

## Reporting the First World War

Charles Repington was Britain's most influential military correspondent during the first two decades of the twentieth century. From 1914 to 1918, Repington's commentary in *The Times*, 'The War Day by Day', was read and discussed by opinion-shapers and decision-makers worldwide who sought to better understand the momentous events happening around them, and his subsequently published diaries offered a compelling portrait of England's governing class at war. This is the first major study of Repington's life and career from the Boer War to the end of the Great War. A. J. A. Morris presents unique insights into the conduct of the First World War and into leading figures in the British high command: French, Haig, Robertson, Wilson. The book offers modern readers a rewardingly fresh understanding of the conflict, and will appeal to scholars of the First World War and British political and military history of the period.

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Reporting the First World War:  
Charles Repington, *The Times*  
and the Great War, 1914–1918

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For CIS

LVII

Grow old along with me

For the best is yet to be.

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## Preface

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Colonel Repington's war was the Great War of 1914–1918. His contemporaries referred to it as the Last, or European War. Quite deliberately he chose 'The First World War' as the title for his wartime diaries, and so provided that dreadful engagement's lasting, most familiar name. Critics claimed it was unduly cynical of him to imply there would be other world wars. He retorted, history had taught him nations were unlikely to stop waging war one with another. He preferred to acknowledge reality rather than indulge in wishful thinking and millennial rhetoric.

For the first two decades of the twentieth century he was the most influential military writer in the country. On questions of defence he was unmatched as a critic and communicator. From 1914 to 1918, his commentary in *The Times*, 'The War Day by Day', was read, dissected and discussed by opinion shapers and decision makers world-wide. A familiar coterie – ministers, statesmen, civil servants, soldiers and sailors – provided him with a constant supply of reliable information. His military informants were for the most part friends or acquaintances from his army days. Sir John French was a close personal friend, but his relationship with Douglas Haig, who succeeded French as C-in-C of the British Expeditionary Force, was never better than reserved. Haig knew that Repington questioned his capacity to command. He resented particularly the military correspondent's effrontery in daring to question his decisions.

Repington generally enjoyed excellent relations with the British and Allied high commands, but he thoroughly distrusted and disliked Henry Wilson. Had Repington not been obliged to leave the army, for which he blamed Wilson, many believed he, not Wilson, would have become Chief of the Imperial Staff.

Much of his writing received extravagant praise and was widely cited with approval. However he never lacked critics, as eager to censure the man as they were contemptuous and disdainful of his opinions. The publication of his wartime diaries in 1920 became the catalyst of this critical opprobrium. Did he really deserve either approval or censure in such immoderate measure? Were his critics justified in characterising him

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as a too clever by half, unpatriotic scoundrel? Was the messenger disparaged simply because his message was disapproved? Neither friend nor foe lightly ignored or forgot what Repington chose to say about them. He was well named 'To's gadfly', for his criticisms were intended to goad and sting.

The Radical Liberal editor Henry Massingham, in an attempt to diminish the influence of a troublesome and persistent critic, characterised him as a narcissistic dandy, 'the gorgeous Wreckington'. The Unionist editor J. L. Garvin, in the course of a mendacious, abusive tirade, scornfully dismissed Repington as 'the Duke of Yellington'. Lloyd George did not scruple to question the military correspondent's patriotism, shamelessly asserting that Repington had been prepared to put his country's security at risk to satisfy his own selfish ends. Why should an ex-prime minister indulge in such bitter, slanderous recrimination a decade after the journalist's death?

A happy coincidence – gaining access to *The Times*' archive that contained many of Repington's letters, and the simultaneous discovery of a battered, second-hand copy of his wartime diaries – persuaded me the life of this soldier turned journalist offered the possibility for an unusually well-documented account of military–press relations in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Over the years many friends, far more knowledgeable than I, have generously and readily responded to my requests for help and advice. Were I to list them all, their number would challenge the number of names in a typical index of one of Repington's books. I hope, therefore, it will be understood why I mention only those who have helped most directly. The greatest debt I owe to Michael Chapman, who, ever uncomplaining and patient, has provided detailed answers to my endless questions. Celia Lee first pointed out to me the treasure-trove of Jean Hamilton's diaries, which I otherwise would most certainly have missed, and kindly provided me with the relevant transcripts. Michael Ackroyd generously volunteered facts and photographs from his unrivalled collection of materials pertaining to Amington Hall and the Repington family. I also thank those friends and colleagues who at different times have read early drafts of chapters and patiently pointed out the mistakes and blemishes: Bruce Murray, Noel Garson, Andrew Porter, Michael Howard, Keith Jeffery, Roger Stearn, Samuel Hynes and Alistair Irwin. The late John Grigg was always a present help and unfailing source of excellent advice, as were the late John Keegan and my much missed, lifelong friend and mentor, John Griffith. Anthony helped pick up the pieces when I faltered in my task and first introduced me to the undoubted benefits of the computer. For saving the text, and on occasion

my sanity, as a consequence of unplanned ‘adventures’ caused by the transfer from my familiar, battered typewriter to modern technology, I owe much to the skills of my saintly friend, Jay Diamond.

Finally, as ever, my heartfelt thanks to Cis. Without her constant support I doubt whether this book would ever have been completed.

A. J. A. Morris  
*Chun*

## Abbreviations

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AC	Army Council
AEF	American Expeditionary Force
AG	Adjutant General
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
C-B	Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CD	Defence Committee
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CIGS	Chief of Imperial General Staff
DAAG	Deputy Assistant Adjutant General
DGO	Director General of Ordnance
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
DMO	Director of Military Operations
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
QQG	Le Grand Quartier Général/French General Staff
HQ	Headquarters
LG	David Lloyd George
<i>MP</i>	<i>Morning Post</i>
NDA	National Defence Association
NID	Naval Intelligence Department
NSL	National Service League
PHS	Printing House Square
PM	Prime Minister
psa	pass staff college
QMG	Quartermaster General
RA	Royal Artillery
RE	Royal Engineers
RFC	Royal Flying Corps

List of abbreviations

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SWC	Supreme War Council
TF	Territorial Force
USN	United States Navy
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
VC	Victoria Cross