

## The Making of a World Power: War and the Military Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England

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Will Coster

For over forty years it has been all but impossible to begin an undergraduate lecture, a book or paper dealing with aspects of military conflict in the early modern period, without reference to the inaugural address given by Michael Roberts in 1956 on *The Military Revolution 1560-1660*. It is therefore perhaps surprising that English historians have been rather reluctant to create a direct link between this historical watershed and the experience of warfare within Britain and Ireland. This has changed with the publication of James Scott Wheelers study of seventeenth-century English warfare, which makes explicit not only the link between England and military revolution, but also points to the civil war and Interregnum as the key period in the transformation of a second rate (perhaps under Charles I we should say third rate) marginal European power into a premiership contender on the world stage.

The work itself is impressive, engagingly written, and demonstrates a depth of scholarship so often lacking in works with a military theme. If no further claims are made for this book, then at the very least it can be said to demonstrates the flowering of the new military history (usually recognised by the conjunction war and society) which began to emerge four decades ago, but which has so rarely lived up to its promise. In contrast to much that has been written in the field, this work manages to confront the central issues in English, and world, history, through the military sphere. It does so through a painstaking examination of administrative and financial documents from the period, which will remain invaluable to future historians for some time to come. It is also highly refreshing to see the navy and army balanced as twin foci of Englands rise to prominence.

Thus, while the first chapter deals with the military revolution debate, the next two examine the English navy, before and after 1648 respectively, before we return to the thorny problem of the creation of the standing army in the civil war and its survival beyond the Restoration. The second half of the book examines in some detail the sinews of war in the seventeenth century, through the problematic area of taxation. Here

chapters are devoted to the financial problems of the Long Parliament, the Customs, Excise and the Assessment, before the argument is reversed in the final chapter to examine the impact of war on the state.

What is perhaps most problematic about the entire book is its very carefully constructed intellectual framework within the historiographical context of the powerful concept of Military Revolution. As Geoffrey Parker noted, the idea of Military Revolution has had a long half-life, outliving the concepts of Court and Country and General Crisis that were spawned in the same era. But, ironically, our first serious study of English military activity in this period, which basks in the dangerous glow of this historical plutonium, has come to us just as the process of degeneration seems to be speeding up. Given the rapidity of this process more apposite metaphors might include icebergs or elastic bands. Depending on ones preferences, military revolution is a concept that has recently begun to melt, or has perhaps been overstretched.

Commendably, the author is not blind to fluctuations in this debate and almost the entire first chapter is devoted to the scholarship surrounding military revolution in both European and English contexts. He points to Parkers geographical and chronological expansion of the concept of revolution and to Jeremy Blacks modification to emphasise the periods 1470-1530, 1660-1720 and 1792-1815. However, he still feels that Parkers modification of the Roberts thesis is useful and defensible (p. 8), eschewing the increasingly fashionable argument put forward by C. J. Rogers for punctuated equilibrium evolution (p. 6). However, the problem is even more complex. Although Michael Prestwich has argued that English military innovations in the fourteenth century were not of the same degree of significance as later transformations (p. 9), not everyone has agreed and it has recently been possible to produce a volume on the theme of medieval military revolution. With hindsight, it seems that Parker, in effect, salvaged Roberts original thesis by a strategic withdrawal to new boundaries. However, those boundaries are now being breached, not just chronologically, but also geographically and thematically, as studies of military revolution across Europe and the wider world have begun to abound. David Parrott, arguably the most trenchant critic of military revolution as a concept, is not cited by the author, but, given this haemorrhaging, he should perhaps have due credit for his observation that, the most interesting question about the military revolution [is] why such an improbable thesis should ever have achieved widespread acceptance amongst historians in the first place.

James Scott Wheelers solution to these problems is to adapt David Landes redefinition of Industrial Revolution as a watershed that set up later developments (p. 9). Such a buttressing of once familiar landmarks on the historical landscape is appealing. It could be argued that while post-war historians created or enhanced a multitude of powerful concepts for the understand of the past, the contribution of the most recent generation has been to remove the capitalisation and/or to make them plural, diluting the clarity of thinking and substituting only confusion. Thus we now talk not of a Revolution, but of revolutions. Where current readers feel the balance to lie at this moment is perhaps unimportant. What is significant is that the author has, to borrow another military cliché, nailed his colours to the mast. As a result, the importance of his work will depend on continued resilience of the Military Revolution argument. In that sense, when the ship goes down, as surely it must, it takes the central thesis of this book with it. What remains to debate is the degree to which this work has helped to support what seems to some a lost cause and, perhaps as significantly, what is learned along the way.

James Scott Wheelers central argument in favour of an English Military Revolution is that it must be seen in financial and administrative terms and that the key developments in these areas took place in a limited period, particularly between the execution of Charles I and the restoration of Charles II. In these areas, the author produces a wealth of evidence to demonstrate the ways in which institutions and methods famously employed in the English and British successes of the late seventeenth century, and beyond, were created in this more limited, and much earlier period. He does this, not only in those chapters that deal individually with the Customs, Excise and the Assessment, but also through those focusing on the formation of the navy and army. Such is the wealth of evidence, both in the form of statistics from the state records and as a blow by blow account of administrative developments, that it is hard not to be won over to this case. Clearly, the perceived need for both large navies and armies did lead to the creation of new, and significant adaptation of existing, financial and administrative institutions, that would later be employed to kick start the British military experiment of the modern period. What is more difficult is to be certain as to how this interfaced

with the application of military power and therefore with more than an administrative revolution.

