

Jump TO Article



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Fromelles 1916: Is the Australian Official History more 'truthful' than the British?'¹

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The report of the Battles Nomenclature Committee, published in May 1921, gave title to an inglorious episode that took place south of Armentières on 19 July 1916: the Attack at Fromelles². This essay examines the treatment of this event by the Australian and British official historians.

Introduction

The attack at Fromelles was, for the British, a relatively minor action involving two Divisions at a time when very much greater attention was being paid to the offensive recently opened on the Somme, where much larger forces were deployed and upon which hung genuine hopes of victory. Expectations for the Fromelles operation were not high. In consequence, the lack of any major achievement became not particularly noteworthy. The British formation involved, 61st (2nd South Midland) Division, going into action for the first time, suffered 1547 casualties – tragic under most circumstances; comparatively light in July 1916. The British Official History (Miles 1938) covers the attack in a single chapter of just 17 pages.

For the Australians, Fromelles assumed much greater significance. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had moved to France as recently as June 1916 and while it had undertaken a number of trench raids after moving into the front line, Fromelles was its first large scale action since Gallipoli. In addition, the formation that took part – 5th Australian Division under the command of Major-General the Hon. James Whiteside McCay – was the newest element, having been created in Egypt in February 1916 and yet to enter a fight (Ellis 1920). The Divisional casualty return at the conclusion of the attack at midday on 20 July totalled 5355 lost, of whom 506 were known to be dead and a further 1700 missing.³

Given its relative importance to the Australians, it is perhaps understandable that official historian Charles Bean's chapter on Fromelles (Bean 1929) would be more extensive than Miles' version, but, at 119 pages, it is seven times longer, reflecting a very different degree of detail.

Bean relates fragments of the story down to platoon, section or individual level and assesses the decisions and effects of the attack in considerably greater depth than does the British version. The sheer effort to collect and make sense of such detail is impressive.

The Attack at Fromelles

The two versions agree on the essential points. On 5 July 1916, British General Headquarters (GHQ) informed the commanders of First, Second and Third Armies that prospects for Fourth Army on the Somme were encouraging. Consequently, on 8 July, General Sir Charles Monro (General Officer Commanding (GOC) First Army) ordered Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Haking (GOC XI Corps) to prepare a scheme with two Divisions to pierce the enemy line, assuming that things continued to go well and that the enemy probably contemplated a widespread retreat. Haking proposed the capture of the Aubers Ridge, including the villages of Aubers and Fromelles.⁴ But as preparations began at Fromelles, things were not progressing as well on the Somme as GHQ had hoped. Bean (1929, 333) records that: *"The general staff...concluded that the attack on Aubers-Fromelles, undertaken as an artillery demonstration, 'would form a useful diversion and help the southern operations'... The action could, 'for the present, be purely one of artillery,' combined perhaps with a few raids, but designed to force the enemy to believe that an important offensive was contemplated."*

There was much delay and uncertainty, Zero hour being moved on several occasions due to poor weather and uncertain results of the bombardment. There were at GHQ deep misgivings that the artillery demonstration they thought was being prepared was still taking the form of a considerable infantry assault. Both Monro and Haking

¹ An edited version of an essay submitted to the Centre for First World War Studies, The University of Birmingham, in January 2006 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

² Known initially to the Australians as the Battle of Fleurbaix (Green 1919) and in German official histories as the *Gefecht bei Fromelles*. Fleurbaix was behind the Australian front and Fromelles behind the German in July 1916.

³ Casualty figures from the operational records: war diary, 5th Australian Division General Staff. National Archives, Kew. Piece WO95/3527. The same figures were used in both histories.

⁴ 8th Division had attacked over the same ground on 9 May 1915, losing 4682 men for no gain of ground and without assisting a much larger French attack north of Arras. The German formation which defeated the 8th Division, 6th Bavarian Reserve Division, was still opposite in July 1916.

gave assurances that all was well and they were against cancellation or postponement.⁵

The attacking infantry were cut down by unsuppressed machine guns and artillery, and although at the extremes small numbers of men broke into the German front trench and a few went beyond into a confusing series of ditches that made up the support line, in the centre, failure to capture the strongly held Sugar Loaf salient proved critical. The attack dwindled and was halted after consideration of a renewal of the assault.

