

## Martial Masculinities: Experiencing and Imagining the Military in the Long Nineteenth Century

**Review Number:** 2387

**Publish date:** Friday, 24 April, 2020

**Editor:** Anna Maria Barry

Joanne Begiato

Michael Brown

**ISBN:** 781526135629

**Date of Publication:** 2019

**Price:** £80.00

**Pages:** 288pp.

**Publisher:** Manchester University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526135629/>

**Place of Publication:** Manchester

**Reviewer:** Samuel Clark

This is an edited collection consisting of 11 articles, plus an introduction and an epilogue, about the role of martial masculinities in British society and culture from the French Revolution to the beginning of the Great War. It originated in a conference held at the University of Hull in 2015. The majority of the authors teach in either a History or an English department. The book is divided into two parts. The first part consists of articles that discuss several aspects of martial masculinity: the soldier's body, the domestic lives of soldiers in the field, stereotypes of soldiers and sailors, and public imagery of veterans. The second part looks at martial masculinities as portrayed in a selection of 19th-century literature. I can identify a number of themes that integrate the articles.

The first is the multiplicity of masculinities. Even the military had more than one. There was no universal experience of armed service, nor any single image of soldiers and sailors. We have various stereotypes of the dissolute and commitment-free soldier or the dandy dressed in form-fitting breeches and high-waisted jackets. In contrast we can recognize the less negative—but not really very favourable—image of the soldier as a rough, fearsome warrior; an image commonly associated with Scottish Highlanders, but in varying degrees attributed to many who served in arms. And then there is the image of the patriotic, stoic, brave, and selfless hero, defending British people from their foreign enemies.

In this collection the most attention is given to the dichotomy of civilian and military masculinities. This does not mean that the two are presented as distinctly different. Quite the opposite; the effect of one on the other is a fundamental concern of *Martial Masculinities*. An important claim is that civilian masculinity did not become irrelevant when men joined the military, a fact most evident in two chapters: Louise Carter's article on interaction between men in military service and their families; and Helen Metcalfe's article on nostalgia and the ways in which soldiers on campaign sought to create some semblance of domestic comforts while in the field, or at least persuade their families that they were able to do so. Soldiers regularly corresponded with members of their families and frequently received packages from home. Carter also talks about the well-known replication of the family structure in military regiments, where the commander was

regarded as a father figure and fellow soldiers or sailors as proxy siblings. Martial masculinity was not altogether martial.

Another theme is the romanticization of the military. It occurred in the context of the romantic movement and the chivalric and gothic revivals of the late 18th and the 19th centuries. In particular, chivalric ideals of heroism, selflessness, and bravery were foremost in martial romanticization. This volume makes a significant contribution to understanding the wider impact of these movements, especially in Elly McCausland's chapter on knightly masculinities in children's Arthurian literature, where she demonstrates how Arthurian tales were adapted to entertain and socialize 19th-century children. As shown by Michael Brown and Joanne Begiato in their chapter on visualizing the veteran, even soldiers long past their prime could be romanticized.

A closely-related theme combines patriotic sentiment, the glorification of war, and enthusiasm for the Empire. These feelings surged in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars when, as several articles indicate, it was manifested conspicuously in martial pride in the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo. In addition, Karen Turner's paper on the construction of St John Rivers as a 'warrior priest' in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* suggests how much of British society became, in a certain sense, militarized during the 19th century. The most robust of these sentiments was the enthusiasm for the imperial project. Over the course of the century, public attitudes toward the British Empire became more positive. Indeed, for many it became nothing less than a religious mission to rescue the rest of the World.

A final theme that I shall mention is that of the soldier's body. It was obviously central to his martial masculinity. His purported strength, prowess, and hardiness are ubiquitous in military imagery. The bodies of soldiers were even imagined as barriers between the British population and its enemies. The soldier's body was also the carrier of the medals and uniforms that were so much a part of the military visual spectacle.

Yet the brilliant imagery of the soldier's body was not without complications. How does one maintain this image despite the pitiful scenes of returning soldiers who were physically disabled, suffering from the psychological scars of warfare and, in many cases, destitute? Can the aged or wounded soldier somehow be incorporated into the portrait of martial masculinity? This difficulty, and efforts to get around it, are examined mostly in the chapter on veterans and in Julia Banister's chapter on the dilemma posed by the buried leg of Henry William Paget, earl of Uxbridge, which was amputated in a farm house at Waterloo.

