

The British Labour Movement and Imperialism  
(with Foreword by Tony Benn)



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Edited by

Billy Frank, Craig Horner and David Stewart

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This volume is respectfully dedicated to the memory of John  
Saville (1916–2009), a pioneer of labour history.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword .....	ix
Tony Benn	
Introduction .....	1
Billy Frank, Craig Horner and David Stewart	
Exploited Workers or Agents of Imperialism? British Common Soldiers in the Nineteenth Century .....	9
Nicholas Mansfield	
Empire before Labour: The “Scramble for Africa” and the Media, 1880–99 .....	23
Christopher Prior	
Labour and Empire: Australia and Britain from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Inter-War Years .....	41
Neville Kirk	
Weaving Tales of Empire: Gandhi’s Visit to Lancashire, 1931 .....	65
Hester Barron	
Labour, Race and Empire: The Trades Union Congress and Colonial Policy, 1945–51 .....	89
Mary Davis	
Labour’s “New Imperialist Attitude”: State-Sponsored Colonial Development in Africa, 1940–51 .....	107
Billy Frank	
Labour and the Central African Federation: Paternalism, Partnership and Black Nationalism, 1951–60 .....	131
Murray Steele	

Labour, European Integration and the Post-Imperial Mind, 1960–75 .....	149
C. M. M. Cotton	
“A Complex Question about the Remnants of Empire”: The Labour Party and the Falklands War.....	173
David Stewart	
Contributors.....	191
Index .....	195



# FOREWORD

TONY BENN

The British empire came to an end during my lifetime and its transformation from imperial rule to independence within the Commonwealth was achieved without the bloody wars that occurred in Algeria and Vietnam which put an end to French domination.

Of course Britain fought a lot of actions against those whom they described as terrorists, such as Mau Mau in Kenya, but in general the transition that occurred was made possible because of the links that the British labour movement and socialists had established with colonial liberation movements.

From the time that Annie Besant supported the Indian nationalists in the nineteenth century through to Keir Hardie, Fenner Brockway and the Movement for Colonial Freedom, these links were of great importance for both sides.

British imperialism, like all imperialism, was motivated by the desire for power and resources made possible by Britain's industrial strength as the first country in the world to undergo the industrial revolution.

Being an island with a strong navy we had military support that sustained that empire. This strategy was based upon Britain's attempt to establish economic supremacy, which allowed it to have access to cheap labour and raw materials and create a market for its own goods.

When I was born in 1925 a quarter of the world's population was run by the government in London and although the white commonwealth – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – had acquired effective self government, the rest of the empire had no democratic base whatsoever.

It was the internationalism associated with socialism that marked the beginning of the co-operation that made possible a relatively peaceful end to British imperialism.

The Suez war in 1956, engineered by Anthony Eden to gain control of the Suez Canal, was actually brought to an end by American pressure at a time when the United States was anxious to dislodge Britain from the Middle East and establish its own dominance.

We currently hear a lot about globalization as if that word only meant free trade and the domination of the world by multinational corporations, but in a sense empires were early examples of globalization. International socialism has the same perspective but with a totally different interpretation based on the common interest of working people everywhere to establish some control over their own lives free from the landlords, kings, emperors and corporations which have historically controlled them.

It would be quite wrong to say that the post-war Labour government gave independence to India and the colonies, because they won it. However, independence was achieved with the good will of influential socialists in the post-war government of Britain which established a real friendship that has served both very well in the years that followed.

We are now witnessing the decline of the American empire, weakened economically by the financial crisis, overstretched militarily in Iraq and Afghanistan and with its influence having diminished sharply during the Bush presidency.

The Stop the War coalition and world-wide peace movement which grew up after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are an example of a global response to American military interventions interpreted in the occupied countries as a sign of friendship from progressive people here and in the United States.

As the Chinese economy grows, despite its present economic problems, and as India comes into its own, it is likely that this will be reflected in a new balance of power between East and West that could bring its own repression, not unlike the empires of the past.

We are being told that new global financial structures are needed to help us to recover from the global recession. It is easy to see why such an argument should be put forward by the rich and powerful, but the question has yet to be answered: "How will those structures become democratically accountable?" Here we face a challenge as great as that faced by Britain in the 1830s and afterwards when the Chartists and the suffragettes demanded the right to be represented in a political system that had previously excluded them.

When the first reform bill came before the House of Commons – modest as it was – it was seen as a revolutionary proposal that would empower the poor against the rich and was bitterly fought to the point that it was only in 1948 that Britain achieved one man, one woman, one vote at the same age.

With two billion Chinese and two billion Indians and many millions of other people who are grossly underrepresented in the UN and other bodies, the meaning of internationalism has to be seen in a new context.

A world run by corporate interests would be as undemocratic as was the political system of Britain until quite recently.

And the argument against enfranchising the poor is an argument that is still very much on the agenda of the multinational corporations and their political friends.

That is the challenge for this generation to realize the historical perspectives which will help us to make sense of it now.