The Australian Version

Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, born in November 1879 in Australia but educated in England, was a professional journalist, appointed as an official correspondent with the AIF in 1914. He was appointed Official Historian in 1919 and spent most of the rest of his life dedicated to the production of the twelve volumes that made up the history, together with his many other written works and the establishment of the Australian War Memorial.

A theme that runs through Bean's work is a dedication to relating the 'truth' and expressing historical events in a frank manner, with public interest in mind. As early as 1901 and while still in England, reacting to press coverage of the rate of sickness among civilians in the concentration camps in South Africa, he had a letter published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 20 October 1901 in which he said (McCarthy 1983, 43): "I do not think that any good cause can be harmed by the publication of the truth, though only harm can come from its suppression."

Much later, in his own diary, he reflected on his role as an historian (McCarthy 1983, 385⁶): "And if the historian cannot write that drama in its full truth, with the interplay of good and evil, wisdom and folly, of all parties working to its complex conclusion, then so much less the historian he."

Bean (1921) makes the point, too, in his preface to the Official History, in which he refers to himself as 'the writer': "In his search for rigid accuracy the writer was guided by one deliberate and settled principle. The more he saw and knew of the men and officers of the Australian Imperial Force the more fully did the writer become convinced that the only memorial which could be worthy of them was the bare and uncoloured story of their part in the war. From the moment when, early in the war, he realised this, his duty became strangely simple – to record the plain and absolute truth so far as it was within his limited power to compass it. To the men and officers of the Australian Forces, both those who live and those who fell, whose comradeship is his proudest and dearest memory, he dedicates this effort to produce a history in which he has striven to attain a truthfulness worthy of them and of their nation."

Bean conceived the Official History to be not only factually accurate but readable by the layman and military

expert alike. This no doubt stemmed from his early days as a press correspondent, and his work remains easy and engaging to the modern reader.

Bean accompanied the AIF to Gallipoli, Egypt and France and was personally acquainted with all the key individuals involved in the planning and execution of the Fromelles operation. He travelled up from the Somme and arrived on the Fromelles front the day after the attack, there witnessing terrible scenes, the trenches and no man's land still being littered with dead and wounded men. At no time at Gallipoli had the Australians suffered losses of this scale: Fromelles was "*unexampled in the history of the AIF*" according to his diary, and – soon to be reinforced by a similar experience at Pozières – left a considerable impression on him. He was angered too by what appeared to him to be a whitewash, when the official communiqués covering the attack were released. He went to some length in the Official History to draw attention to this (Bean, 1929, 446):

In accordance with the policy at this time adopted by GHQ, the severity of this reverse, though of course well known to the German Army and people, was concealed from the British public in the official communiqué: "Yesterday evening, south of Armentières, we carried out some important raids on a front of two miles in which Australian troops took part. About 14 German prisoners were captured."

The communiqué issued by the German headquarters was – as usual when German troops were successful, but not otherwise – fairly accurate ... The main facts soon became known in Australia, and went far to shake the confidence of part of the public in the British official statements, which at first had been accepted as invariably true.

Whether Australian public confidence in British news headlines was really shaken is perhaps less certain than that Bean would have regarded this as yet another example of exasperating British staff incompetence and haughty attitude to the Australians. His views on both factors formed at Gallipoli and were reinforced while in Egypt: "...there seems to be the same general muddle which is the one thing that impresses you with almost everything this British staff has done as far as we have seen it" (Bean 1983, 99 – diary entry of 8 May 1915⁷); and "British staff here hate the Australians pretty badly – it is the English common people who like us; with the exception of those British officers who have fought with us, the British officer generally does not like us" (McCarthy 1983, 211 – quoting from Bean's diary).

