

Bullets, Baggages and Ballads Revisited: Forgotten Sources for the Experience of British Women in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars Revised and Expanded*

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ABSTRACT

For many years 'women's history' has been a considerable growth area and with this has come an increasing interest in the role women have played in times of war. For the period prior to the mid-nineteenth century, however, interest in this subject has been confronted by a major problem in that large numbers of women were illiterate. In consequence, the few female voices that we have are voices from the elites, one effect of this having been that a tiny handful of semi-mythologised heroines - Agustina Zaragoza in Spain, Molly Pitcher in the States - have been acquired a privileged position that far outweighs their actual importance. How, then, can one best approach the most characteristic female figure in the panorama of 'horse and musket' warfare, namely the 'baggage', the soldier's wife who tramped to war in the wake of her husband and carried out a whole range of auxiliary roles in barrack and bivouac alike? In this article, it is argued that one possible source is the ballad, dozens of such works not only discussing the issue of women at war but also doing so in a voice that almost certainly in part comes to us from the otherwise silent lips of the women themselves.

Introduction

If there is one aspect of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars that currently cries out for attention more than any other it is the issue of its impingement on the lives of Europe's women. In the course of the conflicts of the period 1792-1815, millions of women at the very least found the passage of their lives disrupted by the descent upon their homes of one or other of the contending armies, by the experience of military occupation, and by the demands of systems of recruitment that deprived them of all too many husbands, sons and fathers, while for many of those women there was also the experience of real horror in the form of pillage, rape and massacre, not to mention famine and disease. That this is a subject crying for a

monograph goes without saying, but in this article we shall concentrate on one group of women, namely the wives who, as had been the case throughout the eighteenth century, accompanied the British army to war. Though examined with considerable acuity by a number of historical novelists - examples here include Georgette Heyer, E.V. Thompson and Arthur Eaglestone¹ - the subject is one that has largely been ignored by historians. In all his thousands of pages of writing on the Peninsular War, for example, Sir Charles Oman could only manage a few hundred words on them and then dismissed them as 'impedimenta' while there is but one monograph on the subject, and even that is at best rather superficial.² That this should be the case is hardly surprising: setting aside the few wives of officers and generals who accompanied the men on campaign, the vast majority of the women concerned were illiterate, while they have left a footprint in the archives that for the most part has yet to be traced.³ This article will draw upon the comparatively unknown sources including folk songs and street ballads. As we shall see, by no means all the many works of this sort that refer to the lives of army wives and women date from the Napoleonic period - many are rather eighteenth-century in origin or even earlier - but this distinction does not matter; the experiences of a campfollower trudging along in the wake of the forces of the Duke of Marlborough were pretty much the same as those of one doing so in the wake of the Duke of Wellington, while the fact that songs continued to be sung for 100 years or more after they first appeared suggests that their subject matter continued to be relevant in the eyes of succeeding generations.⁴

Home and Recruitment

The first level of female involvement in the struggle that must be looked at concerns the experiences of British women in their own homes in England, and, more particularly, their contacts with recruiting parties, the soldiers garrisoned in their towns and villages and, on occasion, actually billeted with them, or, finally, regiments marching from one place to another. Here we may begin with a song that was collected in the Appalachian Mountains in the years before the First World War, but which certainly dates back to at least the eighteenth century. Entitled 'A Soldier Boy for Me', this takes as a theme an issue that will serve very well as a point of

¹ Cf. G. Heyer, *The Spanish Bride* (London: William Heinemann, 1940); E.V. Thompson, *Cassie* (London, 1991); A. Eaglestone, *Forward the Baggage!* (London: Overdale, 2004).

² Cf. C. Oman, *Wellington's Army* (London, 1913), pp. 274-8; F.C.G. Page, *Following the Drum: Women in Wellington's Wars* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd 1986).

³ The recent rediscovery of a memoir by the wife of a private soldier has therefore been exciting indeed, but it is, alas, an event that is not likely to be repeated. For the work concerned, cf. R. Probert, ed., *Catherine Exley's Diary: the Life and Times of an Army Wife in the Peninsular War* (Kenilworth: Brandram, 2014).

⁴ For a general discussion of the subject, cf. D. Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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departure. To judge by its cadence and structure, a song that was sung as an accompaniment to some sort of physical activity - spinning or weaving, hoeing the soil or washing clothes - this expresses something of the longing for excitement and glamour that must have filled the minds of many young girls growing up amidst the monotony and dreary toil of life on a farm or in a village or a small country town. Such a longing was natural enough, but what is particularly interesting here is the fact that the figure which encapsulates this longing is the soldier. Thus, the text centres on a discussion of potential husbands, and specifically rejects a variety of more-or-less respectable possibilities in favour of taking up with that most risky of prospects, the soldier: 'A soldier boy, a soldier boy, a soldier boy for me; if ever I get married, a soldier's wife I'll be.'⁵ That young girls should have fantasised about such an ideal is hardly surprising. Dressed in uniform coats and, at least in the case of the recruiting parties that were the representatives of the armed forces who were most likely to be encountered in the depths of eighteenth-century England, bedecked with plumes, cockades and ribbons, soldiers offered a splash of colour in a world otherwise dominated by drab homespun linen. At the same time, soldiers travelled, saw the world and had adventures, while by virtue of their very profession, the naive mind might easily invest them one-and-all with notions of honour, courage and vitality, not to mention the hope of social advancement: did not 'Over the Hills and Far Away' - probably the most well-known of all the many ballads that dealt with the military world - speak of the soldiers returning from the wars 'all gentlemen'? In a most literal sense, then, soldiers seemed to offer young girls a way out, and, with soldiers themselves often all too happy to share tales of bravado and in general 'buckle their swash', there must have been many village maids who thrilled at the arrival of a recruiting party or detachment of troops.⁶ Indeed 'The Heiland [sic] Soldier', provides a graphic example:

High up amang yon Heiland hills
There lives a canny maiden,
And she's gone oot ane fine summer's nicht
To watch all the soldier's paradin'.
And they looked sae braw as they marched awa',
The drums they did rattle and the pipes they did blaw,

⁵ The lyrics of 'A Soldier Boy for Me' were collected by the author from its rendition on a cassette entitled 'The Soldier's Muse' recorded by Hoddesdon Folk Music Club in 1980; meanwhile, various versions thereof may be found at <http://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=53515>, [accessed 1 March 2011].

⁶ For the lyrics of 'Over the Hills and Far Away', cf. http://napoleonicwars.org/music_hills.htm [accessed, 2 February 2010]. A classic 'recruiting' song, the latter tells its own tale of relations between the sexes:

We all shall lead more happy lives
By getting rid of brats and wives
That schol and bawl both night and day
Over the hills and far away

Which caused young Mary for to weep and say,
I will follow my Heiland soldier.⁷

To teenage dreams, of course, there was added sexual excitement. Sung by a drummer who is both the son and the grandson of men who were drummers before him, 'Darby Kelly' is very much a rollicking tale of drumsticks and drumming, and a downright hymn to soldiers' prowess between the sheets:

My grandsire beat a drum so neat, his name was Darby Kelly-o;
No lad so true at rat tat too, at roll call or reveille-o.
When Marlborough's name first raised his fame, my gran he beat the points
of war:
At Blenheim he, at Ramillies, made ears to tingle near and far.
For with his wrist he'd such a twist, the girls would leer you don't know
how:
They laughed and cried and sighed and died, to hear him beat his row dow
dow.⁸

Of course, not all girls were fool enough to think that running off with a soldier would be an easy option.⁹ But might not there be another way? Such was certainly the message of a Napoleonic ballad associated with Wiltshire entitled 'The Gallant Hussar'. In this story a young girl named Jane falls in love with a hussar and is locked up for a year on bread and water by her parents for her pains. Finally released, she flies to see him, and begs him to take her away with him, but the soldier refuses, telling her that she will be 'ever undone' and left with 'no portion'. The result being a storm of tears and protests, it is rather the gallant hussar - one Edwin - who is undone: discovering true love, he resolves to abandon soldiering and marry her as a civilian, this being an outcome that is doubly satisfying - at least from the view of

⁷ Lyrics: http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Heiland_Soldier.htm, [accessed 21 September 2010].

⁸ Lyrics: <http://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=30123>, [accessed 21 September 2010].

⁹ Such a young woman is commemorated by 'The Bonnie Lass of Fyvie', this being a Scottish ballad that likely dates from the campaigns of the Marquess of Montrose in the English Civil War and tells the story of how a beautiful girl named Peggy is wooed, with a conspicuous lack of success, by an Irish captain called Ned who dies of a broken heart shortly afterwards; cf.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bonnie_Lass_o'_Fyvie, [accessed 13 June 2011]. There is a later English version entitled 'Pretty Peggy of Derby', which takes much the same line (cf. http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Pretty_Peggy_of_Derby_O.htm, [accessed 13 June 2011]), but in Scotland yet another version called 'Bonnie Barbry' sees the matter very much left open, cf. <http://www.ellengozion.com/lyrics.html>, [accessed 13 June 2011].

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contemporary society - in view of the manner in which it neatly evades any challenge to social convention.¹⁰