Working people have always been instinctively internationalist and have come to realize that democracy is the most revolutionary idea in the world. Democracy dissolved the British empire and has to become the instrument that controls the world in which our grandchildren will have to live.



## INTRODUCTION

BILLY FRANK, CRAIG HORNER  
AND DAVID STEWART

Until recently it was widely assumed by historians and labour studies scholars that the British labour movement's concerns with empire were limited. This was deemed to be a reflection of British workers' parochialism, preoccupation with workplace and standard of living issues, and ambivalence towards imperialism. Consequently, labour historians have tended to neglect the labour movement's interaction with imperialism, preferring to concentrate on internal factionalism, the Labour Party-trade union alliance, industrial relations, and economic policymaking.<sup>1</sup> Partha Sarthi Gupta's classic, though somewhat dated, work on *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement* is the only general survey of the British labour movement's relationship with empire. However, John MacKenzie's pioneering research into popular attitudes towards imperialism is also notable for highlighting working-class enthusiasm for empire and labour movement advocacy of a liberal, ethical imperialism.<sup>2</sup> He argues that "by creating a national purpose with a high moral content [imperialism] led to class conciliation".<sup>3</sup> MacKenzie's argument has been challenged by Bernard Porter, who contends that the working classes were either apathetic towards the empire or superficial in their attitude to it, viewing the empire as a concern of the ruling class.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Recent volumes of *Labour History Review*, which have focused on transnational ideas, activities, spaces, strategies and organizations since the 1860s, are a welcome exception. See *Labour History Review* 74, no. 3 (2009); *Labour History Review* 75, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Partha Sarthi Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914–1964* (London: Macmillan, 1975); John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 311.

Although during recent years several scholars have sought to redress the balance by examining the Labour Party's foreign policy and relationship with the world, imperialism has formed only one of several themes within these studies and the wider labour movement has tended to be neglected.<sup>5</sup>

Rhiannon Vickers contends that the Labour Party's policy on imperial affairs was frequently confused and inconsistent with Labour's belief in Britain's continuing world and imperial role.<sup>6</sup> She argues that in the period 1900–51 a form of internationalism underpinned the Labour Party's foreign policy. Labour's internationalism was primarily influenced by radical nineteenth-century Liberal ideas, and comprised support for social justice at home and abroad, opposition towards militarism, the promotion of democracy and human rights, advocacy of collective security, and hostility towards jingoistic nationalism. On the other hand, John Callaghan presents the Labour Party as holding paternalistic views about empire, based upon commitment to the perceived virtues of British government, which led the party to support colonial trusteeship and disassociate itself from anti-imperialism.<sup>7</sup> Callaghan links Labour's advocacy of trusteeship to the popular belief in Britain's imperial destiny, which justified empire as a civilising mission bringing law, commerce, and Christianity to barbaric parts of the world. In effect, many labourites were convinced that the labour movement could use the wealth, institutions and ideas of the British state to improve colonial people's lives. Of the remaining texts that engage with the wider labour movement and imperialism, Stephen Howe's work on *Anticolonialism in British Politics* is the most noteworthy. Howe refutes the concept of voluntary British decolonization by highlighting the role played by left-wing opponents of empire in advancing the case for colonial independence.<sup>8</sup> Analyzing the strategies of radical pressure groups and political parties, he contends that divisions within the Labour Party left over decolonization have been underestimated.

This book stems from a conference on "The British Labour Movement and Imperialism", held at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston

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<sup>5</sup> The recent edited volume by Paul Corthorn and Jonathan Davis, *The British Labour Party and the Wider World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), is an excellent example of this, as empire is only central to two of the ten chapters.

<sup>6</sup> Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World*, Vol. 1: *The Evolution of Labour's Foreign Policy, 1900–51* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 5–9.

<sup>7</sup> John Callaghan, *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy: A History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 146–48.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire, 1918–1964* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 19–26.

on June 26–7, 2008. The conference was organized in conjunction with the People's History Museum, an institutional partner of the University, and a national Centre for the Study of Democracy. We are extremely grateful to UCLan's former Pro-Vice Chancellor, Patrick McGhee, for helping to fund the conference. Over the course of the two days there were an archive/museum workshop,<sup>9</sup> several stimulating academic panels, and keynote addresses by Tony Benn, Professor Neville Kirk, and Professor Gregory Claeys, the first of which attracted a large public audience. The book, which spans the period between 1800 and 1982, reflects the range of work presented and discussed at the conference. Although it would not claim to be fully comprehensive, the chapters explore the relationship between the British labour movement and imperialism in innovative and challenging ways.

