Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig: An Appreciation

John Terraine

Introductory Note

Those of you who are unable to attend the Society's meetings do miss the interesting and stimulating talks given by eminent and informed people. We feel that where possible we should make these talks available to you all through the pages of the Journal *so that you can all share. I'm equally sure that those members who do attend will enjoy being able to re-live the actual occasions.*

So we are pleased to be able to print the text (adapted to the written style) of the talk given by John Terraine on Saturday 8th October 1988 at the Society's Devon Meeting. The book referred to in the text, Douglas Haig: the Educated Soldier *(1963) is the place where the author has treated Haig's life and career most fully, but it is at present out of print. He deals with aspects of Haig's Great War career in three other volumes which are currently available in paperback:* The Great War 1914–1918 *(Papermac),* The Road to Passchendaele *(Secker and Warburg), and* To Win a War *(Papermac).*

Henry's remark quoted at the beginning of the article was made in a radio broadcast in 1960, and members may like to be reminded that the whole interview is included in an audio-cassette tape entitled 'I Remember' which is published by the Society and is available from the Publications Manager.

John Terraine came to us not as a stranger where Henry Williamson was concerned: he wrote 'I knew Henry many years ago; we used the same pubs when he was in London: he liked my early books on the First World War, which pleased me very much. . . . I consider A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight *to be one of the great unsung works of modern English literature.'*

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Henry Williamson called himself 'a Haig man' — and that in itself is sufficient reason for talking about Haig tonight. There are, however, good enough reasons for talking about him at any time: firstly, because his name is more firmly identified with the British share of the First World War — especially the Western Front, *which was always the main front* — than any other; secondly, because that brief monosyllabic name remains — as it has for seven decades — an acid test of approaches and attitudes towards the war; and thirdly (and largely for that reason) because more controversy surrounds Haig than any other British general in our history.

The controversy was not long in coming — it began in the 1920s — and what distinguished it from the very first was the venom with which it was conducted, which continues to this day. This found its most vitriolic expression in the *War Memoirs* of Lloyd George, speaking with all the authority of the war-time Prime Minister. His index entry on Haig runs to about two and a half full pages, and reads like the headings of a ruinous indictment:

> *misrepresents French attitude to (Passchendaele) offensive; misleads Cabinet about Italian Front; misrepresents attitude of generals to Passchendaele; prefers to gamble with men's lives than to admit an error; completely ignorant of state of ground, etc., etc.*

In the *Memoirs* themselves Lloyd George summed it up: 'I never met any man in a high position who seemed to me so utterly devoid of imagination.' More colloquially, as quoted by his son, the second Earl Lloyd George, Haig was 'brilliant to the top of his army boots, father said.'

Lloyd George wrote with great scorn and passion, and what he said seemed to acquire 'expert' military corroboration from the writings of Captain (later Sir Basil) Liddell Hart and others. It was, in fact, in Liddell Hart's files, which I was able to see when I was preparing my book *Douglas Haig, the Educated Soldier* that I found the sharpest anti-Haig statement that I have ever encountered. In May 1936, L.H. wrote down the following on a piece of paper and filed it away (presumably for future reference):

> *If one wished to make a case against Haig,* ***rather than a balanced estimate of his qualities and defects*** (my italics), *it would be easy, from the diaries and letters in conjunction with the historical records, to show that he was a man of supreme egoism and utter lack of scruple — who, to his over-weening ambition sacrificed hundreds of thousands of men. A man who betrayed even his most devoted assistants as well as the Government which he served. A man who gained his ends by trickery of a kind that was not merely immoral but criminal.*

As Liddell Hart himself said, this was a 'case against', rather than a balanced judgement. It nevertheless seems to have been composed in a state of rare excitement — an excitement which has communicated itself to other writers down the years.

