

The British Army in the West Indies

Roger Norman Buckley

The British Army

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in the West Indies

Society and the Military
in the Revolutionary Age



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To the special memory of my mother,
Elaine Buckley

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Preface

The first experience of regular British soldiers in the West Indies came in 1652, when a fleet under the command of Sir George Ayscue put into Carlisle Bay, Barbados, to compel the local governor to heel to the will of the Puritan commonwealth government in England. We can picture their open-mouthed wonder and great excitement at all they saw of the island. It was a fruitful land: nearly all of the usable land of Barbados had been cleared of trees and was in prosperous use. It was also pleasant-looking, the dazzling colors made bolder by a sun that always shone brightly. These troops soon departed the island, but their arrival marked the beginning of a long and melancholy history. The rapid establishment of a lucrative economy based on plantations and the quantity production of tropical staples by African slave labor, combined with the need to protect this valuable commerce against foreign invasion and slave revolt, led to small but permanent garrisons of British regulars in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands by 1678. In 1962, 284 years later, the last British soldiers left the West Indies.

Although the abandoned parade grounds no longer ring with the staccato sounds of commands and the steady crunch of soldiers' boots, the numerous crumbling cemeteries, regimental service and battle monuments, and imposing fortifications are mute but still visceral reminders of the long and historic service of the British soldier in the West Indies. These monuments, which dot the old imperial landscape, are also dramatic proof of the vast treasure Britain lavished on its West Indian colonies, particularly during the turbulent eighteenth century.

The British army's military operations in the region are well documented in Sir John Fortescue's unrivaled multivolume *History of the British Army (1899–1930)*. Michael Duffy's *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (1987) is a welcome addition to the literature on the British army's campaigns in the West Indies. Additional fragments of information lie scattered in regimental histories and the occasional monograph. Until now, the British garrison in the West Indies has never been studied, a signal fact to which William Foote alluded some twenty years ago in an essay in Robin Higham's important *Guide to the Sources of British Military History* (1971). In contrast to Britain's

renowned Indian army, precious little is known of the culture, traditions, achievements, significance, and peculiarities of the West Indian army. Unlike the Indian army, the West Indian garrison fails to conjure up any old romantic notions. Lacking, therefore, a reputation, image, and identity of its own, it holds no particular fascination for the general public and students of war and society. It is a phantom army lurking subliminally in British imperial history.

If largely unknown, the British garrison in the West Indies had a critically important function: the protection of the region's once profitable plantation-slave economies. The imposing fortifications atop Brimstone Hill, St. Kitts, and the sprawling complexes of crumbling ruins at Prince Rupert's Neck, Dominica, and Shirley Heights, Antigua, are but three examples that testify mightily to the central position of the West Indian colonies in the eighteenth-century British mercantilist empire and the evident need to guard them well. Why, then, has this once vital part of Britain's imperial military network been ignored by scholars and lay people alike? In 1979, in the preface to my study of the history of the British West Indian regiments during the 1792–1815 war between Britain and France, I suggested three primary reasons for this historic lack of interest in the military history of the region.

The first was a traditional disinterest in the West Indies among British military historians. Although the West Indian garrison played an important role in imperial defense, several generations of major British military intellectuals were instead preoccupied with European and North American experiences. Second, social scientists have limited their attention to the economic and social aspects of plantation slavery. They have tended to concentrate (and not without advantage) on the slave trade, the relationship between slavery and the development of European capitalism, the lives of the slaves, abolition of the slave trade and slavery, and the aftermath of slavery. The third reason cited was a general lack of interest in military history among academics and their failure to recognize the significance of the military as a "heavy institution"—that is, an integrated, cohesive, and unavoidably intrusive institution. This predicament stems from what Donald Gordon calls an urbane liberal-humanistic tradition which tended to belittle serious interest in military history as crude and unsophisticated. "To write military history," bemoaned Gordon in his contribution to *A Guide to the Sources of British Military History*, was "to pay tribute to the power of brute force in controlling the destinies of men, and thus to perpetuate the authority of that force in men's mind; and this opens the military historian to the charge of being militaristic." That was written in 1971, during the controversial Vietnam War. Since that time, the study of military history, with its retreat from "battle history" and its new emphasis on "war and society," has continued to emerge (albeit very slowly) from the back benches of academe, where it was once relegated by somewhat self-righteous academics. Nonetheless, some in the academy remain skeptical of the "new" military history. It may be instructive to draw their attention to comments by André Corvisier,

considered by many to be the dean of historians who view the military as a component of social history. “Without claiming greater importance for military events than they warrant,” he wrote in the preface to the 1979 American edition of his *Armies and Societies in Europe, 1494–1789*, “we must recognize that they have a strong influence not only on national activity and the growth of the State but equally on the economic, social, and mental structures of the whole of society. . . . These disparate elements,” he continued, “are closely bound together, and the role of the military event in the nation and in the State constitutes an essential element in the study of its role in society, however diverse the actual relationships between army and society may be according to period or country.”

