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From Liddell Hart to Keegan: Examining the Twentieth Century Shift in Military History Embodied by Two British Giants of the Field

Joseph J. Cook

American Civil War general Richard Taylor wrote plaintively, “Although since the days of Nimrod war has been the constant occupation of men, the fingers of one hand suffice to number the great commanders.”¹ While a bit of an exaggeration, a similar statement could be made about the scarcity of great military historians. Two British historians of the past century could be credited with the label of greatness during their lifetimes, while writing vastly different forms of history. In many ways, Basil Henry Liddell Hart and John Keegan—both knighted for their contributions—symbolized, respectively, the traditional and new approaches to writing military history. Therefore, they form an effective duo to illustrate the shift in historiography the field underwent during the twentieth century.

Scientific professionalism defined the field of history in the mid-twentieth century United Kingdom—a time when Liddell Hart was at his professional height and Keegan was undergoing his education. The modernist school of history prominent in the United Kingdom believed that objective analysis would lead to historical truth. Traditional historiography remained intact, defined by “intellectual excitement, eloquence, and an empiricism which saw the world as open, filled with unique phenomena, and accessible to conscientious research.”² Political history and grand narrative remained popular, with attention paid to the prominent individual actors who shaped history. Liddell Hart embraced this custom. However, the *Annales* school was on the rise in France at the time, and its “eagerness to reject traditional historiography” influenced some Brits.³ However, “Even at the high tide of social history, English historiography never neglected the traditional topics, dealt in customary ways.”⁴ In many ways, these British social history adherents embodied the “*humanisme historique*” which the *Annales* group of France may have sought: an approach that “acknowledged the impact of large-scale forces on human life while respecting the role of the individual.”⁵ John Keegan took inspiration from this new emerging group.

Basil Henry Liddell Hart was a member of a new breed of military historians who came to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century and start of

the twentieth century. The group—in which Hans Delbruck and J.F.C. Fuller were prominent members—was able to apply personal military experience to its work. “A European university education of the 19th century consisted largely of a classical education in which the original texts were read. Many university graduates of the aristocratic classes became high-ranking military officers, who did pore over the accounts of ancient warfare for modern lessons.”⁶ Reflecting on his studies of the ancient texts, Liddell Hart contributed a new biography of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general that defeated Hannibal; focusing on his talent for mobile warfare, Liddell Hart deemed Scipio to be “Greater than Napoleon”—a straightforward subtitle to his book.

Subtlety was never a strong attribute of Liddell Hart’s. To some rivals in the field—and at least one biographer, John Mearsheimer—Liddell Hart’s prominence in the field was largely the creation of his own self-promotion. However, much of the criticism was aimed at Liddell Hart as a supposed military theorist and innovator, not as a military historian. Liddell Hart devoted his military histories to promoting the universal success of mobile warfare—from the Mongols to the tanks of World War I. Some credited him as the innovator of blitzkrieg. “Of course there is a good deal about which Mearsheimer is correct. Liddell Hart did overstate his contribution to armored warfare at the expense of others, most notably Fuller.”⁷ Mearsheimer’s critiques, however, were tainted by the fact that his book had the tone of a character assassination. Other critics could retain “the greatest respect and affection for the man himself,” and for his historical scholarship, but Mearsheimer could not “separate the man from his ideas.”⁸ At any rate, Liddell Hart’s influence within the government as a theorist and policy-maker is not the present issue at hand; rather, it is his contribution to historiography.

Liddell Hart fully embraced traditional, professional approaches to writing military history. He had no qualms about the great man theory of history. A quick scan of his prominent books reveals lengthy biographies of Scipio, William T. Sherman, Edmund Allenby, and the German high command of World War II (he even edited the papers of Field Marshal Rommel). Each delved into the realm of military theory, and may have taken Liddell Hart out of his element, promoting his obsession with mobile warfare. Yet his focus on strategy at the upper echelons of military leadership was perfectly in line with the traditional approach to writing military history.

