Haig’s Tower of Strength by John Powell

Reviewed by Maj Robert Crean AGC(ETS)

Brigadier John Powell OBE was educated at Marlborough College and Durham University and commissioned into the Green Howards in 1966. He commanded his regiment in Londonderry and his final tour was commanding a brigade in Exeter, retiring in 1998. He was the last Colonel of the Green Howards from 2003 until its merger into the Yorkshire Regiment in 2006. He co-authored, with his father Geoffrey Powell, the updated edition of The History of The Green Howards (Pen and Sword books, 2002). A keen skier, fly fisherman and mountain walker, he lives at Farnham, Surrey.

General Sir Edward Bulfin was obviously an extraordinary leader; the most senior Irish catholic to serve in the British Army during the first World War, it is testimony to the man’s abilities that he reached such a rank, and this despite his immediate family being linked to the Irish Nationalist movement (his cousin’s son, Eamon, being one of two men to raise the nationalist flag on top of Dublin’s General Post Office in the 1916 Easter Uprising).

Initially commissioning via the backdoor route of the militia, and serving with the 3rd Militia Battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, Bulfin would spend most of his career with the Green Howards (serving as its Colonel for 25 years) so it should come as
no surprise that this authoritative book was written by Brigadier Powell, the Green Howards last Regimental Colonel.

Powell writes in an easily accessible manner and *Haig’s Tower of Strength* (despite its title) provides a relatively unbiased account of Bulfin’s life, albeit with 158 of the 241 pages focusing on World War One.

What is evident throughout the pages of Powell’s book, is Bulfin’s strength of character. Having neither attended RMAS or Staff College and not held command since he was a Column Commander in the Boer War (during which campaign he was awarded four Mentions in Dispatches!) Bulfin was nonetheless made a Brigade Commander in 1913. Leading his Brigade in Ypres, and a Division in Loos, Bulfin is described as a “Bull” or a “Battering Ram”, who (as a Corps Commander) was instrumental in Allenby’s successes in Palestine and stifling a later rebellion in Egypt.

Understanding the Clausewitzian principal that politics and soldiering are inseparable, Bulfin was not afraid to speak truth to power and was always sure to follow his moral judgment. This moral courage led to damaging clashes with General Gough at Loos and was also seen when Bulfin turned down command of Ireland’s Police Forces in 1920. Having read this biography, one is left with the impression that Bulfin would have been the ideal man for the job (in fact, both the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and Bonar Law thought so) but Bulfin was a proud Irishman who did not want to have to order his countrymen to fire on their own.

Vast amounts have been written about the First World War but, in his epilogue, Powell comments that what has been lacking is analysis of junior and middle ranking generals – having read *Haig’s Tower of Strength*, I am in agreement. Powell has done an admirable job in researching and writing this biography, but Bulfin was not a prolific writer and this book suffers from a lack of first-hand accounts. For those with links to the Green Howards, its antecedent or descendant regiments, this book is to be highly recommended, but for the more general reader, one is left with the impression that it has been padded out with too many overviews of the various conflicts and that Bulfin’s biography would have been far better as an element of a book with greater breadth; I for one am now reading a more detailed account of the Great War and am keen to follow it up with a biography of Allenby.
John Powell

*Haig’s Tower of Strength: General Sir Edward Bulfin- Ireland’s Forgotten General*

Pen & Sword, 2018

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