I have tried, in another book, *The Western Front*, to summarise the various anti-Haig arguments, as follows:

> *Insensitive, unreceptive, obstinate and above all unimaginative — how could such a man be expected to do anything but blunder from slaughter to slaughter? critics would ask. If, of course, it should prove to be the case that he was not any of these things, then one might have to take another look at the slaughter, and many fine theories might go astray; if it should prove to be the case that no general in any country at that time was able to avoid similar slaughter under those conditions, while the best achievements of any of them are fully matched by Haig's, then one might find oneself drawn to the more sober conclusion of Sir Winston Churchill, that: 'He might be — surely he was — unequal to the prodigious scale of events; but no-one else was discerned as his equal or his better.' And this I firmly believe to be the truth.*

So we arrive at the question, how did such violent emotions arise and persist about this particular British commander if no contemporary appeared — as Churchill said — as his equal or his better?

I would suggest that the answer depends on where you start from, and perhaps it is best to start by establishing what category of general we are talking about in Haig's case. There are, I think, three basic categories:

a. the generals who, for various reasons (a long peace, a secondary command) emerge from a long career with no particular distinction and fade away into oblivion;
b. those who, deservedly or otherwise, are associated for evermore with humiliating disasters and surrenders;
c. generals who win great victories in major wars.

In an article on British generals in the *British Army Review* in April 1981 I recalled Field Marshal Lord Slim's dictum that 'the general has no other duty comparable to that of obtaining victory' and, having posed as the next question 'what kind of victory', went on to say:

> *The toughest assignment in modern British military history (i.e., since the creation of our first real Regular Army, the New Model) has been high command in war against the main body of a main continental enemy. Three British officers have undertaken such a task and*

brought it to a successful conclusion: the Duke of Marlborough, the Duke of Wellington and Field Marshal Lord Haig.

So that is our category: that is where Haig belongs.

A little potted biography will be in order here. Haig was born in 1861. He was at Clifton College from 1875 to 1879, where, we are told, he 'did not distinguish himself at work or at athletics'. He went to Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1880, and passed all the requisite BA examinations, but lacked the residential qualification to take the degree. In 1882 and 1883 he played polo for Oxford against Cambridge. He went to Sandhurst in 1884 and passed out first in order of merit, with the Anson Memorial sword, Sandhurst's highest honour. He was commissioned into the 7th Hussars in 1885 (aged 24 — rather old for a new subaltern). In 1886 he played polo for England against Australia (England won 10–4 and 14–2). He became adjutant of the regiment in 1888, which shows that he took his profession seriously from the first. He went to the Staff College in 1896–97.

At that point he was 36 years old and still a captain: to quote again from *Douglas Haig*: 'it could hardly be said, as he emerged from the Staff College, that Fortune had recklessly lavished her attention on Douglas Haig.' Yet only six years later, in 1904, he was a Major General, a dramatic change indeed in the tempo of advancement. To the question 'What had caused it?' the answer is very simple — active service, the true test of the soldier. He had seen active service in the Sudan campaign in 1898, and in the South African War, 1899–1902. He subsequent career took the course: Colonel, 17th Lancers, 1902; Inspector General of Cavalry in India, 1903; Assistant to Mr Haldane at the War Office, 1906; Chief of Staff in India, 1909; Commander, Aldershot Army Corps, 1912; Commander, I Corps, BEF, August 1914; Commander, First Army, December 26, 1914; Commander in Chief, December 19, 1915.

He came home in April 1919 and commanded the Home Forces until the post of Home Forces Commander was abolished in 1920. Thereafter he held no further active command or official post, but in 1921 he became the Founder of the British Legion, and spent the remainder of his life in the service of the Legion. He died in 1928.

As I said earlier, the argument about Haig is very much a matter of where one starts. Indeed, the whole case against Haig could be boiled down to two words: Somme and Passchendaele, the costliest battles fought under his command, or by the British Army at any time. The battle of the Somme in 1916 cost the British Army 420,000 casualties in 4½ months — 57,000 on the first day alone; the worst single-day disaster in British military history until 85,000 British troops went into murderous captivity on February 15th, 1941 in Singapore. But the Somme was the costliest *battle* in our history. At Passchendaele (Third Ypres, 1917), the BEF sustained nearly a quarter of a million casualties in three and a half months. This was a lot less bad, but the unspeakable conditions of the battle ruled out any gratification. In each case there were huge losses, great suffering, small apparent results, and profound disappointment. And that is the usual starting point for talking about Haig. I propose to take a different one.

