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Published on H-Albion (November, 2006)

There is a great deal of current historical interest in both the Jacobite movement in Britain and in the development of Britain’s imperial role in the eighteenth century. Geoffrey Plank’s scholarly work, based on intensive work on the primary sources, attempts to link these two topics in an interesting and innovative, but not entirely successful fashion. His thesis is that the Duke of Cumberland and five of the leading officer’s serving under him, in crushing the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46, learned lessons which they sought to implement during their subsequent military careers in distant parts of the British empire. Having, as they believed, succeeded in bringing the benefits of British civilization to the Gaelic savages of the Scottish western Highlands, these officers went on over the next two decades or so to deploy Britain’s military power to bring civilization, commercial prosperity, political stability, and legal reforms to the native populations and the more recent settlers in Britain’s colonial possessions in the Mediterranean and North America.

A vast amount has been written about the ruthless crushing of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s rash Jacobite adventure of 1745-46. Plank has little new to contribute to the purely military or political aspects of the suppression of this Jacobite rebellion, but he does present a detailed and valuable exploration of how the Duke of Cumberland’s forces regarded the Gaelic rebels in arms and treated them during and after the military campaign that destroyed them as a threat to the British establishment. His study concentrates on the role of the duke and of five of his senior officers (William Blakeney, Humphrey Bland, Edward Cornwallis, John Campbell, Earl of Loudon, and James Wolfe). Plank shows how these men denigrated Gaelic culture and ruthlessly crushed this threat to British power, peace, and prosperity. He is particularly good in showing how Cumberland’s officers and men dealt with the rebels, not only on the battlefield, but, subsequently, through persecution, trials, and negotiations. While many Jacobite rebels suffered condign punishment, Cumberland’s army also sought to regulate, reform, and civilize these dangerous “savages” on the edge of British civilization. The Highlanders were disarmed, estates were confiscated, clan chiefs lost their jurisdictional powers, and Highland
culture was increasingly anglicized. And modest efforts were made to improve the Highland economy and to introduce education, planned villages, and the Protestant religion. While punitive action was more prevalent than benign improvement, the Jacobite cause was severely weakened and the Gaelic Highlanders were gradually assimilated into the dominant British culture, economy, and empire.

Plank presents an interesting slant on the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion, but he breaks entirely new ground in then going on to reveal how the experiences of Cumberland and these leading officers in the Scottish Highlands influenced their subsequent careers as military men and governors in distant parts of the British empire. Bland became governor of Gibraltar from 1748 to 1752; there he attempted to use the British army as a civilizing force and sought to promote immigration, commerce, and legal reforms. Something of an abstract thinker, he tried to design grand, constitutionally significant governmental schemes that he hoped would guide his successors for years to come. His reforms faltered, however, and, after three years of trials and tribulation, he returned to a military command in Scotland. Blakeney was appointed as lieutenant-governor of Minorca in 1748 and spent more years vainly trying to assert his authority in a chaotic situation where the local commercial interests and the Catholic church resisted many of his proposals for change. In 1756 he was compelled to surrender the island to a powerful invasion force from France. Both Bland and Blakeney found it difficult to persuade the local populations to accept British rule, were embroiled in regular commercial disputes, and faced even worse difficulties from the “barbarians” of North Africa.

Cornwallis served as governor of Nova Scotia from 1749 to 1752. He succeeded in building a major British base at Halifax, but he was less successful in promoting a Protestant commercial society and he had considerable trouble with the French settlers and the native Indian “savages” in the province. A decade later he was appointed governor of Gibraltar, where he spent an unhappy decade enriching himself but failing to carry through any significant reforms. Loudon was placed in command of British forces in North America in 1756 and was also made governor of Virginia, but he achieved little in military terms in the war against France and failed to rally much support from the British settlers or their colonial assemblies; he too struggled in vain with the neighboring French and their native Indian allies. He was dismissed from his military and civilian posts in 1758-59, having achieved very little. Wolfe succeeded him in command of the army raised to fight the French and he achieved much greater success. More determined, vigorous and ruthless, Wolfe pursued a savage war against the French and their Indian allies in which he had to work out the rules of war on the frontier. He died, however, while defeating the French at Quebec in 1759.

In exploring the careers of these five British army officers during and after the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46 and during their subsequent careers across the empire, Plank shows them struggling with only limited success to solve the imperial problems that Britain faced in dealing with less civilized or even savage societies hostile to or in armed revolt against British rule. Though not directly of their doing, the greatest success of the British army in these decades was in recruiting thousands of Scottish Gaelic Highlanders into military service in the empire. By the later 1750s thousands of Highlanders were serving with distinction in the British army in North America and they subsequently encouraged substantial immigration into these colonies. In North America, the Highlanders, from a rebellious region as recently as the mid-1740s, became staunch supporters of the British empire and a civilizing force in combat with native Indian “savages.” Thus, the beneficial effects of the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion in 1746 were being clearly felt in North America a
little more than a decade later. These successes were not matched in the Mediterranean colonies however.

The successful role of Highland troops serving with the British army in North America brings Plank’s story full circle. The war in which they served also saw the end of the military careers of many of the officers who had helped to suppress the Jacobite rebellion in 1746. In presenting his account, Plank has produced a well-researched, well-organized, and well-written monograph. His thesis is original and interesting, but not entirely convincing. He glosses over the fact that a large number of the Jacobite rebels were Episcopalian Protestants from the northeast of Scotland and not Gaelic Highlanders from northwest Scotland. He offers little explicit and direct evidence that these five officers had learned lessons from their experiences in suppressing the Jacobite rebellion in Scotland that they deliberately deployed in their later careers in the Mediterranean or North America. Nor is there much clear evidence to show that these officers shared a firm belief in a range of interlocking reforms that would promote the same imperial design. They may have learned the lessons in Scotland that Plank claims they learned, but he has not clearly established that fact or that they then deployed the fruits of their experiences elsewhere in the empire. Few of them wrote out their thoughts on empire. It is possible that they were military men dealing with problems as they arose and not men with an imperial vision that they learned in Scotland and then deliberately sought to promote in the Mediterranean and North America.

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