

Elizabeth's Wars: War, Government and Society in Tudor England, 1544-1604

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The arrival of this new synthesis provides an occasion for Elizabethan military historians to reflect how far this field has come in the past twenty years, as has the whole field of early modern military history. In the past two decades, military historians interested in the early modern period have begun to focus increasingly on the role of military affairs in the development of the state and society, and today few would attempt to write serious military history of this period without a firm grounding in the political, diplomatic, social and economic context in which military events occurred. Indeed, military history has become so integral to early modern studies that at a recent session of the American Historical Association considering the role of military history in American Universities, noted military historian John Guilmartin was able to say he helped the employment prospects of his graduate students by sending them out 'disguised as early modernists'.

Paul Hammer's new book *Elizabeth's Wars* clearly reflects this development in the field of military history, and shows how it has come to affect the study of British history in general. In the 1980s, the study of Elizabethan England was drawn into the emerging debate in the field of military history over the nature and extent of a proposed 'military revolution' in the early modern period. Geoffrey Parker placed himself at the forefront of debate on the nature and role of military changes in the period with his article 'The 'Military Revolution, 1550-1660' – a Myth?' (published in *idem, Spain and the Netherlands, 1559-1659: Ten Essays* [London: Collins, 1979]) and his more extensive elaboration of his theories in *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). The latter work generated numerous critiques, including challenges to Parker's chronology and his vision of a technology-driven process.

For scholars of Elizabethan military affairs however, Parker's explicit exclusion of Britain from his 'Military Revolution' constituted a particular challenge. Was Parker correct in asserting that Britain in the sixteenth century was 'behind' the rest of the west, at least as far as land warfare was concerned? A new perspective was cast on this question when Simon Adams, addressing a Folger Shakespeare Library conference in 1991, asserted that all the talk of England's war weariness in the 1590s needed to be balanced against the apparent reality that England seemed to be winning its conflict with Spain in that decade. Taken in light of Parker's opinion concerning military affairs in Britain, how could this be possible? Clearly, it was time to reassess the military practices of Elizabethan England, consider how they measured against contemporary military

practices elsewhere and reevaluate their importance in Elizabethan society.

The study of military affairs in Elizabethan England traditionally centred on the navy, and was especially focused on accounts of the colorful seadogs like Drake, Hawkins and Frobisher. Land warfare received very little attention by comparison, and indeed even studies of the Navy lacked much in the appreciation of the role of naval action in Elizabethan military strategy or of the importance of the Navy's institutional development in this period. As far as land forces were concerned, only two modern works, C. G. Cruickshank's *Elizabeth's Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) and Lindsay Boynton's *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) existed. While both were (and to some extent remain) valuable works, neither was intended to be a comprehensive study of Elizabeth's forces at war. There were also several good works on Elizabethan military theory by John X. Evans and H. J. Webb, but there was little on the actual implementation of these ideas in practice. Most of all, there was no work that focused on the impact of warfare on the development of the English state or its impact on society.

Historians who took up the challenge of reassessing Elizabethan military practices were blessed with the fortunate coincidence that the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the culmination of the lifetime work of the preeminent scholar of Elizabethan diplomacy, R. B. Wernham. With the publication of *After the Armada: Elizabethan England and the Struggle for Mastery in Western Europe, 1588-1595* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) and *The Return of the Armadas: the Last Years of the Elizabethan War against Spain, 1595-1603* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), we were presented with a comprehensive template of the diplomatic framework in which Elizabethan armed forces operated, based on a lifetime of detailed study of the state papers relating to foreign affairs of the period. Perhaps even more significantly, Wernham's volumes provided a thorough guide to the existing archives, an invaluable aid to scholars wishing to explore them further. Indeed, if the 'challenge' of Parker's military revolution provided an impetus for further study of Elizabethan military affairs, Wernham's work provided the framework that defined such study, while also making its most important archival sources more accessible.

The result of the fortuitous convergence of academic challenge with the appearance of vital tools to address it has been a period of fruitful scholarship relating to Elizabethan military affairs in the 1990s. There has been a veritable cornucopia of articles examining aspects of Elizabethan military history by Simon Adams, R. Ashley, J. E. A. Dawson, Paul Hammer, J. S. Nolan, P. Thomas and D. J. B. Trim (to name only a few) since 1990, adding breadth to the field and particularly highlighting the domestic impact of military affairs on Britain. There have also been several larger works of significance in the attempt to pinpoint a 'military revolution' in Elizabethan England as well. Richard Stewart's *The English Ordnance Office, 1585-1625: a Study in Bureaucracy* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1996) significantly highlighted the growth of bureaucracy in one branch of the Elizabethan state as a result increased military activity. J. S. Nolan attempted to demonstrate the wide variety of Elizabethan military experiences by following the career of one prominent soldier in *Sir John Norreys and the Elizabethan Military World* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1997). Finally, Paul Hammer contributed *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: the Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), a major work that highlighted the effect of military affairs on politics at the highest level of Elizabeth's government.

