The New Armies in Training is a booklet originally published in 1915, made up from a set of short newspaper articles which Rudyard Kipling wrote in the fall of 1914. Kipling produced these articles first as a means of informing the public as to the nature of the British army's new “Kitchener” units being raised from the scores of volunteers flocking to the colors after the start of the First World War. Second, and perhaps more importantly, he wrote as a call to those men who had not yet volunteered, to join the army and fight for King and Country.

This edition, published by the Uniform Press in 2015, was timed for the 100th anniversary of the first edition, and also for the 150th anniversary of Kipling’s birth. It is a pretty little book, as suits a collectable anniversary edition: well bound with heavy paper and with a reproduction of Andrew Garrick Gow’s painting Volunteers Drilling in the Courtyard of Burlington House on the cover, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

The book is sixty-one pages long, and is broken into six sections, which correspond to the original newspaper articles. Each section covers a different part or aspect of the New Armies: Line infantry battalions from the north of England; artillery and Army Service Corps units; Scottish battalions; the Canadian Division; artillery mule drivers from India; and finally, Territorial Force units.

For aficionados of Kipling this book is a delight. It is full of the lyrical descriptive language of all his work, and his intimate relationship with the British army comes through quite clearly. Careful reproduction of regional accents, army slang and other special terms, and the interactions between private soldiers and noncommissioned officers are all here. The book also includes loving descriptions of Indian troops, their customs, speech, and relationships to their officers. Due to the wartime security environment in which this book was produced, Kipling’s references to the identities of these units are always oblique, or couched in coded language—perhaps a frustration for some, but for others yet another way to experience Kipling’s “insider” familiarity with the varied nature of Britain’s Imperial forces.

His admiration, bordering on awe, of the Canadian troops ends in an emotive passage sub-titled, “The Vanguard of a Nation,” which concludes: “In all their talk I caught no phrase that could be twisted into the shadow of a boast or any claim to superiority, even in respect to their kit and outfit; no word or implication of self-praise for any sacrifice made or intended. It was their rigid humility that impressed one as most significant and, perhaps, most menacing for such as may have to deal with this vanguard of an armed
Nation” (p. 43). These Canadians, of course, were those who in the spring of 1915 would endure the horrific artillery barrages and first-ever gas attacks of the Second Battle of Ypres, which would destroy much of the original organization written about by Kipling in this book. Given the heroism and sacrifice displayed by the Canadian Division in that battle, Kipling was probably not far off in his assessment.

The real, underlying purpose of the book, and the articles it was composed from, is revealed throughout in asides and other statements designed not only to engender pride in these men and their units, but to chide and even scold those who in the first autumn of the war had not yet enlisted. References to the quiet and stoic patriotism of the volunteers, their keenness for the work of becoming experts at soldiering, and the sluggishness of the government in providing adequate barracks and other facilities appear with not-too-subtle references to those shirkers not in the field, training and enduring with their fellow countrymen. These references lose any subtlety they might have had in the final passage of the book, where Kipling lets loose with this shaming reproach, under the subtitle, “The Real Question”: “But what will be the position in years to come of the young man who has deliberately elected to outcaste himself from this all-embracing brotherhood? What of his family, what of his descendants, when the books have been closed and the last balance struck of sacrifice and sorrow in every hamlet, village, parish, suburb, city, shire, district, province and Dominion throughout the Empire?” (p. 61).

It is sentiments such as these which led to the throngs of volunteers for the British army, well into 1915. These volunteers, of course, included Kipling’s only son, who was killed as a nineteen-year-old second lieutenant in the Irish Guards at the battle of Loos, and whose eyesight was so bad that he was only allowed to serve after his famous father intervened with the authorities. Kipling was devastated by this loss and the feelings of guilt it brought. It is generally accepted that his role as the popular hagiographer of England and what it stood for caused a waning of his popularity after the Great War, when some of the attitudes he had espoused had less traction. In that sense, this booklet serves, perhaps, as a final review of Kipling’s position before the deluge; his beautiful writing is haunted by our knowledge of what in 1914 was already happening to his world, and would later happen to the men described in these pages.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at 
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50346

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.