Tony Benn, a veteran Labour Party anti-imperialist, begins the volume with a thought-provoking foreword based upon his personal recollections of the labour movement's interaction with empire. Thereafter, working-class agency emerges as a central theme of Nicholas Mansfield and Christopher Prior's chapters. Mansfield confronts the challenge of incorporating unorganized workers, readily associated with imperial oppression, into labour history by analyzing working-class soldiers' relationships with empire and race during the nineteenth century. He explains that the army's structure closely mirrored the class structure of British society and emphasizes that working-class soldiers were the largest group of Britons that the colonized would encounter. Despite identifying examples of political radicalism and racial tolerance, Mansfield concludes that soldiers' reputations as "ruffians led by gentry" was largely justified. In his chapter on labour movement press coverage of the "scramble for Africa", Prior addresses John Callaghan's call for more research into how the press framed the discussion of empire.<sup>10</sup> Prior identifies a direct correlation between the labour movement's "lack of inclination to go directly for the imperial jugular", limited media access to information about colonial developments, and the perceived popularity of empire

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<sup>9</sup> We are extremely grateful to Maria Castrillo, National Library of Scotland, Gillian Lonergan, National Co-operative Archive, Darren Treadwell, Labour History Archive and Study Centre at the People's History Museum, and Jim Garretts, formerly of the People's History Museum, for participating in the workshop. We would also like to thank the Working Class Movement Library (Salford), the TUC Library (London Metropolitan University), and Glasgow Caledonian University Research Collections for sending relevant archival listings.

<sup>10</sup> John Callaghan, "Editorial: Imperialism Recidivism", *Socialist History* 31 (2007), 5.

amongst the working-class. In particular, Prior reveals how the interaction between the newly enfranchised working-class electorate, popular culture and nationalism intersected with labour movement fragility to prevent the development of radical left-wing anti-imperialism.

Hester Barron and Neville Kirk further enhance our understanding of working-class and labour movement attitudes towards empire through regional and comparative studies of Lancashire, Britain and Australia. Barron's chapter on Gandhi's 1931 visit to Lancashire, which highlights the goodwill shown towards Gandhi by cotton workers, demonstrates the fragility of popular imperialism amongst Lancastrian cotton workers during the depression, and their varying degrees of commitment to international working-class solidarity. Given the importance of imperial trade to the Lancashire cotton industry, the chapter provides a fascinating case study that encapsulates the dilemma of British workers who were often torn between self-protection, sympathy for the poor and class solidarity. Kirk broadens our understanding of how imperialism shaped the development of United Kingdom and commonwealth labour movements by focusing on the cross-fertilization of ideas between the British and Australian Labour parties. He challenges core-periphery and top-down approaches to imperial history, and calls for new approaches to the subject that fuse historical context with culture and political economy. Emphasizing the dual influences of class and race on British and Australian attitudes towards empire, Kirk contends that British and Irish migrants were pivotal to the growth of the Australian Labor Party, which in turn helped to maintain British Labour Party interest in the Australian labour movement.

The next three chapters concentrate on the Attlee governments' colonial policies. Mary Davis brings into focus the role of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in developing non-militant trade unionism in the colonies. Presenting the TUC and Labour Party as subscribing to the classic nineteenth-century "white man's burden" justification for the maintenance of empire, she places Labour's colonial trade union strategy in the context of the anti-communist climate of the cold war. Davis concludes by rejecting the Labour Party and TUC's association with anti-imperialism and accusing them of preparing the ground for neo-colonialism. Billy Frank continues the scrutiny of the seemingly "positive" colonial policy that emerged during the war, championed by figures such as Creech Jones and Rita Hinden of the newly formed Fabian Colonial Bureau, through the study of Labour's colonial development policy in Africa. Acknowledging the Labour Party's paternalistic views on race, Frank explains the distortion of Labour's colonial development policy into



colonial exploitation as a result of the demands of the post-war dollar shortage and domestic reconstruction. In doing so, Frank provides an insight into Labour's historic difficulties in reconciling the pursuit of radical domestic and progressive international objectives while revealing the weaknesses of a core-periphery approach to imperial history.

Thereafter, Murray Steele's chapter on the Labour Party and the Central African Federation provides a bridge between the colonial and post-colonial eras, which further enhances our understanding of the limitations of the core-periphery model. Outlining Labour's pivotal role in the establishment of the Central African Federation, he highlights the party's refusal to adopt an anti-imperialist posture despite the lack of progress towards racial partnership made by the white-settler-dominated Federation. In particular, Steele's work illuminates Labour's desire to build a strong inter-racial commonwealth, and places this desire in the context of the party leadership's anti-communism and paternalistic view of colonial development in Africa.

The final two chapters extend the chronological sweep of the book into the late twentieth century. They further illuminate the Labour Party's difficulties in reconciling the pursuit of progressive national and international interests, and highlight the extent to which the party was divided over Britain's post-imperial world role. Exploring the debate over membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in the period 1960–75, C. M. M. Cotton identifies anti-imperialism and support for the Commonwealth as central to the Labour Party's sense of political self. His work shows how Eurosceptics and Europhiles sought to harness anti-imperialist rhetoric to justify their stances towards the EEC, and reveals considerable overlap between the membership and ideas of the Labour Committee for Europe and the Social Democratic Party, formed in 1981. Cotton concludes that the social democrats' rejection of Britain's imperial legacy lends them a serious claim on the mantle of Labour progressivism.

