Richard Holmes – Soldiers

Reviewed by John Tait

Richard Holmes' latest and last work Soldiers, a greatly anticipated study, takes on the ambitious subject of the "lives and loyalties" of officers and men of the British armed forces from 1660 to the present day. A wide variety of social, political, religious and cultural areas are observed, with a mixture of personal accounts, comparative statistics and conclusions, focusing on what precisely has changed and what remains consistent in our army.

Soldiers is worth reading simply for how illuminating each chapter is to the non-military reader. Holmes draws attention to issues the army has had to deal with throughout its colourful history of which the layman might not be aware. For example I enjoyed the commentary on the status of the Territorial Army in the 21st Century, compared to times of major war. Holmes gives us the story in great detail, beginning the chapter in question with a look at the TA today, followed by an account of the early militia, and their role as defenders of the home territory, hence territorial. The chapter ends with an affirmation of the TA's crucial role in modern conflicts, having looked at its increasing significance during WW1 and its temporary envelopment into the regular army during WWII.

Equally the chapter on regimental history was profoundly informative, exploring loyalty and the sense of tribalism that has motivated soldiers throughout the army's history. We also learn how this has been done away with so frequently due to "rebadging", and as a consequence of heavy casualties to a battalion in war. We learn of the geographical ties certain regiments had for countless years, and the grim business of amalgamation following WWII that severed them.

Soldiers, whilst in its essence a historical study, also reads as a sociological piece in many parts. The chapter A National Army: 1660 – 1914 gives good examples of this. Holmes does away with stereotypical preconceptions of the "officer class", pointing instead to the muddled history of the officer corps' social construction. Whilst it is true that in the earliest days noblemen would have purchased most officer commissions, "By 1830 the aristocracy (defined to include members of peers' extended families) provided 21 per cent of officers, and the middle classes 47 per cent." (P. 161). A growing trend of increased social mobility within recruitment is illustrated, though Holmes does not shy away from the blunt facts about which class existed in which regiment, when necessary.

One could not describe the merits of this in-depth examination without a mention of the amount of qualitative, as well as quantitative examples Holmes gives us. We look at the world of the British army at a text book level, then delve deep by use of the first-hand account, at times brilliantly appropriated, into a battle, an incident at the mess hall, or an amusing story about recruitment. One of the stories that sticks to my mind being that of a memorial service carried out in a patrol base in Afghanistan, only to come under attack as it started. The service carried on, with a small number of soldiers holding off the attack. Holmes wrote, "To me this just typifies

both the role of the chaplain on modern ops and the attitude of the British soldier. Even in the midst of a heavy attack, the desire to remember and pay their respects out-weighed other considerations." (P. 235).

This book gives us in-depth accounts of the lives of soldiers not normally shown in the media, such as clergymen, and musicians, who still have a high degree of importance today. It is fascinating to read Holmes' investigations of the origins of the army Chaplin, the feats of endurance and bravery they have shown in both major wars as well as other conflicts, not to mention how they lived daily. One gets the impression that every aspect of the army is included in this lengthy but rewarding work. Gender roles and the perception of homosexuality have chapters devoted to them. The plight of the first women who served with the army reads very well, with the establishment of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps during WW1, through to the Auxiliary Territorial Service in 1938. Holmes misses nothing out, and one leaves chapters like Women Soldiers with a different perception than one entered them with; especially having read the plight of those women working on anti-aircraft batteries during World War II.

Whilst Soldiers is a very thorough and brilliantly researched book, some readers may be perturbed by the sheer weight of information that Holmes delivers. The book requires patience for the reader to reap rewards. Speaking critically, it must be said that some of the writing is lengthily drawn out, and the statistics heavy, which will be too much for some readers of popular history. However, for such a universal study of British Army life both on and off the battlefield one would find difficulty looking elsewhere.

I would highly recommend Soldiers to serious readers of military history, and to the general reader also, not only because of Holmes choice of subjects in studying British Army life but because he writes honestly and without bias on an important topic that non-military readers ought to become more aware of. A highly rewarding read.