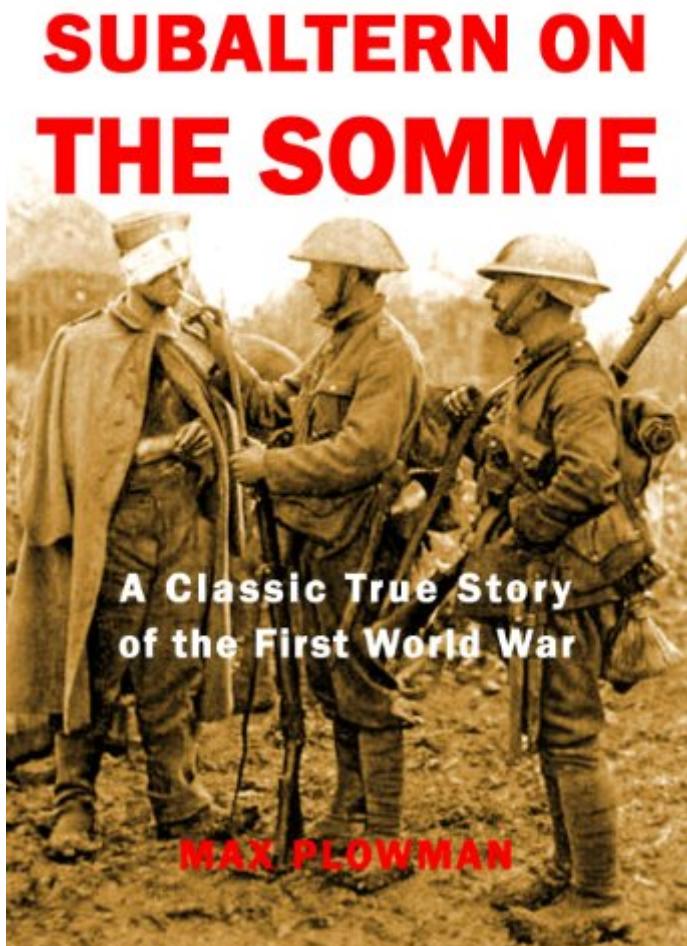


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SUBALTERN ON THE SOMME



Synopsis

Max Plowman joined the 10th Battalion, the West Yorkshire Regiment shortly after it suffered heavy casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme - its casualty rate exceeded that of any other British unit on that day, with seventy per cent killed or wounded. Throughout the rest of 1916, Max Plowman served as a young officer with the Battalion on the Somme. Subaltern on the Somme is a record of his daily life, and ranges across different aspects of his war in the trenches - including fear, shellfire, drunkenness, mud, frustration and his views about his fellow officers and British army commanders. Subaltern on the Somme is for anybody who wonders what trench warfare was like for a junior officer.

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Customer Reviews

Even though the author was an objector, he still had the courage to volunteer for an infantry unit, as an officer. In other words, he needed to experience first hand, the very thing he detested. As usual with most books written by veterans of the First World War, it is a humble, poignant story, devoid of all the "heroics" that started to creep in with later wars. The men of both sides suffered hideously,

and hated the conflict, yet for the most part bore no malice toward each other. They also had to withstand drudgery, and the mind boggling stupidity and lack of concern by senior officers. Quiet, rock solid courage, was the order of the day. This is simply a very real and well written book.

Spoiler.... Plowman turned into an Ardent 1930s pacifist and socialist. Plowman wrote this to support document interwar British appeasement and disarmament. Good if you want to understand why appeasement was so popular but Plowman had a leftist political agenda. I've read better WWI autobiographies and memoirs from junior officers and NCOs without the pacifistic and socialist conclusions.

With the passing of 100 years, the world has little understanding and no remembrance of the madness that was trench warfare in World War I. Plowman's collection of vignettes of life in the trenches calls across the century to remind us once again that war is a nasty deadly business in which death is random and instantaneous. He is neither coward nor hero, but an officer trying to survive and lead as well as he can. His experiences are extremely interesting and the sparse prose he uses to recount them adds to the horrible reality of life in the trenches. Futile attacks where the lives of men were traded for negligible gains in real estate or to close a salient come to life as he recounts all of the emotions of going over the top. Just getting to the trench line was an exercise in defying death almost as bad as attacking from them.