Labour Party commitment to a global role and engagement with supranational institutions also underpins the final chapter on the Falklands War. David Stewart demonstrates how the Labour Party's anti-imperialist, pacifist, and anti-fascist traditions were exposed as inchoate during the conflict. The chapter is underpinned by the contrasting personalities of Tony Benn and Michael Foot. Emphasizing the importance of internal party factionalism and Foot's commitment to the United Nations, Stewart argues that the Labour Party leader's complex diplomatic argument, which contrasted sharply with Margaret Thatcher's populist jingoistic rhetoric, had limited appeal in an increasingly polarized wartime climate. Stewart contends that the failure of both Benn and Foot's strategies weakened the

popular appeal of the Labour Party and galvanized Thatcher's post-imperial mission to destroy socialism.

Nevertheless, considerable gaps remain in the historiography relating to the British labour movement and imperialism. One of the most sizeable voids surrounds the co-operative movement's relationship with empire. This movement was closely involved with imperial trade and working conditions through its tea plantations in India and Africa, and in the promotion of colonial education through the Co-operative College. From the early twentieth century, Co-operative produce was marketed as using "non-sweated labour", making it arguably the most progressive wing of the labour movement in this field.<sup>11</sup> Under the Attlee governments, civil servants were compelled to undertake training courses at the Co-operative College, and more recently the co-operative movement has played an integral role in the development of fair trade.<sup>12</sup> Given the Co-operative's unique position as a highly successful business and mass social movement, it warrants more detailed attention from scholars of imperial and labour history.

Further research is also required into the Welsh and Scottish labour movements' relationships with empire. As Kirk demonstrates through the example of Andrew Fisher, an Ayrshire miner who became the first Labor prime minister of an Australian majority government, Scottish, Welsh, and Ulster migrants to the Commonwealth developed a tripartite identity incorporating their nation of birth, Britain, and their host dominion, which strengthened bonds between commonwealth labour movements and their British brothers and comrades. It would be fascinating to investigate the extent to which these relationships influenced the unionism of the Welsh and Scottish labour movements and interpretations of Britishness in the "celtic fringe" of the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> This would also complement

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<sup>11</sup> Stefan Schwarzkopf, "Innovation, Modernisation, Consumerism: The Co-operative Movement and the Making of British Advertising and Marketing Culture, 1890s–1960s", in Lawrence Black and Nicole Robertson, eds., *Consumerism and the Co-operative Movement in Modern British History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 197–206.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Anderson, "'Cost of a cup of tea': Fair Trade and the British Co-operative Movement, c.1960–2000", in *Consumerism and the Co-operative Movement*, 240–55.

<sup>13</sup> Recent research has tended to focus on the influence of empire in terms of the economy, missionaries, migration, and military service. See T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire, 1600–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); and Esther Breitenbach, *Empire and Scottish Society: The Impact of Foreign Missions at Home c.1790 to c.1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Kirk's pioneering work in the area of global labour history, and clearly demonstrates the need for wider exploration in this field.

*Preston, March 2010*



# EXPLOITED WORKERS OR AGENTS OF IMPERIALISM? BRITISH COMMON SOLDIERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

NICHOLAS MANSFIELD

In his keynote address to *The British Labour Movement and Imperialism* conference of June 2008, Tony Benn referred to the white British working class as “exploited exploiters”. The subject of this chapter – the white working class in uniform – might be considered the epitome of this classification. There is now a huge popular literature on the British army and, as a result of their function as quasi-war memorials from 1918, there are still more military museums in the United Kingdom than any other category. Both tend to concentrate on individual regiments and their battles and rarely address more representative issues concerning soldiers’ working lives. This chapter forms part of a larger and longer-term project on class and the British army. Whilst the structure of the British army closely mirrored the class structure of British society as it moved through the period of industrialization, few historical accounts of it analyze this blindingly obvious fact. Soldiers’ working lives have a potential for enquiry in more detail, in the same way as some historians have applied in more recent years to other groups of unorganized workers such as domestic servants, yet labour historians have ignored them as docile and probably politically suspect. Finding a sympathetic hearing in a conference and book on labour and empire may be hard for a group who might be regarded at best as tools of the ruling class and at worst enthusiastic participants in the oppression against indigenous peoples. In the words of Linda Colley, who has made some groundbreaking reference to the subject:

But to modern eyes the British or any other imperial soldiery easily appear uncongenial or at best unpredictable. It is assumed that they were violent (which they were) and that they were necessarily and inherently conformist (which they were not)... We need to probe beneath the lush

proconsular and plutocratic chronicles of Indian empire and uncover different, more subterranean, less dignified stories, stories of renegades and deserters, stories around punishment and resistance, stories of those majority of British soldiers who stayed loyal and outwardly obedient but sometimes with gritted teeth: the subalterns with white faces.<sup>1</sup>