His prejudices did not stop at this, for it is his promotion of Australian national pride and the development of the "Digger" or "Anzac" soldier and the mythology surrounding him that permeates the Official History and influences his interpretation far more than any anti-British stance. This idealised Australian viewpoint formed early in him. In 1907, in "The Impressions of a New Chum", written but not published as a book but taken up in extract form by *The*

⁵Bean (1929, 347) makes the point that several very senior Australian commanders had taken steps to warn of the risks of the proposed operation. No mention of this is made in the British version.

⁶Bean's diary is held in Australian War Memorial document collection AWM38.

⁷The Dardanelles Royal Commission agreed with Bean on this matter.

Sydney Morning Herald, Bean painted a vivid picture of life in the New South Wales outback as seen by a recently returned son. In "The Ideal Australian", he said in 1908 (McCarthy 1983, 53 – quoting from *The Sydney Morning Herald*): "The Australian finds his ideal in that strong-hearted and sturdy philosopher who is being at this day turned out by the thousand for him in the bush... he is to be an adventurer with all the adventurer's frank and generous virility...to own no superior beneath the King...".

Fewster (in Bean 1983) makes the point that the genesis of Bean's Anzac legend began in his travel through New South Wales and the articles he wrote before 1914, but by the time he left Gallipoli his ideas on the Australian vis-à-vis the British character and future prospects for the Empire were set in clear focus. By late November 1915, Bean's admiration for the Anzac soldier was such that he thought he could spot one in a crowd. He said this after a yarn with Brudenell White (Bean 1983, 171): "We both notice that the Australians here can be picked out on the instant by their faces – a little hard, but the strong, lined, individual faces which men get who stand and think by themselves."

The implication of this presumably being that the British troops were less distinctive and were as such because they did not "think for themselves". The idea of Digger mateship transcending authority is explicit in the following paragraph from Bean (1929, 440), referring to the aftermath of an order from Major-General Sir James McCay, GOC 5th Australian Division, to halt an informal truce that had been arranged for the Australians to collect their wounded: "Then was seen, along the whole front of the 5th Division, that magnificent tribute of devotion which the Australian soldier never failed to pay to his mates. For three days and nights, taking the chance of wounds and death, single men and parties continued to go out in answer to the appeal from No-Man's Land."

One of the 5th Australian Division brigadiers present at Fromelles, later Major-General Harold 'Pompey' Elliott – who also had a renowned anti-British and pro-Digger stance – described how Bean had assigned most blame for the failed attack: "As to the conduct of the battle, Captain Bean, our official historian, who is generally most lenient towards official blundering, found himself forced to condemn it in mild but no uncertain terms. At page 444, Volume 3, of the Official History he states: 'The reasons for this failure seem to have been loose thinking and somewhat reckless decision on the part of the Higher Staff.'" (Elliott 1930, 1)

Yet Bean's actual wording on who and where in the Higher Staff lay responsibility was tame. In reality, while his quest for honesty and truth was laudable, Bean found it difficult to deliver, especially when it came to the sensitivities of describing negative aspects of the performance of senior commanders, both Australian and British, who were still alive. Travers (1995, 17) observed that: "...as Bean was to find out throughout his tenure as an official historian and writer, the truth is hard to define, reports and reputations conflict, and much evidence lies in grey areas, so that compromises have to be made."

It seems that at the time, it was not Haking, Monro or GHQ but McCay who was widely blamed for the appalling

losses to the Division (as he had been for two other costly undertakings – an advance of 2nd Brigade at Cape Helles and a desert march by 5th Division in Egypt). Bean, however, defended him, saying that "the authorities of the AIF were well aware of the truth" of Fromelles. This was despite Bean having no great regard for McCay himself, mentioning him negatively at several points in his diaries. Elliott (1930, 16) firmly believed that Haking had managed to successfully place blame onto McCay, then "got away with it and retained his command till the end of the war". Both Elliott and Bean placed judgement for the failure particularly on Haking for an unrealistic plan, but also on 61st Division and its failure to suppress or capture the enemy salient at the Sugar Loaf.⁸ Bean (1929, 447) wrote in the Official History that: "A particularly unfortunate, but almost inevitable, result of the fight was that, having been unwisely combined with a British division whose value for offence, in spite of the devoted gallantry of many of its members, was recognised as doubtful, the Australian soldiers tended to accept the judgment – often unjust, but already deeply impressed by the occurrences at the Suvla landing – that the Tommies could not be relied upon to uphold a flank in a stiff fight."

