



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/ehr/ceaa258](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceaa258)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Fox, A. (2020). The Secret of Efficiency? Social Relations and Patronage in the British Army in the Era of the First World War. *The English Historical Review*, 135(577), 1527–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceaa258>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **The Secret of Efficiency? Social Relations and Patronage in the British Army in the Era of the First World War**

Writing in early 1901, the energetic and reforming Vice-Admiral Sir John Fisher reflected that 'favouritism was the secret of our efficiency in the old days'.<sup>1</sup> 'Let us have favouritism back again', he continued, 'and Nelsons at 40 winning the Battle of the Nile!'<sup>2</sup> Fisher's oft-quoted aphorism has been held up as an example of his bombast, or as a means of justifying his practice of appointing his protégées – his so-called 'Fishpond' – into key positions within the Royal Navy in order to achieve his own personal aims. It can easily be read as advocating a return to something like the 'Old Corruption' of the previous century – a seemingly retrograde step for an ardent moderniser like Fisher. Yet the admiral's intent was entirely the opposite: he sought to cut through the superfluity of mid-ranking and senior naval officers who had reached their positions owing to the seniority accrued from their length of service in the Navy. In other words, he sought to use what he referred to as 'favouritism' to allow talent to supplant time served as the key criteria in selecting the future leadership of the senior service; this was meritocracy by another name.

What Fisher's effusions demonstrated was a keen awareness of the fundamental importance of people, and the social and political relations between them, to the functioning of an organisation. Fisher brought these attitudes with him when asked to contribute to the Esher committee, a body charged with reforming the administration of the British Army, in 1903-4. In the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Boer War, the Army was widely perceived to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Fisher to Lord Selborne, 13 Jan. 1901, in A. J. Marder, ed., *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, I (3 vols., London, 1952), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

inefficient, expensive, and – to some – incompetent. To remedy these supposed ills, Fisher sought to get ‘the “old gang” out of the War Office’.<sup>3</sup> Pursuing a policy of ‘*new measures, new men*’, the Admiral ruthlessly insisted upon the expulsion of several notable senior officers (including a future Chief of the Imperial General Staff) from the War Office, much to the disgust of several military observers who complained of such ‘harsh and arbitrary treatment’.<sup>4</sup> The work of the Esher committee has been lauded by scholars as a crucial reform to the structures of Britain’s military leadership.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Ian Beckett has argued, the Esher committee’s reforms succeeded only in changing the personalities at the top of the Army, rather than the processes through which officers were selected for senior roles.<sup>6</sup> To be truly effective, reform required a dual track: appointing the best people to senior jobs in the present, whilst simultaneously creating the structures and processes to ensure that they would be replaced by equally capable officers in future.

A sophisticated body of work exists on the political and social life of the armed forces in this period.<sup>7</sup> However, few studies seek to understand the Army explicitly in terms of the interaction between the individual and the organisation. By foregrounding this complex interplay, this article presents a fresh perspective on the internal life of the British Army in the First World War. It illustrates the vital importance of viewing the Army in a holistic sense – as both a *formal* and *informal* organisation – a perspective which requires us to explore and

---

<sup>3</sup> Fisher to J. S. Sandars, 23 Jan. 1904, in Marder, ed., *Fear God and Dread Nought*, III (3 vols., London, 1959), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland, Papers of Lieutenant-General Sir J. S. Ewart, GD527/1/1/135/8, 1 Feb. and 5 Feb. 1904; C. E. Callwell, ed., *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries*, I (2 vols., New York, 1927), pp. 54-6.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. C. Barnett, *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970* (Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 359-61; J. Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900-1916* (New York, 1974), pp. 32-61.

<sup>6</sup> I. F. W. Beckett, ‘“Selection by Disparagement”: Lord Esher, the General Staff and the Politics of Command, 1904-1914’, in D. French and B. Holden Reid, eds., *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, c.1890-1939* (London, 2002), pp. 41-56.

<sup>7</sup> For earlier scholarship on the Army as a social and political system, see E. M. Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815-1914* (London, 1980); H. Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford, 1997); G. D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (Basingstoke, 2000); D. French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c.1870-2000* (Oxford, 2005); C. Kirke, *Red Coat, Green Machine: Continuity in Change in the British Army 1700 to 2000* (London, 2009).

interrogate the connections and relationships between individuals and the structures within which they operate.<sup>8</sup> In essence, it seeks to understand the Army not merely as an institutional structure, but rather one that was shot through with personal ties and powered by individuals with their own ideas and perspectives. By viewing the military in this manner, we see how the existence and development of social relations were a manifestation of the Army's organisational culture and that, rather than seeking to suppress or prevent such relations, they were recognised as an enduring and ubiquitous part of Army life. Furthermore, these social relations often acted in support of formal structures, rather than necessarily subverting or undermining them.

To illustrate this, the article uses the concept of patronage to show how the Army's social and political relations were essential to how it worked. Using patronage as our lens reveals how personal relationships and social relations negotiated, interacted with, and, in some cases, helped overcome hierarchies inherent in an organisation that was structured for the demands of command in the field, rather than necessarily for administrative efficiency or rapid change. The article argues that the use of these processes, which broadly ran along meritocratic lines, where skills and ideas often had value over rank and background, contributed to the Army's flexibility and pragmatism, enabling it to adopt innovative solutions to the challenges of the First World War.

The article is split into five sections. The first addresses the historiography on patronage in both broader society and in the Army during this period. In the second section, a network model is outlined, which centres around three key roles: client, broker, and patron. The model provides scaffolding for the final three sections, which detail three case studies highlighting the ubiquity of interpersonal relationships to the functioning of the Army. These case studies address promotion, technological change, and organisational change respectively. All three

---

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of the relationship between informal and formal organisations, see C. I. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, MA, 1966 [1938]), esp. Chapter 9.

show how social and political processes were an intrinsic part of the Army's existence, interacting with and running alongside institutional structures. Accompanying these case studies, however, are a number of ambiguities: the speed of communications and decision-making, the still-potent remnants of hierarchy, along with the significance of both individual and group perceptions of new people, technologies, and structures. Such ambiguities reveal the very human nature of complex organisations and the inevitable friction that occurs when individuals interact with such organisations.

## I

The nineteenth century has traditionally been viewed as a period of transition from the 'Old Corruption' of the eighteenth century towards a more professional, modern state and society.<sup>9</sup> This move reflected a shift away from *who* you knew being the key source of advancement, to a more meritocratic solution in which *what* you knew became increasingly important.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in many ways, the emergence of this 'greater meritocratic element' suggested that the contrast between meritocracy and patronage was rather more analytical than empirical, as traditional elites continued to dominate public life.<sup>11</sup> Though denuded of its more corrupt connotations, patronage remained an institutionalised part of state and society up to and beyond the First World War, permeating law, medicine, engineering, the church, and the armed forces.<sup>12</sup>

While historians of the British state and society have considered the relationships between patronage, the state, and the professions, it is clear that patronage and clientage in the

---

<sup>9</sup> W. D. Rubinstein, 'The End of "Old Corruption" in Britain, 1780-1860', *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), pp. 55-86; J. M. Bourne, *Patronage and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1986); P. Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1776-1846* (Oxford, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> P. Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 192, 200-201.

<sup>11</sup> C. I. Hamilton, 'John Wilson Croker: Patronage and Clientage at the Admiralty, 1809-1857' *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> H. J. Hanham, 'Political Patronage at the Treasury, 1870-1912', *Historical Journal*, 3 (1960), pp. 75, 78; I. F. W. Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army* (Norman, OK, 2018), pp. 6-7.

Army were ‘certainly just as pronounced and the nature of such relationships just as complex as elsewhere in ... society’.<sup>13</sup> Much of the literature associated with patronage in the Army has tended to coalesce around matters of promotion or selection. On the one hand, detractors have castigated the Army as an institution that operated through the ‘influence of dominant personalities, of social traditions, and of personal friendships and rivalries’.<sup>14</sup> On the other, scholars have remarked on the limitations of this personalised approach, suggesting that promotion was rather more dependent on seniority than brilliance or patronage.<sup>15</sup> Beckett’s recent work on the late Victorian Army has offered a more nuanced examination in this respect, teasing out the continuing tension between seniority and selection, whilst showing how patronage was just one of a handful of factors influencing promotion.<sup>16</sup> Even in the notorious ‘rings’ of officers which gravitated towards prominent generals such as Garnet Wolseley, Frederick Roberts, and Evelyn Wood, merit, skill, and talent were an essential pre-condition for advancement. Edward Hutton, for example, caught the eye of both Henry Crealock and then subsequently Wolseley, through his studied advocacy of mounted infantry, whilst those officers selected to serve in Henry Brackenbury’s intelligence department at the War Office were picked on account of their intellectual capabilities, particularly where languages were concerned.<sup>17</sup> In short, personal relationships brought people into contact with potential patrons, but did not guarantee them any benefit if the officer in question lacked professional capabilities.<sup>18</sup> Though resented by some, these informal groupings thus proved an ‘effective

---

<sup>13</sup> Beckett, *Profession of Arms*, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> T. Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918* (Barnsley, 2003 [1987]), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> I. F. W. Beckett, T. Bowman, and M. Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 29-30; T. Bowman and M. Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training, and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 34-6.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, *Profession of Arms*, pp. 13-147.

<sup>17</sup> C. Stockings, *Britannia’s Shield: Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Hutton and Late-Victorian Imperial Defence* (Melbourne, VIC, 2015), pp. 48-50, 52-3, 200-202; C. Brice, *The Thinking Man’s Soldier: The Life and Career of General Sir Henry Brackenbury 1837-1914* (Solihull, 2012), pp. 174-80.