In reality, however, things were not so simple, for, to marry Jane, Edwin would necessarily have had to become a deserter, thereby in effect placing the couple outside the law. Whichever way the situation was played, then, girls who took up with soldiers faced an uncertain future, and, in the face of all this, it was but natural that there should have arisen a variety of cautionary tales. One such is a song associated with the north-east of England entitled 'Martinmas Time' that a couple of lines suggest dates from the seventeenth century. The lyrics are a little obscure, but the story which they appear to tell is more-or-less as follows. A troop of cavalymen enter a village and encounter a farmer's daughter whom they persuade to report to their quarters 'when no-one did her spy, oh'. Exactly what was said was not recorded, but, to judge from the exchange that takes place when the girl turns up, the soldiers were hoping to recruit her as a communal 'kept woman'. However, to get her to co-operate, they seemingly promised her that she might enlist with them, for before turning up the girl cuts off her hair 'as short as any dragoon-oh' and dresses herself as a 'nice little boy'. No sooner does she present herself, however, than the truth is revealed: the soldiers offer her money to take a room in the village and scorn her protestations that she had come to enlist; still worse, when the girl refuses to comply they make to rape her. In this instance the last laugh is on the predators - the girl claps spurs to her horse and gallops away - but it was clearly a close-run thing.¹¹ More often, one suspects, it was the soldiers who triumphed. One here comes to a song that is still sung today and reflects the received wisdom that all soldiers were knaves who preyed upon the civilian population in general, and young women in particular.¹² Entitled 'Soldier, Soldier, Won't You Marry Me?', this essentially takes the form of a dialogue between a young girl and a soldier who, it is inferred, is either billeted on her family or stationed in the area. Perhaps because the

¹⁰ Lyrics: <http://history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getfolk.php?id=110>, [accessed 1 March 2010]; songs which mention hussars may be dated with some certainty to the nineteenth century by the fact that no British cavalry regiments affected hussar dress until the Napoleonic Wars.

¹¹ Lyrics: <http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/anne.briggs/songs/martinmastime.html>, [accessed 4 February 2010]. The story presented here is a simplified version of what is a very long ballad. However, it may be assumed that many of the details omitted are mere poetic licence: for example, it is not very credible that the girls should have been able to equip herself as a soldier before presenting herself to her would-be seducers. Yet given that the song comes from Northumberland, there may be a ring of truth even here: the area was one of the main zones of activities of the cross-border raiders known as the reivers, and many farmsteads would therefore have had small stores of arms until well into the seventeenth century.

¹² It is interesting to note here that in English the knave in a pack of cards is also referred to as a 'jack'. Given that 'jack' was also a common nickname given to soldiers at the time that playing cards were first introduced in the fifteenth century, it is clear that the connection was one that had in effect existed since time immemorial.

girl has been made pregnant by him, the girl begs the soldier to marry him, but the soldier says that he cannot do so as he 'has no shirt to put on'. Nothing daunted, the girl goes off 'to her grandfather's chest' and gets him a shirt 'of the very, very best', which the soldier then happily puts on. Pleased that the difficulty has been resolved, the girl resumes her plea, only for the soldier to make fresh difficulties. First of all it is a coat that her man has not got, then a hat, then gloves and then finally shoes, but on each occasion the girl raids the chest and brings him what he needs. At last the man is fully clothed, and so the girl tries yet again, only finally to be told that the soldier has a wife of his own. At this point the song comes to an abrupt halt - the stark 'punchline' is, perhaps, one of the reasons for its enduring popularity with children - but in reality no further comment is needed: in six short verses one is informed of all that one needs to know of soldiers and the dangers that they represented, and one can imagine generations of mothers singing the song to their daughters in the hope that none of them would make the same mistake.¹³

But make the same mistake all too many women did. In another song entitled 'The Gentleman Soldier' that, like its predecessor, almost certainly dates from the eighteenth century, we hear of a soldier on guard duty who seduces a young girl called Polly and, in words of grim humour, 'drilled her up in the sentry box wrapped up in a soldier's cloak'. The *dénouement*, is all too predictable. The couple having 'tossed and tumbled till daylight did appear', the soldier rises, pulls on his clothes, and announces that he must be on his way. Much distressed, Polly, who, as we later learn, is already pregnant, attempts to plead her case, but receives much the same answer as the anonymous girl cited in the previous paragraph. 'Oh, come you gentleman soldier, won't you marry me?' 'Oh no, me dearest Polly, such a thing can never be, for I've a wife already and children I have three! Two wives are allowed in the army but one's too much for me!' The cruel jest of the soldier is redolent of the callousness of all too many of the redcoats, while Polly is left with the task of bearing 'a little militia boy' nine months later. Shamed forever, it is implied that she has no option but to turn to prostitution, but, that said, she does at least embark on her new life equipped with a suitably cynical frame of mind. As she remarks, 'If anyone comes a-courting you, you can treat them to a glass. If anyone comes a-courting you, you can say you're a country lass. You don't have to tell them that ever you played this joke - that you were drilled in a sentry box wrapped up in a soldier's cloak!'¹⁴

If Polly becomes a prostitute, the soldier is unrepentant, and gaily marches off to, one presumes, fresh conquests. Indeed the chorus might also be regarded as an ideal motto for such a rover: 'The drums they go with a ratatat and the fifes they loudly

¹³ Lyrics: <http://www.musicanet.org/robokopp/english/osoldier.htm>, [accessed 23 January 2010].

¹⁴ Lyrics: <http://goireland.about.com/od/irishtradandfolkmusic/qt/irishfolkgentle.htm>, [accessed 23 January 2010].

