

Old, Unhappy, Far-off Things

how he had three times won the Military Cross in the Second World War. In black and white it looks a horrifying remark; but to the ear his tone implied, as it was meant to imply, not merely that the act of killing people might legitimately be expected to upset others but that it ought also to have upset him; that, through his failure to suffer immediate shock or lasting trauma, he was forced to recognize some deficiency in his own character or, if not that, then, regrettably, in human nature itself. Both were topics he was prepared to pursue, as we did then and many times afterwards. He was, perhaps, an unusual figure, but not an uncommon one. Fiction knows him well, of course, a great deal of Romantic literature having as its theme the man-of-violence who is also the man of self-knowledge, self-control, compassion, *Weltanschauung*. He certainly exists in real life also, and as often in the army as elsewhere, as the memoirs of many professional soldiers – though few successful generals – will testify. Perhaps – it is only an impression – he is more typically a French or British than a German or American figure, the horizons of the Sahara or the North-West Frontier encouraging a breadth of outlook denied to the Hauptmann or the First Lieutenant on dreary garrison duty in Arizona or Lorraine. And although there is a German 'literary' literature of military life, it is very much more a literature of leadership, as in Bloem's *Vormarsch*, or of the exaltation of violence, as in Jünger's *Kampf als innere Erlebnis*, than of adventure, exploration, ethnography, social – sometimes even spiritual – fulfilment, the themes which characterize the novels of Ernest Psichari or F. Yeats-Brown, or the memoirs of Lyautey, Ian Hamilton, Lord Belhaven, Meinertzhagen and a host of other major and minor servants of British and French imperialism in this century and the last who, by design or good luck, chose soldiering as a way of life and found their minds enlarged by it.

If literature of this latter sort reinforces, as I think it does, my personal view that there exists in the military mind neither a psychological barrier nor an institutional taboo against free discussion of the profession of arms, its ethics, dimensions, rewards, shortcomings, if military society is, as I have found it to be, a great deal more open than its enemies will admit or recog-

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The Deficiencies of Military History

nize, what then is this other and more important obstacle which I have suggested stands in the way of an intellectual transition from the superficial and easy to the difficult and profound in the study of war – or more particularly of battle – which lies at its heart? If the student-officer can pigeon-hole at will the highly polarized view of combat which his military training gives him, in which people are either 'enemy' (to be fought), 'friend' (to be led, obeyed or supported as rank and orders prescribe), 'casualties' (to be evacuated), 'prisoners' (to be interrogated and escorted to the rear), 'non-combatants' (to be protected where possible and ignored where not) or 'dead' (to be buried when time permits); if he can set aside this stark, two-dimensional picture of battle and prepare to look at it in the same light as a liberal-arts student might, or a professional historian, or a strategic scientist, or a member of that enormous general readership of military history which has come into being in the last twenty years, what difficulty will prevent his – and their – seeing what they want to see and being shown what they ought?

The Deficiencies of Military History

START

The difficulty, in a sentence, is with 'military history' itself. Military history is many things. It is, and for many writers past and present is not very much more than, the study of generals and generalship, an approach to the subject which can sometimes yield remarkable results – the American historian Jac Weller's three modern studies of Wellington in India, the Peninsula and at Waterloo, for example, convey a powerful sense of character and are informed by a deep and humane understanding of the nature of early nineteenth-century warfare at every level from the general's to the private soldier's – but which, by its choice of focus, automatically distorts perspective and too often dissolves into sycophancy or hero-worship, culminating in the odd case in a bizarre sort of identification by the author with his subject – an outcome common and understandable enough in literary or artistic biography but tasteless and even mildly alarming when

the Ego is a man of blood and iron, his Alter someone of scholarly meekness and suburban physique.

Military history is also the study of weapons and weapon systems, of cavalry, of artillery, of castles and fortifications, of the musket, the longbow, the armoured knight, of the ironclad battleship, of the strategic bomber. The strategic-bombing campaign against Germany, its costs and benefits, its rights and wrongs, engages the energies of some of the most powerful minds at work in the field of military history today and has fomented one of the subject's few real intellectual antagonisms, comparable in the intensity and the scholarly rigour with which it is carried on to that sustained by seventeenth-century historians over the Rise or Decline of the Gentry; like those exercised by that long-running feud, its initiates seek constantly to widen the arena of their private conflict and to add to the list of combatants, so that all manner of passers-by - mild strategic-theorists, visiting demographers and uncommitted economic historians en route between a pre- and post-war Index of Gross National Product - find themselves challenged to stand and declare their colours over the ethics of area bombing or the practicability of bottleneck targeting. Tiresome though this faction-fighting can be, it justifies itself, quite apart from the importance of the moral issues at stake, by the high level of scholarship at which it is conducted and by the network of connections its participants, unlike so many other kinds of military historian, maintain with the wider world of historical (principally economic historical) inquiry.

