

1 Introduction

Stephen M. Miller

It was over fifty years ago that Brian Bond published his edited collection entitled *Victorian Military Campaigns*, a volume which brought together several of the leading military historians of the day to write about Great Britain's imperial wars of the nineteenth century. At the time, as Bond indicated in his introduction, the scholarship on the subject was quite limited and what existed was often deeply flawed. Historians were only starting to utilize the public archives and, of those, few were interested in military history. Some of the literature was excellent, but most writers of military history remained content writing hagiographies of great generals or recounting the narratives of great wars. Much of the work lacked political context and overlooked the 'enemy' which the British forces had to overcome, and often arguments could not be disentangled from 'imperialist assumptions'.¹ In a brief, yet significant attempt, Bond's contributors, as they had intended, made great inroads in expanding the body of literature and influencing scholars for years to come.

As a result, the scholarship of Victorian military campaigns has grown tremendously since the late 1960s. Political institutions and their relationship with the military have been examined as have important factors related to war and society. The tools of the social and cultural historian have been employed with great efficacy to unlock much of what we now know about the impact of class, race, and gender on the military. Historians are just as likely to study the impact of the regimental system on morale as they are the press, music hall, or volunteer associations. Although there are still some accounts written by journalists and others which make little or no attempt to connect to the available modern historiography and ground themselves firmly in the historical record, no serious historian today would forego a visit to the archives. Indeed, non-English language sources are increasingly seen as vital to any thorough investigation of British imperial history. English-language works

¹ Brian Bond (ed.), *Victorian Military Campaigns* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967), 3.

may still dominate the field, and the focus of study still leans towards the British experience, but the literature which presents the African, Asian or, in the case of New Zealand, the Māori experience, has grown dramatically as well. As an example of how much things have changed, the major work of reference which Bond mentioned in his introduction, Sir John Fortescue's thirteen-volume *History of the British Army*, heavy on operational detail and light on analysis, is not cited once by any of the contributors to this volume. The last volume of Fortescue's work, which overlaps with some of the period this book explores, may remain an important source for some investigations of the British military, notably how the history of the British army was viewed at the end of the nineteenth century, but its contribution to the study of Victorian imperial wars has been far overshadowed by more modern works.

British imperial conflicts, or 'small wars' as Colonel C. E. Callwell labelled them in his similarly titled work, are too many and too varied to cover in any detail in a single volume. Callwell himself, who wrote the first systematic study of these types of wars in 1896, was not interested in providing his readers with narratives of all these conflicts. He was writing a handbook to instruct officers who might encounter a great variety of conditions, adversaries, weapons, and tactics. By examining what these campaigns shared in common as well as how they differed, he was trying to show how campaigns could be won and lost. Callwell identified three types of small wars: (1) campaigns of conquest and annexation, (2) the suppressions of insurrection and lawlessness, and (3) campaigns to wipe out an insult or avenge a wrong or to overthrow a dangerous enemy.² It is important to note, however, that a campaign labelled as one type of small war could easily turn into a different type depending on political decisions and military expediency. Sometimes, these decisions were made in London, but as Bond noted, Victorian generals in the field were regularly granted great independence,³ not just in overseeing military strategy but dictating peace terms and determining factors which could change the political future of the colony, territory, or annexed state.

Much of *Small Wars* focused on conflicts between Europeans and those who Callwell labelled pejoratively as 'half-civilized' or 'savage' who were 'deficient in courage and provided with poor weapons' and who shunned decisive action.⁴ Callwell attempted to provide his readers with instructions of how to defeat this type of enemy whether it be

² C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: HMSO, 1906; Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 25–28.

³ Bond (ed.), *Victorian Military Campaigns*, 20. ⁴ Callwell, *Small Wars*, 31–32.

through the seizure of his capital, the capture of a recognized political leader, or the destruction of his crops and livestock. The selection of the objective was often determined by the cause of the campaign and the perceived political structure of the enemy. In determining the appropriate tactics to utilize in the campaign, Callwell looked at environmental factors and discussed hill and bush warfare, as well as the principles of employing tactical expedients such as the square, the laager, and the zeriba to their maximum effect. He also had to consider the advantages which the breechloading rifle as well as new types of smokeless propellants and other advancements in artillery provided European countries over most of their overseas enemies which resulted in a profound technology gap which only began to shrink, in some cases where western technology could be imported, in the 1890s.

