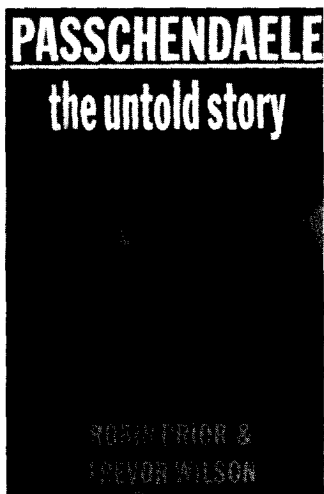
BOOKS

Degenerating Into Pointless Hopelessness

reviewed by Williamson Murray

PASSCHENDAELE, THE UNTOLD STORY. By Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1996, 256 pp., $30.00. (Member $27.00)



It is only now, eight decades after its terrible course, that historians are beginning to unravel what really happened on the battlefields of World War I. Perhaps no battle better reflects the carnage and hopelessness of that conflict than Passchendaele, fought under the appalling conditions of the mud drenched trenches and shell holes of Flanders from August 1917 through early November. Two Australian historians, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, have combined to write what will undoubtedly stand as the definitive history of the efforts of the British and Commonwealth armies to achieve a breakthrough to the Channel coast. Their book is a monument to scholarship, economical and often eloquent writing, and a solid grasp of the real issues involved in World War I—namely the sharp, hard end of tactics. One might also note that Prior and Wilson combined for a superb study of Field Marshal Sir Henry Rawlinson, *Command on the Western Front,* one of the more important British generals on the Western Front from 1914 through 1918.

What then is their contribution, besides telling a horrific story well, besides being just another catalog to the stupidities of World War I? *Passchendaele* underlines the fundamental breakdown in civil-military relations in Britain, one that was as much, if not more, the fault of Britain's civilian leaders as of the generals. One of the swirling controversies that has surrounded Britain's conduct of World War I has been between the supporters of Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, and Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France. The former have argued that Lloyd George understood the stupidity of launching an offensive in Flanders but was prevented by the political constraints from intervening. On the other hand, Haig's supporters have argued that whatever the difficulties of the Flanders operation, Haig and the BEF had no choice but to undertake the operation despite the cowardly snivellings of politicians. By and large, the former have dominated the historical landscape over the past 70 years.

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The authors make a convincing case that both historical views are wrong. First, on the side of the politicians, Lloyd George did argue for another alternative, the commitment of British forces, particularly artillery, to the Italian theater. But in fact there were two factors that made such a strategic approach a dead end. There was nothing in that theater that offered anything of strategic worth, and equally important the Italians were not about to encourage a British commitment that would undoubtedly bring the might of the German war machine down on their heads.

In the end, the War Cabinet and Lloyd George grudgingly allowed Haig to launch his offensive in Flanders. They took this decision in full cognizance of what they were doing. They did make the crucial proviso that only as long as the attack proceeded successfully would the offensive continue. And therein lay the culpable failure of Lloyd George and his ministers to live up to their responsibility to the soldiers in the frontline trenches and to the body politic. For as Prior and Wilson underline, they allowed Haig to continue inspite of palpable failure. The offensive degenerated into the pointless hopelessness that characterized the muddy slaughter of late October and early November 1917. Lloyd George possessed the power and an unassailable political position to stop the offensive anytime he wished, or for that matter even to remove Haig, but in spite of evidence of mounting casualties and decreasing success, the political leadership dithered in strategic irrelevancies. In the next war Churchill would not abdicate his responsibility, and his restless, incisive intelligence would probe the efforts of his military subordinates. There was indeed good reason for his visceral distrust of generals.

Nevertheless, as Prior and Wilson make clear, Passchendaele was also the result of a military leadership that failed to live up to its responsibilities. By 1917, the British Army had developed tactical and operational capabilities that allowed it, in certain circumstances, to deal out considerable

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defeats to the Germans on the Western Front. At Messines Ridge, the British took out the entire German position in a day at minimum cost to the attackers; admittedly the explosion of a considerable number of mines directly under the German positions helped the attack. But the success was equally due to accurate counterbattery fire and a barrage that reached out and covered the attacking infantry from inevitable German counterattacks. Similarly at Cambrai, the British showed that if one gained surprise, a hurricane bombardment supporting a tank-infantry attack could break into and through German defenses.

