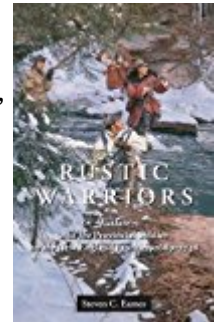


Steven C. Eames. *Rustic Warriors: Warfare and the Provincial Soldier on the New England Frontier, 1689-1748.* New York: New York University Press, 2011. 320 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-2270-1.



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In *Rustic Warriors*, Stephen C. Eames sets out to repair the tarnished reputation of the New England soldier. From 1689 to 1748, New England colonists were involved in a series of wars against their French and Indian neighbors. During this period, British and colonial forces established a consistent track record of failure and disappointment. The fall guy for these many failures has most often been the provincial soldier, who seemed, if not hopelessly inept, frequently over-matched by his French and Indian counterparts. For many historians, the tide of the French wars changed only with the introduction of British regulars into colonial warfare, a transition that began in earnest with the Seven Years' War in 1754, just beyond Eames's period of study. So to redeem the reputation of provincial soldiers, Eames has chosen the period that has traditionally provided the most convincing and well-documented evidence of their incompetence. Both British and colonial observers were never too busy during these early conflicts to document the many failings of the provincial soldier, including but not

limited to his lack of training, his poor discipline, and his fleeting courage. It was clear to most observers during this period that the colonial soldier was not made up of the "right stuff." These conspicuous failures and contemporary evaluations have carried weight across the centuries and have dominated the historical record on the colonial soldier and his character. In an ambitious effort at historical revisionism, Eames attempts to overturn this harsh appraisal of the provincial soldier.

Eames argues for the need to reevaluate the New England provincial soldier on the basis of a new perspective on colonial warfare. He does not minimize the record of military failure or the large body of literature criticizing the provincial soldier, but instead, seeks to place these facts within a deeper understanding of the realities of war on the frontier. He criticizes the tendency of military historians to focus too heavily on the results of key battles and instead sees new possibilities in a careful attention to the everyday life of the common soldier. Alongside this search for detail, however, is the consistent effort to establish a

broader comparative basis by which to assess the provincial soldier. Throughout the entirety of the book, Eames moves seamlessly between specific circumstances of colonial warfare and the broader context of how other soldiers, particularly French and Indian, handled similar circumstances.

Eames dedicates the first part of *Rustic Warriors* to detailing the many contingencies that existed in colonial warfare. In his chapter on provincial forts, for instance, he elaborates on their problems with sanitation, which often led to outbreaks of dysentery and other diseases. In his later chapter on the offensive raids into French and Indian territory that too often ended in disaster, Eames details the very real difficulties in maintaining a sufficient food supply. During certain seasons and depending on the size of the scouting party, even the most careful group could have their endeavors shortened or even ruined by food shortages and return home, not in triumph, but on the verge of starvation. Eames finds that larger expeditions during this period, which like smaller raids often faltered, faced their own unique challenges. Eames highlights many logistical problems that accompanied these larger efforts, as colonial forces were dependent on the British war bureaucracy for financial backing, ammunition, warships, military engineers, and other wartime necessities. Logistical problems could be and sometimes were, as with the planned Quebec expedition of 1709, detrimental to the success of a particular expedition. These insights into the complexities of making war in the colonies are important to Eames's larger argument because they begin to open up new explanations for the colonial military struggles that move beyond the performance of the provincial soldier.

These details, however, only help to exculpate the colonial soldier if other military forces struggled with the same issues, which Eames seeks to establish through wide-ranging comparisons. When dealing with the complaints by colonial of-

ficials of the provincial soldier's penchant for desertion in colonial forts, he looks to the behavior of British regulars, who demonstrated similar tendencies when stationed in isolated posts. He also highlights, after detailing the struggles of the New England raiding parties to maintain an adequate food supply, a major French raid in 1684, which struggled with the same issue so badly that many soldiers fell dangerously ill during the expedition. He finds additional evidence with a French and Indian force in 1747 that was clearly fighting on the brink of starvation. He turns to the French experience again when searching for the appropriate context for the many failed British expeditions. Not surprisingly, Eames finds that the French also struggled with many logistical challenges and points to a planned French invasion in 1697 that fell apart after the late arrival of the French naval squadron. With these comparisons, Eames successfully shifts blame away from the provincial soldier by presenting many obstacles of colonial warfare that wreaked havoc on all its participants, not just the New England soldier.

