

The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army

By Gary Sheffield

Reviewed by Ian Shields, U K Defence Forum

Think of the First World War and what images come to mind? Inevitably it is the Western Front, trench warfare, mud, mass casualties and perhaps even hopelessness. We have been conditioned to think such way largely by the perceived culture and popular media: lacking experience we have been informed by reading Owen and Sassoon at school, by watching Sherriff's *Journey's End* and *Oh What A Lovely War*, by the imager of "Lions Led by Donkeys" (cf Clarke) and by Fry's portrayal of a General (Haig?) in *Blackadder Goes Forth*. Yet there is an alternative view, and the late John Terraine started an alternative school of thought about the First World War in general and the Western Front in particular.

The standard bearer of that school is Professor Gary Sheffield from the University of Birmingham with his outstanding *Forgotten Victory*, excellent co-editorship of Haig's diaries and now what many are already hailing as the definitive (although Professor Sheffield himself, anticipating this accolade, specifically dismisses the notion in his book) biography of Haig. Whether it will be regarded, at least until replaced by another, as definitive I will the reader to decide, but what I can state is that this is a truly significant contribution to our understanding of the First World War and of Haig's role.

What Professor Sheffield has produced is a highly readable work that is immaculately researched, drawing extensively on original papers, diaries and official documents. He tackles head-on many of the myths surrounding Haig, in particular that he was unfeeling, unimaginative and opposed to new technology: three myths that Professor Sheffield disproves through evidence and logic.

He takes many of the more famous "quotations" attributed to Haig (such as the role of Cavalry) and proves that he was either blatantly mis-quoted (often by those who had a grudge against Haig) or were taken totally out of context. In terms of technology, where Sheffield criticises Haig is putting too much faith in unproven new systems (such as gas and the very early tank) and he highlights Haig's friendship with Trenchard and the latter's life-long admiration of the General.

Looking at the book itself, Professor Sheffield runs through Haig's early life and Army career fairly quickly, but stresses that Haig was a product of his time and reminds us repeatedly of Haig's late-Victorian upbringing. His successes in South Africa and attendance at Staff College are covered equally briefly before the author turns his attention in the bulk of the book to Haig's appointments and achievements in France. Each battle – its genesis, the key commanders and the political background (both in terms of Anglo-French co-operation and relations with London)

are examined, and the command decisions, set against the backdrop of the technology of the day, examined.

Interestingly, Professor Sheffield chooses to use much of the language of contemporary doctrine when examining Haig's performance, which further enhances the readability of this biography. In the penultimate chapter he reviews Haig's role in the aftermath of the War, emphasising the great good that Haig did in setting up welfare support for ex-soldiers, particularly the maimed (it is only fairly recently that the words "Haig Fund" have been dropped from the poppies we all buy and wear for Remembrance Day). He also examines, perhaps a little too briefly, Haig's potential (but avoided) role in post-War politics and makes passing (but not developed) reference to Haig's relationship with Mussolini.

A friend of mine, an artist, told me that portraits tell you more about the painter than the subject. Professor Sheffield clearly has a considerable knowledge of Haig and a marked insight into his subject. Equally, he is keen to set the record straight and show Haig in a more balanced light. To a very, very large extent he succeeds: praising where praise is due and criticising where criticism is due.

I doubt that any author can completely disassociate himself from his subject, especially when he has spent as much time working with the source material, but Professor Sheffield has done an excellent job in showing Haig for what he was: the leader of the British troops through a prolonged and painful war and learning experience, and the leader of the great (and, to quote again another of the Professor's works, forgotten) victory. Those who wish to learn more about the Western Front and who are capable of keeping an open mind should read this book for it goes a very long way to setting the record straight.

The critics have rightly given this book considerable praise and I equally commend it.