Review of International Studies (1999), 25, 29–48

Liddell Hart's Big Idea

ALEX DANCHEV

Abstract. Basil Liddell Hart is the most influential military writer of the modern age, revered and reviled by three generations of strategists, armchair and armipotent. This article focuses on his master thesis, 'The Indirect Approach', in relation to another coinage of Liddell Hart's, 'The British Way in Warfare', a parallel gestation. Both concepts smack of the invented tradition; both continue to resonate. They are in every sense characteristic of their creator.

I have long come with reflection on experience to see that most of the fundamental military theories which I have thought out apply to the conduct of life and not merely of war—and I have learnt to apply them in my own conduct of life, e.g. the 'man in the dark', economy of force, the principle of variability' [flexibility], and the value of alternative objectives.

So also with the theory of the Indirect Approach, which I evolved in the realm of strategy in 1928–9, have I come gradually to perceive an ever-widening application of it until I view it as something that lies at the root of practical philosophy. It is bound up with the question of the influence of thought on thought. The direct assault of new ideas sets up its own resistance, and increases the difficulty of effecting a change in outlook. Conversion is produced more easily and rapidly by the indirect approach of ideas, disarming inherent opposition . . . Thus, reflection leads one to the conclusion that the indirect approach is a law of life in all spheres—and its fulfilment, the key to practical achievement in dealing with any problem where the human factor is predominant, and where there is room for a conflict of wills.[1]

Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart (1895–1970), military historian, strategic theorist, journalist, controversialist, archivist, adviser, godfather, and trouble-maker, was not the Clausewitz of the twentieth century, as he and others were wont to claim; but he was, perhaps, the next best thing. A war poet in prose—his best work carried a comparable charge—he wrote no great book, no timeless synthesis, finished or unfinished. *Thoughts on War* (1944) is the skeleton of such a work, *The Revolution in Warfare* (1946) the sketch, *Strategy* (1967) the simulacrum. His output is staggering—dozens of books, hundreds of articles, thousands of letters—but his *oeuvre* is not so much an *oeuvre* as an accumulation, and very often (too often) a repetition. Yet his influence was and is enormous. There is a hardly a military writer of repute in the Western world who has not been touched in some way by this prodigal, indomitable lighthouse of a man. Goethe says that the true sign of genius is a posthumous productivity. On that criterion Liddell Hart would certainly qualify. He lived as a frondeur and later an exemplar. He survived, and survives still, as a

[1] Liddell Hart [LH] reflection, 20 Dec. 1934, Liddell Hart Papers, 11/1934/32, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London [KCL]. Cf. LH, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London, 1967), p. 18; all quotations from this edition unless specified.

climate of ideas. Basil Liddell Hart is the Bertrand Russell of his field: he is all-pervasive.[2]

He described himself as 'border', meaning something more than geography, and always felt a certain distance from the social and intellectual heartland of England, a distance he worked uncommonly hard to close.[3] He was born in Paris, where his father was minister of the Methodist church. He had a conventional upbringing, peripatetic on the Methodist circuit. A series of prep schools led eventually to St Paul's, in London, in the wake of a rather backward boy by the name of Montgomery. His school career was undistinguished; he rose laboriously through the Pauline ranks more by the passage of time in each form than by any sign of intellectual distinction. In 1913, after some frantic cramming, he went up to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, to read for the History Tripos. His university career was, if anything, even more undistinguished; many years later, when asked to contribute to a survey on 'What I Owe to Cambridge' he put first a taste in food and wine. In the examinations at the end of his first year he recorded a dismal Third.

On the outbreak of war Liddell Hart was one of the many young men unconscionably eager for action. On a temporary commission in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, he went to this war three times, a persistence of which he was achingly aware. These were short stints, abruptly curtailed by injury; in each case a certain ambiguity surrounds the curtailment.[4] The first was for about three weeks, in September-October 1915, in a quiet sector near Albert. The second was for a few beleaguered days in November 1915, very much in the thick of things, in the water-logged lines of the Ypres Salient. The third was again for about three weeks, in June–July 1916, for the Big Push on the Somme, in the Fricourt sector, where he was traumatized in Mametz Wood. That was enough, but that was all. In spite of himself, Liddell Hart was never a true *grognard*.

Officially 50 per cent disabled from gas poisoning, and prey to 'soldier's heart', he was relegated to the half-pay list in 1924. He left the Army, sorrowfully, three years later, bearing his famous, galling, eternal rank. With the passage of time that lowly station became a kind of inverted status symbol, epitomized in the Israeli General Yigal Allon's graceful compliment to 'The Captain Who Teaches Generals'. Henceforth, he lived by his pen, and he lived well. He was first a sports correspondent, producing in short order four different accounts of the same match for four different outlets, and an early *succès d'estime*, *Lawn Tennis Master Unveiled* (1926), an intriguing anticipation of *Great Captains Unveiled* (1927). He was also a leading authority on fashion—women's fashion—in particular tight-lacing. Liddell Hart had a sophisticated appreciation of *l'artillerie de nuit*. He was adept at literary cross-dressing. He wrote strategic accounts of lawn tennis, fashion-conscious accounts of strategy, and games-playing accounts of war.

Like all great artists, his best ideas were other people's, made matchlessly his own. He had a gift for the expressive phrase: the man in the dark, the expanding torrent. His theses seem to live, stubbornly, no matter how often their tails are salted. The

[2] This article draws on material developed at greater length in my biography of LH, *Alchemist of War* (London, 1998).

[3] LH, *The Liddell Hart Memoirs* 2 vols (London, 1965), vol. I, p. 2; all references to this volume unless specified.

[4] Ambiguities explored in Alex Danchev, 'To Hell, or, Basil Hart Goes to War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 20 (1997), pp. 66–93.

salting itself has immensely enriched military discourse. His master thesis was the Indirect Approach.

The Indirect Approach was Liddell Hart's opening bid for the supremes. It became his signature tune. Together with its close cousin, or evil twin, the British Way in Warfare (a parallel gestation) it signalled a new phase of his grapple with the conjectural art of butchering one's neighbour. Announced in 1927, first developed in book form in 1929 (mistitled *The Decisive Wars of History*), supplemented by a compendium flagging the British Way in 1932, it was four times further elaborated by its restless author, in 1941, 1946, 1954, and 1967. The work lacked a patron of the traditional kind—Machiavelli dedicated *The Art of War* to the Florentine nobleman Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzo 'because it is usual to address things of this nature to persons who are distinguished by their nobility, riches, great talent, and generosity'—but it prospered nonetheless. Sales, initially unremarkable, mushroomed gratifyingly with every new edition. The 1954 sold over 50,000, the 1967 over 100,000 in hardback in the United States alone.[5] Used as a vade-mecum by various statespersons (Brandt and Nehru), numberless strategists (armchair and armipotent), and the militarily curious of many lands—a Chinese edition came out in 1994—it continues to live an active and inspirational life to this day, not least in the 'manoeuvrist approach' of official British defence doctrine.[6]

Part prescription, part idealization, part excogitation, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (as it became) is as near as Liddell Hart ever got to a treatise, an *Essai général*, of his own. Characteristically, this was achieved more by accumulation than by design. It was started too soon, distended too much, and finished or unfinished too late to produce a truly satisfying whole. Like Voltaire, Liddell Hart was the master of the brief form. Appropriately enough, the Indirect Approach is encompassed in a grab-bag of a book concealing a number of brief forms at once radical and fundamental, not merely provocative but also profound; material chiselled in a sculptor's way, as he once put it, a single chapter containing 'more pure ore—little as that may be—than any whole volume that I have written'. It was Clausewitz's ambition to write something 'that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those . . . interested in the subject'. It was Liddell Hart's too.[7]

A question remained. 'When will Captain Liddell Hart give us a comprehensive and systematic statement of his proposals for a mechanized British Army of the future?' asked the *Army Quarterly* in 1927. It was a petition often delivered and as often denied. *Thoughts on War*, pondered for a decade, came out as Pascalian *pensées* rather than Clausewitzian conspectus. The thoughts are a rich quarry, on war, on life, on self. But these *obiter scripta* constituted only a provisional statement, as the author himself conceded; 'preparation for the ultimate writing of a would-be complete synthesis'. And yet, for whatever reason, the ultimate writing was ultimately postponed. The reasons he gave were circumstantial rather than intellectual.

