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Battles and Dates

University History Departments around the world are home to a broad prejudice against 'old fashioned' military and political history. The dominant model of historical study in the twentieth century was the 'social science' model, which emphasised the broad sweeps of the economic, social and cultural 'great forces' of history. There was little space for the individual, great or humble, in that model. A gulf opened between academic history on one hand, which increasingly sought to cultivate the appearance of science by borrowing from economics and the '-ologies'; and the sort of history ordinary people bought in the bookshops where the top sellers were always the old favourites of war and politics, struggle and triumph, heroes and villains, written as narratives that told their story in terms of choices made by real people. Thankfully, there is now a strong current in favour of putting people back into history.

There have always been historians who have argued strongly that writing clear, readable narratives is at least as important as research for academic historians. Throughout the fifties and sixties, Geoffrey Elton argued that research was of no value until it was written up and presented in a useful form. Elton left no doubt what he meant by useful – for him, it had to be clearly written, free of unnecessary jargon and presented in a way that the average reader could follow, understand and make some use of. 'Old' history took a hammering on a number of grounds.

Firstly, the varieties of 'New' History claimed to offer greatly scientific merit. During the Cold War, economics, the 'dismal science' seemed to offer the tools by which countries could be managed by government in a way that guaranteed fair shares and prosperity for all. Science had built everything from the Atom Bomb to the humble dishwasher. With scientific methods elevated the level of high priests of a technocratic age, historians jumped on the bandwagon. Historical monographs and journals became laden with specialist jargon, comprehensible only to an elite few.

The 'Old' History, with its focus on politics and war, was a victim of the age in another way. After the horrors of two world conflicts, and of the Holocaust, war was regarded with revulsion. A great many people felt that war was some sort of pathological aberration, rather than any normal part of human behaviour. This might be wishful thinking, and it is an argument that is by no means over; and indeed, it might well be an argument that we cannot ever finish, but the approach adopted by many liberals, which was to ignore it and hope it would go away, was intellectually cowardly.

The publication in 1971 of 'The Face of Battle' by John Keegan, was widely accepted as a marking the beginning of a new wave of military history which was sought to combine popular readability with intelligent analysis. 'The Face of Battle', along with a succession of his other books, have been constant staples of the military section of every bookshop for thirty years. Keegan and his work pose particular problems. Keegan himself has admitted that he felt guilty because his flat feet kept him at home when most of his generation were on National Service in the fifties and sixties. Although he lectured at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, he has said he is a pacifist. While he has written a number of 'traditional' military histories, he derides what he calls 'General Staff History'. While he sought to convey an understanding of what war was like for the ordinary soldier, he was not above taking cheap shots at others working in the same field, most memorably when he described Martin Middlebrook as a farmer and an amateur historian.

Many of these contradictions can be found in Keegan's writings. The first chapter of 'The Face of

'Battle' is a trenchant demolition of all previous military history. While some of his criticisms have merit, his attack on old military history, based on a critique of a piece of Napier's particularly florid early Victorian prose, is unfair. His effort to undermine his contemporaries – Young, Chandler and Howard – by comparing them to painters is colourful but is sabotaged at the very end when he admits that the extracts he selects from their works were written to explore particular analytic issues and that they did fulfill those narrative purposes. The whole thrust of 'The Face of Battle' is to argue that war is uncontrollable, chaotic and irrational.

This, of course, was in keeping with the mood of the times when the book was published. The irrationality of war was a theme to which Keegan returned in 'A History of Warfare', devoting much of the first chapter to arguing that warfare in primitive societies is largely symbolic, ritualised and bloodless, and that violent warfare is a disease of the western world. Again, Keegan's effort to construct a framing argument about the nature of warfare is fatally undermined by a range of evidence which simply does not support his theory. The classification of warfare as a disease of unreason suited the mood of the universities in the last decades of the twentieth century.

In recent years there has been a strong reaction to the dominance of history by the social science model. Historians have come to realise that the individual is important at every level. People are not just cogs in a machine. As quantum physicists push beyond the limits of deterministic science and chaos theory provides new, more sophisticated models of real world behaviour, historians have come to realise that human action at every level is not only an important driver of historical events, but probably the most important. History is the story of human choices.