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play: “Fare thee well, Polly my love, I must be on my way.” Such nonchalant bravado is certainly reflected in certain songs that reflect the point of view of the soldier rather than that of the woman. Here the most obvious example is a humorous ballad entitled ‘The Rambling Soldier’ in which a dreadfully likeable anti-hero looks back cheerfully on a military career in which conquering the enemy features hardly at all and conquering women features a great deal. Seemingly employed most of the time as a recruiting sergeant, he is commissioned to ‘range the country over’ and proceeds to lead ‘a gay and splendid life’ whose chief glory is the fact that in every town he has, he says, ‘a different wife’. Archly justifying his conduct on the grounds that ‘the king did want young soldiers’- a reference to the fact that many of the bastards left scattered around the country in the wake of his travels would find that their only option was to enlist in the army in their turn - the rambling soldier cares not a whit for his victims; as he says, indeed, ‘No doubt some lasses will me blame, but never once they can me shame.’¹⁵

Yet not all soldiers were philanderers concerned only with notching up as many rolls in the hay as they could manage. That soldiers could, on occasion, be decent men, indeed, is something that is reflected in several ballads. In the already quoted ‘Heiland Soldier’, for example, the object of the girl’s love tries hard to persuade her to go home and forget him, while in the rather similar ‘Mary and the Soldier’ - probably a version of the same song – he goes to considerable lengths to warn her of the dangers she might face, and, when she proves adamant, says that he will only do so if the couple get married first:

And when he saw her loyalty, and Mary so true-hearted,
He said, ‘Me darling, married we’ll be, and nothing but death will part us,
And when we’re in a foreign land, I’ll guard you, darling, with my right hand,
And hope that God might stand a friend to Mary and her gallant soldier.’¹⁶

Nor were girls necessarily forgotten even when the men had to march away without them. As an example of such feelings, for example, we can here cite the famous march known variously as ‘Brighton Camp’ or ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’. Popular with British and American armies from the Seven Years’ War till the American Civil War, the tune is supposed to date back until at least the mid-seventeenth century, while its words are as heartfelt as they are simple: in brief, the singer looks back with longing to a girl called Sally, laments the rapid passing of the time spent in her company and expresses a fervent prayer that ‘kind Heaven’ will send him safely back to her embrace.¹⁷ Soldiers, in short, were capable of love as well as lust, and that this

¹⁵ Lyrics: <http://hicketytip.tripod.com/Songbook/rambling.htm>, [accessed 24 January 2010]

¹⁶ Lyrics: <http://www.chivalry.com/cantaria/lyrics/mary-soldier.html>, [accessed 21 September 2010]

¹⁷ Lyrics: http://eddiemcguire.com/music_girlleft.htm, [accessed 24 January 2010]

was the case is testified to by 'High Germany' - a song which almost certainly dates from an age that was not encumbered by the regulations which we shall discuss below - in which, in a neat reversal of the roles we have seen above, a soldier named Willy does his utmost to persuade his girl - another Polly - to march off to war with him, only for the young woman concerned to point out that the rigours of campaigning are too tough for the fairer sex to face and that, in any case, she was with child by him and therefore 'not fitted for the wars'.¹⁸

Separation

We arrive, then, at the pain of separation, and, though doubtless keenly felt by many soldiers, it was, perhaps an emotion that hit women rather more strongly, if only because it was often accompanied by economic disaster. For the village girl smitten with some plough boy, not to mention the mothers and sisters of said plough boys, there was the fact that enlistment meant that the young men concerned had gone away for years, often never to return, and of such sorrow we hear a great deal. Thus, in the Scottish song 'High Germany' (not to be confused with the English namesake mentioned above), which dates either from the War of the Spanish Succession or the even earlier Thirty Years' War (in which many Scottish mercenaries fought for the cause of the Swedish king, Gustavus Adolphus), a girl travels to the port of Leith to watch her soldier-lover borne away over the horizon and curses the cruel wars that have taken him away.¹⁹

Once the ship had slipped beyond the horizon, of course, the girl could only dream of her lover's return. Of course, from time to time this actually happened, and, not surprisingly, the possibility was celebrated in the musicography. Thus, in a Scottish ballad entitled 'Donald of Glencoe', a soldier returned from ten years in the wars comes back to his native Glencoe and encounters the girl he had been in love with prior to 'going for a soldier'. Seeing that the girl is unaware of who he is, he decides to test her constancy to him by endeavouring to engage in a flirtation with him. To his delight, however, the girl resists all his blandishments, and he therefore triumphantly draws forth the glove he had carried ever since he went away as a love token (the girl, of course, would have had its partner). Amidst tears of joy, the couple, then, are re-united, and resolve to live in peace together far from 'the loud blast of battle'.²⁰ Thus does hope spring eternal in the human breast. As like as not,

¹⁸ Lyrics: <http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/h/highgermany.shtml>, [accessed 24 January 2008] There are many different versions of this song, and it is often claimed that it is Irish, but its early date and the fact that almost certainly it refers to the Thirty Years War suggests that it is rather an English song that was later picked up in Ireland.

¹⁹ Lyrics: <http://www.kovideo.net/lyrics/c/Cherish-The-Ladies/High-Germany.html>, [accessed 24 January 2010].