My own subsequent investigations into the fertile field of British imperial and colonial military history make it necessary to suggest two additional reasons why historians have neglected the genre. First, unlike India—with its ancient culture and civilization, its romantic terrain, its legendary peoples and their heroic warrior traditions, and its magnificent architectural patrimony—there was little to recommend the West Indies. Indeed, it was a place to be suffered. Allied to a deadly climate, the plantocracy was neither urban nor urbane. As Edward Brathwaite has commented perceptively in his important work *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (1971), the colonies were characterized by a unique yet crude subtropical frontier slave society, with a functional and practical, not an aesthetic, focus. The single purpose, therefore, of those in power was simply to manage the colonial economies. The specter of almost certain death in a cultural wasteland was a powerful motive that induced West Indian proprietors to absent themselves from the region. This need to escape what some view as a completely miserable landscape unfortunately has survived to the present. In 1962, V. S. Naipaul, the Trinidadian expatriate novelist, wrote invidiously and incorrectly in *The Middle Passage* that “History is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies.” A deadly prison to African slaves and their white overlords, without charm, and, to some, lacking a history worthy of study, the West Indies never really captured the public’s imagination or, until quite recently, uninterrupted scrutiny by the scholarly community.

Second, beginning in the nineteenth century, the British army’s central administration in London treated the West Indian garrison as a military backwater. It was, for example, the War Office’s policy to assign those cadets who passed lowest out of the Royal Military College at Sandhurst to the West Indian regiments. The relative obscurity of the West Indian garrison is undoubtedly linked in no small way to its demonstrably inferior status within the hierarchical structure of the British imperial army.

This book is the first in-depth study of Britain’s West Indian army. It is a social and political history of a military community that is shaped and defined in an era of revolutionary change: the period of the French revo-

lutionary and Napoleonic wars that shook the entire Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth century. The general theme of the military and society provides the foundation for this study. The book shows that in order for the British army to carry out its mission of defense of the British West Indies, it had to adapt to the distinctive ecological, social, cultural, and economic conditions of the region. It is a story of conflict. At the heart of the struggle was the deadly environment of the region. Conflict was similarly at the core of all civil-military relations. In fact, a kind of cold war existed between the imperial army and white creole society. Perhaps the most compelling feature of the book is its notion that the military, or more precisely the West Indian garrison, was a community—that is, a complex social organism containing representatives of many social groups all with systematic linkages to the surrounding plantation societies. In many ways, the garrison was a product of the interaction between British society on the one hand and the colonial British West Indian plantation societies on the other.

The book is structured thematically. Part One begins with the question of background: chapter 1 describes the West Indian physical environment and how it helped dramatically to shape warfare and military service in the region, and chapter 2 focuses on the origins and development of a permanent imperial military presence in the West Indies. Part Two examines the diverse demographic composition of the West Indian garrison: chapter 3 deals with the various soldier groups—British and continental, white and black, men and young boys—who constitute the garrison, and chapter 4 sheds light on the several noncombatant groups whose activities and services were vital to the success of the mission of the British army in the West Indies. Chapter 4 also discusses the garrison's women and children, black and white, whose presence helped to create a more congenial social situation. Part Three marks the book's internal transition to the central question of inevitable conflict: chapter 5 explores the cold war that existed between the army and the local Creole political establishments, chapter 6 examines the brutal nature of the British military justice system in the region, and chapters 7 and 8 treat the wars—one against a political enemy, the other against an epidemiological one. Finally, Part Four endeavors to take a more intimate look at soldiering in the West Indies: chapter 9 attempts to re-create a day in the life of the garrison, while chapter 10 briefly looks at how survivors of soldiering in the West Indies were marked by their hard service in the islands.

