

# ‘Old Men Forget’ or do they ‘Remember with Advantages’?

The Problem of Primary Sources  
and Objectivity

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Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,  
But he'll remember with advantages  
What feats he did that day.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare's *Henry V* helped to create the myth of a Great King and has influenced histories of the Hundred Years War; the English remember Agincourt and their other victorious battles rather than the loss of the war. Shakespeare's was a history written nearly two centuries after the events it describes rather than a contemporary account. But Henry's speech on memory contains a critical truth regarding primary sources that has received less attention. Whilst old men do sometimes forget, it is their tendency to remember their feats with advantages in their memoirs and diaries that is the focus of this article. If primary sources are not objective and contain distortions, omissions and errors, can the truth be uncovered in secondary sources using them?

This article seeks to investigate the degree of objectivity in primary sources and how they have shaped subsequent histories by considering three sets of memoirs or diaries maintained by twentieth-century Britons: Winston Churchill's *The Second World War*, Douglas Haig's First World War diaries and Alfred Duff Cooper's diaries. It will argue that these primary sources demonstrate consistent subjectivity and that the perspectives and claims of cause and effect they introduced continue to influence histories of these eras. Churchill and Haig's accounts have been particularly influential. Although both have been disputed, Churchill's by some of his contemporaries and their biographers and Haig's more widely, the early publication and wide circulation of these two primary sources appear to have been significant factors in establishing and maintaining their influence.<sup>2</sup>

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1 William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene III, lines 49-51, Arden Shakespeare, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, (London: Routledge, 1995), 290. *Old Men Forget* was also the title of Alfred Duff Cooper's autobiography.

2 Churchill's *History* was published between 1948 and 1954. Haig's despatches were published in 1919, Duff Cooper's two volume biography using Haig's diary was published in 1935-36, and the diaries themselves in 1952.

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These primary sources have been chosen as they remain central in three of the most enduring stories of the British twentieth century; how Britain won two world wars and how, in 1938, the appeasement of Hitler at Munich led to it fighting the second from a position of disadvantage. Churchill was British Prime Minister for nearly all the Second World War, whilst Haig led its forces for most of the First. Duff Cooper's diaries are included as he is a link between the two. He served in Haig's army in 1918 and wrote his biography in the 1930s, resigned in protest at Munich and served in Churchill's wartime government.

Although published, all three works can be considered primary sources. They represent written records by the observers of, and participants in, the events they describe and all contain descriptions of events of the time. Moreover, the documents included in Churchill's *History*, Duff Cooper's diary and, in part, Haig's diaries were all written at the time of the events they describe and purport to explain.

Churchill was certainly aware of the judgement of history. He appreciated the importance of setting out his own version of events, but he feared subsequent revisionism:

in one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting. There is a new proportion. There is another scale of values. History with its flickering lamp stumbles upon the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passions of former days.<sup>3</sup>

Many historians express an optimistic view of their ability to use history's 'flickering lamp' to 'reconstruct its scenes' from primary sources. For example, the British historian and self-described empiricist Arthur Marwick, whilst recognising that primary sources can be 'full of prejudices and errors' was more confident of history's judgements than Churchill. Marwick claimed primary sources' prejudices, errors and biases are problems that professional historians can solve by their 'urge to find out' and analysis of the evidence.<sup>4</sup> However his focus quickly shifted to the question of the subjectivity of historians rather than the creators of primary sources. Similarly, the first chapter of E. H. Carr's *What is History?* focused upon the difficulty of historians acting objectively, as 'the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretations and his interpretations to his facts'.<sup>5</sup> More recently postmodernists have extended this to argue that historians are necessarily relativists and that there is no possibility of objectivity in the writing of history.<sup>6</sup>

However, by focusing upon historians' subjectivity, the debate pays insufficient attention to whether the primary sources themselves can be objective and the implications of this. Even if we can accept that historians are struggling with the problem of 'looking through a glass darkly' rather than actually engaged in an act of fiction, then how much more complex is their task if the contents they struggle to see clearly have themselves been regularly and deliberately distorted? The

<sup>3</sup> Winston Churchill delivering an obituary for Neville Chamberlain in the House of Commons, *Hansard*, HC Deb, 12 November 1940, vol.365, cc 1617.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Fundamentals of History*, Institute of Historical Research, [www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/marwick1.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/marwick1.html), accessed on 3 August 2012.

