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Martin Gilbert, *The Somme: Heroism and Horror in the First World War*. New York: Henry Holt, 2006. Pp. xx, 352. ISBN 0805081275.

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Martin Gilbert's *The Somme* is the latest addition to the growing body of literature on the bloodiest battle ever fought by the British army. In the summer of 1916 General Sir Douglas Haig, in his first major battle as Commander-in-Chief, had completed plans to attack in strength along a fourteen-mile front, with the object of opening a wide gap in the opposing line through which his cavalry would sweep forward into open country. Most of the divisions that participated in the assault were green, made up of volunteers who had eagerly answered the call to defend their country. Some who had lied about their ages were as young as fifteen, while others were over fifty. They were probably the finest body of men Britain had ever put in uniform but they were insufficiently trained to operate under conditions of trench warfare. The British High Command seemed to think that its recruits were incapable of learning anything other than the simplest of maneuvers. Thus instead of the tried and tested "fire and movement," when some lay down to cover the advance of rest with rifle volleys, the troops were instructed to advance, almost shoulder to shoulder, in a series of long, continuous rows. During the first day of the attack, the British army suffered 57,470 casualties, 19,240 of whom were killed or died of their wounds.

The causes of this calamity are not difficult to determine. The weight of the preliminary bombardment had failed to cut the enemy's barbed wire in many places or to collapse the deep dug-outs where the defenders were sheltered. Thus when the British soldiers clambered out of their trenches and made their way into no man's land they were inexorably mowed down, wave after wave, by a pitiless stream of machine-gun and rifle fire. There was no question of calling a halt to the battle because of the inauspicious start, however tragic. The lengthy preparations involved, the need to ease pressure on the French at Verdun, and Haig's optimistic outlook, dictated perseverance. The battle dragged on day after day with the same dreary pattern. The attackers waded through pocked-marked, muddy terrain, absorbing heavy casualties for negligible gains. At last the weather in mid November compelled Haig to terminate the campaign. During the four-and-a-half-month-long battle (1 July to 18 November 1916) the British army sustained 420,000 casualties, yet nowhere had the Allied line advanced more than eight miles.

Gilbert, who has authored many books, is normally unafraid to wade into troubled waters but there is nothing controversial about his account of the Somme. His intention is to investigate, not the battle as a whole, but rather an aspect of it. He does not dwell on the happenings at British Army Headquarters, the part played by politicians during the various phases of the campaign and why it was allowed to continue in spite of the staggering losses. These topics have been amply covered in the past, most recently by Prior and Wilson in

their superb monograph, *The Somme*.<sup>1</sup> Nor does Gilbert involve himself in the ongoing dispute among military historians about the generalship of Haig and his principal subordinates, and whether the battle seriously degraded the German army or was the ultimate symbol of folly and futility. Instead he tells the story of the Somme through the eyes of hundreds participants who fought face to face with the enemy. As these men wrote down their observations or feelings, they had no way of knowing the outcome or whether they would live through the battle. Indeed, many of those quoted in the book did not survive. Gilbert has gone to great lengths to give the names of the cemeteries in which many lie or, if they could not be identified, the monument on which their names are listed. A number of first-rate maps show the location of the cemeteries.

Gilbert is an excellent writer, a clear thinker, and a bear for research. His selection of contemporary accounts, mostly British but a few German as well, cover many facets of the experience of battle—such as the daily life of front-line soldiers when not in action; infantrymen witnessing the wholesale slaughter of their friends; the execution of soldiers for supposed acts of cowardice; and airmen engaged in dogfights or dropping bombs on enemy targets. Interwoven with diary entries and letters are a number of photographs and a series of outstanding maps depicting the fighting over the course of the campaign. No other account of the battle, not even Malcolm Brown's,<sup>2</sup> has conveyed the distant painful events with such intimacy.

The book, however, is not without flaws. There are at least two factual errors. Gilbert identifies Donald Hankey, a second lieutenant in the 1st battalion, Royal Warwickshire who was killed leading his platoon, as the son of Sir Maurice Hankey, then secretary of the War Committee (216). In fact, Donald Hankey was the brother of Sir Maurice. Then too Gilbert indicates that the Somme “prevented the Germans from transferring troops to where they were badly needed on the Russian and Rumanian fronts” (257). As it happened, the Germans reinforced the Russian front by sending nine divisions from the west in July and August, plus five more between August and October to deal with the Rumanians. But my main criticism is with the structure of the book. At the outset Gilbert neglects to lay out the battle plan in detail and the role of each local commander. As a result, the general reader has no idea of the connection between the individual actions and how their objectives fit into the larger picture. Moreover, Gilbert frequently provides brief biographies of the individuals he quotes and, if they happened to have fallen at the Somme or elsewhere, the location of their graves. Such information is interesting to the readers and particularly useful to those who wish to pay their respects at the gravesides, but it also interrupts the flow of the narrative. A more appropriate place for it would have been an appendix.

For the general reader who wants to know how it felt for the men who did the fighting, Gilbert's book is the single best account yet written. Still, for all its virtues, it falls short of what I expected of someone of Gilbert's stature.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Brown, *Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1997).