He was not without flaws as a historian. In his work concerning contemporary generals of the great World Wars, Liddell Hart was frequently guilty

of breaking his own cardinal rule for history: objectivity. For example, in his discussion of Allenby, the British general of World War I, he usefully quoted a tribute by T.E. Lawrence (who served under Allenby and admired him), but then Liddell Hart inserted his own perspective by adding an aside: “That tribute, if examined, is found to leave out any estimate of mental ability. And I have reason to know that the reservation was intentional.”⁹ In the same book in which Liddell Hart included that and other unnecessary subjective asides based on his own disenchantment with the British high command (awfully impertinent for a mere staff captain), he concluded with an appeal for “the objective study of history as a guide in dealing with our present-day military problems.”¹⁰ Liddell Hart never seemed to recognize the contradiction. Nevertheless, contemporaries viewed it as “undoubtedly a good book” and the author as “a military historian whose work has been of incalculable benefit to the army.”¹¹

Beyond his efforts at portraying/promoting himself as a military theorist and despite his unfortunate knack for personal subjectivity in his evaluation of contemporaries, Liddell Hart made valuable contributions to military history and historiography. His military training allowed him to insert personal knowledge into his study of logistics and other critical fields. “The emergence of modern war on an unprecedented scale” and the replacement of the “art of war” by “military science” created a new atmosphere for historical inquiry in the first half of the twentieth century—an atmosphere that Liddell Hart effectively fused with ancient military campaigns he studied.¹² Scientific approach to history was prominent in Liddell Hart’s scholarship. Although he broke his own rules far too often in writing contemporary history, the bulk of his work on military history dealt with subjects with whom he had no personal acquaintance and thus no reason for grudges. With his fondness for grand narratives and biographies, it can be stated that he was fortunate to have lived when he did. Yet coming at the end of one’s era does not diminish one’s own contributions. In a highly-complimentary assessment, British military historian Ronald Lewin considered this concept:

In the Himalayan range of the great thinkers about warfare he was one of the last and undoubtedly one of the pre-eminent peaks. The time-span he covered spread from the Mongols to Montgomery—and . . . virtually all his writing and ratiocination concerned . . . the military activity of human beings in the old, the traditional and the conventional sense. He was lucky—if it may be called lucky—to

have lived through a period in which two world wars provided him with practical exemplifications (and often contradictions) of ideas about which he had only latterly, because of nuclear development, to make a radical re-appraisal.¹³

The history field that Liddell Hart left behind at the time of his death was not the same as that in which he thrived, but neither was the world.

It could be said that Liddell Hart was the last of the great military historians of his era. He spent a life applying new professional approaches to ancient subject matter and attempting to apply its lessons to his modern world. Yet the world in his final years was vastly different even from that of the World Wars when he served as an advisor (“the Captain who taught Generals,” as Lewin called him). This world was one with which Liddell Hart was not essentially concerned, with its “inter-continental missiles, over-killing, satellites, moon-flights.” Lewin mourned Liddell Hart’s departure, with reference to his grand narrative of mobile warfare in history: “A direct line running from the Mongols’ horses to Montgomery’s tanks has probably—though not decisively—been broken: and broken, in particular, from the point of view of the military critic. With Liddell Hart’s death, it might be said, God shattered a mould.”¹⁴ Before passing away, however, in his reflections on a lifetime of work and on military history as a field, Liddell Hart offered a grim perspective: “I would add that the only hope of humanity, now, is that my particular field of study, warfare, will become purely a subject of antiquarian interest. For with the advent of atomic weapons we have come either to the last page of war, at any rate on the major international scale we have known in the past, or to the last page of history.”¹⁵

Of course, this fatal prognostication of the military history field did not come true. In another of his contradictions, Liddell Hart offered the reason for this in the same essay in which the prediction appeared. Attacking those who criticized the field of military history, he stated plainly, “Can anyone believe that the history of the world would have been the same if the Persians had conquered Greece; if Hannibal had conquered Rome; if Caesar had hesitated to cross the Rubicon; if Napoleon had been killed at Toulon?” Turning his attention to his own home nation, he added, “Can anyone believe that England’s history would have been unaffected if William of Normandy had been repulsed at Hastings? Or—to come to recent times—if Hitler had reached Dover instead of stopping at Dunkirk?”¹⁶ War undeniably affected the course of history since the earliest days of man, and could not be ignored.