I propose to go backwards: to begin at Armistice Day, November 11th 1918, the day the war ended. What was the position of Haig's army on that day?

It amounted to nearly two million men of the British Empire — the largest land force in the Empire's history. They had just reached the end of a 'Hundred Days Campaign' as glorious and decisive as that of 1815 which concluded with the battle of Waterloo — but infinitely less known. It was, in fact, an unparalleled achievement in the history of the British Army, as shown by the following stark statistics: between 8th August and 11th November the British took 188,700 prisoners and 2,840 guns; all other allies together took 196,700 prisoners and 3,775 guns. The British therefore took just under 50% of the

prisoners and just over 40% of the guns captured in that period, and this was done in *nine successive victories* which were largely instrumental in bringing the war to an end in 1918 — a consummation that Haig was determined to bring about. These victories should be as famous as those of Blenheim and Waterloo. Instead, they are forgotten and unknown, so I will list them now:

The Battle of Amiens, August 8th 1918 ('the black day in the history of the German Army').
The Battle of Albert, August 21st (the day on which Haig told Churchill 'we ought to do our utmost to get a decision this autumn').
The Battle of the Scarpe, August 26th.
The Battles of Havrincourt and Epéhy, September 12th (the approaches to the Hindenburg Line).
The breaking of the Hindenburg Line, September 27th–October 5th (35,000 prisoners and 380 guns taken, the British Army's greatest feat of arms in all its history).
The Battle of Flanders, September 28th.
The Battle of Le Cateau, October 6th.
The Battle of the Selle, October 17th.
The Battle of the Sambre, November 1st–11th.

These were Haig's victories, handsomely acknowledged by Marshal Foch:

> *Never at any time in history has the British Army achieved greater results in attack that in this unbroken offensive . . . The victory was indeed complete, thanks to the Commanders of Armies, Corps and Divisions,* ***thanks above all to the*** *unselfishness, to the wise, loyal and energetic policy of their Commander-in-Chief, who made easy a great combination and sanctioned a prolonged and gigantic effort.*

Haig's own comment was characteristic: 'It would be impossible to devise a more eloquent testimony to the unequalled spirit of the British soldier, of all ranks and Services.' I would suggest that this is the *only* proper starting point for a true estimation of Haig.

The cost of defeating the German Army has never been light. The cost of 1918, the Year of Victory (whose 70th anniversary has so far passed virtually unnoticed), was 853,361 officers and men of the British Expeditionary Force, of whom 111,475 (13.06%) were killed. Some 350,000 of these casualties (of whom about 46,000 were killed) were incurred during the 'Hundred Days of Victory'. There was great public rejoicing at the ensuing Armistice which brought the war to an end, but this covered deep private grief, and there can be little doubt that the sense of victory was to some extent blurred by the sense of cost. The sense of cost came, in later years, to overshadow the whole concept of the war, and this is not, after all, too surprising (though I think it has been grossly overdone). The 1914–1918 war was an unprecedented experience for Britain, a fact which, in a relatively short talk such as this, can really only be expressed statistically. (It is certainly the misuse of statistics, mainly by arbitrary selection, that has been the factor most damaging to Haig.)

The 'Great War', as we continue to call it, cost the military forces of the British Empire just over a million dead, and the United Kingdome between 750–800,000; that is, 1.7% of the total population and 13.6% of enlistments. Compare this with earlier conflicts: Britain's most recent previous experience of war had been South Africa, which had cost her just under 22,000 dead in three years, of whom only 5,774 had fallen on the battlefield. The Crimean War, 60 years in the past, had also cost 22,000 dead from all causes,

in one year. The last 'Great War' — against the French Revolution and Napoleon — had lasted just over 20 years and had cost 20,284 sailors dead in battle and 25,569 soldiers, or less than 50,000 all told dead *in battle* — but in those very different times we have to add also 266,000 dead by disease. All these figures reflect the British tradition of making war on the principle of limited liability. Haig's war was not like that, and he had known for many years that it would not be.

