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Charles Kirke *Red Coat, Green Machine. Continuity and Change in the British Army 1700-2000*. Continuum £60 pp256

It is always interesting to read a book from another scholarly discipline; *Red Coat, Green Machine* is a work of social anthropology, though using much historical data, mainly veterans' autobiographies. It examines the cultural links and behaviour which the author, a retired gunner with a doctorate, currently lecturing at Cranfield, traces from the modern Army back to the 18th Century. The early part consists of field research conducted by him as a serving soldier. Dr Kirke uses the second to analyse soldiers' biographies to establish links between present and past. These largely involve relationships between soldiers and with their superiors and semi-authorised and unofficial modifications to discipline. Thus the book is stronger on continuity than on change. Scholars will find its conclusions surprising, veterans perhaps less so. Here your reviewer once overheard the following: '*Jildi, don't be doollally; buckshee scoff's on.*' This interwove three languages, two of which the soldiers concerned had no possible exposure to or faintest idea of the words' origins. The first are Indian, the third Arabic, the fourth Dutch, a legacy like 'trek' and 'lager' of 1899-1902.¹ Similarly he has heard soldiers drinking to a version (unprintable) of Lili Marlene and officers somewhat more tunefully and slightly more soberly to an Austrian folksong (printable), both embedded in unit culture. He accepts the existence of military continuities, though proving them academically is important. But on a more philosophical note he feels that they have always existed; even military micro-cultures can prove remarkably resilient.²

Yet change happens and *Green Machine* doesn't, in your reviewer's opinion, give as much weight to it as perhaps it should. Around 1900 he argues that the British Army underwent a revolution, moving from close to extended order tactics. This demanded that soldiers used initiative; further requiring moving from a disciplinary system primarily imposed by the chain of command to one more reliant on factors internal to individuals. A key manual emphasised:

*The soldier ... must be encouraged to feel that in perfecting himself as a fighting man he is preparing to take his part in furthering the aims of his country... The strongest form of discipline in an army is that which comes from the conception of duty in its highest form which is the spirit of loyalty to King and country.*³

A unit contrasted:

*the [pre-1899] days are past when men had only to turn out clean for guard, and keep out of the prisoners' room to be good soldiers. Now the personal effort is necessary.*⁴

¹ Lager may just derive from the Germans in World War 2. Your reviewer has heard it corrupted to or used interchangeably with leaguer, both describing armoured vehicles assembling for administration.

² The reviewer is aware of a platoon whose JNCOs and soldiers established a unique culture. The centurion's: 'I say unto one go and he goeth and to another come and he cometh... for I too am a man under authority' says something about the military which is as true in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II as in Caesar's. A disciplined, structured force with a common aim is likely, he feels, to cause some broad cultural similarities. Dr Kirke cites similar effects in asylums, *Green* p 74.

³ Nick Evans *From Drill to Doctrine* (KCL 2008), Chapter 7 and Tables 7&8; *Combined Training 1907* p 18.

⁴ *The Rousillon Gazette* I (Jul 1910), p 69, analysing changes in training and tactics post-1902.



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Between roughly 1904 and 1914 disciplinary offences halved and education certificates doubled. Officers now had to lead rather than relying on status and coercion as often hitherto.⁵ Ian Hamilton, a past Adjutant General, observed:

*the balance point of discipline has... insensibly shifted in the past ten years. [O]ur officers have definitely faced the new conditions and have made up their minds to seek discipline for the future in the effects of good example, sympathy and kindness, in ... traditions, in the maintenance of a high level of camaraderie; in the intelligent comprehension by the rank and file of the why and the wherefore of an order and in their keenness to carry it out.*⁶

These new forces affected inter-rank relationships, discipline and training:

*[A]n officer or NCO must convince the recruit from the start that he is a friend who is trying to help him learn the rudiments of a noble profession and not an usher or bully... Under all circumstances must the men know that even-handed justice will be theirs and that every case will be judged on its merits. Extreme good humour and patience...are essential.*⁷

The reviewer feels that the work should have approached its theme a little more broadly. Here he admires Rodger's *The Wooden World*. But one of course confronts the classic 1914-18 dilemma of outflanking the flanking machineguns and ending up, as he has done, in either deep, though not hot water, or Switzerland! Capt Blackadder whom Dr Kirke cites, was acting very much in accordance with 18th Century norms. He had recruited the individual concerned so was bound to him by links of patronage and thus obliged to intervene. Your reviewer speculates that, with a predominantly long-service army, there may have been less need for officers to establish followings than in the short-service RN.⁸ The book needs more historical depth, eg archival material; your reviewer, perhaps unfairly, since it is anthropological work, feels that it over-relies on what is strictly secondary historical data.⁹

⁵ Nick Evans 'Playing the Game off their Own Bats' in this Journal argues that a culture of delegation, initiative and internal discipline arose in LI for tactical reasons, affecting officer/soldier relations; he notes the incident involving Rifleman Harris and his divisional commander, Kirke *Green* p 24, suggests closer contact than one would expect in a heavy infantry formation.

