

ARTICLE

Soldiers, military settlements, and ideas of progress in the British empire, c. 1750–1840

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Abstract

The idea of the military being central to British imperial expansion is nothing new. British armies were both conquerors of colonial territories and institutions through which imperial rule was managed and sustained. In analysing the settlement of demobilised soldiers across Scotland, Trinidad, Sierra Leone, and North India, this article draws attention to the additional significance of the army in colonial concepts of civilisation and human progress. Recruited from among subject populations, the soldiers in these settlements were seen as a means by which British conceits about progress could be evidenced and were tools through which the British state and its proxies hoped to strengthen imperial rule. The article draws attention to the eighteenth-century origins of the interventionist colonial state and examines the broader significance of colonial manpower in British concepts of civilisation and commercial progress.

Keywords: colonial soldiers; military settlers; Scotland; Trinidad; Sierra Leone; India

Military settlements have a long and enduring role in global history. Placing veterans on marginal and vulnerable lands was a common strategy of states both to secure the boundaries of the body politic and to isolate groups that were seen as socially disruptive. A noteworthy and significant attribute of military settlements in the British empire, however, was their relationship to ideas of human progress. Traditionally seen as the most explicit and violent agents of imperial power—Rudrangshu Mukherjee called violence the ‘ultimate imprimatur of colonialism’—soldiers were also a central part of wider debates about colonial societies and social change.¹ There is a wealth of literature that has identified how armies were embedded within the structures, cultures, and exchanges of empire.² Seema Alavi and Douglas Peers have observed from different vantagepoints that the army was central to state-building in India, creating by the 1830s a ‘garrison state’ that made the army the ‘chief instrument’ of Company rule.³ Additional studies have revealed the social significance of colonial recruiting in the state’s approach to sex, alcohol, religious and racial

The author would like to thank Simon Newman, Sarah McCaslin, the late Aaron Graham, and the editors and readers at *Journal of Global History* for their insightful comments on drafts of this article. He would also like to thank his former colleagues at the United States Naval Academy where this article was originally presented.

¹Rudrangshu Mukherjee, ‘“Satan Let Loose Upon the Earth”: The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857’, *Past & Present* 128, no. 1 (1990): 92–116, 93–4.

²Christina Welsch, *The Company’s Sword: The East India Company and the Politics of Militarism, 1644–1858* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Kim A. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency’, *History Workshop Journal* 85 (2018): 217–37.

³Douglas M. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in Early Nineteenth-Century India, 1819–1835* (Tauris, 1995), 7–10; Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770–1830* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.

difference, loyalty, identity, and even friendship.⁴ Yet it is the perceived role of the army as a social vehicle—and the relationship of military power to social change—that forms the basis of this article. In assessing the demobilisation and settlement of former soldiers in four different world regions—the Annexed Estates of the Scottish Highlands, the Company towns of formerly enslaved soldiers in Trinidad and Sierra Leone, and the Invalid Thanah of South Asia—this article encourages scholars to consider the centrality of military settlements to British ideas of human progress.

The connection between military settlements and human progress occurred at a critical moment in the global expansion of the British empire. The revolutionary age witnessed a shifting rationale for empire based on a slippery and ill-defined faith in Europe's role as a harbinger of civilisation and progress. Concerned by widespread anxieties about imperial rule, European thinkers increasingly justified the expansion of state power by highlighting the moral imperative of colonial rule and the benefits to be derived by Indigenous peoples from it.⁵ If there had long been a distinction made between civilised and barbarous populations, this faith in Europe's ability to dispense human progress was a crucial part of the global revolutionary era. Imperial rulers of the age often found no contradiction in the expansion of both political and moral authority. With abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and emancipation in the 1830s especially, these rulers attempted to enact 'humanitarian governance' which allied the dual discourses of human progress and state control.⁶ In the era of emancipation, as Sascha Auerbach asserts, the powerful fetters of laws and regulation created an 'overseer-state' that regulated the movement and freedom of large numbers of African and Asian people in the name of civilisational progress.⁷

Military settlements were part of these wider efforts to oversee the so-called progress of colonial societies. Ex-soldier settlements were not uncommon in this era. Garrison towns in the north of England were important sites of military settlement.⁸ Both Canada and Australia were places where large numbers of Napoleonic veterans settled, especially after the government made it possible for veterans to convert their pensions into lump sums to help them settle on imperial land grants. Some 1,500 veterans took land grants in Upper Canada after 1815 while members of the Royal Veteran Battalions—collections of soldiers no longer fit for front-line service—were siphoned off to New South Wales and were encouraged to settle there.⁹ Crucially, however, in these settlements, the veterans were metropolitan Britons and were understood within existing Enlightenment concepts of civilisation, that is to say people who lived in settled agricultural and urban societies governed by the rule of law derived from, and subject to, reason.¹⁰ The veterans of

⁴Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military, and the Making of Colonial India, 1780–1868* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); David Lambert, *Soldiers of Uncertain Rank: The West India Regiments in British Imperial Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Kate Imry, *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army* (Stanford University Press, 2019); Callie Wilkinson, "'Beastial Communications': Race, Friendship and Factionalism in the Madras Army, 1832–1837", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 3 (2025): 95–120.

⁵Camilla Boisen, 'The Changing Moral Justification of Empire: From the Right to Colonise to the Obligation to Civilise', *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 3 (2012): 335–53; Margaret Kohn and Daniel I. O'Neill, 'A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies and America', *Political Theory* 34, no. 2 (2006): 192–228.

⁶Maeve Ryan, *Humanitarian Governance and the British Antislavery World System* (Yale University Press, 2022), esp. 100–32. See also Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2016).

⁷Sascha Auerbach, *The Overseer State: Slavery, Indenture and Governance in the British Empire, 1812–1916* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), esp. 29–68.

⁸Fred Corbett, 'The Military Estate in the North of England, 1790–1914', *Northern History* 59, no. 1 (2022): 71–97.

⁹Shane Smith, 'Forgotten Settlers: The Migration, Society and Legacies of British Military Veterans to Upper Canada from 1815–1855' (PhD diss., University of Northumbria, 2018), esp. 24–67; Janet M. Hartley, 'Veterans and Empire: A Comparison of British and Russian Treatment of Veterans in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 100, no. 400 (2022): 14–31, 27–8; Christine Wright, *Wellington's Men in Australia: Peninsular War Veterans and the Making of Empire, c. 1820–40* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), esp. 12–30.

¹⁰Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England* (Brandeis University Press, 2018), 159–82.

this article were not and were explicitly excluded—on the basis of subjective ideas of race, religion, morality, or civilisational achievements—from contemporary notions of progress. Among these marginal European, African, and Indian veterans it is possible to trace the faith maintained by imperial administrators in the salutary effects of military settlements in the very heart of communities the empire wished to transform. The armies that were created to subjugate colonial spaces—whose manpower overwhelmingly originated within those spaces—deserve further attention as part of the moral justification for imperialism.

The study of military settlements suggests three features of early nineteenth-century European imperialism. First, military settlements reveal just how embedded within imperial expansion were moralistic conceits about human improvement. Understandings of economic productivity and social and civilisational change were filtered through a military lens in ways that challenge simplistic readings of military power. Second, the range of people who embraced such ideas was extensive. Yes, British imperialism was a pluralistic set of continually evolving relationships rather than a rigid and consistent system.¹¹ But it was coherent enough for different parts of the British state and its Company proxy to support military settlements, albeit at different times and for different reasons. These ideas were global in scope and rested on a foundation of common tropes and assumptions about the military and so-called civilisational progress. Yet we should be careful about assuming that policies required clear ideological frameworks to be globally significant. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that the development of these settlements rested on the contingencies of state power in specific times and places that suggest how empires served as important arenas for developing broader ideas across a myriad of global contexts.

And third, Britain's military settlements marked an important step in the growing confidence of British empire-builders to shape the lives of subject populations. The interventionist approach of the British state identified in the era of emancipation not only had antecedents but had them outside of questions around slavery. These settlements pull the era of the overseer state back into the eighteenth century and, while this earlier era lacked the administrative apparatus that came in later interventions, military settlement schemes tell us much about the state's desire to regulate colonial spaces using the limited means available. The import of these lessons for global history is to highlight the permeable nature of the spatial and intellectual boundaries that cut across Britain's global possessions. Most fundamentally, colonial military settlements challenge the idea that European imperialism was, before the mid-nineteenth century, dominated by an 'atavistic conservatism' that eschewed direct intervention in colonial societies and that it required a dramatic shift in European attitudes to create new forms of imperial rule.¹² Beginning with why soldiers came to be construed as carriers of human progress, this article then explores colonial military settlements, suggesting that soldiers were seen as civilising instruments quite apart from their combat roles. At the end, the article shows why these military settlements are so revealing. Military settlements evidence the under-appreciated centrality of colonial soldiers to the relationship between the state and colonial societies and demand broader acknowledgement as an important part of the global history of European expansion.

