REVIEW : BOOTS ON THE GROUND
by Richard Dannatt

"War is a curse to all people, and especially the poor creatures that come from the wars poor, friendless and unhappy"

Robert Cecil (Secretary of State to Elizabeth I)

In Les Misérables, it is perhaps a mark of the genius of Victor Hugo that he should give to a bishop the gesture of true love on which the drama pivots, as if to deny us the temptation for anti-establishment prejudice. In such a spirit, there's no reason why a former Chief of the Defence Staff shouldn't contribute positively to the peace debate.

Following Lord Dannatt's autobiography 'Leading from the Front', 'Boots on the Ground' sets out to describe the story of the British Army since the 2nd World War. For anyone simply interested in 20th Century history it is in itself a revealing resumé. But Dannatt describes a service heavily involved across the world in a bewildering list of conflicts since 1945. In only one year since-1968-were no British soldiers killed in combat. Throughout, there is much post-colonial 'mopping up', some genuine humanitarian relief and many extremely dubious politically-motivated conflicts.

Throughout, Dannatt describes a force given little say in when and where it is deployed, while often under-equipped or critically overstretched. He convincingly describes the enormous dedication and heroism of combat soldiers during a period of so-called peacetime. He also provides much evidence of the demoralisation felt within the service and its families, when dedication and sacrifice go unrecognised. It is not hard to understand the indignation a family might feel at the loss of a loved one in a conflict that half the nation considers at best irrelevant and possibly criminal. Whatever the reason for signing up or the morality of particular deployments, it could well be argued that society owes combatants the assumption of honourable intent. If we call for this respect amongst civilians, why not equally for service personnel with no say either in their deployment or political preference?

Of the political decisions, the measured Dannatt does little to hide incredulity at the policies of successive governments, particularly in sanctioning the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He refers to the extremely shaky evidence used to justify the decision to risk the lives and livelihoods of service personnel. But he is also highly critical of the decision to undertake that major deployment with an army in disarray following successive cuts from governments looking for savings over several decades. This perceived error was compounded by the simultaneous redeployment to Afghanistan, which Dannatt argues stretched resources way beyond capacity. *"The army was neither structured, manned, equipped nor resourced for two concurrent missions on the scale or duration of Iraq and Afghanistan."* With customary tact in discussing what many argue was a breach of international law, he concludes; *"When regime change is a strategic objective there must be a plan to prevent a vacuum in governance. In Germany in 1945 such a plan existed, in Iraq in 2014 it did not, nor in Libya in 2011."* It cannot be easy for a service trained with great discipline for great precision, to answer obediently to an ever more whimsical and divided political establishment.

And of that political establishment his position is clear; *"One of the military principles of war - the identification and maintenance of the aim - was not widely understood by some of those who went to work in suits."* Tony Blair comes under concentrated fire for pursuing the agenda of; "making foreign-policy a 'moral cause". A milestone in this change of attitude was the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, which stated *"we do not want to stand idly by and watch humanitarian disasters or the aggression of dictators go unchecked. We want to give a lead; we want to be a force for good."* Dannatt admits that the two World Wars brought to Britain; *"expansion of state control over most aspects of life, but particularly the economy."* The result of this overbearing control has been a reluctance to get around the table with stakeholders and resolve issues peacefully.

For example, in Ireland; *"If the problems of the province had been seen more rapidly through a politico-economic prism, a political strategy could have been decided upon, to which military action was the adjunct."* He describes how the demoralisation felt within the army due to a disinterested general public, led in 2000 to the Military Covenant, devised to increase public awareness and respect for the services. But he admits that with the new political agenda, *"by 2010 the army had lost control of the Covenant. In civilian hands, its scope was extended, and its reach extended to the front line of Afghanistan."*