Yet while it could not be ignored in history, the field of military history

could evolve in a new direction, and the second historian in this examination helped propel it on that new track. John Keegan emerged on the scene in 1976 with an instant classic: *The Face of Battle*. While serving as a professor at the elite British military academy at Sandhurst, Keegan buried himself in research concerning soldier experiences in British history. Examining the battles of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme, Keegan wove a narrative of universally timeless characteristics of soldiers in combat. “Drunkenness, mayhem and earsplitting noise were rampant, he found. This was military history in a new key.”¹⁷ The book was an instant classic and is still in print more than three decades later. The seminal book created intense new interest in the field of soldier studies, focusing on the common men of the army rather than the generals and grand strategy which held Liddell Hart’s attention.

Keegan pulled no punches in his introductory chapters to *The Face of Battle*, pointing out the insufficiencies of traditional historiography in military history. Aside from mere criticism of the general ignorance or indifference demonstrated toward the common ranks in traditional history narratives, he was particularly pointed in his assault on the art of history writing itself. He harshly stated that private soldier’s accounts were used improperly: “At worst, they are mined for ‘interest’, to produce anthologies of ‘eye-witness accounts’ in series with titles like *Everyman at War (The Historian as Copy-typist* would be altogether more frank); at best, they serve as the raw material for what is not much more than anecdotal history.”¹⁸ He also deplored those who took the scientific approach to history too far and “achieved the remarkable feat of writing an exhaustive account of one of the world’s greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all.” Keegan admitted that “Historians, traditionally and rightly, are expected to ride their feelings on a tighter rein than the man of letters can allow himself,” but the entirely emotionless result was inexcusable in his opinion.¹⁹

Despite his hopes for the new, social, bottom-up direction of military history he was proposing, he knew that the wider community of professional military historians might be ambivalent about it at first. “The insight which intimacy with soldiers at this level can bring to the military historian enormously enhances his surety of touch in feeling his way through the inanimate landscape of documents and objects with which he must work.” Clearly optimistic about soldier studies, he was nonetheless wary concerning other historians: “It will, I think, rob him of patience for much of what passes as military history; it will diminish his interest in much of the ‘higher’ study of war—of strategic theory, of generalship, of grand strategic debate, of the machine-warfare waged by air forces and navies. And that, perhaps, is

a pity.”²⁰ Liddell Hart and his contemporaries would surely disagree with the “perhaps” part; this was spitting in the face of the military history tradition of the previous century. Yet Keegan then proposed that even critics would be won over when they recognized several things about this new direction (“to question, as I have found it does me—the traditional approach”), particularly the great depth which it could *add* to their traditional work, rather than detract from it.²¹ While the general field of history was evolving, military history could not afford to remain stagnant.

It should be noted that Keegan did not invent the new historiographical shift. Rather, the wild success of his book helped to popularize, shape, and advance the new mold. He traced the birth of the new historiography himself in a 1978 article for the *International Security* journal titled “The Historian and Battle.” In this article, aside from describing his own early experiences in research and methodology, he explained:

[M]ilitary history underwent a remarkable change. I noted at the outset that battle is a popular subject, both with readers as with authors. But it has not in recent times recommended itself to professional historians. Because battle is the central act of warfare, it and associated subjects—the lives of great commanders and their thoughts—have monopolized historiographical enterprise in the military field. But about twenty years ago, that sort of military historiography began to give way to a new approach, comparable in many ways to that of the new historiography of politics and society. The reasons why that happened are, I think, obvious. It was the historiographical heritage of the Second World War.²²

The Second World War, the final conflict which Liddell Hart could actively examine and write about, changed the field of military history forever. Keegan embraced and stepped to the fore-front of this new social-conscious historiography.

