

DECEIVING CLIO:

**A critical examination of the writing of military history in
the pursuit of military reform and modernisation
(with particular reference to Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart
and Major General John Frederick Charles Fuller.)**

by

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DEO GRATIAS

Summary

This dissertation examines the practice of writing military history in conjunction with military theory. It shows that in the pursuit of establishing military theory, military history is often actively distorted and manipulated by military theorists. Those military theorists who, consciously or subconsciously, succumb to this practice are identified here as “theorist-historians”. The effect of this manipulation, its implications and consequences for the field of study as a whole are examined, as is the didactic nature of military history in the light of historical accuracy. In conclusion the role and effect of the military theorist-historians are evaluated against those of purely academic historians. The unique didactic needs of military history are also highlighted.

Two twentieth century British military theorists, B. H. Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller, were chosen as being representative of the military theorist-historian group.

Key terms

Military history, military reform, modernisation, John Frederick Charles Fuller, Basil Henry Liddell Hart, theorist-historian.

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"It is only common sense to say that we cannot hope to build up a true doctrine of war except from true lessons, and that the lessons cannot be true unless based on true facts, and the facts cannot be true unless we probe for them in a purely scientific spirit - an utterly detached determination to get at the truth no matter how it hurts our pride. Not a few military historians have admitted that they feel compelled by position, interest or friendship, to put down less than they know to be true. Once a man surrenders to this tendency the truth begins to slip away like water down a waste pipe - until those who want to learn how to conduct war in the future are unknowingly bathing their minds in a shallow bath."ⁱ

B. H. Liddell Hart on the writing of history

"The one lesson I have learned ... is that seventy-five per cent of history is fallacious. ... History is most unreliable, so unreliable that I cannot help feeling that a little speculation, even if it is not immediately related to facts is sometimes more illuminating than an outline based on the facts themselves."ⁱⁱ

J. F. C. Fuller on the writing of history

"The historian who puts his system first can hardly escape the heresy of preferring the facts which suit his system best ... Such explanation as there is must arise in the mind of the reader of history"ⁱⁱⁱ

An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*

ⁱ Mearsheimer J., *Liddell Hart and the weight of History*, Brassey's Defence Publishers, London, 1988, p. [-1].

ⁱⁱ Reid, B. H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 115.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tuchman, B., *Practicing History*, Macmillan London Limited, London, 1982, pp. 22-23.

Chapter 1

The fog of peace

1.1 Introduction: The seeds of the problem

Early twentieth century American literary icon F. Scott Fitzgerald puts the art of intellectual debate into perspective when he states that a true sign of intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing sides of an argument in one's head while still retaining the capacity for rational thought:

“The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”¹

It is hard to fault this pithy analysis of intelligence, particularly when considering it in the light of the characterisation by theorist-historians of intellectual military debate during the first half of the twentieth century. The *fin de siècle* – with its attendant social, industrial and scientific revolutions – had provided the military world with new tools and technologies to ply its trade. The Anglo-Boer War had ushered in the twentieth century with an ominous sign. Two small independent republics at the southern tip of Africa had sucked Imperial Britain into its largest and most costly war since the Napoleonic wars. Smokeless powder, the defensive use of wire, innovative tactics, the practice of entrenchment and the clip-loaded magazine rifle were all ominous portents of what was to come. As Fuller had aptly surmised, it was to be the “last of the gentlemen’s wars”². The age of the “occasional” warrior had been brought to an abrupt end by the sudden technological advances in, and concomitant intellectual demands of, his profession.

¹ Davidson K., *Carl Sagan: A Life*, John Wiley & Sons, 1999, p. vii.

² *The Last of the Gentlemen’s Wars: A Subaltern’s Journal of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1937) was the title of the book Major-General John Frederick Charles Fuller wrote about his experiences during the second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). It was his second biographical work, complementing a much more comprehensive autobiography entitled *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier* (Ivor Nicholson, London, 1936) published the year before. His title was meant to convey the concept of a war fought by virtual amateurs. The “typical” upper-class officer scorned colleagues who studied, asked for courses and so on. Several personal accounts, diaries etc reveal that in many ways they were as ignorant of battle drills, organisation, tactics and strategy as the Boer officers – hence the “last of the gentlemen’s wars”. Montgomery-Massingberd was the epitome of this type.

Montgomery Massingberd's³ boast of "never having read a military book" was systemic of a bygone era. In the twentieth century the sword alone would not suffice. Helmuth von Moltke had demonstrated that time spent in the classroom was indeed akin to time spent on the battlefield.

At sea, a similar revolution was taking place. Ironclads had given way to Dreadnoughts, and coal and oil had replaced wind as the sinews of nautical mobility. In the 1880s Alfred Thayer Mahan, to all intents and purposes a minor figure in a dilapidated navy, was still fermenting his thoughts on the future of naval warfare⁴. Airpower, which was by the close of the twentieth century to be what naval power was at its beginning, still had to be developed. The foundation for heavier-than-air-flight, the internal combustion engine, had been laid. All that was needed to harness its energy was the efforts of the Wright brothers. The Anglo-Boer War had further revealed the prospects of reconnaissance from the air. Huge tethered balloons performed a function which for centuries, only occupied high ground had been able to do. The prospects of a vantage point possessing not only altitude but also mobility, was tantalising. Great advances in metallurgy, the production of chemicals and science had opened up a world of possibility to the educated soldier. All that was needed to make sense of these advances was an intellectual revolution. Minds had to be changed and intellects primed on how best to deploy these new technologies in war. Giulio Douhet⁵, the Mahan of air power, was still serving an apprenticeship in an Italian army where operational mobility was based on muscle power

³ Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd was the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), 1933-1936, whose antipathy towards the intellectualisation of the study of war has achieved an almost mythical status. A traditionalist, Montgomery-Massingberd consistently opposed change - especially the change propagated by Fuller - giving rise to such memorable utterances as admitting to not having read Fuller's latest book as it would only "annoy" him. He stated: "I have no time for ... [t]hose who run down and crab everyone above them and those who think that because they have read a little Military History everyone else is an ignoramus ... Fuller comes into both categories!" Holden Reid, B., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 87.

⁴ Alfred Thayer Mahan, a US naval officer, achieved international prominence when his book *The Influence Of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* was published in 1889. His reputation as a naval theorist emerged only in 1891/1892.

⁵ Giulio Douhet, an engineer by training, served in the Italian army during the First World War. An outspoken critic of the Italian High Command during the war (he was imprisoned for a year following a particularly serious bout of dissent in late 1915) he ended the war, reinstated and vindicated by the disaster at Caporetto (1917), as head of the Central Aeronautical Bureau. In 1921 Douhet wrote the first treatise to be published on air power, *The Command of the Air* (tr. Ferrari, D.), London, 1942. It is on this work that his reputation rests.

and the sword and lance were still the primary accoutrements of shock on the battlefield.

These social, scientific and intellectual revolutions, rising and fluctuating as they did, coalesced in varying degrees and in a variety of social and cultural environments to form the intellectual morass from which a new class of military intellectuals, best described as “theorist-historians”, was to emerge.

What exactly is the meaning of the term “theorist-historian” in this study? Until the mid to late nineteenth century military history, apart from a few serious attempts to codify military thought such as Karl Maria von Clausewitz’s *On War* and Antoine Henri Jomini’s *The Art of War*, was driven more by public opinion, propaganda and patriotism than by a genuine desire for an intellectual understanding of the dynamics that governed war. This is not to denigrate the many treatises that were published in the wake of the American Civil and Franco-Prussian Wars of the nineteenth century, which represented attempts to educate prospective officers and soldiers. Most cavalry and artillery corps in particular taught their subjects in a turgid, empirical manner, dieting their recruits on regimens of dry fact and established practice. Everything and anything, not least thought, was regulated. Fuller provides an excellent example of this futile attempt to batten the hatches in the face of chance and thereby banish “friction” in “Grenadiers on Castors”⁶. Those practitioners of the art of war that rose above the mundane heights of a Massingberd or a Redvers Buller, were said to possess what the French reverently termed *coup d’oeil* i.e. an eye for battle – or else a “sacred spark of genius” given only to a select few. Alexander had it at Gaugamela, Hannibal at Cannae, Caesar at Illium, Napoleon at Austerlitz (although not at Waterloo) and so on in an unbroken line right up to Moltke’s laying of the Napoleonic ghost. This innate sense of timing and instinct represented an attribute one was born with, an ability one could not hope to acquire. It was this that separated the craftsman from the artisan.

⁶ Fuller, J.F.C., *Watchwords*, Skeffington & Son Ltd, London, 1944, pp. 56-58.

Thus emerged the two extremes: the regulated majority and the divinely inspired minority. There was little or nothing “in between”. When industrialisation, the railway and the telegraph had expanded and distorted the battlefield out of proportion and recognition from the past, and when artillery had driven the front line underground, the importance of logistics and movement became self-evident, giving rise to a military bureaucracy that continues to expand at the expense of the fighting soldier. In the First World War ten men were needed to maintain a single front line soldier. Currently a USAF F15 Eagle averages 35 hours of maintenance for every hour spent in the air. This created the need for an educated class within the military forces. A strong arm and a strong back were no longer adequate prerequisites for a fighting soldier. Still the didactic process was seen purely as an empirical process which translated civilians into soldiers.

At the intellectual level the study of war stagnated. Old truths returned to haunt the descendants of the veterans of Shiloh and Gettysburg, Gravelotte-St. Privat and Sedan. Smokeless powder, weight and volume of fire, quick-firing artillery, the accuracy of rifled barrels all took their toll on nineteenth century military thought with their nadir perhaps being reached by the 60 000 casualties Britain suffered on the first day of the Somme in 1916. The theorist-historians were now driven beyond the mundane tasks of educating soldiers in the use of their rifles and entrenching tools, in some cases still their swords and lances. The theorist-historians wanted to teach soldiers to think. They wanted to nourish the minds of and squeeze every last drop of intellectual inspiration out of the massed khaki or *feldgrau* ranks of the new industrialised armies. To do this they had to educate them to think about warfare. Patiently at first, centering their efforts on what Spenser Wilkinson refers to as “the brain of the army” – the General Staffs – and, as they sparred with authority, moving to the men themselves, the jaundiced veterans of Gallipoli, Verdun and the Somme. They sought to teach the soldiers that the tried and trusted methods of the past were not those of the future. Warfare in the twentieth century had changed, both in nature and temperament. Those entrusted with its pursuit had better change with it, or again pay for their neglect in blood.

The achievement of these goals were to prove thankless and difficult tasks, for Europe's professional military caste had more in common with C. S. Forster's *The General*⁷ than with F. Scott Fitzgerald's "first rate" intellectual. They, however, held the reins of power. The interwar battlefield would therefore be their minds and the objective, their intellects. They would have to be guided, reasoned with, coerced and cajoled to both realise and embrace change. Winston Churchill, younger than most of the interwar generals who controlled the Empire's military machinery, is an example of the kind of change to which this generation had been subjected. His active "fighting" career had started at Omdurman in the midst of a generation weaned on cold steel and cavalry, and was to end 47 years later (1898-1945) in an era of nuclear power and total war⁸. The Boer War had briefly jolted his generation out of their gentle reverie but few recognised the lessons for what they were⁹. The Boers on the Tugela and at Modder River and Magersfontein had dug themselves in and, using smokeless powder and magazine loading rifles, had been able to provide the solid defences that had previously been possible only with the use of a manpower-intensive

⁷ A synopsis of this book is to be found in Lt Col Merrill L. Bartlett's preface of the 1982 edition in which he states: "Forester's fictional work is a not too thinly veiled criticism of military commanders and civilian leadership which brought about this calamity [the senseless slaughter of British troops in the First World War]. Men without imagination like Curzon [Forester's fictional "general"] were necessary to execute a military policy devoid of imagination." Forester C.S., *The General*, The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, Annapolis, 1982, p. x. *The General* has been a perennial favourite on staff college reading lists since its publication in 1936. In his foreword to the 1946 edition, Forester recounts an animated conversation he had with an unnamed officer of the Czech General Staff. The subject - his book - was one of the few English books to be translated into Czech and studied, according to Forester, as a textbook by the Czech army. Forester mentions several other translations, notably into German, Polish, Spanish and Italian. It apparently even made an impression on Adolf Hitler who, according to Forester's German publisher, gave away several specially bound copies to select people during the 1938 Christmas season. Despite its effect, Forester denied any motive other than entertainment as his reason for writing it.

⁸ During a discussion after the first Fuller-Liddell Hart Lecture held at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on 12 October 1978, General Sir John Hackett endeavoured to put the problem faced by this generation in a better perspective. Opening his response to Anthony Trythall's lecture on Fuller and Brian Bond's lecture on Liddell Hart he said: "I present myself to you sir, in the guise of a dinosaur. When I joined my own and the family regiment in the early 1930s from Oxford, I had already been taught, in the OUOTC, something of mounted swordsmanship, which was even then on its way out. I did draw a sword on a horse's back in action (this was in the Palestine operation in 1938) and though this was a slightly discreditable affair on several counts, I am happy to assure you that nobody was badly hurt! I moved from there through tanks to parachuting, and saw in one lifetime how quickly the mode in which wars can be fought could change". 'The Fuller-Liddell Hart Lecture', *RUSI: Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, March 1979, p. 27.

⁹ Many of these issues had initially surfaced during the American Civil War almost four decades earlier.

“defence in depth”. The Boer’s “thin *entrenched* line” and volume of fire had prevented any possible successes. Ardant du Picq’s posthumous call for *élan* had echoed hollowly in the face of modern technology. Unfortunately it went unheeded.

Having cut their teeth on small frontier wars (with the exception of the Boer War which was by no means a “small frontier war”, but a major conflict) and on minor engagements, the British army’s commanders and leaders had failed to respond to the challenges of the Great War. Ivan Bloch’s prescient voice in the wilderness had remained no more than this. The post-1918 generation of military leaders all boasted similar backgrounds. The interwar general was wary of the slaughter which had accompanied what Jehuda Wallach termed the “dogma of the battle of annihilation”. The Allies had slipped into the intellectual inertia of the complacency which often accompanies victory. The butcher’s bill had been too high and the public would not stand for it. It would not be permitted to happen again. The French busied themselves building a monument to ignorance and to the absence of imagination – the Maginot Line – while the British complacently retreated once again behind an aquatic equivalent – the English Channel.

How could the theorist-historians galvanise this inert society? What could they do? How could they shock it out of its complacency? The simple answer could be that it might be done by exaggeration, embellishment and simplification. To achieve this they would have to dominate the intellectual battlefield with confident superiority and arrogant self-belief. The historian Isaiah Berlin pronounced an academic absolution on this type of behaviour:

“As an eminent historian of ideas has written, revolutionary thinkers tend ... to overstate their central thesis. Such exaggeration is neither unusual nor necessarily to be deplored. Those who have discovered (or think they have discovered) new and important truths are liable to see the world in their light ... Many original thinkers exaggerate greatly. ... Nor is it likely that their ideas would have broken through

the resistance of received opinion or been accorded the attention that they deserved, if they had not.”¹⁰

The validation or falsification of this statement is to form one of the core issues of this study.

1.2 What is meant by the term theorist-historian?

As stated, the term theorist-historian is used in this study as a generic term to describe the military writers who, during the first half of the twentieth century, employed history to justify and vindicate their military theories often derived from other sources. Their history, though invariably flawed and simplistic from an academic perspective, generally contained considerable didactic value in as much as it allowed them to illustrate their theoretical precepts with credible examples. Unlike Hans Delbrück – and to some extent John Laughton who was able to grow into his subject, (finally rising to position of Professor of Modern History, Kings College, London) – they were not trained historians, either professionally or academically. The majority, with few exceptions like the former solicitor Julian Corbett, were serving members in either the navy or the army who, self-educated, attempted to address the most pressing military problems of their day.

Examples of theorist-historians include the American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, John Frederick Charles Fuller, the armour theorist and military intellectual, and Basil Henry Liddell Hart, the author of the concept of the “indirect approach” to strategy. With the possible exception of the air power proponent William Mitchell (who was not quite in the same intellectual league as those already mentioned) and, of course Mahan, most of the theorist-historians were British.¹¹ The majority were career officers

¹⁰ Gat, A., *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 163.

¹¹ The inter-war dearth of American theorists was in direct contrast to their post-war dominance. One thinks of Brodie, Luvaas, Kahn, Handel and Paret among many others. A possible explanation for this is that until the Second World War, Britain was a global power with an Empire, hence her thinking on military matters had global significance. Accordingly her military and naval theorists enjoyed a large and close following. After the Second World War and the demise of the Empire, Britain ceased to be a global player in the true sense of the word and was replaced by the United States of America. With the rise of the United States to one of only two super powers and the recognised leader of the Western

with the exception of the naval theorist Julian Corbett and Liddell Hart. The career of the latter was stifled before it had a chance to develop, due to medical reasons, hence his eternal captaincy¹². Giulio Douhet, the Italian proponent of airpower – although he cannot be classified as a theorist-historian – also deserves mention since he was a major theorist of this military generation, possessing a logical approach that provides an interesting contrast – perhaps a counterweight – to the methods of the theorist-historian.

These men all possessed a robust intellect and a capacity for original thought. Mahan, by linking naval power to foreign policy using history as a vehicle for illustration, broke new ground. “Master your principles,” he stated in a collection of Naval College lectures published in 1911 under the guise of *Naval Strategy* “and then ram them home with the illustrations which History furnishes.”¹³ Douhet took time off from a busy military career and a renaissance existence of writing poetry and painting, to envisage and articulate *The Command of the Air*. Fuller, arguably the most inspired of all, was an intellectual maverick (some said “bolshevik”) by nature and instinct. He sought to apply scientific principles to the uninspired butchery of modern warfare, striving to sacrifice slaughter for mobility and so to pave the way for an intellectual framework by which modern warfare could be analysed and understood. Finally, Liddell Hart sought to intellectualise the art of war and thereby reintroduce humanity into what he viewed as man’s most barbaric pursuit. His catch phrase “If you want peace, understand war” encapsulated his self-perceived vocation which was to limit war to necessity and avoid mindless bloodshed. He, although already emulating Fuller, was fond of echoing Sherman’s sentiment that “the only legitimate object of war, is a better peace”. However, unlike Sherman, whose “march to the sea” tore

World, her military theorists came to the fore in much the same way (and for the same reasons) as British theorists had during the inter-war period.

¹² Liddell Hart was to grow frustrated in later life with his, as Danchev terms it, “eternal” rank of captain. It was, however, a term used extensively in his lifetime to describe him both as journalist and author. Reading many reviews of his work, most critics used his rank as a mantra to extol his military and wartime experience. This is perhaps a reverse example of the same kind of discrimination for the military “dilettante” that faced a civilian commenting on military matters in German society. By tying his name to a military rank, it perhaps made Liddell Hart’s status as a civilian commentator more acceptable to the many readers of *The Times*, as well as those of, among others, *The Outspan* in South Africa.

¹³ Mahan, A. T., *Naval Strategy*, Sampson Low, Marston & Company, Limited, London, 1911, p. 17.

the heart out of any early North/South reconciliation, Liddell Hart was prepared to pay the concept more than mere lip service.

To propagate their opinions they all turned to writing. Fuller and Liddell Hart were undoubtedly the most prolific of the group, writing some eighty books between them.¹⁴ What makes this achievement so noteworthy is that they all wrote during the era of the individual scholar as the infant study of warfare had attracted few stellar intellects to its arcane secrets. The closest had perhaps been Spenser Wilkinson, the first holder of the Chichele Chair of Military History at Oxford.¹⁵

These men, having arrived at their various conclusions on the future nature of modern warfare and how it ought to be conducted, had to set about proving and expounding their theories to the military elite and the public at large. This was to prove no mean feat. "Civilian" commentators such as Corbett and Delbrück had to overcome both public and military criticism of their civilian status. A barometer of the degree of public prejudice which existed in Germany for example, may be seen in the fact that whenever a public notice concerning a social event was published in the press, it was the custom for leading academic figures in fields such as medicine or engineering to preface their academic titles with their military rank. Although not entrenched to the same degree, the public in the rest of Europe showed as scant a regard for the civilian "dilettante". Those in the military, unless an official protégé like Liddell Hart (a civilian adviser on military matters to Hore Belisha in the late thirties), fared little better, what with the publication of their books and articles dependent on the whim of a superior. Was that why they all resorted, Douhet included, to the baited gambit

¹⁴ Some wags claim that Fuller and Liddell Hart each wrote only one, at the most two books, in that so much of their work was repetition. They viewed the majority of Liddell Hart and Fuller's work as mere variations of a central theme. For Liddell Hart this was represented by *The Decisive Wars of History* (Bell, London, 1929) and for Fuller by *The Foundations of the Science of War* (Hutchinson, London, 1926).

¹⁵ Although writing mainly in the late 19th century, Wilkinson still manages to hold the modern reader's attention. The reason for this is that, like Thucydides, he attempted to "write for all time". He was a rarity for his day: an intellectual with a genuine academic interest in warfare. Reading his work leads to an appreciation of both his intellect and his scholarship. He provides a glimpse of what Fuller might have achieved in the right academic circumstances. Wilkinson had the intermediate character of being a barrister in civilian life while also being an officer in the part-time volunteers. He later turned to journalism full time before becoming an academic.

identified by Berlin, that of embellishment, blatant exaggeration and overstatement?

1.3 The theorist-historian, historical accuracy and the pressures of a reading public

This study, as the title implies, seeks to examine the relationship between the theorist-historian and his use of history. There is however, a further dimension: the reading public, both military and civilian. It was the centre of gravity. It was its reaction and approval the theorist-historians were seeking. Like trial lawyers courting a jury, the object of the theorist-historians was to convince their peers and the public of the validity of their arguments. It was at the very least a gruelling contest. General George S. Patton is a good example of the type of juror to whom they were appealing.

Patton, more inclined towards fighting than to philosophising nevertheless had enormous respect for military history. A charismatic commander – “Old Blood and Guts” as his men affectionately referred to him – was the antithesis of his British counterpart Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery. While Monty spoke in clipped public-school tones of “giving Jerry a mighty crack” and “sending him right back to where he came from”, Patton spoke in the earthy tones of a fighting man. Addressing Omar Bradley during the Ardennes offensive about the developing situation around Bastogne Patton remarked:

“Brad, ... this time the Kraut’s stuck their head in a meat grinder....
And this time I’ve got hold of the handle.”¹⁶

It would be generous to call Patton a military intellectual.¹⁷ He was a fighting man *par excellence*, but definitely also a thinking soldier. Trading

¹⁶ Bradley, O. N., *A Soldier’s Story of the Allied Campaigns from Tunis to the Elbe*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1951, p. 472.

¹⁷ A more modern analogy of the relationship between Patton and Montgomery can perhaps be seen in the Israeli combination of Ariel “Arik” Sharon and General Haim Laskov. Sharon, later Israeli prime minister, was an outstanding field commander given to erratic acts of brilliance whereas Laskov, no less belligerent, was a more cautious and temperate commander. Laskov served as a regular officer in the British army in the Second World War before serving in the Israeli Defence Force and becoming its Chief of Staff (1958-

on this, American historians have embellished his achievements with “mathematical abracadabra” – as Fuller might have called it – quoting statistics about the Third Army’s advance rates to acquire for him an almost mythical status in their armoured theology. Patton’s view of military history may be said to represent both the traditional and general views of military history of the professional soldier:

“In order for a man to become a great soldier ... it is necessary for him to be thoroughly conversant with all sorts of military possibilities that whenever an occasion arises he has at hand without effort on his part a parallel ... To attain this end ... it is necessary to read military history in its earliest and hence crudest form, and to follow it down in natural sequence.”¹⁸

Patton practised what he preached. Before landing in Sicily he read a book on its Norman conquest to prepare him for fighting over the same terrain. Interestingly his opinion of Liddell Hart sheds light on his view of military intellectuals in general. Patton met Liddell Hart in England in 1944, in the spring before Overlord. He wrote to his wife:

“Liddell Hart has developed a great love for me. He is very well-read but badly balanced and has no personal knowledge of life so far as war is concerned – in that he is not alone. He is a funny looking man, tall and skinny.”¹⁹

1960). Laskov was, according to Brian Bond, a strong supporter of Liddell Hart, having been exposed to his work before 1948. Sharon was more of a maverick, but Bond recounts an exchange of letters between the two - Liddell Hart and Sharon - while the latter was attending the Staff College at Camberley. Sharon asked Liddell Hart for comments and suggestions to assist him in a research paper. Despite a polite initial rebuff Sharon persisted and Liddell Hart then responded with customary generosity. Bond quotes from Sharon’s letter of thanks:

“I was brought up in the Israeli Army which, no doubt, was very much influenced by your unorthodox [sic] school of thought, and of course I am strongly in favour of your ideas”. Bond, B., “Liddell Hart’s Influence on Israeli Military Theory and Practice”, *RUSI*, 121:2, June 1976, p. 86. Bond, however, cautions against regarding Sharon as a disciple of Liddell Hart. “Doubtless his correspondence with Liddell Hart when at Camberley served to confirm his predilection for front line leadership, but on meeting him one quickly realises that he is an extremely self confident soldier who goes his own way regardless of the consequences. It is impossible to think of him as anyone’s ‘disciple’”. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Blumeson, M., *Patton: The Man Behind the Legend, 1885-1945*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1985, p. 43.

¹⁹ Carver, Field Marshal Lord, *The Apostles of Mobility*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1979, p. 82.

Patton's acerbic description of Liddell Hart shows the traditional fighting man's lack of respect for the thinking man.²⁰ In this case Patton was not being entirely forthright for, however limited Liddell Hart's experience might have been, he was present and took his chances in the front line of the bloodiest offensive in British military history – the first Battle of the Somme. What Patton's comments show is that, as a fighting soldier, he was alive to the didactic value military history possessed for his profession. His cut and dried approach also shows that he had little time for the subtle nuances of both diplomacy (as his ongoing fight with "Monty" revealed) and history. Soldiers like Patton wanted "the bottom line". They wanted the gist of what happened in a campaign, its causes and its effects. That is why Liddell Hart's book *Strategy The Indirect Approach* was so successful, running into several editions not to mention printings, and Fuller's *The Foundations of the Science of War* was not. While Fuller dragged his bewildered readers on an intellectual ramble in search of enlightenment, Liddell Hart simplified his thesis into two or three salient points and then proceeded to bludgeon the reader with them at every available opportunity.

Liddell Hart's history was also greatly simplified. Complex campaigns and intricate diplomatic wranglings were sketched briefly with a few quick

²⁰ An example of the constant friction which has existed between these two groups from time immemorial, can be seen in Plutarch's discourse on the Spartans. In it a grizzled veteran retorts to a source he deems unworthy: "What he says is true, but he has not heard the battle trumpets sound." A modern equivalent can be seen in John Keegan's prefaces to his books *A History of Warfare* and *The Face of Battle* where he (Keegan) explains the reasons for his inability to pursue an active military career. Exonerated by a physical handicap he then refers to the martial exploits of his family's preceding generation: a father and father-in-law who served in the trenches and an uncle who never returned from the Great War. It is almost as if he has to provide a moral pedigree to entitle him to write on his subject. This is unnecessary since twenty years of lecturing at Sandhurst equipped him more than adequately for the task. It shows however, an awareness that society still prefers physical experience to temper a source of intellectual debate on warfare. Returning to Patton's exposure to Liddell Hart, the nature of his letter reveals neither a particular affinity nor a knowledge of Liddell Hart's work. Patton seems vaguely patronising. Jac Weller in an article in the January 1974 *Military Review* entitled "Sir Basil Liddell Hart's Disciples in Israel" implies the opposite. Discussing the early career of David Marcus, also known as Mickey Stone, the first IDF general officer, as a personal member of Patton's staff in the final US offensive on Germany, Weller states that "Marcus was even more a Liddell Hart man than Patton had been." (Weller, J., "Sir Basil Liddell Hart's Disciples in Israel", *Military Review*, January 1974, p. 14.) Weller, however, does not elaborate on his source or how he came to this conclusion. This is possibly an example of the posthumous veneration Liddell Hart's professional reputation enjoyed in the period immediately after his death in 1970, when certain academics attempted to link all that was good in military theory to Liddell Hart's direct or "indirect" influence.

strokes of his pen. Scipio's campaign against Hannibal was cut to the bone. Instead of facing a rampaging Hannibal in Italy, Scipio went to Spain to destroy the Carthaginian logistical network. He then isolated the Carthaginians politically by concluding a treaty with the Numidian kings, Masinissa and Syphax, before finally forcing Hannibal's recall from Italy by carving a path of destruction through the Bagradas Valley, the breadbasket of ancient Carthage. Finally, in a series of intricate manoeuvres, he lured Hannibal away from the advantage of fighting outside Carthage's city walls and, on the plain of Zama, defeated him in detail. Nowhere in his book does Liddell Hart examine the nuances of Hannibal's predicament: Why he was unable to march on Rome after his trinity of victories at the Trebbia, Lake Trasimene and Cannae or why he acted in the manner he did are not discussed. Hannibal is seen merely as succumbing to Scipio's superior generalship.

That Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus was a great general is not in doubt. That Hannibal was out-thought is in doubt. Scipio's success was not that he laid out a series of hoops through which Hannibal obligingly jumped, but that he exploited existing conditions to Rome's benefit. There is a significant difference between the two explanations. If Scipio had not had a unique set of advantages over Hannibal, he would not have been able to exploit them. This was his supreme achievement: that he exploited them with the dexterity of a young Alexander. He did not, as Liddell Hart's thesis suggests, spontaneously create them. There is a world of difference between the two.

Accessible history was therefore at a premium. Soldiers, with a few notable exceptions, were not scholars and any attempt to convert them would have been met with resistance. Spenser Wilkinson alluded to this problem when discussing Fuller's writing. He warned that

“no matter how interesting Fuller's ideas were, soldiers would not read books that are hard going”.²¹

²¹ Holden Reid, B., *Studies in British Military Thought*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1998, p. 38.

This was the crux of the matter. In order to be effective, ideas, as well as the history which supported them, had to be accessible. An extreme example of this type of work is perhaps Charles Andrew Willoughby's *Maneuver In War*. First printed as *The Element Of Maneuver In War* in 1935 and then in its revised form in 1939, every possible statement is coupled to numerous historical examples. While interesting at first, it quickly becomes tedious and pedantic, acquiring the air of a textbook for a staff course where a student is required to rattle off a host of examples for every conceivable military occasion. Undoubtedly Patton would have approved.

Theorist-historians had to walk a fine line between maintaining interest while at the same time respecting historical integrity. Telling half a story was just as irresponsible as fabricating one – a concept which Fuller at least admitted to flirting with. His reading of history had led him to believe that at least three quarters of it was unreliable. What would be the harm then, he reasoned in a letter to Liddell Hart, of a little speculation, particularly if it helped its author put his ideas across. Fuller was nothing if not pragmatic.

For obvious reasons, Fuller never openly subscribed to the concept, but his philosophical musings on the writing of history revealed a core problem which has dogged the individual scholar from time immemorial. He is invariably a prisoner of his own perception of events and unfolds them for his reader accordingly. This was a problem that was not easily addressed or remedied in the past. Modern scholarship however, has largely dealt with this problem through specialisation. Current historians are no longer expected to paint as broad a canvas as they once were, but may limit themselves to specific periods and disciplines. When a particularly adventurous historian then decides to draw all the strings together on a particular subject, he has a host of research in depth to draw upon and many colleagues to keep him on the straight and narrow path of honesty. In this sense the theorist-historians were pushing the envelope. They were laying the foundations for future military study. Examining the theorist-historian's use of history and its ultimate value to military theory will form a large part of this study. It must be emphasised however, that this dissertation is not

about military history but military thought and its effective dissemination through the medium of military history.

1.4 The methodology of the theorist-historian

In the prologue to his book *The Day Before Yesterday, 5000 000 Years Of Human History* Colin Tudge describes the progress of theories. "Science" he explains "progresses by the proposal of ideas – hypotheses – of the kind that can be tested". In a social science of the kind being examined in this study, this is a problem, affected as it is by a host of variables which constantly interplay with each other in a non-empirical manner. Emotion, personality, intellect and culture all fluctuate according to person and region thus negating the accumulation of knowledge in an empiric manner. For example, no two rational actors can be expected to react in the same way in exactly the same circumstances, even if they hail from the same cultural, social and intellectual backgrounds. In short, one is not dealing with constants such as in a physical science where an atom of carbon dioxide, for instance, maintains its chemical integrity universally. Whether on earth or on Mars, it remains one carbon molecule combined with two oxygen molecules. Science can, therefore, take this as a given and build on this knowledge. There is no such equivalent in any social science. How then were the theorist-historians to test their theories? Tudge continues:

"More broadly, it also proceeds through grand statements of the kind that can be called 'heuristic'. Heuristic statements (whether in science or any other field) are of the kind that promote understanding, even though they may not literally be true themselves. In practice, a statement may be heuristic and may properly belong in science even though it is not directly testable. This would be the case if the statement, though untestable itself, suggested hypotheses that *were* testable. Such statements provide what the great twentieth-century philosopher Sir Karl Popper has called an 'agenda' for science."²²

It is contended in this study that this is the function of the theorist-historians. They utilised military history in a heuristic manner to enable the knowledge of military theory to progress. While much of what they said might have had dubious historical antecedents, it led to a greater and more comprehensive understanding of the problems faced by military theorists in the twentieth century and may therefore be said to have had a positive effect on military theory. Tudge elaborates on its value:

“It is a coherent idea which pulls the facts together, and gives an overall sense of what went on. Testable hypotheses are generated by, and nest within, this framework, and as they are tested they modify the overall picture. That is the proper dialectic between the real world and our mind-picture of it. In practice, such dialectic provides the only route to progress.”²³

It was the theorist-historians who created the intellectual framework which others then modified. It was their efforts and heuristic use of history which created the environment from which the post-war generation sprang. Under the continued guidance of Liddell Hart, Fuller and others, new theorists such as Bernard Brodie, Blackett and Kahn were able to fathom the abyss of nuclear strategy and guide others through the Cold War years. Tudge, however, issued the following warning in relation to the dangers of simplification:

“[T]he human brain – unlike a computer – is supremely adapted to grasping narratives. We love stories, with a beginning, a middle and an end ... stories we remember. There is only one danger, and it really is dangerous, but easily avoided once we know what it is. The danger is to imagine that the well-told tale, the myth, which should at best be seen as a working model is, in fact, the truth itself. Many scientists, in other contexts, have made this mistake: erected

²² Tudge, C., *The Day Before Yesterday: Five Million Years of Human History*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1995, p. 16.

