
Scottish Officers in the British Army 1714-63

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Source: *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 123, Part 1 (Apr., 1958), pp. 23-33

Published by: Edinburgh University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25526452>

Accessed: 01/12/2009 03:33

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Scottish Officers in the British Army

1714-63

I BEGIN to think it Damm hard to purchase every Thing when I am equally inclin'd to do my Duty with those who come at preferment at an easier rate, had I been a Scott instead of a Cambrian I should have had a Company long agoe— Friends or Foes, I think they prevail . . .,' wrote Lieutenant William Dawkin of the 39th Regiment in December 1747, a year after the suppression of the 'Forty Five'.¹ His complaint serves to draw attention to the fact that there were Scottish officers in the British standing army at this period in numbers that were a challenge to the promotion of officers from the other kingdoms of the Union. What, then, was the background to Dawkin's grievance, and what did a career in the British service mean to Scotsmen in the reigns of the first two German kings of the united kingdoms?

For generations Scottish families had been more attracted to a military life than English ones. The economic pressure of large families and lesser fortunes had long served to add force to a deep-seated predilection for military service which had usually to be gratified abroad. In the period under review the two had combined to impell their members into the armies of Britain and the continental states in greater numbers than their English cousins, who had more to keep them at home. Representative of the martial bent of many Scottish families at this time were the Agnews of Lochnaw in Galloway, a family who literally lived by the sword. Sir James Agnew, the third baronet, had eight sons, all of whom became professional soldiers, and the men of the cadet branch of Lochryan followed similar inclinations. This tradition of unstinted service continued in following generations. Of these Agnews who served

¹ The John Rylands Library, Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/141. This is the largest and by far the most useful of all private collections relating to the military background of the period. Through the kindness of the Librarian and of the staff of the archives department I had the privilege of examining it a year or two ago, and attempted an initial survey in 'The Military Papers of Colonel Samuel Bagshawe (1713-62)' in *Bulletin of The John Rylands Library*, xxxix (1957).

the Hanoverians in the eighteenth century the most celebrated was old Sir James's eldest son, Andrew the fourth baronet, who died a lieutenant-general and colonel of the 21st regiment.¹

This preoccupation with the profession of arms was part of the accepted pattern of life among the territorial families. When Sir Andrew joined the 'Grey Dragoons' in Flanders during Marlborough's wars, as a young cornet, he found his brother-in-law and four kinsmen already with the regiment, and when he went again to Flanders in 1742 as lieutenant-colonel of the 21st Regiment,² his letters show that a large party of relatives, kinsmen and neighbours from his native Galloway used to meet each evening around the camp-fires. These included Sir Andrew himself, his brother James Agnew who was major of the 7th Dragoons, and three younger brothers in the 6th Dragoons.³ Lord Stair, the British commander-in-chief, was himself a Galloway man, and a kinsman of the Agnews.

The standing army at this time was a small force, amounting, up to the year 1739, to some twenty regiments of cavalry and forty of infantry, besides household troops, although two wars had helped considerably to augment its permanent establishment by the end of the Seven Years War in 1763. These regiments were separate entities for military and administrative purposes, there being no peacetime organisation into brigades and divisions and no staff hierarchy as we know it today. They were not organised on a territorial basis and had no county roots or affiliations, with the result that the national composition of each regiment depended almost entirely upon the area of the British Isles in which it was stationed at any one time and upon the nationality of its officers. The latter was a particularly relevant factor. The regimental officers were responsible for recruiting the regiment, under the orders of Government, and since, as often as not, they were permitted to recruit in their home areas, thus combining business with pleasure at least expense to either, the composition of the regiment reflected their individual nationalities.

Among the regimental officers of the army at this time were to be found English, Scots, Welsh, and Anglo-Irish, with even a few colonials, and every condition of men from peers of the realm to the penniless younger sons of struggling professional men or yeoman farmers. Every regiment had its complement

¹ Sir A. Agnew, *The Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway* (1893), ii, 431 ff.

² *Ibid.*, ii, 208.