<sup>18</sup> A. Preston, ‘Wolseley, the Khartoum Relief Expedition and the Defence of India, 1885-1900’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 6 (1978), p. 272.

means of exercising *meritocratic preferment*'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as Stephen Badsey has remarked, for a general to be made aware of a capable young officer and to promote his career accordingly was seen as 'necessary and legitimate', but abuse of the practice, promoting an officer out of 'friendship' or family obligation, for example, was frowned upon.<sup>20</sup>

The literature on the Army of the Victorian and Edwardian periods has certainly revealed much about its internal dynamics, notably how people moved through it in terms of promotions, and how social and political relations played a part in that movement. Where the Army of the First World War is concerned, the emergence of a body of literature focused on military learning and innovation has begun to address some of those relations and dynamics in a wartime context. Initially centred around the idea of a 'learning process' or 'learning curve', interventions in this field have broadly focused on operational and tactical considerations, such as command and generalship, along with new technologies and capabilities.<sup>21</sup> Recent research in this field has begun to consider the fundamental question of *how* military organisations learn and, as a corollary, how they *function*. This scholarship can be broadly grouped into three key areas of enquiry. First, the importance of individual agency and behaviour to learning and innovation. Drawing on organisational learning theory, scholars have sought to highlight the relationship between individual and organisational learning, whilst reaffirming that learning is an inherently social process. Both Stuart Mitchell and Patrick Watt, for example, have highlighted the importance of personal networks and interpersonal relationships to military

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Beckett, *Profession of Arms*, p. 75. Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> S. Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918* (Aldershot, 2008), p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. P. E. Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War* (Aldershot, 2015); G. D. Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London, 2011); A. Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Stroud, 2006); S. Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (London, 2005). On technology, see B. N. Hall, *Communications and British Operations on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2017); J. Beach, *Haig's Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army 1916-1918* (Cambridge, 2013); S. Marble, *British Artillery on the Western Front in the First World War* (Aldershot, 2013); A. Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I* (London, 2000); I. M. Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-19* (Westport, CT, 1998).

learning and effectiveness.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, the role of culture and its influence on an organisation's actions. For Robert T. Foley, the British Army's culture led it to prioritise a 'non-formal', personalised approach to learning, which was driven from the top down.<sup>23</sup> Such an approach was contingent on interactions between individuals, both inside and outside the military, thereby resulting in new knowledge for the organisation. Yet, culture could shape action in both positive and negative ways. Both Brian Hall and Jonathan Boff argue that the Army as an institution embraced a localised, pragmatic approach to problem solving which chimed with its organisational culture.<sup>24</sup> However, Watt suggests that particular sub-cultures embodied by certain senior officers could lead to a far more programmatic approach to learning, with some lessons ignored if they were seen as going against the cultural grain.<sup>25</sup> With certain similarities to 'practice theory' and 'structuration' in the fields of social anthropology and military sociology, the final area of enquiry focuses on the interaction between individuals and institutional structures, such as doctrine, training schools, and chains of command.<sup>26</sup> Jim Beach and Stuart Mitchell have considered this interaction in their respective works, particularly where the extraction of best practice and lessons from the front line were concerned.<sup>27</sup> Aimée Fox has pushed that interplay further, exposing the relational connections between people and structures, arguing that the Army had a 'networked approach' to learning across its various operational theatres. This approach involved the Army blending different methods whether top-down, bottom-up, horizontal, or informal depending on the challenge or situation it faced.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> S. Mitchell, 'An Interdisciplinary Study of Learning in the 32nd Division on the Western Front, 1916-1918' (Univ. of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 2013), pp. 187, 262-65; P. Watt, 'Managing Deadlock: Organisational Development in the British First Army, 1915' (Univ. of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 2017), pp. 223-24.

<sup>23</sup> R. T. Foley, 'Dumb Donkeys or Cunning Foxes? Learning in the British and German Armies during the Great War', *International Affairs*, 90 (2014), pp. 279-98.

<sup>24</sup> Hall, *Communications and British Operations*, pp. 300-304; J. Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 248-49.

<sup>25</sup> Watt, 'Managing Deadlock: Organisational Development in the British First Army, 1915', pp. 209-55.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, 1986); Kirke, *Red Coat, Green Machine*.

<sup>27</sup> J. Beach, "'Issued by GHQ": Doctrine Writing at GHQ, 1917-18', *War in History*, 19 (2012), pp. 464-91; Mitchell, 'An Interdisciplinary Study of Learning in the 32nd Division on the Western Front, 1916-1918', pp. 275-76.

<sup>28</sup> A. Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2018),



This approach enabled the Army to work with, rather than against, its cultural pre-dispositions of pragmatism, flexibility, and empiricism. When this culture came into contact with the challenges of continental warfare, a diverse and dynamic range of methods came into play through the interaction of, and relationship between, people and institutional structures.

## II

‘An army, like any other human society, is an organism’, recalled New Army officer, Alexander Thorburn, ‘whose well being depends on the interplay of human relationships’.<sup>29</sup> While the Army was a large, complex, and bureaucratic organisation, it was not an unthinking, unfeeling machine made up of human parts. It was an assemblage held together through the actions, and interactions, of key actors and processes.<sup>30</sup> The interplay and the tensions between human action and institutional structures played an important role in the social constitution of the organisation, and foregrounding those interactions provides us with valuable new perspectives on how the Army functioned.

The connections that existed between soldiers — whether intimate or through acquaintance — were crucial to how the institution functioned. Scholarship on the Army has shown the importance of these close personal relationships, particularly where the ‘rings’ were concerned. However, less intimate interactions may, in fact, have been of greater import to the Army as a whole. These ‘weak ties’ often involved individuals from different social circles and backgrounds, linking together different audiences, as well as bridging different social groups.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on personal and professional networks, individuals were able to build up effective relations with others, leading to the creation of a network across the organisation and often

---

pp. 51-77.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, xxi.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce, *State of Freedom*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>31</sup> M. Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (1973), pp. 1361-6; idem., ‘The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited’, *Sociological Theory*, 1 (1983), p. 205.

beyond it. Three particular roles existed in this network, aligning with the client-broker-patron relationships familiar to scholars of the early modern period.<sup>32</sup> While such a model does not explain all elements of the Army's inner workings, it provides insight into some of the internal dynamics within the Army, reaffirming the importance of human behaviour and relations to the organisation.

The first role in this network was the client or 'expert' figure – the individual who had certain knowledge, experience, or ideas that set them apart from their colleagues. Expertise had a particular meaning in the Victorian and Edwardian periods: a 'quality possessed by administrators or professionals, generals or specialists'.<sup>33</sup> The 'expert' considered here offered more than expertise in a traditional sense. Some of these experts were civilians with technical expertise, others had military experience or knowledge that had the potential to lead to innovations in technology or training. As the case studies below reveal, there was no single type of expert. Some were young, others middle-aged. They were academics, scientists, as well as soldiers. They were non-commissioned officers and major-generals. Some were located on the periphery of the military organisation, others could be found in civil society, while a few sat uneasily on the border between the two.<sup>34</sup> Their ideas or experiences often proved important in attracting the attention of the second character in this network: the broker or 'entrepreneur'.

Typically, brokers provided access to more senior, influential patrons. They often played the role of the 'weak tie', responsible for connecting certain individuals and groups together and boosting the Army's diversity. Yet, they were more than just intermediaries or gatekeepers. They often had influence and power of their own. In a military context, these individuals were able to generate support for an individual or idea, using and exploiting their

---

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. S. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1986); L. L. Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> R. Macleod, 'Introduction', in R. Macleod, ed., *Government and Expertise: Specialists, Administrators and Professionals, 1860-1919* (Cambridge, 2003 [1988]), p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> F. Guelton, 'Technology and Armaments', in J. Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War, II* (3 vols., Cambridge, 2014), p. 265.

own professional and personal networks to do so. They also played a key role in smoothing over initial resistance, which could often be particularly acute if an appointment or idea appeared threatening.

The final role is that of the patron. These individuals were institutional elites, often holding senior rank, and, as such, in a position to bestow considerable influence. Indeed, by virtue of their position, these patrons were able to decide when, where, and how to pursue ideas and technologies in particular. Where the movement of people was concerned, they were also capable of wielding considerable influence to ensure the right people were in the right positions as we shall see later. Patrons were also responsible for creating the space and environment for experts to address challenges, take risks, and pose new solutions. Such space could manifest in different ways in the Army: it could be through experimentation time on or behind the front line; the establishment of training schools as test beds for ideas and concepts; or simply through acceptance that trial might not always lead to success. Yet, as some commentators have remarked, when these elites oppose change — whether that relates to people, ideas, or technology — then it rarely comes to pass.<sup>35</sup> Though brokers enabled ideas and knowledge to cross social and organisational boundaries, the decision-making was influenced by, and vested in, leaders.<sup>36</sup>

Though we might see this network as too formulaic or rational for a complex organisation, the model offers a heuristic device that necessarily simplifies a more complex picture; its value lies in enabling us to better describe and analyse behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, numerous individuals could fulfil the different roles outlined, suggesting that this interconnectedness — while still ultimately hierarchical — retained a degree of flexibility.

---

<sup>35</sup> K. A. Harkness and M. Hunzeker, 'Military Maladaptation: Counterinsurgency and the Politics of Failure', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38 (2015), p. 783.

<sup>36</sup> Granovetter, 'Network Theory Revisited', p. 219.

<sup>37</sup> C. Kirke, 'A Model for the Analysis of Fighting Spirit in the British Army', in H. Strachan, ed., *The British Army, Manpower and Society into the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2000), pp. 228-9.

Furthermore, weight of effort across the three roles varied depending on the situation in hand. As the case studies below show, the onus often shifted amongst the various roles. Where some appointments were concerned, for example, the entrepreneur played a less important role, with a ‘strong tie’ between the client and the patron proving key. Through this network, individuals were given the opportunity to influence institutional behaviour – often irrespective of where they sat in the organisation. As the case studies reveal, patronage was prevalent throughout the war — across different ranks, regiments, theatres, and nationalities — and was just as important in 1918 as it was at the beginning of the war. It acted as the means through which the social and political networks that underpinned the Army were mobilised to facilitate its intellectual development and day-to-day functioning.

### III

The importance of these social and political networks, coupled with the interactions between individuals and structures, can be seen clearly in the Army’s promotion process, particularly the tension between selection and seniority.<sup>38</sup> For David Lloyd George, Britain’s wartime Prime Minister, promotion was a ‘moving staircase’ on which ‘[w]heedling, pushing, intriguing enables some to wriggle through the crowd ... In the grand Army that fought the First World War the ablest brains did not climb to the top of the stairs ... Seniority and Society were the dominant factors on Army promotion. Department counted a great deal. Brains came a bad fourth’.<sup>39</sup> Nor were such damning indictments limited to politicians. Brigadier-General Frank Crozier, a career soldier who had been forced to resign from the Army before the war, was moved to write how promotion saw ‘round pegs ... shoved into square holes ... Names, ranks, records, lengths of service ... counts most’.<sup>40</sup> Accounts such as these have been held up

---

<sup>38</sup> Promotion by seniority was predicated on time served with a vacancy often filled by the most senior of the officers qualified for the position.

<sup>39</sup> D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, II (2 vols., London, 1936), p. 2041.