<sup>5</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, (London: Penguin, 1987 (1961)), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, (London: Granta, 2000 (1997)), 3.

primary sources considered in this article introduced deliberate biases and, contrary to Marwick’s claims, historians’ ‘urge to find out’ has, to date, been insufficient to ensure that the resultant histories are consistently accurate or objective.

The passage of time is probably an important factor in the production of objective history. When asked his opinion of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai reputedly said that it was too early to tell.<sup>7</sup> More recently, John Keegan claimed that it took 130 years before James McPherson produced the first objective history of the American Civil War. He suggested a similar period might be required before an equivalent history of the Second World War could be written.<sup>8</sup> But whilst insufficient time may have passed and, indeed, ‘the grand building of absolute truth’ is probably unobtainable, historians should do more than merely repeat distortions introduced by the writers of primary sources.<sup>9</sup>

Marwick outlined a distinction between the witting and unwitting testimony of a primary source and the importance of considering the latter as it reveals the author’s underlying assumptions and beliefs.<sup>10</sup> This presupposes that historians and readers can successfully distinguish between the two types of testimony and, furthermore, that they do not share the same assumptions and beliefs. The ongoing credibility of Churchill’s moral tale, that the Second World War was avoidable and won by the forces of good against those of evil, has reinforced the beliefs of its Anglo-American readers and historians for over half a century. Similarly Haig’s claims of an ever-stronger British army defeating the Kaiser and winning the First World War were consistent with the mythology that the British government wanted to create after 1918. It served to give meaning to those commemorating a million British dead and has continued to be repeated by many British historians.

If a primary source is written or rewritten with a view to its eventual publication, how objective is it likely to be? Churchill reputedly planned to publish his memoirs eventually even before joining Chamberlain’s cabinet in 1939.<sup>11</sup> He famously claimed that history would see him favourably as he intended to write the history.<sup>12</sup> Haig’s diary also was written, and re-written too, with the aim of enhancing his reputation.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, although he published an autobiography in his lifetime, Duff Cooper’s diaries, according to his son who edited them half a century later, were written for his own eyes only and not for publication.<sup>14</sup>

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7 Norman Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945*, (London: Pan 2007 (2006), 489-490. Ironically perhaps even this is a failure of a primary source (i.e. the American notes of the conversation between Zhou and Richard Nixon) as it was recently claimed by Nixon’s interpreter, Chas Freeman, that Zhou was actually referring to the May 1968 student riots in Paris, not 1789. Richard McGregor, ‘Zhou’s cryptic caution lost in translation’, *Financial Times*, 10 June 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/74916db6-938d-11e0-922e-00144feab49a.html#axzz22Ffv7Qd4>, accessed on 3 August 2012.

8 John Keegan, *The Battle for History: Refighting World War Two*, (London: Hutchinson, 1995), 30-31.

9 Bury and Elton’s ‘grand building of absolute truth’, quoted in Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (eds.), *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth Century History and Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 3-4.

10 Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 172-179.

11 David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War*, (London: Penguin, 2005), 501.

12 Regularly quoted, for example by John Keegan, *Churchill*, (London: Phoenix, 2002), 160.

13 For example, Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2005). Denis Winter, *Haig’s Command: A Reassessment*, (London, Penguin, 1991). Elizabeth Greenhalgh, ‘Myth and Memory: Sir Douglas Haig and the Imposition of Allied United Command in March 1918,’ *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 68, No. 3, (2004), 771-820.

