

Student A:

The closest I'd ever gotten to reading military history before last week was *The Lord of the Rings*. That said, I had strong and largely negative feelings about the genre, which John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, to my surprise, mostly dispelled. Or rather, his historiographical survey confirmed my ideas of what it was about war history I thought I disliked--the emphasis on generals and strategies, the dehumanization of individuals and the anthropomorphization of masses, the technofetishism--but his own book provided a counterexample.

I was most impressed by Keegan's attempt to understand large-scale movements in battles in terms of individuals--both their psychology (what they knew, how they felt toward their leaders and fellow soldiers, etc.) and their physical condition (whether they had room to move or attack in the formation, what they could see and hear, how well-fed, well-rested, and well-dressed they were, etc.). It seems obvious that battles are fought by soldiers, not by tanks, regiments, or generals, but it is a point Keegan makes well, and probably needed to make. As he writes, "What battles have in common is human: the behavior of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honour and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them" (303).

Keegan's book reminded me to some extent of the readings we did in microhistory. While he is clearly writing about larger, more public, and more significant events than a single massacre of cats, his focus on short time periods, constrained locations, and the experience of individuals does the same thing for military history that Darnton's "Great Cat Massacre" does for French workers in the 18th century: it helps the reader understand both what it was like to be there and why what it was like to be there was important. Keegan has it somewhat easier than Darnton, though, because his single events are already thought to be inherently significant; he doesn't have to worry about idiosyncrasy or generalization because the battles he was writing about had important consequences.

Which is not to say that Keegan doesn't try to generalize. One of my interests in the history of science and technology is understanding how new instruments and technologies change the experience of scientists as they do their research, to which Keegan's discussion of the relationship between war technology and the position of the individual soldier in the field has at least some relevance. As I understand him, Keegan sees the new technologies as making war more dangerous and more inhuman and as giving the individual soldier less and less control over his own environment. As a consequence, he suggests that battles, which are in the end won and lost by the armies of individuals that fight them, and which have effectively turned into sites of total destruction in which honor, courage, loyalty, etc., have little role to play, are on their way out. In this context, it is interesting to note that both of the Gulf Wars resembled--and the second continues to resemble--police actions, counterinsurgency, or bombing runs more than they did battles. I wonder what Keegan thinks about the increasing use of robots in war; it seems like we may be well on the way to battles in which humans have been totally excluded from the combat zone.

If I had to criticize anything in Keegan's book--and this is a very minor point--it would be the schematic way in which he divides the battles into "artillery vs. infantry," "artillery vs. infantry" and so on. This is important for Keegan's project of understanding the changing face of battle as new war technologies are introduced, but I wonder whether it misses out on aspects of battle that do not fall neatly into these categories.

As for Ken Burns's *The Civil War*, which I had never seen before, I watched parts of Episodes 1 ("The Cause"), 4 ("Simply Murder"), and 5 ("The Universe of Battle"). In these episodes, at least, the documentary is such a frankly nationalistic effort, so dedicated to heroizing Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee, so fetishistic in the way it lingers over and continually returns to the image of a Nation tearing itself apart, that I had a hard time even comparing it to Keegan's book. Burns effectively uses images, music, voice, and pacing to convey emotion in a way that is impossible in

a written work; but his descriptions of battles are just the kind of top-down, great-men histories that Keegan criticizes.

At the Battle of Gettysburg, for instance, Burns depicts Pickett's charge as a foolhardy rush of infantry against artillery, one reminiscent of Keegan's description of the Battle of the Somme. But, in contrast to Keegan's account, we get no insight into the states of mind of the men who charged to their deaths after seeing other men die before them. Nor are we really led to understand why the charge was ordered in the first place. Instead, when the battle is done, and after some obligatory enumeration of the tragically high number of casualties, the narrative focuses on the personal reactions of leading men, namely Pickett (who blamed Lee) and Lee (who blamed himself). The question of why the men kept charging--given that nonexplanations like "courage" don't count for much--is never asked, let alone answered. The quotes from individual soldiers are, at best, "color"; they illustrate the pain, deprivation, and confusion of war, but they are in a sense *too* small-scale; they never allow us to see the individual soldier's experience as shaping, in any important way, what happens on the battlefield. On the other hand, Burns does much more than Keegan to give us a sense of the cultural context in which the battle took place; he is telling the history of a war, not of a battle. This seems to me to be the place where documentary film is at its best (and potentially most misleading): in its ability to use images, music, etc. to convey the culture and the feeling of the time.