

Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of a National Consciousness

Review Number: 533

Publish date: Saturday, 1 July, 2006

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ISBN: 0719069858

Date of Publication: 2004

Price: £45.00

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Place of Publication: Manchester

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One of the strengths of the recent historiography of the First World War has been the shift in focus away from the Western Front towards a broader understanding of the conflict as a world war. From Hew Strachan's majestic analysis of the war as a whole, including discussions of campaigns in Africa, the Eastern Front and the Middle East, to the increasing interest in the wartime experiences of nations such as Serbia and Romania, this trend has served to broaden as well as deepen our understanding of this far-reaching conflict. One strand in this trend has been fuller explorations of the role of British imperial forces in the war, focusing less on the white dominions and more on the role and experiences of troops from India, Africa and, in the case of Richard Smith's *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War*, the Caribbean.

Smith's book falls firmly into the category of a cultural history of the First World War. Although two chapters discuss the training and deployment of the two primary Caribbean regiments, the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) and the older, more established West Indian Regiment (WIR), Smith analyses material relating to the experiences of men who enlisted, or attempted to enlist, to explore the ways in which the war shaped attitudes in Britain and Jamaica towards the three themes of his subtitle: race, masculinity and national identity. His sources include personal accounts, newspaper articles and editorials as well as War Office and Commonwealth Office documents.

While neither of the two regiments discussed was exclusively Jamaican, Smith uses Jamaican experiences as a case study to argue that Caribbean soldiers experienced extensive racism arising out of imperial fears about the strength of black men in relation to the weakness and emasculation of shell-shocked white men. Experiences of racism both during the war and in its immediate aftermath led in turn to the strengthening of black Jamaican national consciousness, culminating in the 1938 riots led in part by the 'the illustriously named and flamboyantly attired, St William Wellington Wellwood Grant, a veteran of the First World War who had served in the eleventh battalion of the British West Indies Regiment' (p. 1). Smith's book is thus as much a history of Caribbean nationalism as it is a history of the First World War.

The issue of racism experienced by Jamaican soldiers is central to Smith's argument and forms the focus of much of his discussion, serving as a unifying theme for a roughly chronological discussion that covers Jamaica and the outbreak of war, the recruitment of volunteers, deployment in Europe and the Middle East, the place of the black soldier in the white imagination and mutiny. The examples of such racism range from

the rejection of early Jamaican volunteers by the armed forces and official refusal to allow black West Indians to hold commissions, through the on-going reluctance to deploy the Jamaican regiments in front-line positions and the objectification of the black soldier as a over-sexualised and childlike, to the harsh treatment of mutineers striking over pay and conditions in Taranto in 1918. Smith presents some compelling evidence of discriminatory attitudes on the part of the British government and military towards the enlistment and service of black men, including the unequal pay that led to the Taranto mutiny and social exclusion from facilities such as estaminets. Such behaviour on the part of the authorities undoubtedly served to undermine the identities of the Caribbean regiments as equal elements of the British imperial army that volunteers had been led to believe themselves to be upon enlistment. Smith's analysis of Caribbean attitudes towards Field Punishment No. 1 as an experience reminiscent of slavery and therefore provoking 'particularly strong feelings among black soldiers, who had enlisted in a war regularly portrayed in the West Indies as a struggle against slavery' (p. 128) clearly shows how racial identity inflected on experiences of war service.

The problem with the emphasis that Smith places on the issue of race in this context is the lack of comparison that he provides with the experiences of other British servicemen, raising questions as to how exceptional the experiences of Jamaican servicemen actually were. Gary Sheffield has shown, for instance, that Field Punishment No. 1 was disliked by many volunteers, being seen as a humiliating indignity. (1) Many other indignities faced by Jamaican servicemen were experienced also by their white counterparts. The experiences of labouring rather than fighting (p. 81), of being reduced to an impersonal element of a machine, lacking individual autonomy (p. 93) and the failure to diagnose psychological disorders in favour of discourses of weakness and childishness (p. 85) were experiences common throughout the British army and Smith provides little evidence that West Indian servicemen suffered more than any other group. There is little direct mention of race in many of the examples that he provides, with the exception of some of the material relating to the objectification of the black body. Indeed, in one example of a man hospitalised after attempting to murder a white Company Sergeant Major, Smith notes that 'There are not explicit references to race and colour in Shaw's medical reports.' (p. 85). Except for his repatriation on a ship which provided only segregated accommodation, Shaw's case reads remarkably like the experiences of many British psychological casualties throughout the war who were deemed by the medical establishment to be suffering from irrationality and lack of self-control, a point made by Smith in his first chapter.