Strongly economic in flavour too is a great deal of naval history, built as it must be around the study of weapon systems, of the big-gun battleship of the First World War and the aircraft carrier of the Second. And very precise, from the professional point of view very satisfying, history it can be. For modern naval warfare is, as correspondents with the Eighth Army were fond of reporting of the Desert campaign, very nearly 'pure' warfare, a war without civilians (on the whole) and one in which the common sailor cannot, as the common soldier can, by running away or sitting tight, easily confound his commander's wishes. All being in the same boat, a ship's company generally

does as its captain directs, until all are sunk together; fleets, by extension, until beaten, move as their admirals order. And since naval orders must be transmitted mechanically and are logged as sent and received, navies accumulate archives whose contents are pure historical gold-dust: precisely noted changes of course, the weather reports of trained meteorologists, damage-control reports by professional engineers, accurately timed sightings of friendly and enemy units, hard nuggets of fact about visibility, casualties, sinkings, fall of shot, sea conditions, facts of a density and volume to crush the spirit and blind the imagination of all but the most inspired and dedicated scholar. For inexplicable reasons, it is American rather than British historians who have triumphed in the long-distance event that the writing of naval history is, and this although, by the majority vote of historical events, it is the doings of Royal rather than U.S. Navy which has compelled their attention. (One of them at least, Professor Arthur Marder, has achieved in his study of the British navy in the First World War standards of archival research and organization of material which defy betterment.)

Military history furthermore is the study of institutions, of regiments, general staffs, staff colleges, of armies and navies in the round, of the strategic doctrines by which they fight and of the ethos by which they are informed. At the most elevated level, this branch of the subject shades off, through the history of strategic doctrine, into the broader field of the history of ideas, and in another direction, through the study of 'civil-military' relations, into political science. 'Elevated' should of course be understood here in a very relative sense, for though academic interest in civil-military relations, particularly in those between the German army and the German state, has produced a large, satisfying and in parts distinctly exciting literature, it is elsewhere prone to clothe itself in the drab garments of sociology at its most introspective; while the history of strategic doctrine, with some notable exceptions, of which Jay Luvaas's *Military Legacy of the Civil War* is a glittering example, suffers markedly from that weakness endemic to the study of ideas, the failure to demonstrate connection between thought and action.

That weakness is not, however, peculiar to this sub-branch of

military history. Action is essentially destructive of all institutional studies; just as it compromises the purity of doctrines, it damages the integrity of structures, upsets the balance of relationships, interrupts the network of communication which the institutional historian struggles to identify and, having identified, to crystallize. War, the good quartermaster's opportunity, the bad quartermaster's bane, is the institutional military historian's irritant. It forces him, whose urge is to generalize and dissect, to qualify and particularize and above all to combine analysis with narrative – the most difficult of all the historian's arts. Hence his preference, paradoxically, for the study of armed forces in *peacetime*. And excellent many works of that sort turn out to be. But, as Mr Michael Howard concluded at the end of a long, very painstaking and generally warm review, 'the trouble with this sort of book is that it loses sight of what armies are for.' Armies, he implied, are for fighting. Military history, we may infer, must in the last resort be about battle.

That certainly reflects Clausewitz's view. In an economic analogy, which delighted Engels and has helped to ensure this Prussian (admittedly vaguely Hegelian) general an unobtrusive niche in the Marxist *Temple du Génie*, he suggested that 'fighting is to war' (the paraphrase is Engels's) 'what cash payment is to trade, for however rarely it may be necessary for it actually to occur, everything is directed towards it, and eventually it must take place all the same and must be decisive.' Battle history, or campaign history, deserves a similar primacy over all other branches of military historiography. It is in fact the oldest historical form, its subject matter is of commanding importance, and its treatment demands the most scrupulous historical care. For it is not through what armies *are* but by what they *do* that the lives of nations and of individuals are changed. In either case, the engine of change is the same: the infliction of human suffering through violence. And the right to inflict suffering must always be purchased by, or at the risk of, combat – ultimately of combat *corps à corps*.

