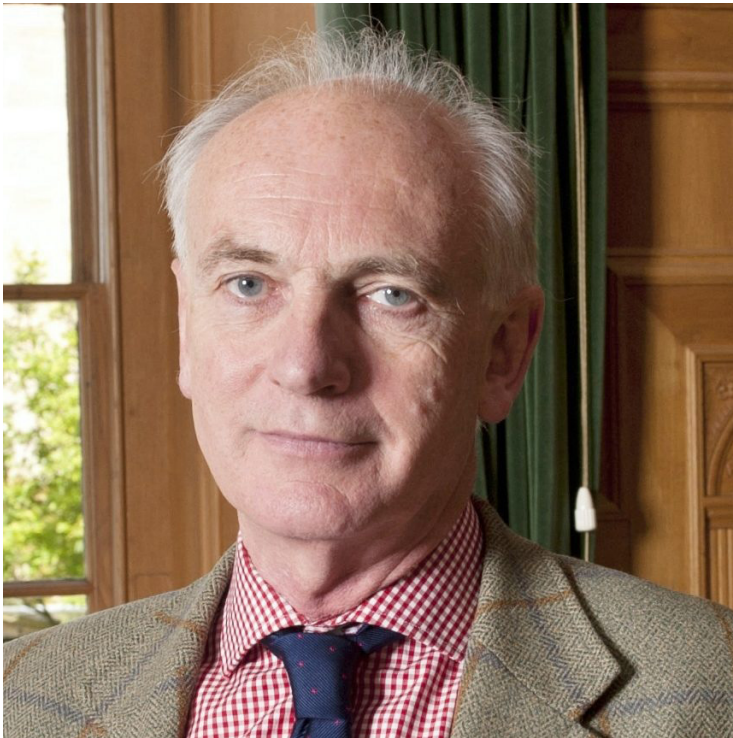


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An Interview with Professor Sir Hew Strachan



*prof. Sir Hew Strachan
(foto: University of St Andrews)*

About prof. Strachan:

Professor Sir Hew Strachan is a British military historian, currently Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He is well known for his studies of the British Army, the history of the First World War, and military history from the 18th century to date, including contemporary strategic studies. During his career, he held various academic positions such as senior lecturer in War Studies at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Professor of Modern History at the University of Glasgow, Chichele Professor of the History of War at All Souls at Oxford. He was knighted in the 2013 New Year Honours for his services to the Ministry of Defence and he also won the Pritzker Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing. In 2017 Strachan was elected Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), the United Kingdom's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. Some of his famous works include *The First World War, Vol. 1: To Arms, European Armies and the Conduct of War*, *Wellington's Legacy: The Reform of the British Army 1830-54*, *From Waterloo to Balaclava: Tactics, Technology and the British Army*, *The Politics of the British Army*, *Clausewitz's On War: a Biography*, etc.

What inspired you to become a historian? Why and when did you start researching the First World War and military history? Have you had any role models in other historians dealing with the same topic, if so which ones and how did they influence your research on the same topic?

I really wanted to be a military historian from a very young age, and in that case, I am an example of a complete geek. I knew when I was about twelve or thirteen that that was what I wanted to do but I really didn't think that there was a career in it, and so I thought that I would have to get another job to earn a living. I have been very lucky that it worked out, but it wasn't a straight path. I did go to university and I did originally work for a shipping company and I realized that I actually needed to do what I wanted to do. It wasn't necessarily always going to be the First World War that I would work on. I was interested in the First World War from a young age, partly because of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak in 1964. I was fourteen then and it was a big deal in Britain at the time, which is what may have influenced me, and certainly, I read quite a bit around the First World War. My PhD was on the 19th-century British army and I thought that I would work on an earlier period of military history when I got a research fellowship in Cambridge in 1975. It must have been five years later in 1980 that Oxford University Press asked if I would write a big history about the First World War. I thought that if I accepted that, it would take the rest of my life, and if I didn't accept it, I would regret not doing it. Of course, I also thought of other things I wanted to do in my life, so it was a big decision. Today I am glad I did accept the Oxford

University Press's opportunity, which took me in a different direction.

