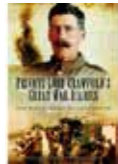


Reviews

Private Lord Crawford's Great War Diaries: From Medical Orderly to Cabinet Minister

Edited by Christopher Arnander
Pen and Sword Books, £19.99



The author of these diaries was probably the only person in the upper reaches of the British aristocracy to serve in the ranks during the First World War. But the 27th Earl of Crawford and 10th Earl of Balcarres was no dim-witted backwoodsman peer, too hapless and incompetent to be given a commission. On the contrary, he was very much officer material, fitted indeed for the high command which he did not want.

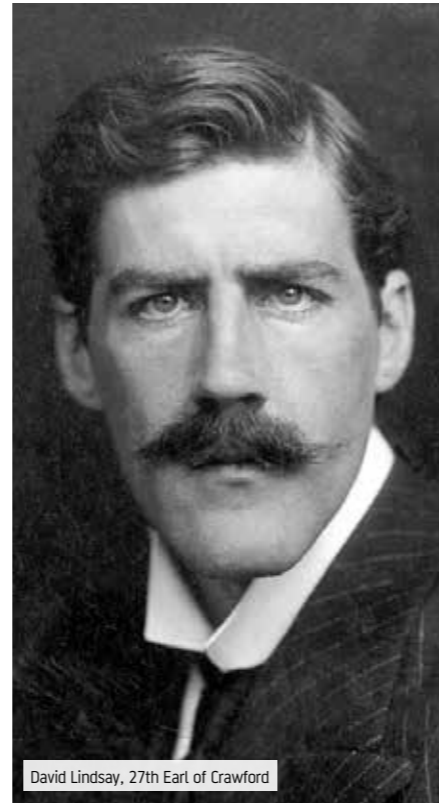
His was a life of high achievement. He owned and ran the successful Wigan Coal and Iron Company in Lancashire, employing over 10,000 people. He nearly became Viceroy of India. Before inheriting his two Earldoms in 1913, he won high praise among Unionists (as the Conservatives then called themselves) for his work as their Chief Whip in the Commons which contributed conspicuously to healing the Party's disastrous split over tariff reform and rebuilding its fortunes after its humiliation by the Liberals at the 1906 election.

Returning from the Western Front as a lance corporal in 1916, he joined the Cabinet as Minister of Agriculture and swiftly ended

the severe food shortages that threatened to cripple the nation at war. Later in his career he brought the BBC into being and became a dominating influence on practically all the great museums and cultural institutions in the country. He himself owned the finest library in private hands.

His decision to enlist in the ranks in 1915 puzzled many of his contemporary admirers. It was certainly an unexpected manifestation of his remarkably versatile, imaginative character and of his deep commitment to public service in many different forms. He acted as he felt he should; his wife and family gave him full support while lessening the rigours of his life in the ranks a little by dispatching hampers from Fortnum and Mason, which also brought joy to his comrades. He later described his time on active service as a "grim experience upon which I look back with infinite tenderness".

In addition to his many other qualities, he was also a brilliant diarist. That has been clear since the publication in 1984 of a generous selection of the previously unknown journals which he kept continuously from 1892 until his death in 1940, brought to light and edited by my friend and sometime co-author, Professor John Vincent. Crawford observed events and people with shrewdness, asperity and wit, rejoicing in picaresque incidents and diverting anecdotes which bring his readers constant delight. John Vincent concentrated



David Lindsay, 27th Earl of Crawford

mainly on the politics and the formidable service to the country's heritage. This new volume, also excellently edited and admirably timed as the centenary of the outbreak of war approaches, brings us a second instalment of the diaries covering the remarkable period of his life spent in the ranks which was largely omitted from the earlier edition. Both books can be read with huge profit and enjoyment.

Crawford's war diaries record, often in passionate language, both his varied experiences and the lasting impressions that they left on him. From the start he felt "not the glories of war, but its horrors", as he said in a speech in Manchester. In the spring of 1915 he was cast into despair by the British army's failure to secure the decisive success that had been expected in the battle of Neuve Chapelle. A few yards were gained at a cost of 13,000 casualties, giving a first intimation of the huge losses this terrible war was to bring. He felt unable

to remain at home where, unusually, he had no significant public work to do. No one, he discovered, took any notice of debates in the Lords which were very poorly attended.

At the age of 43 he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, giving a false age and declaring himself unmarried in order to gain admission. In a letter to his wife some months later he wrote that "occupation of a specific character calmed my conscience which was distraught by Neuve Chapelle and much which preceded it. I could not have remained at home old as I am".

Arriving in France in May 1915, his first diary entry began bleakly: "Amazed by the number of rats". Three days later a colonel gave the new arrivals a stern lecture on venereal disease. "It was admirable – I have never heard the case so well put". The urgent need for stern words was brought home to him on 1 June when he visited a hospital. "There are at this moment some 1,200 VD cases. They include 60 officers, one a lieutenant colonel". That, however, represented an improvement. "There have been as many as 2,000 cases at a time. I had occasion to pass through the officers' lines. What can they think of themselves! I took my mental revenge by refusing to salute".

Private Lord Crawford was distinctly unimpressed by many of the officers who came his way, finding them "utterly incompetent to lead men, to inspire

confidence or respect". He was inclined to subscribe to what later became known as "the lions led by donkeys" view of the war. He was shocked by the number of officers who flouted regulations by bringing excessive baggage with them. One major, "proprietor of the biggest kit we have ever handled", arrived with "a little under a quarter of a ton – five great lumps of vanity", including a primus stove to sterilise his food and drink in the trenches. Unlike Crawford, they seemed incapable of fending for themselves. No less than 14% of Crawford's RAMC unit were officers' servants.

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In mid-June 1915 he took up his duties as an orderly in a makeshift casualty clearing station at Hazebrouck, a town in French Flanders of which he became very fond. He remained there for the next 12 months. There is not a word of complaint in the diaries about the conditions in which he lived. "I sleep on a wooden floor and feel it as soft, softer indeed than a feather bed at home." He greeted the inevitable arrival of lice with imperturbability; the ways

in which their habits differed from those of fleas greatly interested him. He soon got used to constant swearing. It was not difficult to tolerate "a very few foul phrases repeatedly employed".

He regarded the German army with considerable respect. "The ignorance of our officers, and above all their hopelessly unprofessional way of looking at things, offers a sad contrast to the attitude of the enemy." He was impressed by what he heard and saw of those who were taken prisoner. A typical German junior officer "takes himself very earnestly, never forgets he is an officer, and loses no chance of self-improvement in captivity even when sick. How very different with us," he wrote on 25 September 1915. A captured airman, Lieutenant Buchholz, won the diarist's esteem. "Though young Buchholz is only 17, he had a professional and business-like air, lacking in many of our officers of 10 years' service."

In peace, as well as war, this great Christian Conservative with wide interests lived by the principles of duty, service and sacrifice. His diaries show how he put those principles into practice to his country's lasting benefit without ever taking himself or the world around him too seriously. ■

Lord Lexden is a Conservative Peer and historian who has drawn extensively on Crawford's diaries for his own publications



A German soldier leads a group of British officers who are prisoners of war during World War I, place and date unknown. Private Lord Crawford was distinctly unimpressed by many of the officers who came his way, finding them "utterly incompetent to lead men"