⁶ Hamilton Papers 15/1/36 pp 58-9.

⁷ 'Xenophon II' Character Training' *Cavalry Journal VIII* (1913), p 3. They resembled LI methods.

⁸ Blackadder fought under William III and Marlborough, see *The DNB*. NAM Rodger *The Wooden World* (1986), pp 119-124. He examines discipline, *Ibid* pp 205-237; one sees easy relationships eg a sailor asking the port admiral's advice when the latter was at a coffee house. Whether the Army saw similar 'followings' needs more research, but one notes Gen Marshal's little black book. The Army was recruited differently from the RN and arguably had less need for skills so followings in the Infantry and Cavalry may have been less key. But the practice of raising men for rank, common in the Army, though not unknown in the RN, involved patronage.

⁹ Dr Kirke may justifiably argue that the evidence cited mainly involves incidents which are less susceptible to distortion over time. Your reviewer unabashedly uses one such: 'long ago and far away' so may be deemed guilty as charged of double standards! Kirke *Green* p 171, Rodger examines clemency in the period.



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Your reviewer believes that the Army's culture in the 18th Century was based on the broad spirit of Britain, modified by the needs of close order tactics. Then, perhaps due to the success of the Prussians and that a part of the Army fought alongside them in Germany, there was the imposition of a much stiffer discipline, affecting inter-rank relationships. The RN was noticeably more relaxed in the period. But its seamen were skilled and had to exercise much initiative. With the introduction of centralised recruiting, continuous service, steam and concentration of the Navy in capital ships, he speculates that, when broadly the Army was delegating, the RN was ossifying.¹⁰

Serving alongside the US Army, your reviewer was surprised by the institutionally poor off-duty relations between officer ranks. He was told that this was common. He speculated that in an army from an ostensibly egalitarian society, the gap was needed to maintain status. Seeing a very different culture made him appreciate that some of the British Army's officer culture originates in the aristocratic.¹¹ The Army's 18th Century culture survives most visibly in the contrast between the sentries at Horse Guards and Buckingham Palace.¹²

Your reviewer also feels that changes in combat living, a product of tactical change, have also affected inter-rank relationships. In the 18th Century at sea with the introduction of the Divisional System and with the imperative of all being in the same boat, literally, relations between officers and seamen were, he considers, probably closer than in say an infantry battalion in the period.¹³ One notes the frequent commissioning of seamen; some became

¹⁰ A Gordon *The Rules of the Game* (1996) for regulators versus rat catchers. Similarly one notes Cunningham's fulminating contrast between capital ship officers and those brought up in the independent culture of small ships. There is also an interesting comparison between midshipmen serving in frigates, smaller vessels and ships of the line around 1800. In the Edwardian RN, destroyers and submarines seem to have been more relaxed than the big ships. It is noticeable that the RN commissioned very few ratings pre-Fisher, the Army more, with Robertson becoming CIGS.

¹¹ FM Slim *Unofficial History* (1954), pp 204-5 for informal behaviour between an aristocratic Cavalry officer and a trooper to the amazement of a Russian general. I acknowledge Julian Spilsbury's illuminating views on similarities between the Russian and American Armies. Dr Kirke makes the point about separation in the mess; here your reviewer feels that this is partly due to the age gap, Kirke *Green* p 70. G MacDonald Fraser *The General Danced at Dawn* (2000) stresses that the average sergeants' mess is probably more homogenous age-wise. NAM Rodger *The Command of the Ocean* (2004), p 323 for a soldier's view of naval disciplinary laxity. Another interesting contrast between the two services is the Manila campaign; the Army commander was an ex-Cambridge Don and Guardee, the Naval an ex-rating, *Ibid* pp 286-7.

¹² The one are Guardsmen, the others Household Cavalry troopers, noticeably less stiff. They represent different cultures; one utter precision derived from Prussia, the other a more relaxed yet soldierly bearing dating arguably from the 17th Century and their origin as gentlemen troopers.

