H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James McDermott. *British Military Service Tribunals, 1916-18: "A Very Much Abused Body of Men".* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011. 272 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8477-5.

Reviewed by Jason Engle (University of Southern Mississippi)

Published on H-War (May, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

The persistent image of British Military Service Tribunals of the Great War has been one of "middle-class, reactionary servants of the Establishment, instinctively antagonistic towards pacifist sentiments" (p. 2). With the institution of conscription in 1916, the War Office tasked these virtually autonomous tribunals with evaluating applications for exemption from military service obligations. Given little institutional guidance, tribunalists generally possessed equally little judicial expertise; this had important consequences. Moreover, the autonomy granted to these committees allowed the government to detach itself from the unenviable task of granting or denying exemptions to military conscription. Tribunals were, instead, the recipients of public scrutiny and criticism. The fundamental purpose of James McDermott's study is to provide an in-depth, documentary-based examination of the tribunal system, the conclusions of which seek to correct the traditionally unflattering portrayal inherited from contemporary print media from antiwar organizations and newspapers. Overall, this is a lucidly written and cogently argued study that succeeds in fulfilling its design.

The historiography, McDermott argues, has provided only cursory treatment as part of attempts to understand the broader processes of British manpower mobilization and exemption, or has focused on a specific tribunal council, drawing on only fragmentary documentation. McDermott draws extensively on surviving Military Service Tribunal records housed at the British National Archives, the Scottish Record Office, the National Library of Wales, the Northampton Record Office, and multiple other regional record offices. The documents of the Northamptonshire Tribunals serve as the primary source base for the study against which McDermott juxtaposes the available records of other tribunals to present a detailed portrait of how the system functioned. Local newspapers' coverage of tribunals' proceedings provide McDermott with important insights into public perceptions of, and reactions to, the tribunals and their verdicts. The few existing diaries kept by tribunalists also provide the author with another point of analysis.

The Military Service Act of 1916 created roughly two thousand quasi-independent local and county tribunals, usually manned voluntarily by local government officials to review temporary and permanent exemption applications within their local communities and counties (while a central tribunal in Westminster presided over more complex or hotly contested cases escalated from county tribunals). Not surprisingly, as McDermott demonstrates, the peculiarities of their areas directly influenced the nature of the applications and the considerations they prompted, making it virtually impossible to rigidly frame the process by standardized policy. This was particularly evident in the handling of applications from employees of Northamptonshire's book and shoe manufacturing industry. "No other industry," McDermott notes, "came close to representing a yardstick by which local feeling in Northamptonshire measured its contribution (or loss) to the war effort, and no other sector of the local economy relied so heavily upon the Tribunals to ameliorate the vagaries of governmental manpower 'policy' " (p. 89). In other words, the industrialists looked to the tribunals to negotiate their needs with those of the army's.

The agricultural industry placed tribunals in a similar predicament; they found themselves pressed between the Board of Agriculture–lobbying on behalf of farmers–and the War Office. Rural tribunals, McDermott notes, were generally more sympathetic to farmers' needs. Overall, however, individuals working in the food producing and distributing sectors of the British wartime economy found comparative safety as sufficient food supplies were

naturally of chief importance. Perhaps the most complicated cases presented to tribunalists were those of individual businessmen. Unlike boot manufacturers and farmers, businessmen lacked a powerful, unified lobby, save, of course, for those in food production and distribution, such as grocers, butchers, or bakers. Ultimately, tribunalists found themselves having to evaluate the viability of the business in the potential absence of an owner or director. If sufficient evidence existed that inclined tribunalists to believe the businesses could indeed persist in spite of their absence, exemptions were not to be granted, according to the National Service Ministry.

The complexities presented by conscientious objectors solicited mixed reactions from tribunalists. "Shaped by their milieu, most shared a distaste for pacifist principles," McDermott contends (p. 55). Yet at the same time, and contrary to popular perceptions, most tribunalists understood that they were obliged to ensure a fair hearing of objector applications. For others, however, "fairness" was couched in the notion of universal sacrifice. As unsatisfying as the outcomes often were for those on both sides of the conscientious objector debate, issues of social rank proved equally unsettling in the court of public opinion. As McDermott notes, their "application of 'fairness' was as inconsistent as any human quality.... Prejudices, preconceptions, predilections, personal empathy or even a poor lunch might sway one or more tribunalists" (p. 175). While tribunal members were products of their "milieu" and maintained this worldview, the inconsistency in the judgments handed down indicate not the influence of something as static as an applicant's socioeconomic status, but rather the mercurial nature of the human condition on a given day or hour.

Physical fitness requirements for military service added yet another level of opacity to the tribunal process. Medical boards, first directed by army doctors, conducted superficial evaluations of physical condition, passing genuinely incapable men off as fit for frontline duty. The institution of conscription in 1916, while prompting a more conscientious allocation of manpower, still did not solve the frivolous medical examinations and motives of medical boards. It was not until November 1917 that civilian-directed medical boards took over the process of conducting legitimate medical evaluations for the sake of the individual under scrutiny and not for the sake of simply serving up another warm body to man the trenches.

Throughout the study, several overarching themes emerge. The inconsistency of British manpower policy is one clear pattern; the multitude of Military Service Acts passed during the course of the war introduced, reversed, and revised directives. New directives, such as the official adoption of the Volunteer Training Corps (VTC)–what one might equate to a militia of sorts–seems to have provided a channel through which a greater degree of equity and balance in the minds of some tribunalists could be realized, as VTC duties were often assigned to individuals they exempted from military service overseas. Another recurring point is the tribunals' efforts to be equitable and balanced in adjudicating exemptions, which remained just that–efforts. The brief time applicants had to present their cases, and the clarity in which they articulated their cases and their abilities to evoke the tribunals' sympathy, coupled with the erratic nature of the human condition proved insurmountable obstacles to achieving consistency. Furthermore, the lack of institutional direction and judicial inexperience contributed to tribunals' struggles. It also contributed to another of the study's recurring themes–the fact that tribunals tended to consider the unique circumstances of their own community and its immediate economic interests over the needs of the War Office.

British Military Service Tribunals, pressed on one side by the British Expeditionary Forces' constant need for fresh recruits and the consideration of the needs of their local community on the other, performed a precarious and, at times, contradictory function. Indeed, they occupied "the only non-military staging post between the hearth and front line" (p. 7). Moreover, the exemption process facilitated a dialog with the public that reflected the very real and poignant human costs of their deliberations. As it were, the lasting impressions of tribunals and its members have largely been negative, as obstructionists by the military or as soulless jurors, merely rubber-stamping the policies of the British war machine. This study is an important corrective to that image.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Jason Engle. Review of McDermott, James, *British Military Service Tribunals, 1916-18: "A Very Much Abused Body of Men"*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34963

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