

Initially, Lloyd George wondered whether he should accept the War Office. Under Kitchener some of the minister's power had been ceded. He did not hesitate for long since he shared the general assumption he would enjoy 'a greater influence on the war's conduct as the Secretary of State than any other member of the Cabinet'.¹ It soon became apparent that his ministerial powers had been circumscribed. He had wanted Arthur Lee to be his Under Secretary of State, but the appointment went instead to Derby, the candidate the soldiers favoured.²

Repington was anxious to discover what the War Office thought of their new minister. Apparently, he was inclined 'to consult subordinates instead of the heads of departments'. That would never do. Robertson insisted strategy was his responsibility; the minister's independent views were undoubtedly a cause for concern. A particularly disconcerting rumour was that Lloyd George intended to replace Jack Cowans as QMG with Eric Geddes, a leading businessman and railway management expert. In his former ministry LG had appointed experienced, energetic businessmen to provide increased vitality and improve management skills. As this initiative had proved startlingly effective there was every reason to expect he would repeat it in his new ministry. A growing national war effort implied the increased integration of civil and military. Repington shared the soldiers' dislike of civilian infringement upon their powers. He feared for his friend's future, especially as Jack was mired in his usual trouble – 'his susceptibility to "ladies"'.³ Repington sought an informal chat with Derby. Unlike Lloyd George, he 'knew the ways of soldiers',⁴ and would understand why Cowans was irreplaceable.

Robertson had insisted he was 'in exactly the same position with LG as he had been to Lord K'.⁵ The minister confirmed as much when they lunched together at the Carlton, insisting he and Robertson were getting on 'capitally'. It was particularly pleasing, the new minister averred, to have 'some good men under [him] at the War Office'. Repington advised him, 'Work through the soldiers.' Consult with them as Haldane had. They would soon eat out of his hand, but not if they were treated as one

might civil servants in other departments of state. Soldiers were 'kittle cattle' – difficult, sensitive creatures – and if he did not carry them with him, he would certainly be beaten.

Repington did not presume to suggest to Lloyd George, as he had to Jack Seely, that he should run *all* his ideas past him. Instead, he advised the new minister, 'Do nothing for three months until you get to understand the machinery.' He implied there was more than sufficient time to get to know individual soldiers. But Lloyd George would soon discover the soldiers created a barrier of professional exclusiveness that shut him out. For that reason, he never managed to overthrow or weaken Robertson's power. Had he established personal links with soldiers, it would have helped him to get to know the army better.⁶ Robertson would later quite incorrectly claim, as Secretary of State Lloyd George was connected 'with no measure that had any special influence on the course of the war'.⁷ But the translation of Eric Geddes from business life to the service of the army in France was both significant and important.

Was the army making the best use of highly qualified civilians? This question had prompted a lively exchange between Repington and his Hampstead neighbour and friend, H. G. Wells. Repington was clear: jobs previously undertaken by soldiers ought to be retained by them rather than surrendered to so-called civilian 'experts'. Since August 1914 the army had greatly increased both in size and complexity. Never had civilian expertise been required so much as now. Repington acknowledged it would be absurd to suppose, given such an 'extraordinary improvisation, everything can go on oiled wheels or that mistakes are not made'. When men distinguished in other walks of life joined the new armies, naturally 'they expected to find places equal to those they held in their former employments'. He assured Wells, the intellectual ability that had come into the army *was* being used. That civilians *should be* employed was a large admission for Repington to make. It revealed how much and how relatively quickly he had modified his former intransigent viewpoint. He instanced no less than ten brigade commands in France that were held by non-regulars. Similarly, a large number of brigade majors at the front were non-regulars. He cited with apparent approval the names of Eric Geddes and his brother A. C. Geddes, until recently the Professor of Anatomy at Toronto University, now a Brigadier General and Director of Recruiting. He also mentioned Sir William Garnet and Sir Sam Fay, who, like Eric Geddes, were railwaymen destined between 1917 and 1919 to become Directors General of Movements and Railways. But soldiering was a hard profession; he emphasised it required a long apprenticeship. The professionals could hardly be blamed for showing a certain reluctance

‘to confide the lives of their men to those who are not fully qualified to lead . . . In a war like this it takes time to get the best men to the right places and much forgetfulness of one’s own opinion of oneself has to be contributed to the common good.’⁸ Wells valued Repington’s military knowledge and sound common sense. It had obviously been a struggle before he had managed to come to terms with what was inevitable. Churchill would frequently complain of the way in which the ‘old Regular army officers still have all the higher commands even when all the intelligence of the country is now in the army’. To this assertion Repington invariably would respond, ‘In no profession would apprentices be at the top after two years.’⁹

During the course of his first luncheon with Repington after he became minister for war, Lloyd George had admitted he did not look forward to defending the Mesopotamian campaign.¹⁰ Robertson, four days earlier, had let slip the campaign was ‘an awful mess they could not get right’.¹¹ He distinguished two problem areas: logistics and relations with the Indian army. It was ‘difficult to say who was responsible for the muddle’, but it soon became clear that the chosen ‘fall-guy’ was Beauchamp Duff, since March 1914 India’s C-in-C. In October Charles Monro succeeded Duff in the Indian command. His subsequent success in that command was crucial to Britain’s war effort, for Indian troops constituted the Empire’s principal strategic reserve. The increased power and efficiency of the Indian army enabled it to make the major contribution to General Sir Frederick Maude’s successful campaign in Mesopotamia. Repington advised Lloyd George that Monro was a general with ‘a good head and very dependable’. He further advised the minister to leave questions about the Indian army alone, implying it was a mystery understood best by military experts, ‘full of pitfalls’ for the unsuspecting civilian. This ancient military ‘wisdom’, by constant repetition would become very familiar to LG.

