

From Scum of the Earth to Soldiers of the Queen: The Reputation of the Working Class British Soldier in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

For several centuries, the reputation of the working class British soldier was that of a violent, drunken boor. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, the working class British soldier was celebrated by the public as the expander and defender of empire. This article will assess how the change in the working class British soldier's reputation came about, arguing that the key drivers for change were the impact of the Crimean War, and working class soldiers' growing involvement with the British empire in the later nineteenth century.

Key words: British Army, class, Crimean War, empire, nineteenth century.

Introduction

During the nineteenth century, the public perception of rank-and-file soldiers in the British army underwent a radical transformation. Drawn almost entirely from the working classes, the rank-and-file had long been an object of contempt in the eyes of the British public for being violent, drunken and boorish.¹ Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, working class soldiers were celebrated by British society. Praised for loyalty and bravery in far-flung imperial exploits, the ordinary soldier's reputation had made an almost complete volte-face.² This article will explore the working class British rank-and-file's change in reputation in the nineteenth century. It will look at three time periods to chart the change. First, from c. 1800 to c. 1815, during the Napoleonic Wars. Second, the Crimean War from 1853 to 1856.

¹ For discussion of the negative view that coalesced around British soldiers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India, 1780-1868* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980).

² See Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); John M. MacKenzie, "Introduction: Popular Imperialism and the Military", in *Popular Imperialism and the Military 1850-1950*, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 1-24; H. de Watteville, *The British Soldier* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1954).

Finally, the South African War from 1899 to 1903. These time periods represent the beginning, middle and end of the rank-and-file's transition in reputation from negative to positive. This article argues that there were two key drivers for this transition – the impact of the Crimean War, and soldiers' involvement in the expanding British empire in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century British army was explicitly defined along class lines. A rigid hierarchy with officers at the top and privates at the bottom, saw each group drawn from different class backgrounds and leading separate lives within the same institution. Nick Mansfield, states that 'class pervaded the structure of the army at every level, with the rank and file being consistently treated less well than officers.'³ Further than this, 'the army's structure almost exactly reflected class distinctions as they were developing in industrialising Britain.'⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, men for the ranks were drawn almost entirely from the working classes, increasingly from urban, industrialised areas.⁵ The officer corps, by contrast, found its candidates largely in the upper classes of British society – the aristocracy, gentry and wealthy men of property. Peter Burroughs states that 'such restricted recruitment and social homogeneity enabled officers to perpetuate the values and pretensions of the officer gentleman'.⁶ An 1856 article in *Bentley's Miscellany* described British officers as 'gentlemen – many connected with the aristocracy, but the majority with the plutocracy'.⁷

Rigid class distinctions affected every aspect of the rank-and-file soldier's army life. He lived separately from his officers, in communal barracks buildings rather than private lodgings. He also ate in those barracks, while officers had exclusive messes and dining halls. His diet consisted of a monotonous one pound of bread and three-quarters of a pound of meat a day, while officers supplemented their rations with luxuries acquired from outside the military.⁸ Even the red coat he wore for much of the century was a dull brick-red colour rather than the bright scarlet of his superiors.⁹ Promotion from the ranks was rare, especially outside times of high mobilisation such as the Napoleonic Wars. Privates could expect to toil

³ Nick Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers: Class, Employment, Conflict and the Nineteenth-Century Military* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 1. Mansfield is one of the few scholars who looks at British soldiers primarily through the lens of class. He is chiefly focussed on how class defined daily life for British soldiers, rather than how their public reputation was linked to their class origin, as is the focus of this piece.

⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

⁵ Peter Burroughs, "An Unreformed Army? 1815-1868", in *The Oxford History of the British Army*, eds. David G. Chandler and Ian Beckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 169.

⁶ Burroughs, "An Unreformed Army?", 170.

⁷ "British Army Reform", *Bentley's Miscellany* 40 (July 1856): 398.

⁸ Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815-1914* (London: Longman, 1980), 58.

