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Introduction

Field Marshal Sir Douglas (later Earl) Haig is one of the central characters in the history of the First World War, a very major figure in British military history generally and a personality of some significance in British history as a whole. Haig's part in the fighting of the First World War took up only some four-and-a-quarter years of a life of more than sixty-six. His pre-1914 career, during which he took part in two of the wars of the late Victorian era, is certainly not without interest. Yet had he not played a major role in the First World War it is unlikely that a biography of him would attract many readers. So while the present book takes account of the experience Haig brought to that war and briefly examines his life in the post-war world, the focus is on the First World War itself.

Haig's part in that war became intensely controversial while it was still in progress and the controversy has never wholly abated. Haig's most extreme detractors have accused him of being a callous and incompetent butcher, responsible for sending hundreds of thousands of British and British Empire troops to unnecessary deaths.[1] A view of him as purblind and unimaginative (though not necessarily as brutal or callous) seems, indeed, to have become the predominant one in British popular culture.[2] Yet Haig attracted during his lifetime, and has continued to attract since, devoted admirers who have portrayed him as one of the great British commanders and as the key British architect of victory[3] in the First World War.

Debates about Haig's role in the First World War have now reached an interesting stage. A substantial proportion of the attacks on his performance between the 1920s and the 1960s employed two lines of approach, both now largely discredited and abandoned. The first of these was what might be termed the "British Way in Warfare" approach. Critics of Haig such as Winston Churchill, David Lloyd George and Basil Liddell Hart (who coined the term "British Way in Warfare") indicated that, largely owing to Haig's stance and that of Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff 1915–1918, the British excessively concentrated their efforts on the Western Front and failed to take full advantage of

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opportunities in other theatres.[4] Sir James Edmonds and the other official historians of the British military effort in the war rejected this line of argument. John Terraine, author of a major study of Haig in the early 1960s, and one of the most widely read historians of the British experience of the First World War for the next couple of decades, endorsed the official historians' verdict and attacked the "British Way in Warfare" school in a more accessible and populist style than they could. Terraine repeatedly argued, as Haig had done during the war, that the Western Front was inevitably the decisive theatre. Adventures in other theatres were generally a waste of effort.[5] If the Germans had knocked France out they would have won the war as a whole. It was ultimately impossible for the British to have won the war without committing a mass army in the West and undertaking very major offensive operations with it. Though not everyone liked his manner of discourse, Terraine essentially won this argument. Practically all First World War scholars of real substance are "Westerners" now.[6]

A second line of attack, employed by Churchill in his *World Crisis* and taken up by several subsequent writers, was that Haig and his staff failed to make the most imaginative use of the military technologies that became available during the war. Something like the offensive mounted near Cambrai on 20 November 1917 could and should have been done, Churchill argued,[7] a good deal earlier in the war. Though, during the early 1990s, the eminent Canadian scholar Professor Tim Travers revived, with specific reference to 1918, the argument that Haig under-utilised the latest military technologies,[8] it seems fair to say that it has not carried the field. Most historians seem now to accept that, whatever his other faults, Haig was very open to technological innovation, that the British army on the Western Front was highly experimental and innovative and that the British pushed the available military technology to its limits in the war's final year.[9]

Yet the abandonment of these traditional lines of attack on Douglas Haig does not mean that his reputation as a general has been wholly and finally vindicated. The revolution in Western Front scholarship that has taken place since the 1980s (brought about through the work of Shelford Bidwell, Dominick Graham, Tim Travers, Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson, Paddy Griffith and a host of other able historians)[10] has highlighted other issues, practically all of which were raised in some form during the war itself. Haig's capacity to adjust from open warfare to quasi-siege warfare conditions, his selection and employment of his staff, his relations with and employment of subordinate commanders, his handling of his artillery, his choice of battlefields for offensive operations, his use of intelligence and his ability to "read" battles and strategic situations are amongst these.