Military settlement and human progress

Most major empires have used military settlements as a means of asserting dominion over conquered areas. In the late Roman Republic and during the reigns of Caesar and Augustus, large numbers of military colonies were established as a gratuity to veterans. Both the Han and Ming

¹¹John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2012), xiii.

¹²David Washbrook, 'South India, 1770–1840: The Colonial Transition', *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 479–516, 483–4; Anand A. Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793–1920* (University of California Press, 1989), 55–114; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

dynasties in China used soldiers to build military-agricultural colonies or *tuntian* during periods of expansion. In seventeenth-century New France, the Intendant, Jean Talon, successfully encouraged members of regiments returning to France to remain in Canada in vulnerable frontier regions; something that he married to the famous dispatch of the 'King's Daughters' to the colony. In Mughal India, the empire's *mansabdari* system appointed officers to land revenue assignments where veterans of the army were settled and where the Mughal army subsequently drew most of its contingents.¹³

British writers were not ignorant of these precedents. Keen to find in Roman antiquity justification for their conquests, British commentators noted the benefit of military settlements to the body politic. In his famous history of the Roman empire, Edward Gibbon noted that it was the 'duty' of leaders 'to provide rewards for a successful army' and 'settlements for a numerous people'. As a number of scholars suggest, both soldiers and civil servants were often cognisant of the Roman example and were concerned with the ancient world's treatment of veterans and their role in political stability.¹⁴ In some cases, the British inherited military settlements that were incorporated into imperial policy. The Malayan and Javanese diaspora in the Indian Ocean World—soldiers brought to Sri Lanka to fight the Kandyans in Sri Lanka—had been inherited from the Dutch who were likewise only co-opting a migratory chain that had seen South-East Asian soldiers settle in Sri Lanka for decades before the European arrival. The British were keen to take advantage of these settlements and one of the reasons given for plans to conquer Ceylon from the Dutch was to gain access to such recruits.¹⁵ At other times, British officials used the military systems that they inherited as cautionary tales. John Malcolm, the soldier, administrator, and governor of Bombay in the late 1820s, believed that maintaining the allegiance of Indian soldiers through rewards was 'the most important principle in our government'. He wanted to ensure that the soldiers' 'claim to their rank or land was founded in the gratitude of a State' but rejected the *mansabdari* system previously used by the Mughals as being 'altogether inadmissible' for inculcating loyalty to the Company state.¹⁶

Even before the age of revolutions, military settlements had been a key part of British expansion. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, English and Scottish military plantations spread to the Gaelic-speaking Scottish Hebrides and across the Irish Sea to Ulster. After the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland in 1649, veterans of the New Model Army were awarded confiscated Catholic land in lieu of wages that the Commonwealth government was unable to pay. Thousands of British veterans took up the offer and brought the military settler population of post-Civil War Ireland to well over 10,000 men.¹⁷ Cromwell's Western Design on Jamaica also involved the extensive use of military settlements, a formula that spread to other islands. Between 1697 and 1702, the Barbados assembly spent £36,000 bringing 2,000 veterans of the war against Louis XIV's France to settle on the island.¹⁸ By the era of the Seven Years War, plans for military

¹³J.C. Mann, *Legionary Recruitment and Veteran Settlement during the Principate* (Routledge, 2018 [1983]); Thomas Chapaid, *The Great Intendant: A Chronicle of Jean Talon in Canada* (Brook, & Company, 1920), 45–57; Edward L. Dreyer, 'Zhao Chongguo: A Professional Soldier of China's Former Han Dynasty', *Journal of Military History* 72, no. 3 (2008): 665–725; Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500–1700* (Routledge, 2002), 136–44.

¹⁴Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Westley and Davis, 1836 [1781]), chs. VI and XXXVIII; Clive Dewey, *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (Hambledon Press, 1993), 120–5.

¹⁵B.A. Hussainmiya, *Orang Rejimen: The Malays of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment* (Perebit Universiti Kebangsaan, 1990), 31–4, 38–9, 44–8, 58; James Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon, containing an Account of the Country*, vol. 1 (Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 144.

¹⁶John Malcolm, *Observations on the Disturbances in the Madras Army in 1809* (William Miller and John Murray, 1812), 102; John Malcolm, *Sketch of the Political History of India* (Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1811]), 513–20.

¹⁷Aonghas MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility in the North Atlantic World: The Case of the Northern Hebrides, 1570–1639* (Brill, 2015); Pádraig Lenihan, *Consolidating Conquest: Ireland, 1603–1727* (Routledge, 2014), 134–9; Rhys Morgan, 'From Soldier to Settler: The Welsh in Ireland, 1558–1641' (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2011), 104–24.

¹⁸Hilary McD. Beckles, *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 55–6.

settlements of British regulars in the Ohio Valley, Georgia, Florida, the West Indies, and the Gold Coast of West Africa had all been suggested or carried into effect.¹⁹

What made certain military settlements different was two factors. The first was the racial and ethnic composition of the soldiers involved. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British state and its commercial proxies recruited hundreds of thousands of soldiers from colonial populations. Enslaved Africans, South Asian sepoys, Scottish and Irish Gaels, and men from communities as distant as Spanish Nicaragua and East Africa were all part of this constellation of colonial manpower.²⁰ Their importance to the military power of the British empire is incontrovertible. In South Asia, locally recruited sepoys accounted for 85 per cent of the Company's soldiers by the first decades of the nineteenth century.²¹ Few knowledgeable commentators could have doubted Britain's dependence on the very populations that were explicitly rejected from mainstream notions of Britishness.

The second was the importance of promoting human progress as a justification for imperial rule. This was not something entirely unique to the British. It had existed in the ancient world. What became known as the 'civilising mission' was embedded in the writings of Virgil, Plutarch, and Tacitus. The British empire arrived early at the conceit that civilisation could come through the sword and the Roman example was used by Sir Thomas Smith and Edmund Spenser to justify the English conquest of Ireland in the last decades of the sixteenth century. There were more recent and global examples. What has been called a 'civilising agenda' was central to Qing expansion into Central Asia and the Qing empire made use of mechanisms similar to their European counterparts to lay claim to the so-called improvement of subject peoples.²²

What was meant by civilisation was, of course, subject to debate. The civilising missions associated with European empires in the late nineteenth century often focused on the psychological transformation of colonial people and their systems of belief.²³ Concepts of civilisational improvement dating to the eighteenth century were much more concerned with the palpable signs of social change. Efficient methods of governing, a regular administration of the law, and an acceptance of the language, dress, and religion of the coloniser were usually key. But it was commercial improvement that stood at the apex of human progress. Commerce was seen to generate the 'arts of civilised life' and since such arts were the metric by which societies were judged, there were those who believed that the expansion of colonial commerce always implied human progress.²⁴ In the mid-eighteenth century, Adam Smith advised that commercial improvement would lead to less insecurity and thus alleviate society from a host of perceived ills. As he put it, 'whenever commerce is introduced into any country probity and punctuality always accompany it. These virtues in a rude and barbarous country are almost unknown.' But commerce also promoted better administration of the law to protect the property that was being created. While not a promoter of imperialism per se—Smith's views on the American Revolution ran counter to most British views of the time and he had mixed feelings about the effects of extending commercial markets into colonial environments—he did believe that, since modern nations

¹⁹Andrew Mackillop, *More Fruitful than the Soil: Army, Empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715–1815* (Tuckwell, 2000), 57; Richard Reid, ed., *The Upper Ottawa Valley to 1855: A Collection of Documents* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 9, 220. See also Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 113–214.

²⁰Matthew Dziennik, *Colonial Soldiers and the British Empire in the Age of Revolutions: A Global History* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²¹*The Imperial Gazetteer of India: New Edition*, 25 vols. (Clarendon Press, 1909), 4:335–8.

²²Kenneth Pomeranz, 'Empire & "Civilizing" Missions, Past & Present', *Daedalus* 134, no. 2 (2005): 34–45, 35; C.A. Hagerman, *Britain's Imperial Muse: The Classics, Imperialism, and the Indian Empire, 1784–1914* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 68.

