Introduction

Charles à Court[1] was born 20 January 1858. He was proud of his family pedigree and his ancestors who had rendered distinguished service to church and state. His father, Henry Wyndham à Court Repington 1819–1903, was by nature gentle and retiring; his mother, Emily (neé Currie), was the dominant partner in the marriage. Both parents indulged their attractive and clever only son, which might explain the wilfulness sometimes apparent in his adult character. His education was conventional for someone of his social class. After preparatory school, from 1871 to 1875 he attended Eton College. A want of interest and effort, not any lack of ability, explain his school years' lack of distinction. After Eton he was sent for a year to a military crammer at Freiberg. There he forgot much and learned little. In 1877 he entered Sandhurst. It proved a hugely enjoyable experience. Commissioned as a sublieutenant in the Rifle Brigade, he was sent to India in 1879, where he joined the fourth battalion at Nowshera. He had scarcely time to master the fundamental disciplines required of a regimental officer before joining the Peshawar Field Force. He judged his personal contribution to his first campaign, the Second Afghan War, 'supremely unimportant', yet it taught him a significant, never to be forgotten lesson. The army's political masters seemed blissfully unaware that a successful campaign required detailed, advance planning, and so were quite unconcerned that troops were left in blank ignorance about the country in front of them, that transport arrangements were miserable, hospital equipment wretched and that inadequate numbers had been provided for all units. The army was accompanied by Archibald Forbes,[2] the outstanding military correspondent of his day. He, however, had seen no reason why he should report any of these obvious failings. Despite the inadequacies of equipment and lack of preparation, the fortitude and courage displayed by the troops ensured the assault mounted upon the formidable fortress of Ali Musjid succeeded. Shortly afterwards, Repington collapsed with a violent and prolonged attack of enteric fever and was invalided home.

When his health finally recovered, he resumed his military service in Ireland. Ceremonial guards and a richly agreeable social and sporting life

Fig. 1 Major Charles à Court, 1898 (aged 40)

contrasted with helping to put down and control agrarian riots. During this period he began a self-imposed, arduous programme of military studies. His monograph, *Military Italy* (1884), enjoyed a *succès d'estime* that encouraged him not only to pursue his professional studies with even greater determination but fostered an ambition to secure a place in Staff College. He entered Camberley in 1887 where, for the next two years, he was extremely happy. Significantly he acquired a wide circle of friends, many of whom were to enjoy distinguished military careers. Of this company he

was generally acknowledged to be the most brilliant. The one teacher who impressed him was Colonel Fred Maurice, who lectured on strategy and tactics.

After Camberley he was posted to Burma to resume his regimental duties, but to his delight almost immediately was transferred to the Intelligence Department. France was then considered the power that posed the greatest threat to British security. It became the particular focus of his study and interest. He spoke and wrote the language fluently and through frequent visits gained a thorough knowledge of the country's topography and communications' systems. He compiled a series of handbooks on the French Army that covered a wide range of subjects and was written in a style more lively than any previous departmental publication. By the end of his five years at Queen Anne's Gate he was firmly established as a staff officer of outstanding potential. He rejoined his regiment and served first at Aldershot, then Dublin, never missing an opportunity to impress his seniors with his competence and dash. In August 1897 he was chosen as one of two British officers to serve as DAAG on the staff of Sir Francis Grenfell, Sirdar of the Egyptian army. Subsequently he served on Kitchener's staff during the Atbara campaign and at the Battle of Omdurman (1898). He was impressed by Kitchener and the great man clearly thought well of him. Á Court was twice mentioned in despatches. Later that same year during the Fashoda crisis he was recalled and sent to Brussels from where he first set up and then supervised a highly successful secret service system throughout France.

In November 1898 he was appointed the first British military attaché to the Low Countries. Temperament and knowledge ideally fitted the Major (brevet Lieutenant Colonel) for his new posting. This was necessarily enhanced by his father's deep purse, upon which he was encouraged to draw generously. Repeated requests for detailed reports on his hosts' military plans at first threatened to overwhelm him, but they were successfully executed to the declared satisfaction of his various chiefs at the Foreign and War Offices. At the First Universal Peace Conference at The Hague (1899), he was attached to the small British delegation as a technical military expert. He took full advantage of the opportunity this afforded him to become closely acquainted with the Great Powers' most influential military, naval and diplomatic representatives. Most importantly, he became convinced that Germany, not France posed the greater threat to the security of Britain and her empire.