[5] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, trans. Ellis Farneworth (New York, 1990), p. 5; sales figures, 11/1941/20, KCL; publication data from David Higham Associates. The 1929 (hardback) edition sold some 2,000; a 1942 (paperback) reprint of the 1941 edition some 25,000.

[6] Stephen Romer, 'Brandt on the Brink', *New Statesman*, 5 May 1972; Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Bombay, 1961), pp. 447–49; John Kiszely, 'The British Army and Approaches to Manoeuvre Warfare', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19 (1996), pp. 179–206.

[7] LH to Brophy, 7 Feb. 1953, 13/30, KCL; *The British Way in Warfare* (London, 1932), p. 9; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), p. 63.

It was the time. Or the money. 'If Clausewitz had been a living Englishman his work *On War* [1832] would either have remained unwritten or his publisher would have filed his petition in bankruptcy.'[8] Were there reasons he did not give? The time and the money mattered. Liddell Hart lived high on the hog, but he earned what he spent and he spent what he earned. He had no savings. His pension was his royalties. Laurence Sterne declared that he wrote, not to be *fed*, but to be *famous*. Liddell Hart wrote to be fed *and* to be famous. But he also wrote to be *right*, and to demonstrate his rightness to others: to make a difference. If he was a sage, he was a perennially engaged one.

The Indirect Approach is more an attitude of mind than an arrow on the map. 'Thoughout the ages, effective results in war have rarely been attained unless the approach has had such indirectness as to ensure the opponent's unreadiness to meet it. The indirectness has usually been physical, and always psychological.' It may even have been unintentional. Indirectness is multiform. It is both devious and vaporous. Normally, though not necessarily, it is a manoeuvre directed at the enemy's rear: an eccentric manoeuvre, literally and figuratively; not shunting but flanking. Robert Graves suggested *The Art of Out-Flanking* as a catchpenny title. 'In strategy', averred Liddell Hart, 'the longest way round is often the shortest way home.'[9]

> 'Shunting' strategy is a mental relic of trench-warfare. Not only our conditions but our traditions urge that we should break away from it. Let us recall Cromwell before Dunbar, taking every physical hazard rather than that of a direct attack upon an enemy in position. Look at him in the Scottish campaign, when at last he had superiority of force, rather than take the obvious course, leaving his enemy one bolt-hole—an open path towards England. A big risk, apparently, but it gave him the chance to close on their rear; so by the 'crowning mercy' of Worcester he avoided the greater risks, military and political, of a long-drawn-out campaign in the Highlands. Look at Marlborough twisting and turning in such bewildering manoeuvres that his men thought him mad—until he walked through the Ne Plus Ultra lines, without sacrificing a life, except a few in marching . . . The aim of these masters—and theirs is the best English tradition—was to get by *an indirect approach* on the enemy's rear, knowing that once astride his line of communications and retreat he would either be paralysed or unhinged—in which case his natural tendency would be to fall back in fragments in their embrace.[10]

In any conflict of wits or wills the line of least resistance is the line of least expectation. That is the basis of the Indirect Approach.[11] For Liddell Hart, two major problems had to be solved: *dislocation* and *exploitation*. This thinking grew out of his early work on infantry training and tactics, informed by a grand tour of strategy in history—Baedeker's battles—and coloured by his more recent observation of live generals running wild in their natural habitat.[12] 'The training of armies is primarily devoted to developing efficiency in the detailed execution of the attack. This concentration on tactical technique tends to obscure the psychological element.

[8] LH, *Thoughts*, pp. 8, 137; LH to Faber, 27 Apr. 1944, 9/22/5, KCL; LH to editor, *Army Quarterly*, 15 (1928), p. 399.
[9] LH, *Strategy*, pp. 25–26; Graves to LH, 23 Jan. 1942, 1/327, KCL.
[10] LH, 'Armoured Forces in 1928', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution* [*JRUSI*], LXXIII (1928), p. 726 (my emphasis).
[11] This formulation follows Norman Gibbs, 'The Novel Expedient', *Spectator*, 20 Aug. 1954. It is founded on two of LH's key maxims: choose the line of least expectation; and exploit the line of least resistance (*Strategy*, p. 348).
[12] LH, *Strategy*, pp. 25, 349.

It fosters a cult of soundness, rather than of surprise. It breeds commanders who are so intent not to do anything wrong, according to 'the book', that they forget the necessity of making the enemy do something wrong. The result is that their plans have no result. For, in war, it is by compelling mistakes that the scales are most often turned. Here and there a commander has eschewed the obvious, and has found in the unexpected the key to a decision—unless fortune has proved foul. For luck can never be divorced from war, since war is part of life. Hence the unexpected cannot guarantee success. But it guarantees the best chance of success.' At first the explanation did not stop there, but continued mischievously to *épater les Blimps*. 'That is why the successes of history, if not won by abnormally clever generalship, have been won by generalship that is astoundingly foolish. Perhaps that is why Britain has had such a long run on the world's stage.' This provocative tailpiece evidently would not do for the embattled Britain of 1941. It was never reinstated.[13]

The business of war, therefore, was not position and attrition, and mutual exhaustion, but analysis and paralysis, and maximal preservation. Liddell Hart prescribed frugality, not prodigality. He also prescribed a parable. His earliest theoretical figure was resurrected. The man-in-the-dark became the man-in-the-ring. Here he faced a new predicament. He had moves to make, and maxims to follow. War was not milling; it was wrestling, or better yet ju-jitsu. 'In war, as in wrestling, the attempt to throw the opponent without loosening his foothold and upsetting his balance results in self-exhaustion . . . The most effective indirect approach is one that lures or startles the opponent into a false move—so that, as in ju-jitsu, his own effort is turned into the lever of his overthrow.' First throw, then throttle. In this as in so much else—though he denied it—Liddell Hart followed Clausewitz. 'Countless duels go to make up war, but a picture of it as a whole can be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance. *War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.*'[14]

The enemy must be unhinged, then, before being unmanned. Whom Liddell Hart wishes to destroy he first sends mad. In other words the strategy of Indirect Approach '*is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this*'. Just here, quite deliberately, he uttered one of the great heresies of strategic theory: bloodless victories. 'Strategy', he argued, 'has for its purpose the reduction of fighting to the slenderest possible proportions . . . The perfection of strategy would be, therefore, to produce a decision without any serious fighting.'[15] This was an argument about ends and means and outcomes. 'Of what use is decisive victory in battle if we bleed to death as a result of it?' He had posed the question as early as 1924 in a formative article on 'The Napoleonic Fallacy', which he transposed into the Clausewitzian fallacy, of waging absolute war by seeking decisive battle against the enemy's main force, the classic route to Valhalla. Liddell

[13] LH, *Strategy*, pp. 347–50; 'The Essence of War', *JRUSI*, LXXV (1930), p. 491.

[14] LH, *Strategy*, pp. 25, 163, 339; Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 75 (his emphasis). Boxing in an earlier version; wrestling in the exchange with Wilkinson in which 'The Strategy of Indirect Approach' was first heralded: LH to editor, *Army Quarterly*, 15 (1928), p. 400. Typically, Clausewitz warns later that combat in war is *not* simply a contest between individuals. LH used Graham's translation of *On War*, edited by Col. F. N. Maude (London, 1908).

[15] LH, *Strategy*, pp. 338–39 (his emphasis).