³ *Ibid.*, ii, 28 0

of hardy Scots. It was very much the exception to the rule if a regiment found itself without any Scottish officers. The general return of the 39th Regiment for 1752 showed three of them, two of whom were captains and one a lieutenant.¹ The number in each regiment was generally, on average, higher than this. In regiments which were, from their early days, associated with the northern kingdom such as the Grey Dragoons, and the 1st, 21st, 25th, 26th and 42nd Regiments,² the officers were predominantly Scotsmen, whilst regiments like the 33rd³ which chanced to have Scottish gentlemen for their colonels always contained a number of their countrymen, usually their relatives and protégés, among the officers. The 33rd, indeed, numbered 30 Scots among the 106 officers who served with it, 1739-55. There was also a marked tendency towards nepotism. Sir Andrew's colonel, Brigadier John Campbell of the 21st, had three of his relatives among the lieutenants of his regiment. Among them was a Duncan Campbell, 'one I have a particular concerne in', he informed Agnew. 'He is a very pretty boy, has had a very liberal education and writes and speaks French, so that I can recommend him to you for an aid-de-camp. You'll find him vastly useful', he assured him.⁴ The 6th Dragoons, for so long associated with Ireland and Enniskillen, were commanded by Lord Stair 1715-34, and during these years no fewer than eight of his relatives and kinsmen were serving in the regiment at one time.⁵ The like was the case in many regiments whose colonels were Scots. In all, something like one-fourth of all the regimental officers of the army were Scottish. There was a steady accretion in their numbers between 1714 and 1763 but no great variation in the overall fraction, since the increase marched *pari passu* with the progressive expansion of the size of the army occasioned by the demands of war.

The Scots were not confined to bearing the drudgeries of regimental duty. Provided their political allegiance was not suspect they could expect no obstruction to be placed in the

¹ Bagshawe MSS., 2/4/140.

² Now the Royal Scots Greys, the Royal Scots, the Royal Scots Fusiliers, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, the Cameronians and the Black Watch.

³ Now the 1st Battalion, The Duke of Wellington's Regiment. Robert Dalzell was colonel 1730-39 and Lord Charles Hay 1753-60, while Hugh, Viscount Primrose, George Mure of the Caldwell family, and Sir James Lockhart-Ross, Bt., were among the lieutenant-colonels in these years.

⁴ Agnew, *op. cit.*, ii, 289-90. John Campbell of Mamore succeeded as fourth duke of Argyll in 1761.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ii, 258.

way of their preferment. This is demonstrated by the large number of them who became colonels of regiments, appointments of great financial reward at this period. At the accession of George I eighty-one colonels continued to serve the new monarch, and among their number were twelve Scottish gentlemen. Between 1715 and 1739, the years of peace before the outbreak of the war with Spain, there were nineteen Scots among the ninety-four new appointments: and between 1739 and the end of the Seven Years War forty-seven Scotsmen figured among the 199 new colonels, making a total of seventy-eight Scottish colonels out of the 374 confirmed and appointed since 1714. This means that just under one-fifth of all colonelcies went to Scottish officers.¹ Taken together with the regimental officers it represents a fraction of the whole which is out of proportion to the relative populations of England and Scotland at this time. The northern kingdom was certainly pulling its weight in answering the military commitments of the united realm, whatever the impulses behind the effort.

The majority of these officers were lowland Scots. Besides being more addicted to Jacobitism, the Highlanders, when they did leave home, were inclined to serve in the Scots-Dutch or in other continental armies rather than in the British service.² There were, however, far more Highland officers in the army before the outbreak of the Seven Years War than is generally realised.³ Many Highland gentlemen supported the union, and

¹ These figures were compiled during the course of work for an M.A. thesis, 'The social and professional background of the officers of the British army, 1714-63', now deposited in the University of London Library.

² For the Scots-Dutch, see *Papers relating to the Scots Brigade in the Service of the United Netherlands* (Scottish History Society). A considerable number of officers came into the British service from continental armies at the beginning of the Seven Years War, particularly from the Scots-Dutch who contributed seventy or eighty officers for the new levies. Most of these were half-pay officers, reduced in 1749 and 1752 when the Scots-Dutch had been lessened in size. Nothing like this influx had occurred in the earlier war. Among the more prominent of these officers were some who raised or commanded new regiments later in the war: David Graeme of Gorthie and Braco (105th); Robert Murray Keith (87th); Thomas Oswald (103rd); James Johnstone (101st), and others.

