

# British Journal for Military History

Volume 8, Issue 2, September 2022

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**ISSN:** 2057-0422

**Date of Publication:** 28 September 2022

**Citation:** James E Kitchen & Stuart Mitchell, 'Michael Howard and the Historian's Craft: An Introduction to the Michael Howard Special Issue', *British Journal for Military History*, 8.2 (2022), pp. 2-26.

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# Michael Howard and the Historian's Craft: An Introduction to the Michael Howard Special Issue

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## ABSTRACT

*This introduction to the Michael Howard Special Issue offers a short background to his life, contextualises the themes found across the contributions to this issue, and then provides a more detailed analysis of Howard and his two 'careers' as a Captain and a Professor. Howard's life as a soldier is too often compartmentalised from his work as a historian; this introduction examines where and how Howard's military experiences shaped his later intellectual interests, academic career, and historiographical ideas. It then moves on to look at Howard's landmark lecture and article 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', the influences on his methodology, and two prominent lectures he gave at Oxford as Regius Professor of History. The picture that emerges of Howard is one of a life dedicated to understanding the past and nurturing through good faith the generations that would follow him.*

In an academic career spanning most of the second half of the twentieth century, and across a life that reached nearly a century, Michael Howard made a profound contribution to scholarship on the history of war. His published output was vast. It included substantial monographs, such as his account of the Franco-Prussian War or two contributions to the British official history of the Second World War, as well as numerous essay collections and shorter works of synthesis, such as *War in European History*. These not only engaged students of military history but opened up complex topics to a much wider audience. Through his joint translation of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* with Peter Paret (and the oft forgotten Angus Malcolm), he also helped to reinvigorate the intellectual history of war. Given how avidly this new translation was received by student officers in military academies and staff colleges in the English-

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v8i2.1632

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speaking world, it also served to place his stamp across professional military education and many of its foundational concepts.<sup>1</sup>

Howard's influence on the study of war rested on more than just his published historical output. At King's College, London (KCL) in the 1950s and 1960s he played an important role in the creation of the Department of War Studies and in embedding the subject into the wider academic profession as something worthy of sustained and detailed study.<sup>2</sup> Although its growth into the 'world's leading academic institution for the study of war' was largely a product of the period from the 1990s onwards and thus post-dated Howard's tenure at KCL, he nonetheless provided much of its identity and guiding principles.<sup>3</sup> Through the creation of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in the same period, Howard was also involved in reaching beyond academia to try to broaden the debate on questions of defence and security, engaging with people outside a few corridors in Whitehall. He saw it as an organisation, drawing on US models, that would help to create a "civil society" of defence intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> War, in particular the cataclysmic potential of a nuclear confrontation, was a subject that Howard felt must be explored and explained to the general public, as deterrence existed ultimately for their protection.

A grant from the Ford Foundation enabled Howard to travel extensively around the US visiting some of the leading institutions and generating connections that would make him an influential voice on nuclear deterrence and strategic studies on both sides of the Atlantic. In September 1961 he participated in the Pugwash Association's conference at Stowe, Vermont where he and other voices from the humanities, sciences, and politics in both the US and USSR met to discuss arms control. Although the gains that came out of this meeting were intangible, and at best incremental, the

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<sup>1</sup>For a short overview of Howard's life, career, and achievements, see Andrew Roberts, 'Sir Michael Howard obituary', *The Guardian*, 1 December 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/01/sir-michael-howard-obituary>.

Accessed 17 June 2022. For the wider impact of the Howard and Paret translation, see Hew Strachan, 'Michael Howard and Clausewitz', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2022), pp. 143-160. For a general overview of Howard's contribution to military historical scholarship, see Hew Strachan, 'Michael Howard and the Dimensions of Military History', *War in History*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2020), pp. 536-551.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: The Memoirs of Sir Michael Howard*, (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 140-152.

<sup>3</sup>Lizzie Ellen, ed., *War Studies: Celebrating Six Decades of Research and Teaching Excellence in the Study of War, 1961-2021*, (London: Kings College London, 2021), pp. 8-15: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/warstudies/assets/war-studies-at-60-celebratory-publication.pdf>. Accessed 18 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 160-164.

Pugwash conferences created enough common ground to continue throughout the Cold War and remain a forum to discuss global affairs to this day.<sup>5</sup> Given the acute tensions of the Cold War in the 1960s, and Howard's stateside political, scientific, and academic connections, it was unsurprising that he was also drawn into what he described as the 'consultant professor' role, advising the Defence Secretary, Dennis Healy, on officer education for the three services, although with limited success.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the 1980s Howard would find himself invited to seminars at Chequers to offer opinions on the rising tensions with the Soviet Union. In this instance he found his audience even less receptive to his thinking. He described Margaret Thatcher as 'friendly and courteous', but also as 'not easy company, lacking as she was in any sense of humour and increasingly impervious to new ideas'.<sup>7</sup> The candour with which Howard discusses his engagement with political figures and policy formulation in his memoir perhaps suggests the very real limitations that academics – even those at the top of their profession – can face in shaping public discourse.<sup>8</sup>

Even if his direct engagement with policymakers was not so successful, Howard's professional career as a historian went from strength to strength in the 1970s and 1980s. A move to the University of Oxford saw him become the Chichele Professor of the History of War in 1977 and then the Regius Professor of Modern History in 1980. Howard interestingly wrote that he did not think himself well qualified for the latter post, as he had spent the preceding decades engaged mainly in debates over deterrence and strategy rather than the latest historiographical developments.<sup>9</sup> His final job saw him move to Yale to take up a chair in military and naval history; duly escaping the tortures of Oxford's labyrinthine administration. Any self-deprecation over his historiographical knowledge did not detract from the fact that Howard

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<sup>5</sup>Howard would attend five more conferences (12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup>, 58<sup>th</sup>, and 66<sup>th</sup>) across the next ten years, see Jeffrey Boutwell, ed., Sandra Ionno Butcher, Sally Milne, and Claudia Vaughn, 'Participants in the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs meetings, 1957-2007', *Pugwash Newsletter*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (October 2007), pp. 26-158. For an account of his experiences at the Stowe conference, see Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 176-179.

<sup>6</sup>Howard described three types of academic: the lofty 'God Professor' managing a department of servile lackeys, the 'Airport Professor' transiting from one international conference to the next, and the 'Consultant Professor' chairing government or public committees. Howard noted that at one stage 'he was developing the worst characteristics of all three'; see, Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 192-193. Politicians, of course, still seek advice, and since Howard esteemed historians like Sir Hew Strachan and John Bew have undertaken advisory roles to various governments.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 206-210.

