



Driant, between science fiction and anticipation

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Général (2S) Henry-Jean Fournier

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Histoire & stratégie

General (2S) Henry-Jean Fournier, secretary of the promotion of Saint-Cyr "Lieutenant-Colonel Driant", gives us a portrait of this original hero, officer, writer, and who was also a Member of Parliament.

Lieutenant-Colonel Émile DRIANT (1855-1916), who died as an officer and hero at the beginning of the Battle of Verdun on February 22, 1916, at the head of his battalions of chasseurs at Bois des Caures, was also a member of Parliament and a writer.

The one who was nicknamed "the military Jules Verne" was in fact the author, under the transparent pseudonym of "Captain Danrit", of many "war fiction" novels which were often said to contain a premonitory vision of the immediate future.

This is the dream of every political decision-maker and military leader: to foresee the future in order to better anticipate events that may occur. Driant had that ability.

What was it about?

A broad culture

First of all to a very broad culture based on excellent background knowledge in history, geography, mathematics, physical sciences and... drawing! For, as the Emperor (of whom he was a fervent admirer) was told: "A little drawing is better than a long speech". His writings are full of precise descriptions and explanatory sketches that demonstrate

and support his thinking. He had this talent from the many hours he spent, both during his secondary school studies and at Saint-Cyr, working on drawings.

At that time, when photography did not yet exist, drawing was one of the keys to military science, both in topography and in perspective visions or descriptive studies, in which Driant excelled. He excelled in this field, particularly during topographical work carried out in the Compiègne region, then at the Liouville fort, in the Meuse, and finally in Tunisia, where no maps existed.

Later, Driant replaced the pencil with a camera and became a great lover of photography. His knowledge of history and geography enabled him to offer his readers very precise descriptions of the way of life and thinking of the peoples he portrays. His knowledge of history and geography will enable him to offer his readers very precise descriptions of the way of life and thinking of the peoples he portrays in his books, whether they are the African tribes of "The Black Invasion"¹, the Asian tribes of "The Yellow Invasion" or the Russian populations of "On the orders of the Czar".

By combining the study of maps and meteorological characteristics, Driant managed to imagine, in 1909, in his book "Les rosbins de l'air", the drift of a balloon taking its crew to the far North, where his heroes will find the remains of the Swedish expedition Andrée, who disappeared body and soul in 1897, in conditions identical to those of their real discovery some twenty years later...

Similarly, it was after spending long hours studying maps, prevailing winds and the technical characteristics of the first flying machines that Captain Danrit described the adventure of "... the first flying machines. The Pacific Aviator" who, in 1910, following a surprise attack by Japan against an American base in the Pacific, demonstrated the capabilities of the air arm in a maritime theatre. Beyond this premonition of what was to happen at Pearl Harbor thirty years later, Driant, without going so far as to imagine the use of aircraft carriers, however, stages an aircraft that is propelled from a ship?

For Driant is an enthusiast of the third dimension. His work most often includes descriptions of flying machines that are still in their infancy in reality. Driant's talent lies in imagining their use.

Thus, in the very first years of the 20th century, he will describe, from the fleets of balloons that he has built up over the years, the flying machines that are still in their infancy in reality. He used the fleets of balloons that he staged to describe the different operating modes of the future air force as it would be born during the First World War: observation, support, bombardment, transport.

To implement these means, Driant is also interested in telecommunications, because a means is needed to compensate for the distances that such devices allow. Around 1904, he had demonstrations of T.S.F. carried out in the Troyes municipal council chamber, where he commanded the 1st Battalion of hunters on foot, after having had antennas installed in the towers of the city's cathedral in order to communicate with the Eiffel Tower.

As you can see, Driant does not invent anything, but warns, anticipates how the progress made possible by the technological revolution of his time, which affects all fields and in which he is constantly interested, could be used.

A tireless curiosity

Driant's ability to anticipate is based on an untiring curiosity. His family archives contain hundreds of small newspaper articles, carefully cut out and filed, relating the most diverse facts about scientific progress.

