

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1921.

A DEFENCE OF GENERAL GOUGH.

THE FIFTH ARMY IN MARCH, 1918. By
W. SHAW SPARROW. With an Introduction
by GENERAL SIR HUBERT GOUGH.
(John Lane. 21s. net.)

This is an interesting and, if carefully read, a valuable book; but it is not a book that can be skimmed except at the risk of missing the best parts. Mr. Sparrow writes cleverly, but he has not the gift of bringing out the salient points of his argument; and he is impatient in the narrative portions and spoils the effect of a plain story by mixing it with controversy, much of which is rather ill-tempered.

Much of Mr. Sparrow's case is frankly bad. Far too much is made of the great inferiority in numbers of the Fifth Army as compared with the Third (Byng's) Army on its left. Sir Douglas Haig had not men to spare; and he was quite right to hold the southern end of his line, which was nearest the French and furthest from the sea, more weakly than the rest. Too much is made of delays in the arrival of the French reinforcements and the defects of their equipment. The French had to make sure that the main attack was towards Amiens and not down the Oise or in the Rheims sector; the defects of equipment were evidence of haste and perhaps of bad liaison work. There are several passages referring to the French that are unfortunate in their tone; and the argument that the appointment of a generalissimo should have been delayed until after the German offensive was over strikes one as ridiculous, for the chief moral of these days at the end of March is the need of a single united command. Sir D. Haig's hold on his team was not nearly tight enough; and every army commander—especially General Gough, if Mr. Sparrow's observations preserve his spirit—tended to regard himself as a first-class independent power with rights against his neighbours. Nor, again, are the gibes against the politicians wholly valid. Mr. Lloyd George was inaccurate in his references to General Carey's force, which stopped a dangerous gap south of the Somme in front of Amiens. Apparently it was organized on the instructions of General Gough himself, and Carey did not arrive until after the work was done; moreover, there were other scratch armies—notably Little's and Kingham's in the same region—which did work quite as good. (The story of how Little on the third day of the battle hurried back from leave, which he was spending in the Lakes, and managed early on the sixth day to reach the critical point with a scratch army that he had picked up at Corbie is excellent.) But, apart from this inaccuracy and a certain prejudice in favour of the Third Army which he had from headquarters, the substance of his statement in the House of Commons (repeatedly referred to but never quoted) was not far out. It is possible that he may have been prejudiced against General Gough on account of the losses at Ypres in the preceding autumn, and that the main reason why Gough was superseded was not so much faulty leading in the week beginning March 21 as the desire to have some one near

GENERAL SIR HUBERT GOUGH.

the French who would get on with them, which General Rawlinson did and General Gough, one guesses, would never have done. Mr. Lloyd George made the mistake of giving too many reasons before all the facts were quite cleared up, for this last reason was quite sufficient in itself.

It is not true, as is sometimes loosely said, that the Third Army would never have retired but for the defeat of the Fifth; for the Third lost a great deal of ground to Von Buelow in the Bullecourt sector, and this had quite as much to do with the retirement of General Byng's right from the Flesquieres (Cambrai) salient as the loss of ground by the Fifth Army. Mr. Sparrow is probably right in arguing that the Flesquieres salient was held too long and with too many troops considering its great natural strength; and he makes out a pretty strong case for the Ninth (Gough's extreme left) division in its misunderstanding with the Forty-seventh, its nearest neighbour of Byng's army. Also one is impressed by Mr. Sparrow's criticism of the boundaries between the Fifth and Third Armies which, as drawn in the February before the battle, seemed expressly designed to give the Fifth Army a grievance in the event of a retreat. It is difficult, however, to follow Mr. Sparrow in his criticism of the official maps on this point, and in any case its importance is exaggerated. The really vital question is whether Peronne should not have been held longer. It was inevitable that Gough's army should give ground, attacked as it was by overwhelming numbers; and Sir D. Haig had contemplated a retreat as far as the Somme as a normal development of a strong attack. He could not apparently forgive General Gough for losing Peronne, and it is not a sufficient answer that General Byng lost Bapaume. Mr. Sparrow argues, and with some plausibility, that the elastic plan of defence was the sounder, that there would have been a real break through had General Gough resisted more strongly east of the Somme, and that in fact there was no break through. It is a pity that these strategic ideas, for which there is much to be said, are not illustrated more closely, for the narrative of the battle as seen from the point of view of Gough tends to become sketchy after the first day. In any case, if extensive retirement was contemplated, it is clear that our tactical arrangements were all wrong, that the front lines were held too strongly, and that the battle-zone of defence should have been very much further back.

The controversial tone of the references to the Third Army is to be regretted; but Mr. Sparrow though a difficult, is an interesting writer if only he would trust more to plain narrative. He has taken great trouble with his maps, which though not beautiful are plentiful and helpful.