

The use and abuse of history by the military¹

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To be a successful soldier you must study history
General George S. Patton

This paper examines the use and abuse of history by the military. In particular it focuses on military history and its employment in support of officer education by professional armed forces. The paper will examine what is meant by the term ‘military history’, dividing the discipline into ‘popular’, ‘academic’, and ‘professional’ categories and analysing each in turn. The main focus of the paper is on the latter, which relates to the employment of military history by armed forces in the belief that it is ‘useful’. It is somewhat unusual for a subject in the arts and humanities to find its value discussed in such utilitarian terms and the paper seeks to establish just what ‘useful’ might mean in this context before offering suggestions as to what this implies about the way in which military history is taught.

Any historian writing on this topic must acknowledge their debt to Michael Howard², whose 1961 lecture on the ‘*Use and abuse of military history*’ is justly regarded as a classic and is required reading for all with an interest in the field (Howard, 1962). His focus on the dangers and the opportunities presented by the study of military history is a key theme of this paper. Howard was a decorated war veteran, winning the Military Cross in the Italian campaign of the Second World War. The author of this paper can boast no such experience but rather is the veteran of fifteen years of teaching military history and strategic studies at military colleges in both Ireland and the UK, with occasional forays further afield. Sadly, neither government has yet agreed to issue a campaign medal for such service but the experience does inform the analysis within the paper and also the conclusions that, perhaps unsurprisingly, emphasise the enduring importance of military history.

What is military history?

A dictionary definition suggests that history is ‘*the study of or a record of past events considered together*’ (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2011). The simplicity of this

¹ This paper is based on a presentation given by the author to the Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies at Liverpool Hope University on 24 Feb 2011.

² Michael Howard is President Emeritus of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and prior to this was Chichele Professor of the History of War and Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University and Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale University. He was also a founder member of the War Studies Department of King’s College London.

definition hides some rather heated debate on the nature of history, particularly on the possibility of objectivity within historical enquiry and on the value of theory. The subject is grounded in the examination of primary sources, *'the relics and traces left by past societies'* (Marwick, 2001:156) and thus in an empirical methodology in which the historian gathers and interprets evidence. On this basis Arthur Marwick defined history as *'bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians'* (Marwick, 2001) while Michael Howard succinctly explained that *'history is what historians write'* (Howard, 1991:11). The result will always be an imperfect reflection of what actually happened, conditioned by the strengths or limitations of the historian's method and intellect, but the discipline remains grounded in an attempt to show *'how it actually was'* based on evidence rather than speculation or *a priori* theorising.

If one returns to the dictionary it suggests that *'military'* means *'relating to...belonging to...or typical of the armed forces'*. Logically, therefore, military history is a body of knowledge about the past, produced by historians, that relates to armed forces. Howard defined military history simply as *'the history of armed forces and the conduct of war'* (Howard, 1984:5) and John Lynn offers a very similar approach, defining it as *'the study of military institutions and of the conduct of past wars'* (Lynn, 2008:18). The emphasis that both place on the conduct of war is significant. Warfare, the employment of organised violence, or the preparation to employ violence, lies at the heart of the discipline. This implies a particular focus on combat, the preparation for combat and the support of those engaged in combat.

Most historians who write about war are not military historians. For many years the dominant approach to the study of war within the discipline has been the *'war and society'* or *'new military history'* approach. Work within this genre does not focus on military activity per se but rather on the impact of military organisation and activity on wider society. The approach often involves an examination of issues such as the impact of war on literature or on attitudes to class, race or gender. Critics have suggested that this de-militarises military history by ignoring the core function of armed forces, representing something of a *'flight to the suburbs'* of the subject area (Murray and Sinnreich, 2004:17). Geoffrey Best, an historian who has written numerous books focusing on the armed forces and society once admitted that he, like others within the field, did not actually know much about the *'sharp end'* of the subject. He believed that he could not truly be described as a military historian as he lacked the specialist insight into the combat activity of armed forces, something that he accepted was their basic *raison d'être*. He suggested that he, and others like him, could more properly be described as being *'militarily engaged'* (Howard, 1984:11-12). Studying war in its broadest context does not necessarily make you a military historian.