The logistical problem remained unresolved. Cowans was the one member of the General Staff capable of finding a satisfactory solution. Since becoming QMG in 1912 he had demonstrated exceptional capacity and ability as an administrator. His talents exactly fitted the particular requirements of his office. In an army and a department that traditionally thought small-scale, he had the capacity to think big. Without fuss he had rapidly expanded services ranging from food to transport and buildings. The minister readily appreciated his unique skills, and the king and a host of other influential figures found ‘Jolly Jack’ irresistibly likeable. His romantic adventures afforded them a never-ending source of delight. When told of Jack’s latest romance, the king roared with laughter. ‘They tell me he is fond of the ladies’, he chortled. Lloyd George rejoined, ‘I believe the



Fig. 10 Lieutenant General Sir John Cowans (1862–1921)

ladies are very fond of him.’¹² But Jack’s relationship with Mrs Cornwallis-West was about to change the picture. The backbench Liberal MP and friend of Lloyd George, Sir Arthur Markham, took up the case of Sergeant Patrick Barrett, for whom, it was alleged, Cowans had improperly arranged a commission. At the behest of his elderly aristocratic would-be patron and mistress, Mrs Cornwallis-West, Barrett had been despatched to France. Markham insisted there would have to be an inquiry to determine the exact facts of the affair. Provided that he did not raise the matter in the Commons, Lloyd George guaranteed Sir Arthur should have his inquiry.

Cowans was undoubtedly shaken to learn there would be a court of inquiry. Repington raged that his friend’s ‘time for the next three months would be wasted over a trivial and idiotic case’. He contrasted this with the enormous demands imposed upon ‘the man responsible for feeding

and supplying 3,400,000 men'.¹³ When Markham suddenly died it was suggested the inquiry might conveniently be dropped, but Lloyd George felt in honour bound to keep his promise. As the inquiry would be chaired by the former CIGS, Field Marshal Lord Nicholson, and one of the three other members was an army man, it was thought this might favour Cowans. F. E. Smith, however, feared the inquiry might well find against Jack. He thought 'Old Nick' showed every sign of being thoroughly contumacious.¹⁴ The inquiry sat in private and delivered its finding to the Army Council in November. While not entirely damning, the verdict was undoubtedly damaging. Cowans was found to have behaved indiscreetly and without a proper measure of propriety. Particular exception had been taken to what he had written in some private letters. The irony was that he had voluntarily surrendered the letters so that it might not be said he had anything to conceal. Repington thought the inquiry's use of the letters grossly offensive. They had been wantonly misused. Nor was he alone in his feelings of outrage.¹⁵

Robertson had hinted to Repington the inquiry report might not favour Cowans. Thoroughly disquieted, Repington was already uneasy about his friend's prospects. So far as he could judge, at the War Office there seemed to be 'a regular set against Jack'. What exactly inspired this prejudice was difficult to determine. Absurdly, he began to wonder whether the aim all along had been to use the Cowans case 'to get rid of all soldiers in the QMG branch and on the Army Council and to substitute civilians'.¹⁶ It was a measure of how worried Repington was that he should indulge in such paranoid fantasies. He finally learned what his friend's fate would be. Lloyd George angrily declared he had no alternative but to sack Cowans because the king had written to him supporting the QMG. It was not the king's business, Lloyd George angrily insisted. It had been very wrong of the king to attempt to use his influence. It left him with no alternative; the QMG would *have* to go. But as Lloyd George reflected, there was a positive aspect. It would undoubtedly make the military more wary of him and demonstrate he not only possessed the powers, if necessary he would use them to enforce his will.¹⁷

When all looked black for Cowans, Derby successfully stepped in to plead he should be let off with a reprimand and reduced to QMG in France alone. Derby further proposed that his other duties could be carried out by some 'great civilian'. Cowans had been told that he was being demoted because Lloyd George 'could not defend him in Parliament for having written "indiscreet private letters"'. Repington justifiably observed that in their time they had all written such letters, 'including LG and all his friends'. The official explanation was patently absurd. Repington's ubiquitous, all-knowing, 'well-placed friend' in the

War House, within twenty-four hours had quashed any idea that any 'great civilian' would materialise to undertake Jack's duties. Now that Derby was Secretary of State for War he clearly intended to be master in his own house. Derby decreed Cowans effectively would suffer no punishment.

With his career and reputation once more secured, the QMG was able to address and solve the logistical problems that had previously plagued the Mesopotamian campaign. Repington half suspected there was an intrigue and that 'political hangers-on' were still intent 'to fix their claws in the branch'. He remained fretting and fuming late into December. Perhaps it might help, he thought, if he wrote something about the QMG's work for *The Times*. He would emphasise Jack's indispensability. He also had Freddy Clayton's fate on his mind. As he had feared might be the case, he had been sacrificed.¹⁸ Such treatment, Repington considered 'disgraceful'. Returning home Clayton sought to appeal to the king. That had been more than a month earlier but his letter was still held up at GHQ; it had not even arrived at the War Office. Repington suspected the explanation was unwonted political interference, and this strengthened his belief there must be a widespread intrigue. It did not seem to occur to him that he was allowing his imagination to run riot.

