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Review Essay

# “Donkeys” or “Lions”?

## Re-examining Great War Stereotypes

**Jonathan F. Vance**

- Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), \$39.95, 424 pages, ISBN 0-7735-1230-6.
- David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916-1918*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995), \$108.00, 332 pages, ISBN 0-19-820559-7.
- J.P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military Thought and Armoured Forces, 1903-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press (distributed in Canada by UBC Press), 1995), \$34.95 paper, 342 pages, ISBN 0-7190-4814-1.
- Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), \$29.95 paper, 333 pages, ISBN 0-88864-279-2.
- Edward H. Wigney, *The C.E.F. Roll of Honour: Members and Former Members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force who Died as a Result of Service in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Privately published (available from Eugene G. Ursual, P.O. Box 8096, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 3H6), 1996), \$135.00, 867 pages, ISBN 0-9698857-3-3.

When the Theatre Workshop's production of "Oh! What a Lovely War" opened in London in 1963, it came in the middle of a wave of revived interest in the First World War. As much about the 1960s as it was about 1914-1918, the production made another splash in 1969 when it was transformed into an equally arresting film by Richard Attenborough. In short order, the film became the most visual aspect of what Alex Danchev has nicely characterized as the "'bunking' and debunking" of the First World War.<sup>1</sup>

"Oh! What a Lovely War" fleshed out the icons which, since the late 1950s, had adorned popularized histories of the war. Among the most memorable characters of the film were John Mills as Sir Douglas Haig, a plodding dullard with the imagination of a turnip, and Laurence Olivier as Sir John French, garrulous and a tad randy. At the other end of the spectrum were the "lions," to use the metaphor adopted by Alan Clark (from a probably apocryphal remark attributed to Falkenhayn) as the basis for his 1961 best-seller *The Donkeys*: the much-tried

and much-misused infantrymen who deserved better than to be driven to their deaths by moronic generals.

To these stereotypes we might add a few more, created by generations of poets, novelists, and historians since the 1920s. There is the yammering and jingoistic propagandist viciously lampooned by Siegfried Sassoon in poems like "The Effect," "Editorial Impressions," and "Fight to a Finish."<sup>2</sup> There is the chaplain, also a favourite target of Sassoon (the Bishop of Byegumb in his poem "Vicarious Christ" is another brutal caricature), who exhorted men into the furnace but was careful not to stray too close to the fire himself. And finally there were the politicians, the "old men of Europe," who, like Nero, fiddled as their world burned.

By the 1970s, these were the central figures in the conventional wisdom regarding the First World War. It was a war in which witless generals (the "donkeys") threw their troops against barbed wire and machine guns like lambs to the slaughter, for the simple reason that blinkered

tactical thinking and limited imagination prevented them from pursuing any other course. These "brass hats" fought the enemy in front of them, but also the enemy behind, the "frock coats" who spent their days bickering over how to prosecute the war. The victims of their almost criminal insanity (the "lions") fought gamely but inevitably came to despise the generals and politicians for their callousness, and to discard their idealism, which seemed completely irrelevant amongst the supreme futility and pointlessness of the Western Front. Equally loathed by the troops were the bibulous churchmen who supposedly ministered to souls but whose energies were really directed towards ensuring that the soldiers were refrained from drinking, gambling, womanizing, and the other simple pleasures that were open to them. And on the home front, dishonest journalists and fat propagandists ensured that the "stay-at-homes" continued to believe that the war was a gallant affair of redcoats and happy warriors.

Sketched in such exaggerated terms, these characters approach the ridiculous. Nevertheless, they have had remarkable staying power. Fed by such classics as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), the conventional wisdom, with its requisite doses of pathos and tragedy, has provided ample fodder for popularizers, documentary producers, and countless undergraduate history and literature courses. Not until the late 1980s did it come under any serious challenge and even then the lions/donkeys theme, and all of the related stereotypes, stubbornly refused to be unseated. Fussell now draws strong criticism for a cavalier disregard of facts, but the caricatures he helped create retain their appeal.

Debunking the debunkers, to use Danchev's terms, has become something of a growth industry, and Crerar, French, Harris, and Keshen all offer further attempts at revising decades-old caricatures. David French's book amounts to a re-examination of the legendary disputes between generals and politicians, which he dismisses as postwar finger-pointing engaged in by men who were desperately trying to shift blame for tactical disasters onto someone else. Instead, he argues persuasively that the frock coats and brass hats were in fact united in the view that, for Britain, winning the peace was as

important as winning the war. In this reading, the Battle of Passchendaele becomes an entirely logical operation, in a strategic if not a tactical sense: in the context of the time, with the collapse of Russia, the possible collapse of France, the success of Germany's submarine offensive, and the slowness of the American build up, there was no other option for British policy-makers than to launch a major offensive in Flanders.

French then asks us to reconsider wartime rhetoric about British war aims that stressed the need to stem the threat of German aggression and ensure the security of the British Empire. Derided by later observers as an attempt to divert attention from the fact that the war's causes lay in tawdry economics, French insists that those aims were right and just and, despite the immense human and economic cost of the war to Britain, were largely realized. Britain, concludes French, emerged from the war with immeasurably greater international prestige, even if the British were unable to recognize it. As he puts it, "the willingness of British policy-makers to sacrifice almost three-quarters of a million men to defeat the Central Powers made a profound impression on the minds of its former enemies" (296), an impression that persisted until it was destroyed by the appeasers.

