



The smaller picture: 'In Retreat' - Herbert Read and the 2nd Green Howards during the German March Offensive 1918

by Philip Dutton

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PRELUDE *"The enemy is rather threatening for the moment.?"*

Wednesday 20 March 1918 (BEF GHQ, France): much concerned for the welfare of his wife and recently-arrived third child ' a much longed for son (born 15 March), Sir Douglas Haig penned a solicitous letter to Lady Haig. Acknowledging the strong likelihood of an imminent German offensive on the southern sector of the British held front Sir Douglas regretfully explained that his planned visit to England would be better delayed until the following week - "*The enemy is rather threatening for the moment..*"[\[1\]](#) But keen to maintain his wife's health and morale, the fifty-seven year old Field Marshal arranged for his cook to make some soup for her and organised for it to be sent to her by King's Messenger. The next day, while this sustaining broth was in transit, the awaited German offensive was indeed launched following a terrific early morning bombardment of British positions; a bombardment which *'in grandeur of scale, of awe, and of destruction surpassed any other in the World War'*[\[2\]](#). The German March Offensive had begun.

SUMMARY

Written in 1919 but not published until 1925, Herbert Read's short memoir 'In Retreat' tells the story of the 2nd Green Howards during the German 1918 Spring Offensive. Despite its brevity the account is rich in the type of detail missing from many of the official unit war diaries of the period. Though a small picture of a huge event it would be hard to find a better account of what the infantry of Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army went through during those last days in March 1918.

1918 - a year in the shadows?

In terms of public awareness the date '21 March 2018' may well trigger more ideas of the spring equinox than the centenary of the opening day of a cataclysmic battle on the Western Front. Fixated on the tragedies of the Somme in 1916, and, to a lesser degree, the dismal slog towards Passchendaele in 1917, the start of the 1918 German Spring Offensive gets short shrift, even though this monumental battle represented the greatest possible danger to the Allied cause in the west since the German invasion of Belgium and France in August 1914.[\[3\]](#)

The German March 1918 Offensive

The Kaiser's Battle (*Kaiserschlacht*?) was planned as the decisive battle of the war and the scale and complexity its organization and execution, virtually defy description. The size of the battlefield, numbers of troops involved, and the tumultuous progress of the fighting impose the heaviest of burdens on the chronicler seeking to establish an accurate and coherent narrative. Seventeen years were to pass before the British Official account of the March fighting saw print.^[4] Its arrival in 1935 was met with considerable interest.

Herbert Read's 'Time & Tide' Review of the Official History

In February 1935 the political journal *'Time and Tide'* included a review of the British official version of the German offensive. Entitled *'History and Reality'*, the article was written by the editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, a highly respected literary figure, poet, art theorist and pacifist, who was particularly qualified to comment as he had been a by no means disinterested bystander in the events depicted. **Herbert Edward Read** (1893-1968) served with distinction on the Western Front during the First World War. Commissioned into the Green Howards^[5] in 1915, he was awarded the MC in 1917 and the DSO the following year. In March 1918, as acting Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion of the Green Howards (2/Green Howards), then occupying defensive positions opposite St Quentin, Read had the misfortune to be deeply implicated in the anxieties, chaos and destruction of the March Offensive, but the very good fortune to survive it. This was for him an unforgettable experience and one that compelled him to write an account of his ordeal, which, though completed by 1919 as *'In Retreat'*, was not published until 1925. Read's participation in the great battle inevitably informed his responses to Edmonds' narrative. Acknowledging both his personal and literary involvement in the battle, Read mused on the differing 'truths' offered by the 'scientific historian' (Edmonds) and the experience-based 'poetic truths', offered by the 'artist' (Read himself). Taking, by way of example, Edmonds', necessarily summary, treatment of the activities of the 2/Green Howards, and scrutinising the professional historian's use of the tasteful conventions of military historical phraseology, Read came down emphatically on the side of poetic truth: *'History is ...an aggregation of facts which excludes feeling, excludes humanity, excludes truth. The only truth is in poetry'*^[6] So saying, Read's admiration for the Official History was high, and he commended Edmonds' *'scientific account of objective forces and events'*^[7], and his consummate skills of concision and clarity. Having vigorously flown the flag for the poetic sensibility Read, despite quibbles on Edmonds' treatment of artillery co-operation and the performance of the Royal Flying Corps, gave an emphatic 'thumbs up' for *'1918'* Volume I.^[8]