## Class, Empire and the Army

The British empire was central to the creation and experience of the army for a very long time, from Tangier and Bombay in the 1660s, to Aden in the 1960s, and discussion of the complex relationships between class and empire is potentially fruitful. With a powerful navy strongly allied to commercial interests and a dominant political tradition of distrust for a standing army, the army's main role for over three centuries was as an imperial gendarmerie, defending frontiers won in brief and bloody aggressive wars. The all-volunteer British army was tiny compared to European rivals and the seizure and holding of these immense spaces was an extraordinary technical achievement, based on discipline, bravery and well organized logistic and naval support. Like other imperialisms, the British made extensive use of locally recruited auxiliaries, usually from conquered peoples. Unusually, with one exception – the white regiments of the East India Company – it did not raise specific troops at home for colonial service. By the mid-nineteenth century, most of its core regular soldiers could typically expect to spend much of their service overseas, usually in no bigger units than the individual regiment and often in much smaller postings.

The army's structure closely mirrored the class structure. Officers traditionally came from the gentry or even aristocracy, though with wartime enlargements, more from upper middle-class backgrounds appeared, especially in unfashionable and technical regiments. Until the 1880s, junior officers, except in the artillery and engineers, purchased their commissions and promotions, a system which suited both the families of otherwise unemployable younger sons and the state, which did not have to provide retirement pensions. In contrast with much of post-revolutionary Europe, as a deliberate and class-based policy, very few British officers were promoted from the ranks. Those who were elevated mainly had specialist roles such as paymasters, adjutants or veterinary surgeons,

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<sup>1</sup> For the discussion on the literature on servants from a labour historian, see John Benson, "'One Man and his Women': Domestic Service in Edwardian England", *Labour History Review* 72, no. 3 (2007), 212; Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1660–1850* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 316.

which enabled the prevailing anti-professionalism in the British officer corps to continue. Even the abolition of purchasing commissions did not change the class-based composition and, except arguably for the two world wars of the twentieth century, it continues to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Common soldiers, by contrast, were nearly all working class, and were traditionally viewed as a dangerous and unsettled class – “the very scum of the earth” in the Duke of Wellington’s famous phrase. Even in the more settled working class it is said that “to go for a soldier” brought disgrace to your family. Ruffians officered by gentry became a separate military caste remote from and distrusted by the rest of British society, compounded by long overseas imperial service. This analysis is typical of most military historians – the popular wing (including the museums referred to earlier) seeing common soldiers as ragged heroes not able to control their own destinies and mistreated by government and British society in general. This widespread and simplistic view is reflected when the subject is dealt with (usually tangentially) by academic historians. The subject of soldiers as workers has barely been covered by labour historians, and if it had been considered, it is likely that this “powerless dupes” analysis would also be shared.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Colley’s recent analysis of soldiers in sections of *Captives*, and in chap. 7 of *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 1994), though worthy of expansion, is a refreshing counter-balance to standard accounts like Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815–1914* (London: Longman, 1980); and *The Late Victorian Army 1868–1902* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); or Gwyn Harries, *The Army in Victorian Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) which downplay class. Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) is more concerned with high politics and even the dated popular iconoclastic account. Corelli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army: A Military, Political and Social History of the British Army 1509–1970* (London: Cassell, 1970) displays the prevailing conservatism of military history. All are influenced by the magisterial and arch-Tory J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army* (London: Macmillan, 13 vols., 1899 to 1930). One exception to the trend is Lawrence James, *Warrior Race: A History of the British At War* (London: Little, Brown, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Variations in Wellington’s comment, which he made several times, are discussed in Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington: The Years of the Sword* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 379–80. In a similar way to the academics referred to in fn. 2, contributions, since 1922, to the most serious journal on the British forces, *The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, generally treat class in a tangential way. The main British journal for labour history since the 1960s, *Labour History Review*, has published nothing on soldiers as workers, with the occasional piece on unrest and subversion amongst troops awaiting demobilization after 1918.

However, this common view, shared across the spectrum, has come to be queried recently by academics influenced by the new emphasis on cultural history. Disparate historians like Peter Stanley (working on the white regiments of the East India Company); Roger Norman Buckley in a study of the ethnicity and class of Caribbean garrisons of the Napoleonic Wars; and John Rumsby's recent micro-study of early Victorian enlistment as a career choice, have all begun to nuance the working lives and culture of the rank and file away from a crude caricature. My own work on farmworkers and their trade unions has emphasized the importance of the mass mobilization of the Great War and the particular role of radical ex-service organizations; an emphasis suggested when interviewing many of them in Norfolk a generation ago. This has continued with a class analysis of the county yeomanry emphasising their role as political gendarmerie, which extended into the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