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repeatedly made significant contributions to scholarship on the history of war. In particular, he covered a number of different typologies of historian. His first work was a regimental history, of his former regiment the Coldstream Guards during the interwar years and the Second World War. He served as an official historian, writing volumes on British grand strategy in 1942-43 and on the intelligence history of the war. His history of the Franco-Prussian War demonstrated a mastery of source material and the ability to use it to construct an argument on the changing character of modern war that linked the battlefield back to the political, social, economic, and cultural contexts of the armies fighting across it.<sup>10</sup>

Howard was also 'the master of the short book' that used fluid prose and a remarkable breadth of knowledge of his subject to draw readers into the analytical complexities of a topic.<sup>11</sup> These shorter volumes remain some of his most thought-provoking works, whether providing a sweeping overview of European warfare from medieval mounted warriors to the push-button age of nuclear annihilation, or trying to introduce the complexities and contradictions of Clausewitz's life and thought, or undertaking the near impossible task of dissecting the First World War.<sup>12</sup> Of these shorter works, it is perhaps his *War and the Liberal Conscience* that remains the most intriguing. It wrestles with the 'liberal dilemma' that, on the one hand, regards war as unnecessary and which in a 'rational, orderly world wars would not exist', but on the other hand accepts that wars may have to be fought in cases of liberation from oppression or for the survival of societies.<sup>13</sup> This was a topic he had originally approached for the Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge in 1977, but which reflected a deeper intellectual struggle over the use of war by the state. As Hew Strachan has noted, Howard did not see peace as the norm of international relations, but that it instead resulted from the creation of a legitimate order, one that for much of history had been the product of war. Strategy – a topic to which he dedicated much historical

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<sup>10</sup>Michael Howard and John Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards, 1920-1946*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951); Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968); Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy. Volume IV: August 1942 – September 1943*, (London: HMSO, 1972); Michael Howard, *British Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume V: Strategic Deception*, (London: HMSO, 1990); Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961).

<sup>11</sup>Strachan, 'Dimensions of Military History', p. 550.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Michael Howard, *Clausewitz*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Michael Howard, *The First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup>Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pb. edn., 1999), p. 3.

and contemporary scholarship – was for Howard the means by which war was controlled and restrained, giving it purpose.<sup>14</sup>

The genesis of *War in European History* and *War and the Liberal Conscience* provide an insight into the centrality of lectures to Howard's process of writing history. The Radcliffe Lectures held at the University of Warwick in the spring of 1975 were a proving ground for ideas that would find a more formal written output in *War in European History*, while the Trevelyan Lectures did much the same for *War and the Liberal Conscience*.<sup>15</sup> If the ideas could be successfully communicated to audiences, then they would be suitable for wider general consumption. Howard's first education in the art of lecturing was delivered by the Army Education Corps towards the end of the Second World War; in the post-war world he had many opportunities to refine his methods.<sup>16</sup> It should be no surprise that Howard perfected a written style that favoured brevity and clarity over laborious, unnecessary detail, giving his books an almost unique scope, ambition, and accessibility.

In the foreword to *War in European History* Howard would observe: 'War has been part of a totality of human experience, the parts of which can be understood only in relation to one another.'<sup>17</sup> He would acknowledge that there remained a certain value in didactic, analytic studies, but it was clear that to truly understand the phenomenon the scholar must lift his eyes above the mechanics of campaigns and adopt a much broader view. This has become widely accepted in scholarly circles.<sup>18</sup> More recently though, some commentators have argued that military history and its historians are in some way 'weaponised'. Rather than historians becoming unwitting accomplices to some ill-defined militarist agenda, Howard's intellectual concerns and writing demonstrate a subtle and intellectually rigorous engagement with the realities of war, not from the perspective of its promotion, but from a position of seeking to restrain its necessity.<sup>19</sup> Howard came from a family background in which Quaker and anti-war

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<sup>14</sup>Strachan, 'Dimensions of Military History', p. 546.

<sup>15</sup>Howard, *War in European History*, p. x; Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup>Howard, *War in European History*, p. ix.

<sup>18</sup>It is perhaps best exemplified in Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*, (London: Profile, 2020).

<sup>19</sup>Kim A. Wagner, 'Seeing Like a Soldier: The Amritsar Massacre and the Politics of Military History', in Martin Thomas and Gareth Curless, eds., *Decolonization and Conflict: Colonial Comparisons and Legacies*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 25-27. Wagner does not provide any evidence to justify his assertions regarding military history and professional military education in Britain, although he does offer a short critique of four imperial and military historians. This is a rather partial and parochial view of the field, presenting a misleading image of contemporary military history. For

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sentiments were prominent, and he himself harboured deep personal fears about the potential of the Cold War to result in nuclear Armageddon.<sup>20</sup> As he noted in his memoir, it was to this 'vast subject' of liberals wrestling with the moral and realist uses of war that he had wished to return in more detail later in life.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to these books, Howard remained a prolific essayist throughout his life, producing succinct arguments that challenged crude assumptions and pushed his readers to think with greater care, calmness, and reflection about complex issues that warranted a fuller and less superficial understanding.<sup>22</sup> Taking his post-retirement output in *The RUSI Journal* alone, these essays ranged widely across topics such as the execution of soldiers for cowardice in the Great War, the terminological imprecision of the 'war on terror', shifting ideas on strategy, and the European Union referendum.<sup>23</sup> All demonstrated a careful and measured approach to thinking about war, its conduct, and its wider historical, political, social, and cultural context.

The pieces assembled for this special issue of the *British Journal for Military History* marking the centenary of his birth aim to engage with a variety of aspects of Howard's scholarship and academic career. To borrow one of his most famous phrases on military history, this special edition examines his contribution to the history of war in width, depth, and context.<sup>24</sup> The articles tackle elements of his shaping of the fields of military history and war studies, as well as drawing on his ideas to think more deeply about historiographical debates that resonate through to today. Following this introduction is a personal essay by Adrian Gregory that looks at the teaching of a

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a more insightful appreciation of the issues involved in delivering professional military education, see Louis Halewood and David Morgan-Owen, 'Captains of War: History in Professional Military Education', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 165, No. 7 (2020), pp. 46-54.<sup>20</sup>For the influence of his family background, see Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 1-7, 11-20, and 38-41; Strachan, 'Dimensions of Military History', p. 546. For Howard's fears of nuclear war, see Roberts, 'Michael Howard'.

<sup>21</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 205.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace*, (London: Temple Smith, 1970); Michael Howard, *The Causes of War and Other Essays*, (London: Temple Smith, 1983); Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>23</sup>Michael Howard, 'Condemned: Courage and Cowardice – Introduction', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 143, No. 1 (1998), pp. 51-52; Michael Howard, 'Mistake to Declare this a "War"', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 146, No. 6 (2001), pp. 1-4; Michael Howard, 'The Transformation of Strategy', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 156, No. 4 (2011), pp. 12-16; Michael Howard, 'Better In or Out? The Historical Background', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 161, No. 3, (2016) pp. 4-6.

<sup>24</sup>Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, Vol. 107, No. 625 (February 1962), pp. 4-10.

course at Oxford originally designed by Howard and that sprang out of his twin interests in the liberal dilemma over war and the period from the Franco-Prussian War to the Great War. This was an era that involved profound change in war's conduct and its impact on states and societies in Europe. Gregory points out some of the practical realities of delivering such a course in the context of the early twenty-first century when issues of war and peace again became prominent in international relations.

