
This is an attractive sounding proposition but also an extremely difficult one, namely, to explore what soldiers thought and did in the Wars of The Roses. Anthony Goodman is perhaps here following up on some of those underlying interests in his splendid chapter entitled 'The Wars and Society' in his 1981 book on the Wars of The Roses. In the end this is not just another book on the Wars, not least because, in order to recreate this dimension the author has had to work from fragments and to stray well beyond both chronological and geographical parameters of mid-fifteenth century England. The result is a book of value for anyone with an interest in the medieval soldier's experiences.

It takes awhile to reach the soldiers but along the way are two valuable chapters, on the Wars today and on attitudes to war. This last addresses the dichotomies of war – belief in the just war yet a sense of the horrors of war; rules of engagement yet common failures to observe the conventions. Comparison of warfare fought abroad, in Wales and Scotland, and civil war at home is instructive, especially given the author's interests and expertise on Spain which indeed emerge periodically throughout the book.

The reader comes at last to the soldiers, the emphasis on those in the lower ranks. Firstly there are the types of soldiers, among these the professionals, drawn from the whole period of the Hundred Years' War. Goodman reflects that there were more of these old soldiers in the early campaigns of the 1450s and sees 1469-71 as the last fling of the veterans of the French war. Edward IV's army of 1475 was thus, unsurprisingly, one of raw recruits. Besides these men there were the Calais garrison; after 1461, those men who took service and trained abroad, particularly in the Burgundian armies where respect for English archers remained substantial; and lastly the much smaller numbers of foreign mercenaries. In much of this Goodman reminds us of the continuing internationalism of at least some English soldiers and some of the armies. Characters occasionally emerge, like Sir Edward Woodville (pp. 108-12), Edward IV's brother-in-law. Appropriately much space is given to the arrayed men, the author raising a host of difficult questions such as how often men were compelled to serve; what the quality of the forces raised in this way was like and how it might have varied from one region to another; how captains were chosen; how often such local arrays might have trained; and what part women played. Through scattered fragments a picture emerges though there is perhaps some contradiction in the conclusion that the commons when fired up could give a good account of themselves (p. 123) and yet the thought that nobles preferred not to rely on a 'ragged regiment of rustics'. The recent reassessment by Montgomery Bohna (English Historical Review 2003) of Cade's Revolt as very much a military movement comprising men raised by the system of array and perhaps York's letters of 1452 to the citizens of Shrewsbury, and others, for 'good and likely men' to make up what turned out to be his apparently sizeable Dartford force (Paston Letters, 1904 ed., vol. 1, p. 98), suggest that the long established needs for defence did indeed give many that 'hard, cutting edge, eagerly sought in civil conflicts' (p.125).

An imaginative chapter on campaigning runs the gauntlet of the more obvious things like training for war, provision of equipment beyond arms and armour, lodgings and victuals but explores less well travelled ground, notably the possible part played by women, either fighting themselves in exceptional circumstances or as prostitutes. Here, once again trawling very widely, especially in Europe, Goodman is interesting but rightly tentative in his conclusions about what this actually meant during the civil wars. He concludes the chapter with a study of the tensions between soldiers and populace but also the potential gains to the non-combatants who could find new markets in spoils of war, production of banners and an equine economy emerging from expanded horse-breeding and supplying of the essential accoutrements for horses and ponies. One has to overlook the lack of evidence on these points but they are doubtless important matters to ponder. In similar vein is the chapter on the hopes and fears of soldiers where issues like weariness, camaraderie, wounds and surgeons – here much use being made of the recent archaeology of the Towton battlefield – and desertion are all considered, with some good stories, such as the tale of Henry Walter of Guildford (pp. 180-82) and the observations of a Spanish banner bearer (p. 193). In examining memories of the Wars Goodman is forced largely to abandon the common soldier. Instead he has gathered material about noble memories and memorials of the Wars, commenting, however, that the lack of commissioned chivalrous accounts of the main players may reflect the fact that many had had to admit that the Wars were ignominious, for such indeed is the nature of civil wars. They leave behind bad memories. For many common soldiers of course, their fate was the mass grave and the efforts to commemorate them, such as the short-lived chapel at Towton, seem not to have been substantial. Pride of place is given to what Goodman admits is a highly dubious anecdote about Barnet field but one that
may have captured something of the realities of the soldier’s experiences.

The book is illustrated with two sections of well chosen plates though the full significance of the choices might have been emphasised with a page reference to the story which each illustration represents where it appears in the text – for example the story of Ellen Gethin, ‘the terrible’, whose tomb appears in plate six, is given on page 142. If the book sometimes suffers from a, perhaps inevitable, lack of substance because of the very limited material, it makes up for this in range. It is a thought provoking volume that helps the reader to get inside the experiences of war – the real experiences of the majority of players.

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