Early twenty-first-century conflict in the Middle East and Central Asia has generated a renewed interest in asymmetrical warfare and Callwell's observations. Naturally, a number of articles have appeared in the similarly entitled journal *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, but references to Callwell and small wars have appeared in all of the leading military history journals, including *The Journal of Military History*, *War & Society* and *War and History*.⁵ Although many of the chapters in this volume do not specifically mention him by name, the authors were all keenly aware of Callwell's attempt to essentially codify the European, mostly British, experience of warfare overseas in the second half of the nineteenth century despite the great diversity of these imperial campaigns. All three types of small wars are discussed in the following chapters as are the environmental factors, the objective of the campaigns, and the political and social organization of the enemy. Callwell often ignored, rushed to assumptions, or did not understand the latter, and Bond's book was much more interested in looking at British institutions and British generals than in conducting detailed investigations of the armies, strategies, and war aims they had to counter. Organizational strength, however, was extremely important in determining how effectively the enemy could respond in wartime.

⁵ See, for example, Alexander Morrison, "The extraordinary successes which the Russians have achieved" – The Conquest of Central Asia in Callwell's *Small Wars*", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, 4–5 (2019): 913–36; Daniel Whittingham, "Savage warfare": C. E. Callwell, the roots of counter-insurgency, and the nineteenth century context", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23, 4–5 (2012): 591–607; and, David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith, 'Myth and the small war tradition: Reassessing the discourse of British counter-insurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, 3 (2013): 436–64. Also see, Daniel Whittingham, *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way of Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Politics at home frequently determined the timing of a small war, the objective, and the overall military response. It could also shape the aftermath of a successful campaign. Conservative, Liberal, and Whig governments alike engaged in small wars. At times, a change of government during a campaign could produce a significant impact on its direction. Commanding officers overnight could become hobbled by the civilian War Office or could take action prematurely out of fear of being recalled or anticipation of being pressured to end a war. All of the chapters in this volume, discuss how political actions at home could profoundly affect small wars overseas. They also examine the role of local politics.

The impetus for many of the military campaigns launched by Britain came from overseas and were instigated by the ‘men on the spot’.⁶ Military force could, as mentioned above, avenge a wrong or restore order, or perhaps allow for the better movement of trade or interrupt a monopoly, for example, which primarily benefited local actors. The location, local factors, and the type of conflict could also determine whether the British effort would rely on local auxiliaries and/or volunteers or use them to supplement British troops. But often campaigns were launched with foreign policy in mind. Transportation and communication networks had to be protected; vulnerable frontiers had to be safeguarded. Fears of Russian intrigue in Central Asia, French challenges to the Nile and Indochina, and a potential German–Boer alliance in Southern Africa all directly or indirectly produced military activity which had far-reaching consequences. The contributors have addressed, when relevant, issues of foreign policy and security both at home and overseas.

The contributors have also paid close attention to what Daniel R. Headrick referred to in 1981 as the ‘progress and power of industrial technology’ and its linkages to Europe’s rapid conquest of Africa and Asia during the Age of New Imperialism.⁷ ‘The Tools of Empire’, whether they came in the form of technological innovation or invention which opened up an arms gap or led to advances in communication and transportation, at times, gave Great Britain a decisive advantage in some of these conflicts. The following chapters discuss, when relevant, how the British Army utilized new technologies to overcome both the enemy and

⁶ See Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981); and Alexander Schölch, ‘The “men on the spot” and the English occupation of Egypt in 1882’, *The Historical Journal* 19, 3 (1976): 773–85.

⁷ Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 3.

environmental factors, as well as address what technologies their opponents were able to employ.