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In the pages that follow a serious effort is made to address all these issues and to incorporate them into a full re-evaluation of Douglas Haig as a man and a soldier.

What follows is neither a polemic in attack upon, nor one in defence of, Haig's reputation. Rather it is an attempt at a balanced, judicious consideration of one of the most important figures in British military history. Haig, it is argued, had genuine patriotism, a high level of professional dedication, much openness to technical and tactical innovation, a remarkable degree of political astuteness on some issues and very considerable skill as a political in-fighter. As a commander he had considerable force of character and the authority to secure, with rare exceptions, the compliance of his subordinates with his will. Coupled with this went a high level of physical and psychological resilience and, at least most of the time, a great deal of resolution. These qualities enabled him to play, it is argued, a vital part in shaping the campaign that brought final victory to the Allies.

Yet it is also contended that, even in the mobile warfare for which his military education had best prepared him, Haig was not a naturally gifted field commander, that he found it intellectually difficult to adjust to the unusual conditions that arose on the Western Front and that he cannot escape responsibility for casualties to his forces that were, for much of the period from the spring of 1915 through to late 1917, disproportionate to the results achieved. Haig, it is suggested, bore much responsibility for the near collapse of British civil-military relations by the end of 1917, the effects of which were so serious that they placed the Allied cause in jeopardy the following spring. His preparations for and handling of the German 1918 offensives were, it is further indicated, in some respects dangerously, almost fatally, inadequate and flawed.

Perhaps most controversially it is argued that Haig was not the perpetual optimist of legend. In 1914 he went to war full of anxiety about Britain's lack of preparedness and proved a nervous, somewhat battle-shy corps commander in the initial weeks of campaigning. Over-confidence and excessive strategic and operational ambition were, indeed, his besetting sins as commander-in-chief in 1916 and 1917. Yet the evident failure of his plans for 1917, combined with his diminishing faith in his allies and a growing fear of Bolshevism had, by the end of that year, made him doubt the realism of pursuing a complete victory. While he was keen to retain his command at almost any price, he became, in the early weeks of 1918, a keen advocate of compromise peace, apparently prepared to accept terms that would have left the Germans the real winners. His confidence in the Allies' capacity to defeat Germany decisively fluctuated greatly in the course of 1918, but remained somewhat fragile. From mid-October until a few days before the Armistice was signed, at a time

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when the German army was actually on its last legs, Haig was arguing that Germany must be offered very generous terms if the fighting were to end that year. In these last weeks he was, in effect, playing down the impact and significance of the victories his own army was achieving.

Ultimately it is intended to avoid the stereotypes of Douglas Haig both positive (as the clear-sighted, imperturbable great captain) and negative (as a stupid, callous, unimaginative butcher and bungler) and to reveal a human being of at least average complexity, possessing both considerable capacities and virtues and some fairly serious flaws.

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1 Boyhood and early career

Background and childhood

Douglas Haig was born on 19 June 1861 at 24 Charlotte Square, in an affluent part of Edinburgh. His father, John Haig (1802–1878) was a wealthy whisky magnate whose principal residence was at Cameron Bridge in Fife. His mother, born Rachel Veitch, was nineteen years younger than her husband. Considered a great beauty in her youth, she came from a prominent Scottish family, which, at the time of her wedding in 1839, had fallen on hard times. Financial considerations and a sense of familial obligation may well have motivated her teenage nuptials with a rich businessman more than twice her age. Before Douglas, she had borne ten children, having delivered one about every two years since the marriage. Seven had survived. Douglas was her eleventh and last child: the eighth to survive infancy. His oldest brother, William, was twenty years his senior.[1]

Douglas Haig was directly but distantly descended from the Haigs of Bemersyde, a family of Norman origin and martial tradition, significant on the Anglo-Scottish borders since the twelfth century. In his later years he became proud of the Bemersyde connection and, through public subscription, acquired that property as his own home. Historians, however, have sometimes referred to the Field Marshal's illustrious border ancestry without making clear its remoteness.[2] Douglas Haig was certainly aware of his descent from the border family from an early age and there is evidence that he visited Bemersyde at least once during his childhood. During his early life, however, there was little if any social contact between his branch of the family and the Haigs who owned Bemersyde. For most of his army life, Douglas Haig's brother officers never heard him refer to his connection to the border family[3] and there is no evidence that it in any way inspired or advanced his career.

