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ALLEN DAVENPORT OF THE WINDSOR FORESTERS; FENCIBLE CAVALRY TROOPER AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST

NICK MANSFIELD

Introduction

The recent article on Moses Ximenes and the Windsor Foresters or Berkshire Fencible Cavalry, brought to mind an unusual memoir written by one of his troopers. Allen Davenport (1775-1846) served for the whole of the life of the regiment. In old age he wrote a long autobiography, which concentrated on his role as a pioneer working class political activist, for which he was both famous and infamous. In what is the only known surviving account by a Fencible Cavalry trooper, the first dozen pages are a description of his military life, which he seems to have excelled at and relished.¹

Considering his very poor background, Davenport achieved a remarkable, if unluccrative, career as a shoemaker, journalist, lecturer, poet, publisher, agitator and organiser. Like many other 'military radicals' such as William Cobbett, (1763-1835), a highly successful journalist and MP, who achieved the rank of Regimental Sergeant Major while serving in the 54th Foot, Davenport was proud of his service and used the military language he picked up in the Fencibles in his writing and rhetoric.²

Davenport's later Political Career

According to his biographer, Malcolm Chase, Davenport was an 'important link between the Chartist movement and the heritage of the French Revolution'. He had an extraordinary forty-year political career in which he was engaged in every reform cause. Like William Cobbett, Davenport started as a Tory patriot, and after briefly supporting the Whig grandee Charles James Fox, he became a partisan for the radical aristocrat Sir Francis Burdett (1770 – 1844). Active in the London shoemakers' trade union after his discharge from the Windsor Foresters, Davenport was able to place its resources at the disposal of Burdett who was seeking a parliamentary seat. After several attempts, Burdett was returned for the Westminster constituency in 1807. The shoemakers' union attempted major strikes in 1810 and 1813, moves that Davenport opposed. He was proved right when the union was defeated and broken up. Thereafter Davenport sought more intellectual paths to reform.³

¹ Andrew Cormack, 'Captain Moses Ximenes and the Berkshire Fencible Cavalry', *JSAHR* No. 97 (2019), pp. 109-119 and Malcolm Chase (ed.), *The Life and Literary Pursuits of Allen Davenport* (London: Scholars Press (1845 [1994]). There is an overall dearth of memoirs from those serving in the auxiliary forces in the French Wars.

² Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, pp. x, and 47, Malcolm Chase, 'Davenport, Allen (1775-1846), *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography*.

³ Nick Mansfield, *Soldiers as Citizens – Popular Politics and the Nineteenth century British Military*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 38-40. See Chapters 3 and 4 for the many discharged ex-servicemen active in post 1815 reform movements.

Davenport was converted to land reform under the influence of Thomas Spence (1750 – 1814), the eccentric Newcastle-born radical shoemaker, who publicised his ideas through the distribution of copper tokens. Later, Davenport was to become Spence's first biographer. By 1815, Spence's disciples became known as the Society of Spencean Philanthropists and formed a revolutionary republican underground movement in Regency London. Though a leading member, Davenport did not join other ex-servicemen in various attempted coups organised by Thomas Thistlewood (1774-1820), a penniless former Militia lieutenant. Thistlewood's group, infiltrated by spies, was eventually surprised in Cato Street, Marylebone, and arrested after a scuffle in which a policeman was killed. Five members were later executed; the last group in Britain to be sentenced to being hanged, drawn and quartered. Davenport also befriended the influential leader Henry 'Orator' Hunt (1773 – 1835), a radical gentleman, formerly of the Wiltshire Yeomanry. Hunt was arrested at the protest meeting in St Peter's Field, Manchester in August 1819, where the ensuing fracas became known as the Peterloo Massacre.⁴

Davenport was also a follower of Robert Owen (1771-1858), a wealthy cotton factory owner who was attempting to change society through his 'secular religion' and 'back to the land colonies'. Owen expended most of his fortune in attempting to establish, unsuccessfully, five of these colonies in both Britain and the United States of America, whose purpose was to bring about his 'New Moral World'. Davenport himself applied to be a colonist at the community in Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire in 1839, but was turned down 'because the community had sufficient shoemakers.' Though often critical of Owen, Davenport followed his progression from promoting the quack science of phrenology – predicting character from the study of bumps on the head – to the more down-to-earth consumer co-operative movement. The latter stemmed from the formation of the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844. One of Davenport's allies in this last enterprise was Miles Ashworth (1792-1868), a flannel weaver turned Royal Marine, who in his last voyage before demobilisation, had been part of the escort on HMS *Northumberland*, taking Napoleon to exile on St Helena in 1815.⁵

Davenport was one of the first male supporters of votes for women and other feminist causes, including birth control, ideas which were anathema to most contemporaries. Also contentious was Davenport's abandonment of the Methodism of his youth for fierce, free-thinking secularism, which alongside his propagation of universal adult education and support for Irish independence, also put him beyond the political pale. Towards the end of his life, Davenport was adopted as the 'grand old man' of reform by the huge Chartist movement, which demanded the extension of the right to vote, and he was lionised at their meetings.