Combat *corps à corps* is not of course a subject which historians, any more than other sorts of writer, can be accused of ignoring.

The 'battle piece', as a historical construction, is as old as Herodotus; as a subject of myth and saga it is even more antique. It is an everyday theme of modern journalistic reportage and it presents a literary challenge which some of the world's masters have taken up. Stendhal, Thackeray and Hugo each offer us a version of the battle of Waterloo – as seen through the eyes of a shell-shocked survivor, of a distracted bystander, of a stern and unrelenting Republican deity; while Tolstoy, in his reconstruction of the battle of Borodino, which had for nineteenth-century Russians the same historical centrality as Waterloo for contemporary Western Europeans, not only brought off one of the most spectacular set-pieces in the development of the novel-form, but also opened the modern case for the prosecution against the Great Man theory of historical explanation.

Imagination and sentiment, which quite properly delimit the dimensions of the novelist's realm, are a dangerous medium, however, through which to approach the subject of battle. Indeed, in that sub-world of imaginative writing which Gillian Freeman has called the undergrowth of literature, calculated indulgence in imagination and sentiment have produced, and regrettably continue to produce, some very nasty stuff indeed, which at its Zap-Blatt-Banzai-Gott im Himmel-Bayonet in the Guts worst may justifiably be condemned by that overworked phrase, 'pornography of violence'.

Historians, traditionally and rightly, are expected to ride their feelings on a tighter rein than the man of letters can allow himself. One school of historians at least, the compilers of the *British Official History of the First World War*, have achieved the remarkable feat of writing an exhaustive account of one of the world's greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all. A brief, and wholly typical, extract will convey the flavour; it describes a minor trench-to-trench attack by infantry, supported by artillery, on 8 August 1916, at Guillemont, in the second month of the Battle of the Somme:

Some confusion arose on the left brigade front, where the 166th Brigade (Brigadier-General L. F. Green Wilkinson) was replacing the 164th – a very difficult relief – and although the 1/10th King's (Liverpool Scottish), keeping close behind the barrage, approached the

German wire, it lost very heavily in two desperate but unavailing attempts to close with the enemy. Nearly all the officers were hit, including Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Davidson, who was wounded. Next on the left, the 1/5th Loyal North Lancashire (also 155th Brigade) was late through no fault of its own; starting after the barrage had lifted, it stood no chance of success. Subsequently the 1/7th King's attacked from the position won by its own brigade (the 165th) on the previous day, but could make no headway.

Agreed that this is technical history; that it is intended as a chronological record of military incident to provide, among other things, material for Staff College lectures and authoritative source references for other historians to work from. But is this featureless prose appropriate to the description of what we may divine was something very nasty indeed that happened that morning at Guillemont fifty-eight years ago to those 3,000 Englishmen, in particular to those of the 1/10th Battalion of the King's Regiment? * That it was something very nasty is revealed by a footnote: 'The Victoria Cross was awarded to the medical officer of the 1/10th King's, Captain N. C. Chavasse, for his exceptionally gallant work in rescuing wounded under heavy fire.' For most of us know, even if nothing else about the British army, that the Victoria Cross can be won, and then very rarely, only at the risk, often at the cost, of death. If we also know that Chavasse is but one of three men ever to have won the Cross twice, his second being a posthumous award, and that his battalion was a Kitchener unit, composed of enthusiastic but half-trained volunteers; if we guess that 'could make no headway' and 'stood no chance of success' means that its neighbouring battalions returned precipitately to their trenches or did not leave them, then we can glimpse, in this episode in no-man's-land at Guillemont on 8 August 1916, a picture in miniature of

* It is revealing to contrast the mealy-mouthedness of the official historians with what Dr Anthony Storr has to say on the language of scholarship: 'The words we use to describe intellectual effort are aggressive words. We attack problems, or get our teeth into them. We master a subject when we have struggled with and overcome its difficulties. We sharpen our wits, hoping that our mind will develop a keen edge in order that we may better dissect a problem into its component parts.' *Human Aggression* (Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1968), p.x. Dr Storr would be better qualified than I to suggest explanations for military historians' habitual reluctance to call a spade a spade.

the First World War at, for those compelled to fight it, almost its very worst.

