Book Review: The Wandering Army: The Campaigns that Transformed the British Way of War

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Huw J. Davies has written a powerful monograph on the British Army as a learning organization in the century 1750–1850. The 12 chapters of *The Wandering Army: The Campaigns that Transformed the British Way of War*, plus its introduction and conclusion, proceed chronologically with unifying themes. Davies argues that British Army learning was an accidental military enlightenment that rested upon military theory, experience, and knowledge exchange. He draws critical evidence from archival sources on informal knowledge networks and the larger European military enlightenment and notes the advantage conferred by worldwide British deployments against different foes with varied skill sets in all sorts of terrain and climate conditions.

Chapters 1 and 2 cover the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) and the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), using the British defeat at the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745 as a starting point. Chapter 3 dissects eighteenth-century British military thought to include a more holistic and sophisticated analysis of theorists (especially Henry Lloyd) and the influence of Frederick the Great. Moreover, Davies sets the standard for military theoreticians and senior British commanders to integrate theory and practice in the big picture and in the field.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the American Revolution, “the American War” in British parlance. This case study highlights the philosophical and experiential differences, not just issues of personality, between Generals William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton, and Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquess and 2nd Earl Cornwallis, arguing in regard to Howe and Clinton that “the root of their disagreement was fundamentally different ways of thinking about the application of military power” (137).

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on British operations in India circa 1750–1803 and the complexity of shifting alliances and evolving capabilities amongst the British, French, Marathas, Mughals, and
Mysoreans. Effective logistics led to successful operations, and Davies emphasizes the British integration of earlier experiences in Europe, North America, and India, plus military knowledge gained via complex formal and informal networks, including the connection between Cornwallis and Arthur Wellesley, the future 1st Duke of Wellington.

Chapter 8 assesses the depressing British defeats against Revolutionary France in 1793–95 due to political and military strategic deficiencies besides tactical shortcomings. These challenges sparked the reinvention of the British Army in 1799–1815, led by Frederick Augustus, Duke of York and Albany, and are explained in chapters 9, 10, and 11. Davies covers in detail the training camp at Shorncliffe with expanded roles for light infantry under the practical tutelage of Lieutenant General Sir John Moore, Colonel Coote Manningham, and Lieutenant Colonels William Stewart and Kenneth Mackenzie. They inculcated the notion of the “universal soldier,” for example, the light infantryman can function equally as well as line infantry and grenadier, noting eighteenth-century precedents (299, 301–2). John le Marchant accomplished similar reforms for the cavalry. Moore introduced more permanent brigades and Wellington’s Peninsular Army (1809–14) infantry divisions (302, 306).

Chapter 11 showcases the often-forgotten staff officer training at High Wycombe and notes the importance of military geography at the operational and tactical levels with an emphasis on mapmaking, intelligence, collection, and analysis. By 1811, there were over 200 graduates of the Senior Department and 1,500 from the Junior Department. These staff officers and the central role of Major General Sir George Murray as Quartermaster General were critical sinew for effective and efficient Peninsular operations under Wellington’s exacting leadership.

Alas, Chapter 12 notes the British Army’s lessons unlearned due to deep-seated retrenchment after the victory at the Battle of Waterloo. Large-scale force reductions and budget cuts inaugurated a period of stunted intellectual development in 1815–50. In particular, the informal learning networks shriveled, eliminating the cross-fertilization of combat experience across the different theaters of war.

Davies’s book is a fresh appraisal of the extant military thought and sheer variety of British Army experience. This review cannot do justice to the depth of analysis among the wide range of theoretical underpinnings, far-flung British military experience, and the complexity and subtlety of the knowledge networks. The critical roles of informal networks and leaders supporting change showcase the contingency of agency. The emphasis on informal knowledge exchanges is a rare, albeit difficult, element to study and is central to Davies’s thesis. All rest upon vast research in primary sources.

_The Wandering Army_ is a formidable achievement, given its methodology. While it reads more like British ways vice a single way of war, the book underlines the criticality of an army’s ability to learn and demonstrates that adaptation and innovation in many forms must occur for Landpower to be a viable instrument for success.

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