A Court returned to England in September 1899. Within two weeks he had sailed for South Africa as DAAG on Buller's Headquarter's staff. Arriving in Cape Town, he soon discovered that bluff and hard work were insufficient to compensate for earlier miscalculations and inadequate

preparations. Disappointingly, the heroic Buller proved to be an unimaginative, overcautious C-in-C. But à Court perceived the army's greatest weakness was the want of a properly functioning General Staff. He was engaged in the thick of the fighting at Spion Kop, Vaal Krantz and Pieter's Hill. Shortly after the relief of Ladysmith, he was once more struck down by a violent attack of enteric fever, developed serious complications, and his life was despaired of. More dead than alive, he was invalided home where, after a long period of recuperation, eventually he recovered. For his 'thoroughly good services as Commandant of Headquarters' he was twice mentioned in despatches and in September 1901 gazetted a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George.

He returned to his old posting at The Hague and Brussels to discover circumstances were much changed and far from easy. The British were extremely unpopular and sentiment at every level in Dutch and Belgian society favoured the Boers. Repington was involved in unofficial peace negotiations, but it was at this point that his private life collided disastrously with his military career. On 14 January 1902 the *London Gazette* gave notice of his immediate retirement from the army. In a quarter of a century's service he had demonstrated ability, industry, ambition, boldness, bravery and tenacity. He had been both a popular member of his regiment and a staff officer of outstanding promise. His virtues as a soldier were many, but there were undoubted faults. He was extravagant and impetuous, could be decidedly cavalier in his attitude to routine and authority, and made it very apparent, whatever their rank, he did not suffer fools gladly.

In February 1882 à Court married Melloney Catherine Scobell (1860–1938). Of their four children, two daughters survived infancy. He was an amusing, generous but never faithful husband. Army life offered him many opportunities for frequent, unexplained absences, a temptation he did not resist. He enjoyed several, mostly short-lived, amorous liaisons. Just how many exactly must now be largely a matter for conjecture. What is certain is, though his behaviour was inexcusable it was no worse than that of many another young army officer. The faster set in society winked at marital impropriety, the only solecism to be found out. For his part, this never seemed to concern him.

In 1897 while serving in Egypt, he met Mary Garstin (née North, 1868–1953), the wife of Sir William Edmund Garstin, a distinguished and successful engineer. They fell in love and their affair flourished. As he never conducted any of his amours with discretion, his wife soon learned of his latest adventure. When discovered, invariably he would promise his wife in future he would desist from such conduct, but sooner rather than later his head would be turned by some pretty creature and once more he

would be up to his familiar tricks. Quite out of character, he remained 'loyal' to Mary Garstin and despite numerous discoveries and enforced estrangements their affair continued. Less than a week before his departure with Buller, his wife discovered they were still 'carrying on'. He promised, as so often before, he would never stray again, but this time, to ensure he kept his bargain, he was required to sign a document before witnesses promising 'upon his word of honour as a soldier and a gentleman' he would never again meet or communicate with his mistress. Mary's cousin, Georgina, Countess of Guilford, was actively involved in these negotiations and it was she who formally demanded à Court's written parole. Before signing, however, he insisted his undertaking was given 'on the understanding [Mary] will be spared all future indignities and humiliations on my account'. He always maintained this condition 'formed part of the transaction'. When signed, his parole was given to Major Henry Wilson 'for safe keeping'. Apparently Wilson was involved, not only as a friend of Garstin and Georgina but also as à Court's colleague.

Three months after leaving England à Court received a pathetic letter from Mary telling of the bitter reproaches and cruel taunts she had constantly to suffer at the hands of her husband and her cousin Georgina. He had kept to the letter and spirit of his agreement, but their behaviour was a clear breach of the understanding he had signed. He considered himself no longer bound by his parole. However, when told Wilson this he refused to acknowledge that Garstin and Georgina had broken the agreed terms repeatedly asserting, 'You know this will end in divorce.' Shortly after this meeting with Wilson, à Court was struck down with enteric fever and his life despaired of. It was months before he was fit enough to be invalided home. Soon after his eventual recovery he resumed his affair with Mary. He asked his wife to divorce him on the grounds of his admitted adultery. She refused but Sir William showed no similar reluctance. He sued his wife for divorce on the grounds of her adultery and cited à Court as co-respondent. An undefended suit was heard in December 1901 and Garstin was granted a *decree nisi*. The case was reported in considerable detail in the London and national press.