²³ *Ibid.*

hypotheses just to get their investigations on the road, and then mistaken them for the truth they were trying to find out.”²⁴

Liddell Hart might have benefited, as would some of his contemporaries, from these words. Tudge’s warning highlights another fundamental problem faced by the theorist-historians: Are they able to write history impartially? Are they able to produce good quality history within the confines of what Karl Popper would term an “agenda”? This was a point raised by Brian Bond in response to a question posed by Adrian Liddell Hart at an informal discussion involving among others Sir John Hackett, Brigadier Anthony Trythall (Fuller’s biographer), Brian Bond, Correlli Barnett and Sir Michael Howard after the inaugural “The Fuller – Liddell Hart Lecture” at RUSI. Bond came to the conclusion that the two – the historian and the theorist – co-exist uneasily if at all.²⁵

What is important to note however, is that the theorist-historians maintained a certain dynamic tension between military theory and military practice via their use of military history. They held all three components in place in relation to each other. It was not an easy task or one which came naturally to them. Initially, Mahan for one was quite daunted by the prospect of writing history. He viewed history very much in the light of a layman when approaching the subject for the first time. Schurman remarks:

“Like most literate non-academics he [Mahan] seems to have been inclined to believe, at least in the beginning, that scholars are accustomed to write with almost super-human detachment and omniscience, and he was unaware that such an attainment is a very rare scholarly gift.”²⁶

This was true of most of the theorist-historians in the beginning. The written word has always dominated the spoken word. Once it has been read instead of merely heard, it acquires a certain legitimacy, an aura of truth for those

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 16-17.

²⁵ ‘The Fuller-Liddell Hart Lecture’ *op. cit.*, pp. 21-31, a dialogue held at RUSI on 12 October 1978 between Brigadier A.J. Trythall, MA, and Brian Bond, MA, FRHistS.

²⁶ Schurman, D.M., *The Education of a Navy*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 71.

uninitiated in the profession. As they progressed, however, and realised that on occasion their sources played just as hard and fast with the truth, they were wont to lose their scholastic or academic innocence. They came to see that, in the interests of propagating a theory, the end more often than not justified the means. They came to view the approach as pragmatic very much in the light of Fuller's speculation. This does not mean they were without conscience in the matter. In an effort to justify his historical approach Mahan pointed towards his results. Schurman explains:

"It was, however, in the process of delivering his Presidential Address to the American Historical Association in 1902 that Mahan was forced to grapple directly with his status amongst historians. In this context one must realise that, while a military man might cause some fastidious academic eyebrows to be raised simply because he ventured into the academic field, he was not speaking to historians at a time when the pragmatic approach was generally unpopular with them. Mahan however was concerned to justify himself. His books were renowned as sources of superb generalization and they were, as he admitted, dependent largely on printed secondary sources; therefore it is not surprising he entitled his address 'Subordination in History'.

Although his development of the theme was scholarly and detached, Mahan based his central defence, almost defiantly, on practical results."²⁷

It was Mahan's contention that his history was effective in communicating his ideas. The old adage that the history which lies inert in unread books does no work in the world he applied to Lord Acton. Lord Acton, he admitted, was "drenched with the wisdom of ages". He stated that Lord Acton, due to a misguided zeal for accuracy, did not transfer much of his knowledge to the general public as all he ever published were "essays and periodicals". In Lord Acton's case it was not so much an unread book as an unwritten one. Mahan, on the other hand, viewed himself as an effective

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

communicator of his ideas. That was his primary function in this instance. Here he is in good company. No less able a historian than Barbara Tuchman made the same comment. She wrote that once, in the course of her research for a particular project, she came across a very able historian who had been researching the diplomatic history of US and Moroccan relations at the turn of the century for close on 40 years. Tuchman states that she was sure the woman knew more than any other person alive on the subject. It was to no avail, however, as the woman had made no attempt to disseminate the fruits of that knowledge to the reading public. Except for the individual concerned, Tuchman viewed the whole exercise as pointless²⁸. This was Mahan's defence.

"If the value of academic scholarship had anything to do with the business of communication then, when it came to the printed work, that great British scholar [Lord Acton], lately deceased, had not been prolific outside the essay and periodical field. Undoubtedly, argued Mahan, Acton's mind was drenched with the wisdom of the ages. The shedding of some of this vast store of knowledge would have been of inestimable value to both scholars and mankind at large. Owing to a misguided passion for accuracy and completeness, however, only a few drops of this knowledge ever reached the general public. In contrast to this Mahan had communicated; his books were written and distributed. This was his real defence and he went on to show how prolific historical production had been possible for a naval officer coming to the study of history late in life. Worthwhile production occurred, he said, through the proper use of certain questions which he addressed to history. By this means he was able to select and subordinate the material to produce valuable generalizations. Subordination of detail was thus important to achieving the desired pedagogical result. His purpose was pre-set."²⁹

²⁸ Tuchman, B. W., *Practicing History*, Macmillan London Limited, London, 1981, pp.20-21.

²⁹ Schurman, D.M., *The Education of a Navy*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 74.

Mahan's primary objective in his use of history was not to perpetuate memory of an event or even its understanding in a historical context, but to achieve, in his words, a "desired pedagogical result". Schurman continues:

"For him then, the historian was the purposeful scholar allied to the artist. He went further and stated that the military historian found himself in a position of special advantage in that he 'naturally' applies his purpose (principles of war) to the writing of history. Most of this, if not universally acceptable, is reasonable enough and not unworthy of men who have been classed above mere military scribblers. He extended his neck to the headsman somewhat when he attempted to argue that his conclusions were unlikely to be totally overthrown because of future original research in primary documents."³⁰

Schurman concludes:

"One can only state that twentieth-century historians have shown great preference for original research and that not all their reassessments have been negligible."³¹

Mahan, like all the theorist-historians was a product of his time. His mind-picture of what had happened and, as a consequence of that, what would happen in future, was formed by an instinctive opinion developed over years of naval service interspersed with serious and casual reading on naval matters. The "principles" (portents of Fuller) which guided his historical writing had therefore been evolved by a host of variable influences, some intellectual, some practical, some even a product of conventional wisdom inherent in the truisms of naval tradition. One thing his opinions, and therefore his "principles" were not. They were not the product of the years of detached scholarship one would expect a work of significance and impact should require. By his own admission, however, he had come to history late in life causing Schurman to comment that

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³¹ *Ibid.*

“Mahan’s mind was limited by his late arrival in the world of letters. ... The reflection is unavoidable that study might easily have modified his arch conservatism. ...It should come as no special surprise that his most glaring weakness as an historian, his over-rigidity, affected his value as a strategist”.³²

Mahan’s arch conservative religious views also impacted on his writing of history. Nevertheless Schurman identifies his delicate handling of Lord Nelson’s affair with Lady Hamilton as proof of his ability to keep these emotions in check when the need arose. His biography on Nelson also shows that Mahan was pragmatic in recognising a bias in his work and indeed used it in the production of his history.

“Mahan’s biographic gift was great. Part of its strength lay in his frank recognition of inability to be objective about historical characters whom he disliked. Mahan was convinced that only the admirer should write biography. In his own case, at least, he was undoubtedly right.”³³

More often than not it is an admirer who is drawn to write a biography; Trythall in the case of Fuller and Bond in the case of Liddell Hart. But each needs a counterweight: Mearsheimer in the case of Liddell Hart and to a lesser extent J P Harris in the case of Fuller.

These limitations were by no means unique to Mahan. Fuller and Douhet, both enmeshed in Fascism (Douhet as a member of Mussolini’s *Fascisti* and Fuller as a member of Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists) were deeply influenced by their personal political philosophies. Both were intellectual elitists without regard for democracies. Both viewed modern armies as small elites of hand-picked individuals, destined to guard the nation: Fuller by way of a small, professional, highly mobile mechanised force, while Douhet envisaged a professional air force destined to destroy

³² *Ibid.*, p. 76-77.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

the enemy from the air. Azar Gat,³⁴ in a study on the roots of Fascism and its progenitor proto-fascism, tracked these influences in both these military thinkers and their thought. Their view of history was greatly influenced by their Fascism.³⁵ Trythall recounts that the German Luftwaffe undoubtedly did Fuller a favour when they bombed Eyre & Spottiswoode's store in Paternoster Row during the Blitz. Burnt to the ground unfortunately along with many of his personal papers was the entire first edition (both volumes) of *Decisive Battles: Their Influence Upon History and Civilisation*. Fuller said afterwards that he felt like thanking Hitler as this gave him the opportunity to rewrite the book – something he had wanted to do – and while so doing, edit out much of the Fascist thought which pervaded the earlier edition.³⁶

Douhet's view of history was just as self-indulgent. Unlike its earthbound counterparts, air power did not have a centuries old reservoir of experience to draw upon. The First World War had seen the wide-ranging application of airpower in all the roles which would come to be regarded as its traditional roles, i.e. ground attack, interdiction, gaining air superiority and strategic bombing. It also had the steep learning curves of both the fledgling Royal Flying Corps and the Imperial German *Luft-streitkräfte* for its supporters to reflect upon. There had been many lessons to be learned between 1914 and 1918. The Zeppelin and AEG Gotha raids on London had foreshadowed Guernica and both the "Blitz" and Bomber Command's costly bombing offensive over Europe. General Sir Edmund Allenby's use of air power at Wadi Fara after the Battle of Meggido was echoed on all fronts by the majority of air forces during the Second World War (the Soviet Illyushin Il-2 Shturmoviks over the Eastern Front and the Allied "Jabos" over Normandy in the form of British Hawker Typhoons and American P-47 Thunderbolts are among the many examples).³⁷ Douhet, however, dismissed

³⁴ Gat, A., *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War: Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet and Other Modernists*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998.

³⁵ Douhet was not a historian. He wrote no major work of history to illustrate his ideas.

³⁶ Trythall A.J., *Boney Fuller: Soldier, Strategist, and Writer 1878–1966*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1977, p. 218.

³⁷ A parallel of the aerial destruction wrought against the Turks at Wadi Fara can be seen in the Allied destruction of a German pocket at Falaise during the D-Day campaign and again, almost fifty years later, in the devastation visited on the retreating Iraqis on the road to Basra during the Gulf War.

the air history lessons of the Great War and chose to rely on logic alone. As Phillip S. Meilinger points out, it was a curious decision:

“Finally, he [Douhet] failed to see the importance of history – of looking to the past to illuminate the present. In this regard he was in the same position as the nuclear theorists following World War II. Because little empirical evidence existed upon which to base a model of how one could use nuclear weapons in war, their theories became intellectual exercises that relied on the force of logic. Similarly Douhet chose to ignore what little evidence did exist from World War I: ‘The experience of the past is of no value at all. On the contrary, it has negative value since it tends to mislead us.’ He took this position not because he believed that history was useless, but because it provided the wrong lessons for airpower. Paradoxically, however, at the same time he denigrated the lessons of the Great War, he built a theory of airpower based on that war’s repeating itself. The result was a curious mixture of the past and future, with no apparent anchor in either dimension.”³⁸

As Ken Booth points out in an article titled “History or Logic as Approaches to Strategy”, Douhet perhaps represents an extreme example of the logical approach to the development of theory. Here he is in direct contrast to the theorist-historians. Instead of looking to the past in an attempt to see the future, he chose to rationalise the future via intellect. Due to the entirely new dimension of warfare introduced by controlled flight, Douhet thought it more apt to supplant the examination of history with that of possibility when devising strategy. He failed to realise that, instead of supplanting the strategic bow, air power was merely supplying another, albeit extremely effective, arrow for its quiver of war. Booth explains:

“Whereas Mahan made generalisations and distilled ‘principles’ on the basis of history, Douhet, with equal earnestness, applied himself to logical reasoning, for he considered that all past practice was

³⁸ Meilinger, Col Phillip S. (ed.), *The Paths to Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, Air University Press, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1997, pp. 29-30.

obsolete; in most respects he dismissed even the Great War, which had only occurred a few years previously.³⁹ Interestingly, and untypically short-sightedly for such an enthusiast of technical change, Douhet did assume that he could generalise from the Great War in certain aspects of national defence; he assumed, for example, that defensive superiority and stalemate on the ground and sea would be characteristics of future wars.⁴⁰

Much debate rages over the extent to which Douhet and his method succeeded in gauging the role of air power in modern war. In many instances his prognostications were optimistic and far beyond the technical abilities of the day. The type of destruction he envisaged being visited from the air did not materialise until the advent of nuclear power, and then only briefly until ICBMs replaced the first intercontinental bombers. Invulnerable retaliatory forces then negated any advantages of a pre-emptive strike. Although changing circumstances accommodated Douhet's theories somewhat and made them relevant after the war in ways he could not have imagined, credit as a theorist can only be given for intention and not coincidence. Booth frames it thus:

"The advent of nuclear weapons, and their acquisition in considerable numbers, has led some to praise Douhet once more, and they point out that his analytical framework was of considerable value and relevance to the thermonuclear era. To the extent that this is true, it is more a reflection on Douhet's good luck than on his ability as a strategist; strategists should be judged by the relevance of their theories to their own era, not to one which is several (unforeseeable) technological revolutions ahead. Furthermore, the argument that Douhet's analytical framework was validated by nuclear weapons cannot be pushed far: Douhet's framework was only of some relevance between the years 1955-60, when both super-powers had nuclear plenty and inter-continental capabilities, but before they acquired invulnerable retaliatory forces. To the extent

³⁹ Booth K., 'History or Logic as Approaches to Strategy', *RUSI: Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, 117:3, September 1972, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 41.

that Douhet's analysis offers interesting insights into the post-war strategic balance, it is only for the dangerous years of 'The delicate Balance of Terror' in the second half of the 1950s."⁴¹

Meilinger perhaps gives the most fitting epitaph to Douhet's work when he states that although Douhet was not always correct in his analysis, and that much of what he said and thought did not come to pass, his fundamental premise was correct. In modern conventional warfare command of the air is absolutely essential. It took, points out Meilinger, untold centuries of warfare to forge the intellectual talents of a Clausewitz, a Mahan or a Jomini. We should therefore, he suggests, not be too hard on Douhet who produced his seminal work, *The Command of the Air* (published in Italian in 1921), a little over a decade after the advent of powered flight.⁴²

1.5 The research problem

Unlike academic historians, theorist-historians were under a unique pressure to produce results. Their objective was to propagate a theory. In order to achieve this they utilised military history in a didactic manner both to explain and to illustrate their theories and, very importantly, to justify any theoretical conclusions. The target audience covered a wide cross-section of society, incorporating among others military, academic, political and social circles. In order to reach and influence these diverse views to a specific way of thought, the individual theorist-historian propagated a view of military history best justified (or explained) by his own particular theory. In the pursuit of this objective however, theorist-historians were, in most cases, wont to behave in both an overweening and fanatical manner, often to the detriment of the broader science of military history.

The history of the theorist-historian was, therefore, not necessarily an exercise in objective historiography, but rather a missive aimed at educating the public in general and explaining the nuances of their way of thought in particular. What are the consequences of this type of use or "abuse" of

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 39.

⁴² Meilinger, Col Phillip S. (ed.) , *The Paths to Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, Air University Press, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1997, p. 34.

military history for military thought? It is the contention of this study that the effect was positive.

1.6 Why are J. F. C. Fuller and B. H. Liddell Hart considered representative of the theorist-historian group?

Brian Holden Reid was attempting to address a long-standing problem when he stated that the reputations of Fuller and Liddell Hart are not linked like “the interest rate and inflation, when the one goes up, the other goes down”. It has long been a characteristic of this field of study for scholars to gravitate towards one or the other, and then indulge in sarcastic and sometimes acrimonious debate over who was the greater, the more influential or insightful military philosopher. It has also been said that the reason for disputes in the academic world being so vicious is because the stakes are so small⁴³. This has been the case with the supporters of both Fuller and Liddell Hart. Suffice it to say, however, that their reputations are indeed linked, although not at the expense of one another, but rather on account of one another. They are inexorably linked by the era in which they lived, their professional relationships and their respective theories as well as, of course, by the advent of the tank. It is virtually impossible fully to understand the one without reference to the other. They provided tantalising glimpses of what might have been, each in the case of the other.

Liddell Hart pursued a writing career outside the autocratic confines of the armed forces while Fuller did so from within (until his retirement from the army as major-general in 1933). Thus knowledge of what agitation for reform was possible from both within and outside the armed forces is covered. Another intriguing facet to their parallel careers was their directly opposing political beliefs. Liddell Hart, always politically more astute and tolerant than Fuller, was a liberal, whereas Fuller became a member of the British Union of Fascists. These two differences alone make a comparative study of their respective careers important since it covers the full political and professional debate of the key defence issues of their day, both from within and outside the armed forces.

⁴³ Sometimes attributed to Henry Kissinger.

Then, of course, there is the question of influence. It is an established fact that Liddell Hart approached Fuller in humble tones for his opinion of his early work on infantry tactics. Both his “man in the dark” theory and his “expanding torrent” theory were submitted to Fuller in a gesture both of friendship and a desire for Fuller’s professional opinion. Fuller’s conversion of Liddell Hart to the “armoured creed” is also well documented, as is his influence on Liddell Hart’s early work and his first attempts to structure a cogent theoretical picture of a future European war. Liddell Hart’s *Paris or The Future of War* bears the characteristics of a reworking of Fuller’s *The Reformation of War*. Where it starts to become difficult to separate the two on the issue of influence is in Liddell Hart’s later career when, having gained both in confidence and intellectual ability, he struck out on his own. Liddell Hart’s detractors unfairly accuse him of never quite being able to cut the intellectual apron strings that originally tied him to Fuller. They view him as guilty of reworking Fuller’s fundamental ideas for his own purposes. Such an opinion has, in the light of much recent scholarship by among others Azar Gat, been demonstrated to be both wrong and simplistic. Although Fuller was a pivotal and enduring influence on Liddell Hart’s career and military thought, he was not its sole progenitor. Liddell Hart’s own intellectual achievements were substantial and are deserving in their own right.

To understand this issue fully, it is necessary to examine the nature of their relationship, both personal and professional. Fuller and Liddell Hart often used one another as sounding boards for a particular idea or theory. They co-operated extensively in propagating their views, to both the public and the armed forces. Fuller is on record as having arranged for Liddell Hart to ask a particular question at a RUSI lecture in order to allow him to introduce a particular concept. They gave drafts of their work to one another to criticise. Although this occasionally led to an acrimonious exchange, it proved to be mutually beneficial. It is revealing that Fuller valued Liddell Hart’s input. This actively dispels the contention that Liddell Hart did not contribute to the debate. Although much has been written on Fuller’s influence on Liddell Hart, very little has been written on whether or not Liddell Hart exerted any

influence on Fuller's military thought. This constitutes a lacuna in this field of study that perhaps could be rectified only by a detailed scholarly analysis of both Fuller and Liddell Hart's personal correspondence. It is obvious then that in the context of the study of interwar military thought, Fuller and Liddell Hart are inextricably linked and likely to remain so indefinitely.

This raises the question whether they are considered suitable representatives of the theorist-historian group. There are a number of reasons for an affirmative answer to this question.

Firstly, they are arguably the best-known pioneering members of this group in the twentieth century. Both were prolific writers and much of their work is still in print. Very importantly, of all the theorist-historians, they made the most extensive use of military history to illustrate their theoretical precepts. The majority of serious students of military history are, therefore, familiar with both their lives and their work. They have also proved more enduring in their military thought than, for example, Mahan, whose relevance to naval matters barely survived his passing, or Douhet, who, although correct in his fundamental premise, was over-optimistic in his conclusions. Although time has exposed numerous cracks in both Fuller and Liddell Hart's ideas, the overall structure of their theories remains remarkably sound. Few students can find a more stimulating and readable introduction to military thought than Liddell Hart's *Strategy The Indirect Approach* or a more thought-provoking introduction to the underlying causes and patterns of war than Fuller's *The Conduct of War 1789-1961*.

Another important reason for their suitability is the amount of scholarly debate that both these theorists have continued to generate in recent years, both for and against. They appear to have proved far more fascinating and stimulating than their contemporaries, both intellectually and biographically.

1.7 What is the object of this dissertation?

The object of this study is to show that, in the pursuit of establishing a military theory, military history is actively distorted and manipulated by

military theorists. If this is so – how, why and to what extent is military history manipulated? Secondly, what are the implications and consequences of such distortion and manipulation for military theory and, seen in context, does it fulfil a purpose?

1.8 Hypothesis

It is the contention in this dissertation that the manipulation and distortion of military history by theorist-historians results not from conscious dissemblance, but from the desire to pursue military excellence.

It is difficult to frame this concept in a single hypothesis. What is also important to consider is the motivation for manipulation, if indeed manipulation did take place. It is also the contention in this dissertation that if the manipulation of military history did take place, it was not so much driven by dishonest reasons as practical ones. As Mahan explained in his revealing lecture titled “Subordination in History”, the military historian finds himself in the fortuitous position of being able to apply his purpose to the writing of history. That purpose, for the theorist-historians, was the acceptance of a military theory they thought best suited to their respective country’s needs.

As the description of this dissertation’s objective is broad, it has been broken down into smaller, more manageable, segments.

Chapter 1: This chapter explains the research problem. It includes the reasons for the selection of Major General John Frederick Charles Fuller and Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart as being representative of the theorist-historian group.

Chapter 2: This chapter is an analysis of the relationship between military history and military theory. It also examines the problems of culture, ethnicity, propaganda, context and perspective in the writing of military history. Finally, it functions as a short philosophical and historiographical primer for the remainder of the work.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 introduces J. F. C. Fuller and B. H. Liddell Hart. It is a discussion of their early lives and careers and explains their social, intellectual and military backgrounds. It also briefly touches on their professional and intellectual interaction. Knowledge of these aspects of their lives is essential for a better understanding of chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 focuses on J. F. C. Fuller and aims to answer the following questions:

- What were the origins of Fuller's military thought?
- What type of military historian was he and did he manipulate history, consciously or subconsciously and for what ends?
- What was the relationship between Fuller's military thought and military history?

Chapter 5: Chapter 5 concentrates on B. H. Liddell Hart and is aimed at answering the following questions:

- What were the origins of Liddell Hart's military thought?
- What type of military historian was he and did he manipulate history consciously or subconsciously and for what ends?
- What was the relationship between Liddell Hart's military thought and military history?

Chapter 6: In the light of the conclusions drawn from chapters 4 and 5, the role and effect of theorist-historians is evaluated against those of academic historians. The didactic nature and needs of military history are examined in the light of historical accuracy.

1.9 Research methods and sources

The method of research was to analyse, compare and contrast the various sources with a view to understanding the manner in which the two authors presented data, their interpretation and the conclusions drawn as well as their individual approaches to achieving the objects of their writings.

Similarly, the work of other writers – both laudatory and critical – was consulted to ascertain the manner in which it interpreted Fuller and Liddell Hart's views.

This dissertation utilises both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprise the various publications written by Liddell Hart and Fuller which in both cases includes their memoirs. Publications take the form of books and journal articles published by the authors during their lifetimes. Secondary sources play a particularly important part in this dissertation. The reasons for this are as follows. Liddell Hart's legacy appears to be in a constant state of flux. It could even be said to have spawned its own genre with various protagonists making academic gain out of either defending or attacking what Liddell Hart perceived his legacy to be (or his actual intellectual achievements as championed by his protectors). The rigorous cut and thrust of this debate has given rise to high standards of scholarship on both sides. Accordingly, no meaningful discussion on Liddell Hart can progress without taking this body of work in consideration. In the case of Liddell Hart, the works of Brian Bond, John Mearsheimer, Azar Gat and Alex Danchev among others are indispensable to the modern researcher. Gat's measured analysis of Liddell Hart's military thought and its origins are arguably the most complete and scholarly, showing the benefits of writing with a hindsight unavailable to earlier commentators such as Brian Bond and Michael Howard.

In Fuller's case no-one was stung to attack or defend his reputation to a similar degree. What has generated an interest in his reputation however, is the debate on who was intellectually responsible for the tank's successful tactical and strategic debut and to what extent he was responsible for the introduction of a manoeuvre-based system of warfare aimed at the psychological paralysis of an opponent as opposed to its physical destruction. Brigadier Anthony John Trythall and Brian Holden Reid have so far proved to be among the most indispensable of Fuller's intellectual biographers and their work has likewise to be considered when writing on or about Fuller.

Chapter 2

“An agreed upon fiction”⁴⁴:

The relationship of military history to military theory

2.1 General

What is the relationship between history and the armed forces? Historians have long held the upper hand in time of peace in deciding to whom must go the laurels and to which “Great Captain” must be accorded the respect and adulation of future generations. Though many remember Hannibal for mastering Rome’s Legions at the Trebbia, Lake Trasimene and Cannae, few remember the Senator Fabius whose “Fabian strategy” planted the seeds of Hannibal’s demise. Still fewer remember the Consul Nero, whose deception of Hannibal⁴⁵ enabled Scipio to set about his task of saving Rome.

Scipio Africanus is perhaps more justly remembered than the other two for his pivotal role in Hannibal’s destruction. His conduct of the campaign in Spain, culminating on the North African plain of Zama, ensured Rome’s subjugation of Carthage. Building on the solid foundation of Fabius’ strategy and Nero’s audacity, he had mastered Hannibal with Napoleonic dexterity. But even this was not sufficient to secure Clio’s laurels. In the preface to his hagiographic tome *Scipio Africanus – A Greater than Napoleon*, Liddell Hart mentions that his book is only the second one on Scipio to appear in the English language. The first and only other book had been written by an English clergyman over a century before and had largely neglected Scipio’s military achievements; a sharp contrast to Hannibal who has long been a staple of popular military history and literature. This is a

⁴⁴ The title used here comes from the following quote by Napoleon:

“Historical fact ... is often a mere word; it cannot be ascertained when events actually occur, in the heat of contrary passions; and if, later on, there is consensus, this is only because there is no one left to contradict. ... What is ... historical truth? ... An agreed upon fiction. ... There are facts that remain in eternal litigation.”

Matthews, L. J., et al, (eds.), *The Parameters of War*, Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defense Publishers, Washington, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Stealing away unseen to journey 450 km to the Metaurus with the cream of his army, Nero combined with the force of Livius Salinator and defeated Hasrubal at the head of a Carthaginian relief force. Returning swiftly to his encampment opposite Hannibal, his 13 day absence went unnoticed. The first inkling Hannibal had of his brother’s demise was when Scipio had Hasrubal’s severed head catapulted into his camp.

typical example of the adulation history often reserves for the vanquished at the expense of the victor. Indeed, in Rome it was the custom to praise opponents defeated in battle. Several scholars have put forward a theory explaining this phenomenon. They speculate that by praising vanquished enemies, the Romans were inadvertently praising themselves. If their enemies were so great, were the Romans not greater for having overcome them? A prime example of this tradition may be found in the Roman sculpture "The dying Gaul". Although mortally wounded and subjugated, as a cord around his neck indicates, the Celt's bearing is proud and disdainful. From the Roman perspective the enemy is seen as noble and defiant, retaining his dignity in the moment of death. He serves as both a reminder to Rome's enemies of the greatness of her legions and the duty which Rome expects from her legionnaires.

If historians hold sway in times of peace and prosperity, the generals rule with an iron rod in time of war, for, during such times the pen inevitably gives way to the sword. Theories generated in peacetime are tested by war and are either confirmed by successful implementation or proved wanting by failure. An example is Douhet's theory of war being waged and won mainly through airpower. Despite the direst predictions by an interwar generation of strategists – only just coming to terms with the modern internal combustion engine and using Guernica as a yardstick – airpower proved only part of the equation needed to overcome the enemy, and not the answer in itself. The Gulf War of 1991, in which airpower was to play a decisive role in attaining a "cheap" victory in terms of lives and equipment, demonstrated five decades later that ground forces still are an essential component of a modern military force if it is intended to impose one's will on the enemy. It is this crucial relationship that must be examined. However, many military personnel fail to connect the two. An example of this is the perhaps apocryphal story mentioned by Anne N Foreman, then Under-Secretary of the United States Air Force, in the foreword she wrote to *Military History and the Military Profession* in 1992.

"I am reminded of the story ... of the Israeli general who once accosted one of our colleagues (a medievalist, I believe). 'What

makes you think your studies of campaigns in the era of swords, armor, lances, and horses have any relevance in today's fast-paced, high-tech warfare?' asked the general. Replied the historian, 'What makes you think, General, that you are smart enough to win the next war on the basis of your own experience alone?'"⁴⁶

Field Marshall Count Von Schlieffen, author of the "Schlieffen Plan" and head of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1906, perhaps framed the relationship between the warrior and the historian better:

"Before everyone who wishes to become a commander-in-chief, there lies a book entitled 'The History of War'. It is not always, I must admit, very amusing. It involves toiling through a mass of by no means exciting details. But by their means we arrive at facts ... and at the root of it lies the perception of how everything has happened, how it was bound to happen, and how it will happen again."⁴⁷

2.2 Historical tradition and its relationship to military history

The historical tradition evolved from the oral tradition which, in ancient times, functioned as a reservoir of knowledge and culture. Communities eking out a living in a hostile environment acquired a deep knowledge of their world and its resources and looked to the oral historians of their tribes and communities to commit this knowledge to memory for posterity. Primitive religions, each with its own creation myth, stored their gradually accumulating theology in the minds of their Shamans, Druids and medicine men. Incorporated into this vast patchwork of superstition and knowledge was the tribe's history – an account of the previous generation's achievements, where they had come from and what they had done. Genealogy likewise represented an important tradition with bloodlines being

⁴⁶Charters, D. A., et al, (eds.), *Military History and the Military Profession*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1992, p. xii.

⁴⁶ Bellamy, C., *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, preface.

committed to memory until they merged with shadowy figures of myth and legend.

The written word emancipated the oral historians, freeing them for the first time from the limitation of memorising events, thoughts, opinions and other factors. Information could now be recorded and accumulated without fear that the death of an important elder or holy man due to disease or war would rob them of his knowledge. Homer's *Illiad* is perhaps the foremost example of an oral history surviving its origins to become a staple of modern literature as well as Western culture.

The *Illiad* straddles the worlds of myth and reality, blurring the two until they are indistinguishable and it becomes impossible to determine where one ends and the other begins. If it were not for Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Troy, scholars would still be debating the veracity of its existence. Its discovery, however, left more questions unanswered than those it answered. Who were the Trojans and how did the war come about? Who precisely were the Greeks and where did they come from? To what extent can one look to Homer's account for an explanation of what actually happened?

Every child is familiar with the ruse of the Trojan Horse. The stern warning "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" echoes from another age to entertain and at the same time warn us to be wary of a subtle enemy. The Trojans, safely ensconced behind their stone walls, celebrated a perceived victory by taking the enemy unknowingly into their very midst. Their demise is said to have been rapid, bloody and brutal. All the elements of high drama are present. A recalcitrant lover, a cuckolded husband seeking vengeance, a noble warrior destined to die in single combat. Greek honour sated, the victorious soldiers returned to their beached ships to begin their journey home and, at the same time, present a fresh canvass for the *Odyssey*.

The reason for quoting Homer as an example is to introduce the stylised portrayal of the Trojan War. Under the pretext of recounting an event, a blueprint was laid for Greek martial behaviour that was to last almost a

millennium. Achilles, cursed by the Gods with a weak heel only, became the archetypal Greek warrior. Generations of Greek Hoplites took their places in the serried ranks of the phalanx inspired by their vision – which was Homer's vision and therefore history's vision – of Achilles. Alexander the Great, the Macedonian king who lead his victorious phalanxes from the relative obscurity of the Peloponnese to Central India, believed himself the very incarnation of Homer's Achilles. If Homer,⁴⁸ in conjunction with Greek culture, had intended to manipulate the history of the Trojan War to promote his view of the values that Hoplite warfare should adopt, then he was extremely successful. From a Greek perspective the manipulation of history was indeed both beneficial and successful, and it became a blueprint for Greek martial conduct. Homer's *Illiad* is by no means unique. The old testament, unlike the new, has its origins in the oral tradition. Jericho's demise, verified by modern archeology, has been dated to about 6000 BC. Accounts of its fall survived the ensuing millennia until – with whatever imperfections and embellishments it had acquired through centuries of travel through the tongues and imaginations of men – it was committed to writing. To the generations which followed, it was quite literally carved in stone in every sense of the word, as there was no way of refuting it once it had acquired what was then the mystic aura of the written word.