<sup>40</sup> F. P. Crozier, *A Brass Hat in No Man’s Land* (Norwich, 1989 [1930]), p. 160. Crozier’s resignation from the

as evidence of an organisation either constricted by process or fouled by rank nepotism. Yet, such accounts simplify what was a far more nuanced and flexible process. As Beckett notes, promotion was usually “seniority tempered by selection” followed, in theory, by one of selection by merit’.<sup>41</sup>

During the First World War, the tensions and interplay between seniority, selection, and merit continued. For some, such as Lloyd George, the ‘deadening weight’ of seniority was the ‘army way of doing things’.<sup>42</sup> It is easy to perceive seniority as unfair, promoting officers because it was ‘their turn’ as Admiral Fisher admonished or, in some cases, placing a ‘premium on mediocrity’. It had its uses, however. In many respects, the impersonality of seniority offered a form of security against naked favouritism. Such a view was summed up neatly by Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Robb to the 1901 Dawkins committee on War Office organisation:

We give instructions that men are to be taken in order of seniority, and if we think there has been any favouritism about it, we call for a return showing those who proceeded and those who were exempted, and we can tell by this return and by the regimental numbers whether any men have been wrongly eliminated.<sup>43</sup>

During the First World War, seniority remained in effect. Certainly, there were appointments made on the basis of seniority that appeared disquieting to some, such as that of Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stopford as commander of IX Corps in August 1915.<sup>44</sup> Despite initially

---

Army was precipitated by his habit of writing cheques that bounced.

<sup>41</sup> Beckett, “Selection by Disparagement”, p. 41.

<sup>42</sup> Beckett, *Profession of Arms*, p. 6; W. Westerman, ‘Soldiers and Gentlemen: Australian Battalion Commanders in the Great War 1914-1918’ (Univ. of New South Wales Ph.D. thesis, 2014), p. 303.

<sup>43</sup> *Minutes of Evidence of the Committee on War Office Organisation* (Dawkins Committee), Cd. 581, 1901, Evidence of Robb, p. 387.

<sup>44</sup> For a recent reappraisal of Stopford’s performance, see J. Cleverly, ‘More than a Sideshow? An Analysis of GHQ Decision-Making during the Planning for the Landings at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli, August 1915’, *War in History*, 24 (2017), pp. 44-63.

recommending him, General Sir Ian Hamilton, the commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, soon deemed Stopford a ‘terrifying suggestion[s]’.<sup>45</sup> Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, was supposedly horrified when ‘he heard that Stopford was only appointed because he was senior...’ and it was ‘one of the most crushing trials he [Grey] had had to bear’.<sup>46</sup> Following the landings at Suvla Bay in August 1915, Stopford was sacked, but the question of who would replace him remained. One of the divisional commanders in IX Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir Bryan Mahon, was mooted as a possibility having originally been passed over in favour of Stopford. However, Hamilton believed he was only ‘good up to a certain point’ and that ‘as a corps commander here he would be quite hopeless’.<sup>47</sup> Hamilton decided to appoint Major-General Sir Henry de Beauvoir de Lisle — an officer junior to Mahon — to *temporarily* command IX Corps. With his experience on the Western Front, de Lisle was deemed an ‘excellent organiser which is badly wanted at present in 9th Corps’.<sup>48</sup> Writing to Lord Kitchener, Hamilton remarked that ‘Mahon is senior to de Lisle but I would not ask Mahon to accept the position for I could not put him into command of the corps at present...’<sup>49</sup> De Lisle’s temporary appointment would require that Mahon ‘waive’ his seniority. He refused. In a letter to the War Office, Hamilton recounted Mahon’s ‘very singular course’:

We have had hundreds of cases of junior temporarily running shows over seniors, and in the French army alongside us ... Of course this must always be something of a passing and urgent nature. But in no case with us, and in no case with the French ... has there been an instance until now of an officer putting his personal feelings above the exigency of the situation.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> R. Crawley, *Climax at Gallipoli: The Failure of the August Offensive* (Norman, OK, 2014), pp. 30-31.

<sup>46</sup> D[awnay] F[amily] P[riate] C[ollection], Cecil Dawnay to husband, c.15 Nov. 1915.

<sup>47</sup> LHCMA, Papers of General Sir I. S. M. Hamilton, 7/2/43, Hamilton to War Office, 10 Jun. 1915.

<sup>48</sup> LHCMA, Hamilton Papers, 7/2/23, Hamilton to Kitchener, 15 Aug. 1915.

<sup>49</sup> LHCMA, Hamilton Papers, 7/2/23, Hamilton to Kitchener, 14 Aug. 1915.

<sup>50</sup> LHCMA, Hamilton Papers, 7/1/12, Hamilton to Wolfe Murray, 16 Aug. 1915.

The perceived failure of the Suvla Bay landings revealed the double-edged nature of seniority: it could be inflexible — as we see with Mahon — but it could also be flexible, with attempts made to put suitable officers, often junior ones, with appropriate skills into an appropriate position. This flexibility was furthered enabled by the use of substantive, brevet, or temporary ranks, which could help ameliorate some of the challenges of seniority.<sup>51</sup> Lord Kitchener, for example, was content to ‘give’ an officer a lieutenant-general’s rank if Hamilton wished the individual in question to take command of a corps.<sup>52</sup>

Although seniority offered checks and balances to mitigate the excesses of favouritism, it could also be used as a way of reaffirming the importance of experience. Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, for example, had attempted to replace his chief of staff (who held the rank of brigadier-general) with a major — an officer three ranks junior. Birdwood was informed that such an appointment was inappropriate:

Sir Ian [Hamilton] is fully aware of the excellent work which Major Wagstaff has performed, but he cannot agree to his being advanced straight away ... while officers ... who are fit for the appointment, are available, and I am to suggest that, as this officer certainly deserves advancement, it would be a suitable appointment for him to succeed Colonel White ... of the Australian Division.<sup>53</sup>

This was not Birdwood’s first attempt to circumvent seniority. During the preparation for the Suvla landings, Birdwood and his staff had written to subordinates regarding the selection of

---

<sup>51</sup> Substantive rank was a permanent regimental rank, governing pay and allowances. A brevet rank is an Army rank given in recognition of service. Both acting and temporary rank were gazetted, acting rank being relinquished on leaving the specific post, temporary rank lasting beyond a specific post if required. See Hodgkinson, *Battalion Commanders*, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> LHCMA, Hamilton Papers, 7/2/23, Kitchener to Hamilton, 14 Aug. 1915.

<sup>53</sup> LHCMA, Hamilton Papers, 7/2/44, Braithwaite to Birdwood, 15 Sept. 1915.

successors in case of casualties: ‘It is to be clearly understood that these selections are not necessarily to be based on seniority, but that the *most suitable men* to take over in emergency are so selected’.<sup>54</sup> Decisions to put seniority to one side were not limited to Birdwood or to the Gallipoli campaign. At a conference with his subordinates in May 1917, Major-General Sir Cameron Shute, commanding 32nd Division on the Western Front, discussed promotions with his subordinates and stressed: ‘(Not by Seniority – this will encourage energy in junior ranks)’.<sup>55</sup> By moving towards a performance-based promotion system, commanders were trusting their subordinates to effectively ‘talent spot’ soldiers and officers worthy of appointment and, by doing so, delegating to them the bestowal of patronage.

To appoint based on merit and suitability rather than seniority was a goal that many commanders worked towards in the war. Lord Kitchener, for example, was unequivocal on the matter in a telegram to Hamilton: ‘This is a young man’s war and we must have Commanding Officers that will take full advantage of opportunities that do not often occur’.<sup>56</sup> Such an approach was given further impetus with the appointment of Sir Douglas Haig as commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in December 1915. Even before this appointment, Haig had attempted to move away from appointments made on seniority tempered by selection, focusing on merit instead. In July 1915, he was of the opinion that ‘the present circumstances in which the Army was placed justified the selection of the best and youngest men to fill the highest commands’.<sup>57</sup> To this end, he sat down with the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, and went through the *Army List* to identify potential lower down the seniority list.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, before formally taking command of the BEF, Haig met with his military

---

<sup>54</sup> Canberra, A[ustralian] W[ar] M[emorial], AWM4 1/42/7 PART 7, 1st Australian Division General Staff war diary, Skeen to divisions, 2 Aug. 1915. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in S. Mitchell, ‘An Interdisciplinary Study of Learning in the 32nd Division on the Western Front, 1916-1918’, p. 265.

<sup>56</sup> LHCMA, Hamilton papers, 7/2/23, Kitchener to Hamilton, 14 Aug. 1915.

<sup>57</sup> T[he] N[ational] A[rchives] of the United Kingdom, WO 256/5, Diaries of Field Marshal Sir. D. Haig, 26 Jul. 1915.

<sup>58</sup> A. J. Vines, ‘An Assessment of Sir Douglas Haig’s Role as a Military Manager on the Western Front’ (King’s College London Ph.D. thesis, 2015), pp. 234-5.



secretary where he stated that ‘only those who had proved their fitness for advancement should be promoted. I had no “friends” when it came to military promotion, and I would not tolerate a “job” being done’.<sup>59</sup> Friendship and jobbery in this sense had very specific meanings to Haig. Though Haig had clearly benefitted from the patronage of a number of important figures in the decades before the First World War, such as Evelyn Wood, he saw it as earned rather than given, secured through perceptions of his potential and ability.<sup>60</sup> Lord Esher, for example, had ‘intrigued mercilessly’ to ensure that Haig was at the centre of Lord Haldane’s reform process, offering us a patronage network in action: Haig as client, Esher as broker, and Haldane as patron.<sup>61</sup> Following his appointment as Director of Military Training in 1906, Haig wrote to Esher gratified that ‘the King should think *my* presence is necessary at home, especially so as the reason is a military one. I am very glad to hear the good account which you give of Haldane, and am sincerely grateful to you for the good opinion which *you* have *made* him form regarding myself’.<sup>62</sup> Three years later, prior to Haig’s departure for India, he wrote to Esher on the outcome of the Haldane reforms: ‘I wish you had been present and heard Haldane’s praise, because *it was you who suggested my name to him* for the work and I was, consequently, brought back from India’.<sup>63</sup>

Some historians have criticised Haig for not staying true to his comments in December 1915, pointing to the promotion of John Charteris and Hubert Gough – officers whose records continue to attract controversy – as clear cases of favouritism.<sup>64</sup> Yet, recent research has illustrated that such critiques present only a partial picture at best.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, where Charteris is

---

<sup>59</sup> TNA, WO 256/6, Haig Diaries, 14 Dec. 1915.