14 Julius Norwich (ed.), *The Duff Cooper Diaries 1915-1951*, (London: Phoenix, 2006 (2005)).

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This provokes the question, what is objectivity? It is a concept that appears to be more discussed than well defined by British historians. For example, Marwick does not appear to offer a definition, whilst Carr's belief in the necessity of progress led him to suggest that objectivity could only be judged in retrospect as it implies a capacity to project into the future to give more profound insights into the period.<sup>15</sup> An ability to judge objectivity only from the perspective of a later period is unsatisfactory: such a retrospective test is open to the abuses of current ideology. American historians have perhaps made a greater contribution to this debate. John Lukacs has written at length about the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> In considering 'the waves of twentieth century revisionism', he highlighted the dangers of using history as a tool to support current political ideas or ideology.<sup>17</sup> Peter Novick's concept of neutrality is more helpful, as is Thomas Haskell's of 'asceticism' in his review of Novick's *That Noble Dream*. Haskell argued that something is objective if it avoids wishful thinking, accepts unsatisfactory information and shows a willingness to 'enter sympathetically into the alien and possible repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers'.<sup>18</sup>

However, notions of neutrality and asceticism are, like Carr's belief in progress, inherently subjective. Tests of objectivity require more transparent assessment criteria. Building upon Haskell's suggestions, Mark Bevir put forward a framework that included three 'rules of thumb' for assessing whether intellectual behaviour was objective. According to Bevir, objective behaviour requires a willingness to take criticism seriously, a preference for established standards of evidence and reason and a preference for positive speculative theories rather than merely theories designed to obstruct criticisms.<sup>19</sup>

Janet Abu-Lughod raised a further three issues to be considered in determining historical objectivity which are more closely related to the structure of the narrative itself. She suggested that problems arise from viewing events from only one perspective, constructing history backwards by starting with the result and then building a narrative that makes it inevitable and choosing a starting point for the story to fit the arguments.<sup>20</sup>

The primary sources considered all lack objectivity when judged against these six criteria. In respect of Bevir's 'rules of thumb', Churchill, Haig and Duff Cooper all wrote justifications of their actions rather than serious reflections of criticism. Both Churchill and Haig were able to control official documents thus ensuring a diminution in standards of evidence. Writing before the introduction of even the fifty-year rule, Churchill had sole access to his government's papers and regularly used them in a way to deflect possible criticism.<sup>21</sup> He included documents edited to obscure his complacency of the Japanese threat in 1939-41 and to deflect American criticism of his

15 Marwick, *The New Nature of History*. Carr, *What is History?*, 123.

16 For example, John Lukacs, *The Last European War: September 1939/December 1941* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976). John Lukacs, *Five Days in London: May 1940*, (Melbourne: Scribe, 2001 (1999)). John Lukacs, *Churchill: Visionary, Statesman, Historian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). John Lukacs, *The Legacy of the Second World War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

17 John Lukacs, 'Revising the Twentieth Century', *American Heritage*, Vol. 45, No. 5, (1994), 83-90.

18 Thomas Haskell, 'Objectivity is not Neutral: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novak's "That Noble Dream"', *History and Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1990), 130-132.

19 Mark Bevir, 'Objectivity in History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 33 No. 3 (1994), 332-337.

20 Janet Abu-Lughod, 'On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past,' in *Remaking History*, eds. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, (New York: The New Press, 1998 (1989)), 112-113.

21 The fifty-year rule was introduced by the British government in 1958. It provided for the general release of government papers fifty years after they were created. Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 499.

delays in launching the Second Front.<sup>22</sup> Haig’s deliberate rewriting of his diary, which is discussed below, is an even more blatant example of abuse of evidence.<sup>23</sup> Churchill’s use of speculative theories, or what Reynolds called his ‘love of counterfactuals’, seems specifically designed to obstruct alternatives.<sup>24</sup> Reynolds noted, for example, Churchill’s use of these counterfactuals to defend his position at Yalta.<sup>25</sup>

These primary sources also fail to meet Abu-Lughod’s objectivity criteria. The principal purpose of both Churchill’s *History* and Haig’s diaries seems to be to support their positions and decisions rather than to view events from other perspectives. Equally, both made their works a morality tale by starting with the result, victory in war, and explaining how their actions led to this result. Churchill was able to go further by arguing that the war itself could have been avoided if his warnings had been heeded.<sup>26</sup> Both also chose starting points that suited their argument. In the diaries he edited and circulated, Haig began with the outbreak of war in 1914. Prior to this, he had been responsible for military training and had a major role in the composition of the *Field Service Regulations* that underpinned the tactics followed so unsuccessfully by his armies at the Somme and Passchendaele. Omitting this inconvenient truth helps to reduce his apparent culpability as even he accepted that ‘we went into this war lacking preparation for it’.<sup>27</sup>

