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The Militia Lists and family history

BY MATTHEW MCCORMACK

The civil census is usually the first port of call for people wishing to trace their ancestors, but it has its limitations. In particular, it does not go back very far: the first national census did not take place until 1801, and family historians know that the 1841 census is usually the earliest this is usable. To go back further, you have to consult other types of sources.

A body of documents that is often overlooked by family historians and social historians alike are the militia ballot lists, known as the ‘Militia Lists’. In 1757 the government passed the Militia Act, which meant that 33,000 civilian men should be available for military service. Britain was regularly at war with France in the eighteenth century, but the regular army was relatively small and mostly posted abroad, leaving Britain vulnerable to invasion. Britain’s military vulnerability was underscored by the American War of Independence, which made it clear that a weak military power would be no match for Napoleon’s grand strategy.

The Militia Lists were an attempt to redress this balance. The Militia Act of 1757 set in motion a range of measures designed to create a citizen army capable of fighting against an invasion force. The Militia Lists were designed to be a national census, taking a snapshot of the adult male population of Britain at a particular point in time. The lists were compiled using a ballot system, with each county being required to create a list of eligible men for military service. The lists were then used to select a pool of volunteers who could be called up in times of emergency.

The Militia Lists list were compiled between 1757 and 1876, with the first national census taking place in 1801. The Militia Lists were compiled using a ballot system, with each county being required to create a list of eligible men for military service. The lists were then used to select a pool of volunteers who could be called up in times of emergency. The Militia Lists were compiled using a ballot system, with each county being required to create a list of eligible men for military service. The lists were then used to select a pool of volunteers who could be called up in times of emergency.

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which appears to have been a practical measure to avoid large families falling upon the parish. These exempt groups were often recorded and crossed off, and are therefore visible to us, but sometimes they were omitted from the lists.

The militia ballot also included many health exemptions, since the purpose of the lists was to provide men who were physically fit enough to serve. Details about men’s bodies and their physical and mental health are recorded, and they are then crossed out if they are therefore not liable for the ballot. Men were rejected for suffering from fits, lameness, rheumatism or flat footlessness, which would prevent them from marching. Men had to be able to handle a musket, which was five feet long plus bayonet, so were rejected if they were ‘very short, unable to carry arms’. They needed a forefinger to pull the trigger and front teeth to rip the top off a powder cartridge. Looking at the lists, it is possible that some individuals deliberately maimed themselves.

The poet John Clare (who himself served in the county militia) recalled that the local gypies ‘disabled the finger of every male child in war time when infants to keep them from being drawn for the Militia.’

Other disabilities are recorded in the lists including deafness, dumbness, blindness or loss of an eye. The lists also record mental illness, albeit rather imprecisely: ‘infirme & insane’ or ‘he is not rite in his head’. As well as being of interest to genealogists trying to find out about a particular individual, they therefore have much potential as sources for historians of medicine and disability. Indeed, the militia lists of the eighteenth century provide much more biometric information than the early Victorian censuses.

There are other factors that we have to bear in mind when using these sources. Fundamentally, most men did not want to serve, so it is fair to assume that they tried to avoid being listed if possible. If a man was drawn in the ballot he could buy himself out or provide a substitute, but the £10 fee and the cost of substitutes were beyond most poor men. Effectively it was a form of conscription, which was rarely popular.

The attempts to collect the lists were met with some of the worst rioting of the century – and, ironically, existing militia regiments had to be brought in to suppress the disorder. At a more personal level, the process could be resisted. Men sometimes refused to give their names, and it is likely that constables would sometimes refuse to issue them up chose their own format. Some constables were more literate and conscientious than others, and spelling in the eighteenth century was often hit-and-miss. If you are tracing a particular surname, it is advisable to try various spelling variations. Hatley suggests no fewer than 17 different ways of spelling the common Northamptonshire name ‘Tebbutt’, for example.

Even given these limitations, though, these are tremendously rich sources. At their best, they give details of names, occupations, military service, family size, apprenticeship and mental and physical disability. They were collected by parish, so if you are trying to track down an individual you need to know where to look. For example, if you consult the lists for the parish of Culworth in 1777 you can see ‘Richd. Law’ and ‘Wm. Smith’ from the notorious Culworth Gang, which committed violent robberies across southwest Northants. If there’s a modern edition like Hatley’s, then being able to browse and use the index will speed things up, so it’s a good place to start.

Yet I would highly recommend consulting the originals, if they are available. Even if they are in the worst handwriting, the fact that you are actually holding the very document at the heart of the process. As well as giving an insight into big questions like population, military policy and the workings of the state, the militia lists help us to study history ‘from below’ by telling us about ordinary people. It tells us about their jobs, their families and their health, a full century before the censuses enable us to do so.

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