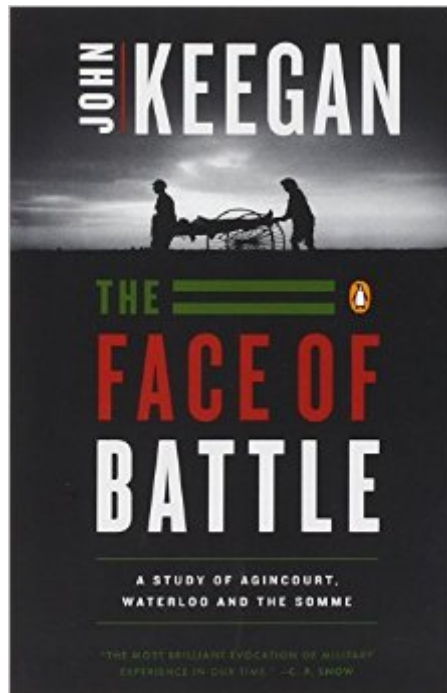


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The Face Of Battle: A Study Of Agincourt, Waterloo, And The Somme



Synopsis

Military historian John Keegan's groundbreaking analysis of combat and warfare. The Face of Battle is military history from the battlefield: a look at the direct experience of individuals at the "point of maximum danger." Without the myth-making elements of rhetoric and xenophobia, and breaking away from the stylized format of battle descriptions, John Keegan has written what is probably the definitive model for military historians. And in his scrupulous reassessment of three battles representative of three different time periods, he manages to convey what the experience of combat meant for the participants, whether they were facing the arrow cloud at the battle of Agincourt, the musket balls at Waterloo, or the steel rain of the Somme. The best military historian of our generation. • "Tom Clancy

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Someone had to write this book - interesting that it was John Keegan. War may be about great leadership, and Keegan has a book like that, or it may be about feints and flanking maneuvers, and Keegan has handfuls like that, but at some point someone has to pull all the statue-builders and map-gazers off their seats and remind them that war, throughout history, has always come down to an actual living, breathing human being facing a charging sword inches away or a raking machine gun, heard but never seen. What is going on when a man stands to face a charging horseman or goes over the top from a muddy trench to a likely death? Would a horse, no matter how trained, charge directly into a mass of armed men? Would they flinch? Would the horse turn? Could they really be routed in ways so colorfully portrayed in paintings of war when it seems simply impossible

to fit so many horses or men into so small a space, to leap through the mass of other flesh? What did it really mean to be struck a sword's blow or a by musket's ball? What became of a man wounded in no man's land, or captive, or a slaughterer of captives. Keegan's questions range from the deepest questions of humans facing death to the pragmatic problems of daily needs and mud and dirt and flesh. This book is apparently unique among military histories in raising and contemplating them. Keegan offers an oddly heightened awareness of these questions by noting right at the beginning that he has not, in fact, ever been a soldier. He has been called upon to teach and to mentor them as one of the most esteemed military historians of our era but he has not stood in those boots.

The special genius of Keegan is his ability to evoke the human side of war. This comes from his understanding of the martial factors involved, an empathy for the participants, and a fine prose style that allows him to really reach the reader. In "The Face of Battle", Keegan employs these formidable talents to describe the battles of Agincourt (October 25, 1415), Waterloo (June 18, 1815), and the Somme (July 1, 1916) in three chapters. Before these is a chapter on battle in military history, and after them a conclusion regarding the future of battle. The first chapter is devoted to the history of battle in history. Keegan describes and cites examples of what he calls "the battle piece", a form which he traces back to Julius Caesar, an example of whose writing he cites as containing the key flaws of its type: "Here it all is-DISJUNCTIVE MOVEMENT: 1. the Legion is hard pressed, some of the soldiers are slinking away; 2. Caesar arrives and has the standards advanced; 3. the enemy's attack loses its impetus; UNIFORMITY OF BEHAVIOUR: the enemy are all attacking, the legionaries are either resisting feebly or drifting off until Caesar's arrival makes them all fight with fervor; SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERIZATION: only two people are mentioned by name, of whom only one is accorded an important role - the author; SIMPLIFIED MOTIVATION: the led have lost the will to fight until the leader restores it to them by some simple orders and words of encouragement." The above paragraph is the key to appreciating what Keegan is doing in his battle descriptions in "The Face of Battle".

One of the most wonderful aspects of John Keegan's impeccable writing style is that it is always used in service to the telling the story at hand, in this case a quite unique and fascinating look at the literal face of battle itself, that is, at the nature of the experience of combat from the soldier's perspective. Of course, since most of his other tomes he argues masterfully about the integrating elements of warfare regarding specific campaigns and battles in a specific conflict such as World

War Two or the First World War (see my reviews), here he focuses brilliantly on the nature of organized violence itself, and how it is perceived and witnessed by the men who are so engaged. In a very real sense, he has reversed the usual logic about conducting war from the overall perspective and strategies of the generals and admirals overseeing the engagement of forces to focus instead on the horrific and mind-boggling perspective of the soldier on the ground, the "cipher" so often taken for granted and ignored in historical treatments. For this reason alone any serious student of military history should enthusiastically devour this book. Yet, of course, as we devotees of Keegan's works have come to expect and admire, there is much more of value in this thin but provocative volume. Keegan memorably details and describes the horror, pain, and confusion of the battlefield, and redefines the nature of our understanding of what it means to be a soldier, from the nature of a soldier's fears to the physical and emotional assault on his person, covering everything from wounds to trauma to shell shock. He accurately and articulately describes the operation of everything from field hospitals to makeshift prisoner of war camps, and the atrocious realities involved in experiencing either.

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