The social position of Douglas Haig's immediate family was based not on a medieval lairdship and a landed estate but on modern industry and commerce: not on martial tradition but on hard cash. Some of the Haigs had been distilling whisky since the late seventeenth century. A century

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later they had made it a big business. John Haig, Douglas's father, was the greatest figure in a vastly expanded nineteenth century Lowland industry and was its principal spokesman in its dealings with the government.[4] In Victorian Britain there were few obstacles to social advancement on the basis of wealth gained by commerce. In order to enter society's very highest ranks, the acquisition of the correct manners, attendance at the right educational institutions and appropriate marriages were of considerable importance. All this could quite easily be accomplished within a generation or two and Douglas Haig was a typical product of the process. The fact remains that the business that propelled him into the late Victorian social elite was alcoholic liquor. Through the marriage of an older sister, a stream of Irish whiskey[5] combined with his native Scotch to float his career.

Though his family owed its wealth to business, Douglas Haig showed no particular interest in a career in that field. Possibly this was a reaction against his father. John Haig had excellent qualities. A highly intelligent man who in his youth had won a prize for mathematics at St Andrew's university, he was reportedly of liberal views and considered to be a good employer. But, already fifty-nine at Douglas's birth, he seems to have exercised little positive paternal influence. Frequently ill with asthma (from which, in childhood, Douglas also suffered), gout and alcoholism, he was apparently away a good deal, sometimes abroad seeking cures at health resorts. This may have been for the best. He was reportedly given to outbursts of foul temper and foul language that frightened and upset other members of the family.[6]

Douglas's mother clearly had a far greater influence on the moulding of his character and general outlook on life. Since her marriage, Rachel Haig had immersed herself in family matters, almost entirely forgoing a social life. Devoutly religious, she insisted on hearing her children say their prayers night and morning and attempted to instil in them a strong sense of self-discipline and duty.[7] This was not easy in Douglas's case:

> As a child he was headstrong, bad-tempered and intractable. He invariably wore the kilt, and as a minor punishment the drum which was his most treasured plaything bore as an inscription in bold lettering: "Douglas Haig – *sometimes* a good boy".[8]

Spending most of his early childhood at the family's Cameron Bridge home, Haig did not go to school until he was eight. He was thus much in the company of his mother and there can be no doubt that he ultimately absorbed some of her cardinal values. Haig's childhood was marred by severe asthma but he fought hard to overcome this by diet and exercise. Gradually, during boyhood and early manhood, he acquired a high degree

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of self-control. Such control, however, was imposed upon a nature that remained intensely passionate and somewhat highly strung. For most of the rest of his life Haig was given to occasional dramatic outbursts of emotion, most typically of anger, but sometimes of joy. It was only in his last years that his fierce temper was no longer in evidence.[9]

Clifton and Oxford

Between 1875 and 1879 Haig attended Clifton, a minor public school near Bristol. He went there instead of Rugby, as his mother had originally wished, because, still inattentive and a poor academic performer at preparatory school, it seemed unlikely that he would pass Rugby's entrance exams. At Clifton, although he never excelled scholastically or at games, he became, in both areas, a fair achiever. His delighted mother became eager that he should go to university and pursue a profession, but the exact nature of his future career apparently remained undecided. A year after leaving school he was able to gain admission to the University of Oxford without difficulty, though that was no vast achievement for a public school boy of his social background and financial means. More important, perhaps, by the time he left Clifton, Haig appeared well adjusted and comfortable in society, at least with other males of his own social class.[10]