Dannatt is perhaps at his most insightful when describing the pointlessness of putting boots on the ground in countries where we are not welcome; a lesson successive politicians seem reluctant to learn. In the Middle East after the 2nd World War; *"British soldiers and members of the Palestine Police Force would fight a losing battle against the terrorists in part because they were unable to win the active support of the local population."* Likewise, he acknowledges that progress in Northern Ireland would never be easy when the commander there estimated that: *"half of the province's Catholics sympathised with the IRA"*, a group benefitting meanwhile from the funding of equally sympathetic Catholics in the U.S. This acknowledgement of the importance of the core morale of a people echoes the sentiment of Mahatma Gandhi when he addressed China following its invasion by Japan in 1937. *"Saying that your culture and morals are in danger of being destroyed, leads one to think that the reform movement in your country was only skin-deep . . . Blaming the wolf (Japan), would not help the sheep much. The sheep must learn not to fall into the clutches of the wolf."* The natural extension of this argument could be to suggest that against this spirit, Hitler could never have established a meaningful takeover of Britain. Either way, it supports the benefit of diplomacy over military engagement, further underlined by Dannatt's assertion that despite NATO, *"The end of the Cold War was a civilian, not a military victory."*

There are many other insights to be found in this book. For instance, those who suggest every conspiracy merely a 'conspiracy theory' should read his description of the 1956 Operation Musketeer; *"cooked up at a secret meeting"* to ultimately overthrow President Nasser of Egypt. Or the confirmation that the Mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan were indeed *"financed chiefly by Washington."* He talks of the now well recognised strategy of 'plausible deniability' used by states to avoid implication, inferring much warfare is now therefore covert or proxy; undertaken by lawless agents of agents.

Where some may be less comfortable is in what appears the subliminal acceptance that might is always right. With regard to NATO Dannatt appreciates that it could be argued: *"with the Cold War long over, the organisation had too much time on its hands and was seeking out 'out-of-area' operations such as Afghanistan to justify its continuing existence."* But then ventures to suggest the organisation; *"has been more relevant to the security of Europe than the European Union."* Nowadays it is more frequently argued that it was the horror of the two World Wars that allowed a new narrative of peace to bind Europe together. The historian Professor Yuval Harari argues that new guiding 'stories' for humanity are rare and of greater potency than the threat of any army. Again, scientists responsible for the 'Doomsday Clock' now ticking ever closer to midnight, may not agree with Dannatt's assertion that Britain's nuclear deterrent; *"helped to keep the peace in Europe throughout the decades of Cold War tension and remains the bedrock of the nation's security."*

There is also an assumption that Britain's global worth is measured by its defence spending and the size of its weapons, overlooking those advanced nations spending little on defence. Apparently it was Britain's overseas military role that: *"symbolised the country's global status"*

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rather than achievements relating to the reduction of poverty, healthcare, education and the environment. The Global Peace Index asserts the inverse relationship between welfare and 'defence' spending, finding that the most civilised countries tend to have the smallest military. Rather than armies, these countries rely more on 'policing'. To Dannatt it is apparently to be lamented that: *"In the post-Cold War 1990s, senior commanders became concerned that the army could be reduced to a little more than a gendarmerie, the fate befalling other armed forces across Europe, notably in Holland."*

One might ask what is wrong with a gendarmerie. He states that the army was *"Certainly serving the nation during the foot and mouth crisis, the fireman's strike and a fuel protest, but that was hardly what many had signed up for."* Had so many signed up for something more glamorous? This might suggest lethal combat in foreign lands is more heroic than vital civil duties back at home. It also begs the question whether we need to be on a different plain to Holland. Have our military activities really made us more respected internationally? ". . *if Britain is to retain any influence or standing in the international community then it is key to ensure that her Armed Forces, and the boots on the ground that are the enduring symbol of her influence, are sustained as a credible fighting force."* In other words, is it apparently the army that *"continues to allow Britain a global role"*? Dannatt appears to conclude so, regretting that: *"Ever since the early 1970s, spending on education and health began to overtake spending on defence"*, as if this was a problem. He asserts that though there is a perception of 'no votes in defence', the Falklands campaign proved the contrary for Thatcher. To many, this could sound like an argument for seeking wars to win votes.