⁴ Allen Davenport, *Life, writings and principles of Thomas Spence*, (London: Waklin, 1836). Mansfield, *Soldiers as Citizens*, pp. 76-77 and 80-81.

⁵ Mansfield, *Soldiers as Citizens*, pp. 114-116; Nick Mansfield, *Buildings of the labour movement*, (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), Chapter 5 and Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, p. 53.



Portrait of Allen Davenport taken from his book
The Life, Writings and Principles of Thomas Spence
(London, 1836)

He was a prolific author, political journalist and poet whose works were still being re-published by the co-operative movement in the 1860s. His work never made money and when he died in 1846, at his own request, he was buried in unconsecrated ground. His funeral expenses were covered by a collection made among the various reform groups he had supported.⁶

Davenport and the Windsor Foresters

Davenport was born in Ewen, in Gloucestershire, a hamlet near Cirencester, one of ten children of a handloom weaver. His early days coincided with massive upheaval for the rural poor, with the new mechanisation of the Northern textile trades undercutting the traditional domestic weaving of the West country and East Anglia. In addition, enclosures and associated agricultural change tended to impoverish farm workers and their families. Like many others, Davenport's Army service was to open up career opportunities, which would generally be unavailable to most rural labourers. Working at odd jobs from an early age, Davenport had no prospects of any education, but clearly a bright lad, he taught himself to read by studying the text of the broadside ballads, widely distributed in the villages, comparing them with the words and tunes he already knew.⁷

Aged twelve, he was sent to live and work as a groom for a nearby gentleman farmer and 'learnt in a considerable degree the art of horsemanship ... [and] sometimes rode with my master after the squire's hounds'. Davenport then worked for a veterinary surgeon as a horse-breaker. His accumulated experience with horses made him an ideal recruit for the mounted services in the Army. Davenport did not seem to seek promotion and served nearly seven years as an ordinary private, indicating that equine skills were probably widespread in the early nineteenth century and that a man had to have exceptional talents to be taken on as a farrier or rough rider.

His restless nature was also indicated by his failed attempt to run away to sea, which only got him as far as Bristol. Britain's adherence to the First Coalition against Revolutionary France in early 1793 and the subsequent expansion of the Army gave Davenport his chance for adventure. He later acknowledged his susceptibility to the recruiters' message:

⁶ Mansfield, *Soldiers as Citizens*, p. 113, Malcolm Chase, 'Davenport, Allen (1775–1846)', *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. 8 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 38–45 and Allen Davenport, 'Strikes and their Consequences Fifty Years Ago', *National Co-operator Leader*, 1 March 1861. For Davenport's political activities in context see Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London*, (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979) and Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, (Oxford: OUP, 1993). For Davenport's poetry see Peter Scheckner (ed.), *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry*, (London, Associated University Press, 1989), p. 332

⁷ For the construction of working class careers through army service see Nick Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers – Class, employment, conflict and the nineteenth-century military*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), Chapter 3 and John H. Rumsby, 'Making Choice: Constructing a Career in the Ranks of the Early Victorian Army', in I.F.W Beckett (ed.), *Victorians at War: New Perspectives*, (London: Society for the Study of Army Historical Research, 2007), pp. 23–33.

But though I was very young, I was a bit of a patriot, and thought, at that time, that everything undertaken by England was right, just and proper ... I shouted "Church and King", as loud and long as any priest or lord in the kingdom ... [it was my] ... bounden duty to put down such a desperate nation of levellers, blasphemers and regicides.

After failing to find a ship willing to take him, Davenport returned to his local market town of Cirencester. He fell in with a:

smart young corporal who commanded a recruiting party in the town, made up to me, and after describing in flourishing language the glorious cause of the war, and the delightful life of a light dragoon, proffered to me a significant shilling in the name of his gracious majesty King George III. Which I, with very little hesitation accepted, and became a soldier of a regiment of light cavalry, then being raised under the name of "Windsor Foresters". I was delighted with the name, I thought it so poetical.⁸

It is unclear if young Davenport understood that he had enlisted in a Fencible Cavalry unit, one of a number raised for home service only, whose contracts protected members from being drafted for overseas service, especially in the unhealthy station of the West Indies, which consumed British manpower in the 1790s. Nonetheless, he was soon disabused of the recruiters' flowery rhetoric:

we marched from old Corinium, Cirencester in August 1794 ... But I did not at first find things quite so poetical as I imagined. The temporary barracks in which the men were lodged was a miserable and filthy hole; and such was a noise kept up nearly the whole night, that there was no getting an hour's sleep from night to night.