²⁰ Lyrics: <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Donald-of-Glencoe-lyrics-Cara-Dillon/E62F9B7184515D1C48256F2E0027CB66>, [accessed 2 March 2011]. Rather similar is 'Pretty Fair

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however, it would not be the man who turned up, but bad news. For a good example, we have 'The Bonnie Light Horseman', which is a lament for a cavalryman in a hussar or light-dragoon regiment killed in action against the forces of Napoleon, very probably in the Corunna campaign in the winter of 1808-1809. Not only were a number of British cavalry heavily engaged in such actions as Sahagún de Campos, but the return of the forces of Sir John Moore to England directly from the horrors of the battlefield had a tremendous impact upon a public that was normally shielded from such sights; at the same time the reference to the soldier being killed 'coming home' may also be a clue here. Whatever the exact circumstances, however, this is a song of deep mourning: the girl cries for her lost lover, and speaks of throwing over everything in her despair and wandering the world as a vagabond for the rest of her days.²¹

It was not just sweethearts who suffered, of course. Mothers, too, watched their sons march away, and they, too, sometimes heard long afterwards of deaths in distant battles. Just occasionally, however, their sons returned to them. If the women were lucky, the men concerned were both intact and eager to make up for past failings - the well-known 'Wild Rover' may refer to one such penitent - but, if they were not, they found themselves confronted by tragic figures fit only for begging. One such tale is recounted by the bitter-sweet 'Mrs McGrath'. In brief, a distraught mother living in some coastal town goes down to the quay every day to enquire if the crews have any news of her soldier son, only for the young man suddenly to appear one day with two wooden legs, a cannon ball having maimed him at the battle of Fuentes de Oñoro. The wails of grief that ensue echo down the years, as, perhaps, does the evident confusion as to who her son had been fighting:

Now were you drunk, or were you blind
When you left your two fine legs behind?
Or was it walking upon the sea
That took your two fine legs from me?
All foreign wars, I do proclaim,
They're only blood and a mother's pain,
And I'd rather have my son as he used to be
Than the King of America and his whole navy.²²

Miss', for in this ballad we hear how a young girl working in her garden was suddenly accosted by a soldier who, to her astonishment, asks her to marry him. Much startled, the girl protests that she has a lover who went for a soldier some seven years since, and that she loves him still, whereupon the soldier produces the ring she gave him when they parted, and all is joy and happiness; cf. <http://www.ellengozion.com/lyrics.html>, [accessed 13 June 2011].

²¹ Lyrics: <http://www.contemplator.com/england/horseman.html>, [accessed 24 January 2010].

²² Lyrics:

All this was bad enough, but for soldiers' wives the situation was still worse. In the British army soldiers were allowed to marry in peacetime with the permission of their company commander, and many seem to have done so, often living with their families in the shelter of the curtained-off corner of a barrack room. When a regiment was sent abroad, however, only a set proportion of the women concerned - usually six per company - were allowed to accompany the men, the deal being that they would be provided with half rations in exchange for acting as cooks, laundresses and general 'maids of all work'. The problem, of course, was that, in any given company, twenty or more men might have wives and, indeed, children, and therefore a ballot followed to select the lucky handful who would go on campaign. Given the dangers and discomforts involved, the word 'lucky' might seem an odd choice here, but for the women left behind their situation was generally so dire as to be still worse: they were turned adrift with nothing more than a licence to beg their way back to their towns of origin, and that despite the fact that they were very often burdened with young children. In effect, this often meant that sooner or later there would be a slide into prostitution, and it is this which prompts the citation at this point of the well-known 'Johnny has gone for a soldier'. Although this appears to have originated in Ireland at the time of the departure of the 'wild geese' following the victory of William III at the battle of the Boyne, it is particularly associated with the American War of Independence, and stands as a generic lament of all the thousands of wives who found themselves thus stranded. And very grim it is too, the girl concerned talking of dying her petticoats red - in other words, becoming a prostitute - begging her way through life and filling her parents with shame. At all events, the words are full of an anguish that the passage of the centuries has done nothing to diminish. Thus: 'I wish I were on yonder hill: 'tis there I'd sit and I'd cry my fill. And ev'ry tear would turn a mill; Johnny has gone for a soldier.'²³ Nor is 'Johnny has gone for a soldier' the only such lament. In 'The Recruited Collier' another girl weeps for her 'dashing Jimmy', complaining how a recruiting party 'enticed him in and made him drunk' and, having got him to swear himself in as a soldier, rebuffed every attempt of her family to 'pay the smart' (i.e. buy his redemption). Mixed in with her tears, however, there is an anger not found in 'Johnny has gone for a Soldier': Jimmy

http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/b/bruce_springsteen/mrs_mcgrath.html, [accessed 21 September 2010]; no overt reference to the battle of Fuentes de Oñoro appears in the text, but the soldier gives the date of his injury as 5 May, which is the same as that of the battle.