We need to go back now to 1906, when Mr Haldane, the new Secretary of State for War, summoned Haig to the War Office to take part in the most effective Army reform in our history. Haldane tells us:

> *After surveying the whole Army, I took it upon myself to ask Lord Haig, who was then in India, to come over to this country and to think for us. From all I could discover even then, he seemed to be the most highly-equipped thinker in the British Army.*

Haig thought to some purpose. He had no doubt, in 1906, that the antagonism between Britain and Germany was coming to a head, and no doubt either that the purpose of Army reform should be to prepare it for Continental war. He equally had no doubts about what sort of an army would be needed for that: in October 1906 he wrote to Haldane's private secretary, Sir Gerald Ellison, saying: 'Our object in my opinion should be to start a system of finance suited to the 'supposed situation', i.e. a great war requiring the whole resources of the nation to bring it to a successful conclusion.' These were prophetic words, whose meaning began to become apparent ten years later.

'The whole resources of the nation' — in other words, Haig saw what very few others saw, or would admit; that 'limited liability' was defunct. The liability, henceforth, would be unlimited. He underlined the point later in the same letter to Ellison: 'The Swiss system seems to me to be exactly what is wanted 'to root the Army in the people'. . .'' And a month later, according to Lord Esher, Haig was saying he wanted 'to be able . . . at the end of twelve months to place an army of 900,000 men in the field, and keep it there for five years.'' It is not possible to over-state the visionary — indeed, the revolutionary — quality of ideas like these at that time. A war 'requiring the whole resources of the nation' — unheard of! A system 'to root the Army in the people' — unknown since the Middle Ages! '900,000 men in the field' — unthinkable!! And 'for five years' — inconceivable!!

And this was the man Lloyd George said was devoid of imagination. Lloyd George, be it noted, was at that time pronouncing that Germany was a friendly nation, much to be admired.

Be that as it may, these were the ideas that caused Haig to argue for a Territorial Army of 28 divisions, complete and self-contained in all respects. Haldane supported him, but finance dictated by the T.A. would be limited to 14 divisions. Nevertheless, it was the beginning of the Citizen Army, of preparedness for the demands of modern, total, war. No one had an earlier, or better, understanding of the Citizen Army than Haig; this was his first profound perception of the coming war. And having thus foretold a continental war with a continental army, and identified the continental enemy, Haig had little difficulty in grasping and pondering the next fundamental — he perceived that Britain would be entering, once more, a coalition war, and that her army would be fighting on French soil beside a French Army which would be greatly superior in numbers. In other words, Britain would be the junior partner in the land war, which meant she would have no option but to concede the last word on strategy to the French High Command. This control remained in French hands throughout the war, which was something that many important people could not then, nor ever afterwards, understand or accept.

Few contrasts, I think, are more revealing that that between Lloyd George's pathetic

comment to his friend Winston Churchill in January 1915, when he asked, 'Are we really bound to hand over the ordering of our troops to France as if we were her vassal?' compared with what Haig said to his French Liaison Officer about a year later, just after he had become Commander-in-Chief; he wrote in his diary: 'I pointed out that I am *not under* General Joffre's orders, but that would make no difference, as my intention was to do my utmost to *carry out General Joffre's wishes on strategical matters as if they were orders.*' It was a remarkable statement, revealing beyond all shadow of doubt Haig's understanding of the disciplines of coalition war. It stemmed from the realization that the great army which he now commanded — nearly a million strong — was still occupying only about 40 miles of front, while the French held 400 miles, and that French casualties had been enormous, amounting to just under two million, while British casualties (including the high losses in Gallipoli) were just over half a million, and that such comparisons are very bad for coalitions — there is no treaty which says that one ally shall do all the dying — and that keeping France in the war was a main objective of the Alliance. This was a very fundamental perception indeed, and a permanent one; it reached its full value in March 1918 when, at a moment of fearful crisis, Marshal Foch became Allied Generalissimo at Haig's instigation. At the very outbreak of war, in August 1914, he had said: 'Great Britain and Germany will be fighting for their existence. Therefore the war is bound to be a long war . . . we must organise our resources for a war of several years.' And in 1915, in March, he expressed with equal clarity the great strategic simplicity: 'We cannot hope to win until we have defeated the German Army.'