⁹ Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers*, 33-34.

away for decades, with the only prospect of advancement being potential promotion to sergeant. The usual argument against promotion from the ranks was that it would lower the tone of the officer corps. The Duke of Wellington exemplified this opinion, testifying before a Royal Commission on Military Punishment that rankers “do not make good officers; it does not answer. They are brought into society to the manners of which they are not accustomed.... They are men of different manners altogether.”¹⁰

The social cohesion of the officer corps was preserved, for much of the century, through the purchase of commissions. Young men bought their way into the service at the rank of ensign or lieutenant, then purchased their way up the promotion ladder. The prices paid for commissions kept them out of reach of working class soldiers, with their paltry income of 1s a day. There were set prices for commissions, but non-regulation overpayments were the norm. Lord Brudenell (later the Earl of Cardigan, of Charge of the Light Brigade fame) was meant to pay £6175 for his lieutenant colonelcy in the 15th Hussars in 1830.¹¹ He in fact paid between £35,000 and £40,000.¹² Though the purchase system was abolished in 1871, many have argued that the officer corps became more, not less exclusive.¹³ Greater selection from public schools, and the requirement of a private income to fund an officer’s lifestyle remained a bar to working class men.

The class distinctions that defined the British army did not disappear as the nineteenth century progressed. They in fact remained remarkably rigid – demarcating the lives of rankers and officers as much in 1900 as they had done in 1800. However, what did change over the course of the century was the class-based perception of rank-and-file men in the eyes of the British public.

The Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a negative public image of soldiers had existed for over a hundred years. The army had been an object of contempt since the time of the English Civil War, when ‘a blind, obstinate revulsion against a standing army had taken a firm hold of England’.¹⁴ The negative perception of British regulars crystallised in the eighteenth century, when the stereotype of the rank-and-file soldier became that of a violent, drunken, sexually-dissipated boor, responsible for putting down popular

¹⁰ The Duke of Wellington, quoted in Spiers, *The Army and Society*, 5.

¹¹ Spiers, *The Army and Society*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers*, 76; Correlli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970: A Military, Political and Social Survey* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), 313-314; Edward Spiers, “The Late Victorian Army 1868-1914”, in *The Oxford History of the British Army*, eds. David G. Chandler and Ian Beckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 190; Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 282.

¹⁴ de Watteville, *The British Soldier*, 2-3.

protest and enforcing the Crown's authority. William Hogarth's painting *The March of the Guards to Finchley* (1749-1750) perfectly represents this view. Depicting Guardsmen marching off to fight in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, Hogarth's painting portrays several of the key soldier stereotypes that persisted into the nineteenth century. The Guardsmen at centre is being fought over by two women, one of whom is pregnant, while one of his comrades amorously carouses with a milkmaid behind him. At the front right, a soldier is collapsed on the ground drunk, his stockings around his ankles. He refuses water from a comrade, while reaching for another glass of gin from the woman to his right.¹⁵ At the far left, a soldier urinates against a wall, apparently pained by his venereal disease, while at the far right, two soldiers, one brandishing a knife, rob civilians in the crowd.¹⁶ Looking down over the whole scene are prostitutes, calling to the soldiers from the windows.

By the early nineteenth century, the stereotypes depicted in Hogarth's painting were thoroughly cemented in popular consciousness. There is perhaps no more famous summation of the reputation of the British rank-and-file at this time than that given by the Duke of Wellington during the Peninsula War. Wellington described the rank-and-file as 'composed of the scum of the earth...fellows who have enlisted for drink - that is the plain fact'.¹⁷ Wellington was not alone in his assessment. Sources from the early nineteenth century are replete with references to the behaviour and social origins of British rankers, with drink featuring prominently. A clergyman, Septimus Ramsey, delivered a sermon in 1834 in which he described the behaviour of British soldiers, related to him by a judge. Ramsey stated that 'a judge told me that the barracks were so near his house, that the peace of his family was *daily* disturbed by the shrieks of the soldiers. That scarcely a day passed without one being flogged, and that the cause was almost invariably *intoxication*.'¹⁸ Ramsey also described the actions of British soldiers in India, where a military court 'within a very short space of time, passed sentence of death on thirty-two of our soldiers for murdering the natives when in a state of intoxication.'¹⁹ An 1811 article in the *Monthly Review* similarly described the 'abuses' of alcohol that 'too often occur' at British military posts in the colonies.²⁰ The article stated that in these colonial posts 'hardly a day passes without witnessing the most disgusting scenes of

¹⁵ David McNeil, *The Grotesque Depiction of War and the Military in Eighteenth Century English Fiction* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ The Duke of Wellington, quoted in David Gates, "The Transformation of the Army 1783-1815", in *The Oxford History of the British Army*, 145.