Not everyone is happy to focus on the sharp end of military activity. Stephen Morillo, in his excellent introduction to the subject, has noted that military history is not the most respected branch of historical enquiry and the root of this disapproval lies in its subject, war (Morillo, 2006:1). Rather too many people seem to believe that study implies approval and that war is not something that one should approve of. Of course, the obvious rejoinder is that, to paraphrase Sun Tzu, the conduct of war is of such

importance, quite literally the province of life and death, it is vital that it be studied carefully (Sun Tzu, 1963). It should never be forgotten that wars always result in death, destruction, waste and human suffering, all too frequently on a truly staggering scale. However, ignoring the phenomenon is unlikely to make it go away. As Trotsky reputedly said, ‘*you may not be interested in war, but it is interested in you*’.³ Indeed, one might suggest that in a democracy in the twenty-first century it is particularly important that as wide a range of people as possible should understand the nature and character of modern warfare and of armed forces in order that they are equipped to make intelligent judgements about the way in which their own governments seek to employ military force. The requirement for military personnel to understand these issues should be too obvious to require further elaboration, particularly given the historical correlation between ignorance and military incompetence (Murray & Sinnreich, 2006:2).

As has already been suggested, military history can be categorised into three broad types: popular, academic and professional (Lee, 2007. Lynn, 2008). While this paper focuses on the latter it will briefly examine popular and academic approaches as both have an impact on the professional use of military history.

Popular military history

Military history is popular with the general public. This much is reflected on the shelves of any high street bookshop, in the numerous television and radio documentaries devoted to the topic and also through the popularity of film and television dramas with a military focus. One might quibble about the specific content of series such as ‘*Band of Brothers*’ or ‘*The Pacific*’ but their viewing figures suggest a popular engagement at least with the military history of the Second World War. The prevalence of various re-enactment groups and military history societies provides further evidence of popular interest and some, such as the Military History Society of Ireland, do much good work. One might even suggest that the popularity of video games with a military focus provides yet more evidence of an enduring interest in ‘things military’.

John Lynn has reflected on the apparent truth that the main consumers of popular military history are men and boys (Lynn, 2008). He does not go as far as one commentator who suggests that military history plays a role in teaching men to be men (Grimsley, 2007), but does ponder whether military history publications represent the male equivalent of the romance novel. Pandering to such an audience is not something liable to promote scholarly standards, as Lynn explains:

[b]oth varieties of literature provide a form of escape, in which the key to the author’s success is excitement and readability. In the case of military history, this requires that the author stress drama and not trouble the reader with too much context or complexity. Battles are too often described as ‘decisive’ and generals praised as being particularly talented or condemned

³ The analysis here builds on a discussion of these issues by the author in the introduction to *Understanding Modern Warfare* (Jordan et al, 2008).

as particularly inept. Often, but certainly not always, the result is a portrait painted in strong colours that leaves little room for nuance. (Lynn, 2008:21)

Indeed, it is fair to say that while some popular histories manage to convey difficult and complex ideas in an easily digestible fashion without compromising the subject matter, rather more do not. Quality within the genre is variable but much of what exists places an emphasis on glossy pictures and technical detail and offers superficial analysis and little depth, sophistication or awareness of the broader context. The worst examples might with some justice be called 'warnography', military porn designed to titillate through graphic images and lazy caricatures far divorced from reality.

There is nothing wrong with popular military history as entertainment. Indeed in some senses it is a positive thing, reflecting a wide ranging interest in military history that can translate into healthy sales for those authors able to meet this demand and into a strong uptake for courses in military history in those universities that deign to offer them. Liberal minded academics may have reservations about the subject area but these concerns seem not to be shared by most students. On the downside the vast and continuous outpouring of low quality non-academic military history can lead the credulous astray and can also contribute to the rather lazy assumption that all military history is of similar quality and that somehow the entire discipline is unscholarly (Lee, 2007:1116). This might be akin to deciding that all poetry is flawed because you do not think much of the rhymes found in greetings cards but, in truth, academic military historians do not help themselves in this respect by often swallowing their principles and dipping their toes into the world of popular history either to pocket a healthy royalty cheque or to massage their vanity by appearing on television.