I think that anybody in Britain would say that the biggest influence on British military history in my lifetime was Michael Howard, who died just over a year ago. Michael was somebody who gave academic military history standing in the wider world, but in the UK particularly. He also did something which I thought was going to be unsustainable. Though he was a historian, he kept a dialogue between military history and strategic studies alive – which I tended to say is now unsustainable. Certainly, before I went to Oxford, which is now twenty years ago, I had said that military history had become so big, and strategic studies had become so big, that the two fields now have different expectations and literature, and that they are so separated that they are simply not sustainable. When I went to Oxford twenty years ago as Professor of the History of War, I was acutely aware that Oxford did expect me to do both military history and strategic studies. So partly because of that, partly because of the impact of the 9/11 wars and the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, I found myself working on as much strategic studies as military history. So, Michael Howard became a role model, whether I liked it or not because I found myself doing exactly as Michael had done.

Three years have already passed since the centenary commemoration of the First World War, which has been marked by numerous commemorations, projects, scientific papers, books, and congresses. Has the British general public expressed any bigger interest in the First World

War on this occasion and did that interest decline three years after commemoration?

The centenary was very big in Britain. I think much bigger than even I had expected. In 2011 and 2012 I began to realize that it was going to be a big event but the British government at that stage had not shown much interest and I began to lobby because not only the government but also other organizations needed to be aware that there was going to be a big interest. The consequence was that, although the government did launch a plan for the centenary in 2012, it still turned out to be bigger than they had anticipated. In fact, when I sat down with the Prime Minister's representative for the centenary, we thought that there would be three major events – one in 2014, one in 2016, and one in 2018 – so the beginning and end of the war, and the Battle of the Somme and its impact on British life and culture. In the end, there were many more events than that. The centenary grew precisely because it was so strong on all levels, and its strength came from the fact that local communities wanted to remember people in their war memorials. The government responded and then the centenary programme grew from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down.

Did it all die in 2018? The government programme ended in 2019 but I don't think it died in the sense that it has generated a continuing interest, and of course as a scholar, I would have to say that the new research that came out of this impact of the centenary is very often still only finding publication right now. I was involved in a big conference which was held at St Andrews in 2018 and was supported by the British and

Scottish governments. The book on the British home front from that conference is going to be published early next year, in 2022. We still have to see the full effect of what the centenary has been in the late 2020s. So, yes, the interest has declined but it has left an impact.

In Croatian general public and historiography, the First World War is often ignored and neglected in favour of the Second World War due to the ideological changes and social crisis caused by that war. What is the relationship between these two wars in the British general public and historiography? Is there any greater interest in one of the wars or are they both equally researched and analyzed?

Britain in the era of the two world wars had a much more comfortable ride than Croatia. Between 1918 and today Croatia has undergone fundamental political changes and that itself has meant that the events had more impact on Croatian identity. Because it was not invaded, put under a different form of government, divided or didn't lose territories, Britain's identity has had the comfort of continuity. The result is that in Britain there is familiarity with both world wars. Britain had more people killed in the First World War than in the Second World War, and therefore more families were affected, and that gives it immediacy. In terms of popular culture, the Second World War is more widespread because it is clearly closer. My childhood in the 1950s was marked by the Second World War. My father and many of my friends' fathers served in that war and we looked up to our fathers and that was the war that had an impact. So, in a way, the First

World War had to be rediscovered but it has a big popular following. I think that, as we get more distance from it, it becomes closer again because, when both world wars become history rather than part of an oral tradition, then in some way it becomes more accessible and better understood. When we did surveys in 2014, it was very clear that, for the vast majority of the British public, knowledge of the First World War was obscure. They didn't know that Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated in Sarajevo, but they did believe that there definitely had been a football match at the Western Front on Christmas Day 1914.

Since this interview will be published in a student's journal – we would like to know if you had noticed what kind of interest, or to what extent are students interested in topics dealing with the First World War? What reasons would you give students to get them interested in this topic?

