



2015-103

Peter Hart, *Fire and Movement: The British Expeditionary Force and the Campaign of 1914*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 480. ISBN 978-0-19-998927-0.

Review by James Campbell, The University of Maine (james_campbell@umit.maine.edu).

In his latest volume on the First World War, Peter Hart has skillfully used the massive resources of the Imperial War Museum¹ to enlarge our understanding of the people and actions of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) during the Mons, Marne, Aisne, and Ypres battles of 1914. His stated intent is to pierce the veil of “self-congratulatory myth” (x) surrounding the BEF’s contributions to the epic opening battles of the war and put into perspective the fact that it comprised only 120,000 men among millions of French and German soldiers and was far less significant to the outcome of the battles than the standard works on the subject make it seem. Nor was the BEF so well prepared for war as the “fairy-tale version of 1914” (x) would have it.

The British Regulars were skillful soldiers, courageous and adaptable in the near-impossible circumstances they found themselves [sic]. But they and their commanders lacked practice in many of the disciplines of modern warfare. We learn the truth about the German Army they faced, not the caricature of hordes of automatons, but the reality of a well-trained and superlatively equipped force that outfought the BEF in the early battles. (xi)

The French Army gets its proper due in this account, which dispels the popular impression that the BEF “saved” the French, when the truth was often just the opposite. The author rightly credits the French Commander, Gen. Joseph Joffre, with the leadership and vision that made victory at the Marne possible; he also praises Gen. Ferdinand Foch and his French divisions for their decisive role in preventing an ultimate German breakthrough at Ypres. Hart’s corrective analysis highlights the true story of the BEF in 1914, which needs no embellishment. He describes the extraordinary professionalism and bravery of that small force, ill-prepared for the ordeal ahead. Its achievements are all the more remarkable in light of the power and prowess of its adversaries and the checkered performance of some of its leaders. Hart is particularly critical of the decisions of General Headquarters, especially the triumvirate of Field Marshal Sir John French, Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Wilson, and Lt. Gen. Sir Archibald Murray. By contrast, he singles out Field Marshal Douglas Haig and Maj. Gen. Sir Philip Rynd Robertson as examples of superior leadership.

Hart builds his narrative on extensive quotations of the leaders and soldiers of the BEF themselves, with some (disappointingly) small additions from German and French sources. Readers familiar with Lyn MacDonald’s classic books on the First World War² will recognize some familiar individuals here, but Hart adds many new voices. This format makes for gripping and vivid accounts of the European combat experience of professional “Old Contemptibles” like Sgt. John McIlwain of the Connaught Rangers:

Great bursts of fire and screams of delight brought us to the firestep—to a sight every infantry soldier dreams about. The Germans were lumbering over towards us just 50 yards away, in any order, bunching together. We poured rapid fire into them. Nine out of every ten were hit. The dead piled up in heaps. In the heat and noise of the conflict, and while my rifle was roasting hot, I became aware of Mick Keating roaring in my ear, “For the love of Jesus, Sergeant, give me your rifle for my own is blocked entirely!” He had been firing like hell, killing Germans for England. “God blast and damn you!” He yelled at the rifle, battering at the breech with his bare hand as if it was something alive! I took the rifle off him and gave him my own. I found his was choked with dirt and wasted precious minutes clearing it. (332)

1. Where he is Oral Historian.

2. 1914: *The Days of Hope* (NY: Atheneum, 1988); 1915: *The Death of Innocence* (NY: Holt, 1994); *Somme* (1983; rpt. NY: Viking, 2013); *They Called It Passchendaele: The Story of the Third Battle of Ypres and the Men Who Fought* (London: Joseph, 1978); *To The Last Man: Spring, 1918* (NY: Basic Books, 1999); *1914-1918 Voices and Images of the Great War* (1988; rpt. NY: Penguin, 2005).

The book's fifteen chapters (and an epilogue) follow a chronological format, each covering a major battle of 1914. The introduction and first chapter, "Ready for War?" assess the BEF's and Britain's preparedness for twentieth-century warfare; Hart also reviews the state of British military leadership at the time, as well as the reforms of tactics, equipment, and organization undertaken by the Army following the Boer War and the signing of the Entente Cordiale in 1904. He discusses, too, the tension between the traditional British strategic focus on naval strength and the anticipated use of the Army side by side with the French in Britain's first major contribution to a continental war in nearly a century (7–12). Hart, like other recent authors,³ points out that Britain was constrained in developing a unitary doctrine for employment of the Army because of the vast range of circumstances it might face across the Empire (17). This lack of overarching doctrine made it difficult for BEF commanders and staffs to communicate operational directives in the confusion, stress, and fatigue of combat in the opening weeks of the campaign. And, too, with the exception of Haig's staff at First Corps, none of the higher-level staffs in the BEF had trained together prior to being thrust into the fight. Gen. Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, for instance, was appointed to command of Second Corps just days before it entered combat at Mons (65).

The strongest chapter of the volume covers the Aisne battle on the Chemin des Dames in early fall 1914. Hart provides powerful first-person accounts and excellent descriptive analyses of the operational decisions that drove the fighting. A particular strength is his treatment of the BEF's evolving grasp of the value of artillery forward observation, communications between trench lines, gun positions, and staff work.

One weakness here and, indeed, throughout the book, is the placement of the maps at the front of the book. The extremely small-print labeling is frustrating, as are the disturbingly frequent typographical errors infecting even unit designations and names of principal characters. Still, these faults do not detract much from the book's readability.

Hart sometimes overstates his main thesis about British unpreparedness and the myth of the BEF's superiority over the German Army. Though his points about the German Army's superb staff training, tactical doctrine, and effective combined arms coordination are certainly well founded, the German accounts quoted in the book show that they, too, were unprepared for the conditions confronting them in the opening battles of the war. The almost unimaginable casualties sustained by both the French and German Armies in 1914 have led many historians⁴ to conclude that no army in Europe could have been adequately prepared for twentieth-century combat on such a scale. The BEF's readiness in 1914 was relatively good given the circumstances.

Hart's striking combat narratives attest that the BEF did establish some level of moral ascendancy over the Germans from the earliest engagements, which made German units and commanders hesitate to vigorously follow up their successes in their pursuits from Mons and Le Cateau. British commanders were well aware that, too often, just one more enemy assault would have broken them (326). Hart quotes German soldiers' accounts of their visceral fear in the face of withering British rifle fire at Ypres, regardless of the clear superiority of their own artillery preparation. And the historically typical tenacity of British units willing to fight almost to the last man at the Aisne and at Ypres really did make the difference between holding the line and a German victory.

Peter Hart's *Fire and Movement* is a fine addition to the literature on the Edwardian British Army. It should be read carefully by every serious student not only of the British Army, but of the Great War.

3. E.g., Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902–1914* (Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 2012).

4. E.g., Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (NY: Knopf, 2013).