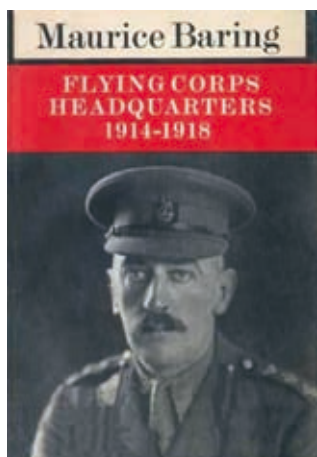


Historic Book Review



RFC Headquarters 1914-1918

By Maurice Baring

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Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

This edition of *APR* sees a new element in the form of a series of historic book reviews. A roughly chronological approach is being taken, beginning in the immediate post First-World War period, but it is intended to cover more modern 'classics' such as Warden's *The Air Campaign* in due course. The next few editions of *Air Power Review* will see reviews of *Basic Principles of Air Warfare*, Slessor's *Air Power and Armies* and Douhet's *The Command of the Air*. If readers have any particular books that they would like to see reviewed in this series, they are invited to write to D Def S (RAF) with suggestions – or indeed if they would like to contribute a review along these lines that would also be welcomed. Maurice Baring, the author of *RFC Headquarters 1914-1918*, had what could be described as at best an indifferent

military career, joining the British Army in 1914 as a lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps, and retiring some 8 years later as a wing commander in the newly formed Royal Air Force. These are facts of a sort, and based solely on them any reader would be forgiven for asking why such an individuals' reminiscences, which is fundamentally what *RFC Headquarters 1914-1918* consists of, justify a place on an air power library shelf. But this bald statement of achievement does not really describe the man of whom General Foch said, 'there was never a staff officer in any country, in any nation, in any century, like Major Maurice Baring.' And it certainly does not reflect Trenchard's own thoughts, who wrote, in a private letter to Sir Maurice Hankey that '...Maurice Baring was, and still is, the greatest personal friend I have ever had'. However the comparison between the unvarnished facts of the opening statement and the following assertions begin to hint that in this case possibly details should not be taken at face value – and that would certainly be an appropriate approach in general when considering this tome. Perhaps the most cogent reason for its importance, and subsequent place in the pantheon of air power history, is the light that it sheds on Hugh Trenchard during his time with the RFC and Independent Force in France. But although there is much more within its cover, nonetheless, before considering the contents in any detail, it is worth getting to know the author a little better.

So who was Maurice Baring? Largely unknown today outside of a small band of air power and RAF cognoscenti, Baring was a well-known figure in establishment circles from the end of the 19th century until half-way through the 20th. An educated man (Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge) with a particular gift for languages (Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, Russian

and Danish) and widely read in all of them, it was perhaps no surprise that he began a career in the Diplomatic Service in 1898. However, more unexpectedly, this career was not to last long, and in 1904 he left the diplomatic lifestyle behind and became a journalist, initially working as a war correspondent covering the Japanese-Russian conflict in Manchuria. A move to St Petersburg, Russia, and a change of role to regional correspondent followed before continuing in this position firstly in Constantinople and then the Balkans, where he successfully represented *The Times*. Baring was also a distinguished writer, with 20 or more published works including novels, collections of poetry and short stories, and, unusually for an English author, enjoyed even more critical success in France than he did in England, with 10 of his books being translated. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1910, and his faith permeated much of his work – indeed he is considered, along with G K Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc – one of the foremost Catholic novelists of the 20th century. However his career as an author was not particularly long: his first novel was published in 1921, but the onset of Parkinson's disease some 15 years later brought his writing to an abrupt end, as well as resulting in his eventual death in 1945. But it would be unfair to leave this pen-picture at that, as Baring was anything other than simply a man of letters. He enjoyed living life to the full, and was possessed of a wicked sense of humour – this was after all the man who in 1914 sent a telegram from Vienna to a friend in the War Office saying 'Feel all could be settled if we really got together. Signed, Franz Joseph.' He also had an open and generous heart, as was amply demonstrated by the depth of his loyalty and commitment to both Sir David Henderson and Trenchard. Baring was, as they say, a very complicated character indeed.

But what of the book itself? The contents are, at first sight, an almost haphazard mix of prose, poetry, early air power thinking, notes on key individuals, and copies of

lists produced whilst on inspections with 'Boom'. However understanding the subplot that lies behind the production of the book does much to explain why it is as it is, as well as telling us something about both Baring and Trenchard. In 1923 Trenchard had run into trouble with the history of the RFC and RAF in the First World War that he was determined to have written. The problem was that the original author, Sir Walter Raleigh, had rather inconveniently died after producing only the first out of a planned 6 volumes. Trenchard wanted Baring to complete the job, but Baring was not keen; partly because he knew that what was wanted was a detailed history and he did not want to commit himself to such a mammoth task, and partly because he had already put a significant amount of work into a personal memoir aimed at capturing his experiences with the 2 generals who had directed most of the war in the air – Henderson and Trenchard. However when Baring submitted his manuscript, Trenchard appears to have requested that most of the elements relating to him be withdrawn. This left rather a hotchpotch of elements, arguably without the main theme that held them together, but one can imagine Baring, who had put the manuscript together over a 2-year period, being keen to get something out – and the story certainly provides an explanation for the contents as they are. Fundamentally RFC Headquarters is based upon Baring's diary entries from the war years, beginning with his somewhat desperate efforts to get into the war in 1914. This resulted in his joining Sir David Henderson, the first head of the RFC, as a member of his staff on an Intelligence Corps commission – although not, it should be noted, on the basis of any particular military skills¹ but purely on his proficiency with languages. The most vivid descriptions pepper the book – from the then-Colonel Brooke-Popham², and his 'portmanteau of gold' which was used to pay the RFC's bills wherever they went, to a dining-in night in 1917 where he reported that '...after the dinner everything in the room was broken; all the plates, all the

glass, all the tables, the chandeliers, the windows, the doors, the people.' Indeed it is in these titbits of observation that much of the charm of this book lies; also apparent throughout is that the peculiar sense of irreverence which exists within the RAF to this day was very much in evidence in the RFC from its earliest existence. It is also possible to track the development of the RFC in technical terms, as various trials are reported, beginning with cameras and bombs, interruptor gear and wireless, to finish with bombsights and navigation equipment, and it is certainly noteworthy that bomb dropping trials frequently took place on front-line RFC aerodromes in the early part of the war!

