



THE DONKEYS

ALAN CLARK

'A shell-burst of a book' *The Economist*



P I M L I C O

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THE DONKEYS

Alan Clark was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. He served in the Household Cavalry before qualifying for the Bar in 1955. In 1974 he became Conservative MP for Plymouth Sutton and went on to hold a number of ministerial posts. He has written several works of military history: *The Fall of Crete*, *Barbarossa: The Russo-German Conflict 1941-45* and *Aces High: The War in the Air over the Western Front*. He has also published his *Diaries*.

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For
JANE

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Ludendorff: 'The English soldiers fight like lions.'

Hoffman: 'True. But don't we know that they
are lions led by donkeys.'

FALKENHAYN: *Memoirs*

Introductory Note

This is the story of the destruction of an army—the old professional army of the United Kingdom that always won the last battle, whose regiments had fought at Quebec, Corunna, in the Indies, were trained in musketry at Hythe, drilled on the parched earth of Chuddapore, and were machine-gunned, gassed and finally buried in 1915.

I was drawn to this subject almost by chance. While working in another field I came across the diary of an officer in the Leinsters and was overcome by the horror of the contents and the sense of resignation and duty that characterized the writing. I began serious research, back through the orders of battle and the unit records, in an effort to find out what happened to these men who endured for so long such incredible privations, such extremes of misery and squalor. Their casualties were frightful. In the first two hours of the Battle of Loos more British soldiers died than the total number of casualties in all three services on both sides on D-Day 1944. And slowly, as the field of operations widened, their fate became apparent. Again and again they were called upon to attempt the impossible, and in the end they were all killed. It was as simple as that.

My generation did not fight in the Second World War. To many of us the First is as remote as the Crimean, its causes and its personnel obscure and disreputable. I have tried to put down simply, factually, tediously even, what happened to these men in one year, 1915. Because in print they have no memorial. The huge cemeteries of regimented headstones that stand on 'ceded ground'—these are for the 'New Armies', the volunteers who died on the Somme the following year and for the conscripts slaughtered at Passchendaele. The graves of the soldiers killed in 1915 are harder to find: clusters of white crosses that stand where

the men actually fell on the sites of the German redoubts or of the advanced dressing stations, often away from the roads, hidden in folds of the ground, signposted only by the fading green notices of the War Graves Commission. And in the same way the evidence of their fate is scattered among unit records, official histories, regimental magazines published years afterwards. Today there are very few visitors to the graveyards. The visitors' book at the Bois Carré cemetery at Loos contains only three English names for the whole of 1959. And so it is with the sources which, undisturbed for decades, gather dust in museum libraries.

I am anxious that this work should not be thought an 'indictment'. It is quite outside my intention to take part in arguments which relate, in any case, chiefly to the years of 1916 and 1917. This study is concerned simply with what the Army was ordered to do, and what happened when it attempted to carry out those orders; the results being important from a military-historical standpoint in that this year, 1915, saw the core of professional quality dissipated before it had been either properly equipped or substantially reinforced.

In compiling the material I owe an immense debt to that acknowledged master of military history, Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, who has allowed me access to his private files on the period and has been of the greatest help at every stage in the development of the book. I have also been greatly assisted by Miss Coombs of the Imperial War Museum Library, who has helped me in tracking down obscure items—often on the slenderest of leads. My thanks are also due to Captain Burgon Bickersteth, the historian of the Cavalry Brigade, for his help with documents and in conversation; to Colonel L. B. Beuttler for his assistance in extracting material from the War Office library; and to Captain G. C. Wynne from whose research on the period over the last thirty years, and from whose translations of German documents, I have drawn at length.

ALAN CLARK

Prelude: On the Aisne

Sir John French: The British Army will give battle on the line of the Condé Canal.

Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien: Do you mean take the offensive, or stand on the defensive?

Sir John French: Don't ask questions, do as you're told.¹

IN THE first week of September 1914 the German armies to the east and north of Paris were in full retreat. The 'Battle' of the Marne—an engagement of manoeuvre which, by the standards of later years, can be accounted almost bloodless—had broken the nerve of the German General Staff and they had authorized a general withdrawal to the line of the Aisne and the Chemin des Dames, intending, with their front thus shortened, to extend their right flank to the sea and make junction with the armies that had lately been investing Antwerp.

The war at this stage had a picturesque, traditional quality. The French infantry marched into action in their red-and-blue uniforms and felt caps, men and officers dressed like the pieces in 'l'Attaque', a parlour game lately introduced into Edwardian drawing-rooms,² whose very title suggested the one-sided trend of fashionable military thought. Photographs of those days show whole platoons of men forming up, under fire, in close order. Sometimes graced by a low farm wall, at others kneeling among the corn-stooks in a manner little different from that of the Old Guard at Waterloo, awaiting the signal to fire which their officer gave by dropping his sword, as at an execution. The

1. Brigadier-General Sir J. E. Edmonds, the official historian (Liddell Hart files).

2. 'L'Attaque' was just put on the market in 1890.

