

1914: Fight the Good Fight: Britain, the Army and the Coming of the First World War, 2013, 528 pages, Allan Mallinson, 1446463508, 9781446463505, Random House, 2013

'No part of the Great War compares in interest with its opening', wrote Churchill. 'The measured, silent drawing together of gigantic forces, the uncertainty of their movements and positions, the number of unknown and unknowable facts made the first collision a drama never surpassed. In fact the War was decided in the first twenty days of fighting, and all that happened afterwards consisted in battles which, however formidable and devastating, were but desperate and vain appeals against the decision of fate.' In this major new history, one of Britain's foremost military historians and defence experts tackles the origins - and the opening first few weeks of fighting - of what would become known as 'the war to end all wars'. Intensely researched and convincingly argued, Allan Mallinson explores and explains the grand strategic shift that occurred in the century before the war, the British Army's regeneration after its drubbings in its fight against the Boer in South Africa, its almost calamitous experience of the first twenty days' fighting in Flanders to the point at which the British Expeditionary Force - the 'Old Contemptibles' - took up the pick and the spade in the middle of September 1914. For it was then that the war changed from one of rapid and brutal movement into the now familiar image of the trenches and the coming of the Territorials, Kitchener's 'Pals', and ultimately the conscripts - and of course the poets. And with them, that terrible sense of the pity and of the futility. Mallinson brings his experience as a professional soldier to bear on the individuals, circumstances and events and the result is a vivid, compelling new history of the beginnings of the Great War that speculates - tantalizingly - on what might have been...

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