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In Red coat dreaming, Dr. Craig Wilcox has embraced an increasing trend in which military aspects are melded with both personal and social history. The result is a most interesting and readable account of the period in the 19th century when the British Army was also Australia’s army. Using numerous personal narratives and extensive research, Wilcox demonstrates how Australian military history has been bound up to Britain. These stories weave in and out of his theme, the sartorial signature of the British Army, the “red coat”.

The author presents a convincing argument as to why the population, with its British roots, indulged in “red coat dreaming”. Middle-class attitudes towards the British Army, particularly its officers, were strongly positive. Indeed, thousands had served in the British Army before settling in Australia; many were proud of the British Army’s achievements on battlefields far from Australia; and hundreds of Australians enlisted in the Army or married its officers.

Part of the book’s value is that it delves into history, hitherto unexplored or forgotten, of the military tradition in Australia before Gallipoli. While “slouch hat” military history has sprung from the ANZAC tradition, Spicer Cookworthy is emblematic of the earlier “red coat” tradition. From a family of squatters on the Vasse River, 200 km south-west of Perth, Cookworthy, then an ensign of the Royals, splashed ashore at Gallipoli in the spring of 1854, some 61 years before any other Australian soldier (shades of the 10th Light Horse at the Nek).

Although Red coat dreaming is specifically written about Australia from 1788 to 1915, “red coats” are still in evidence in Australia today. Anyone watching the Australian Army Bands on parade cannot fail to notice their sartorially splendid “red jackets”. This is echoed in the scarlet sashes worn by the sergeants of the Australian infantry regiments.

A small criticism of this excellent book is that the author simply identifies each British regiment by its number, e.g. the 77th. However, all British regiments that served in Australia had territorial connections. Therefore, it might have been helpful to have an appendix pointing out that it was, say “77th Regiment of Foot (East Middlesex)”.

Roland Millbank
One other aspect that is still sorely lacking is research into the lives of the families of the British Army who also resided and often settled in Australia from the 1790s through until 1870. Again, despite some broad inroads, these often lack any Australasian focus, and are scant for the period from 1815 to the 1840s, with emphasis general Between 1899 and 1901, forces from the six Australian colonies fought alongside each other before being replaced in 1901 by forces of the newly established Australian Army following Federation. A total of five theatre honours were awarded for service in South Africa, being bestowed upon successor units in the form of honorary banners and distinctions presented in 1904, 1908 and 1911. Red Coat Dreaming: How Colonial Australia Embraced the British Army. Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-19360-3. The British Army in the West Indies: society and the military in the revolutionary age. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1998. CADELL, Sir Patrick. A History of the Bombay Army. London: Longmans Green, 1938. CALLAHAN, Raymond. The East India Company and the Army Reform, 1783-1798. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972. WILCOX, Craig. Red Coat Dreaming: how colonial Australia embraced the British army. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.