¹⁸ Septimus Ramsey, "Extracts from the Sermon on Drunkenness", *Parliamentary Review and Family Magazine* 1, no. 30 (August 1834): 1338.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "Art. IX. A Commentary on the Military Establishments and Defence of the British Empire", *Monthly Review, or, Literary Journal* 66 (October 1811): 201.

inebriety', and it lamented that 'the foundation of almost all crimes and offences committed by the British soldier, is laid in a love of inebriety'.²¹

The explanations given for ordinary soldiers' violent and drunken behaviour usually centred on their class origins. Erica Wald writes that 'it suited many higher officials to look upon the European rank-and-file as *terra incognita* – they assumed a host of unflattering, often violent stereotypes based on the men's social background.'²² Wald further notes that 'most officers held strong class assumptions that meant that they viewed the soldiers as brutish, barely controllable louts.'²³ Kenneth Ballhatchet strikes a similar note, writing that British soldiers 'came from the lower classes and so were thought to lack the intellectual and moral resources required for continence'.²⁴ For contemporaries 'it was well known that the lower classes, from whom the rank and file of the army were recruited, would not repress their animal instincts'.²⁵

Observers lamented that the army's recruiting methods did little to attract a greatly desired 'better class of recruit'. The way that regiments found recruits was blamed for perpetuating the poor behaviour of the British soldier, by only attracting men from the lowest classes of society. Recruitment, like much of army life, involved large quantities of alcohol. Edward Spiers notes that 'unconcerned about factors like sobriety, honesty and respectability, the recruiting parties made straight for the public houses and fair-grounds.'²⁶ Recruiting sergeants would ply potential recruits with drink and regale them with stories of the adventure to be had as a soldier. Some men proved receptive to these tales of glory, but if that failed, one Scottish recruiting sergeant noted, 'your last recourse was to get him drunk and then slip a shilling in his pocket, get him home to your billet, and next morning swear he enlisted'.²⁷

Early-nineteenth century commentators decried the army's recruiting methods, and the class of recruits they generated. An 1802 "Essay on the Means of Recruiting the British Army" lamented that 'few evils are more generally or justly complained of' than 'the necessity of seeking soldiers from the refuse of society'.²⁸ The author noted that the army was 'obliged to rely for our levies on the shameless *finesses* of crimps and recruiting serjeants, whose exertions operat[ed] chiefly on the thoughtless and abandoned'.²⁹ An 1807 article in the *Edinburgh Review* complained that 'every form of chicanery and deception has been employed to entrap those

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*, 2.

²³ Ibid, 3.

²⁴ Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class*, 2.

²⁵ Ibid, 10.

²⁶ Spiers, *The Army and Society*, 41.

²⁷ Quoted in de Watteville, *The British Soldier*, p. 98.

²⁸ "Essay on the Means of Recruiting the British Army", *Cobbett's Annual Register* 24 (June 1802): 924.

²⁹ "Essay on the Means of Recruiting", 924.

into the service into which they could not be honestly persuaded to enter', and that 'the goals [*sic*] have also been occasionally drained, in order to make up the deficiencies of the ordinary supply.'³⁰ Recruiting methods bore the blame for attracting low-class recruits to the army, but contemporaries never blamed the real reasons the army attracted few higher-class privates – namely the pathetic pay, brutal conditions of soldiering and indefinite term of service.

The Crimean War

The reputation of the rank-and-file remained largely static for the first half of the nineteenth century. However, in the 1850s, an event occurred that began to transform the British regular in public eyes. The Crimean War (1853-1856) represented, if not a military disaster, then a logistical disaster for the British army. The army was sent to the Crimea entirely unprepared for the conditions it had to face. One historian of the war notes that though all of the Allied nations were relatively unprepared, 'the British were particularly negligent. They failed to provide proper winter clothing for the troops, who were sent to the Crimea in their parade uniforms, without even their greatcoats'.³¹ Though the British soldiers fought well at the battles of The Alma, Inkerman and Balaklava, when they settled in for the siege of Sevastopol in the winter of 1854/55, they faced weather conditions and material shortages that made their lives a misery.

The conditions faced by the army in the Crimea were nothing new for British soldiers. Corelli Barnett notes that 'every harrowing detail of the Crimea had been seen before, many times, since Elizabeth's expeditions to the Netherlands and France.'³² It was newspaper reporting of these conditions, especially at Sevastopol, that was truly new, and began to change minds about the rank-and-file. Newspaper circulation had grown dramatically in the first half of the nineteenth century. *The Times* increased its daily circulation ten-fold between the Napoleonic Wars and the Crimean War – from 4000 to over 40,000 daily copies.³³ The most famous Crimean correspondent was William Russell of *The Times*, whose despatches brought home to the British public in harrowing detail the reality faced by their soldiers around Sevastopol. Russell wrote of camp conditions, stressing the cold, wet and mud:

Rain kept pouring down – the skies were as black as ink – the wind howled over the staggering tents – the trenches were turned into dikes – in the tents the water was sometimes a foot deep – our men had neither warm

³⁰ "Art. XI. General Observances upon the Probable Effect of any Measures which Have for their Object the Increase of the Regular Army", *The Edinburgh Review* 11, no. 21 (October 1807): 173.

