

Haig's Command: A Reassessment. DENIS WINTER. London: Penguin Books, 1991. Illustrations, maps, biographical sketches, appendixes, references, and index. 362 p. ISBN 0-14-007144-X (soft cover).

Denis Winter, a schoolmaster turned preeminent historian, spent ten years researching and writing *Haig's Command*, a devastating reappraisal of Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force during World War I. At the core of Winter's story are shocking revelations of falsification, unscrupulous use, and even destruction of the archival record. His analysis of the "history of the record" is in fact as fascinating as his history of the wartime contribution of Britain's most controversial field marshall.

The opening of World War I archival records in Britain in the 1960s generated many new books on the "war to end all wars." With most of the major figures by then dead, significant reevaluations and reinterpretations were advanced. Attempts at that time to come to grips with the horrific and senseless suffering of trench warfare included a series of examinations into the career of Sir Douglas Haig. Generally, there emerged two schools of thought. The first follows the famous observation by Erich von Ludendorff, Second-in-Command of the German Forces during the last two years of the war, that British soldiers were "lions led by donkeys." The second school, as espoused by one of the most respected British military historians, John Terraine, believes that Haig was dealt a bad hand—poorly trained troops and insufficient resources—and that he did the best he could with what he had; according to Terraine, Haig was a well-educated, hard-bitten soldier whose controversial policy of manpower attrition was the only one with which the British could hope to win, and, although costly, it succeeded.

Of these two schools, Winter certainly sides with the donkey critics. Indeed, his book is an attempt not only to strip away the defences around Haig's strategies, but also in the process to shatter previously held beliefs about Haig's abilities. Winter's evidence starkly illustrates Haig's mule-like mentality, his obsession with launching strategic offensives at the wrong place, and, in the process, his overall incompetence. Winter's indictment has pushed the debate of Haig's historiography so far in the "donkey" direction that it may never again return to the centre.

Because of inaccuracies in the British official history of the war, Winter had to turn to the Australian and Canadian national archives in order to cross-check the accepted versions of events. In the process he found that many of the documents in those archives that shed light on the failure of the British Command no longer existed in the British Public Record Office, from where they had originally been copied. Like a detective ruthlessly tracking every lead and also every false but promising clue, Winter for ten years pored over thousands of files looking for discrepancies between the original records and what was deposited in the colonial archives. Somewhat reminiscent of modern-

day conspiracy theorists, Winter accuses British archivists and record keepers of deliberately withholding evidence and obscuring material for researchers (p. 5). More disturbing yet, Winter has also unearthed another coverup: the deliberate falsification of official history and the destruction of archival documents.

Haig's Command focuses on the man himself, although in the process of examining Haig's actions, Winter also scrutinizes the major battles fought by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). First, though, Winter tries to understand who Haig was. Physically, Haig looked every bit the British general: ramrod-straight back, immaculate mustache, piercing eyes, and a cold glare that could reduce men to shivers. Yet, Winter argues, beneath that icy exterior was a notoriously inarticulate man who communicated with grunts and nods, leaving subordinates with contradictory impressions. The grunts were not reflective of some special ability to convey information quickly or of a man always in deep thought, but simply evidence of a weak man who had little to say and less ability to say it. Despite these deficiencies, Haig never questioned whether he was the right kind of soldier for command and habitually turned to Providence to see his army through to victory. Having been very successful in the South African War (1899-1902), Haig quickly made his way through the higher command ranks, although displaying paranoid, anxious, and even vicious behaviour towards any competitor who got in his way. In addition, Haig had a strong hand in writing the Field Service Regulations of 1909, which described how the British soldier should be trained. Haig's own principles of war were closely related to that rule book, despite the fact that it was largely obsolete by 1914, and completely antiquated and thus dangerous by the time he took over command in late 1915. Driven by his cavalry background, Haig's strategies throughout the war were based on the concept of developing the breakthrough battle, even though countless examples had shown the impossibility of such an approach on the Western Front with its miles of fortified trenches, barbed wire, interlocking machine-gun nests, pockets of poison gas, and artillery-swept killing grounds. As the war progressed, there evolved structural and technological changes to counter the stalemate of the Western Front, but, Winter argues, Haig was impervious to most of these, thus condemning countless hundreds of thousands to dismemberment and death simply because Haig was either too set in his ways or unable to apply soundly even the inadequate strategic initiatives he tried to instigate. Equally detrimental to effective leadership was his intense hatred of politicians and the French—not ideal qualities to display in coalition warfare.

