

Max Hastings. *Catastrophe: Europe goes to War 1914*. London: William Collins, 2013. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 628pp. ISBN 978-0007519743 (Hardback). Price £13.25.

In December 1914, Charles à Court Repington wrote in *The Times*:

‘It transcends all limits of thought, imagination and reason. We little creeping creatures cannot see more than a fraction of it. Even if we climb painfully to the top of the highest ladder of thought we are still pigmies, and the war still towers high above us. We see the raging torrents at our feet, but the high summits are veiled in impenetrable mist.... We look, gasp, wonder and are dumb. We do not know. Nobody knows. This war, for once, is bigger than anybody. No one dominates it. No one even understands it. Nobody can’.

He was describing the Great War, but these words apply equally well to the military historical phenomenon that is Sir Max Hastings. He is an unstoppable force of nature, beyond ‘all limits of thought, imagination and reason.’ Reviewing one of his books for this journal is akin to criticising a tsunami: quite beyond the point. Having laid bare the mysteries of the Second World War, most recently with titles such as *Nemesis*, *Armageddon* and *All Hell Let Loose*, Hastings has now turned his fertile pen to the First. *Catastrophe* tells the story of the coming of the Great War and of the campaigns which filled the last five months of 1914. It is a dramatic story, and Hastings tells it clearly enough. Members of the British Commission for Military History will, I suspect, learn little new from this book, but frankly it is not aimed at us. This is a work of popular history which seeks – and has received ample – validation primarily in the bestseller lists.

This book reminds me forcibly of the movie *The Longest Day*. It tells a dramatic but well-known story. It has a huge cast of characters and picks out telling and eye-catching vignettes. I enjoyed, for instance, his lively description of the fall of Liège (pp. 160-5). It also recycles more than a few clichés and, in such a long production, cannot avoid the odd *longueur*. Inevitably, there are occasional inaccuracies. Although Hastings sought advice from academic historians who are well up to speed with the very latest research, their counsel does not always appear to be reflected in the finished product.

Hastings acknowledges the impact the *Guns of August* had on him over 50 years ago, and it does not seem fanciful to suppose that he hoped to write an updated and expanded version of Barbara Tuchman’s work. Where she stopped on the Marne, Hastings carries the story through to Christmas 1914. He incorporates much more material on events in Serbia and Russia than she did. Commendable as this is in historical terms, although overall the narrative is competently told, Hastings does not quite match Tuchman for brio.

Hasting’s passion in places sucks the reader in, for example when he argues that the war was Germany’s fault. Sometimes, though, like a sultan in his seraglio, he occasionally appears to have spread his attentions somewhat thin. Nonetheless, he seems to have managed to persuade much of his established fan base, until now content with their 1939-45 addiction, to taste something new with the First World

War. Whether *Catastrophe* will prove the gateway drug which leads them back to their book-dealers for more refined product, remains to be seen. If it does, Hastings will have done us all a very great favour. I, for one, went out and bought a second copy of *Catastrophe* for a friend, who I believe enjoyed it.

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