Churchill too chose a convenient starting point: the rise of Hitler’s Germany. If his *History* began earlier he would have needed to both explain his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1924-29) in introducing the rolling ten-year rule and also consider the threat posed by Japan to British interests in Asia.<sup>28</sup> He castigated the policy of appeasement in his *History*. However, appeasement owed its existence in part to the fact that Britain had insufficient strength to simultaneously confront multiple potential enemies, especially both Germany and Japan.<sup>29</sup>

Duff Cooper’s diary, although not meeting these criteria of objectivity, does not abuse them to the same extent. It appears to be a more contemporaneous record, written with less of an eye to eventual publication. However, it too lacks perspective, even of issues that Duff Cooper himself raised. In the summer of 1938, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he had advocated a policy of appeasing Japan, recognising the risk of simultaneous conflict with Germany, Italy and Japan in a war ‘I was not sure we could win’.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, within three months he was prepared to risk this war, in rejecting the Munich Agreement and resigning his cabinet position. Whilst this may have

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22 Ibid., 500.

23 Winter, *Haig’s Command*, 225-239.

24 Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 501.

25 Ibid., 464-471.

26 This was Churchill’s argument in his opening volume which covered the period when he was out of power (*The Gathering Storm*, (Cassell: London, 1948) vii-ix).

27 Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (London, Allen Lane, 1998), 305.

28 The ten-year rule was introduced in August 1919 and required military expenditure to be based on the assumption that there would be no major war for the next ten years. In July 1928, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Churchill converted it into a perpetual ten-year rule.

29 For example John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 1989). Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana, 1989), 400-446.

30 Norwich, *The Duff Cooper Diaries*, 251.

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been a reasonable conclusion, his diaries of the month of September included no consideration of the risk of the simultaneous threats he had been so concerned by earlier.<sup>31</sup>

Due to their authority, control over documentation and early publication, published primary sources can have significant influence over the subsequent writing of history. In noting the centrality of Churchill's *The Second World War* to the (Western) historiography of the War, J. H. Plumb's judgement was that we 'move down the broad avenues which he drove through war's confusion and complexity'.<sup>32</sup> Plumb's view was expressed in 1969, before the release of many of the government documents under the thirty-year rule, let alone intelligence records, such as Ultra, and during the Cold War when neither the Soviet perspective nor their records had a significant influence upon Anglo-American historians of the war.<sup>33</sup> What is more troubling is that this still seems to be the prevailing judgement in the West. In their books published in 2004 and 2006 respectively, Reynolds claimed that Plumb's judgement holds true today and Norman Davies argued that the perspective of Western histories of the war remains 'Churchillian'.<sup>34</sup>

Although Anglo-American historians have gradually identified Churchill's intentional additions and omissions, they have generally failed to correct his political perspectives, or what Marwick would call his unwitting testimony. Churchill's additions to primary sources included the creation of documents that Reynolds suggested he might have written for the future historical record rather than for genuine contemporary purposes. These include his memoranda on Auschwitz in July 1944 and strategic terror bombing following the destruction of Dresden in March 1945. Despite their apparent importance, neither was followed up in the usual Churchillian manner.<sup>35</sup> Evidence has also emerged of his omissions. These include the suppression of the Ultra secret, on the grounds of national security, and creating the fiction that there had been no debate about continuing the war in May 1940 when, in fact, the cabinet discussed this for several days.<sup>36</sup> However, whilst these have been identified and gradually corrected in subsequent histories, a number of Churchill's political perspectives have continued to be accepted with inadequate challenge. The most significant are possibly regarding appeasement and the role of the Soviet Union.

Churchill buried the appeasers. The reputations of his immediate predecessors as Prime Minister, Baldwin and Chamberlain, have still not recovered.<sup>37</sup> His claims of the need to oppose rather than appease dictators continue to influence public opinion and politicians. Both Anthony Eden, in respect of Suez in 1956, and George W. Bush, over the invasion of Iraq in 2003, are reputed to have been strongly influenced in their decisions for war by Churchill's stern warnings against appeasing dictators.<sup>38</sup>

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31 Ibid., 256-271.