Academic military history

Academic military history is largely confined to universities and similar academic institutions and, much like other history specialties, it has its own journals, conferences and research institutes. Indeed, it is quite well served in this respect, with a number of good peer-reviewed journals dedicated to it, including the *Journal of Military History*, *War in History*, and *War and Society*, and there are numerous other journals relating to war studies and strategic studies that are receptive to military history submissions. Similarly, it is a field in which it is not impossible to find a publisher for scholarly monographs. While military history has not figured prominently in the Irish publishing scene, except for works that focus explicitly on Irish topics, university presses elsewhere have not shown a marked aversion to publishing military history and respectable academic publishers such as Routledge and Palgrave/Macmillan have series devoted to the field helped, perhaps, by a degree of cross-over in the markets for popular and academic history.

Nevertheless, military history does suffer from an image problem within the academic world, a point noted both by Jeremy Black and Stephen Morillo in their recent studies of the field, and something emphasised particularly by American military historians (Morillo, 2006. Black, 2004). Military history is often seen as being less than respectable

and not quite scholarly. Although very popular with students it is a deeply unfashionable topic with almost everybody else. The claim, by an anonymous critic, that *'military history is to history as military music is to music'* is not untypical and many simply disapprove of the general subject area. This can and does translate into difficulty getting support from mainstream funding councils and problems getting work published in high profile history journals excepting those with a specific military or strategy focus. The issue appears particularly acute in the United States, where some military historians seem to feel under siege in a hostile world in which *'few academic disciplines occupy a lower caste than military history'* (Bunting, 2008:13). John Lynn is not alone in commenting on a trend where retiring military historians are not replaced and young postdoctoral students cannot get work. Indeed he suggested that the situation was so bad that aspiring military historians would have to learn to disguise their work and cloak themselves in more fashionable garb, linking their work to gender or culture or race if their careers were to survive (Lynn, 1997; Lynn, 2008). The status of the discipline in Ireland is little better. Despite the existence of War Studies Centres in Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin both are largely within the war and society genre, militarily engaged but not necessarily engaged in military history. The Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies (CMHSS) at NUI Maynooth does have a particular focus on operational military history and provides tuition and supervision in the subject area, in addition to offering the only graduate programme in military history at any Irish university, but it remains something of an oasis in otherwise rather arid terrain.

As an aside it is worth noting that the need to embrace different disciplines in order to disguise the military nature of one's research can have positive side effects. John Lynn's own work fruitfully embraces the cultural context of military activity, not least to debunk the popular but flawed cultural emphasis of Victor Davis Hansen (Lynn, 2003. Lee, 2007). As Robert Citino has stressed, there is little point in retreating into a corner to ponder the academic equivalent of *'why do they hate us'* and the best academic military history follows a research agenda that in its breadth and sophistication need bow to no-one. His suggestion that historians from the broader discipline should *'[t]ry something genuinely daring, even countercultural, in terms of today's academy. Read some military history'* is nevertheless revealing in terms of the perceived isolation of military historians from their colleagues in more fashionable subject areas (Citino, 2007:1090).

Professional Military History

Professional military history, sometimes called 'applied' military history, is based on the assumption that history can have a real and direct utility. It is an approach most closely linked to armed forces and to military academies and its support represents a major opportunity for employment for military historians. For example, the Military History Division at the US Military Academy at West Point employs 25 lecturers (eight of whom are civilian), while the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in the UK employs 14 lecturers in the War Studies Department and eight more in the Department of Defence and International Affairs. On an even larger scale, the Defence Studies Department at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College currently has a full-time academic staff

just short of 50 lecturers, roughly half of whom are military historians. This suggests that the military, or at least some militaries, take military history seriously.

The US military, in particular, places a significant emphasis on what are called '*military history operations*'. For example, the US Army has a Center of Military History, a Combat Studies Institute that declares itself to be a military history think tank, it sponsors a number of military history publications, promotes funding and scholarship schemes, employs numerous historians at the Cadet School at West Point and the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth while a significant section of the academic staff at the Training and Doctrine Centre at Leavenworth are devoted exclusively to the provision of military history field trips, 'staff rides' to use the military parlance. The army has even gone so far as to create a doctrine for military history in the same way that they have a doctrine for counter-insurgency and other military activities and military history personnel deploy forward on operations with the army in a conscious effort to gather evidence that will, in the fullness of time, promote the creation of accurate historical accounts. They do not do this purely for the fun of it. The assumption underlying their use of military history is that '*its use by units and individuals can teach valuable lessons from their recent past or provide unique insight into more distant times...A wise soldier learns from the past, both the successes and failures*' (HQ Dept. of US Army, 2003) The focus on 'lessons learned' is a prominent one in cadet schools and staff colleges the world over and reflects the belief that military history can be used to direct positive effect. This can be a dangerous assumption.