What Haig honestly believed during the war will likely never be known, for he rewrote his diaries to reflect better the realities of events as he saw them with the benefit of hindsight. That a man who was so worried about his personal image before and during the war should attempt to clean it up afterwards is perhaps not surprising. Generals from Caesar to Wellington have sought to

show themselves in a better light with “revised” diaries and, of course, with more retrospective memoirs. Through intense research, Winter has uncovered Haig’s attempts to conceal his inadequacies. He asserts that in the 1920s Haig put forth a “smoke-screen of lies and fictions” to hide the disastrous consequences of his actions (p. 87). Equally important, because significant portions of the historical writing following the war were based directly or indirectly on Haig’s diaries and a quasi-history he commissioned, there was a skewed version of the war which did not reflect other realities evident in the war memoirs and anti-war literature that began to surface in the 1920s. For a significant, formative period, the history of the war was Haig’s version, a version where his faults were swept beneath the rug of historical falsification and document tampering.

This is the meat of Winter’s book, at least for archivists. Winter devotes two chapters to the systematic coverup and falsification of the record, beginning with the pressuring by Haig and his close allies of the Official Historian, James Edmonds, to distort the British effort in the war. This enormous multi-volume work, entitled the “History of the Great War Based On Official Documents” (OH), carried and presented an air of authenticity. After all, documents do not lie. They are the evidence of transactions and events. Thus the general notion of the assumed sanctity of archival evidence, about which Hilary Jenkinson in these very same years was writing at the Public Record Office, was used to add credibility to an effort designed to distort the truth. Initially, John Fortesque, the Librarian of Windsor Castle, was hired to write the OH, but when his version turned out to be “unacceptably truthful,” he was replaced by Edmonds, a man more easily bent to the will of his superiors (p. 276). Edmonds was an old friend of Haig’s; when the OH was in rough drafts, Haig and other senior commanders were allowed to read over, object to, and change any events or passages they did not like. The difficulty of writing an objective history with the major players still alive was only compounded by Edmonds’s lower military rank and the very real pressure put on him by the Committee of Imperial Defence, which did not want to embarrass any of the leaders. What resulted was a mixture of propaganda, fiction, and outright lies. With no chance to consult the archival documents themselves because of the fifty-year rule, subsequent historians were left with only skewed sources.

More detrimental, and harder to accept, Edmonds went through thousands of documents and extracted those with damning information about Haig and the British effort. In order to compile the official “truth” after the selection process, Edmonds destroyed those documents that could have revealed his coverup. Such a shocking revelation has been hinted at by other historians for some time, for there were just too many missing memoranda and orders to be put to chance, but Winter has gone one step further. Once again displaying his ability to track down sources, Winter gives us the process by which Edmonds, with pressure from Haig and his supporters, disposed of the “body.” If the Colonial Official

Historians, most notably Charles Bean of Australia, had not fastidiously spent three years copying the vetted documents, then we would forever be left with a gap in our history and understanding of the Great War. Similarly, Prime Ministers Robert Borden of Canada and William Morris Hughes of Australia took back to their countries copies of Imperial War Cabinet records relating to conditions and high-level strategy on the Western Front, and these eventually found their way into the national archives of those countries. Yet the “original” counterparts of these records surviving in Britain are not the same! It is by such cross-archival comparisons and detailed analysis of the history of records that Winter has uncovered one of the great archival scandals of the century.

