

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649753192

The Battle of the Somme by John Masfield

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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JOHN MASEFIELD

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BY
JOHN MASEFIELD



LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN

TO
MAJOR THE HON. NEVILLE LYTTON

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN, 1919

FOREWORD

I HAVE been asked to write a few words of preface to this little book.

While I was in France, in the late summer and autumn of 1916, it was suggested that I should write a History of the Battle of the Somme, then in its second stage or act. In discussing the plan of the book, it was decided that I should begin with some account of the attacks upon Verdun (which the Battle of the Somme ended), and end with the taking of Bapaume, then hoped for, but not expected to happen at once. In order that I might write with full knowledge, some arrangements were planned, by which I could go again to Verdun, to visit some positions which I had not seen. It was made possible for me to go to the Somme, certain introductions were given to me, and I was formally requested to write the History.

After some delay, I was permitted to go again to the Somme battlefield, and to live on or near it for those months of 1917 when our Armies were advancing in all that area. It was made possible for

me to watch the advance of our Armies from point to point and from valley to crest, and to trace those old, much more grim advances, in the area from which the enemy had been beaten in the first months of the attack. During those months I walked over every part of the Somme battlefield in which British troops had been engaged, over every part at least twice, and over many parts, which specially moved me, such as Delville Wood, High Wood, Pozières, Mouquet Farm, Thiepval, and the Hawthorn Ridge, more times than I can remember. I came to know that blasted field as well as I know my own home. I saw much there which I am not likely to forget.

In June, 1917, when I felt that I knew the ground so intimately well, from every point of view, that I could follow any written record or report of the fighting, I returned to England, hoping to be permitted to consult the Brigade and Battalion diaries, as in 1916, when I wrote a history of the campaign in Gallipoli. It was not possible for me to obtain access to these documents, and as only four others, of any worth, existed, my plan for the book had to be abandoned.

Feeling that perhaps some who had lost friends in the battle might care to know something of the landscape in which the battle was fought, I wrote a little study of the position of the lines, as they stood on July 1, 1916. This study, under the title *The Old Front Line*, was published at the end of 1917. I then

attempted to write an account of the battle from what I had seen and heard, and had written as much as is here printed, when I was turned to other work, of another kind, many miles from Europe and the war.

Scanty as the books are, they would have been scantier but for him to whom I dedicate them. By his kindness and forethought much which would have been difficult and disappointing was made possible and pleasant. The disappointment of having to forego the task of writing of our Armies in their victory was but a small thing when set beside the memory of so much that was an inspiration and a delight.

JOHN MASEFIELD.