³ Pitt has long been credited, quite wrongly, with first conceiving the notion to recruit Highlanders into the army in whole regiments. Highland companies, regimented in 1739 to form the 43rd (now 42nd), the first Highland regiment, had been used early in the period under review, and in the 1739-48 war a two-battalioned regiment of Highlanders had been raised by John, fourth earl of Loudoun, and bore his name. It served with reputation in Flanders, but was disbanded at the peace. Twelve independent companies, largely composed of, and officered by, Highlanders, had been sent out to India with Boscawen's fleet in 1747, and many loyal Highland companies had helped to put down the rebellion.

either served in the army themselves or were represented there by their sons and relatives. Many of the Scottish members at Westminster were Highland gentlemen, filling places in the army, high and low. Among them was Sir Robert Munro, of Foulis, member for the Wick boroughs 1710-41, who was the first lieutenant-colonel of the 42nd when it was regimented in 1739. When colonel of the 37th Regiment he was killed in action against his fellow countrymen at Falkirk in 1746 at the age of sixty-two. Lieutenant-General Charles Ross of Balnagowan, member for Ross-shire 1727-34, was another. He was colonel of the 5th Dragoons 1695-1714, and after being deprived of the regiment on suspicion of his political allegiance, was re-appointed in 1729. But highland or lowland, these Scottish colonels were decidedly men of weight in their own country. They were almost without exception landed proprietors, and over half of them were titled noblemen and baronets and their sons.¹ Half their total number sat in parliament, for the most part in the lower house, with a few in the upper house as representative Scottish peers.²

The channels by which Scotsmen entered the army were much the same as those in England. To secure a first commission application had to be made to influential persons and a sufficient 'interest' generated. Sir James Agnew purchased first commissions for most of his sons. In January 1718 he wrote to his kinsman, Lord Stair, requesting that his second son, Patrick, be allowed to purchase a cornetcy in his dragoons. Patrick Agnew had been intended for the legal profession and, wrote his father, 'hath got a very liberal education for fitting him for that business, having studied the law for some years at home, and went thereafter to Poictou, in France, when he plied the law pretty close for two years.' On his return, said Sir James, his son had still wished to become an advocate, but had become 'very much discouraged . . . by reason that there are already too many of that profession; for there is not one-third of that employment that are able to gain their bread by it, and even of that number the most part are such as have good estates, and are able to live upon their own till such time as they come into business; and indeed they cannot propose coming into business for a good many years after entering.'³ This

¹ Nineteen titled noblemen, seven of their sons, and ten baronets.

² Twenty-five of the Scottish colonels were M.P.'s, and at least a dozen were representative peers.

³ Agnew, *op. cit.*, ii, 235.

being the case, his father thought him better provided for in the army. Patrick got his commission, but unfortunately died young.

Money did much to smooth the path to a first commission. It was otherwise with John Mackenzie, the younger son of a minor laird, William Mackenzie of Suddie,¹ who in 1730 enlisted as a gentleman volunteer in the hope of being given a quartermaster's warrant or an officer's commission. There was little money to spare for a younger son. The regiment of his choice was a dragoon regiment upon the Irish establishment commanded by his kinsman, General Charles Ross of Balnagowan, in which his cousin Alexander Rose, of the Kilravock family, was lieutenant-colonel. Lord Cathcart, then colonel of the 8th Dragoons, was also a kinsman. Yet despite these connections, and an obvious desire to please, John waited six years for his first commission, an ensigncy in a regiment of foot. This he owed not to those on whom he had pinned his original hopes, although, as he said, General Ross was 'so very intimate with the Duke of Dorsett, that for half a dozen words [he] could get a Pair of Colours in any regiment of Foot in Ireland for me . . .'² but to another kinsman, Sir Robert Munro of Foulis, already mentioned. His long wait was due partly to the fact that his colonel and his backers had nearer relatives than himself to serve, and partly to the unpleasant reality that he could not afford to purchase when a quartermaster's warrant was permitted to be sold.³ During this time he kept a servant, whom he later sent as a drummer to his uncle's company in the 1st Royals, and contrived to live in a certain style, largely owing to the kindness of his relations, the lieutenant-colonel and his uncle, Captain John Shaw of the Royals, of whom he wrote, 'Were it not for the Generosity of my good Uncle I cou'd not bear it out so long like a Gentleman, as thank God

