

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

I admit that I wasn't totally psyched about this week's topic before reading the Keegan book. For students who refuse to make history the study of dead white guys and the wars they fought, where would mainstream military history fit? But in *The Face of Battle*, John Keegan does justice to military history. In fact, his historiographic points are similar to other authors we have read—Thompson, Ulrich, Darnton, Braudel, and others. For instance, he criticizes “scientific historians.” He argues that there is no “extreme uniformity [in] human behavior” (38). Also, he pays attention to the everyday concerns of ordinary soldiers, and highlights the “trivial incidents”(32). His most compelling points also rest on “unofficial” sources. He uses personal accounts. Keegan's approach is also rooted in a *longue duree* examination of how battle evolved. In his words, “battle is a historical subject, whose nature and trend of development can only be understood down a long historical perspective” (303). Simply put, Keegan's book is his personal attempt to catch a glimpse of the face of battle. And this endeavor entails an understanding of the social, psychological, and cultural realities behind each battle.

The study of war should not be limited the discussion of tactics and strategy. Perhaps the best and only sources we have today for these purposes come from the chroniclers. Keegan notes that their information is quite consistent (86). However, his mission is to go beyond technical, outcome-oriented narrative, and show battle “as it actually was” (34). He tries to get inside the soldier's mind through his continuing psychological analysis. For example, each case-study contains a section on the soldier's “will to combat.” His larger goal, however, is to capture the “character” of the battle. Thus it is apt to underscore that soldiers in all three cases were cold, hungry, exhausted and miserable; fatigue was crucial in determining the outcome of battle (134).

In the opening passage, Keegan notes that “a battle must obey the dramatic unities of time, place and action” (14). What's interesting is that the location of the battle is consistent for the all three cases. What does change, however, is the time. And for Keegan who views battles as “finite moments in history” (303), it is only natural to link social changes to the changing regimental culture of the armies. For example, a key factor separating the battles of 1815 and 1916 was the leadership. In Waterloo, “Officers were still independent gentlemen, holding rank by cash purchase” (193). In contrast, Keegan points to the unprecedented degree of “conscious, principled, and exemplary” (277) leadership in 1916.

Keegan states early on that he has never fought in battle himself. In fact, he mentions this several times throughout the book. Would his participation have made a difference? This reminded me of the Pulitzer Prize winning historian Joseph Ellis who, for his entire career, lied to

his students that he had fought in the Vietnam War. Why did Professor Ellis risk his reputation as a scholar to project this false image? Perhaps this is evidence that we are better persuaded by historical arguments when they come from firsthand sources. This is where Keegan's use of others' accounts serves him well. His book is so moving because of the amount of detail used in describing wounded soldiers, for example. The passage about soldiers dying alone in the battlefield with the Bible and waterproof blanket was particularly powerful.

Keegan's general tone is not entirely objective. His anti-war slant, which becomes more apparent in the final section, is hardly surprising given his subject matter: the human context of battle. In a Vietnam War seminar I took last semester, the professor had us read two novels based on the personal accounts of Tim O'Brien (*If I Die in a Combat Zone*) and Bao Ninh, a North Vietnamese soldier (*The Sorrow of War*). Both works shared a key concept: soldiers didn't want to be in battle. Similarly, the Agincourt chapter also suggests that combat was the last resort for both sides. Using the term "pressure of compulsion," Keegan explains that "the English had sought by every means to avoid battle." He depicts the French having been "drawn into battle with all the free-will of a man who finds himself going the wrong way on a moving stair-case" (116). In Waterloo, so miserable the circumstances, so severe the exhaustion that it reduced soldiers' to acts of "cruelty", as soldiers re-wounded the disabled. Again, at Somme, to kill was a necessity, not a desire. Both the Germans and British feared a counter-attack above all (284). His closing message, that "the usefulness of future battle is widely doubted" (342) testifies to his wish to keep the discourse on battle a historical, not current, one. Worst of all, the face of battle may no longer exist.