<sup>60</sup> Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 23-4; Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform*, pp. 71-2, 194-5.

<sup>61</sup> Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 58.

<sup>62</sup> Haig to Esher, 15 Mar. 1906, in M. V. Brett, ed., *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher, Vol. 2 1903-1910* (London, 1934), p. 151. Original emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> Haig to Esher, 11 Oct. 1909, in Brett, ed., *Journals and Letters*, p. 417. Emphasis added.

<sup>64</sup> Travers, *The Killing Ground*, pp. 8-11, 23-26; J. Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Barnsley, 2014 [1998]), esp. Chapter 1.

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed exploration of Haig’s management of promotion, see Vines, ‘An Assessment of Sir Douglas Haig’s Role as a Military Manager on the Western Front’, pp. 234-41.

concerned, Haig had ‘discovered’ him in January 1910 during a staff ride in India where he had been impressed by the ‘skill and accuracy’ of his work.<sup>66</sup> This favourable impression of Charteris’ professional acumen therefore led Haig to recommend him for accelerated promotion. When he accompanied Haig to GHQ in December 1915, Charteris was a newly appointed brigadier at thirty-eight years old; his predecessor had been twelve years his senior. Like most instances of patronage, Haig had cultivated this relationship as he considered Charteris a talented officer with promise and ability. However, talent and ability in small wars did not always translate into aptitude in total war: Charteris was eventually replaced in January 1918. While Charteris and, to a lesser extent, Gough have been used as sticks to beat Haig, one can just as easily point to individuals such as Claud Jacob, Henry Horne, and Philip Howell who were also brought on by Haig – again – owing to perceptions of their talent and ability. Howell, for example, had come to Haig’s attention as a staff officer in 1905, resulting in the latter recommending Howell for a nomination to the Staff College, highlighting his ‘force of character ... great interest in his profession ... [and] gifted with considerable tact and self control’.<sup>67</sup> Howell viewed Haig as an important patron. In response to Howell requesting a transfer from Salonika to the Western Front in early 1916, Haig wrote ‘[o]f course you may rely on me doing my best to get you here in some capacity, but I expect you have made yourself so valuable where you are that I doubt if the authorities will let you go’.<sup>68</sup> Whether through Haig’s hand or otherwise, Howell was transferred to the Western Front in June 1916. Yet, his time in France was short-lived. Killed by a shell fragment in October 1916, Howell was portrayed as an officer who might have risen ‘rapidly to the highest position that the Service has to offer’, and that ‘it is a tribute to the present leadership of the British Army that a man of his quality should have received his due reward *without waiting for years and seniority*’.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Beach, *Haig’s Intelligence*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>67</sup> LHCMA, Papers of Brigadier-General P. Howell, 2/1/2-44, Haig to Quartermaster-General India, 12 Feb. 1906.

<sup>68</sup> LHCMA, Howell Papers, 6/2/159-202, Haig to Howell, 2 Feb. 1916.

<sup>69</sup> L. Howell, *Philip Howell: A Memoir by his Wife* (London, 1942), pp. 245-52. Emphasis added.

Beyond the cadre of Regular Army officers, Haig was also supportive of civilian experts, such as Henry Maybury, Eric Geddes, and Ralph Wedgewood, who were brought in via lateral entry at general officer rank to oversee the Army's transport and logistics systems. His rationale for the appointment of civilians was owing to '... the amount of work which the Army requires of a civilian nature ... With the whole Nation at war, our object should be to *employ men on the same work in war as they are accustomed to do in peace* ... To put soldiers who have no practical experience of these matters into such positions merely because they are generals and colonels, must result in utter failure'.<sup>70</sup>

Whether we point to the example of Philip Howell or to those civilian transport experts, merit seemed important to Haig. In his Final Despatch, he reiterated that

[P]romotion has been entirely by merit, and the highest appointments were open to the humblest, provided he had the necessary qualifications of character, skill and knowledge. Many instances could be quoted of men who from civil or comparatively humble occupations have risen to important commands. A schoolmaster, a lawyer, a taxi cab driver, and an ex sergeant-major have commanded brigades; one editor has commanded a division, and another held successfully the position of senior staff officer to a Regular division.<sup>71</sup>

Haig's despatch perfected the rhetoric of merit, but, in practice, its application was far from consistent. Where Territorial and New Army officers were concerned, for example, there was a glass ceiling with those officers rarely advancing beyond the rank of brigadier. As one historian has recently remarked, there remained a 'bias towards the regular soldier' in the

---

<sup>70</sup> TNA, WO 256/13, Haig Diaries, 27 Oct. 1916. Emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> J. Boraston, ed., *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches December 1915 - April 1919* (London, 1919), pp. 347-8.

British Army.<sup>72</sup> Comparison with the Australian and Canadian forces throws this bias into even sharper relief. Although commanded for much of the war by British officers, the Australian and Canadian corps were eventually commanded by dominion officers. From June 1917, the Canadian Corps was commanded by Arthur Currie, a realtor and part-time soldier in the Canadian militia before the war; while in 1918, command of the newly amalgamated Australian Corps was given to John Monash, a civil engineer and militiaman of German parentage. From August 1917 onwards, it was official policy in the Australian Imperial Force that, while ‘appreciating thoroughly the assistance given by the British army’, such officers should be replaced and Australian formations be commanded and constituted ‘as far as possible ... with Australian officers for commands and staff’.<sup>73</sup> By the end of the war, of the seven divisions within the Australian Corps, for example, four were commanded by Australians, one by a New Zealander, and two by British officers, whilst at brigade level, pre-war Australian militia officers dominated both infantry and mounted formations.<sup>74</sup> A similar picture emerged with the appointment of the senior staff officer in a division (GSO 1). In November 1918, only two of the ten dominion divisions in the British Expeditionary Force had a British officer as GSO 1.<sup>75</sup>

The discrepancies between appointment practices in the British and dominion forces were discussed at the Imperial War Cabinet and Committee of Prime Ministers in mid-1918. Sir Robert Borden, the Canadian premier, urged ‘the imperative necessity of putting aside every consideration in appointment except that of efficiency’. Highlighting the ‘high degree of organisation’ in the Canadian forces of whose officers ‘only a small proportion were professional soldiers’, Borden slammed the British approach: ‘if it was true that in the British

---

<sup>72</sup> Hodgkinson, *Battalion Commanders*, p. 206.

<sup>73</sup> London, British Library, Papers of Field Marshal Lord Birdwood, MS Eur D686/57, Defence Department to Birdwood, 4 Aug. 1917.

<sup>74</sup> Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p. 223.

<sup>75</sup> D. E. Delaney, *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India 1902-1945* (Oxford, 2017), p. 140.

Army only professional soldiers had any opportunity of rising higher than the rank of brigadier-general, that was equivalent to *the wholesale scrapping of the brains of a nation* in its struggle for existence'.<sup>76</sup> The committee of prime ministers held a week later ruminated on a similar theme. Discussing the need for 'greater opportunities' for officers in the New Armies, the committee felt that such men 'accustomed to the highest responsibility in other professions' had 'now acquired great military knowledge and experience in nearly four years of active warfare' and should be promoted accordingly.<sup>77</sup> Such discussions underscored Lloyd George's deep-seated animus towards the 'seniority and society' of the British Army. Highlighting Currie and Monash as examples of 'brilliant military leaders', Lloyd George reasoned that because they were non-Regular officers, it gave 'full play to their gifts'. If there had been as highly gifted men in the British Army, they were 'consigned to the mud by orders of men superior in rank but inferior in capacity'.<sup>78</sup>

Whether one agrees with Haig or Lloyd George's interpretation, two things are clear: first, the different perceptions of merit in military and civilian spheres. For the military, the 'preponderance of Regular officers' in key command and staff posts was a 'policy' decision.<sup>79</sup> There was a Regular 'closed shop' where higher command and staff appointments were concerned. However, by the end of the war, the bulk of British generals on the Western Front were 'rapidly promoted young officers, most of whom were acting up at least two – and commonly three levels above their substantive rank'.<sup>80</sup> For the Army, this *was* merit in practice. Yet, for politicians like Borden and Lloyd George, this 'closed shop' smacked solely of inefficiency and elitism. Secondly, by focusing exclusively on high command appointments, we overlook attempts to best use the skill sets of Territorial and New Army personnel at lower

---

<sup>76</sup> TNA, CAB 23/41, Imperial War Cabinet Minutes of Meetings, 13 Jun. 1918, pp. 2-3. Added emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> TNA, CAB 23/44a, Committee of Prime Ministers 19A, Minutes, 21 Jun. 1918, pp. 7-8.

<sup>78</sup> Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, pp. 2041-2.

<sup>79</sup> J. Bourne, 'The BEF's Generals on 29 September 1918: An Empirical Portrait with some British and Australian Comparisons', in P. Dennis and J. Grey, eds., *1918: Defining Victory* (Canberra, ACT, 1998), p. 55.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

levels. If we revisit Haig's belief that men should be employed in the same work in wartime as they are in peacetime, a range of appointments based on merit and suitability become apparent. Numerous non-regular officers were transferred into appointments where they could make a demonstrable impact, often relying on interpersonal relationships to facilitate this. We see this with Major Vernon Willey, an officer in the Nottinghamshire (Sherwood Rangers) Yeomanry and partner of a firm deemed the 'largest wool merchants in the world'.<sup>81</sup> His expertise was identified by Lieutenant-General Sir John Cowans, the Army's quartermaster-general, as 'the sort of man that we want to get hold of' owing to his administrative and business training.<sup>82</sup> Cowans acted as both broker and patron figure, transferring Willey to the department of the surveyor-general of supply at the War Office where he served as controller of wool supplies from 1917 until 1920. As we shall see later, Cowans played a similar patron role in the establishment of the Army's inland water transport service in early 1915.

It was not just Territorial and New Army officers that were disenfranchised when it came to senior appointments. As John Bourne notes, reservist officers fared little better. By the end of September 1918, there were only seventeen officers of general rank from this source on the Western Front – representing only 0.3 per cent of the total number of reservist officers at the outbreak of war.<sup>83</sup> One of those reservists who achieved general officer rank was Major-General Guy Dawnay, who served as Haig's deputy chief of staff (DCGS) from January 1918. His appointment to this position illuminates the complex dynamics of promotion within the Army, highlighting the interaction of social and political processes with institutional structures, such as seniority and the chain of command.