In Retreat 'origins

If Edmonds' History of the March Offensive constituted an attempt to render a comprehensible version of the 'bigger picture', Herbert Read's treatment of those days is, understandably, more narrowly focused. The origins of his memoir may be traced to early April 1918, when Read, enjoying a temporary reprieve from the crisis wrote a letter to his fianc in Leeds: *'I think the experiences of the last ten days have had a rather deep effect on me...I saw humanity very naked and life more precious and more pitiful'*^[9]. Earlier in the same letter he intimated that he was unwilling to let her hear the details of that *'raging hell... until I have written a book about it.'*^[10] Read duly began, in the spring of 1919^[11], a prose account of his part in the 'retirement', which was finished that same year. Publication proved something of a problem and the work did not see print until 1925, when Leonard and Virginia Woolf issued *'In Retreat'* under the imprint of the Hogarth Press. A self-consciously literary outlet for what was essentially a highly specific military reminiscence written by a poet and (at the time) museum curator^[12], *'In Retreat'* was well received, and later merited positive comments (and indeed a single 'asterisk' emblematic of merit) in Cyril Falls' *'War Books'* (1930).^[13]

'In Retreat' 'a transcript of experience'^[14]

Less than 50 pages in length[15], *In Retreat* is rich in intimate detail. Read combines a record of his personal sensations with a series of vivid, documentary-like, pictures of the actions involving the 2/Green Howards between 21 and 29 March 1918. The bare outline of his story is as follows: the battalion, in reserve on 20 March, was rushed up to the 'Battle Zone' on the morning 21 March, there to repel a series of mass German infantry assaults. Following an injury to Battalion's Commanding Officer in the early afternoon of the 22nd, Read assumed effective leadership (up until 26th March) of the battalion and, though repeatedly near-surrounded by the advancing enemy, co-ordinated with cool military professionalism a series of withdrawals. The much depleted and exhausted battalion, denied rest, is engaged in more defensive fighting before its eventual relief from the line.

His narrative includes many valuable historical insights into the nature of the battle. These include: descriptions of the local British defences and initial success in repelling the enemy onslaughts in the Ropy sector; the intensity and accuracy of German artillery bombardments; enemy infantry infiltration tactics; the shortcomings of British artillery (see **Appendix 1**) and the disorienting effects of fog, mist and smoke upon the defenders. Importantly, he highlighted the British failure to complete an effective third line of defensive trenches 'the Reserve or 'Green Line' - and the negative impact this had on British morale[16]. The memoir reads at times like a military report, with its spare clarity and precisely timed messages (carried by heroic 'runners?') punctuating the chaotic course of days and nights where sleep was not an option and food and water scarcely available.

The record of actuality is complemented by Read's scrupulous depiction of his own sensations during the battle. The accumulations of anxiety in the anticipation of the expected German attack; admissions of despair and exhaustion as disappointments mount and defeat and extinction loom. Also, contrastingly, moments of acute elation: following the repulse of an attack, or the discovery of French infantry reinforcements arriving in support. Discernible throughout is Read's competence as an officer and a very humane one at that. His concern for his men shines through[17]. If Read took pride in his military career in the post-war years it was surely as much due to his having earned the respect of the 'other ranks' in the battalion as to the official awards that formally marked his gallant service.

Conclusion

Although Edmond's '1918' Volume I and Read's '*In Retreat?*' could not be more different, - the authors, unlikely as it sounds, shared some things in common. Both experienced at first hand disastrous headlong military retreats 'Edmonds as a Divisional Staff Officer on the Western Front after the Battle of Mons in August 1914[18], and Read as a temporary infantry battalion commander in March 1918. Both were writers of the highest quality 'valuing detachment, analysis and clarity of expression. And both 'the much older and brilliantly academic Regular Edmonds, and youthful 'imagist' poet and literary-theorist, temporary officer Read - shared the highest sense of professionalism as soldiers.

Widely disparate as they are the two works offer complementary truths: the fact-based objectivity of the military historian and the experience-charged response of the artist/writer. Read's short account, though specifically recording the trials experienced by the 2/Green Howards includes observations of general conditions, tribulations and, on occasion, minor triumphs, that were almost certainly shared by other infantry units of Fifth Army. Read's 'small window' opens on to a narrow view of a tiny portion of the huge landscape of the March 1918 battle front. But the wealth of data it supplies and the humanity with which writer conveys his and his unit's ordeal helps make more intelligible, from the British perspective at least, the vastly complicated story of the German Spring Offensive - that hugely significant, yet relatively ignored, event in the history of the Great War, the centenary of which we commemorate this year.

