



Somme: Into the Breach by Hugh Sebag-Montefiore.

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The centenary of World War I has occasioned a spate of new scholarly studies of that momentous tragedy, particularly of its most horrific battle.¹ In *Somme: Into the Breach*, noted journalist Hugh Sebag-Montefiore² focuses specifically on the daily experience of the common foot soldier in graphic and moving detail. His judicious use of archival material, library resources, Red Cross files, personal testimonies, and diary extracts helps convey a soldiers-eye view of the horrors of industrialized carnage on the Western Front and the extraordinary detachment of the Allied command that precipitated the Somme bloodbath.

The book comprises thirty-nine chapters, sixty pages of notes, a select bibliography, and an index. Twenty-one high-quality maps clarify positions and actions on the Western Front, the Somme battlefield, and various salients of the engagement; plentiful photographs show key personnel and the squalor of the trenches.

The author starts on page 1 at the Beaumont Hamel commune near the Somme front and follows the flawed strategic logic and human suffering of the offensive in subsequent chapters. He begins with the gripping testimony of a British cameraman filming the opening infantry assault:

I watched ... the lads mount the firestep, and ... spring up the ladders onto the parapet ... with mixed feeling[s] Many slid ... back [as soon as] they reached the top, killed or wounded.... [T]he survivors worked their way through our barbed wire in the face of the fierce shell and machine-gun fire, leaving behind many of their pals.... They went up the long incline in perfect order, dropping to the ground every now and then, as if on an exercise on Salisbury Plain, regardless ... of the intense shelling and small arms fire around and ahead of them. The line thinned as men fell, but it never faltered, [and] at last they vanished from sight, into the inferno on the ridge beyond All that we could see was the bursting of heavy shells, and [over the sound of the artillery, we heard] ... the rattle of machine-gun and small arms fire. (3)

Machine-gun fire, more than anything else, savaged the attackers' ranks and reassured the German defenders, bludgeoned by Allied artillery barrages, that their position was not collapsing. A sober assessment of the Somme front could have anticipated the Allies' 19,000 dead and 57,470 wounded on day one of the battle, but, ever since the First Battle of the Marne (6–10 Sept. 1914), a collective delusion about the efficacy of massed firepower and infantry assault against prepared defensive positions had gripped the high command of both sides on the Western Front. After all,

1. E.g., Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2016); Richard van Em-den, *The Somme: The Epic Battle in the Soldiers' Own Words and Photographs* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2016); Andrew Roberts, *Elegy: The First Day of the Somme* (London: Head of Zeus, 2015); Taylor Downing, *Breakdown: The Crisis of Shell Shock on the Somme, 1916* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2017); and Robert Kershaw, *24 Hours at the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London: Ebury Pr, 2017).

2. His previous work includes *Enigma: The Battle for the Code* (NY: Wiley, 2000) and *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2006).

a similar storm of steel had been raging at Verdun since the preceding February, and the carnage there was deemed as somehow ancillary to what might happen on the Somme.³ Most histories of World War I portray Gen. Sir Douglas Haig, the fifty-five-year-old commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) as an arrogant amateur. For good reason: Haig was so confident of his superior judgment that he resented perfectly reasonable observations by the Lloyd George government on how best to prosecute a war in Europe with an army of 1,448,000 men—many of them inexperienced volunteers. He also contrived to bar the political leadership from monitoring his command (24–31).

Sebag-Montefiore strives to treat Haig with some empathy, but finds no reason to dispute the prevailing scholarly verdict of breathtaking incompetence: “Haig’s ignorance concerning the use of artillery was astonishing”; in preparation for action at Neuve Chapelle, he sent out a memo “asking whether someone could tell him how many guns and shells were needed to cave in a German trench” (513). One of Haig’s men, Pvt. J. Elliot of the Northumberland Fusiliers, described the death of comrades:

“He was riddled with bullets, writhing and screaming. Another lad was just kneeling, his head thrown back. Bullets were slapping into him, knocking great bloody chunks off his body. He was far from being the only one to drop.” Private Elliot believes that some of the Germans held their fire until his battalion were well on their way across No Man’s Land. “That way we would cop it if we came forward, and cop it just as bad if we tried to go back. We were just scythed down.” (185)

Such passages evoke the enormity of the sufferings of all the war’s participants and the appalling insensitivity to the waste of life. Even when Allied soldiers achieved some small tactical victory, their own brutality shocked them and left another kind of wound. Vernon Wilkinson, a nineteen-year-old private of the London Regiment, remembered a trench full of surrendering Germans:

They had already dropped their rifles and offered no resistance. I wanted to use the bayonet, but could not bring myself to do it. So I fired a couple of rounds at two yards range into the two nearest me. This was nothing else but murder. I don’t know what made me do it, as they could easily have been taken prisoner. (470)

Such an act, committed in peacetime, would seem disgusting, heartless, and barbaric, but “because it was seen in the context of all the horrific sight on the Somme, it did not ... strike observers as being so terrible” (472). Sebag-Montefiore lays the blame for such brutalization of decent men at the feet of military leaders who lacked imagination and simple common sense.

Prime Minister Lloyd George was so disgusted with the slaughter on the Somme that he pondered placing Haig and the BEF under French command (514–15). Other historians have seen Haig’s thinking as rooted in the nineteenth century and thus wholly unsuited to twentieth-century industrial warfare, which required fixity of purpose and precise calculations of munitions and guns; they stress the strategic context and the conceptualization of the Somme offensive: Haig was “The very opposite of an attritional general. He considered that wars were won by decisive battles.”⁴

Admittedly, however, such larger strategic questions are peripheral to Sebag-Montefiore’s overriding interest in the experience of rank-and-file soldiers mired in the mud and blood of the

3. See Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013) 26–30, 98–99.

4. Prior and Wilson (note 1 above) 307.

Somme front. His book is a significant addition to the commemorative literature on the Somme precisely for its concentration on the trees rather than the forest.⁵ It is a product of ambitious research and impassioned enthusiasm rather than a triumph of the historian's craft.

5. The book is flawed by inadequate copyediting, occasional awkward syntax, and a penchant for clichés. Its author also misidentifies (65) the source of his Shakespearean subtitle, which derives from *Henry V*, 3.1.1 (during the capture of Harfleur, not prior to the Battle of Agincourt).