³¹ Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 280.

³² Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 285.

³³ *Ibid.*

nor waterproof clothing – they were out for twelve hours at a time in the trenches – they were plunged into the inevitable miseries of a winter campaign – not a soul seemed to care for their comfort, or even for their lives.³⁴

Russell lambasted the British government and high command, lamenting that ‘the wretched beggar who wandered about the streets of London in the rain led the life of a prince compared with the British soldiers who were fighting for their country, and who, we were complacently assured by the home authorities, were the best appointed army in Europe.’³⁵ For the first time, the British public was made aware of the brutal life ordinary soldiers led. A new emotion, rather than the usual disdain or derision, began to enter public discourse around the ordinary soldier – pity.

This change in attitude was reflected in writing of the time. *The London Journal* stated that ‘The British army, since its landing in the Crimea, has been uninterruptedly at hard work – not such work as our hardest-worked labourers in England perform, but work of a Cyclopean character – and that under and in the face of every disadvantageous circumstance.’³⁶ Reporting on one particularly bad storm in 1855, it asked readers to ‘think of the condition in which men and horses must have been placed in such a spot on a November morning, suddenly deprived of their frail covering, and exposed to bitter cold and wet, with empty stomachs and not the remotest prospect of obtaining food or shelter till the storm ceased.’³⁷ The article praised British soldiers for their ‘fortitude and high courage’ in bearing ‘such privations and hardships with unflinching resolution!’³⁸ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* gave ‘thanks, under God, to the valour of our brave soldiers, whose constancy and courage, under fearful odds, transcended even Spartan achievement’.³⁹ The magazine chastised the British public for their former attitudes, stating that ‘it was not right nor decent that, when our armies were toiling and bleeding on the field, there should be any appearance of apathy at home’.⁴⁰ It also chastised the treatment of regular soldiers within the army, quoting a *Times* article demanding that officials ‘give the private soldier honourable mention, orders of merit, a fair chance of a commission – in a word, as much opportunity of rising in the army as any industrious and well-conducted workman has of rising to be a master in

³⁴ *Russell’s Despatches from the Crimea 1854-56*, ed. Nicolas Bentley (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ “Hurricane in the British Camp in the Crimea”, *The London Journal* 20, no. 519 (February 1855): 337.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 338.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “The Conduct of the War”, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 77, no. 471 (January 1855): 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 1.

his craft'.⁴¹ Perhaps most tellingly, an article in *Bentley's Miscellany* stated that 'The common soldier can no longer be passed over as a trooper, as one of a flock fed to be killed; his countrymen look upon him as one of a band of heroes, and wish to see him rewarded, provided for, and respected.'⁴²

The results of the outcry over conditions in the Crimea were telling. A commission of enquiry interviewed military, medical and supply officers from the high-command down to brigade level, to determine what had gone wrong in the Crimea - an effort that never would have been undertaken for Wellington's scum of the earth.⁴³ The war caused light to be shone on barracks back in Britain which were found to be 'built to an even meaner standard than accommodation for criminals or the workhouse poor'.⁴⁴ A Royal Commission into barrack conditions following the war meant that for the first time soldiers were provided with outside privies, separate bathhouses, proper heating and ventilation, modern kitchens and laundries, separate married quarters, reading rooms and structured exercise.⁴⁵

Ordinary soldiers, as opposed to famous generals, also began to be celebrated in art and public memorials for the first time. John Bell's Guards Crimean Memorial, unveiled in London in 1861, featured three rank-and-file guardsmen overlooked by a personification of Honour. It was 'the first war memorial in Britain to raise to hero-status the ordinary troops.'⁴⁶ It was symbolically placed opposite the Duke of York's Column (a memorial to George III's son, a commander against Napoleon), which had been erected in 1833 and paid for by deducting a day's pay from every soldier in the army.⁴⁷ Lady Elizabeth Butler's Crimean War painting *The Roll Call* (1874) also foregrounded ordinary soldiers over officers. The near-two metre high canvas features only one mounted officer, and was otherwise 'entirely dominated by the suffering of the rank and file.'⁴⁸ The painting caused a sensation when it was first exhibited at the Royal Academy, and was so popular that policemen had to be posted to protect the painting from the huge crowds.⁴⁹

The Crimean War represented the turning point for public attitudes around working class regular soldiers. From being an object of derision for over a century, they moved to become an object of compassion and respect. An 1860 article stated that, post-Crimea, 'a belief had very generally spread that this country had at last proved herself capable of taking proper care of

⁴¹ *The Times*, Issue 21925, 15 December 1854, 6, quoted in "The Conduct of the War", 7.