But if we may conclude that the official historians' decision to deal with the emotive difficulty in military historiography by denying themselves any explicit emotional outlet whatsoever was unsatisfactory, and that some exploration of the combatants' emotions, if not the indulgence of our own, is essential to the truthful writing of military history, we are still left with the problem of how it is to be done. 'Allowing the combatants to speak for themselves' is not merely a permissible but, when and where possible, an essential ingredient of battle narrative and battle analysis. The almost universal illiteracy, however, of the common soldier of any century before the nineteenth makes it a technique difficult to employ. Dr Christopher Duffy, by heroic labour among little-known Prussian and Austrian archives, has pushed use of the technique backwards into the eighteenth century; but it is not until the coming of the wars of the French Revolution that we find any extensive deposit even of officers' memoirs and not until the First World War that we hear the voice of the common man (though infant murmurs can be detected during the American Civil War). Robert Rhodes James, who is one of a handful of historians to have discussed the technical difficulties of writing military history, holds strongly to the view that battles ought to be and are best described through the words of participants; and in *Gallipoli* he gave a master's demonstration of how it may be done.

There are, however, objections to general dependence on the technique and not wholly those concerned with the paucity or absence of material from which to work. One, well known to all scholars, is the danger of reconstructing events solely or largely on the evidence of those whose reputations may gain or lose by the account they give: even if it is only a warrior's self-esteem which he feels to be at stake, he is liable to inflate his achievements - what we might call 'the Bullfrog Effect' - and old warriors, particularly if surrounded by Old Comrades who will endorse his yarn while waiting the chance to spin their own on a reciprocal basis, are notoriously prone to do so. Contemporary letters and even more so, genuinely private diaries (if such exist)

are a much more reliable source; but they must be used in the right way. Too often they are not. At worst, they are mined for 'interest', to produce anthologies of 'eye-witness accounts' in series with titles like *Everyman at War* (*The Historian as Copy-typist* would be altogether more frank); at best, they serve as the raw material for what is not much more than anecdotal history, yielding a narrative with a great deal of pungency and a high surface shimmer but without any of that intense particularity or energetic and confident generalization which are the trademarks of the historical *maitre-ouvrier*.

Anecdote should certainly not be despised, let alone rejected by the historian. But it is only one of the stones to his hand. Others – reports, accounts, statistics, map-tracings, pictures and photographs and a mass of other impersonal material – will have to be coaxed to speak, and he ought also to get away from papers and walk about his subject wherever he can find traces of it on the ground. A great pioneer military historian, Hans Delbrück in Germany in the last century, demonstrated that it was possible to prove many traditional accounts of military operations pure nonsense by mere intelligent inspection of the terrain, and an English follower of his, Lt-Colonel A. H. Burne, proposed the applicability of a principle he had tested on every major English battlefield (Inherent Military Probability) and which, used with circumspection, is a rewarding as well as intriguing concept.* I would also argue that military historians should spend as much time as they can with soldiers, not on the grounds that 'armies always remain the same at heart', a notion which any historian with a sense of professional self-preservation would dismiss out of hand, but because the quite chance observation of trivial incidents may illuminate his private understanding of all sorts of problems from the past which will otherwise almost certainly remain obscured.

Christopher Duffy, who was lucky enough to spend some weeks teaching Yugoslav militia the elements of Napoleonic drill for a film enactment of *War and Peace*, described to me the thrill of comprehension he experienced in failing to manoeuvre

*The solution of an obscurity by an estimate of what a trained soldier would have done in the circumstances.