The corporal dilemma was not the only complication in the social construction of martial masculinity. Serious contradictions are obvious among the different stereotypes of the soldier, which is the principal message of Anna Maria Barry's paper on Charles Incedon, who mixed together almost all the different stereotypes: an authentic (though not distinguished) sailor, a portly and alcoholic Regency rake, and a singer of patriotic songs and naval ballads, but at a time when singing was seen as a feminine and foreign profession. And Susan Walton remarks on the contrast between the chivalric image of the soldier portrayed in the moralistic novels of Charlotte Yonge and the pleasure-loving soldiers in other 19th-century fiction, such as M.W. Thackeray's *Rawdon Crawley* and Thomas Hardy's *Sergeant Troy*.

Equally glaring was the contradiction between the search for domesticity in a soldier's life and the reality of armed service. It was impossible to deny the exclusion of most soldiers and sailors from the domestic world that they were expected to sacrifice themselves to protect, a point best made by Lorenzo Servitje in his chapter on Tennyson's poem 'Locksley Hall'. It is also difficult to deny that a man acquired martial masculinity by joining the armed forces but at the expense of his domestic masculinity. The military encouraged domesticity only to the extent that it was useful to them, as is evidenced by the restrictions imposed on marriage. To make matters worse, Victorian efforts to raise the standards of married life in British society made domestic masculinity more difficult for soldiers and sailors to sustain. Carter notes that it was generally believed that the welfare of many families of men at war deteriorated as a result of the absence of male heads of households. Personal knowledge of the adversities experienced by their wives and

children was a source of considerable mental anguish and guilt for many soldiers.

We might expect to find evidence of the contradiction between the glorification of war and its hardships. What the authors of this collection find instead is a glorification of these hardships, which were integrated into the image of the patriotic, brave, and selfless hero. The exception is found in Barbara Leonardi's chapter on the Scottish novelist, poet and critic, James Hogg, in whose writing the savagery of war is starkly represented, and the heroic and chivalric image of British soldiers is trashed. Hogg was not alone in his attitude toward war. Isaac Lamb points out in the Epilogue that the pejorative words 'militarism' and 'militarist' entered the English language in the period covered by this volume (p. 263). There is also evidence of opposition to the Empire. For Hogg neither soldiers nor working-class civilians derived any benefit from British colonialism.

These contradictions are relevant to the subject to which I would like to turn for the remainder of this review. Along with the outstanding contribution *Martial Masculinities* makes to the comprehension of masculinity in 19th-century Britain, it contributes significantly to the extensive literature on disciplinary techniques in modern society. In any functioning society, it is necessary to have as much consensus as possible on what is honourable, admirable, courageous, and responsible versus what is shameful, irresponsible, and inglorious. It is also essential to have a disposition in the society to try to live according to these agreed standards. A fundamental argument in the literature on discipline is that a transformation has occurred in the past several centuries in the way in which people have been disciplined. As a result of extensive social-political changes over this period, traditional methods of discipline have become less effective and new methods have—if not always smoothly—emerged.

A major force for change has been the development of larger collectives that have been socially constructed as publics, nations, republics, and other commonalities, in which people thought it was important to persuade others to be honourable, admirable, et cetera. This change resulted from a massive demographic expansion, greater social interaction beyond local communities, and the interest of states in controlling larger populations. These larger collectives were, however, less tightly-knit, less restraining, and less homogeneous than the communities into which people were formerly integrated. The transformation was extremely gradual, beginning in the British Isles in the 16th century and still evolving in the 20th century, but the 19th century was a critical transitional period.

Over much the same period, a massive transformation took place in the nature of war. Most obviously, the size of armies expanded enormously. On the Continent, the expansion began during the 17th century, in Britain during the 18th century. All this brought about a dramatic change in the social composition of armies. Troops became more diverse. They also consisted of a broader social range of the population, which meant that during the French Wars, more than during any earlier wars, a considerable percentage of people in Britain knew a family with a husband or son in the military, if they did not have one or two themselves. This gave rise to a more positive attitude toward soldiers, which edged up during the 19th century, especially after the Crimean War.

Owing to the above social-political developments and changes in the character of war, traditional methods of disciplining soldiers and sailors came to be seen as less effective. Although corporal punishment persisted, it gradually declined in legitimacy as a method of improving their behaviour. Solidarity among soldiers endured within regiments, but it was difficult to maintain over a national army.

One of the newer disciplinary techniques that was intended to raise the standard of both civilian and military behaviour is 'individualization'. The meaning of this term varies, but as a method of self-discipline it usually refers to two interrelated processes. One is that an expectation of individual autonomy, self-actualization, and responsibility is instilled into a population. The other is that people are led to place themselves in a system of classification that tells them what they are, but also what they are not but could have been, or could become. We can distinguish between positive and negative individualization. Positive individualization refers to locating oneself relative to those categories of people who supposedly have

comparatively favourable qualities in a system of classification, while negative individualization refers to locating oneself relative to those classified as having comparatively negative characteristics.