artillery clattered into action in the style of the military displays, or 'tattoos', that had followed an unaltered pattern for the last half-century: six-horse teams pulled the eighteen-pounders, or seventy-fives, and their limbers on spindly, iron-shod wheels, arraying them in exposed positions with a precision and geometric neatness that made counter-battery work by the enemy a simple problem of mathematics. The gunners had no protection other than a quarter-inch steel plate above the axle and the polished brasswork at breech and hub glinted in the September sunlight, often betraying their position before they had fired a round. The French Cuirassiers rode into action wearing full peacetime uniform with polished shakos and breastplates—'Dam'd fellows with their hair down their backs,' was the comment of General John Gough, Haig's Chief of Staff—and were mown down. Behind the lines was the excitable atmosphere of 'a prolonged field-day with a bit of circus thrown in for good measure'. Wealth and social distinction still counted for much, particularly when, as in all previous wars, it was both necessary and desirable to supplement the issued equipment by personal expenditure. 'You may hear at any time the sound of shot-guns and come across a party of officers shooting pheasants. There is a pack of beagles run by most cavalry units. . . .' Charteris, Haig's Chief of Intelligence, tells how he had ' . . . a young Prince of Orleans attached to us as a sort of unofficial interpreter, also a French banker with a magnificent car. Both are very anxious to do anything for anybody.' (They seem to have spent most of their time driving English officers backwards and forwards from Paris.) His own staff consisted of ' . . . a diamond merchant, an engineer from Vickers, and a brewer. The diamond merchant is appropriately rich; anyhow, he has placed at my disposal a very fine Rolls-Royce in which I can do my trips behind the lines.'

Many others found all this fuss objectionable and tried to ignore the war. The proprietor of the *Trois Tours* at Poperinghe was constantly complaining to all and sundry

of the way in which the horses of the 9th Lancers were eating the bark off his trees—two years later the inn had been literally erased from the face of the earth and his orchard was a flat pool of mud. At least one of the grander restaurants in Paris excluded officers in uniform, and the sign '*Pas de chevaux*' was hung outside many of the châteaux in Picardy.

For at this early stage in the fighting the horses were everywhere. It was the cavalry, Queen of the battlefield since the Middle Ages, that caught the eye and the imagination: the Scots Greys, the 4th Hussars, the 5th Lancers, the 9th Lancers, the 12th Lancers, the 16th Lancers, the 18th Hussars, the 20th Hussars—in the Expeditionary Force it seemed that there were nearly as many regiments of horse as of foot.¹ In troop and squadron strength they trotted about the autumn countryside, pennants fluttering from the tips of their lances, young men and their grooms from fox-hunting families the length and breadth of Britain, eager for 'a go at the Boche'.

And this moment, of all, was their opportunity. Largely owing to the intervention of Galliéni and the famous 'Taxi-cab Army' the armies of Kluck and Bülow had become separated, one on each side of the Marne, connected by a front of some thirty miles that was almost without protection. Across this exposed flank streamed columns of transport and supply, and the whole confused mass of support echelons that were crowding up on each other as the fighting armies executed their turnabout. To protect this vulnerable and congested region the Germans were forced to rely on some scattered troops of Uhlans, two battalions of Jäger (sharpshooters on bicycles) and a few dismounted oddments that had straggled in. This motley force, without adequate central direction, had to hold the crossings of the Grand and Petit Morin rivers for a period—it could not be less than five days—while von Kluck withdrew from his salient.

Opposite them was the B.E.F. with its mass of cavalry

1. Actually the proportion was 18 cavalry to 78 infantry, but 17 cavalry regiments were in the line compared with only 42 infantry battalions.

and, under the command of cavalry officers, now offered what was to be, in Europe at any rate, the last and greatest opportunity in the history of the arm. A resolute thrust, pressed with even a semblance of the disregard for casualties that characterized later operations under the same commanders, would have broken through this screen and ruptured the enemy's supply lines. Kluck's army—which had been virtually without rations since the 5th September—would have been cut off and wholesale surrenders would have resulted.

But what followed was disappointing. The forward movement of the British cavalry was timid and hesitant. Sometimes, very rarely, the young officers had their hearts' desire and there were encounters with Uhlans or *Garde Dragoner*.¹ More often a Maxim, chattering elusively from some distant barn or copse, would cause a whole squadron to dismount and delay—perhaps until dusk.

Largely responsible for this faltering approach was Sir John French, the Commander-in-Chief. He was slow even to realize that the Germans had altered direction and on the 6th September his forces lost all effective contact with the enemy. This seems to have perplexed him, as did a request from Joffre, that evening, to push northward (i.e. straight into the gap, instead of north-west to relieve the imaginary pressure on Franchet D'Esperey's 5th French Army). In his diary that evening he wrote: 'It now became necessary to study the situation with great care,' and the following day: 'My intention to close at all speed with the enemy had to be tempered by consideration for the French Armies on my flank, both of which were opposed by much larger forces.'