32 J.H. Plumb, quoted in Reynolds, *In Command of History*, xxii. Jack Plumb was a British historian and one of the syndicate of writers of Churchill's *History of the English Speaking People*.

33 Under the 1967 amendment to the Public Records Act, government papers began to be released thirty years after their creation.

34 Reynolds, *In Command of History*, xxii. Davies, *Europe at War*, 473-474.

35 Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 501-502.

36 Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941* (London: Penguin, 2008), 11-53. Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940*.

37 Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 504.

38 Churchill's influence on Bush is outlined in Jacob Weisberg, *The Bush Tragedy: The Unmaking of a President* (New York, Random House, 2008), 223-234.

Churchill's treatment of the Soviet Union was more complex but his perspective remains influential. When he wrote, Churchill was in the unique position of being both a past and potentially future Prime Minister.<sup>39</sup> This led to a significant distortion of the role of Britain's wartime ally but Cold War foe that continues to be reflected in Anglo-American histories of the war. By setting a framework of the war as being largely won by Britain and the United States, he suppressed the role of the Red Army. Norman Davies argued that, for any story of the war in Europe to accurately reflect the relative share of fighting, over seventy-five percentage would need to be devoted to the Eastern Front.<sup>40</sup> Churchill's *History* gave it less than a tenth, a ratio that has been followed by many British historians. For example, in his *Second World War*, John Keegan recommends fifty books available in English in his bibliography. Just four focus on the Eastern Front.<sup>41</sup> Andrew Roberts produced *The Storm of War*, which claims to be a 'new' history, three years after Davies. Although apparently accepting Davies' argument and describing the fact that four-fifths of Germans killed in combat died on the Eastern Front 'the central statistic of the Second World War', Roberts' book reversed Davies' percentages, devoting just under a quarter of its contents to the Eastern Front.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Churchill hid Stalin's wrongs to emphasise the uniqueness of Hitler's evil and justify the West's Soviet alliance. For example, both in 1943 and when writing of it in 1949, Churchill ensured that the Soviet massacre of 15,000 Polish officers at Katyn was blamed on the Nazis.<sup>43</sup> This myth was followed by many historians and only laid to rest when Gorbachev released the relevant papers from the Soviet archive in 1990.<sup>44</sup>

Whilst not as dominant as Churchill, Haig likewise continues to influence the British view of the First World War. He took over as commander of the British forces on the Western Front in December 1915. Thus, as well as the victory in 1918, the enormously costly and controversial battles of the Somme and Passchendaele were fought under his direction. He justified these earlier battles by claiming:

the rapid collapse of Germany's military powers in the latter half of 1918 was the logical outcome of the previous two years. It would not have taken place but for the ceaseless attrition which used up the reserves of the German Armies ... It is in the great battles of 1916 and 1917 that we have to seek for the secret of our victory in 1918.<sup>45</sup>

Haig's narrative has been regularly followed by British military historians. Both his critics and supporters recognise that understanding the uses and abuses of his diary are central to his story.<sup>46</sup> This begins with his reason for maintaining a diary. Originally Haig used his diary as a personal document. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne observed that he had often kept a diary since his youth

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39 Remarkably, whilst completing the sixth and final volume of his *History*, Churchill was the serving Prime Minister. Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 429.

40 Davies, *Europe at War*, 25, 491.

41 John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London, Pimlico, 1997 (1989)), 499-502.

42 Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2010 (2009)), 603. He devotes 142 of 577 pages to the Eastern Front (excluding the preface and conclusion).

43 Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 327-328.

44 As late as 1989, John Keegan explained the mutual brutality of the Eastern Front as a Soviet response to Nazi atrocities and prisoner massacres. He makes no mention of Katyn. Keegan, *The Second World War*, 152-154.

45 Haig's Final Despatch, 21 March 1919, quoted in Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 523.

46 For the purposes of this article, I have used Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2002 (2001)) and Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig* as examples of supporters, and Winter, *Haig's Command* and Greenhalgh, 'Myth and Memory' as critics.