The implications are extremely troubling. Archivists are taught to believe that the archival record is authentic and impartial; within the archival document there is always assumed to be “truth,” as Jenkinson put it. And most of the time, archival documents do reflect the truth. But in this case, it is disturbing to think that what military historians have based their interpretation of Haig upon—the archival record—has been tampered with and vetted for personal reasons. In effect, Haig’s reputation has been built on a rotten foundation. If not for the archives in Canada and Australia, there would have been no way to learn that the foundation was indeed rotten. And there remain further doubts as to whether all of the original documents (before tampering and destruction) were opened to the colonials, and if so, whether they had the time or resources to carry out a complete copying job.

This issue of tampering and indeed obfuscation of the record has come up many times since then, from scandals in the Nixon and Bush White House administrations to recent public inquiries in Canada regarding peacekeeping in Somalia and tainted blood. Winter has given us a historical context within which to examine modern organizations’ record-keeping practices, to understand better the flow of their records to archives.

Winter has not only produced a new interpretation of World War I and Sir Douglas Haig, but he has done an even greater service by uncovering the falsification of history, the deliberate meddling in the writing of the Official History of the war, and the more grievous crime of destroying the archival record. In a useful appendix he also outlines the large number of cases he discovered where war diaries and personal memoirs had been rewritten, and issues an appropriate word of caution to subsequent historians. This is a book that should be read by all historians and archivists for its own sake, and the implications of Winter’s discovery certainly merit further evaluation and analysis by archivists in terms of their own assumptions about the nature of documents and evidence. While the documents now surviving are very useful as evidence of Haig’s efforts in the 1920s to set the record “straight,” these documents are no longer the accurate reflection of the events of 1914-1918 they purport to be. The context of the record has changed, and only a “history of the record” analysis can reveal this. Should not archivists see such work as a central part of

their own professional duties, rather than leaving it to historians like Winter, no matter how talented these historians may be?

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Atlas historique de Montréal. JEAN-CLAUDE ROBERT n.p. Art Global and Libre Expression, 1994. 167 p. ISBN 2-920718-48-7 (Art Global); ISBN 2-89111-525-2 (Libre Expression).

The *Atlas historique de Montréal* is an impressive and attractive synthesis of the history of Montréal from its founding to the present. It was produced by the Fondation Lionel-Groulx as part of the 350th anniversary celebrations of Montréal and is the third in a trilogy of works, the others being a bibliography, *Clés pour l'histoire de Montréal* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1992), and a coffee-table album on the founders of the city, *Pour le Christ et le Roi* (Montréal: Libre Expression, 1992). According to Jean-Marc Léger, the director of the Centre de recherche Lionel-Groulx, the *Atlas* was conceived with a socio-political objective in view, i.e., to recall "à qui serait enclin à l'oublier, que notre ville fut d'abord une oeuvre française, qu'elle fut ville française pendant plus de 120 ans."

The *Atlas* resembles the distinguished *Historical Atlas of Canada* in its multidisciplinary approach, combining geographical, sociological, and demographical perspectives. The author, Jean-Claude Robert, has in fact worked on the *Historical Atlas of Canada* and brings to the *Atlas historique de Montréal* personal and academic qualifications that account in large part for its undeniable quality. Born and educated in Montréal, and professor of history at the Université du Québec à Montréal, he brings to his work both the insight of a native son and the knowledge and detachment of an academic. Part of the second generation of Quebec historians to be profoundly influenced by the *École des annales* in France, Robert completed a Ph.D. thesis in 1977 entitled *Montréal, 1821-1871: aspects de l'urbanisation*. At the same time he joined a grant-funded research group called the "Groupe de recherche sur l'histoire de Montréal," and, alone or in collaboration, has published numerous articles on various aspects of the city's history.

In keeping with its more or less nationalist objective, the *Atlas historique de Montréal* is designed by its attractive appearance to interest a cultivated general public. Its broad appeal is a function, too, of the non-specialist language used in the text, written in a style both elegant and economic. At the same time, the multidisciplinary approach and depth of the research underpinning its contents provide a synthesis of the evolution of Montréal which is useful to academics, students, and professionals in the fields of history, historical geography, demography, and sociology as well as urban studies.