Comment

Whilst it is apparent that there were genuine errors of judgement and staff work higher up, it was, surely, questionable that the fighting value of the 61st Division was any less than 5th Australian, either before or in the immediate aftermath of Fromelles. Neither had seen any significant action prior to this, although the Australian formation contained a nucleus of men who had seen action at Gallipoli. 61st Division was certainly under strength and in part composed of men who had initially not wished to submit for overseas service, but otherwise was in no worse condition of preparation than the Kitchener Divisions that had been committed at Loos or on the Somme. The performance of the Division in its first action was not notably worse than most of its fellow second-line Territorial Divisions.⁹ It might even be argued that in taking early action to avoid casualties they had behaved with caution appropriate to the circumstances. The "unwise combination" was not 5th Australian with 61st Division, but that two inexperienced formations made up the entire

⁸61st Division's failure at Sugar Loaf allowed heavy enfilade fire to be aimed at the Australian units. Haking acknowledged the tactical problem this caused in a report to GHQ on 26 July (Ellis 1920, 113).

⁹The first major commitment of the second-line Divisions in France can be characterised as follows (Falls 1940; Stirling 1922):

- 57th went into action north of Poelcapelle on 26 October 1917. In appalling ground conditions, they barely moved from their start line and suffered 1634 casualties.
- 58th completed the capture of Bullecourt on 17 May 1917 as the enemy prepared to withdraw. While far from a failure on the scale of Fromelles, it was hardly a great success.
- 59th had its first major engagement against comparatively light opposition near Graventafel on 26 September 1917 and achieved its objectives for moderate cost.
- 62nd joined the aborted attack at Bullecourt on 11 April 1917 and suffered serious casualties. In a renewed assault on 3 May, it failed to reach the objective and suffered almost 3000 casualties. Bullecourt was extraordinarily tough, so the Division's performance should not necessarily be regarded as poor.

attacking force.¹⁰ Bean's comments may be interpreted as saying that the Australian Division was a good one and everything it did was right, proper and courageous – and that everything the British Division did was incompetent and valueless at any level above the gallant individual. Hardly the 'truth' or 'rigid accuracy', despite his best intentions.

The British Version

The British version of events was compiled by Captain Wilfrid Miles under the guidance of Brigadier-General James Edmonds, who also wrote the preface to this volume. Both were career soldiers who moved into jobs creating the historical records late in their military careers.

Bean and Edmonds frequently conferred on the histories. The latter was sceptical of the value of Bean's unmilitary style and disliked the position he had taken with regard to the British – in short, he did not believe Bean was qualified for the task. This statement from his report to the Sub-Committee for War Histories in 1931 (Travers 1995, 15) is typical: *"I have spent considerable time over the TS. Chapters of the Australian history dealing with the later part of 1917, sent to me for criticism by Dr. Bean – it having been arranged, in view of errors in the early volumes, that the British authorities should have a chance of correcting their many misleading and erroneous statements.... [Bean] founded his narrative far too much on general gossip without reference to documents and has little idea of how Armies are commanded and Staff work done."*

James Edward Edmonds passed into the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich in 1879 and was commissioned into the Royal Engineers two years later at the age of 20. A bright, prize winning, student, he passed staff college in 1895 where he revealed an interest in military history, beginning to write *The History of the Civil War in the United States 1861-1865*, which was eventually published by Methuen in 1905. Edmonds was a Colonel and General Staff Officer Grade 1 (the senior operational staff officer) of 4th Division when it landed in France in August 1914. His role with a fighting formation was short lived, for his health deteriorated in the stress of the withdrawal from Mons. He was soon appointed to the engineering staff at GHQ, where he spent the rest of the war. He attained the maximum age limit on 6 February 1919, retired with the honorary rank of Brigadier-General,¹¹ and was appointed Director of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, taking over responsibility for production



British war correspondents and press censors in France, 1916 – Captain C. E. W. Bean is seated at the right end of the front row [AWM A00712].

of the Official History. This became a life's work, for he was heavily involved until the last volume was produced in 1949. Edmonds wrote most of the volumes that covered the events in France and Belgium and oversaw all others.

