Writing military history is far from a recent development though the scale on which it is written has fluctuated. For as much as scholars in the past decades have trumpeted the ‘new’ military history, large scale assessments have been part of the historiography since the time of Sun Tzu and Thucydides. Moderate and small scale investigations (e.g., wars, campaigns, engagements, battalions) formed the field’s cradle and remain at the heart of the popular press. Very small-scale and micro-histories, the ‘great man’ studies of warriors like Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte, offer single-case studies for the would-be commander.¹

The traditional operational emphasis derives from the fact that military history authors had long been military men themselves writing primarily to their comrades as an audience. For the Highland battalions, Major General David Stewart of Garth, the author of the earliest attempt to record Scottish regimental histories and who played a central role in launching the image of the romantic “Highland” soldier, had served with the 42nd and 78th Highlanders. Throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Richard Cannon, principle clerk of the Adjutant General’s office, edited 70 regimental histories including those for the Highland battalions. Arthur Grenfell of the Black Watch, colonels Charles and A.D. Greenhill Gardyne, both of the Gordon Highlanders, and Brigadier Alfred Cavendish of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders all wrote far less extravagant and more realistic presentations than Stewart of Garth’s for their respective regiments.

As the field of military history has become progressively less the domain of ex-military men and amateur “buffs” since the late 1960s and early 1970s, a tension has developed in the field.² The chronological, whiggish implications of ‘old’ and ‘new’ military history suggest that the earlier, small scale work has been (or should be) supplanted with a larger scaled approach. It has been remarked that official histories (and to this we might add the British regimental histories similar to those noted above) are so closely edited into a non-controversial manner that they effectively cease to be relevant to the study of military

history.3 Were there one “true” set of questions and answers in military history, this assertion might have merit, but this is not the case. Similarly, it is difficult to conclude that military history must, at its base, be about battle, as this does not contemplate an army in a deterrent role, or a trained soldier who never fires a shot.4 Military history, being a segment of human experiences, must in the last resort be about humanity. The scale may fluctuate according to the immediate interests, but let it never be valued based on the academic fashion *du jour*.

In focusing on the military component of human experiences this study has focused on issues of composition, traditions, and expressions of identity. What does this tell us about warfare? The fact that a man wears black-buttoned spats or blue facings will not, in itself, lead him to valour when faced by the confusing din of battle. Just as surely, there is no mechanical connection between the amount or style of silver plate laid up in the Officers’ Mess and a battalion’s ability to achieve its ultimate purpose of securing territory. Without some form of meaningful resolution to that question, to the question of the intersection of thought and action, the preceding chapters on the creation, development, and transmission of Highland regimental identity have been interesting academic exercises that cannot be distinguished from any other specialisation in history or perhaps sociology.

It has been observed that “humans do not like chaotic, unpredictable situations and work hard to stabilise and ‘normalise’ them.”5 The patterns learned through shared experiences – that is, identity – provide the stability and normalcy humans naturally seek. It has to be acknowledged that, no matter how similarly members think, respond and behave, there is no single, unified group consciousness; identity is the sum total of individual thoughts, beliefs, and actions based on shared experiences, and so must in the end provide an individual with patterns that successfully eliminate (or at least reduce) chaos.6 This mental configuration serves to help individuals relate themselves to the realities of the world around them – their environment, other group members, and those outside the group – to make sense out of what they observe, experience, and hear from others.

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