²³ Lyrics: <http://www.chivalry.com/cantaria/lyrics/shule.html> and <http://www.contemplator.com/america/johnny.html>, [accessed 24 January 2010]. The version here presented is an amalgam of the Irish and American versions: by the time of the Napoleonic Wars, it may be presumed that the two were becoming more and more conflated.

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was off to be 'a brigadier, a grenadier', and yet expected her never to forsake him and to live her life alone.²⁴

When news came that a regiment had to leave its cantonments, the scene was likely to be one of great confusion, as witness, for example, 'The Rout it is Come for the Blues', a song that describes the moment when a cavalry regiment stationed in Scarborough was ordered to embark for some unmentioned destination ('rout' here means not a panic-stricken flight, but rather the act of turning a regiment out of its quarters). Thus, 'The lasses were crying and wringing their hands, "O the Rout it is come for the Blues, for the Blues, the Rout it is come for the Blues."' ²⁵ As already implied, however, not all women stayed at home to weep over men who had marched away. Setting aside the hundreds of women who went to war as official camp followers, there were also those - wives unlucky in the ballot or sweethearts determined not to be separated from their men - who at least thought of taking radical steps to challenge their fate by either adopting men's dress and hiding in the ranks, or simply running away with the army (indeed, an example of this last reaction may be found in 'The Rout it is Come for the Blues'). Whether dreams were ever translated into reality is another matter, but there are certainly several songs that discuss the issue, and from this it can be inferred that the idea had a certain plausibility. Perhaps the best known of these is 'The Banks of the Nile'. Based on the embarkation of the British army sent to oust the French from Egypt in 1801, the song documents an exchange between a soldier and his woman in which, having failed to get him to desert, the latter begs the man to allow her to cross-dress and enlist as a recruit. This ploy does not work, and the girl - this time a Nancy - is left to fill her mind with macabre visions of lions devouring her lover's corpse in some sandy desert far away.²⁶ Also left behind, albeit if only on account of the resistance of parents, was one 'sweet Polly Oliver', but in her instance she was made of sterner stuff. Resolving on desperate measures, she resolves to dress up in her dead brother's clothes and enlist in the army in an attempt to find her departed soldier-lover. Seemingly not knowing which unit the man is in, she chooses a regiment at random, and serves in it for some time without finding him. One day, however, the company is asked if anyone has any experience of nursing. Responding in the affirmative, she is led to the bedside of none other than her lover, there following a suitably joyful reunion (a reunion that meanwhile meets the double goal of restoring

²⁴ Lyrics: http://www.lyricsmania.com/the_recruited_collier_lyrics_kate_rusby.html, [accessed 2 February 2010].

²⁵ Lyrics: <http://www.folkinfo.org/songs/displaysong.php?songid=185&pagenum=1&reverse=false>, [accessed 25 January 2010]. Some commentators associate this song with the blue-uniformed Lifeguards, but this seems unlikely to be correct.

²⁶ Lyrics: <http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/sandy.denny/songs/banksofthenile.html>, [accessed 24 January 2010].

the woman to her proper gender status and instantly plunging her back into the role of carer).²⁷

Rather similar in some respect, but possessed of an added twist is 'The She-Volunteer'. As usual, boy meets girl, but in the game of love it is not just men who are cruel. In this instance, moreover, the young man is not even a soldier, but his suit is nonetheless scornfully rejected. Deeply hurt, he therefore resolves to join the army, and promptly marches off to war. At this, however, the girl regrets of her cruelty, and sends after him to ask him to return, only for him to tell her that he is now serving in the cause of king and country and will not be distracted from his duty for the sake of her and anyone else. To this response, of course, there is but one answer: the girl dresses herself as a man, enlists in her beloved's regiment and fights beside him in Flanders.²⁸ In other ballads, however, the lover is more accommodating, a good example here being 'Susannah Cope'. Supposedly based on a true story, this describes how a young girl eloped with a soldier of the Guards and served alongside him in disguise until a bullet wound led to her sex being discovered.²⁹ Rather similar, perhaps, is the story of Mistress Thomasina Clarke. Caught up in the English Civil War, she enlisted alongside her husband in disguise in approximately 1646 - a response, perhaps, to economic desperation - and served for nine years as a musketeer, before being caught out by the birth of a son, what is particularly interesting about the ballad that records her life - 'The Gallant She-Soldier' - being the manner in which it stresses the relish with which the woman threw herself into her role and hints very strongly that the husband was little more than an adjunct that allowed to live out an alternative life-style with verve and gusto:

²⁷ Lyrics: http://www.lyricsmania.com/sweet_polly_oliver_lyrics_sarah_brightman.html, [accessed 20 January 2011]. There are many other versions of this song. In one the girl finds her lover and fights beside him as a soldier, only for him to fall mortally wounded by her side, whereupon she is rescued by a general, the latter going on to make her his wife; lyrics: <http://www.contemplator.com/tunebook/england/polly.htm>, [accessed 1 March 2011]. Sprung from the same root is 'Polly Officer's Rambles': in this piece the girl as usual runs away, but apparently discovers that life as a free agent is much too much fun to give up. Unfortunately for her, however, her lover spots her, and she is promptly forced into marriage (a scenario that is entirely plausible: as a woman, her only role in the army is that of a wife, so it was a case of marrying or facing expulsion from the camp). For an interesting American variant, cf. <http://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=20034>, [accessed 1 March 2011]. In brief, denied from having the man she wants - in this case a captain in the American army - the girl again dresses herself as a man, and runs away to find him; this she does, and in the end all is happily resolved, despite a series of complications that are less than easy to understand (not least the fact that, thinking that she is a man, the gallant captain at one point appears to make homosexual advances upon her!).