On the outbreak of war, Dawnay was a captain and had spent three years on the reserve list. In 1911, he had left behind what had been a promising military career to pursue financial

---

<sup>81</sup> TNA, MUN 4/6471, Department of Surveyor-General of Supplies, List of Businessmen assisting Raw Material Section, n.d. (1917).

<sup>82</sup> TNA, WO 107/43, Inspector General of Communication Letters, Cowans to Altham, 13 Nov. 1915.

<sup>83</sup> Bourne, 'The BEF's Generals', p. 56.

and commercial opportunities in the City of London. He had seen action in the Second Anglo-Boer War and had served in a number of staff positions before attending Staff College in 1908, coming top of his intake in the qualifying examination. It was here that his promise was recognised by the commandant, Henry Wilson, who remarked on his 'clearness of thought and expression, as well as ... his grasp of all that war means'.<sup>84</sup> While Dawnay had considerable military aptitude, he was also well connected through family and marriage. His mother, for example, was a lady in the Royal household and a distant cousin of Sir Edward Grey, while his wife, Cecil, was the granddaughter of Lord John Lawrence, a former viceroy of India, and the niece of Herbert Lawrence, a fellow reservist who would go on to serve as Haig's chief of staff in 1918.

It would be easy, then, to see Dawnay's rise as simply a product of his social and political connections. However, this was far from the case. His connections, particularly with those in the political sphere, were important, but it was the impression he made on his military superiors that proved decisive. Until his eventual appointment to Haig's staff in 1918, Dawnay spent his war in the 'sideshow' theatres, serving in Gallipoli, Egypt, and Palestine. Much like Philip Howell, he was desperate for a return to the Western Front. His immediate superior during the Gallipoli campaign and subsequent confidante, Cecil Aspinall, consoled him: 'your name is held in very high esteem by the people who matter and ... they are most anxious to get you out here [to the Western Front] if it can be done'.<sup>85</sup>

While Dawnay may have been keen to return to France, his abilities had been recognised by Major-General Sir Arthur Lynden-Bell, the chief of staff to the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force at Gallipoli and then subsequently to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Palestine. Lynden-Bell would prove an important broker and subsequent patron to Dawnay, eventually facilitating his return to the Western Front. Dawnay held Lynden-Bell in high

---

<sup>84</sup> DFPC, Wilson to Vice Chancellor, Oxford University, c.Sept. 1919.

<sup>85</sup> DFPC, Aspinall to Dawnay, 11 Jun. 1916.

esteem, expressing relief at serving a chief who was ‘delightful to work with’, ‘phenomenally quick’, and possessed of ‘an exceptionally good brain’.<sup>86</sup> The feeling was mutual. Although Dawnay was carrying out ‘valuable work in Egypt’, Lynden-Bell actively sought ways of increasing the former’s chance of appointment at either the War Office or in France, acting as a weak tie between Dawnay and senior military figures in London. Writing to him in July 1916, Lynden-Bell reassured Dawnay that he had spoken to ‘Bob Whigham about you and told him that if he would find you a job ... I would consent to your going’.<sup>87</sup> Whigham had proved useful to other officers seeking opportunities back on the Western Front, notably Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Horne. Whigham had ‘dropped several hints’ to Haig about the ‘suitability’ of Horne being ‘brought back to the Western Front’ and that Haig had agreed to this.<sup>88</sup> Lynden-Bell concluded his letter with an assurance to Dawnay that he was also ‘going to see the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS)’ about the matter.

Yet, it took until January 1918 to resolve the matter, attesting to the often slow decision-making and movement of appointments, particularly between theatres, as well as the competing operational requirements of each expeditionary force. Owing to ill health, Lynden-Bell had been sent home from Palestine in September 1917, and was subsequently appointed as deputy CIGS. This proved an incredibly influential position, which saw Lynden-Bell shift from the role of broker to patron. Letters to both Dawnay and his wife, Cecil, suggested machinations behind the scenes to effect Dawnay’s move to the Western Front. Writing to her husband in late October 1917, Cecil recalled how Lynden-Bell has ‘ordered, begged and urged that you should make no promises or vows ... to return [to Palestine]’.<sup>89</sup> On 22 January 1918, Dawnay

---

<sup>86</sup> London, I[mperial] W[ar] M[useum], Papers of Major-General G. P. Dawnay, 69/21/1, Dawnay to wife, 28 Oct. 1915 and 1 Nov. 1915.

<sup>87</sup> DFPC, Lynden-Bell to Dawnay, 17 Jul. 1916. Whigham was Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

<sup>88</sup> S. Robbins, *British Generalship during the Great War: The Military Career of Sir Henry Horne 1861-1929* (Abingdon, 2010), p. 111. Horne was ordered to return to France in April 1916, remarking ‘Well done Douglas Haig’.

<sup>89</sup> DFPC, Cecil Dawnay to husband, 22 Oct. 1917.



received a letter from his uncle-in-law, Herbert Lawrence. Following a considerable reshuffle at General Headquarters, Lawrence now served as Haig's chief of the general staff (CGS). 'Would you care to accept the post of DCGS in France, working under me?', wrote Lawrence. '[I]t would be a great advancement'.<sup>90</sup> Four days later, Lawrence wrote about major changes he was contemplating making to the staff organisation at General Headquarters. Yet, the most telling remark came at the end of the letter: 'I presume that it is all right about Palestine ... *Belinda* [Lynden-Bell] *told me that was arranged*'.<sup>91</sup> Through the efforts of his patron, Lynden-Bell, Dawnay's appointment was confirmed and he took up the position less than a month after Lawrence's initial letter.

Brought in to oversee training and organisation at General Headquarters, Dawnay's appointment was initially unpopular. Charles Bonham-Carter, for example, who had previously held responsibility for training matters, remarked how Dawnay 'had distinguished himself in Egypt and Palestine', but was 'younger than ... me and naturally we saw no reason why he should have been brought in over our heads'. However, he continued, 'we got over that very quickly and found him a first rate man to work under'.<sup>92</sup> Dawnay's less than conventional military career gave him certain freedoms. As someone proud of his reservist background ('I don't in the least want to go back to the army permanently, thank you very much!'), he wrote to his wife,<sup>93</sup> he was willing to take risks and make decisions that may have been unpalatable to those who were concerned about their post-war careers. Cuthbert Headlam, a close friend and eventual colleague at General Headquarters, remarked how Dawnay believed himself 'much cleverer than the vast majority of people with whom he comes in contact ... I don't think that Guy himself cares 2 pins whether he goes or stays and that strengthens his position

---

<sup>90</sup> IWM, Dawnay Papers, 69/21/3, Lawrence to Dawnay, 22 Jan. 1918.

<sup>91</sup> DFPC, Lawrence to Dawnay, 26 Jan. 1918. Emphasis added. William Peyton was the BEF's military secretary, a position central to the management of appointments, promotions, and removals.

<sup>92</sup> Cambridge, Churchill Archives Centre, Papers of General Sir C. Bonham-Carter, BHCT 9/2, Autobiography, n.d. (c.1954-55), pp. 11-12.

<sup>93</sup> IWM, Dawnay Papers, 69/21/1, Dawnay to wife, 3 Apr. 1916.

immensely'.<sup>94</sup> Dawnay, for example, was fundamental to the establishment of a revitalised training directorate for the BEF and, according to Sheffield, likely encouraged Haig to appoint Lieutenant-General Sir Ivor Maxse as head of that new directorate.<sup>95</sup> The poor performance of Maxse's corps during the German spring offensive had left him under a cloud, but through Dawnay's brokerage and Haig's patronage, he was given a second chance. After the armistice, he wrote to Dawnay, reflecting on their work together: 'you were our original "father and mother" and that subsequently you had no easy job to launch the new department ... [I]t never would have even started had you not become DCGS when you did'.<sup>96</sup>

Dawnay's appointment in January 1918 highlights three key points relating to patronage and social relations in the Army. First, that patronage was accessible to those who were non-Regulars. Dawnay was a proud reservist, starting the war as a captain. His uncle-in-law, Herbert Lawrence, was also a reservist who reached high rank and position in the war. While the 'success rate' for reservist officers was low, there was often less concern about how decisions taken in war would affect post-war careers. Secondly, the snobbery associated with the 'sideshow' theatres was not as pronounced in Dawnay's case.<sup>97</sup> Certainly, some individuals were sceptical about the effectiveness and ability of those who had spent their war beyond the Western Front. However, both Dawnay and Lawrence offered a different perspective. As one Egyptian Expeditionary Force officer remarked in a letter to Dawnay '[i]t is good that the BEF should have to get both their G[eneral] S[taff] from the EEF'.<sup>98</sup> Finally, that patronage was not synonymous with favouritism.<sup>99</sup> Both Lynden-Bell and Lawrence employed their power

---

<sup>94</sup> J. Beach, ed., *The Military Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1910-1942* (Stroud, 2010), pp. 208-9.

<sup>95</sup> Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 287.

<sup>96</sup> DFPC, Maxse to Dawnay, 19 Feb. 1919.

<sup>97</sup> For more on this 'snobbery', see A. Fox, "'Thomas Cook's Tourists": The Challenges and Benefits of Inter-Theatre Service in the British Army of the First World War', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 58 (2017), pp. 82-91.

<sup>98</sup> DFPC, Campbell to Dawnay, 26 Feb. 1918.

<sup>99</sup> D. French, 'Colonel Blimp and the British Army: British Divisional Commanders in the War against Germany, 1939-1945', *English Historical Review*, CXI (1996), p. 1200.

responsibility, engaging with the military secretary's branch, and revealing that advancement based on demonstrable merit existed within the organisation. While there might have been some ruffled feathers, this was an appointment that went with, rather than against, the institutional structures of the Army, aided by the use of temporary and brevet ranks. In May 1918, Dawnay was a 'Brevet Lieutenant Colonel with temp[orary] rank of Major General'.<sup>100</sup> The flexibility within the appointments process allowed for some considerations to be put to one side. In Dawnay's case, then, seniority, records, and length of service were less important than his proven and recognised abilities.