⁴² "Winter in the Crimea", *Bentley's Miscellany* 37 (January 1855): 58.

⁴³ "The Reports of the Commissioners on the Army Before Sebastopol", *The Examiner*, no. 2506, 9 February 1856, 90.

⁴⁴ James Douet, *British Barracks 1600-1914*, (London: The Stationary Office, 1998), 127.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 141.

⁴⁶ Figes, *The Crimean War*, 468.

⁴⁷ Figes, *The Crimean War*, 468.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 478.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

the unsurpassed warriors whom she sends forth to fight her battles.’⁵⁰ Barnett put it more pithily when he wrote that ‘for the first time in history the nation knew what its soldiers were going through, and cared.’⁵¹

Empire and the South African War

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British army was almost exclusively engaged in wars of imperial defence and expansion. Having experienced a turnaround in the Crimea, it was during this period that a more positive image of the rank-and-file was cemented. As popular imperialism grew at home, soldiers became increasingly linked with the growth and maintenance of the empire – a role traditionally associated with the celebrated Royal Navy. Several historians have noted the link between the army and empire. Herman de Watteville states that the soldier ‘now represented the instrument of popular imperialism; he became the symbol of Victorian jubilees and the inspiration of loud heroics all based on the outcome of the “small” colonial campaign of that epoch.’⁵² John M. MacKenzie notes the imperial link, and also the comparison with the navy. He writes that ‘colonial war played a vital part in transforming the reputation of the military and placing it on a standing equal to that of the navy.’⁵³ As a result of this transformation ‘the soldier became a popular hero.... He came to rival, even overtake, the reputation of the naval “Jack Tar” in the popular imagination.’⁵⁴

Popular imperialism reached its apogee during the South African War of 1899-1902. By this time, the army had fought dozens of campaigns. However, the South African War represented an unparalleled imperial conflict, both in scale and cost. The war ‘proved to be the longest (two and three-quarter years), the costliest (over £200 million), the bloodiest (at least twenty-two thousand British, twenty-five thousand Boer and twelve thousand African lives) and the most humiliating war for Britain between 1815 and 1914.’⁵⁵ The British army suffered a series of humiliating defeats in 1899, culminating in ‘Black Week’ in December, where it suffered reverses at Stromberg, Magersfontein and Colenso. However, despite these military failures, the reputation of the rank-and-file, buoyed by fifty years of popular imperial service, did not seem to suffer. Following the 1899 defeats, there was a rush of volunteers to the army unprecedented in British history. This made a marked change from the early-century opinion that ‘no man inlists [*sic*] into the army with the consent either of his parents or friends. From that

⁵⁰ “Homeward Bound”, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 9, no. 230 (March 1860): 372.

⁵¹ Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 285.

⁵² de Watteville, *The British Soldier*, 9.

⁵³ MacKenzie, “Introduction”, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

⁵⁵ Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Abacus, 1992), xv.

moment they consider him as lost, and exert all the influence they possess to deter him from what they consider as a ruinous step.’⁵⁶

Writing during the war reflected the new respect that ordinary soldiers held in public eyes. Sidney Shippard, in December 1899, called Britain’s soldiers ‘the best and bravest of her sons’, and praised ‘those splendid heroes of all ranks’.⁵⁷ He wrote that soldiers ‘of every class among our countrymen, are the martyrs of a great and holy cause.’⁵⁸ Alfred T. Story, writing for the *Strand Magazine* in August 1900, stated that ‘to read the daily papers is like being at a school of heroism’.⁵⁹ He related the story of a British soldier, in a military hospital having been wounded in South Africa. In his sleep the soldier apparently ‘began to sing in a soft low voice’ the popular song ‘Home Sweet Home’ and the anthem of British power ‘Rule Britannia’.⁶⁰ In Story’s view, this singing soldier ‘was a personification of England.’⁶¹ It is difficult to believe that anyone at the beginning of the century would have claimed soldiers as personifications of England. Praise for regular soldiers even extended to an inverse criticism of officers, with the British public looking for someone to blame for their defeats.⁶² An article in the *London Quarterly Review* in April 1901 implicitly blamed officers for the army’s reverses, while praising the rank-and-file, stating that ‘when rightly led [Britain’s] soldiers are still invincible.’⁶³