Plowman's description of combat is a significant source of information about those emotions. This book is well worth the read especially as this is the centennial of the war's beginning and we need reminders of its insanity now that all of its Plowmans have passed.

A *SUBALTERN ON THE SOMME* is a very unusual memoir. In a sense it is reminiscent of Anthony Swafford's *JARHEAD*, because rather than being about battles and fighting, it is really an account of what it means to be at war in the everyday sense of the word. The author, Max Plowman, served in France in 1916, a time when some of the most sanguinary battles of the First World War were taking place, but you won't find passages about masses of men charging into machine gun fire, hand-to-hand fighting, or anything like that. Instead, what you get is a series of incidents which demonstrate that war consists largely of mud, lice, discomfort, boredom, exhaustion, filth, stench, loneliness, homesickness, black comedy, petty tragedy, bullying, drunkenness, and institutional stupidity. Sure, the shells go flying; and yes, if you stick your head even an inch over the parapet it's

liable to be smashed by a sniper's bullet; and to be certain, you'd better keep that gas mask handy...but moment to moment, war is a bore - and an uncomfortable one at that. *SUBALTERN* was originally written under a pseudonym ("Mark VII"), and it soon becomes obvious why: Plowman was the antithesis of the flag-waving jingo patriot and "Hun-hater" that the British press and government tried very hard to create and lionize. A sensitive man who could see his German opponents as human beings first and enemies second, he volunteered in a spirit of idealism that did not long survive contact with the world's first totally industrialized war. In fact, the war seems to have disappointed him rather intensely. Many of his fellow officers were cynical, dissolute drunks, most of his superiors combined the worst qualities of the bully and the coward, and quite a few of his men had absolutely no business being in uniform -- one of the book's most heartbreakingly passages involves an epileptic private who the regimental surgeon insists is faking his condition. He repeatedly states his willingness to fight and even to die if the cause requires it, but as the book goes on he begins more and more to question whether the cause he signed up for is the one he actually got. This theme of war being a swindle, a sort of emotional bait-and-switch played on soldiers by their governments, is a common one in war literature, but Plowman tackles it somewhat more honestly than most Allied soldiers. The book's main problem lies in its structure - it's simply a series of recollections in chronological order, without a "plot", so to speak, and without a real moment of climax. Indeed, when I bought the book I assumed it was about the horrible slaughter of the Somme battle, in which the British Army lost 20,000 dead in a single day, but in fact Plowman doesn't remember the battle - he was knocked senseless by a shell and couldn't recall a bit of it, which gives the book a horribly anticlimactic feeling. But that, too, is in the overall spirit of the book - just when Plowman thinks the war is going to finally live up to his expectations, it swindles him yet again. I can't say this is the best of the war memoirs I've ever read, but it presents a picture of the squalor and degradation of trench warfare which is vivid and appalling despite the delicacy of Plowman's very English prose. In sum, this is a book written by a fundamentally decent man who seems to have wanted to kill any lingering illusions about the nobility of the Great War, and in that sense it is a success. Many war memoirs, no matter how consciously they try to tell the reader that war is hell, often end up doing precisely the opposite, but nobody who reads *A SUBALTERN ON THE SOMME* would want to trade places with Max Plowman. And I don't think he would have had it any other way.

I am an avid reader of first hand accounts of The Great War and this is one of the best. The author doesn't dwell on the horrors of fighting, but rather recounts the day to day events that make up the

bulk of the time for a soldier. The old saying is that war is long periods of boredom and fatigue punctuated at intervals by terror: this is what he shows the reader, along with the often irritating interpersonal squabbles of a very junior officer. Beautifully written in the form of diary entries that resemble a modern day blog, this book is as relevant to today's warriors as it was to those of a century ago. Well worth the time of anyone interested in the truth about war and those who fight.

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