Hart was in general an unsympathetic reader of Clausewitz, often obtusely unsympathetic, but his reading of Clausewitz's most famous dictum was very acute. It was embodied in some primordial propositions on war and peace. For Liddell Hart, 'the object in war is to attain a better peace—even if only from your own point of view. Hence it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire. This is the truth underlying Clausewitz's definition of war as a "continuation of policy by other means"—the prolongation of that policy through the war into the subsequent peace must always be borne in mind. A state which expends its strength to the point of exhaustion bankrupts its own policy, and future.' The moral he drew was as bold as it was unpopular. 'It is wiser to run risks *of* war for the sake of preserving peace than to run the risks *in* war for the sake of finishing with victory . . . Perseverance in war is only justifiable if there is a good chance of a good end—the prospect of a peace that will balance the sum of human misery incurred in the struggle. Indeed, deepening study of past experience leads to the conclusion that nations might often have come nearer to their object by taking advantage of a lull in the struggle to discuss a settlement than by pursuing the war with the aim of "victory".' A secure peace is better than a pyramid of skulls.[16]

Progressively, the vainglory of 'victory' became one of his most fervent teachings. The inverted commas were more tragic than ironic. All through the low dishonest decade preceding the second Great War, Liddell Hart found himself in a fateful double bind. As he was attaining guru status, so he was losing his faith. The monk of war broke out of the monastery. His own unbelief—a kind of military apostasy—had been gathering like cloud for some time. While the barbarians sharpened their teeth in the wings, he embarked on an agonizing reappraisal of the moral and intellectual foundations of his calling.

In the beginning it was anchored in the fierce doctrinal debates occasioned by the revolutionary potential of the 'landship' or tank. 'We are far too much absorbed with the idea of "positions",' he warned in 1925, 'both of taking them and of occupying them. Navies have always commanded vital arteries without occupying them; is there any reason why the mobile armies, the land navies, of the future should not do the same?' The odyssey continued during the evolution of the Indirect Approach. 'Why assault at all, even indirectly?' he asked three years later: a question to give generals conniptions. 'The armies of 1914–18 were like huge fungoid plants, firm-rooted and nourished through long stems. The [British] Armoured Force has the power to be a deadly vapour "blowing where it lists"; an influence, invulnerable less through its armour than through its power to move away. Thus it would be intangible, and hence all the more demoralizing.' This was attrition of the mind. Liddell Hart remembered his Ardant du Picq. 'Loss of hope rather than loss of life is what decides the issues of war.'[17] The modern armoured force might thereby realise the timeless ideal of winning a war without fighting a battle. This ideal—the opposite of bloodthirsty—he attributed to his brilliant eighteenth-century spokesman Maurice de Saxe. Saxe, however, was not at all averse to battle on his own

[16] LH, *The Remaking of Modern Armies* (London, 1927), p. 92; *Paris, or the Future of War* (London, 1925), p. 20; *Strategy*, pp. 366, 370–71. The passage on risks first appeared in this wording in the 1941 edition (pp. 208–09), but it is latent in the 1929 (pp. 148–51).

[17] LH, 'Army Manoeuvres, 1925' and 'Armoured Forces in 1928', *JRUSI*, LXX and LXXIII (1925 and 1928), pp. 652 and 728–29; *Thoughts*, p. 20.

terms.[18] What about Liddell Hart? Significantly, he defined strategy as 'the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy'. This is now the canonical text. He himself pointed the contrast with Clausewitz ('the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war').[19] It was almost as if Clausewitz were taking on Liddell Hart, rather than vice versa. A spliced dialogue:

> Clausewitz: How are we to counter the highly sophisticated theory that supposes it possible for a particularly ingenious method of inflicting minor damage on the enemy's forces to lead to major indirect destruction; or that claims to produce, by means of limited but skilfully applied blows, such a paralysis of the enemy's forces and control of his will-power as to constitute a significant short cut to victory? Admittedly an engagement at one point may be worth more than at another. Admittedly there may be a skilful ordering of priority of engagements in strategy; indeed that is what strategy is all about, and we do not wish to deny it. We do claim, however, that direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must be the dominant consideration. We simply want to establish this dominance of the destructive principle.
>
> Liddell Hart: The humanisation of war rests not in 'scraps of paper', which nations will always tear up if they feel that their national life is endangered by them, but in the enlightened realisation that the spread of death and destruction endangers the victor's own future prosperity and reputation . . . Battle is at best but a means, a move on the chessboard of war, which is most fruitful when combined . . . with moral [psychological] and economic moves, so that each reacts on the others. Let us never again confound the means with the end: the goal in war is the prosperous continuance of our national policy in the years *after* the war, and the only true military object is the moral one of subduing the enemy's will to resist, with the least possible economic, human, and ethical loss to ourselves.
>
> Clausewitz: Our conviction that only a great battle can produce a major decision is founded not on an abstract concept of war alone, but also on experience. Since time began, only great victories have paved the way for great results; certainly for the attacking side, and to some degree also for the defence . . . We are not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed. The fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle must make us take war more seriously, but not provide an excuse for gradually blunting our swords in the name of humanity. Sooner or later someone will come along with a sharp sword and hack off our arms.[20]

Hacking is precisely what Liddell Hart sought to avoid. His object was to dethrone the destructive principle and elevate the preservative one in its place—less glorious perhaps, but more decent and more efficient. Just as Clausewitz overreacted to the antiseptic idea of making war geometrically—the pseudo-science of oblique movements at acute angles expounded by Pfuel, Tolstoy's monstrous theorist-general—Liddell Hart overreacted to the *Schlacht* and *Schweinerei* of war, the bloodlust of the Corsican vampire and the bloodletting of 1914–18. 'Philanthropists might of course think that there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war,'

[18] Following Vegetius, Saxe had written: 'I do not favour pitched battles, especially at the beginning of a war, and I am convinced that a skilful general could make war all his life without being forced into one . . . I do not mean to say by this that when an opportunity occurs to crush the enemy that he should not be attacked, nor that advantage should not be taken of his mistakes.'

[19] LH, *Strategy*, pp. 333–35; Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 177. Originally 'the distribution and transmission of military means' (1929), then 'the art of distributing military means' (1941); in its final form from 1954. Clausewitz also had some suggestive passages on the *possibility* of an engagement, which LH apparently overlooked, but which he might have found more to his liking.

[20] Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 228, 260; LH, *Remaking*, pp. 111–12.

Clausewitz wrote, scathingly. In these terms Liddell Hart was a philanthropist.[21] Could he be brought to battle even in principle? Eventually he would define away the thing itself. 'The key idea is "strategic operation" rather than "battle"—an old term that has outlived its suitability and utility.' In the meantime he wriggled. His preference was clear: no battle, if possible. The Indirect Approach was to obviate the need for it. 'A surfeit of the "hit" school brings on an attack of the "run" method; and then the pendulum swings back,' his friend T. E. Lawrence remarked in 1928. 'You, at present, are trying (with very little help from those whose business it is to think upon their profession) to put the balance straight after the orgy of the late war. When you succeed (about 1945) your sheep will pass your bounds of discretion, and have to be chivied back by some later strategist. Back and forward we go.'[22]

Around the middle of the decade the guru and the apostate collided. 'War is a monstrous fraud,' recorded Liddell Hart blackly in 1936. 'The more I reflect on the experience of history the more I come to see the instability of solutions achieved by force, and to suspect even those instances where force has had the appearance of resolving difficulties.'

> But the question remains whether we can afford to eliminate force in the world as it is without risking the loss of such ground as reason has gained. Beyond this is the doubt whether we should be able to eliminate it, even if we had the strength of mind to take such a risk. For weaker minds will cling to this protection, and by so doing spoil the possible effectiveness of non-resistance. Is there any way out of the dilemma? There is at least one solution that has yet to be tried—that the masters of force should be those who have mastered all desire to employ it. That solution is an extension of what Bernard Shaw expressed in *Major Barbara*: that wars would continue until the makers of gunpowder became professors of Greek . . . or the professors of Greek became the makers of gunpowder. And this, in turn, was derived from Plato's conclusion that the affairs of mankind would never go right until either the rulers became philosophers or the philosophers became the rulers. If armed forces were controlled by men who had become convinced of the wrongness of using force there would be the nearest approach to a safe assurance against its abuse. Such men might also come closest to efficiency in its use, should the enemies of civilization compel this. For the more complex war becomes the more its efficient direction depends on understanding its properties and effects; and the deeper the study of modern war is carried the stronger grows the conviction of its futility.[23]

His reflections on these matters were often percipient but seldom disinterested. There can be little doubt who is cast for the role of philosopher-king. Many years later, a real-life professor of Greek turned maverick maker of gunpowder, the politician Enoch Powell, presented himself at Liddell Hart's front door. On being asked where he had left his car, he exclaimed: 'I have come, as befits a pilgrim visiting the Master, on foot.' As a young man Powell had been vastly impressed by Liddell Hart's best-selling revelation of *The Real War* (1930). His retrospection is interesting. 'The generation who lived under the shadow of the Great War being resumed under similar conditions felt an affectionate gratitude to Liddell Hart. He

[21] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (Oxford, 1991), p. 683; LH, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (London, 1933), p. 120; LH, *Paris*, p. 14; Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 75 (substituting 'philanthropist' from the Graham translation for 'kind-hearted people' in the Howard-Paret one). *Schlacht* is slaughter, and in Clausewitzian usage a single great battle. *Schweinerei* is something like obscenity.

