

The Great Kiltie Con

The author of a new book on Scottish military disasters says Scotland's pride in its soldiers has been ruthlessly exploited by Whitehall for almost 150 years - with dire consequences.

"When people talk about Scottish soldiers they think about guys in kilts," said Paul Cowan, author of *Scottish Military Disasters* from his home in Canada.

"Back before the First World War people used to follow the exploits of the Highland regiments in the papers the way they now follow football teams.

"There's no doubt that the British Establishment has been ruthless in exploiting Scotland's pride in its soldiers and persuading them in two world wars they can best serve their country by going into the infantry.

"In the fighting after D-Day in 1944 a British study suggested that although the infantry made up only 25% of the troops involved they suffered 71% of the casualties."

Cowan said three out of the 10 British infantry divisions which fought in Europe after D-Day were Scottish, a proportion which does not reflect population figures.

"It's apt that one of the best memoirs of the fighting after D-Day is by an officer from the Gordon Highlanders called "So Few Got Through," said Cowan.

"In a single month in late 1944 the 15th Scottish Division suffered 2,562 infantry casualties. That works out to the equivalent of three of its nine infantry battalions in one month of war. A rough count shows that of the 153 front line battalions serving in British infantry divisions in 1944 no fewer than 41 were Scottish - more than one in four. And half of them were 'Highland'"

Cowan said in the First World War about half the Scottish infantry were put in kilts in a deliberate attempt to exploit national sentiment.

"The Government wouldn't have spent all that money on kilts instead of trousers if they hadn't expected a big pay back," the Scots-born writer remarked.

Cowan said the prestige the Highland regiments enjoyed dated back to the mass recruitment of young men from the Highlands and Islands in the 60 years following the almost suicidal charge of the Highlanders at the Battle of Culloden.

"I think General James Wolf, a veteran of Culloden who was in the battle against the French which brought Canada into the British Empire, summed up very nicely the official attitude to Highland troops when he wrote in 1751 that "They are hardy, intrepid, accustomed to a rough country and no great mischief if they fall,"" said Cowan.

Cowan said that Scottish pride has also cost its soldiers dear.

"The Scots managed to alienate their French allies in 1424 with their boasting and enrage their English enemies by declaring a fight to the death at Verneuil," he said.

"The French ran away from the battle and the English took the Scots at their word by slaughtering them almost to a man."

Cowan said many Scots have a romanticized view of their own history.

"Many Scots believe the country was never conquered by the English," he said.

"In fact Oliver Cromwell conquered and occupied Scotland in 1651 following his victories at Dunbar and Worcester.

"Dunbar was an example of the many battles that the English won despite being outnumbered by the Scots.

"Bannockburn was one of the few major battles the Scots actually won. Against it you've got count Wallace at Falkirk, Solway Moss, Flodden, Halidon Hill, Dunbar, Worcester, Neville's Cross, Dupplin Moor, and Pinkie."

The former journalist said it was often only geography and weak central government control from Edinburgh that defeated English attempts at domination.

"In many ways Scotland before Culloden was pretty much like Afghanistan today when it came to attempts to occupy it," he explained.

"Holding the cities didn't equate to conquering the country and the hills were full of people who paid very little attention to events in the capital."

Cowan, who has reported from Afghanistan and Kosovo for one of Canada's biggest newspaper chains, said he wrote *Scottish Military Disasters* to highlight that Scots soldiers have been no more immune from bad luck and bad generalship than any other troops.

"I noticed many histories ignored the occasions when things went wrong or dismissed them in a single sentence," he explained.

"Scotland's military history is far more interesting when you go beyond all the blood and glory stuff.

"There are the soldiers who became shark food when their ill-equipped ship sank off the coast of South Africa, or how a whole regiment ended up in jail after an ill-advised attempt to invade South America, the Scots kidnapped by ruthless mercenary recruiters and were then massacred by Norwegian peasant farmers or what happened when Robert the Bruce's wee brother tried to conquer Ireland."