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ROGER NORMAN BUCKLEY. — *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979. Pp. xi, 210.

The last hundred years of slavery and the slave trade in the Western Hemisphere coinciding as it did with rapid industrialization in Europe and North America generated rich seams of ironies and moral dilemmas. The limited nature of the freedom for which abolitionists worked, the efforts to prevent the collapse of sugar production in the post emancipation Caribbean, and the rise of plantations in Africa as the ocean going slave trade was suppressed are just some of the themes which recent historians have quarried to considerable effect. The present book, an extension of a McGill thesis, adds a further dimension to the complexities of Britain's relationship with her slave colonies in the early nineteenth century by tracing for the first time the early history of the first black regiments in the Caribbean.

With only one short chapter on campaigns this is not a military history in the traditional sense. Rather the author is concerned with broader ramifications of the British government's decision to raise eight regiments in which the other ranks would be largely men of African descent. Terrified of armed slaves in any capacity the colonial governments opposed the move even though with the mortality of white troops at appalling levels, the security of the British slave system was at stake. After lengthy negotiations and delays the British government got its way and took the first step in that assertion of imperial authority over colonial legislative autonomy which led to complete abolition over a generation later. More important the unwillingness of free blacks to enlist and of planters to sell their own slaves meant that army recruiters had to buy thousands of slaves direct from the transatlantic slave ships in the Caribbean. Thus the slave trade received a major official boost at the very moment when the abolitionists, among them British cabinet ministers, were becoming a national force in Britain. Indeed the author argues, though with rather circumstantial evidence, that recruiting needs explain Pitt's reluctance to commit his government to abolition of the slave trade. Finally there was the nature of the relationship between the black (and often multi racial) corps and colonial society, particularly the protracted question of whether the soldier slaves should be subject to the local slave laws or the Mutiny Act. The latter was finally resolved only when the Imperial Government took the radical step of emancipating all slaves in uniform in December 1807, thirty-one years before the rest of the slave population were fully enfranchised. Even before this however the daily spectacle of the army subjecting black slave and European recruits to the same treatment had had a significant impact on colonial society in general and black consciousness in particular.

Thus the West India regiments were in the fascinatingly ambivalent position of being in a sense agents and representatives of one view of social relations functioning in and indeed protecting a society which was organized according to a pre-industrial and by this time anachronistically different view. The resultant tensions form the subject matter of this monograph which despite occasional infelicities of style and, more rarely, facile judgements, is a model study. It is thoroughly researched, replete with detailed information with which even the specialist in the field will be unfamiliar, and yet it never loses contact with and often illuminates the larger and better known issues.

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