²³Harry Liebersohn, 'Introduction: The Civilizing Mission', *Journal of World History* 27, no. 3 (2016): 383–7, 386; Erik Linstrum, *Ruling Minds: Psychology in the British Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

²⁴Hagerman, *Britain's Imperial Muse*, 69; Ernesto Gallo, 'Civilisation and Empire: A Challenging Nexus', *Human Figurations* 3, no. 1 (2014), accessed 15 April 2026, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0003.105>.

waged war for trade rather than plunder, they had a vested interest (as he saw it) in enhancing private property and the law in conquered territories.²⁵

A focus on soldiers as engines for social change was, however, curious. British elites in the period had few good words to say about soldiers. The duke of Wellington's famous quip that his soldiers were the 'mere scum of the earth' is only the best remembered articulation of a broader fear about the corrupting influences of military life. The end of any war was often accompanied by panic for the moral health of the nation. Stephen Janssen, a Member of Parliament and Lord Mayor of London in the 1750s, used an early form of data analysis to link rising crime to the demobilisation of soldiers in the aftermath of the War of the Austrian Succession. During the Seven Years War, the secretary at war, Lord Barrington, explained that 'In times of Peace, reduced soldiers are a burden to the mother country, because for every one that takes to industry at home, ten take to evil course.' By the time Wellington uttered his famous words, the ill effects of ex-soldiers begging on the streets of London was the subject of a House of Commons select committee and the Veteran Battalions sent to New South Wales were sent there, in part, to reduce the number of ex-soldiers living in Britain.²⁶ That such views were often inaccurate—veterans were often respected members of their communities—did little to diminish the view that the army was the most unlikely place for an improvement of the human condition.²⁷

The contrast with demobilised soldiers in colonial settings could not have been greater. On the edges of empire, soldiers were seen by British elites not as a source of disorder but as a necessary requirement for defence and security. If the arrival of ex-soldiers in the metropole was seen as a harbinger of moral collapse, for many administrators of empire, the army was the forge of imperial order, not only in the sense that it defended the boundaries of the imperial state but also in that it maintained the conditions for commercial prosperity. Ex-soldiers were perceived to be ideal settlers that would help propagate a 'hardy and industrious race, fit for serving the public', as one 1760 plan for the Scottish Highlands put it. George Canning, a future prime minister and close ally of William Pitt, told the House of Commons in 1802 that the empire required strong garrisons composed of military settlers who might create a 'hardy native militia . . . to endure the fatigue and difficulties of . . . warfare'.²⁸ Yet the soldiers themselves were also seen as engines for commercial progress. Having been in the service was imbued with positive connotations of labour, industry, and hardiness.²⁹ It says something about the attractiveness of the putatively disciplined colonial soldier that colonial troops could appeal as architects of imperial order.

Labour theory was crucial here. Most soldiers engaged in manual labour. Digging and maintaining roads and fortifications—work for which they usually received additional pay—was a far more common experience than combat. And the view that manual labour was the lot of the common soldier helped reinforce the view that military labour might bring marginal lands into cultivation for the benefit of the empire. Borrowing from the Lockean conceit that labour produced property and that property was the basis for civilisation, it seems to have required little intellectual energy to perceive of colonial soldiers as instruments through which British officials

²⁵Adam Smith, *Lectures in Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms*, ed. Edwin Cannan (Clarendon, 1896 [1763]), 222–4, 253; Orlando Samões, 'Progress and Prosperity in Adam Smith's Natural Liberty', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 34, no. 2 (2017): 213–36.

²⁶Philip Henry, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington, 1831–1851* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888), 14, 18; Lord Barrington to the Duke of Newcastle, 12 Sept. 1760, Add. MSS 32911, ff. 263–4, British Library, London (hereafter, BL); J.M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660–1800* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 227; Wright, *Wellington's Men in Australia*, 12–30.

²⁷J.E. Cookson, 'Early Nineteenth-Century Scottish Military Pensioners as Homecoming Soldiers', *Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009): 319–41.

²⁸Hints Toward a Plan for Managing the Forfeited Estates, 1760, MS 16506, f. 28, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter, NLS); *Parliamentary History of England* (T.C. Hansard, 1820), 36:869, 871–2.

²⁹Minute by Sir Edward Paget, 24 Dec. 1824, IOR/H/665, f. 1, BL; Journal of a Voyage from Port Glasgow to Bombay and the Persian Gulf, 1828, MS 9594, NLS.

might transform conquered lands into sites productive to British interests. This was especially important given Locke's assertion that the failure of Indigenous peoples to exercise their right to property justified their colonisation.³⁰ The labour conducted by soldiers on marginal lands generated property and the settlement of soldiers on that property might create societies in which property rights would be respected and colonial communities could be orientated toward British markets with supposedly long-term benefits for human progress.³¹

British military settlements in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds

It was on the Annexed Estates of the Scottish Highlands that the first government-run experiments in military settlement of the period took place. In the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, the government in London passed a series of measures designed to pacify the followers of the exiled Stuart line; measures that included the seizure of the estates of attainted rebels. The Vesting Act of 1747 placed more than fifty estates under the management of the Barons of the Scottish Court of Exchequer. A further act in 1752 appropriated fourteen estates to the crown to be managed by a Board of Commissioners.³² The government's objectives involved more than punishment. In keeping with conventional views of Jacobitism, the administration of Henry Pelham believed that it was the political, social, legal, and cultural backwardness of Scottish Gaels that was to blame for their disaffection. The avowed aim of the Annexed Estates, therefore, was to 'civilise the inhabitants' and promote 'the Protestant Religion, good Government, Industry and Manufactures, and the Principles of Duty and Loyalty'. The significance of this scheme should not be underestimated. The Board was populated with significant figures within the Scottish establishment and its budget was not insignificant.³³ The early years were, however, plagued by ineffectiveness, a lack of presence on the ground—usually limited to a local factor and his agents—and the environmental limits on commercial improvement.

As soldiers began to return from the Seven Years War in the early 1760s, a number of the Board's members suggested carrying out improvements with military labour. Prominent landowners such as Lord Deskford, Sir Ludovic Grant of Grant, and Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk argued that increasing the demographic concentration of their estates through military settlers was essential to the creation of market surplus. Other landlords argued that recruitment had denuded their lands of young men and that their support for recruiting efforts justified the return of soldiers to their lands. As they put it, they required 'hands to labour the ground' and that the discipline of military service could serve to enhance the value and productivity of the land.³⁴ For the government's Commissioners, the return of robust young men looking for land to start families was too tempting to pass up. An added advantage was that it was one of the few policies upon which the Board—wrenched by partisan politics and struggling to cover their costs—could actually agree.³⁵

What made such efforts remarkable was that the soldiers were themselves Gaels—former members of the Highland regiments—who were subject to the same pejorative comments of indolence and savagery that coloured government views of Highlanders in general. Military settlements in the region just a few years earlier had emphasised the role of the army as a civilising

³⁰Matthew H. Kramer, *John Locke and the Origins of Private Property* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–6; David Boucher, 'The Law of Nations and the Doctrine of *Terra Nullius*', in *War, the State and International Law in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Olaf Asbach and Peter Schröder (Routledge, 2010), 63–82, esp. 69–70.

³¹Boisen, 'The Changing Moral Justification of Empire', 335–53.

³²*Statistics of the Annexed Estates, 1755–1756* (Scottish Record Office, 1973), 1.

³³*Reports of the Annexed Estates, 1755–69*, ed. Virginia Wills (Scottish Record Office, 1973), vi.

³⁴Petition of the Nobility and Gentry of the Highlands, 1763, GD87/1, f. 95, National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter, NRS); Mackillop, *More Fruitful than the Soil*, 89.

