



A New Excalibur: The Development of the Tank 1909-1939

A J Smithers

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'The idea of a mobile strong-point, out of which the tank developed, probably occurred to most minds after our first experience of attacking strongly entrenched positions; I first heard it suggested by an Intelligence Corps officer as early as the Battle of the Aisne....the suggestion of using the 'Caterpillar tractor, which has been experimented with at Aldershot in 1914, immediately arose....but it was so obvious a development that it must have occurred simultaneously in many regiments and staff messes.' Thus stated Jphn Charteris, Sir Douglas Haig's Director of Military Intelligence. Obvious development it may have been, but the birth and infancy of the tank were nevertheless weighed down by the by a truly remarkable burden of handicaps in which the endeavour to solve the enormous number of technical problems which the construction of such a vehicle presented at times to pale into insignificance compared with the endless squabbles between the headstrong band of 'midwives' and 'monthly nurses' who gathered in it's nursery. It is essentially upon this ill-associated bunch of intevnters, engineers, soldiers and politicians which Jack Smithers concentrates on this fascinating study of the vehicle which was born out of the stalemate of the Western Front in the First World War. As is inevitable in almost any work of history set in the first half of the century, the figure of Winston Churchill looms large in the foreground, but the role that he played in this instance is remarkable even by his standard when it is remembered that at the crucial time he was First Lord of the Admiralty and theoretically had nothing to do with warfare on land. Foremost amongst the leading actors in the drama come Sir Eustance Tennyson-d'Eyncourt, Sor Earnest Swinton, Bertie Stern, Sir William Tritton and Walter Gordon Wilson. Of the last- few named will have heard, but as the author says, 'but for him there would have been no tank. Not, at any rate, in 1916.' This is the first exhaustive study of the men behind the earliest tanks and to quote the author again, 'they quarrelled-furiously at times- is hardly surprising, for these were strong-willed men and great matters were at stake. Who was right and who was wrong hardly matters. There is honour enough for all of them.' The story of their quarrels and the machines they produced combine, under Smithers' skill full pen, to make a remarkable and compelling study.

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