Thus he was flatly ignoring the precepts laid down in the Field Service Regulations² that 'A Commander who has gained a strategical advantage may have to act at once in

1. A description of the charge of the 9th Lancers at Frétoy on the 7th September—probably the last encounter in which a member of the British Army was wounded by a *lance*—is given in Appendix No. 1.

2. Part 1, 1909 (Sec. 99.3).

order to prevent the enemy bringing about conditions more favourable to himself"—and that 'All pursuing troops should act with great boldness and be prepared to accept risks that would not be justifiable at other times.'

Attitudes at corps and divisional level were equally cautious and leisurely. General Sir Hubert le Poer Gough, the Commander of the 2nd Cavalry Division, went, on the 8th September, to a funeral which occupied him for the whole day and, on the 9th, did not get his cavalry out of their billets until three o'clock in the afternoon. On the 10th the whole divisional front was thrown into confusion because its leading echelon—the 5th Cavalry Brigade under Sir Philip, later Lord, Chetwode—executed a complete circle and came up in the evening against the left flank of its own support line—a manœuvre ascribed in the *Official History* as due to 'unfamiliarity with the terrain and the fatigued condition of horses and men'.

It is not surprising that under such conditions of leadership the English advance averaged somewhat less than seven miles a day. Of the two corps, Haig's went the slower owing to its commander's insistence on keeping his infantry in front, with the cavalry waiting behind—an unexpected order of battle from one who had written before the war that 'the role of cavalry on the battlefield will always go on increasing' and that 'the organization and training of cavalry must have as its basis the necessity of mass tactics'.

For a week the British cavalry meandered over the unfamiliar terrain disturbing the harvest, while among them the columns of infantry stopped and started and stopped again. The enemy was seldom seen. Gunfire was heard only occasionally. Then, on the 12th, when it was already too late, Sir John French ordered Haig to let his cavalry loose and 'get over the Aisne as soon as you can'.

'By now everyone was regarding the advance as a "pursuit". The roads were strewn with abandoned German equipment. I myself saw hundreds of lances left behind and

there were many stragglers. The orders that "the crossings over the Aisne will be seized" were understood by all to mean that the advanced guards should push over the river, the main bodies remaining on the south bank. But everyone was very tired and, to put the lid on it, the 12th September provided a real wet afternoon and evening. In the afternoon heavy firing was heard south of Soissons and, although aviators had reported only a rearguard at Bazochs, ahead Haig ordered his divisions *not* to proceed as far as the Aisne but to halt ahead of the 1st Division at Vaucère and the 2nd at Dhuizel! His later excuse was that the 3rd Division on his left was not keeping up and the French 18th Corps on his right was also behind and could not be relied on. His usual Scots caution. As it happened, even the reduced march ordered by Haig was not completed until after dark.¹

But already the lava of the first eruption was hardening. The beginnings of trenches were being dug; strands of barbed wire were being staked out on the open ground; the last hours of 'fluid' warfare were ticking past as the front took shape in the form that it was to retain with but small variation for the next four years.

It was twenty years before this double failure—at both tactical and strategic level—was explored by students at the War Office, and even then their findings were given only a restricted circulation.² Among others, these points were given prominence:

'(1) *The necessity for orders to make their intention unmistakable to the recipients.* None of the G.H.Q. orders at this time disclose the intention of the C. in C.

'(2) *The importance of not losing touch with the enemy.* For example, there was no reconnaissance in front of 1st Corps (Haig) on the night of the 13–14th September. As a result of this the advanced guards of both divisions were forced to

1. Sir J. E. Edmonds (L.H. files).

2. *Tour of the Aisne*, H.M.S.O., 1934. The italics are mine.—A.C.

deploy on the morning of 14th in the confusion of surprise, from cramped valleys about Troyon and La Maison Brulée, and found themselves crowded on ground too restricted for their proper employment and in complete ignorance of their surroundings.

‘(3) There was a *hopeless lack of concentration*. The B.E.F. advanced to the Aisne with its divisions spread over the front and all were committed to battle on the 13th, though none were heavily engaged. There was no reserve except the 19th Infantry Brigade on the extreme left. No effort was made by G.H.Q. to concentrate superior force against the gap in the German lines and, having no reserve, G.H.Q. were unable to reinforce 1st Corps front on the 13th, where alone there was room for manœuvre.’

It is of interest to examine the conduct of the ‘Battle’ of the Aisne because of its significance as a background to the offensives of later years. In the following months, and continuing right up until the winter of 1917, the British commanders were to make every effort, spending the lives of their men with profligacy, to reproduce the sort of conditions of open warfare and ‘cavalry country’ that had confronted them on the Aisne in the autumn of 1914. But their handling of operations at this time gives no confidence that they would have been any more efficient or imaginative, had their wish been granted, than they were in coping with the siege-like conditions that set in after the first great opportunity was lost.

