REVIEW


Sadly, there are few survivors left of the generation who served in the trenches during World War I. It is thus left to present-day authors to tell the stories of their brave deeds. A recent edition to this genre is Walter Reid’s *To Arras, 1917: A Volunteer’s Odyssey* in which he tells the story of his uncle, Ernest Reid, an officer in the Black Watch who died on 18 April 1917 of septicaemia brought on by wounds sustained during the Battle of Arras. But Reid’s monograph is not the usual military biography with which many of this journal’s readers will no doubt be familiar. Rather than merely chronicling his uncle’s life Reid attempts to provide his readers with an understanding of what it was that drove so many of Ernest’s generation to enlist even after the horrors of modern trench warfare had become known to the general public. Context such as this is missing from most of the accounts that have emerged since the guns fell silent in 1918 and it is this contextualization that sets Reid’s work apart from that of others.

In attempting to help his readers understand why a young Scotsman like Ernest would volunteer for duty, Reid goes beyond the family background that one might expect in a work such as this and details the circumstances that existed in the Scotland in which Ernest and his peers grew up. He chronicles the familial, cultural, and educational influences which would have imbued Ernest and his generation with the sense of duty that compelled them to unquestioningly heed the call to arms. Looking back now, just over ninety years after the outbreak of the war, it is difficult to fathom how the spirit of the time led so many to enlist. But enlist they did – in numbers that are sure to astound the modern reader.
When the war broke out Kitchener authorized the formation of his ‘New Armies’ and aimed to have 100,000 men join up. The actual numbers far outstripped that figure. As Reid chronicles, the initial target of 100,000 was reached within a mere three days. Another 100,000 soon joined up to be followed two days later by yet another 100,000. A fourth group, again numbering 100,000, followed immediately afterwards (p. 100). Such a rush to enlist is almost beyond modern understanding but, to Ernest and his contemporaries, it was their duty to do so and both their upbringing and the society in which they lived merely reinforced this notion. It was this sense of duty that carried them through the horrors of trench warfare with an *esprit de corps* that has all but disappeared from modern society.

In addition to discussing Ernest and the factors that led him from his home in Paisley and his legal studies at the University of Glasgow to the front lines, Reid also details much of the history of the Black Watch in an effort to convey for his readers not only the society Ernest had left, but also the one he had joined. The pages that detail the history of the Black Watch and the regiment’s activities during World War I are some of the most interesting in this monograph. Those with an eye for military history, especially Scottish military history, will find these pages to be particularly compelling. Reid does a superb job not only of chronicling the activities of the Black Watch but other famous Scots regiments as well. But he does not stop there. Reid, in fact, delves quite ably into the circumstances, both political and military, that led so many young men of that generation to their premature deaths. Reid also criticizes, quite objectively, those (such as Haig) who persisted in sending so many young men into battle to achieve objectives which could not possibly be achieved. In so doing Reid not only chronicles the futility of the great battles in which so many died but, at the same time, demonstrates the nobility of their sacrifice. It was a sacrifice made all the more noble by the fact that they surely knew that the tactics they were forced to employ were seriously flawed and yet they persisted in their duties in spite of that.

Reid does all of this in a style that is both compelling and readable. But, above all, his writing style conveys more than a hint of compassion for Ernest and his contemporaries. He provides idyllic descriptions of Ernest’s home life and of Scottish society
yet manages also to convey the horrors of battle without deviating from his easy-going narrative. Reading this book one can almost imagine sitting in front of a fireplace enjoying a wee dram while Reid tells the life story of the uncle he never knew (Ernest died twenty-seven years prior to Walter’s birth). This compelling, yet compassionate, writing style is missing from many of the accounts that have emerged from the war and that, in addition to the book’s other admirable qualities, makes it easy to recommend.

Reid closes his account of Ernest’s life by quoting the local Baptist minister who, at the conclusion of a Sunday service, announced to the assembled congregation, of which Ernest had been a member, that Ernest had died of his wounds. As that minister said ‘He was not a warrior by instinct: but he heard the call of duty, and willingly offered himself in defence of home and native land’ (p. 179). That is a fitting epitaph not only for Ernest, but also for those others of his generation whose upbringing led them to heed the call to arms and who gave their lives in what they saw as a noble cause. Present, and future, generations would do well to remember both those men and their deeds.

*Colin W. Graham*

*McMaster University*