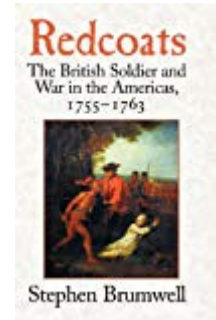


**Stephen Brumwell.** *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755-1763.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. x + 349 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-80783-8.



**Reviewed by** Mark Power Robison

**Published on** H-Atlantic (August, 2004)

A resurgence of research on the Seven Years' War is reordering scholars' thinking on that conflict and its role in American history. Most notably, Fred Anderson's *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in North America, 1754-1766* (2000), serves to place events in the Americas in the broadest context--that of the first global war.[1] The war set in motion many of the events leading to the American Revolution and served as a watershed moment dividing the colonial past and the national future. In *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755-1763*, Stephen Brumwell challenges a series of assumptions and omissions concerning the British regulars who served in the Seven Years' War. Brumwell's exhaustive study successfully humanizes the men involved and gives greater nuance to our understanding of their experiences and contributions.

*Redcoats* begins by contrasting the high esteem enjoyed by British regulars at the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, with their unpopular status at the outset of the war and their harsh treatment by historians. According to Brumwell,

depictions of the redcoats unfairly show them in an "unflattering" light that reduces them to "no more than automatons" (pp. 2-3). Although often criticized as overly rigid and unsuccessful in battle, Brumwell "argues that the British army contributed far more to winning the Seven Years' War in the Americas than historians have been prepared to concede" (p. 4). The author also challenges earlier "simplistic descriptions" of his subjects and promises a study in which "redcoats of all ranks emerge as individuals with voices of their own" (p. 5). Based on extensive archival research in official documents--such as those at the Public Record Office--as well as private correspondence, this study certainly provides the most thorough, nuanced treatment of this subject to date.

The text is organized thematically but begins with a chronological narrative of the war highlighting the role of the redcoats in the North American theater. Brumwell observes that after receiving heavy criticism for General Edward Braddock's defeat at the hands of the French in 1755, the long road to rehabilitating the image of the army began in 1756 with the recruitment of

the Royal American Regiment. The majority of these soldiers, 7,500 of the 12,000 men, came from the British North American colonies. After the successful siege of the French fortress city of Louisbourg in 1758 and the capture of Quebec in 1759, the redcoats experienced "an upsurge in the prestige of British regulars" (p. 29). As successes mounted and the focus of the campaign switched to the Caribbean in 1761, the redcoats experienced the apex of their esteem in the colonies--acclaim that would not last long as the ongoing presence of the troops in the colonies led to post-war tensions.

Successive chapters address various aspects of the soldiers' lives. Brumwell argues that the soldiers came to the army with diverse backgrounds and experience. Many were non-English immigrants to the British colonies and, although "drawn overwhelmingly from the 'labouring classes,'" many brought the skills used as tradesmen in more prosperous times (p. 82). The author also notes that although most of the officers bought their commissions and hailed from the gentry, the army did afford a fortunate few the possibility for rising through the ranks.

The famously harsh discipline of the redcoats also receives a thorough examination. Although corporal punishment clearly played a large role in the service, and occasional executions further reinforced the climate of fear, Brumwell uses this ominous topic to highlight a key concern for the regulars: their rights. He argues that "far from being intimidated into slaving obedience by the fearsome sanctions ranged against them, British soldiers remained remarkably ready to defy the Army's discipline in defense of their hallowed 'rights'" (pp. 99-100). This principled stand and the close-knit camaraderie amongst the soldiers are offered as evidence that "the redcoats retained a powerful sense of their own worth" (p. 136). Like many passages in the book, Brumwell's tone here is somewhat defensive. His desire to paddle against what he clearly sees as a heavy current of

scorn for his subjects leaves him pleading with the reader to consider them as complex human beings rather than martinets.

One long-standing criticism of the redcoats concerns their inability to adapt to warfare in the Americas. Recent scholarship, such as John Grenier's dissertation "The Other American Way of War: Unlimited and Irregular Warfare in the Colonial Military Tradition," points to the ability of colonials to adapt to their surroundings while metropolitan regulars struggled in harsh terrain, extreme weather, and in the face of foreign tactics employed by Amerindian adversaries.[2] In contrast, Brumwell argues that, although challenged by the climate and the dense forests, by 1760 the redcoats had adapted their methods to the American context. Similarly, he notes that although most of his subjects "gained only a superficial knowledge of Indian culture," they adopted many of the methods and some of the equipment employed by Amerindians in waging effective war in the northeastern woods (p. 189).

In perhaps the only serious omission in this thorough and well-written study, Brumwell pays too little attention to the oppression meted out by the redcoats. Although he rightly notes that the British assigned themselves the "moral high ground" in response to atrocities perpetrated by their Amerindian and French adversaries, he lets pass an opportunity to consider the motivations and meanings of British brutality (p. 183). Instead, he merely notes that scalplings and torture perpetrated by their enemies "only hardened those men it sought to demoralise. The brutalisation that inevitably resulted was encouraged by official policy"(p. 184). To blame all atrocities the redcoats perpetrated during the war so casually on retaliation for crimes first committed by their opponents oversimplifies a complex process of adaptation. It also glosses over the most unsavory legacies of the British army during the war. Most notably, while discussing General Jeffrey Amherst's harsh tactics against Amerindians in 1763--including the

notorious attempt to spread smallpox by distributing infected blankets--Brumwell notes that "in this grim sense, the brutal ethos of the American frontier left its imprint on the British Army" (p. 188). While he is right that the attempt at germ warfare "should not be taken as typical," this brief discussion provides relatively little insight into the uncivil aspects of the British army's conduct in North America (pp. 188-89).

The popularity of the redcoats in the North American colonies in 1763 stands in stark contrast to their reviled status just a few years later. Amidst this increasing animosity, most of the regulars who captured French North America remained in the New World. Those of them whose status as colonials preceded their service were joined by many of their counterparts from metropolitan Britain, who either found themselves stranded without passage home or who availed themselves of land grants in the new territories captured from the French and their Amerindian allies. The limited nature of pensions, provided only to those wounded in the war, and the inadequacy of services for those crippled in battle "provides a further reminder that such men deserve to be treated as individuals rather than as faceless and voiceless components in an oppressive military machine" (p. 303). Brumwell concludes by noting the tragic irony that many of these veterans fought against one another when the deep division of the American Revolution left many on both sides of the conflict.

This extensive and thoughtful study will serve as an excellent resource for scholars seeking a richer understanding of the redcoats' backgrounds and experiences in the Seven Years' War. Brumwell's work also adds to scholars' growing understanding of the Atlantic context in which events in North America unfolded.

#### Notes

[1]. Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in North Amer-*

*ica, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, distributed by Random House, 2000).

[2]. John Grenier, "The Other American Way of War: Unlimited and Irregular Warfare in the Colonial Military Tradition" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1999).

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

**Citation:** Mark Power Robison. Review of Brumwell, Stephen. *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755-1763*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9716>



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