A regular village to house a thousand clerks had been built for Geddes's new branch at Montreuil. The troops called it Geddesburg. Repington made no effort to hide his contempt. He more than distrusted, he feared this civilian empire growing at the nerve centre of a great military enterprise. What exactly might it portend for the army he had known, the small, tightly knit family of regiments that had nurtured his generation of soldiers? What did it portend for a friend like Stuart Wortley?¹⁹ He was almost certainly going to be sacked and Jack might well suffer the same fate, even though the QMG's work had been admirably done without hitch or complaint. Didn't the minister understand? Delicate machinery was 'liable to be thrown out of gear if a pack of civilians without knowledge of military affairs was dumped down to run it'.²⁰ Several months earlier, in one of his lunchtime conversations with Lloyd George at the Carlton, Repington had stated his objections to the replacement of soldiers by civilians. He had chosen quite the wrong moment and LG, unhappy with the military, made 'very uncomplimentary remarks about several of them'. He refused to recognise any difference between soldiers and civilians and was determined to take the best man wherever he found him.²¹ Before this storm Repington judged it wisest to beat a hasty, tactical retreat.

His 'article on Cowans' great work' was published but its head and tail had been removed. Thus truncated, Repington thought it failed to serve

as a warning that the efficiency of the QMG's department was threatened. Whether the cuts had been made by the Censor or in-house, he could not tell. A few days later, although he was reassured by Derby there was no longer any danger Cowans would be moved from his post, Repington continued to grumble. Soldiers had every right to look askance at the 'dispossession of some of their important functions'. He hoped his censures had caused Derby a degree of anxiety.²² To the end of the war he would, if at all possible, resist any attempt to 'civilianise' the military, his opposition the more exaggerated because the Prime Minister so clearly had lost faith in his generals. It seemed businessmen were much more Lloyd George's cup of tea than soldiers.

It was entirely understandable that Repington should have followed the fortunes of a close colleague and friend whose military career, not for professional incompetence or failure but for indiscrete behaviour, had been placed in jeopardy. He could not have failed but be aware of the parallels as much as the disparities between the prolonged and careful inquiry into Jack's indiscretion, and his own, earlier cursory examination by Roberts and Kelly-Kenny. The most obvious difference between the two cases was the very different professional consequences suffered by the accused. He had been required to resign his commission; Jack suffered no professional penalty other than a reprimand. He was not in any way resentful but asked himself why, when his friend's offence had been so much more serious than his transgression, had Jack got away with it?

In part the question answered itself. Undoubtedly Cowans avoided the consequences of his folly because he was fortunate in his political friends. Almost scuppered by the king's well-intentioned interference, he was rescued by Derby.²³ It was also Cowans's good fortune that the last stages of the Court of Inquiry happened to coincide with the heightened political machinations and manoeuvrings over the premiership. Naturally, Lloyd George's immediate personal political prospects and the fate of the coalition government had been at the forefront of his thinking, and not what might be the appropriate disciplinary measure for Cowans. But what had counted most in his favour was that he was uniquely gifted at his job; he was virtually indispensable. To ensure and maintain adequate and speedy supplies for British forces on all fronts was a task that had grown increasingly demanding in scale, complexity and urgency. It was not a sensible time to contemplate making disturbing changes.

The proposals made by the military commanders at Chantilly in December 1915 and endorsed by their political leader shaped the intended Allied strategic pattern for 1916. The major British contribution would be the Somme offensive. The consequent evacuation of Gallipoli and concentration of effort on the western front pleased British High

Command. What it did not do was resolve a fatal irresolution at the heart of military planning. Was the offensive intended to force a breakthrough, or was it only one of a series of offensives designed to grind down the German forces? The debate remained unresolved when the Germans pre-empted everything by attacking Verdun on 21 February 1916. In the months that followed a remorseless battle of attrition developed. The French paid a fearful cost in casualties for their stubborn resistance. That June, as had been agreed earlier, the Russians began what initially appeared to be a very successful offensive against the Austrians in Galicia. The Italians, meanwhile, were once again fighting hard if inconclusively in the Trentino. All this military activity suggested, sooner rather than later, the British army would begin an offensive against the Germans.

As early as April, Haig had accepted he would need to help relieve the pressure on the French. He had argued for a small-scale offensive because the forces available to him were comparatively weak. By June, as his supplies improved, he was persuaded a large-scale effort was required provided he was given sufficient artillery and munitions to sustain it and could be certain that his troops were properly prepared. This suggested August as a possible starting date. Joffre, however, was adamant he could not wait so long. Such a delay would mean that the French army would cease to exist. The offensive should begin not later than July. The defence of Verdun had made such demands upon available French manpower they now could supply only sixteen divisions, much less than half the forty previously promised. Joffre insisted the attack should not be in Flanders, Haig's preferred choice, but north and south of the Somme.