In his delightfully crafted 1972 account, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars*, the popular historian Byron Farwell mentioned as many as sixty campaigns the Victorian army took part in during the second part of the nineteenth century and tried to detail almost half of them in thirty dedicated chapters.⁸ The scope of this work is not as ambitious but nevertheless presents thirteen imperial conflicts dating chronologically between the Indian Rebellion of 1857–58 and the South African War, 1899–1902. By limiting the number of expeditions considered, the authors have been able to examine each case in greater detail. Each chapter includes discussions of the origins of the conflict, its outbreak, the armies employed by both sides, the war aims, the role of technology, the function of the Royal Navy, when pertinent, and the aftermath. In addition, each chapter includes an up-to-date historiographical discussion and provides further reading. A brief narrative of each conflict is included as is, in most cases, an examination of a typical battle during the campaign.

As mentioned before, this book does not include discussions of every small war Great Britain engaged in during the period under examination. It has included the most significant, in terms of numbers and cost, and has attempted to provide a good cross section, including wars of imperial conquest, campaigns of pacification, and punitive expeditions. By including wars in North, South, East, and West Africa; South, Central, and East Asia; and in New Zealand, it has demonstrated the regional, topographical, and climatic diversity highlighting the organizational difficulties and challenges which Great Britain had to overcome. Beginning with the Indian Rebellion and ending with the South African War, it also enables readers to see the impact of changing military and military-purposed technology on strategy and tactics during this fifty-year period. Whereas the Bond volume omitted both the Indian Rebellion and the South African War, a thorough understanding of each is absolutely indispensable to an examination of imperial small wars.

Douglas Peers' investigation of the Indian Rebellion starts off this collection of essays. India was such a vital component of the British empire that its security, both domestic and foreign, was paramount and had to be protected at all costs. In large numbers, British forces, along with Sikhs from the Punjab and Gurkhas from nearby Nepal, were

⁸ Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972). Also see Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *The Colonial Wars Source Book* (London: Arms and Armour, 1995).

required to preserve Britain's rule in India when challenged in 1857 by a variety of forces, including many mutinous sepoys in the Bengal Army. Britain continued to maintain a large European and Indian force throughout its rule which was utilized at home and overseas in several small wars. Whether the British government or the Governor-General/Viceroy practiced a forward policy or one of 'masterly inactivity', force was regularly utilized to further strategic and economic ambitions. In the case of Afghanistan, as Rodney Atwood shows in Chapter 7, the goal of the small war was not annexation but to ensure influence on the frontier. When the war ended, the troops returned to their peacetime activities. In the case of Upper Burma, however, as Ian F. W. Beckett demonstrates in Chapter 11, many years of pacification were required after the rapid seizure of Mandalay, the overthrow of the ruling family, and annexation. The expedition to Tirah in 1897 – launched in part to pacify the Afridi and the Orakzais and to restore British prestige, as Sameetah Agha argues in Chapter 12 – did little to change British policies on the frontier.

Bruce Collins looks at Britain's punitive expeditions to China between 1857 and 1860 in Chapter 3. Although there were certainly strategic issues at stake, mostly concerning other western powers, the British government asserted that wrongs had to be avenged and commercial practices had to be protected and augmented. Although not driven by economic factors but solely by the need to maintain prestige, Christopher Brice, in Chapter 4, looks at the unique conflict in Abyssinia in the 1860s and the success the British achieved against both Tewodros II and nature. As Callwell wrote, 'small wars are, generally speaking, campaigns rather against nature than against hostile armies'.⁹ In Chapter 6, which addresses the Third Anglo-Asante War, Ryan Patterson similarly asserts it was the local environment which presented such great challenges to Sir Garnet Wolseley's expedition. The British forces had to overcome supply problems caused by distance and lack of roads, disease, and combat in dense forests. In Chapter 5, John Crawford investigates the New Zealand Wars, a series of conflicts lasting more than forty years, waged between Māori and the British armed forces and British (Pākehā) settlers primarily over land rights, which proved disastrous for the Māori.

