

Somme – The Heroism and Horror of War by Martin Gilbert.

John Murray 2006.

The battle of the Somme, the archetype for the senseless destruction of life in war, lasted just over three months and claimed close to 310,460 lives. Its hallmarks are the courage of the combatants, the almost criminal negligence and amateurishness of their generals, and the absolute pointlessness of it all. Over a quarter of a million lives for the achievement of next to nothing.

Martin Gilbert, in my view Britain's greatest living popular historian, tells the story of the Somme as only he can, bringing to life events and individuals, many of the latter of whom would be unknown.

Although a short book by Gilbert's standards, Somme packs a mighty punch, for it is impossible to read it without entering its narrative, hearing the artillery explosions and the machine gun fire, the screams of the wounded and the fatalism of the combatants, and mentally wading through the mud that in the end brought the battle to a standstill.

It is hugely to his credit that Gilbert has produced such a profound and moving tribute to those who gave their lives, as they believed, for their King and Country, and whose loss we still recall 90 years later. Two motifs run through this book: first, the incompetence of the generals, and second, the untold numbers who died and whose remains were never identified. The phrase 'their names are on the Thiepval Memorial' (to the missing) ultimately becomes an almost physical blow to the reader.

Martin Gilbert has also included some of the lesser known poems written by soldiers, and deeply moving they are to, both for their fatalism and inner beauty.

It is worth pondering how long the battle of the Somme would have lasted, and how long the government that sanctioned it would have survived, if today's media of communication had existed 90 years ago, and soldiers had been able to text and call their families from the trenches via their mobile phones.

The armchair generals who happily condone the sending of other people's sons and daughters to die in the corner of some dusty foreign field should read this book.

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