

REVIEWS

Erskine turned a blind eye to much brutal violence by both the KR and the Home Guard and accepted that military courts martial were excessively lenient in prosecuting criminal acts by British soldiers. Bennett cites the notorious case of Major Griffiths, who had to be tried twice for clear cases of murder before justice could be seen to be done.

This is a superbly researched book, based a tremendous amount of archival research including the secret Colonial Office archive, which has only just been released to the National Archives in Kew. It is vital reading for anyone seeking to understand the British Army's role in modern counter-insurgency actions, whether in Kenya or in Afghanistan and this book cannot be recommended too highly.

DECLAN O'REILLY
University of East Anglia

Roger Lee, *British Battle Planning in 1916 and the Battle of Fromelles: A Case Study of an Evolving Skill*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2015. Index, xiv + 229pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-4995-5. Hardback. Price £70.00.

Except in Australia – whose troops underwent their true Western Front baptism of fire in that sector – the attack at Fromelles on 19 July 1916 has been long overshadowed, in historiographical terms, by the concurrent events on the Somme. Until recently, the majority of accounts of Fromelles, not least in Australia, have portrayed Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Haking – the GOC of XI Corps, which conducted the operation – as a pantomime villain whose incompetence contributed significantly to the apparent failure and high cost of the attack, suggesting that his nickname of 'Butcher' was richly merited. Since 2002, however, Fromelles has received fresh scholarly scrutiny, and public attention, partly driven by the 2010 exhumation and reburial of 250 soldiers found in graves bordering the nearby Pheasant Wood. Many of these works remain generally critical of the handling of the battle, but detailed studies by Paul Cobb (2007), and Peter Barton (2014), in particular, are more considered, while Michael Senior's 2012 examination of Haking's overall performance as a corps commander has done something to rehabilitate his reputation.

This highly stimulating new study by Dr Roger Lee, former Head of the Australian Army History Unit, is outstanding both for the quality and breadth of its research and for its balanced and objective approach, which happily avoids any narrow national narrative or bias. As Professor Gary Sheffield remarks in his Foreword, the book contains the first serious overview of the BEF's planning processes in 1916, exploring in depth all its facets from GHQ down to brigade level as well as investigating how

well (or badly) they actually worked at Fromelles. Lee's conclusions run counter, in several respects, to most previous interpretations of the action. He argues that the attack was an *operational* success in that it fulfilled its principal aim of deterring the movement of German units from the Lille area to the Somme. In the author's judgement, the planning staffs also coped capably with late changes and reductions in the numbers of divisions and guns at Haking's disposal, adjusting orders and logistic arrangements to ensure that adequate artillery resources were in place to support the attack and that the nominated infantry formations were equipped for the task and in position on time.

Lee concedes that the planning process and operation orders for Fromelles had serious flaws, perhaps the worst error being to fix the boundary between the assaulting divisions on the middle of the main German defensive position at the Sugar Loaf salient. This meant that the capture of such a crucial feature was *not* the responsibility of a single brigade, thereby creating unnecessary confusion when inexperienced divisional and brigade staffs and commanders were involved. Nevertheless, Lee contends that the principal cause of the *tactical* reverses suffered at Fromelles was the failure of the combat troops implementing the plan – although, given the pressing need for as many *trained* soldiers as possible to be deployed on the Somme further south, Haking and Monro (the First Army commander) had no real option other than to use the relatively green 61st (South Midland) Division and 5th Australian Division. It was a matter over which 'even army commanders had little control'.

On the whole, the author concludes that, even in 1916, the BEF already possessed an 'effective method for devising battle plans'. When, by 1918, this methodology was boosted by *sufficient* skilled staff officers and by combat-hardened front line troops, British battlefield planning 'provided the blueprint for final victory'. This important, scholarly and thought-provoking book will undoubtedly make a distinguished and welcome addition to the historiography of the British and Dominion forces on the Western Front in the Great War. The only caveat is that, in view of the book's high price, the reader surely has the right to expect the publishers to make rather more of an effort to print larger maps and sharper photographs.

PETER SIMKINS
University of Wolverhampton