³⁵Matthew Dziennik, 'Under Ye Lash of Ye Law: The State and the Law in the Post-Culloden Scottish Highlands', *Journal of British Studies* 60, no. 3 (2021): 511–39.

force but only because the army was composed of Anglo-Britons. Posting English and Lowland soldiers to isolated areas, it was said, would produce ‘some better kind of husbandry in the neighbourhoods of those stations than has been known amongst the mountains’. Duncan Forbes of Culloden, a key government ally in Scotland, argued that ‘the natives may follow the example having the advantage of instruction to their children in those particulars at the [military] stations’.³⁶ Faith in the military’s ability to transform marginal localities and their people was not confined to Forbes. The Lord Justice Clerk, another senior legal figure, recommended that army pensioners should be granted leases at cheap rates to encourage colonies of loyal subjects ‘so as not only to keep the natives under subjection but [to] abolish their principles, language and dress’. The commander-in-chief in Scotland and the Lord Justice Clerk wrote in 1747 that the ‘shortest and easiest way of civilizing [sic]’ a ‘Barbarous, Lawless country’ was to vest as much property as possible in the crown, giving ‘his Majesty the absolute Disposal of all the Inhabitants’.³⁷

The settlement of militarised Gaels marked an important shift in the practice of social change. To justify the settlement of ex-servicemen on Highland estates it was necessary to state that military service had made Gaels more productive and useful than their civilian counterparts. Samuel Johnson, who once famously quipped that serving on a British warship was worse than any prison, made much of the positive effects of military service on young Gaels during his tour of the Outer Hebrides in 1773. Johnson noted that not only did the army serve as a useful school in promoting the English language but that military service provided ‘excellent habits’ for the improvement of the region.³⁸ Of the soldiers that were settled on the Annexed Estates as part of the government’s scheme—officially approved in March 1763—more than half were local to the areas where they were settled, with most of the remaining soldiers from elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands. Just 16 per cent were men from the Scottish Lowlands or England.³⁹

As was so often the case with government schemes, however, realities on the ground could never match the ideologically inspired dreams of the commissioners. The government spent £3,000 on the settlements, which was to provide 500 men with a farm rent-free for three years and a bounty to take up the property. But the farms were not prepared to receive the settlers and, in many cases, existing tenants had to be removed in order to make way for the soldiers. Existing tenants resented the Commission’s privileging of young single men at the expense of established families and resisted removal or made life extremely hard for those who took up the farms. In the end, the Commission spent more than 60 per cent of its total budget to settle just 259 soldiers, many of whom subsequently abandoned the properties when the rent-free period came to an end.⁴⁰ This first government-led settlement scheme expended significant sums for a very meagre and unsuccessful return.

Gaelic Scotland was not the only location in which commercial development and thereby human progress brought military settlement to the fore. Defeat in America in 1783 was a crippling blow to British views that their empire was, in the words of one parliamentarian, ‘protestant, commercial, maritime, and free’.⁴¹ The rejection of this conceit by American revolutionaries and

³⁶Some Thoughts Concerning the State of the Highlands of Scotland, 3 Oct. 1746, SP36/88, ff. 50–3, The National Archives, London (hereafter, TNA).

³⁷*The Albemarle Papers*, ed. Charles Stanford Terry, vol. 2 (Spalding Club, 1902), 484–5; Memorandums Concerning the Highlands, 1746, GD112/47/1, ff. 5–9, NRS; Nicola Martin, *The British Army in Scotland and North America, 1745–1775: Militarisation on the Fringes of Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 77. For more on efforts to transform the Scottish Highlands in the period, see Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment’s Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Yale University Press, 2013).

³⁸Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (J. Williams, 1775), 30, 75, 407.

³⁹Mackillop, *More Fruitful than the Soil*, 93.

⁴⁰Annette M. Smith, ‘The Forfeited Estates Papers, 1745: A Study of the Work of the Commissioners for the Forfeited Annexed Estates’ (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 1975), 64–9; Report of the Commissioners to the King, 1764, E723/2, ff. 74, 96, NRS.

⁴¹David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173.

increasingly disturbing reports of exploitation and famine in Company-ruled India—the 1770 Bengal Famine killed more than a quarter of Bengal’s population—sent figures such as Edmund Burke into scathing critiques of imperial rule.⁴² To reclaim its right to moral and civilisational superiority—to rebuild the nation’s ‘moral capital’—an increasingly sizeable section of educated elites put pressure on the British government to outlaw the slave trade and ameliorate conditions on plantations in the West Indies.⁴³ The war with revolutionary France that began in 1793 undermined efforts to ban the Atlantic slave trade but it did not end public pressure to limit the expansion of slavery.

Matters came to a head with the capture of Trinidad from the Spanish in 1797 and its retention under the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. The ‘Trinidad Question’ saw abolitionists and government ministers competing against investors and planters keen to tap the profitability of the newly captured island. For many government officials, including George Canning, as well as Charles James Fox and the foreign secretary William Grenville, events in Haiti were a warning that sugar colonies risked ‘weakness and insecurity’ and that Britain’s possession of the island had to rest on more solid foundations.⁴⁴ The capture of Trinidad offered Canning and others a canvas on which to project a different type of colonial empire; one that would replace large plantations with hundreds of small farms occupied by single families producing coffee and other commodities for market.⁴⁵

It was as part of these arguments that the settlement of enslaved soldiers was considered. The establishment of the West India regiments in the 1790s was initially conceived of as a means of safeguarding European lives from high mortality rates.⁴⁶ But the soldiers were also a symbol for British reformers who imagined a more benign empire in which colonial peoples were partners rather than merely subjects. A Caribbean empire in which the slave trade had been outlawed and which was defended by enslaved men in British uniforms fitted this vision of empire. The retention of Trinidad was an opportunity to turn this vision into practice and, in the absence of an existing British plantocracy, permitted the government to create a crown colony in which no local legislative body would contest orders from London. In February 1802, the prime minister, Henry Addington, informed the island’s governor that a ‘mode of assisting towards the population and improvement of Trinidad may be found in the establishment upon the Plains and low grounds of some of the most deserving and trustworthy Soldiers of the West Indian Regiments’. Three months later, Canning argued before parliament that the ‘meritorious soldiers’ of the regiments deserved recognition and that this represented a different type of British imperialism in the Caribbean. As he put it, the ‘improvement’ of the island would not come by ‘making large grants or sales to great capitalists’ but by offering ‘encouragement’ to soldiers and their families to subsist themselves in ‘modes of agriculture which might make Trinidad the source of health and comfort to the soldiers and sailors of Great Britain’.⁴⁷

The plan engendered bitter opposition. Political and military leaders struggled to agree on the merits of settling enslaved soldiers. London favoured the plan since, in an age of limited government bureaucracy, the army was one of the few instruments over which the state could exert

⁴²Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78; Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c. 1500–1800* (Yale University Press, 1998).

⁴³Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Christa Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas* (University of Virginia Press, 2014).

⁴⁴*Parliamentary History of England*, 36:869.

⁴⁵Claudius Fergus, ‘Dread of Insurrection: Abolition, Security, and Labor in Britain’s West Indian Colonies, 1760–1823’, *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 66, no. 4 (2009): 767–73.

⁴⁶Lambert, *Soldiers of Uncertain Rank*, 27–8.

⁴⁷Addington to Picton, 18 Feb. 1802, CO295/2, ff. 40–5, TNA. See also Hobart to Picton, 18 Feb. 1802, CO296/4, ff. 27–9, TNA; *Parliamentary History of England*, 36:869, 871–2.

considerable control. In the absence of voluntary British settlers, soldiers could be forced to settle there without the odium of relying explicitly on slavery to expand crown control. But the island's governor, Sir Thomas Picton, doubted that it was possible to populate the island without importing large numbers of enslaved Africans—which he continued to do. In just two years between 1802 and 1804, some 10,000 enslaved Africans arrived on Trinidad. While Picton was willing to acknowledge that the 'conduct and faithful services' of the soldiers had entitled them 'to the protection of government'—the soldiers had themselves been promised their freedom and land after their service—he did not believe in the project.⁴⁸ Picton was already under investigation by the Privy Council for deaths that had occurred in Trinidad among both the enslaved and the soldiers and he would subsequently be found guilty of arranging the torture of a mixed-race girl named Luisa Calderón, though the verdict was later overturned. Other military leaders were similarly problematic. Sir Alexander Cochrane, the commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands from 1805 to 1810, was a Trinidad slave owner, sympathetic to the planter interest, and used his distance from London to soften the objectives of his political masters.⁴⁹ Such reticence was critical and, within a few short months, war was renewed with France. Settlement of the West India regiments was no longer a priority and many enslaved veterans were retained as combat troops rather than disbanded as settlers.⁵⁰

