



A short guide to a long war

The Connell Guide to World War I, Max Egremont. Paperback, £8.99. www.connellguides.com

My introduction to World War One was via the War Poets. But after a decade I'd had enough of imaginative responses to the war. I wanted to know "what really happened" – why and how, where and when.

If only Max Egremont's illustrated short guide had been available. It would have alerted me to the key questions, briefly described the main issues, provided lots of facts, highlighted some of the controversies, and pointed me towards further reading. Though I am now reasonably familiar with the subject, I am glad to have read Egremont's concise distillation.

How do you fit into 128 pages a war that lasted 51 months, that involved 135 countries, that saw the collapse of three empires, that involved almost 66 million soldiers, sailors and airmen worldwide, that left approximately 9 million of them dead and 15 million wounded or crippled, and that killed 5 million civilians?

One way you do it is by heading each short chapter with a provocative question. For example: How much was Germany to blame? Was Britain right to join in? Were Britain's soldiers "lions led by donkeys"? What were the effects of the terrible battles of 1916? Why did the US finally decide to fight? How did the First World War change Europe? How fair was the Treaty of Versailles? This approach means that the author concentrates on the most important points about each topic, choosing words carefully and using them wisely.

Another way is to have 18 text boxes scattered throughout the book. They deal with a variety of more specific topics (for example: German militarism, The role of imperialism, The rise of nationalism, British complacency, Sir Edward Grey, German atrocities, Douglas Haig, War in the Middle East, Conscientious objectors, The home front).

When the fighting ended the writing began, and continues to this day. Despite a century of researching and recording, analysing and examining, there is still disagreement among historians about the Great War's politics and personalities, its diplomatic and military manoeuvres, its successes and failures. Egremont sometimes clinches a point by quoting from another historian – a generous and admirable approach that familiarises readers with authors to explore when they want to delve deeper. Being such an accomplished writer himself, Egremont knows when to use someone else's astute summation or perceptive turn of phrase.

The book is one in a series of well-produced guides published by Jolyon Connell (founder of The Week magazine). The aim is to introduce historical and literary subjects to people who are short on time but want an authoritative introduction. Egremont fulfils the brief: he provides plenty of facts but doesn't skimp on the analysis. There is a chronology and a section on further reading. The book is attractively packaged and reasonably priced. I recommend it.

Linda Hart.

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'The Western Front Association was formed with the aim of furthering interest in the period 1914-1918; to perpetuate the memory, courage and comradeship of all those who served their countries in France and Flanders, and in their own countries, during the Great War. It does not seek to justify or glorify war. It is not a re-enactment society, nor is it commercially motivated. It is entirely non-political. The object of the Association is to educate the public in the history of the Great War, with particular reference to the Western Front. Applications for membership are welcomed from people of a like mind.'