¹ For this family see Sir R. Douglas, *Baronage of Scotland*, 415-17. Thirteen volumes of the family papers are housed in the British Museum (B.M., Add. MSS., 39188-39200). Gentlemen volunteers were a feature of military life at this time. They were usually young men of good family, like John Mackenzie, with little means. There were others in his dragoon regiment, (B.M. Add. MSS., 39189, fol. 25). For an interesting account of one such gentleman, Henry Spelman of the King's Dragoon Guards, see *Hist. MSS. Comm., Townshend MSS.* (in 11th Report, part 4), 151-2.

² B.M., Add. MSS., 39189, fol. 25.

³ B.M., Add. MSS., 39189, fols. 60, and 1, 16, 25. Quartermaster's warrants (there was one Q.M. to each troop in a cavalry regiment) were at the colonel's disposal, and were more frequently given away to deserving young men than put up for sale.

I've done.'¹ His ensigny in General Robert Sutton's regiment, the 19th, was procured through Sir Robert Munro's interest with the earl of Wilmington, father-in-law of the lord lieutenant of Ireland, the duke of Dorset, in whose gift junior military appointments in the Irish regiments were vested. John Mackenzie's career was not cut short by sudden death, as was poor Patrick Agnew's. He went through the disastrous West Indian expedition of 1740-42 unscathed, where so many died, and survived to die a lieutenant-colonel of marines many years later.

Scottish officers had a name for efficiency, but as William Dawkin's words suggest, they were not always popular with their brother officers, nor yet with members of the governing aristocracy in London. This is evident from a letter written in 1757 by Charles, third duke of Richmond, to his younger brother, Lord George Henry Lennox, who was then a captain in the 25th Regiment (a Scottish one which he had entered by choice), and who now wished to have a majority in one of the new Highland regiments being raised by Simon Fraser and Archibald Montgomery from men whose political affiliations were distinctly dubious. Playing the elder brother, the duke said that he had been very sorry when George 'grew so fond' of the Scots, and that he was now rather appalled by this new inclination, since 'a desire of serving with them and in one of the new Highland battalions will be looked upon as having the same principles and way of thinking as they have. . . . What stronger connection can there be', he continued, 'than desiring to serve in the same corps, commanded and composed of rebels? . . . I hope you will entirely drop it, I could wish you would do the same of your fondness for the Scotch in general. Be civil to them as they have been to you. Allow them great

¹ B.M., Add. MSS., 39189, fol. 159. John was very much concerned with keeping up the appearance of gentility, 'otherwise, I can assure you', he told his father, 'I would rather goe a Slave to Virginia, than live a Private Dragoon, in Ireland' (fol. 16). He was a young man with an amusing turn of phrase. Writing from Ballyshannon in 1739 he excused his previous silence by his being 'confined to Quarters, in a Much more Retird place than Suddie: no Officer with me & nothing worth giving my friends any trouble-offering, & nothng but exercising the company (which is here quarter'd alone) to divert a high pitch of Spleen & Melancholly, engenderd by want of company, and the Sulphureous vapours of a boggy situation' (fol. 216). In the same letter he related how the Irish ladies were well guarded from penniless adventurers like himself, 'so that here I've no prospect of rising [but] by the Scabard, having no other Settlement to Make on any woman, after Death, but the Sword & half-pike; which does not contain Many Acres'.

merit as good officers. But do not choose among them your friends. It can never do you honour and may be of disservice to you.¹ Henry Fox, the secretary at war, and Lord Albemarle, a general officer of good repute, added their quota of dissuasion. Although his first remarks were directed specifically against Fraser and his men, who had been 'out' in the 'Forty-Five, the duke's latter strictures were delivered at the Scottish nation in general, loyal and disloyal.