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but that his pre-1914 and post-1918 diaries were generally very summary.<sup>47</sup> His war-time diaries appear to have been written for two additional purposes: to enhance his standing by providing a personal commentary on the Western Front to George V and his advisors and to provide his testimony to history.<sup>48</sup> Haig spent much of his post-war life rewriting his diaries. As a result, at least two versions of his diaries exist, the handwritten original ('manuscript') and the later typed version ('typed'). Denis Winter claims that, in addition, Haig rewrote the manuscript version after the war. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, whose criticisms are much milder than Winter's, notes that the typed amendments tend to play down French performance and put Haig's own actions in the best possible light.<sup>49</sup> Even Haig's supporters recognise that he edited his diaries post-war because he planned to have them published after his death.<sup>50</sup>

Critically the typed version includes amendments to justify features of the earlier battles. He retrospectively added his concerns of the VIII Corps' ability to his 1916 diary by supplementing his claim two days before the battle that he had 'full confidence in their ability to reap success in the coming fight' with the post-war comments that 'I was still anxious regarding the leading of small units' and that its senior officers were 'amateurs in hard fighting'.<sup>51</sup> The VIII Corps suffered appalling losses on the first day of the Somme: over ninety per cent of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment were killed or wounded.<sup>52</sup> Equally, Haig made small but critical post-war additions to his record of his pre-Passchendaele meeting with the War Cabinet. He included after his contemporary claim 'that Germany was within 6 months of the total exhaustion of her available manpower, if the fighting continues at its present intensity' the retrospective proviso 'to do this, more men and guns are necessary'.<sup>53</sup>

We would expect Marwick's empiricist historians to be immediately alerted by the diary revisions and use their 'urge to find out' to identify the truth, but this has frequently failed to occur in the British historiography of the war. Both Haig's 1930s biographer, Duff Cooper, and the original diary editor, Robert Blake, used his typed diary, as did James Edmonds in writing the official British history of the war.<sup>54</sup> As recently as 2005, Sheffield and Bourne, in disputing Winter's claims, asserted that the changes Haig made to his diaries were 'generally mundane'.<sup>55</sup> Despite the popular view of 'donkey-like leadership' in a futile war presented in *Oh! What a Lovely War* and *Blackadder*,<sup>56</sup> many British military historians have followed Haig's perspective on the outcomes of the war; essentially that the Allies won a decisive military victory in 1918 due to the performance of the British army under Haig's command.<sup>57</sup>

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47 Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 3.

48 Haig was well connected at court and his wife, who distributed his diary during the war, had been the Queen's Maid of Honour: Winter, *Haig's Command*, 21.

49 Ibid, 225-239. Greenhalgh, 'Myth and Memory', 782.

50 Robert Blake, the editor of the original publication of Haig's diaries: Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 3-4.

51 Haig's typed comments, inserted into his diary of 29 June 1916: Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 194.

52 William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: the Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century* (London, Abacus, 2010 (2009)) 196.

53 Haig's typed comments, inserted into his diary of 19 June 1917, Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 300.

54 Ibid., 2-3.

55 Ibid., 5.

56 Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, xxxii-xxxiii.

57 For example, Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.

This can be seen in the recent treatment of the Doullens Conference by British historians. The conference was held in late March 1918 at the height of the crisis of the German offensive. It resulted in the establishment of the unified Allied command that arguably led to the victory later that year. According to Haig’s post-war typed diary, he remained calm whilst Petain ‘struck me as very much upset, almost unbalanced ... [and as having] the appearance of a commander who was in a funk and has lost his nerve’ and was preparing to abandon covering the British right flank to fall back on Paris. Haig’s typed diary continued by claiming that he requested the conference and proposed that Foch be given supreme command over all Allied Armies on the Western Front rather than, as others were suggesting, just over operations around Amiens.<sup>58</sup> In 2004, Elizabeth Greenhalgh argued that this myth is embedded in the British historiography of the war and then proceeded to demolish it by outlining how these elements did not appear in the original manuscript diary and that there is no other evidence for them.<sup>59</sup>