Michael Howard once noted that history does not teach lessons. Historians may claim to teach lessons, and often they may do so wisely, but 'history' does not (Howard, 1991:11). History does not provide a ready-made, reliable and uncontested guide to future actions. Just because something worked in the past does not mean that it will do so in future, leaving aside the complicating reality that historians are quite liable to disagree vehemently on when it worked, why it worked, and even whether it really did work. History might best be viewed as an ongoing argument between historians, and consensus should be viewed with suspicion. The contested nature of history enlivens the discipline but it should make one wary of trying to derive meaningful lessons. Furthermore, it is important to remember that while historians may repeat one another, history does not repeat itself. Each event is the result of its own unique context and innumerable different factors which can never be repeated. Similar things may happen in similar ways for similar reasons but each event or series of events must be understood within its own context and with the knowledge that apparent similarities usually hide many important differences. Broad meta-narratives that seek to encompass diverse events within an all-embracing theory are often flawed for precisely this reason. The point is worth emphasising, history does not repeat itself and it does not teach lessons.

If this is true then why should the professional soldier study history? Leaving aside the value of history for its own sake, an activity engaged in purely for the pleasure of such engagement, one could note the general utility of history as a means of training the mind. Academic history can be used to encourage the intellectual development of the individual, promoting their ability to undertake research, to analyse, evaluate and

interpret evidence and to assess and filter information. It can also be used to teach them to write up their findings in a logical and coherent fashion. In this respect it is no different to any other form of academic activity within the arts, humanities and social sciences; the specific subject area is largely irrelevant. However, it is often easier to get soldiers to engage with military history than it would be to get them to study other historical topics or to read classic literature or to debate political philosophy. Because of their chosen profession, soldiers (and sailors and airmen) tend to have an interest in 'things military' both past and present. As such, the use of military history can represent a valuable pedagogical tool when encouraging sometimes reluctant individuals to '*take their brains for a walk*'. A '*walk*' that carries them to the banks of the Boyne or through the fields of Waterloo, the Somme or Afghanistan may be more palatable than one that leads through less obviously relevant terrain.

Furthermore, while military history does not teach lessons or provide answers a sophisticated engagement with the subject is useful as knowledge of past events can foster an understanding of the present by focusing the mind on things that need thinking about. Historical examples can provide some warning against poorly conceived actions and may suggest more effective courses to follow. They do not provide the answers, but, as Geoffrey Till⁴ suggests, they may help to identify some of the questions (Till, 1982). In short, military history can be useful in developing an individual's understanding of war, alerting them to issues that have been important in the past and that may reasonably be expected to be important again. As Arthur Marwick argued, history acts as a form of collective memory (Marwick, 2001). Without it we have no more chance of understanding who we are, where we are, and how we got here than has an individual suffering from amnesia. Knowledge of the past is essential part of understanding the present. Thus, Milan Vego⁵ has noted the difficulty of teaching modern concepts of operational art to students with poor knowledge of past wars (Vego, 2010:124). Of course, this must be tempered by the realisation that things change and thus the soldier must, as Michael Howard explained, '*steer between the dangers of repeating the errors of the past because he is ignorant that they have been made, and of remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete*' (Howard, 1962: 7).

This point is well reflected in US doctrine which notes that '*commanders and staff members can judge the effectiveness of current or planned operations by the study of related past actions*'. It goes on to explain that '*although each combat action is unique, a review of actions against a similar enemy or comparably organized and equipped opponent can provide useful insight*' (HQ Dept of US Army, 2003:1-1). It argues that military history should be integrated into unit training for combat because its use provides practical assistance in promoting problem solving and it allows soldiers to profit from the experience of others:

⁴ Professor Geoffrey Till was the Dean of Academic Studies at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College and prior to that at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich.