[22] LH, *Strategy*, p. 364; Wavell to LH, 11 June 1936, 1/733, KCL; Lawrence to LH, 17 Oct. 1928, in LH and Robert Graves, *T. E. Lawrence to his Biographers* (London, 1963), p. 4.

[23] LH reflection, 11/1936/79, KCL; *Thoughts*, pp. 12–13.

enabled them to believe that the horrific follies of 1914–18 had been analysed and understood and would not be repeated.'[24] Affectionate gratitude was sparing enough at the time. As an inheritance, however, it is not to be lightly dismissed.

Enoch Powell's tale would have tickled Basil's father, Bramley Hart. As he read the reviews of *The British Way in Warfare* (1932) the proud father wrote to the prodigal son of his hopes for the future. 'I sometimes dream of such powers as you possess being consecrated to the defence and exposition of Christian Truth—doing for the twentieth century what [Joseph] Butler did for the eighteenth century. But every man in his own order—only let us remember that the order is of the best and the highest.' Liddell Hart replied: 'With regard to what you say about myself—I also have dreams. Very similar to those of your own. I cannot foresee how the opportunity will come, but I am preparing myself by meditation and observation of human nature. My interim philosophy as regards my present work is put in the preface to my last book.'[25] The preface in question betrays signs of the inner struggle.

> Any reasonable man must hope that war will have no future. But experience does not lend encouragement to the hope. And reason working on experience may even suggest a doubt whether war has not some purpose that is beyond the ambit of human reason, despite its palpable unreasonableness as a way of settling any human issue. That purpose may be as a corrective to greater evils, as a cleansing of the spirit of a people and an age from corruption. If so, it is a crude and wasteful way of cleansing, but it may be necessary in default of a better way. Reason checks the definite denial of such a purpose, while nevertheless impelling those who believe in the ascendancy of reason to strive against war along with the evils which produce war—to check the fever as well as the disease.
>
> But for this we must understand the condition we are attempting to treat. Rational pacifism must be based on a new maxim—'if you wish for peace, understand war'. Ignorance means the disarmament of the peace-lover, rendering him impotent either to check war or to control its course. History has ample evidence of how often a move to preserve peace, or to restore it, has been paralysed by so-called 'military reasons' that were no more than a rationalization of unreasonable impulses. There lies the tragedy, a tragedy which pacifism of the proverbial ostrich variety has always invited, and still invites. Hence we need to understand not only the causes but also the conduct of war. This understanding can only be attained if we study war in a purely scientific spirit, with our minds freed from any pro-military or anti-military bias which might impair our judgement—and thereby nullify our deductions.[26]

If you wish for peace, understand war was an adaptation of the Roman authority Vegetius, a prime source for strategists down the ages: 'Let him who desires peace, prepare for war.' For Liddell Hart, the coinage was particularly apt to the coiner. It became his motto and his epitaph.[27]

Rational pacifism was something even more personal. In many obvious ways, not least his eternal rank, Liddell Hart was not a pacifist. His writings of the 1920s are

[24] Lord Chalfont, 'Prophet without Honour', *Sunday Times*, 1 Feb. 1970; Enoch Powell, 'Foreword' to LH, *Scipio* [1926] (London, 1992), p. v; letter from Enoch Powell, 9 May 1994.

[25] Father to LH, n.d., 9/10/4; LH to father, 27 July 1932, 8/356, KCL. Joseph Butler, Bishop of Durham, was the author of *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Course and Constitution of Nature* (1733), a work much appealed to over the next century.

[26] LH, *British Way*, pp. 7–8. Cf. *Thoughts*, pp. 9–10.

[27] Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, condensed in Thomas R. Phillips (ed.), *The Roots of Strategy* (London, 1943), pp. 35–94. Much of Machiavelli is Vegetius; a little of Liddell Hart too. The translation here is slightly altered. In the original: *Qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*.

sprinkled with slighting references to ignorant or deluded members of that unhappy breed; and in principle he never gave up on organized violence.[28] In practice, however, he came very close. 'There is a streak of pacifism in every intelligent European soldier whose character was shaped by the Western Front in the First World War,' wrote Richard Crossman on 'The Strange Case of Liddell Hart', in 1952. It was a shrewd observation. In Liddell Hart the pacifist streak was ineradicable. As time went on his unbelief yawned wider. By the mid-1930s he was convinced that, far from being a deliverance, war was an abhorrence (and total war a nonsense), victory a semblance, and battle an excrescence. Philanthropists or pacifists changed their spots. 'It is a paradox of the present situation', he reflected in 1936, 'that the pacifists—who repudiate claims of "national honour"—alone are intent on upholding Britain's honour.'[29] During the Second World War he had grave practical and ethical doubts about almost every aspect of Allied strategy, most conspicuously the area bombing campaign, against which he joined with the indomitable Bishop Bell—a prophetic and apostolic partnership—in testing the moral significance of the establishment to destruction, as Donald Mackinnon expressed it. He deplored the use of the atomic bomb in 1945, and was from the outset an atomic sceptic, supporting the campaign for nuclear disarmament long before there was a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and giving intellectual aid and comfort to the non-violent resistance of the Committee of 100. 'Whatever the value of nuclear weapons as a *deterrent* they are not a *defence*, as their actual use would be suicidal. For that reason the continuation of nuclear air or missile bases in this densely populated island, or any other country in Western Europe, tends to diminish the credibility of the deterrent far more than they add to its possible value. Their presence merely puts those countries in pawn. To talk of the 'vital' importance of such bases is delusion or humbug. They are the perilous legacy of an ill-considered and obsolete defence policy.'[30] Liddell Hart was always a crushing unbeliever.

Shortly before he died he told the journalist Bernard Levin, smilingly, that he was and always had been a pacifist.[31] Whatever lay behind the smile, this was a paradoxical formation for the man touted as the Clausewitz of the twentieth century. 'Anti-war' is a crude slogan—who, after all, is pro-war?—but it is a badge of commitment. 'I can make cannons,' says the arms manufacturer in *Major Barbara*. 'I cannot make courage and conviction.' Liddell Hart made courage and conviction. He was expertly anti-war.[32]

To be more exact, he was anti-massacre. It was Robert Lowell, a Conscientious Objector and not a pacifist, who appreciated that 'the one thing worse than war is massacre'; and Voltaire who caught the prevailing abject realism in his satirical net: '"Do you think", said Candide, "that men have always massacred each other the way they do now? that they've always been liars, cheats, traitors, ingrates, brigands? that they've always been feeble, fickle, envious, gluttonous, drunken, avaricious,

[28] LH, *Great Captains Unveiled* (Edinburgh, 1927), p. 177; *Remaking*, pp. v-vi, 276.
[29] R. H. S. Crossman, 'The Strange Case of Liddell Hart', in *The Charm of Politics* (London, 1958), p. 224; LH reflection, 2 May 1936, 11/1936/26, KCL.
[30] Donald Mackinnon, 'The Controversial Bishop Bell', *The Listener*, 21 Dec. 1967; *Peace News*, 23 Feb. 1962.
[31] Interview with Bernard Levin, 15 Apr. 1994; *Daily Mail*, 2 Feb. 1970.
[32] Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara* (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 139.

ambitious, bloodthirsty, slanderous, debauched, fanatical, hypocritical, and stupid?" "Do you think", said Martin, "that hawks have always eaten pigeons when they find them?"'[33] Once a conscientious warrior, Liddell Hart became an equally conscientious objector. Unlike Candide, he was not prepared to accept such an answer. The comparison with Clausewitz was unwarranted and unfortunate. Clausewitz was the Mahdi of massacre.[34] That was the Continental way in warfare. It required cannon fodder. He, Liddell Hart, would be the Lama of limitation. He would point a different way, a better way; as it happened a British way. It required loose change.