As he had been unable to choose either the time or the place of his first major offensive as Commander-in-Chief, Haig was extraordinarily sanguine about the battle's likely outcome. For a time he sustained his familiar, deluded belief that a breakthrough was a real possibility; that the enemy would crack under pressure and he would secure a decisive victory. On the basis of Haig's previous unsuccessful promises of 'breakthrough', unsurprisingly Lloyd George was not convinced. Haig meanwhile was forced to adopt the opinion that Robertson and Joffre had shared from the beginning: essentially, the Somme would be a battle of attrition. On the first day the British sustained almost 60,000 casualties, dead, wounded and missing. This figure constituted 14 per cent of the total losses suffered in the 140 days the battle lasted. The brunt of these losses was borne by Kitchener's volunteer divisions. The seemingly endless flow of blood from both sides – the German losses were equally heavy – was finally staunching only by the mud and relentless autumnal rain.

The Somme had been in progress almost three weeks when Lloyd George met Repington at the Carlton. That day Repington had been

greatly surprised the first of the articles he had written about the Somme had been returned unaltered by the GHQ censor. Naturally, their conversation largely concerned the fighting. Lloyd George was persuaded the very heavy casualties already suffered by the army meant they could not hope to be successful. He feared the Germans were likely to bring more guns and troops from the north and Verdun to the battle. Repington was obliged to admit that he shared LG's pessimism. There would be no great change until all British armies were equipped with sufficient heavy guns. He then told Lloyd George exactly what he had learned from Foch two weeks earlier.²⁴

Foch attributed his success to the way he had deployed his artillery. He had used his 500 heavy guns in co-operation with field guns and trench mortars to mangle and smash to smithereens the villages of Dompierre, Fay and Estrées, which were part of the German defensive line. He had ordered his guns to fire at nothing but the first line. If he were asked to attack a position, he would no longer ask how many divisions he was to be given but only how many heavy guns. He considered each Army Corps of two divisions should have 100 heavy guns over and above the normal field guns and howitzers. The British artillery preparations had been ineffective because they were dispersed and not concentrated upon the enemy's first line. This more than any other reason accounted for the excessive losses the British had suffered. Foch had afforded Repington the opportunity to examine the German trenches recently taken by the French. Trench mortars had been used to wreck the German wire and the heavies had pounded the rest. Seventy-fives had set up a barrage to keep back reinforcements while long-range guns had counter-battered the German artillery. The devastation, Repington recorded, was 'very complete'. On an eight-mile front Foch had as many heavy guns as Luigi Cadorna, the Italian C-in-C, had for one four hundred miles long.

Lloyd George and Repington agreed, the Germans would not be beaten before 1918. So much for Haig's idea that a swift and decisive breakthrough could be achieved in 1916. The Germans were not ready to surrender so soon. Hard battles would succeed each other until eventually, their men and material wasted and exhausted, German resistance would finally be worn down. Lloyd George was convinced the grinding would proceed even better if there were not only more guns but also if Germany were compelled simultaneously to defend more areas. It was clear to Repington, this last was why the minister favoured the Salonika offensive. LG agreed with him that nothing could be done there this year 'unless Romania joined in. Then we would have to keep the Bulgars employed'. Thus, Haig's first offensive as C-in-C, the Somme, had been in progress less than three weeks when Lloyd George betrayed he

was already considering other possibilities. He asked Repington, 'If there were to be a change of commander in France who would [he] choose?' Repington proposed Allenby. Lloyd George said he 'did not remember him'.²⁵

Some of Foch's comments about artillery could not have failed to remind Repington of a conversation with Haig shortly after his appointment as Commander of the First Army in January 1915. At the time Repington supposed the German front was impregnable and had expressed considerable doubts over whether there was one British general sufficiently fearless or uncaring of public opinion, prepared to suffer the inevitable heavy losses if an attempt were made to breach the enemy line. Modern weapons gave an undue advantage to defences and enormous casualty lists were inevitable. Repington was convinced the public would not tolerate such losses. Haig, however, responded that given the appropriate guns, ample ammunition and high explosive he did not doubt they could easily walk through the German defences in several places.²⁶ Haig avoided the obvious implication of Repington's question by claiming he could find a way through without his troops having to suffer huge losses. But instead of developing his argument and pressing Haig, Repington allowed himself instead to be tempted to injure Henry Wilson. He drew attention to efforts to have Wilson appointed CIGS in Murray's place. Haig, pretending an innocent naivety in such matters, later wrote in his diary in his best maiden-aunt tones, 'Such an intrigue greatly surprised me.' His claim was nonsensical. Repington's words had reminded him Wilson possessed an unmatched capacity for intrigue. But playing the sneak also reminded Haig that Repington and Wilson were birds of a feather, the one as bad as the other.²⁷ Repington would have done better to have pursued his original argument and let Wilson go hang.