In the 'New Old' History, political and military history are restored to a central, but not necessarily overwhelming role in the canon of historical scholarship. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, political and military history are the fields in which human choices and human action can have the most immediate and direct effects on the greatest number of people. My choices in economics about which multinational brand of petrol or coffee I purchase will make some difference, but it takes a great many individual choices like that to produce a measurable, significant change in economic or business history. Likewise, in cultural terms, my individual choices about what book I buy only comes to be historically significant when it is aggregated together with a great many other purchasing choices. It is in politics and war though that individual choices are most important because they can and do have immediate and dramatic effects on events. On Sept 11th, thousands of people were murdered because a very few individuals, possibly as few as the 4 pilots among the hijackers, chose to fly into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Since then a relatively small number of key players – Bush, Cheney, Blair and others – have made choices which committed the US and UK to a war in Iraq. In the instability which has followed, the actions of individuals have had a profound impact. The 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter' who executes a western hostage on video in Iraq makes a choice which affects the price you pay for petrol at your local filling station. Clearly, a great many people are not simply swept along helplessly on the tide of the great forces of history, but act to change the direction of history. People make history, and in the domains of politics and war, the choices people make have the most immediate, wide-ranging and irreversible consequences.

Secondly, from the point of view of 'lessons learned', political and military history are the domains in which it is easiest to explicate the sequences of cause and effect, and to measure success and failure. The habits of thought which historical analysis teaches are important and useful, and they are most easily and dramatically seen in the realms of war and peace. We in the west live in a world in which we are usually insulated from the immediate negative consequences of poor choices. Driving is probably the only aspect of our daily lives where the consequences of poor decisions are immediate and often fatal. In many areas of life, people have become accustomed to devoting a great deal of effort to avoiding responsibility for mistakes, often by denying there was ever any

mistake made. In warfare, the consequences of failure are usually immediately visible. In the chaotic 'face of battle' it may be hard to work out what when wrong in a firefight, but higher levels of command, it is possible to analyse errors and learn lessons from them.

Learning these lessons is useful both in the particular case of the use of war as politics by other means and in the general area of decision-making.

In the particular case of the use of military force to make war and peace, we live in which the Chinese sages called 'interesting times'. Military interventions have become more common in the past decade. It is often said that peacekeeping is not a soldier's job, but only a soldier can do it. In the recent past peacekeeping as a military mission has been joined by counter-terrorism, drug enforcement, nuclear non-proliferation, humanitarian intervention and state-building have joined to list of tasks which, apparently, only a soldier can do. In many cases, the resort by politicians to the use of the military has not been the right choice. Missions have been had mandates which have been diplomatically acceptable, but militarily impossible. Media Spin has raised unreasonable hopes for military interventions. Poorly thought out operational choices have led to spectacular failures. In the light of these, it is important that politicians, diplomats and the public are literate and informed about military history, especially about recent military history. Politicians and public alike need to be informed about two things. They need to understand the historical background to the 'crisis of the year', whether it is in Kosovo, Somalia, Afghanistan or Iraq. How did the problem emerge, who are the players, what is their history. Many of the current fighters in Najaf or Darfur learnt their history from their grandparents, and that collective memory goes back over a century. If we are to help with meaningful solutions, we need to be aware of the historical roots of those problems. Secondly, in the particular area of the use of military force for political ends, both politicians and the public need to have a realistic appreciation of the limitations on the use of military force. Some problems are simply not soluble by the deployment of military power. Often, use of a peace-enforcement or peacekeeping mission alone is not enough; it needs to be linked to progress on meeting critical political goals. By and large, public opinion in Europe (including Ireland) is more aware of these issues than in the US, but we are not clear enough in our thinking to 'sell' this instinctive position to the US in explicit arguments. Most people would agree that the 'European' view on the proper use of military force is better than the 'US' view; many would like to see Ireland and the other non-aligned European states play a stronger role in shaping the future of the 'European' view. If we are to do that, then we must be able to sell it based on clear and rigorous arguments, based on an understanding of the limitations of the use of force, and an essential part of that is the study of the history of previous peace-enforcement and peacekeeping deployments.

Aside from the immediate and pressing value of military history to inform public policy, it has a general merit as a tool to sharpen decision analysis and decisionmaking skills. It is very hard to say in social, economic or cultural history, that X was a mistake and that it happened because of A, B and C. It is much easier, in both politics and war, to identify what people's objective were, whether those aims were fulfilled and, if not, why not. There are a great many reasons why military operations fail, either in execution, in planning or in understanding. The study of military history, and if its handmaidens, diplomatic and political decisionmaking in crisis, can help us to form a better understanding of why people do really stupid things. There is no guarantee that a careful study of the errors (and the successes) of the past can prevent making fresh new errors in the future, and in fact military history has often led to armies preparing to win the last war, not the next. However, a careful reading of military history can equip people with a better understanding of the process of making good and bad decisions. This, as a general skill, is useful everyday, and there are very few fields, outside of military and political history, where it can be so easily studied. (Oddly, or perhaps not, team sports is probably one of the other fields.)