The day following the trial à Court received a letter written at the direction of the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Roberts from the Adjutant General, Sir Thomas Kelly-Kenny. His attention had been drawn to the report of the divorce proceedings in *The Times*. A Court was asked to submit a 'statement of explanation' as to why he had not kept his parole. His detailed explanation was duly sent to Kelly-Kenny. Wilson was also sent for, interviewed, and asked to submit an account of his conversation with à Court about whether the terms of the parole had been broken. There are clear inconsistencies of fact between what Wilson wrote and

what he had actually said as recorded in à Court's sworn statement. Because the Adjutant General had a good opinion of Wilson but thoroughly disliked à Court, he was not inclined to examine à Court's account carefully, and neither did he address the inconsistencies in Wilson's evidence. He simply advised Roberts, 'Lt. Colonel à Court has broken a solemn written promise made to a brother officer.' A Court's explanation he described as 'far from satisfactory' and proposed, 'not withstanding his past services I advise he be called upon to retire from His Majesty's service'. Roberts concurred. 'He has not behaved like an officer and gentleman.' The Minister for War formally signed his approval and à Court was immediately ordered to retire. There was no formal appeal.

Á Court blamed his dismissal, not upon Kelly-Kenny, as he might well have done, but entirely upon Henry Wilson, an opinion shared by many of his colleague in the Rifles. They too distrusted the eccentric Irishman and thought him not only inordinately ambitious but also extraordinarily devious. Nor did it escape their notice that à Court's enforced resignation would ease Wilson's professional advancement. The rumours concerning Wilson persisted, and because the army could ill afford to lose an officer of à Court's calibre it was supposed he would soon be reinstated.[3]

Obliged to earn his living, he chose journalism as his new vocation and rapidly established a world-wide reputation as Britain's leading military commentator. His advocacy of the reformed defence arrangements introduced by Esher and Haldane made a significant contribution to their success and public acceptance. The changes he canvassed and advocated so enthusiastically were designed to strengthen and protect Britain and her imperial defences against Wilhelmine Germany. When war with Germany was declared, he kept a critical, day by day watch over the nation's military fortunes as, with her major allies, France, Russia (until 1917) and latterly the United States of America, Britain engaged in a life and death struggle with Germany and her associates.

In September 1920 Constable published *The First World War, 1914–1918: Personal Experience of Lieutenant-Colonel C. à Court Repington CMG*.[4] Priced two guineas, the first impression of the two-volume set sold out almost as soon as it appeared. Nine further impressions swiftly followed as sales on both sides of the Atlantic remained buoyant. The diarist's declared purpose was to provide a reliable source for future historians. He also wittingly provided the conflict with its lasting title.

The historical value of a record written by an informed commentator who knew so many of the leading military and political participants was immediately acknowledged. Repington was compared with Pepys, 'as much at home in the War Office and Whitehall as Mayfair. He knew

everyone worth knowing and heard everything worth hearing'.[5] His daily war commentaries afforded neither individuals nor governments any opportunity to be complacent. Inside Westminster it was widely mooted he was more influential than many ministers.

The same month as Repington's war diaries appeared, Margot Asquith published her autobiography. 'I fear the next journalistic enterprise that unlikely pair might inspire,' declared Esher to the king's secretary, 'could well be a weekly causerie in a Sunday paper by "Leaders of Society".' Margot cheerfully admitted that want of money had been her reason for writing. Repington's diaries had been similarly inspired. This motivation was by no means unique. Thoughts of financial gain plus the opportunity for vindication of their actions inspired most of the war's early memorialists and historians.