It may be suggested that in the preceding half-century the British commanders had acquired reputations that were greatly out of proportion to their achievements. Zulus, Afghans, Dervishes, Chinese—all these and even, in the end, Boers—had been defeated. But distance had magnified the severity of those ‘struggles’ and they had been still further exaggerated by the newspapers—themselves responding to the public appetite for glory during these long, tranquil years. Nor had it been inconvenient for the politicians to allow these

inflated reputations to flourish. For the generals were far away; they could make no trouble; and their prowess, as it seemed, reflected glory on the home Government. Thus a popular tradition of heroic infallibility had been established which was to mate disastrously with the amateurish good humour and ignorance of contemporary military theory that was reality. For the adulation that had been their lot from Press and public had deluded the commanders with notions of their own ability and made them at the same time secure against dismissal by the politicians.

So it was that, as the leaves fell and the ground turned to mud and the German howitzers with their twelve-horse teams plodded patiently up to the line, the British Army was poised over an abyss. It could be saved only by a reckless squandering of the virtues which, like its delusions, sprang from a background of peace and a stable, ordered society. Bravery, perfect discipline, absolute conviction of right and wrong and the existence of God; a whole code of behaviour that is now little more than an object of derision—these were to be pitted against the largest and the most highly trained army in the world.

It could only be hoped that the British officers would profit rapidly from experience.

A Band of Brothers

He [Sir John French] surrounds himself with capable leaders and staff officers, and not only brings his troops to a high degree of efficiency, but also makes his officers a band of brothers, and establishes a good comradeship between all arms and all ranks.

The Times, on his appointment, 3rd August 1914

IN COMMAND was Sir John French. 'There was not a moment's hesitation about the appointment of Sir John,' said *The Times*, 'there was no painful canvassing of candidates, no acrimonious discussion, no odious comparison of the merits of respective generals, no hint of favouritism, of Party intrigue.' But to some it may have seemed unusual that these concepts were mentioned at all.

He was a weak-willed man of medium height, 'amiable enough', though 'petulant when thwarted'. He had 'a liking for the ladies', and rumour has it that this taste was not unconnected with his urgent need for £2,000 when he was commander of the Cavalry Brigade at Aldershot. He had borrowed the money from Douglas Haig, at that time his Brigade Major, and now one of his corps commanders.

For Haig, himself, having a superior officer in his debt was but one of a variety of fortuitous happenings that had so far compensated for a military talent which, although systematic, was not outstanding or original. He was not really a Haig of Bemersyde,¹ although he took the title on his

1. I have been asked by the solicitors to the Haig Trustees to set out the following facts concerning the late Field Marshal's lineage: 'He was directly descended from the 17th Laird and as such was entitled to bear the Quartered Arms. When he was born no Haigs were living at Bemersyde and the direct line through a younger son of the 17th Laird had petered out about 1840 when the last male heir died. Later about 1870 the sisters of that heir left the property

ennoblement, but came from the whisky-making side of the family. Hence he had not entered the Scots Greys, which might have been considered a natural choice, but had joined the 7th Hussars. He failed the Staff College examination. However, the Duke of Cambridge, who at that time had the right of nominating candidates was an acquaintance of Haig's elder sister, Henrietta. Under these auspices Haig applied a second time and the formality of an entrance examination was waived. From there he took frequent leave to attend shooting parties organized by his sister for the Prince of Wales, and these entries, boldly inscribed in the leave book, made their impression on his instructors.

None the less, in the final outdoor examination Haig did not shine and attracted unfavourable comment from General Plumer, who was conducting it. At thirty-eight he was still only a captain. During the Boer War Haig was Chief of Staff to French, who had command of the Cavalry Division. (He thought that 'the Boers were treated too generously') and afterwards he was made an A.D.C. to the King. From that time forward his ascent was more rapid and he became respected for his conventional opinions; as that 'Cavalry will have a larger sphere of action in future wars', and 'Artillery only seems likely to be really effective against raw troops'.

Finally, in 1905, he married the Hon. Dorothy Vivian, one of Queen Alexandra's maids of honour, and from then on his position in Court circles was unchallengeable.

An unfortunate result of the fact that his progress owed more to influential connections than to natural ability was that the Army seemed to contain many people who had tried to thwart Haig or who had, on account of superior quality, excelled him.

to a colateral who belonged to the same line as the Field Marshal, who owned Bemersyde until it was sold to the group of subscribers who bought it for the Field Marshal in 1921. During all this time the senior branch of the family had been living in America. In 1948 the Lord Lyon declared that in his opinion it was important for the Chief of the Family to be living in the family home, and so the Field Marshal's son was declared to be Haig of Bemersyde.'

For example General Grierson, his fellow corps commander in the B.E.F., had completely outmanœuvred Haig at the autumn exercises of 1912, to the embarrassment of all concerned, and to such an extent that the manœuvres had to be closed a day early. On arrival in France Grierson had died of a heart attack and Sir John French's choice as his successor was General Plumer, the erstwhile Staff College examiner who had taken such a poor view of Haig's performance. At the last moment, however, this decision was altered and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien was appointed in his place.

As subordinates, too, there could be counted several divisional commanders enjoying only cool relations with Haig. One of these was General Allenby, commanding the 1st Cavalry Division who while at the Staff College had been preferred, when in direct competition with Haig, for the mastership of the Drag.