The British Way in Warfare was officially unveiled in a lecture at the Royal United Service Institution in London on 28 January 1931. The title of the lecture was 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories'. Its thesis was Baconian and Swiftian. 'Thus much is certain', Bacon had asserted in a famous essay, 'he that commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much or as little of the war as he will. Whereas those that be strongest by land are many times nevertheless in great straits.' And in his scathing demolitionist tract on 'The Conduct of the Allies' (1711) in the wars against Louis XIV of France, Jonathan Swift had mordantly regretted 'that the Sea was not the Duke of Marlborough's Element, otherwise the whole Force of the War would infallibly have been bestowed there, infinitely to the Advantage of his Country, which would then have gone hand in hand with his own'.[35] Two hundred years later, Liddell Hart took up where Swift left off. He argued that the British Way in Warfare was essentially businesslike. Finding that by happy chance she did indeed command the sea, Britannia had almost instinctively evolved an historic practice based on economic pressure exercised through sea power. 'This naval body had two arms: one financial, which embraced the subsidising and military provisioning of allies; the other military, which embraced sea-borne expeditions against the enemy's vulnerable extremities. By our practice we safeguarded ourselves where we were weakest, and exerted our strength where the enemy was weakest'—true economy of force. So far as Britain was concerned, the war on land (wherever it might be) was prosecuted by proxy, by the artful dodge of 'lending sovereigns to sovereigns', and not by sending an expeditionary force. That is to say, not a *British* expeditionary force. Hessian mercenaries were another matter. This practice was continued over three centuries, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth, achieving its ultimate expression in the epic imbroglio that was the Seven Years' War (1756–63).

'You know England. Are they as mad there as they are in France?'
'It's a different kind of madness,' said Martin. 'As you know, the two countries are at war over a few acres of snow across in Canada, and they're spending more on this war than the whole of Canada is worth. To tell you exactly if there are more people who should be locked up in one country than in the other is something my feeble lights do not permit . . .'
Thus conversing, they landed at Portsmouth. A multitude of people covered the shore, all gazing intently at a rather stout man who was kneeling blindfold on the deck of one of the naval ships. Four soldiers, posted opposite this man, each fired three shots into his skull, as calmly as you please, and the assembled multitude then dispersed, thoroughly satisfied.

[33] Robert Lowell, 'Struggle of Non-Existence', *History* (London, 1973), p. 155; Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. Roger Pearson (Oxford, 1990), p. 61.
[34] LH, *Ghost*, p. 120 (in full, 'the Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre'). On conscientious objectors see *Thoughts*, p. 87.
[35] Francis Bacon, *Essays* (London, 1973), p. 96; Jonathan Swift, 'The Conduct of the Allies', in Herbert Davis (ed.), *Political Tracts* (Oxford, 1951), p. 23.

'What is all this?' said Candide. 'And what demon is it that holds such universal sway?'
He asked who this stout man was who had just been ceremonially killed.
'He's an admiral,' came the answer.
'And why kill this admiral?'
'Because he didn't kill enough people,' Candide was told. 'He gave battle to a French admiral, and it has been found that he wasn't close enough.'
'But', said Candide, 'the French admiral was just as far away from the English admiral as he was from him!'
'Unquestionably,' came the reply. 'But in this country it is considered a good thing to kill an admiral from time to time so as to encourage the others.'[36]

The British Way in Warfare was to encourage the others. It was at the same time a strategic orientation—maritime rather than Continental, periphery-pecking rather than ironmongering—and a politic disposition: auxilliary rather than principal in Swift's parlance, conservative rather than acquisitive in Liddell Hart's. In each instance it was suitable, flexible, and, above all, profitable. Britain, 'Ever-Greater Britain', had baled out and waxed fat. The end justified the beans.[37]

Not coincidentally, Britain's 'historic practice' harmonized with Liddell Hart's strategic precept. In the conduct of war, Britishness was indirectness nationalized. The British Way in Warfare functioned as a magnificent demonstration of the grand strategy of Indirect Approach. Like the wearing of a kilt, like the Indirect Approach itself, the British Way in Warfare is a classic example of an invented tradition. Liddell Hart had a complicated relationship with tradition. Tradition-as-encrustation he hated. 'Throughout military history the hallmark of the Great Captains has been that they stripped the art of war of the coils of custom that, like ivy, suffocate and drain the sap from the tree of commonsense action.'[38] Tradition-as-emancipation he loved. Curiously, this scourge of the backward-looking was the greatest inventor of military traditions in the modern era.

Like many such inventions (including the kilt) 'The British Way' continues to be the object of extraordinary fascination. This has taken several forms. The most arresting is a series of vigorous refutations offered ritually every decade by the cream of commentators from George Orwell to Michael Howard. '"Limited aims" strategy is not likely to be successful unless you are willing to betray your allies whenever it pays you to do so', wrote Orwell feelingly in the midst of the Second World War. 'Disgusted by the spectacle of Passchendaele, Captain Liddell Hart seems to have ended by believing that wars can be won on the defensive or without fighting—and even, indeed, that a war is better half-won than won outright. That holds good only when your enemy thinks likewise'—a key point—'a state of affairs which disappeared when Europe ceased to be ruled by an aristocracy.' Howard concluded rather similarly in the 1970s:

[36] Voltaire, *Candide*, pp. 72–73. This was the unfortunate Admiral Byng, acquitted of cowardice but found guilty of dereliction, and executed on his own quarterdeck in 1757.

[37] LH, 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories', *JRUSI*, LXXVI (1931), pp. 486–510; revised as 'The Historic Strategy of Britain', in *British Way*, pp. 13–41; reprinted in 1935 as *When Britain Goes to War* and in 1942 under the original title. Cf. David French, *The British Way in Warfare* (London, 1990). Periphery-pecking/ironmongering is Second World War terminology. See Alex Danchev, *Very Special Relationship* (London, 1986), p. 34; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Second World War* (New York, 1993), p. 250.

[38] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1992); LH, *Thoughts*, pp. 114–15.

A commitment of support to a Continental ally in the nearest available theatre, on the largest scale that contemporary resources could afford, so far from being alien to traditional British strategy, was absolutely central to it. The flexibility provided by sea power certainly made possible other activities as well: colonial conquest, trade war, help to allies in Central Europe, minor amphibious operations; but these were ancillary to the great decisions by land, and they continued to be so throughout the two world wars . . . When we did have recourse to a purely maritime strategy, it was always as a result, not of free choice or atavistic wisdom, but of *force majeure*. It was a strategy of necessity rather than of choice, of survival rather than of victory. It enabled us to escape from the shipwrecks which overtook our less fortunately placed Continental neighbours; it gave us a breathing space in which to try to attract other allies; it enabled us to run away—which, as a method of 'taking as much or as little of the war as one will' is never to be despised; but it never enabled us to *win*.[39]

The British Way has taken many beatings. But it has also been adapted to many purposes, most recently a swelling interest in 'strategic culture'—the values, beliefs, customs, and conditions which combine to influence the use of force, or the consideration of the use of force.[40] The subject is still in its infancy, but one thing is readily apparent. In any assessment of British strategic culture the salience of history and tradition (invented or otherwise) would be difficult to over-estimate. Here, at least, Liddell Hart and his historic practice find complete acceptance, and a rare tribute, apropos yet ironic. The tradition he invented is now part of the culture it purported to explain.

