



William Philpott, *Bloody Victory, the Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century*; Little, Brown £25

As Bill Philpott's title and subtitle suggest, this is a very ambitious project whose aims are impressively realized. The significance of the battle, he argues, has been obscured by over-concentration on the '*minutiae of tactical analysis and the microcosm of trench experience*'. The campaigns of attrition at Verdun and on the Somme were unavoidable and the Allies adapted better to modern methods of industrial warfare than their opponent. Bill contends that the French Army took the major role from the outset and was initially much more efficient than the British, due mainly to its much greater experience in artillery-infantry co-operation. In his concern to impress readers with the superiority of the French contribution he perhaps understates the British achievement, particularly in the later stages of the battle. On a broad strategic view, far from being pointless, or a mutually ruinous stalemate, the Somme imposed physical losses and a slump in morale from which Germany could not recover. By the Spring of 1917 the German army had been fatally weakened to the extent that hopes of victory in the West had disappeared.

Given Bill's expertise on the French role in the campaign it is not surprising that his hero is Ferdinand Foch: '*perhaps the only First World War general who deserves recognition as one of the great captains of history*'. Fayolle and other French generals are also highly praised. By contrast, it is clear that Haig is not greatly admired. In mitigation it is allowed that he was not unduly pro-cavalry (either in making senior appointments or in placing excessive faith in that arm in battle). He was also justified in taking an ambitious view of possible strategic gains in territory. But on the debit side he overrode Rawlinson's initial plan for limited '*bite and hold*' advances and later allowed too many piecemeal attacks to be launched. Worst of all, both during and after the war he is accused of displaying pettiness and rancour in downplaying the roles of Joffre, Foch and the French contribution in general.

Bill succeeds splendidly in his ambitious attempt to put the campaign in a very broad military, political, literary and cultural context by demonstrating that its repercussions continue to influence us right up to the present. Churchill is his chief *bête noire* for his irresponsible criticisms during the battle and later for conveying them to a very large readership in *The World Crisis*. Lloyd George is also taken to task for attempting to blame Haig for the unavoidable wart of attrition in which he himself had played such a crucial, albeit reluctant, role. The successive links in the chain of misunderstanding and misrepresenting the campaign are traced through Liddell Hart and AJP Taylor to Joan Littlewood and 'Blackadder';

In a concluding 'Reflection' Bill quotes Sir Michael Howard to the effect that the Somme campaign, though a terrible and tragic event, '*must be understood in its context, and explained rather than condemned*'. Unfortunately, ever since 1916, the narrative of the battle has been determined by what went wrong rather than what went right: consequently '*revolutionary changes in warfare have been swamped by mud and blood.*' One can only hope, alas without too much confidence, that this admirable study will secure a change of mind on the part of serious students of history who are willing to accept that this crucial campaign on the road to victory has been consistently misrepresented and misunderstood.