On the subject of winning votes, Dannatt stays clear of the revolving door between business and politicians now at risk of spinning off its hinges. It is very hard - in fact some say, designed to be almost impossible - to estimate how much pressure so many powerful industries exert upon the country's legislature to shape thinking and policy. Equally, it is hard for our post-industrial society to appreciate the long-term corrosive effect on our minds of increasingly deregulated market forces. The fact that in 2012 Dannatt honourably avoided the temptation to accept a near six-figure salary for promoting the agenda of a corporation, speaks volumes about what is now forcing near obsessive 'offence' spending. For many will recognise the extent to which President Eisenhower's prescient warning of a growing 'Military Industrial Complex' straddling the major industries of the world, has been fully realised.

Measured and thoughtful, Boots on the Ground is an important read because it provokes the vital dialogue about our place in the world and how best it should be handled. It could also be said to show the way to a greater understanding between often hostile and apparently intractable outlooks. This nuance has never been more essential as we attempt to tackle worldwide social-political and environmental crises. Few will disagree with Dannatt concluding that: *"Britain's Armed Forces must never again be taken to war without the approval of Parliament, full support of the British people and fully thought through strategy."* And yet, a growing consensus in the country would now insist that if we want peace we'd do well to prepare for just that. Otherwise, when all you possess is a hammer then every problem does indeed look like a nail.

Anthony Russell
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Building a more Peaceful World

How Not To Go To War: Establishing Departments for Peace and Peace Centres Worldwide by Vijay Mehta, published by Catapult, New International.

Vijay Mehta, Uniting for Peace Chair and Author of The Economics of Killing (global arms trade) and Peace Beyond Borders (European Union peace making), takes an imaginatively fresh angle on peace-building in his new book How Not To Go To War. He proposes society's pro-war institutions be countered by new institutions dedicated to promoting ideas, activities and programmes to advance peace across the spectrum, from anti-violence and harmony in local communities to peaceful relations internationally, with national government Departments for Peace in a pivotal role.

Mehta sees the latter institutionalising peace within the public sector by "dragging the prevention of violence and conflict to the centre of the policy agenda" (as environmental concern has risen up national agendas in many states). Internationally, such institutions could engage in conflict prevention and resolution, disarmament, and non-military security. Within a country, defence diversification, creating trust between alienated minorities and the state, e.g. running de-radicalisation programmes (instead of interior ministries, generally building a culture of peace especially among youth and alerting government of social tensions, would be priorities. Most desirable but certainly more difficult, is the hope they would "act as catalyst in stopping the military's engagement in violence and permanent wars" (albeit public opinion currently seems to have halted the latter).

Such peace-building would necessarily be complemented by a network of Peace Centres providing mainly education, recreation and sports facilities to benefit local youth and encourage community harmony. One would surely want such facilities open to all ages, especially socially excluded like unemployed and lonely elderly. (Mehta envisages a Labour-led Britain moving to a four-day week with four-day schooling and Peace Centres offering the fifth day). I would also see such centres as foci of local peace activism. Mehta envisages Social Business Enterprises and peace-linked entrepreneurs as a parallel force to strengthen a peace-based society, transforming the Military Industrial Complex into a Peace Industrial Complex.

Balancing disturbing facts of today's militarised world with challenging ideas and hopeful vision of 'the world as it might be,' Mehta offers a deeply informed, radical and very relevant blueprint of ways forward towards a truly peaceful world. This book is essential reading for all peace activists and anyone concerned for the global future. My only caveat is that a moral revolution is needed for his proposed peace structures, once in place, to fulfil their lofty purposes - one calling for the coming together of people of different faiths and humanist philosophies for the sake of all humanity.

Rev. Brian Cooper

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