The two rebellions were, not unnaturally, the occasion for much suspicion, a great deal of it falling unfairly on the majority of Scotsmen. There is, however, little evidence that they caused many difficulties for Scottish officers by way of obstructing or cutting short their careers without cause, or that they led to any slackening in the flow of Scottish gentlemen into the army. There were certainly no mass removals, although several officers of suspect sympathies were requested to sell out. John Walkinshaw Craufurd, elder son of a Kilmarnock laird, sold his lieutenancy of dragoons in 1746 under pressure from government, so family tradition has it, on account of 'an act of trying friendship' performed at the execution of his friend and neighbour Lord Balmerino for his part in the rebellion.² Incidents of this nature were the inevitable sequel to internal strife and only to be expected.

Yet, although few officers were removed, the taint of Jacobitism in the family could have a retarding effect upon an officer's career. Alexander, fourth earl of Balcarres and his younger brother James, the fifth earl, each served in the army for many years. Their father, Colin, the third earl, had, together with James, been 'out' in the 'Fifteen. Since that time

¹ *Hist. MSS. Comm., Bathurst MSS.*, 677-8. Scotsmen were not particularly popular in London, especially during Bute's ministry. Boswell notes in his *London Journal* the bad reception given at a playhouse to two Scottish officers just returned from the West Indies. In disgust, they made the bitter retort, 'This is what we get for capturing the Havannah.' Yet Scots made first-class officers. The letters (1760-62) of Major Robert Preston of the 93rd Regiment (contained in Bagshawe MSS., 2/1) give an insight into the attitude of a professional soldier who took his task seriously. Brigadier John Campbell, previously mentioned, was full of zeal for the service. His regiment had lost a great deal of equipment in one of the great battles in Flanders, whereon he wrote to Sir Andrew Agnew, 'The return of our losses is very distinct. What reparation is to be made I really can't tell, but I am resolved my Regiment shall want for nothing in my power. I leave you and the Major to lay your heads together, and furnish the Battalion with what is necessary for the service' (Agnew, op. cit., ii, 297). This was at his own expense.

² Burke's *Landed Gentry* (1952), 552.

the family had not been suspected of acts or sympathies alien to the Hanoverian succession, yet the shadow of their indiscretion dogged their steps. Alexander had a blameless record, yet he served for close on thirty years without being allowed to get further than a captain and lieutenant-colonel in the Third Guards. James's fate was even harder. Pardoned after the suppression of the rebellion, he became a lieutenant in the Grey Dragoons. When he went to the Continent with his regiment in 1742 he was still a captain at the age of forty-nine. He still had hopes of promotion through distinguishing himself in the campaign, but these were short-lived. After he had distinguished himself at Dettingen his name was mentioned to George II who 'fell into a passion and told the minister that he had occasion to know before, that no person who had ever drawn sword in the Stuart cause should ever rise to command, and that it was best to tell Lord Balcarres so at once';¹ which, being the case, someone should have done so a good deal earlier. James then lost heart completely. He had become, as he told his superiors, 'tired with acting in a low station and unable to bear the drudgeries of it'. He thought having to leave the service to which he was attached 'a hard choice', but, he went on, 'as our family has hitherto produced none but men of worth and honour, I can no longer bear being treated as if I were without either, and drudge on a captain, after having been thirty-seven years an officer, and lived in peace and war without reproach.'²

A little later, James Murray, major of the 15th Regiment and soon to be Wolfe's brigadier at Quebec, was most apprehensive about the damaging effect his brother's Jacobite sympathies might have on his career, and he told his father-in-law that he was 'likely to have the whole punishment of it unless protected by your influence'.³ His marriage to the daughter of Mr Collier, who was mayor of Hastings, a whig prominent in local politics, and a valued ally of the duke of Newcastle, neutralised the ill-effects likely to ensue from his family's proclivities.

The Bagshawe Papers in The John Rylands Library permit a sketch of one of the Scottish officers of the 39th Regiment—David Hepburn, a Lowland Scot, born in 1701. He entered the

¹ A. W. C. Lindsay, *Lives of the Lindsays*, ii, 140.