As his school days drew to a close, Haig became an orphan, his father dying in 1878 and his mother in 1879. The former loss left him unmoved. The latter affected him more deeply. It did not, however, make him morbid. In his late teens he found himself possessed of a private income that was his by legal right rather than through paternal sufferance and he began to adopt a lifestyle to match. Postponing university entrance for a year, he accompanied his brother Hugo on a trip to the United States. He seems to have enjoyed the experience. Henceforth travel became a big part of his life. He was to return to the United States, to tour the Indian sub-Continent, parts of Australia and Western Europe and to campaign over great tracts of Africa. Some of this globetrotting was intrinsic to military duty and done at public expense. Much was self-motivated and self-funded.[11] If Haig's mind was insufficiently broad (as some have alleged) it was not for want of travel.

In 1880 he went up to Brasenose College, Oxford. There he lived the life of a young, fashionable, upper-class Victorian male. His academic studies, which included some Greek, Latin and religious studies, French literature, Political Economy and Ancient History, appear to have been of little interest to him. Competent enough to get by without difficulty he worked hard enough to guarantee that he passed his exams. Yet he seems to have showed no desire to excel and possessed relatively little intellectual

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curiosity. He only read books that were necessary to pass his exams or of direct relevance to the profession he eventually chose. Other activities attracted more of his attention. He rowed, played a little golf, hunted and shot. In polo he distinguished himself, playing for the University in 1882. He was an active member of some of the most fashionable undergraduate clubs, enjoying wine and conversation. No dour Calvinist at this stage of life, he did not even disapprove of gambling in moderation. Even if few relationships he formed at Oxford went very deep, he was, to all appearances, full of good fellowship.[12]

Despite the formidable character and considerable influence of his mother, Haig, in his early twenties, was not noticeably religious. The beliefs that he did hold before the First World War do not appear to have been of a narrowly Presbyterian variety. He consulted fortune tellers and sometimes attended spiritualist meetings with his sister Henrietta. There is no evidence that he ever rejected the essential Christian doctrines in which he had been educated. But until he took supreme command on the Western Front his Christian observance seemed to contemporaries to be of a formal rather than of a particularly personal or passionate kind. He seems to have been still more indifferent to sexual passion and formed no known romantic attachments. As Charteris puts it:

> He had no women friends: women neither interested him nor attracted him.

A close military colleague would surely not have been so blunt about this matter had it not become conspicuous to contemporaries, though it was perhaps more so in the first two decades of his army career than it was at Oxford. Haig, as a young man, and indeed into mid-life, was strikingly handsome. He was fastidious about his appearance to the point of being a dandy.[13] While he did not possess a glib tongue, there seems to have been every reason to believe that he could have been a success with women had he wished to. According to his future wife he had, until he married at the age of 44, a reputation as a "woman-hater". But it seems unlikely that he was ever a true misogynist. Perceiving the generality of women as frivolous and silly, he could respect the minority who struck him as serious-minded and he had a strong aversion to types of bawdiness that he considered insulting to the honour of the female sex as a whole.[14]

Given his seeming lack of sexual interest in women for so much of his life, it is not unreasonable to ask whether he may have been, at least latently, homosexual. From an enlightened, early twenty-first century perspective, that question should be straightforward rather than awkward or embarrassing. But it cannot be answered. There is a tantalising reference in Charteris's biography to a particularly close and enduring friendship that he struck up at Oxford with the (unnamed) son of a Hampshire

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landowner, a friendship that is said to have lasted well into later life. But there is no evidence to indicate homosexual practice or even inclination. For most of his life Haig gave little indication of interest in sex of any kind. There is a family story of an affair, only briefly preceding his marriage, with Daisy Warwick, the independently wealthy wife of the Duke of Warwick's eldest son. But no letters or other forms of written evidence have been produced. There is, however, no doubt that his relatively late marriage was fertile; it appears to have been remarkably devoted and affectionate on both sides, and it endured unto death.[15]