Keegan continued building a reputation as a leader in the new vein of soldier studies, including creating a comprehensive history of warfare. Agreeing with Liddell Hart’s assessment of the inevitability and primacy of war, Keegan “presented swaths of military history, reaching back to prehistoric times to put war in cultural context. Controversially, he rejected Clausewitz’s dictum that war is politics by other means, insisting that war is even more integral to civilization.”²³ Some reviewers

believed he took this too far. One was perplexed by Keegan's "constant, and at times trifling, battle with Clausewitz." Nevertheless, this same reviewer praised Keegan for attempting to fuse military and social history, admiring his "synthesis of some of the best recent interdisciplinary work on warfare to provide a coherent framework to understand non-political, non-technological studies of the subject."²⁴ Another reviewer had a more positive reaction to his approach to Clausewitz. "Just as philosophers are stuck with Kant, teachers of military history are stuck with Clausewitz, whose fat and barely translatable German book is what they need to make their subject academically respectable. But that does not make Clausewitz right, far from it."²⁵ Accepting the premise that Clausewitz made military history academically respectable—which can certainly be disputed—Keegan was making a major historiographical leap by directly challenging the Prussian's work. Reception was mixed, but clearly he was attempting to move military history forward and into a wider context.

Aside from shifting focus to the common soldiers, Keegan incorporated many other fields into his study of military history. *The Face of War* and *A History of Warfare* incorporated social, psychological, cultural, and economic lines of inquiry. He then turned his attention to another factor that was only beginning to gain prominence in military history. In the post-World War II period in which Keegan rose to prominence, "The most innovative historiographical movement of the era, the Annales school, developed an agenda which stressed deep structural actors such as geography, climate, and population instead of military and political events."²⁶ Keegan had tackled population in his two aforementioned books. In *Fields of Battle*, he shifted his focus to geography and climate as a determining factor in broad military history. Focusing exclusively on North America, he paid particular attention to men such as Samuel de Champlain and George Washington, who had professional experience as a mapmaker and a surveyor, respectively.²⁷ He later returned to the theme of North American geography in his history of the American Civil War. Expanding his range further in other books, Keegan focused on the value of military intelligence—including examinations of the cultural images of spies—in *Intelligence in War*, and on the appeal of leadership in *The Mask of Command*, which relied heavily on psychology.

Despite his pre-eminence in the field, however, Keegan was not immune from missteps. Like Liddell Hart, Keegan's blunders tended to occur when he overreached. The controversy of his efforts to dispute Clausewitz's famous dictum has already been seen. *A History of Warfare*—as his most ambitious and wide-ranging

effort—seemed to elicit the most controversy altogether. One glaring error by Keegan in the book was a puzzling dismissive attitude toward gender history: “Keegan explicitly refuses to address women in this study, content instead to argue that they ‘have always and everywhere stood apart.’ Such a blanket exclusion undermines his own powerful logic.”²⁸ Critics also attacked the book for its dismissive attitude toward irregular forms of warfare. Identifying state-run armies and murderous mobs as the two collective actors in warfare, he determined that “only the state-run kind deserved serious study.”²⁹ The twenty-first century War on Terror has proven the error of Keegan’s thinking in this area. Finally, his history of the American Civil War, published in 2009, focused largely on geography throughout the narrative, but reached an unsatisfactory conclusion in turning to social/economic questions. In this book, Keegan seemed a bit careless with facts throughout, and his conclusion that the horrors of the Civil War in the United States essentially frightened the Americans from ever staging a socialist revolution seemed terribly undeveloped by evidence.

What can be said in conclusion about the two British stalwarts of military history in the twentieth century, Liddell Hart and Keegan? The two men sat on opposite sides of a historiographical divide—one helping to usher out the traditional in grand fashion, the other propelling and rejuvenating the field after the horror and destruction of two World Wars diminished interest in military affairs. Both created controversy through their work, typically the result of oversteps—always a risk for historians in development of a thesis. In many ways, both men failed to appreciate the turns the world would take near the ends of their lifetimes. Liddell Hart was not a man suited to writing about inter-continental ballistics or nuclear weapons—and over-emphasized the fatality of nuclear weapons on the field of military history, almost as if to claim that military history could not continue without him. Keegan failed to appreciate the tremendous impact non-traditional armed forces could have on the battlefield of the twenty-first century.

