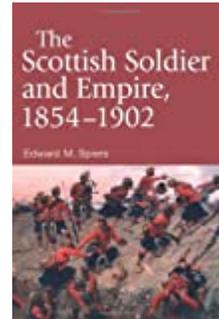




Edward M. Spiers. *The Scottish Soldier and Empire, 1854-1902*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. xii + 244 pp. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2354-9.



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The Scots' Military Contribution to the Empire

In his most recent work, *The Scottish Soldier and Empire, 1854-1902*, Edward M. Spiers provides “a fresh perspective on the Scottish military experience in the late nineteenth century” (p. 1) by basing his investigation primarily upon the personal correspondence of those who served in Scots regiments as well as the stories about their exploits as published in (mainly Scottish) newspapers. By examining the experience of imperial campaigning through this prism, Spiers sets his work apart from that of others in this area such as Diana M. Henderson’s *Highland Soldier: A Social Study of the Highland Regiments, 1820-1920* (1989), which are based largely upon official sources. The result is a work that provides a unique and interesting perspective into these imperial campaigns and how they were perceived both by those who took part in them, as well as by their countrymen at home.

The image of the highland soldier, bedecked in kilt and sporran while steadfastly facing down a determined enemy force, is a familiar one that entered the public consciousness largely through the stories of war correspondents (the predecessors to today’s “embedded” reporters)

and war artists. This image was reinforced by the correspondence of soldiers which, as Spiers demonstrates, “provided a personal perspective that editors relished” (p. 214). Scots (primarily highland) soldiers, then, came to be seen as “representatives of Scotland within a greater imperial mission” (p. 112) and their virtues became inextricably linked with the values of British imperialism.

Scotland’s sense of place in the imperial mission “found reflection in the willingness of communities, large and small, urban and rural, to celebrate military achievements both at the time and in retrospect” (p. 213). These achievements were variously commemorated through mural tablets, church windows, and statues. The Scots’ commemoration of imperial battles reflected their desire to honor the sacrifice of their fallen countrymen, but, perhaps more importantly, also to provide public acknowledgement of the nation’s place in the imperial enterprise. A prime example of this was the statue, erected in Burns Statue Square—which Spiers erroneously calls Burns Station Square (p. 206)—by the citizens of Ayr and unveiled by the Earl of Eglinton on November 1, 1902. The statue memorialized those members of the Royal Scots Fusiliers

who had given their lives in the imperial cause during the South African War. Public commemorations such as this in Glasgow—"the second city of the empire"—reinforced not only nationalist feeling in Scotland, but, equally, perceptions of the nation's integral role in the expansion and maintenance of the empire. Ultimately, however, "the martial values associated with contemporary notions of the Scottish soldier, infused with patriotic feelings and a sense of imperial purpose, aroused more passions in war than in peace" (p. 213). Despite this, Spiers concludes that "national pride in their military efforts, resurfaced whenever an imperial war erupted" (p. 215) and that this helps to explain why the Scots "responded with such passion and alacrity when the First World War erupted" (p. 215).

Spiers's monograph, which is accessible to both the neophyte and the expert alike, begins with a chapter that discusses the image and self-image of Scottish soldiers. From there, it proceeds chronologically and examines all of the major, as well as minor, conflicts in which Scottish regiments took part during this era. These include West Africa, Afghanistan, the Transvaal, Egypt, the Sudan, and South Africa (among others). As context, each chapter includes a discussion of the domestic—both in Britain as a whole and in Scotland itself—and international political climates in which these campaigns took place.

Spiers is careful to note the self-censorship of the personal correspondence on which the study is based. Sol-

diers were loath to provide too many realistic details for fear of overly worrying their relatives at home. At the same time, their letters often reflected a circumscribed view of both battles and campaigns as many soldiers would not have had any knowledge of events outside of their immediate areas of responsibility. Spiers has overcome these limitations by utilizing a vast array of correspondence and thus is able to provide a more comprehensive view of both the campaigns and the soldiers' individual experiences, than would otherwise have been the case.

The main criticism that can be leveled at Spiers's work is that he devotes too much attention to the highland regiments and thus somewhat marginalizes other Scots units such as the King's Own Scottish Borderers, the Royal Scots Fusiliers, and the Scots Guards. It must be admitted that this was perhaps dictated by the sources available or by the fact that it was the highland regiments who, because of their distinctive dress, were most visible on the battlefield and thus garnered most of the attention from war artists and correspondents; yet the fact remains that more discussion of non-highland regiments would have enabled the author to provide a more inclusive portrait of the Scottish military experience in the late nineteenth century. This criticism aside, however, Spiers's work is easy to recommend and is one which will make a valuable addition to the library of anyone with an interest in either Scottish or imperial military history.

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