Vanda Wilcox then examines Howard's magisterial *War in European History* through a European historiographical lens, placing it into wider debates on the history of war taking place in the 1970s and 1980s in France, Italy, and West Germany. The book's *longue durée* perspective highlighted the breadth of approaches that could be encompassed within the 'war and society' school of military history that Howard had been so influential in establishing. As Wilcox highlights, using Umberto Eco's review of Howard, this was also a book that stimulated, and can still stimulate, profound thinking about the relationship of force and power in the conduct of war. Moreover, Wilcox notes a particular trait of Howard's scholarship, which can in light of the 'global turn' make him seem somewhat dated: he was a distinctly *European* historian.<sup>25</sup>

David Morgan-Owen and Michael Finch then provide a careful dissection of Howard's place within the creation of war studies as a separate scholarly discipline, in particular his role in the establishment of the eponymous department at King's College, London. As they illustrate, a degree of myth making has crept into the story of Howard's role. In their retelling a more complex narrative emerges, in which institutional interest in the study of war preceded Howard's tenure at KCL, and the setting up of the department and its courses rested on the enabling activities of other historians often left out of the story. The key part of Howard's legacy for war studies was to establish it as a pragmatic discipline that ranged across a smorgasbord of other academic fields, but within which military history remained the lodestone.

Mungo Melvin then focuses in on what is probably Howard's most important single scholarly contribution: his translation with Peter Paret of Clausewitz's *On War*. This translation wrestled with the difficulties of all translations, between fidelity to the original text and the need to produce an accessible work for contemporary readers.

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<sup>25</sup>Howard did make two forays into topics relating to what would come to be termed 'global history', examined via the lens of European imperialism: 'Empires, Nations and Wars', the Yigal Allon Memorial Lecture at the University of Tel Aviv, March 1982, published in Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 21-48; 'Empire, Race and War in pre-1914 Britain', in Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 63-80. For a succinct overview of the 'global turn', see James Belich, John Darwin, Margaret Frenz, and Chris Wickham, eds., *The Prospect of Global History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).



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As Melvin highlights, such problems also beset the two earlier English-language translations, although Howard and Paret did produce a text that was both comprehensive and readable. Given the issues of mistranslation and shifting intellectual interests around the study of war, Melvin suggests that it is time for a new translation of *On War*; an argument that resonates with Hew Strachan's calls for a more comprehensive approach to all of Clausewitz's work.<sup>26</sup>

This is followed by Linda Risso's examination of Michael Howard's views on the nuclear deterrence arguments of the early 1980s. She highlights his balanced perspective on the risks of a nuclear clash with the USSR and his desire to get policymakers to think more carefully about the reasoning behind the choices made by Soviet leaders. Howard had little time for the stereotyped views emanating from American 'maximalist' strategic theorists that saw the USSR as a 'cosmic evil'. What emerges is a sense of Howard as a deeply empathetic thinker who argued for a considered and ethical approach to nuclear strategy at a time when such views did not always enjoy support among Western policymakers.

Finally, the collection closes with an essay by Alisa Miller that takes Howard's 1987 essay on 'War and Technology' and uses it as a springboard to explore how narratives of contemporary wars are constructed and presented in the twenty-first century. Even with the promise of digital technologies enabling a broader perspective on who fights, suffers, and documents war, the reality is that the heroic masculine warrior figure still dominates. The essay makes a good case for the enduring power of Howard's thinking on war and military history, which set up ideas that continue to resonate with our contemporary understanding of war.

These articles and essays highlight four key facets of Howard's work and academic career. First, they address his contribution to the historiography around military history and the history of war more generally. Second, they contextualise his position as the 'founding father' of war studies, at least in Britain. Third, they present Howard both as a scholar and as a profoundly important public intellectual. Fourth, they point to the enduring prominence of his scholarship in shaping the study of war and its foundational ideas and texts. Reaching across all these pieces are a series of interconnecting themes. First and foremost is Howard's brilliance as a stylist and writer, able to convey complex ideas in a succinct and engaging manner. When some twenty-first-century writing on war and its history appears to have adopted the worst attributes of the social sciences – language and arguments that can only be understood by, and are of interest to, a handful of fellow academics – it is refreshing to be reminded

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<sup>26</sup>Strachan, 'Howard and Clausewitz', p. 144.

of the power of concise and erudite prose.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Howard teaches that being a historian is, at least in part, about being able to write well. Across all his books, articles, and essays, despite the frequently troubling subject matter, he wrote with great elegance and erudition. He was unmatched in his ability to craft narratives that framed the complexity of problems while observing the salient connections between their multiple elements. When G.M. Trevelyan questioned the very purpose of the discipline of history, he was calling for it to go beyond the dry accumulation of facts and their interpretation in order to elevate itself such that it could explain the ‘full emotional and intellectual value to a wide public by the difficult art of literature’.<sup>28</sup> By these lofty parameters we must surely judge Howard favourably, for he did not just explain matters simply and accessibly, but he also avoided the twin pitfalls of simplism and reductivism. To steal a phrase once more from Trevelyan, Howard’s ‘magnificent historical narrative educates the mind and the character’.<sup>29</sup>

Howard also emerges from these articles as a historian who valued empathising with historical subjects. As he noted in his memoir, this historical empathy enables people to engage with the diversity of human cultures and thus to avoid misunderstandings such as those of Britain and France with regard to the politics of central Europe in the 1930s and which dogged US policymakers’ approach to the USSR during the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> An empathetic historian such as Howard was thus one who thought beyond the minutiae of particular military problems to ask fundamental questions about the politics, societies, and cultures in which these problems existed and were confronted. What is also evident from these articles, is that Howard, despite being a prominent figure in war studies and contemporary strategic thought in the second half of the twentieth century, was by education and temperament fundamentally a historian. He was a scholar interested in change and continuity through time, in asking questions about ideas and evidence, who sought out the contextual complexities to problems, and who identified patterns and processes.

Two aspects of Howard’s life and scholarly output are, however, only touched on tangentially in the following articles. Given their prominence to the development of his thinking, the introduction will examine them to draw out the wider influences on Howard’s life and, correspondingly, his approach to history. These two aspects

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<sup>27</sup>For an example of the complexity of some current writing on war, requiring a six-page glossary of terms to make sense of the language used, see Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Hurst, 2022), pp. 207-212.

<sup>28</sup>G.M. Trevelyan, *Clio a Muse, and other Essays Literary or Pedestrian*, (London: Longmans Green, 1913), p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 207-208.

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concern his Second World War military experiences and his field-defining lecture and article on 'The Use and Abuse of Military History'. Together, these two elements help illuminate the enduring tensions and legacy of Howard's methodological approach to the study of history, a subject on which he provided further insights in a pair of lectures that bookended his Regius Professorship in the 1980s. The introduction concludes with an examination of Howard's legacy for the military historical profession and a brief personal reflection on his generosity of spirit and good humour.

