PRIOR, Robin, and Trevor WILSON — *The Somme*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson's book *The Somme* will certainly please a number of historians, but will most likely rankle a good many others. This is probably the most comprehensively researched and detailed "ground-up" reconstruction of Britain's most costly battle yet produced. However, the operational reconstruction is couched in a more purposeful theoretical approach. The authors intend to test some well-entrenched myths by examining the battle, its planning and its execution, in minute detail. In so doing, the authors also construct a top-down battle (and pre-battle) narrative. While the authors' arguments proceed quite logically, they tend to paint the decisions made — almost invariably viewed as political, strategic, and tactical blunders — in black and white. The resulting work is both engaging and often convincing, especially regarding "sharp-end" operations, but it also suffers at times from a rigidity that precludes any alternative interpretation of the sources.

Prior and Wilson examine some well-worn myths that have recently come under general assault concerning strategic leadership in the British army during the First World War. Probably the most enduring myth — and the one most directly engaged — is the "Lions Led By Donkeys" argument that presents British generals, especially Sir Douglas Haig, as insular, stupid, and wasteful of men's lives. The result is not a vindication of Haig, but a reaffirmation of the traditional line. Haig and 4th Army commander General Sir Henry Rawlinson are soundly condemned for what the authors consider their mishandling of the battle.

The authors begin by suggesting that the War Committee's decision to approve the campaign was the first, and perhaps most serious, blunder. Thus Prior and Wilson shift some of the blame to Britain's political leaders. For the most part, however, the narrative deals with both Haig and Rawlinson. Strategically and tactically these men are lambasted. There is a sense throughout the book — familiar to generations of Great War students — that where blame needs to be laid, it should be laid at the top. Of course, this all assumes that blame needs to be apportioned. The authors establish only a scant argumentative framework for or against the relative wisdom of actually undertaking such a battle. It is assumed that the Somme was an unmitigated disaster. Thus the Somme is still folly and Haig is still to blame, but now the politicians must share some of the burden. The authors point out that some generals, notably Rawlinson, saw the value of alternative tactical options. That these newer tactics were not undertaken in 1916, and had to wait until 1917, is ascribed to High Command's mental torpor. The authors paint Rawlinson as being either strategically stultified (like Haig) or, if showing promise, too acquiescent to Haig's demands. In either case, the message is clear: by acting like Haig, Rawlinson was ineffective. The clear implication supports the now time-tested theory that Haig was obtuse, old-fashioned, and resistant to change.

First World War historiography has taught us two main (but contradictory) lessons about the Battle of the Somme. The first is that the Somme was very costly and produced minimal gains. It rightfully points out that minimal territorial gains were made, but also that the show was not worth the price of admission. The second lesson, spear-

headed recently by Gary Sheffield, is that, both operationally and strategically, the Somme was, in fact, a British victory: "[it] should not be dismissed simply as a bloody disaster" (Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, 2002, p. 185). Sheffield points out that, whatever one says of Haig, Britain ended the war on the winning side. Contrary to Prior and Wilson's "butcher bill" analysis, Sheffield suggests that, despite losing more men, the British were better able to absorb the losses they sustained than were the Germans. Operational military historians have also noted some of the benefits the British army derived from its Somme experience in terms of battle doctrine and trench warfare tactics. Indeed, Prior and Wilson anticipate this by pointing out that these same tactics and doctrine existed before the Somme, indeed Rawlinson advocated their use, but they were not consistently applied during the battle, and this was Rawlinson's failing. It is commonplace to say, but nevertheless true, that Haig and the politicians did not have a "Somme" from which to draw any experience in June 1916. That they took the lessons learned in the Somme and subsequently applied demonstrably more successful tactics as a result should, on balance, count toward their credit. Conversely, however, that Haig was at the head of the victorious army does not, or should not, mean that *ipso facto* he planned the war efficiently and effectively.