Perhaps Smith's most extensive and successful example of discrimination toward Jamaican servicemen was the British military hierarchy's reluctance to use either West Indian regiment in front line service in Europe. The WIR served briefly in Cameroon before being returned to Jamaica for the duration to guard against civil unrest. While the BWIR did serve in Africa and the Middle East, men from the regiment stationed in France, Belgium and Italy were designated as labour battalions. Smith argues convincingly that these deployments were based on racial stereotypes of the lack of martial ability, and consequently masculinity, of the soldiers involved. 'Incorporation into the brotherhood-in-arms of the Empire was,' he notes, 'conditional on the place each man occupied in the hierarchies of race and class' (p. 96).

This interpretation of men's service allows Smith to read Jamaican experiences of war as a discourse of gender as well as race. 'Being disarmed, or denied the opportunity to bear arms in the first place, signalled a man had failed to meet his ultimate public duty and symbolically removed the status and rights linked to discourses of armsbearing.' (p. 87) Smith is able to demonstrate how armed service was clearly linked to a discourse of mature masculinity in the recruitment of Jamaican volunteers, while lack of front line service reduced men to a lesser status of unreliability that segued into the racist imperialist discourse of black men as immature and uncontrolled. Smith pushes the reading of a gendered imperial discourse further, however. He argues that the juxtaposition of the healthy black male recruit with the unhealthy white troops who were increasingly being emasculated by shell shock was an image that undermined imperial control. 'As white men returned from the war mentally and physically emasculated, the black body served as "a reminder of what the body can do, its vitality, its strength, its sensuousness".' (p. 102) Only through the imagining of black men as over-sexualised could order be restored by emphasising their immaturity and lack of self-control. In addition, black masculinity was degraded through black soldiers' status as a source of

entertainment, 'portrayed as playthings or at play to reflect their childlike status within discourses of race and Empire' (p. 109).

This reading of gender discourse, while convincing in terms of race, has, however, a tendency to oversimplify the question of the war's impact on understandings of masculinity. In focusing on men's bodies as the source of male identity, it ignores the extent to which understandings of martial masculinity were readjusted during the course of the war to reflect the challenges posed by experiences of war. While physique undoubtedly remained important to British middle-class conceptions of the masculine ideal, less physical manifestations of masculinity, such as the ability to endure, became increasingly important. By the end of the war, the ability to suffer had become a key mark of masculinity. This can be seen in a section from Alfred Horner's diaries that Smith quotes which can be read not simply as a depiction of the 'wretched state of white manhood', but rather as a celebration of 'the heroism of the poor wounded lads ... [whose] matted hair, clotted blood, pale blue and here and there the silence of the Great Sacrifice' become symbols of their Christ-like suffering (p. 102). Sight of this suffering could, according to Horner, still edify, despite the evidence of physical failure that it provided. Given Horner's background of muscular Christianity, this evocation of a masculinity ennobled by suffering presents a rather more complex picture than Smith's simple juxtaposition of black health and white weakness suggests.

Smith also relies on a discussion of the number of British servicemen suffering from psychological disorders to illustrate the extent of the damage to the ideal of a healthy self-controlled masculinity inflicted by the war. It was the existence and extent of these casualties, Smith argues in his first chapter on the wartime crisis of masculinity, that supported contemporary concerns of male emasculation by the experiences of war. Again, this is something of an oversimplification. Psychological disorders were equated with a loss of self-control but that did not necessarily equate with emasculation in contemporary discourses. Indeed, a number of doctors expressed concerns about the hyper-sexuality and potential for violence of shell-shocked men in language that might bear fruitful comparisons to the imaginings of black men as uncontrolled sexual beings. Similarly, the language of regression and childishness used by some doctors in relation to their white patients would be worth comparing to the status of black men as childlike that Smith notes.