However Haig’s massaging seems to continue to influence many British historians. In 1991, Winter argued that this massaging had occurred in the inter-war period as a desire to cover up the indecisive result in 1918, the appalling loss of life and the fear of a resumption of the same war within a generation.<sup>60</sup> What is more disturbing is that Haig’s distortions have continued to be accepted even after the publication of Greenhalgh’s 2004 article. Three years later, in 2007, Andrew Roberts repeated Haig’s myths that Petain was more concerned with protecting Paris than assisting the British.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Sheffield and Bourne took Greenhalgh’s comments on how Haig had carefully ensured that the manuscript and typed versions did not contradict each other as further evidence that ‘the overall authenticity of Haig’s diary is ... not in doubt’.<sup>62</sup> This virtually inverts her actual argument, which is that it was the very subtlety of the changes between the manuscript and typed versions that was so effective. As she observed ‘Haig’s massaging of the record and the official historian’s acceptance of Haig’s version of events ensured that the traditional narrative survived ... despite being untrue, that narrative has survived in both British and French historiography’.<sup>63</sup>

Haig’s biographer, Alfred Duff Cooper, was also a member of Churchill’s wartime cabinet and later Ambassador to France. Ironically in view of his use of Haig’s diaries to write his biography, Duff Cooper, in explaining the value of a diary, claimed ‘an account ... written the day after the event must be of greater value and of greater interest than any account, however painstaking, accurate and eloquent, written years later’.<sup>64</sup> His diaries, unlike the other two works, appear to have been written primarily neither for political reasons nor as an external personal testimony. Equally, they do not appear to have been written with a view to publication, or to have been subject to consistent rewriting.<sup>65</sup> Norwich commented that he has little doubt that ‘unlike, many diarists, he [Duff Cooper] never intended it for any eyes but his own’.<sup>66</sup> Duff Cooper himself, in answering the

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58 Haig’s typed diary, 24 March and 26 March 1918, Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 392-394.

59 Greenhalgh, ‘Myth and Memory’, 771-820.

60 Winter, *Haig’s Command*, 238-257.

61 Andrew Roberts, *A History of the English Speaking People since 1900* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 137.

62 Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig*, 8-9.

63 Greenhalgh, ‘Myth and Memory’, 820.

64 Norwich, *The Duff Cooper Diaries*, 485.

65 Duff Cooper’s diaries were not published until over fifty years after his death and Norwich notes that the majority of the period comprises seventeen handwritten volumes. Norwich was both Duff Cooper’s son and the editor of his diaries.

66 Norwich, *The Duff Cooper Diaries*, xii.

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question of why he kept a diary, explained, ‘people who love life as much as I do want to keep some record of it – because it is all they can keep’.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, is it reasonable to assume that these diaries are more honest or even objective? Initially perhaps, but on closer reflection, one has to question their objectivity or the possibility of using them to ‘recreate the past’. In considering whether his father ‘wielded the blue pencil himself’, Norwich noted that some of the later volumes only exist in typed form and that they show ‘an unmistakable change of tone’.<sup>68</sup> As Haig’s biographer, Duff Cooper certainly understood the importance of diaries to histories and historians and not only did he securely retain his diaries but also, as part of his estate, chose to leave them to his nephew who was a publisher.<sup>69</sup> He was also very aware of the danger of his diaries being mislaid or read by prying eyes, which again raises the question of how accurate a record he was likely to leave.

As Duff Cooper observed, old men do forget.<sup>70</sup> However, as Shakespeare continued, they also remember what they did with advantage. Furthermore, much of this advantage has remained. Contrary to Churchill’s concern that ‘a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting’, many of the subjective and advantageous perspectives that he and Haig introduced into their narratives of their wars have remained in the historiography. Despite the demonstrable lack of objectivity in the primary sources, historians have shown a tendency to return to the ‘broad avenues’ originally driven by these old men. To date, history’s ‘flickering lamp’ has been insufficient to fully illuminate alternative routes.

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67 *Ibid.*, 470.

68 *Ibid.*, xiii.

69 *Ibid.*, ix.

70 *Old Men Forget* was the title of Duff Cooper’s autobiography.

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