

The Somme

Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson

Reviewed by Dr Peter Stanley

Our understanding of history seems to move in little jumps. We read the work of historians who argue a case based on the evidence they present, and the understanding we thought we shared is suddenly under challenge. We read, consider, and – if they do their job well – our understanding shifts. With *The Somme* Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have indeed done well. For decades – since the 1960s certainly, probably since the 1930s – we have believed many things about the Somme offensive of 1916 that Prior and Wilson challenge and generally succeed in refuting.

We believed that the Somme was the product of blimpish generals rather than their political masters: well, some of us. In any case the authors show that it was not. They show that the Somme offensive was not a response to Verdun, as we have all assumed. We believed that the Kitchener battalions walked into battle in long straight lines – I certainly did. They show that they did not. And so on.

Prior and Wilson are two Australian scholars (one late of Adelaide University and long established at the Australian Defence Force Academy, the other in active retirement in Adelaide). They now have the method of producing authoritative books on the war on the Western Front while based a thousand kilometres apart (and 10,000 kilometres from their main sources) pretty much down pat. They produced *Command on the Western Front* (a study of Sir Henry Rawlinson) in 1992 and *Passchendaele: the Untold Story* in 1996. Both have published other books on the Great War.

The Prior and Wilson method relies on the old-fashioned but not-to-be-sniffed-at approach of obtaining as many relevant contemporary documents as they can find – mainly in the National Archives in Britain (which they still quaintly think of as the ‘Public Record Office’). These they scour, analyse and interpret, asking questions, proposing, testing and resolving: just like historians are supposed to do. The beauty of their approach is that they are prepared to challenge ideas and views which we have taken for granted. (The disadvantages of their method are that they tend to confirm interpretations which they have already advanced – the centrality of artillery rather than infantry, for instance – and they can appear a bit smart-alecky: a problem I sympathise with.)

The result is to turn on its head a battle which you might think has been more intensively studied than any other, in the Great War at least. What, I wonder, will the Western Front industry and its main trade union, the Western Front Association, make of this book? I was tempted to put off reviewing it until I had gathered a swag of other reviews, not so much to crib from their evaluations, but to comment not just on the book but on its reception.

Three receptions are possible. *The Somme* might be accepted as giving a fresh, provocative but justified view of this most compelling battle. Or it might be rejected, with revisionist revisionists contesting the authors’ arguments. This contention might at least generate some productive synthesis. Worse of all, *The Somme* might be ignored (not least because the authors come from, where was it? Adelaide?) The same fate has befallen other good books.

Condescension would be unfortunate, and not just because the authors are leading scholars internationally. In any case, Prior and Wilson are not apostles of Charles Bean. His third volume spends about 300 pages detailing the six-week agony of Pozières-Mouquet Farm. (Still, it is sometimes forgotten that Bean did not chronicle every attack by every battalion on every trench: he glosses over many of the later attacks as being repeats of earlier assaults.) Prior and Wilson take a refreshingly un-parochial view: they are military historians who happen to live in Australia, not ‘Australian military historians’. Accordingly, the part of the three Australian divisions’ in the July-August attacks occupy no more space than do the 36th (Ulster) or 51st (Highland) Divisions. Even so, their twelve-page chapter ‘A Hell of a Time’ judges Pozières-Mouquet Farm to have been ‘the worst ... of all the tactical nightmares on the Somme’. Prior and Wilson sketch a debacle in mid-August that suggests not just how cold-blooded senior commanders could be (Australian as well as British) but which also implicitly challenges the Australian assumption that the troops were much more able than their commanders. On the Somme, it seems, everyone was learning, and by making the most appalling and costly mistakes.

This is classic military history. The authors do not muck about finding colourful and moving human stories to personalise the titanic actions of which they write. Their language can be as clinical as the British official histories whose footsteps they dog. Still, it seems somewhat reprehensible that Prior and Wilson as historians betray the same disregard for the individual as the senior commanders whose Olympian detachment they bemoan. Hardly anyone mentioned is given initials, much less a first name, and none are introduced or described as people. This is ironic at least. Perhaps it is justifiable in a book of this scale, and one which takes such a clear and iconoclastic view of such a vast battle. But someone else needs to take on the Australian part in the Somme to revise Peter Charlton’s *Pozières 1916*. ♦

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