Wartime military service with the Coldstream Guards in the Italian theatre was fundamental to shaping Howard as a historian and his thinking on war. His memoir makes this clear, dividing his life between his dual identities of captain and professor. It was important not because this service led to his first work of history, a jointly authored book on the Coldstream Guards' war, nor because it gave him credibility at KCL to take on the military studies appointment in 1953. Crucially, service in Italy gave him experience of the sharp end of war, and in one of the conflict's bloodier and more intense campaigns.<sup>31</sup> His memoir was unflinching in describing the realities of infantry combat in Italy, highlighting the confusion of tactical actions and the costs of modern industrialised war, both for the soldiers fighting it and the civilians suffering its fallout.<sup>32</sup> Even his account of the infantry attack on a position known as 'the pimple' at Salerno that won him the Military Cross, is described in a self-deprecating and reflective analytical manner. He noted that his gallantry award was due more to luck than anything else, highlighting three elements to the action. He pointed to the fact that he had few choices about what to do at the time except advance, that his superiors observed it and could thus write him up for the award, and that as it was his first taste of combat he was yet to fully grasp the fear inherent in battle. Howard was brutally frank in describing his actions in subsequent engagements as 'cowardly'.<sup>33</sup> In a later section he devoted much attention to unpicking not the heroism of war but what could go wrong. He described a patrol that he led which ended up stuck in a minefield, resulting in him having to abandon a wounded man who later died of his injuries. Howard wrote of his shame about this incident and noted that after the war

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<sup>31</sup> For the strains the Italian theatre placed on combatants, see John Ellis, *Cassino – The Hollow Victory: The Battle for Rome January-June 1944*, (London: Deutsch, 1984); Peter Caddick-Adams, *Monte Cassino: Ten Armies in Hell*, (London: Preface, 2012). For another veteran's experience of the horrors of the Italian campaign, see Spike Milligan, *Mussolini: His Part in my Downfall*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1978).

<sup>32</sup> Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

he visited the soldier's grave.<sup>34</sup> For Howard then, war was not only a subject of academic inquiry but also a deeply personal and troubling experience.<sup>35</sup>

What this experience – reinforced by then trying to construct an orderly historical narrative of his regiment's war – did give Howard was an appreciation of the complexities of understanding war as both participant and chronicler. The sources were often poor or contradictory, especially given the nature of combat accounts such as unit war diaries that were frequently written long after an action had occurred. Details on administration and logistics often dominated over information on operations, and accounts of battle could be distorted by the excitement and fatigue experienced. Thinking of the challenges in weaving together a narrative, Howard observed that 'battle was as difficult to describe as the act of love'.<sup>36</sup> Yet, as Howard knew all too well, fighting was at the heart of war. The organised application of violence by the state to achieve particular ends was what made war a unique phenomenon in history, but also one that resonated across history.<sup>37</sup> It was a historical experience that reflected both change and continuity. His own military and combat experiences in Italy attested to this. Like so many soldiers on campaign before him, Howard became a disease casualty, suffering from malaria at Salerno, bouts of which recurred throughout his campaigning.<sup>38</sup>

Although having served in a major war, which placed him in the same soldier-scholar bracket as Clausewitz, Howard retained an ambivalent attitude to his own military service.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the war he described the figure of 'Captain M.E. Howard MC' with succinct distance: 'it wasn't me.' He also noted how out of place he felt on returning to Oxford to complete his degree, having lost friends killed during the war and having had friendships altered by it.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, Howard did not advocate that

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 107-109.

<sup>35</sup>Despite witnessing the full horrors of war and the corresponding refugee crises created, Howard would never embrace pacifism.

<sup>36</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>37</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) p. 75, unless otherwise stated all references in this article are to this translation; Howard, *Grand Strategy*, p. 1; Howard, 'Grand Strategy in the Twentieth Century', *Defence Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001), pp. 1-10, especially p. 3.

<sup>38</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 80 and 82.

<sup>39</sup>For an overview of the phenomenon of the 'warrior scholar' and the ideas of such figures in the field of irregular warfare, see Andrew Mumford and Bruno C. Reis, eds., *The Theory and Practice of Irregular Warfare: Warrior-Scholarship in Counter-Insurgency*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>40</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 123-124.

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only ex-servicemen could make good military historians, indeed quite the opposite. He argued that his military service gave him only a limited perspective on one small part of the Second World War, stating that it was 'confined to a worm's eye view' and that being there was a 'dubious advantage'. Moreover, he felt that a good historian could use their own 'imaginative effort' to recreate the atmosphere of a campaign, stating: 'some historians have an astonishing ability to deduce from other people's accounts what things were like and to write as if they were there.'<sup>41</sup> If Howard was a soldier-scholar then it was an identity that contained within it a degree of tension as much as it provided professional validation for him as a military historian who had seen combat.

Howard's personal conflict between his experiences as a soldier at the sharp end and the objective construction of past events as a historian was mirrored in wider changes to the academic study of war. In the 1960s a 'new military history' emerged placing much greater emphasis on cultural, social, gendered, and emotional responses to war. Like all movements this was not initially a conscious collective process but an iterative, cumulative change as the political sands of academia shifted, elevating different approaches, validating some and relegating others.<sup>42</sup> Although Howard would never share in the hostility that would typify some later critics of traditional military history, he should still be seen as a pioneer of the new movement. His advocacy for war studies as a broad discipline, reached well beyond narrow operational accounts of battle. But, as Howard often made clear, war always came back to fighting and the brutal realities that he had known all too well.<sup>43</sup>

As Hew Strachan has noted, the 'new military history' that Howard argued for from the 1960s onwards has often been more concerned with things other than combat. Topics such as disease, identity, economic and social contexts, and cultures have come to dominate, leading to a 'history of war with the fighting left out'.<sup>44</sup> The results are accounts of conflicts that go so far as to dismiss battle as playing much of a role in the outcome. Recent works on the Second World War offer a microcosm of such military historical debates. Phillips Payson O'Brien's history of the Allied campaigns against

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<sup>41</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', p. 9.

<sup>42</sup>Joanna Bourke, 'New Military History', in Matthew Hughes and William Philpott, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 258-280.

<sup>43</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 130-131 and 145. The importance of thinking about and understanding fighting is at the heart of Howard's influential article on the pre-First World War cult of the offensive, see Michael Howard, 'Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914', *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1984), pp. 41-57.

<sup>44</sup>Strachan, 'Dimensions of Military History', p. 545.