In the second part of the book, Eames turns his attention specifically to the provincial soldier and builds on his revisionist position. He moves beyond deflecting blame away from the provincial soldier and attempts a direct reinterpretation of his perceived failings. One example occurs with his treatment of frequent complaints by British officials that provincial officers were of a low social status and accordingly of poor quality. Part of this observation was true as private or noncommissioned officers could rise to these positions in the colonial army solely on the basis of distinction in the field. Consequently, social distinctions between officers and soldiers were dangerously thin from the British perspective. For Eames, this searing criticism is partly explained by the "bigotry of class," but also reflected a limited understanding of colonial circumstances on the part of the British observer (p. 9). Recruitment of colonial soldiers was often a difficult process and depended largely on the personality of the leading officer.

New England colonists were more willing to enlist with leaders who had demonstrated success in the field, even if it came from those without social distinction. What British observers often interpreted as the leadership of the unqualified were actually individuals most capable of recruiting the best soldiers.

Eames makes his most convincing argument for a new understanding of the colonial soldier in his chapter on battle drills. For the historian and contemporary observer alike, poor training of the provincial soldier was causally linked to his struggles in the field. "Training days" in the colonies often devolved into drunken revelries with little, if any, time dedicated to somber military training. Eames makes the argument, however, that conventional military drills made little sense in New England. Their main purpose was to instill in the soldier the ability to subordinate the natural instinct of self-preservation in favor of necessary military discipline, even in the face of the most threatening circumstances. This was important training for the linear style of battle common to Europe, but not in the New England wilderness. In the wooded terrain of the New England frontier, soldiers operated in dispersed formations and were often separated from their commanders. The unflinching discipline of linear tactics was ill-suited to colonial warfare, which demanded some level of independence on the part of the soldier. The lack of seriousness surrounding "training day" is not evidence to Eames of men who did not take their military responsibilities seriously, but of individuals who were sufficiently knowledgeable about colonial warfare to understand that conventional training drills were not useful for them and potentially even counterproductive.

The end result of *Rustic Warriors* is a depiction of the provincial soldier that holds up much better against his French and Indian counterparts. Eames has successfully undercut many contemporary attacks on the provincial soldier by ex-

posing the limited perspective of those critics. The colonial observer too often ignored the many challenges of colonial warfare that were also plaguing their French and Indian enemies, while the British observer failed to understand the nuances and adaptations necessary for battle on the frontier. The historian whose opinion of the provincial soldiers relies heavily on these sources will have to engage in the future with Eames's effort to undermine their legitimacy. There is still so much documentary evidence that opposes his overall contention that it is doubtful that Eames has had the final word on the issue, but he has succeeded impressively in broadening the contours of the debate.

One of the great strengths of Eames's work is its tight organization around the issue of the provincial soldier's reputation, but that does at times seem to limit his willingness to expand on some of the most interesting implications of his research. One area where this is particularly apparent is the possible intersection between military and political culture. A persistent criticism of the provincial soldier, which Eames cites repeatedly, was his unwillingness to accept authority easily, with one contemporary observer noting that Americans were so invested with the notions of rights and liberties that they were "almost Levellers" (p. 104). Eames confines his explanation of this American characteristic to the particular needs of frontier warfare, but fails to engage the question of whether it was part of a larger democratic ethos in the colonies or potentially crucial in the formation of one. The question of the larger ramifications of these military characteristics on colonial society seem particularly pertinent given his own observation that military participation often acted to jump-start individual political careers. The book remains, however, an ambitious and well-researched attempt to understand anew the provincial soldier and the particular circumstances of war on the New England frontier.

*: Warfare and the Provincial Soldier on the
New England Frontier, 1689-1748*

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