his troops successfully across country 'in line' and of the comparative ease with which he managed it 'in column'; thus proving to his own satisfaction that Napoleon preferred the latter formation to the former not because it more effectively harnessed the revolutionary fervour of his troops (the traditional 'glamorous' explanation) but because anything more complicated was simply impracticable. I myself recall a similar archaeological pang in catching a glimpse of a Guards sergeant marching backwards before his squad who were learning the slow-march on the Sandhurst drill-square; the angle of his outstretched arms and upraised stick, his perfectly practised disregard for any obstacle in his backward path, the exhortatory rictus of his expression exactly mirrored the image, sketched from life by Rowlandson, of a Guards sergeant drilling his recruits on Horse Guards parade 170 years before; and through that reflection I suddenly understood the function – choreographic, ritualistic, perhaps even aesthetic, certainly much more than tactical – which drill plays in the life of long-service armies. The insight which intimacy with soldiers at this level can bring to the military historian enormously enhances his surety of touch in feeling his way through the inanimate landscape of documents and objects with which he must work. It will, I think, rob him of patience for much that passes as military history; it will diminish his interest in much of the 'higher' study of war – of strategic theory, of generalship, of grand strategic debate, of the machine-warfare waged by air forces and navies. And that, perhaps, is a pity. But if it leads him to question – as I have found it does me – the traditional approach to writing about combat *corps à corps*, to decide that, after he has read the survivors' letters and diaries, the generals' memoirs, the staff officers' dispatches, there is yet another element which he must add to anything he writes – an element compounded of affection for the soldiers he knows, a perception of the hostilities as well as the loyalties which animate a society founded on comradeship, some appreciation of the limits of leadership and obedience, a glimpse of the far shores of courage, a recognition of the principle of self-preservation ever present in even the best soldier's nature, incredulity that flesh and blood can stand

the fears with which battle will confront it and which his own deeply felt timidity will highlight – if, in short, he can learn to make up his mind about the facts of battle in the light of what all, and not merely some, of the participants felt about their predicament, then he will have taken the first and most important step in understanding battle ‘as it actually was’.

For if to propagate understanding of, not merely knowledge about, the past is the historian’s highest duty, making up his own mind is the essential precondition to that end. Making up one’s mind about anything, let alone a large and complicated body of material, is always a difficult and often painful task but it is one which many military historians would seem to shun altogether. The anecdotal historian avoids it, since he has already decided that his only responsibility is to entertain the reader and he can therefore discard whatever material he judges will not. The anthologist historian avoids it absolutely, usually justifying this abdication of his function by the plea that he prefers to let the reader make up his mind for himself – as if someone he appropriates of only a fraction of the record is thereby put in any position to do so. The ‘General Staff’ historian also avoids the responsibility, for his mind is made up for him by prevailing staff doctrine about the proper conduct of war and he will accordingly select whatever facts endorse that view, while manhandling those which offer resistance. The technological, the economic, the strategic, the biographic historians will all in their turn approach the subject of battle with their attitudes somewhat pre-cast, though they are usually well trained enough to advise the reader of their bias from the outset. But even the all-round military historian tends, in my experience, however perceptive, innovative, forthright, even downright disrespectful he is in his discussion of staffwork, leadership, strategic decision and the like, to shy away from the challenge of planting the impress of his own mind on his battle descriptions. One would certainly not suggest that he does so consciously, nor that the battle pieces he writes are not the fruit of careful research and skilful organization. But the trouble precisely is that what most military historians write about battle are indeed ‘battle pieces’, that is to say essays in a highly

traditional form, which no amount of labour to fill out with new information will materially alter so long as the historian accepts the conventions within which he is working. To suggest that most military historians do accept those conventions is not to accuse them of that beginner’s error, the transmission of traditional accounts (‘For want of a nail the kingdom was lost . . .’); nor is it to impugn them of unreflectingly adopting the modes of thought of this or that great historian of the past. It is rather to argue that what has been called the ‘rhetoric of history’ – that inventory of assumptions, and usages through which the historian makes his professional approach to the past – is not only, as it pertains to the writing of battle history, much more strong and inflexible than the rhetoric of almost all other sorts of history, but is so strong, so inflexible and above all so time-hallowed that it exerts virtual powers of dictatorship over the military historian’s mind.

- STOP -

The ‘Battle Piece’

What do I mean by the ‘rhetoric of battle history’? And what are its usages and assumptions? They are demonstrated in an extreme form in a passage which, though I have already dismissed it as ‘myth history’, is so famous and so striking an example of the ‘battle piece’ that I cannot resist reproducing it. It is General Sir William Napier’s account of the advance of the Fusilier Brigade (7th Royal and 23rd Royal Welch Fusiliers) at the battle of Albuera, 16 May 1811, generally regarded as the crucial moment of the battle (of which Napier was not an eyewitness, having been wounded at Fuentes d’Onoro a fortnight before):

Such a gallant line, issuing from the midst of the smoke and rapidly separating itself from the confused and broken multitude, startled the enemy’s masses, then augmenting and pressing forward as to an assured victory; they wavered, hesitated and, vomiting forth a storm of fire, hastily endeavoured to enlarge their front, while a fearful discharge of grape from all their artillery whistled through the British