⁵ Milan Vego is Professor of Joint Military Operations at the US Naval War College.

Most obstacles that face a novice in combat have been experienced before by other soldiers...Training on sites of previous battles can provide vivid examples of how units and individuals met their responsibilities in the turmoil of combat. This tool broadens the outlook of today's soldiers and helps equalize the imbalances in personal experience. (HQ Dept of US Army, 2003:1-1)

Military history represents a vast bank of information, opaque and difficult to interpret though it might be, and this provides individuals with the opportunity to examine issues beyond their own immediate experience. In a profession where learning on the job tends to get people killed, soldiers can, through the use of military history, gain the benefit of the experience of others. Basil Liddell Hart argued that the study of military history offered the opportunity to learn from experience that is longer, wider and more varied than that of any individual and suggested that '*[t]here is no excuse for anyone who is not illiterate if he is less than three thousand years old in mind*' (Liddell Hart, 1971).

Military history can also be used in a slightly different way to bolster morale and to build esprit de corps. Recruits and cadets will usually find themselves reading or listening to inspirational accounts of heroic actions, emphasising the proud history of their unit or regiment, intended to build up a sense of pride and belonging that may help to sustain them in difficult circumstances. Such history is not usually based on very scholarly grounds and incidents of cowardice, poor judgement and bad behaviour are often glossed over. In some senses, the truth is less important here than the myth. For example, the main lecture hall at the Cadet School in Ireland is named after Patrick Pearse and students work (or doze) under his watchful gaze from a portrait photograph on the wall. Pearse is an iconic figure, the inspirational hero of the 1916 rising and he is remembered as a shining example of patriotic zeal and selfless sacrifice for his country. His performance as a military planner and leader is best glossed over. A dispassionate reading of history tends to support Kathleen Clarke's contention that Pearse knew no more about commanding men than did her dog, but this is largely irrelevant. To function effectively, soldiers, sailors and airmen need to have something to believe in. They must have pride and confidence in their organisation, and history plays a part in generating this. Experience suggests that pride in the regiment or unit really can sustain people through unspeakable horror and, even if the soldier knows in the back of their mind that half of the tales are untrue, the myth can still have sustaining power. Howard described this as '*nursery education*', giving soldiers, like children, a means of dealing with the disagreeable facts of life, facts which can, for the military, be very disagreeable indeed (Howard, 1962: 4-5).

Military history can also be used to good effect as propaganda to promote the apparent virtue of a service to politicians and to the public. US doctrine prefers to call this '*Public and Command Information*' and notes that it can foster confidence in the military and also support recruitment. Once again, this tends not to require the most critical form of historical enquiry, although any sophisticated propagandist will recognise the need to avoid obvious lies or omissions. Nevertheless it is difficult for any organisation to take a completely objective view of its own history, particularly of the recent past, and the

temptation to twist the record remains high in an environment where that record may actively be used in support of or in opposition to funding or where failures and misdemeanours can be seriously embarrassing and may result in litigation. The temptation to hide mistakes can be overwhelming, although Liddell Hart warns against such '*camouflaged history*' as reluctance to face up to institutional failure undermines any possibility of learning from past experience and may lead to false conclusions being drawn (Liddell Hart, 1971).

There is an ever present danger that 'nursery history' and 'camouflaged history', in unholy alliance with distorted accounts in print, television and on film, can combine to generate enduring myths that can influence the way people think and thus, ultimately, may affect policy. Jeremy Black has written of the problem of historical myth making (Black, 2008). In the context of Irish history, J.J Lee has reflected on the danger of showing a lack of reverence for '*sacred cows*' jealously guarded by those '*of the bovine faith*' (Lee, 1989:xiii) and all nations and most military institutions have their own equivalent of such cattle. The trouble with sacred cows is that they create sacred bullshit and their veneration requires a tolerance of this that does not encourage the kind of critical engagement required to build a sophisticated understanding of the matter at hand. The vigorous, sometimes vicious, response to those historians who seek to shed new light on the Irish War of Independence by challenging the established myth provides a good example of this in action. It requires both intelligence and courage to break out from the prevailing group-think and to challenge established myths. The young RAF cadet, for example, who decides to argue that history demonstrates that air power does not have independent strategic effect is taking a more challenging route than the one who follows established thought and doctrine, but tolerance of such heresy is vital if history is not to become a subject devoid of intellectual or practical merit.