Two of the volumes, on the 1916 battles of the Somme and the 1917 battle of Cambrai, were written by Wilfrid Miles. The Somme volume covering Fromelles was published in 1938, nine years after Bean's work. Miles' appointment was not merely to provide additional writing capacity, but typical of Edmonds thinking: *"I consider the work can be done more efficiently and quicker by a partnership than by a single individual and I have generally in my private work (e.g. History of the American Civil War) written in partnership. In official work such partnership is particularly necessary as an insurance against error and misjudgements."*¹² This is the logic of an engineer: productive and efficient, conscious of risk – but inevitably at the cost of colour and personality.

On taking over responsibility for the history, Edmonds clarified the style and purpose of the work, conceiving it as a military textbook. Consequently, it is quite different to the Australian version, notably in avoiding detail – for example, rarely are actions of units smaller than a company discussed and individuals below lieutenant-colonel very rarely mentioned unless they had done something particularly noteworthy. The 'broad brush' approach is most apparent in the volumes dealing with very large and complex operations such as the Somme or the defence against the German offensives in 1918. Such were these events, it is often difficult to keep up with the story at a unit level, let alone individual, and to indulge in the level of

¹⁰Haking submitted a report on 24 July 1916 to Advanced First Army HQ, saying that the problem was the inexperience of the two Divisions: "with two trained Divisions the position would have been a gift after the artillery bombardment". One is forced to wonder about his misplaced confidence in two untried formations when the Aubers Ridge was the objective of their advance.

¹¹ *London Gazette* 29 March 1919 p. 4141.

¹²Papers of the Committee on Official War Histories, National Archives, CAB/103/73.

detail that Bean was able to cover would have made these works impractical to produce and quite probably extraordinarily difficult to follow. There is no doubt that there is a loss of human interest as a result, and indeed Edmonds was criticised for producing an unemotional, unengaging study.

Edmonds has also been accused of bias in favour of the higher command and of being protective to Haig and others among the officer class. The chapter on Fromelles assigns blame to no one. Instead, Miles (1938, 134) asks the reader to believe that: “*The pity of it was that the action need not have been fought. To have delivered battle at all...betrayed a grave under-estimate of the enemy’s powers of resistance.*”

We are left to guess how such an underestimate came about and why the attack was finally ordered. Miles and Edmonds were not alone in leaving some open questions, and it is the areas that neither Bean nor Miles address that remain of interest and open for research. For example: what motivated Monro and Haking to proceed with the attack, when there was little to gain, the forces at their disposal were untested and the artillery preparation of dubious effect? Why, when Monro had a change of heart and requested cancellation, did Haig insist on carrying on? What aspects of their training caused those men of 5th Australian Division who did reach the enemy front line to vacate it and move forward? Was 61st Division’s lower casualty rate the result of due caution or lack of will?

Conclusion

While the differences between the two histories are striking, it is difficult to say that one is more truthful than the other. While they are both apparently reliable in terms of facts when compared with primary sources and indeed in both cases drew upon them, the two histories are presented in wholly different styles in terms of language, depth and detail, for their authors sought to produce them for quite different purposes. Both are affected by the prejudices of their authors and the sensitivities they felt for open discussion of the less praiseworthy factors of performance of key individuals, many of whom were still alive when the histories were published.

Taken in the round, while Bean’s version and interpretation of Fromelles is undoubtedly more lively and colourful, it is in reality no more truthful than Miles’ rather less ornamented treatment. Both are remarkably readable; both present the essentials of the affair well and are a valuable record – and both suffer from the constraints placed upon them by time, relationships and human nature.

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