Within a decade of succeeding to a life interest in a large and valuable estate, Repington had managed to dissipate a good part of his inheritance. Yet, he insisted, he dreaded bankruptcy. One meaning of his former unadorned surname, *à court*, is 'to be short of funds'. The irony did not escape him. In earlier, prosperous, carefree times he had frequently avowed money meant little more to him than counters. He continued to look after neither pounds nor pence, deliberately eschewing Micawber's sound financial advice. He decided the speediest, most sure way he might solve his financial problems would be to write a best-selling book. In *Vestigia*, a memoir he published in 1919, he had strolled through his family history as preface to his life as a soldier. He offered no explanation as to why his army career had ended so abruptly. Nor did he say anything of his broken marriage or of Mary, who, as his de facto wife, adopted his surname and had borne him a daughter. His brief account of his pre-war years as a military correspondent, first with the *Westminster Gazette*, then *The Times*, concluded with Britain's declaration of war against Germany, on 4 August 1914.

Critics generously praised *Vestigia*. It sold well but made no more than a modest, short-lived dent in his huge debts. He concluded, had he not written the book with deliberate discretion, he would have sold many more copies. The better to attract the guineas of future readers, he promised his friend General Sir Ian Hamilton, 'My next book [a diary of his wartime experiences] will not be discreet.'[6] From September 1915 onwards he reordered materials into a daily account of the war. He included letters and notes of conversations with politicians, soldiers and friends, anything he considered likely to attract the widest possible constituency of readers, for only huge sales of his book could ensure his freedom from the toils of bankruptcy. The odds against success were long, but Repington, an instinctive and habitual gambler, always found heroic wagers irresistible.

When published in 1920, an early critic, the former premier, H. H. Asquith, remarked how the diaries were a 'strange mélange of social gossip and military criticism'.[7] Shane Leslie, though an extremely hostile critic, nonetheless began his review with the unqualified assertion that there could be no doubt this was 'a great book of the war written by a central and typical figure'.[8] But some critics who sought to undermine Repington's credibility insisted he had been deliberately mendacious, indiscrete and had betrayed confidences. Their ill-informed judgments would soon have been forgotten had not certain members of the establishment eagerly chosen to play wilful chorus to their misrepresentations.

Derby, Minister for War, 1916–18, was one such disgruntled grandee. He complained, Repington had 'betrayed' him by 'revealing' their frequent discussions. This had succeeded in making him 'appear disloyal'.[9] Derby and his ilk were enraged at Repington's 'revelations'. They believed the *hoi polloi* should never know what their social superiors thought about anything. It was none of their damned business. Admiral Sir Reginald 'Porky' Bacon wrote, 'It would have been far better if the public had been told nothing.'[10] It never occurred to these critics that Repington's supposed indiscretions had been prompted by *their* revelations. The messenger alone they supposed worthy of blame. They had supplied the brickbats but wanted no part in any blame for the consequent shattered window panes.

Esher, as befitted a royal confidant and political fixer who preferred power without responsibility, was a much wilier bird than Derby. He loftily dismissed the diaries as 'very indiscreet, much very dull, all very vulgar'. Those who had 'unburdened their souls . . . when they knew they were talking to a journalist', were not deserving of sympathy. They had only themselves to blame. He smugly claimed *he* had never said anything to Repington he had not been prepared to see in *The Times* next morning. He permanently guarded his privacy behind the marmoreal barriers of his discretion. He claimed Repington was 'thoroughly untrustworthy', but conveniently forgot how eagerly he had once canvassed and applauded his support. Nothing was ever allowed to shake Esher's fine opinion of himself. With untroubled conscience he knowingly misrepresented the diaries' purpose. They were merely intended 'to rehearse the diarist's social triumphs'.[11]

The addressees to whom these condemnatory communications were sent were as important as the tone and content of the messages. Esher chose Stamfordham for that best guaranteed the credulous attention of the king. The Dean of Manchester chose Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, knowing him to be Repington's sworn enemy. He sent the CIGS a catalogue of the diarist's supposed moral shortcomings, salaciously emphasising

the diarist's delight in the company of handsome women. Lubriciously he pronounced, to 'judge by the number and description of the lovely ladies who flit across his pages, Repington would certainly have moved heaven and earth to get Turkey in on our side so that when he was *dégommé* he might be received into everlasting harems!'[12] Grandee politician, courtier, cleric; their eclectic choice of Repington's supposed failings delineated not *his* but *their* moral perturbations.

