Three Unit Histories of the War of 1812


With the bicentenary of the War of 1812 upon us, it is pleasing to see a number of authors tackle histories of specific units of the War of 1812. In this review I will comment briefly on three recent publications dealing with, respectively, a regular regiment, a fencible regiment and an embodied militia regiment.

The regular regiment is the 100th (or His Royal Highness the Prince Regent's County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot. With a title like that, it will be no surprise that this was an Irish unit raised in 1804 at the end of the Peace of Amiens. Late in the following year the 100th Foot was sent Canada where it saw extensive service during the War of 1812, participating in the 1813 raid on Plattsburgh, the capture of Fort Niagara, Chippawa, Conjocta Creek and Fort Erie. The unit's role in these battles is covered by the author but his real interest perhaps lies in the postwar settlement of many officers and men of the 100th Foot in Goulbourn Township, which is now part of Ottawa. In doing so, Barry Roberts provides much interesting detail on the later lives of members of the unit including photographs of houses they built that stand to this day.
For King and Canada is an interesting book which is very rich in anecdotal and personal narratives. My favourite character is Private George Ferguson, the devout Methodist lay preacher, who confessed he only fired his musket once during the war and was sure he did not hit anyone (one wishes that Ferguson deserted and joined the American army). There are many other interesting men and women who come to life in the pages of this book but, unfortunately, it has a major flaw -- Roberts does not provide a single source citation, not even a basic list of sources. This, unfortunately, restricts the book's utility for the serious student of the war but for those looking for a good read on the wartime experience of a British regular regiment, For King and Canada is worth perusing.

An absence of sources is not a complaint that can be made against Winston Johnston's Glengarry Light Infantry as the author lists no fewer than 1886 individual documents, books or articles he consulted while writing his book. Unfortunately, Johnston, a scientist by training, chose to use scientific, rather than standard historical citation method and, for example, does not give the page numbers for published sources. That aside, Johnston narrates the formation, training, campaigns and battles (and the GLI saw more action than most Canadian units of the war) and peacetime service of the "black stumps" in great detail. He also includes numerous document transcriptions containing useful information as well as an annotated nominal roll of the entire unit.

It is noteworthy that Johnston devotes considerable space to the living conditions under which the enlisted man served. He provides fascinating information on uniforms, weapons, quarters, rations, discipline, married life, medical services and religion which will be extremely useful for both the historian and the re-enactor. He also analyzes the regiment's casualties, breaking them down by type, and it is surprising to see such a high number of men taken prisoner. In a similar fashion to Roberts, Johnston includes considerable biographical detail on members of the unit including their postwar lives. This history -- which is a Bicentennial re-issue of a title that first appeared in 1998 -- is without doubt the definitive source on the Glengarry Light Infantry and will remain so for some time to come. It is a book that belongs in the library of every serious student of the War of 1812.

Another book that certainly belongs in that library is Richard Feltoe's Redcoated Ploughboys, his magnificent new history of the Incorporated Militia Battalion of Upper Canada. The IMUC (as they are known to the 1812 cognoscenti) have long needed such a study as the only thing available up to now has been an article by Cruikshank published more than a century ago. The IMUC are among those units raised by the governments of Upper and Lower Canada which include the Voltigeurs Canadiens, the Select Embodied Militia battalions and a number of small troops or companies of dragoons, gunners, and artillery drivers. Enlisted for the duration of the war, or at least for extended periods of service, these units inhabit a strange place between the permanent and militia forces and I once coined the term "provincial regulars" as a handy identifier into which to slot them. The plain fact is that the only thing "militia" about the IMUC was their cumbersome title because they were trained, armed, uniformed and equipped as regulars -- and were largely commanded by regular officers.

The author provides context for the history of the IMUC including the organization of the militia of Upper Canada, particularly in the first nine months of hostilities when some major, but often misunderstood, changes were made to it. It was the irascible Colonel Thomas Pearson, "the Cyclops
of the St. Lawrence" and possibly the most bad-tempered but professional officer in British North America who proposed the unit's creation. Feltoe quotes widely from Pearson's written submission on the subject but tactfully omits the phrase where Pearson states that Upper Canadian militia officers "have in many cases irreparably injured the service by their imbecility and precept" - but then Tom Pearson always called a spade a shovel, because that is what is. The proposal approved, the IMUC was raised in a number of division across the province, the largest of which was stationed at Prescott where Pearson whipped it into shape, a process enjoyed by neither party.

Feltoe traces the IMUC's operational history in great detail and his text is accompanied by some excellent maps that will be a treat for the tactical wargamer. Being a long time re-enactor, he also provides some fascinating and useful documented information on the life of the soldier and his family. Personally, I found it interesting that Feltoe did extensive research in the dreaded Record Group 9 IB, Pre-Confederation militia records, one of the worst organized and confusing document collections in the national archives. Many a brave author has cheerfully waved goodbye before plunging bravely into the undergrowth of RG 9 IB -- never to be seen again.

Richard Feltoe not only emerged intact, he brought back hidden treasure and the result is that Redcoated Ploughboys is a well researched, written and illustrated book that is a model of regimental history. It will appeal to the professional historian, the re-enacting and wargaming communities -- and the casual reader. Highly recommended.

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