Foch argued that Haig had failed because unlike the French he had sought to conquer ground with his infantry, not his guns. On Saturday 8 July Repington had gone by invitation to British GHQ, north of Amiens, to meet and talk with Douglas Haig. It would be their first meeting since his appointment as Commander-in-Chief. The correspondent had hoped he might discover whether British artillery tactics were as hidebound as Foch had implied. Haig attempted to snub Repington but was thwarted. It was pointed out to him that the military correspondent of *The Times* enjoyed a political importance he could not afford to ignore. That consideration was particularly pertinent given the scale of the casualties suffered in the offensive's first week. Politicians and public alike had every right to be given an explanation by the C-in-C for these losses. Haig unwillingly and reluctantly deferred.²⁸ As was inevitable, the exercise was conducted in a frigid, guarded fashion. Kiggell, who since

December 1915 had been Haig's Chief of Staff, attempted to lighten the gloomy atmosphere. Occasionally he would shoot furtive smiles towards his old friend but dared to say or do very little beside. Repington was well primed for his meeting. He had spent the previous two days talking to, among others, Castelnau, Foch, Charteris, Rawlinson, who was now commanding the new Fourth Army, and a particular old Ulster friend of his, 'Putty' Pulteney.

Haig prefaced his account of their meeting in his diary with the general observation that while 'Correspondents [were] given a free pass to go anywhere and could write what they liked they should not divulge anything of value to the Enemy.' According to Repington, Haig had referred directly to 'an old telegram of mine from France of which he thought he had cause to complain'. Repington reminded Haig, his telegram had been cleared by the Censor. To judge by Kiggell's reaction, this was news to him. Haig gave a brief exposition of how the battle had progressed so far – effectively saying nothing – before announcing he would welcome criticisms. But when Repington suggested the artillery could possibly have been deployed more effectively on the first day of the offensive, Haig bluntly denied there could be any truth in the suggestion. The manner of his response, indeed, his whole defensive demeanour, clearly demonstrated how much he resented the least criticism. Repington did not pursue the matter for Haig was clearly unprepared to talk about any substantive issue of real interest. Repington was left 'with the strong feeling that the tactics of July 1 had been bad'. At the end of their meeting he wrote, 'I don't know which of us was more glad to be rid of the other.' Mutual antipathy was probably the only sentiment both men shared. Repington bumped into Esher as he left GHQ. He refused to say what he thought about his briefing with Haig. He wanted to see the rest of the front for himself and gather more information. That task occupied him for the next two days. What he saw and what he was told served to confirm the opinions he already held.

Before a luncheon conversation with Lloyd George on 19 September, Repington spoke to French twice and also to Robertson. Apparently 'Wully' was 'pretty happy' with the way things were progressing on the Somme. Repington noted how Robertson seemed inclined to skate swiftly over negative but nonetheless significant issues. They had suffered a third more casualties than the Germans. They had insufficient heavy guns, although Robertson said he was certain there would be enough by November. The numbers for drafts were standing up well; 58,000 trained men had been sent out and 15,000 were standing by. He saw Haig every two or three weeks; not that he interfered, but it afforded an opportunity

to discuss broader issues. Robertson thought the war would continue well into 1917, but insisted the British army and their Allies were doing well. Repington spoke of the failed attacks by VII, VIII and X Corps on the first day of the Somme, but was careful to describe them as 'a very glorious failure'. He judged that the generals had done their best. He would deplore it if it were thought fit to punish them. His conversations with French served only to reveal the former C-in-C's increasingly pessimistic outlook. He told Repington they had just learned from the War Office that the losses by Saturday 15 July had exceeded 100,000. Did Repington think the game any longer worth the candle? He compared losses and gains with those at Loos to the Somme's considerable disadvantage. At this rate, he concluded, he did not think they could win. Repington agreed. French pressed him to speak with Lloyd George.²⁹ But after their 19 July meeting it was another three months before Repington and Lloyd George met again for an extended post-luncheon conversation about the war. Then the Somme was about to reach its inconclusive, temporary ending, the taking of the Redan Heights on 19 November. In the intervening weeks much happened to shape the future relationship of Lloyd George and Haig. Then, in the first week of December, the Secretary of State for War replaced Asquith as Prime Minister.

On 29 July Robertson had sent a note to Haig pointing out that the 'Powers that be' were growing increasingly restless. If the loss of 300,000 men could not guarantee really great results, ought they not to be satisfied with something less? If the primary object of the exercise had been the relief of pressure on Verdun, was that not already achieved? In the course of his long reply justifying himself and his strategy, Haig insisted that they must continue to maintain their offensive. His defiant explanation and rationale was that losses were not significantly greater than if there had been no offensive. He calculated that July's fighting had cost *only* 120,000 extra losses and repeatedly insisted the rising casualty count alone could not be 'regarded as sufficient to justify any anxiety as to our ability to continue the offensive'.³⁰

Churchill for one was not impressed by this argument. Recently Repington had seen much of him. Churchill had always been against the Somme offensive; had pronounced from the first day it 'would come to no good'. He claimed to know exactly what was going on and why the British army had suffered such heavy losses – a pretty big claim even by Churchillian standards. At the next vote of credit he intended to comment on how the war was being conducted. He wished to consult with Repington beforehand. When the military correspondent attended the Commons on 1 August, Churchill showed him the memorandum. It would be fathered by F. E. Smith. Well written and highly critical,

Repington observed, there was nothing in it to which he took exception. However, he failed to see what useful purpose it would serve.