This book has several aims. The first is to examine, by means of reconstruction, the inner life of the British West Indian garrison: namely, its organization and the conditions under which its members—black and white, male and female—lived, served, and usually died. The book's second aim is to examine the relationship between the royal garrison, governed by its own law which it took overseas, and the dominant Creole society, which was marked at the time by a long tradition of local political autonomy, solidarity of a tiny ruling class composed of whites with vested interests in

slaveholding, and by a determined opposition to external interferences and direction from the metropolitan government. The third purpose in writing this book is to demonstrate that the British West Indian garrison was a vital institution of Creole society and an important instrument of social change. A fourth goal is to re-create the sense of dramatic journey and adventure experienced by the tens of thousands of British soldiers and their dependents who served in the West Indian garrison. A considerable part of the book examines their existence in and responses to an unknown universe. My final reason for undertaking this study is to begin the long scholarly process that will one day encourage someone to write a full history of the British army in the West Indies.

This book is built on a great body of largely unused manuscript material, mined over the years in numerous public and private archives in Europe, North America, and the West Indies. It is also based on an analysis of hundreds of printed sources.

This book encompasses the period of the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1792–1815. To concentrate on Great Britain’s West Indian garrison during the 1792–1815 war is to focus on perhaps the most critical period in the history of the imperial army in the region. The rebellions of free persons of color and of slaves in the French West Indies, which followed the spread of the French Revolution’s egalitarian principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, plunged Britain into war in 1793 to seize these colonies. In March 1795, revolution and race war spread in the British islands of Grenada and St. Vincent. Disturbances erupted in Jamaica in July of the same year, when French agents provocateurs probably helped to foment war among the Trelawney Maroons, “transfrontier” Africans who had successfully escaped from slavery to seek their freedom in the rugged interior of the island. Altogether, Britain’s efforts to capture the French islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, and St. Domingue, and to avert a full-scale revolution in England’s own colonies, resulted in the unprecedented imposition of large numbers of British troops into the region. More importantly, a new imperial policy of legislative interference in the government of the West Indian colonies began to emerge, one that eventually would lead to the introduction of crown colony government for those islands conquered from Britain’s enemies and a reconstruction of that in the old British islands. Prominent in the development of this new system of colonial government was the British West Indian garrison.

I would have liked to examine, in depth, the numerous British military operations that occurred throughout the region. This, however, is a vast separate subject. Fortunately, this story has been well told by John W. Fortescue and Michael Duffy. Nonetheless, I have given some attention to these campaigns as well as to the relationship between them and garrison life. Of necessity, then, this book is essentially a study of what Reginald

Hargreaves calls the “waiting about time,” that period of inaction which filled up more of the soldier’s life than the actual business of killing on the battlefield.

In an effort to keep the project within manageable limits, I have directed my attention to those military camps that comprised the Jamaica command and the Windward and Leeward Islands command, the principal administrative units of the British West Indian army. The former, which reported separately to London on the state of the command, included bases at Jamaica, the Bahamas, Bermuda, and the Honduras Settlement (as Belize was then known). The latter command, with its headquarters at Barbados, comprised camps at Antigua, Barbados, Demerara-Berbice-Essequibo (as Guyana was then called), Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Tobago, and Trinidad. Much less attention is given to those camps installed in colonies conquered during the long war and ultimately returned to Denmark, the Netherlands, France, and Sweden with the establishment of a definitive peace in 1815. These included posts at Curaçao, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Bartholomew, St. Croix, St. Domingue, St. Eustatius, St. Martin, St. Thomas, the Saints, and Suriname.

Although this is a study of the British West Indian garrison, some attempt has been made to look at the similar and dissimilar experiences of the Danish, Dutch, and French garrisons in the region. This effort is underscored by my archive work in Denmark, France, and the Netherlands.

Many years ago my wonderful and wise Trinidad-born mother solemnly advised me always to “give credit where credit is due.” The occasion which prompted that counsel is long forgotten, but not the judicious advice which obviously stuck in my memory. Because numerous individuals and institutions assisted me mightily in every phase of the production of this book, it is now time to heed that guidance and give credit where it is justly due.

Without financial assistance I could not have undertaken the considerable travel that was necessary in the preparation of this study. To the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the American Council of Learned Societies, the University of Hartford, the Osler Medical Library Fellowship Program at McGill University, the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, and the Research Foundation of the University of Connecticut, I am profoundly grateful. I owe my heaviest debt of all to the National Endowment for Humanities in Washington, D.C., for its generous support over the years—particularly a Basic Research Award.

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