

Kevin B. Wamsley
University of Western Ontario

**Rough and Ready, Sometimes Fancy, but always
Manly: Exploring the Social World of the Garrison
Soldier in Nineteenth Century London**

The strategic location of garrisons in British North America signaled the primacy of military control in the colonial policy of British imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The idea of military stability and protection attracted both colonists and mercenaries, and also ensured a measure of economic circulation in the garrison town, as soldiers' pay flowed to tavern-owners and shopkeepers. Within the emerging cultural life of growing towns, regiments of strong, trained men offered a physical presence, both coercive and comforting, during an era in the colonies when physical violence was more a part of human relationships than the social pleasures created by infrequent gatherings which brought townspeople together. Sports and pastimes were invoked by officers both as public signifiers of British civility and strength, but

also at the personal level for the men to reaffirm masculine identity and to alleviate general boredom.

Works by Robert Day and others has suggested that the townspeople, for the most part, had positive associations with the soldiers, enjoying parades and organized sporting events, competitions, and sports days. And, certainly, the shopkeepers benefited when the soldiers were permitted leave to town to spend their pay. However, for others, the position of the soldier in garrison town life was one of contradiction and ambiguity. A dedicated military force was convenient on the one hand but, on the other hand, having trained men whose masculine identity was partially based in the successful deployment of physical violence was problematic when leave hours found soldiers in the local taverns. Through no fault of the soldiers, common ideas about colonial manhood drew meaning from a respect for physical strength and men often employed fists and weapons as the means for solving personal and professional disputes. Consequently, by association with their professions, garrison soldiers were often subject to physical challenges and attacks from the men in the taverns.

Reputations of drunken, brawling soldiers ran counter to the images of colonial stability and the civilized man promoted through the cultural activities of the British garrisons, including cricket matches, horse-racing, regattas and the costume balls organized by educated officers. This paper examines the social experiences of the soldiers and officers of the Garrison in nineteenth century London. Meanings about masculinity and the employment of the physical body, as they related to sport, community events, and time off from the military post, will be examined within the context of British imperialism and the establishment of the town of London. Archival records, newspapers, personal papers and diaries are the main sources for the paper. The substantive material is situated within current debates on nineteenth century masculinity as they relate to sport, public performance, and identity.