The oldest recorded written history is to be found in Egypt where it relates to the actions of a warrior ruler, Menes,⁴⁹ the unifier of Egypt. Also, engraved in the Egyptian granite over two thousand four hundred years ago, is a glowing account of the Egyptian warrior king Thutmosis' martial success against the King of Kadesh at Megiddo (1458 BC) – the first battle recorded in history. To say that Egyptian accounts of their nation's battles deified their rulers is an understatement. The Egyptian scribes literally and figuratively turned hagiography into an art form. Countless carved panels praise the martial prowess of dead Pharaohs. Engraved in granite by an

⁴⁸ Homer was merely a link in the chain that kept the memory of the Trojan Wars alive. He obtained and transmitted his information in the time-honoured oral tradition and he was tied to his verbal sources in much the same way as a modern historian is tied to primary and secondary sources when attempting to reconstruct an event. Homer's fame lies in his presentation, viz. his poetry. Certain archeologists have made the improbable suggestion that a contemporary of Homer invented an alphabet in order to save his work for posterity.

⁴⁹ Dupuy, R. E. and Dupuy T. N., *The Collins Encyclopedia of Military History: From 3500B.C. to the Present*, fourth edition, HarperCollins Publishers, Glasgow, 1993, p. 4.

anonymous hand, Ramses II stares out across the millennia as he leads his men into combat against the dreaded Sea Peoples and the Libyans. The Egyptians are seen as strong and martial, whereas their helpless opponents wilt, obligingly awaiting the death blow. Early history appears to have been anything but objective.

The second great battle of ancient times (in the pre-Trojan War era) of which adequate records have survived, is the battle of Kadesh (1285 BC). A temple situated at Karnak in Egypt has an outer wall decorated with images and hieroglyphs celebrating an Egyptian victory over the Hittites at Kadesh. Ramses II is mentioned as having concluded a treaty with the vanquished Hittite king after hostilities had been concluded. However, at the former Hittite capital of Boghazkoy, archeologists subsequently found another version of the same treaty stating that the Hittites had triumphed over the Egyptians. Propaganda, it seems, is as old as the art of writing itself and history was very much in the eye of the beholder.

The Assyrians followed suit. Leaving tantalising clues about their culture and civilisation, they wrote prodigiously and used historical accounts of their battles and punitive raids as propaganda to terrorise subjugated states. History – here defined loosely as the written accounts of past deeds – was being employed as part of a conscious policy of terrorism to ensure subjugation. A well-known description quoted by Arthur Ferrill in his book *The Origins of War* gives us a glimpse of the terror imposed by the Assyrians on the subjugated peoples.

“While I was staying in the land of Kutmuki, they brought me the word: ‘The city of Suru of Bit-Halupe has revolted, they have slain Hamatai, their governor, and Ahiababa, the son of a nobody, whom they have brought from Bit-Adini, they have set up as king over them.’ With the help of Adad and the great gods who have made great my kingdom, I mobilised my chariots and armies and marched along the bank of the Habur. ... To the city of Suru of Bit-Halupe I drew near, and the terror of the splendor of Assur, my lord, overwhelmed them. The chief men and the elders of the city, to save

their lives, came forth into my presence and embraced my feet, saying: 'If it is thy pleasure, slay! If it is thy pleasure, let live! That which thy heart desireth, do! Ahiababa, the son of a nobody, whom they had brought from Bit-Adini, I took captive. In the valor of my heart and the fury of my weapons I stormed the city. All the rebels they seized and delivered them up. ... Azi-ilu I set over them as my own governor. I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar; many within the border of my own land I flayed, and I spread their skins upon the walls; and I cut of the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled. Ahaibaba I took to Nineveh, I flayed him, I spread his skin upon the wall of Nineveh.'"⁵⁰

The passage of time has done little to dampen the inherent sadism of this account. The very nature of the writing, however, is in itself a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Assyrians for, by concentrating on their motives, particularly the need to publicise such heinous acts, a better understanding is gained of their political position and aspirations. The point being made is that even "bad" or biased history can be extremely valuable in what it reveals about the authors and what they are trying to do.

In *The Ride of the Second Horseman*, Robert L. O'Connell attempts to explain the Assyrian predicament in a chapter entitled "The Lords of Extortion". An oversimplified explanation of Assyria's problem was the fact that Assyria, like Prussia under Frederick the Great, was an army in possession of a nation or, in this case, an army in possession of an empire. To maintain the status quo the military had to continue to subjugate neighbouring territories and ensure that they paid tribute in the form of people, gold and food. They were very much in the situation described by Joseph Heller in *Catch 22*. Assyria lived by the sword and, as the Old

⁵⁰ Ferrill, A., *The Origins of War: From the Stone Age to Alexander the Great*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1988, p. 69.

Testament warns, it died by it. What is important here, however, is to understand their judicious use of history. O'Connell mentions that

“the Assyrians were only scrupulous in recording their victories”.⁵¹

This was a logical assumption for a nation that stood or fell by its ability to inspire fear.

2.3 The early historians

Herodotus emerged as “The Father of History” in the fifth century BC. Unfettered by the restraints that had afflicted his predecessors, he nevertheless limited his “Histories” by indulging himself in the artistic elements of his trade. The story is told that Thucydides, attending the Olympian Games, an occasion of great solemnity and social significance to the ancient Greeks, wept upon hearing Herodotus recite from his *History*. Whether he wept for its semantic beauty or lack of objective realism is not clear. What is recounted, however, is Herodotus' response. Turning to Thucydides' father, Olorus, Herodotus said:

“Olorus, your son's spirit is aflame with a passion for learning”.⁵²

Thucydides erupted onto the “historical” scene like a giant among pygmies. He can, in many ways lay claim to being the “Father of Critical History”; a much more deserved and flattering epithet than the one of Herodotus. Joseph Gavorse's introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of Crawley's translation of Thucydides' *The Complete Writings of Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War* is worth reading in this regard.

“The son of Olorus undoubtedly did admire the work of ‘the father of history’ – but not as history. His conception of history was so different from that of his predecessors, and he himself so conscious

⁵¹ O'Connell, R. L., *Ride of the Second Horseman: The Birth and Death of War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, p. 156.

⁵² *The Complete Writings of Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War*, Random House, New York, 1934, p. xiv.

of his role as pioneer, that he even felt obliged to warn his readers that 'the absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract from its interest.' Indeed, the distance between the work of Herodotus and that of Thucydides is so great that scholars have found it difficult to realise that they lived in the same period and wrote for the same readers, and have compared the birth of critical history as springing full-grown from the brain of Thucydides, ...⁵³

Critical history, unfortunately, did not spring "full-grown" from Thucydides. He did not have the tools of the modern historian or the shoulders of past generations of historians to stand on. Suffice it to say he was its midwife. After Thucydides, as Gavorse points out, the Western World had to wait almost five centuries for a worthy successor in Tacitus.⁵⁴ Thucydides nevertheless had done his work well; the mould had been broken and later generations of historians would look to him for inspiration in their search for the truth.

The Roman historians took up the Greek torch and carried it across Europe and the Mediterranean, immortalising the exploits of Rome's legions from Carthage to Britannia while simultaneously cataloguing her defeats from Cannae to the Teutobergwald. Some historians succeeded in mastering the basics of their trade better than others and – with modern historiography and archeology identifying and verifying much of their work – it is to them one turns for an accurate rendition of those times.

The single thread which runs through history from its oral inception is the description and accounts of wars and warfare. The oldest known English poems, such as the "Battle of Maldon" (991AD),⁵⁵ deal with the early Viking invasions of Britain. The preoccupation with warfare by these early historians is understandable in terms of the effect it had on their ancient communities. Wars initially appeared to occur in much the same manner as natural disasters, sent at the whim of an otherwise bored or vindictive god.

⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. xiv-xv.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. xiv.

⁵⁵ Holmes, R., (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 535-536.

The critical study of history, however, allowed historians to moderate their views and realise that war, like disease, possessed both causes and symptoms and a close examination of the phenomena related to it might enable them to navigate troubled times more successfully.

While the ensuing two millennia saw vast strides in historiography and defining works such as Gibbon's monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it was the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that saw the advent of history as approximating a true science. Military history, for long the engine of all history, had by this time, become a poor relation in terms of the broader historical canvass which dealt with art, culture, religion, economies and industrialisation. Man's social history came more and more to the fore as proponents of religion attempted to plumb the depths of man's soul in order to establish the true nature of what they viewed as God's ultimate creation. Was man inherently good or inherently bad? Philosophers pondered on such questions and, trusting their particular rationale, imposed it on their view of history. This gives rise to the question of "context" in history.

2.4 Context in the use of military history

It is important that historians are seen in relation to the time and culture within which they worked as they, and their work, are a product of both. Two simple examples of this are Willem Steenkamp's books on South Africa's participation in the Angolan civil war and the Namibian (South West Africa) Bush War. His first book *Adeus Angola*, written shortly after Operation Savannah in 1975, is as good an example of a "drum and trumpet" history as there is – mirroring conventional wisdom prevalent in South Africa at the time. *Border Strike* written seven years later, although a marked improvement, is still an indulgent exercise in both political and martial hagiography. *South Africa's Border War 1963-1989*, published in early 1991, is by far his most competent book on the subject. It is also the only complete single-volume history of the entire war to emerge thus far. The flaws of his two earlier works should not be used to condemn them, however, as *Adeus Angola* was the first book printed on South Africa's

Angolan adventure (or misadventure) and *Border Strike* the first attempt to provide a glimpse of the South African Defence Force (SADF) at war in the bush. As such, both books are invaluable. Both books however, are products of their time as was Steenkamp, who, serving within the SADF, could hardly claim the objectivity of a neutral observer. Context is therefore important when evaluating historians and their history.

The Greeks had realised this and Socrates had displayed admirable talent in isolating the pitfalls of the written medium of communication – whether in recounting history or otherwise. To achieve this he had utilized a story concerning the Egyptian God Thoth – credited as the inventor of writing – seeking a royal blessing for his invention.

“The king told Thoth: ‘You, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that they really possess ... You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant.’”⁵⁶

With the limitations of the written word thus highlighted, the Greeks, under Herodotus and Thucydides, set about building the foundations on which the modern edifice of history now rests. Context, however, still dogs modern historians. Brian Bond, although generous in his appraisal of John Mearsheimer’s controversial and valuable contribution on Liddell Hart (*Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*), points this out in a guarded defence of his work *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*. In the preface of the latest edition (a Gregg Revivals reprint 1990) Bond takes cognisance of Mearsheimer’s scholarly approach and academic integrity but comments that

“Mearsheimer’s book displays both the advantages and the drawbacks of relying almost entirely on documentary evidence. All

⁵⁶ Robinson, A., *The Story of Writing*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1995, p. 8.

his charges are scrupulously documented and several of them seem to me to have been substantiated. On the debit side, his political scientist's approach, coupled with pardonable limitations in understanding of the British politics and the army, set up barriers to the full appreciation of Liddell Hart's role".⁵⁷

So Bond, (and one might perhaps add, rather like the Greeks), undoubtedly feels that a synthesis of academic work and first hand knowledge about the subject or field is preferable to a more sterile approach based purely on primary and secondary documentary sources. He elaborates:

"Liddell Hart's warmth of personality and generosity towards numerous aspiring young historians like myself needs to be placed in the balance to modify the egocentricity and polemical spirit so evident in his personal papers."⁵⁸

Both arguments have their merits and both academics acknowledge this in their rigorous approval of the other's work, while at the same time defending their own viewpoints. The ideal lies, perhaps, somewhere in between. Thus it is important to discuss the personalities and circumstances of both Fuller and Liddell Hart before setting out to mine their work in order to resolve the hypothesis of this dissertation.

Before leaving the subject of context in military history, however, it is perhaps worth looking at the most prominent debate which surfaced during the interwar years – that of mechanisation – with history in mind. To any modern student of military history it is virtually incomprehensible that there was any debate on the merits of mechanisation at all. The advantages seem to be self-evident. Liddell Hart's and especially Fuller's literary skirmishes with established military thought and all its ensuing sarcasm can be followed with great delight, safe in the knowledge of the righteousness of their cause. The military reader of their day had no such luxury. Military thought, having just clambered out of the quagmire of the "Great War", was

⁵⁷ Bond, B., *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, Gregg Revivals in association with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 1991, p. iv of the preface.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

standing at a crossroads already littered with the debris of pre-war strategists' and generals' reputations. Piling up at the same intersection was a powerful peace lobby marching to the beat of an idealistic drum and an economy that was yet to make any sense of the war years. Added to all this was the emotional balm of military tradition which, more than anything else, breathed life into the regimental system which was, and still is, the lifeblood of the British army. Thus the "Great War" assumed the air of an aberration, a "one-off" charnel house, that would never be repeated by a wiser and more watchful Europe. As the latter, with the notable exception of Germany which had been dragooned into change by the Treaty of Versailles, gradually attempted to pick up the reins of peace-time soldiering, the horse slowly reclaimed its lost pedestal. That soon-to-be epitome of military ignorance, the twentieth century cavalry officer, convinced all who would care to listen that mobility away from railheads in the twentieth century, still equated to the horse. "Bull" Allenby's campaigns in Palestine had proved it just as Tukhachevskii's horse-borne "Mongols" – routing the Polish into a 375 mile retreat from Kiev before being routed in return outside Warsaw by Polish cavalry – were proving it.

To the professional soldier in the decade following the First World War, there was no obvious choice to be made. If there had been, Fuller and Liddell Hart's contributions to twentieth century military thought would have been mundane and they would have been mere footnotes among a host of prescient military theorists. The professional soldier, at the turn of the century was, for the first time asked to divorce himself from the horse, a constant campaigning companion for upwards of three millennia and one of his last remaining links, along with the sword and the lance, with the armies that had marched across the face of Europe for two millennia. Military mobility had been based on muscle power since the dawn of warfare, therefore it was understandable that so many chose it above – what we today would consider the logical choice – mechanisation. Even those who realised that the horse's days were numbered, attempted to find some way of allowing the horse to co-exist on the modern battlefield. Hence the Polish *Uhlans* were seen off the battlefield by German tanks and not, as they should have been, by astute Polish generals.

Context therefore is important, because once lost, it is difficult to understand why certain decisions were made and others not. Context must also be considered when judgment is passed on what is written when all is speculation and a clear mind is needed to wrest clarity. Importantly, with hindsight should come sympathy, not condemnation. Hans Delbrück in his famous example of the Battle of Marathon⁵⁹ demonstrated that historians, quoting out of context – and often being totally ignorant as to the tactics and weaponry, not to mention the dynamics of ancient warfare – merely mimicked those who had gone before them. The historians allowed the age of a source to grant it a certain credibility without first analysing it objectively with the information they already had at their disposal.

Delbrück broke new ground by deviating from the time-honoured tradition of quoting ancient historians whose writings – often embellished third or fourth hand copies of original texts that had failed to survive – had long been regarded as sacrosanct. Long-held “truths” became tarnished by modern archeology. The application of modern research methods by Delbrück put a modern perspective on flawed historical accounts which had long been regarded as being beyond reproach.

2.5 Perspective in the use of military history

Perspective is another important facet in the study of military history. Barry S. Strauss and Josiah Ober, in their book, *The Anatomy of Error: Ancient Military Disasters and their Lessons for Modern Strategists*, encapsulate this concept in the title of their chapter relating to Alexander’s campaign against the Persian empire of Darius III. Instead of stringing their bow with a title such as *Alexander the Great’s Campaign against the Persians*, they opted for *Darius III of Persia: Why He Lost and Made Alexander Great*⁶⁰. The title highlights the role played by Darius’s negligence and mistakes in elevating Alexander to a godlike status in the ancient world. They put

⁵⁹ Delbrück, H., *Warfare in Antiquity: History of the Art of War*, vol 1, (tr. Renfroe, Jnr., W. J.), University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1990, pp. 72-90.

⁶⁰ Strauss, B. S. and Ober, J., *The Anatomy of Error: Ancient Military Disasters and their Lessons for Modern Strategists*, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1992, p. 103.

forward a convincing argument as to how a more judicious Darius might have stalled the Macedonians at the Granicus, not to mention the Issus and Gaugamela. This has the refreshing air of translating the views that the outcome of Alexander's campaign was all but a foregone conclusion or that Hannibal merely had to arrive at Cannae to take his place in history. The perspective from which history is approached is as important as the context in which it is viewed. Both say as much about the writer of history as about as his motives.

Mearsheimer, in gathering what Bond refers to as "a case for the prosecution", examines Liddell Hart's use of history and provides an interesting framework for an analysis. In short, Mearsheimer – in Fulleresque fashion – identifies three different patterns in which he states policymakers react to history. The first, to which he refers as "analytic history", he defines as follows:

"In the first pattern, *analytic history*, the policymaker behaves like the classic rational actor; he consciously turns to the past for help in understanding the present. History is used to develop generalisations applicable to the present. ... In essence, the policy maker selects historical events to guide him in dealing with contemporary problems, for history cannot provide final answers – only a frame of reference that can deepen understanding of current problems and perhaps clues to solutions."⁶¹

The second pattern he identifies as *omnipresent history* which is defined as the following:

"In ... *omnipresent history*, a policymaker views issues almost exclusively in terms of a specific historical event. He forces the present to conform to his chosen interpretation of the past."⁶²

⁶¹ Mearsheimer, J., *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, Brassey's Defence Publishers, London, 1988, p. 218-219.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 219.

Having made this strong assertion, Mearsheimer completes his trilogy with what he terms *selective history*:

“In ... *selective history*, history has little influence on the decision maker. ... Instead, the decision maker bases policy prescriptions on parochial interests that he is doing his utmost to defend.”⁶³

Mearsheimer elaborates further on selective history, dealing specifically with the issue that lies at the heart of this thesis:

“History, however, usually does have a role to play, for once the policymaker’s position on an issue is established, he selectively uses history to support that position. His use of history is neither scientific nor unbiased.”⁶⁴

While many concur with Mearsheimer’s divisions, they rarely represent a historian in his or her entirety. Historians may perhaps fall foul of the third approach on occasion, but rarely set up shop in it with the intention of doing business. It may be safe to say that the majority of historians pause on their academic journeys at each of the three approaches at some stage or other before invariably settling on what Mearsheimer refers to as the analytic history approach.

2.6 B. H. Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller

Liddell Hart and Fuller, having arrived at specific conclusions through what they felt was an adequate and prescient feel for the present, used history in a manipulative manner in order to give weight to their theories. While this falls within the realm of what Mearsheimer describes as speculative history, it differs in the sense that in their case history, while being manipulated, was in essence being simplified to aid in the digestion and acceptance of theory.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 219-220.

Perhaps for want of distinction it could be referred to as prescriptive history. While the distinction may appear tenuous it is not so. When modern historians write history, possibly the majority of their readers – even perhaps some less punctilious academics – rarely verify the integrity of their use of source. They assume that the historian has been thorough, and view his work as a reliable source until proven otherwise. We all read John Erickson's *The Road to Stalingrad* and *The Road to Berlin* in studying the war on the Eastern Front or Richard Simpkin's books when attempting to grasp the nuances of Soviet military theory, and swallow whole their interpretations of what occurred.⁶⁵ This is a disturbing trend, but it is unavoidable because some, unlike the above two authors, are not fluent in Russian, and if they were, may not have access to the necessary sources. Therefore, the Anglophone world's perception of the war on the Eastern Front lies entirely in the hands of those serious scholars who are able to fulfill these requirements and make adequate use of available primary sources. A similar situation is the manner in which Peter Paret and Michael Howard have come to monopolise Clausewitzian studies in the English-speaking world.

These historians are all respected scholars whose academic integrity has stood the test of time and is considered beyond reproach. Out of necessity one relies on their informed opinions for guidance through the quagmire of events that constitute the flotsam and jetsam of history, relying at the same time on them and on their peers not to abuse this trust. In short, readers and researchers are prepared to relinquish the responsibility of verifying the information to a handful of specialists, each with his own perceptions and agendas. They form a controversial and often incestuous filter for information which – if Mearsheimer is to be believed – is subject to manipulation. An example of this is Liddell Hart's intellectual "canonisation" by the most prominent military historians of his era.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Brigadier Richard Simpkin (1921-86) an MC winner and member of the Royal Tank Corps during the Second World War, was also a gifted linguist, fluent in both Russian and German. He was the author of several influential books on manoeuvre warfare, most importantly *Race to the Swift* (Brassey's Defence Publishers, London, 1988).

⁶⁶ Intriguing about Mearsheimer's analysis of Liddell Hart's shortcomings, is that in spite of the wealth of intellectual support as indicated in Liddell Hart's *Festungsschrift*, in which luminaries such as General André Beaufre and Michael Howard participated, support for

Ultimately the question is, if one is prepared to relinquish this role to prominent scholars and historians, is not trusting their judgment overall part of the equation? Therefore if a historian chooses to portray a series of events in a specific light in order to enhance understanding of the subject as a whole, is he not merely fulfilling the task expected of him? Fuller and Liddell Hart were right in choosing mechanisation and the salient aspects of mobile warfare, as hindsight has revealed them to be. How therefore, they could argue, can it be wrong to make history, however unwilling, an accomplice in order to propagate the concept? The issue being addressed is not the study of history as a science, but the use of history as a medium for military education.

Both Liddell Hart and Fuller refer to "truth" as a concept. In history one can never know the "truth" in essence. One is rarely sufficiently privileged to be privy to all the events of a battle or campaign, or even to the precise sequence in which they took place. In fact Peter Paret felt so strongly about this that, when reviewing a book on Napoleonic warfare, he inadvertently offended the author by suggesting that all accounts of battles should be written in a different colour so as to emphasise the speculative nature of such content, or to use Paret's words,

"so that readers would know at once that they were entering treacherous territory".⁶⁷

A modern paradigm is the battle of Prokhorovka, allegedly the greatest armoured clash in the history of warfare. It took place during Operation Citadel, the German operation to reduce the Kursk salient in July 1943. Long regarded as an inevitable defeat for the Germans, new facts are emerging which question this assumption. Some even point to a potential German victory if the German high command had had the stomach to see

the original assertions on Liddell Hart's contribution to military thought and the role he played in the inter-war period has been decidedly lacking.

⁶⁷ Paret P., *Understanding War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, p. 85.

through what was amounting to an armoured Verdun on the Soviet side⁶⁸. The outcome of this speculation remains to be tested against the background of serious scholarship. Nevertheless, even in this century of the global village and mass communication, a major battle which took place in living memory is still the basis for lively speculation. The truth remains as elusive as ever.

It is often said that while the former Soviet Union “won” the war on the Eastern Front, it lost the subsequent battle for history. The German generals, in a large part destitute, incarcerated and heirs to a divided country, set about putting pen to paper in an effort to alleviate both their consciences and their sudden pecuniary embarrassment. Apparently spurred on by Liddell Hart, who was keen to flush out any compliments that might be forthcoming and suggest a few of his own, the former German High Command set about creating the mythology of *Blitzkrieg*. Campaigns which might have gone either way suddenly acquired an air of inevitability with a few deft strokes of a pen. The Soviet Union by contrast, yet to come to terms with the brutality of Stalin’s tenure and still immersed in the cult of his personality, carefully edited its history to reflect Stalin’s omnipotence and the official party line. Georgi Zhukov, the saviour of Moscow, architect of Stalingrad and conductor of Bagration, while allowed to ride at the head of the victory parade in Moscow, was relegated to the sidelines. The conqueror of Berlin and his colleagues – great generals such as Rokossovsky, Rudenko, Konev and Shtemenko – were merely viewed as the human face of Stavka (the Soviet command structure), the tail to Stalin’s dog. Shtemenko’s *The Soviet General Staff at War 1941-1945* was heavily censored and Zhukov’s memoirs were heavily edited despite their respective authors’ attempts to stay within clearly defined guidelines.

German historians capitalised on these muted products of Soviet historiography stating that the Soviet generals were fortunate that the cream

⁶⁸ This speculation over the possible outcome at Prokhorovka is taken from an article published on the Internet by George M Nipe Jr entitled “Kursk Reconsidered: Germany’s Lost Victory” on 3 July 1998. The website was www.thehistorynet.com. This website is owned by Cowles History Group Inc which places selected articles from its historical publications on this website. The article originally appeared in its military history publication *World War II*.

of Germany's military intellect had been hamstrung by Hitler's blundering attempts to emulate Frederick the Great as a warrior-statesman. Manstein's famous "back-hand" victory at Kharkov in 1943 was proof, they said, of what the German generals were capable of if left to their own devices. German historians glossed over Russian successes as merely the product of mass. Grains of half-truths were magnified along with the truth until they merged with popular history to become firmly entrenched in the public's mind.

The Cold War further coloured Western perception of the Soviet Union's military contribution to the war. Little credit was given to the Soviets for Operation Uranus, the encirclement of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The defeat was, and still is, viewed more as the result of German impetuosity than of Soviet brilliance and tenacity. Indeed, most accounts of the demise of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad have an air of tragedy about them. They stand in stark contrast to the rarely examined slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers who perished in the enormous encirclements of the frontier battles, a human tragedy of equal or greater proportions. Soviet accounts are rarely examined with the same empathy or sense of pathos. Such are the vagaries of history.

Chapter 3

Basil the Prudent and the intellectual tramp:

The early years of B. H. Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller

3.1 General

Few comments sum up the relationship between Basil Liddell Hart and John Frederick Charles Fuller more succinctly than the following sentence taken from a letter written by Fuller to Liddell Hart, encouraging him to shed what Fuller perceived to be his [Liddell Hart's] intellectual inhibitions.

“My dear Basil the Prudent. ... The way to enjoy life is to be an intellectual tramp.”⁶⁹

Fuller knew himself. Examining his life, one cannot help but be intrigued by his intellectual ramblings. Starting with his deep infatuation with spiritualism and the occult under the auspices of Aleister Crowley at the turn of the century, right up to his flirtations with Fascism in the mid-thirties, Fuller showed an independence from and disregard for, mainstream public opinion which, although admirable, were to cost him dearly. Liddell Hart on the other hand, possessed no such independence. This must not, however, be confused with a lack of character. He was simply cut from a different cloth.

It must also be understood that Liddell Hart carried a certain amount of emotional baggage because of his circumstances. Not finishing his degree at Cambridge had prevented him from claiming a certain conventional respectability among his intellectual peers, although if this had been a major issue he might have rectified it⁷⁰. His bid for the Chichele Chair for War Studies at Oxford in later life and his disappointment at not obtaining it showed that he was not as impervious to academic standing and its

⁶⁹ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 232.

⁷⁰ It is important to note that Liddell Hart's former mentor and lecturer at Cambridge, Geoffrey Butler, organised for him to complete a doctorate at Cambridge but Liddell Hart was unable to avail himself of this opportunity because of financial constraints.

concomitant prestige as he always intimated. His delight at eventually being given an honorary degree by Oxford University bore this out.

Liddell Hart was also keenly aware of his limited prospects in the army. A captain, he realised that his chances of achieving high rank were virtually non-existent, given his poor health and limited experience in the Great War. He found his military niche as an instructor and specialist in infantry tactics. It may be said that he sought refuge in this for, by specialising in this subject he could pull higher ranking officers onto his "parade ground" and interact with them in a manner he could never hope to do either professionally or socially. Accordingly, he never quite lost his respect for the military system of hierarchy in the way Fuller did, although he could be scathing in his criticism of it. His tenuous early existence by means of journalism and writing gave him an independence to voice opinions denied a serving member of His Majesty's armed forces. But it also led him to temper his views in order to remain employable and not to alienate that segment of the military he was courting and seeking to influence.

Fuller, on the other hand, held the traditional military animal in contempt with an ease bred from long familiarity. He had attained Major-General's rank before retirement. Thus the military hierarchy was no sacred cow for him. Moreover, his Plan 1919 had provided him with the most impeccable credentials of all the early pioneers of mobile warfare. Allied to this was a keen sense of self-worth which often manifested itself in displays of arrogance. Fuller, very importantly, was also older than Liddell Hart – eighteen years to be exact – and in many ways better able to weather the storms of criticism. Absolute faith in his own ability precluded doubt or second guessing. He was, he realised, an initiator, a creator of ideas. He did not see himself as a prophet or a sage but as a catalyst for change which, he thought, everybody must eventually realise, had to come. In short, he tramped the intellectual byways of military thought with great delight and little trepidation. Liddell Hart was by nature and circumstance denied this luxury. Consequently he spent considerable time testing the waters before attempting to plumb their murky depths. Both, however, were true

intellectuals with considerable talent. Both appear to have had tremendous egos.

3.2 J. F. C. Fuller: The early years

A good introduction to Fuller is to be found in Bryan Cooper's *The Ironclads of Cambrai*. In this work, in which the genesis of tank warfare is dealt with, Fuller's contribution is sufficiently outlined for the reader to realise his enormous and unique intellect as well as his vital contribution to the evolution of this new form of warfare. What makes the book particularly interesting, however, is that Fuller's contribution is set against the panorama of the Western Front and the attritional style of warfare indicative of the bankruptcy of European military thought at the time. Fuller's contribution is not viewed simply with the benefit of hindsight. The reader is made to struggle with him and other early personalities such as Martel and Elles, through their various trials and tribulations and that of the fledgling Tank Corps so that, for the first time, one gains a sensitivity for Fuller's intellectual evolution and the enormous task which he helped accomplish.

Cooper indulges the reader in the immediacy and benefit of actual conversations between certain key personalities which, although making for bad history, interjects a touch of humanity into the situation that formal historical writing tends to strip away. Only a few modern historians – one being Barbara Tuchman – are able to walk the fine line between these two worlds with any degree of academic integrity. However, Cooper's work introduces the reader to Fuller at a crucial time in his life, before leading on to a realisation of the scale of what he was to achieve both physically and intellectually.

John Frederick Charles Fuller, as was Liddell Hart, was the son of an English cleric. He was born in Chichester on 1 September 1878. His parents, both erudite, had three sons, of whom John was the eldest – Lionel and Walter being the other two – and a daughter, Maxie, who was mentally handicapped. Fuller seems to have enjoyed a close relationship with his entire family. He developed a special rapport with his indulgent mother

who, although raised in Germany, was French. This explains Fuller's subsequent use of the Germanic contraction of his second name. He was known to all as Fritz⁷¹ until the advent of the First World War made this undesirable. "Boney" (for Bonaparte) then took hold. It was an oblique reference to both his physical appearance as well as his "Napoleonic" demeanour. Academically he appears to have been an indifferent scholar.

"Throughout his life Fuller never responded to the stimulus and competition of organized learning; on the contrary, he always seemed to react against it."⁷²

He did, however, possess an ability for independent thought that was to stand him in good stead. His future was settled when his maternal grandfather, Mr De la Chevallerie of Leipzig, decided that he should attend Sandhurst. In preparation Fuller attended a crammer called "Jimmy's" after its erstwhile principle, a Captain James whom Fuller describes as

"small, almost diminutive, as clever as a monkey" (a description one of his biographers, A.J. Trythall, says "reads oddly like a piece of self-description"⁷³).

Fuller passed the Royal Military College admission examinations, an achievement to which he attached little value. According to him, "Jimmy" was either a

"clairvoyant or he bought the examination papers from the printers a little in advance".⁷⁴

Either way, according to Fuller, Captain James' little band of scholars circumvented the system. Trythall comments that Fuller's exceptional performance in geography (Fuller's marks of 497 out of 500 for geography

⁷¹ Bassford, C., *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1845*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 136.

⁷² Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, pp. 7-8.

⁷³ Trythall, A. J., *'Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

was a record at the time as he proudly pointed out in his biography *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*⁷⁵) and his first place both in history and in freehand-drawing cannot be justified alone by Captain James' pragmatic approach to his student's academic success. A paltry 18 marks out of 500 for Latin is a clear indication that assistance, if there was any, was limited. Giving no indication of what was to come, Fuller subsequently graduated from the military institution without distinction in 1898. The historian Brian Holden Reid passed the following judgment on his Sandhurst sojourn:

"It can be safely said that the Sandhurst system of instruction left no permanent mark on Fuller except to show, to paraphrase the Duke of Wellington, how war should not be taught."⁷⁶

Being gazetted in the 1st Battalion, The Oxfordshire Light Infantry (the old 43rd as explained by Fuller in *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*⁷⁷) Fuller, as did Winston Churchill, set about educating himself in his spare time. As Reid points out, although his first intellectual forays were decidedly haphazard, he gradually became drawn to the major controversies of his day. Darwin's writings had invaded his intellectual world and were to have a profound effect on his further development, leading Reid to comment that

"[i]t was a gradually increasing interest in evolutionism that shaped Fuller's intellectual outlook more than anything else".⁷⁸

In 1899 Fuller arrived in South Africa and, reading prolifically in the course of his duties, covered some two hundred volumes. The titles of these works veered erratically from Darwin's *Descent of Man* to *Lorna Doone*, a romance set in the Scottish Highlands. Fuller's reading, however, was for the larger part serious, focusing on philosophy and art. His military experiences in South Africa were not without value either. "Black Week",

⁷⁵ Fuller, J. F. C., *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*, Ivor Nicholson, London, 1936, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 8.

⁷⁷ Fuller, J. F. C., *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*, Ivor Nicholson, London, 1936, p. 6.

⁷⁸ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, pp. 8-9.

as the string of British defeats in the opening phase of the Second Anglo-Boer became known, came as a shock to all Britons, Fuller included. He subscribed to much of the conventional wisdom present within the British army at that stage. This is reflected in his comment:

“‘I have noticed it myself that the best sportsmen make the best officers ... a certain amount of intellect is of course necessary to keep step with the scientific principles of modern warfare but animal cunning and courage hold the first rank still.’”⁷⁹

However, he lamented the general standard of military education in the British army at that time.

