

Stephen Heathorn: *Haig and Kitchener in Twentieth-Century Britain: Remembrance, Representation and Appropriation* (Farnham: Ashgate 2013). Pp. x, 268. Hardback, Illus., Bibliography. ISBN: 9780754669654. RRP: £95

For revisionist historians of the Great War, especially military historians, this book will make depressing reading. “Revisionists”, such as Gary Sheffield, John Bourne, Brian Bond, William Philpott and Peter Simkins, are those military historians who since the 1980s have attempted to show that the popular view of the Great War—that it was futile and unnecessary; that the British Army was led by callous, incompetent generals who were personally responsible for the enormous casualties; that the war could have been won without defeating the Germans on the Western Front; and that the victories of 1918 are of less significance than the battles of attrition in 1916 and 1917—requires significant reassessment.¹ Stephen Heathorn claims, however, that revisionists are fighting a battle that they cannot win. Using traditional historical methods, they are trying to clear away the accretions laid down by subsequent generations to show how the British Army fought the Great War and won it. In effect, they are more concerned with interpreting the Great War through the eyes of its participants *during the years from 1914 to 1918* than through the memories of subsequent commentators (participants or otherwise). This is a futile objective (despite it being, arguably, the primary purpose of history), for the disillusionment with the war that grew as another approached in the 1930s and the morbid appeal of the ‘million dead’ are too deeply embedded in popular culture to be overcome.² ‘Historians’, writes Heathorn, ‘are deluded if they believe that their status or methods will alone carry the day. The past carries meaning for individuals and groups beyond that which historians can and do provide’.³ Commenting on changing attitudes towards material forms of remembrance he goes on, ‘While historians should certainly offer their own perspectives in trying to re-contextualize such statues [Field Marshal Haig’s in Edinburgh], simply directing people to read the latest historiography rather misses the point about the purpose and reproduction of popular remembrance’.⁴ Leaving aside the question of who exactly among the body of Great War historians are guilty of such dismissive behaviour towards the people, Heathorn is claiming that the revisionists are swimming against the determinist tide—indeed, tidal wave—of (cultural and presentist) history. To point out that virtually no one of the wartime generation had read Wilfred Owen’s poetry and that therefore his influence was virtually nil is a waste of time. To argue the pros and cons of the idea of the British Army undergoing a learning curve or process during the war is a waste of time. To prove the existence of manifold falsehoods in *The Monocled Mutineer* is a

¹ The literature that can be broadly termed ‘revisionist’ is enormous. For a few examples, see Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War Myths and Realities* (London 2001); Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (New Haven 1994); Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Stroud 2006); Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (London 1982); Peter Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army’s Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Barnsley 2014); William Philpott, *Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (London 2014); Paul Harris, *The Men who Planned the War: A Study of the Staff of the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Farnham 2016). The editor of the Ashgate Studies in First World War History, in which Heathorn’s book is published, is John Bourne.

² For a comment on the ‘morbid’ nature of fixating on casualty figures amongst battalions of the New Army, see Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, *Jutland 1916: Death in the Grey Wastes* (London 2012), iBook version, page 6.

³ Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchener*, p.14.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.228.

waste of time. We live in an age of sentimentalism and preening self-regard that feels justified in changing (not just reinterpreting) history to suit modern tastes.⁵ The result of the agitation to pardon those executed under military law during the Great War is just one example of modern arrogance, sentimentalism and narcissism. It is a forlorn hope to expect the use of rational disciplinary methods to change modern opinion of the Great War.