Perhaps it is on account of a feeling of insecurity engendered by this background that Haig's diaries, which are filled with information about his colleagues, seem unusually critical. For it is almost impossible to find mention of one whose abilities do not fill him with misgiving—unless it be Major-General Lomax, 'an experienced and practical leader, *most loyal to me*'.¹

Loyalty, however highly he may have regarded it in subordinates, was not a virtue that Haig himself exhibited in relation to those above him. On the 11th August he cornered the King, who had been conducting a farewell review of the Expeditionary Force at Aldershot, and told him:

'... as I felt it my duty to do, that from my experience with Sir John in the South African War he was certain to do his utmost loyally to carry out any orders which the Government might give him. I had grave doubts, however, whether either his temper was sufficiently even, or his

1. The italics are Haig's. The implication shall be left for the reader to estimate—A.C.

military knowledge sufficiently thorough, to enable him to discharge properly the very difficult duties which would devolve upon him during the coming operations.'

The King's response to this disclosure is not recorded. Perhaps it was a little disappointing for Haig wrote further on that 'the King did not give me the impression that he fully realized the grave issues both for our country as well as for his own House, which were about to be put to the test', although (poor man) he '*. . . seemed anxious*'.

Haig's doubts about French extended to his Chief of Staff, Major-General Sir Archibald Murray:

'I had a poor opinion of his qualifications as a General. In some respects he seemed to me to be "an old woman". For example, in his dealings with Sir John. When his own better judgement told him that something which the latter wished put in Orders was quite unsound, instead of frankly acknowledging his disagreement,¹ he would weakly acquiesce in order to avoid an outbreak of temper and a scene.'

Haig added:

'However, I am determined to be thoroughly loyal and do my duty as a subordinate should, trying all the time to see Sir John's good qualities and not his weak ones, though neither of them [French and Murray] is at all fitted for the appointment which he now holds at this moment of crisis.'

Of Monro, who took Murray's place as G.O.C. 2nd Division, Haig wrote:

'Monro proved himself to be a good regimental officer and an excellent commander of the Hythe school of musketry,

1. i.e. Showing 'disloyalty'? Further evidence that Haig's attitude in matters of this kind was strictly subjective is offered by his entry regarding a slight disagreement with his own Chief of Staff, Brigadier-General John Gough: 'It was during the retreat on the night after the action at Villiers-Cotterets. After dinner at Mareuil, he, in his impetuous way, grumbled at my going on "retreating and retreating". As a number of the Staff were present, I turned on him rather sharply, and said that retreat was the only thing to save the Army, and that it was his duty to support me instead of criticizing. He was very sorry, poor fellow.'—*The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, p. 87.

but some years with the territorials has resulted in his becoming *rather fat*. He lacks practical experience in commanding a division.'

In considering the younger officers Haig could find little grounds for satisfaction. Of the staff of Sir Henry Rawlinson, Bt., commander of the 4th Infantry Division, he wrote:

'His general staff consists of two Regulars, R. A. K. Montgomery, R.A., and Dallas, who had a bad sunstroke in India, from the War Office. Toby Rawlinson (his brother) acts as Mess President. He is now graded as Colonel, though he left the 17th Lancers as a Subaltern. Joe Laycock and the Duke of Westminster were A.D.C.s. There were two or three other officers about, who in peacetime were connected with motors or polo ponies.'

Of the Indian Corps:

'I felt surprise at the air of dejection and despondency which met me all round their headquarters, both outside, where orderlies and others were hanging about numbed with cold, and inside, where all ranks, staff officers, British and Native clerks seemed to be working together in three or four rooms on the ground floor. All the windows were shut and the atmosphere was, of course, very close. I came away feeling that things were not altogether in an efficient state in the Indian Corps.'

On visits to other units he found further grounds for complaint.

'I motored over in the morning to see the 17th Lancers. They gave me a great lunch in the Marie. The regiment is messing by squadrons. This may do very well at first, but in my opinion the officers of a regiment should always mess together in a "Regimental Mess" whenever possible.'

Nor were good manners any surer a road to Haig's favour: he described D'Urbal, commander of the French Army on

his left, as 'a tall suave, elderly gentleman—rather an actor, the type of man seen on the stage playing the part of "the respectable Uncle"—and unpleasantly *polite*'.

While Haig could find little consolation as he looked around and beneath him, his superior was haunted by fear of the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener.

Relations between Kitchener and French had been poor since the time of the South African War. Now they were worsened by Kitchener's reluctance to accept the restraints of a political, civilian, appointment. As the premier soldier of the Empire it seemed to him intolerable that he should not be allowed to give Sir John direct orders, as to a subordinate. He discussed frequently with his friends the possibility of assuming the post of Captain-General, or Generalissimo, and of holding it in addition to his existing office of Secretary of State, in order to formalize the responsibility which he bore for the supreme direction of British military strategy. When he travelled to France he always wore his uniform, and tricky points of protocol—always a fertile source of dispute among soldiers—would crop up.