Germany and Japan has most recently pushed this line for the Second World War. As he sees it, this was a war won on the shop floors of industrial plants in Michigan and Manchester, and in the economic strategy planning centres of Washington and London, not on the blood-soaked battlefields of Normandy or Imphal. In contrast, Jonathan Fennell's study of British Commonwealth soldiers and their willingness to fight and die for the cause, offers an alternative approach. By foregrounding morale, something tested and broken in battle, Fennell places the emphasis away from the economic management of the war and back onto how it was fought, how that fighting played out, and then how combat affected the men who had to keep fighting the war. Perhaps, rather than taking an anti- or pro-battle line, future histories might follow the broad approach of Dan Todman in his magisterial two-volume history of the British war effort. This brings together the social, economic, cultural, and military dimensions of the war, coming close to producing a 'total history' of a total war.<sup>45</sup> What this specific debate reflects are the key questions about the writing of the history of war first identified by Howard and with which he too wrestled. In this respect he offers a vital bridge between two, often mutually hostile, methodological camps. He promoted and embraced the broadening of the field, but never completely denounced the value of rigorous studies of campaigns.<sup>46</sup>

One of Howard's most important contributions to military history came in his field-defining 1961 Royal United Services Institution (RUSI) lecture on 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', published in the February 1962 edition of its journal. Although this article is frequently seen as giving military history its professional identity, it is also much misread and misunderstood, reduced simply to Howard's three 'general rules of study' to be applied to military history, that it should be done in width, depth, and context. Yet this call constituted less than a quarter of the article, the other three quarters reflected Howard's deeper scholarly concern with a careful and measured approach to intellectual inquiry more widely.

In particular, the lecture was not addressed to academics but to military professionals. His general rules were to aid officers in their study of military history and to help them avoid some of the pitfalls of taking an overly instrumentalist and needlessly narrow

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<sup>45</sup>Phillips Payson O'Brien, *How the War was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Daniel Todman, *Britain's War. Volume 1: Into Battle, 1937-1941*, (London: Allen Lane, 2016); Daniel Todman, *Britain's War. Volume 2: A New World, 1942-1947*, (London: Allen Lane, 2016). For a succinct overview of such military historiographical debates, see Jeremy Black, *A Short History of War*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), pp. 233-238.

<sup>46</sup>Howard, *War in European History*, p. ix

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approach, concerned merely with tactical and operational 'lessons'. Howard also offered a nuanced critique of regimental history writing, where the institutional historian had to sustain the image of a 'flawlessly brave and efficient' formation.<sup>47</sup> The result was often a form of history that established myths, although he accepted that these could be helpful in sustaining certain 'emotions or beliefs' within military institutions. He contrasted this form of very particular military history writing – a subset of a sub-discipline – with the 'function of the historian proper'. The latter was to engage with 'complicated and disagreeable realities', inevitably resulting in the 'critical examination of the "myth"'.<sup>48</sup> Howard also issued some criticism of amateur historians lacking 'academic training', who read into the past anachronistic thoughts or motives; here he was thinking of military men dabbling in crude historical analogies.

Howard's argument still resonates particularly well with a twenty-first-century audience. Elements of what could be described as post-modernist thinking emerge. He notes that academic historians are aware of studying not what happened in the past but 'what other historians say happened in the past'. History is thus fundamentally a construct, rather than a revealed truth, even if it did give rise to the illustration of useful principles and certain insights into the enduring characteristics of the human condition. More importantly, for Howard readers are often presented with an account of past events that is incorrect in its orderliness, a result of the historian's selection and interpretation of evidence. Here his own experience of combat in the Second World War shaped his argument. He points out that military historians have to 'create order out of chaos', and that this process could produce tidy accounts that in some ways were a 'blasphemous travesty of the chaotic truth'.<sup>49</sup>

In his RUSI lecture Howard emphasised, as in much of his other work, the Clausewitzian notions of change and continuity in the history of war. Ranging widely across the history of modern warfare from Napoleon in Italy to the British in the Western Desert, Howard attacked the notion that the lessons of history were clear and easy for officers to divine. Instead, he posited the idea that 'Clio is like the Delphic oracle: it is only in retrospect, and usually too late, that we can understand what she

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<sup>47</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', p. 4. For a brilliant dissection of myth-making in the British Army, see David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c. 1870-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>48</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', p. 5.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6. History as a construct of historians and the difficulties of using it to provide simple lessons for today's policymakers is a subject touched on by Lawrence Freedman with respect to the Russia-Ukraine War; see Lawrence Freedman, 'Spirits of the Past: The Role of History in the Russo-Ukraine War' (12 June 2022): <https://samf.substack.com/p/spirits-of-the-past>. Accessed 16 June 2022.

was trying to say'.<sup>50</sup> This led him to set down his three general rules. These in many respects reflected the conceptual approach to military history that underscored his entire academic career. First, that it should adopt a *longue durée* perspective, in part as the only way in which to identify and consider the continuities and discontinuities of military affairs. This was perhaps an unsurprising point for a historian of his generation, with Howard noting the significant influence of the *Annales* school on him in his memoir.<sup>51</sup> Second, that only through a deep study of a broad range of sources could the chaos of war's reality be uncovered. Third, that battles and campaigns could not be studied in isolation and had to be placed in a wider economic, social, and political context. The key point for Howard was that studying military history was, for both military professionals and civilians alike, about intellectual growth; it was not just a means to an end, to make it easier to win the next battle or war, but to build empathy and wisdom.

This central theme was reiterated by Howard in the discussion that followed his lecture; in fact, this part of the published article, so rarely referred to subsequently, offers a vital insight into his thinking on military history and the role of history more generally. Chaired by Lieutenant-General John Hackett, an officer who understood myth-making better than others and would create his own myths around the Soviet threat, the discussion ranged widely across Howard's argument.<sup>52</sup> Questions came, in all but one instance, from serving or retired officers of the three services. Perhaps unremarkably a number focused on his criticism of regimental histories and Howard robustly defended his position on the subjective nature of such historical accounts. More interesting, were a series of questions that focused on the idea of identifying patterns in history and using these as a predictive tool, helping to shape actions in future wars. Howard went further here than in his lecture in drawing a clear distinction between the roles of the 'operational analyst' and the historian. The former was 'action oriented', studying the past merely to discover how to do things better in the present; whereas the latter studied the past for 'more complex reasons'. For Howard, identifying patterns in history was a part of historical practice, but one that was highly subjective. It thus built on his argument about the inherent complexities of historical study in which questioning and criticism were at the heart of the discipline.

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<sup>50</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', p. 7.

<sup>51</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 206-207. The influence is also evident in his valedictory lecture as Regius Professor, concerned as it was with questions of processes and structures in history, see Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 188-200, especially pp. 193-194.

<sup>52</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', pp. 8-10; Jeffrey Michaels, 'Revisiting General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War*', *British Journal for Military History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016), pp. 88-104. Howard would later play a pivotal role in the appointment of Hackett to the role of Principal of King's College, London in 1968.