APPENDIX 1

Read makes reference in *'In Retreat'* to five instances of, what we would now call 'friendly fire'. Undoubtedly there were cases of British 'shorts' causing havoc during the retreat ' but in the chaos of a rapidly moving series of actions such accidents, were inevitable. Read's eager attribution of blame to his own side may well be based on 'experience' but his ready identification of the origins of the incoming fire also perhaps reflects inherent prejudices of the infantryman towards the gunners. The difficulties for the latter were legion and the prevalence of thick fog and heavy smoke only added to the problems of registration and observation. There may well be some truth in A G MacDonell's wry definition of the function of the artillery subaltern in the latter part of the Great War: '*... a young artillery gentleman had to be attached to each battalion headquarters in the Line, whose duty it was to point out the fundamental difference between east-bound and west-bound projectiles and thus soothe the fighting troops into feeling a partial, at any rate, security.*'^[19]

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----- NOTES -----

[1] *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig?*, edited by Robert Blake, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1952, p.294

[2] *History of the First World War*, Basil Liddell Hart, Cassell & Co Ltd, 1970, p.493

[3] '21 March 1918 was one of the great turning points of the First World War and, in the number of men involved, was probably the greatest battle of that war.' *The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1918: the First Day of the German Spring Offensive*, Martin Middlebrook, Penguin Books, 1983, p.9

[4] *Military Operations. France and Belgium 1918: [Vol I]. The German March Offensive and its Preliminaries*, Brigadier-General Sir J E Edmonds, Macmillan, 1935.

[5] *The Green Howards (Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment)*

[6] *Time and Tide*, 9 February 1935 (Quoted in *Herbert Read. All That was Left of Them*, edited by Benedict Read, The Orange Press, 2014, p.209)

[7] 'Ibid, p.210. The praise for Edmonds was in marked contrast to Read's reaction to Liddell Hart's *The Real War* (1930), which he condemned as a 'shoddy piece of rhetoric' in the July the 1930 issue of *Criterion*. See ' *The Real War?: Liddell Hart, Cruttwell and Falls?*, Hew Strachan in *The First World War and British Military History*, edited by Brian Bond, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1991, p.46

[8] The military operations of 1918 ultimately required four additional volumes of official histories ' making a grand total of five. 'Put together these make a work substantially longer than the Bible?; see *The Imperial War Museum Book of 1918: Year of Victory*, Malcolm Brown, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1998, p.xxix.

[9] *Extracts from a War Diary*, Herbert Read, entry for 1 April 1918, quoted in *Herbert Read. All That was Left of Them*, edited by Benedict Read, The Orange Press, 2014, p.136.

[10] Ibid, p.135

[11] *In Retreat*, Herbert Read, The Hogarth Press, 1925, p.7

[12] Since 1922 Read had been Assistant Curator in the Department of Ceramics and Glass in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

[13] *War Books. An Annotated Bibliography of Books about the Great War*, Cyril Falls, (new edition introduced by R J Wyatt, Greenhill Books, 1989, p.226-27. (Originally published in 1930; the single asterisk denoted, in Fall's categorization, 'a good book').

[14] *In Retreat*, Herbert Read, The Hogarth Press, 1925, p.8

[15] In its original 1925 edition *In Retreat* comprises 44 numbered pages (including Introduction and Appendix; if the map of 'The Route of our Retreat' is included the total would be 46 pages.

[16] 'We found an empty mockery and I was in despair??, *In Retreat*, op.cit, p,23

[17] One instance stands out: entrenched before the village of Esmerly-Hallon, on 23 March, he distributes sustenance (Army biscuits and red wine) in almost sacramental fashion to his famished men. *In Retreat*, op cit., p.29.

[18] As a senior Staff Officer (GS01) of the 4th Division of the British Expeditionary Force.

[19] *England Their England*, A G MacDonell, Folio Society edition, London, 1987, p.4. (Originally published by MacMillan & Company in 1933). My thanks to Chris McCarthy for pointing me towards this reference

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