Davenport escaped this 'military bedlam' through a bad reaction to a smallpox inoculation. After he had recovered, he followed the regiment north to Stamford and then barracks in Edinburgh, where he 'found an abundance of materials for poetry ... [for] every aspiring genius and lover of nature and art.'

Again, he was brought to reality by the mundane nature of everyday soldiering:

We remained in those barracks ten months, and the following spring, 1796, we marched from Edinburgh to the sea-shore near Dunbar, where a camp was laid out, and tents erected to receive us, and a miserable concern it turned out. Our situation in this our first encampment was wretched in the extreme ... the poor horses stood shivering at the ropes, with coats all standing on end, and as rough as badgers; and the men drenched in their tents.

⁸ Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, pp. 5–7.

At that time the soldier's pay was so low, that we were literally starving. Most of us growing youths and had sharp appetites, and necessarily whetted by a constant exposure to the wet and fresh air ... so that some of us, when a four pound loaf was delivered to each to serve for four days, ate more than half the first day! I and another comrade, went on a deputation to the Colonel's marquee to complain, but we could get no redress; starvation seemed our portion. Guess our joy on receiving the information that our pay was increased three pence halfpenny per day.

Davenport was already showing the talents that he would later need as a shoemakers' union leader but was lucky that his delegation coincided with the government's general pay rise, so he was not singled out for punishment, as often happened to soldiers' complaints.⁹

From the tents of Dunbar, Davenport and the Windsor Foresters marched north to Perth barracks in the autumn of 1796. Here he waxed poetic about the Highland scenery. He fell in love with a local girl and considered desertion to remain with her when the regiment moved on to Stirling. This march was in support of the civil power as the Militia Acts were extended to Scotland:

*The cause of that mysterious and sudden march was the reluctance which the Scotch people evinced to being drawn for the militia, among whom many young men declared that they would rather suffer death than be soldiers by compulsion.*¹⁰

The attempted balloting of all 18 to 23 year olds resulted in over 40 riots throughout the Scottish Lowlands in August and September 1797. The most bloody was in Tranent, now East Lothian, where 11 people were killed and many more wounded by the Cinque Port Fencible Cavalry. Fortunately for Davenport, the Windsor Foresters were not as actively involved as their sister regiment.¹¹

The following year the regiment was in Aberdeen in quarters, which Davenport considered comfortable, when he was called out for special service:

The following spring, 1799, I was one of a party appointed to escort a number of state prisoners who had been tried for high treason, having been concerned in the Irish rebellion of 1798. There were fifteen in all, and occupied five coaches. Among whom were the celebrated Arthur O'Connor, and General Ault. The former, uncle to Mr. Fergus O'Connor, the Chartist leader, and was proprietor

⁹ Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, pp. 8–9 and Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers*, pp. 158–161.

¹⁰ When the Militia in England and Wales was reformed by William Pitt in 1757–58, it was not thought appropriate that Scotland should be included. The Militia was extended to Scotland in *An Act to raise and embody a militia force in that part of the Kingdom of Great Britain called Scotland* – 37 Geo III c.103 (1796). The Act was amended by 39 Geo III c.62 (1799) – D. Pickering, *The Statutes at Large* (Cambridge; Vol. XLI, 1797 & Vol. XLII, Pt. 1, 1799).

¹¹ Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, pp. 9–10. For the Scottish Militia riots see Ian F.W. Beckett, *Britain's Part-Time Soldiers – The amateur military tradition, 1558–1945*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword edition, 2011) pp. 78–9 and J.E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793–1815*, (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 106–7.