This meant, of course, the main body of the German Army, which, since Germany held the initiative, would be deployed where the Germans decreed — that is, on the Western Front, whatever the circumstances. There, sooner or later, it would have to be met and beaten. This was what the French had been trying to do, at enormous cost, in 1914 and 1915. In 1916 it became something the British were going to have to attempt, *whatever the cost*. Haig understood that. He was one of the very few who did, either then or at any other time. He went to war, then, better equipped than any other British officer (with the exception of Lord Kitchener, Sir William Robertson and a handful of others) to understand the strategic constraints which would govern the war.

War, however, and modern war especially, does not consist only of strategy.

The First World War was from the beginning the greatest war of technical innovation ever fought — the introduction of the new elements of Air and Submarine warfare would alone display that fact. But they were not alone. The internal combustion engine also powered mechanical transport, motor-cycles, armoured cars and, above all, tanks. Electronics transformed communication: vast networks of field telephones became the first tool of command: Wireless Telegraphy and later Radio Telephony appeared and underwent constant development, with jamming, scramblers, and radio interception all coming into use. This was, above all, an artillery war; gunnery reached new degrees of sophistication (and involved enormous numbers of guns), with complex techniques of aerial observation of fall of shot, sound ranging, flash-spotting and calibration, requiring the use of unheard-of insruments like microphones, galvanometers and oscillographs. Gas, flame-throwers, deep mining and smoke all found their place in the battle plans. To all of this Haig lent an attentive and receptive eye and ear, as his diaries show.

Under his command the I Corps and the First Army were innovators (in the BEF) of many important techniques: aerial photography, trench mortars, artillery timetables, light railways, battle rehearsals, and many more besides. His attitude towards tanks is most revealing of all. Without even having seen them, he detected in them the possibility of 'decisive results', and after their debut — which many thought equivocal to say the least — he sent his Deputy Chief of Staff to London to demand 1,000 tanks without delay. It

need hardly be said that he did not get them! He summed up his attitude towards the technicalities of war after a meeting between Ministers and Generals to discuss new weapons at the end of 1915, when he said: 'I thought the meeting was good for the generals as well as for the Government. Generals after a certain time of life, especially French, are apt to be narrow-minded and disinclined to take advantage of modern scientific discoveries. The civilian Minister can do good by pressing the possibility of some modern discovery.'

The war of technology was also a war of organisation. It was called — without affection — a Staff Officer's war; and so it was, because armies of millions requires an enormous apparatus of administration. As early as 1916 the BEF contained a 'population' larger than any single unit of government in England except London. Haig's attitude to this feature was equally broad-minded:

> *With the whole nation at war, our object should be to employ men on the same work in war as they are accustomed to do in peace. Acting on this principle I have got Geddes at the head of all the railways and transportation, with the best practical civil and military engineers under him. At the head of the Road Directorate is Mr Maybury, head of the Road Board in England. The docks, canals and inland water transport are being managed in the same way, i.e. by men of practical experience. To put soldiers who have no practical experience of these matters into such positions, merely because they are generals and colonels, must result in utter confusion.*

Haig was, in fact, a modern general, fighting Britain's first modern war.