The settlement of enslaved soldiers, however, was an idea that would not go away. When war was declared between Britain and the United States in 1812, British strategy soon turned to the potential of inciting slave revolts on the Atlantic coast. In April 1814, the same Sir Alexander Cochrane issued a proclamation offering freedom to any slave who entered British service or took the opportunity of becoming 'Free Settlers into some of His Majesty's Colonies'. Some 4,000 African Americans escaped enslavement as British raids disrupted the plantation economy of the Chesapeake region. Of these, around 600 were mobilised as the Corps of Colonial Marines, a force that participated in the battle of North Point and the burning of Washington.⁵¹ Following the war, the Colonial Marines were suggested as ideal settlers for Trinidad. Between 1815 and 1816, six ships carrying 800 settlers arrived there. The Colonial Marines and their families—almost 600 of the settlers—arrived in August 1816 and were directed to 'company villages', located east of San Fernando in Naparima District. Each marine was granted 16 acres of ground within the villages and as many acres as he could cultivate outside of the villages, along with tools and materials for houses, seeds, and government rations until the farms could be established.⁵²

The stated aim of the settlements mirrored those in Scotland in a number of important respects. The settlers were directed to land that had originally been earmarked for the West India regiments in 1802. The area had been cleared and some sheds had been built—largely through Indigenous migrant labour from South America—but little other preparation had been made for them. Governor Ralph Woodford warned the government not to send men 'to this colony where there is no shelters for officers or men—the present Barracks are not fit for livestock'. He warned in stark terms that ex-soldiers should not be sent 'literally to die here from want of the primary Comfort of the Country'. But Woodford was, nevertheless, anxious for labour and the villages were situated with the aim of economic improvement and the building of roads that would link the

⁴⁸Picton to Hobart, 12 Apr. 1802, CO295/2, ff. 51–3, TNA; Fergus, 'Dread of Insurrection', 775.

⁴⁹James Epstein, 'Politics of Colonial Sensation: The Trial of Thomas Picton and the Cause of Louisa Calderon', *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (2007): 712–41; S.A. Cavell, 'Abolition, the West Indies Colonies and the Troubling Case of Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, 1807–1823', *Mariner's Mirror* 107, no. 1 (2021): 23–39.

⁵⁰Fergus, 'Dread of Insurrection', 778.

⁵¹C.J. Bartlett and Gene A. Smith, 'A "Species of Milito-Nautico-Guerilla-Plundering Warfare": Admiral Alexander Cochrane's Naval Campaign against the United States, 1814–1815', in *Britain and America Go to War: The Impact of War and Warfare in Anglo-America, 1754–1815*, ed. Julie Flavell and Stephen Conway (University of Florida Press, 2004), 174, 187–8.

⁵²John McNish Weiss, *The Merikins: Free Black American Settlers in Trinidad, 1815–16* (McNish & Weiss, 2002), 5, 18.

east and west coasts of the island.⁵³ The company villages were designed to be crucial nodes of cultivation and served as a reminder of the potential for soldiers to enhance commercial productivity. They were joined in 1817 by members of the 3rd West India regiment and Woodford put the settlers to infrastructure projects that would enable trade goods to 'be conveyed to a market' along with whatever produce that the farms produced.⁵⁴ By the mid-1820s, some 3,520 acres had been brought into cultivation and it is estimated that, by 1862, one in eight Trinidadians were ex-soldiers of the British army.⁵⁵

For all his concern with the lives of the settlers, however, Woodford was primarily a defender of planter interests and his use of the settled soldiers seems to have been principally as a labour force that could create the infrastructure necessary for the growth of the plantation economy.⁵⁶ When it came to enforcing the government's interest in the creation of independent yeoman farmers, Woodford was less resolute. The soldiers were initially allotted a pension of 5d per diem but Woodford was forever seeking to cut costs and, over time, cut the rations that were provided to the settlers to further encourage their own cultivation, which was extremely difficult given the terrain and location of the settlements.⁵⁷ More than half of the soldier settlers eventually left the company towns. Those who were young and single tended to leave for day labour on the coast where other opportunities and eligible young women could be found. The government continued to fund improvements in the settlement and was still spending large sums into the 1830s but the shadow of government parsimony was ever present.⁵⁸

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Sierra Leone also served as an experiment in free labour in which demobilised soldiers were a prominent part. Sierra Leone was a crucial hub for the recruitment of the West India regiments with some 3,000 men and boys—so called 'Liberated Africans' taken from slave ships by the Royal Navy—coercively enlisted into the army in the aftermath of the 1807 abolition of the slave trade.⁵⁹ When the West India regiments were reduced after the Napoleonic Wars, Sierra Leone also became a site of settlement. Soldiers from the 3rd and 4th West India regiments were demobilised there in 1818 and were followed by others from the reduced 2nd West India regiment in 1819; perhaps as many as 1,250 individuals in all. Like their associates in Trinidad, an allowance of 5d per diem was granted to each man, which was initially used to pay for provisions and the establishment of shelters.⁶⁰

In Sierra Leone, however, the use of ex-soldiers to promote social change became mired in competing imperial priorities. The colony's leadership believed the soldiers to be useful to the militia and placed the men and their families in Freetown to this end. The militia of Sierra Leone reflected the complex demographics of the colony, where little more than one in every hundred settlers was white. The abolitionist Zachary Macaulay—who was a prominent critic of military leaders like Cochrane and who would eventually extend his interests to investigating Cochrane's illicit slave trading—wanted to demonstrate that free Africans could become useful subjects of the empire and pushed for a militia in which race was no barrier to service. It was also deemed critical

⁵³Woodford to Henry Goulburn, 10 Jan. 1819, CO295/48, ff. 3–8, TNA; K.O. Laurence, 'The Settlement of Free Negroes in Trinidad Before Emancipation', *Caribbean Quarterly* 9, no. 1–2 (1963): 26–52, 29.

⁵⁴Woodford to Bathurst, 12 Dec. 1819, CO295/48, ff. 409–15, TNA.

⁵⁵Weiss, *The Merikins*, 18; Roger N. Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (Yale University Press, 1979), 136–7.

⁵⁶Return of the number of Spaniards who have emigrated, July 1819, CO295/48, f. 196, TNA; Woodford to Bathurst, 12 Dec. 1819, CO295/48, ff. 409–15, TNA; Cavell, 'Abolition, the West Indies Colonies and the Troubling Case of Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane', 33.

⁵⁷Weiss, *The Merikins*, 12; Woodford to Bathurst, 12 Dec. 1819, CO295/48, ff. 409–15, TNA.

⁵⁸D. Evans to Reverend Dr. Dakins, 8 Feb. 1837, CO295/118, f. 206, TNA.

⁵⁹Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 95, 131.

⁶⁰J.J. Crooks, *A History of the Colony of Sierra Leone, West Africa* (Browne and Nolan, 1903), 96.

to settle West India soldiers in the capital to ensure future recruitment.⁶¹ These priorities, however, led to the ex-soldiers being settled exactly where available land was in short supply. According to the 1826 report on the colony, this had resulted in the military settlements becoming 'very prejudicial to the individuals themselves'.⁶²

There were also those who did not share in the view that soldiers were a natural corollary to human progress. Robert Thorpe, the colony's first judge, bitterly opposed the coercive enlistment of men taken from slave ships and decried the militarisation of the colony.⁶³ More critically, the soldiers who did settle in Sierra Leone resisted any effort to make them serve in a military capacity. In the mid-1820s, Governor Charles Turner attempted to re-enlist former soldiers for active service to defend territory recently acquired from the Sherbro. There was an outcry. Taking the side of the ex-soldiers, Zachary Macaulay stated he was troubled by 'what appeared to me so extraordinary a jurisdiction over men in all respects civil inhabitants of the Colony'. Macaulay was convinced that the disbanded men, 'with their own homes, families & connections' were valuable assets to the colony, in addition to being 'peaceable industrious well behaved & loyal colonists'.⁶⁴ In spite of hopes that former soldiers would serve as a useful reservoir of manpower, the soldiers themselves displayed a great reluctance to give up their status as settlers and again submit themselves to the harsh life of active service.