“‘[H]e [Fuller] doubted whether ‘there is one officer out of a dozen’ whose military education extended beyond the names of their commanding generals.’”⁸⁰

A brief skirmish with appendicitis was incorrectly diagnosed as a “twisted gut”⁸¹ and the ensuing complications of that misdiagnosis almost cost Fuller his life. An Oxfordshire subaltern, also reporting sick, noticed Fuller’s condition and organised for him to be put on a hospital train bound for the main military hospital in Wynberg. The alacrity of the doctor’s correct diagnosis and treatment upon his arrival in Cape Town ultimately saved his life. A lengthy period of convalescence required Fuller to be evacuated to England, but he returned with enough time to participate in the war’s closing stages, serving in command of a predominantly black reconnaissance troop (Fuller had only two Europeans serving under him). This was a particularly hazardous form of employment in the light of the Boer practice of sometimes executing white officers who led black troops⁸².

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Trythall, A. J., *‘Boney’ Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 11.

⁸² Bassford, C., *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1845*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 136.

Normally capture by the Boers entailed nothing worse than a little jovial public humiliation followed by the swift removal of all equipment up to and often including articles of clothing before being turned loose in the veld. Fuller recounts in *The Last of the Gentlemen’s Wars* how one of his troops, Simon, was dragged behind a horse and shot after capture. Near the

With South Africa and the Boer War behind him, Fuller was transferred back to England. Chatham, to which Fuller referred in his memoirs as one of the worst places in which to pursue his profession (“[o]f all the evil places for soldiering, whatsoever form it may take, surely Chatham is the worst”⁸³), was to be the regiment’s home for a year before it was posted to Umballa in India in 1903 and then on to the Simla Hills in early 1904. The 43rd finally ended its voyage at Sabathu. Fuller could not have been disappointed with the 43rd’s move. Here, for the first time, he was exposed to the mystic influences of Indian culture.

It was in India that he was to meet Aleister Crowley whom Reid rather aptly describes as a “writer, magician and notorious self-publicist.”⁸⁴ An interesting fact is that Fuller’s 1936 autobiography makes no mention of, and totally ignores this relationship with, Crowley. However, coming across an advertisement in the *Traveler’s Edition* which promised one hundred pounds for the best essay on Crowley’s work, Fuller promptly entered and won. He was, however, never paid. His subsequent friendship and interest in all things Crowley resulted in his first book *The Star in the West*, a book (which surprisingly is still in print and available for purchase on the Internet) he was later to dismiss as

“[a] jumble of undigested reading with a boyish striving after effect. Written in the execrable English of a public school educated subaltern”.⁸⁵

Nevertheless his exposure to Crowley introduced him to an entirely new world far removed from the realm of his chosen profession. In a military

bloated body of his dead scout an ominous message had been scrawled on a whitewashed farm wall. I quote Fuller:

“Pray to God you are not caught for we will shoot everyone of you as we did Simon and the English officer too who leads you.”

Trythall, A. J., *‘Boney’ Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 17.

The Boers, it seems, did not appear pleased with any attempts to undermine what they perceived to be the natural order. Fighting a war was one thing. Arming and leading the native population against them was another. Von Lettow Vorbeck’s Askaris were still some fourteen years distant.

⁸³ Fuller, J. F. C., *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*, Ivor Nicholson, London, 1936, p.16.

⁸⁴ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1987, p. 14.

sense, however, Crowley's friendship had at least one positive effect. Crowley introduced Fuller to Col F. N. Maude⁸⁶ who in turn exposed him to the works of Clausewitz⁸⁷.

In 1906 Fuller returned to England on a year's sick leave, the result of a marathon bout of enteric fever which, if Fuller is to be believed, consisted of an initial 23 days of delirium and a overall 70 days of high temperature. Armed with a burgeoning intellect however, he began to read seriously about military matters for the first time. He married Margarethe Auguste Karnatz, whom he called Sonia, in the same year. She was to prove a loving and loyal wife although she had a penchant for repeating Fuller's private comments in public. At one social occasion she remarked that Fuller, upon hearing that a general whom he thoroughly disliked had been awarded the GCB, suggested accordingly that the letters obviously stood for "Great Cretin Brotherhood"⁸⁸. Reid is particularly harsh in his criticism of her:

"Her influence was totally negative. She confirmed Fuller in his prejudices and suspicions and pandered to his intellectual vanity. Her cantankerous defensiveness alienated friends and relatives and increased his isolation and estrangement from the world around him."⁸⁹

Trythall confirms this picture, stating that Fuller's mother, Thelma de la Chevalerie, "only put up with her because if she had not allowed everything to pass her by she would never have seen her son".⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 15.

⁸⁶ Bassford, C., *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1845*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 136.

⁸⁷ Fuller's attitude towards the dead Prussian is well documented in Christopher Bassford's all-encompassing look at Clausewitz's impact on the English-speaking world titled *Clausewitz in English - The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1945 op cit.* In a chapter specifically entitled "J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart", Bassford examines the dynamics of their relationship with Clausewitz's work which, in turn, sheds much light on their respective approaches to writing military history. This issue will be covered in the following chapter.

⁸⁸ Bond, B., *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, Gregg Revivals in association with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 1991, p. 36.

⁸⁹ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 16.

⁹⁰ Trythall, A. J., *'Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 21.

Moltke's unleashing of the Schlieffen Plan found Fuller safely tucked away in the General Staff, having recently attended the Army Staff Course at Camberley. A five month stint as Deputy Assistant Director of Railway Transport and a seven month sojourn under General Du Cane undoubtedly saved him from the unprecedented slaughter of the British Expeditionary Force's junior officers which marked the opening rounds of the Great War. An altercation with Du Cane ended his martial isolation and found Fuller in France in 1915, serving as a corps staff officer to VIIIth Corps (GSO2 as there were already two GSO3s). The year 1916 saw, at General Kentish's suggestion, a week-long series of "conferences" for frontline officers being organised under the auspices of Fuller who planned, wrote and presented the course. Bassford humorously points out that with many of the officers attending being quite senior to Fuller

"[t]hus began his habit of lecturing to his superiors".⁹¹

Fuller, quite unexpectedly, found his calling in the tank. Seldom, in the history of warfare, has a revolution in military technology been so keenly matched by an intellect to exploit it. If he were not the author of the concept itself, he was its greatest proponent during the early years. Fuller is the name that is found again and again in the writings of other great armour theorists. Liddell Hart was without doubt Fuller's most famous British convert. The other great intellectual engine of mobile warfare, Marshal Mikhail N. Tukhachevskii, had no qualms in pillaging Fuller's work to enunciate his own theories. In Richard Simpkin's analysis of Tukhachevskii's contributions to manoeuvre theory titled *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, chapter eight consists of a preface written by Tukhachevskii for the Russian translation of Fuller's book *Reformation of War*⁹². In it Tukhachevskii analyses Fuller's thought and offers interesting criticism. The point is that Fuller was the dominant original tactical and strategical fountainhead of military thought in relation to the tank; a detail which is often obscured by the biographies of lesser men of the period as

⁹¹ Bassford, C., *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1845*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 137.

⁹² Simpkin, R., *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*, Brassey's Defence Publishers, London, 1987, pp. 125-134.

they scrambled for the crumbs of history to which they believed they were entitled in their memoirs.

The year 1918 found Fuller, a colonel and close to the core of Allied strategic planning, as the principal staff officer at the British Tank Corps HQ, immersed in developing "his doctrine of tank warfare".⁹³ Sensing the need for the proper exploitation of the mobility of tanks, namely the Medium D tank which would never see war service⁹⁴, Fuller penned a paper titled *The Tactics of the Attack as affected by the Speed and Circuit of the Medium D Tank*. This rather innocuous sounding paper was pure gold in terms of original military thought for it subsequently became known as "Plan 1919". As Charles Messenger put it, it "was to be the foundation stone for the champions of mechanised warfare in the 1920s and 1930s, and indeed for *Blitzkrieg*."⁹⁵

The Allied victory once again found Fuller's chosen profession unemployed in Europe. While military theorists and governments pondered on the unprecedented bloodletting of Verdun, the Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele and their aftermath, they wondered if such a war could recur in Europe or whether the prospect of mortgaging another generation to pay the inevitable butcher's bill had indeed made this war, as some hoped, the "war to end all wars". This was to be the world that Fuller and his military peers would inhabit, invariably drawn to the growing controversies over mechanisation and the potential of airpower. Other people would intrude on what had traditionally been a military sphere in much the same manner as the prescient banker Bloch, to offer advice and speculate on whether there would be another war, and if so, how it should be fought. This is the Fuller

⁹³ Messenger, C., *The Art of Blitzkrieg*, Ian Allan Ltd, London, 1991, p. 29.

⁹⁴ Fuller's plan centered on a tank which was non-existent at the time, the Medium D. The Medium D in essence, was the creation of a Lieut-Col Philip Johnson who, as an engineer was searching for the elusive combination of mechanical reliability and 20mph. In October 1918 he was given *carte blanche* to pursue the project. Adapting the hull of a Mark V and replacing the tracks and suspension system with ones of his own design, Johnson came perilously close to achieving his goal. The first Medium D was trundled out - long after the armistice - in May 1919 looking, according to sceptics, "as if it had just had a serious accident." In ideal conditions it proved that it could indeed touch 20mph in much the same way that Howard Hughes' aerial monstrosity "The Spruce Goose" could fly - tenuously at best and without endurance. Five were built but none entered service. See Smithers A.J., *A New Excalibur: The Development of the Tank 1909-1939*, Guild Publishing, London, 1986, pp. 205-206.

that concerns this dissertation, for it was here that Fuller started to turn to history to find vindication for his own theories on how and why future wars would be fought.

3.3 B. H. Liddell Hart: The early years.

One way of approaching Liddell Hart is through his relationship to Clausewitz. Liddell Hart wrote disparagingly of the “Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre” as he liked to refer to Clausewitz, perhaps subconsciously for the reason that Clausewitz had framed his thesis first. Liddell Hart’s magnum opus, in terms of original military thought, was his book *Strategy*, originally published in 1929 by G Bell & Sons, Ltd as *The Decisive Wars in History – A Study in Strategy*. This was the bedrock of his contribution to military thought and the vehicle for his much trumpeted “indirect approach”. It was meant to provide a way out of the attritional abattoir of the First World War. This had been orchestrated, in Liddell Hart’s view, almost entirely by a generation of military strategists under Clausewitz’s influence. Their bias in a large part, was deemed due to Von Moltke the Elder’s misguided sanction of Clausewitz’s work *On War*. Liddell Hart’s recognition of Clausewitz’s basic tenets, the enduring parts of *On War* that Fuller was to refer to in later life as “pure gold,”⁹⁶ would have entailed his recognition that his work was a variation on a basic theme rather than the creation of a new school of thought. Liddell Hart sought to replace Clausewitz’s position in Western military thought, not through vanity or arrogance, but purely because he believed that he had found the solution. Liddell Hart was to carry this view of Clausewitz with him to his grave. Occasionally he would modify a particularly harsh criticism of Clausewitz or quote him to justify an argument when it suited him. But his fundamental position on Clausewitz, unlike that of Fuller, who came to appreciate Clausewitz in later life, never really altered.

According to Liddell Hart, a fundamental flaw in Clausewitz’s work was that, what was good about it was couched in such abstract terms that it

⁹⁵ Messenger, C., *The Art of Blitzkrieg*, Ian Allan Ltd, London, 1991, p. 29.

⁹⁶ Trythall, A. J., *‘Boney’ Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 251.

ceased to be accessible to the reader and thus left itself wide open to misinterpretation. The influence of his work on the generation of commanders after the elder Moltke, made this misinterpretation particularly damaging. Thus in Liddell Hart's view, the ability of *On War* to inflict harm was infinitely greater than its ability to do good in terms of military theory. This attitude on the part of Liddell Hart impacts directly on this dissertation for it suggests that, in Liddell Hart's view, complex matters should be simplified for the sake of easier digestion by the readers so as to prevent misinterpretation. Here lies the crux of the matter. With such an attitude Liddell Hart surely subscribed to an "end justifies the means" school of thought. Hence the manipulation of history would not be such an anathema to him. Though this may appear to be a tenuous line of thought with very little direct support since Liddell Hart's reputation as a historian has never been seriously challenged, there is enough circumstantial evidence in this regard to warrant an investigation.

Basil Henry Liddell Hart was born Basil Henry Hart on 31 October 1895, the son of an English cleric, only adopting the double barrel surname of Liddell Hart in 1921, Liddell being the name of his mother's side of the family. Born in Paris, he had the subsequent advantage of dual nationality under French law until the age of 21.⁹⁷

The circumstances of his father's profession presumably ensured that Liddell Hart endured a religious childhood and, when Rev Hart's continental sojourn – caring for the spiritual needs of the Anglo-American and French Protestant communities in Paris – came to an end in 1903, he returned with his family to Guilford in England. By all accounts Liddell Hart was not a robust child and by his own admission suffered from a host of complaints that "rather spoilt me as regards hardening me." He then goes

⁹⁷ When the time came, he chose England, for the obvious reason that, being the son of an English Wesleyan minister and having returned to England at the age of eight, he viewed himself first and foremost as an Englishman. Victorian jingoism and the prestige of Britain's empire ensured that most expatriates' offspring chose to retain the advantages of membership to an empire on which the "sun never set".

on to add that his mother nursed him extensively: "In fact she made me altogether too soft."⁹⁸

His early scholastic career was not marked by outstanding success, but an important indicator of his intellect was to be found in his regular correspondence with the editor of a magazine entitled *The Aeroplane*. Unaware of the age of the young Liddell Hart, the editor published a few of his letters and even went as far as to comment on several of them in leading articles. This speaks volumes for both Liddell Hart's abilities as a writer and in being able to formulate and project independent opinions at a relatively young age.

Having survived the rigours of Edwardian schooling Liddell Hart went on to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge to read for a degree in modern history. Much of the time that he should have allocated to the subjects presented for the degree examinations, he spent in the pursuit of military history. He also continued his boyhood habit of corresponding with various publications with great success. The result of all these distractions was a vaguely ominous third-class pass in the May 1914 preliminary examinations. Dawn was breaking however, on the first of the cataclysmic world wars that were to scar the first half of the twentieth century. As the younger Von Moltke's formations plunged into France, the war found Liddell Hart still at Corpus Christi. Fearful lest "the war would be over by Christmas", Liddell Hart took a temporary commission and started military training with the University Officer Training Corps. Needless to say his parents, remembering his delicate constitution, were less than happy with his decision. Basil, it appeared, had found his niche. Immersed as he was in military history, he was quite prepared – like the rest of his generation – to follow in the ancient footsteps of the Welsh Longbowmen and English Men-at-Arms to ensure that England's martial glory would once again flourish on a French battlefield.

⁹⁸ Bond, B., *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, Gregg Revivals in association with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 1991, p. 12.

Liddell Hart's initiation into campaigning on French soil was, in his own words "a gentle introduction to war."⁹⁹ Overcoming a sudden fever which had threatened to send him home, Liddell Hart spent his second tour of front line duty ensconced in the muddy earthworks of the Ypres salient, where a near miss concussed him severely enough to warrant his return to England. Unlike their earlier attempts to send him home when he had contracted a fever, this time the doctors were not met with protests. Displaying considerably bad timing, Liddell Hart returned to France in time to take part in the slaughter of the Somme offensive. His participation in the offensive, commencing on 1 July, was abruptly terminated on 18 July when he was badly gassed along with his company as it was moving up to Bazentin-le-Petit Wood to close a gap which had appeared in the new front line¹⁰⁰. His good fortune in surviving the Somme was undoubtedly due to the fact that he had started the offensive in reserve. Nevertheless, he had endured an offensive which, on its opening day, had suffered ten times more casualties than the entire complement of English soldiers that had imposed its will on the French at Agincourt. It was a sobering experience that was to colour his desire to circumvent senseless slaughter on the modern battlefield in later life.

At the time, however, Liddell Hart was still the archetypal jingoistic British officer, who revelled in the glorification of war. His vision, and indeed the British public's vision of warfare, was of the kind immortalised by the war artist Richard Caton Woodville (1856-1927) in his epic canvas "Saving the Guns at Maiwand" or Lady Elizabeth Butler's (1846-1933) ubiquitous "Scotland Forever" of which engraved prints were to be found in studies and mess halls throughout the length and breadth of Britain.¹⁰¹ Liddell Hart,

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Liddell Hart, B. H., *Memoirs: Volume One*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 25.

¹⁰¹ The seeds of maturity would germinate in Liddell Hart and in stark contrast he recounts the following incident which he experienced during the Somme offensive in his memoirs: "During this reconnaissance I had a 'grandstand' view of a renewed attack that was launched by the 34th Division on the La Boisselle sector. It was strangely different from any picture of battle sketched by war artists in the illustrated Press. Instead of the dramatic charge of cheering troops which they depicted, one saw thin chains of Khaki-clad dots plodding slowly forward, and becoming thinner under a hail of fire until they looked merely a few specks on the landscape." Liddell Hart, B. H., *Memoirs: Volume One*, Cassell, London, 1965, pp. 22-23.

awash with a patriotic fervour one would have expected to have been somewhat tempered by 1916, wrote in a "last letter if killed on duty"¹⁰² two months prior to the Somme offensive that, while it was undoubtedly an honour to die for England,

"I feel it an even greater honour to die as an officer of the British Regular Army".¹⁰³

Having delivered himself of these heady sentiments, Liddell Hart utilised his convalescence to write a small book titled *Impressions of the Great British Offensive on the Somme* by "A Company Commander who saw three and a half weeks of it".¹⁰⁴ Brian Bond's description of the booklet deserves to be quoted in full:

"There could hardly be a more comprehensive catalogue of the assumptions about British generalship in the First World War which he [Liddell Hart] would denounce with increasing severity for the remainder of his career.

Thus, to quote just a few examples, he praised the 'amazing perfection of our organisation which in its generalship and staff work were super-German'. The Somme area was well-chosen for the offensive and the strategy was masterly. Sir Douglas Haig was 'the greatest General Britain had ever owned'. 'Whilst not all our staff are brilliant, it is safe to say that 90 per cent of our general staff officers are really brilliant men, with quite a large number of men amongst them who have a genius for war ... We have produced fully a hundred first-rate generals.' He denounced ignorant civilian critics of the war who only revealed the shallowness of mind: 'it is only the General Staff who really understand the value of any operation'.¹⁰⁵

This account written some 48 years after the incident, shows the evocative nature of Liddell Hart's writing and the pathos inherent in these simple lines stands out as a monument to his talents as a writer.

¹⁰² Bond, B., *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, Gregg Revivals in association with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 1991, p. 17.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Armed with this booklet, – which, fortunately for him, was never published due to the War Office's refusal to grant permission – Liddell Hart set about spreading the gospel. His supervisor at Cambridge, Geoffrey Butler, was the first recipient of a private copy and thought sufficiently highly of it to pass it around among a group of friends which included the lawyer and prolific author of *The Thirty-nine Steps*, John Buchan, who was then serving on the staff of Haig's headquarters as a temporary Lieutenant Colonel. Buchan, reflecting Liddell Hart's adulation of the British High Command, was impressed with what he saw and set about recruiting him into a historical section he was planning to set up at GHQ. The scheme came to nothing due to Buchan's illness and his subsequent transfer to England. This was fortunate for Liddell Hart because the criterion – slavish admiration of the British High Command – which Buchan appeared to be using for recruitment, would have resulted in, at best, a stilted, distortion of the events. The armistice found Liddell Hart married to Jessie Stone – the daughter of his assistant adjutant – a captain and serving as the adjutant to volunteer units in Cambridge and Stroud.

Liddell Hart, through his writing ability though, had made some fairly important friends and contacts in influential positions. Booklets he had published on infantry drill and training during the last two years of the war had, through judicious circulation, managed to gain the ear and favourable approval of General Sir Ivor Maxse, the former Inspector-General of Training in France at the close of the war. Maxse subsequently carried Liddell Hart's name and ideas upstairs to the upper echelons of, to borrow Liddell Hart's description, the "super-German" General Staff. Maxse was again to be the catalyst in Liddell Hart's future civilian career, this time when he facilitated an entry into journalism for Liddell Hart via his brother Leo Maxse, the editor of the monthly *National Review*. Denis Winter in *Haig's Command* – a revisionist reappraisal of Haig's talents as a general – recounts Liddell Hart's opinion of Maxse. According to Liddell Hart, Maxse was

“a soldier version of Lloyd George. He is difficult to argue with as he always wants to do all the talking. Bubbling over with fiery

energy. Brilliant surface cleverness. Possibly not very deep but seizes salient points fast. Red hot enthusiast for efficiency. Likes people who show they are not afraid of him".¹⁰⁶

For emphasis Winter then adds a rather humorous comment from Deputy Chief of Staff Dawnay, made in the spring of 1918, that speaks volumes about Maxse's character and seems to confirm Liddell Hart's opinion:

"Saw Maxse yesterday. Still arguing."¹⁰⁷

To give credit where credit is due, Liddell Hart soon discovered, as Bond succinctly puts it, that his wartime heroes, the British generals, residing in that bastion of British intellectual military thought, the Imperial General Staff

"were found to possess not merely feet of clay but wooden heads as well".¹⁰⁸

Liddell Hart had come full circle. After venerating the intellectual abilities of the British High Command and downplaying its faults, he was at last viewing it in a critical light. Liddell Hart summed up his "road to Damascus" experience bluntly in a note penned between 1920 and 1921, the title of which was pure Liddell Hart:

"How my hero-worship of 'generals' waned and disillusionment began, through close contact with the *best* of them – and finding their lack of fresh ideas – how they depended on a novice like me to show them the lessons of the war."¹⁰⁹

Liddell Hart was not given to half-measures and he pursued his new quest – that of "waspish critic"¹¹⁰ of the British High Command – with the same

¹⁰⁶ Winter, D., *Haig's Command: A Reassessment*, Viking, London, 1991, p. 288.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Bond, B., *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, Gregg Revivals in association with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 1991, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 21.

gusto and vigour as he had its previous martial canonisation. It is important to point out, however, that his driving force was to establish his own theoretical framework for the waging of modern warfare, not to break down the British High Command. However, he remained a scathing critic of its professional performance during the "Great War".

The post-war years saw Liddell Hart develop his thoughts on infantry tactics and write a number of influential articles in this regard. Arguably, he earned most prestige with an article written for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on infantry tactics.¹¹¹ It was in 1921 that Liddell Hart approached Fuller for the first time, sending him two articles on what he called "The 'Man in the Dark' Theory of War" for review¹¹². Fuller's reply presciently stressed that the tank would dominate pursuit operations in the future "since cavalry was now practically useless while infantry was too slow"¹¹³. Consistent with his character, however, Fuller could not resist interjecting a touch of sarcasm. He queried why Liddell Hart had thought it necessary to "convert" the "fog of war" into the "pitch of darkness"¹¹⁴. Thus began a long and fruitful relationship that was to prove mutually beneficial and stimulating until Fuller's death more than forty years later in February 1966.

It was through Fuller that Liddell Hart was first exposed to the concept of the tank's pre-eminence on the future battlefield. After initially debating the issue in favour of the virtues of infantry over those of the tank, Liddell Hart succumbed to Fuller's mechanised vision of a future European war. As a converted apostle of armoured warfare and expounding his theory of the "indirect approach", Liddell Hart set about metaphorically bludgeoning the military establishment into submission, using history as his "gospel" and the press as his "pulpit". This is the Liddell Hart that concerns this dissertation.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 31.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 28.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4

The origins of J. F. C. Fuller's military thought and its relationship to military history

4.1 General

Unlike Liddell Hart, Fuller's strength lay in his originality. He appeared to be able to conjure up his theories utilizing little more than an eloquent pen and an agile mind. As Brian Holden Reid puts it, he started with a blank piece of paper and progressed from there. Others sought inspiration from him, rarely vice versa. This is not to say that Fuller functioned in a vacuum, for Reid points out as follows:

“Yet although Fuller is increasingly acknowledged as the greatest military thinker produced by Britain, it would be quite false to suggest that he labored like some great weary titan laden by the burden of neglect. Britain had produced some writers of note before Fuller. He read them and inherited much of the style of his thinking from them, even though he elevated it to a much higher plane.”¹¹⁵

He was exposed to outside influences to which he indubitably reacted, but his thoughts were more often than not based on a rigorous analysis of his own impressions. Originality came at a price however, for with every disciple came a critic and ultimately it was the critics who shaped his writing. In *The Education of an Army* Jay Luvaas highlighted an observation by Georg Lichtenberg which seemed particularly apt when applied to certain of Fuller's detractors. Lichtenberg had postulated that a book functioned in much the same manner as a mirror for, in his words

“when a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out”.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Reid, B. H., *Studies in British Military Thought: Debates with Fuller and Liddell Hart*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1998, p. 68.

¹¹⁶ Luvaas, J., *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought, 1815-1940*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 373.

The observation itself is self-explanatory. Luvaas however, emphasises that when approaching the complex mental furniture of theories such as Fuller's, the reader must pay it the necessary respect and, at the very least, the intellectual courtesy of an open mind. Many of Fuller's early opponents, such as Field-Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, did neither - to their detriment.¹¹⁷ On one memorable occasion Massingberd, at the time the CIGS, while discussing Fuller's latest book with Liddell Hart, revealed that he had not in fact read the book which he was in the process of condemning for, in his own words, "It would only annoy me"¹¹⁸. While this incident has become widely and justifiably quoted in literature to illustrate the Imperial General Staff's pre-war intransigence regarding Fuller and Liddell Hart's armour evangelism, it is not the whole truth. Even Fuller's most ardent critics on occasion acknowledged both his originality and intellectual prowess. Cavan showed that he at least did occasionally open the covers of Fuller's works when, after reading Fuller's 89-page booklet *Generalship: Its Diseases and their Cure*, he said:

"Your writings always deserve attention, In fact demand it. They are provocative, which is what you want."¹¹⁹

When pursuing Fuller, however, a critic had to keep his wits about him, for Fuller's sulphurous pen was both quick and unrelenting. The prefaces of his books are peppered with witty, apocryphal analogies designed to exacerbate rather than heal any differences of opinion between author and reader. The preface to *On Future War*, published in 1928, is an excellent example of this

¹¹⁷ Montgomery-Massingberd was a particularly stubborn opponent of Fuller, as was Field Marshal Lord Cavan. Cavan, however, occasionally exposed himself to Fuller's work. His loyalty lay with the Army and he could not cross the divide, however reasonable it seemed. Fuller's antagonistic belligerence in both pen and deed ensured this. Fuller's talent for alienating the British High Command was without peer, for Cavan was the current (1922-1926), and Montgomery-Massingberd the future (1933-1936), Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff were not known for their forward vision. Geoffrey Norris recounts how a former CIGS, Sir W. G. Nicholson, stated that "Aviation is a useless and expensive fad advocated by a few individuals whose ideas are unworthy of attention." Norris, G., *The Royal Flying Corps: A History*, Frederick Muller Limited, London, 1965, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ Luvaas, J., *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought, 1815-1940*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 352.

¹¹⁹ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 228.

as is the preface to *Generalship: Its Diseases and their Cure*, published by Faber & Faber in 1933.

In *On Future War* Fuller wrote:

“That there is room for this book I believe, since military journals are seldom read by the public, but what persuaded me most of all that a book of this nature may help a worthy cause is a story told me a few weeks ago by a friend. It was as follows:

Junior Staff Officer: ‘Sir a proposal has been made to mechanise the X Company YZ.’

Senior Staff Officer: ‘What! Another unit to be mechanised, why, soon we shall have no army at all.’¹²⁰

In *Generalship: Its Diseases and their Cure*¹²¹, Fuller was even more blunt. He opened the preface by relating a conversation he had had with the French Deputy Chief of Staff. Over lunch the French officer (Fuller does not give his name) had recounted the following, obviously apocryphal, story: During the battle of Waterloo an audacious French colonel by the name of Clement had been shot through the head. Napoleon, with his usual eye for a brave subordinate, instructed that he be taken off to the Surgeon General Larrey for immediate treatment. In the process of treating Clement, Larrey was forced to remove the top of his skull and withdraw the brain. At this crucial moment an aide-de-camp arrived shouting “Is General Clement here?” Clement, apparently oblivious to the enormity of the operation he was undergoing, jumped up shouting; “No! But Colonel Clement is.” The aide-de-camp on hearing him cried: “Oh, mon general, the emperor was overwhelmed when he heard of your gallantry, and has promoted you on the field of battle to the rank of General.” Without waiting to hear any more Clement leapt off the operating table, replaced the top of his skull and started heading back towards the battlefield. Larrey, seeing Clement’s brain still on the table shouted after him: “Mon general – your brains!” to which

¹²⁰ Fuller, J. F. C., *On Future War*, Sifton Praed & Co., Ltd., London, 1928, viii.

¹²¹ Fuller, J. F. C., *Generalship: Its Diseases and their Cure; A Study of the Personal Factor in Command*, Faber & Faber, London, 1933, pp. 7-8.

Clement, without pausing to stop, shouted back: "Now that I am a general I shall no longer require them!".

Having thus made his point Fuller softened the blow:

"In this modest study my object is to prove, that though Clement was wrong about brains, without his courage there can be no true generalship."¹²²

Fuller's reference to courage can be taken in both a moral and a physical sense. The ambiguity of the statement allowed him to voice his concerns without being blatantly insubordinate, revealing a literary touch almost as deft as that of a Jonathan Swift. Without reading too much into Fuller's mischievous style, it is possible that he was referring to courage in the moral sense in order to make the change, or even partial change, towards mechanisation. In generalship, courage was courage, whether moral or physical. Marshall Lefebvre, Napoleon's "possessor of the sacred fire", when noticing an envious friend eyeing his residence, suggested that the friend walk 30 paces to the far end of the courtyard and face 20 musket shots. If he survived – the magnanimous old Marshall reckoned – he could have the residence, for that was how he had earned it in the first place. ("I had a thousand bullets fired at me from a much closer range before I got all this."¹²³) Fuller knew this kind of generalship from the pages of history only. Familiar as he was with Napoleonic lore, he was probably even aware of Lefebvre's peculiar brand of "generosity". His generation, however, had experienced in the Great War the "Chateau Generals" whose only recourse to valour, in the exalted heights of their office, now lay in the moral dimension. There would be no more Alexanders, no more Colleys suffering the ignominy of being slaughtered by a farmer's bullet. Their job was now to shoulder the moral and intellectual burdens of their office and bear its full brunt without faltering. Fuller was reminding them of this task.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Chandler, D. (ed.), *Napoleon's Marshals*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. xxxix.

Fuller's literary forte was impatient sarcasm. In average hands sarcasm is often self-defeating. In Fuller's hands it was devastating. He soon discovered, however, that to be both sarcastic and correct was unforgivable.

When Fuller first put pen to paper as a young subaltern, he was embarking on a literary career that would span 58 years and some 43 books. This was a prodigious effort by any standards. His literary legacy has provided us with a comprehensive catalogue of his interests: the occult, the tank, Eastern philosophy and mysticism as well as infantry training to mention but a few. Fuller also wrote extensively on military history. In what is considered by many to have been his finest historical work, a three-volume history of warfare titled *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their Influence upon History* published by Eyre & Spottiswoode, he reveals a pervading interest in cause and effect, coupled to an underlying desire to synthesise martial experience with the intellectual pursuit of warfare. The pinnacle of his literary career is commonly held to be *The Conduct of War, 1789-1961: A Study of the Impact of the French, Industrial and Russian Revolutions on War and its Conduct*. Fuller himself disagreed with this assumption for, as a formative work, he considered his turgidly written *Foundations of the Science of War* as being more important. His reason for this centred on the belief that, despite its lack of critical or commercial success, *Foundations of the Science of War* enabled him to articulate many of his fundamental ideas for the first time.

Fuller's many books were groundbreaking publications for their time, a fact sometimes obscure to the modern reader inasmuch as many of his early and most original ideas have subsequently become part of accepted military wisdom. Del Capo Press has recently (1999) made many of his military works available again in paperback, revealing both an enduring popularity and relevance. A search of the Internet reveals that Fuller's books and articles on the occult have proved no less popular. Current aficionados of Crowley still consider Fuller's *The Star of the West* as a standard introduction to its subject. Although his relationship with Crowley had come to an acrimonious end in 1911, Fuller's lifelong fascination with the occult never deserted him and much of his writing was coloured by adjectives and

expressions borrowed from this field. Crowley was heard to comment in later life that it was he who had taught Fuller to write through his publication and editing of Fuller's early writing on the occult in his review *The Equinox*. Wherever Fuller acquired his singular talent for literary expression, however, he wielded it with a skill and authority entirely his own.

Trythall says that Fuller's first serious attempts at writing for publication were made when he was with the 10th Middlesex and his first successful military publication was a pamphlet titled *Hints on Training Territorial Infantry*.¹²⁴ Fuller's freedom to write about the armed forces was always a tenuous liberty, fraught with implications. As a serving member of His Majesty's Forces, he was often obliged to couch solid criticism in patriotic terms and to blunt his barbed pen when dealing with fellow and senior officers whom he considered opposed to change. This particular task often proved beyond him, especially when dealing with opponents of mechanisation, a group he contemptuously and humorously referred to in his memoirs as "horse-worshippers"¹²⁵. He soon acquired the unenviable reputation in circles of the military hierarchy of being "too clever by half". The CIGS in waiting, Field-Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd's obvious annoyance and intense dislike of Fuller provides a well-documented example of the animosity he could inspire. An example of the difficulties Fuller faced in serving these two masters – His Majesty's Forces and his own rigorous intellect – is aptly illustrated by the following incident.

