

suggest, there are other ways of conceiving what the limits of politics might be and the aesthetic possibilities that riot beyond them.

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IAN BECKETT, TIMOTHY BOWMAN, and MARK CONNELLY. *The British Army and the First World War*. Armies of the Great War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. 476. \$29.99 (paper).  
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It is no easy task writing a comprehensive history of the British Army during the First World War. Even while the guns of the Western Front still fired, quiet debates began to arise over combat performance, leadership, and the army's strategic employment. The following century has only intensified these arguments. In one respect it is not surprising: more than eight million men served in the armed forces of the British Empire between 1914 and 1918, so many as to defy easy generalization. For every example supporting one line of argument, a comparable counterexample is rarely far away. It is into this enormous and difficult topic that Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman, and Mark Connelly have sought to draw upon "the full breadth of the historiography" (5) and make a significant contribution. In some respects, they have achieved this. The ambitious scope and laudable focus on the social as well as the military aspects of the army ensure that this book makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature. Unfortunately, the project is undermined, to an extent, by inconsistencies in quality across the eleven chapters and by a narrow focus on the Western Front.

Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly cannot be faulted for ambition. The first five chapters cover the pre-war training, composition, and change in the officer corps, the national commitment to creating a nation in arms during the First World War, the citizen-soldier experience, and British strategy throughout the war. Given the authors' past work on these subjects, it is no surprise that these five chapters are exceptionally well crafted. They draw on an impressive range of sources, from the private diaries of key individuals to army personnel files and other official records, while a diverse range of more recent scholarship, from relevant monographs to unpublished PhD dissertations, has been used to persuasive effect. Of note is chapter 3, "A Nation in Arms," which scrutinizes the British voluntary recruitment drive and national mobilization. It employs qualitative and quantitative research methods, amalgamating contextual accounts and statistical data from a significant range of sources. Regional recruitment (including in Ireland), the challenge of implementing conscription mid-war, the plight of minorities such as the Russian Jewish community and women's volunteer organizations are all considered, making this section a triumph of breadth, depth, and succinct writing.

The rest of the book mainly covers the war on the Western Front, with a chapter dedicated to each year from 1914 through to 1918 and the final chapter considering the war "Beyond the Western Front." It is in these last six chapters that the book varies in quality more markedly. The authors have managed to cover an impressive amount of territory, analyzing the preparations, conduct, and aftermath of all the major battles the British took part in on the Western Front while never losing sight of the political context at home. Once more Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly demonstrate that there are few historians who can weave a narrative so succinctly and clearly. Still, the diversity of sources that propped up the first half of the book is here eroded by an overreliance on a handful of authors, predominantly Paul Harris, Robin Prior, and Trevor Wilson. These scholars are certainly important, and their frequent usage is

understandable to an extent; however, one might expect a similar treatment to be given to other key authors, notably Spencer Jones on 1914 or William Philpott for 1916. The effect of this slanting towards one side of the historiography is to present a particularly unflattering depiction of Sir Douglas Haig and some of his subordinate generals while also inadvertently sidelining the influence of the French army on the British during this period. It is, of course, the authors' prerogative to take this approach, but when the book purports to engage with the "breath of the historiography," it is reasonable to expect the case for the defense to be presented more frequently and openly. The exception to this imbalance is chapter 10, which covers 1918 and presents a nuanced view of one of the most complicated years on the Western Front. The source base is wide and synthesizes the state of modern scholarship expertly. Moreover, by dedicating significant space to the final year of the war, Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly sidestep the pitfall of over-focusing on the major battles of 1916 and 1917 to the detriment of the year of decision.

The largest failing of *The British Army and the First World War* is its summary treatment of the war beyond the Western Front. The authors justify this decision by correctly observing that France and Belgium remained the primary focus for most of the war; nonetheless, the fact remains that the British Army in its broadest sense was committed globally. Only 25 pages are given over to cover the Cameroons, German East Africa, Mesopotamia, the Dardanelles, Palestine, Salonika, Italy, and Ireland. Consequently, the narrative is cursory, and important events are not given due consideration. For instance, the August Offensive during the Dardanelles campaign is given only a few lines despite Rhys Crawley's excellent recent scholarship, while the section on German East Africa contains minor factual errors. Jacob van Deventer is given as Jan Smuts's successor in 1917 (393), whereas it was actually Major-General Reginald Hoskins, a British commander. Later, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck is supposed to have continued his campaign until 23 November 1918 (396), but in fact he was notified of the Armistice and ceased fighting on 13 November. Some perspective must be maintained: these are reasonably trivial errors and do not undercut the principal arguments of the book; nonetheless, they serve to demonstrate the more haphazard approach to the global context of the war.

Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly's work is an excellent, if inconsistent, account of the British Army during the First World War. At its best, it brings out the social character of the institution, the changes in wider society, and the contribution made by the British people. The later military sections provide a useful summary of major events and capture the difficulties posed by the Western Front but perhaps do not fully account for the debates in the existing literature. The lack of global focus is a problem, but given the breadth of this study it is one for which the authors can be forgiven.

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*The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* is a groundbreaking work—in its scope, in its range of contributors, and in its exploration of an area of Irish historiography that has long existed in the shadow of political and cultural studies.

It is not as though Ireland missed the "social turn": Conrad Arensberg's most influential works (1937's *The Irish Countryman* and 1940's *Family and Community in Ireland*) were