One key reason why an academic engagement with military history is important to the military is that history is so often used by the wider defence community to support theories about command and leadership or strategic behaviour. The professional and academic presses are awash with books and articles that purport to establish key features about leadership, war, insurgency, stabilisation or peacekeeping through reference to historical case studies. In the better cases history is used as the evidence upon which a theory is based, in the worst it is little more than cosmetic window dressing for a theory devised entirely independently of any serious historical research. Such window dressing is important, as historical 'evidence' appears to provide a veneer of legitimacy to what might otherwise be recognised as little more than a speculative flight of fancy.

History is important to strategic theory because, as Colin Gray has argued, '*historical experience is literally our sole source of evidence on strategic phenomena as the future has not yet happened*' (Gray, 2006:5-6). An understanding of history is thus a necessary requirement for any theory of war that is based on more than unfounded speculation. Strategies devised *without* a mature understanding of history can often be badly flawed precisely for this reason; witness the problems with the game theory approaches of the McNamara era in 1960s America which helped to fatally undermine the formation of an effective strategy for the war in Vietnam. Similarly, contemporary theories about there

being ‘generations of warfare’ are fundamentally flawed because their authors do not understand or wilfully misrepresent the historical record (see Junio, 2009, Echevarria, 2005 and Porch, 2006). Unfortunately, this does not mean that such ideas are not popular with those who like easy theories and who do not themselves know their history, characteristics not uncommon amongst military personnel.

To use history intelligently requires something quite different to nursery history. It requires a sophisticated engagement with the true complexity of war, and an ability to detect that which does change and that which does not. Michael Howard’s suggestion that in order to do this one must study war in width, in depth and, perhaps most importantly, in context, has stood the test of time and should be written in bold type across the top of every study guide. It is also, unfortunately, very difficult for a soldier to do this. It takes a long time to research a battle or campaign thoroughly, likely weeks, months or even years to do the job properly. Add on to this the requirement to understand the broad political, social, economic and cultural context within which events happen and also to appreciate the broad sweep of global military history, without which one cannot identify issues of enduring importance, and one is talking of a lifetime’s work. This may be possible for the professional historian but rarely for a soldier who has more mundane and pressing matters to deal with. Certainly there have been some high profile soldier scholars, and not all of them have proven incompetent in battle, but most soldiers during their professional career can only ever be consumers of history written by others, and then only on a part-time basis. The important thing is for them to have the knowledge and skills to be intelligent consumers. Even this is no easy task.

In trying to meet this challenge a key problem is that, quite simply, the military do not do enough military history. In fact, they often do surprisingly little. Most officer cadets will take classes in military history at academies such as Sandhurst, St Cyr, and West Point, as they do at the Irish Cadet School, but experience suggests that for many the class represents a welcome opportunity to catch up on some sleep. This is an understandable response given the propensity for the military directing staff at such schools to believe that it is their duty to keep the students in a constant state of physical and mental exhaustion, but it does not support their ability to engage with the subject, or any subject, in a sophisticated fashion. Sleep deprivation may be a necessary preparation for the rigours of active service but it provides poor preparation for academic work. Leaving aside the problem of exhausted students, which is a feature more common in cadet schools than in the more civilised environments at junior, senior and higher command and staff courses, an enduring problem is that officers of all ranks are rarely given the time to engage with history in a mature or sophisticated manner. This is particularly true in the Irish case, where military history is frequently accorded a lower priority than is the norm in other western academies. In addition, officers of all nationalities will tend only to engage with military history in a formal sense at intermittent stages in their career, coinciding with their attendance on courses equivalent to the Cadet, Junior Command and Staff and Senior Command and Staff Courses in Ireland. Attendance at these is usually separated by many years. Thus, for example, while students on the Junior Command and Staff Course at the Irish Military College undoubtedly engage in much useful work in support of their military history assignments, it will likely be many years before they do

so again on the senior course. As Jay Luvaas⁶ noted, in the context of US officer education, *'no course in military history can really do much good if the officer is exposed every half dozen years throughout his career to no more than a structured course of only a few months duration'* (Luvaas, 1995:96).

