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Stephen Badsey *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918*. Birmingham Studies in First World War History, Ashgate 2008 ISBN 978 0 7546 6467 3

Dr Stephen Badsey is well known to readers, having been a distinguished member of the Commission for many years so it is with some trepidation that I'm reviewing his *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918*. The book is based on, but far extended from his doctoral thesis, *Fire and the Sword*, written in the early eighties.¹ His thesis was academically significant then and the book is no less so now, as scholars, admittedly not many from those who study military history, and the laity continue to see the British Cavalry through the mud of the Somme and the excesses of Edwardian England.² This book is an overdue corrective.

The casual reader might consider that cavalry after 1900 were a backwater, doomed by technical advances, and argue that the work's significance is small. Reverting to first principles there are two active tactical fundamentals, firepower and mobility. Henry Wilson foresaw the results of ignoring the latter:

with no superior mobility, unaccustomed to long and tedious marches, ... ignorant of how to requisition, ignorant of how to billet, still served by horse ..., instead of motor traction ... then I am in favour of ... having a Slogging Match (sic).³

For much of the period which Dr Badsey covers, firepower was limited in depth of effect with mobility potentially more decisive, but growing firepower was impairing its tactical effect.⁴ But, as Wilson saw, mobility and tempo, hence cavalry despite its drawbacks, were vital in general war. Before 1899 the British required strategic mobility but cavalry were hard to move over distance, particularly by sea, while combat was often in terrain where they could not fight or were too logistically exigent.⁵ In colonial campaigning generally the mobility needed was logistical as: *'whatever happens we have got, the Maxim gun and they have not,'* hence the tempo demanded in conventional war was unnecessary. Consequently cavalry remained a backwater for much of the 19th Century, deployed in Britain in unsuitable stations, a legacy of past IS duties, or garrisoning India to guard against the remote risk of war with Russia.⁶

¹ (Aldershot Ashgate 2008); SD Badsey *'Fire and the Sword. ...'* (Cambridge 1981).

² Dr E Reid *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research (JSAHR)* 84 (2006). This usefully analyses cavalry equestrian sport pre-1914 but, this author feels that its conclusions rely on dated assumptions on tactics. A Lucking *'Was the British Army Lagging Technically in 1914?'* *JSAHR* 87 (2009) makes sweeping statements on cavalry attitudes to machine guns post 1900, ignoring much contrary evidence.

³ Brig Gen Wilson *Initiative and the power of Manoeuvre* (1910), pp 2, 7.

⁴ Primitive tyre technology impaired motor vehicles' cross country performance, while the skills and manufacturing base needed for extensive motorization did not then exist. In 1914 the BEF was the most motorized force in Europe.

⁵ Dr Badsey notes that the British Army's wars were generally in Africa

⁶ *Reports on the Sanitary Condition of Piershill Barracks Edinburgh* (1906); Lt WS Churchill *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (reprinted 1989), p 180. The 12th Lancers raised in the reign of George 1 first saw combat in 1801, Lt Col Hobson *Some XII Royal Lancers* (Long Compton 1936), p 4.



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But in general, as distinct from colonial warfare, attrition was unsustainable for a small, largely regular force which consequently would have to outmanoeuvre rather than out-fight its foes; hence cavalry were vital. The emphasis on cavalry and mobility after 1900 reflects the increased likelihood that the Army would have to fight in Europe. Herein lies the importance of Dr Badsey's book; cavalry were central to British concepts for European warfare, remaining vital for tactical reconnaissance, screening and exploitation.

In 1899 the British cavalry were at a low ebb compared to continental armies', the ratio of cavalrymen to infantry was about half, cavalrymen held no key army posts, few relative to other arm officers were psc and the arm, largely denied the chance of combat, provided, as Churchill experienced:

To the young man who wishes ... to spend a few years in a military companionship... the British cavalry will be well suited. [T]o the [aspiring] professional ... I would recommend ... some [Indian cavalry] regiment on the frontier.⁷

Dr Badsey scrutinises reform in the Cavalry before 1899 and their operations in South Africa, arguing that their performance there, regarded as dire, was not just due to the arm's inherent faults. Contemporaries felt that Roberts had erred by over-expanding MI and irregulars beyond the limits of the available horses and logistics, thus harming the cavalry.⁸ Staffwork in Roberts' HQ was sometimes indifferent, while Buller who understood that immobility meant frontal assaults: *'the very thing that ought not to be done,'* did not enhance mobility enough or use his mounted troops effectively.⁹ But even allowing for these defects, the risks inherent in widely dispersed combat in unknown terrain, much greater for cavalry than for infantry, and the difficulties of scouting in the smokeless ammunition era, the cavalry's performance in South Africa was poor. Here your reviewer parts company with Dr Badsey. He has stressed reform before 1899, but your reviewer doubts how far they were practically implemented. Churchill makes the point:

'Stables' will no longer be dull when [the young cavalry officer] realises that on the fitness of his horses, his life and honour may one day depend... But when he realises that all is empty display and that his regiment is a sword too costly to be drawn, he naturally loses keenness and betakes himself to polo.¹⁰

Another indication of change is training. Reading regimental journals before and after 1900, one is struck by the number of imaginative exercises held postwar and the lack of them beforehand. Rimington trained his brigade imaginatively, commenting after one reconnaissance exercise:

⁷ Churchill *Malakand*, pp 180-1.