I meet students who are interested in the First World War because they are a selected group. When I taught in Cambridge, Oxford, and Glasgow, I taught a First World War course and those courses were fully subscribed, so student interest was high. I think that military history attracts students too because it's a popular subject, but it wasn't when I was an undergraduate, partly because students had less say in the formation of the curriculum which was set down from top-down. However, now students' demand can determine the curriculum.

Why should students be interested in the First World War? Well, I think they should be interested because the First World War still shapes a great deal

of our lives today. I think we tend to exaggerate the direct links such as the problems of the Middle East and the challenges that Southeastern Europe confronted in the 20th century. You can't understand some of today's tensions in the Balkans or the Middle East without understanding the legacy of the 19th century and how the First World War changed that. Even in Western Europe, the desire to create the European Union, the desire to create a world in which Europe can't be torn apart by war, came immediately from the impact of the Second World War, but the ideas were there and were being formulated after the First World War. There are two other crucial influences. The Russian Revolution and America's entry on the world stage come out of the First World War. So, you can't understand much of the 20th century's history or the positions that those states occupy today unless you begin at that point.

There are many books and scientific papers on the topic of the First World War. Would you say that there are still open questions or unexplored topics dealing with the First World War that future historians could explore? Is it possible to say that any topic, including the First World War, can be researched completely, or is there always room for the reinterpretation of certain processes and concepts? How do new approaches and methods affect the opening of new research questions related to the First World War and how can these questions affect the reinterpretation of already covered topics?

Many reinterpretations are recycling old ideas. The most obvious example of that is the outbreak of the First

World War itself. Today we are again at the position occupied by European historiography and politics in the 1920s and 1930s because we believe that Europe did not go to war because one state was particularly aggressive but because the international system broke down. Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* embodies the thinking that was prevalent in the late 1930s. In a way, interpretations have completed a circle and the consequence of that is that historians will at some point restate the argument of German war guilt in order to bring this back to where we were in 1919 and the 1960s. Topics like the origins of the war will always draw attention.

There is also the question of fresh archives and what these tell us and whether that changes our interpretation. In terms of pure scholarship, clearly, the exploration of archives that have been closed can change the way we see things. Particularly if you are writing for Britain, with the domination of the English language, then the danger is that the perspective you would get from these wars is an Anglocentric one. When I am writing about the First World War, although I don't have enough languages knowledge to explore the material I want to look at, I still try to place myself in Central Europe when I am writing so that you can make some sense of international difference. When I began my career as an academic, the First World War documents had only just been opened because most archives had a 50-year rule. So in 1968, the last of the First World War archives were being opened and that meant that much of the literature was not based on proper archival research because historians wrote based on the memoir literature, not archive documents. The

opening of the Russian archives in the 1990s was a major development. The Ottoman archives present challenges even for Turkish speakers, but they still have an enormous amount of information to give us, and so do the Austro-Hungarian archives, I should say. The archives in Vienna didn't suffer any major losses of First World War documents, but you also have to be multilingual to approach them. If you are looking at Croatia, you need to go to Vienna, but you need to have good German for the work. From an archive perspective, there is still plenty to be done and that is just talking about state archives. There are many other archives of other organizations to consider because the First World War was a global war and it involved all of society. So any archive which has survived from that war will tell you something about the war.

There is also the question of new interpretations and historians who become interested in new methods. When I was teaching at Cambridge, I taught a course of Jay Winter's. He is interested in the memory of war and the history of memory. His original interest was in demography and quantitative economics, but he then moved on to become primarily a historian of memory. That had an enormous influence on how many countries have looked at the First World War – through its impact on memory and the way in which the Great War shaped culture.

Very often we are still struggling to do integrated history in two senses. Integrated in the sense that we need to bring the history of memory, military, economic, social, and political history together, so we need to be able to do all of these histories simultaneously. Secondly, integrated in an international

sense, because it needs to be comparative. National histories don't really get us far enough and we still look at Britain too much from a national perspective. So, changing approaches matter. If I have to mention one area which is underdeveloped right now, I would say that there has been a decline in economic history. It really needs to be reactivated in our understanding of the war. There are so many areas in economic history that have not been looked at since the great Carnegie series on the economic and social history of the war that was completed in the 1920s and 1930s.