But these were limited successes (which could nevertheless have been repeated on a number of other locations on the Western Front). Unfortunately, for the frontline soldier, Haig was incapable of recognizing the limitations that the tactics placed on the conduct of operations in 1917. Thus, he eliminated two of his senior army commanders from the conduct of the Flanders offensive because their plans were too cautious and realistic. Instead he chose General Sir Hubert Gough, his least experienced and competent army commander, who willingly fell in with Haig's plans for a great sweeping operation that would not only drive the Germans back from Ypres, but that would recapture the Belgian ports that had fallen into German hands in 1914. To that end Haig would keep Rawlinson's Fourth Army involved in planning an unrealistic and potentially disastrous amphibious landing on the Belgian coast for most of the fall.

From the first, Gough's offensive was too ambitious for the artillery available, and even there Haig made a serious mistake by concentrating only a portion of his artillery assets in support of the Flander's offensive. Gough's first day's attack gained some considerable ground, but not where it mattered. Haig and Gough then persisted throughout August in launching a series of decreasingly effective attacks on the German positions; Gough's Fifth Army's staff work was marked by sloppiness and ineffectiveness—so much so that Haig eventually brought Herbert C.O. Plumer in to take over the conduct of the battle. Plumer started off with a considerable success, but his attacks degenerated into an increasingly costly slogging match that was made even more horrific by the conditions—a battlefield where the combination of massive artillery bombardments, the destruction of the drainage system, and heavy rains created a nightmare for the troops fighting the battle. Well might the combat poet, Siegfried Sassoon, write "And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists/Flounders in the mud. O Jesu, make it stop." Haig, fed optimistic intelligence by his staff, persisted right to the end of the battle in believing that the German Army was on the brink of collapse. The gap between the understanding of General Headquarters where Haig and his staff planned, and the realities of the battlefield is best summed up by the words of his chief of staff, Launcelot Kiggell, who upon visiting the frontline for the first time in November, commented, "My God did we send men to fight in that?"

This is a great book. Above all it underlines that generals must really know the sharp end of tactics and battle. Haig and all too many of his senior commanders did not, and their country and its soldiers paid a terrible price. Equally, the authors have laid out the cost of a political leadership willfully irresponsible in its unwillingness to call its military to account. It is a book that every Marine who aspires to higher command should add to his or her library—one that will undoubtedly reward its owner by rereading and rereading.

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Ireland's Covert Warrior

reviewed by LtCol Joseph F. Collins, USMCR

MICHAEL COLLINS: The Man Who Made Ireland. By Tim Pat Coogan. Roberts Rhinehart Publishers, Niwot, CO, 1992, 1996, 480 pp., $16.95. (Member $15.25)
MICHAEL COLLINS: A Life. By James MacKay. Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh and London, 1996, (Available in U.S. April 1997), 320 pp., $29.95. (Member $26.95)

In the early 1920s, Mao Tse-tung, then a librarian at the University of Beijing, followed news accounts of the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921). Mao was fascinated by peasant soldiers, calling themselves the Irish Republican Army (IRA), tilting at the might of the British Empire and bringing its colonial rule to a grinding halt. He was especially fascinated by the architect of this new form of guerrilla warfare, Michael Collins, a farmer's son and onetime bank clerk.

Mao would incorporate the tactics of Collins and eventually put them into practice in his own revolution. In the 1930s, Zionist guerrillas would also emulate the IRA, and one of their most militant leaders, Yitzhak Shamir, would call himself "Michael" after Collins. In the 1940s, Britain's Special Operations Executive was headed by Colin McVean Gubbins, a veteran of the Anglo-Irish War who used IRA tactics against the Third Reich.

Yet, until the release of the popular movie *Michael Collins*, the founder of modern revolutionary warfare has been largely unknown outside of Ireland. Even in his own country, his memory has been suppressed by political factions.

Collins was a complex man whose facets included the peasant, exile, accountant, soldier, politician, spy, diplomat, and nation builder. During his short life, he was often portrayed in the press as a gunman. However, he

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