

Adrian Gilbert. *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914.* Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014. 304 pp. \$25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84908-859-6.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The autumn of 1914 looms greatly in any study of the twentieth-century British army. It was, depending on one's bent, a time of triumph, a disgrace, evidence of the donkeys-leading-lions school of history, or, with the Bowmen of Agincourt aiding the soldiers at Mons, part of a literally mythic event. While it is, in that respect, among the most storied epochs in British military history, it is also among the most studied. Thus, a historian's promise to present the "real story" of the "Old Contemptibles" is no small undertaking. What secrets will his work uncover? What fundamental misperceptions will fall away as the real truth is demonstrated? Adrian Gilbert suggests the answer in his introduction to *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914*, by citing Basil Liddell Hart's quip that Brigadier-General J. E. Edmonds's twenty-eight-volume Official History was "official but not history," and explaining that "British histories of the 1914 campaign typically adopt the emotionally comforting paradigm of the plucky Briton giving the overbearing foreign bully a bloody nose" (p. 12). Instead,

Gilbert says that his use of first-person accounts and other primary sources would "provide vital evidence of how the battles of 1914 were actually fought, sometimes confirming the traditional view, sometimes not" (p. 13). Gilbert's work is a perfectly fine, and often quite insightful, chronicle of the British experience in the first few months of World War I, but few readers will sense the sort of iconoclastic blockbuster promised at the outset. Instead, there is little materially new in the book, and a great deal of reliance on secondary sources, especially the writing of Terence Zuber. An unfortunate error, early in the work, twice identifies Garnet Wolseley as "Field Marshal Wolsey;" such mistakes are easy to make but lead readers to wonder what else has been overlooked in the writing and editing process. (In fact, none others were noted.)

Challenge of Battle is straightforward and chronological. It takes the British Expeditionary Force under Sir John French from Mons to the disappointment of continued withdrawal to the Marne, then to the Aisne. Finally, after movement

to Ypres, the work moves to the trenches that would come to define the western front. And, Gilbert does, in fact, quote numerous personal diaries and unpublished reminiscences, including those of medical officers. Their higher survival rates made them especially useful 1914 sources, and their characterizations of line officers, morale, and everyday heroism are captivating. There are also several German accounts of their enemy, most of which indicate a healthy respect for the British soldiers and their courage, if not their tactics.

Gilbert frequently brings the discussion down to regimental, battalion, and even company level. In general, these unit-level descriptions are compelling, but raw citation of their casualty counts, without corresponding data on unit depletion, detracts from their value. When the Irish Guards lost three hundred men in the “Great Retreat,” or the King’s Own Yeoman Light Infantry suffered ninety killed and wounded from a direct artillery hit, the reader is uncertain of the extent to which the units were able to sustain these casualty rates, especially after their initial, horrific losses.

The book is especially strong in two areas; its analysis of British artillery, and descriptions of soldiers who went over the hill rather than over the top. Gilbert describes shortcomings in several aspects of the Royal Artillery’s deployment, including an unwillingness to take advantage of screening hills, and a severe shortage of the right types of shells. Stragglers, deserters, and units simply losing their nerve and being put to flight by German attacks are likewise thoroughly covered. Once again, both are well documented, but like Gilbert’s discussion of the cult of the offensive, are consistent with much recent scholarship. Gilbert also provides ample maps, both strategic and tactical, which genuinely aid his narrative.

“Under promise and over deliver.” It’s the motto by which many briefers operate, and it presents a principle equally apt to historians. This book is a solid, interesting, and easy-to-follow de-

scription of the BEF in 1914. It would make a good guide for a traveler planning a visit to the early battlefields of the war, or a lay reader seeking an overview of that period. But it overpromises in its suggestion that a unique story will be presented; the last Official History volume was completed in 1952, but many writers since then have documented a very different experience. It’s the real story, all right. It just isn’t a new one.

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