As General Taylor stated in his 1870 memoirs, war has been the constant occupation of men since the days of Nimrod. The seven score years since Taylor wrote that have done nothing to halt that endless cycle of human destruction. To borrow another phrase from Taylor, “May we not well ask whether religion, education, science and art combined have lessened the brutality of man since the days of [Albrecht von] Wallenstein and [Johann Tserclaes, Count of] Tilly?”³⁰ Liddell Hart and Keegan went far beyond Wallenstein and Tilly in their examination of the past—reaching all the way to ancient times. Examining the subject on

different levels and from different intellectual angles, they satisfied Liddell Hart's prescription for finding historical truth: "Truth is a spiral staircase. What looks true on one level may not be true on the next higher level. A complete vision must extend vertically as well as horizontally—not only seeing the parts in relation to one another but embracing the different planes."³¹ While Liddell Hart focused primarily on the upper levels of the military hierarchy and political structure, Keegan filled in the foundation as best he could with focus on soldier studies and varied social sciences.

Neither man believed war was possible to be done away with, though Liddell Hart believed it needed to be and Keegan referred to himself as "95 per cent pacifist."³² As Keegan put it, "I don't think you can run this wicked world without armed force."³³ If one accepts Liddell Hart's basic premise that one studies history in order to learn how not to repeat it, this sense of the inevitability of warfare is troubling. Keegan never portrayed himself as a military theorist or strategist in the sense that Liddell Hart did, and was more interested in explaining the past than prognosticating the future. With the depth of his analysis, he helped take the military history field from the high level grand narratives of Liddell Hart to the multi-faceted histories that are expected of professional historians in the modern era.

Like Shakespearean tragic figures, both Brits were undone at moments by their own excessiveness. This should serve as a cautionary tale to military historians in the post-Keegan world. Keegan was generally successful in avoiding Liddell Hart's vice, by leaving personal feelings out of his work. Modern military historians must recognize the dangers of over-reaching in thesis as Keegan was occasionally wont to do. This can be corrected in one of two ways. The reach of new military histories can be drawn back to conservative levels, safely protecting the historian from such charges. Or the military historian could delve even more deeply into the subject than Keegan did, incorporating the fields that he ignored such as gender history. Certainly the latter approach is preferable. Keegan and his contemporaries advanced historiography along a new path from the tradition of Liddell Hart. It is the next generation's responsibility to expand and pave this new path in order to further develop military history as an academic field. War is not disappearing from humanity's future as both men warily hoped; yet deeper understanding of the wars of the past will hopefully help to limit it in the future.

Notes

1. Richard Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction* (Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1998), 11.
2. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 388.
3. *Ibid.*, 391.
4. *Ibid.*, 388.
5. *Ibid.*, 391.
6. Richard A. Gabriel, "Can We Trust the Ancient Texts?" *Military History* 25, no. 1 (March/April 2008), 4.
7. Richard M. Swain, "Liddell Hart and the Weight of History by John J. Mearsheimer," *Albion: a Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 803.
8. *Ibid.*, 804.
9. B.T. Reynolds, "Through the Fog of War, by B.H. Liddell Hart," *International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (January-February 1939): 112.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Gabriel, 5.
12. Gabriel, 5.
13. Ronald Lewin, "Sir Basil Liddell Hart: The Captain Who Taught Generals," *International Affairs* 47, no. 1 (January 1971): 79.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971), 12.
16. *Ibid.*, 17.
17. Stephen Miller, "John Keegan 1934-2012; a Scholar of Soldiers in Battle," *Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2012.
18. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 32.
19. *Ibid.*, 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 33.
21. *Ibid.*, 33.
22. John Keegan, "The Historian and Battle," *International Security* 3, no. 3 (Winter 1978-1979), 140.
23. Miller.

24. Michael Neiberg, "Reviews – A History of Warfare by John Keegan," *Journal of Social History* 29, no. 2 (Winter 1995), 466.
25. "The Killing Fields – A History of Warfare by John Keegan," *The Economist* 329, no. 7831 (October 2, 1993), 97.
26. Richard Buel, Jr., "A History of Warfare by John Keegan," *History and Theory* 34, no. 1 (February 1995), 90.
27. Miller.
28. Neiberg, 466.
29. "The Killing Fields," 97.
30. Taylor, 41. Wallenstein and Tilly were two leading generals of the Thirty Years War.
31. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn From History?*, 92.
32. Stephen Miller, "John Keegan 1934-2012; a Scholar of Soldiers in Battle," *Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2012.
33. *Ibid.*

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