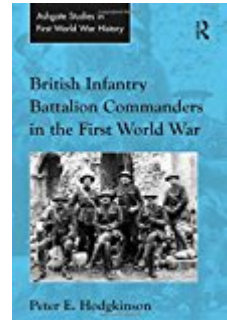


Peter E. Hodgkinson. *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War.* Ashgate Studies in First World War History Series. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2015. 264 pp. \$124.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4724-3825-6.



Reviewed by Geoffrey Hayes

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

This is an ambitious and rich study by Peter E. Hodgkinson, whose prosopographical analysis of the British army's commanding officers (COs) addresses four central questions: Who were these men? How competent were they at their posts? What qualities made them good officers? And did the British army create a meritocracy by the end of the war? Frustrated by judgments built on layers of anecdote and myth, Hodgkinson seeks answers from a database of over four thousand officers who saw active service. The result is a highly (possibly overly) detailed but still important collective biography of the lieutenant-colonels who commanded British battalions in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

Some of the findings offer few surprises. British officers could no longer purchase commissions after 1871, but the upper and upper-middle classes still supplied the lieutenant-colonels of 1914, and well beyond. They were the sons of officers, gentlemen, and clergy, with a few emerging from the business or professional classes. Hodgkinson's survey of citizen COs suggests that

there was not quite the social revolution within the commissioned ranks that some have claimed. Regular (professional) officers were far more likely to lead a battalion in 1914, as they had more war experience than their territorial (reserve) counterparts. More surprising is that 45 percent of all active infantry COs during the war came from the regular force, thus reinforcing the long-held perception that professionals held favor over amateurs. The professionals included a large number of dug outs, a derisive phrase for retired, mainly professional officers chosen to lead the new army. The author concludes from an extensive sample that dug outs were not nearly as old or out of touch as some have believed.

The turnover of COs through attrition was dramatic, especially through the fall of 1914, the summer and fall of 1916 on the Somme, and the German offensives in the spring of 1918. A CO's average tenure in command of a battalion was 8.5 months. One in ten would die in command; another four would be replaced for wounds, incompetence, breakdown, or as part of a divisional house

cleaning. In such circumstances, army officials looked increasingly outside the regiment for successors, but the regulars still preferred to find their commanders from within. Although the official history cites a 1917 order that no one older than thirty-five could lead a battalion, the author discovered plenty of older COs well into 1918. Others were youngsters. The most intriguing in my view was John Hay Maitland Hardyman, who was just twenty-three when he died leading the 8th Somerset Light Infantry near Bapaume in August 1918. Hardyman then held membership in a protest organization seeking an end to the war.

The author's professional background in clinical psychology provides an especially fascinating discussion of the qualities good officers required. No one at the time recognized the terms of modern psychology, but most then understood that officers had to look after their men (referent power) and be good at their jobs (expert power). A neat survey of the wording found in decorations they received reinforced familiar terms: bravery, intelligence, diligence, fairness, paternalism, and tact. No wonder that some could not bear the strain.

Dozens of narratives drawn from personal records and regimental histories tease out a complex view of these officers, whether they were regulars or citizen COs, "fire-eaters" or "rat-catchers" (p. 184). As to whether the BEF was a meritocracy by the end of the war, Hodgkinson says no. Some rose on merit, like the prewar jam salesman who enlisted as a private and ended the war a lieutenant-colonel. He was an exception. To the end, seniority lists and personal recommendations still favored the professional over the amateur.

This is a remarkable piece of scholarship, a fine example of the Birmingham school of military history. The combination of statistical work and rich personal accounts stands as a testament to the author's exhaustive curiosity. Most prefer personal narratives over statistics, but it is still surprising that, despite the extensive work in the

numbers, the author includes here just fourteen tables and no statistical appendices. Even a few more tables could have better situated the many (indeed, too many) personal narratives. Perhaps the author might make available online some of his quantitative research.

The questions Hodgkinson addresses and the many approaches he follows will undoubtedly prompt more study. Further questions spring to mind from this work. Can we compare British lieutenant-colonels to their colonial or Allied counterparts? Were the backgrounds, training, or length of tenure of colonial commanders any different than those studied here? Or, can we compare battalion or divisional leadership through the war in any objective way, either by casualties, fatalities, or even unit court-martials? In other words, can numbers gleaned from the battlefield help us understand how these men actually led?

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