Next day Repington dined with French. Sir John was ‘in his best bantam-cock form’ and apparently intent upon striking at Robertson. Repington pleaded with the Field Marshal to acknowledge Robertson had a difficult hand to play. So long as Haig remained C-in-C, he was obliged to support him. It was not in the country’s interest for the C-in-C and the CIGS to quarrel. “‘Ah!’” said French, “‘you used to say the same thing to me about Kitchener when I did not get on with him.’” It was one of those occasions when Repington was only too glad of Brinsley Fitzgerald’s presence to help him calm the hopelessly irascible Field Marshal. Repington admired French, as he did Churchill. Boldness, dash, indomitability and magnanimity of spirit more than compensated for their undoubted faults. Repington found himself persuaded by Robertson’s assertion there were ‘a great too many people buzzing about trying to interfere with and run the war . . . We were under a mutual obligation to go on; we could not tell Paris we have had enough and meant to stop . . . The best thing to do was not to give way to the busy bodies.’ Repington considered Robertson’s opinion ‘very sound’. For that reason, he told him, although the recent corrections made to his article on the Somme by the Censor at GHQ were ‘dishonest’, the war was ‘too big for [him] to trouble about such trifles at present’. Robertson merely repeated his earlier assertion: ‘The great thing is to win the war; nothing else matters.’³¹

Northcliffe, in the *Daily Mail*, ‘in a vein of awe-struck reverence’,³² had claimed, ‘The doings of the army are put before the world each day with the frankness that is part of Sir Douglas Haig’s own character. He is opposed to secrecy.’³³ This monumentally absurd claim was soon contradicted by Northcliffe’s brother, Rothermere. Dining with Lloyd George the evening after the Cabinet had seen Churchill’s damning memorandum, he insisted that the Somme offensive was a failure, a simple, dreadful truth withheld to delude the public and mislead his host. Rothermere insisted the communiqués he received were ‘full of lies, lies, lies!’³⁴

The following week Lloyd George paid a lightning two-day visit to France. He scarcely found a moment for Haig. Fred Maurice, who had accompanied him, told Repington all about it when, a few days later, they met to dine at the Savoy. Maurice had been greatly amused by Lloyd George’s enthusiastic description to the House of his first visit to the front. From his account it might have been supposed ‘he had been everywhere and seen everything’. He had certainly left a favourable and optimistic impression with the soldiers. What truly surprised Charteris, who had anxiously monitored the Welshman’s progress, was his apparent lack

of concern about the casualty figures.³⁵ Had this, he wondered, truly reflected the minister's frame of mind?

As Repington discovered when he called at Horse Guards, one man who was not prepared to change his mind was French. The Field Marshal believed the army had by now lost more than 200,000 men. Facing ruin, it had failed to gain any compensatory advantage.³⁶ Visiting the War Office on 6 September, Repington hoped to see Lloyd George but instead learned the minister had left for Paris two days before insisting that the Somme offensive was all wrong and that more troops should instead be sent to Salonika. Repington saw no reason why there should be any change of plan at this late date. Admittedly Haig's tactics had at first been not only bad, but expensive. They had, however, improved. There was no real alternative now but to go on and no point in sending more men to Salonika when 'they could only come from France and the Somme'. If Sarrail could do nothing with 400,000 men, why give him more? Repington bewailed 'a tomfool expedition that had cost so many lives uselessly'.³⁷ He had learned from two old school friends, 'Fatty' Wilson and 'Bockus' Nicol, more than half their strength was down with dysentery and malaria. It would be fair to say that matters turned out very much as Repington had forecast from the beginning.

Meanwhile, on his second, extended tour to France, the series of questions Lloyd George asked Foch really set the cat among the pigeons. He had clearly not forgotten his earlier conversation with Repington, who had emphasised the superiority of Foch's tactics over those of Haig. LG knew that he could not hope to get a detailed response either from Haig or any of his commanders. As Secretary of State he was their nominal head, but they, like the CIGS, were more Haig's men than his. In the circumstances Lloyd George thought it not unreasonable to question an Allied general who had enjoyed success on that disastrous first day of the Somme when the British had suffered so many casualties. He wanted to know why the British had taken fewer prisoners and why they had occupied less ground and at a much higher cost in killed and wounded than the French. As the responsible British minister surely he had a right to be told the truth? Lloyd George was about to learn an important and significant lesson: professional loyalty among soldiers extended to allies. Foch, sensing that Haig could find himself in trouble, had instinctively returned cagey responses to the politician's eager interrogatories. He insisted he did not know the answer. He reminded the Secretary of State the British troops were green and untried whereas his had been veterans. These had not been the answers Lloyd George wanted to hear.

Next day, at Lee's suggestion, he posed the same questions to Henry Wilson. Though the most political of the British generals, as a soldier he

instinctively felt a loyalty to fellow senior officers. He returned the same answers as had Foch – that the British ‘troops and artillery were new to the game’.³⁸ Soldiers were never more aware of their brotherhood-in-arms than when threatened by politicians. Haig wrote in his diary, ‘I would not have believed that a British Minister could have been so ungentlemanly as to go to a foreigner and put such questions regarding his subordinates.’³⁹ The CIGS said he would confront Lloyd George but Haig advised him to let the matter drop. Nevertheless, he made it his business to see news of the politician’s faux pas was widely publicised. As a result, Gwynne’s *Morning Post* threatened Lloyd George. Should he ever repeat his gaffe, the *Post* would reveal exactly what had happened. Lloyd George responded by praising the British army and its generals and denying he had done anything that exceeded his legitimate sphere of activity.⁴⁰ Politician, editor and generals were all behaving in character.