Some military historians, like John Keegan and Richard Holmes, believe that they should spend as much time as possible with today's soldiers to get acquainted with the way of their decision-making process which can be useful in their studies. What do you think about this matter?

Both John Keegan and Richard Holmes were my good friends. They taught at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and they were, therefore, intimately involved in the life of soldiers. As it happens, thanks to John Keegan, I also taught in Sandhurst for a year, so I got to know soldiers pretty well too. Teaching at Sandhurst, of course, is not the same as soldiering. I do think that there is some truth in that. Michael Howard, being a soldier in the Second World War, once said that there is something quite distinct about warfare and the experience of war, and for most academics fortunately today that experience will be unknown. So, yes, I think there is value. There is also a danger in perhaps exaggerating that value because you are in danger

of romanticizing war. John Keegan's problem particularly was that he did romanticize military life and he took the professional British army as prototypical of all armies when it was not. I think that you need to approach the issue with caution, but I certainly value my links with those in the army.

I can make that quite explicit. When I was at Oxford, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were going on and we had a seminar series where we invited operational commanders who had recently returned from those conflicts to come and speak off the record. It was an opportunity for them to reflect on their experience and an opportunity for us to learn from it. I realized how much I was learning through hearing from them about their experiences. Interestingly, their experience of war was changing the whole time. We can say that even the First World War was clearly a different war in 1918 from what it had been in 1914.

How relevant are military history and historiography today?

I think I am going to flip this question a little. If you mean how military history helps us to understand things today, I think it does, but in a way, all history helps us to understand. Not that history has lessons to teach us, it simply doesn't. It's not that history repeats itself because it doesn't. But history teaches us understanding and it teaches us what sort of questions we should ask of the events of our own time; it teaches us how to look at those events critically, and it provides context. Of course, there is a real sense in which people live out their pasts and I think it is strong in cultures with strong oral traditions. The very first time I went to Afghanistan in 1971,

I was talking to a presumably illiterate Afghan, and he said, 'We Afghans beat you British', and I said 'Yes, that is true, but you didn't do it because this was in the 19th century'. He replied: 'That is true, my grandfather did'. Of course, that was many generations before his grandfather, but time collapsed for him. Even more strikingly, I was back in Afghanistan in 2011 or 2012 and I had a similar conversation, but this Afghan said: 'We beat Alexander the Great'. So, he went back not just a hundred years, as the first one did in 1971, but two thousand years. But, again, for him the experience was immediate. His national history was important, and he could describe it in the present tense rather than in the past. I think literate societies, and those with a well-developed history and historic sense sometimes can get too distant from that sense of immediacy.

In today's world when information is being transmitted very quickly, including the one concerning historiography, how do you follow the news and research development related to your field of research?

I have problems because resources are now so extensive, wide, and available twenty-four hours a day. I am trying not to look at everything in the immediate moment. I am still interested in reading yesterday's newspaper and not today's because if I read yesterday's newspapers, I get more distance from it in comparison to if I read it first thing in the morning. I do still read newspapers, and they are my principal source of information. I don't watch much news on television, partly because in Britain the news is very parochial and local. Beyond that, I

suppose most of my information comes from *Think Tanks* and their websites. To keep up with current research is much more difficult than it was because it appears in so many different formats. I used to check the review pages of academic journals regularly and that is still the best way forward, but some reviews can be published very late and I am often ashamed to discover books and articles I should have been aware of too late.

History has never been so widespread in society. The development of technology and the Internet has made it possible for almost anyone to deal with history in a variety of ways – from historical feature movies and documentaries, historical novels and comics to various websites and video games. Some historians see the popularization of history as a certain danger to science because some wrong or ideologically coloured interpretations can occur, while others believe that history simply must adapt to such conditions and thus to the popularization of itself. What do you think about this – do historians have to adapt and insist on both the popularization of history and so-called public history or should they investigate only within scientific and academic circles?