At the end of 1923 Fuller had approached the War Office for permission to publish a book in which he had rather "modestly" aspired to

"do for war what Copernicus did for astronomy, Newton for physics and Darwin for natural history".¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Trythall, A. J., *'Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 26.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 109-110.

He had titled this ambitious project *The Foundations of the Science of War* and had based it on a series of lectures he had given under the same name at Camberley.¹²⁷ The War Office refused to sanction its publication, citing as its reason the fact that the new CIGS at the time, Lord Cavan, objected strongly to the idea of his staff officers writing books. Fuller requested an interview with Lord Cavan and it was duly granted. Cavan explained to Fuller that it

“was contrary to discipline for serving officers to publish books because these might call into question the validity of the manuals”.¹²⁸

To a spirit imbued with Darwinism such as Fuller's, such an argument must have seemed preposterous. However, he was obliged to toe the line meekly. Lord Cavan further stated:

“On principle I consider that no officer on the active list should be permitted to publish any book on a military subject. I cannot enforce this as regards the army generally, but as regards General Staff officers I intend to do so, and whilst you are at the Staff College I cannot give you permission to bring the book out.”¹²⁹

There was nothing Fuller could do other than request that his four-year tenure to Camberley be reduced to three years. His request was granted. Fuller's attitude towards Cavan after the incident was anything but meek as is manifest in a letter he wrote to Liddell Hart barely a week later, in which he referred to Cavan as “a little rabbit of a man”, and concluded that

“[t]he mind of this little man is only 800 years out of date. Isn't it wonderful”.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Liddell Hart, B. H., *Memoirs: Volume One*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 64.

The "discipline breaching" *Foundations of the Science of War* finally saw the light of day when it was published by Hutchinson in 1926.

The controversy concerning *War and Western Civilisation 1832-1932: A Study of War as a Political Instrument and the Expression of Mass Democracy* was an interesting and subtle attempt at censorship. It also illustrated the pressures under which "Fuller the author" and "Fuller the historian" worked. It took the form of a letter from the Permanent Undersecretary and the Army Council. The Army Council, the Permanent Undersecretary informed Fuller, wanted to convey its displeasure at a certain passage in *War and Western Civilisation: 1832-1932* and to ask Fuller to take greater care in expressing such opinions in future. The crux of the matter was Fuller's comment concerning Britain's role in starting the Opium War in order to acquire Hong Kong from China.¹³¹

Fuller, never at a loss for words and with his usual fiery conviction, had labeled it as

"[t]his most iniquitous piece of banditry" that had "laid the foundations of the present Civil War in China".¹³²

Fuller defended himself on the grounds of "historic truth."¹³³ The Army Council however was unimpressed as to the historical validity of the statement. It simply did not want to see it in print. Trythall recounts the following attitudes on the part of the Army Council:

"Whether or not the opinions expressed by Fuller were correct, the Army Council believed their publication highly improper since it gave 'to those who seek to undermine the prestige of the British Empire, an opportunity which might have the most unfortunate results'. "¹³⁴

¹³¹ Trythall, A. J., *'Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 176.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Fuller was not in the least deterred by the incident and was quite prepared to tilt his pen at all-comers. In a letter to his mother, written soon after, he appeared uncontrite and stated his intention to continue writing and guarding his literary independence:

“I have fallen back on the pen and intend to use it whether the War Office like it or not. What I write is neither scurrilous or libelous or even personal, and as an officer on half-pay can write what he likes I see no reason why I should discontinue doing so”¹³⁵

It is important to note that Fuller’s writing and journalism were a main source of income; an income that was essential for him to maintain his position both in society and in the army. These pressures aside, what were Fuller’s attitudes towards the study of history and “historical truth” in general?

4.2 J. F. C. Fuller as historian

In summing up his biography on Fuller, Trythall gave a brief synopsis of Fuller’s merits as a historian which makes a good introduction to this subject.

“As a historian, and in quite a different way, he [Fuller] made a unique contribution. His system of writing military history, of drawing lessons from it for the future, either as prescriptions or predictions, first exposed in *Foundations*’ was used again and again with great effect. He was never an academic, impartial seeker after the truth, and he used his imagination extensively, but the total insight he achieved by this method more than compensated, in his later, less strident works, for his faults of scholarship. Some of his deductions, notably the law of military evolution and the constant tactical factor, are important contributions to historical understanding.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

Trythall makes some valid points, firstly, acknowledging Fuller's lack of a formal academic pedigree and secondly, questioning his impartiality. The fact that Fuller was an intellectual is beyond doubt. The body of serious work produced by him during his lifetime on a host of topics is tangible proof of that. The fact that his intellect was an untutored one also explains some of his shortcomings from a conventional historian's perspective and accounts for some inexplicable gaps in his historical knowledge. His grasp of history as a whole however, was impressive for someone as active as he was in both his private and professional lives. He had never had the benefit of the time which is usually the preserve of what Liddell Hart called a "cloistered don". His impartiality, on the other hand, is somewhat more difficult to gauge although Trythall's succinct analysis appears to lie very close to the truth. A telling indictment of Fuller's inability to be impartial is Brian Holden Reid's comment concerning both Fuller and Liddell Hart in which he also partly quotes Fuller:

"Fuller and Liddell Hart were as emotionally committed to their subjects as any sympathetic biographer could be. Any talk of detachment was, as Fuller observed, delusion."¹³⁷

Delusion is a strong word, but it shows a certain candour on Fuller's part. If Fuller was prepared to eke out every ounce of speculation from a doubtful "historical example", he was nevertheless determined to be honest with himself. The fact that Fuller recognised that an inherent bias existed and that it coloured most of written history had also prompted him to write in 1929:

"The one lesson I have learned ... is that seventy-five per cent of history is fallacious. ... History is most unreliable, so unreliable that I cannot help feeling that a little speculation, even if it is not immediately related to facts is sometimes more illuminating than an outline based on the facts themselves."¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 117.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Since he subscribed to this belief, it is intriguing to note that Fuller had written as early as 1923 that

“it is by exaggeration that man’s mind is aroused”.¹³⁹

These thoughts combine to form a heady mixture when they are used as a basis for the writing of history. This is not to say that Fuller actively pursued the two concepts when writing history, but they serve as important indicators as to into which direction he pointed his mind when addressing such problems. Another important factor to consider when examining Fuller’s reputation as a historian is that much of his work was written with bias. He was often either propagating a concept or defending one. Rarely was his military writing concerned with history for history’s sake. The nature of his antagonistic relationships with his detractors also ensured that Fuller adopted a “black-and-white” style. This left little latitude in which to examine the many grey areas often present in both sides of an argument. Trythall mentions this facet of Fuller’s writing when discussing the evangelical fervour he displayed in spreading his ideas.

“He certainly aroused opposition by his writings and he developed a black-and-white style which missed no tricks. Boney was an adept at stirring things up.”¹⁴⁰

The occasion of Fuller’s first serious argument with Liddell Hart provides an assessment of Fuller’s attributes as a historian by his one-time protégé and erstwhile colleague Basil Liddell Hart. The argument concerned an article which Fuller had been requested to write by Liddell Hart for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the rather broad topic of “War”. Liddell Hart had approached Fuller in his editorial capacity on behalf of the editor-in-chief, a Mr J. L. Garvin. The upshot of the argument was that when Fuller submitted his manuscript to Garvin it was rejected by the latter on the grounds that it

¹³⁹ Trythall, A. J., *‘Boney’ Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 81.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

“contained many generalisations contrary to the verdict of historians who carried more weight”.¹⁴¹

The fact that Liddell Hart was merely conveying Garvin’s assessment did not seem to dampen the hurt Fuller felt over the matter. His wife, Sonia Fuller, eager as ever to enter the fray and having no qualms about killing the messenger, fired the first shot when she made it known the following day that she held Basil personally responsible for the rejection. Liddell Hart, thinking that Sonia was speaking for both herself and her husband, tried to clear the air with a letter. In it he attempted to analyse the basis of their friendship and professional relationship. The letter is remarkable for both its content and its frankness. The part which refers to Fuller’s abilities as a historian reads as follows:

“Fuller was not always right, although a genius, and his thought was on a higher plain than his exposition, which varied in his written work between ‘dazzling brilliance and a certain mistiness’. Fuller was impervious to argument, lacked receptiveness and his historical knowledge was uneven. He was sometimes too bold but ‘the creative imagination is often more likely to arrive at historical truths than the pedantic burrower of documents’.”¹⁴²

The two key phrases here which expose as much about Liddell Hart as of Fuller are, “creative imagination is often more likely to arrive at the truth” and “pedantic burrower of documents”. The first part of the sentence provides an academic absolution to the realm of speculation, whereas the second part belittles the importance of the pursuit of documentary research. (An echo of this but not necessarily a direct reflection is to be found in Bond’s criticism of Mearsheimer’s reliance solely on documentary sources for *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*). This unexpected window into the relationship between Liddell Hart and Fuller – opened unwittingly by Sonia Fuller’s belligerence – is valuable. It reveals much about the dynamics of the relationship between the two and provides clues to how

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.156.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.156-157.

Liddell Hart viewed Fuller's historical writing. Liddell Hart was giving what surely must be seen as a backhanded compliment to Fuller when he stated that "the creative imagination is more often likely to arrive at the truth". In essence he was implying that Fuller's brilliance lay more in the field of creative speculation than in logical conclusions drawn from an arduous study of historical examples. This implication was given substance by the comment written by Liddell Hart to Fuller some two months after examining a draft of *The Generalship of Ulysses S Grant* (1933):

"[O]ne so often has the feeling that you don't sift evidence but simply search it for something to support an opinion already formed."¹⁴³

This is a brutally honest comment that Reid feels was as much an attribute of its author as it was of Fuller's. Liddell Hart did not hold his critical faculties in check when asked to express an opinion by Fuller on his work. Much of it, to Fuller's benefit, was valid and constructive. Yet Fuller did not always perceive it as such. An example of Liddell Hart's ability to provide constructive criticism is quoted by Reid:

"Fuller was fond of argument by quotation, advancing themes by reference to other writers. Liddell Hart advised him to check this tendency. 'Least of all do I like quotations from military historians of a later generation e.g. Atkinson. The reader wants Fuller's own criticisms not those of a second rate pedant.'"¹⁴⁴

This, though a valid criticism, was not taken kindly by Fuller. Trythall and Reid both give accounts of spats between the two concerning one's reaction to the other's criticism. Reid recounts Fuller's rounding on Liddell Hart

"for sending him [Fuller] 'corrections' as if you [Liddell Hart] were a schoolmaster and I a little boy".¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Reid, B.H., *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1987, p. 116.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.118.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

The arguments could get quite heated as evidenced by an irate Fuller in full cry:

“To you they [the corrections] must be so, and because I have not swallowed them in one gulp your self-pride is wounded, so deeply wounded that you talk of ‘getting at the truth’, do not delude yourself, for what you are getting at is your own glorification.”¹⁴⁶

A perceptive Fuller, in a moment of anger, identified Liddell Hart’s Achilles’ heel, his intellectual ego. It was this same ego that would cause the controversy surrounding Guderian’s comments on Liddell Hart in *Panzer Leader* and cause the latter subtly to put himself forward at Fuller’s expense after the Second World War. Personal reputation was important to Liddell Hart, as indeed it is to all people. No inconvenience was too great, no compliment too small, to prevent him from flushing it out and writing it down.

Returning to Fuller as a historian, however, it is easy to see how these conflicting pressures might have coloured his work. Besides not being above exploiting a convenient quotation, Fuller generally viewed historians as a rather biased lot. After centuries of writing history, his predecessors had failed to deliver a Darwin to pierce the veil of ignorance which surrounded his profession. To him this was an unforgivable failure which he was hoping to remedy, as his publication of *Foundations of the Science of War* showed. Clausewitz was not considered a Darwinian figure by Fuller for a host of peculiarly British reasons that were themselves to spawn a tradition in British military writing. John Keegan, strangely, is the current heir of this tradition, using the same tired terminology against Clausewitz – evil genius, Mahdi of Mass, blind proponent of annihilation, etc. Reid points out that Fuller’s seizure of the moral high ground on the issues of objectivity may have been premature:

“Though he might have scant regard for the pretensions of other historians, Fuller was prone to claim for himself the objectivity they

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

lacked. The quality of his scholarship must therefore be assessed. Fuller read widely. *Grant and Lee* he claimed, 'has four years reading behind it'; but the width of his reading was rarely matched in depth. For example, apart from the memoirs of Grant, Sherman and Sheridan, Fuller had read few of the recollections of other serving officers of the period. He was not acquainted with publications in scholarly journals."¹⁴⁷

The requirements which Fuller's full-time profession demanded of him made vast inroads into his reading and writing time. This is a weakness shared with most "amateur" historians. Possibly at times he would have had to compromise his research by limiting it to the bare essentials and then, letting his "creative imagination" take head, gallop off, and outstrip the less adventurous "pedantic burrowers of documents" in search of the truth.

If Fuller was adept at manipulating history, it is important to understand how he achieved his military insight which he was able to propagate and defend so articulately. Fuller was first and foremost a thinker. He rarely accepted anything at face value and was a healthy sceptic. If everybody said something was black, it was worth examining the possibility, in Fuller's mind at least, that it could very well be white. Trythall made the following observation about Fuller:

"The masses were generally wrong, so he normally started his thinking from the opposite of mass opinion."¹⁴⁸

Armed with this healthy disrespect for mainstream opinion, Fuller examined all the nooks and crannies of an idea or concept before applying his considerable powers of logic to conclude whether or not it was viable. His contribution to the development and strategic and tactical use of the tank in the First World War was an example of his logical powers. Fuller learned from experience and the kindergarten of the Anglo-Boer War. To this was added the intellectual stimulation of the problems he faced in the Great War

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁸ Trythall, A. J., *'Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 191.

while serving as GSO 2 to the precursor of the Tank Corps, "The Heavy Branch of the Machine Gun Corps". All this combined to form the penetrating intellect he used to probe military matters. Reading military history supplemented his experience and articulated experiences he had shared with the writer. When he read about the Battle of Arbella and Alexander's use of heavy cavalry, he saw the Medium D rampaging through a break-in in search of the exposed underbelly of the enemy's command and control system. While others saw a graphic description of war in the age of muscle-power, Fuller discerned strategic paralysis. Where others regarded the death of Darius as divine retribution for two centuries of Persian meddling in the Peloponnese, Fuller saw the possibilities that emanate from destroying the brain of the army.

The symbiotic relationship between the influences of martial experience and the study of military history differ as between individuals and there is no way to measure it. Moltke the Elder was able to flourish on the battlefield after a lifetime spent in the "classroom", whereas Napoleon learned the art of command in the saddle, defeating continental Europe at Austerlitz while half Moltke's age at Sedan. Fuller's relationship with military history, accordingly, is difficult to gauge. Did his experiences inspire his theoretical concepts or were they inspired by the dusty tomes at the Staff College Library? Whatever the answer, the advent of peace in 1918 and the prospect of war in 1938 forced him to delve into history to search for the answers that appeared so elusive to his fellow interwar strategists and historians and so obvious to their post-war counterparts.

Fuller, it is important to bear in mind, viewed history through the lens of Thomas Carlyle:

"His whole interpretation of history was based on belief in the influence of great men, not of the people."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

The masses were not the historiographic centre of gravity; the great men were. This was a view firmly entrenched also in Liddell Hart's historical philosophy.

This is important in understanding Fuller's political philosophy. In turn, it is crucial to understanding his approach to history. For all his later arguments justifying his political two-step with Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, he was by nature and design drawn to Fascist philosophy. Fuller believed that the masses were destined to be followers and that any form of power sharing with them was bound to end in disaster. For this reason he saw democracy in its reigning form as a cause rather than preventative of war. He accused democracy of unleashing the moral forces of total war. Industrialisation had made total war physically possible, but it was the masses who had made it morally possible. In August 1914 they had streamed out onto the streets of London, Berlin, Moscow, Vienna and Paris and, like Shylock, demanded their pound of flesh regardless of the cost. It was only when the race to the sea was completed, and their young men devoured in the cauldrons of Ypres, Passchendaele and Verdun, that they started to balk. Total war had surfaced in their midst and Moloch-like, had to be fed to prevent it from consuming them.

The French armies mutinied, the Russian armies collapsed and fell upon one another. The British High Command executed some 346 officers and men on a host of charges ranging from cowardice to desertion in order to maintain its grasp on its first conscript armies. The German armies on the other hand, having woken Europe from its slumber, could do nothing but endure stoically in the vain hope that they would persevere. The civilian populations – the other vital half of the equation of war in the industrial age – realised for the first time the nature of the modern beast. They had opened a Pandora's Box in a blinding desire for national prestige. Chastened by the bloodletting, the European democracies allowed the pendulum to swing yet again after the war, this time to embrace pacifism and its attendant clarion call of "never again". Fuller accordingly had scant respect for them. His philosophy was best exposed in a letter he wrote after returning from attending Hitler's fiftieth birthday celebrations in Berlin on 20 April 1939.

The honour of an invitation had been extended only to him and Lord Brouncker in Britain. A letter had been addressed by him to *The Times*. In it he had stated that he wished to point out that

“he was not an anti-democrat but only believed in democracy which put duty to nation before individual right or ‘pluto-mobocracy’.”¹⁵⁰

It was an interesting opinion for someone who made a living out of challenging the establishment and who was prepared to brook no censorship. He also wrote an account of his visit for a German publication, the *Westfälische Landeszeitung*¹⁵¹, in which he gave a clear insight into his feelings regarding as to whom he considered responsible for the making of history.

“Thus it came about that, on April 19, I arrived in Berlin to feel what Thomas Carlyle the philosopher and historian must have felt nearly a hundred years ago when he penned the following words: ‘For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here ... all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment of Thoughts that dwell in the Great Men sent into the world; the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these’. Surely this is true. I could feel it in the streets, in the buildings, in the crowds, in the rush of aeroplanes overhead and in the roaring of tanks below. Also I felt it in the fields as one day I traveled along the road to Potsdam: there the soil is poor and sandy; yet from it were sprouting forth emerald green crops. Great leadership and great followership can alone accomplish such things, and it is the first which right through history has ever and always created the second.”¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

In his memoirs, *The Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*, Fuller removed any ambiguity as to who or what he considered to be the driving forces of history. Here, writing in 1935 he states:

“This I have always felt; as a youth and now as a man well in middle age: That truth is courage intellectualised. Thus the idea of the great man is the coping-stone of my philosophy as it was the philosophy of that great man – Thomas Carlyle. Therefore in my study of war I have always put the great man first. As my system was founded on the organisation of the human body, of necessity it follows that to breathe life into it, those who can do so must be men who at least aspire towards greatness.”¹⁵³

For Fuller “great men” were the cart-horses of history, dragging the world firmly in their wake. In *The Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier* he referred to Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Mussolini, Pilsudski and Kemal Ataturk as a “galaxy of dictators” who were

“[n]ot men of the study, but of the forge; blacksmiths of a return to manliness. Shackle breakers and shackle makers – men of action. Men who showed that ‘This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, magical and more ...’.”¹⁵⁴

The implication of this philosophy is potentially enormous, for it implies that an intellectual (enlightened) minority must take responsibility for an ignorant majority. It is possible that Fuller viewed his task as a historian in the same light. Having worked out “the bottom line”, it was his responsibility to sell it to the masses.

There are two main indicators which point to the patronising airs which Fuller and Liddell Hart adopted when dealing with colleagues and the public at large. First, both felt intellectually superior, a feeling reinforced by the existing military attitudes towards them and their ideas. In a written

¹⁵³ Fuller, J. F. C., *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*, Ivor Nicholson, London, 1936, p. 477.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 476.

soliloquy Liddell Hart professed to have a keener mind than "anyone he had encountered in the military". Fuller's authoritarian view on politics and his perception of intellectual Darwinism, combined with the behaviour and opinions of people like Montgomery-Massingberd, reinforced his feelings of superiority. From there on it was merely a small step to prescribing instead of discussing. A feeling of noble resistance in the face of persecution comes strongly to the fore in the following excerpt from Liddell Hart's memoirs:

"[O]n hearing that I was to be invalided out, Fuller wrote to me 'I am most sorry to hear of your fate. Personally I consider it inevitable. ... The pretext is your health. The cause is that you are a writer. Mediocrity has its back against the wall, and we who have helped to force it into this position are its first victims. If I had been your age and rank I should have been treated as you are about to be ... You are being decapitated. I am being slowly strangled. I do not know who is to be envied most.'¹⁵⁵

Liddell Hart had the generosity to comment in his memoirs that Cavan's decision probably had more to do with his health than his writing, but if Liddell Hart really thought so, it makes one wonder why he mentioned it. With the intellectual military vanguard they represented apparently under siege, Fuller and Liddell Hart were left to use military history to vindicate their views and garner support for their ideas. Fuller's view of a benevolent dictatorship in politics can easily be translated into a benevolent intellectual dictatorship with regard to the use of history. Liddell Hart had no such pretensions. He simply believed he knew better and tailored history accordingly. Perhaps the best description of Fuller as a historian comes from the man himself. Replying to a letter from William Sloane with a request as to where he should deposit his correspondence with Fuller after his (Fuller's) death,¹⁵⁶ the latter had indulged in a little introspection which

¹⁵⁵ Liddell Hart, B. H., *Memoirs: Volume One*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 64.

¹⁵⁶ Fuller stated that he had not planned to house his archives anywhere in particular, but since Sloane had taken such an interest in him, "[n]othing would give me greater pleasure than to know that my life's work eventually rested in your hands". Trythall, A. J., (*Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 256.) Thus an American university acquired Fuller's papers.

shed considerable light on how he viewed himself and his contribution within the context of military science:

“I am no prophet, no expert and perhaps too imaginative to be a good historian ... I am a student of war and a military critic.”¹⁵⁷

Fuller did not believe in military prophets for, in his view, no one could foresee what would happen in the cauldron of war. However, he did believe in drawing relevant lessons from the past and present and applying them to the future. A “theory” predicts what may happen based on what has happened. A “prophet” predicts what will happen. Fuller did not traffic in certainties. He used his mind and his imagination to extrapolate what might happen and made his case accordingly. In the foregoing quotation, an important reference is made by Fuller to his use of imagination. By his own admission, Fuller suggested that perhaps he should have kept a tighter rein on what Liddell Hart referred to as his “creative genius”. Liddell Hart once stated that while assertions should be treated with caution in the study of military history, admissions should generally be welcomed as true.

With this in mind, Fuller’s blunt admission becomes all the more pertinent. Brutal self-honesty was one of Fuller’s strengths and he was the first to question his own as well as anyone else’s historical method. Any talk of detachment – Fuller wrote to Liddell Hart in a letter in 1929 – was delusion. This honesty makes Fuller’s mistakes somehow more palatable than Liddell Hart’s and has the added advantage of being open to rebuttal. This is particularly evident in Fuller’s evolving relationship with Clausewitz. Unlike Liddell Hart, his opinion of the Prussian philosopher matured to the point where he was able to overcome the traditional British distaste for the man and his work. In the latter part of his career Fuller embraced parts of *On War* – ten percent according to his estimation – and referred to them as “pure gold”. This revealed an intellectual flexibility that was beyond Liddell Hart.

¹⁵⁷ Trythall, A. J., *‘Boney’ Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 256.

Returning to Thomas Carlyle, it is important to understand his view of history since this sheds light on Fuller's own interpretation of the subject. Carlyle was a Scottish historian whose reputation rested on his major work, *The French Revolution*. While he was working on the manuscript, it was given, partially completed, to J. S. Mill for an opinion and accidentally burned by his maid. Carlyle rewrote it from memory¹⁵⁸. A pessimist as regards the ordinary man, Carlyle looked to strong men with what he perceived to be a God-given mission to accomplish what the masses could not. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle's next major work after his epic three-volume work on the French Revolution, revealed just how enamoured he was with individual strength. In Oliver Cromwell and Frederick II of Prussia he found all the qualities of the ideal man. Both men were autocratic dictators; Cromwell under the guise of preserving the Republic and Frederick by divine right. Carlyle abhorred democracy. A synopsis of his political views is found in a letter he wrote to the Russian revolutionary A. I. Herzen in which he stated: "I never had, and have now (if it were possible) less than ever, the least hope in 'Universal Suffrage' under any of its modifications"¹⁵⁹. (A strong echo of this view can be found in Fuller's letter to *The Times* condemning "Pluto mobocracy"). Continuing, Carlyle referred to the "sheer Anarchy (as I reckon it sadly to be) which is got by 'Parliamentary eloquence,' Free Press, and counting of heads."¹⁶⁰ These sentiments are all easily recognisable in Fuller's writing. Liddell Hart, always politically more liberal and astute than Fuller, nevertheless also fell under Carlyle's sway, although in a less obvious manner. Hero worship was always a problem for the immature – and occasionally the mature – Liddell Hart. The title of his book, *Scipio Africanus: Greater than Napoleon*, reveals a transferal of Carlyle's hero-worship for individuals, as did his enthusiasm for each new "great" captain he "discovered" in his triumphant march towards fleshing out his concept of "the indirect approach". This is further manifest in the lists Liddell Hart constantly made evaluating everybody and placing them in order of merit. His books on Foch, Lawrence and Sherman reveal an all too forgiving eye.

¹⁵⁸ *The Encyclopedia Americana: International Edition*, vol 5, Grolier Incorporated, Danbury, Connecticut, 1990. p. 672.

¹⁵⁹ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol 2, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., Chicago, 1986, p. 874.

Both Fuller and Liddell Hart retained a sense of the heroic. It was a hallmark of the generation and the time in which they lived. Individuals were lionised for their achievements. From scientists to aviators, achievers were seen as paragons of moral and intellectual virtue. Heroes were not allowed feet of clay. When Scott perished in the abysmal conditions of the Antarctic, Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities did not question his inept planning, but praised his reckless courage while ignoring his gross stupidity.

Jay Luvaas' treatment of Fuller in *The Education of an Army*, although now over a quarter of a century old, has dated little since he wrote it during Fuller's lifetime. It has weathered the revisionist deluge of the last two decades with remarkable buoyancy. History has probably been kinder to Fuller largely because he neither courted nor coveted it. Wellington's response to a potential blackmailer of "Publish and be damned" is a sentiment worthy of Fuller and would sum up his attitude towards any attempted revision of his reputation or intellectual legacy¹⁶¹. In his chapter on Fuller, aptly titled *The Discordant Drum*, Luvaas examined his penchant for seeking scientific principles in what generally amounted to a social science. Fuller was searching for underlying principles of warfare that could be held up as universally true. He was seeking to establish a "true" science of war based on what he considered scientific principles. Luvaas mentions that whereas other military commentators such as Colonel G. F. R. Henderson, author of *Stonewall Jackson*, also spoke of a "science of war" their approach was, if anything, historical¹⁶². Fuller's search for scientific principles was in part motivated by a desire to introduce order and a method by which warfare could be systematically studied. This impacted directly on his use and interpretation of military history. As Luvaas points out:

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ While Liddell Hart has been a revisionist staple, Fuller has largely been ignored. A recent attempt at reappraisal, however, has been Paul Harris' *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military Thought and Armoured Forces, 1903-1939*. Published in 1995 by Manchester University Press, Harris argues that the initial success at Cambrai has more to do with Baptiste Estienne (who headed the French Tank Corps) than Fuller. Harris is also of the opinion that the success at Cambrai was due more to the advancement of artillery tactics as opposed to the introduction of the tanks themselves. It remains, however, an opinion and not necessarily a correct one.

¹⁶² Luvaas, J., *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought, 1815-1940*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 351.

“He [Fuller] studied the science of war with the tools of science, and if his treatise contains frequent historical references it is because military history provided helpful illustrations and at the same time offered empirical proof of a sort. Fuller utilized military history to teach, but he himself learned by other methods.”¹⁶³

There exists a perennial debate between military theorists as far back as Von Bülow as to whether the conduct of war constitutes an art or a science. Fuller’s views on the matter were simple. The “principles” themselves belonged to the realm of “science” while the nuances of their application belonged to “art”. Luvaas explains:

“From the first Fuller had contended that war was both a science and an art – a science in that it comprised certain elements governed by fixed laws or principles, and an art when it came to applying these principles to the fluctuating conditions that prevailed in the field. He also contended that war must be investigated as a science ‘before as an art, its forces can be correctly expanded’.”¹⁶⁴

Brian Holden Reid refutes the allegation that Fuller sought to reduce war to a science as some of his critics, swayed by Fuller’s choice of the title *The Foundations of the Science of War*, have charged. Reid states:

“Fuller never at any point contended that war could be reduced to an exact science; his reasoning followed Napoleon’s. ‘Military science consists in calculating all the chances accurately in the first place, and then in giving accident exactly, almost mathematically, its place in one’s calculations.’”¹⁶⁵

Fuller’s emphasis on a “scientific” approach reveals that the study of history was not his primary concern. It was to bring about a “true” understanding of warfare. If history could be used to help achieve this, then why not use it?

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 346-347.

¹⁶⁵ Reid, B. H., *Studies in British Military Thought: Debates with Fuller and Liddell Hart*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1998, p. 39.

Moreover if history needed to be bent slightly to conform, then why not? This raises the matter of how Fuller manipulated military history. More importantly, how did he use it to propagate his perception of events?

4.3 J. F. C. Fuller's use of Tukhachevskii as example

An example of the way in which Fuller allowed his prejudices to shape his history is seen in his treatment of Tukhachevskii. Before his deification in US military doctrine, Tukhachevskii was largely unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world.¹⁶⁶ Winston Churchill might well have been describing Tukhachevskii when he coined the phrase "an enigma, wrapped in a riddle, enclosed in a mystery" for that has been the lot of Fervacque's "*Le Chef de l'Armee Rouge*"¹⁶⁷ in Western military literature since his demise in what Robert Conquest termed *The Great Terror*. Western military historians have constantly skirted around Tukhachevskii's military and theoretical achievements on their way to paying homage to the USSR's Second World War titans. There have been exceptions however, such as Erickson's treatment of Tukhachevskii in *The Soviet High Command 1919-1941* and Simpkin's treatment of him in *Race to the Swift and Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*. All however, are somewhat sparse in

¹⁶⁶ There are a number of reasons for this. Tukhachevskii had become a non-person after his execution at the height of Stalin's purges - both inside and outside the Soviet Union - and all information regarding him had been destroyed. Except for a set of documents secretly stored in the restricted access section of Moscow's Lenin Library, all his works were declared illegal and anyone found in possession of them was considered an enemy of the State and punished accordingly. The singular lack of information coming out of the Soviet Union at this time made it extremely difficult for Western historians to catalogue this period until the advent of Robert Conquest's treatment of the purges in *The Great Terror* (Hutchinson, London, 1990) and John Erickson's *The Soviet High Command 1918-1941* (Macmillan & Co Ltd, London, 1962). This contributed greatly to the initial misunderstanding and demise of both Tukhachevskii's historical reputation and theoretical legacy. The declaration of Tukhachevskii as an enemy of the State caused almost all the information and personal records relating to him to be destroyed by his colleagues as well, as they scrambled to distance themselves from him. In a typical gesture, Stalin placed V. K. Blyukher, a friend of Tukhachevskii and fellow marshal, in charge of the firing squad. Within a year, however, Blyukher found himself on the receiving end of an official firing squad.

¹⁶⁷ Pierre Fervacque was the *nom de plume* of Remy Roure, a French journalist who had been imprisoned with Tukhachevskii at Ingolstadt during the Great War. He wrote a short biography on the latter, which appears to have been the primary source of Fuller's information on Tukhachevskii's personality. The book, *Le Chef de l'Armee Rouge: Mikhaïl Toukatchevski*, was written in French and, to my knowledge, has never been translated into English. According to Grover Furr, Roure was a highly respected French journalist in his day and a founder and one time political editor of *Le Monde*. G. C. Furr, 'New Light On Old Stories About Marshal Tukhachevskii: Some Documents

biographical detail. Simpkin's spartan biography in the opening chapter of *Deep Battle* is perhaps the most reliable introduction in English to Tukhachevskii as is his book which covers the salient parts of Tukhachevskii's contribution to twentieth century military thought.

By far the most detailed attempted analysis of Tukhachevskii in English and evidently the most flawed, has been Thos Butson's *The Tsar's Lieutenant* published by Praeger in 1984. If nothing else, Butson is considered entertaining. He apparently dredges up numerous half-truths and myths concerning Tukhachevskii and packages these, alongside good research, into a neat chronological tale, occasionally it has been felt, substituting speculation for fact.¹⁶⁸ Shimon Naveh has done much, however, to set the record straight in both a contributing chapter on Tukhachevskii in Shukman's (editor) *Stalin's Generals* and in his own widely acclaimed book *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*. A widely read book, which has probably most shaped the general Western perception of Tukhachevskii as a victim of an intelligence plot, is *The Tukhachevsky Affair* by Victor Alexandrov. It deals with the reasons behind Tukhachevskii's sudden demise. Much of what Alexandrov states is difficult to prove and is possibly more than a little sensationalist.

Although no one has ever satisfactorily explained the reasons behind Stalin's purge of the Red Army in the late thirties, the circumstances surrounding Tukhachevskii's ultimate demise appear to have their roots in his Russo-Polish War confrontation with the cavalry clique of Stalin, Buddenny, Voroshilov and Yegorov. With Poland apparently prostrate and Tukhachevskii's Western Front Command (consisting of four armies and a cavalry corps) rolling towards Warsaw, Buddenny's decision to ignore Tukhachevskii's orders (designed to offset a possible counterattack led by Marshal Joseph Pilsudski) was to prove disastrous. It gave Pilsudski and the

Reconsidered', *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 13:2 and 3, Summer-Fall 1986, pp. 293-308.