Scarcely contained, anger bubbled beneath the masks of friendship and camaraderie so readily assumed for the public stage. In private they did not seek to disguise their differences. Robertson told Repington in confidence, he was expected to give so much time to Lloyd George he found it increasingly difficult to give his whole mind to his key task, defeating Hindenburg. Could they not ‘all be pals and work together’? That, Robertson acknowledged, was a pious, unrealisable hope considering the personalities, the stubborn determination, the self-righteousness of the characters involved. He vowed he would try to ‘go on quietly in his own way, stick to his own job and brook no interference in his sphere’. But, he admitted, Lloyd George had tested that resolve more than once. ‘I am a poor man,’ he told Repington, ‘but that makes me no less determined to resign if my advice is not followed.’ And there was reason for hope and optimism, Robertson admitted. ‘On compulsion, LG had been splendid. He fought like a tiger, even for compulsion in Ireland.’⁴¹

When Repington next enjoyed a long conversation with Lloyd George, he noted the politician was in good form. But frustration with the military lay not far below the surface and soon would be revealed dramatically. LG proudly told his mistress, he had ‘triumphed over the soldiers’ at the previous day’s meeting of the War Committee. An earlier decision had been reversed and two divisions would now be sent to Romania. The lesson he drew from this was that ‘Soldiers respect nothing so much as power. This [would] considerably strengthen his influence and his prestige among them.’⁴² Yet, he admitted to Repington, he was more dissatisfied than for a long time with the general state of affairs. What did Repington think? Did he see a way to winning the war? How would he propose to achieve it? The correspondent was not the least disobliged to

be questioned thus. His immediate response was to pose a question of his own: 'What exactly did Lloyd George mean by "winning the war"?'

Soldiers and politicians notoriously offered very different answers to that seemingly innocuous question. The antipathy both groups felt for each other undoubtedly coloured their exchanges, but the real stumbling block was when either party spoke of 'winning the war'. Identical words concealed real differences, ambiguities, confusions. Lloyd George unhesitatingly asserted the war would be won if the Germans were thrust out of France and Belgium. Repington's response was that to win any war, as Hindenburg had said, was 'a question of the strongest will-power . . . in the language of the Prize Ring, to keep on punching'. Even to '*win the war in the ordinary way*' (my emphasis) would require 'a very much greater superiority of force than we possess'. At present, enjoying a numerical advantage of perhaps six to five in the west, they needed to be stronger '*to annihilate the enemy*' (my emphasis). For soldiers, the enemy was Germany and the western front the only place where the war could and would be settled. The fundamental strategic aim therefore, in France and Flanders, was to inflict a crushing defeat upon German arms so great that the Germans would never again attempt to seek a position of world dominance. The inevitable consequence was a war of attrition. The German army would be brought to its knees by inflicting more losses upon it than it could inflict upon the Allies. Robertson had adopted this strategy reluctantly and with no great certainty. He had grave reservations about the dependability of France and Russia as allies. But, he confessed, he could see nothing better. He stuck to it instinctively rather than for any convincing reason in its favour.⁴³ Haig had arrived at the same conclusion more by accident than design. He was slowly obliged to admit (despite the advantage of inspiration courtesy of Napoleon and his dead brother Geordie, kindly supplied in the letters of his sister Henrietta), that the way to victory would inevitably be paved by hecatombs of dead and mutilated infantry. That was the sufficient, awful, human sacrifice and the necessary consequence of his strategic planning. Initially this was hidden from him by his lack of imagination and his unrealistic optimism.

Lloyd George complained to Repington it was his experience that commanders 'only concerned themselves with their special fronts. They were unable to take broad views.' He expressed considerable doubts whether they could continue to 'get sufficient men to carry on'. Repington admitted it was 'not very encouraging'. At this point in their conversation the minister suddenly and vehemently declared it simply was not good enough that everyone should be 'asked to keep silent and bow the knee to the military Moloch'. He was not prepared to remain perpetually quiescent. He was the Secretary of State for War. His was the

responsibility. He would have to accept the blame. Therefore, 'He meant to have his own way.'⁴⁴

Repington appeared shocked by this outburst, although why he should have been is difficult to understand. Earlier, warned by Robertson of the latent antagonism between Lloyd George and the High Command, Repington noted it was 'even deeper than R suspected'. How could he have forgotten that exactly the same issue had been rehearsed only a fortnight earlier?⁴⁵ Robertson had asked Repington what he thought of a letter of resignation he had drafted as CIGS. He was no longer prepared to have his military opinions constantly opposed at the War Committee. Lloyd George, who had long wanted to exploit the Salonika front, had argued that a small extra effort there compared with the vast expenditure of men and munitions on the Somme would reap the considerable dividend of a victory over the Bulgars and turn events to Allied advantage in Romania. Lloyd George made it clear to Robertson, he, like any other member of the War Committee, was free to take his own line on strategic thinking. He would not be a dummy, 'a part for which I am not in the least suited'. He was not prepared 'merely to advocate the opinions of my military advisers'. Robertson and LG knew very well their argument was not about strategic choice so much as about their relative powers as Secretary of State for War and CIGS. Robertson's authority was entrenched by an Order in Council. That considerably out-trumped Lloyd George. The minister could be as sarcastic as he liked, but the CIGS won hands down.⁴⁶ The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reggie McKenna, no friend of Lloyd George, claimed 'LG was silenced and overshadowed by Robertson who was the real Minister of War.' LG was 'effectively an extinct volcano'. Repington did not believe that, even for a moment.⁴⁷ He nevertheless valued McKenna, who was generally a reliable and generous source.