To make matters worse, when military institutions do engage with military history it is often in a highly stylised manner, with the desire to draw 'lessons learned' often prominent. Eliot Cohen has noted that the desire to discover and capture 'lessons learned' has in some ways supplanted history (Cohen, 2005). In the US there are institutions such as the Center for Army Lessons Learned and the Joint Universal Lessons Learned System that attempt to make use of the immediate past in a way that Cohen finds disturbing. As he explains,

"Lessons learned" exist in a bureaucratic setting in which unpleasant comparisons are avoided and institutional equities protected....At a deeper level, "lessons learned" presume some degree of certainty: events understood, processes known, and well-defined actions to be taken. They preclude discussion or debate and do not seek to yield multiple interpretations or to stimulate further research. (Cohen, 2005:586)

Whereas the study of military history tends to highlight the role of contingency and to produce more questions than answers, 'lessons learned' can gloss over detail to find solutions that appear practical but that are built on very shaky foundations. As Cohen notes, they tend to have a very short half-life.

Two decades before Cohen made these comments Jay Luvaas identified similar problems in the way in which history was taught in military academies. He identified a tendency to favour *'organizing and presenting information in a lucid, often lavishly illustrated lecture, in which tidy answers outrank the nagging questions in the minds of everyone involved'* (Luvaas, 1995:83). He reflected on the dangers of using historical examples out of context, where they obscure rather than reveal reality, of distorting and compressing the past in order to create tidy and distinct patterns and of twisting history to teach what you want it to teach. The desire to find clear and distinct 'principles' and 'lessons' may appeal to many, particularly in an age where most lessons are taught using PowerPoint briefing slides, a medium that a Harvard Business School study found to be conducive to *'generic, superficial, simplistic thinking'*, and where students may be conditioned to believe that if they can remember the bullet points then they have actually learned something. In reality of course, as Edward Tufte commented, *'Bullet outlines can make us stupid'* (Cohen, 2005:586).

All too often military history case studies are employed rather superficially in order to draw out the 'lessons' of a particular campaign or leadership style or to drill home to the student the apparent utility of a series of doctrinal concepts or assumptions. A classic example of this is the attempt to prove the enduring utility of the 'Principles of War'

⁶ Jay Luvaas (1927-2009) was Professor of Military History at the U.S. Army War College.

through reference to some past campaign or battle. These ‘principles’ are intended as a means of identifying issues that are likely to be of importance, and have been distilled from a reading of military history, but frequently they are used as a checklist, as an alternative to real analysis, by over-worked students seeking to find an easy route-map through the ‘*unenviable morass of material*’ (P. Gray, 2001). The propensity of soldiers of all nationalities to argue that anything or everything can be explained through reference to these principles, or to whatever doctrinal formula they have most recently been exposed to, is noteworthy. There is a tendency to praise or castigate the performance of generals from Hannibal to Haig through reference to concepts and principles that they would not have recognised and that may have limited or no relevance to the actual case study. Even if an individual avoids such pitfalls they will very rarely be given the time to research a subject properly and thus are unlikely to be able to develop a sophisticated understanding of the topic at hand. How, in such circumstances, are they to separate the Victor Davis Hansens of this world from the John Lynns? Failure to do so will probably have no immediate consequence as it is likely that their military supervisors will not have the knowledge to do so either. In such circumstances, the requirement for expert academic support and supervision is apparent.

