CHAPTER 1

Military Mapping and Modernist Aesthetics: Blunden, Aldington, and Ford

The general public must cultivate the map habit of thought [. . .] to see the daily details in perspective, and help them to maintain that national sanity and justified optimism which were essential to our winning the war.

Halford Mackinder’s presidential address to the Geographical Association, January 6, 1916

[I]t all sounds such a ridiculously easy matter to those who read. Map maniacs stab inaccurate maps with pins; a few amateur strategists discourse at length, and with incredible ignorance [. . .].

H. C. McNeile (“Sapper”), No Man’s Land (1917) (90)

[I]n a number of cases in the war zone in France [. . .] parties fully equipped with large scale maps walked right through towns several times without being able to find them. This was due to the fact that the map showed a landmark that had been absolutely wiped out.

J. K. Finch, Topographic Maps and Sketch Mapping (1920) (77)

The Western Front in the First World War was, at its time, by far the most thoroughly and efficiently mapped battleground in history. The war came during a golden age of cartographic technology, when industrial-age techniques of material production combined with Victorian standards of analytical rigor to create or improve such advances as trigonometric surveying techniques, land-based and aerial photography, stereographic projection, multicolor lithography, and mobile printing presses. The high level of cartographic accuracy and utility that resulted from these advances proved especially valuable given certain tactical exigencies that had developed...
in the progress of military technology, such as the need to aim indirect artillery fire against entrenched defenders from a distance of several miles. Using refined systems of contour lines and grid references based on Cartesian spatial coordinate structures, army cartographers sought to depict the shape of the terrain and the location of enemy positions on it as precisely as possible, thereby achieving an unprecedented rationalization and ordering of space over thousands of square miles of ground (see figure 1.1).

A broad variety of British organizations and individuals pursued these goals, creating a wealth of cartographic materials for battlefield use. Specialized army field units carried out surveying, and large governmental and military bureaucracies worked exclusively on map production. Additionally, all regular officers in the British Army received instruction in map reading, topographical mapmaking, and panoramic landscape sketching in order to supplement and correct the mass-produced maps issued to them. Furthermore, the virtual immobility of the front lines in France and Flanders meant that the same ground underwent repeated surveying and mapping.

Figure 1.1 Part of 1915 British trench map of Loos area, France. [Loos] Sheet 36cNW3 and Parts of 1, 2, & 4, Provisional Edition No. 3. From the Geography and Map Collection, Library of Congress. The officer whose work made this updated map possible earned the first Military Cross for topographical surveying (Chasseaud, *Topography* 95).