



Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c.1870-2000

David French

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The regimental system has been the foundation of the British army for three hundred years. This iconoclastic study shows how it was refashioned in the late nineteenth century, and how it was subsequently and repeatedly reinvented to suit the changing roles that were forced upon the army.

Based upon a combination of official papers, private papers and personal reminiscences, and upon research in the National Archives, regimental museums and collections, and other depositories, this book challenges the assumptions of both the exponents and detractors of the system. The author, David French, shows that there was not one, but several, regimental systems and he demonstrates that localised recruiting was usually a failure. Many regiments were never able to draw more than a small proportion of their recruits from their own districts. He shows that regimental loyalties were not a primordial force; regimental authorities had to create them and in the late nineteenth century they manufactured new traditions with gusto, whilst in both World Wars regimental postings quickly broke down and regiments had to take recruits from wherever they could find them. French also argues that the notion that the British army was bad at fighting big battles because the regimental system created a parochial military culture is facile.

This is the first book to strip away the myths that have been deliberately manufactured to justify or to condemn the regimental system and to uncover the reality beneath them. It thus illuminates our understanding of the past while simultaneously throwing glaring new light on the still continuing debate over the place of the regimental system in the modern army today.



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