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THE GREAT BOOK WAR

ROBERT FOX's expert guide to the very many books on the First World War

THE GUNS OF AUGUST have been booming a year early for the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. Scores of books have appeared already this year on this much trodden historiographical battleground. Two of the most outstanding are panoramic sweeps of the world before the armies and nations went to war and changed the world forever. Margaret MacMillan complements *Peacemakers*, her brilliant account of Paris in the peace negotiations of 1919, with ***The War That Ended Peace*** (Profile, £25). Charles Emmerson also takes a global perspective in ***1913: The World Before the Great War*** (Bodley Head, £25), highlighting what was going on in Japan and Argentina as much as the capitals of Europe.

Both reveal a world in love with new technology and fashion, but the air of scientific experiment and optimism was matched by a sense of nervousness in politics both domestic and international. Very few leaders felt completely in control of their nations' destinies – a mood both authors reflect brilliantly. Both books won

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high praise from Christopher Clark in the *London Review of Books*, who last year set the pace with his ***The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*** (Penguin, £10.99). 'MacMillan is a wry and humane chronicler of this troubled world', in particular offering 'a lively and sophisticated overview of the international crises that shook prewar Europe.' Emmerson's book is 'a magnificent global study'.

Both authors are careful not to ascribe blame for the war, and both stated in a talk at *The Oldie*'s Soho Literary Festival in September that it was as unnecessary as it was wasteful. 'The First World War could have been avoided,' MacMillan told the audience.

Controversy about who is to blame for the war through its many phases and battlefronts is a powerful theme in many of the new books, sometimes explicitly, sometime implicitly. Sir Max Hastings, in his account of the opening of the war, ***Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War 1914*** (William Collins, £30), has no doubt about pinning it all on German aggression. Combining his strengths as journalist and military historian, Hastings very fairly lays out the different lines of argument and schools of thought in the 1914 blame game. 'Hastings keeps it simple and pacy,' said Ian Jack in the *Guardian*, particularly on the first five months of the Western Front.

He is especially hard on the British generals, said David Crane – whose beautifully crafted account of the War Graves Commission, ***Empires of the Dead*** (William Collins, £16.99), came out in September. 'Whatever happened later, it was the French who saved France in 1914 and saved it in spite of everything our own Sir John French could do to scupper the alliance,' commented Crane in the *Spectator*. French had wanted Britain to withdraw the BEF altogether after the first few weeks.

Some of the same ground is covered by another military historian and journalist, and former soldier, Allan Mallinson, in ***1914: Fight the Good Fight – Britain, the Army and the Coming of the First World War*** (Bantam, £25). The book is concerned with 'military choices, specifically Britain's military choices,' says the author. Simon Heffer in the *Mail* praised Mallinson's novelist's style and soldier's eye.

Most original, perhaps, is Saul David's ***100 Days to Victory: How the Great War was Fought and Won*** (Hodder, £20) in which David relates the war in 100 vignettes and incidents. Jane Shilling in the *Mail* admired his 'ingenious approach' – whose 'charm becomes clear as soon you open the book'. Ben Shephard in the *Guardian* said he was reduced to tears by Vera Brittain's account of receiving her dead lover's bloodstained tunic 'after the blockheads at the war office had sent it back to his family'.

Jeremy Paxman's ***Great Britain's Great War*** (Viking, £25), though one of the shorter books, is sure to outsell the others. It is attached to a five-part blockbuster series on BBC television early next year. The television tie-in lends a certain bittiness, noted one critic. Paxman's friend Ian Jack was full of praise in the *Guardian* for its verve and insight. He particularly liked Paxman's conclusion that 'the war marked the point when the British decided that what lay ahead of them would never be as grand as their past; the point at which they began to walk backward into their future.' Apart from this being a bad dose of Victorian purple prose, the proposition doesn't bear forensic scrutiny.