### Working Conditions of Imperial Soldiers

Soldiers were a huge occupational group throughout the century – indeed, the largest group those being colonized would encounter – for example, in 1830 white troops “made up 90% of all British residents in India”. Mass mobilizations against the Napoleonic French, with its partial conscription, gave armies of over 300,000 men. Even the pared down army of the 1820s numbered over 100,000, with countering home-grown radical subversion supplementing imperial garrison duty. The climax came with Victoria's jubilee with a regular British army of 200,000, to say nothing of the other colonial forces in which the white working class played a prominent role,

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Stanley, *The White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India, 1825–1875* (London: Hurst, 1998); Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Age of Revolution* (Jacksonville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998); and John H. Rumsby, *The 16th Lancers 1822–46: The Experience of Regimental Soldiering in India* (PhD diss., Leeds University, 2004). Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000) attempts a similar process for sailors. Nicholas Mansfield, *English Farmworkers and Local Patriotism, 1900–1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), chap. 5; idem, “The National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Soldiers and Sailors, 1917–1921: A View From the Marches”, *Family and Community History* 7, no. 1 (May 2004); and idem, “Foxhunting and the Yeomanry”, in R. W. Hoyle, ed., *Our Hunting Fathers: Field Sports in England after 1850* (Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing, 2007).



a figure which soon doubled as the crisis of the Boer War gave a “dry run” for the Armageddon of 1914.<sup>5</sup>

The regiment was the building block of the army and its structure included large numbers of specialist workers whose daily tasks mirrored wider British society in miniature, usually carrying on trades learnt in civilian life. So officers’ needs were dealt with by cooks, grooms, horse-breakers, saddlers and servants of all kinds, and even the rank and files’ demands were filled by weavers, barbers, the building trades, gardeners, shoemakers, tailors, teachers and tinsmiths, and by soldiers turned traders, especially sutlers running beer-shops and cook-shops. More specialist military trades were also found such as blacksmiths, gunsmiths, armourers, waggoners and riding masters. Soldiers also worked on constructing fortifications and barracks, either as day-labourers where they were paid extra, and in the absence of specialist troops, skilled and often time-served artificers, engineers, masons and miners were usually found in the ranks of any infantry regiment. Away from the atypical large scale and brutal campaigns, most soldiers’ service was spent in boring garrison duty and even after enduring the hours of drill and training, common soldiers still had time for part-time jobs. Where indigenous labour did not exist, in isolated military garrisons, the unit came into its own as a self-contained and self-sufficient society which fulfilled its own European consumer demands supplied by pre-enlistment skills of traders and artisans in the ranks.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Colley, *Captives*, 316. The statistics about the size of the army are from Roderick Floud, Kenneth Wachter and Annabel Gregory, *Height, Health and History: Nutritional Status in the UK, 1750–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 46–8.

<sup>6</sup> The everyday working life of nineteenth-century soldiers is largely yet to be reconstructed, though Buckley, *British Army*, presents an object lesson of how it might be done. See also Jacalyn Duffin, “Soldiers’ Work, Soldiers’ Health: Morbidity, Mortality and their Causes in an 1840s British Garrison in Canada”, *Labour/Le Travailleur* 37 (1996), 37–80. For the spare time available to most imperial soldiers, see, for example, *30th Foot, Standing Order Book, Bermuda, 1835–1838* and *Standard Orders 30th Foot* (Chatham: Burill, 1830), both in Queen’s Lancashire Regimental Museum Archive, Preston; and the comments of Sergeant John Pearman in Carolyn Steedman, *The Radical Soldier’s Tale* (London: Routledge, 1988), 146–7. For self-sufficient colonial communities see Frank Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib* (Uckfield, Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2003 edn.), 84–6, 94; and, for example, *The Sentinel* (1878), the journal of the 59th Foot, published in India and containing advertisements for a regimental watch and clock maker, printer, monumental mason and electro-plater: Queen’s Lancashire Regimental Museum Archives, Preston.

In the Indian subcontinent where local labour was cheap enough to cover all fatigues, common soldiers could live well – “Princes could live no better than we” according to one Victorian trooper – other opportunities rose for trading or for the growing number of training posts in native regiments and the lower ranks of government service. In all sorts of jobs and especially in isolated posts all over the empire, working-class people could assume positions of responsibility, which would not have been available to them in British civilian life, a phenomenon illustrated as early as the 1780s in William Cobbett’s memoirs of his life as a soldier in Nova Scotia.<sup>7</sup>