¹⁶⁸ It is intriguing to note that Prof Sally Stoeker, the author of *Forging Stalin's Army, Marshal Tukhachevsky and the Politics of Military Innovation* (Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1998) does not make use of Butson's work at all. It is likewise worthy of note that Richard Simpkin does, however, mention Butson's book in his short bibliography at the end of *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii*(*op cit.*). It may be argued

Poles the glimmer of hope they needed. Pilsudski, showing great moral courage and in a manner reminiscent of Gallieni at the Marne, struck between the two groups, and what had seemed like a Soviet juggernaut shuddered to a halt before disintegrating. With Soviet troops streaming towards the rear in a race for survival the recriminations started. History appears to have judged Tukhachevskii's conduct better than that of the triumvirate of Buddenny, Voroshilov and Stalin. Lenin put the blunder into perspective when, condemning Buddenny and Stalin's lack of co-operation with Tukhachevskii's main force, he argued: "Eh! Who on earth would want to get to Warsaw by going through Lwow [Lvov]!"¹⁶⁹

The animosity created by this incident and Tukhachevskii's harping on what he perceived to be its cause, had dire consequences for the Soviet Union when Stalin was eventually able to gain retribution in full.¹⁷⁰ Stalin's Soviet Union was a grim dictatorship. Robert Conquest's account of those turbulent years shows that, with Vyshinsky patrolling the corridors of Soviet justice and Yezhov and later Beria controlling the secret police and intelligence apparatus, no form of retribution was unattainable or underutilized by the Soviet state. Once condemned, people such as Tukhachevskii became non-persons. Every trace of their existence was eradicated, everyone associated with them or related to them was removed from office and in most cases "liquidated" in similar fashion to the German concept of *Sippenhaft*. The result of this terror was such, that once someone was declared an enemy of the Soviet people, everyone hastened to cut ties with the unfortunate individual. Records, letters and photographs were destroyed in a manner that no war or conflict could ever hope to emulate. The result was a vacuum that allowed speculation to thrive but very little of

that Simpkin's book, invaluable to English readers as it is, represents older scholarship as it was published 11 years previously in 1987.

¹⁶⁹ Erickson, J., *The Soviet High Command 1918-1941*, Macmillan & Co Ltd, London, 1962, p. 99. Stalin and Yegerov's argument that an attack on Lvov was necessary in order to pre-empt a recently mobilized Rumanian army from assisting the Poles did not hold water then, nor does it now.

¹⁷⁰ Stalin had Tukhachevskii arrested and shot for treason in 1937. He was one of the first high-profile military casualties of The Purges. Much speculation has taken place over whether he did in fact conspire against Stalin or not. One school of thought attributes Tukhachevskii's demise to a German intelligence plot designed to incriminate him while others suggest that the German intelligence community were in fact manipulated by Stalin in order to provide him with an excuse to eliminate Tukhachevskii. No one has, as yet, been able to prove their propositions and the debate rages on (or plods forward).

fact to emerge. Such was the fear and immediate destruction of history's debris that Tukhachevskii's writings were banned with all existing material destroyed except for a set of his works which was secretly housed in Moscow's Lenin Library.

How does this relate to Fuller? The almost total destruction of Tukhachevskii's life and the records of his existence allowed historians to exploit the resultant vacuum for their own benefit. Fuller was one such historian and his treatment of Tukhachevskii is a good example in this regard¹⁷¹. In terms of his Fascist blueprint of Mosley's "thought/deed" man, Tukhachevskii should have been Fuller's ideal modern warrior as he was arguably the nascent Red Army's brightest star both on the battlefield and in the classroom. Instead, tainted by Fascist propaganda and his hatred of Bolshevism, Fuller viewed Tukhachevskii as a latter day Genghis Khan, "frantic" with desire to export Bolshevism beyond the confines of the Soviet Union. Admittedly Fuller suffered from a lack of information, being limited (if his footnotes are an indication) to Fervacque's biography, but this did not stop him from making categorical statements about Tukhachevskii and his generalship. Fuller's pencil sketch of Tukhachevskii in his three-volumed history of warfare was both widely quoted (an example being *Purnell's History of the First World War* p. 3430) and widely known, and – until modern scholarship (Brigadier Richard Simpkin) and the end of the Cold War painted a truer likeness – the general perception of the Anglo-Saxon world.

What is known about Tukhachevskii's early life is that he was born into a poor family whose tenuous claim to nobility was to prove more of a hindrance than an advantage in a political system that was to allow a former Donbas coal miner to lead the country. A bright student, Tukhachevskii was commissioned into the Semenovskii Guards Regiment, an elite Czarist formation, and served in the First World War. Much speculation surrounds

¹⁷¹ Krushev partially rehabilitated Tukhachevskii when he came to power in order to use his execution as a "stick" with which to beat remaining Stalinists. The subsequent Soviet military's veneration of, and the political agenda behind, Tukhachevskii's rehabilitation, only served further to obfuscate the key issues surrounding his demise. G. C. Furr, 'New Light On Old Stories About Marshal Tukhachevskii: Some Documents Reconsidered', *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 13:2 and 3, Summer-Fall 1986, p. 307.

his exploits during the War and his subsequent capture and incarceration by the Germans. Although he was imprisoned at Ingolstadt in Bavaria at the same time as a young Charles de Gaulle, there is no proof that they ever met or spoke. Having escaped from captivity, he returned to Russia where he joined the ranks of the Bolsheviks.

The bare facts of his military achievements are threefold:

- the destruction of Kolchak and Deniken during the Civil War (1918-1920),
- the near defeat of the Poles in the Russo-Polish War (1920), and
- the successful elimination of the Kronstadt and Tambov rebellions (1921).

Tukhachevskii had applied himself with marked success to civil war, conventional war, an insurrection and a vicious counter-insurgency campaign. In addition to these achievements on the battlefield (which sets him apart from both Liddell Hart and Fuller), he was an exceptional military intellectual; a fact recognised by both Frunze and Lenin, an early patron. Allied to this was the fact that he spoke French as a home language, had a reading knowledge of English and was reasonably fluent in German. As a pastime he crafted violins and he was a great admirer and friend of the Soviet composer Shostakovich. The latter credited Tukhachevskii with saving him from one of Stalin's murderous whims, a feat he, unfortunately, could not repeat for himself. This is hardly the cultural Philistine portrayed by Fuller.

"By instinct he [Tukhachevskii] was a romantic barbarian who abhorred western civilization. He had the soul of Ghengis Khan, of Ogdai and of Batu. Autocratic, superstitious, romantic and ruthless, he loved the open plain lands and the thud of a thousand hoofs, and he loathed and feared the unromantic orderliness of civilization. He hated Christianity and Christian culture because they had obliterated paganism and barbarism and had deprived his fellow countrymen of

the ecstasy of the god of war and the glamour of the 'carnival of death'."¹⁷²

This is probably the most concise one-paragraph synopsis of Europe's fearful perception of Bolshevism prevalent at that time. Intriguingly, it is epitomised in one individual. With a few brief strokes of Fuller's pen Tukhachevskii, rightly or wrongly, assumed the mantle of the Mongol horde that had scarred so deeply the Christian psyche of medieval Europe. Fuller's Tukhachevskii was to be the spiritual heir of Arminius's Teutonic horde – the barbarians recorded by the Roman historians Dio Cassus, Paterculus and Florus – who had slain civilisation's representatives, Varus's three legions, so carelessly in the Teutoburgerwald two thousand years before. Fuller's view of the Battle of Warsaw bore this out. It was, in his opinion one of the most decisive battles of the twentieth century. Poland had saved Europe and provided it with a bulwark against the Asian – now Bolshevik – horde. Whether he was merely regurgitating Fervacque's opinion or fashioning his own, it was the image he believed and wanted to project. (The above description reeks of Fascism and would generally be considered by many as an accurate description of the nihilistic philosophy put forward by them, a philosophy to which Fuller was no stranger.) To quote Fuller at length:

"When he was incarcerated at Ingolstadt, he said to Fervacque, a fellow prisoner: 'A demon or a god animates our race. We shall make ourselves drunk, because we cannot as yet make the world drunk. That will come.' Once Fervacque found him painting in discordant colours on a piece of cardboard the head of an atrocious idol. What is that? He asked him. 'Do not laugh,' replied Tukhachevskii, 'I have told you that the Slavs are in want of a new religion. They are being given Marxism; but aspects of that theology are too modern and too civilized. It is possible to mitigate that disagreeable state by returning to our Slav gods, who were deprived of their prerogative and strength; nevertheless they can soon regain them. There is Daschbog, the god of the sun; Stribog, the god of the

¹⁷² Fuller, J. F. C., *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their Influence upon History*. vol 3, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1957, p. 339.

storm; Wolos, the god of human arts and of poetry; and also Pierounn, the god of war and lightning. For long I have hesitated to choose my particular god; but after reflection, I have accepted Pierounn, because once Marxism is thrust upon Russia, the most devastating wars will be let loose. ... We shall enter chaos and we shall not leave it until civilization is reduced to total ruin.' ”¹⁷³

Fervacque's Tukhachevskii has all the hallmarks of an anti-Christ and Fuller was a more than willing accomplice and mouthpiece to translate that image into English. In order to portray him as such Fuller appeared to grasp at straws, the most tenuous of which is the meaning he attempts to interject into a childish prank:

“This was no sudden, imaginative whim caused by the boredom of imprisonment; when Tukhachevskii was a small child he and his brothers had scandalized their French governess by ‘baptising’ three cats, amid dreadful howlings, in the name of ‘The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.’ Every Western virtue terrified him, ‘Honour, what is that,’ he cried? ‘Out-of-date word which henceforth must be left to Occidentals.’ ”¹⁷⁴

This is a remarkable display of religious prudery from an acknowledged agnostic and one-time advocator of free sex. It must be remembered that Fuller was a quintessential Victorian/Edwardian gentleman to whom honour was not a concept to be taken lightly, although he was too pragmatic an individual to allow himself to be dominated by it. Fuller is at pains to emphasise what he perceives to be Tukhachevskii's inherent desire for destruction, a groundless accusation based more on anti-Bolshevik Fascist propaganda than any reasoned study of his subject. This description of Tukhachevskii might easily have sprung from the pages of *Action*, the Fascist publication that Fuller occasionally contributed to.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* pp. 339-340.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 340.

“In his eyes, destruction justified everything because it unlocked the door which led to the road back to Seljuk, Tartar and Hun. ‘Seriously,’ he said, ‘it would be good for humanity were all books burnt, so that we could bathe in the fresh spring of ignorance. I even think that it is the sole means of preventing humankind becoming sterile.’ What he yearned for was a return to the days of Ivan the Terrible; ‘then Moscow will become the centre of the world of barbarians.’ ‘Had Nicholas II but followed in the footsteps of Peter the Great and Catherine II, how docile the Russians would have been, for they love a despot.’ ‘If Lenin is able to disencumber Russia from the old scrap iron of prejudice and de-westernize her, I will follow him. But he must raze all to the ground, and deliberately hurl us back into barbarism.’”¹⁷⁵

Fuller’s Tukhachevskii is a nihilistic acolyte of mindless destruction and Fuller fails to give the reader any reasons why this should be so. The more these passages are examined the more they appear to have in common with Fascism. The Western perception of Marxism equating to the destruction of civilisation flows through the description in a unifying theme. Anyone familiar with Tukhachevskii’s work and life cannot fail to be appalled by its inaccuracy.

Fuller’s graphic portrayal of Tukhachevskii’s anti-Semitism by way of character reference is surprising from someone who had himself been responsible for an article – in the not too distant past – referring to European Jewry, titled *The Cancer of Europe*¹⁷⁶. While Fuller might not have been as crass as Tukhachevskii in saying “The Jew is a dog, son of a dog, who sows his fleas in every land.”, his anti-Semitism was more than the traditional Edwardian gentleman’s distaste for Jews that some writers have tried to make it out to be. Fuller was anti-Semitic in the true sense of the word. His mellowing with age cannot and should not be used to offset it. The general perception and tone of Fuller’s description of Tukhachevskii is negative to say the least.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Trythall A.J., ‘Boney’ Fuller: *Soldier, Strategist, and Writer 1878–1966*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1977, p. 184.

Tukhachevskii's abilities as a general are also portrayed by Fuller in a grudging light. Rather than highlight his undoubted abilities Fuller chooses to describe his generalship as "cunning", a word with more negative connotations than positive ones when describing character or ability. Fuller states:

"Though a cunning general, as an administrator Tukhachevski was, like most Russians, hopelessly inefficient. A Tartar at heart, he intended to live on the land and his system of supply closely resembled that of Attila or Genghis Khan."¹⁷⁷

Fuller views Tukhachevskii's logistical system as one of choice and not one of necessity. Nowhere does he examine the factors behind Tukhachevskii's logistical predicament. By referring to Tukhachevskii as a "Tartar by heart" Fuller implies that an instinctive ad hoc approach towards logistics was the approach favoured by Tukhachevskii and not, perhaps, one forced on him by circumstance. Fuller's Tukhachevskii embraced all the emotional historical baggage dredged up by the term Tartar. Fuller does also not miss any opportunity to link Tukhachevskii's name with those of Attila and Genghis Khan.

What did Fuller have to combat Fervacque's stilted perception of Tukhachevskii? Christopher Bellamy, in his book *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare*, quotes a passage by Pilsudski describing Tukhachevskii which appears to have been available to Fuller. Marshal of Poland, Joseph Pilsudski, Tukhachevskii's battlefield nemesis, had this to say of the then 27-year-old Tukhachevskii's martial abilities:

"Tukhachevskiy understood the art of communicating to his subordinates his own energy and well directed activity. This fine display of generalship will always speak in favour of M. Tukhachevskiy's ability as a commander to conceive bold strokes

¹⁷⁷ Fuller, J. F. C., *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their Influence upon History*. vol 3, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1957, p. 345.

and carry them out energetically. ... Tukhachevskiy made a most skilful disposition of his forces ... only a general of the highest order could have undertaken so bold and coherent a deployment of his troops. ... It is beyond doubt that Tukhachevskiy was no ordinary general. In his march beyond the Vistula he made a reality of his own designs and creative intelligence ... he therefore passed in thought and later in reality through an extent of territory equal to half Europe. This was no mean achievement.”¹⁷⁸

Bellamy quotes this passage from an English translation of Pilsudski's book *Year 1920, and its Climax, Battle of Warsaw during the Polish Soviet War 1919-20, with the Addition of M. Tukhachevsky's March Beyond the Vistula*. (Pilsudski Institute of London and America, London and New York, 1972). Bellamy is referring to the 1972 English edition. Fuller, in *Decisive Battles*, refers to an earlier French edition of the same book as *L'Annee 1920, Joseph Pilsudski (1929)* (p. 344). He was, therefore, aware of Pilsudski's appreciation of Tukhachevskii's generalship. Although there is always the possibility of Pilsudski employing the old Roman device of praising himself indirectly by praising an enemy he has vanquished, Fuller chose to ignore his description of Tukhachevskii. He chose, instead, to use Fervacque's, to put it mildly, historically coloured description which fitted more with his own flawed impressions of Tukhachevskii. It is safe to say that Pilsudski's appreciation of Tukhachevskii is more balanced and better able to stand up to modern scholarship.

4.4 Conclusion

In his writing Fuller often reflected Constantin Brancusi's melodramatic dictum to his students that they were to “create like a god, reign like a king and work like a slave.” Brancusi, a twentieth century Romanian sculptor (1876-1957), was encouraging his students not to fear originality and to have confidence in their work. Fuller possessed all three qualities to a remarkable degree. He refused to mortgage his considerable intellectual

¹⁷⁸ Bellamy, C., *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 81.

talents by squandering his energies in cheap imitation of his peers. He pursued his own thoughts to their logical, and sometimes illogical, conclusions. He was not easily swayed. In this sense he did indeed “create like a god”. Fuller had no fear of disapproval, intellectual or otherwise, although he did not suffer it well when it was forthcoming, as his altercation with Garvin via Liddell Hart showed. This was perhaps one of his greatest strengths although, as revealed by his infatuation with the British Union of Fascists, it could lead him perilously close to disaster. Fuller was and remained – in the words he used to describe himself – an “intellectual tramp”.

With regard to “reigning like a king” Fuller did indeed assume and project an imperious authority over his chosen field, although Liddell Hart was to usurp the crown in later life. Fuller’s Plan 1919, occasionally still the target of the odd revisionist, remains the most impeccable credentials of all the early theorists, Tukhachevskii included. This gave him an authority that was difficult to challenge. Fuller was introduced to Hitler at the latter’s birthday celebrations in Berlin in April 1939. Hitler, remarking on the armoured review which had trundled past his podium for hours that morning, enquired of Fuller: “I hope you were pleased with your children.” To which Fuller replied: “Your Excellency, they have grown so quickly that I no longer recognise them.”¹⁷⁹ This was the kind of recognition which Liddell Hart craved and Fuller, although not actively shunning it, generally disdained. Heinz Guderian, the future *enfant terrible* of the Panzer corps and the last Chief of the Army General Staff (21 July 1944 – 28 March 1945), spent a morning in Fuller’s company at the German Military Attaché’s house in Fitzjohns Avenue, London, just prior to the war. Guderian’s armoured exploits in France and Russia were still to come and one cannot help but wonder what was said during the morning’s conversation. This is a further indication of the standing and prestige which Fuller enjoyed among his peers. One shudders what Liddell Hart might have asked Guderian to insert in *Panzer Leader* had he met him in similar circumstances. Typically Fuller never traded on that morning’s conversation in his subsequent writing.

¹⁷⁹ Trythall, A. J., *‘Boney’ Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 205.

There can be no doubt that the term "work like a slave" was a self-evident truth as far as Fuller was concerned. At the time of his death in 1964 Fuller had just completed his final work, *Julius Caesar, Man, Soldier and Tyrant* which was published the following year. Three years previously he had published *The Conduct of War 1789-1961* considered by some to be his finest work. Before that he had written *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*, a book which Reid claims brought him to the subject with which he is now most closely associated; that of Fuller himself.

Having acknowledged Fuller's attributes it is time to view his flaws. He was at times an extremely cantankerous and arrogant individual. His brusque manner and sulphurous pen often did more harm to his cause than good. At times he was more concerned with being right than with propagating this cause. The Tidworth affair is perhaps the most complete example of this.

Brancusi's dictum is also an apt description of Fuller's history. Much of it was created by him in the sense that Liddell Hart had implied when complimenting him on his "creative artistry". In Fuller's own words, perhaps he had been "too creative" to be a good historian. An academic historian, perhaps, but he was undeniably an excellent didactic historian. His stirring command of the English language and epic use of ridicule could inflame the driest subject. He ignited interest at a higher level. Fuller once stated that he hated *soviets*. He hated an individual's effort being diluted by the collective mediocrity of a group. His lectures were aimed at the one or two students who excelled in his class. They were the ones he sought out. The rest could come along for the ride, if they so wished, but they were merely incidental. History was the supreme prop of his trade. He was a teacher. He taught war in its broadest sense. It was not the science of numerically or factually correct incidents (information) such as the factually bloated diatribes on the Civil War which had lead him to complain that from them the weight of kippers eaten by Stonewall Jackson for breakfast in the Shenandoah Valley campaign could be gauged and little else. It was the pattern of warfare he sought to discern in much the same manner as Darwin had exposed evolution's twisting coil. His attitude towards traditional

historical accuracy can best be gauged by his reply to the editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* when asked to insert a small correction in an article on Alexander's victory at Gaugamela. It was a needless exercise according to Fuller:

“Don't bother” he had replied, “The ordinary reader will never read it. The extraordinary reader will know.”¹⁸⁰

Fuller created his history to reflect his theory. If he did not manufacture the events themselves, he painted them in the colours he desired. As his theories were inherently sound, his history flowed effortlessly into the narrow intellectual furrows he had ploughed. It had a logic that appealed to the reader. It was, more often than not, simplistically didactic and immediately accessible. This does not mean that Fuller did not, on many occasions, write good history. His treatment of Alexander, not to mention Julius Caesar, has, in some opinions, yet to be surpassed.

There was a reverse side. His sweeping analysis of warfare in *Decisive Battles*, historically, is a treasure house of fact and fiction as his treatment of Tukhachevskii shows, nevertheless the analysis itself is inherently sound. When closely studied, some of the details may appear blurred, but the overall picture is there for those who make the effort. A comparison between Fuller's trilogy and Delbrück's four-volumed magnum opus, *History of the Art of War*, soon reveals the difference between an academically trained historian and what at times seems like a self-taught savant.

Fuller was, perhaps, the foremost military historian of his generation. He was without doubt Liddell Hart's peer in both range and skill. Liddell Hart had to wait an entire lifetime for his Chesney Gold Medal (1966) whereas Fuller had already garnered his first one 44 years before in 1919, when only a young colonel. The two of them were, however – militarily speaking – the foremost theoretical and historical spokesmen of their generation. It was to

¹⁸⁰ Luvaas, J., *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought, 1815-1940*, Cassell, London, 1965, p. 373.

their history that forward-thinking officers of all armies turned during the inter-war period. They were not always right in their answers, but more often than not they asked the correct questions and this was all their students needed. They indeed reigned like Brancusi's king, or more accurately, like two consuls, each controlling the student legions on alternate days. It may be safely said, however, that Fuller remained the master and Liddell Hart his foremost student.

General Sir John Hackett, on the 31st October, 1963, at the auspicious occasion when Fuller¹⁸¹ and Liddell Hart were presented with their Chesney Medals, referred to Fuller as

"the Gadfly of Socrates, pricking people to awareness of false complacency, not always a popular pursuit in armies. ... Not everyone would agree with his political conclusions nor accept his interpretations of history. In so provocative a writer, this would be impossible. But no one would deny the vigour of the first nor the penetration of the second".¹⁸²

Hackett's words are an accurate description of Fuller. If Fuller was "the Gadfly of Socrates" then Liddell Hart was the fly in Aesop's fable who, alighting on the axle of a fast-moving chariot, turned to the world proclaiming: "Look at the great dust cloud I am raising." Liddell Hart did much to usurp Fuller's reputation. Indeed, it often seems that he genuinely believed himself Fuller's peer. But both he and Fuller were merely representative of that swirling dust cloud of military thought. The intellectual turmoil had many progenitors but none as articulate or wide-ranging as these two. Fuller, like Liddell Hart, was a historian of convenience, not of vocation, and his history reflected this. He sought to use history for his own decided purpose.

¹⁸¹ This was Fuller's second Chesney Gold Medal and Liddell Hart's first and only. Fuller had received a RUSI Gold Medal in 1919 for his prize-winning essay "The Application of Recent Developments in Mechanics and Other Scientific Knowledge to Preparation and Training for Future War on Land".

¹⁸² Trythall, A. J., *'Boney' Fuller: Soldier, Strategist and Writer 1878-1966*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1977, p. 260.

Chapter 5

The origins of B. H. Liddell Hart's military thought and its relationship to military history

5.1 General

Hilaire Belloc, the historian and Victorian polymath, once justified himself with the words "my sins are scarlet but at least my books are read". These words are also a rather apt description of Liddell Hart.

Liddell Hart, apart from Fuller, was unique among military historians in the Anglophone world. Like a literary octopus, his invigorating prose and encyclopedic knowledge reached out its tentacles to ensnare anyone with even the slightest interest in military history. His output in writing – both articles and books – was prodigious. Even more remarkable is the fact that most of what he wrote was read. Alex Danchev, in a recent biography of Liddell Hart, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*,¹⁸³ quotes a seventeen-year old John Terraine copying tracts of Liddell Hart's articles because they inspired him:

"John Terraine, later an antagonist [of Liddell Hart's], remembered his own beginnings [as a military historian]: Round about 1960 I was commissioned to write a book about Lord Haig. The first thing I did, obviously, was to assemble the notes I had been collecting for a number of years which could bear on the subject. Among them I came across a note which could not have been made later than 1938

¹⁸³ Danchev cites a visit with Michael Howard to Lady Kathleen Liddell Hart – "a sprightly and spritely 90 year old" – as the chief inspiration for his biography while Professor Sir Michael Howard is briefly described as "the midwife of this project". What is valuable about Danchev's work is that it has the benefit of an enormous resurgence in Liddell Hart studies. Having been vaguely canonized in Bond's otherwise impeccable *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought* (*op cit.*), Liddell Hart was all but held up as a charlatan in Mearsheimer's equally scholarly *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (*op cit.*). Danchev, writing almost a decade after Mearsheimer, has had the benefit of all the ensuing controversy stirred up by him. Adding tone to the general debate is Gat, who, having taken up the cudgels on Liddell Hart's behalf, has published a series of well-argued articles in his defence. Danchev and Gat however, show the advantages of having written their work after the original dust had settled. Other scholars, like Alaric Searle, have also contributed to the general debate which promises to continue for some time to come.

– when I was still a schoolboy. I had been reading the works of Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart, and had found them so stimulating that already, at the age of seventeen, I had the impulse to copy out passages and put them in a file. So, whatever else I may say, I must begin by acknowledging that the original impetus which made me a military historian (as opposed to a military dilettante) came from him.”¹⁸⁴

This was a skill peculiar to Liddell Hart. He was able to inspire both the learned and layman in a way most other authors on military history could not. He was concise, logical, emotive and original in his writing. Most important, his didactic use of military history was both intellectually accessible and stimulating, a rare combination in itself.

Liddell Hart’s literary skill was firmly based on his voracious reading habits as a child. By his own estimation he had read, on average, 200 volumes a year in the years immediately preceding his sixteenth birthday. These had ranged from serious articles on aviation to the wild tales of derring-do which abounded in the *Boy’s Own* annuals that proliferated during his adolescence. Writers such as Dumas, Stevenson and Scott marked him as, indeed, they did many of his generation. Books on military history had likewise featured, a favourite being his father’s copy of Major General Sir Frederick Maurice’s *Franco-German War*.¹⁸⁵ Danchev framed these influences succinctly:

“For Basil Liddell Hart, it [his youthful reading habit] was the fertile subsoil of his adult style.”¹⁸⁶

Liddell Hart’s writing skills had been further honed during adolescence by voluminous letter-writing – his precocious correspondence with various magazines – and occasional short stories, written for personal pleasure, ranging in subject from ancient warriors to modern aviators.

¹⁸⁴ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 251.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 24.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 25.

Stylistically, Liddell Hart was a chameleon. His maturing interest in sport (particularly rugby and lawn tennis), military history and *haute couture* made for unusual analogies and peppered his writing with interesting adjectives. As Danchev states,

“[h]e wrote strategic accounts of lawn tennis, fashion-conscious accounts of strategy, and games-playing accounts of war”.¹⁸⁷

While Liddell Hart's lively style and prose ensured a reading public, what of its content? How did he arrive at his subject matter and conclusions? What were his influences? More importantly what kind of historian was he?

In sharp contrast to Fuller, Liddell Hart first had to establish a pedigree in armoured thought and warfare before he could start pontificating on the subject. A request to join the Tank Corps soon after his conversion to the “armoured creed” by Fuller had come to nothing on the grounds of ill-health. Liddell Hart was, from the army's point of view, “constitutionally inadequate.”¹⁸⁸ He was consequently placed on the half-pay list in 1924.

Liddell Hart's first attempts at distilling his own thoughts on armoured warfare were simple echoes of Fuller's work. Azar Gat¹⁸⁹, who has done an admirable job of defending Liddell Hart's somewhat tattered reputation in the wake of Mearsheimer, points out that much of Liddell Hart's early work on armoured warfare was a simple regurgitation of Fuller's work. In an article published in March 1996 in *The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol 19, No 1* titled “Liddell Hart's Theory of Armoured Warfare: Revising the Revisionists”, Gat states:

“The new stage in his [Liddell Hart's] thought was opened with an essay ‘The Next Great War’, which he wrote in late 1922 for the first

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 87.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 64.

¹⁸⁹ Azar Gat has thus far provided the most scholarly and comprehensive analysis of the origins of Liddell Hart's thought. In two journal articles, “The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart's Strategic Ideas” and “Liddell Hart's Theory of Armoured Warfare: Revising the Revisionists”, as well as in his book *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, Gat broke new ground and greatly extended the scholarship on Liddell Hart's early intellectual

Royal United Services Institution competition to be announced after the one Fuller had won in 1919. The essay failed to win the prize, but not necessarily because of conservative backlash, as Fuller and Liddell Hart suggested. The judges' decision not to select the same work twice in a row is understandable – Liddell Hart's essay was almost a replica of Fuller's."¹⁹⁰

This early reliance on Fuller for "inspiration" was by no means unique. Gat observed other indiscretions on the part of Liddell Hart:

"Liddell Hart again produced a Fullerite picture of future mechanized warfare in *Paris or the Future of War* (1925), which plagiarized Fuller's *The Reformation of War* (1923) – 'the book of the century' in Liddell Hart's admiring words – almost lock, stock and barrel, without any acknowledgment."¹⁹¹

It is apparent that Liddell Hart had an either conscious or subconscious aversion to paying his early intellectual debts to Fuller in full. Gat, although in the process of attempting to "revise the revisionists" as stated in the title of his essay, made no bones about Liddell Hart's early trading on Fuller's intellectual property. Pointing out Brian Holden Reid as his only accomplice in this observation, Gat points out a startling similarity between Liddell Hart's *Paris or the Future of War* and Fuller's *The Reformation of War*.¹⁹² Gat's brief description of *Paris or the Future of War* deserves to be quoted in full.

"Air power using the humane and non-destructive gas would dominate war, overwhelming in a very short period the enemy's civilian rear as well as immobilizing the old, obsolete mass armies. Concentrated armoured forces would travel the countryside operating against the enemy's command and communications, his

development. His work has provided new impetus for the debate and has contributed greatly to Liddell Hart's current rehabilitation.

¹⁹⁰ Gat, A., "Liddell Hart's Theory of Armoured Warfare: Revising the Revisionists", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19:1, p.2.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 3.

'nerve system', in the manner Fuller had suggested in 1918. In the naval arena it would seem that in closed seas the aircraft and submarine would displace the battleship."¹⁹³

From here Gat moves to the core of the issue:

"This was Fuller almost to the letter. To remove any doubt, we are not dealing here with ideas developed conjointly; nor do we have here two lines of thought running parallel, as Liddell Hart would claim in later years. A comparative examination of the development of Fuller and Liddell Hart respectively clearly reveals that the ideas which Fuller had developed by 1922-23 – not only regarding armoured warfare but also in many other respects – came as a revelation to the admiring Liddell Hart, who made them his own."¹⁹⁴

The early evidence facing Liddell Hart is certainly grim. One cannot help but wonder whether Liddell Hart would have been as generous as the "Gold Medalled" Fuller if the roles had been reversed. However, Gat goes on to point out subtle but crucial differences that emerged between the two theorists from 1927 onwards. As damning as Liddell Hart's early writing is, his later writing diverges significantly from Fuller's. In the early 1930s Fuller became distracted by other issues – most noticeably Fascism in the form of Sir Leonard Mosely's British Union of Fascists (otherwise known as "Mosleyites") – and he subsequently lost touch with the mechanised movement, although not to the extent that Liddell Hart liked to suggest after the Second World War. What Gat's article reveals however, is that in the early stages of his intellectual anabasis, Liddell Hart walked a tenuous line between originality and intellectual plagiarism. Accordingly Liddell Hart's early intellectual debt to Fuller is substantial or, as Gat eloquently puts it,

¹⁹² Gat, A., "The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart's Strategic Ideas", *War in History*, 3(3), 1996, p. 297.

¹⁹³ Gat, A., "Liddell Hart's Theory of Armoured Warfare: Revising the Revisionists", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19:1, p. 3.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

“[o]ne might say that he [Liddell Hart] sprang fully armed from Fuller’s brow”.¹⁹⁵

Fuller was not Liddell Hart’s only source of clandestine inspiration. In a separate article, published this time in *War in History* in March 1996, Gat delved into the various sources of Liddell Hart’s military thought. He wanted to get to the core of the ideas which had shaped Yigal Allon’s “the captain who teaches generals” military philosophy. Under the dramatic title of “The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart’s Strategic Ideas”, Gat set about tracking these sources. As the author of the highly acclaimed trilogy *The Origins of Military Thought; The Development of Military Thought: The Nineteenth Century* and *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, he was particularly well placed to accomplish this task. Alex Danchev quite rightly refers to Gat as a “Homeric” source on this issue.

In addition to Fuller, Gat observed, Liddell Hart had drawn on three other main sources for his ideas. These were

- the prominent French neo-Napoleonic school of the turn of the century,
- Julian Corbett (who along with the Colomb brothers was Britain’s answer to Mahan), and
- the publicly acclaimed T E Lawrence of “Lawrence of Arabia” fame.

Like his favoured Mongols, Liddell Hart “pillaged” major portions of their work and made them his own. It is best told in Gat’s words:

“[H]e was able to build upon three important contributions to modern military thought, which he adopted, synthesized, radicalized even beyond their originally radical thrust, expanded, and applied to reverse completely both nineteenth century military theory and the picture of the past. Of these contributions, two had been well recognized but were somewhat out of the mainstream, while the third was new and sensational but fairly obscure. The first was the prominent French neo-Napoleonic school of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its learned unraveling of the origins

¹⁹⁵ Gat, A., “The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart’s Strategic Ideas”, *War in History*, 3 (3), 1996, p. 295.

and nature of Napoleonic strategy and its comprehensive criticism of Clausewitz's interpretation of that strategy. The other two were Julian Corbett's rejection in the early twentieth century of the strategy of annihilation and its emphasis on decisive battle, which Liddell Hart adapted from sea to land warfare; and T. E. Lawrence's remarkably similar theorizing, which Liddell Hart expanded beyond its original desert guerrilla setting."¹⁹⁶

Two of the influences which Gat mentions above were common knowledge. Liddell Hart's debt to Fuller had, of course, been well known if not extensively documented as was his debt to Corbett. Spenser Wilkinson had tied the threads connecting Liddell Hart to the neo-Napoleonic school. Lawrence's theorising, however, similar as it is to Corbett's, was something of a minor revelation to his readers.