*of the "Northern Star" a radical newspaper. The destination of these prisoners was fort [sic] George, a strong fortress in the very heart of the Highlands.*¹²

Arthur O' Connor, (1763-1852), came from an Irish Anglican gentry background, and though High Sheriff of Cork, and an Irish MP, was a reformer, and joined the rebel United Irishmen in 1796. In 1798, O' Connor was arrested in England, on his way to secure French support for the rebellion and was lucky to escape with his life. After release from Fort George in 1802, he was banished to France and was made a General of Division by Napoleon, though he never heard a shot fired in anger, and married into the aristocracy. O' Connor's nephews included the troubled Chartist leader Fergus O' Connor MP (1794-1855), who eventually went mad and his brother, Francis Burdett O' Connor (1791-1871), one of many British officers, who served Simon Bolivar, the South American liberator. Francis, as he was known, ended his days as a Peruvian General and hacienda owner. Davenport was later to know Fergus O' Connor as a fellow Chartist and contributed poems to the *Northern Star*.¹³

By 'General Ault', Davenport almost certainly meant 'General' Joseph Holt (1756-1826), a successful guerrilla commander of the United Irish rebels in Wicklow. A protestant farmer, he used his establishment connections to negotiate a surrender in the autumn of 1798, accepting transportation to New South Wales. He prospered in Australia and was pardoned in 1814 when he returned to Ireland. As a later firm advocate of Irish independence, Davenport in his memoirs was probably indulging in wishful thinking in mentioning Ault as one of the prisoners he escorted, because, Joseph Holt was transported directly from Ireland.¹⁴

In his next station at Aberdeen, Davenport demonstrated the frequent use of abundant free time by enterprising soldiers to learn new skills or apply existing ones in interacting with the civilian world:

*I became acquainted with two young shoemakers, who worked next door to the house in which I lodged, who very pressingly invited me to come and sit by them while they were at work ... and ultimately offered to teach me their trade... and was so far the master of the awl, that I could mend my own shoes, and sometimes sewed, or put patches on the shoes of my comrades ... [eventually] I had accomplished my object, which was to attempt to make a pair of shoes for myself ... in the course of four or five days [I] produced a pair of shoes ... and from that moment I called myself a shoemaker, and have followed that trade ever since.*¹⁵

¹² Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, p. 10.

¹³ Mansfield, *Soldiers as Citizens*, pp. 124 & 128.

¹⁴ For Holt see Tony Moore, *Death or Liberty – Rebels and radicals transported to Australia 1788-1868*, (Sydney: Pier 9, 2010). Davenport's rendition of Holt's name probably indicates that he retained a Gloucestershire accent all his life.

¹⁵ Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, p. 10. For soldiers working on their own account see Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers*, Chapter 3.

By the summer of 1800, the Windsor Foresters were slated for disbandment. Though Davenport was tempted to remain near his girlfriend in Scotland, he followed the regiment south and took his discharge at Warwick: ‘I had an ardent desire to see my friends and youthful companions, after six long years of absence.’

His rare description of his return could no doubt be replicated by many thousands of citizen soldiers with less literary skills, in the dark days of the French Wars, when communications were so patchy and it still burns bright when given decades after:

I shall not attempt to describe my feelings, when I came within sight of my native village. No language, no arrangement of words, can express the palpitating emotions of my heart, and the wild transports and trembling delirium that thrilled every chord and fibre of the soul! I had no sooner entered the cottage in which I was born, than I was surrounded by scores of villagers of all ages and sexes; nay some elderly people who had gone early to rest, actually crept from their beds, and came to congratulate me on my safe return, to “God bless me,” and to express a wish for my future happiness.¹⁶

Following discharge, times were hard and like many ex-servicemen Davenport found the need to earn a living difficult, after the regulated activity of a soldier’s life. He continued to work as a shoemaker in Cirencester before seeking his fortune in London in 1805, and embarking on a political career as outlined earlier. The following year he married Mary, a fellow employee and they had a single child Mary Ann. Sadly, Mary died in 1816 and Mary Anne in 1824.

Despite his flowery language – typical of working-class self-educated writing of the period – Davenport’s memoirs, although probably written over 40 years later, seem to be accurate and reliable. They are especially valuable given the dearth of accounts covering the routine aspects of soldiering, especially from members of the auxiliary forces.¹⁷

His later prolific writings continued to be littered with military jargon and language picked up from his days as a Fencible light dragoon. As late as 1833, his description of the vast trade union meeting in Copenhagen Fields, London to protest at the transportation of Dorset farmworkers, later known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, shows this: ‘every branch of that tremendous Union, in every part of the country, should have met on the same day, and for the same purpose, and have rested on their arms (to use a military phrase) till the unjust and cruel sentence had been annulled.’¹⁸

¹⁶ Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, p. 12.

¹⁷ For working class memoirs generally see David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom – A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*, (London: Methuen, 1981.). For a discussion of military memoirs see Neil Ramsay, *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780-1835*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

¹⁸ Chase, *Life and Literary Pursuits*, p. 98.