### **Living Conditions of Imperial Soldiers**

Most of the rank and file in Britain’s imperial army endured appalling living conditions. In the United Kingdom, troops were billeted in pubs until the Napoleonic Wars, but in colonial service all lived in barracks which were constructed with no thought for comfort, usually of the cheapest materials and the smallest possible size. These cramped quarters allowed little scope for privacy, even for married or cohabiting soldiers. Poor housing was compounded by extremes of weather unimaginable to most British recruits, and made worse by the need for soldiers to be stationed in the most strategic places, rather than in those with temperate climates. Disease was endemic and the mortality rate for common soldiers was much higher than in civilian life. Though some postings were regarded as healthy, in most, the crowded living conditions were breeding grounds for epidemics which even in wartime killed far more soldiers than died in battle. The Caribbean of the 1790s became the nadir of this, with half of the 89,000 soldiers sent to seize French sugar and slave islands dying of disease. Although diet could be supplemented locally, in some places these opportunities did not exist. The government provided rations, based on salted meat and biscuit, which offered little resistance to disease.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Marquis of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, vol. 3 (London: Leo Cooper, 1982), 141. George Spater, *William Cobbett, the Poor Man’s Friend*, vol. 1, chap. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Ian Dyck, “Introduction”, in William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (London: Penguin Classics edn., 2001), ix. Richard Holmes, *Soldier Sahib: The British Soldier in India, 1750–1914* (London: Harper, 2006), chaps. 2 and 5; and Richards, *Old Soldier Sahib*, 251. See also Dan Howden, “At the Edge of the World”, in the *Independent* (Aug. 9, 2005) on how the colony on Tristan Da Cunha was founded by rankers.

What was always available, though, was cheap liquor, and a culture of hard drinking, alcoholism and violence prevailed.<sup>8</sup>

Soldiers also endured a brutal disciplinary system. Officers believed that their ruffians needed controlling with corporal punishment, which was lavishly applied with official sanction for minor transgressions, a practice abolished in most of post-revolutionary Europe but not in the British army until the 1880s. In contrast, in 1835 corporal punishment was abolished for locally recruited Indian sepoy regiments by the Whig Governor General Lord Bentinck. After his tenure ended, somewhat under a cloud – the first of several liberals in that post despised by soldiers – flogging was reinstated along with much harsher punishments as a result of the violent events of 1857. The lash also continued to be used on West Indian soldiers, many of whom were ex-slaves, and on African auxiliaries. Poor diet, crowded barracks, constant threat of disease, harsh climate, brutal discipline, hard liquor, homesickness, miserable pay and boredom caused mental illness later diagnosed by French army doctors as “Soudanism.” One outcome, made easier by the availability of firearms, was suicide. In 1860s soldiers had treble the suicide rate of United Kingdom civilians – the highest occupational group – and this does not include the large numbers of ex-soldiers who today might be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. Less extreme options might involve self-harm to obtain discharge or deliberate crime (including attempting suicide) to obtain transportation to Australia as a preferred location.<sup>9</sup>

## Forms of Resistance

Other forms of resistance were more spirited. Desertion was endemic in the British army. In the melting pot of the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, this was easier; in 1833 one-in-five soldiers on the home establishment were imprisoned, the vast majority for desertion, with over 10 percent of the army on the run. In the empire, desertion was trickier but

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<sup>8</sup> See Buckley, *British Army West Indies*; and Duffin, *Soldiers' Work; Soldiers' Health*. The statistic is from Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987), 333.

<sup>9</sup> Colley, *Captives*, 332–3. Soudanism was covered in Bertrand Taithe's inaugural professorial lecture “Thresholds of Horror: Massacres in French Soudan in the era of the Dreyfus Affair”, University of Manchester, Apr. 10, 2008. John H. Rumsby, “Suicide in the British Army, c.1815 to c.1860”, *Labour History Review* 84, no. 340 (2006), 351. For the transportation of soldiers to Australia see Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. 11, 495.

not impossible. Before the 1770s the American frontier offered tempting opportunities to slip away and was reachable from Canadian postings for the next century. In South Africa the Boer republics offered similar opportunities. Though hostile environments and societies difficult to hide in presented problems, these were not insurmountable; in 1790s Jamaica for example, white deserters found refuge in the fierce Maroon societies of escaped black slaves. Other deserters sought to use their military skills as renegade soldiers for Britain's enemies. Examples are known from as early as the seventeenth century in Tangiers and in India. Indeed the post-Mughal successor states offered attractive career opportunities for violent and unprincipled mercenaries well into the nineteenth century. Officer service for a foreign power was regarded as acceptable until the Napoleonic Wars and the rise of nationalism. Inter-marriage may also have contributed to such apparently inexplicable episodes as the desertion of British artillerymen to the doomed city of Bhurtopore in the 1825 siege, or Sergeant-Major Gordon serving with the revolted sepoys during the siege of Delhi in 1857. Unlike officers, such rank and file renegades received no mercy if captured by British military authorities. One could argue that this tradition continued as late as the 1960s with British soldiers seconded to friendly powers in Asia and mercenary activities in Africa.<sup>10</sup>

Other resistance was influenced by the pre-enlistment working-class attitudes and culture which soldiers brought with them. Evidence for go-slows and strikes is sketchy and opaque but just as in some civilian working lives, such as agriculture, in the absence of formal organizations like trade unions, informal negotiations seem to have taken place, with NCOs acting as a cross between foreman and shop steward in determining acceptable work loads. The clearest examples of this are from Stanley's work on the white regiments of the East India Company, which were raised as early as the 1660s, alongside sepoy regiments to protect their operations. By offering higher pay and eventual pensions, to offset being based permanently in India, they were able to attract recruits with more skills than the regular army. Their officers, appointed by the Company, were of a lower social class than the King's commissioned officers and

