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0521809959 - The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History

Brian Bond

Frontmatter

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The Unquiet Western Front

Britain's Role in Literature and History

Britain's outstanding military achievement in the First World War has been eclipsed by literary myths. Why has the Army's role on the Western Front been so seriously misrepresented? This book shows how myths have become deeply rooted, particularly in the inter-war period, in the 1960s when the war was rediscovered, and in the 1990s.

The outstanding 'anti-war' influences have been 'war poets', subalterns' trench memoirs, the book and film of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and the play *Journey's End*. For a new generation in the 1960s the play and film of *Oh What a Lovely War* had a dramatic effect, while more recently *Blackadder* has been dominant. Until recently historians had either reinforced the myths, or had failed to counter them. Now, thanks to the opening of the official archives and a more objective approach by a new generation, the myths are being challenged. This book follows the intense controversy from 1918 to the present, and concludes that historians are at last permitting the First World War to be placed in proper perspective.

BRIAN BOND is Emeritus Professor of Military History, King's College London.

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Preface and acknowledgements

In delivering the annual Liddell Hart lecture at King's College London in November 1997 I had an early opportunity to outline my views on the many myths and misrepresentations which have distorted British understanding of the nation's achievement in the First World War and, more particularly, of the Army's role on the Western Front. When, shortly afterwards, I was invited by Trinity College Cambridge to give the prestigious Lees Knowles lectures in 2000 this seemed an ideal opportunity to examine this huge and controversial subject in more detail and over a longer period. The programme of four lectures, given under the umbrella title 'Britain and the First World War: the challenge to historians', permitted me to pay more attention to the 1960s, when earlier 'disenchanted' and profoundly critical views of the First World War were rediscovered and much developed. Part of my argument throughout has been that military historians have in general failed to present a positive interpretation of Britain's role in the war or, at any rate, that their versions have been overwhelmed and obliterated by the enormous impact of supposedly 'anti-war'

poetry, memoirs, novels, plays and films. While the best of these imaginative literary and personal interpretations have deservedly remained popular and influential they ignored, or failed to answer convincingly, the larger historical questions about political and strategic issues: what was the war 'about'? how was it fought? and why did Britain and her allies eventually emerge victorious? Fortunately, due in part to the availability of a much wider range of sources, but even more to changing perspectives and greater objectivity, really excellent military history began to be published in the last decade or so of the twentieth century. In my final lecture I therefore suggest that historians are now successfully challenging the deeply rooted notions of British 'butchers and bunglers', of 'lions led by donkeys', and of general disenchantment with an unnecessary, pointless and ultimately futile war.

In 1999 I was elected a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford for the Hilary and Trinity terms 2000 and spent this idyllic interlude in preparing the four Lees Knowles lectures. I am most grateful to the Warden and Fellows for the many stimulating discussions of my research in progress, and especially for the opportunity to outline my ideas at the Visiting Fellows' seminar chaired by Robert O'Neill. I also presented a draft version of the second lecture at my former college, Worcester, where John Stevenson, James Campbell and other scholars offered some challenging comments.

My two short visits to Trinity College, Cambridge in November 2000 were somewhat overshadowed by anxiety about being flooded at home, as actually occurred a month later, but the kindness of the Master and Fellows still made this a most enjoyable and memorable occasion. I am especially indebted to Boyd Hilton for the great care he took in arranging and advertising the lectures, and for the splendid accommodation and festivities he laid on in college. Robert

Neild, Dennis Green and other Fellows went to great trouble to make my wife and me, and my guest Tony Hampshire, feel welcome. William Davies and representatives of Cambridge University Press offered early encouragement that my lectures would be published, and Philippa Youngman's exemplary copy-editing has saved me from numerous slips and obscurities.

In a concise survey of a vast topic such as this one inevitably incurs numerous debts to friends, colleagues and constructive critics which can only be briefly and inadequately acknowledged here. Correlli Barnett kindly suggested my name as a possible Lees Knowles lecturer and overcame difficulties to attend the series. Keith Jeffery, the previous lecturer whose outstanding book was published during my stay at Trinity College, gave me helpful advance information about the venue, likely numbers attending and arrangements in College. Stephen and Phylomena Badsey, Nigel and Terry Cave, and Gary Sheffield all read the lectures in draft after their delivery and pointed out numerous stylistic blemishes, factual errors and possible modifications and changes. I have adopted nearly all their suggestions but am, of course, entirely responsible for the final text. Alex Danchev also read and approved the third lecture in which I draw heavily on his contribution to a volume I had edited a decade earlier.

In addition to vetting the lectures in draft, Stephen Badsey, Gary Sheffield and Nigel Cave made available to me copies of articles, reviews, cassettes and other material as did Ian Beckett, Keith Grieves, Robin Brodhurst and Nicholas Hiley. They, and other helpers mentioned in the references, will recognise my indebtedness to them while, I hope, excusing me for not pursuing every topic to the extent or in the detail they might reasonably have expected.

I am grateful to the Liddell Hart Trustees for permission to quote from files in the Liddell Hart Centre for

X PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Military Archives at King's College London. I have carefully checked the number and wordage of quotations from published works and believe that they fall within the permissible limits for scholarly discussion such as I have experienced with other historians' quotations from my own publications. However, should any author feel I have infringed his or her copyright I offer my sincere apologies.

It remains to acknowledge what is by far my greatest debt, to my wife Madeleine, for typing and retyping my longhand draft and suggesting numerous clarifications and stylistic improvements. Although this is a short book, it has been prepared for publication in particularly difficult circumstances due to the severe flooding of our home and the six months of chaotic disruption that resulted.