Many of Great Britain's most formidable opponents during the period of investigation proved to be in northern and southern Africa. In Chapter 10, Rob Johnson details two small wars. The first, the Egyptian Campaign of 1881–82, secured the safety of the newly built Suez Canal and ensured British indirect control in Cairo. The second,

⁹ Callwell, *Small Wars*, 57.

which proved much more difficult, and resulted in the failure of relieving Khartoum in time to save Charles Gordon, was the war in the Sudan against Mahdist forces. Edward M. Spiers continues the story of the British in the Sudan in Chapter 13. Sir H. H. Kitchener's successful reconquest would restore British prestige and add to his own growing reputation. In Chapter 8, Ian Knight discusses the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, the result of a mixture of political, strategic, and economic concerns, which included, arguably, the greatest defeat the British suffered in battle in their many small wars. But if the British fully restored their prestige after the Battle of iSandlwana by winning the war, it was challenged again only two years later and 100 miles away at Majuba Hill. John Laband explores the First Anglo-Boer War, what Callwell identified as 'operations of regular armies against irregular, or comparatively speaking irregular forces' in Chapter 9.¹⁰ Those same irregular forces were put to a much greater test twenty years later when British forces, eventually numbering upwards of half a million, faced off against the Transvaal and Orange Free State commandos in a terrible campaign which devastated the land, and led to the deaths of more than 25,000 white, primarily, children, and perhaps 20,000 Africans in concentration camps. In the final chapter, Stephen M. Miller discusses the South African War, 1899–1902.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

2 The Indian Rebellion, 1857–1858

Douglas M. Peers

Background

The uprising known variously as the Indian Mutiny, the Indian Rebellion, the First War of Indian Independence, the Sepoy War, or even the Soldiers' Revolution has been the subject of hundreds of books, articles, and pamphlets.¹ Others have turned to the Urdu expression, *ghadar*, which translated means outburst, mayhem, rebellion, riot, or disturbance,² in an effort to encapsulate what consisted of a loosely connected series of events involving military mutinies, civil unrest, economic protests, religious revivals, and efforts at restoring dethroned aristocrats. Mutiny was for a long time the most common term, particularly amongst the British. But mutiny is a very limiting term: it was not only sepoys who challenged British rule – peasant cultivators, their landlords (*zamindars* and *taluqdars*), and many religious figures also participated. Others joined in at the prospect of plunder or settling old scores. Benjamin Disraeli aptly observed that 'the people of India were only waiting for an occasion and a pretext'.³ By the end of July 1857, three months after the first regiments had risen against their officers, only thirteen of the seventy-four Bengal Native Infantry Regiments were still in existence, the rest having mutinied or been disarmed and disbanded, often with considerable loss of life. All ten regular cavalry regiments had mutinied, and ten of the eighteen irregular cavalry regiments had mutinied or been disbanded. In other words, more than two thirds of the native portion of the Bengal Army had either disappeared or taken up arms

¹ Updated spellings have been used as far as possible except in instances where either the quote is from a contemporary source, the term was part of official nomenclature used at the time, or the changes are so recent that many readers may not be aware of the difference. 'Native' is used when necessary to prevent confusion when trying to identify or differentiate between individuals or units of Indian rather than European heritage, e.g. native regiments or native officers.

² Mahmood Farooqui (ed.), *Besieged 1857: Voices from Delhi* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), 394.

³ Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 13.

against their one-time masters. There were isolated outbreaks of violence elsewhere with smaller mutinies breaking out as far east as Chittagong and Dhaka and in various stations of the Bombay Presidency including Karachi, Satara, and Kolhapur, as well as in Hyderabad and a few stations of the Madras Presidency. Even the French in their enclave at Pondicherry were sufficiently worried to request protection.⁴ Contemporaries feared and not without some justification that India might be lost to the British. Henry Norman, the Assistant Adjutant General of the Bengal Army, observed just how quickly colonial rule had collapsed, and wrote to his wife that ‘We did not meet one single cart, or any sign of trade. Everywhere the dak bungalows, turnpikes, police stations and telegraph lines had been destroyed. Ten months before I had travelled along the road witnessing every sign of good government and prosperity’.⁵

