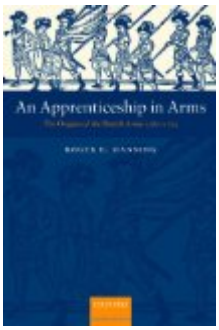
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roger B. Manning. *An Apprenticeship in Arms: The Origins of the British Army, 1585-1702.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xix + 467 pp. $135.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-926149-9.

Reviewed by Bruce P. Lenman

Published on H-Albion (July, 2007)

This lively and welcome book was originally the concluding part of another volume which came out in 2003.[1] The readers for Oxford University Press urged that this material be separated off. How right they were, for it is a substantial piece in its own right. One problem that the author has not entirely tackled is the need to make this book fully self-contained. Serious students of the topic might have read the first volume, but it is unwise to take it for granted that they have. The first book was on the theme of "swordsmen," which was a loose term freely used in the seventeenth century in a pejorative way, for example by opponents of Cromwell's scheme for regional government by Major-Generals. It is a term repeatedly used in this book as a term of art, but in a way that assumes its meaning is self-evident. It is not. Even in the seventeenth century, it was used contentiously and readers of this current volume have to work out what Roger B. Manning intends by it. He seems to mean the loose groups of armed retainers who acted as enforcers for the gentry and nobility of early modern Europe, and the theme of the book is broadly the process whereby this dispersed kind of force was eventually transmuted, between the late Elizabethan period and the death of King William III, into the beginnings of one British Army, with professional leadership.

Another concept Manning uses repeatedly, without explaining the meaning (which would involve admitting that it means different things to different people), is the "Military Revolution." Invented originally by Michael Roberts in his inaugural lecture in the Queen's University Belfast, it was then enthusiastically endorsed by Geoffrey Parker.[2] Subsequent comment has been more critical and many would argue that most of the features associated with the alleged revolution were already developing in late medieval Europe and that there was a long period before the 1790s when the maximum size of any given European field army was stable due to logistical, political, and technological constraints. Fortunately, Manning's argument really depends on the simple fact that, due to heightened dynastic and sectarian conflict, the demand for soldiers soared in the European military labor market from the mid-sixteenth century onward, and that rulers asserted fiscal monopolies and tried to monopolize legiti-

mate force within their domains, creating an unprecedented capacity to fight for lengthy periods and to maintain significant field armies on different fronts. They still preferred to use a high proportion of foreign mercenaries, so that they could more securely coerce their people. Kings naturally thought in this way, but so did the republican patriciates that ran the emergent Dutch state. Like Albania, the marginal realms of the British Isles had a surplus of suitable, underemployed, young males available for recruitment by military entrepreneurs.

One of the best features of this book is that it truly tackles the interwoven histories of the three Stuart Kingdoms, something that many historians have been either too intellectually lazy or too ignorant to attempt. "British" is a slippery adjective. After 1603 it coexisted with not just four national identities, but also with mutually antipathetic versions of some of those identities. Manning is excellent on the process that destroyed devolved military power in Ireland and Scotland. There was nothing inevitable about it. But for the disastrous and late Spanish intervention in Ireland that forced Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone out of his Ulster fastnesses to defeat at Kinsale, the Earl was poised to see off an appalling Queen of Ireland and to negotiate, pressured but undefeated, with her vastly more benign heir, James VI and I. As it were, the terms a heavily defeated Tyrone secured at the end of the Nine Years War were notably generous and it required the extraordinary irresponsibility of the flight of the northern earls to doom the Gaelic North. In 1702, the Gaels of Scotland were half way through their century of bloody intervention in Lowland politics. Nevertheless, it was only after the rebellion of 1745 that the Highlands were finally disarmed and deprived of serious military capacity.

The author's central thesis is that mercenaries from all of the three kingdoms served in the great wars of western, northern, and central Europe in large numbers, whilst the Stuart monarchy could hardly afford to fight a serious war, let alone maintain standing armies in its realms. Manning shows how the disastrous wars of Charles I against both Spain and France, between 1624 and 1630, following his foolish trip to Spain in 1623, had cost Charles the respect and trust of his subjects long before the Scottish rebellion of 1638 ushered in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. At this point, professional soldiers (Scottish, Irish, and English) flocked back to the British Isles to offer their services to train and lead the numerous armies engaged in internecine warfare. It might have been better to say they brought the latest ideas on military technology and tactics with them, rather than the Military Revolution, for by far the most important thing Charles II did in 1660-61 was to disband the (unfundable) standing army of the Commonwealth of England, Ireland, and Scotland.

He and his brother James VII and II then gradually built up three small standing forces, and James discountenanced the only possible alternative, which was some sort of militia. In practice the militia was always unsatisfactory, and to James it was unacceptably Protestant. His armies were designed primarily to coerce his English subjects, especially with Scottish and Roman Catholic Irish troops. Though Pepys worship (that of all things related to Samuel Pepys, however loosely) has led to an exaggerated veneration for the professionalism of the English Navy Royal, it proved as useless as the three professional armies when William of Orange invaded in 1688. Manning rightly stresses the importance of the growth of military professionalism, but tends to exaggerate the conflict between social rank and professionalism in early modern armies. You had to have the backing of your nobility, as Charles I and James VII and II (both geniuses at alienating them) found. A noble colonel was needed to raise a regiment. There were always plenty of hard-bitten professional lieutenant-colonels and majors around to lead it, and they were very often gentle-

men. Recent work on the survival of European nobilities before 1800 underlines this.

Manning does use occasional MS sources, but you cannot cover a field this wide archivally; so what he really provides is an impressive mass of skillful synthesis of recent work leavened by wide reading of contemporary military autobiographies and theoretical works. The result is stimulating and often contentious, as it should be, but the conclusion seems rock solid. The professional standing British Army, to this day a three kingdom, four nation force with foreign mercenaries like Ghurkas attached, was in practice invented after 1690 by William III, a Dutchman who was also a French prince. You cannot, as this book so clearly shows, write British history plausibly in the way too many historians try to write history, as barely-concealed propaganda for an alleged (often dubious) national state.

Notes

[1]. Ian Gentles, "Review of Roger B. Manning, *Swordsmen: The Martial Ethos in the Three Kingdoms*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, October, 2004: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=226351098072056.

[2]. Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560-1660: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the Queen's University of Belfast* (Belfast: Boyd, 1956).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Bruce P. Lenman. Review of Manning, Roger B. *An Apprenticeship in Arms: The Origins of the British Army, 1585-1702.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13384

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.