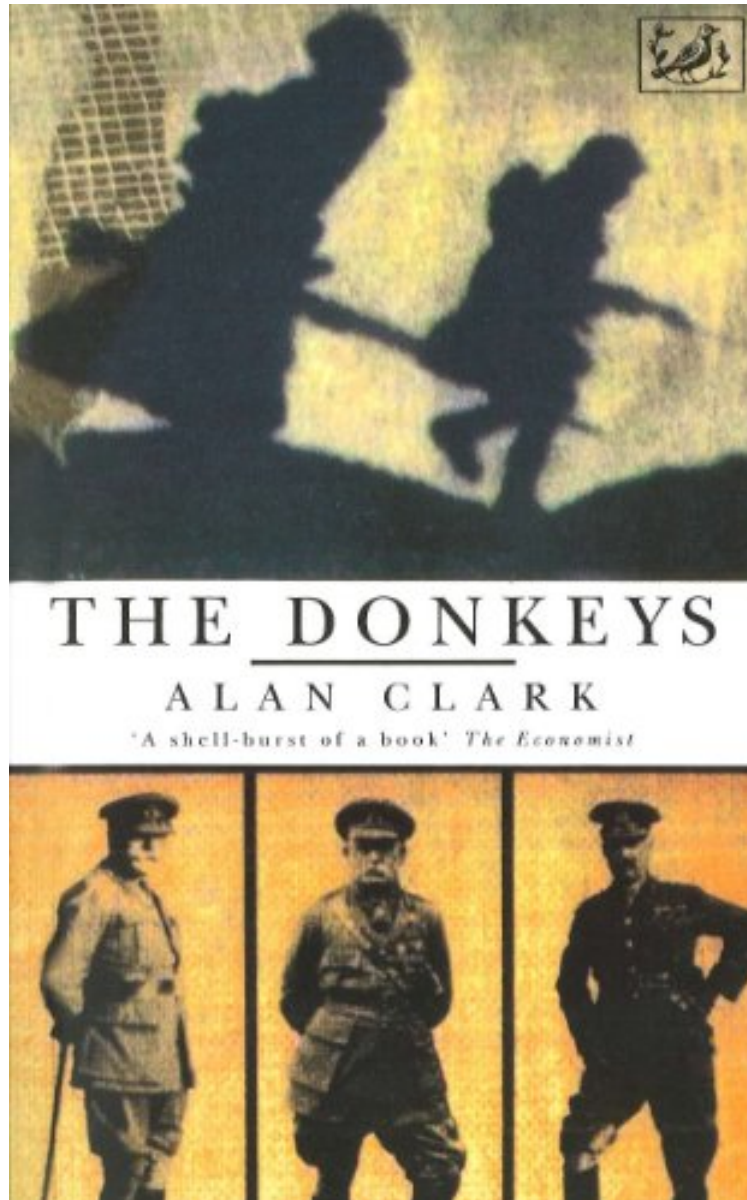



The Donkeys

Alan Clark

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Alan Clark : The Donkeys before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Donkeys:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. "Don't we know that they are lions led by donkeys."By Robert BoltonAlthough he later became known for his colorful parliamentary career and the zestful commentary in his diaries, this was the book that first established the reputation of Alan Clark as a historian, albeit one unpopular with his peers. Alan Clark's The Donkeys, rightly or wrongly, provoked a thorough revision of the public's view of World War

One and the competency of its commanders on the Western Front. In this slim volume, Mr. Clark covered a single pivotal year, 1915, and how it shaped the way the rest of the war would be fought. Although by January of 1915, both the Allies and the Central Powers had suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties, there was still a somewhat romantic view of the conflict. The year opens with John French in command of the British Expeditionary Force, with his eventual successor (and consistent critic) Douglas Haig under his command. Clark's primary argument is that French and those under him consistently underestimated how mechanized warfare had destroyed the old styles of combat. Within the first few weeks of August 1914, each side had established a network of trenches that made breaking through or outflanking the opponent's lines virtually impossible. Each side at a given time was roughly equal in strength, and only through attrition warfare and the eventual inability of one side to replace their losses would victory be achieved. Clark quotes heavily from French's letters and Haig's diaries to emphasize their seeming inability to grasp this point. At the same time, they also had difficulty coordinating with their French and Belgian counterparts, and on the rare occasions when a break-through seemed possible inadequate communications squandered it. Throughout the book, Clark also offers snippets from the writings of other officers and provides statistics suffered at particular battles. These add a personal touch that illustrates the effect of a strategic decision on the front lines. It has since been argued by Haig's family and others that Clark misrepresented the context in which the high command wrote and why they made the decisions they did, and that at other points he either exaggerated or completely fabricated his sources. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in the book's title. It comes from a reputed dialogue between German commanders that the English soldiers are "lions led by donkeys." When Clark was later questioned in private conversation about his source, he apparently admitted he simply made the story up. While these criticisms may be valid, it has been shown in other works that Clark's principal thesis, that many of the early commanders in the war failed to comprehend adequately the technological changes they were facing, is correct. More importantly, the sheer scale of slaughter leaves a reader aghast at its dehumanizing effects. One anecdote that particularly stuck with me came from the appendix: an English soldier complained when the leg of a corpse that had been embedded in the trench wall was removed. The reason for his dissatisfaction? He now had nowhere to place his binoculars. The book ends with French dismissed from the high command and Haig about to assume to control. Although 1915 had been a horrible year, the slaughter of the Somme and the grinding pace of Verdun in 1916, and the chaos of the Hindenburg Offensive in 1918 were all still to come. By the end of the war, only 53 parishes in all of England had units return home with no casualties. In many ways, the fighting of 1915 set the British Empire on a course of decline from which it never recovered. Whatever the faults of Clark's book, it is a vital read to understand the debates over World War One that continue to this day.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Brilliant narrative! By Juan C. Gray I really liked this book, as it shows the political developments and the vanity and stupidity of Generals, while they disposed of soldier's lives. This should be a huge blemish on English military history.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Donkeys - Alan Clark By C. Genders Alan Clark's scathing indictment of the British Army commanders in the first full year of the 1914-18 War is quite masterful, and, although possibly not intentionally, it paints a damning picture of the English class system of that period. The utter lack of regard for the lives of the lower ranked field officers and their men is quite palpable throughout Clark's description of the various 1915 engagements. The pointless wastage of men and materials in the battles of that year destroyed the old professional volunteer army, which was later replaced by an army of 'cannon fodder' conscripts. The overall commander of the army during the disasters of the 1915 debacles was virtually forced to resign as a result. The new Commander, was, if anything, more forceful in his attitude of unconcern regarding the wastage of young lives than the one he replaced.

On 26 September 1915 twelve British battalions - a strength of almost 10,000 men - were ordered to attack German positions at Loos in north-east France. In the three-and-a-half hours of the actual battle, they sustained 8,246 casualties. The Germans suffered no casualties at all. The Donkeys is a study of the Western Front on 1915, a brilliant expose acute; of a key stage of the Great War, when the opposing armies were locked in trench warfare. Alan Clark scrutinizes the major battles of the year. He casts a steady and revealing light on those in High Command - French, Rawlinson, Watson and Haig among them - whose orders resulted in the virtual destruction of the old professional British Army.