

Review of Neil Ramsey, *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780-1835* (Ashgate, 2011)

It is difficult to imagine the British publishing industry today without the military autobiography. It is therefore amusing to read the critical response to the first glut of such works, in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. A reviewer in *Blackwood's* in 1821 found this type of memoir 'dull' because the writer 'is for ever heralding the exploits of his own little squad or battalion [...] and disgusting us, who care nothing about him, with some story of a rifleman sending a bullet through his thick legs, or a lancer breaking his sabre on his still thicker skull' (p.47). Scores of such works were published by veterans of these conflicts, and while they are commonly used by military historians – often in an anecdotal and empirical way – they have been almost entirely ignored by literary scholars. The reasons for their neglect today probably have much in common with the snobbery that surrounded them at the time. The common soldier's memoir is naive in style and narrow in perspective; these are non-canonical works that do not play by the rules of polite literature. Neil Ramsey's superb new book is therefore very welcome, because he not only takes them seriously but also makes a compelling case for their significance.

Ramsey offers a fascinating overview of the invention of this genre in the early nineteenth century. Prior to this, privates and subaltern officers did not publish memoirs, unless they were in particular genres such as the spiritual biography (for which they provided promising material, given soldiers' very poor reputation for godliness and morality). The Napoleonic Wars, however, saw a rise in the army's reputation and in the public's interest in the common soldier. Ramsey aligns literary developments with historical arguments that this was the first 'total war', which involved an unprecedented civilian effort and a shift in the relationship between the spheres of war and society: the soldier's memoir is therefore a symptom of modernity. It also reflected a shift in the conduct of war itself, away from the 'clockwork' warfare of the eighteenth century towards a model of battle which co-opted the perspective and initiative of the common soldier. It is no coincidence that so many of these individualistic narratives emanated from members of the famed 95th Rifles, since the light infantry epitomised this ideal. The most famous of these soldier authors was John Kincaid, whose *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade* (1830) has constantly been republished, and who was the model for Bernard Cornwell's fictional Sharpe.

As the title suggests, Ramsey situates these humble but hugely popular works in the context of Romantic literary culture. They were infused with the language of sensibility. Early examples used the culture of feeling to tell 'the story of the suffering traveller within the framework of the interpersonal campaign narrative': such works could be subversive, 'detailing war's miseries and horrors' in a way that could be threatening to the establishment (p.194). Later on, however, the genre became domesticated, as officers such as Moyle Sherer and George Glieg abandoned sentimental moralising for stoicism and patriotic enthusiasm. This set the scene for the muscular fiction and biography of the Victorian era, revelling in imperial adventure and derring-do. The sheer number of these texts merits a monograph treatment: Ramsey has identified nearly 200 and helpfully lists them in an appendix, which will be a first port of call for any subsequent study in this area. *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture* will be of great interest to anyone working on war and its cultural reception in this fascinating period.