Yet faith in the civilising effects of military settlement proved surprisingly enduring. While initially settled in Freetown, the soldiers were encouraged to move into the hinterland where the British were struggling to assert a commercial footprint. Former West India regiment soldiers were among the founders of the villages of Waterloo, Gibraltar, Wellington, York, and Hastings on the edges of the nascent colony. Macaulay praised the soldiers for being model settlers and had opposed Turner's plans to re-enlist them partly because their commercial activities were deemed more useful to the colony than their martial talents. Some ideological inconsistencies were required here. The service that had made these men such useful military resources, in Macaulay's reading, had made them too valuable as commercial agents to return to them to military service.⁶⁵ As in Scotland, the military's role in commercial improvement was also imbued with cultural significance. Soldiers were at the forefront of new colonial experiments in labour and land use. The establishment of 'legitimate commerce' was particularly important to the British abolitionists. Legitimate commerce, with its focus on free labour and small-scale plantations, required land, private property, and increasing numbers of healthy settlers.⁶⁶ In this thinking, the replacement of slavery by legitimate commerce would have a civilising effect on the supposed barbarities of West Africa. Lt. Col. Charles Maxwell, the governor of Sierra Leone between 1811 and 1815, argued that ex-West India soldiers settled in Sierra Leone would 'as a matter of course, in the common occurrences of life, communicate some useful knowledge to their countrymen, in the different branches of arts, necessary to it; and they could not fail to spread the fame of England, to an extent hitherto unknown in Africa; which might soon lead to consequences, equally important and beneficial to both'. On the contemporary Gold Coast, similar sentiments were expressed with one administrator stating that British garrisons were 'places in which British subjects and property

⁶¹Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford University Press, 1962), 73; Cavell, 'Abolition, the West India Colonies, and the Troubling Case of Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane', 28; Maxwell to Bathurst, 24 September 1812, CO267/34, f. 37, TNA.

⁶²*Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of Sierra Leone* (House of Commons, 1827), 16.

⁶³A Copy of the Abstract of Charges Sent to Lord Bathurst, n.d., CO267/65, TNA.

⁶⁴Nemata Blyden, *West Indians in West Africa, 1808–1880: The African Diaspora in Reverse* (University of Rochester Press, 2000), 34, 44.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁶Philip Misevich, 'Freetown and "Freedom"? Colonialism and Slavery in Sierra Leone, 1790s to 1861', in *Slavery, Abolition and the Transition to Colonialism in Sierra Leone*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz (Africa World Press, 2015), 205–9.

engaged in trade with the natives . . . and by means of which . . . the civilisation of the natives may be greatly promoted'.⁶⁷

It was one thing to make this argument; it was another thing altogether to create the conditions by which soldiers could become successful. Giving evidence to a parliamentary enquiry in the 1830s, several figures reported that soldiers settling in the colony suffered greatly from the want of the necessities of life and, as a result, had returned to the abuse of alcohol so prevalent in the army.⁶⁸ Worse—from the point of view of the abolitionists—ex-soldiers also featured in debates about the virtues of the colony as a paragon of British anti-slavery. To avoid drifting into the colony's underclass, some ex-soldiers purchased the apprenticeships of captive children brought into Freetown by the West Africa squadron. The apprenticeships were deeply exploitative and something the colony's officials called 'nothing more than Slavery of the worst description'. The pre-colonial population of Sierra Leone expressed incredulity at how settlers could purchase redeemed captives from slave ships and make 'them work worse than Slaves', all the while claiming that slavery did not exist in the colony.⁶⁹ Perhaps most shockingly, ex-soldiers living on the edges of the colony were likely involved in the tit-for-tat slave raiding between the colony and the neighbouring Temne, Mandé, Bullom, and Fula. Efforts to reduce violence on the frontiers often included stipulations that captives be exchanged, something that both encouraged further raiding and made a mockery out of British declarations of anti-slavery.⁷⁰ Far from helping advance human progress, many soldiers became part of the exploitative systems that were part and parcel of imperial rule.

Such ambiguities were not limited to the Atlantic region. The demobilisation of sepoys in India featured many of the same problems. Sepoys who were injured in the service or had served ten years in the army could be classed as Invalids and placed in settlements called 'Invalid Thanahs'. From the 1780s onward, Thanahs were established in Bhagalpur before moving north and west into Bihar and Benares. The objective of the Thanahs mirrored those already seen in Scotland, Trinidad, and Sierra Leone, where soldiers would spearhead commercial development and, by extension, progress and improvement. The Thanahs were located on the fringes of established areas of cultivation and were designed to bring marginal lands into production and enhance the value of land in areas where agricultural activity had declined. While the number of soldiers settled on the Thanahs was not very large—a little over 1,000 soldiers across Bhagalpur in 1802—the wider significance of the Thanahs was out of all proportion to their number. The expanses of land brought into cultivation to support the Thanahs were extensive. By the early nineteenth century, fully one-fifth of the wasteland in Bhagalpur had been purchased to settle former sepoys.⁷¹

Perhaps because British administrators thought they recognised England in the agricultural systems of North India, civilising endeavours were less conspicuous on the Thanahs. There is little doubt, however, that their influence was there and was increasingly prominent. A number of Company officers justified military expansion on the basis of the civilising effects it would have on the empire's Indian subjects. Colonel Alexander Walker, who had served in India since 1781, wrote in the 1810s that the sepoys were exemplars of the civilisation that the empire wished to see. Arguing that it was essential to devote more money to the military at the expense of the Company's civil service, James Young wrote in 1820 that 'the actual state of Human society &

⁶⁷Macaulay to Castlereagh, 8 May 1807, WO1/352, f. 349, TNA; Maxwell to Bathurst, 24 September 1812, CO267/34, f. 37, TNA; J.J. Crooks, *Records Relating to the Gold Coast Settlements* (Browne and Nolan, 1923), 127.

⁶⁸*Report from the Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa*, vol. 1 (House of Commons, 1842), 256–7, 567–8, 643.

⁶⁹Maeve Ryan, "'A Moral Millstone': British Humanitarianism and the Policy of Liberated African Apprenticeship, 1808–1848", *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 2 (2016): 399–422; Richard Anderson, 'The Diaspora of Sierra Leone's Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and 'Liberation' at Freetown, 1808–1863', *African Economic History* 41 (2013): 101–38, 125; Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, and Martin A. Klein, eds., *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 337.

⁷⁰C.W. Newbury, *British Policy Towards West Africa, Selected Documents, 1786–1874* (Clarendon Press, 1965), 250–1.

⁷¹Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, 102–8.

of civilization in India . . . could not endure for one day after our mil[itar]y superiority ceased'. Or as Walter Badenach, a captain in the Bengal Army, argued in an 1826 pamphlet, the effects of military service on the Company's sepoys were 'so conspicuously beneficial, as to be a strong inducement for us to extent it further, as it almost entirely changes their habits, and corrects that part of their conduct in which they are most apt to go wrong'.⁷²

The most prominent advocate of this line of thinking was John Malcolm. Malcolm questioned the value of imposing social reform on India. Malcolm claimed that the improvement of Indian society would come not from British reforms but from the talents of Indian elites, and he gave the Company army a prominent role in facilitating this improvement. Malcolm believed that the best civil officials were those who had served in the army. As he put it in 1811, 'all employments and situations of profit and honour in the civil Administration . . . should only be attainable through the means of approved service in the regular army'.⁷³ The Thanahs featured prominently in this process and were seen by Malcolm as nurseries of model Indian subjects as well as places from which could be drawn loyal and effective administrators for the civilian administration. The appeal of putatively disciplined sepoys to the imposition of colonial authority made the Thanahs especially appealing forms of socio-economic change. And since it was to Indian elites that men like Malcolm looked to for the future of British India, they were also located close to recalcitrant chieftains whose presence was seen as disruptive to social order and commerce. In Benares, in particular, Thanahs were located in the wastelands that provided shelter to Rajput communities who were unwilling to pay revenue to the ruling family of Benares. The Thanahs thus served as an important means of denying space to autonomous communities and as a means of supporting the efforts of loyal allies in exerting control over their territories. As Seema Alavi highlights, the 'distribution of invalid *jagirs* [land assignments] represented a rigorous intervention by the Company in the affairs of the zamindars'.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, as in Trinidad, chronic underfunding forced the sepoys into an unenviable position. The Bihar Thanahs were environmentally fragile and rarely satisfied the needs of retiring sepoys. By the 1820s, sepoys increasingly turned to monetary pensions and the existing villages declined. Disease and depopulation took a heavy toll and those who had received earlier *jagirs* often requested that they be permitted to surrender them and convert to a cash pension. A survey conducted of the Thanahs in Bhagalpur in 1810 suggested that a fresh influx of 6,000 or 7,000 sepoys would be necessary to sustain the settlements but such numbers could not be found.⁷⁵ Yet vestiges of the system remained. As late as the 1850s, *jagirs* were still being granted to individual sepoys though the poor quality of the land—often in 'Jungly [*sic*] Country'—and the isolated nature of the settlements meant they rarely prospered.⁷⁶

In Awadh and Benares, the productivity of the land tended to be better and, as a result, the Thanahs maintained their coherence into the 1830s. But this presented the Company with a different set of problems, including fraudulent claims to *jagirs* and the creation of a market for the sale of pension rolls. An 1817 investigation by I.H. Shakespeare, the military secretary to the Resident in Awadh, found numerous examples of fraudulent activities.⁷⁷ Economically viable *jagirs* also made the sepoys independently secure and self-confident in ways that undercut Company rule. The Company faced the problem of seeing the settlements deteriorate or support

⁷²Nancy G. Cassels, 'An Historiographical Challenge: Correspondence Between an Indophile and an Indophobe', in *Orientalism and Military Cantonment in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, ed. Nancy G. Cassels (Edwin Mellen, 1991), 67–9; Walter Badenach, *Inquiry into the States of the Indian Army: With Suggestions for its Improvement* (William Clowes, 1826), 87; Draft of Lt. Col. James Young's Report, 6 Jan. 1820, Add. MSS 38,518, ff. 46–7, BL.