Liddell Hart's inventions were authentically but not exclusively Liddell Hart's. If he pondered Bacon and Swift (and he may not have done so until later), he also plundered Churchill, Corbett, Lawrence, Richmond, and Sun Tzu, to name but five. And behind them stood a whole *feuilleton* of French writers only too eager to array and assay the military past for the enlightenment of the military present.[41]

From the unlikely lips of Winston Churchill he took the misnomer of 'battle' and the substitute concept of 'siege-offensive', a sanguinary competition drawn out over many months, to no good end. More importantly, he took a certain admonitory ambition, impalpable but tonally crystal-clear. 'The use of force for the waging of war is not to be regulated simply by firm character and text-book maxims. Craft, foresight, deep comprehension of the verities, not only local but general; strategems, devices, manoeuvres, all of these on a grand scale are demanded from the chiefs of great armies . . . Nearly all the battles which are regarded as masterpieces of the military art, from which have been derived the foundation of states and the fame of

[39] George Orwell, 'Perfide Albion', *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 Nov. 1942, in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 283, 286; Michael Howard, 'The British Way in Warfare', in *The Causes of Wars* (London, 1983), p. 200. Cf. Hew Strachan, 'The British Way in Warfare Revisited', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp. 447–61, and 'The British Way in Warfare', in David Chandler (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 417–34.

[40] John Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence* (Oxford, 1995); Colin McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War* (London, 1996); Alan Macmillan, 'Strategic Culture and National Ways in Warfare', *JRUSI*, 140 (1995), pp. 33–38. Cf. Lawrence Freedman, 'Alliance and the British Way in Warfare', *Review of International Studies*, 21 (1995), pp. 145–58.

[41] LH seems to have read and marked chiefly Arthur Boucher, *L'Art de Vaincre* (Paris, 1928); Hubert Camon, *Le Système de Guerre de Napoléon* (Paris, 1923); Jean Colin, *The Great Battles of History* [1912], trans. 'under the supervision of Spenser Wilkinson' (London, 1915), and Jean Colin, *The Transformations of War*, trans. L. H. R. Pope-Hennessy (London, 1912). He would have been alerted to Bacon in T. E. Lawrence, 'The Evolution of a Revolt', *Army Quarterly*, 1 (1920), pp. 55–69, and to Swift in Herbert Richmond, *National Policy and Naval Strength* (London, 1928).

commanders, have been battles of manoeuvre in which very often the enemy has found himself defeated by some novel expedient or device, some queer, swift, unexpected thrust or strategem. In many such battles the losses of the victors have been small.' This was the recitation that Liddell Hart longed to hear; 'a bonfire lighted on a dangerous coast to assist doubtful navigators'.[42]

From Britain's pre-eminent maritime strategist Julian Corbett, a civilian whose 'sea heresies' provoked a familiar patronizing response from the bridge, he took the lineaments of a British maritime tradition, grounded in a scintillating reinterpretation of Pitt's 'system' and its successful employment in the Seven Years' War. 'For Pitt army and navy were the blade and hilt of one weapon, and from the moment the weapon was in his grip he began to demonstrate the force and reach of his method . . . a most brilliant lesson of the way in which the weak army of a strong naval power can be used, of how great Continental armies may be made to feel the shock of fleets, and of how mere superiority at sea may be made to thwart Continental cabinets, to tangle their strategy, and upset their moral balance'. But his borrowing from Corbett was more fundamental still. From Corbett, too, he took the essential antinomies of the Indirect Approach—orthodoxy and heterodoxy, sterility and versatility, weakness and strength, decision and procrastination—neatly switched from one element to the other, in coincident terms: the paradigm naval analogy.

> Naval strategy studied on a chart is comparable to pure mathematics. It sets itself as it were upon a clean slate to solve certain problems of naval warfare, without regard to the deflecting influences of military or diplomatic considerations. The usual definitions display it as concerned with obtaining command of the sea, with combinations for overpowering the enemy's main fleet and the like . . . But the historical method reveals at once that the command of the sea is only a means to an end. It never has been, and never can be, the end itself. Yet obvious as this is, it is constantly lost sight of in naval policy. We forget what really happened in the old wars; we blind ourselves by looking only on the dramatic moments of naval history; we come unconsciously to assume that the defeat of the enemy's fleets solves all problems, and that we are always free and able to apply this apparently simple solution. Thus, until quite recent years, naval thought had tended to confine itself to the perfection of the weapon and to neglect the art of using it. Or, in other words, it had come to feel its sole concern was fighting, and had forgotten the art of making war.[43]

From Lawrence's ruminations on the Arab revolt against the Turks in 1916–18—a side-show of a side-show, as Lawrence rightly said, an oriental pendant to the Western Front—he took another analogy, not naval but camel, though similarly derived. 'Camel raiding-parties, as self-contained as ships, could cruise without danger along any part of the enemy's land frontier, . . . and tap or raid into his lines where it seemed fittest or easiest or most profitable, with a sure retreat always behind them into an element which the Turks could not enter'. This was good for both the Approach and the Way, but Lawrence had even more mesmerizing things to say, things which so delighted Liddell Hart that he copied them down verbatim and made them his own.

> The books gave me the aim in war quite pat, 'the destruction of the organized forces of the enemy' by 'the one process battle'. Victory could only be purchased by blood. This was a hard

[42] Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis* vol. 3 (London, 1927), part i, pp. 21, 39, 60; LH, 'Mr Churchill on the World Crisis', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 Mar. 1927.
[43] Julian S. Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War* (London, 1907), vol. 1, pp. 2–3, 6–7, 8–9.

saying for us, as the Arabs had no organized forces, and so a Turkish Foch would have no aim: and the Arabs could not endure casualties, so that an Arab Clausewitz could not buy his victory. These wise men must be talking metaphors, for we were indubitably winning our war . . . but suppose we were an influence (as we might be), an idea, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. We might be a vapour, blowing where we listed. Our kingdoms lay in each man's mind, and as we wanted nothing material to live on, so perhaps we offered nothing material to the killing. It seemed a regular soldier might be helpless without a target. He would own the ground he sat on, and what he could poke his rifle at . . . The Turk was stupid and would believe that rebellion was absolute, like war, and deal with it on the analogy of absolute warfare. Analogy is fudge, anyhow, and to make war upon rebellion is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife.[44]

From Herbert Richmond, a punchy theorist-admiral and a congenial fellow-objector, he took ready-made something called 'the British form of warfare'—by a strange circularity, from an idea found in Foch—a combined strategy based on the maintenance of naval strength and pursued by forming friendships or alliances, grand and not so grand. 'We engage in alliances, alliances which almost invariably involve us in petty principalities, duchies, bishoprics, or minor monarchies with which we have no direct interest or concern, not because we are interested in the personality, the dynasty, or the religion of the ruler, not even because we like or dislike either party to the quarrel, but because disputes between these lesser Powers provide too often the spark that lights a great war, in the outcome of which our security at sea will eventually be involved.'[45]

From the gnomic wisdom of the ancient Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu (or from his modern English translator) he confirmed the morphology and terminology of his own theory. 'All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder and crush him.''To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence. Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.''In all fighting the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory.'[46] The paired concepts of this last utterance are central to Sun Tzu, and in their military application may originate with him. They were rendered as *direct* and *indirect* in the translation used by Liddell Hart, a translation widely adopted in the first half of this century, though now, like its forerunners, somewhat discredited.[47] Translators of military theory are almost as reluctant as the theorists themselves to acknowledge any predecessors. Later versions favour *straightforward* and *crafty*, or *normal* and *extraordinary*, or, perhaps most authoritatively, *orthodox* and *unorthodox*.[48] The Unorthodox Approach? So easily is the glossary of strategic thought rewritten.

[44] Lawrence, 'Revolt', pp. 58–60, 64, 68.
[45] Richmond, *National Policy*, pp. v, 25–26, 27, 55.
[46] Sun Tzu in *Roots*, pp. 11, 13, 16; reproduced as epigraphs to LH, *Strategy* (1954 and 1967).
[47] *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (London, 1910). I follow the encyclopaedic Ralph D. Sawyer's version (Boulder, CO, 1994). The abridgement in *Roots* is Giles minus the annotations.
[48] Respectively D. C. Lau, 'Some Notes on the Sun Tzu', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 28 (1965), pp. 317–35; Griffith, *Sun Tzu*, pp. 42–43, 91; and Sawyer, *Sun Tzu*, pp. 147–50.

