



24 peers were killed in action in WWI. Lord Lexden looks back on the contribution the Upper House made to the war

Peers and their families were conspicuous throughout the First World War. Nothing, of course, could have been less surprising. For centuries many heads of aristocratic families and their sons had made their careers in the armed forces. Like most of its other members, they rarely appeared in the House of Lords itself.

When the superbly equipped British Expeditionary Force, commanded by Sir John French, later Earl of Ypres, arrived in France in August 1914, peers were well represented among its officers. They included the 6th Viscount Hawarden, aged

24, the first peer to be killed. He died on 28 August during the later stages of the Battle of Mons—a battle in which the British suffered grievously as a result of the incompetence of their commander, as Max Hastings shows devastatingly in his widely acclaimed book on the first months of the war, *Catastrophe*. By the end of 1915 the British death toll included nine peers and an astonishing 95 sons of peers – a catastrophe indeed and one that would get much worse.

Grief bound the Lords and Commons together. The first MP to be killed, Arthur O'Neill, who died on 6 November 1914, was the son of a peer (his own son, Terence, would become Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in the 1960s). Altogether no fewer than 12 of the 19 MPs who lost their lives were the sons of peers. The upper house itself suffered even more; 24 of its members died. Noble families were undeterred by

ever growing casualty lists. Twenty years later Viscountess Barrington looked back on the “pride and exaltation of fond parents and wives, their willing offering of their sons and husbands, to fight in so great a cause”.

When the war was over, a detailed record was compiled of all peers and their sons who had played a part, large or small (in some cases very small indeed). The long list was printed as an obscure appendix in the multi-volume *Complete Peerage* published in 1930. It runs to 67 pages and is now available on the Parliamentary website, having recently been rediscovered. The compilers of this important document included new peers created after the war up to 1930 (and their sons) as well as those who held titles during the war (plus sons). There were some 620 members of the Lords in 1914; by 1930 the number had risen to over 750, thanks largely to Lloyd George's



British artillery at Gallipoli in December 1915. The 5th Earl of Longford led a cavalry charge across open ground during the battle, telling his officers: “Don't bother ducking – it doesn't do any good.”



Soldiers on their way to Mons as part of the British Expeditionary Force in August, 1914. The 6th Viscount Hawarden became the first peer to be killed in the war at the Battle of Mons

profligate creations. To gain an accurate impression of the contribution of the Lords to the war, the subsequent creations have to be stripped out.

Irritatingly, the 1930 compendium, otherwise rich in detail (helpfully listing medals and decorations), omits the ranks held by the noble combatants. Overwhelmingly, of course, they were officers. So far I have only come across one peer who was perfectly content to be no more than a private. The 27th Earl of Crawford and 10th Earl of Balcarres was one

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of the truly outstanding Tories (or rather Unionists, as they were then known) of his generation. Inheriting his titles in 1913 after winning acclaim as his Party's Chief Whip in the Commons, he decided in 1915 at the age of 43 ('old as I am') to join the Royal Army Medical Corps where after a few months he was made a lance corporal

(he thought sergeant should be the limit of his ambition). He recorded his experiences movingly in the diary which he kept throughout his life. He was unsparingly honest. On 8 August 1915 he wrote, "during the early stages of the war many of our men behaved very badly, looting and destroying during the retreat [from Mons], and giving themselves and us a most evil reputation". This wonderful diary has recently been published – I reviewed it in *The House* on 21 March – shedding important new light on the war as the centenary of its outbreak approaches.

Crawford left his casualty clearing station on the Western front in July 1916 to become Minister of Agriculture in the first wartime coalition. His predecessor but one had been the Liberal 8th Baron Lucas and 11th Baron Dingwall who served in Asquith's previous government. In Cabinet he sat next to Winston Churchill who wrote later, "I had known him since South African days, when he lost his leg. Young for the Cabinet, heir to splendid possessions, happy in all that surrounded him, he seemed to have captivated Fortune". A passionate airman, fortune deserted him on 3 November 1916 when he was reported missing, presumed dead during a flight over German lines. His

great-nephew, Ralph Lucas, is my polymath colleague on the Tory benches in the Lords.

No peer showed greater bravery than Brigadier-General the 5th Earl of Longford, father of Frank, the Labour minister and prisoners' friend, whose wife was the aunt of Harriet Harman. This very different Longford led a cavalry charge across open ground to capture a strategically important hill in Gallipoli on 21 August 1915. "Don't bother ducking", he told his fellow officers. "The men don't like it and it doesn't do any good". His body was never recovered.

The names of all 24 peers, together with those of the sons of peers, who died are inscribed on the fine memorial in the Royal Gallery. They represent one in five of those from the peerage who served in the war. "One loss follows another till one is dazed", said the former prime minister, Lord Rosebery, as he pondered—as we should today—the grievous destruction of so much talent and unrealised potential. 🏰

Alistair Lexden is a Conservative peer and political historian. His review of Private Lord Crawford's Great War Diaries can be found on his website, [www.alistairlexden.org.uk](http://www.alistairlexden.org.uk). He is grateful to the staff of the House of Lords Library and of the Parliamentary Archives for their help