



Gary Sheffield *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army*, Aurum Press, London, 2011. xx and 460 pages, maps, illustrations, source notes, bibliography, £25.

The last few years have seen another wave of Douglas Haig studies – Scott Simpson’s *Douglas Haig: ‘The Preparatory Prologue’ 1861-1914* (2006), Gary Mead’s *The Good Soldier: The Biography of Douglas Haig* (2008), Walter Read’s *Architect of Victory: Douglas Haig* (2009), and Paul Harris’s *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (2009). Sir John Davidson’s now classic 1953 *Haig: Master of the Field* has recently been republished and there is, of course, the Bourne & Sheffield edition of Haig’s diaries. This reflects the continued fascination with and controversy over the man who commanded the largest British operational land force in history. On the other hand, some might ask whether there is room for yet another Haig book at this time.

BCMh members will know that Gary has been working on his study for some years and it would have been published much earlier if he had not been let down by his original publisher. This, however, may well have been to his advantage, since it has given him the opportunity to read and take into consideration the other recent Haig books. But he also justifies *The Chief* on the grounds that his studies of his subject have revealed ‘a more complex, and certainly more interesting, figure than I had anticipated.’ Likewise, several questions surrounding him still lack satisfactory answers and it is difficult to reconcile the popular view of him as a dunderhead, at least where the Western Front is concerned, with his victories during the Hundred Days.

The author sets out to place Haig squarely in his times and to judge him against the backdrop of these rather than from a 21st century viewpoint. Thus, he sees Haig as an archetypal Victorian imbued with the mores of the age. Much of this is down to the influence of his mother, who instilled in young Douglas his sense of duty and religious faith. Added to this was the Victorian concept of ‘heroic masculinity’, as encapsulated in the ‘soldier of Empire’. This reinforced his sense of duty, but also included self-control and the importance of maintaining physical fitness.

Having established his character, and what made it, Gary takes us through Haig’s early life, showing that once decided to become a soldier he treated his profession with the utmost seriousness, unlike many of his peers who regarded soldiering as a pastime. His first campaign in the Sudan taught him a number of lessons, not least the importance of logistics and the need to keep abreast of emerging technology. He also demonstrated coolness under fire and tactical acumen. Experience as an operational staff officer, both in Sudan and South Africa, and as a squadron and regimental commander made him a well rounded soldier.

It was, however, South Africa which caused to think deeply on the future of cavalry. To maintain traditional role of shock action on its own was simply not enough; the cavalryman also had to be able to fight effectively on his feet. But this did not mean turning him into a mounted infantryman, whose lack of sword or lance made him incapable of the very shock action that was still an essential part of the cavalryman’s make-up. In other words, Haig was looking for versatility, thus putting him among the progressives. Indeed, the adjustment of the horse soldier’s *modus operandi* to suit the conditions of modern warfare is one of the threads running through the book and Gary reflects the recent work done on British cavalry 1914-18 by Steve Badsey and others.



Haig's reforms did not concern just the Cavalry, however. Gary points to the work he did with Esher and Haldane in the post Boer War reforms. In particular, Gary points to his overseeing of the writing of *FSR II*, which for the first time provided the British Army with something approaching a common doctrine, and the establishment of the Territorial Force. He sees Haig's time at Aldershot Command as necessary preparation for the European war which seemed increasingly inevitable and convincingly debunks the popular belief that Haig failed to see the potential of the aircraft, as supposedly demonstrated by the 1912 Army Manoeuvres. Rather, Gary argues, these showed Haig placing too much emphasis on 'prototype technology', as he would again with the tank in 1916.

Naturally, most of the book concerns Haig's performance during 1914-18. Gary sees his performance during the opening weeks of mobile warfare on the Western Front as being frustrated by poor communications and the often 'dead hand' of French's headquarters. This, in part, induced a fear of envelopment of his corps by the Germans and it was this that brought about his seeming loss of self-confidence at Landrecies, together with the fact that he was suffering from a stomach upset. First Ypres became a matter of hanging on and Haig not so much commanded his corps as acting as a 'facilitator' to his subordinate commanders, juggling with what few reserves he had. Again, Gary dismisses Haig's supposed loss of nerve on 31 October, citing John Hussey's detailed study of the events of that day in the *British Army Review* No 107 of 1994.