In an article written in the year of his death, more than twenty-seven years after the conversation was recorded, Haig is alleged to have expressed an interest in entering the army shortly after his arrival at Oxford. But such an interest is difficult to confirm from other sources. If it existed, it was probably not definite or strong. Other observers thought he had no particular sense of direction in his first two years at university. Yet he fitted well enough into the social milieu and no one seems to have thought him eccentric. His apparent lack of interest in women could be dismissed as a form of shyness. Entirely conventional in his tastes and habits, he was, in most respects, a typical representative of his social class, gender and age group at this moment in history. Conspicuously good at nothing except riding and polo and lacking any obvious ambition, it must have seemed quite possible that he might become just another upper-class drone.[16]

Yet how many people have a clear sense of direction between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one? As a young man under no compulsion to earn his living, perhaps the surprising thing is that Haig had found a definite purpose (and had seemingly become possessed of a driving ambition) before his twenty-third birthday. In 1883 Haig decided to apply to Sandhurst and to seek a commission in the army. It was the most important decision of his life so far. But it may not have been his idea.

Henrietta and Sandhurst

It is a paradox that, while, before his marriage, Haig appeared, to many observers, to be disdainful of women, feminine influence seems to have played a pivotal, determining role in his life. The influence of his mother has already been outlined. But the most enduring and, arguably, most important relationship of his life was with his sister, Henrietta. Up to the death of their mother, Douglas and Henrietta seem not to have been particularly close. Henrietta was ten years older and had married and moved to Ireland when he was only eight. Their mother's death apparently brought them much closer. She helped him

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get over the shock of it and appears gradually to have taken over the maternal role.

Henrietta's subsequent devotion to her brother has been ascribed to a thwarted maternal instinct, the Jamesons being childless. Her brother may also have offered Henrietta a vicarious outlet for ambition. Like most Victorian middle- and upper-class women, Henrietta had no career of her own. Her husband, whilst satisfyingly rich and well connected, was a sportsman and man of leisure. He clearly did not manage his family's business on a day-to-day basis and was not actively pursuing a profession.[17] Whatever the cause, the Douglas–Henrietta relationship became extraordinarily important to both parties. Though their voluminous correspondence diminished after Douglas's marriage, in other respects the sibling bond remained strong. For a couple of years, while the Haigs were in India, Henrietta acted as mother to their children. Decades later, Haig would die in Henrietta's London home, and she would outlive him by only a few months.

For the first few years after his mother's death Douglas Haig led, as we have seen, a rather carefree, sociable, apparently somewhat aimless existence. Henrietta, however, seems to have inherited their mother's intensity and familial ambition. Like her mother, she had married early, in 1869, at the age of 18. Also like her mother she had married money: Willie Jameson, another rich distiller. The Jamesons had better social connections than the Haigs had hitherto enjoyed. Willie Jameson had a considerable reputation as a yachtsman. This fashionable upper class sport was financed by his whiskey fortune. It was through the Prince of Wales' interest in sailing that the Jamesons became part of his social circle, being frequent guests at Cowes, Sandringham and Balmoral.[18]

Henrietta was, perhaps, both dissatisfied with the lack of direction in her brother's life and keen to make the most of her royal connection. Association with the royal family would inevitably have brought the Jamesons into contact with army officers, especially those from the "smarter" regiments. Henrietta was inevitably aware of her brother's pride in his appearance, his good physical shape, his appreciation of horses and his skill as a rider. She would have realised what a dash he would cut in uniform and how easily he could fit into the social ambience of an officers' mess. An intelligent, if not a highly educated, woman, Henrietta would also have appreciated the enduring influence of the royal family in the army. If one of her male relatives were to gain a commission, she might be in a good position to assist his career. Apparently she had already tried, without success, to persuade Douglas's older brother John to follow this path. During his last year at university, in March 1883, Haig and Henrietta went on holiday to the Continent together and it may well

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