It is not the main purpose of Heathorn in this book to undermine the work of military historians. Rather, his objective is to show how and why the reputations of two eminent British military figures have changed dramatically over time (and for the worse). The subjects are Lord Kitchener and Sir Douglas Haig, both of whom were at the times of their deaths heroic figures but who are now viewed with scorn. The book ‘examines the ways in which First World War historiography, appropriated representations and various forms of remembrance about these two men’s reputations developed alongside and influenced one another over the course of the twentieth century. The aim is to contextualize and explain where and why contested interpretations of these figures developed and by whom and why they were perpetuated’.⁶

The subtitle of the book, ‘Remembrance, Representation and Appropriation’ neatly sums up its major themes. The themes of remembrance and representation are now well-ploughed fields in Great War studies. The decline and fall of the heroic reputations of Kitchener and Haig are well known, especially Haig’s. Kitchener’s, linked more to his role in the Empire than to his crucial creation of a new army in 1914-1915, has suffered from the emergence of anti-imperialism. Less connected to the Great War than Haig in the popular mind, he has become an ‘anachronistic hero’ rather than an anti-hero.⁷ That cannot be said of Haig. Disingenuously attacked after his death by Lloyd George in the 1930s, he became the *bête noir* in the 1960s of a left-wing, pacifist and anti-Establishment movement that used satire and irony to colonise popular culture. Haig has become, in Heathorn’s opinion (following Pierre Nora), a *lieu de mémoire* for the Great War, a “site of memory” or ‘a singular (though contested) reference point of remembrance that conveys meaning for many people regardless of what actual knowledge about the subject they may have’.⁸ In Haig’s case, in the popular mind he is a metonym for the Great War as an unmitigated disaster. As Heathorn points out, however, Haig’s reputation continues to be contested (even if evidently he thinks that revisionist historians are banging their heads against a brick wall). Within the typology that he uses—borrowed from Northrop Frye—the interpretation of every protagonist or hero in a narrative can be placed in one of five ‘modes’: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic.⁹ Heathorn’s discussions of the changes in the reputations of Kitchener and Haig over time are placed within this framework, with both high mimetic and low mimetic modes being found in the more recent academic studies of Haig.

Heathorn’s third conceptual theme is ‘appropriation’, used in its art historical sense:

⁵ See, for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/12188018/Cambridge-college-removes-African-bronze-cockerel-statue.html>.

⁶ Ibid, p.2.

⁷ Ibid, p.234.

⁸ Ibid, p.147.

⁹ Ibid, p.151.

Cultural creation generally begins with appropriation: the borrowing of images, texts, sounds and concepts from the surrounding world. Significantly, appropriation recontextualizes whatever it borrows to create new meanings. ... In this study, appropriation is deployed to analyse how particular representations of Haig and Kitchener have been used in different, later contexts by various groups or interests for their own purposes.¹⁰

Appropriation is the least important of Heathorn's three themes, although its use in the context of Great War studies is probably the most original part of this book. One example of this process where an event or an idea is extracted from its context and used for another purpose is the case of Kitchener's visit to Russia being an 'open secret' at the time of the voyage of HMS *Hampshire* in June 1916, which ended prematurely with the torpedoing of the ship and Kitchener's death. This had been raised during a debate in Parliament on alien internment, but was subsequently extracted from that context and used in the interwar period in fantasy stories about gold bullion, murderous spies and attempts to forestall the Russian Revolution.¹¹

In his conclusion Heathorn makes two important points about his subject. The first is that the processes of Great War remembrance and appropriation are 'not very different in kind' from those of the Victorian and Edwardian eras.¹² This continuity rather than change supports the view that the war did not cause a great caesura with the past. The second point is that the focus of collective remembrance, despite the efforts of the state 'to ritualize and sacralise the sacrifice of the whole nation', remains on the individual casualty. 'The meaning of individuality is preserved amongst the masses in mourning.'¹³ This certainly seems to be being borne out by many of the local activities occurring during the centenary commemorations of the Great War. Perhaps inevitably, however, the focus remains firmly on those who died rather than those who survived the war. The trope of the 'million dead' still holds sway.

Ironically, this book is unlikely to have much influence in the public domain. Using a complex theoretical framework in which the changing reputations of Kitchener and Haig are placed, it is unlikely to have much appeal outside the Academy. Its price, too, will put off all but university libraries and the most avid Remembrance enthusiasts (the hardback was £75 in 2013 and is £95 on Amazon today).

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¹⁰ Ibid, p.14.

¹¹ Ibid, p.96.

¹² Ibid, p.236.

¹³ Ibid.