² *Ibid.*, ii, 122, 132.

³ R. H. Mahon, *Life of General James Murray* (1921), 52.

army at the late age of twenty-five, and, after four years service in the ranks, obtained a commission in the 39th in 1730.¹ He served with it for the next thirty-one years, including peacetime soldiering in Ireland and the West Indies, and war-service at L'Orient 1746, on board the fleet during Hawke's victory at Ushant, and in India.

Hepburn was a man whose buoyant spirit was at last quite broken, as much by repeated vexation and disappointment as by age and long service. There is a great contrast between his early and later years. In the 40's 'Old Davy' was beloved by everyone, and he must have been an engaging person. Writing from Portsmouth a brother officer described him as 'by much the greatest bean in this garrison',² and when the 39th served as marines on board the fleet he became 'a great associate of the Navy Folks', Sir Peter Warren taking such a liking to him that he insisted on keeping him on his flagship out of his turn for duty.³ His health, however, became undermined by hard service, and this deterioration and his sensitive personality combined to make him feel his later misfortunes more than he might otherwise have done. Since Hepburn, like many Scots, had little besides his pay and possessed no influential friends other than those he had made during his service, it was inevitable that his promotion would be slow, since he could not afford to purchase in his turn. He accepted this situation, but he was not prepared for the succession of disappointments that beset him when the regiment came back from India in 1758. There was trouble over his succeeding to the majority,⁴ and, when his commanding officer, Samuel Bagshawe, left to raise the 93rd Regiment at the end of 1759, he neither succeeded him as lieutenant-colonel of the 39th nor went with him to be lieutenant-colonel of the new regiment, although it had been discussed.⁵ This left Hepburn extremely peevish. To Bagshawe he wrote, 'I will not take up your time or trouble you at present on my private Account. If my long service and Some Sufferings do not stand me in stead, I am so Absolutely

¹ Bagshawe MSS., 2/4/140.

² Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/190.

³ Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/147 and 2/2/260-1. This involved him in a great deal of unpleasantness with his commanding officer, who felt he should not be allowed to do duty out of turn. Hepburn was extremely sensitive about the dispute.

⁴ Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/266-7.

⁵ A scribbled note on the back of one of Bagshawe's letters, 15/1/29, shows that he was being considered, but Bagshawe had to accept an officer nominated by government.

Friendless that I know of none to whom I can apply with any face. It is a degree of Misfortune to have lived too long and to have survived [one's] Friends and Patrons. I quietly submit to providence, and the pleasure of my Superiors.¹ The final blow came when an office blunder was the occasion of extra delay, anxiety and financial loss after he had arranged the details of his retirement-scheme.² These successive disappointments coming at the close of a life of danger and considerable hardships converted him into a miserable, complaining old man, whose every letter was a recital of his misfortunes. One of his last extant letters paints a sorry self-portrait. 'My health is really very bad, and my Eyesight almost gone, my Spirit quite broke, with both publick & private Ills.'³ This came from a man who was then in the highly responsible position of lieutenant-colonel of a regiment of infantry!

This is not altogether a happy report to give of an eighteenth-century Scottish officer, but it more accurately represents the condition of the improverished majority than would a tale of wealth, success and rapid advancement, to which few Scottish officers had pretensions. It is significant that all but a very few of the Scots who became colonels of regiments were men of social rank and landed property, who were either in politics themselves or had friends in powerful positions. For most Scots a military career would mean following in David Hepburn's footsteps. This fate, though obvious to all, did not deter would-be soldiers from a military life, because there was always the consolation that Fortune, heedless of the claims of nationality, would cast something in their way, and she treated poor Scotsmen no worse than she did poor Englishmen. Political sympathies excluded, it is clear that there were no barriers, other than those which lack of wealth and position placed in every obscure officer's way, to the Scotsmen who played an important part in the officering of the army in early Georgian times.

JAMES HAYES.⁴

¹ Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/270.

² Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/273.

³ Bagshawe MSS., 2/2/272.

⁴ Formerly research student in the University of London.