



a huge boost to David Cameron ahead of the 2015 general election. A combination of more powers devolved to Scotland and English nationalist sentiment may result in a federalised UK.

*The Battle for Britain* is a must-read for every Westminster dweller; it expertly delivers the background and the context of the vote that will determine our futures, north and south of the border. 🇬🇧

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### Public Schools and the Great War: The Generation Lost

By Anthony Seldon and David Walsh

Pen and Sword Books, £25



As the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War approaches, firmly held popular assumptions about the futility of its campaigns and the incompetence of its commanders are being challenged by an avalanche of fine, well-researched books, written with a wide audience in mind. For far too long the popular view of the war has been far removed from that of most of our military historians. More is now being done than ever before to bridge the divide, and to try and ensure that the terrible conflict is seen in true historical perspective by the country as a whole.

This is one of the very best of the new books on the war. Anthony Seldon and David Walsh, who are both highly accomplished teachers and writers, re-examine with subtlety and skill the part played by the country's public schools. Their contribution has rarely been depicted in flattering terms. Did not these institutions, bastions of the classics in a country that needed more science teaching, produce the much-derided generals who skulked in luxury while their troops were slaughtered? Did not foolish young officers, imbued with outdated public school ideals of glory, recklessly sacrifice the men in their charge?

These widely held views have long been summed up in the popular phrase, "lions led by donkeys". It provided the title of an unduly influential book, *The Donkeys*, published over 50 years ago by the vain, wayward Tory MP and acclaimed diarist, Alan Clark. Our leading military historian,

Sir Michael Howard OM, dismissed it at the time of its publication as "worthless". Nevertheless, it gave an immense stimulus to the negative image of the war which became fashionable in the 1960s and has remained so ever since.

Drawing on a wide range of sources which include material supplied by more than 200 schools, Seldon and Walsh show that what has been widely regarded as historical truth is in fact a gross caricature. British generals did not keep themselves out of harm's way, sipping port in French chateaux. Nearly 60 were killed and some 200 injured. As for the junior officers, the virtues instilled in them by their public schools – duty, courage, loyalty, endurance – proved immensely valuable when heavy

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responsibilities were suddenly thrust upon them in the trenches of the Western Front, as warfare took a form that was wholly unforeseen when the conflict began. A public school education was by no means the only preparation for successful command in terrible circumstances, but none

proved more effective.

Few former public schoolboys glorified war for long. Many struggled with doubts and reservations, expressed movingly in the letters and highly personal memoirs that conveyed their deepest feelings to family and friends with painful honesty. These invaluable records make plain to posterity how in many different ways they came to terms with the war into which they had been cast.

Numerous extracts from them give this book a memorable, haunting poignancy. "I had no romantic illusions," wrote one young officer from Westminster School. "I was not eager or even resigned to self-sacrifice and my heart gave back no answering throb to the thought of England. In fact I was very much afraid ➤



1916: a British Grenadier Guardsman keeps watch on 'No-Man's land' as his comrades sleep in a captured German trench at Ovillers, near Albert, during the Battle of the Somme

and afraid of being afraid, lest I show it." A Wykehamist, who turned down a commission, told his family that "I will not hate Germans to the order of any bloody politician, and the first thing I will do after I am free will be to go to Germany and create all the ties I can with German life." He was killed on the Somme a few months later. To him and many others the war was an abomination, as these eloquent authors rightly describe it.

In a powerful foreword, Sir Michael Howard highlights the key point: in

1914 the world faced for the first time an "industrial war that... demanded a new kind of professionalism that could master the complex interaction of weapons, many of which had barely been invented. That professionalism could be learned only by a ghastly process of trial and error". Seldon and Walsh show how young officers drawn from the public schools acquired that professionalism without which victory could not have been won.

"During the centenary and beyond," they conclude, "we would do well to

immerse ourselves in the experiences of men and women who participated in the Great War, and whose lives were affected by it." There could be no better advice for those organising the commemorations that are to come. 🇬🇧

**Lord Lexden** is a Conservative peer and historian. From 1997 to 2004 he was General Secretary of the Independent Schools Council whose seven member associations include the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, founded in 1869, to which most of those widely referred to as public schools belong.