While these comparisons might serve to reinforce some of the official concerns that Smith identifies about the impact of war in undermining the imperial order, the raising of gender as a discourse does add an element of complexity that Smith never fully addresses. By relying on the gendered interpretation of shell shock presented by Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert, he fails to engage with recent re-evaluations of these arguments, such as the critiques made by Laurinda Stryker, who argues that Showalter's reading of shell shock as a gendered condition is 'only at the price of some misrepresentation' (2) and Gail Braybon, who notes the limited and literary nature of the sources used to support interpretations of gender relations in wartime. (3) Smith exhibits something of the latter problem himself in his reliance on the works of Vera Brittain and Robert Graves to support his reading of white emasculation. The extent to which the juxtaposition of black and white masculinities affected understandings of gender within the broader context of the war as a whole is somewhat less central than Smith presents it as being, given the complexity of the social understandings of martial masculinities that are increasingly being exposed.

Where Smith's racial and gender analyses are far more successful, however, is in relation to his discussion of the uses of martial masculinities as a tool of mobilisation both for the army and for nationalist causes. In his chapters on 'The recruitment of Jamaican volunteers' and 'Nationalism and pan-Africanism', Smith marshals an impressive array of primary material, much of it from Jamaican newspapers, to demonstrate how the associations between soldiering, masculinity and citizenship were deployed to encourage men to fight first for the Empire and then for national independence. By tracing the links between patriotism, wartime experiences of discrimination and post-war experiences of economic hardship, Smith makes important links between racial and national identities, arguing that it was not only the fact that hopes of equality through service proved false in practice which radicalised ex-servicemen, but also the failure of the colonial authorities to appropriately reintegrate them into post-war society. The treatment of veterans in the post-war political and economic climate, discussed in the final chapter, is particularly interesting, showing how

'veterans' struggles to gain recognition for their wartime sacrifices took place against a backdrop of increasing nationalists activity and a heightened consciousness of Jamaican identity' (pp. 157–8). Veterans' demands for political recognition sought to define their role as a symbol of national manhood within the framework of imperial allegiance that had led to veteran status in the first place, a process that, as Smith shows, influenced movements ranging from the Jamaica League to the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

As in his discussion of race, placing the Jamaican nationalist experiences within a broader context would enhance Smith's argument. The politicisation of veterans and their relation to nationalist movements in a colonial context raises questions in relation to both the politicisation of European veterans, as discussed by Deborah Cohen for example, (4) and the development of national consciousness in other parts of the British Empire. Such comparisons might usefully draw out the effects of the particularity of the Jamaican economy that Smith notes (p. 153), while at the same time indicating some of the broader issues raised by the numerous problems of re-integrating ex-servicemen into civil society that were experienced by many of the nations involved in the First World War.

Despite these reservations, this book does the field of First World War studies a service in presenting the history of Jamaican First World War servicemen by opening up a previously under-examined geographical area. The manner in which it does so is ambitious and not always successful in making its case. Oversimplification undermines some of the assertions about gender while lack of a comparative element left this reader with questions about the particularity of the Jamaican case in terms of racism and the development of a national consciousness. It is to be hoped that, in the future, historians of the Caribbean will investigate further the important relationship between wartime experiences of racism and post-war developments in national identity that this book identifies, placing the history of the region more fully in the context of the comparative history of the war.

However, in examining Jamaican experiences of the war, this book does make its own contribution to First World War historiography. It not only provides an important reminder that the British army of the First World War was a colonial army, influenced by the assumptions of its imperial traditions, a fact which inflected the experiences of a significant portion of the men who fought in the name of King and Empire. It also demonstrates the important cultural links between military service and national identity in a context where issues of race place a central role. In doing so, it makes an interesting addition to the growing literature on the war as both a cultural and global conflict.

Notes

1. G. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 64. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. L. Stryker, 'Mental cases: British shellshock – politics of interpretation' in [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. Braybon, 'Winners or losers: women's symbolic role in the war story' in [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. D. Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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