Liddell Hart fed on all of these men, and many more besides. This does not mean that he read much of what they wrote. He had other fish to fry. There were problems to solve and people to see. After adolescence he was more a raider than a reader. Of Churchill's serial volumes on the Great War, *The World Crisis* (1923–29), he concentrated on the first two chapters of the third. Of Corbett's stupendous shelf-full, he studied the introductory framework to *England in the Seven Years' War* (1907), and diligently raided the rest of that long book for his Great Captain, Wolfe, a neglected portrait whose various guises and disguises, strategical and biographical, place it at the very heart of his development as a writer and thinker.[49] The rest of Corbett's work he probably absorbed through others. He never owned and perhaps never opened the *chef-d'oeuvre*, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911). Richmond helped him with Corbett, and Aston with Richmond.[50] He papered over the cracks with *The Expansion of England* (1883), by J. R. Seeley, whose mission it was to show that 'the expansion of England into Greater Britain' began with the naval invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588.[51]

Seeley's story connected vividly with the swashbuckling adventures of Liddell Hart's youth. 'My criticism of your history', Robert Graves wrote to him as a friend in 1943, 'is that you have (in the past) tended to accept school textbook accounts of generals or religious disputes or campaigns which you have not yourself studied in intimate detail.' Graves was right. There was no alternative. Liddell Hart ploughed a broad field: by current standards a whole valley. He could not be expected to keep up with everything. The sharper criticism is that he neglected even the Holy Scriptures of the military profession. As Shelford Bidwell laconically observed, 'British soldiers are little given to theorizing. Clausewitz, Jomini, von der Goltz, and Hamley were read only by those eccentric enough to study their profession.' Less a profession than a part-time employment, quipped Liddell Hart. Was he the victim of his own well-made jest? One member of his talented kindergarten, Jay Luvaas, has pointed to the importance of Liddell Hart's work habits for an understanding of the intellectual positions he occupied and defended with such tenacity. 'He was accustomed to concentrating on a given subject until he felt he had assessed it properly and then to put it into his files, to be redeployed intact whenever his mind crossed that portion of the field again. Although he may have consulted Clausewitz occasionally on some particular subject, it is unlikely that he ever reread *On War*—certainly not with an open mind—after his initial exposure in the 1920s.'[52] Liddell Hart was a corsair. Rereading was not his style.

Nor was it his method. 'My own experience, supplemented by observation, is that the essential [thing] for a writer is to have something to say. Then, however crude his delivery of it, he will make his own prose channel for it, improving with experience. Wide reading will help his ease of delivery, but not conscious imitation. Like a

[49] LH, 'Wolfe', in *Great Captains*, pp. 207–74. The portrait contains, *inter alia*, the 'smoking gun' for LH's borrowing from Corbett (p. 249, quoting *Seven Years' War*, pp. 221–22), and, in pentimento, the British Way (pp. 266 ff.).

[50] Sir George Aston, *War Lessons, New and Old*, *The Problem of Defence*, (ed.) *The Study of War* (London, 1919, 1925, 1927). LH may also have consulted C. E. Callwell, *The Effect of Maritime Command on Land Campaigns* and *Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance* (Edinburgh, 1897 and 1905).

[51] J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883), pp. 107–08.

[52] Graves to LH, 18 Aug. 1943, 1/327, KCL; Shelford Bidwell, *Modern Warfare* (London, 1973), p. 195; Jay Luvaas, 'Clausewitz, Fuller and Liddell Hart', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 9 (1986), p. 211.

stream, a man of flowing ideas will gradually cut his own channel. The idea is more important and essential, as a start, than felicity in expression.' First the hypothesis, then the proof. But Liddell Hart's hypotheses ruled his proofs. He did not sift evidence discriminately to see what would turn up; he ransacked it thievishly and bagged what he could find. One of his earlier ideas, the Expanding Torrent, was not deduced, Newton-and-applelike, from 'Nature's method of attack', as he announced at the time. Rather the reverse. The idea induced the image, as he confessed later. 'I actually thought out the method first, and then the parable by which to make it live in the mind'.[53] Liddell Hart was what Auden called a parable-artist. He told parables of war. The best-known, if not the best-loved, is the big idea with which he is most readily identified. The Indirect Approach did not emerge by happenstance, either from his extensive tour of twenty-five centuries and 280 campaigns, or from his intensive study of Sherman in Georgia. The same conclusions would have emerged from dinner at the Savoy and 'Gone with the Wind'. This parable had been already foretold: Liddell Hart had foretold it. What he needed was confirmation. 'The criticism I should be disposed to make of your history is that it is doctrinaire rather than historical,' wrote Spenser Wilkinson, in a variation on Graves. 'By that I mean that you set out to teach dead generals how much better they would have done if they had been imbued with your views of the Indirect Approach.'

Wilkinson's 'doctrinaire' was Liddell Hart's 'practical'. Both involved prescription, or even conversion. One printing of *The Strategy of Indirect Approach* bore the catchpenny title *The Way to Win Wars* (1942). In the midst of the totalest of total wars—a grim irony—it sold out immediately. 'You have mastered the art of expression in your searching after the power to convert souls,' Lawrence complimented him. 'It is fine as writing, and would be fine writing, if it were only a description of how to brew hops.' To be fed and famous called for sales and souls, which is far from an ignominious combination. A prescriptive purpose was neither wicked nor strange—certainly not to military theorists. Of course there were risks, and in some measure he sensed them. 'I admit that there is a certain danger in similes or parables, but I think that in most cases their illustrative and teaching value more than counter-balances such possible defects.'[54] The danger was that he could become the captive of his catchpennies, the slave of his similes, the prisoner of his parables. Fuller thought so (Liddell Hart cordially reciprocated), and another from the kindergarten, Brian Bond, has taken leave to suggest as much with regard to a bravura passage near the beginning of his lecture on the British Way:

> The mud of Flanders was symbolical. In past wars we had put our foot in it—physically. Before the last war even began we had again put our foot in it—this time metaphorically and mentally. And, during the war, we threw our whole body into it. The immediate chain of causation is to be traced through Sir Henry Wilson's pre-war affiliation [with the École de Guerre], Lord Kitchener's summons to arms, the General Staff's haste to reach France, and General Joffre's haste to reach Germany, down to its ultimate destination in the swamps of Passchendaele. Thither we guided and thither we spent the strength of England, pouring it out with wholehearted abandon on the soil of our allies.

[53] LH, 'Method of Work', 13/1, KCL; 'Colonel Bond's Criticisms', *Royal Engineers Journal*, XXXVI (1922), p. 302.

[54] Lawrence to LH, 30 Aug. 1932, in *Biographers*, p. 48; LH, 'Colonel Bond', p. 302.

It was heroic, but was it necessary? It was magnificent, but was it war? A supplementary yet separate question is whether it even benefited our allies in the long run. Did we sacrifice our security, our mortgage on the future, for a gesture?