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<sup>10</sup> Anglesey, *British Cavalry*, vol. 4 (1986), 125; Strachan, *Politics of the British Army*, 89; Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. 8, 567; and vol. 11, 495; Buckley, *British Army West Indies*, 226; Colley, *Captives*, 39, 180, 260, 287, 317; C. Stein, *Bhurtpore, Battles of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 3 (London: Cassell, 1896), 336; and Christopher Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny* (London: Penguin, 1978), 275, 421. For officers taking service in the armies of other countries see Christopher Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

were allowed to engage in trade, a sideline which was supplemented by even more profitable looting, indulged in by all ranks as the Company absorbed more areas of India in wars of aggression. The more astute Company regiments were versed in contract culture, and throughout their history both junior officers and men engaged in strikes when management attempted to transgress these. This culminated in the “White Mutiny” of 1858–9, when thousands of soldiers took over their barracks (even led by spokesmen quoting radical rhetoric, one named appropriately Benjamin Franklin Langford) refusing their forced transfer to the Queen’s army – “A Manchester Strike” in the words of one hostile observer.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Raj and Racism**

By the late nineteenth century India had become central to the working experience of the rank and file. With a considerable British army of up to 90,000 stationed there to avoid a repeat of the 1857 rising, most regular soldiers could expect to serve in the sub-continent, with an average length of service for an infantry battalion of fourteen years. With the abolition of the East India Company, the army and the expanding government became intertwined, creating new career paths for white soldiers which became standardized into a Town Major’s List for each cantonment. As time elapsed soldiers were prevented from settling, such jobs being essential for those with Indian families, and absorbed up to 10 percent of British military manpower. These posts encompassed military secondments as instructors to sepoy regiments and to military, technical and medical establishments. There were also postings for soldiers with some education to junior government service of all types and jobs in public utilities such as railways, libraries and museums, plus engineering, telegraph and postal

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<sup>11</sup> For a short survey of military strikes see Lawrence James, *Mutiny in the British and Commonwealth Forces, 1797–1956* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1987), 14–15. Stanley, *White Mutiny*, chaps. 10 and 11 is a detailed account. For other surveys of the “White Mutiny” – suppressed with minimal bloodshed compared with the black revolt of 1857 – see Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol 13, 528–9; and T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 22–3. As late as 1890 a company of the 2nd Grenadier Guards in London refused to parade after what they regarded as excessive night duty, and were punished by six court martials and a posting to what was then regarded as an outlandish station, Bermuda: See Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Victorians at War* (London: Hambledon, 2003), 155.

services. These all brought status, more interesting employment, pensions and the opportunity to stay on in India for those who had married locally.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst in the “white Empire” most government jobs were taken by free settlers, expatriate ex-soldiers were employed in police forces and as instructors for local militias which had replaced British troops by 1870. Probably following the misguided ideas of classically educated civil servants, various attempts were made in Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand to set aside land holdings for ex-soldiers, to provide a caste of “military settlers” as the core of colonial self-defense. During the manpower shortage during the Crimean War there was even an experiment to settle German soldiers – from Hanover and Switzerland – in South Africa. Soldiers, however, did not necessarily make good farmers and these were largely unsuccessful.<sup>13</sup>

A considerable number of rank and file soldiers’ memoirs emerged from the Napoleonic wars and some continued to be published during the wars of nineteenth-century imperialism. Just as rankers in the Peninsular war were scathing about their Spanish and Portuguese allies, whilst regarding their honorable French opponents in good light, later casual racism about black Indians or Africans was common. There is also evidence that high-caste Indian soldiers regarded British rankers as disgusting barbarians. Whilst racism was an underlying theme, interactions between soldiers and inhabitants – either indigenous locals or white settlers – varied enormously throughout the empire. Buckley’s analysis of the Georgian Caribbean uncovers interracial cohabitation even in a society based on slavery, and the same seems to be true of India in the early days of imperialism before the Memsahibs and the regimental women arrived. The decline in the intimacy between the British imperialists and their host Indian community was a major contribution to the rebellion of 1857. Frank Richards’s lively account as an Edwardian private illustrates the total lack of respect with which white soldiers then held Indian civilians. Hostility though could exist between white soldiers and free white colonists, for example in New Zealand, where the refusal of immigrants to subscribe to a war memorial for a departing regiment, caused the soldiers to include a

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<sup>12</sup> Stanley, *White Mutiny*, chap. 12; and Holmes, *Soldier Sahib*, 149–150, 237–9. The impact of India on the English language is also immense.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *Army in Victorian Society*, 203; Peter Reese, *Homecoming Heroes* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992); Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. 12, 520; and vol. 13, 227; and Arthur Egerton, “The British German Legion, 1855–1856”, *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 64 (1921).