Conclusion

Military history is important to the military for a number of reasons. In the form of ‘*nursery education*’ it can be useful in developing a sense of pride and belonging that can sustain groups through difficult times. It can also provide useful propaganda in the battle for civilian hearts and minds on which funding programmes rest and recruitment depends. In both cases the history that is used must be credible but is unlikely to be at the cutting edge and will likely gloss over embarrassing details. While this may be inevitable, even functional, it is important to recognise the shortcomings of history camouflaged in this way. For history to be used to good effect beyond the nursery one requires a much more sophisticated engagement that is receptive to complexity, controversy and to uncomfortable conclusions. Such an engagement can promote a deeper understanding of armed forces and their various activities across time and this can support a more mature understanding of problems that soldiers are likely to face throughout their careers. Claims that history is of no value to the contemporary soldier because the pace of political, social or technological change is so great that there is nothing to learn from the past are flawed because they fail to appreciate that military history is not used to provide answers that will always remain true but rather to develop a mature understanding of armed forces and their activities without which no soldier can hope to understand the contemporary environment, changing or otherwise. Importantly, an appreciation of history will also equip them with the knowledge to intelligently critique the historical analysis of others, providing protection against theories that, to quote Colin Gray, ‘*repackage the obvious in ways that mislead the credulous*’ (Gray, 2005: 143).

With specific reference to the Irish Defence Forces one might claim that military history is largely irrelevant to them because they are not employed in or equipped for traditional war-fighting roles. Why study blitzkrieg in France in 1940 if your army has no tanks; what value is a study of the strategic bombing of Germany if your air corps has no

bombers; and, can the Battle of Midway hold any lessons for a naval service without any large surface combatants? In reality, of course, each of those case studies has much to teach us about command and control, decision-making, the value of intelligence, of tempo and initiative and numerous other issues that are of relevant to any armed force regardless of size. Equally, military history does not have to be the study of operations on a grand scale or to focus exclusively on high intensity warfare. An army focused on peacekeeping and peace support operations might reasonably pay particular attention to the history of such operations, while not neglecting the combat operations which represent a basic part of their *raison d'être*. One could also note that Defence Forces personnel now often work with multi-national staffs and contribute to multi-national operations where they are required to have an understanding of operations on a scale and of a type that the Irish Defence Forces alone would not undertake.

If one accepts that an understanding of military history is important then one faces the problem of how to do it properly. This poses numerous challenges that have been discussed already. Provision of appropriate academic tuition at junior, intermediate, senior and higher level has become established as international best practice, but does raise obvious resource challenges for smaller armed forces. In any case in this context the most precious resource for armies large and small is likely to be the time available within any given career for educational activity and this will always be limited. Reflecting on this problem, and on years of experience in teaching military history to the US Army, Jay Luvaas suggested that the solution was to teach officers to teach themselves. One could not gain a very satisfactory understanding of military history from episodic engagement at military colleges, but those colleges could provide the knowledge, skills and, perhaps most importantly, the inspiration, to enable individuals to maintain their engagement throughout their careers through reading, the conduct of staff rides and battlefield tours and similar activity. In essence he was suggesting that they could be equipped to become intelligent consumers of military history and then encouraged to consume, at their own pace and in their own time, as part of what we would today call lifelong learning. Eliot Cohen made a similar point, suggesting that what was required was the generation of an *'historical mind'* a *'way of thinking shaped by one's reading of history and by using history as a mode of inquiry and a framework for thinking about problems'* (Cohen, 2005:575).

Thus the aim of those teaching within the formal structures of military education should be to equip their students with the knowledge and skills to be intelligent consumers of military history and to recognise the value of such consumption. This cannot be achieved by accident and requires an integrated plan for education from initial entry through to the most senior levels. This should include measures that encourage self-directed learning between the key career courses. The ultimate prize is an officer corps better equipped to deal with the problems of today and tomorrow because they have an understanding of the past. It is a prize worth fighting for. Of course this cannot happen in isolation. Military history is but one part of an officer's education and must be integrated with other learning activities. In the Irish case the active involvement in the educational activity at the Military College of the departments of Adult Education and of History (via the CMHSS) at NUIM has helped to generate a progressive military/academic partnership that

represents a model of its kind. In this environment it should be possible to build on much good work that has already been done and to continue to find ways to create and support the intelligent consumer of military history. The CMHSS is helped in this by the close liaison that exists between it and others involved in 'professional military history' at Fort Leavenworth, Shrivenham, Sandhurst and the Dutch Military Academy at Breda. That an appetite exists for such consumption is borne out from experience within the Military College, from the engagement of the CMHSS with individuals and units across Ireland and from the involvement of active and retired Defence Forces personnel of all ranks from lieutenant to major-general in postgraduate study with the CMHSS. For these individuals at least, military history is not counter-cultural even if it is sometimes daring.

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