In this way, Driant keeps himself constantly informed of what is happening around him, without limiting himself to his professional field of activity. In addition, Driant maintains a wide network of various correspondents. His visit to the office of the Minister of War in 1886 allowed him not only to discover the various aspects of the organization of the armed forces, but also to meet many people involved in the developments of the time. Thus Driant was asked to take part in the inauguration of an airship in place of his minister, or to attend a particular session at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers.

Driant also showed an interest in the Navy, paying particular attention to the possibilities he saw in the action of the submarines he often used. He is also a member of associations such as the Automobile Club, which encourages all initiatives aimed at developing this new means of transport. He will thus take part, as an observer-referee, in motor races alongside his friend the Dion engineer-inventor.

More simply, he was also interested in the innovations made possible by the appearance of the bicycle, of which he became a fervent supporter for military employment. While he was an instructor at Saint-Cyr, he founded a cycling club and trained his fellow officers in long bicycle raids. To the great displeasure of the cavalymen of the time, he deduced that units of combatants mounted on velocipedes could cover long distances silently, quickly and without significant logistical support, allowing them to infiltrate an enemy device. This reflection will contribute to the creation of units of cyclist fighters, which will have a certain notoriety at a time, let us recall, when the speed of movement of the fighter did not exceed, in the best of cases, that of the man on horseback, which had never been exceeded since ancient times.

A capacity for imagination

The third aspect of Driant's ability to anticipate lies in his imagination. He was able to glimpse job opportunities from his reading, his meetings, his reflections. Driant was not a dreamer. All his intellectual activity was constantly driven by the desire to constantly improve the military capabilities of the French army. His entire intellectual activity was constantly driven by the desire to constantly improve the military capabilities of the French army, to enable it to win the battle of the future that he imagined and wished to avenge the affront of the 1870 defeat that had marked his adolescence at the least cost.

His first work, which he began to publish in 1888 and which brought him immediate fame, is entitled "The War of Tomorrow", in which he expresses the experience he acquired during his career. In it, he describes a German invasion, this time stopped by the fortresses built on the north-eastern border, the quality of the organisation of the mobilisation of forces and, finally, to the manoeuvring capabilities of the French army, motivated by the powerful patriotic ardour of its soldiers.

The whole vision of a future war is present in this scenario, which describes the consequences of preparatory measures adopted sufficiently in advance to make it possible to oppose any surprise. For if future war is often built on the ground, the one who has succeeded in preparing for it in advance wins at least the first battle.

On the future, Driant will often use the same process: stay as close as possible to current events so as to remain plausible; adopt a global point of view by presenting the causes of conflicts and then, after the battle, their consequences, which is akin to defining the goals of war too often forgotten by political decision-makers.

It would take an entire book to quote in more detail his futuristic visions, which are sometimes veritable premonitions, especially when he evokes his own death, described several times in his books, where he often mixes autobiographical memories. For Driant is a man who wrote his life and lived his work.

Priority to reflection

Culture, curiosity and imagination: these are the three keys to Émile Driant's talent for anticipation in trying to discern what the future war will be like and thus enable its preparation. If we can say today that he was sometimes a visionary, it is essentially because he limited his horizon to about fifteen years. This is the time, nowadays, to develop a weapons programme.

And this without sinking into the defect often reproached, in a caricatured way, for the military to prepare for the last war and to give in to their reflexes in the face of events. For Driant, the ideal armament would be one that would be so terrifying that it would prevent it from being used and thus forbid war. A premonition that is singularly reminiscent of the deterrence we know.

If they seem very dated and obsolete today, the images of Driant's war-fiction were nevertheless, in his time, real anticipations because their author had managed to make his reflection prevail over his reflexes as a soldier. Attitude that any staff officer should adopt.

¹ Recently republished, in a very nice presentation, with a biographical book on Driant, by Le Comptoir des Editeurs in Saint-Méen le Grand (35290)

Admitted to the Special Military School of Saint-Cyr in 1965, General Henry-Jean FOURNIER belonged to the "Lieutenant-Colonel DRIANT" class (1965-1967), of which he was secretary of promotion. An infantry officer, he notably commanded the 152nd Infantry Regiment and served in various staff positions in the field of operational preparation of forces. He ended his career in 2000 after serving as Chief of Staff of the French forces in the former Yugoslavia and then as Chief of Staff of the Atlantic Defence Military Region.

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