But the heart of this book is undoubtedly contained in what it reveals about the relationship between Trenchard and Baring, which was without doubt an odd pairing. Baring – articulate, multi-lingual, a deeply devout convert, writer and sensitive soul, and Trenchard – almost the complete antithesis – unscholarly, frequently inarticulate, a firm agnostic, and very much a man given to action rather than introspection. The start was certainly rocky: when Baring collected Trenchard from the docks on his arrival in France he almost succeeded in delivering him straight to the German lines, thanks to a map-reading error. And when Trenchard took command of the RFC in France he told Baring that "he was willing to keep me for a month. He would see by that time whether I should be of any use to him, and if I was of no use I should have to go." But this unlikely partnership was unquestionably at the root of much of the success of the RFC in the later part of the First World War, and the early success of the RAF up until the early 1920s. For whilst Trenchard was an intuitive problem solver, and possessed of tremendous insight, he did not find it easy to explain his ideas, either orally or on paper. Baring was the first in a line of interpreters, or 'English merchants' as Trenchard would later refer to them, whose task it was to elucidate his ideas to a wider audience.



Maurice Baring

Trenchard is still something of an enigma, and the only biography that currently exists really does not do justice to this complex character, but this book does provide glimpses into his character from the man who probably knew him better than any other. An incident early on in their relationship occurred when Trenchard happened to mention that he was rather fond of a particular type of marmalade – and the next day Baring saw to it that a pot was at the general's place at table. Trenchard was quite obviously pleased, and commented that he could see that Baring had a memory – and that he (Trenchard) intended to make good use of it – which he certainly did. The fact that 'Make a note of that, Baring' became a saying in the RFC is testament to the fundamental role that Baring played in enabling Trenchard's management style, as Trenchard was very definitely a commander who believed in a hands-on approach. The systematic way that he approached running the RFC in France – making notes whenever he visited a location, and then following them through with his staff officers immediately he returned – and most importantly of all, making sure that the problem was resolved, clearly made a difference. As Baring pointedly remarked, 'This did not conduce to our repose, but it did further the efficiency of the R.F.C.'

The clarity of Trenchard's thought on operational matters also comes through clearly – for instance in his ability to see the need for a clear line of logistics support, which led him to provide each Army RFC Brigade with its own dedicated Air Park. And although willing to accept considerable losses to achieve his objectives, he did not lose sight of the human cost contained therein. An example towards the latter end of the war, when he insisted on seeing a severely injured pilot in hospital in order to personally present him with an immediate gallantry award, reveals a side of Trenchard that is perhaps not so well known. But Baring himself also had a tremendous ability with people, as Trenchard's fulsome tribute to him in *The Times* after his death makes clear:

“He knew more about what mattered in war and how to deal with human nature, how to stir up those who wanted stirring up, how to damp down those who were too excitable, how to encourage those who were new to it, and in telling me when I was unfair than any other man I know. He was a man I could always trust ... He never once failed me and only once lost his temper with me, though I must have tried him highly. All the juniors had confidence in him ... I can pay no higher tribute: words fail me in describing this man.”

It is certainly interesting to contrast the role of Baring with that of a latter-day staff officer – whose function is much more to do with managing their principal's diary and duties than to stirring up and damping down – or even telling the principal when he is being unfair! Of course the difference comes down to the fact that Baring was a successful and well-connected individual in his own right, not dependant on the Service for his future career, and of a similar age (and with similar values to) his General.

What then is the real legacy of Flying Corps Headquarters? It is a most difficult book to review, but despite all its obvious shortcomings; the lack of a consistent style or theme, the enormous variations between

various components, and the frequently archaic allusions and metaphors, it does paint in an odd way a most vivid picture of what the early RFC was like. It also reinforces the part that luck has to play in war – if Baring had not ended up in the RFC, and if Trenchard had followed his first instincts to get rid of him when he took over – would anyone else have been able to articulate Trenchard's thoughts to the rest of the world so well? Without that articulation, and the constant attention to detail, would Trenchard have ever reached beyond command in the field at brigadier level? And without Trenchard, how would the Royal Air Force have fared in those critical post-war years? These are questions that have no satisfactory answer, but Baring's writings, especially when compared with those of Trenchard's 'in the raw', clearly show where the finesse and articulation occurred. The picture that we gain of Trenchard also presents a more 3-dimensional and human view of this most pivotal character in the early Air Force. This then is Baring's greatest legacy: a combination of artless narrative and deep insight which provides us with a unique window into both the RFC and Trenchard, and thereby allows us to understand much more about the spirit of each of them. Anyone wishing to gain a more in-depth understanding of either would be well advised to read it at least once.

Notes

1 When they arrived at Maubege to set up their first airfield, Baring was asked to make a map, and noted that 'He [Brooke-Popham] told me to draw a map of the Aerodrome, but I didn't know what to mark on it. The result was picturesque rather than useful.'

2 Later Air Chief Marshal, and the first commandant of the RAF Staff College at Bracknell.

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