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English Warfare, 1511-1642 (review)

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English Warfare, 1511–1642. By Mark Charles Fissel. London: Routledge, 2001. ISBN 0-415-21482-3. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xviii, 382. \$25.95.

A meticulously researched work that is the result of over twenty years labor, this book is somewhat unfortunate in appearing about ten years too late. It raises some serious objections to the “Military Revolution” thesis championed by Geoffrey Parker, which was the central point in extensive debate about early modern military affairs roughly a decade ago. This book would have been an important contribution at that time, but since then much of the debate over the military revolution has faded into recognition that development of modern military practice in the western world cannot easily be explained by a single “grand thesis,” but varied greatly in both timing and form, depending on local circumstances. Though *English Warfare, 1511–1642*, fits this latter model nicely, Fissel seems compelled to work within the “military revolution” framework. Contrary to Parker’s earlier assertions, he maintains that English warfare in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century was consistent with contemporary developments in continental warfare. In particular, he highlights English skills in siege warfare that are often overlooked, firmly placing English soldiers on the continent squarely in the middle of one of the central elements of the “military revolution” thesis. Despite that, the real strength of this book is in demonstrating the development of a distinctly English method of warfare that shows remarkable continuity with both earlier and later periods. Fissel highlights practices such as the use of foreign mercenaries and allies in effective ways, an emphasis on missile weapons and the ability to deploy small expeditionary forces to far flung locations that would be familiar to English commanders from Edward III’s day to Marlborough’s. This remarkable continuity and distinctive character argue very heavily against the “military revolution” idea generally, instead suggesting an evolutionary process dependent on the local conditions and military needs of the state in question. Further, *English Warfare* also very clearly demonstrates that extra-state institutions could be the motors of military change as well, a welcome change from interpretations of the period which center exclusively on “state driven” institutions. All this makes Fissel’s efforts to fit English warfare into the “military revolution” criteria laid out by Parker seem unnecessary and even a bit self-contradictory, as the overall message clearly points to a new paradigm in this field.

Despite this ambiguity in central thesis, Fissel has produced an important work here because it spans a long chronological gap that exists in the literature of English military history. Certainly the book provides useful reminders to just how extensive English military activity was in this period, with chapters on operations in Ireland, the Netherlands, France, Scotland, and Iberia, as well as several on the administrative support institutions that developed to backstop these operations. In all cases, Fissel has done an excellent job of finding and utilizing relatively hard to find sources, and there are few stones left unturned here.

Altogether, this is a work which will provoke a lot of thought in anyone interested in the military history of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and which should in particular inspire some serious reconsideration of long-accepted views about British military history in the period.

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Civilians in the Path of War. Edited by Mark Grimsley and Clifford J. Rogers. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8032-2182-7. Maps. Notes. Index. Pp. xxvi, 280. \$45.00.

One of the authors in this excellent book of essays noted in his own earlier book on American bombing in World War II that he was inspired to think about civilians and war when a student of his at West Point asked “to what extent moral considerations and other limitations on combat can really be effective in a high-stakes, high intensity conflict in a heavily populated area like Western Europe.” That question was undoubtedly fielded in the mid-to late 1980s during the waning years of the Cold War. It does, however, highlight the fundamental point raised in all of the essays in *Civilians in the Path of War*, edited by Clifford J. Rogers and Mark Grimsley, that the sparing of civilians in war has not been an absolute and transcendent idea but relative, contingent, and always contextual.

The editors in their introductory essay identify four essential patterns that emerge from the collection of essays that were originally presented as conference papers at the Fourth Midwest Military History Consortium in 1993. The first pattern drawn from the essays is that refraining from killing civilians in war has been “instrumental rather than absolute.” The second pattern, according to the editors, is derived from the first in that if political leaders over time have instrumentally spared the lives of civilians in war the decisions to attack them have also been instrumental. The third pattern is that regimes and peoples at war have used attacks on civilians as “negotiations” to gain advantage over their adversaries. The final pattern pointed out by the editors as emerging from these essays is that ideological and cultural conditions have profoundly shaped the treatment of civilians in war.

The editors state that the volume’s essays are more concerned with the reasons why attacks on civilians occurred than the morals or ethics involved. Yet a tantalizing dynamic emerges in this collection of essays that the editors did not highlight. On the one hand, the essays dealing with older historical events like Clifford J. Rogers’s piece on the Hundred Years’ War do follow the stated emphasis on why attacks on civilians occurred instead of moral and ethical issues. But on the other hand, the essays concerned with warfare in the twentieth century like Holger H. Herwig’s piece on the German military did tend to show a critical moral tone with respect to the historical actors and events being studied. Perhaps temporal distance affects the scholar’s moral approach to subject matter.