The position was aggravated by Henry Wilson, nominally sub-Chief of Staff, who held an ill-defined but highly influential position of liaison with French General Headquarters, or 'G.Q.G.'. Henry Wilson's importance was twofold. In the first place he was a convinced 'Westerner', that is to say that he was deeply committed to the doctrine that the whole war effort of the Empire should be applied exclusively in Flanders¹ to the exclusion of all other theatres such as the Balkans and the Middle East. Second, he enjoyed the best possible relations with the French commanders—unlike many of his compatriots whose careers were equally involved—and from Foch and Joffre he would pick up a

1. In his diary he tells how he 'Dined with the King. Also Prince of Wales and Stamfordham [Private secretary to the King]. Had little talk with the King, but much with S who said among other things that I was more responsible for England joining the war than any other man. I think this is true' (*Memoirs of Sir Henry Wilson*, ed. Sir E. Callwell, 189).

variety of confidential information and political tit-bits often in advance even of their arrival at the Cabinet Room in London.

Wilson was convinced of his own indispensability, but power—real power, that is, as compared with mere leverage for intrigue—seemed to be eluding him. This may explain his morally tortuous behaviour. As Director of Military Operations at the War Office he had played a prominent role at the time of the scandalous 'Mutiny at the Curragh'¹ when he communicated Cabinet secrets to the Opposition and seems, as his diary shows, to have seen nothing improper in giving advice and encouragement, based on confidential information, to the Ulster Volunteers. He was friendly with Sir John French, they had been on intimate terms since the Curragh incident (which had forced French's, though not Wilson's, resignation) and the two men were joined in a mutual dislike of Lord Kitchener.² The Commander-in-Chief was less articulate in his expressions of dislike, but he seems to have listened happily enough as Wilson told him that the Secretary of State was as great an enemy of the B.E.F. as Moltke or Falkenhayn. Wilson also complained

1. In essence the Curragh affair (March 1914) centred round the stated preference of Brigadier-General Hubert Gough and fifty-one out of seventy officers of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade for 'dismissal' rather than action should they be ordered to enforce the Liberal Government's home rule policy against the protestant north of Ireland. A muddled War Office directive and the incompetent handling of the incident by Sir Arthur Paget, G.O.C. Ireland, obscured the real issue. This lay in the unwelcome irruption of the Army into domestic politics, and the establishment of an *entente* between its higher echelons and the Conservative opposition—an association of which there were to be several reminders during 1915.

2. Kitchener's biographer, Sir Philip Magnus, explains the background to this hostility. In July 1909 Kitchener had visited the Staff College at Camberley at the end of Wilson's period of service as Commandant. Kitchener had then questioned some aspects of Wilson's teaching, and Wilson had not replied with becoming modesty. Relying upon the licence which his social popularity had earned in many quarters, he had displayed a casual breeziness which the Field Marshal had deemed unsuitable. Five years later, on the 7th August 1914, Kitchener had occasion to summon Wilson to his room in the War Office in order to rebuke him for indiscreet discussion in Mayfair drawing-rooms of the transport arrangements of the B.E.F. Wilson hotly resented that rebuke, and thereafter did his best to poison the receptive mind of Sir John French against Kitchener.

constantly about Kitchener's policy of keeping a number of trained officers and N.C.O.s in England to serve as instructors for the new Kitchener's Armies that were being formed. (Actually, not enough were kept back.) Wilson professed to believe that Kitchener was mad: and he joked about Kitchener's 'shadow armies for shadow campaigns at unknown and distant dates'.

This friction between French and Kitchener had unfortunate side effects—not least of these being that produced on the running of French's own headquarters. When after three months it became necessary to replace Sir Archibald Murray (French's Chief of Staff), there developed a positive turmoil of intrigue and mortification. When the matter was first raised it was taken for granted that Wilson would succeed. On the 19th December he wrote in his diary: 'Saw Sir John twice this morning and again this evening. He talked as though it were settled that I was to be C. of S.' But four days later there was disquieting news:

'Sir John began by saying that he would speak very openly. He said no man had ever given another more loyal and valuable help than I had given him. He said that so long as he was alive and had power my future and my promotion were assured. He went on in this way for some time and then came to the real point. He said the Government and Kitchener were very hostile to me. They said my appointment would be very repugnant to the Cabinet and would shake confidence in the Army!'

It is evident that Wilson was not content to leave the protection of his interests in Sir John's hands, in spite of the latter's protestations. On Boxing Day he drove over to G.Q.G. at Chantilly with Huguet¹ and they discussed the whole question in the car. On arrival they recounted the state of affairs to Joffre in the presence of Delcassé² who, by chance, was also there.

1. French liaison officer at G.H.Q. at St. Omer.

2. French Foreign Minister.

'On this Delcassé said he would see Bertie¹ at once, and that if this interview was not satisfactory he would go over and see Asquith, that it was intolerable that I should be ruled out for political reasons. . . . Delcassé had sent for Bertie and was crossing to England tonight, so it looks as though he were moving.'