Haig's experiences as an army commander during the fledging trench offensives in 1915 caused him to become convinced that they had been launched on too narrow a front and the object should be to attack on a frontage of at least 25 miles and to wear down the enemy, maintaining a large reserve with which to strike him when he was at his weakest. As for the handling of the reserves at Loos, Gary sees the fundamental problem as being that French and Haig had entirely different concepts on how the battle should be conducted and that matters were not helped by French's lethargy. It resulted, of course, in his downfall, but Gary dismisses the idea that Haig played the part of Brutus, pointing out that French had already fallen into disfavour with the King, Kitchener, and Robertson.

1916 and 1917 are the years in which Haig's performance is at its most questionable and Gary does not shirk criticism of his subject. In spite of Haig's earlier recognition of the vital importance of an efficient logistics system, he faults Haig's failure for a long time to bridge the class divide between the G and the logistics staffs. Yet, the fact that no operation stands much chance of success unless it can be supported logistically is one that the British Army has had to constantly relearn. Haig also put too much strain on the transport system during the Battle of the Somme, forcing it to near breaking point. In this case, he made amends by getting Sir Eric Geddes out to France to reorganise the system, enabling it to stand up to the intense pressures of 1918. Indeed, one of Haig's qualities was that he was prepared to import civilian expertise to ensure that his command operated with the maximum efficiency.

As for the conduct of the British offensives of 1916-17, Gary does criticise Haig for not exerting sufficient grip on Rawlinson in July 1916 and Gough in August 1917. On the other hand, he was a believer in allowing subordinate commanders at all levels to use their initiative and Gary sees this as a form of *Auftragstaktik*. Unfortunately the BEF of 1916 lacked the experience for this to be effective and there was no common tactical doctrine. This began to



be rectified in 1917, but it was not until Maxse was appointed BEF's Inspector of Training in 1918 that progress was really made. As for Third Ypres, Gary concludes that Haig really had no other viable option but to continue the battle into November in order to secure the Passchendaele Ridge, citing the German General von Kuhl in his defence.

Gary handles Haig and the politicians with skill, although he reveals little new. Indeed, it comes down to the fact that Lloyd George was unable to get rid of Haig because there was simply no one else of sufficient stature to replace him. Haig, too, was able to establish a rapport with the Allies, especially Foch, and it was partially thanks to this that the BEF was able to weather the storms of spring 1918 and achieve such success during the closing months of the war. As a strategist, he notes that in January 1918 Haig described Germany's position with remarkable accuracy, but faults him for his unwillingness to release resources to bolster other fronts, especially the Italian. Yet, as a theatre commander (as far as the British were concerned), it was understandable why Haig should resist a seeming weakening of his strength.

The German March 1918 offensive certainly put Haig under much the same strain that had suffered at Ypres in 1914. As for the Lys offensive, Gary sees the famous 'Backs to the Wall' exhortation as designed not just to stiffen his troops, but Haig himself. What is remarkable is that after these two serious blows to the BEF that Haig was prepared to send divisions to bolster the French and how quickly he was able to rebuild his command in time for the final victorious offensives. Now it was Haig against the politicians again, with himself, together with Foch, firmly believing that the war could be ended in 1918, while most were beginning to gear up to a final summer 1919 knock-out blow. Some historians have asserted that Haig suffered a loss of nerve in October 1918 and became unduly pessimistic. Gary, however, puts another spin on this, arguing that Haig feared that imposing overly harsh terms on Germany would merely stiffen resistance and result in ever more Allied casualties.

Finally, Gary moves on to Haig's postwar championing of those who had fought in the war, showing the enormous contribution he made and which may well have caused his death at a relatively young age. Especially significant was Haig's warning that the government's demobilisation policy would merely create trouble, which it did and had to be revised along the lines that he had proposed.

A review like this can only touch on just some of the issues that Gary addresses. What is clear is that he has put an enormous amount of research and thought into this study. The book is also extremely well written – to read it, as I did, poolside in Palm Springs with the temperature approaching 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade and still remain engrossed is, I feel, an acid test! Saul David's endorsement that *The Chief* is 'the fairest and most insightful life of Haig so far' is an accurate summary. Gary deserves very warm congratulation, but his book is unlikely to be the last word on Douglas Haig.

Charles Messenger