Undoubtedly the most important work to appear in the last decade however, has been Mark Charles Fissel's long-anticipated *English Warfare, 1511-1642* (London: Routledge, 2001). The culmination of twenty years of study, Fissel's work examines firmly establishes the Elizabethan period as central to England's 'military revolution'. Fissel argues that the key to English military changes in the period was a flexibility that allowed English forces to absorb foreign military practices, combine them with uniquely English elements and apply them in a variety of differing situations. Further, Fissel correctly points out that this was not a process entirely dependent on the state, by emphasising the Elizabethan state's tendency to make use of the private resources of her kingdom to achieve its goals. Finally, Fissel begins to make an essential connection, by showing that it is impossible to separate the Elizabethan army from the operations of the Navy, a theme he will explore further in a forthcoming article.

Undoubtedly, the evolution of Elizabeth's armed forces would be incomprehensible without reference to the navy, and historians of the Elizabethan Navy have not been slow to respond with new work in the last decade. David Loades' *The Tudor Navy: an Administrative, Political and Military History* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1992) deals primarily with the institutional evolution of the navy, but again highlights how military change had broader political implications. There have also been a number of good reassessments of leading Elizabethan naval figures, including biographies of Drake and Hawkins by Harry Kelsey, James McDermott's treatment of Frobisher and R. T. Spence's biography of the privateering Earl of Cumberland, the latter being particularly interesting because of its focus on the economic implications of 'private' warfare. (1) Together these biographies have brought the image of the famed seadogs more into line with the social and economic context of their times. Most significantly, N. A. M. Rodger's masterly *The Safeguard of the Sea: a Naval History of Britain, Vol. I, 660-1649* (London: HarperCollins, 1997) engaged in a relatively radical reinterpretation of the Elizabethan Navy's strategic role, in emphasising the strategic priorities of national security and supporting relatively limited land operations that were imposed on the Navy.

Perhaps the appearance of Paul E. J. Hammer's new book *Elizabeth's Wars* prompts such an extended recounting of where we, as historians of Elizabethan military affairs, have *been* in the last decade, because it is a very good statement of where we *are* today. As his notes and bibliography show, Hammer has incorporated all the scholarship of the last twenty years into this work. In the best traditions of synthesis however, he also goes further than that, taking ideas found in these works and carrying them on to conclusions implied, but not fully elaborated, by previous historians.

To some extent, the title of this work is misleading, since Hammer, like Fissel and Gervase Philips in *The Anglo-Scots Wars, 1513-1550: a Military History* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), identifies the 1540s as the decade in which the 'military revolution' first came to Britain, and thus begins his account over a decade before Elizabeth I came to the throne. Indeed, there is much to be said for this, since the innovations made by Henry VIII in order to prepare his kingdom for war with France and subsequently by Lord Protector Somerset in the attempt to absorb Scotland, certainly conformed closely to the 'military revolution' theory of Geoffrey Parker. However, as Hammer points out, the financial burden of these innovations proved too much for England to bear. Hammer effectively uses this episode to set the stage for later military developments, by casting it as an experiment that failed, leaving the Elizabethans to search for a different solution. It is a construction that makes a good deal of sense, especially when we consider that the Queen's most trusted advisor, William Cecil, would have had clear memories of the 1540s and the financial disaster for the government that followed it. One of Hammer's central ideas is that subsequent military developments in the Elizabethan period were all firmly based on the determination not to repeat the misguided 'modernization' of the 1540s.

Working from this thesis, Hammer proceeds to document the Elizabethan state's search for military forces appropriate to meet achieve England's goals within the scope of its resources. Hammer keeps a firm eye on the slim resources Elizabeth I had available for military purposes, and with good reason, for this is the key to understanding why the Elizabethan military establishment did not evolve along continental lines.