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Howard retained a deep scepticism about the utilitarian employment of military history to serve the contemporary needs of the armed forces. In his inaugural address as the Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford in 1977 he stated bluntly that 'academic studies can by themselves no more prevent wars than they can teach people how to fight them'.<sup>53</sup> Instead he argued that the study of war provided knowledge, insight, and analytic skills that could inform discussion and then subsequent actions. The point was for military history not to provide crude 'lessons' for officers to then replicate, but to help them better grasp the nature of the problems they faced. Later, during his Regius Professorship's inaugural lecture, Howard recounted his difficulties in trying to identify lessons from the Italian campaign in which he had served when giving a lecture to a less than receptive audience of young army officers. As he noted, they were quite reasonably eager to be shown the direct relevance of this campaign to their careers. Although he suggested there might be some professional value that could be derived from looking at questions of tactics, logistics, intelligence, and morale, he was also acutely aware that the campaign waged in 1943-45 was a unique experience. He argued that it resulted from circumstances 'that would never, that *could* never, be precisely replicated'. Pithily and somewhat mischievously, he echoed Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin's witticism that the only real 'lesson' was not to try to conquer Italy from the bottom of the peninsula.<sup>54</sup>

The most interesting question asked at his 1961 RUSI lecture was also concerned with a didactic reading of the history of war, but in far broader terms. Intriguingly, it was the only recorded question to come from a non-military man: Anthony Verrier, a special correspondent with the *Economist*, *Observer*, and *New Statesman*, who later authored numerous works on military and imperial history. Verrier's question suggested that Howard wrote military history to help soldiers better fight their battles, whereas he, as a journalist, tried to emphasise that war was an aberration that could not last forever. Howard pushed back against this assertion making clear that he did not write military history to aid the services in their conduct of war: 'I write military history because I am interested in military history.' He went further, arguing that 'one cannot deal with the past at all unless one understands the part which military affairs played in it'.<sup>55</sup> In this brief exchange Howard perhaps made his strongest case for why military history mattered, and to which his broad church conception of the 'new military history' was moving the discipline. As Margaret Macmillan has argued, war has infused all aspects of how states, societies, and cultures interact throughout history. It is a pervasive part of life, one framed in paradoxical terms as both inherently chaotic but also among the most organised of human activities.<sup>56</sup> Howard's 'Use and Abuse of

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<sup>53</sup>Howard, *Causes*, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 10; Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 155.

<sup>55</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', p. 8.

<sup>56</sup>Macmillan, *War*, pp. 7-11.

Military History' is thus far more than an essay on *how to do* military history, nor is it just for officers to ponder. Instead, it should be read as a succinct treatise on good historical practice in general – surely all historians would agree with the call to width, depth, and context – but also as a defence of military history within and integral to historical studies.

For much of his career Michael Howard wore his methodological influences lightly. While references can be found, he rarely described how those great historical thinkers who went before him affected his own approach in any sort of detail. To be sure, he mentioned figures in passing but Howard's focus on accessibility precluded lengthy detours into the philosophy of the profession. Yet these breadcrumbs, coupled with his public lectures, provide an insight into the figures who shaped his approach. It has already been noted that Howard was, by his own admission, suffused with the principles of the *Annales* school of history, but perhaps less obviously Howard's historical philosophy bears a notable resemblance to the theorist he is most associated with today: Carl von Clausewitz. In Howard's formative years at Wellington College, an elite British public school, he was introduced somewhat unknowingly to some of the battlelines of the philosophy of history: the exploration of the past as an art or a science; as aesthetic or functional; specialist or general. He read Leopold von Ranke's *History of England* and Trevelyan's *England under the Stuarts*. Scholars who, whether he knew it at the time, established the value of the modern interrogation of source material in Ranke's case and the value of accessibility in Trevelyan's. Even his tutors mirrored some of these methodological frictions. Although Rollo Talboys had retired by the time Howard graduated to the Upper School, he still observed how his tutor viewed history 'as a branch of literature and tool for the civilization of the Philistines'. His successor, Max Reese, would take a more pragmatic approach: 'history was not a tool of civilization but a way of getting scholarships.' Howard left Wellington with a thorough understanding of the Tudors and Stuarts but by his own admission his class had been turned into 'specialists before we knew about generalities'.<sup>57</sup> Regardless of whether Howard understood the full weight of these influences, his early education – and indeed his time at Oxford – gave him a certain professional confidence that allowed him to breezily admit to never having struggled through Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and to remark upon the drabness of the Institute for Historical Research before it was lit up by the founding of the journal *Past and Present* in 1952.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 33-34. His former tutor Rollo St Clare Talboys would later write *A Victorian School: A History of Wellington College*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1943).

<sup>58</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 136.

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Clausewitz is not often thought of today as a historian. As Hew Strachan recognised, Clausewitz's principal ambition – to find a general theory for war – stemmed from philosophy not military history.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Clausewitz wrote extensive campaign histories and recognised that any theory had to be buttressed by real events and experiences. This required him to engage with history. In Book 2 of *On War* Clausewitz explores the difficulties and virtues of history. It is in this that some comparisons with Howard might be drawn. Clausewitz from the outset offers a parallel with his translator, starting the chapter by explaining that he wanted to 'focus attention on the proper and improper use of examples'.<sup>60</sup> He went on to describe four areas where history has distinct utility to the theorist: to explain an idea that is perhaps not easily understood; as an application of an idea which might otherwise lead to inappropriate generalisations; to prove that a phenomena might be possible; or to prove a theory or support a doctrine.<sup>61</sup> Developing these central ideas of utility led Clausewitz, much as it did Howard over a century and a half later, to observe the necessity and limitations of both width and depth. Of width Clausewitz recognised there was value citing a range of events where precise details might be lacking in order to support a given proposition. Yet he also recognised that where the issue in question was hotly contested and counter examples may be produced with similar ease, no firm conclusion could reasonably be drawn. Furthermore, as the critical context of each example gets lost in the collective packaging with others, it becomes 'like an object seen at great distance: it is impossible to distinguish any detail, and it looks the same from every angle'. And so they can be used to support conflicting views. With depth Clausewitz went further than Howard: 'where a new or debatable point of view is concerned, a single thoroughly detailed event is more instructive than ten that are only touched on.'<sup>62</sup>

Subtle differences between Howard and Clausewitz were also present. Clausewitz was chiefly concerned with causality when it came to depth, Howard with the variety and interpretation of source material and social context. Clausewitz thus warned of writers without a sufficient grasp of the events they cite irresponsibly, explaining them as leading to 'hundreds of wrong ideas and bogus theorizing'. The solution, he contended, was 'to show that the new ideas he is presenting as guaranteed by history are indisputably derived from the precise pattern of events'.<sup>63</sup> Howard in his 1961

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<sup>59</sup>Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography*, (New York: Grove Press, 2007), p. 95.

<sup>60</sup>Clausewitz *On War*, p. 170. Interestingly O.J.M. Jolles translated this as 'the correct use and abuse of examples'; see Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. O.J.M. Jolles, (New York: The Modern Library, [or. 1943] 2000), p. 382.

<sup>61</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 171; see also Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War*, p. 97.

