



**Robin Prior *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*
(Yale UP 2009 – ISBN: 978 0 300 14995 1 Hardback)**

I have never written a bad-tempered review before, but this is a very bad-tempered book and evokes strong feelings. Robin Prior has every right to feel strongly about a campaign in which many men died for what he believes to have been a complete and utter waste of time and effort. I know that most of the people reading this review will probably agree with him, and any detailed study of the campaign will provide more lessons on how **not** to conduct combined operations overseas than anything else. But the men of 1915 were given a set of orders and they did their best to carry them out. Their political masters had the vaguest notions of what they were supposed to achieve ('mission creep' doesn't begin to explain it!) and not the slightest interest in ensuring that they had the wherewithal to do it properly. They were looking for a cheap victory at a time when British and allied resources were stretched to the limit. Robin makes several references to the limitations of the British army in 1915 (in terms of doctrine and modern experience). This is incontrovertible and should lead to some better understanding of the difficulties the soldiers faced once they had been put ashore. The army in 1915 regarded the Royal Navy very much as the 'senior service' and I am quite sure that, if the sailors said they could shoot the troops ashore, the army would have believed them.

Nowhere in this savagely critical study is there a single reference to the fact that this was the first attempt at an assault landing in the face of the modern weapons of war with which we are familiar in the whole of recorded history. These men, soldiers and sailors both, had no experience on which to base their plans. Their only guide was a Manual of Combined Naval and Military Operations published in 1913, which dealt entirely with making an unopposed landing on an enemy coast with a view to developing land operations once a base had been secured. We are so familiar with assault landings now, though everything that can go wrong will go wrong in this, the most hazardous operation of war, that it is hard to comprehend the mood in April 1915. Most observers were half expecting a disaster to happen. A careful reading of contemporary accounts shows more than anything a sense of sheer relief at getting ashore at all.

The exasperated accounts of the repetition of badly prepared and executed attacks, mainly on the Cape Helles Front, take no account of the series of telegrams from the War Office in London literally goading Sir Ian Hamilton to get on with the war and achieve some useful result. Hamilton was under strict orders not to ask for more troops from Lord Kitchener, and when reinforcements were sent out they were always below their normal strength in artillery (and some infantry divisions were sent out without a single gun to their name).

Robin has a problem with Sir Ian Hamilton! In an earlier book he thought he was 'dug out' of retirement in 1914 (instead of being the most senior general on the active list). In this book he is first mentioned as GOC Eastern Command (which he never was), before being recognised as commanding the Central Striking Force in the UK. He is described as "*a man who it can reliably be said knew little of...modern war*". The German Great General Staff published a potted biography of him in 1914 in which he was described as the single most experienced soldier alive anywhere in the world at that time – but what would they know?! He is also recognised as one of the very few British generals in 1914 who had ever



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commanded more than 20,000 men in the field. A hint that Hamilton, who was 61 in 1914, was just glad to get an active command and was too grateful to Kitchener to make any fuss is also wide of the mark. If the Gallipoli command had not come up, Hamilton was scheduled to take the next New Army (of six divisions) available for service on the Western Front.

Having convinced himself that Hamilton was incapable of fighting a modern war, Prior then suggests that when Hunter-Weston (who gets a relatively good press here compared to that which is usually meted out to him) devised some successful 'bite and hold' tactics that achieved some good results in the Cape Helles sector, Hamilton didn't understand them and chose instead to resume 'manoeuvre warfare' out of the Anzac bridgehead. How curious then that Hamilton wrote a letter in July 1915, based on the Gallipoli experience, pointing out precisely how the nature of war had changed and that to achieve success in trench warfare one had to seize a tactically important point and destroy the inevitable enemy counter-attacks. If that doesn't sound like Plumer in 1917 I don't know what does.

I am sorry to report that a heavy sarcasm is resorted to in several places, not just the lowest form of wit but the worst possible use of hindsight to make a sneering judgement on men coping with difficulties an historian writing ninety years later can never fully understand. The one attempt at a straight joke misfires because Hamilton's ship taking him east was not HMS *Foresight* (meant to contrast with a complete lack of ?) but it was HMS *Phaeton*. Sadly the book gets so bilious towards the end that even the astonishing success of the evacuation is written down to a 'myth'.

The book is good at forensically dissecting the political aspects of the campaign, both in its inception and preparation, and in the expectations of the effect it would have on the Balkans scene (though there is still a lot of hindsight employed). Abusing politicians who send men off to war without adequate resources is fair game. Abusing the servicemen trying to obey their political masters to the best of their ability should be done with a little more understanding.

John Lee

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