Challenged to find any alternative to that gesture, a challenge he would face again, Liddell Hart could find none. Given the circumstances of 1914, he too would have sent an expeditionary force across the Channel, either to France or to Belgium. He would have done something else later—in the antique dichotomy of 'Westerners' and 'Easterners' in the Great War, Liddell Hart was a slightly evasive Easterner—but this was a crucial admission for any future Way. Yet it was never publicly acknowledged. 'Is it too unkind to suggest that to do so would have ruined a memorable metaphor?' Perhaps it is. Liddell Hart was already committed, to an idea and to a text. Even in the discussion period after the lecture he was referring questioners to the printed version of his remarks, scheduled for the Institute's proceedings. 'In conversation he might change his tone or his opinions, but once in print—never!'[55]

He did reread (and rewrite) Lawrence, at once his authority and his subject. Part hero, part Plato, Lawrence of Arabia was for Liddell Hart a living parable, and his prescriptive biography of that lionized leprechaun is a parable life. Lawrence is 'the Drake of the desert', 'the spirit of Freedom come incarnate into a world of fetters'. He evokes a sustained comparison with 'the man who is justly regarded as England's most representative military genius', the Captain-General, Marlborough. 'In Lawrence, as in Marlborough, one finds the profound understanding of human nature, the power of commanding affection while communicating energy, the knack of smoothing out troubles, the consummate blend of diplomacy with strategy, the historic English instinct that there is more in war than the winning of battles, the sense of ground combined with a wider sense of geography, and perhaps above all, the uncanny calm that acts like oil on a turbulent sea.' But Lawrence was a greater than Marlborough:

Lawrence plumbed depths over which Marlborough was content to sail by the chart of his age. If this habit of taking deep soundings was an increasing hindrance to Lawrence's progress towards personal success, it was of inestimable service to him in avoiding the unknown reefs on which generalship has so often been wrecked. He profited not only from the experience of his forerunners through the ages, but from his own deep reflection. To their instinct for war he added a reasoned theory of war more profound than any of the Great Captains have revealed. If this statement be questioned I can only refer the reader to chapter v of this book ['Martial Reveries'], and pose him the counter question as to where among the writings, dispatches, and recorded utterances of the Great Captains there is to be found an 'appreciation' of war that can compare with this for breadth and depth. When I first read it in 1920 it made an instant impression, but I am forced to confess that it was only when I came back to it after another twelve years spent in continuous study of war that I came to realize how far Lawrence's thought had travelled, and how much I had originally missed. It is only now [in 1934], even if now, that I appreciate its full significance.[56]

'Martial Reveries' (a nod to Saxe) reproduced the substance of Lawrence's 'Evolution of a Revolt', the electrifying miniature quoted above. Distilled from the fabulous *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—Lawrence's legendary war-story to end all war-

[55] LH, 'Economic Pressure', pp. 488, 505, 508; Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart* (London, 1977), p. 3, 77; Jay Luvaas, 'Liddell Hart and the Mearsheimer Critique', *Parameters*, XX (1990), pp. 14, 17. The offending passage was reproduced unchanged in *British Way*, p. 15.

[56] LH, *Lawrence*, pp. 94, 475–76, 482.

stories, printed privately in 1926 but published commercially only after his death in 1935—it made an instant impression, not only on Liddell Hart, but on anyone interested in the action, the Araby, or the author: a sizeable and influential contingent. 'Of all Englishmen who have achieved a great reputation as a man of action he had most deeply the taint of the man of letters, and to this he owes much of the reputation that men of letters have made him.' Corbett's sinuous verdict on Walter Raleigh, a verdict quite possibly known to Liddell Hart from his raiding, is tailor-made for Lawrence. Prominent among those men of letters was Liddell Hart's mentor, John Buchan, who deftly incorporated 'Evolution of a Revolt' into a novel, and who suggested the idea of reprinting the piece in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whose military editor Liddell Hart had become, under the rubric of guerilla warfare.[57] Liddell Hart needed no further prompting. In 1927, with Lawrence's connivance, the military editor himself produced a bastard version of the original for the *Britannica*, forwarding the fee to the delighted and impecunious author, then masquerading as 338171 Aircraftsman Shaw in the semi-anonymous ranks of the RAF. This was the start of an increasingly close relationship, closer on Liddell Hart's side than Lawrence's, but close enough for all that, conducted almost entirely by correspondence: a true pen friendship.

So it came about that Liddell Hart reread 'Evolution of a Revolt', as if for the first time, precisely when the Indirect Approach was beginning to take shape in his mind. Its airy ruminations were manna from Heaven. 'Our war should be a war of detachment: we were to contain the enemy by the silent threat of a vast unknown desert, not disclosing ourselves until the moment of attack. This attack need be only nominal, directed not against his men, but against his materials . . . At length we developed an unconscious habit of never engaging the enemy at all . . . Our cards were speed and time, not hitting power, and these gave us strategical rather than tactical strength. Range is more to strategy than force. The invention of bully-beef has modified land-war more profoundly than the invention of gunpowder.'[58] Guibert, Colin, du Picq, Saxe, all passed in review before him. The cerebral jolt of this summoning of the ghost of past masters is immediately apparent in Liddell Hart's writing about the swirling armoured force and its demoralizing effect, and thereafter in his whole countervailing conception of rationally making war rather than rudely fighting. 'I may over-estimate the goodness and value of your book because it hits my tender spot,' remarked Lawrence when he read *The British Way in Warfare* in 1932. 'In the Seven Pillars I wrote a chapter on theory, which was an expression, in terms of Arabia, of very much what you argue about war. Of course yours is war proper, and mine was a tussle in a turnip field: but the lesser sometimes mirrors the large.' Tender spot matched tender spot. 'The more I probed into the reasons which guided his actions in the war, the more I found them to coincide with my own military philosophy,' reminisced Liddell Hart thirty years later. 'In application, but still more in the evidence that this application had been based on calculation, he served as the almost perfect example of that philosophy of war.' There was indeed a remarkable synchronicity between them. For Lawrence as for Liddell Hart, war must be rational, national, and—this above all—frugal. The hero did not like battles any better than did the maestro.

[57] Julian S. Corbett, *The Successors of Drake* (London, 1900), p. 149; Buchan to LH, 1 Oct. 1927, 1/124, KCL. The novel is *The Courts of The Morning* (1929), highly recommended by LH.

[58] Lawrence, 'Evolution', pp. 61, 63.

Meanwhile, Liddell Hart had itchy feet. He had been military correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* since 1927. In 1934 he negotiated an advantageous agreement with *The Times*. The following year he became their military correspondent—the blue riband of military journalism—and their adviser on defence matters as a whole. When he enquired about a contract, he was informed that *The Times* did not have formal contracts, 'as once on *The Times* people usually stayed there for life'. His own first impressions were more prescient. 'I breathe pleasantly in its atmosphere, but I am not quite sure that I shall be able to breathe freely . . . One of the things that drew me most strongly to *The Times* was the way it maintains a sense of proportion, but this operates within limits—an Oxford don-cum-English general's sense of proportion.' On the mantlepiece in his office he found a framed quotation: 'The wisdom of a scribe cometh from his time of leisure: and he that is less in action shall receive wisdom.' For the Pied Piper of Indirectness this was peculiarly apt.[59]

Lawrence wrote him a letter of congratulation generous and shrewd: 'You are now on the Treetop of the profession . . . I implore you not to blow the extra salary on a new car (or a new hat, if Mrs L.H. is in the ascendant) but to use your new enlargement for some unprofitable but worthy book. Give us some reflections upon the relations of density to type of war: working out the influences of much or little landroom upon tactics. So doing you will put [Major General Sir Ernest] Swinton out of joint at Oxford and earmark his chair [the Chichele Professorship of Military History] for yourself. *The Times* and All Souls have a historical connection. Do both, I pray you.'[60] Lawrence had the knack of interpreting Liddell Hart to himself. His reference to the Chichele chair was a ripe example. Notwithstanding the proportionate limits of the Oxford don, Liddell Hart had kept a covetous eye on that chair ever since he left the Army, in 1924. Appointments to it were made for five-year periods; barring gross moral turpitude, extensions were granted on request. Regrettably, the current occupant was merely indolent. Swinton had been appointed in 1925 and extended in 1930. In 1935 he would be sixty-seven. He was not expected to seek a third term. In a splendid illustration of the value of the Indirect Approach in the conduct of life, Liddell Hart's aide-mémoire for his negotiations with *The Times* concluded with the cryptic notation: 'release for "chair"'.[61]

[59] Material in 3/104 and 112, thoughts notebook, 14 Mar. and 4 Aug. 1935, 11/1935/3 and 25, all KCL; LH, *Memoirs*, pp. 257–59; Donald McLachlan, *In the Chair* (London, 1971), pp. 154–55.
[60] Lawrence to LH, n.d. [Jan. 1935], in LH, *Memoirs*, p. 352.
[61] LH notes for *The Times*, 11 Dec. 1934, 3/104, KCL.