¹³ Dr Kirke cites evidence that over-familiarity between officers and soldiers in the 18th Century was condemned, *Green* pp 206-7. The weight of evidence in Rodger's *Wooden World* suggests the RN differed. But your reviewer feels that there is and perhaps always has been a subtle distinction in inter-rank relations; the ideal is that within the hierarchy the leader is comradely to all but familiar to none. The lieutenant who lived with his men, Kirke *Green* p 37, was perhaps as bad for subordination as the chateau general who, when his GSO 1 observed that the wet night was pretty rough on the troops, retorted: 'nonsense they've got



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admirals. In the Army with little effective subdivision below company-level, there was less contact. In the 19th and 20th Centuries your reviewer speculates that team sport may have been important in increasing inter-rank contact; Dr Kirke notes the modern effect. In the field at present officers and soldiers often live very close to each other. Here there is a contrast with navies.¹⁴ It initially staggered your reviewer that inter-rank relations in the French Army, originating in a republican society with conscription, were far more rigid than in the British between 1914 and 1917.¹⁵

One contemporary point of difference is that your reviewer feels that Dr Kirke's view that the NCO/WO chain is unofficial is wrong.¹⁶ By having a second, parallel chain of discipline and reporting, your reviewer's experience is that the organisation was much stronger. It supported the JNCOs, to a lesser extent the SNCOs, gave him much better information, allowing sometimes the conveyance of reproof decidedly more candidly when the Army Act did not suffice.¹⁷ This, he feels, is a strength of the British system.

Your reviewer considers that the state of affairs in the British Army in the 18th Century was more complex than Dr Kirke argues. This comment is a product of their respective academic discipline, perhaps also because 'modelling,' as Dr Kirke notes, always leaves rough edges.¹⁸

their waterproof sheets.'

¹⁴ This is of course not backed by research. For the RN, see Vice Admiral Gretton *Escort Commander* (1964), pp 73-4 contrasted to Slim's anecdote above. In the Dreadnought era with the RN's concentration in a massed fleet of big ships as opposed to small ones scattered worldwide, officer/rating relationships must have altered. But the sea still provides a more cohesive environment with greater equality of risk. Significantly the senior British military combat deaths in the 2 World Wars were at sea, FM Kitchener and Gen Lumsden.

¹⁵ A Horne *The Price of Glory* (1978), pp 70-1 contrasted with GD Sheffield *Leadership in the Trenches* (2000), Chapter 6. The French may have neglected their men for similar reasons as the Americans. Paternalism can be seen at sea in the 18th Century and in the modern Army. Whether it is a product of the 18th Century *noblesse oblige* or Victorian attitudes is beyond this reviewer. He suspects it is an enduring, though not invariable military attitude. But in a republican service for a superior to concern himself overly with subordinates, equal to him as citizens, might either be politically suspect or patronising. Horne *Glory* briefly touches on the ill effects in 1917 of French officers' failure to look after their men. M van Creveld *Fighting Power* (1983) notes the US Army's devaluing of many of human factors generating combat power in 1941-45. But *Noblesse oblige* is not invariable, Wellington turfed out some officers from a billet in favour of a soldiers' hospital, observing their sulky attitude, he returned to find they had reverted. The result; Hurricane Force 15 on the Beaufort Scale!

¹⁶ Kirke *Green* p 3. Admittedly this is not laid down in *QRs*, but most commanders use it.

¹⁷ One of the problems which the head of any body, not just military, ranging from a platoon upward is working out what's happening internally. Much attention is paid to intelligence on the enemy; your reviewer has often felt that more is needed internally. By talking to his senior WO your reviewer was more confident. It was particularly useful in assessing the sometimes uneasy relationship between a young, overconfident officer and an experienced sgt. In some respects this parallel chain has links with the Indian Army's use of experienced Indian officers. Your reviewer feels that a strong NCO system strengthens the whole; he was concerned that US infantry's SNCOs, perhaps top and drill sgts excepted, didn't have the clout of their British equivalents.

¹⁸ Your reviewer's latest degrees are from a department in a school of social science, but is a historian; Dr Kirke is anthropologist, your reviewer speculates that their differing disciplines cause them to accentuate differing effects, Dr Kirke to establish continuity, your reviewer to try to understand change.



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Your reviewer has concentrated perhaps unfairly on the historical aspects of a book primarily focussed on anthropology. One of marks of a good work is that it makes the reader think; here the author has succeeded admirably. Your reviewer is in debt to Dr Kirke.

Nick Evans