*, 'The Protagonists' pertains to those involved in the fighting of the war itself, looking at the social and cultural structures of the Royalist and Parliamentary armies, officers and soldiers. In an interesting analysis of what made a good officer, Donagan stresses the role of honour, which she admits is a 'slippery and elusive' concept but uses case studies to exemplify how the language of honour played itself out in the practice of warfare. The concept of honour also affected the treatment of foreign military experts, who, whilst essential to civil war armies, were considered to be soldiers' of fortune (even if they were not) and therefore implicitly dishonourable. As well as good officers, there were, of course, bad ones and Donagan brings out the differences between headstrong duelling Royalists that were, in some cases, literally out of control and more tempered Parliamentarians. Such a distinction is never allowed to run into caricature and Donagan's case study of the Royalist Catholic Colonel Sir Henry Gage's siege breaking sortie at Basing House illustrates how an officer could marshal his character to obtain his set military objectives and save the lives of most of his men. Donagan's treatment of the soldiery, focussing on transgression of military law and practice such as desertion, straggling and changing sides shows how Civil War armies were often fluid and ineffective. However, Donagan does give positive examples of the soldiery's resolute bravery in face of disaster. Her references to the London apprentice Nehemiah Wharton's sight-seeing adventures whilst a Parliamentary soldier remind us that the Civil War was not all trudge and military discipline could present participants with an expansion of their world that would not have been possible under peacetime conditions.

The final division of chapters contains a comparative case study of the First Civil War siege of Boarstall House, a minor Buckinghamshire fortification, and the more infamous Second Civil War siege of Colchester. In so doing, Donagan applies the findings of the previous sections of *War in England 1642–1649*. The discussion of Boarstall brings out its Royalist governor Sir William Champion's concerns for honour and Sir Thomas Fairfax's adherence to honour codes but his steely determination to ensure that the Royalists could not take military advantage of these codes. Of particular interest are the negotiations concerning the freedom of the pregnant Lady Champion, showing how wives and other women could become pawns in the requirements of honour and quarter found in Civil War sieges. Donagan also brings out the problems of civil war in a society where lines of patronage and family connections were essential for peacetime social stability. These networks both operated to mitigate the potential horrors of the siege as well as inculcating concerns and suspicion that former friendships might cause a combatant to turn his coat at a critical time.

The siege of Colchester was one of the most notorious sieges of the Civil War. Donagan elegantly ties up the threads of the whole book in the chapters devoted to Colchester, showing the Royalists continuing concern for honour and the Parliamentarians determination to crush what was considered to be a taking up of arms against the clear will of God. As at Boarstall, Fairfax refused the civilian townspeople relief and the descriptions of famine, fire and fleeing women trapped between Parliamentary and Royalist front lines brings out the sense of horror that contemporaries judged the siege. As well as narrating the military and logistical course of the siege, Donagan explores the role of printed propaganda to show how warfare of a different kind was conducted in the nascent public sphere. This was especially so in London; a City which itself wavered in its support for Parliament's ever more expensive and politically radical war. The importance of the rise of news culture as a tool of propaganda is also touched upon by Donagan showing how the Parliamentary forces fired pamphlets into the town narrating the events of the Royalist collapse in the Second Civil War in order to crush the besieged garrison's morale.

The exploration of the siege of Colchester concludes with an analysis of the summary execution of Sir George Lisle and Sir Charles Lucas. This discussion brings out the competing concepts of honour, legality and cruel necessity that the Second Civil War threw up as well as the thought processes of Fairfax's and Ireton's implementation of victor's justice. Donagan again stresses the importance of propaganda, both by printed word and local myth in the construction of the memory of one of the most notorious domestic incidents of England's troubles.

Finally, Donagan ends the book with a wide ranging conclusion that seeks to integrate her study of military

culture into the wider social and political history of mid 17th-century England. Donagan concludes that throughout the Civil War, the concept of law remained a fundamental and ever present normative structure of English culture. This was of particular concern to soldiers promised indemnity who found themselves in the 1650s prosecuted in civilian courts for acts committed in the name of their commanders or Parliament. It would have been interesting if Donagan had brought this into focus by a brief discussion of the rule of law in the Cromwellian campaigns in Ireland. A further criticism is that not enough attention is given to the political implications of the rise of military culture for the decade of Republican rule that followed after the chronological cut off date for the book. However, these are both minor quibbles. *War in England 1642–1649* provides an impressive study of the culture of war and warfare in England's mid 17th-century crisis and one that advances a new military history of this period.

Notes

1. Ian Gentles, *The New Model Army in England, Ireland and Scotland, 1645–1653* (Oxford, 1991). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Barbara Donagan, 'Did ministers matter? War and religion in England, 1642–1649', *Journal of British Studies* (33), 1994, 119-56. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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