J.P. Harris, too, is rather kinder to British policy-makers than some recent historians. He declines to view the generals as being "blind to the opportunities afforded by such new technologies" as the tank (315), arguing instead that most army commanders were more than willing to consider the tank on its own merits when the idea was first presented to them. Even Haig, usually stereotyped as a general who refused to allow any new ideas to enter his mind after 1904, was "as positive as could reasonably have been expected given their limited combat power" (315). In short, Harris puts J.F.C. Fuller in his place, reminding us to treat warily anything Fuller said that was later proven correct by the experience of the Second World War. In the context of 1916, the tank was a poor solution to the tactical problems posed by the stalemate on the Western Front. The wonder is not that GHQ failed to express more faith in the weapon, but that they gave it any consideration at all. Just as the battle of the memoirs was a postwar attempt at scapegoating, so too was the idolatry of Fuller

and the tank in the interwar period: if only Haig had given the tank a chance, so much slaughter could have been avoided.

Duff Crerar takes on an equally well entrenched stereotype, the well meaning but widely despised (at least by the troops) padre, although this attempt at revisionism is less successful. It is largely an administrative history, focusing on the struggle to create an efficient and effective chaplain service that was free of favouritism and denominational jealousies. In this regard it is an excellent study, and an admirable record of John Almond's tireless efforts to bring order to the chaos into which the chaplain service had degenerated under the tender ministrations of Sam Hughes and his cronies. Crerar is less convincing when discussing the impact of chaplains on the soldiers. He dismisses the traditional view, that soldier had little respect for chaplains because few of them were willing to share their dangers and discomforts, but introduces little fresh evidence for any contrary view. He also has relatively little to say about the message conveyed by chaplains to their charges and does not venture into an examination of the religion of the trenches, a curious blend of Salvationist fundamentalism and superstition. He does, however, present a convincing variation of an argument made by other historians: postwar disillusionment among ex-chaplains did not grow out of the horrors they had witnessed on the battlefields, but out of their frustration with a peacetime society that seemed to betray the ideals for which the fallen had died. Also worth mentioning is the book's excessive referencing. Fully 140 pages of notes for 231 pages of text is completely uncalled for, and should have been ruthlessly pruned by an editor.

In light of this prevailing revisionism, it is perhaps ironic that the portrait of Ernest J. Chambers, Canada's chief censor, in Keshen's book is in itself stereotypical. He is shown in the uniform of Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, and appears every bit as true-to-type as if he had been rendered by Sassoon: pompous, self-important, humourless, and severe, this Chambers would have been a perfect subject for Sassoon's acerbic pen. And yet, as Keshen makes clear, Chambers was quite different than this one-dimensional caricature. He may well have been over-zealous, particularly when

suppressing the ethnic press, but he was also diligent (often making himself available at any hour of the night or day), selfless (he declined a salary for his work, insisting that the honorarium he received as Gentleman Usher was sufficient for his needs), and tactful (preferring to use personal diplomacy rather than edicts to achieve the desired goals). Whatever long-term consequences Chambers' work may have had for ethnic minorities and for the schism between veterans and stay-at-homes, in the short term he was successful in ensuring that Canadians remained committed to the ideals and goals of the cause. On another level, Keshen also has some interesting things to say about the publicity campaigns created for recruiting and fundraising purposes. He provides valuable evidence for an argument which has long been inferred, that the ultimate failure of volunteerism in Canada was as much a failure of marketing and public relations as anything: if the recruitment campaigns had been managed as capably as the Victory Loan drives, conscription might not have been necessary.

With all of the old stereotypes coming under reconsideration, one is left to wonder if there are any foundations left upon which to build a new conventional wisdom. In a curious way, the soundest base is provided by the names which fill over 800 pages of Wigney's book. In what can only be described as a labour of love, he has sifted through the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Department of Militia and Defence, Canada's Book of Remembrance, and countless regimental histories and memorial volumes to compile a register of the 67,000 men and women who died in uniform from the beginning of the war to the final demobilization of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1921. The entries are necessarily brief, confining themselves to name (including aliases), rank, number, unit, date of death, place of burial, and any remarks that could be included in the space available, but they are sufficient to make the book an invaluable reference tool. The Roll of Honour also calls into the reader's mind endless questions about the thousands of lives cut short. Was Private Deligny Lambert of the 22nd Battalion celebrating the Armistice when he died of wood alcohol poisoning on 17 November 1918? What drove Corporal Watson Jamieson of the 7th Canadian

Railway Troops to slit his own throat on 21 January 1918 near Poperinghe? And what of Private Herbert Jones of the 26th Battalion, who was only sixteen years old when he went missing in action on the first day of the Battle of Vimy Ridge? What experiences had he packed into those few years of life?

In compiling this record, Wigney is in fact responding to an impulse felt by Canadians who lived through the First World War. The Armistice was followed in this country by an unprecedented wave of memorialization as communities, business, churches, and schools felt impelled to record the names of their fallen in stone or bronze. They believed fervently that the names had to be preserved for posterity because, once the names were forgotten, the ideals for which lives were lost would disappear as well. They may well have been right. The ideals for which the First World War was fought (not to mention the mentalities with which it was fought) seem, to many people in the 1990s, strange and incomprehensible. It is easy to descend into hand-wringing and tut-tutting, and to fasten blame for the horrors of the Western Front on a few broadly drawn caricatures. It is much more difficult to make the psychic leap back to 1914-

1918 and see things with contemporary eyes: how bizarre an idea the tank must have seemed, how the strategic situation of 1917 made an attack at Passchendaele seem sensible, or how passionately people were moved by God, King, and Empire.

### Notes

1. Alex Danchev, "'Bunking' and Debunking: The Controversies of the 1960s," in Brian Bond, éd., *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.263-88.
2. See Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

Jonathan F. Vance is the editor for the Spring 1997 issue of *Canadian Military History*. His book *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* was recently published by UBC Press. Dr. Vance begins a tenure track appointment at the University of Western Ontario this fall.