

'Noble Volunteers' Review: The Men Beneath the Red Coats

By Don N. Hagist, Westholme, 332 pages, \$34

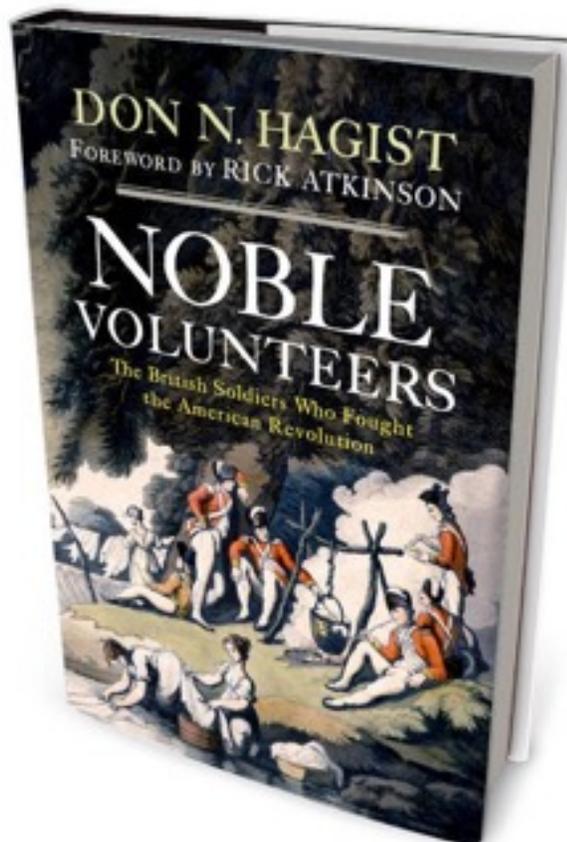
Few stereotypes from the American Revolution are as well-developed as that of the soldier who fought for Britain. The caricature is ubiquitous: A one-dimensional "lobster," the "bloody-back" regular, motivated by selfishness, who fought for the love of money. He was heartless and cowardly; a pawn of the king, inept on the battlefield because of his old European ways. Here was a convenient foil for the resourceful Patriot, who fought valiantly on the winning side and for all the right reasons—family, farms and freedom. In "Noble Volunteers," Don Hagist invites us to peer beneath the red coat. What do we find?

One central insight is that "there was no 'typical' British soldier." British regulars encompassed "such a range of nationalities, ages, skills, and socioeconomic backgrounds" that we are better off "appreciating how they were different rather than how they were the same." What, for instance, motivated them to enlist? The reasons were as many as the men who joined, with neither unemployment nor impoverishment ranking high on the list. Most were between the ages of 20 and 25, but little else united them. Some sought new careers. Others to escape overbearing mothers, or wives. Others still were moved by wanderlust or boredom. Mr. Hagist is skeptical of accounts, such as Sylvia Frey's "The British Soldier in America," that draw conclusions about soldiers' motives from quantitative data. Too much was idiosyncratic, a mystery.



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Mr. Hagist concentrates on the particular. We follow the British soldiers in America from Boston in 1773, before hostilities break out, to Yorktown in 1781. But it is not the battlefield that is most intriguing here; it is instead Mr. Hagist’s wealth of detail about all other aspects of a British soldier’s life. Recruitment in Britain (and elsewhere); months-long transport in private vessels across the Atlantic, its trials and wonders (“flying fish, sharks, sea turtles, seals, and icebergs”); soldiers’ wages, within and without the army; literacy rates; training exercises; living

arrangements in barracks, huts, wigwams and encampments; what they wore, ate and drank; the diseases they contracted; their desertions; “the plunder problem” (“the army’s Achilles’ heel,” says Mr. Hagist, because of its effect on the “hearts and minds” of the local populace); soldiers’ prizes, promotions and demotions; drafts and impressments; punishments and courts-martial; entertainments; religious dispositions; injuries, imprisonments and, occasionally, deaths; and, for some, their postwar lives. It is all here.

Every reader is sure to learn something, and in the process will come upon a favorite among the British soldiers. One of Mr. Hagist’s is Roger Lamb, whom he wrote about previously in “British Soldiers, American War” (2012). Lamb, from a middle-class Dublin family, enlisted with the 9th Regiment of Foot in 1773, at the age of 17, having lost all his money gambling. In America he saw heated action in two major campaigns; was captured twice; and, twice escaping, rejoined the British army each time. Returning to England in 1784—and discharged (from the 23rd Regiment) but “denied a pension because he had served only twelve years and had no disability”—he became a schoolteacher and published author, living until 1830.

Or, take William Crawford. An “ardent disposition for adventure” led him to join the 20th Regiment knowing that meant war in America. Captured, he was interned at Saratoga, N.Y., and marched for months throughout the north, then south to Virginia. Escaping, he was recaptured and jailed. Not to be so easily outdone, he befriended the jailer’s daughter hoping she would release him. Things didn’t go quite as he planned. “She forged a marriage certificate, spirited him out of jail, and presented him to townspeople as her husband.” Crawford accepted his fate. Others also remained in America, many with land grants. Still, most soldiers’ lives were not as well documented, and many ended in much darker places.

When we attempt to see the American Revolution through the eyes of its British soldiers, we are reminded that thinking historically about the war is difficult. It requires us not only to forget how events turned out, but also to recapture very particular moments from the participants’ perspectives. “Standing sentry on a storm-swept shoreline in the middle of a winter night, fending off a rising fever while fearful of imminent attack by assailants unseen, may have been one man’s most difficult hours of an eight-year war,” writes Mr. Hagist, “but histories focused on pivotal campaigns are unkind to such personal experiences, trivializing or entirely overlooking most of the hardships endured by most of the soldiers.”

Mr. Hagist, the managing editor of the *Journal of the American Revolution*, also overturns the notion that British troops steadfastly held to European ways, marching into battle in close-order formations. They were remarkably fleet of foot, brave and resourceful. They “continued to prevail against superior numbers by using zealous speed and steadiness,” even when coming to battle “pretty much fatigued, marching & halting far above 20 hours & little to eat or drink,” as one combatant reported. The author posits that “the ultimate loss of the American colonies was not caused by inability of British soldiers to adapt to warfare in America but to challenges of logistics, manpower, and especially the lack of a clear strategic vision of how to win a war against a popular insurgency.”

Lavishly illustrated, the book includes several images from the manuscripts on which “Noble Volunteers” relies; archives are mined in the United States and England, but also in Canada, Ireland and Scotland. Scouring those remains and “piecing together fragments,” Mr. Hagist’s “patchwork biographies” bring life to the British soldiers who fought in the American Revolution, giving human dimensions to those anonymous figures beneath their red coats whose caricature we should put to rest.