The class distinctions in the army did not disappear over the nineteenth century, and the rank-and-file in the South African War continued to be drawn largely from the working classes. Though working class rankers were no longer derided as riotous drunks, a new class-based fear around physical fitness emerged during the war. As working men flocked to the colours following the call for volunteers, massive numbers of recruits had to be turned away as physically unfit for service – 330 per 1000 in 1899, 280 per 1000 in 1900.⁶⁴ Over the course of the war, it was estimated that only two in five men were healthy enough to remain effective soldiers.⁶⁵ These statistics seemed to confirm fears that had been building over the

⁵⁶ “General Observances”: 174.

⁵⁷ Sidney Shippard, “South African Problems and Lessons”, *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 46, no. 274 (December 1899): 885.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Alfred T. Story, “Deeds of Daring and Devotion in the War”, *Strand Magazine* 20, no. 116 (August 1900): 153.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: 160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Criticism of officers had begun following the failures in the Crimea. Sergeant Timothy Gowing, 7th Fusiliers, famously called the Crimean army one of “lions led by donkeys”. Richard Holmes, *Redcoat: the British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 123.

⁶³ “The Great Boer War”, *London Quarterly Review* 5, no. 2 (April 1901): 392.

⁶⁴ Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood”, *History Workshop* 5 (Spring 1978): 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

physical condition of the urban working class, caused by their work, housing and lifestyle. Andrew Wilson, science columnist for the *Illustrated London News*, wrote in 1889 that 'the proportion of Army recruits rejected on account of physical disqualifications, is of an alarming nature.'⁶⁶ Pre-war fears were only heightened during the South African War when recruiting numbers increased exponentially. Recruits were turned away for being 'too small for instance, or too slight, or with heart troubles, weak lungs, rheumatic tendencies, flat feet, or bad teeth.'⁶⁷ The condition of working class recruits during the war caused panic among British authorities, who saw it as endangering the future of the empire. Major General Frederick Maurice stated in 1903 that 'no nation was ever yet for any long time great and free when the army it put into the field no longer represented its own virility and manhood.'⁶⁸ T. J. Macnamara wrote in 1905 that 'Empire cannot be built on rickety and flat-chested citizens.'⁶⁹

However, despite the class-based panic over the fitness of the army, a negative public perception of the rank-and-file did not return – not even to stereotype them as weak and stunted rather than boorish and alcoholic. It was testament to the respect that the ordinary soldier had acquired over decades of imperial service since the Crimea, that he was able to come out of the South African War with his reputation unscathed. Indeed, the stigma attached to service in the ranks seemed to be further dispelled by the South African War, and in 1914 there was an even greater rush to enlist than in 1899.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century was a period of radical change in the life and reputation of the working class British rank-and-file. In the latter years of the Napoleonic Wars, their reputation for drunkenness, violence and debauchery traced its roots as far back as the English Civil War. Their reputation would remain relatively static for decades, until the 1850s when the Crimean War proved a catalyst for an unprecedented change in public opinion. The widespread reporting of terrible conditions faced by British troops around Sevastopol changed the soldier from an object of contempt to one of compassion and respect. This respect was only enhanced in the second half of the century, as in campaign after campaign the red, then later khaki coated British soldier expanded and defended the empire. By the time of the South African War at the turn of the century, the soldier's new reputation was sealed, and not even the reverses of Black Week, or fears around physical degeneration could dent it. It is important to remember that the

⁶⁶ Andrew Wilson, "Science Jottings: National Muscle", *Illustrated London News*, Issue 2618, 22 June 1889, 798.

⁶⁷ Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood": 15.

⁶⁸ Frederick Maurice quoted in Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood": 93-94.

⁶⁹ T.J. Macnamara, "In Corpore Sano", *Contemporary Review* (February 1905): 248.

inherent class composition of the army, with high-class officers and low-class privates, never went away. However, this does not detract from the fact that the rank-and-file soldier of 1900 was perceived fundamentally differently from his 1800 equivalent. In the space of one hundred years he had gone from being the scum of the earth to being an imperial hero.