The official historian of the war, Sir James Edmonds, noted how it had been the gossip and intrigue Repington related in his narrative, that lost him his social position. Another distinguished historian, Cyril Falls, on the evidence of the diaries, supposed Repington to have been an elderly thruster living in the greatest comfort, dining and wining all the prettiest and most charming ladies, while from the vantage of Hampstead continually calling for more sacrifices. This characterisation of Repington is as far from the truth as *Punch*'s spoof, 'War to the Knife & Fork' that portrayed the hero, 'after putting things right at Downing Street and showing everyone at the War Office how their work ought to be done, lunching at Claridge's with six leading ladies, all of them cheery souls'.[13] Shane Leslie noted there was nothing Repington would not blurt out 'like an honest fish-wife. When he is most outspoken he is most true'. There was the rub for those who supposed themselves to be the 'victims' of Repington's portraits: they were too disconcertingly honest!

Repington's judgment of men and what motivated them was both astute and unsparingly honest. He affords his readers an immediate, compelling portrait of England's governing class at war. Members of the establishment waged or avoided the war after their own fashion; Repington merely provided an unvarnished record of their actions. He never surrendered his duty to dine in company any more than he ever forgot to record the interminable lists of his fellow guests and diners. But whatever his critics then and since have thought, his social vignettes were included not because he was a snob. They were simply literary stage setting intended to amuse readers and attract potential purchasers. To disingenuous middle-class moralists, they presented a novel, otherwise inaccessible, social scene. To the familiars of his social circle, what he described was commonplace. Their interest was arrested by the possibility they, their friends or acquaintances might be mentioned or to discover whether they had ever said something indiscreet that he had recorded for posterity.

Repington's critics insisted that the threnody informing his personal experience of the war was a shameless lamentation for his privileged, overindulged, social set; the self-pitying whines of an older man urging the young to pointless sacrifice. But what we read is the frequent angry revelation and denunciation of shortages of munitions and men; the

confusions, the avoidable reprehensible mistakes of politicians and governments; the wasteful *contretemps* and misunderstandings between allies; the endless, destructive interference of certain politicians, most particularly Lloyd George, in matters that would have been best left to the military. Repington's was an early, compelling exegesis on the battle between the frocks and the brass hats.

Repington 'saw' the war as a 'Westerner', determinedly opposed to 'sideshows' dreamed up by 'amateurs' without experience or knowledge of war and the military arts. At the same time, he seriously doubted whether Haig initially had really been aware of the true cost and consequences of entrenched warfare any more than he really acknowledged the disadvantages of fighting in a sea of mud. Sir Douglas, maybe because he was persuaded he was divinely inspired, for long seemed to think he could win without acceding to the same dreadful imperatives as other commanders. He insisted he would find a way to break through the enemy lines and gallop on to victory. Repington early acknowledged and understood why the German Army had to be battered into complete humiliating submission. The majority of his post-war critics accused him of being heartless and uncaring of the human cost.

As a reviewer in the American press pointed out, due to the short-sighted enthusiasm of biographers, the reputations of many of the war's leaders were in danger of being ruined. He instanced Henry Wilson whose immediate reputation as a clever soldier was largely destroyed by his biographer's injudicious use of extracts from his personal letters and above all his diary, 'the most sensational self-exposure in all literature'.[14] Wilson could not be blamed for the posthumous publication by others of his private papers. Repington, however, deliberately designed the diaries of his war experiences to attract the maximum attention. He hoped the consequent expected huge sales would repair his finances. Instead he succeeded in offending many, and particularly Lloyd George. The former prime minister was angrily intent, at almost any cost, to justify his reputation as 'the man who won the war'. Malignly, unjustly and dishonestly his *War Memoirs* besmirched the correspondent's patriotism.

Despite the obvious prejudice and self-interested animosity of Repington's contemporary critics, historians, for the most part,[15] have accepted their judgments. Repington has been dismissed as an intriguer, an untrustworthy, dishonest, scoundrel, and his journalism, books, published diaries of the war unduly neglected. Yet, they remain what they have always been – an honest record of one man's opinions. The conversations he recorded and published that caused such a social and political furore, illuminate brilliantly that boundary where publicity and politics merge and so often collide.