Fortified by this, Wilson had another meeting with Sir John at which he said that: '. . . in my judgement he *must* remove Murray. He *must* beat Asquith on the matter of principle, and he *must* offer me the appointment.' Wilson declared that when offered the post he would refuse it. '. . . I can do no more than refuse the appointment that I have worked for and dreamed of for years.' And he went on to assure the Commander-in-Chief (though on what evidence is not clear) that Murray himself was anxious to vacate the post: '. . . five minutes after he is told that he is going to be given a Corps, he will thank God that the strain is over'. French's reaction to this harangue is not specifically recorded. It is possible that from experience he felt that Wilson might after all be prevented by his conscience from refusing the post when it was thus formally offered to him. At the time he was no more than 'charming and grateful', and gave Wilson to understand that he 'I think, perhaps, will use this loophole'.²

For a few days it seemed as if a compromise, and a typically unsatisfactory one, was to be the result of all this agitation; namely the retention of Murray in his position and of Wilson, and the other candidates, in theirs. G.Q.G. were keeping a watchful eye on the situation, and on 5th January Foch was able to write to Joffre and tell him that:³

'My telegram in cipher despatched today gave you a brief account of my knowledge of Field Marshal French's

1. Viscount Bertie, British Ambassador in Paris.

2. All quotations are taken, unless otherwise stated, from Sir E. Callwell's edition of Henry Wilson's *Memoirs*.

3. Liddell Hart, *Foch*.

intentions with regard to a prospective change in his staff. Whether he has asked to keep him [Murray] I don't know; I do not think so. But he may have abstained from asking for his recall; for I know that when he learned of the steps we had taken he said that in those circumstances he could do nothing.

'English pride demands that Murray stays where he is. Anyhow, Lord Kitchener and Mr. Asquith would not hear of General Wilson as his successor. When Murray is recalled and Wilson has gained people's confidence, I believe that we shall be able to progress. . . .'

In the meantime Wilson's hopes had been raised again when French, who was preparing his headquarters for a visit from Asquith and Kitchener ' . . . leant over to me and said to me in a whisper: "You are such a brute, you will never be nice to people you don't like. Now I am going to get Asquith out here, why don't you make love to him?" By which he means that he still wants to have me as Chief of Staff.'

However, Foch's hopes of his protégé 'gaining people's confidence' showed little understanding of Wilson's character. The following week he was back in London and saw, among others, Lord Lansdowne, with whom he was characteristically indiscreet:

'I spoke freely about our relations with the French, and my proposal that they should send some representative men to see what Kitchener was doing, also of the strained relations between Sir John and "K"—also of my suspicions of Winston's intrigues—and so forth. He was charming, as usual.'

When he got back to France Wilson made contact with Robertson, at that time Quartermaster General and his leading opponent as candidate for the post. They went for a drive in Wilson's Rolls and Robertson said that though ' . . . the offer was a tempting one, as it meant an increase of

pay as well as of position, I did not wish to accept it'.¹

It did seem that for the time being the whole matter was dying down, and Wilson left for a tour of the French line at the invitation of Joffre: 'No other officer in any army, not even a Russian, has been allowed to go down the French line except me.' Certainly it started off pleasantly enough. He was 'everywhere met by the Generals, who took the greatest pleasure in showing me things and making me as comfortable as they could. I went to Amiens, Chantilly, Chagny, Villiers Cotterets, Reims, Epernay, Bar-le-Duc, Remiremont. . . .' But at Remiremont there was bad news. A message '*en clair*' from Robertson writing as *Chief of Staff*, announcing the relief of Murray on grounds of ill-health, and Wilson's formal appointment as liaison officer with the French Army.

Wilson hurried back to St. Omer where he saw Sir John who, in some embarrassment it may be thought, repeated that 'nothing he could ever do for me for the work I had done could be enough, and that, so long as he held power, etc., etc.'. French did, however, agree to Wilson's immediate promotion to lieutenant-general (although he had no power to do so without reference back to the War Office) and there was talk of a K.C.B. But this latter hope turned out to be ill-founded; in the days immediately preceding publication it got around that Wilson's name was not, after all, on the list. French approached Kitchener, who replied that nothing could now be done as the King had signed the list. When the *Honours Gazette* appeared it was found that Wilson had been granted his temporary lieutenant-generalship as an 'honour'. Wilson ('The fools have given me another opening') at once wrote to Robb, the Military Secretary, claiming that this gave him 'permanent date', i.e. not a temporary rank at all—'but happily,' as his biographer says, 'this question never had to be put to the test'.

Sir John French seems to have had the idea of compensating for the only mediocre support that he had lent to

1. Sir William Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*.

Henry Wilson's aspirations by the bad manners with which he treated Robertson, the Government nominee. He ignored Robertson socially, insulted him in public on a variety of occasions, refused to mess with him and continued to sit next to Henry Wilson at meals. Robertson got his own back when Wilson tried to dabble in Staff matters by stalling him on one pretext or another, refusing him access to documents or sending them up days late. Naturally the smooth running of the British G.H.Q. was affected. Haig describes a characteristic incident:

'I went to Hazebrouck at 11.30 a.m. to see Sir John French. When I was shown into his room, Sir William Robertson (C.G.S.) followed. Sir John said would he kindly wait as he had something to say to me alone. Then when Robertson had gone he said that he had "nothing private to say, only he wished to make it clear to R. that he (F.) meant to see his army commanders alone occasionally, because R. had tried to insist that F. should not see any of his subordinate commanders unless he (R.) was present as C.G.S.'"'