²⁸ For the text of this song, cf. W. Chappell (ed.), *The Roxburgh Ballads* (London: Ballad Society, 1869-99), VII, p. 727.

²⁹ For the text of this song, cf. Dugaw, *Warrior Women*, (1996), pp. 186-7; both references in the lyrics and the fact that a prose version of the story appeared in print in 1800 suggest that the campaign involved was the Flemish one of 1793-95; for the pamphlet version, cf. Anon., *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Susannah Cope, the British Female Soldier* (Banbury: Cheney, 1810).

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despite the saccharine ending, it is all but overtly stated that Mistress Clarke had no intention of restricting herself to a single man, whether husband or not. Thus:

For other manly practices she gained the love of all,
For leaping and for running or wrestling for a fall,
For cudgels or for cuffing, if that occasion were,
There's hardly any one of ten men that might with her compare...

But now behold with wonder what happened at the last
After much time in merriment she had in London passed:
She found by several passages herself to be with child,
'Twas by her honest husband she could not be beguiled.³⁰

Let us say, however, that the number of women who went to war in this fashion was extremely small, and that, on the whole, the British army's procedures for limiting the number of women who took ship with its expeditions succeeded in keeping it to a statutory minimum. Yet this was the beginning of the story. Thus, a few months' campaigning was usually sufficient to augment the ranks of the camp followers with many local women who had fallen for a soldier, seized the chance to escape abuse, drudgery or boredom, been forced to take refuge with the troops after the loss of home and family, or were simply pursuing previous occupations of a horizontal nature. As 'Happy the Soldier', a song popular with the British army in the American War of Independence, puts it, 'No girl, when she hears it, though ever so glum, but packs up her tatters, and follows the drum.'³¹

Campaigning

Women, then, took part in the campaigns of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period in significant numbers, but they only rarely did so as romantic amazons in the style of Susannah Cope. Infinitely more common was the figure of the 'drab' - the bedraggled and doubtless not very attractive wife and mother who found that she had in effect merely exchanged one form of servitude for another. Here, however, the 'musicography' tends to let us down. Once upon a time, perhaps, some of the campfollowers had been the sweet young maids who feature in the ballads, but a few years of the privations and brutality of army life changed all that. The soldiers' women were in reality a pretty unprepossessing lot: they drank, they smoked, they

³⁰ For the story of Mistress Clarke, which is borne out by an entry in the baptismal register of St Botolph's church, Aldgate, for 17 July 1655, cf. <http://www.historyofwomen.org/crossbiogs.html>, [accessed 8 June 2011]. The version of the song given in the appendix is that which appears in Chappell, *Roxburghe Ballads*, VII, p. 728, but the references to France and Spain suggest that the text was added to during or after the War of the Spanish Succession; in consequence, the story of the lady's sexual adventuring may be little more than *ex post facto* embroidery.

³¹ Lyrics: <http://www.contemplator.com/england/happysld.html>, [accessed 24 January 2010].

pillaged, they were probably extremely trail-worn and weather-beaten, and their sexual morals were not those of conventional society (whilst it is certainly not true that all of them were promiscuous, nor still less that they were all prostitutes, all of them had no option but to take fresh husbands no sooner than their existing ones had been killed, whilst it is probable that, out of sheer necessity, at least some of them earned a little extra money by selling sexual services 'on the side'). Hence the fact that a 'baggage' and its derivative of 'old bag' is to this day a pejorative term for a woman in the English language, and, hence, too, the fact that the camp followers were on virtually every level a threat to accepted ideas of womanhood - Susannah Cope, by contrast, was not only a chaste and loving wife, but also a brave and disciplined soldier who had in the very act of defying convention also accepted some of its stricter norms, while, for all that they very often ended up as prostitutes, the girls who wept for their departed menfolk were very clearly figures who had accepted their place in society. As a result one finds few songs that refer specifically to the lives that women led in the field, and it is notable that the only one that has thus far been identified - 'The Fate of Faithful Nancy and William of the Wagon-Train' - is a very conventional tale of a virtuous wife married to one of Wellington's soldiers who is mortally wounded by a stray shot while watching a battle, stumbles onto the battlefield to seek her husband, and, tragically enough, comes across his dead body.³² We here see a clear attempt to sanitise a reality that was usually much less palatable, but, as Holly Mayer writes of the women who went to war in the American War of Independence, 'Female campfollowers were rarely extolled in song or story. They were more likely to be ridiculed for not being decorous, self-denying wives, sisters, daughters ... Campfollowers were a problem for they muddled the image of the orderly, virtuous society that the revolutionaries were trying to create.'³³ If this was so of colonial America, meanwhile, so it was equally the case with *ancien-régime* Europe: whatever France's opponents were fighting for, it was most certainly not, in the words of yet another well-known ballad, 'a world turned upside down'.