⁸ Lt Col Haig *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa (RCWSA) Evidence II* (1903), Q 19375; Badsey *Fire* p 139.

⁹ *RCWSA Evidence II* Qs 15281-4; Poplar Grove saw poor synchronisation possibly due to failures by Roberts' HQ. Roberts Papers 7101-23-221-1 'telegrams Buller/WO 11/11/99& 16/12/99.'

¹⁰ Churchill *Malakand*, p 180.



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it is one step more in developing in the cavalry soldier the qualities of Individuality (sic), self-reliance and ability to “carry on” without supervision.

Contrastingly the 1897 Cavalry Concentration included 32 parades, one divisional, 14 brigade and 3 regimental drills, a march-past, 3 days of inspections, one horse and 5 church-parades but only one outpost practice and two reconnaissance days.¹¹ Afterwards Wolseley commented: '[cavalry] brigadiers lacked enterprise, while superiors gave them too little scope.' He and Roberts condemned cavalry reconnaissance in 1899. Despite the introduction of Squadron System in the early 1890s, the arm had not stressed initiative pre-1899 so was often inert in South Africa. Callwell saw initiative was vital to it: 'the infantryman and gunner may look to their officers; the trooper must look to himself.'¹² The arm's horsemastership was poor in South Africa, worse than the RA's, and prewar it had been indifferent to the Army Veterinary Department's ills. These suggest that the reforms of the 1890s were less effective than Dr Badsey argues. Nor were cavalry officers as professional as their other arm counterparts, at least measured by pscs.¹³

The core of the work, Chapters 4 and 5, examines reform after 1902, providing vital analysis of a key period in the Army's and the arm's development. Your reviewer feels that they could have made more of the growth of cavalry's importance in Army doctrine. The British ratio of infantry to cavalry divisions in the BEF in 1914 is striking. The author might also have probed the change in training emphasising reconnaissance and low-level initiative after 1902 and may have underestimated the significance of the strength of feeling shown in the shock versus fire debate.¹⁴ Out and out thrusters, those advocating balanced shock and fire tactics, the eventual winners, and those recommending MI fire-based tactics all saw mounted troops as critical; few in 1899 would have argued so. But these are carping points. It cannot have been easy to rewrite a thesis written decades before to produce a new work, but Dr Badsey has succeeded admirably. There are some typos. Anticipating John Lee's protest, Ian Hamilton was a substantive colonel in 1899 not a major and had made his reputation; at least in the Army, on the Frontier and in India, not with MI.¹⁵

¹¹ WO 27/503 '3 Cavalry Brigade ... Ulster Scheme,' p 5. IGC 'Recent Steps in Cavalry Training' *CJ* 1 (1906), pp 129, 128. for similar cavalry training, Capt Stewart *The History of the XII Royal Lancers* (1950), p 237 notes section training. [cops v robbers. *Black Horse Gazette* III (1897), p 5

¹² WO 279/3; WO 279/9 p 32; Buller was also critical, WO 297/4, Appendix II pp 25-6; *The Times* 28/8/99; eg Moller's performance at Talana and the Greys at Mazilikat's Nek. *The Tactics of To-day* (1900), p 103.

¹³ N Evans 'Sport and Hard Work...' forthcoming in *JSAHR*, Tables 1b, 2b, 3 and 4. There were fewer cavalry pscs and that in 1899 no ex-cavalryman held an important army post. Wood may be deemed an exception, but his last regimental service was in the Infantry. In 1899 no cavalry BM was psc and the senior staff officer of the Cavalry Division who was, was so excitable as to be unfit for combat. Education standards for officer entrants were significantly worse than the Infantry's. N Evans 'The British Army and Technology before 1914,' article submitted to the *JSAHR*, Table 5.

¹⁴ N Evans *From Drill to Doctrine* (University of London thesis 2008), Table 9. The British ratio expressed in continental cavalry divisions was 1:2, the French and Germans conservatively 1:6.

¹⁵ Dr Badsey stresses the strength of feeling but your reviewer feels that there are further deductions to be made; Badsey *Doctrine* p 156; *Quarterly Army List October 1899* p 172 records his promotion to colonel on 25/11/91. Hamilton had made his reputation as an infantry brigadier at Elandslaagte and Tirah, J Lee *A Soldier's Life* (2000), Chapter 3.



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Your reviewer differs in his interpretation of the state of reform of the Cavalry before 1899 from Dr Badsey. His thesis, starting in 1897, is looking back so may minimise reform beforehand; contrastingly Dr Badsey is working forwards thus change may seem more significant. But whatever the reason, be under no illusions the work is important for those interested in the British Army and for scholars of the 1st World War. Finally a blast at Dr Badsey's publishers; publicity for this work has been dire; it is too important for readers to have heard about on the grapevine.¹⁶

Nick Evans

¹⁶ Memo to Dr Badsey: the readers of *Mars and Clio* would have appreciated knowing that the work had appeared. The reviewer heard of its publication in a whispered aside from a furtive source in: 'a vile hotel, a long way east of Camberwell.' But that as Kipling says is another story!