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In 1740, British writer James Thomson crafted a poem that would become a cornerstone of British culture. Marrying Britain’s martial capacities with its naval prowess, the powerful refrain of “Rule Britannia, Britannia Rules the Waves” can still be heard echoing throughout venues from theaters to football stadiums. For historians, the paired themes of this poem are classic points of discussion regarding the development of the British state and nation. John Brewer’s *Sinews of Power* attributes the growth of bureaucratic and financial institutions to the growing need for a large navy in an era of colonial conflict while Linda Colley’s seminal *Britons* argues that maritime activities constituted one of the wide-scale shared experiences that resulted in the development of a British national identity.[1] Any study of this island state would thus be incomplete without mentioning the navy. Jeremy Black’s *How the Army Made Britain a Global Power, 1688-1815* complicates this trend by arguing that an experienced land force was just as necessary when it came to policing colonial lands while also asserting power on the European continent itself.

Black is certainly well familiar with this content. He has published more than 180 books over the course of his four-decade career, and the topics range from surveys of the history of modern warfare to more germane subjects like eighteenth-century British foreign policy. This expertise allows him to articulate the key points of his argument in an accessible manner. In the brief introduction, Black contends that the British army “needs to be understood both on its own, and also in the context of other European, indeed global, forces of the period” (p. x). Compared to the successes of the militarized Prussian state or the continuous failures of the Qing Dynasty to conquer Southeast Asia, Britain’s ability to field a force that could both quash colonial unrest and fight a formal war on the global stage is not only impressive but was achieved in spite of political issues at home. This panoply of threats both domestic and foreign demanded that the British army develop an operation flexibility lacking in other forces, several key elements being the ability to supply soldiers around the globe, experienced commanders, and the ability to work alongside irregular forces (militias, trade companies, etc.). While Black thoroughly explores these themes in the following ten chapters, a more detailed outline of the narrative itself as well as a more thorough discussion of the historiographical roots of the army-versus-navy debate would be appreciated by lay readers and professional scholars alike.

Generally, the reader can divide *Global Power*’s chapters into three distinct time periods from the eighteenth century. Chapters 1 through 3
(1689-1756) cover the growing pains of an army thrust into global and domestic conflict, chief among them the political culture of a kingdom recovering both from Oliver Cromwell’s reign and the tensions of Stuart policy. The threat of Jacobite rebellions and French invasions were consistent throughout the early eighteenth century, and Black argues that providing domestic defense “tested armies, units, their commanders, and the support system to an extent greater than any other challenge” (p. 1). While such crises did not ease the public’s distrust of a standing army, they did help foster a military culture in which officers’ competence on the field was as important as their heritage, a phenomenon which Black describes through George II’s personal interventions in promotions and political appointments. This period, though, was marked by inconsistent performance. Colonial needs varied from region to region, rendering the army “little involved in the [Robert] Walpole years in imperial conflicts. British interests, instead, were largely dependent on local forces, and these were focused essentially on defence” (p. 58.)

Chapters 4 through 6 describe the transition from setback to success, the pivotal moments being the Seven Years’ War (1756-63) and the American War for Independence (1776-83). Here Black emphasizes the importance of early colonial fighting in this war, battles in the Ohio Valley having “ensured that the war for empire was to the forefront in the Seven Years’ War,” and even the later war in Europe “was to be conceptualized in terms of winning America in Germany” (p. 66). In this American theater, Black smartly contrasts generals like Edward Braddock with James Wolfe to demonstrate continued improvement from 1755 to 1760 while also noting that the Anglo-German force in Europe found success despite the multinational and political complications of this force. His argument thus aligns with those of scholars like P. J. Marshall and Fred Anderson, that this conflict crystallized the imperial mission in the minds of the public and government alike. [2] From here, Black then compares two vastly different colonial experiences during the postwar period, those of the American colonies and India. He creatively links the two as being different theaters in the same global war that spanned the 1770s and 1780s. For the American War of Independence, he largely attributes the failure to insufficient manpower, writing “the limited forces at their disposal repeatedly affected the strategic options, operational plans, and tactical moves, of British generals” (p. 114). Without adequate reserves, casualties mounted and those that remained were forced into defensive postures, whereas “Britain’s financial strength” bolstered the empire’s commanders in India during the Anglo-Maratha Wars (1775-1819) as they developed the “hybrid war making that was important to their tactical and operational success, notably of sepoys infantry with cavalry and impressive logistics” (p. 137).

Chapters 7 through 10 present the product of these cumulative lessons: an experienced fighting force with the capability of operating anywhere on the globe. While Britain certainly experienced operational failures during the campaigns in the Netherlands during the French Revolutionary Wars (1789-99), Black notes that such setbacks were learning moments for an army that had not experienced a major continental war in decades. While he is correct to point out that leaders like the Dukes of York and Wellington had to adapt to the new style of fighting presented by the republican, and later Napoleonic, armies, the emphasis on reform from above hides the experiences of the regular soldiers to some degree. If, as he writes, “Wellington needed to know that his soldiers would be able to respond to instructions to move to fight” during the Peninsular War (1807-14), then a well-placed quote from subordinate commanders on the state of his soldiers would bolster his argument that much more (p. 164). This is not to detract from the argument of this section, however. In the descriptions of the Peninsular War as well as in more imperial theaters like the War of
1812 and Africa, one can find traces of the same kinds of strategic decision-making, of amphibious landings in relatively weak parts of the opposing lines, that characterized the British high command during the Second World War.

Ultimately, it is important to note that Black’s mission here is not to completely dismiss the body of naval-centric works on British history so much as assert that the army was just as critical a variable in the expansion of the British Empire. After all, it takes a navy to protect the global supply lines that made the British army successful in the later part of the century, and for every Minden and Waterloo there is a comparable naval success like Quiberon Bay and Trafalgar. This work therefore constitutes an excellent reframing of an old issue. Black’s sources of personal correspondence, army missives, and published government/parliamentary documents are compelling not because they reveal some hidden perspective but because he considers them within a context of British imperial expansion. For professional historians, this is a concise study that offers a counter-methodology to a long-standing historiographical theme. Though Black clearly knows that historiography, such readers would no doubt have appreciated a narrative that openly incorporated a deeper analysis of those sources against which he argues. Students of the history of military science would find the greatest utility from this work, its descriptions of British administrative structures and strategic considerations offering case studies in organization and logistics.

Notes


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