⁷³Malcolm, *Sketch of the Political History of India*, 529. See also Jack Harrington, *Sir John Malcolm and the Creation of British India* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), esp. 39–71.

⁷⁴Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, 108.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 129–31.

⁷⁶Petition of Havildars and Sepoys, n.d. [1857], IOR/E/4/848, f. 923, BL.

⁷⁷Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, 133–4.

them in ways that might undermine sepoy dependence on the Company state.⁷⁸ Like the settlements in Scotland, Trinidad, and Sierra Leone, the settlements allowed the Company to engage in notions of human improvement which floundered on government parsimony, imperial inconsistencies, and opposition from soldiers whose lives were worth more than the marginal lands upon which they were placed.

State intervention, commercial change, and military agency

What do these military settlements reveal about imperialism and concepts of human progress? Three key things can be said. First, there was an obvious connection between soldiers and commercial development. While enlightened theorists such as Adam Ferguson drew a distinction between the martial habits of supposedly uncivilised communities and the refined and commercial but often unmartial attributes of civilised societies, the administrators of empire seem to have found nothing contradictory in martial vigour *and* commercial improvement.⁷⁹ For these individuals, military service could be conceived of as a source of refinement and progress, especially in colonial contexts. This was a function of the militarised nature of so much imperial rule. With so much of the empire's ideological parameters wrapped up in violence, understandings of economic productivity, social and civilisational change, and security were also filtered through a military lens. Lacking efficient metrics for measuring so-called civilisation, everything from speech patterns to the neatness of dwellings was deployed as evidence of the close connection between military service and social improvement.⁸⁰ Since soldiers were a group over which the state exerted significant control, any evidence that colonial peoples had 'considerably improved their circumstances' were connected back to their military service.⁸¹ And since soldiers were a natural corollary to security, it became possible to link military service with commercial improvement. As Canning had said about Trinidad, 'Strength once established, wealth would naturally follow.' Even those in the planter interest like Governor Woodford saw soldiers as part of the broader improvement of the colony.⁸²

This is not to say that security and commerce were always consistent. On the Annexed Estates, established families were evicted and existing agricultural patterns disrupted in the interests of giving land to soldiers. The disruption produced a domino effect that undermined the economic vitality of much larger sections of the population.⁸³ In Sierra Leone, settling soldiers near Freetown gave the colony access to an important military resource but it undermined the creation of farms in the interior where the abolitionists saw the future of commercial development. There was tension between the civil and military aims of the colony's leaders.⁸⁴ Yet this divide—as historians of the British empire have already noted—was never as clear cut as we might imagine. It is worth considering in more detail how empire-builders reconciled their claim to humanitarian governance with their extensive reliance on military force. Military settlements were one such place of experimentation.⁸⁵

Second, military settlements do evidence the desire of the state to intervene in the social character of colonial societies. Efforts to engineer idealised visions of agrarian society featured prominently in all of the settlements. Yet efforts to 'fix' traditional society into bucolic stasis usually depended upon the artificial imposition of socio-economic change. This typically required administrative energies that were above and beyond simply placing settlers on plots of land and stepping back. What this suggests is that the British state was far more willing to engage in social

⁷⁸Memo Regarding Invalid Pension Establishment of Native Arms, 11 August 1854, GD45/6//354, NRS.

⁷⁹Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (A. Millar and T. Caddel, 1767), 374–85.

⁸⁰Regimental Orders for the 6th West India regiment, 1800, MS 203, 3, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston.

⁸¹*Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of Sierra Leone*, 40–1.

⁸²Fergus, 'Dread of Insurrection', 769.

⁸³Mackillop, *More Fruitful than the Soil*, 95.

⁸⁴*Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of Sierra Leone*, 25, 32.

⁸⁵See notes 7 and 8 above.

change than a review of British colonial policies before c. 1830 would typically have us believe. The established dichotomy between Oriental and Utilitarian approaches to empire might not be the best means of explaining these developments. Traditional understandings of British imperialism note an important shift from Orientalism to Utilitarianism around the 1830s, most notably in India with T.B. Macaulay's 'Minute of 1835' and William Bentinck's role as governor-general from 1828 to 1835.⁸⁶ More recent scholarship is not so convinced and highlights a number of discrepancies in this narrative, including the continued influence of prominent Orientalists in Company government and claims that the crucial divide in imperial policies was between commercial and territorial idioms of sovereignty and not between competing ideological approaches to colonial societies.⁸⁷

Military settlements further destabilise this narrative by suggesting the emergence of interventionist policies and state-backed social engineering back into the middle of the eighteenth century. And the significance of the military is instructive here. The approach of the imperial state to so-called human progress was determined not by vague shifts in prevailing imperial ideologies but by the contingent desires of policymakers and the relative power of the state in a given time and place. Where military settlers could be used, the imperial state was all too willing to attempt socio-economic change. Where such localities were understood as being strategically vulnerable, the willingness of the state to devote its energies to the perceived problem increased exponentially. The demobilisation of military settlers in both Trinidad and Sierra Leone reflected a desire to improve commercial utility *and* illustrate that British colonies would be more secure without the expansion of slavery, an argument that events in Haiti made more plausible. The very process of moving people significant distances at state expense is indicative of an emerging desire to oversee colonial processes on a global scale before emancipation.⁸⁸ It was local conditions and the extent of imperial authority—not shifting ideological attitudes in the metropole—that seem to have had the greatest influence on a broad range of colonial policies. The Annexed Estates and the Invalid Thanahs were both decades old by the time that a Utilitarian approach to empire supposedly saw increased intervention in the social foundation of locations over which the British state and its proxies claimed authority.

If the state's reach was broad, it was also deep. Direct intervention in the lives of settled soldiers did not require the extensive state apparatus of the latter nineteenth century. In the Thanahs, regulations in 1804 permitted invalid landholders to adopt sons to succeed them as heirs. This, in turn, saw the Company step in to verify all adoptions and impose its influence on who could and could not legitimately succeed to a *jagir*. The administration of pensions was also increasingly devolved to a local level and to district Invaliding Committees where it was possible to maintain greater oversight of ex-sepoys. By the time Bentinck took office, the Company possessed clear regulations for administering invalid *jagirs*. Company officials intervened directly in the domestic world of relatively minor families within its territories to the extent of defining the meaning of familial relationships.⁸⁹ Within two decades, the Company created full lists of each pensioner and

⁸⁶David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization, 1773–1835* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969); Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*.

⁸⁷For challenges to the Orientalist-Utilitarian framework, see D.A. Washbrook, 'India, 1818–1860: The Two Faces of Colonialism', in *Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford University Press, 1999), 398; Rama Sundari Mantena, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780–1880* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Joshua Ehrlich, *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁸⁸For other examples of the state's mass movement of militarised settlers, see S. Karly Kehoe and Ciaran O'Neill, "'A Colony to Themselves': Scottish Highlander Settler Colonialism in British North America, 1770–1804', *Journal of British Studies* 63, no. 3 (2024): 1–18; Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (Yale University Press, 2018).

