

Newcastle University e-prints

Date deposited: 2nd May 2012

Version of file: Published

Peer Review Status: Peer reviewed

Citation for item:

Farr M. [A Part of History: Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War, introduced by Michael Howard](#). [book review] *British Scholar* 2009, **2**(1), 165-167.

Further information on publisher website:

<http://www.euppublishing.com>

Publisher's copyright statement:

The definitive version of this article, published by Edinburgh University Press, 2009, is available at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/brs.2009.0118>

Always use the definitive version when citing.

Use Policy:

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not for profit purposes provided that:

- A full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- A link is made to the metadata record in Newcastle E-prints
- The full text is not changed in any way.

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

**Robinson Library, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne.
NE1 7RU. Tel. 0191 222 6000**

and thus helped bring into focus public perceptions of what had happened; or to put it another way, helped define the Battle of Britain in terms of stages and significance in a manner that, revisionist accounts aside, has lasted more-or-less intact down to the present.

The spoken and printed word, though, made up only a part of the media prism through which the battle was understood by the general public. There were also very significant visual representations, ranging from recruiting and product advertisements all the way to feature films such as *The First of the Few* and flattering artistic portraits of pilots by artists such as Eric Kennington. It was primarily through visual means that the Spitfire and 'The Few' who flew it came to form a central part of the mythology surrounding the battle.

Having exhaustively examined the production and reception of battle propaganda in all its representational forms, Campion finally considers the cumulative effect on the public. Drawing extensively on diaries, letters, and home intelligence reports he convincingly demonstrates that official and semi-official propaganda efforts were successful both in terms of maintaining public confidence at home and projecting a positive image of Britain's role in the battle abroad.

The central conclusions the author draws from his comprehensive survey are that the propaganda surrounding the Battle of Britain was as important as the actual fighting in influencing morale at home and opinion abroad, and that the foundations of the post-war mythology surrounding the Battle of Britain were laid while events were still unfolding and in the months immediately afterward. An immense, highly detailed, and careful work of scholarship full of subtle nuance and considered judgment as well as informative fact—marred only slightly by poor professional copy-editing in one or two places, something almost unavoidable as academic presses try to reduce costs—*The Good Fight* is unlikely to appeal to the casual reader hoping for a coffee-table treatment of the subject. But for anyone seriously interested in the nature and content of the propaganda surrounding the Battle of Britain, *The Good Fight* will prove indispensable reading.

S. P. MacKenzie
University of South Carolina

A Part of History: Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War

Introduced by Michael Howard. London and New York: Continuum, 2008. xx + 229 pp. \$34.95 (hardcover).

It is conceivable, as Dan Todman writes at the end of the final essay in this collection, that the Second World War will come to supplant the First in the minds

of subsequent generations; until then we will still hold the Great War as the locus for so much of the modern experience, and more so in Britain than in any other combatant country. Reflections on the war remain both a scholarly and a popular preoccupation, with much cross-fertilisation; ground where *A Part of History* must have been intended to flourish. There are more than enough edited volumes with their dutiful subject-wide chapters for general, undergraduate, or school readerships; with an impressive cross-generational line-up of historians (and non-historians), this one might have managed something different: to have conveyed recent trends in scholarship to a wider readership, or served as a call to arms for future research for a more specialist readership. Instead, it does not consistently do either, any more than it addresses its stated objective of how “our understanding of the war is likely to change now that firsthand experience has been lost” (it had not been lost then, but, since publication, Harry Patch, mentioned in one of the essays, did die, and with him Britain’s last personal connection with the fighting).

This is a curious volume, from the title onwards. No editor is named, and one has no sense of under whose auspices or direction it was commissioned other than that its publication would coincide with the ninetieth anniversary of the armistice. Michael Howard’s introduction is a perfectly serviceable one to the war itself, but not in any sense to the volume or the essays that follow, of which no mention is made. The themes, broadly defined, are military (Gary Sheffield and Trevor Wilson on the Western Front, Malcolm Brown and Julian Putkowski on the Tommy, Peter Hart on Gallipoli, Nick Hewitt on Jutland), cultural (Michael Burleigh on religion, Stephen Badsey and Nicholas Reeves on propaganda, Ian Bostridge on Britten’s *War Requiem*, Brian Bond and Max Saunders on prose and Dominic Hibberd on verse), gender (Jane Potter and Terry Castle on women), representations (Terry Charman on the Imperial War Museum, Gavin Stamp on memorials, Esther MacCallum-Stewart on contemporary popular culture, Todman on remembrance), and methodology (Lynn Macdonald on oral history, Tony Pollard on conflict archaeology). This is the present reviewer’s arrangement, however; the volume is no more organised than the early war effort.

The lack of clear categorisation does at least differentiate it, as unfortunately does overlap, repetition, contradiction, and omission. Some essays attempt an objective general outline, others offer a specialist revisionist interpretation; some are more concerned with historiographical currents, others emphasise what needs to be done. Yet, just as the lack of coherence undermines the volume’s value as a book, the brevity of all but two of the chapters mean they lack any real value as articles. There are threads of debate, most obviously between the ‘revisionists’ (and present are two leading practitioners, Sheffield and Bond, with Todman of the younger generation) and those who maintain that the war was as awful and pointless as

it appeared, here represented by Putkowski, who single-handedly, and somewhat intemperately, engages in the kind of hand-to-hand historiographical combat that might have made for a diverting separate section. The war over revisionism is the more significant given the poppy-infused teaching of the subject in schools, based too much on the testimony of those, as Macdonald remarks, who 'were poets and not reporters'. Bond offers an interesting contemporary comparison, of the memoirs of C. E. Montague and Charles Carrington, the latter perhaps constituting, as it were, the first revisionist.

To the aforementioned range of approaches, one might almost add a fifth: the capricious. Castle's 'Courage, Mon Amie', is by far both the longest and the most original chapter, and yet embodies the wider faults of the volume. It is an extraordinary essay that touches on, *inter alia*, her and her mother's sex lives, her gym, her reaction to 9/11, and what she saw at the cinema the previous week. This is not by any means to say that there should be no place for historicising Didion-esque autobiographical reportage, but it is very hard to see how its place could possibly be here. It sticks out half a mile. Castle's trenchant observations on Vera Brittain might have been fashioned by an editor into a shorter and more coherent essay, but her self-indulgence, however engaging, is matched only by the indulgence of whoever edited the volume. Perhaps no one did, which would explain a lot.

Such concerns may be dismissed as the sniffs of academe, but the essential problem is that *A Part of History* is neither thorough enough to be scholarly nor balanced enough to be popular. Most essays have no references, and though most which do employ Chicago style, one uses Harvard; some chapters offer a list of items for further reading, others a mini-essay, many have neither. More substantively, given the overlap, are the omissions. Whilst there are anecdotal and autobiographical observations aplenty, there is almost nothing on Britain in an international context. No essay – other than Burleigh's stimulating contribution, and a not uninteresting but certainly otherwise unrelated one about India by Santanu Das – seeks to situate the experience of an imperial power more widely: in a world war. As for politics, either high or low, there is nothing whatsoever. There may have been good reasons for this, but none are offered, in the way that no reason is offered for there being so many short essays without any connecting purpose. That may of course be what 'Aspects' has been held to mean, but the book is certainly a missed opportunity, insofar as anniversaries are opportunities. We will no doubt have to wait until 2014 for the next.

Martin Farr
Newcastle University