

Editing 'The DLI and The Somme'

When in October 2015, Edward Bilcliffe mentioned a manuscript on the Somme found among his father's effects, I was immediately interested and anxious to see it. John Bilcliffe's links to Durham are summarized in Steve Shannon's Introduction and Tribute.

I saw the manuscript, together with DLI historian Harry Moses. It was an amazingly ambitious work telling, as John put it, the story of a regiment's involvement in the Somme campaign. Post-WW1 it was established that the Somme Campaign lasted from 1st July 1916 until 18th November 1916. It has often been assumed that any man who died at the Front during that period was a Somme victim, something which John's work clarified. John's history identified the relevant engagements, the battalions of the DLI involved, maps of the actions, the individual soldiers killed, those who died of wounds and other causes as well as their final resting places and memorials. He had decided to produce summaries in figures as well as useful listings for those who might wish to search for DLI sites abroad. The concept was extraordinary, interrelated and complex.

First study showed that the book was unfinished. John had last worked on the manuscript in 1998 when he set it aside for personal reasons. John had, for instance, made notes of queries he wished to answer, doubts about the spelling of names and points he intended to work on. A photograph section covering cemeteries, graves and individuals had not been started and John had only included first drafts of his maps.

Both Harry Moses and I studied the manuscript in detail. With the beginning of the Somme Centenary only eight months away, I suggested that Edward let me make a digital copy and, working on that, attempt to update and complete his father's work. Harry wished to limit his own involvement to a consultancy role as he had already begun work on a new book of his own.

I have been asked how much work was involved. I kept no record of hours but every name had to be checked and hundreds of minor and major alterations and corrections were made. All spellings, army numbers, battalion allocations and ranks were checked as well as cemetery/memorial information. I added given names where there were only initials and, often, second and third given names. Many notes were added to individual entries, something John had begun (and which now appear as footnotes). A significant number of citations were added in Part 3.

John had intended to include those men who died of wounds no later than the end of November 1916 but I thought that cut-off date should be extended to the end of December 1916 to include men who may have been shipped home where they subsequently died. Edward agreed to the change and that allowed for the inclusion of men such as 2Lt C D Moon Ord who died in hospital at Sunderland having been wounded at Martinpuich. (His history, incidentally, came from the Harrow Memorials volumes).

In the main I followed John's style, consulting with Edward if I felt a change was apt. Some names, particularly duplicates, were deleted and new names added. The changes added the names of 51 men to the book's DLI total of Somme deaths.

Ensuing from the interrelated concept of the book, an alteration to an individual's details could result in about ten consequential changes, so it was with immense relief that I finally achieved agreement between the cemetery listings and those of the battalions.

After seven months of intensive work it became clear that the completion of the book planned by John was unachievable in the timescale we had hoped. Rather than miss having the core of his work available for the Somme Centenary Edward agreed to a release of the sections completed to date so that searches of battalion listings, honours and awards and all cemetery/memorial listings could to be made available to the public during the centenary. My hope was that the work could appear on the Durham At War website. The work of Steve Shannon and Gill Parkes has now made that a reality.

John set out to produce something helpful and informative for both historians and individual researchers. In that he was successful! His work provides an easily accessible summary of the DLI's part in the Somme campaign and a detailed record of the individual cost. I am pleased to have helped and, together with Steve and Gill, to have brought it to the public. I believe John would have seen the Durham At War presentation as a fitting platform as it can, potentially, reach a far wider audience.

Peter Nelson