⁸⁹Designations of religion, caste, or sect were often used to judge the merits of a claim and heirs were judged as legitimate only if they conformed to Company definitions of family. See Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, 137–41.

their family connections in order to regulate the sepoys. These lists followed closely on the heels of the first modern census in Britain and predated the establishment of the census in India by two decades.⁹⁰

And third, military settlement reveals the range of people involved in global expansion and the shifting ideological and administrative mechanisms that influenced their lives. In the complex and often contradictory world of British imperialism—with politicians of various political persuasions attempting to enact policy through a range of military, commercial, and civil authorities—there were no clear lines of demarcation in support for military settlements. In Scotland and Sierra Leone, it was civil authorities who were most keen to use soldiers for their commercial purposes, sometimes challenging security concerns to do so. Military figures such as Picton in Trinidad opposed the settlements because he doubted that he could trust military-trained ex-slaves and because he favoured the expansion of plantation slavery. There was a sincere belief in the civilising effects of soldiers but different parts of the British state and its Company proxy supported military settlements at different times and for different reasons. What held it all together was the idea that military service could discipline colonial men and turn them into the types of colonial subject that would bring stability to the perceived chaos of empire. The chaotic pluralism of British imperialism was very much at home in colonial military settlements but the appeal of the disciplined colonial soldier transcended this chaos, at least in so much as it appealed to a broad range of imperial administrators.

The appeal of the disciplined colonial ex-soldier must have been significant since it ran counter to realities on the ground. Soldiers were rarely paragons of social discipline. Efforts to impose military order by granting lands to officers who might then sublet smaller parcels of land to former soldiers collapsed when soldiers refused to submit themselves to the hierarchies that had defined their working lives. Military settlers were also highly disruptive to non-military families. The British Resident at Lucknow in the 1830s reported that some sepoys acted as ‘habitual tyrants’ to their neighbours. The Company’s backing for military settlers contributed to this tyranny. Former soldiers—who felt empowered by their connection to Company officials—frequently encroached upon the lands of nearby zamindars. Zamindars, in turn, led raids against the Thanahs. Some zamindars soon regretted their decision to surrender lands to the Company for the purposes of establishing stations. Disputes between sepoys and villagers placed the Company in the unenviable position of either failing to support invalid soldiers or of alienating established cultivators. Company officials rarely chose the former strategy.⁹¹ In Gaelic Scotland, military settlers also provoked social tension by pursuing aims that were inconsistent with the interests of existing tenants. Enclosing common pasture, preventing poaching, and targeting young men for recruitment were all ways in which military settlers disrupted the existing social order.⁹² Soldiers might have been a valued source of marginal labour but this did not mean that they simply did what they were told.

Conclusion

One final commonality across these settlements was their relative failure. To create sustainable military settlements, the imperial state had to invest time, money, and energy over the medium- to long-term to support them. The decentralised and uncoordinated nature of British imperialism made this extremely difficult. Yet it is curious that commentators were wildly optimistic about the positive effects of military settlements, at least in retrospect. Walter Scott would later argue that government interventions in Scotland had rendered the people ‘a class of beings as different from

⁹⁰Memorandum Regarding Invalid Pension Establishment of Native Arms, 11 August 1854, GD45/6/354, NRS.

⁹¹Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, 124–7.

⁹²*Reports of the Annexed Estates*, 12–13; Marianne McLean, *The People of Glengarry: Highlanders in Transition, 1745–1820* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 59–60.

their grandfathers, as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time'. It was a change, he said, without parallel in the history of Europe.⁹³ In India, John Malcolm was deeply convinced by the success of the Thanahs and described them as a 'noble instance' of his broader hopes for British India. Under different circumstances, some commentators on the 1857 Indian Uprising also acknowledged the success of the Thanahs when they noted the loyalty of the sepoys who had become civil administrators, not 'that the authority of the police carried any weight' as one writer acerbically put it.⁹⁴

Why this faith endured when the practical results did not live up to expectations is a compelling question. Much of it probably depended on the twin imperatives of commercial development and the importance of humanitarian governance. As Rosanne Marion Adderley notes, British pride in the treatment of colonial subjects often precluded the use of overt coercion in the state's dealings with them.⁹⁵ Like the cynical use of Liberated Africans as apprentices or Picton and Cochrane's disregard of abolitionist legislation to protect planter interests, it seems likely that military settlement offered the British state a grey area by which the spirit—if not the letter—of Britain's laws as a benevolent power could be abused. Asserting that the military settlements were also a vital part of the process of civilising colonial spaces helped further shield the reality that humanitarian governance was much more about governance than it was about humanity.

This faith helped make military settlements an enduring part of British imperialism. Since the military remained one of the few tools over which the state could exert significant control, the assertion that military settlements remained useful to social change—in spite of evidence to the contrary—helped legitimise military authority over colonial societies. After the cataclysm of 1857, Punjab became particularly important to British thinkers as a repository of loyal soldiers and the vast irrigation projects of the 1880s were mobilised to support this aim. Keen to 'create villages of a type superior in comfort and civilisation to anything which had previously existed in the Punjab', as the Colony Committee later said, the settlements became joint civil-military ventures with a similar focus on both civilisation, security, and future recruiting. As in the earlier settlements investigated here, the imperial state used the settlement of so-called martial families to entrench itself in rural society and influence the development of what they believed to be civilisational improvement. The Canal Colonies, as Tan Tai Yong notes, contributed to a close and sustained relationship between Punjab and the Indian Army but the military requirements of the colonies resulted in vast inequalities and extensive discrimination against those who did not reside permanently on market-orientated farms and were therefore dismissed as uncommercial and unmilitary. In short, 'uncivilised'.⁹⁶

While studies of military settlements in the British empire, especially prior to the First World War, tend to focus on white veterans rather than colonial troops, the settlements that were created in the age of revolutions form part of a broader use of ex-soldiers to imprint ideas onto colonial spaces.⁹⁷ And it might be time to consider them in a more global and holistic sense as a major component of British imperial thinking. There was often little in the way of bureaucratic or conceptual overlap between these settlements. Yet some imperial officials saw the similarities and

⁹³Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (Adam and Charles Black, 1862 [1814]), 316; Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 150–60.

⁹⁴Malcolm, *Sketch of the Political History of India*, 526; Noah Alfred Chick, *Annals of the Indian Rebellion* (Charles Knight and Co., 1859), 775. See also *Mutiny Records: Correspondence and Reports* (Punjab Government Press, 1911), 273.

⁹⁵Rosanne Marion Adderley, 'New Negroes from Africa': *Slave Trade Abolition and Free African Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 136.

⁹⁶Rajit K. Mazumder, *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab* (Permanent Black, 2003), 67; Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 13–14; Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government, and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849–1947* (Sage, 2005), 12.

⁹⁷Evan Wilson, *The Horrible Peace: British Veterans and the End of the Napoleonic Wars* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2023); Hartley, 'Veterans and Empire', 14–31; Ulbe Bosma, 'European Colonial Soldiers in the Nineteenth Century: Their Role in White Global Migration and Patterns of Colonial Settlement', *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 2 (2009): 317–36.

noted the ‘close historical parallel’ in various iterations of soldier settlement, using the example of Scotland to justify policies in New Zealand or, in the case of Lord Grey, citing the Invalid Thanahs as inspiration for the settlement of invalid soldiers in South Africa. When looking back on the Canal Colonies in Punjab, one retired colonial officer later said that they were ‘colonies in the Roman sense’ and had ‘brought soldiers, and particularly Punjabis, together, emphasizing their sense of difference from the rest of India’.⁹⁸ Seen in a global context, the military settlements in Scotland, Trinidad, Sierra Leone, and India emphasise just how critical military ideas were to the larger edifice of colonial rule; not just in an administrative and ideological sense but as part of broader ideas about change and human progress. The settlement of soldiers reflected an increasingly robust belief on the part of the state that armies could be used to promote imperial objectives away from the battlefield as well as on it. It is in this overlap between the armed forces and perceived societal progress that a neglected part of European imperialism can be discerned. Armies are generative as well as destructive institutions and war placed soldiers at the confluence of a range of imperial ideas and endeavours. We should take seriously the non-combat role of armies in colonial environments and recognise that conquest was only one—and perhaps not even the most important—function of this vital tool of imperial expansion.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Sarah McCaslin, Simon Newman, and the late Aaron Graham for their insights on earlier drafts of this manuscript. He is also grateful to Stephen Mullen for his suggestions regarding sources related to Trinidad and to his colleagues at the United States Naval Academy’s Works-in-Progress where a draft of this paper was presented.

Financial support. None to declare.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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⁹⁸*The British Empire*, ed. Jane Samson (Oxford University Press, 2001), 176; Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, 142–4; Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (Cape, 1974), 388.