#### IV

If a focus upon individuals and relationships affords us a more nuanced appreciation of promotion and preferment within the Army's rank structure, this approach also reveals the processes through which new technologies moved into, and around, the Army. The example of the 'Wombat' boring machine shows the importance of such relationships in the promotion and institutionalising of this particular technology. Originally developed in Australia by a fifty-three year old civilian mining engineer, the Wombat saw a change in its intended use during the course of the First World War from a tool of exploration to a weapon of exploitation. While the example of the Wombat might seem to support the well-worn trope that military technology is reliant upon civilian scientists or skilled professionals coming to the aid of the institutionally conservative armed forces in time of war,<sup>101</sup> this is a superficial understanding of the process. In fact, the example more closely aligns with recent scholarship that rebuts the trope of the creative civilian versus the conservative soldier.<sup>102</sup> Viewing the development and use of this

---

<sup>100</sup> DFPC, Cecil Dawnay to husband, 25 May 1918.

<sup>101</sup> See e.g. R. Macleod, 'The Chemists go to War: The Mobilization of Civilian Chemists and the British War Effort, 1914-1918', *Annals of Science*, 50 (1993), pp. 455-81; Guelton, 'Technology and Armaments', p. 265.

<sup>102</sup> D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2006), esp. pp. 305-9. See also Fox, *Learning to Fight*, pp. 164-203; C. Phillips, *Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War* (London, forthcoming)

technology through the lens of patronage and interpersonal relationships reveals, first, that the Army's boundaries were not as rigid as we might surmise; there was significant permeability between military and civilian worlds. Secondly, we are able to appreciate the full extent to which the Army acted collaboratively and co-creatively with civilians, proactively fostering these relationships in the pursuit of military efficiency. The civil-military relationships that transcended those seemingly fixed organisational boundaries were also key in mobilising the Wombat from a technology on the periphery of Britain's empire to one that sat at the heart of the Army's mining capabilities. The story of this little-known machine sheds light on how technology moved within the Army, as well as the social, political, and institutional processes that enabled that.

Though military mining had a long history in early modern forms of warfare, the Army had to reconceptualise it in a new and increasingly scientific way during the war. Key contributors to the evolution of military mining in the First World War were found within the Australian Electrical and Mechanical Mining and Boring Company, colloquially known as the 'Alphabet Company'. Originally established to serve at Gallipoli on demolition duties, the company found itself on the Western Front in 1916 with a particularly novel technology: the 'Wombat' boring machine. The Wombat was designed by Stanley Hunter – the client in our patronage network – for use in geological survey. Before the war, Hunter had been in charge of boring in the Victoria mines department and had 'learned from experience' that boring – an expensive process – could be cheapened. With that view in mind, he designed a 'combined percussion and rotary boring machine'. Hunter believed that his model represented a saving in time of 'at least 20 to 25 per cent' compared to the larger and heavier machines he had worked with.<sup>103</sup> Before leaving Australia, he had designed some 'powerful drills to be driven by hand'. Known as 'Wombat' drills, their novelty lay in their ability to bore both vertically and

---

<sup>103</sup> 'A New Boring Machine', *Kalgoorlie Western Argus*, 5 Sept. 1905, p. 5.

horizontally.<sup>104</sup> Upon the outbreak of war, Hunter volunteered for war service and was commissioned as a captain into the Australian Imperial Force, bringing thirty-nine Wombats with him. As we shall see, the Wombat's use was initially localised to Hunter and the Alphabet Company, but its broader utility was realised through the interaction of a number of individuals, realising its transformation from a tool of exploration to a weapon of exploitation and opportunity.

Hunter's expertise was recognised by two brokers: Tannatt Edgeworth David and Ralph Stokes. A professor of geology at the University of Sydney, Edgeworth David had been assigned to provide expert advice to the British Army on mining. His role was largely independent from the Australian forces. Based at General Headquarters, he had roving responsibilities across a number of formations along the Western Front. This role brought him into contact with a number of influential senior commanders, providing him with ample opportunities to broker the work of experts in the mining company.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, General Headquarters felt that his association with the Alphabet Company should be 'retained in the most quiet way', and that he might act as an important interlocutor between those experts and possible patrons in higher command.<sup>106</sup> Ralph Stokes, the second broker figure, was not a career soldier either. He had served in the ranks during the Second Anglo-Boer War, but had left the Army to pursue a career in gold and nickel mining in South Africa and the United States.<sup>107</sup> At the outbreak of war, Stokes was working in Alaska. He volunteered for war service and was commissioned into the Royal Engineers. By the time the Alphabet Company arrived on the Western Front in May 1916, he was serving as assistant to Brigadier-General Robert Harvey, the patron figure in our network, who had been appointed as the officer responsible

---

<sup>104</sup> 'Boring Under Enemy Lines', *The Beaudesert Times*, 6 Jun. 1919, p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> D. Finlayson, *Crumps and Camouflets: Australian Tunnelling Companies on the Western Front* (Newport, NSW, 2010), p. 97.

<sup>106</sup> TNA, WO 158/137, Mining diary of Major R. Stokes, 12 Jul. 1916.

<sup>107</sup> J. K. E. Douglas, 'Obituary: Brigadier R. S. G. Stokes', *Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, (1979), p. 264.

for all British and dominion mining efforts in France and Belgium in January 1916.

Edgeworth David and Stokes had a close relationship with Robert Harvey in different ways. Edgeworth David's 'strong tie' with Hunter and the Alphabet Company enabled him to act as a broker on its behalf, introducing Harvey to Hunter's 'famous "Wombat" drill from Australia'.<sup>108</sup> Stokes, as Harvey's assistant, spent time visiting the Alphabet Company, where he first observed the Wombat, impressed by its portability and the innovation of its detachable drill bit. He was just as impressed by its inventor, commenting on Hunter's considerable expertise and impartiality.<sup>109</sup> With both Edgeworth David and Stokes brokering the Wombat, Harvey decided to trial the drill across the Western Front in a series of defensive and offensive contexts.

Efforts were made throughout 1916 to mobilise and institutionalise the Wombat through a number of formal methods, namely training schools and doctrine. The British Second Army mining school was one of the earliest fora for the institutionalising of the drill; a Wombat was established there for training purposes in May 1916.<sup>110</sup> Two months later, a mining school was established in the British First Army. At this school, a number of ranks from a range of formations, beyond the Alphabet Company, trained on the Wombat. Soldiers observed and took part in demonstrations, including the destruction of communication trenches using Wombat bores, as well as taking part in competitions for the fastest bore.<sup>111</sup>

In late October 1916, the utility of the Wombat was codified in *Mining Notes* – a weekly publication instituted by Harvey and distributed by GHQ to all tunnelling companies in France and Belgium, to formations in the United Kingdom, and to the expeditionary forces beyond the

---

<sup>108</sup> R. Macleod, "'Kriegsgeologen and Practical Men": Military Geology and Modern Memory, 1914–18', *British Journal of the History of Science*, 28 (1995), p. 440.

<sup>109</sup> TNA, WO 158/137, Stokes diary, 11 Jul. 1916.

<sup>110</sup> D. Finlayson, *Supporting Tunnelling Operations in the Great War: The Alphabet Company* (Barnsley, 2018), pp. 58, 241.

<sup>111</sup> TNA, WO 95/243/9, First Army Mine School war diary, Nov. 1916; TNA, WO 95/407/1, New Zealand Tunnelling Company war diary, 19 Oct. 1916.

Western Front.<sup>112</sup> An overview of the machine was provided, as well as specifics relating to its drills rods and cutters. The results of experimentation in the various mining schools was included in the publication, with a request for further details of its utility in the front line.<sup>113</sup> Two further *Mining Notes* on boring and blasting in chalk, published in late December 1916, referenced the Wombat as a key enabler for this new form of offensive mining.<sup>114</sup> Through the interaction of the Hunter - Edgeworth David - Stokes - Harvey patronage network, with institutional structures, such as schools and doctrine, the Wombat was very much in the conscience of tunnelling companies across the British Army.

By April 1917, Stokes remarked that '[t]he use of the wombat has been considerably developed and may become a habit'.<sup>115</sup> It was in this year of the war that the Wombat was used in operations. Prior to the capture of Vimy Ridge on 9 April 1917, the Wombat was used to 'open up deep explosion trenches' across no man's land.<sup>116</sup> Hunter himself put in 'five bores from the ends of the land tunnels or subways, where infantry were lying in wait to open a great attack', which 'afforded excellent cover for the troops'.<sup>117</sup> On two occasions, the Wombat was used at Loos for 'offensive demolition', and it was also employed in Flanders to bore for water and repair choked boreholes.<sup>118</sup> By late 1917, the Wombat had been adopted across the entire British force on the Western Front with Alphabet Company personnel attached to each formation's mining school to instruct individuals in the Wombat's use.<sup>119</sup> The machine's capabilities were also demonstrated to newly arrived US Army officers.<sup>120</sup> Australian

---

<sup>112</sup> Institution of Royal Engineers, *The Work of the Royal Engineers in the European War, 1914-19: Miscellaneous* (Chatham, 1926), p. 81.

<sup>113</sup> TNA, WO 158/130, *Mining Notes No. 73*, 21 Oct. 1916, p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> TNA, WO 158/130, *Mining Notes No. 82 and 83*, 28 Dec. 1916.

<sup>115</sup> TNA, WO 158/137, Stokes diary, 1 Apr. 1917.

<sup>116</sup> Institution of Royal Engineers, *The Work of the Royal Engineers in the European War, 1914-19: Geological Work on the Western Front* (Chatham, 1922), p. 55.

<sup>117</sup> 'Boring Under Enemy Lines', *The Beaudesert Times*, 6 Jun. 1919, p. 6.

<sup>118</sup> Institution of Royal Engineers, *Geological Work*, p. 55.