Striking evidence of individualization during the 19th century is provided by the growth in hero worship. The 19th century was the age of the hero, or what Helen Goodman refers to as the 'hero industry', which was manifested in the popularity of monuments of military commanders and celebratory biographies of military figures, but is also evidenced in other types of publications such as those of Thomas Carlyle. Goodman holds that the rise of the hero industry was aided by the growth of literacy, printed readership, and technologies of mass publication, which Brown and Begiato also suggest as reasons for the proliferation of veterans in literary and visual culture in the latter half of the century.

*Martial Masculinities* adds to the literature on self-discipline in a number of ways. First, several articles illustrate the encouragement of personal autonomy and individual responsibility in the social construction of masculinity. We see this most clearly in Yonge's idealization of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Light Infantry, which was reformed on the principles of the British Army general, John Moore. As Walton explains: 'Instead of soldiers being drilled into submission under the threat of extreme punishment, its members were expected to show initiative, take responsibility and demonstrate a superior type of restrained behaviour' (p. 164). Of course, this individualization was not meant to encourage people to pursue their own self-interest. On the contrary, it exhorted them to serve the larger collective. It is in this sense that, in Tennyson's poem, the individual, having been rejected by the community in which he grew up, 'withers' into the larger collectives of army, nation, and empire.

Second, this collection identifies a range among those who participated in the promotion of self-discipline. Much of the academic literature on the transformation of disciplinary techniques quite rightly focuses on the role of the expanding European state. Yet it is worth noting that both state and non-state actors participated in the celebration of Paget's courage and the problematic effort to venerate his amputated leg. The same was true of the positive visualization of veterans, though the evidence here suggests that this was especially an enterprise of state agents; more specifically those trying to increase military recruitment. In contrast, all of the literary writers engaged in masculine idealization—Yonge, authors of children's Arthuriana, and H. Rider Haggard—were non-state actors. Haggard, who is the subject of Goodman's chapter, was a partial exception. He was employed in colonial administration in Africa for seven years before he became a lawyer and made a career writing adventure stories for children. Although the moral objectives of these writers were consistent with many of the British state's interests, they were not writing on its behalf.

Third, it is often difficult for those studying the history of self-discipline to determine how intentional its encouragement was. In *Martial Masculinities* it is not difficult. Most of the idealization of soldiers in this book was clearly intentional, though in varying degrees. The extreme is found in Yonge's didactic novels, but intentionality is unmistakable in the depiction of veterans, and in the children's literature explored by McCausland and Goodman.

Fourth, some of the articles in this collection illuminate the dilemma inherent in positive classifications. Better than any other work I have read recently they reveal the potential complexity of such classifications, due in this case to the varieties of masculinity and the diversity of experiences of military personnel. It was not difficult for 19th-century writers to construct a consensus about the ideal martial masculinity. However, the average soldier, sailor, or civilian was not expected to fully meet the ideal—for example to react as Paget supposedly did when his leg was being cut off 'without a groan or contortion of his countenance' declaring 'who would not lose a leg for such a victory?' (p. 21). One is expected to admire the heroic soldier, compare oneself to him, evaluate one's own behaviour in terms of his behaviour, but the standard set by the ideal is usually too high to expect more than a few to meet, or even aspire to meet it.

The contradictions in martial masculinity discussed in this book demonstrate a number of deviations from the ideal: the wounded soldier, the aged veteran, the rough fearsome warrior, and so forth, not to mention variations within these classifications. Even Paget's image as the honourable and courageous soldier was

compromised by a subsequent public scandal over an extra-marital intimate relationship. The dilemmas that these deviations could create varied. Readers of children's books and their parents did not face any serious dilemma. There was general recognition that the kinds of heroes constructed in Arthurian legends and other children's books were mostly imaginary. In fact, the last thing anyone wanted was that boys would try to do what the heroes in these stories did. The wounded soldier and the aged veteran created more of a dilemma. Would not the ideal soldier end up like them?

The greatest difficulty, however, was undoubtedly created by fictional works like those of Yonge—difficulty for her readers but also, as Walton reveals, for Yonge herself. In contrast with the writers and readers of Arthurian legends and other children's books, Yonge provides us with an example of a writer who truly believed in the reality of her fictional heroes. She molded them in the likeness of people she knew. They were, in her words, 'not mere ideals' (173). Thus, she believed that others—soldiers, sailors, and civilians, including women and children—could behave similarly in circumstances that called for it. The trouble with this unrealistic conflation of the classification came home to Yonge when her brother was sent off to Crimea with high expectations only to withdraw from the campaign, abandon his commission, and return with no medals or distinction.

To be honest, I am not all that keen on collections. They are often publication vehicles for articles that would not be accepted if refereed individually by a good journal. This fine book is an exception. It includes only a few articles that I did not think would meet such a standard. And I found them all well written and fascinating. I highly recommend this book.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2387>

**Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/316948>