Lawrence was a rare animal in the British high society of the late twenties and early thirties. He was a living icon. Accordingly, Liddell Hart gained much by his close association with him although it is obvious from their correspondence that this was far from the driving force in the relationship. Liddell Hart found Lawrence, as indeed did most of his contemporaries, intellectually stimulating. The image recreated by David Lean, of a solitary figure clad in white and given substance by Peter O'Toole in the Oscar-winning epic "Lawrence of Arabia", was the selfsame image which captivated a postwar British public starved for genuine heroes. Lawrence's well-publicised attempts at obscurity – such as his enlistment as an airman in the Royal Air Force as aircraftman J. H. Ross and later T. E. Shaw – only served to heighten the public's appetite for him. A cryptic reference to him under the *nom de plume* "T E S" occurs in the preface to Liddell Hart's *The Decisive Wars of History*, which was later to become the much-vaunted *The Strategy of the Indirect Approach*. A cryptic clue was perhaps the most Liddell Hart was prepared to part with when it came to giving credit to the sources of what he considered to be "his" ideas. In the preface in *The Decisive Wars of History* he cites as the inspiration for his concept of the "indirect approach"

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 297-298.

“an attempt to distill the essence of one’s reading and reflection over a number of years”.¹⁹⁷

At most, his sources had to be content with a brief sentence baldly thanking a handful of people

“[f]or helpful comments and suggestions ...”.¹⁹⁸

This small concession apparently covered a multitude of sins. No mention was made of Colin, Lawrence or Corbett.

As a young Oxford undergraduate, Lawrence had been exposed to a number of treatises on war. On his own initiative he had read, among others, such authors as Clausewitz, Moltke, Caemmerer, Jomini, Willisen, Saxe and Guilbert.¹⁹⁹ From these he had drawn much the same conclusions as his contemporaries. Well versed in conventional military wisdom, the war had allowed Lawrence to embark on his own intellectual odyssey in the cockpit of the Middle East. On returning from the war, Lawrence discussed his experiences and their implications in a private monograph - *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* - published in 1922 by Oxford University Press and circulated only among a close group of friends.

Lawrence’s Arabian campaign had been unique inasmuch as it had not been dominated by European-style armies, each seeking out the other for the ubiquitous “Battle of Annihilation”. Nor had it been a grim affair of subterranean tunneling and wanton slaughter in the face of modern technology. It had been a vicious struggle between two unequal forces. On the one side were the Turks – strong, conventional and seeking a decisive clash – and on the other, an elusive force of Arab irregulars cobbled together by various tribal loyalties, a way of life and a strong desire for personal gain.

¹⁹⁷ Liddell Hart, B.H., *The Decisive Wars of History*, G. Bell & Sons, Limited, London, 1929, p. vii.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Needless to say Lawrence's war was not a conventional one and his thoughts accordingly were unconventional. Gat, quoting three separate passages in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, points out their remarkable similarity with Liddell Hart's later ideas:

"[I] was left ... to find an alternative end and means of war. Ours seemed unlike the ritual of which Foch was priest. ... In his modern war — absolute war he called it — two nations professing incompatible philosophies put them to the test of force. Philosophically it was idiotic ... It sounded like a twentieth-century restatement of the wars of religion, whose logical end was utter destruction of one creed ... This might do for France and Germany, but it would not represent the British attitude. ... [Moreover] such war depended on the levy in mass, and was impossible with professional armies; while the old army was still the British ideal. ... [In addition] battles in Arabia were a mistake ... Napoleon had said it was rare to find generals willing to fight battles; but the curse of this war was that so few would do anything else. Saxe had told us that irrational battles were the refuge of fools. ... In character our operations of development for the final stroke should be like naval war, in mobility, ubiquity, independence of bases and communications, ignoring of ground features, of strategic areas, of fixed directions, of fixed points. ... Our tactics should be to tip and run: not pushes but strokes. We should never try to improve an advantage. We should use the smallest force in the quickest time at the farthest place."²⁰⁰

Gat continues:

"Anyone who has ever read Liddell Hart would not fail to recognize these ideas, but they have never been traced to Lawrence and his writings."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Gat, A., "The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart's Strategic Ideas", *War in History*, 3 (3), 1996, p. 301.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 302.

T. E. Lawrence had in his possession a broad scholarship and an impressive command of the written word. His was a profound intellect, schooled in – but not harnessed by – conventional military thought. He was also well versed in the art of command. He therefore possessed both the intellectual knowledge of military theory and the experience to question the accepted martial philosophers of his day. This he did incisively and eloquently. It is thus easy to see how his thoughts, so articulately expressed, provided the divine spark for Liddell Hart's fertile mind. The sin lay not in Liddell Hart's borrowing, but in his failure to acknowledge Lawrence for, as Gat points out, instead of blazing a trail he had been

“following Lawrence's headlights”.²⁰²

The evidence Gat provides on this issue relates to an article Lawrence had published in *The Army Quarterly* of October 1920. The article had been based on two chapters of the as yet unpublished *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* which dealt with military theory. In it Lawrence had outlined his thoughts on the subject. Correspondence found in Liddell Hart's archive shows that he had read it and, suitably impressed, had corresponded briefly with Lawrence about it.²⁰³

Some years later when, as military editor for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Liddell Hart was faced with producing an article on guerrilla warfare, he renewed his literary contact with Lawrence. Keeping Lawrence's publicity-shy habits in mind, Liddell Hart suggested that Lawrence's 1920 *Army Quarterly* article be used as the basis for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry. Lawrence readily agreed. He also informed Liddell Hart about his privately printed manuscript, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which had yet to make a public debut. In it, Lawrence informed Liddell Hart, were two chapters which had formed the basis of the *Army Quarterly* article. He also suggested who might assist him in obtaining a copy of the scarce monograph. Thus, armed with Fuller's brow and Lawrence's pen, Liddell Hart was becoming a

²⁰² *Ibid.* p. 303.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 302.

formidable force in his own right. His praise of Lawrence as soldier and intellectual, however, was profuse and sincere, as his biography *T E Lawrence: In Arabia and After* shows, but, like the tragic hero in a Shakespearean drama, Liddell Hart's fatal flaw prevented him from paying his intellectual debt to Lawrence in the currency it deserved. Gat states:

"However, rather as he behaved in Fuller's case, he pretended it was mere coincidence that his ideas resembled so closely what Lawrence had written before."²⁰⁴

Gat emphasizes that it is only Liddell Hart's reference to Lawrence's writings in 1921 and 1927, in his archives, that reveals the true story of who wrote what and when. Gat also points out that those who did not study *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* would be unlikely to notice the similarity. However, the public, exposed only to Lawrence's martial biography after his untimely demise astride "Boanerges"²⁰⁵ – a Brough Superior motorcycle – in an English country lane, could hardly have been expected to have seen the similarity²⁰⁶. Even if they were aware of it, the sequence of publishing events might suggest that the influence had come from Liddell Hart and not vice versa as Gat maintains.

Even Lawrence, reticent about personal fame as he apparently was, appeared to be unaware of the true sequence of events. Gat reveals that he did not even own a copy of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, much less keep a record of his correspondence with Liddell Hart which might have shed light on the matter. Gat quotes Lawrence naively writing to Liddell Hart after reading his article on the theory of strategy:

"I may overestimate the goodness and value of your book because it hits my tender spot. In the Seven Pillars I wrote a chapter on

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 303.

²⁰⁵ "Boanerges" is a biblical name which Lawrence transferred from motorcycle to motorcycle. It means "the Sons of Thunder".

²⁰⁶ Due to a typical Lawrence quirk, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was published publicly only after his death.

theory, which was an expression in terms of Arabia, of very much of what you argue about the aim of war.”²⁰⁷

Having assimilated Lawrence thus, Liddell Hart moved on.

Liddell Hart's use of Corbett, as mentioned earlier, was not a revelation. Gat's research points out that similarities and differences between Corbett and Liddell Hart have long been recognised by historians. Liddell Hart, as with Lawrence however, neglected to pay his dues. To quote Gat:

“But again, since to the best of my knowledge Liddell Hart never cited Corbett's name or work, it has not been detected how directly and decisively he was influenced by Corbett.”²⁰⁸

Corbett's case was vastly different from that of Lawrence. As one of Britain's foremost naval theorists, Corbett ploughed in the wake of the doctrine of unlimited war and the decisive battle on both land and sea that was fashionable at that time. He was one of the first military theorists to question the validity of these two strategic shibboleths which accordingly brought him into conflict with other major theorists, notably Spenser Wilkinson who openly disparaged his views. According to Corbett, Napoleon had ultimately failed and this cast doubt on his methods. Nelson's success, however, had served to keep the debate alive.

Both Mahan's and the Prussian-inspired Great General Staff's vision of naval and land warfare was strongly coloured by the Napoleonic pattern. Breathing fire, a country's land and naval forces had the primary task of destroying their opponent in pitched battle. Corbett questioned the validity of this mode of thought. His vision encompassed the multi-dimensional view of state, military and public with the required Clausewitzian perception. The battle – the act of armed conflict – was merely a means to an end and not the end in itself. The destruction of an opponent's army or navy was no longer the sole objective, but one, albeit a very important one,

²⁰⁷ Gat, A., “The Hidden Sources of Liddell Hart's Strategic Ideas”, *War in History*, 3 (3), 1996, p. 303.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 303-304.

of a series of possible objectives. To paraphrase the Duke of Wellington, no longer would they come on in the same old way and be stopped in the same old way. Corbett's insightful contribution to military thought, although ignored during the Great War, ensured that. Liddell Hart, the perennial borrower, was quick to make Corbett's view his own and transpose it onto land. Gat reveals that, in *Paris or the Future of War*, Liddell Hart wrote:

“The destruction of the enemy's armed forces is but a means – and not necessarily an inevitable or infallible one – to the attainment of our goal. It is clearly not, despite the assertion of military pundits, the sole true objective in war. ... All acts, such as defeat in the field, propaganda, blockade diplomacy, or attack on the centres of government and populations are seen to be but means to that end.”²⁰⁹

Corbett's hand is clearly seen in this passage as Gat points out, but, as always Liddell Hart declined to nod in a mentor's direction.

While Lawrence and Corbett had written in English, the French neo-Napoleonic school wrote in French. Liddell Hart's early years in Paris and his subsequent mastery of the French language had opened this world of military thought – denied his Anglophone colleagues – to him. During the early 1920s he had read the works of one of the more prominent historians of this school, Jean Colin. Colin, according to Gat, had become the standard-bearer for this school of thought although he was merely one of a host of capable historians who contributed to this school of French military thought. Others such as Henri Bonnard and Hubert Camon, although Colin's equals, did not receive the same recognition. Suffice it to say Liddell Hart burrowed his way freely around their work and found much to inspire him. Gat states that

“during the early 1920s he [Liddell Hart] repeatedly referred to Colin's books, which were his chief guides to modern military history and theory. In them he could find a scholarly summary of

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 305.

the findings and conclusions of the French neo-Napoleonic school".²¹⁰

The Franco-Prussian War and the success of Prussian military theory had acted as a catalyst for the redevelopment of French military thought. An old adage states that few things focus the mind like a sound beating. The French had received their beating, parted with Alsace and Lorraine, and were consequently extremely focused. Using archival material and sources previously unavailable to former commentators on Napoleonic warfare, as well as Napoleon's large body of correspondence, the neo-Napoleonic school sought to wrest a deeper understanding of Napoleon and his methods than had previously been possible. Their results were illuminating and occasionally at odds with Prussia's intellectual god of war. Gat explains:

"The French perceived very accurately that in viewing Napoleon's strategy from distant and defeated Prussia, Clausewitz had been primarily impressed by its immense energy, boldness and decisiveness. Fiercely reacting against the old 'strategy of manoeuvre', he had portrayed Napoleonic strategy as extremely direct and vigorously simple and had missed a great deal of its subtlety of conception and manoeuvre. They pointed out that, while it was true that Napoleon had always sought the great battle, he had never been as direct in going about it as Clausewitz had imagined. They were astonished by Clausewitz's assertion that 'Napoleon had never engaged in strategic envelopment', citing the many instances of Napoleon's *manoeuvre sur les derrières* the manoeuvre against the enemy's rear, one of the most fundamental patterns of Napoleonic strategy. This had been the pattern that had underlain the Marengo, Ulm, and Jena campaigns, to name only some of the most famous examples."²¹¹

Herein lies the root of Liddell Hart's dismissal of Clausewitz. Clausewitz, according to Liddell Hart, represented all the crassness of Prussian military

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 299.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 300.

theory which was ultimately based on a battle of annihilation. This affront to Napoleon's genius became an affront to him. He magnified Clausewitz's shortcomings to the point of holding him accountable for the bankruptcy of strategic thought in the Great War. Gat continues:

"It was these important ideas that Liddell Hart popularized, in both senses of the word, and forged into a weapon against nineteenth-century Prussian dominated military theory."²¹²

According to Gat, Liddell Hart owed much to the neo-Napoleonic French school as well as to other predecessors and colleagues. His fundamental philosophy on warfare had not sprouted from a seemingly barren wasteland but had been nurtured by many and keenly influenced by the writings of key military intellectuals, not the least being Fuller, Corbett, Lawrence and Colin and his contemporaries. It was they who had been his intellectual nursery and not military history.

The value of Gat's assessment of Liddell Hart however, is that, despite being aware of these flaws in the mythology which surrounds Liddell Hart, he views none of them as fatal to Liddell Hart's post-war reputation and gives the following reasons as to why he feels this way.

"The aim of this article is not to assess these ideas but rather to point out their sources. In the first half of the 1920s, the formative years in the development of Liddell Hart's view of war, he freely borrowed them from the writings of Fuller, the pre-war French school, Lawrence and Corbett. In all these cases he borrowed them without acknowledgment, in two cases from close friends. Consequently, Fuller grew increasingly resentful, especially as Liddell Hart from the late 1920s on no longer assumed in private or in public a subordinate role to Fuller, as he had done before. Lawrence, for his part, remained unaware of what was going on. In Liddell Hart's favour one may argue that no intellectual enterprise is without its sources of influence and inspiration, acknowledged or

²¹² *Ibid.*

unacknowledged. Moreover, if none of Liddell Hart's sources won the same renown as did his own theory of war, none of them had combined the weaving of such a sweeping counter-theory and counter-history of war with the possession of his tenacity in hammering out his ideas and his gifts for simplification and marketing. In most cases these are indispensable conditions of success."²¹³

It is Liddell Hart's "hammering" and "simplification" which concern this dissertation. Having established that intellectual forays into military history were not the primary source of his theoretical ideas, what kind of history did he write? Having committed himself to a theoretical chicken how then did he set about creating a historical egg?

5.2 B. H. Liddell Hart as historian

In *Thoughts on War* Liddell Hart quotes Rebecca West's well-worn observation to describe the state of his chosen profession:

"A study of military history brings ample confirmation of Rebecca West's *mot*: 'Before a war military science seems a real science, like astronomy, but after a war it seems more like astrology'."²¹⁴

It is a revealing sentiment for it shows that Liddell Hart viewed the serious study of warfare as being still in its infancy. Despite three millennia of recorded history, much of it dealing with warfare, and much theorising, he was still of the impression that a vacuum remained in place of a serious body of military thought. He continues:

"Those who have progressed furthest in exploration of war realize that its scientific study has barely begun. ... There is doubtless a science of war; but we are a long way from discovering it. Apart from the mere technique of utilizing weapons, what passes for

²¹³ *Ibid.* p. 308.

²¹⁴ Liddell Hart, B. H., *Thoughts on War*, Faber & Faber Limited, London, MCMXLIV, p. 24.

'military science' is hardly more than the interpretation of conventions nurtured by tradition and warped by sentiment, patriotic and professional. Sentiment and science are incompatible, but this truth has yet to be accepted in the military world.'²¹⁵

Written in April 1935, this passage from *Thoughts on War* bears all the scars of his continuing battle with established military thought in Britain, but it also sheds considerable light on what he viewed as his task as a military theorist. What is debatable however, is what he meant by the term 'science'. Did he mean that there were certain immutable principles relating to the conduct of war – as Fuller suggested in his early writings, notably *The Foundations of the Science of War* – or was he using it merely as a generic term to describe a recognized body of serious academic work on military theory? Richard M Swain shed light on this question in an article entitled "B.H. Liddell Hart and the Creation of a Theory of War, 1919-1933". Commenting on Liddell Hart's intellectual journey from tactician to strategist, Swain states that by 1922 Liddell Hart had moved away from the practical (formulating minor tactics) and begun to embrace the theoretical. According to Swain

"Liddell Hart was also developing his sense of the nature and source of knowledge about war. He was concerned to develop truly 'scientific' theories. Science he defined according to the New English Dictionary, as 'a department of practical work which depends on the knowledge and conscious application of principles,' or according to Webster's Dictionary, as 'Systematized Knowledge' or 'Knowledge classified and made available in work, or *the search for the truth*'. This is an important distinction, for it lays the emphasis on process rather than product".²¹⁶

The sentence "This is an important distinction, for it lays the emphasis on process rather than product" deals with the very core concern of this dissertation. Liddell Hart sought to give his work an intellectual pedigree it

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Swain, R. M., "B. H. Liddell Hart and the Creation of a Theory of War 1919-1933", *Armed Forces & Society*, 17:1, Fall 1990, p. 39.

did not possess. He sought to create the illusion that it had been inspired by an objective analysis of military history as opposed to a heavy reliance on predetermined “fishing expeditions” of the kind mentioned by Danchev. Liddell Hart reinforced this perception in the following lines quoted by Swain:

“‘The pure food of military science,’ Liddell Hart wrote in a somewhat intemperate article the following year, ‘can only be gained by study of and reflection on the lessons of military history and their application, in the light of new weapons and conditions, to future war’.”²¹⁷

History then, was to be seen as the ore from which his theory had been mined. It was also to be used as a valuable ally in a crusade undertaken to advance the “science” of warfare, the ubiquitous search for truth. He, with Fuller and certain other contemporaries, would thus lay a solid foundation for the modern study of war. The challenge was to make sure that their “science” resembled Rebecca West’s pre-war “astronomy” and not her post-war “astrology”. Was he successful in this task and if so, how?

The war poet Robert Graves, a good friend of Liddell Hart, even serving as a collaborator on a volume on Lawrence with him, saw definite flaws in Liddell Hart’s historical approach. He chided him gently as a friend in a letter written in 1942, for not being thorough in his historical research and accepting too much at face value:

“‘My criticism of your history’, ... , ‘is that you have (in the past) tended to accept school textbook accounts of generals or religious disputes or campaigns which you have not yourself studied in intimate detail.’”²¹⁸

Danchev agrees with Graves but qualifies the above statement with the following observation:

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 40.

²¹⁸ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 175.

“Graves was right. There was no alternative. Liddell Hart ploughed a broad field: by current standards a whole valley. He could not be expected to keep up with everything. The sharper criticism is that he neglected even the Holy Scriptures of the military profession. As Shelford Bidwell laconically observed, ‘British soldiers are little given to theorizing. Clausewitz, Jomini, von der Golz and Hamley were read only by those eccentric enough to study their profession.’ ‘Less a profession than a part-time employment,’ quipped Liddell Hart. Was he a victim of his own well-made jest?”²¹⁹

Danchev’s partial apology for Liddell Hart’s shortcomings as a historian can be seen as valid in the sense that many modern military historians have commented on Liddell Hart’s prolific output in articles and books, describing it as all the more remarkable since he did not have access to the extensive resources currently available to modern research institutions and foundations. Liddell Hart indeed had to “plough a wide field” but is this justification enough for his shortcomings as a historian? Many other historians were faced with the same challenges in their respective fields of expertise and, as posterity has shown, have been better able to weather the storms of controversy initiated by their work. Fuller is one such example.

The reason given by Danchev for this is that Liddell Hart was “a young man in a hurry”, apparently cutting corners in his haste. With regard to research, he covered far too much ground far too quickly in his reading. This often resulted in a shallow knowledge of his subject when it was not something either close to his heart or of long-standing interest.

Liddell Hart’s literary mien had been acquired during his youth through his avid reading of a host of subjects including military history. As an adult, however, he spent his reading energy with a purpose, scanning much of what he should have read in order to find what he was searching for. Danchev commented on Liddell Hart’s penchant for trawling the works of his contemporaries and peers for inspiration and vindication, likening him to

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

a literary pirate (Liddell Hart was a born corsair²²⁰) who plundered as he went:

“Liddell Hart fed on all these men [Corbett, Lawrence, etc] and many more besides. This does not mean that he read much of what they wrote. He had other fish to fry. There were problems to solve and people to see. After adolescence he was more a raider than a reader.”²²¹

Danchev later reiterates this point when discussing Liddell Hart's habit of skimming other historical works to buttress his own. Corbett is a case in point. Here Danchev reveals a raider at work:

“Of Corbett's stupendous shelf-full, he studied the introductory framework to *England and the Seven Years War* (1907), ‘The Function of the Fleet in War’ and diligently raided the rest of that long book for his Great Captain, Wolfe, a neglected portrait whose various guises and disguises, strategical and biographical, place it at the very heart of his development as a writer and thinker. The rest of Corbett's work he probably absorbed through others. He never owned and perhaps never opened the *chef-d'oeuvre*, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911). Richmond helped him with Corbett, and Aston with Richmond. He papered over the cracks with *The Expansion of England* (1883)”²²²

There is no question that Liddell Hart sought inspiration anywhere he could find it and, more importantly, used other historians to lighten the burden of his research. That, however, is only half the story. As Danchev states,

“[t]here is no question that Liddell Hart hunted and gathered very widely. He fished where he could, without fear or favour. ... He made some acknowledgment in his work – more perhaps than is generally credited – but no apology. None was expected (except by

²²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 176.

²²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 174-175.

²²² *Ibid.* p. 175.

posterity) and none was due. He was a young man in a hurry. He had mastered versatility and was studying effrontery. He was as needy of sustenance as he was greedy for acclaim – prophetic success rather than porcine failure. In context, and in comparison, the tireless fishing is unremarkable. What is remarkable is what he did with the catch”.²²³

Danchev mirrors Gat’s sentiments in emphasising that it is what Liddell Hart made of his “catch” that constitutes the primary issue and not, as many revisionists have gone to great pains to point out, where he found it. Richard Swain complements this line of thought. He advocates separating the two issues when viewing Liddell Hart’s contribution to military thought.

“The question of originality is another issue. Without doubt Liddell Hart was a borrower. He was widely read and took from previous and contemporary thinkers what he found useful and fitted it into his own framework. It was the framework for which he claimed originality more than the panels. Certainly by the time he arrived at the indirect approach he had achieved his own intellectual independence.”²²⁴

The fact that Liddell Hart was showing indecent haste in his quest for the truth had, however, also been noticed by the grand old man of British military history, Spenser Wilkinson. Wilkinson, an accomplished military historian and military theorist, was perhaps Liddell Hart’s only peer besides Fuller. He had this to say about Liddell Hart:

“Liddell Hart is a keen fellow whom I am disposed to like, ... but he writes too much and is in a hurry. The right way to get there (wherever he is going) is to go quietly. Slow and sure.”²²⁵

²²³ *Ibid.* pp. 81-82.

²²⁴ Swain, R. M., “B. H. Liddell Hart and the Creation of a Theory of War 1919-1933”, *Armed Forces & Society*, 17:1, Fall 1990, p 47.

²²⁵ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 158.

Wilkinson's academic background permeates the above comment. He was used to an environment where an academic wrote a book for his peers only after years of research. Books in themselves, besides their contribution to academic debate and a body of knowledge, were to mark the achievements of a lifetime, not a work in progress. Liddell Hart's thirty-four plus books and countless journal and newspaper articles stand out in sharp contrast to the handful of major works which mark most academics. Robert O'Neill succinctly framed the pressures facing Liddell Hart as follows:

"He had no foundation grants or research assistants to give him time for detached contemplation. He depended on a forceful pen and a copious output to hold his position. Strong views and a clear position on nearly all of the many defence issues of his day were requirements of the job. Had he ceased to produce a copious stream of articles and books he would have been eclipsed by other journalists. To repeat, his works need to be judged against the standards of their time and the circumstances in which they were produced. What was important was their hitting power within days or weeks of their publication. The rate of fire was often as important as the quality of the aim."²²⁶

Notwithstanding this litany of pressures, Wilkinson was correct in his original assessment. If Liddell Hart wanted to contribute towards the academic debate at the highest level he had to overcome these obstacles. Circumstances could not be used to mitigate shoddy research. Of his history, Wilkinson had this to say:

"The criticism I should be disposed to make of your history is that it is doctrinaire, rather than historical, By that I mean that you set out to teach dead generals how much better they would have done if they had been imbued with your views on the indirect approach."²²⁷

²²⁶ O'Neill, R., "Liddell Hart unveiled", *Army & Defence Quarterly Journal*, 120:3, July 1990, p. 12.

²²⁷ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 176.

Wilkinson had recognised an inherent weakness in Liddell Hart's use of history, which was that it was seldom an objective historical account. More often than not it was a parable masquerading as history. In an article published in the December 1998 *RUSI Journal* titled "Liddell Hart and Manoeuvre", Danchev assessed Liddell Hart's historical method as follows:

"How did he work? Despite his own protestations, he is not to be seen as a scholar or a scientist, I think, but as a creative artist. He was what Auden called a parable artist. He told parables. In Liddell Hart's case, he told parables of war."²²⁸

Creative artistry, while a compliment to an artist, poet or musician, are not the words with which a competent historian would like to be described and Liddell Hart was no exception. In his letter to Fuller in which he attempted to clear the air after Garvin's rejection of Fuller's contribution for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Liddell Hart praised Fuller for his "creative imagination", stating that it was one of his strong points. It is quite clear then that Liddell Hart did not view himself in the same light, although he had strong reservations about the reliability of documentary evidence and despised what he termed a "pedantic burrower of documents". (One wonders how he would have rated Mearsheimer?) In his book *Why Don't We Learn From History?* he severely criticised documentary evidence, stating that

"pure documentary history seems to me akin to mythology".²²⁹

This is not to say that he rejected documentary evidence outright, but that he was very circumspect about its use. Liddell Hart was very aware of the imperfections of a documentary approach i.e. documents were not always what they seemed. Records, memoirs and written accounts of individuals' experiences did not always tally with what was known about a specific event. The problem was how to recognise and avoid the pitfalls. It appears

²²⁸ Danchev, A., "Liddell Hart and Manoeuvre", *RUSI Journal*, December 1998, p. 33.

²²⁹ Liddell Hart, B. H., *Why Don't We Learn From History?*, P.E.N. Books, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1944, p. 9.

that Liddell Hart's suspicion comes largely from his own ability to blur the line. Liddell Hart was to all intents and purposes an intentionally reliable and honest witness, but he fell foul on occasion to embellishing and downplaying events to suit his own perception of what happened. His memoirs are excellent examples of this as is the whole sordid affair of his seeking Guderian's approval for a paragraph (written by him) inserted in the English edition of *Panzer Leader*. In researching his biography on Liddell Hart, Danchev came across what he referred to as a Liddell Hart hallmark – "lists".²³⁰

As stated Liddell Hart constantly rated everyone and everything, often posting his findings on lists displaying their order of merit. Danchev mentions diverse list titles such as "Really Great British Generals", "Great Captains" and "An All-time Field Force". But the most pertinent lists was the series titled "Chronic Poisoners of the Wells of Truth", "Frequent Foulers of the Wells of Truth" and the last simply as "Occasional" [Foulers of the Wells of Truth]. Liddell Hart counted himself, along with all his peers not mentioned in the first two groups, among the last for under the heading of "Occasional" he had written "all of us, including myself".²³¹

He was aware, then, that he was not immune to the perils of his trade, although he was not as candid with himself about his prejudices as Fuller was with his. Broadly, Liddell Hart implies with these lists that, whereas embellishments will occur (as they more easily do in a social science not dealing with empirical or quantifiable matter), he, along with his peers in "occasional", consciously avoided exploiting these errors for their own purposes.

Returning to Liddell Hart's strong feelings on the use of documentary evidence and the "manipulation of history", we are fortunate to have in his own words the following passage from *Why Don't We Learn From History?*:

²³⁰ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 30.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

"Experience has also given me some light into the processes of manufacturing history, artificial history. The product is less transparent than a silk stocking. Nothing can deceive like a document. Here lies the value of the war of 1914-1918 as a training ground for historians. Governments opened their archives, statesmen and generals their mouths, in time to check their records by personal examination of other witnesses. After twenty years' experience of such work, pure documentary history seems to me akin to mythology. To those academic historians who still repose faith on it, I have often told a short story with a moral. When the British front was broken in March 1918, and French reinforcements came to help in filling the gap, an eminent French general arrived at a certain army corps headquarters, and there majestically dictated orders giving the line on which the troops would stand that night and start their counter-attack in the morning. After reading it, with some perplexity, the corps commander exclaimed: 'But that line is behind the German front. You lost it yesterday.' The great commander, with a knowing smile, thereupon remarked: '*C'est pour l'histoire.*' [That is for history!] It may be added that for a great part of the war he had held a high staff position where the archives on which much official history would later depend had been under his control."²³²

This appears to be a rather crafty ploy on Liddell Hart's part, for it is an argument difficult to refute. This broad allegation against French records of the war is difficult to counter without exact names, incidents and locations being mentioned. This was a favourite Liddell Hart technique when writing history or using history in an argument or debate. He hardly, if ever, gave sources or footnotes, which most academics accept if properly used are essential if a work is to be accurately judged by one's peers.

This habit annoyed Fuller and became a bone of contention between the two with Liddell Hart ultimately dismissing Fuller's reservations on the subject.

²³² Liddell Hart, B. H., *Why Don't We Learn From History?*, P.E.N. Books, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1944, pp. 8-9.

It was, however, certainly a valid criticism of Liddell Hart's history. Danchev recounts Liddell Hart's considering footnotes "a snare and delusion", stating that

"[h]e [Liddell Hart] was taken to task by Boney Fuller – 'you should have inscribed authorities for the quotations, they are so helpful for the student'."²³³

They were also, Boney did not need to add, "so helpful" for checking the integrity of their use. Liddell Hart, however, certain as he was about his method, thought otherwise. Danchev mentions a useful passage on the use of footnotes written by Liddell Hart in his biography of Sherman which encapsulates his feelings on the subject. Here Liddell Hart's eloquent defence of his viewpoint is reminiscent of Wavell's comment that, with his knowledge and talent, Liddell Hart could defend both sides of an argument with equal vigour and success²³⁴, although in this case the vigour seems hollow and the success lacking:

"The absence of footnote references from the pages of this book may aggrieve some readers but will, I hope, please a larger number, who do not care for the untidy and irritating modern fashion of treating any historical study as a card-index rather than as a book to be read. Footnote references are an inevitable distraction to the reader's eye and mind. The justification for omitting them is not, however merely one of narrative smoothness and page cleanliness. Such references are only of value to a small proportion of readers – as a means to personal research or composition. By directing the student's attention to an isolated quotation or piece of evidence, such footnote references are apt to give this a false value; and can be the means of conveying a false impression. They may enable the student to find out whether the author's use of a quotation is textually correct, but they do not enable him to find out whether it

²³³ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 269.

²³⁴ Bond, B., *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, Gregg Revivals in association with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 1991, pp. 58-59.

gives a correct impression. For the true worth of any quotation can only be told by comparison with the whole of the evidence on the subject. Further, the practice of littering the page with references is not even a proof that the author has consulted the sources. It is easy to copy a quotation – complete with footnote reference! – from some previous writer, and a study of books on the Civil War, especially, suggests that this labour-saving device is not uncommon.”²³⁵

This passage contains a good example of Liddell Hart’s sometimes high-handed dismissal of his reader’s intellect. In it he highlights what are, admittedly, negative aspects pertaining to the use of footnotes. However, he proposes to pre-empt this problem simply by not supplying any.

He ignores the prime reason for the use of footnotes, i.e. the identification of sources for the reader in order to establish the reliability and integrity of the information with which he is being presented. On the premise that the reader might, according to Liddell Hart, misinterpret the original source of his factual information, he does not supply any information on his sources. In effect, this does away with the opportunity to disagree with him. Such an autocratic and misplaced sense of knowing better than the reader would not be tolerated today. It also established him, in the forum of his books, as the only authority qualified to decide on what was meant by a source. This was surely a convenient filter for a didactic historian for, in short, it cemented his position as the font of all wisdom to the legions of readers he was indirectly insulting. To summarise his argument: there were and are definite dangers in using footnotes indiscriminately, but the dangers inherent in discarding them are infinitely greater. This approach by Liddell Hart is typical of his broader approach to history as a whole. Once he had formulated an opinion in writing, he was impossible to move – witness his relationship with Clausewitz.

²³⁵ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 269.