<sup>119</sup> AWM, AWM4 16/1/1, Australian Electrical and Mechanical Mining and Boring Company war diary, Jan. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>120</sup> TNA, WO 158/140, Mining diary of Major W. E. Buckingham, 5 Jul. 1917.

newspapers proudly reported that the British War Office had ‘officially adopted’ the Wombat, with one paper carrying the heading ‘Wombats in France. Distinctly Australian’.<sup>121</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald*’s interview with Edgeworth David noted that ‘thirty-nine of these were originally taken from Australia by the Mining corps, and the British military authorities found them of such use that they ordered 50 more of the same pattern...’<sup>122</sup>

The adoption of the Wombat reveals three key points: first, the importance of joining discrete networks together. Both Edgeworth David and Stokes, for example, played important roles as brokers for Hunter and his Wombat. Edgeworth David’s own legitimacy as a geologist enhanced Hunter’s in the eyes of the British military establishment. Stokes, as assistant to Robert Harvey, the officer in charge of British mining efforts, was able to act as his chief’s eyes and ears, identifying best practice. There was a degree of homophily between Hunter and his two brokers, which transformed the ties between them from weak to strong: none of them were career soldiers, yet all of them had practical experience of mining in a civilian context.<sup>123</sup> Secondly, securing patronage was not necessarily dependent on rank or background. Hunter was an Australian volunteer in his mid-fifties who remained a captain throughout the war until medically discharged in May 1918.<sup>124</sup> It was his ideas and expertise that had the value, rather than the rank that he held. Patronage in the Army still tended to operate within institutional and hierarchical constraints. As in Hunter’s case, patronage helped streamline the chain of command, attesting to some flexibility, yet the interpersonal relationships were still inherently hierarchical between lower and upper ranks: Hunter a captain, Edgeworth David and Stokes both majors, and Harvey a brigadier-general. Finally, we see the mobility of knowledge and technology in different contexts. With the Wombat, it moved transnationally from the

---

<sup>121</sup> ‘Wombat Boring Apparatus’, *Queensland Times*, 30 Oct. 1918, p. 6; ‘Wombats in France’, *World*, 30 Oct. 1918, p. 4.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Science in War’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 1919, p. 6.

<sup>123</sup> For the influence of homophily, see M. McPherson, L. Smith-Lovin, and J. M. Cook, ‘Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27 (2001), pp. 415-44.

<sup>124</sup> Canberra, National Archives of Australia, Service record: Captain S. B. Hunter, B2455.



periphery to the centre; from the civilian to the military; and from the local to the general. The Army proved an active partner and collaborator, aiding in the refashioning and repurposing of the Wombat for a different function and set of circumstances. Through experimentation and its use in a military context, the technology was de-personalised, pushed to its limits, and altered to suit its new purpose.

## V

While the example of the Wombat suggests an overwhelmingly positive response from the Army to new ideas and technology, the establishment of an inland water transport service in the opening months of the war sheds light on some of the tensions when embarking on organisational change. The Army was required to revise its initial views on the viability of this type of supply and transportation system, including how it functioned and what expertise was required. Through a combination of personal relationships and demonstrable expertise, an outsider with connections to senior officers at the War Office was given the opportunity and authority to influence the Army's policy and performance on the Western Front. Much like the example of the Wombat then, we see further evidence of the Army's permeability, accepting of those from different backgrounds with different experiences. Related to this is the existence of social and political networks that further blurred the organisational boundaries of the Army, showing how shared norms and values, which transcended individual organisations, could reinforce particular modes of thought. In the case of inland water transport, particularly its recruitment, such networks had a second order effect, affecting individuals who were outside immediate patronage networks, thereby reinforcing the importance of 'weak ties' to the life of the Army.

Before the outbreak of the war, the Army was aware of the potential benefits of using

inland water transport as part of its logistics infrastructure in wartime.<sup>125</sup> Yet, it took a retired, decorated commander from the Royal Indian Marine, Gerald Holland – our expert and client figure – to convince them of its merits. He initially had an uphill struggle, turned away in late 1914 by a War Office that was ‘unaware of any Engineer officer’ who could work inland water transport, and convinced that the ‘railways systems in the theatre of war would be capable of coping with all demands made upon them’.<sup>126</sup> Holland persisted, however, aided by his expertise in a number of different employment contexts. Though Holland was a former naval officer, the Royal Indian Marine was officially considered a non-combatant arm, its officers junior to Royal Navy officers of equal rank.<sup>127</sup> What gave his opinions substance were his military and civilian experiences. He had worked closely with Army counterparts as a naval transport officer during the Second Anglo-Boer War, bringing him into contact with senior figures who would act as important brokers and patrons in 1914. He had also worked closely with civilian counterparts as the principal port officer at Rangoon and then, following his retirement, as marine superintendent on the London and North Western Railway (LNWR) from 1907 onwards.

There were two brokers for the inland water transport scheme: Lieutenant-General Sir James Wolfe Murray who, in late 1914, was CIGS – the professional head of the British Army – and Colonel Sir Richard Montagu-Stuart-Wortley, the officer responsible for military movements in the United Kingdom. There is little evidence to suggest that these connections were anything other than weak ties established during the war in South Africa, but their influence carried significant weight. Montagu-Stuart-Wortley brokered Holland’s introduction

---

<sup>125</sup> General Staff, *Field Service Regulations, Part 2: Administration* (London, 1909), pp. 97-8. For more detail on the work of the inland water transport service, see C. Phillips, ‘Logistics and the BEF: The Development of Waterborne Transport on the Western Front, 1914-1916’, *British Journal for Military History* 2 (2016), pp. 42-58; idem., *Civilian Specialists at War*.

<sup>126</sup> TNA, WO 32/5162, Formation and organisation of inland water transport in France and Belgium, 1914-1915, Director of Supply and Transport to Cowans, 10 Dec. 1914; TNA, WO 158/851, ‘History of the Inland Water Transport Directorate 1914-1919’, n.d., pp. 4-5.

<sup>127</sup> E. J. Headlam, ‘The History of the Royal Indian Marine’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 77 (1929), p. 533.

to John Cowans, our patron figure and the officer responsible for the supply and logistics of the entire British Army. In a letter to Cowans, he urged ‘the claims of Commander Holland, whom I know to be a most energetic and useful officer and who, I believe, is well known to [Wolfe Murray]’.<sup>128</sup> The War Office reconsidered the question of inland water transport and Holland was commissioned as a lieutenant-colonel in late December 1914 and sent to the Western Front. Inland water transport was to ‘form part of the Royal Engineers, as skilled officers and men were necessary for the work’.<sup>129</sup> The challenge for Holland was finding those skilled individuals.<sup>130</sup>

When in post as head of inland water transport, we see Holland shifting role from client to broker. The initial appointments he made to the newly inaugurated service were all men known to him and who had served with him either in the Marine or on the LNWR. They formed ‘a nucleus for the new organisation’ and were men ‘on whose keenness and loyalty he could rely in organising and carrying out the work ahead’. The LNWR also provided men from its maritime and administrative staffs to work in this new service.<sup>131</sup> These individuals had proven themselves competent in similar roles. Holland identified these candidates, put their names forward, and then relied on institutional support from patrons like Cowans at the War Office to approve those recommendations. The expertise of the candidates, as well as Holland’s own legitimacy and political capital, underpinned this process.

While previously trusted colleagues formed the initial cadre of recruits, Holland diversified his hiring practice, drawing in people with varied backgrounds through open recruitment: colonial administrators, clerks, along with civil, mechanical, and electrical engineers all volunteered. The types of individuals that he interviewed for commissions, for example, were diverse. They came from different backgrounds and age groups. Some were

---

<sup>128</sup> TNA, WO 32/5162, Stuart-Wortley to Cowans, 12 Dec. 1914.

<sup>129</sup> TNA, WO 95/56/4, Inland Water Transport Directorate war diary, 19 Sept. 1915, p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> TNA, CAB 45/205, Diary of Lieutenant-Colonel G. E. Holland, 31 Dec. 1914.

<sup>131</sup> TNA, WO 158/851, ‘History of the Inland Water Transport Directorate’, pp. 8-9.

commissioned from the ranks, whilst others were recruited direct from civil society. Neither time served nor rank were particularly important. For Holland, the essential element was their varied and valuable skill sets. In short, he was selecting based on merit and suitability. In the middle of January 1915, Holland interviewed Corporal William McKinley, a ‘trained Lloyds sapper’, who had enlisted in the Army. Deemed ‘satisfactory’, he was commissioned as a captain in the Royal Engineers.<sup>132</sup> On 22 January, Mr Thomas Perrin came to interview. A river transport expert with six years of experience on the African Gold Coast, Perrin was commissioned as a lieutenant.<sup>133</sup> A day later, Holland interviewed Mr G. J. Tagg, aged fifty-two, who could speak French, and knew the French and Belgian canal networks well. He was also a member of the famous Tagg family — a renowned firm of boat builders and steam launch men on the River Thames. He was appointed a captain in the Royal Engineers.<sup>134</sup> Of the thirty-two officers, including Holland, recruited between December 1914 and February 1915, twenty-one (65 per cent) had ‘civilian’ noted as their ‘previous rank’.<sup>135</sup>

This process of headhunting was not limited to the officer corps. There was an ‘active campaign’ for the enlistment of skilled personnel who worked on the River Thames and at the various sea ports.<sup>136</sup> Such expertise was highly prized and petitions were made to the Treasury to endorse the ‘highest rate of Engineer pay’ in order to ‘obtain men with the special qualifications’.<sup>137</sup> The War Office recognised that the patriotism evoked by the war had meant that ‘far better workmen’ than those who usually enlisted were coming forward to join the Royal Engineers in particular. ‘They are masters of their various trades’, wrote the War Office secretary, ‘and only require adequate training in military duties to be of full value as soldier

---

<sup>132</sup> TNA, CAB 45/205, Holland diary, 20 Jan. 1915.

<sup>133</sup> TNA, CAB 45/205, Holland diary, 22 Jan. 1915.

<sup>134</sup> TNA, CAB 45/205, Holland diary, 23 Jan. 1915.

<sup>135</sup> TNA, WO 32/5162, ‘Particulars of Officers’, n.d. (Feb. 1915).

<sup>136</sup> TNA, WO 158/851, ‘History of the Inland Water Transport Directorate’, p. 19.

<sup>137</sup> TNA, T 1/11761 [3434], Inland Water Transport rates of pay, 4 Feb. 1915.

artificers'.<sup>138</sup> In February 1915, the Treasury agreed that the extension of higher pay should be offered to the men recruited into the inland water transport service, providing such qualifications were not possessed by ordinary Royal Engineers recruits.<sup>139</sup> The inland water transport recruitment campaign revealed how individuals could be affected by social and political relations even though such individuals were not directly involved in the original patronage network.

In June 1917, Holland died from a sudden illness. Colleagues remarked on his 'great foresight and powers of initiative with wide experience in connection with the sea service, civil, marine, and mechanical engineering problems'.<sup>140</sup> It was through his efforts that the Army had developed a capable water transport service to support its road and rail networks. The deadweight tonnage the service conveyed increased from just under 840,000 in 1916, to 2.4m in 1917, to 2.8m at war's end. Its expansion in personnel terms was also considerable: from a skeleton staff of five officers and five other ranks in January 1915, to 71 officers and 1,600 other ranks in January 1916, to 187 officers and 7,500 other ranks by December 1918.<sup>141</sup> Despite his untimely death, Holland's original idea of using inland water transport on the Western Front had been institutionalised across the British force in that theatre.