Despite the fact that Prior and Wilson still level blame at Haig and Rawlinson, their detailed examination of the decisions made on a day-by-day basis tends to support the old adage that, at the Somme, lions were led by donkeys. On the other hand, their evidence suggests that the common infighting between the higher commanders, the fact that Rawlinson often disagreed with Haig's orders, and the fact that these officers repeatedly tried to come up with workable plans would indicate that they were not necessarily profligate with the lives of their men, but tried — albeit unsuccessfully — to undermine the German defence. The authors, however, do not reach such conclusions. Historians critical of Haig have paid too little attention to the excellent German defensive system. As Prior and Wilson often point out, this system consisted of three lines and was often miles deep. That Haig and Rawlinson had trouble cracking the German defence seems understandable.

Even where other historians have praised the British high command for its innovation — for example in regard to the September 15 battle of Flers-Courcelette in which tanks were first employed — the authors find the methods employed wanting. They admit that these novel weapons might have given a tactical advantage, but again the commanders failed to plan properly. Simply put, Rawlinson was not sure of the tanks' capabilities and so devised plans in which the creeping barrage would sport 100-metre gaps so that the tanks could advance without fear of succumbing to British artillery. The problem was that 1916 tanks moved at about two miles per hour: slower than walking pace. If the infantry were to advance with the tanks, the men would need to move more slowly than normal across No Man's Land, toward an enemy that was unencumbered by the usual bombardment upon which British infantrymen had come to rely. The authors comment that the appearance of the tank "[i]ronically ... denied them the established sustenance of the creeping barrage and replaced it with a vulnerable substitute of doubtful efficacy" (p. 220). Here again, as in numerous other areas, the authors overstep the bounds of evidentiary support. They claim that, because Rawlinson decided the tank would "be substituted for the creeping barrage"

at some points along the front, he now felt the tanks possessed the equivalence of "his most powerful weapon — the artillery" (p. 221). Nowhere does this seem to be the case, however. The creeping barrage, it was feared, would damage the tanks. Further, the authors point out that the barrage would be re-imposed once the attack reached the German third line, thereby acting in support of a deeper armoured and infantry penetration. Neither the gaps in the barrage, nor its total re-imposition along the whole front as the attack proceeded, suggest that the armour was seen as anything but a novel (although hopefully decisive) support weapon. Paradoxically, the authors explain that the New Zealand Division and the 41st Division made substantial gains on September 15 and that in fact the fire plan and the tanks, for the most part, performed well. Such evidence can, perhaps, point to the fact that Rawlinson's plan for employing the tanks was at least somewhat well-founded.

The authors also attempt to dispel the "myth" that on the first day of the Somme the infantry marched single-file like lambs to the slaughter. In fact, they point out that only a minority of the divisions involved acted in such a manner. Instead, some units moved out into No Man's Land under cover of darkness; some rushed the enemy trenches as quickly as possible; others worked in smaller groups to attack more easily achieved objectives. But such tactics were employed only because lower commanders — or maybe division and corps commanders — sanctioned their use, not because Rawlinson or Haig had directed them. The two senior field commanders are thus awarded no credit for the employment of such tactics, even though Rawlinson had suggested their use. Instead, he is criticized for allowing his subordinates the flexibility to choose how they should cross the battlefield based on local topographical conditions. Other historians might well label such flexibility "leadership". Prior and Wilson suggest that it was folly to come up with potentially battle-winning tactical advancements and then not to order the use of such innovations. Notwithstanding all this, the authors argue convincingly that, whatever new tactics were employed on July 1, they were doomed to failure because the artillery programme (particularly regarding counter-battery and wire-cutting shoots) was inadequate. Finally, the infantry is comprehensively rehabilitated: "Whatever failings the Somme demonstrated in the British army, it is hard to argue that the performance of the combat infantry was one of them" (p. 304).

Overall, this book commends itself to people holding two diametrically opposed views. There are those who argue that Haig and the British high command were indeed poor generals that promiscuously flung human bodies against probably the most formidable defensive system ever devised. In this interpretation, despite days and weeks spent planning, these generals simply could not crack the German wall — mainly due to their incompetence — and thus were failures. Others, like Sheffield, are more sympathetic to the generals' plight. In this book both will find an impeccable and detailed operational reconstruction of the battle that, despite its negative criticism of the generals and its frequently inflexible analysis, reveals just what the British army and its commanders faced and why, therefore, they failed to defeat the Kaiser's army in the summer of 1916.

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