These uprisings have been attributed to a Muslim conspiracy, a Hindu Brahmin plot, Christianization, not enough Christianization, modernization, not enough modernization, resurgence of tradition, and peasant discontent. Militarily, the rebels often displayed determination, commitment, and ingenuity. But the lack of an overall strategic plan, their failure to break out of the Doab (the lands lying between the Jumna and the Ganges) and ignite other areas, and their difficulties fighting large scale pitched battles against the British ultimately led to their defeat. For their part, British forces tended to best the rebels when they faced them in an open battle, but whatever advantages the British possessed were often neutralized in the bitter and bloody street fighting necessary to retake cities and towns.

A distinguishing feature of these conflicts was the savagery and destructiveness exhibited by nearly all participants. The sheer scale of the crisis and extent to which colonial authority nearly disappeared caught the British by surprise. Shock produced demands for revenge, creating what became in many respects a race war. It was also an early example of a total war, at least in terms of the extent to which distinctions between military and civilians disappeared, which accounts in part for the brutality. Arthur Peppin, a private trader in Calcutta, wrote in June 1857 that ‘the fright continues strong as ever’, and went on to justify the violence unleashed as it was ‘more than a hatred of people to people,

⁴ Lord Clarendon to Vernon Smith, 29 Sept 1857, MSS Eur F231/23, India Office Library and Records, British Library (IOLR).

⁵ William Lee-Warner, *Memoirs of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wylie Norman* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1908), 176.

but of race to race'.⁶ Race and religion were often used interchangeably: hence a war on heathens was synonymous with a war on natives who were described and marked by their skin colour. And while the dominant narrative at the time stressed British courage in the face of adversity and the perfidy of their Indian subjects, there were some who acknowledged with regret that revenge had become an end in itself. William Howard Russell, the Crimean War correspondent from the *Times* who was dispatched to India, lamented that 'All these kinds of vindictive, unchristian, Indian tortures, such as sewing Mahomedans in pig-skins, smearing them with pork-fat before execution, and burning their bodies, and forcing Hindoos to defile themselves, are disgraceful, and ultimately recoil on ourselves. They are spiritual and mental tortures to which we have no right to resort, and which we dare not perpetrate in the face of Europe'.⁷

Most commentaries on the Mutiny have framed their discussions in terms of a colonial dichotomy pitting what is British against what is Indian, a convention which ironically has been perpetrated by nationalist narratives. But on closer scrutiny one finds many parallels between the colonial forces and their rebel opponents, including recourse to religion and a readiness to use terror and brutality not only on combatants but on civilians at large. Would-be martyrs were found on both sides as were appeals to be doing the work of God. The British were tempted to read religion into everything, and to try and characterize rebel actions and thinking within tight religious parameters. Religion also shaped the actions of British soldiers. At Lucknow, Henry Norman found that some sailors who were serving with the relieving force had taken some 24-pounder shot and used it to smash some glass and marble at Shah Najaf; they declared that they 'did not intend to stand any of their idolatry'.⁸ And in Delhi, a British soldier nicknamed 'Quaker Wallace' bayoneted mutineers while chanting the 116th psalm.⁹

In practice, religion proved to be far more malleable than what colonial narratives have typically assumed. It was never as simple as a fight between one religion and another, nor was religion in and of itself an all-determining force even though British explanation at the time tended to fixate on religion, and particularly what they saw as a Muslim conspiracy. Rebel proclamations which spoke of Hindu-Muslim unity, and

⁶ Arthur Peppin, 22 June 1857, MSS Eur C488, IOLR.

⁷ William Howard Russell, *My Diary in India, in the Year 1858-9*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge Warne and Routledge, 1860), ii, 46.

⁸ Lee-Warner, *Memoirs*, 187.

⁹ William Dalrymple, 'Religious rhetoric in the Delhi Uprising', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Rethinking 1857* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2007), 35.