Returning to Liddell Hart's dire warnings on the integrity of the official French archives of the Great War, it is interesting to note the gentle absolution he grants the British archives after once again dealing with the broad and very real problem of unreliable documentary evidence:

"Many are the gaps to be found in official archives, token of documents destroyed later to conceal what might impair a commander's reputation. More difficult to detect are the forgeries with which some of them have been replaced. On the whole British commanders do not seem to have been capable of more ingenuity than mere destruction or ante-dating of orders. The French were often more subtle; a general could safeguard the lives of his men as well as his own reputation by writing orders, based on a situation that did not exist, for an attack which nobody carried out – while everyone shared in the credit, since the record went on file. I have sometimes wondered how the war could be carried on at all, when I have found how much of their time some commanders spent in preparing the ground for its historians. If the great men of the past, where the evidence is more difficult to check, were as historically conscious as those of recent generations, it may well be asked what value can be credited to anything more ancient than contemporary history."²³⁶

Historical consciousness is a dangerous criterion for Liddell Hart to use, for he was more acutely aware of it than most. Why else would he have run down all his accolades for posterity instead of, as in Fuller's case, letting posterity find them where they fell or not at all. There is also more than a hint of Anglo-Saxon prejudice coming through regarding the French writing and handling of their archives. The British, Liddell Hart suggests, were merely guilty of holding their tongues while the French were guilty of active manipulation. He again provides no substance to these allegations except for his good name, instincts and reputation. These, perhaps apocryphal, anecdotes are typical parables of the kind that Danchev was earlier quoted

²³⁶ Liddell Hart, B. H., *Why Don't We Learn From History?*, P.E.N. Books, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1944, p. 9.

as having mentioned. The only difference here is that these are not parables of war, but parables of history. Liddell Hart, the eternal mentor, was chivvying his intellectual sheep into their pens with a combination of disarming logic and implied truth, but very little concrete evidence.

Liddell Hart was not a fool however, and his weaknesses as a historian are by no means fatal. They are precisely this – weaknesses. He was both erudite and perceptive and wrote too much history of value to be discarded lightly. He constantly grappled with “truth” in his search for confirmation however, and on occasion came perilously close to embracing it. He wrote:

“The exploration of history is a sobering experience. It reduced the famous American historian, Henry Adams, to the state of cynicism shown in his reply to a questioning letter – ‘I have written too much history to believe in it. So if anyone wants to differ from me, I am prepared to agree with him.’ The study of *war* history is especially apt to dispel any illusions – about the reliability of men’s testimony, and their accuracy in general, even apart from the shaping of facts to suit the purposes of propaganda. Yet if the historian comes to find how hard it is to discover the truth, he may become with practice skilled in detecting untruth – a task which is, by comparison, easier. A sound rule of historical evidence is that while assertions should be treated with critical doubt, admissions are likely to be reliable. If there is one saying that embodies a general truth, it is – ‘No man is condemned save out of his own mouth.’ By applying this test we can go a long way towards a clear verdict on history, and on history in the making.”²³⁷

In writing history it was Liddell Hart’s *modus operandi* to fashion the idea first and then flesh it out with historical examples. It is an obvious approach in Liddell Hart’s case for he did not approach history as a historian but rather as a theorist.

²³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 10.

Although he had read history at Oxford briefly before joining the KOYLI in the Great War, he never returned to complete his studies and suffered accordingly from a lack of exposure to professional academic historians. With regard to his intellectual development, he had initially been sucked into the world of minor tactics before embracing its strategic counterpart. Once his considerable intellect had been stirred by military theory, however, he sought to know more, and, as his confidence grew, he began to experiment. Writing had always come easily to him. His Fleet Street apprenticeship however, had introduced a certain cavalier attitude towards checking minor details, as time deadlines demanded, and only just survived on the gist of a breaking story. Details could come in later editions if the story retained its newsworthiness. Journalists wrote for the here and now, historians for the past. The same can be said of Liddell Hart's history. It was for the here and now. It had to be of relevance for the student immediately. Historical fact followed theoretical speculation with monotonous regularity as he wrote history as a theorist and not a historian. In fact, Liddell Hart's first concerted attempt to write history as a historian was his two-volumed *The Tanks* published a mere 11 years before his death in 1970.

Recognised as his most enduring historical work, it was started in the summer of 1946 at the request of the then Colonels-Commandant of the Royal Tank Regiment. It had a painful gestation and was published only some 14 years later in 1959. A perhaps wiser and humbler Liddell Hart had this to say in his preface to the first volume:

"Early in 1946 I was asked by the then Colonels-Commandant of the Royal Tank Regiment to undertake this book, and began preparation of it that summer. Despite a long and close acquaintance with the subject, and with the Regiment (previously the Corps), the historical exploration in detail proved to be a much harder and longer task than any of us had reckoned. It has also been much the most impressive lesson I have had in the complexity, obscurity, and fallibility of historical evidence – particularly when it is a matter of memory. I have spent far longer on this book than on any previous one, and am still far from content. Any readers

who question the facts or conclusions in it will find me very ready to agree that I may be wrong – though not necessarily with their alternate views. After more than forty years' experience in the study of history the nearest I come to being sure about anything is that historians, or witnesses, who are confident of being right are those most likely to be wrong."²³⁸

Returning to Liddell Hart's cavalier attitude towards details, it is important to note that they are the lifeblood of history. Historians need the faint clues these details provide to point them in the right direction. A casual reference to an unknown text, individual or event could alter the way historians viewed a particular world, an example being the great debate in Greek Hoplite warfare over how exactly the opposing armies approached each other and commenced battle. Did they come together in a violent surge as described by the Greek word *Othismos*, and, after the initial bone-jarring clash, shove against each other in a lethal pushing match with each side willing the other to collapse, or did they simply square off against each other in a more open formation and fight a series of loose order duels? We do not know. We know of most or all the major Greek battles in the ancient world. We have a fair idea of the political intrigues which brought about the wars between Athens and Sparta, not to mention between the Greek city states and ancient Persia, but we do not know a fact so mundane that from Thucydides to Xenophon, no one took the time to explain in detail how the two Hoplite phalanxes closed for battle. To answer this question we have to pay close attention to the minor details of other descriptions relating to Hoplite warfare and, being sensitive to their nuances, make an educated guess. This methodology was foreign to those who worked within the time constraints of the fourth estate. As Swain remarked, in Liddell Hart's case the rate of fire was as important as the quality of aim. Somewhere a compromise had to be made.

As a journalist, Liddell Hart was daily subjected to these pressures and, as an author, to the pressures of his publishers. Notwithstanding these there was the additional pressure of his financial dependency on his output. All

²³⁸ Liddell Hart, B. H., *The Tanks 1914-1939*, vol 1, Cassell, London, 1959, p. xiii.

these factors combined to have an effect on his writing. Having cut his teeth in journalism, it is difficult to believe that it did not mark his writing of history. Swain identifies a key weakness in Liddell Hart's writing style which can perhaps be traced to his journalistic background – a propensity for deliberate overstatement. Swain states in his conclusion of "B.H. Liddell Hart and the Creation of a Theory of War, 1919-1933" that

"Liddell Hart suffers from careless reading, a vulnerability greatly aggravated by his use of colorful analogy and deliberate overstatement".²³⁹

Both the writing qualities mentioned by Swain are characteristic tools of the press where limited space dictates that a reader's interest must be immediately grasped and held at all costs, and no doubt must exist in the reader's mind as to the meaning the article is trying to convey²⁴⁰. While this might make for good journalism, it does not make for good historical writing.

Liddell Hart's modus operandi of letting theory dictate historical examples can be seen in the way he approached the circumstances surrounding the development of his theory "The Expanding Torrent". Danchev explains:

"The expanding torrent was not deduced Newton-and-apple-like, from nature's method of attack, as Liddell Hart said at the time. Quite the reverse (as he later confessed). First he had the idea and then he thought up the image in which to convey it. 'I actually

²³⁹ Swain, R. M., "B. H. Liddell Hart and the Creation of a Theory of War 1919-1933", *Armed Forces & Society*, 17:1, Fall 1990, p. 46.

²⁴⁰ In his biography of Marshal Foch, *Foch, Man of Orleans*, (Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1931) Liddell Hart offers an analysis of Foch's book *Des Principes de la Guerre*. A paragraph in this critique reveals Liddell Hart's impatience with writing that obscures the fundamental message the author is trying to convey. It was a direct contrast to Liddell Hart's own forceful style which left no doubt in the reader's mind as to the intention.

"Foch's opening chapter on the teaching of war comprises some eight thousand words. To trace any clear ray of thought running through them is difficult and nonetheless because of the bright colouring of the panes which give a casual impression of radiance. It is with a sense that the author involved himself in needless confusion and contradiction through excess of verbiage that we come to his second chapter."

Marshall-Cornwall, J., *Foch as Military Commander*, B. T. Batsford Ltd, London, 1972, p. 17.

thought out the method first,' he said, 'and then the parable by which to make it live in the mind.' Thus the parable artist at work. We are not dealing here with somebody who sifted evidence discriminately, as scholars and soldiers are supposed to do, to see what would turn up and then analyse it. Liddell Hart ransacked evidence thievishly and bagged what he could find for his own decided purposes."²⁴¹

This was in direct contrast to the image Liddell Hart liked to conjure up for his reading public of a slow, deliberate thinker who weighed up the evidence objectively before giving a verdict. Examining Liddell Hart's "indirect approach" Danchev dispels this popular image with the following words:

"He purported to derive this approach from a survey of some 200 campaigns over 25 centuries – a kind of Baedeker's Battles – and an intensive study of Sherman in Georgia, but the same conclusions would have emerged from dinner at the Savoy and going to see *Gone With The Wind*. He already had the notion. What he wanted was confirmation. He ransacked history bagging examples of what he had already thought out."²⁴²

It is a common argument by his detractors that Liddell Hart merely dressed up the obvious instead of developing something new. Correlli Barnett – in an article for *RUSI* entertainingly titled *Basil Faulty?* – was particularly scathing in his condemnation of Liddell Hart's theories and more pertinently, his writing of history. Barnett criticises Liddell Hart's history for concentrating too narrowly on the battle or, as Liddell Hart was wont to see it, the decisive manoeuvre. This is what Correlli Barnett had to say:

"Liddell Hart's histories of the two world wars could have been written by 'Stonewall Jackson' Henderson, in that they are narrowly concerned with military strategy and implementation.

²⁴¹ Danchev, A., "Liddell Hart and Manoeuvre", *RUSI Journal*, December 1998, p. 34.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

You will find virtually nothing in these books on logistics or communications, though these are the key to the conduct of war in the field. You will find no coverage or understanding of the industrial and technological basis of war, although this is what determines the quantity and quality of the weapons with which each side fights. And indeed, as Alex Danchev shows in his book, Liddell Hart had *no* understanding or interest even in the technology of the tank, his great theoretical love.”²⁴³

The pressures of time and the need to establish a particular perception of how modern wars should be fought can be used in Liddell Hart’s defence, although this argument can only carry so far. Robert O’Neill candidly discusses Liddell Hart’s habit of gathering historical evidence selectively to suit his purposes, bluntly stating that Liddell Hart’s history is not always to be seen as an objective analysis of historical fact, but rather as food for thought when discussing military theory:

“The strength of this rejection of the methods of 1914-18 and the intense pressures of his [Liddell Hart’s] life led him sometimes to jump – but not always – to conclusions and to ignore historical facts which did not suit his theorising. His works are not to be regarded as objective expositions but rather as strongly didactic, advocating a line with which the reader was welcome to argue.”²⁴⁴

O’Neill elaborates further:

“He was used to trading blows and was no mean exponent of the art of verbal fisticuffs. His approach was that if he believed he had a good idea, he would publish without waiting to examine it from all sides. He was highly controversial in his day, but his arguments were convincing to many and even to those who were more

²⁴³ Barnett C., “Basil Faulty?”, *RUSI Journal*, April/May 1999, p. 62.

²⁴⁴ O’Neill, R., “Liddell Hart unveiled”, *Army & Defence Quarterly Journal*, 120:3, July 1990, p. 11.

critically disposed, his work was regarded as useful in challenging established ideas.”²⁴⁵

The rush to get to print was a typical Liddell Hart trait which was, perhaps, also a carry-over from his journalistic training. Most of his books were written in a matter of months (with some notable exceptions) and were rarely returned to once printed. The idea of revising a book did not appear to sit well with him. His core work, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, underwent two revisions, which could more accurately be termed enlargements, since originally appearing in the guise of *The Decisive Wars of History*. However, both new editions retained the original text to a large degree.²⁴⁶

An observation by Liddell Hart, oft repeated by his critics, is that one must “[a]lways write on any subject, particularly military, with one eye on the historian of the future”.²⁴⁷

While much can be made of his intentions when writing this thought, it is important to note that a qualifying statement accompanies it. The original statement at first glance, however, comes uncomfortably close to echoing the sentiments of the anonymous French general in charge of the French military archives, except that in this case, “That is for history” becomes

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ The only real difference was that Liddell Hart added and interpreted subsequent conflicts in light of his theory of the indirect approach. The last new and enlarged edition came out in 1967. The tank was then still the undisputed queen of the conventional battlefield and he made much of the Israeli performance of 1948-1949. The Israeli success in the Six Day War in 1967 probably further confirmed his ideas. However, it is not clear how he would have incorporated the lessons of the Yom Kippur War had he lived to see it. Doubtless, remembering Wavell’s words, he would have found a way. It is unfortunate that rather than write a history of the Second World War, which took up much of his time in the last decade of his life, he did not attempt a major revision of his theoretical work in the light of new evidence and the intellectual maturity he had by then achieved. Colonel John Boyd of the USAF, the originator of the Boyd Cycle - otherwise known as the OODA loop - was able to articulate Liddell Hart’s fundamental thesis more economically and with a higher degree of sophistication than Liddell Hart had been able to attain. Liddell Hart’s thesis, while mentioning psychological dislocation as an objective, had traditionally viewed manoeuvre in terms of relational movement in space. Boyd however, articulated it in terms of relational movement in time or tempo. One wonders what heights Liddell Hart would have been able to scale had he concentrated on the theoretical constraints of his thesis, such as it’s only being relevant between two rational actors acting in a rational manner, and adapted it for broader application.

²⁴⁷ Danchev, A., *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 70.

“That is for the historian”. Clearly the ambiguity of the original statement also bothered Liddell Hart for he added the following explanatory note at a later date:

“By this I meant enabling an historian to trace the process of thought by which I arrived at my ideas. At this time (December 1920) the entire sum of my writings amounted to a few pamphlets, one booklet, some five articles and the draft of the official manual *Infantry Training*, still unpublished – all embodying and expounding my evolving theory of tactics and of war. But I had become conscious that my ideas were likely to have an important effect in shaping future events, and, having a strong sense of history, felt that I ought to make it clear how the concept had evolved in my mind.”²⁴⁸

Having examined the origins of Liddell Hart’s ideas earlier in the chapter and seeing the many and diverse influences and sources of inspiration, it is clear that Liddell Hart is being less than honest on this occasion. He consciously manipulated the record to obfuscate any outside influence to the point of marginalisation. In short, he sought to create the illusion that history had guided an enlightened mind to find what had eluded the rest of mankind, not to mention his contemporaries. Liddell Hart sought to elevate his eternal rank to that of a “Great Captain”. While the Guderians, Mansteins, Zhukovs and Rokossovskys had plucked the physical prizes of their profession in war, Liddell Hart wanted to harvest the intellectual prize for himself. The battlefield might belong to them, but the classroom was to be his alone. It was not his most attractive trait.

5.3 Conclusion

The title of John Mearsheimer’s exposé on the inner machinations of Liddell Hart’s failed attempt to protect and enhance the mythology which surrounded him after the Second World War, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, is peculiarly apt. In exposing the less savoury aspects of Liddell

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 77.

Hart's character, Mearsheimer sought the analogy of weight to denote the slow inexorable pressure of historical truth as it crushed Liddell Hart's reputation. It accomplished that and much more besides. It succeeded in placing Liddell Hart's immense contribution to twentieth century military thought in the correct context after alternative periods of slavish adulation and revisionist ridicule. This was in itself a more difficult and time-consuming task than any of his antagonists or self-appointed guardians perceived. It required perspective and the tireless efforts of many to evaluate objectively the man, his milieu and his work. Finally, nearly three decades after his death in 1970, an accurate multi-faceted picture of Liddell Hart is starting to emerge. He was an original and articulate thinker, a talented writer, a consummate thief of intellectual property, egotistical, vain, a generous mentor to young scholars, an innovator, a pervasively influential theorist and very importantly – a part-time historian. Liddell Hart needed a Mearsheimer to separate the wheat from the chaff. While it is recognised today that in certain instances Mearsheimer took his criticism too far, it is also recognised that in many instances his criticism was valid and contributes greatly to our understanding of Liddell Hart and his place in twentieth century military thought.

The nature of this chapter has highlighted Liddell Hart's negative attributes at the expense of his positive ones. However, to view the man in his entirety, it is important not to dwell on these facets alone. Perhaps his single most important contribution, as Michael Howard rightly pointed out in an obituary, was almost single-handedly to take military theory out of the barracks and into the public domain. Fuller, for all his originality and acerbic wit, could not match Liddell Hart in this sphere. He did not share Liddell Hart's enthusiasm for the uninitiated and tended to write more for his peers and less for the man in the street. Liddell Hart's post-war kindergarten of young historians all bear testimony to a generosity that was all but contrived.

A problem Liddell Hart created for himself in later life was his claim to pre-war prescience. In post-war Britain he successfully emulated Bertrand Russell in holding himself up as a guru to a new, inquiring generation

attempting to understand how Europe's greatest war had come about. He forged this status on his claims of prescience before the war, claims he had to defend in an academic arena. This was Mearsheimer's reason for writing *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*.

Mearsheimer, in the course of researching a book *Conventional Deterrence*, found discrepancies and inconsistencies between the accepted version of Liddell Hart's pre-war contribution to military thought and the documented version. It is true that Liddell Hart enhanced his reputation at the expense of others. Mearsheimer brought it to public attention. The danger of manipulating history for personal ends is nowhere more evident than in the damage Liddell Hart did to his posthumous reputation by seeking to enhance his status during his lifetime. It almost caused irreparable damage to his real theoretical achievements and reputation. Fortunately, the weight of history prevailed and Liddell Hart's reputation has resumed its rightful place as one of the twentieth century's major military thinkers.

The result of Mearsheimer's introspection is that, with regard to Liddell Hart, military historians are not quite as gullible as they once were. In essence, Mearsheimer's critique of Liddell Hart has not so much tarnished Liddell Hart's reputation as burnished it. The Liddell Hart of the late 1960s was a romanticised figment of popular imagination. The one presented by Danchev and Gat, not to mention O'Neill, Searle and Swain is not. It is more real and infinitely more impressive.

Captain André Dubarle, an officer who served under Marshall Foch in the Great War and who was later to die in action, described the belligerent defender of the Marne in the following words:

"He is a priest who judges, condemns, and teaches in the name of a dogma that inspires him, and to which he has devoted all the strength of his brain and his heart. General Foch is a prophet inspired by his God."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ Marshall-Cornwall, J., *Foch as Military Commander*, B. T. Batsford Ltd, London, 1972, p. 57.

This was Liddell Hart almost to the letter except that his dogma was the “indirect approach” and his god – limitation.

The reality of Liddell Hart’s and Fuller’s use of history is that they did not sift historical evidence carefully, analyse the results and then establish a trend. Quite the reverse, they let preconceived ideas dictate historical examples. Often they – Fuller in particular – relied on second hand sources of information (supplied by what Liddell Hart referred to as second-rate pedants) because it complemented an argument. Their theories had more to do with common sense and astuteness in recognising future trends than with history.

Liddell Hart once discussed how, having developed his theory of the “expanding torrent”, he had to search for some way to illustrate it in simple terms. Eventually he alighted on the example of rushing water seeking the path of least resistance. While neither the theory nor the example are striking, as both have occurred in nature and warfare since time immemorial, the sequence of theory followed by example is important. It illustrates the manner in which they worked. Rather than battle with history’s intricacies, Fuller and Liddell Hart chose to cleave the Gordian Knot with their substantial intellects. The inevitable result was that they were unable to explain satisfactorily how they had untied it.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: A battle for the mind

6.1 General

A photograph taken in 1919 shows Fuller, mounted alongside Brigadier-General Sir Hugh Elles, leading the newly formed Tank Corps across Westminster Bridge during the great Victory Parade of 1919²⁵⁰. Trundling behind them, destined to an early retirement as memorials and monuments in villages and town squares throughout England, came a squadron of Medium C tanks. It was a moment of supreme irony. Elles – who had ridden into battle astride the first tank ever to do so – entered the first year of peace mounted on a white charger accompanied by Fuller, the future nemesis of the cavalry corps. Instead of their rumbling talisman of victory – the tank – they had chosen the horse, for both appeared every bit as susceptible to the romantic bond of man and beast as were their cavalry counterparts.

The Medium Cs, stoically bringing up the rear, were better suited to the marshy, bullet-swept expanses of no-man's land but not so for the solemn sedateness of a victory parade. It would take flickering newsreels of victorious dust-stained tank crews and another two decades to supplant the cavalry officer in the popular imagination. This black-and-white image of the horse-mounted Fuller and Elles, more than most, simultaneously represents the end and birth of an era. The horse would remain on until the end of the Second World War, hauling German artillery once again towards victory at Sedan, stoically bearing the weight of *Panzer* wagons across the open steppes of the Eastern Front and, ultimately, being eaten at Stalingrad. It would not, perhaps with the exception of Poland's gallantly futile gesture and the Cossack bands harassing the retreating columns of the Eastern Front, again take its place in the front line. Except for ceremonials the horse's time had passed. Fuller had known this as he had trotted beside Elles through the ecstatic crowds. Perhaps others had realised it too. It was Fuller, however, who first articulated the lesson and drew the initial line in the sand

on behalf of mechanisation. He was soon to be followed by an inspired Liddell Hart. This was Fuller's achievement. It had been professional instinct and experience, honed by his appointment as Chief of Staff of the Tanks Corps, which had guided him to this conclusion and not the study of history. It would be military history, however, that was to be the veneer of intellectual respectability he would graft to his method and use to justify his military thought like other theorist-historians. As the analysis of his use of history in chapter 4 revealed, as with theorist-historians such as Liddell Hart, his history was a curate's egg. It was good only in parts. Simply put, the fundamental question posed in the first chapter of this dissertation is as follows. In the light of the unique pressures faced by the theorist-historians, did the good justify the bad?

6.2 Theorist-historians versus academics

As emphasised by Tudge (in chapter 1), a social science does not live or function in an absolute environment but in a social one with all its attendant problems and fluctuating variables. De Saxe's observation that "the human heart is the beginning and end of all matters pertaining to war" is perhaps most true of the writing of military history. As highlighted in chapter 2 the history of warfare has, from time immemorial been coloured by a society's culture, experiences, desires and limited understanding of past events. For every Thucydides who has emerged to catalogue and synthesise historical debate and understanding, a host of pretenders have followed.

A recent example of this was the heated debate, spilling over into diplomatic action, between Korea and Japan over the role of Japan's occupation of Korea during the first half of the 20th century and Japan's use of Korean women – among other Asian women – as "comfort women" in their war-time military brothels. Iris Chang's acrimonious debate with Japanese academics and their role in rewriting Japanese school textbooks concerning Japan's role in the Second World War and the "Rape of Nanjing (Nanking)" in particular, is further indication of the often parochial interests of modern

²⁵⁰ Fletcher, D., *Mechanised Force: British tanks between the wars*, HMSO, London, 1991, p. iii.

historians. An example closer to home which was recently played out in a European court was the libel case brought against Deborah Lipstadt by David Irving in an attempt to resuscitate his reputation as a historian. It was an attempt which failed miserably for the right reasons²⁵¹. It had the added effect of bringing the spotlight to bear on particular aspects of a nation's history which is often at odds with its modern perception of itself. An examination of this phenomenon lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is nevertheless an avenue which lends itself readily to the debate.

Barbara Tuchman, a historian whose reputation and method continue to flourish, regarded the following paragraph in *The Guns of August* (titled *August 1914* in Britain and the Commonwealth) to be "the best thing in the book." It is a note on her sources which, she contended, was rarely read. It concerns the problems she faced in writing history on as large and as complicated a scale as the Great War.

"A full bibliography of the subject would fill a book. No other episode in history has been more fully documented by its participants. They seem to have known, while they lived it, that like the French Revolution, the First World War was one of the great convulsions of history, and each felt the hand of history heavily on his own shoulder. When it was over, despite courage, skill and sacrifice, the war they had fought proved to have been, on the whole, a monument of failure, tragedy and disillusion. It had not led to a better world. Men who had taken part at the command level, political and military, felt driven to explain their decisions and actions. Men who had fallen from high command, whether for cause or as scapegoats – and these included most of the commanders of August – wrote their private justifications. As each account appeared, inevitably shifting responsibility or blame to someone else, another was provoked. Private feuds became public, public controversies expanded. Men who would otherwise have remained mute were

²⁵¹ Professor Deborah Lipstadt wrote a book published in 1994 titled *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Penguin Books Limited, London, 1994.) Irving, who denies that the Holocaust took place, contended that the book

stung to publish, as Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien by Sir John French. Books proliferated. Whole schools of partisans, like those of Gallieni and Joffre, produced libraries of controversy. Through this forest of special pleading the historian gropes his way, trying to recapture the truth of past events and find out 'what really happened'. He discovers that truth is subjective and separate, made up of little bits seen, experienced and recorded by different people. It is like a design seen through a kaleidoscope; when the cylinder is shaken the countless coloured fragments form a new picture. Yet they are the same fragments as made a different picture a moment earlier. This is the problem inherent in the records left by the actors in past events. That famous goal, '*wie es wirklich war*', is never wholly within our grasp."²⁵²

This then, is the best that the 'good' part can aspire to be. Tuchman uses the German historian Leopold von Ranke to identify the true task of the historian. It is to "find out how it really was". Tuchman quotes Ranke directly "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*" (as it actually has been). As she points out "it is never wholly within our grasp."²⁵³ As explained in chapter 4 on Fuller's use of history and chapter 5 on Liddell Hart's use of history, this was not the object of the theorist-historian. They – the theorist-historians – wanted to show "how it should be". They wanted the public to view the carefully constructed designs of their own personal kaleidoscope. They therefore assumed the responsibility of historical interpretation based on their own intuition. Accordingly, the theorist-historians must be judged by a set of criteria different from those of Ranke. Tuchman was alive to the importance of intuition. She addressed it in 'The Historian's Opportunity', an essay published in a collection under the title of *Practicing History*.

"Though some will debate it, intuition, too, is an aid. The intuitive historian can reach an understanding of long-past circumstance in much the same way as Democritus, the predecessor of Aristotle,

undermined his professional reputation as a historian and sued Lipstadt for libel. Irving lost the case.

²⁵² Tuchman, B., *August 1914*, Constable and Co. Ltd., London, 1962, p. 428.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

arrived at the idea of the atom. His mind mulling over observed phenomena, worked out a theory of matter as composed of an infinite number of mobile particles. The process may have been cerebral, but its impetus was intuitive. Strict disciples of history as a science may scorn the intuitive process, but that attitude comes from being more catholic than the pope. True scientists know its value. It is an arrow shot into the air, which will often pierce the same target that the scientific historian with his nose on the ground will take months to reach on foot."²⁵⁴

While Fuller and Liddell Hart's formulation of a cohesive military theory may pale in comparison to Democritus's subject, it is directly comparable in its formulation and, as it eventually dealt with the legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, proved the logical culmination of Democritus's weighty contemplation.

6.3 The hypothesis revisited

In chapter 1 the hypothesis was laid out as follows:

It is the contention in this dissertation that the manipulation and distortion of military history by the theorist-historian results not from conscious dissemblance, but the desire to pursue military excellence.

In the chapters dealing with the origin of both Fuller and Liddell Hart's military thought and their relationship with history, it was established that both indeed manipulated history to mirror their theoretical precepts.

Academic historians – "cloistered dons" as Liddell Hart once referred to them – had the benefit of a contemplative lifestyle, bought and paid for by academia. In their so-called "ivory tower" they also had the luxury of dealing in theoretical concepts which were often safely beyond the confines of testable hypotheses. If their theories were not undisputedly refuted by archaeological phenomena and circumstantial evidence, it had as much

²⁵⁴ Tuchman, B., *Practicing History*, Macmillan London Limited, London, 1982, p. 59.

chance of being right as anyone else's theory. Theory was thus located in a world of educated speculation and guesswork confined only by what little fact was known.

This was not the case for the theorist-historian. His hypothesis ultimately lay within what was, and remains, a testable dimension. Fuller's theory of mechanised warfare, as articulated and espoused in *FSR III* (1932), was to be weighed, seven years after publication, against the reality of the Second World War. The same held true for Liddell Hart. While the tautology of his so-called theory of the indirect approach was always evident, even to devout disciples such as Raymond Aron and André Beaufre, his valid writings on warfare and the subtler nuances of his philosophy were likewise held up to scrutiny against the harsh light of wartime experience.

The nature of the problems faced in equipping a fighting force and the lead time involved in gearing an army, navy or air force for a specific doctrine or philosophy of war-fighting, places an enormous demand on a nation. It inherently precludes second-guessing. This is the peculiar burden of the military theorist for, as with those in the medical profession, his mistakes are paid for in blood. What the theorist-historian writes must, therefore, be both applicable in practice and what he believes to be right.

Next comes the burden of selling the idea – in the case of Fuller and Liddell Hart the idea was mechanisation – to the armed forces, the politicians and, as South Africa's continuing arms procurement debate reveals, the public at large. Once a hand has been put to the plough, or in this case the sword, there is no going back. This was the task faced by the theorist-historian. Thus it can be seen that his work, in effect, reveals only one side of, what is in essence, a debate. Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford University, Robert O'Neill, cautioned against this approach in the 1988 Annual Lecture for the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives:

"Liddell Hart's devotion to a line of argument meant that he wrote interesting books – books which give one the pleasure and stimulation of arguing against part of their line as well as the

satisfaction of accepting part of it. They should not be read with simple-minded reverence lest the reader take away a view which is not fully-formed, representing only one side of a debate.”²⁵⁵

The same could be said of Fuller. O’Neill continues:

“I am curious as to how far Liddell Hart expected his books to be read and accepted uncritically. He wrote as an advocate and employed the techniques of advocacy. He was challenging an orthodoxy that he saw as disastrous and all too well-entrenched. Nowadays in the absence of that particular orthodoxy, and with the benefit of historical hindsight, some of his works read poorly, but that is not to say that they lacked merit at their time of publication.”²⁵⁶

Herein lies the crux of the issue. The works of the theorist-historians had much merit at the time of their publication. They not only provided an alternative to existing ideas but also opened the door to future debate. Taken outside the context and debate in which their work was written and produced, the theorist-historians’ historical method suffers considerably under modern scholarship. Seen from within the context and debate, one is suddenly able to make better sense and a different picture begins to emerge.

The theorist-historians were compelled to write in the manner they did by the circumstances within which they found themselves. O’Neill provides an interesting perspective on the academic integrity of their dilemma:

“Of course, in this approach he [Liddell Hart] was not alone. Ever since men have written history, they have used it, and still use it, for justifying particular lines of policy they wish to see adopted. There is nothing improper in this approach, provided that the conclusions fit the facts on which they are based. At least Liddell Hart did not hide

²⁵⁵ O’Neill, R., 1988, “Liddell Hart and his Legacy”: Annual Lecture; a public lecture to mark the 25 years of work in the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives.
www.kcl.ac.uk/lhcma/info/lec88.htm.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*

his purpose as do some writers who seek surreptitiously to twist evidence to support this theory or that about how wars were caused, how international tensions have been raised and sustained at a high level or how stupid or criminal various political and military leaders have been.”²⁵⁷

O'Neill also points out that

“[u]nlike some strategists today, Liddell Hart was not ignorant of history and knew generally where to look to find evidence to support his theories. But it was not always a successful quest and the more ambitious his designs became the less securely they stood”.²⁵⁸

The theorist-historians pursued “practical” military excellence in their writing of “theoretical” military history. That was their motivation. It was a battle for the mind. With the capture of this objective they were remarkably successful as they inflamed debate and articulately defended their theories with their numerous books and articles. While their research methods did, on occasion, fall within the strict scientific confines of historiography, it is well worth remembering Tuchman’s defence of intuition. Fuller and Liddell Hart hit the mark with an “intuitive” arrow much quicker than their opponents could have rationalised their post-war predicament. Fuller acknowledged this feat when he rejected any notion of prophecy. He saw himself as a catalyst for the change that was inevitable. Sooner or later his opponents would realise that he and Liddell Hart were broadly correct in their assessment of the direction the future of warfare would take. For himself and Liddell Hart, however, it was a question of the sooner the better, and in the pursuit of that objective the end always justified the means.

Tuchman further identified their dilemma when commenting on the conclusions represented by a collection of her essays:

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*

“Whether these selections when gathered together offer any philosophy of history is a question I hesitate to answer because I am rather afraid of philosophies. They contain a risk for the historian of being tempted to manipulate his facts in the interest of his system, which results in histories stronger in ideology than in ‘how it really was’. Yet I do not suppose one can practice the writing of history over a long period without arriving at certain principles and guidelines.”²⁵⁹

Fuller and Liddell Hart did succumb to the temptation of manipulating the facts. Their personal philosophy of war formed the very marrow of their historical skeletons. They made no apology, however, for – as with all theorist-historians – the *Schwerpunkt* was ideology and not history.

In short, the theorist-historians marched where academics feared to tread. It was inevitable as they were first and foremost philosophers of war and their history would echo not in the halls of academia, but on the battlefields of the future.

²⁵⁹ Tuchman B., *Practicing History*, Macmillan London Limited, London, 1982, p. 8.

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