Thus far, we have looked entirely at the subject of women acting within the traditional female sphere, the furthest that the cases that we have heard of having gone having been to adopt men's clothing for the explicit purpose of staying within a cherished relationship. There is, however, one other area to be considered in the form of that of the woman who seizes the chance to escape abuse, drudgery,

³² I owe my knowledge of this ballad to Gregg Butler of the folkgroup 'Strawhead'. William's unit was the Royal Wagon Train, a transport corps organised in 1802.

³³ H.A. Mayer, 'Women and wagoners: camp followers in the American War for Independence', *History Now*, No. 21 (September, 2009), http://www.historynow.org_2009/historian5.html, [accessed 25 January 2010]. Also worth noting is Mayer's full-length work on the same subject, viz. H.A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

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boredom, or possibly even live out an alternative sexuality, and not only enlists as a man, but seeks to serve permanently in that capacity. There were a few notorious cases of such individuals, and though, lamentably enough, none are known from the Napoleonic era, the idea was still celebrated in song (indeed, we have already come across it in 'Martinmas Time'). Thus, one ballad that was doing the rounds at the time of the Peninsular War and the battle of Waterloo was 'The Famous Woman Drummer', this being an extraordinary tale of a young girl who runs away from home and is taken on by the army as a drummer, in which capacity she serves for some time and with great credit before finally being unmasked by a fellow woman who falls in love with her and betrays her to her commanding officer when she discovers her secret.³⁴ Once again the number of such cases may not have been very great, but exist they most certainly did, and so here, too, the popular music of the time captures an aspect of the wars against France that would otherwise go almost unrecorded. What is more, whereas the drunken and foul-mouthed baggage was a phenomenon from which the music of the period shrank, along, be-it-said, with the prostitutes who clustered around every barracks in the country (an exception here is 'The Trooper and the Maid', a rather sordid ditty which revolves around the visit of a soldier to a prostitute called Sis who plies her trade in a tavern run by her own mother), we see here a phenomenon that was actively celebrated.³⁵ Although the text does not say as much in so many words, the young girl drummer of the song had not just adopted men's garb, but also cast aside the perceived physical and moral infirmities of her sex and, in effect, became a man. How strange, then, that she should be a more acceptable figure than her sisters who had rather chosen paths that were, comparatively speaking, at least, much more conventional.

Conclusion

The folksongs and ballads that have been looked at here offer an imperfect view of the experiences of British women in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era. Very

³⁴ For the lyrics of 'The Famous Female Drummer', cf. Chappell, *Roxburgh Ballads*, VII, p. 730 (for a more generic version entitled simply 'The Female Drummer', cf. http://eddiemcguire.com/music_femdrum.htm, [accessed 24 January 2010]). This ballad is, it seems, based on another true story, albeit one in which it turns out that there was a man involved in the story after all. In brief, the girl concerned was one Mary Ann Talbot (1778-1808). The illegitimate daughter of an English lord, according to the version of her life that is usually given, she was at the age of fourteen seduced by an officer named Bowen who was conducting her to a new guardian in London. Disguised as a servant, she first accompanied Bowen to the West Indies, and from there, now forcibly enlisted as a drummer, she sailed with him back to Flanders, where she was wounded at the siege of Valenciennes. Finally freed from Bowen, who was killed in the final assault, she then deserted and, after a complicated series of adventures which may or may not have seen her serve in both the French navy and the Royal Navy, she finally ended up being taken on as a domestic servant by a publisher named Kirby who published two different versions of her life and secured her some degree of notoriety. For all this, cf. <http://www.historyofwomen.org/crossbiogs.html>), [accessed 13 June 2011].

³⁵ For the lyrics of 'The Trooper and the Maid' - no maid she! - cf. http://www.chivalry.com/cantaria/lyrics/trooper_and_the_maid.html, [accessed 21 September 2010].

acute on the interaction between soldiers and lower-class women in civilian society, they have less to offer on the lives that women led on campaign. Interestingly, this does not just apply to the wives of the common soldiers, but also to those of the officers: the latter, perhaps because they simply had no place in the world which the balladeers were seeking to reflect or address. Indeed, in rather the same way that the poster imagery of Republican Spain placed great emphasis on the utterly unrepresentative figure of the *miliciiana*, so the ballads and folksongs generated by 150 years of 'horse and musket' warfare chose to highlight the equally unrepresentative figure of the 'female warrior'. That said, if other sources will continue to provide us with the bulk of our information on the wars, the popular 'musicography' of the Napoleonic Wars remains an important source that deserves to be better known, and it is very much to be hoped that this short piece will do something to point to its value.

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