

Music of the American Revolution

THE KING'S OWN REGULARS

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In times of conflict, it is a common practice to vilify, mock, and/or otherwise belittle one's opponent. The American Revolution was no exception to this axiom. A prime example of this was the targeting of the British not with bullets, but humorous barbs, in the song "The King's Own Regulars".

Most historians and musicologists credit Benjamin Franklin to be the writer of the lyrics. Though Benjamin Franklin did not directly claim authorship in any extant records, he did promote the lyrics in various publications.¹ The strongest evidence of Benjamin Franklin as the author is a letter Charles Carroll of Delaware wrote to his wife stating that Benjamin Franklin penned the words.^{2,3} Upon reading the wit entailed within the lyrics, it is difficult to imagine anyone but Benjamin Franklin could have composed such sardonic verses.

Further evidence is that Benjamin Franklin submitted the lyrics to the printer of the Pennsylvania Evening Post for publication in 1775, several months after the Battles of Lexington and Concord. This is the earliest known writing of the lyrics. In his introduction, Franklin wrote that the song was meant to encourage the American militia in their actions against the British Army.⁴ He continued in his introduction by distinguishing between the British soldiers who had no personal interest in the war, but were pressed into action by their officers, with the undisciplined American Militia who were fighting for their homes, families, and principles. Continuing with this line of thought, Franklin deduced the causes for which the Americans fought made them equal in battle to the "disciplined" British Regulars. (N.B. In the context of the 18th Century British Army, discipline was simply defined as obeying the orders of officers.)

The 16 stanzas of the song cover the more ignoble exploits of the British army beginning with the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745 and progressing to the retreat of the British from Concord, Massachusetts in April 1775. Written from the viewpoint of an anonymous British Soldier, the first stanza describes his pride in the British army and that they "never run away". In stanzas three through eight, the narrative outlines the past conduct of the British army at various 18th century military engagements. Applying Franklinesque wit, the narrator in the song maintains the integrity and valor of the British soldiers, while explaining away their poor performance. In all instances, according to the narrative, the soldiers maintained their valor but were hapless victims of circumstances beyond their control. The military engagements denoted in the song include:

Battle of Prestonpans (1745, Jacobite Rebellion) where the British soldiers' "hearts were stout . . . but our feet were wrong headed and took us away",

Battle of Falkirk (1746, Jacobite Rebellion) here the British feet "swore they would stand, but [the] legs ran however",

Braddock's Defeat (1753, French & Indian War) "That great expedition cost infinite sums; But a few [French] irregulars cut us all into crumbs",

Sieges of Fort Oswego and Fort George (1756 & 1757, French & Indian War) where the British surrendered their forts "not thro' fear, but mere persuasion",

Battle of Carillon (aka Ticonderoga) (1758, French & Indian War) though the British swore revenge upon the French, they “. . . soon turned tail without hesitation” as the French were “not fighting in regular fashion” but “behind trees”,

Siege of Louisburgh (1758, French & Indian War) here the “great regular army” retreated without fighting as the British general “did not feel bold that day”.

Stanzas eight to sixteen progress through the simplistic, if not fanciful, cause of the American Revolution through to the British retreat to Boston after Lexington & Concord. The description of the retreat from Concord is written as a parody of the British maladroitness performance.

Prior to engaging the Americans, the narrator poses that the British anticipated any martial actions against the colonists to be a foregone victory and hoped they did not dirty their review clothes. Later the narrator describes the British as running away so fast after Concord “that the Yankees would not face us”. The lyrics close with the farcical boast that “if they [the colonists] beat us in the fight, we beat them in the race [back to Boston]”.

The tune applied to the lyrics was from the songs “Old Courtier [of the Queen]” and the subsequent “New Courtier”.⁵ This song is believed to date from the reign of Elizabeth I but the earliest known publication was not until 1660.⁶ The selection of this tune, as with other Patriotic songs of this period, appears to be related to the message contained in the song of origin.

The principal theme of “Old Courtier” and “New Courtier” is that the refined, genteel ways of the previous gentry have given way to less refined and somewhat vulgar practices of subsequent generations. The tenth stanza of “The King's Own Regulars” employs this theme. In this stanza, the rebellion of the colonies is depicted as having been deliberately staged by George III so that he could suppress a rebellion as did his father and grandfather. It is surmised that the selection of the tune was a pernicious act to convey the message that the political leaders of Great Britain at that time did not possess the virtues of their predecessors.