In pursuing this line of thought, Hammer shows he has absorbed the same lessons Mark Fissel highlighted in his work. The 'military revolution' of the sixteenth century, if it existed at all, cannot be categorized by a single set of criteria, but instead took on different forms, depending on the conditions in which it occurred. Military innovation was after all a tool of the state, and would naturally adapt itself in ways best suited to serve the needs of the state in question. The model of biological evolution first introduced into the military revolution debate by Clifford Rogers is appropriate here, as we see military practices evolving in ways best suited to the environmental 'niche' they occupy. In the case of the Elizabethan state, this environment was defined by Britain's island position, the financial limitations of the Elizabethan state and the relatively limited goals which Elizabeth I set for her armed forces. Hammer wisely keeps his eyes on each of these factors throughout *Elizabeth's Wars*.

Still, this work highlights the fact that military change in Elizabethan England was evolutionary in many ways. Hammer is careful to point out the survival of feudal levies even during the Armada campaign of 1588. If anything, Hammer may underestimate the survival of feudal mentalities among the military class of England, since there is plenty of evidence that virtually every expedition that left England's shores was to some extent organized around the clients of its commanders. There is even some reason to see various expeditions as the tools of specific court factions, and to view important courtiers as the heads of rival military organizations that spanned everything from recruitment to supply. It is a bit surprising that Hammer does not pursue this further, given the orientation of his previous work, for there remain many questions about the role of such rivalry in strategic decision-making by the Elizabethan government.

Probably the most original element of *Elizabeth's Wars* is Hammer's view of Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. Inspired by two articles L. W. Henry produced in the 1950s highlighting Essex's military writings [\(2\)](#), which Hammer elaborated on substantially in his own previous work, he convincingly characterizes Essex as a military reformer at the cutting edge of contemporary military practice. This is a long stretch from the common image of Essex as a chivalric throwback that has predominated in many works, adding a new dimension to our understanding of this complex figure. It is now possible to see Essex as a living example of the rapidly changing role of the nobility in early modern military practice, which saw movement from the medieval role of warrior leading by example in combat to a more polished form of military technician. Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, whom Elizabeth I ordered to stay away from the battlefield and study books of war, is another fine example of this trend, and Hammer would have profited by looking into his career further.

The biggest success of this book is Hammer's ability to see the Elizabethan military establishment as a whole, with no distinction between militia and army, or for that matter army and navy. This is certainly the way the Queen's government viewed its armed forces, and it behooves us to follow suit. In this vein, Hammer is particularly effective in following the line of Fissel, N. A. M. Rodger and others by recognizing the deeply intertwined nature of land and sea forces in the Elizabethan military establishment. Each supplemented the other, and no Elizabethan campaign, especially those central to the nation's security, would have been possible without close cooperation between the two arms. Thus Hammer gives equal weight to Elizabethan forces' operations on both land and sea, and is careful to point up the interconnected nature of the two.

But even this does not give a complete picture of the military resources available to the Elizabethan state, for as Hammer indicates, Elizabeth I was not hesitant to make use of the private resources of her subjects to achieve the purposes of the state. Likewise the Crown was never slow to pass the financial burdens of war down to the county level. Hammer is especially good when dealing with the political consequences of Elizabeth's increasing reliance on such resources, and is particularly judicious in not overestimating the country's discontent in the 1590s. Still, if the system for maintaining the war effort was as fundamentally sound as Hammer asserts, one must wonder why the government of James I was in quite such a hurry to demobilize. This is a subject that deserves some further attention however, for as Hammer points out, it involves the rapid disappearance of a fairly elaborate military establishment. Likewise, it would be worth

considering the effect of demilitarization on a culture that had grown used to war after twenty years of conflict.

Indeed, as these questions illustrate, *Elizabeth's Wars* need not be the last word on this subject. Though Hammer has effectively pulled together the fruit of a decade and a half of research by a number of historians and put it into a coherent narrative, there are few new archival sources here, or for that matter many totally new ideas. A synthesis such as this is valuable contribution to the literature of Elizabethan and early modern military history as a summation of what has been achieved in this field, a chance to consider where we stand today. However, even more importantly, it provides an excellent platform for further research, for in addition to what has been done, it shows what still needs to be done in the field. As such, *Elizabeth's Wars* should be required reading for all scholars of Elizabethan military history, especially those just entering the field.

Notes

1. Harry Kelsey, *Sir Francis Drake: the Queen's Pirate* (London: Yale University Press, 1998); idem, *Sir John Hawkins: Queen Elizabeth's Slave Trader* (London: Yale University Press, 2002); James McDermott, *Sir Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer* (London: Yale University Press, 2001); R. T. Spence, *Privateering Earl: George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland, 1558-1605* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. L. W. Henry, 'The earl of Essex as strategist and military organizer (1596-7)', *English Historical Review*, 68 (1953), 363-93; idem, 'The earl of Essex and Ireland, 1599', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 32 (1959), 1-23.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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