

# British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 3, November 2020

---

Review of *Early Modern Military Identities, 1560-1639: Reality and Representation* by Matthew Woodcock & Cian O'Mahony (eds.)

**Shahid Hussain**

---

**ISSN:** 2057-0422

**Date of Publication:** 25 November 2020

**Citation:** Shahid Hussain, 'Review of *Early Modern Military Identities, 1560-1639: Reality and Representation* by Matthew Woodcock & Cian O'Mahony (eds.)', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.3 (2020), pp. 178-180.

[www.bjmh.org.uk](http://www.bjmh.org.uk)

---



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

**Matthew Woodcock & Cian O'Mahony, *Early Modern Military Identities 1560-1639: Reality and Representation*. Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019. X & 315pp. ISBN 978-1843845324 (hardback). Price £60.00.**

Warfare in the Early Modern Period is synonymous with the Gunpowder Revolution. Historians, scholars and academics have commented on the development of firearms, including the matchlock, wheel-lock and flintlock. In addition, the use of artillery became increasingly popular throughout the Early Modern Age, resulting in improved fortifications and defensive tactics. As a result, academics have devoted significant attention to the 'heavier' aspects of warfare. However, both Matthew Woodcock and Cian O'Mahony, alongside a team of literary critics, independent scholars and historians have attempted to shed light on an often-neglected area of military history, particularly in the late Tudor and early Stuart Period. Their work focuses almost exclusively on the individual soldier, examining how Early Modern fighting men viewed themselves and others. They also attempt to explain what it meant to be a soldier in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their focus on the individual is refreshing, particularly in an area that is often dominated by tactics, gunpowder and siege warfare. Furthermore, *Early Modern Military Identities* attempts to take a cross-discipline approach to military history, using sources and methods from literature, drama and the digital humanities to examine what it meant to be a soldier in Tudor and Stuart Britain.

*Early Modern Military Identities* is split into a collection of separate essays, with part one focusing on masculinity and the methods soldiers used to construct their identities. Part two analyses Anglo-Irish military identities. The final selection of essays looks at military figures on the Early Modern stage, including in the plays of William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton. We would expect any discussion of military identity, particularly in the late Medieval and Early Modern period, to comment on masculinity and David Trim's essay *Warlike Prowess and Manly Courage* does just that. He demonstrates how the values of a soldier were displayed in distinctly masculine terms. However, Trim also discusses the relationship between performance and masculinity, recounting the story of Edward Stanley, a soldier who 'dressed in yellow saving his curatts,' in order for everyone to witness his courage. This focus on the performative nature of warfare is particularly insightful and shows us how masculinity was projected on the Early Modern battlefield.

Somewhat related is Matthew Woodcock's discussion of Caesar's *Commentaries*. Written by Caesar himself, *The Commentaries* recount the military campaigns of the Romans during the Gallic Wars of the first century BC. Woodcock discusses *The Commentaries* in detail, showing how they acted as a model for the Early Modern fighting man and how military identity could be characterised by the pen and sword.

## BOOK REVIEWS

In order to support his argument, he demonstrates how figures such as Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Deputy of Ireland and Sir Roger Williams, one of the best-known professional soldiers in Elizabethan England were familiar with *The Commentaries*. Interestingly, Woodcock demonstrates the importance of the 'literate soldier.' By using Caesar's works as a model, he is able to show how the ideal soldier was expected to be well read, scholarly and literate.

The essayists writing in *Early Modern Military Identities* frequently use literature and poetry to support their arguments. Philip Major's analysis of *The Highway to Heidelberg* and David Edward's commentary of O'Meara's Latin epic *Ormonious* shed further light on military identity and representation. *The Highway to Heidelberg* was written by Thomas Fairfax, a soldier who served Queen Elizabeth in the Low Countries. The Fairfax's' detailed their family genealogy, status and notable achievements in their works. Major shows how literary acumen helped to enhance a military family's reputation. Furthermore, he also illustrates how *The Highway to Heidelberg* had another, more political purpose, serving as a guide to James I and warning him about the ambitions of Imperial Spain and the dangers of Muslim Ottoman expansion. Historian David Edwards then demonstrates how the Latin poem *Ormonious* was fabricated by the Gallic poet Dermot O'Meara, to show his patron, the Earl of Ormand, in a positive light by celebrating his military identity and exaggerating elements of his military career. In a way, Edward's essay is similar to Major's. They both show how military identity could be constructed for political purposes. The Earl belonged to one of the 'Old English' families (English Catholics who had settled in Ireland after the Norman Conquest) and their position was coming under increasing threat from new waves of English settlers. Edwards illustrates how poetry and the arts provided an opportunity for soldiers to manipulate their records and maintain favour with the English court. The methods they chose are also revealing, particularly given James I was known to be a patron of the arts and model 'renaissance king.'

The authors use a range of written sources, including archival material, manuscripts and plays to inform their analysis on identity and representation. However, an examination of portraiture and visual sources may have shed further light on the ways military men presented themselves, particularly given the fact portraiture was an important way to project power in the 16th and 17th centuries. However, the book's analysis of military identity is wide ranging, thorough and raises new questions. For example, what role did women play in formulating military identity? How did British mercenary soldiers, serving on the battlefields of Europe, construct their military identities? And were Scottish military identities different to their English and Irish counterparts?

In conclusion, this collection of essays is suitable for readers who are interested in the literary and cultural aspects of warfare. It is also suitable for those interested in more

conventional military history, mainly because it challenges the idea that military history is solely about weaponry, armaments and mass tactics. By focusing on the individual and using literature, manuscripts and drama, the authors are able to provide a thought-provoking book on military identity that is novel, insightful and well-researched.

SHAHID HUSSAIN  
University College London, London, UK

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i3.1434

**Quintin Colville & James Davey (eds.), *A New Naval History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. Notes. Index, Illustrations. 250pp. ISBN 978-1526113801 (hardback). Price £80.**

Quintin Colville and James Davey bring to naval audiences an anthology of essays that can be categorised as cultural and social history of the Royal Navy. As such, this book will be of primary interest to a British audience. However, given the quality of the essays contained herein, one hopes a work of similar scope might be considered for other navies in history, especially the US Navy.

The first five essays deal with “sociocultural analyses of naval communities” stretching from mid-1700s to the 20th century. (8) The final five essays deal with “the public presentation of naval subject matter through a variety of representational forms.” (11) These topics tend toward the latest trends in historical investigation and employ the language of scholarship and academia. The introduction by Colville and Davey provides a useful historiographical discussion about the evolution of naval history from battles, leaders, and operational matters to the social and cultural issues examined in this book. It then provides chapter summations.

Evan Wilson’s opening essay “Particular skills” examines those often-forgotten members of the wardrooms of the Royal Navy, the warrant officers who dealt with pay, medical, chaplains, and the ship masters. Wilson highlights how these officers came from similar social backgrounds as the executive (or line) officers—the middle classes.(31) Elaine Chalus’s essay is among the more interesting reads in the collection because it is essentially a very-well written microhistory based on the letters of a wife to her seafaring husband.

The third entry in the first section jumps ahead several generations to the Edwardian fleet of the early 20 century and looks at the topic of homosexuality (sodomy) in the fleet. Mary Conley finds that although work on her topic is not new (“forty years,”