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Review of *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army* by Ian F W Beckett

Aimée Fox

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Ian F W Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army*. Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 2018. Xviii + 350pp. 3 maps. ISBN 978-0806161716 (hardback). Price £32.95.

Too often the British army is seen as *apart from* rather than *a part of* broader society. Ian F. W. Beckett's *A British Profession of Arms* clearly argues that, in many respects, the Army of the Late Victorian era did not materially differ from other professions such as the church, law, and medicine. While duty and service were key touchstones of the professions of arms, so too were 'material reward and career advancement' in the form of money, honours, and awards. Beckett, a retired professor of military history at the University of Kent and an authority on the late Victorian army, takes the reader through the complex, murky workings of command where personality, politics, and patronage could make or break an officer's career. The result is an impressive, meticulously researched book that makes an important contribution to our understanding of the British army in this period and beyond.

The book is divided into two parts with four chapters in each: the first part explores the appointments and selection process through which officers navigated, detailing the internal and external factors that could influence a military career. This half of the book provides readers with a rich tapestry of factors that influenced military careers, ranging from the well-known 'Rings' which surrounded leading figures such as Garnet Wolseley and Frederick Roberts, to confidential reports, and the overlooked importance of levees. Beckett also explores more subtle influences upon progression within the Army, with thoughtful sections on the impact of social skills, politicians, royalty, and officers' wives. The second part of the book then examines how those myriad factors played out in practice through a series of case studies with chapters on the Second Afghan War (1878-81), the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), and the South African War (1899-1902).

While authoritative throughout, Beckett is at his most compelling in Chapters 2 and 4, which detail the promotion and selection process and external influences upon military careers. Chapter 2 takes the reader through the 'highly complex affair' associated with promotion, detailing how factors such as the 'smartness' of regiments and an officer's religious conviction could weigh for or against him. This chapter highlights a core theme of the book, namely the tension between promotion based on selection, merit, and seniority. As Beckett notes in the conclusion, '[d]ependence on seniority alone would have led to military atrophy, but ... "reliance on natural aptitude was the path to amateurism, not to professionalism"' (pp.247-48). Chapter 4's focus on external influences highlights the importance of viewing the Army as a part of society, subject to its various slings and arrows, rather than as a hermetically sealed

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monolith. It is in this chapter that we see how complicated internal processes were made more complex by 'private considerations' that 'intruded on appointment, advancement, and reward' (p.109). The inclusion of the importance of officers' wives in this chapter was a welcome addition to our understanding of both military careers and the Army itself, complimenting Verity McInnis' recent work in this area (*Women of Empire: Nineteenth-Century Army Officers' Wives in India and the US West*, 2017).

A British Profession of Arms is the product of decades of thorough, painstaking research. Beckett deploys this wealth of knowledge with skill to illustrate the considerable complexity of the inner workings of the late Victorian army. Yet it must be noted that the sheer volume of information contained in this book may make it challenging to readers coming to the topic afresh. The prominence of the central figures of the period, such as Cambridge, Roberts, and Wolseley, provides a narrative spine to the work. However, the deluge of other officers' names, ranks, and appointments occasionally make the argument difficult to follow. In this respect the inclusion of a 'dramatis personae' may have been helpful as a handrail for the general reader in particular. Similarly, the second half of the book may be confusing to readers who lack a good working knowledge of the three campaign case studies which is required in order to understand those campaigns through the lens of the politics of high command.

This book represents a lifetime's scholarship and research on the British army. Its encyclopaedic coverage of the ins and outs of the military careers of many of Britain's imperial officers means it will become a 'go to' work for students and scholars working on Late Victorian military history.

AIMÉE FOX
King's College London, UK

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Timothy Bowman, William Butler and Michael Wheatley, *The Disparity of Sacrifice: Irish Recruitment to the British Armed Forces, 1914-1918*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. Xiv + 298 pp. (hardback). ISBN: 978-1789621853. Price £85.00.

In the interests of transparency, this reviewer should declare that he peer reviewed the initial proposal and final manuscript of this title, and on the basis of comments made then, was asked to write some words for the book's back cover. So this book