Holland's recruitment practices left a legacy on the directorate: patronage and expertise remained essential. When Holland died, Cyril Luck — one of the former's subordinates in the Royal Indian Marine — took over as director of the transport service on the Western Front. Furthermore, in August 1917, Lieutenant-Colonel John Parkhouse, one of the service's assistant directors and in civilian life a district goods manager on the LNWR, acted as a broker, requesting the services of two LNWR colleagues to take over as discipline officers for inland

---

<sup>138</sup> TNA, T 1/11761 [21765], Grant of Engineer pay, 12 Oct. 1914.

<sup>139</sup> TNA, T 1/11761 [3434], Bradbury to Secretary, War Office, 10 Feb. 1915.

<sup>140</sup> TNA, WO 158/851, 'History of the Inland Water Transport Directorate', p. 21.

<sup>141</sup> London, Institution of Civil Engineers Archive, 623.6:656 ML, 'Transportation Report for the year, 1917', n.d., pp. 12-14; *idem.*, 'Transportation Report for the year, 1918', n.d., pp. 17-18.

water transport. The previous holder had ‘no knowledge or experience whatever of transportation work’, whilst the two suggestions put forward by Parkhouse had ‘suitable experience and knowledge’.<sup>142</sup> These examples not only underscore the effective institutionalising of the service, but also speak to the central importance of personal relationships to the internal workings of both the directorate, but also the Army, reinforcing the utility of foregrounding social and political processes to help understand those dynamics.

The example of inland water transport further highlights the extent to which elements of patronage *within* the Army often mirrored social networks *outside* of the Army. While we may perceive military and civilian professions orbiting around each other, they often intersected in different spaces and contexts. Attendance at the same schools, the same universities, or the same gentlemen’s clubs, for example, provided a bond of union between individuals, irrespective of profession. Similarly, the various ‘learned societies’ that sprang up in the nineteenth century, such as the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Institute of Marine Engineers, proved to be key venues for ‘informal socialising and gentlemanly conversation’ between members of different professions.<sup>143</sup> These various spaces and structures played an important role in maintaining and legitimising paternalist modes of thought and practice in both the Army and broader society.<sup>144</sup> Pre-existing networks were transferred into the military domain during the war, speaking once again to the permeability of the Army’s organisational boundaries. Indeed, a deputation of civil and mechanical engineers to the Western Front in late 1918 recognised that ‘practically 90% of the Engineers who have been responsible for the engineering work carried out in France were in civil employment before the war’ — thereby

---

<sup>142</sup> TNA, WO 95/4785, Assistant Director Inland Water Transport war diary, Parkhouse to War Office, 26 Aug. 1917.

<sup>143</sup> C. Andersen, *British Engineers in Africa, 1875-1914* (London, 2011), p. 89; A. Fox, ‘Goats Mingling with Sheep? Professionalisation, Personalities, and Partnerships Between British Civil and Military Engineers, c.1837-1939’, *War & Society* 38 (2019), pp. 269-72.

<sup>144</sup> J. Lawrence, ‘Paternalism, Class, and the British Path to Modernity’, in S. Gunn and J. Vernon, eds., *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (London, 2011), pp. 147-64.

realising Haig's desire to 'employ men on the same work in war as they are accustomed to do in peace'.<sup>145</sup> Gerald Holland — one of those individuals in civil employment — had, through his long-standing relationships with senior officers, established a patronage network, initially predicated on weak ties, that enabled him to go direct to the top of the military establishment. Though the Army was hierarchical and bureaucratic in nature, individuals and their ideas crossed permeable organisational boundaries, negotiated and interacted with institutional structures and processes, resulting in novel solutions to the challenges of war.

## VI

An Army has many ingredients: equipment, command and staff structures, doctrine and procedures, yet the most basic and fundamental is the soldier.<sup>146</sup> Stripping back those other elements reveals the Army as effectively a community of people. Much like other communities, there is competition for power and resource. There are differences in opinion. There are conflicts in terms of priorities and goals. Cliques and cabals exist, as well as clashes of personality and bonds of alliance. As a result, organisations like the Army are not necessarily the most cooperative of places – a necessary consequence of the need for rapid decision-making and obedience on the battlefield. Yet, despite a requirement for bureaucratic rules, rationality and logic do not always prevail because different people see things in different ways.<sup>147</sup> As I have argued, rather than something to be purged out of the organisation, these differences and frictions are essential if an organisation is going to adapt, change, and, ultimately, survive – something that was widely appreciated in the British Army of the First World War.

The tensions that existed between people and bureaucratic rules highlights the interplay

---

<sup>145</sup> LHCMA, Papers of Major-General A. Stuart, 7, 'Some Private Recollections of a Base Wallah, 1914-1919', 1933, p. 153; TNA, WO 32/5104, Institution of Civil Engineers' Report on Western Front, 28 Apr. 1919, pp. 3, 7.

<sup>146</sup> Kirke, 'Fighting Spirit', p. 227.

<sup>147</sup> C. Handy, *Understanding Organisations* (London, 1993 [1986]), pp. 23, 291.

between the informal and formal organisation: the social, collaborative relations between individual members on one hand, and the structured, hierarchical rules of the organisation on the other. While sometimes cast in opposition, these two perspectives are, in reality, inseparable and mutually reinforcing. The formal organisation provides parameters through policies, regulations, and procedures, whilst the informal organisation, a ‘spontaneous phenomenon’ which ‘cannot be prevented’ binds individuals together – whether in terms of primary group cohesion or through shared values and ideals.<sup>148</sup> This is no more apparent than in the Army: ‘informal, face-to-face groups’, for example, were important in supporting the command structure.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, as Richard Holmes remarked, ‘[s]eldom is the difference between an organisation’s appearance and its inner reality more marked than in the case of the British Army. It appears hierarchical, regimented and disciplined, but is often collegiate, tribal and comfortable’.<sup>150</sup>

Where the Army of the First World War is concerned, the formal and informal organisation were not always dichotomous or in opposition. Alexander Thorburn encapsulated this sentiment when he explained his understanding of the Army, and argued that its well-being depended on the ‘interplay of human relationships’.<sup>151</sup> By foregrounding individuals and their relationships, we can better understand the Army as an institution. It was permeable and diverse. Its boundaries less rigid than we might suppose, allowing for the movement of ideas and people both inside and outside organisation as the examples of the Wombat and developments in inland water transport reveal.

The social relations that existed and developed between individuals were a manifestation of the Army’s enduring organisational culture – one that prioritised the local, the

---

<sup>148</sup> F. J. Roethlisberger, ‘The Foreman: “Man in the Middle”’, in R. Dubin, ed., *Human Relations in Administration* (New York, 1970 [1951]), p. 228.

<sup>149</sup> L. R. Sayles, ‘Informal Work Groups and the Formal Organization’, in Dubin, ed., *Human Relations*, p. 115.

<sup>150</sup> R. Holmes, ‘Foreword’ in Kirke, *Red Coat, Green Machine*, xi.

<sup>151</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, xxi.



pragmatic, and the individual. As this article has revealed, the Army tended to fall back on pre-existing, embedded cultural norms to enhance its intellectual development and day to day working. Whether through the ‘rings’ and cliques of the Victorian Army, the shared experience of civilian mining within the Alphabet Company, or the connections which saw Guy Dawnay rise from a reservist captain to major-general, these relationships were ubiquitous and enduring. They were not the sole preserve of the Regular army officer corps, nor were they solely concerned with matters of promotion.

While such relations enabled individuals to circumvent aspects of the chain of command, such actions did not constitute wholesale subversion. Though the practice of ‘consent and evade’ was a reality within the Army, social relations often complemented, rather than undermined, the formal organisation of the Army. Many of these relationships worked hierarchically, drawing on institutional structures to legitimise decisions made, thus speaking to the flexibility that existed within certain institutional structures. By foregrounding the importance and prevalence of these social relations to the Army, it is easy to see how they seemingly support detractors’ comments that the Army was run as an ‘unofficial personalised system’.<sup>152</sup> However, as Gary Sheffield rightly questions, ‘how else do they think organisations are run?’<sup>153</sup> By broadening out the discussion beyond the confines of promotion, the ubiquity of this personalised system becomes apparent, suggesting that it was more than just lubricant to grease the cogs of the organisation.

The importance of these dynamic interpersonal and social relations is not limited to the Army of the First World War. We have seen the importance of such relations to the Victorian and Edwardian Army, and the way in which *perceptions* of merit, talent, and ability influenced these relationships. Interrogating these relations has implications for how we approach the internal dynamics of the Army after the First World War. In the interwar years, for example,

---

<sup>152</sup> Travers, *Killing Ground*, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 24.

we see similar applications of patronage. Whatever the ‘apparent role that nepotism, age, and “musical chairs” played’, it was limited by the desire to advance merit, rather than to ‘reward the worthless’.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, the kinds of men who attracted patronage had ‘probably already proven their competence in action before they reached high office’.<sup>155</sup> As with the experience before and during the First World War though, to what extent were ideas of talent and competence objective, or simply driven by selection in one’s own image? In the Second World War, generals such as Brooke and Montgomery were not ‘unduly sentimental about withdrawing [their] patronage if a protégé failed’. On the contrary, many generals acted ruthlessly to weed out individuals who were deemed incompetent or unfit for the job.<sup>156</sup> Yet, there is still an opportunity for further research in terms of rediscovering important social relations and interpersonal dynamics beyond the prism of promotion. As this article has shown, bound and influenced by shared culture, procedures, and structures, the actions and agency of individuals and the permeable, dynamic relationships between them underpinned the Army’s ability to offer bespoke, often innovative, solutions to the large, complex problems of modern war.

---

<sup>154</sup> Beckett, *Profession of Arms*, p. 247; D. French, “‘An Extensive Use of Weedkiller’: Patterns of Promotion in the Senior Ranks of the British Army, 1919-1939”, in French and Reid, eds., *The British General Staff*, p. 168.

<sup>155</sup> French, ‘Weedkiller’, p. 174.

<sup>156</sup> French, ‘Colonel Blimp’, p. 1996; M. Frost, ‘The British and Indian Army Staff Colleges in the Interwar Years’, in D. E. Delaney, R. C. Engen, and M. Fitzpatrick, eds., *Military Education and the British Empire, 1815-1949* (Vancouver, 2018), pp. 165-67.