Visit almost any military or regimental museum and you will find mementos of individual lives. These take many forms: medals, uniforms, bibles, letters, diaries, paintings, photographs; or sometimes collected ‘ethnic’ materials, both the weaponry of opponents and the artefacts of their peaceful activities. The relatives of soldiers, NCOs and officers usually find solace in donating such materials to the museums where they feel they will be cherished, will be useful to those wishing to study military history, or will be displayed for public view. Sometimes, the donations happen after their owner’s death in action; sometimes at the end of a full life of survival and return to ‘civvy street’. Naturally, much of this material relates to the two World Wars of the twentieth century, but, given Britain’s imperial past, it is striking that a high proportion of these donations relate to the imperial campaigns of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is also true of so many of the colours and battle honours that hang in churches, testimony to a communal pride, or to the large numbers of memorials, brass plaques and gravestones to be found around the country. For the observant visitor, colonial campaigns have a habit of turning up almost anywhere, not only in the museums, churches and graveyards of the imperial power, but also in the landscape, memories and preserved artefacts among the peoples against whom these campaigns were fought.

Although there has been a plethora of many different types of military history, this book is one of the first to consider the lives and attitudes of individuals both in the officer corps and in the ranks, in this case exclusively on the British side. Each war also stimulates a small wave of publications, something apparent again in the Falklands, Gulf and Iraq wars of the last quarter century. Soldiers still write letters, keep diaries (now sometimes audio diaries) and occasionally write books, all with an eye both to their relatives and to a wider public. Each war throws up its criticisms and its controversies and after each there is a sort of ‘appeal to the ancestors’ as a means of modifying policy, improving conditions or equipment, and as testimony to bravery and incompetence, political strategy and military tactics.

This book takes a sequence of colonial campaigns in Africa and sets out to illuminate them from the materials left by British combatants. These men were taken from familiar surroundings to highly unfamiliar ones, to ‘small wars’ that Sir Charles Callwell described as ‘campaigns against nature’. ‘Nature’ in this instance was not just the environment, but the nature of conventional warfare, the nature of opponents who often turned out to be more competent than any over-confident imperialist expected, and indeed the nature of the British soldiery who had to cope with climatic conditions, disease, and indigenous tactics such as they had never imagined. Inevitably, the soldiers reflected on all of these in their letters and diaries, in their judgments
of the situations in which they found themselves, and in their attitudes to superiors and the ‘enemy’ which were often severely tested and modified in the course of campaigns.

In doing so, they invariably kept people at home informed in ways that were not always possible in the press. For, after all, the writings and materials that went home were all part of the manner in which an imperial society tried to make sense of the warfare into which its elite led it. The materials that are revealed and analysed in this book were part of the reciprocal character of the imperial experience: warfare was not just some ‘distant noise’. Through its combatants’ connections with families and friends, it was, in some senses, a set of surprising, often disorientating, and sometimes tragic events, which were also experienced by those at home.

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