Writer, scientist, inventor, statesman, diplomat, printer, publisher, and political philosopher are all vocations typically associated with Benjamin Franklin. Now to this list is added balladeer. But not the balladeer of just any song, but what is arguably the most satirical song of the American Revolution.

The King's Own Regulars (1775)⁷

Since you all will have singing, and won't be said, nay,
I cannot refuse where you so beg and pray;
So I'll sing you a song-as a body may say.
'Tis of the King's Regulars, who ne'er run away.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

At Preston Pans we met with some Rebels one day,
We marshall'd ourselves all in comely array:
Our hearts were all stout, and bid our legs stay,
But our feet were wrong headed and took us away.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

At Falkirk we resolv'd to be braver,
And recover some credit by better behaviour;
We would not acknowledge feet had done us a favour;
So feet swore they would stand, but-legs ran however.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

No troops perform better than we at reviews;
We march and we wheel, and whatever you chuse.
George would see how we fight, and we never refuse;
There we all fight with courage-you may see it in the news.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

To Monongehela with fifes and with drums
We march'd in fine order, with cannon and bombs:
That great expedition cost infinite sums;
But a few irregulars cut us all into crumbs.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

It was not fair to shoot at us from behind trees:
If they had stood open as they ought before our great Guns we should have beat them
with ease.
They may fight with one another that way if they please;
But it is not regular to stand and fight with such rascals as these.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

At Fort George and Oswego, to our great reputation,
We shew'd our vast skill in fortification;
The French fired three guns, of the fourth they had no occasion;
For we gave up those forts, not thro' fear-but mere persuasion.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

To Ticonderoga we went in a passion,
Swearing to be revenged on the whole French nation.
But we soon turned tail, without hesitation
Because they fought behind trees, which is not the regular fashion.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

Lord Loudon he was a fine regular General, they say;
With a great regular army he went his way
Against Louisbourg, to make it his prey;
But return'd without seeing it, for he did not feel bold that day.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

Grown proud at reviews, great George had no rest,
Each grandsire, he had heard a rebellion suppress.
He wish'd a rebellion, look'd round and saw none,
So resolv'd a rebellion to make of his own-
With the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

The Yankees he bravely pitch'd on, because he thought they would not fight,
And so he sent us over to take away their right,
But least they should spoil our review clothes, he cried braver and louder,
"For God's sake, brother kings, don't sell the cowards any powder."
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

Our General with his council of war did advise,
How at Lexington we might the Yankees surprise.
We march'd-and we march'd-all surpriz'd at being beat;
And so our wise General's plan of surprise was complete.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

For fifteen miles they follow'd and pelted us, we scarce had time to pull a trigger;
But did you ever know a retreat perform'd with more vigour?
For we did it in two hours, which sav'd us from perdition,
'Twas not in *going out* but in *returning* consisted our *expedition*.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

Says our General, we were forced to take to our arms in our own defence:
(For *arms* read *legs*, and it will be both truth and sense.
Lord Percy (says He) I must say something of him in civility,
And that is, I can never enough praise him for his great agility.
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

Of their firing from behind fences, he makes a great pother,
Ev'ry fence has two sides; they made use of one, and we only forgot to use the other.
That we turn'd our backs and ran away so fast, don't let that disgrace us;
'Twas only to make good what Sandwich said, "that the Yankees would not face us."
O the old Soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

As they could not get before us, how could they look us in the face?
We took care they should not, by scampering away apace;
That they had not much to brag of, is a very plain case.
For if they beat us in the fight, we beat them in the race.
O the old soldiers of the King, and the King's own Regulars.

¹ The King's Own Regulars, The History Carper, Retrieved 26 March 2025 From
<https://historycarper.com/1775/11/27/the-kings-own-regulars/>.

² Lawrence, Vera Brodsky, Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents, Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc. First Edition, 1975, page 54.

³ Letter from Charles Carroll to Mary Darnall Carroll, 15 April, 1776, H. Furling Baldwin Library, Maryland center for History and Culture.

⁴ The King's Own Regulars, The History Carper, Retrieved 26 March 2025 From
<https://historycarper.com/1775/11/27/the-kings-own-regulars/>.

⁵ Letter from Charles Carroll to Mary Darnall Carroll, 15 April, 1776, H. Furling Baldwin Library, Maryland center for History and Culture.

⁶ *Old Courtier, A Collection of Several Ingenious Poems and Songs by the Wits of the Age*, Printed for William Ledge, London, 1660, page 161-162

⁷ *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 22, March 23, 1775, through October 27, 1776, ed. William B. Willcox. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982, pages 274–277.