Certainly from contemporary documents one does not draw a reassuring picture of happy personal relations in the higher echelons of the B.E.F. Haig describes the Mess at G.H.Q. on a typical evening.¹

'I motored to St. Omer and dined with Sir John French. Lieutenant-General H. Wilson was also dining. Brinsley Fitzgerald told me that the C.-in-C. had asked Wilson to join his Mess—a very great mistake, we both agreed, because he is such a terrible intriguer and is sure to make mischief. Wilson's face now looks so deceitful. By having W. in his Mess, while Robertson (the Chief of Staff) is only able to see him at stated times, the Commander-in-Chief is courting trouble. Billy Lambton (the Mil. Sec.) is weak, and quite under the influence of Wilson, it seems. Luckily,

1. Haig's diary for 12th March 1915.

Lambton is stupid, and more than once has unconsciously given away what H. Wilson has been scheming for.'

Personal rivalries at G.H.Q. were complicated at every stage by the intervention of the French whenever it was felt by them that the influence of 'dooble-Vay', as Wilson was known, was threatened. The first instance of this, and one which, it may be thought, provides the key to the whole situation, had arisen at the Dunkirk conference of November 1914:

'In imagined privacy Kitchener mooted his intention of recalling Sir John French and replacing him by Sir Ian Hamilton. Joffre and Foch had thought of asking that French should be replaced by Henry Wilson but they were not favourable to a change to the unknown which might weaken their existing influence over the British command. The following day Foch told Wilson privately of Kitchener's proposal, and suggested that French himself ought to be told. Next day, according to Wilson's diary: "Sir John and I went to Cassel at 3 p.m. when Sir John thanked Foch personally and in the warmest terms for his comradeship and loyalty. They shook hands on it, and the two parted great friends." Through this breach of confidence French and his staff were able to take steps both at home and in France to nullify the proposal. Also there is little doubt that some members of his staff took the shrewd course of informing Joffre, quite untruthfully, that Sir Ian Hamilton spoke the French language even worse than Sir John French. It is needless to emphasize the effect of this hint at G.Q.G. where the inter-allied situation in Flanders was already compared, with caustic humour, to The Tower of Babel.'¹

Foch's disclosure naturally strengthened his influence over French, if it did not increase his respect for him. It is clear that Foch gauged aptly the character of the British Commander-in-Chief, if also that admiration for it was not the

1. Liddell Hart, *Foch*, p. 149.

reason for combating his recall. For, earlier, when Huguet (the French liaison officer with the British) told Foch that Sir John was aggrieved with him, he jocularly replied: 'Bah! It is of no importance; you have only to tell him that he has just saved England; that will put him in good humour again!' On this message being conveyed to French he made the gratified, though not immodest, retort: 'But, my dear fellow, I know it only too well, I knew it from the beginning.'¹

Now, after Robertson's appointment, Foch wrote to Joffre:

'General Murray is leaving the English Army, ostensibly because of his health. Murray is replaced by General Robertson, a good choice in default of Wilson. Wilson remains head of operations and relations with us. His status has not been raised, but his position is growing more important.'

Lest these overt intrusions into the domestic politics of the British Army should have left too many ruffled coats, Foch added: 'It might be advisable to make another distribution of medals among the English generals. The Field Marshal [i.e. Sir John French] wished to remind me of it. . . .'²

1. Liddell Hart, *Foch*, p. 149.

2. *Ibid*, p. 152.

Winter in the Trenches

The region of the Lys basin and the plain of Flanders consists entirely of low-lying meadow. Throughout the winter months the clayey subsoil holds the water approximately two feet below the surface and there is a tendency for any minor declivity, whether natural or artificial, to become water-logged.

Introductory note to *War Office Manual*, 1913

NO-MAN'S-LAND was a grassy tufted waste, pock-marked with brown craters, with here and there the stumps of broken trees and little greyish mounds which, from their situation and contour, suggested human origin. At a distance—it varied from 80 to 200 yards—stood the German emplacements. Through half-closed eyes, or when veiled by the damp mist that rose from the ground at dawn, the irregular line of grey and fawn hummocks that was the enemy breastwork might have been a stretch of dunes on the seashore, with the dark bundles of wire straggling from their lower reaches like wild blackthorn.

Sometimes, at night, it was absolutely still for minutes at a time. The voices of the enemy could be heard and even the click of a sentry's heels at inspection. A subaltern in the Black Watch wrote in his diary:

'I could hear some Boche playing Schubert; it was "The Trout", that bit that goes up and down, on an old piano. They must have got it in a forward dug-out; even so it was incredible how clear the sound came across. But before he got to the end someone put a flare up over Auchy and the