Naturally, seen from this standpoint the essential characteristics of revolutionised armed forces are their size and permanence, because both of these factors have direct effects on the financial costs of warfare. Here hindsight presents something of a problem, as it is generally assumed that military revolution in England orbited only around the issue of standing armed forces. The author notes the lack of a such an army as a problem for the English in the early seventeenth century, but, despite French experimentation in the later stages of the Hundred Years War, in this period only Spain had anything can be meaningfully be called a standing and professional land army (p. 1). Similarly, Elizabeth I is noted as having failed to modernize English financial thinking and to create a permanent professional navy (p. 24). One wonders if she realised that is what she should have been doing. Undoubtedly most of the political nation, including the Queen, would have thought these outcomes great successes. This dichotomy, between what is antiquated and medieval and what is modern and therefore presumably superior, is used throughout the book in a way most recent historians have been keen to avoid. If the thesis of Military Revolution can only be judged in such stark terms, as a transformation between the medieval and modern, it seems certain to fail, since it cannot match up to the reality of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, where the thing individuals were most keen to avoid was administrative and political innovation.

However, these comments have a wider context within the book. As the authors emphasis is on the 1640s and 1650s as a watershed, they serve to emphasise the discontinuity in armed and administrative structures before that point. Thus, in addition, we deal with Jacobean neglect of the navy, while the efforts of Charles I were undermined by a series of disasters. In contrast, after the Interregnum the author points to the continuities in service. Thus, despite the abandonment in 1674 by Charles II of his attempt to maintain a war strength navy in peacetime, the continued employment of specific squadrons is emphasised (p. 59). Surely James Scott Wheeler is right to point to continuity in armed land forces across the Restoration line, dispensing with the legal fiction that dates the origins of the present Royal army to 1660 and not the regicide forces established by parliament in 1645. But Charles II's land army was initially small, and fluctuated considerably in size depending on circumstances. Units and personnel were maintained, but not universally. The author makes a convincing case for greater continuity in English armed forces after the Interregnum than before, but whether that point marked a clear watershed, or merely a staging-post in a process of growth and development, is open to debate.

The financial argument for the Navy is the most compelling, with graphs that clearly demonstrate near continuity between the annual average expenditure on the Cromwellian and Restoration navies and then continued growth from the 1680s (p. 65). However, the evidence is far less clear in the case of land forces, where the staggering rise in such expenditure in the middle decades of the century, from annual averages of under £100,000 in most of the first part, to over £700,000 in the 1640s and 50s, strongly suggests discontinuity with the past (p. 210). The problem is that after the Restoration, expenditure remained at roughly half this level until the Glorious Revolution. Thus, in terms of land forces, if not in terms of navies, the continuity of expenditure between Interregnum and Restoration appears limited.

The contrast between army and navy is problematic in a number of other ways. At the outset of chapter 2, we are boldly told that the Tudors founded the modern English Navy. However, historians have never been agreed on this point; other candidates for such a foundation have included Alfred the Great, Edward III and Henry V (p. 22). The problem, of course, is that pre-industrial ships, being made of rotting wood, mean that navies needed constant re-foundation. The author circumnavigates this problem by arguing that the Navy should be defined not so much by its ships, but by its continuous administrative establishment. This is seen as lying in the 1540s with Henry VIII's setting up of a permanent shore based administration in the Council for Maritime Causes, even if it was to undergo considerable modification over the next century and a half. We must contrast this with the army. The author points to the important effectiveness of the systems for raising and paying the New Model Army (pp. 83-6), but this was, and continued to be, carried out on an ad hoc and regimental basis. From 1645, there was continuity of personnel and units, but arguably it would be at least the late eighteenth century before Britain established a permanent administrative structure for its armed land forces. It seems then that the administration military revolution was somewhat staggered in

England between its two major arms.

One of the problems is that Englands, and later Britains, military experience is so radically different from its continental neighbours. With the Navy acting as the first line of defence, there was no need for a large standing army to hold borders, virtually no permanent fortifications in the style of the *trace italienne*, so popular on the continent. Therefore, it could be argued that a significant discontinuity between the Interregnum and Restoration periods lies in part in the abandonment of the English Republics brief ascendancy as a major land power, and the emergence of Britain as a naval and expeditionary force, a policy still in place into the twentieth century. Britain did not need the same sort of military revolution as its neighbours; with a powerful navy it could, and did, continue to rely on the amateur military tradition for defence, and a small professional army for attack. This then is part of the reason that England does not fit into the pattern, fragmented and partial as it might now seem, found in the rest of Europe.

This is not necessarily to undermine the authors central premise, that it was the financial administration and systems established in the civil wars and Interregnum were vital to the later development of Britain as a military and imperial power. However, it is evident that this did not necessarily amount to a transformation of warfare in itself. This book throws illuminating light on the developments of the period, assembling a mass of invaluable statistics and a framework for understanding the processes of accumulation and distribution. Despite the careful linking of these factors with military fortunes and developments, what remains debatable is whether these administrative changes constituted a military revolution, or were simply one more stage in a process of evolution.

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