General Sir Ian Hamilton (1853–1947)
and the Russo-Japanese War

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INTRODUCTION

General Sir Ian Standish Monteith Hamilton (1853–1947) is best known for his command of the disastrous Dardanelles Expedition in 1915 when British and Allied forces tried to effect a landing at Gallipoli in order to open a second front against Turkey and relieve the pressure on Russia. It is, however, his experiences and observations as one of the senior members of the team of British military observers attached to the Japanese army during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 that merit him a place in this volume, for he was one of the first to predict a Japanese victory and he had much to say about Japan, the Japanese and the Japanese army in his official reports, in his published accounts and in his private papers.¹

Hamilton was born in Corfu and went to the Royal Military College, Sandhurst.² In 1873 he joined his regiment in India and during the Second Afghan War of 1878–80 caught the attention of
his commanding officer, who, as Field Marshal Lord Roberts, was later to be one of the leading officers in the British army. He was wounded during the First Boer War in 1881 and later saw action in Sudan and Burma. By 1891, with Roberts’ patronage, he was the youngest colonel in the army. In 1899, during the Second Boer War, he led the trek to Pretoria, which was celebrated in a book by his friend and companion on the march, Winston Churchill, and he was for the second time recommended for the Victoria Cross: the first time he had been turned down because he was too young, but this time it was because he was too senior in rank.\(^3\) In 1901 he returned to Britain to take up a new appointment as Military Secretary to Lord Roberts, now the Commander in Chief of the Army, but by the end of the year Roberts had sent him back to South Africa as Chief of Staff to Lord Kitchener to act as Roberts’ eyes and ears during the closing stages of the Boer War.

The years 1904–5 he spent in Japan or with the Japanese army in Manchuria, already knighted and a lieutenant-general. By 1907 he was a full general, and he was arguing in public against conscription and in favour of a volunteer army.\(^4\) In 1910 he was appointed Inspector General of Overseas Forces and spent the next four years either at his headquarters on Malta or on tours of inspection. Following the outbreak of war in 1914 Hamilton remained on the home front until summoned to command the allied military force, consisting of British, French, Australian and other troops, which was to take the Dardanelles. The plan had been put forward originally as a naval operation by Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, but foundered on poor preparation, bad planning and inadequate support from London. Although his forces managed to land and establish themselves on the coast, albeit with large loss of life, the lack of reinforcements and the weight of the opposition made further progress slow and difficult. After six months he was recalled to London and his military career effectively came to an end. The Commission of Enquiry went some way towards exonerating him and found fault with the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, as, many years later, did the official history of the Dardanelles Expedition.\(^5\) His most recent biographer, however, has noted that, while the ‘odds were stacked against’ him, he failed to capitalize on his chances.\(^6\)

To his dismay, he played no further active part in the war after his return in 1915 and he retired from the army in 1920. He was instrumental in the foundation of the British Legion after the First World War, but as he was frequently called upon to speak at the unveiling of memorials to the dead he became more and more of a pacifist. As such, and as a fluent speaker of German, he not only deplored the treatment of Germany in the Versailles Treaty but also promoted...