Modern wars are costly wars; they consume lives by the million, on and off the battlefield, and it was the shock of this consumption of soldiers' lives that prompted the unthinking execration of Haig — as though one man could halt an industrial revolution! What, then, was Haig's own view of the great battles of attrition in 1916 and 1917 with which his name is so fatally connected? He certainly had no illusions about their nature. In his Despatch of 21st December 1918, *The Advance to Victory*, he says:

> *The strain of those years was never ceasing, the demands they made upon the best of the Empire's manhood are now known. Yet throughout all those years, and amid the hopes and disappointments they brought with them, the confidence of our troops in final victory never wavered. Their courage and resolution rose superior to every test, their cheerfulness never failing, however terrible the conditions in which they lived and fought. By the long road they trod with so much faith and with such devoted and self-sacrificing bravery we have arrived at victory . . .*

That passage should leave no doubt about his feelings on a human level: in his Final Despatch of March, 1919, he reveals something of his strategic thought:

> *Neither the course of the war itself nor the military lessons to be drawn therefrom can properly be comprehended, unless the long succession of battles commenced on the Somme in 1916 and ended in November of last year on the Sambre are viewed as forming part of one great and continuous engagement . . . If the operations of the past 4½ years are regarded as a single continuous campaign, there can be recognised in them the same general features and the same necessary stages which, between forces of approximately equal strength, have marked all the conclusive battles of history.*

Haig had taught his theory of the necessary stages of war in India in 1909, and he never departed from it. They were: the manoeuvre for position; the first clash of battle; the wearing-out fight; the decisive blow.

It is, of course, the third stage — what he called the 'wearing-out fight' (in other words the three years of attrition during which four-fifths of Britain's casualties were incurred) — which has commanded so much unfavourable notice for so long. Haig's own view of it is quite clear. To quote again:

> *In the stage of the wearing-out struggle losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are approximately equal in numbers, in courage, in morale and in equipment, there is no way of avoiding payment of the price, or of eliminating this phase of the struggle. In former battles this stage of the conflict has rarely lasted more than a few days, and has often been completed in a few hours. When armies of millions are engaged, with the resources of great empires behind them, it will inevitably be long. It will include violent crises of fighting which, when viewed separately and apart from the general perspective, will appear individually as great indecisive battles. To this stage belong the great engagements of 1916 and 1917 which wore down the strength of the German Armies.*

So Haig made no attempt to avoid responsibility for the war of attrition; he never tried to claim credit for victory and blame something or someone else for the hard part — e.g. subordinates, Allies, the Government, the troops, bad luck, etc. Instead, he insisted:

> *If the whole operations of the present war are regarded in correct perspective, the victories of the summer and autumn of 1918 will be seen to be directly dependent upon the two years of stubborn fighting that preceded them.*

This, it seems to me, is the wisest statement written about the Great War. A great pity that it was totally disregarded during the peace, so that everything had to be painfully learned again the second time.

So, to sum up, what can we say is Haig's place in our military history? At the beginning of this paper I put him very firmly in the topmost bracket — the category of Marlborough and Wellington — as commanding against the main body of the main enemy in a continental war. There are, of course, important differences: Marlborough and Wellington were both Coalition Commanders-in-Chief (Marlborough for many years, Wellington in 1815 for a Hundred Days), and that is a position of very special responsibility. Haig was not a Coalition C-in-C, though he did have French Armies under his command on two occasions, and he also had American and Portuguese troops under him, besides the varied forces of the then British Empire. But it was, of course, in the scale of Haig's war that the chief difference lies. Furthermore, in the armies commanded with such distinction by Marlborough and Wellington, the actual British force was always a contingent rarely rising to as much as 30% of the whole.

Haig's armies did actually *themselves* engage the enemy's main body. In 1916 the BEF fought 95½ identified German divisions — 43½ twice and 4 three times, which makes a divisional total of 143. In 1917, in the battles of Arras, Messines, Lens and Third Ypres, the BEF engaged 131 identified divisions. When the Germans attacked the British front in March – April 1918 they used 109 divisions — 50 on the first day alone. In Haig's Final Offensive, the BEF encountered 99 German divisions — some twice, some three times, and some even four times. This was 'the main body' indeed; never at any time, in any war, has a British Army performed such feats as these.

Sir Winston Churchill, in a memorable phrase, described the year 1940 as 'the finest hour' of the British people. Objective assessment must equally describe 1918 as 'the finest hour' of the British Army, and to no one is that fact more due than to its admirable Commander-in-Chief.