<sup>62</sup>Clausewitz, *On War* pp. 172-173

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

RUSI lecture went further, explaining that the historian's job was to research in such variety that the 'tidy outlines dissolve and he catches a glimpse of the confusion and horror of the real experience'.<sup>64</sup> In this he articulated a point that the great Prussian would surely have agreed with. Despite these differences in reasoning there can be little doubt that both viewed history in a fundamentally similar fashion. Howard would confirm as much in his memoir. After a tangential reference to Ranke's adage that the historian's job was to find out 'what had really happened', Howard observed:

Later I was to find in Clausewitz an analysis of the historian's task that coincided exactly with my own experience. First, find out what happened. Then, establish a chain of causation. Finally, apply critical judgement. Before one could interpret the past, one had to recreate it.<sup>65</sup>

As geniuses do, they made it sound so simple, but within this process both men were acutely aware of the dangers and difficulties that the charting and application of past events might pose to the scholar and soldier. Clausewitz was not Howard's only influence, he cited on various occasions Ranke, Hans Delbrück, and Pieter Geyl; he was also evidently shaped to greater or lesser extents by other major historical movements like the *Annales* school, Marxism, and post-modernism. And still, it was in the early nineteenth-century military theorist that we can see some of the clearest parallels to Howard's historical outlook.

Howard did not produce many writings on wider historiographical questions, but as he noted in his memoir, his appointment as Regius Professor required him to reflect more deeply on the nature of his profession.<sup>66</sup> In his inaugural lecture in March 1981, he reiterated many of the ideas that he had raised twenty years earlier in his RUSI talk. In a political and educational climate that was looking for 'relevance' from university disciplines, Howard presented a passionate case for the value of understanding the past. In a nod to Shelley, he described historians as the 'unacknowledged legislators of mankind', whose study of the past is fundamental for informing how societies view themselves and their present.<sup>67</sup> For Howard, the historian's job was in part to ensure that such understanding was not impaired by fraud, prejudice, and error. However, as before, he reiterated the complexities of the historian's task, having to wrestle with too few sources in the case of the medievalist or too many for the modernist who

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<sup>64</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse', p. 7.

<sup>65</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 130.

<sup>66</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>67</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 13. For a broader argument on the place of history in the English education system, see David Cannadine, Jenny Keating, and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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must then resort to careful processes of selection. In a direct echo of comments in 1961 and presumably this time being received by an audience more sympathetic to historical self-criticism, Howard noted that 'there is no such thing as "history". History is what historians write, and historians are part of the process they write about.'<sup>68</sup>

Although aware of the difficulties of historical practice and the need of historians to be able to contextualise their own approaches and to develop new ones, he also pointed to an inherent tension between these professional questions and lay demands on the discipline, which were impatient for 'lessons'. He offered the amusing analogy of historians being like workmen tearing up a perfectly usable road, trying to dissuade members of the public from following the road, and then issuing warnings that the surface they have just laid is only temporary. Worse they do not know when they will finish work on the road, nor where it leads, and that it must be used with caution. Here, perhaps, was Howard reflecting on the value of constant reappraisal from within an academic discipline, but he was also aware, as a publicly engaged intellectual, that from the outside historiographical debates often seemed like navel gazing. In his memoirs, he recalled trying to quickly get up to speed with the cultural turn then engulfing historical studies and advocated by the 'Young Turks in the faculty'. He did not find Derrida and Foucault particularly enlightening texts.<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, Howard did use the forum of his inaugural lecture to offer what he described as the four 'lessons' historians were entitled to teach. The first was 'not to generalize from false premises based on inadequate evidence', what he described as an 'austere' lesson. To illustrate this he gave a series of popular and controversial opinions on the Second World War that did not stand up to scrutiny. As historians' writings would eventually find their way into the 'public reservoirs of popular histories and school text books', as well as television documentaries, the 'primary professional duty' of the historian was to ensure the knowledge provided was accurate.<sup>70</sup> His second 'lesson' focused on the need for '*understanding of the past*', grasping the details, mores, and assumptions of previous ages. This required the 'quality of imagination' in order to re-create the structures of beliefs that informed the decisions and actions taken by people.<sup>71</sup> Both these lessons reflect elements of his RUSI talk on military history in 1961, emphasising the particularities of the historical profession and that to prosper as a historian one needed to foster an inquiring and open mind. Here also was Howard making the case for the historian to be a profoundly empathetic scholar.

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<sup>68</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 11.

<sup>69</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 12; Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 207.

<sup>70</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 14.

His third 'lesson' reached further, challenging what he described as 'boastfully ignorant' new elites who proclaimed their ignorance of the world. Instead, Howard argued that the study of history had a powerful role in helping people to comprehend cultural diversity. He suggested that a failure to understand the historical background to events, the wider cultural context, and the character of foreign societies could lead policymakers to make lethal miscalculations on a grand scale.<sup>72</sup> This was also a very particular attack on the Anglo-centric character of the Oxford history syllabus in the early 1980s, which featured very little European, American, or even Irish history, let alone accounts from further afield. As a historian whose professional interests lay very much in the European history of warfare and who had challenged Basil Liddell Hart's notion of British military exceptionalism, this fostering of a broader cultural understanding as an integral element of the study of history clearly had deep personal resonance.<sup>73</sup> Much of Howard's published work reflected a rejection of an Anglo-centric version of military history and instead embraced a specifically European approach.<sup>74</sup>

His final 'lesson' was a melancholy and sombre one and reflected his deep fears of nuclear escalation in the early 1980s. It was to point out to his audience how vulnerable was the social framework in which they as historians currently operated. Beyond the potential catastrophe of annihilation in a clash with the Soviets, Howard also pointed to the threat that totalitarian regimes posed to the free practice of historical enquiry. He observed that the 'bourgeois liberal societies' that allow historians to publish freely on events in the past were only a few centuries old and could be easily swept away. In consequence he called for historians to engage with the values of the societies they lived and worked in, rather than remaining detached from such debates. As he described it, 'the one "lesson of history" he [the historian] must never allow himself to forget' was that 'he is a member of the polis and cannot watch its destruction without himself being destroyed'.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, doing so would be harder in practice than in theory. Howard was acutely aware of the difficulties for historians offering views on contemporary events unfolding before them. Writing of his BBC radio talk on the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, later published in *The Listener*, he commented that it had aroused 'very strong emotions' and as a result 'it was difficult under the circumstances to preserve the kind of academic calm needed for cool judgement'.<sup>76</sup> This was despite the fact that as an event it also neatly illustrated his ideas on the role of force in politics.

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<sup>72</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>73</sup>Strachan, 'Dimensions of Military History', pp. 541-542.

<sup>74</sup>Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 145; Howard, *Franco-Prussian*; Howard, *War in European History*.

<sup>75</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup>Howard, *Studies*, pp. 17 and 251-259.

