



Putting the 'citizens' back into the 'citizen army'

by Christopher Phillips

2014-02-17 19:45:11

Now that the dust appears to have settled, I'd like to revisit Michael Gove and his comments regarding the First World War made at the start of the year. But rather than get into the ins and outs and rights and lefts of the comments made by the Education Secretary, more important is the fact that what Gove said ' and doubtless the manner in which he said it ' triggered off a wave of ripostes, retorts and responses from a whole host of commentators, and based on a wildly varied level of historical research and basic knowledge. Whether you agree or not with Michael Gove, it seems that everyone has an opinion on the First World War. There are two that I would like to pick out just briefly: the first was my colleague Jessica Meyer's response on her excellent [blog](#), which you should all read, based upon in depth exploration of historical documents and illustrating the nuance and complexity of the subject from the point of view of a historian.

The second is none of those things. It was written by the TV critic of the *Guardian*, Stuart Jeffries, as a direct response to Gove's criticisms of *Blackadder*. The [article](#) in question, which received near-universal praise in the reader comments posted below the line, contains one section in particular which bears repeating:

"most of us accept the argument that the carnage of the Somme was in part due to the revisionist historical dictum that our troops were lions led by donkeys ' that the flower of British youth died in the mud of Flanders and the Somme, and in the seas off Jutland, because of leadership issues that make RBS and G4S seem beacons of *managerial competence*."

It's the final part of this sentence which most interested me. The idea, seemingly hard-wired into the popular imagination of the First World War in Britain, is that the war was managed, or directed, or commanded, by an insular, out-of-touch, arrogant, upper-class elite, entirely unfamiliar with the requirements of a modern fighting force and hopelessly incapable of facing up to the implications of industrialised warfare. It was an idea promoted most vociferously by the wartime Prime Minister David Lloyd George in the aftermath of the war ' with the twin aims of promoting his own role as the 'man who won the war?', and to denigrate the senior commanders with whom his relations had, at best, been fractious, and at worst downright poisonous. If we take the comments of Stuart Jeffries as a litmus test, it's fair to say he succeeded.

But what has happened to the debate since the *War Memoirs* in the 1930s has gone even further than Lloyd George intended. The 'lions and donkeys' school of thought, which achieved undoubted superiority in the 1960s, served to effectively reduce the wartime relationship of civilian and military to the binary: the 'donkeys' were the military, the ignorant, insular, stubborn buffoons, barely worthy of the epithet of 'professional' soldiery; the 'lions' were the brave civilians, Kitchener's volunteers and ' after the volunteers had been massacred on the killing fields of the Somme ' the conscripts who suffered at Passchendaele. These civilians were the duped, or, alternatively, the unthinking, unquestioning drones, sent to their deaths in pointless, mindless offensives.

Such an outlook has allowed for two things to happen simultaneously. We have been able to commemorate those men who fought as heroes whilst simultaneously absolving 'the public' of any responsibility for the conduct of the war. It allows us to ignore the difficult question as to why the fighting took on the character that it did. As has been pointed out by John Bourne, if Haig was the unthinking, cavalry-obsessed simpleton that history has portrayed, how on earth did he command an army of two million men, utilising the most thoroughly modern equipment and relying on an all-arms mixture of man, horse and machine - of science, technology, communications alongside brute force' Surely, had Haig been incapable of adaptation, the army he commanded would have remained at least in structure if not in size a remnant of the Victorian army he knew and had spent his entire career in?

My research over the past few years has sought to redress this imbalance, by placing the people who fought the war at the heart of the story, not as mindless, unthinking pawns on a giant chess board controlled by the likes of Haig and Ludendorff, but as men and women who made active choices and whose contributions were not merely reduced to those of 'cannon fodder'. This was not a war fought by an insular, out-of-touch Army, far removed from the society it was employed to fight for ' both geographically and characteristically ' it was in fact a war fought by the British people and utilizing all of the skills required to operate a vast, global economy in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

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