LG, with a fine show of simulated self-righteousness, accused Robertson of divulging secrets to the press. He knew the general regularly spoke to Repington, but the military correspondent was usually careful not to divulge in *The Times*, 'anything that any competent observer could not have reconstructed from conversations in clubs and current rumours'.⁴⁸ The responses to Lloyd George's views on strategy that he recorded in his *War Diaries* are much more muted, even open-minded than those he had published in *The Times*. He admitted there was 'a need to discard all the baggage of our earlier learning and teach ourselves anew in the light of our new experiences. We should not allow ourselves to be hampered by anything.' He even went so far as to agree heartily with Lloyd George's criticism that 'the soldiers should have made better plans when Romania entered the

war'. But in *The Times*, for months he had disdainfully dismissed all politicians' strategic choices as inept. He had slammed the way politicians harassed, hampered and interfered with military matters. 'Their common denominator is a complete ignorance of the principles of strategy.'⁴⁹ Seeking to please, he had told Northcliffe of one piece of presumption perpetrated by the Secretary of State. This had prompted the proprietor to storm down to the minister's office and leave a message warning Lloyd George, if he continued to interfere with strategy then he, Northcliffe, would 'expose it both in the House of Lords and in his own newspapers'.⁵⁰

From time to time all parties to the debate had behaved badly, but no episode was worse than when Lloyd George, in early October, sent Field Marshal Lord French to question the French high command about their artillery techniques. On his return French was to report directly to Lloyd George and not to the CIGS. Le Roy Lewis, the British military attaché to the Paris embassy, informed Repington, French's commission was not intended to be complimentary or helpful to Haig. Repington said and wrote nothing. He was never more eloquent than when he chose to keep silent. He knew Johnny French's trip on Lloyd George's behalf did no favours for anyone. Lloyd George achieved nothing other than create more frustration.

In effect, the Secretary of State for War had despatched the former British C-in-C to provide him with the means 'to tell tales against Haig and his command'.⁵¹ Even to a Field Marshal, Foch refused to provide the required evidence to compromise the British high command. This distrust and duplicity were never admitted in the public record. Instead, Derby told the Lords in late November (an ironic if not farcical prelude to Lloyd George's removal to 10 Downing Street), 'We have a combination which cannot be equalled much less improved.'⁵² It did not matter the claim was nonsense or that it was 'the opposite of what Lloyd George believed'.⁵³ He thought Haig neither a competent strategist nor a big man, though he was prepared to admit he was a good fighter. If possible he thought even less of Robertson. Derby's claim did reflect a greater truth; that LG, despite his most strenuous efforts to resist, had been bested by the military, and it was they who determined Britain's military effort should remain concentrated on the western front.

The Battle of the Ancre, the last futile stage of the Somme offensive, was largely a knock-down battle of wills, a consequence of the mutual mistrust and ill-feeling between the frocks and the brass hats. Repington acknowledged that Haig decided to have 'one more smack at the Germans' because he supposed 'LG was still such a dangerous factor'.⁵⁴ There is scarcely anything in the *Diaries* about the bloody confrontation

on the Ancre. He did note, almost off-handedly, ‘We had more guns with Gough’s attack than on the whole Somme front on July 1’, and that ‘Gough accounted for 20,000 to 30,000 Germans’.⁵⁵ Between 13 and 18 November, at a cost of more than 20,000 casualties, Gough’s Fifth Army, before they were bogged down in mud and slime, secured the ruins of Beaumont Hamel and Beaucourt, villages originally planned to be secured on the first day of the Somme. This victory – an ‘advance’ of 2 kilometres – was achieved four and a half months later than originally planned. It assured Haig would get his way at the Chantilly Anglo-French conference. There, all the military leaders concurred that ‘The old strategy should be continued’. Repington judged it ‘the best conference yet . . . We shall press on in the west after a delay for training and repairs’.⁵⁶

Long before Beaumont Hamel and Beaucourt, Repington had been concentrating upon the question Haig had chosen to beg in their January 1915 meeting, as had Lloyd George in their meeting of July 1916. How were sufficient men to be recruited and trained⁵⁷ to fill the drafts until Germany was finally wasted, exhausted and beaten? Matters grew worse, not better when Asquith’s intended National Service Bill for men from 16 to 60 years of age was cut short by Lloyd George’s assumption of the purple. Any measure Lloyd George could bring in would not begin to produce trained men until June or July at the earliest. Repington was planning a whole series of articles on the subject for *The Times*. Not cheered by his early experience of the mercurial Welsh prime minister, Robertson provided Repington with a very gloomy picture. All LG wanted, apparently, was ‘a quick victory, a victory while you wait. He does not care where so long as opinion will be impressed.’ Robertson suggested Beersheba might be a better bet than Damascus. LG did not think that Beersheba would catch on, but Jerusalem might. Repington sardonically summed up the whole issue in his diary: ‘So this is War Cabinet strategy at the close of 1916. If we can win on it we can win on anything.’⁵⁸