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Howard's inaugural lecture and its four lessons of history reinforced many of his ideas on the specific practice of military history that he had set out in 1961, but which could be applied more widely. The lineage of his thought is particularly clear in his ideas on the constructed nature of history, the difficulties of actually researching and writing that history, and the need for it to be done with an empathetic and imaginative approach to the past. He did return to historiographical questions in his valedictory lecture at Oxford in May 1989. Here, after lamenting that he had not achieved many of his aims for history at Oxford, Howard presented a wide-ranging overview of historical approaches to structures and processes in history. His talk encompassed thinkers from the Renaissance and Enlightenment through to the great Marxist historians of the mid-twentieth-century British historical profession. Despite the broader range of intellectual subjects, Howard's themes remained constant and were reiterated, presumably for some of the same audience as in 1981. The historian was thus to empathise, in order to understand and explain the past. Howard, though, rejected the notion of the historian as a dispassionate moral relativist, not able to judge the past. He pointed to the example of the Holocaust as an event that pushed historians to judge past beliefs and actions, but which also profoundly challenged the ability to empathise with a society and culture that was so different. What emerges from the lecture is a sense of Howard as a historian who was profoundly interested in questions of how people thought and acted, and of how historians then researched and wrote about these people. As he noted, the study of the past was not meant to be comforting – he had a particular swipe at 'escapist nostalgia' as embodied by the 'Heritage Industry' – but it did offer the only way to discover more about what a society had been, what it currently was, and where it might be heading.<sup>77</sup>

What emerges from the three lectures in 1961, 1981, and 1989 is Howard's musings on the very nature of being a historian. It is of value to engage with the arguments of these three lectures and essays, and not to just reduce them to disembodied, pithy quotations, as it is across them that he made his contribution to defining what he saw as the particular character of and purpose for the historical discipline in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. Although the first of these lectures was concerned mainly with military history, and Howard is principally famous as one of the founders of the 'new military history' approach, if read more closely it offers a succinct outline of a particular type of historian, not just a military historian, and of the complexities of historical practice not just in the field of studying war. Reinforced by his lectures and essays bookending the 1980s, Howard thus emerges as a scholar deeply interested in the *craft* of history and what defined good historical scholarship.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>78</sup>Marc Bloch's unfinished book defending the *Annales* school, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou Métier d'historien*, first appeared in an English-language translation in 1954 as *The*

There is much merit in historians in the 2020s revisiting not only his ideas on width, depth, and context, but also his ideas on empathy, cultural diversity, imagination, and the fragility of the societies and their associated freedoms that allow historians to scrutinise the past.

As Howard's career attests to, the *longue durée* perspective on the military historical profession in Britain from when he entered it in the aftermath of the Second World War through to today is one that can only speak to progress. No longer is there a need to talk of military historians as establishing the field: that work is done and it is now a core part of historical study. Military history today, a century after Howard's birth, is a vibrant, diverse, intellectually stimulating, and publicly engaged field of study. The stereotype of a male-dominated discipline has been shattered by a bow wave of pioneering female historians. A brief trawl of recent publications on the subject of the First World War makes this abundantly evident, with ground-breaking new works from Vanda Wilcox, Heather Jones, Michelle Moyd, Catriona Pennell, Aimée Fox, and Kate Imy. Between them these historians cover topics as varied as the Italian Empire, the British monarchy, African soldiers, British mobilisation, organisational learning in the British Army, and the Indian Army.<sup>79</sup> For just one conflict to have such a diverse

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*Historian's Craft*. At the time Howard would have been beginning his project on the Franco-Prussian War. Howard and Bloch, a fellow soldier-scholar, shared common questions about the researching and writing of history, as well as the thought involved in studying and constructing it. The debt is clear from Howard's valedictory lecture at Oxford, in which he described the *Annales* as 'the great school of history founded by Marc Bloch'. The choice of *craft* to describe Howard's approach in this introduction is thus a deliberate one. See Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 193-194; Peter Burke, 'Preface: Marc Bloch and the New History', in Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. vii-xviii.

<sup>79</sup>Vanda Wilcox, *Morale and the Italian Army During the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Vanda Wilcox, *The Italian Empire and the Great War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Heather Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Heather Jones, *For King and Country: The British Monarchy and the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Kate Imy, *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).



## MICHAEL HOWARD AND THE HISTORIAN'S CRAFT: AN INTRODUCTION

historiography is testament to the profound impact of the (now not so) 'new military history' since Howard argued for it in the early 1960s.

This does not mean the work must stop. The top ten bestseller lists in bookstores are still too frequently dominated by authors, frequently male, long-established, and often offering little more than elegantly retold stories of broadly familiar subjects.<sup>80</sup> This is not a problem confined to military history. To describe the military historical field as 'parochial' is to take a deliberately narrow view in order to create a straw man, presumably to be burnt down by the supposedly better theorised parts of the historical profession.<sup>81</sup> It is also a perspective that wilfully ignores the fact that all historical subfields contain parochial approaches, a point forcefully argued by Jo Guldi and David Armitage and often derived from the professional focus required of many doctoral research projects.<sup>82</sup> This is, obviously not without its historiographical problems. As Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested with respect to recent studies of the English Reformation, any account of such a vast and complex topic that involves sifting through and selecting from myriad institutional archives 'must be pointillist in character'. This in itself, however, raises the danger of missing the 'significant shapes that emerge from these myriad individual points'.<sup>83</sup> As this makes clear, the risks of focused studies is not one confined to military history, it is a more deeply embedded problem of much history writing.

Michael Howard represented the highest ideals of the historical profession. He was ferociously intelligent, accomplished, erudite, and assured. His sense of humour shone through and set him apart from many more serious or self-absorbed figures who have

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<sup>80</sup>For example, Anthony Beevor, *Russia: Revolution and Civil War 1917 – 1921*, (London: Orion, 2022); Jonathan Dibleby, *Barbarossa: How Hitler Lost the War*, (London: Viking, 2021). For a particularly egregious oversimplification of a complex subject, see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Bomber Mafia*, (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

<sup>81</sup>Wagner, 'Seeing Like a Soldier'. For the broader debate about military history, especially when examining the European colonial empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Kim A. Wagner, 'Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 85 (Spring 2018), pp. 217-237; Huw Bennett, Michael Finch, Andrei Mamolea, and David Morgan-Owen, 'Studying Mars or Clio: Or How Not to Write About the Ethics of Military Conduct and Military History', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 88 (Autumn 2019), pp. 274-280; Kim A. Wagner, 'Expanding Bullets and Savage Warfare', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 88 (Autumn 2019), pp. 281-287.

<sup>82</sup>Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 38-60.

<sup>83</sup>Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'A Monk's-Eye View', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (10 March 2022), p. 11.

graced the highest rungs of the profession. Until his last days he was accommodating to those new to the field as well as old friends. In 2014 at the RUSI conference on the First World War, part of Operation Reflect – the British Army’s commemoration of the centenary – Michael Howard delivered a paper that was among the most powerfully argued and clearest in its dissection of the conflict’s causes. Yet at the following drinks reception he largely shunned the gold-braided generals and VIPs, choosing instead to talk and listen to the young students and early career academics in attendance. He discussed their research ideas, offered insightful avenues for inquiry, but much more amusingly he held the room with his tales of the harmless mischief that punctuated his academic life; stories which never quite made the pages of *Captain Professor*.

As this collection of articles hopefully demonstrates, his work and ideas still provide much to discuss for military historians in the twenty-first century. Indeed, they go further, suggesting that Howard’s thinking on the history of war opened questions that lie at the very heart of the historical profession more widely. Our lasting memories are of a kind and generous scholar, fascinated by history, and always eager to learn about new ideas and interpretations. Howard was undoubtedly among the titans of the twentieth-century historical profession, but he was also a model academic citizen.