I am a strong believer that historians should insist on the popularization of history. Of course that there is much rubbish in popular history but if you simply let it run and complain from the outside then it seems to me you are accepting that. One of the beauties of history is that it speaks in a language that is accessible, common, and it doesn't require a special vocabulary

in a way that pure sciences do or even subjects like economics and some other social sciences do. There is plenty of good popular history which conveys knowledge to a wider audience, and that is possible in broadcast media, in television or radio, and it is perfectly possible online. There is no reason to be defeated by this. In fact, it is an opportunity to raise the level of historical debate. Having said that, I am not at all a master of new technologies. I continue to communicate in a very old-fashioned way through the printed word, of course, and through online and broadcast media. But I don't tweet and I don't have a blog. I don't do all sorts of other things that I know I maybe should.

The research work of historians can sometimes be very arduous due to the constant travel through libraries and archives. How do you deal with such a life? Do you have to make certain sacrifices in your private life to keep up with the pace of research?

There is always more to read than you have got the time to read it. I am now 71 and I don't expect ever to retire, and I hope I don't have to. I hope I can retain my faculties until I die so I can continue to be involved because I find it deeply fulfilling to be involved. Of course, that creates a demand that takes me away from my family. My family is very understanding and supportive, but it is important to strike a balance, which is challenging. It is also enriching because travelling to archives, to conferences, and engaging with other peoples and traditions means that you are widening your understanding and you become a better historian. I didn't learn the German language in

school, but I realized that, if I wanted to study the First World War, I needed to learn German, and the moment I was reading sources in German I realized I understood the German position better, and that is the case for all research.

Often, we can hear writers and historians say that they have the fear of white or blank pages at the beginning of writing books or scientific papers. Have you ever had a similar fear and how do you start to write your scientific books or papers?

I never had that fear and I never worried about a blank sheet of paper. I also realized that you can't wait for inspiration. Inspiration comes from engagement and concentration. Maybe if you are a great poet or novelist you can rely on inspiration. But for me, a routine in writing is very important, and I try to write every day, but I don't find it difficult. It is also important to have thinking time and I do try to clear my head before I write. So, I get up in the morning and I go for a walk before I do anything else, and that is when I do my thinking. After breakfast, I sit down and I write, and by lunchtime, I probably have nothing sensible to write anymore, and the rest of the day I devote myself to other things.

How did the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic affect your scientific work and how did British historiography adapt to the new working conditions?

In my case, it has been a very productive time because I haven't been able to travel but I have been free to write every day almost continuously. For my research students, it has been a major disaster because the archives and libraries have

been closed and that's affected me too. Although the archives in Britain have been reopened, they haven't reopened for the sustained periods that a scholar needs, particularly if you are a research student. You need to book a time so that you can spend two weeks or a month continuously in an archive, but now you can spend only two hours at a time, which is simply not adequate. I am lucky but for younger generations, this has been a really big problem. Britain has a very tight system of funding for research students, one that is for three years only and the advice which has come has been for students to change their projects, but if they are halfway through they can't change them because they are already committed. The positive side for them has been that international communication through *Zoom* or *Teams* has made international contact much easier and we have been able to have international speakers address students' seminars because they have been freed to do that in a way they would not have been if everything had stayed the same. When I have lectured recently to audiences that would have been restricted to perhaps hundred and fifty or two hundred because of the size of a lecture hall, I now found myself speaking to five or six hundred people online, even one thousand in one case.

Can you tell us what research you are currently working on and what are your plans for future research?

The book I am currently writing is called *The Nature of War* and is really a long-delayed project. I wrote most of it before 2014 and the centenary of the First World War. It is a discussion asking ten major questions about war. It is a dialogue between past, present,

and in some sense future. What are the constant and changing features of war and how does history help us understand current warfare? The theme came out of the programme we had at Oxford on the changing character of war. It made me think about war across time and engage with other disciplines in a way that I hadn't done before and I wanted to capture some of that. The consequence of the lockdown thanks to COVID-19 has been that the book is twice the length it should be. So, I don't know if the publishers will be very happy when they finally get it but it is almost finished. When I have done that, the most important thing I have to do is get back and finish my book of the First World War. I have written one of what is meant to be three volumes and the first volume is very big and it came out nearly two decades ago.