



Donald A. Yerxa. *Recent Themes in Military History: Historians in Conversation.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. vi + 141 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-738-2; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57003-739-9.



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The Future in the Past

Military history has been undergoing a period of fairly intense self-examination in the last few years. Some military historians, including John Lynn, have expressed worry that military history is dying off within the academy. Others, such as Jeremy Black, have offered analyses of trends in military history designed, at least in part, to counter that perceived unpopularity by stressing the connections of military history to trends that pervade the historical profession, including the rising influence of social and cultural historical approaches and global perspectives. In the interests of full disclosure, this reviewer has contributed to this latter thread.[1] This slim volume of articles collected mostly from the pages of the journal *Historically Speaking* and edited by Donald Yerxa, the Journal's editor, falls into the analysis and promotion category. Compiled with an eye to students of military history, it aims to show how historians talk to each other, and in the process to reveal some of the main themes of recent military history. I am sympathetic to the aim, but unintended dissonance between the volume's stated themes and the themes that actually emerge from the text

unfortunately render the result somewhat disappointing.

The themes the book presents explicitly are of two sorts. First, there are the themes around which the four parts of the book are organized. Part 1 looks at "Military Revolutions, Then and Now," a large and obvious theme in military history since the publication of Geoffrey Parker's *The Military Revolution* (1996); Parker contributes the lead essay and a response to this section. Part 2 examines "The Future of War," which strikes this reviewer as an odd theme for military *historians*, whose subject is presumably the past; more on this below. Part 3 presents an interview and a short article on "Soldiering and the Experience of War," and part 4 presents two interviews about "War and the Human Condition."

Second, the book is built around the conceptual theme that history is a collective enterprise: historians talk to each other, argue, build up cases in exchanges among themselves, and so forth. Historians furthermore reflect consciously on what they do individually and collectively. This is the theme aimed most explicitly at stu-

dents and those outside the profession.

A number of alternative and probably unintentional themes emerge from a reading of the volume, however. These threaten to undermine the book's usefulness along a number of axes. First, as presented in this volume, military historians are almost exclusively Anglo-Americans concerned with current issues. Even the Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe is considered in a presentist frame that ties it tightly to evaluation of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs. The reader learns little about the impact of the Military Revolution on Early Modern Europe or how this debate within military history has affected the broader historical discourse about the early modern period. Instead, the various articles focus on methodological issues involved in reading the lessons of that period into contemporary debates about ongoing transformations of the modern battlefield. The "Future of War" theme, in other words, has metastasized through the volume, making military history look as if it exists simply to provide data to policymakers looking to potential conflicts. The driving force behind this concern is the third emergent theme: the universal agreement among the volume's contributors that the George W. Bush-Richard B. Cheney administration has been a complete disaster in terms of military policy—one indictment after another of the thinking (or lack thereof) informing the war in Iraq flows through the volume like the Euphrates through Baghdad.

This reviewer would not argue for a second with these indictments. But is this really the only issue military historians are dealing with recently? For this reviewer, at least (admittedly a medievalist by training), these unintentional themes do not accurately characterize the field of military history. Classical, medieval, and non-western military historians will find little to recognize from the broad chronological scope and geographic range of modern military history. Social historical approaches and the "face of battle" perspective do make some appearance in the "Experience of War" section of the book, but social and especially cultural history approaches to military history likewise are underrepresented. No short book could cover all the interesting debates current among military historians, but this selection fails even to come close to being representative.

Nor will historians who aim primarily at an understanding of the past on its own terms find this a comfortable read. The presentism, the focus on the future, and the emphasis on policy alternatives may fit too easily into many non-military academic historians' stereotypes of military historians as militarists too closely allied to government to be treated seriously in academic terms. That the persistent criticism of the Bush-Cheney administration may throw a curveball at such stereotypes is counterbalanced by the fact that a number of the contributors here are in fact policy analysts and not historians. The book is, therefore, unlikely to attract the interest of non-military historians. That this is unfortunate does not make it less true.

Finally, there is a general problem for the text if it is viewed as a teaching tool. It is comprised almost exclusively of short essays virtually devoid of apparatus; footnotes to sources and secondary literature are few and far between. While this works excellently in a journal aimed at professionals working in the field who are already familiar with the details of the debates, it presents a poor model of academic debate to students, who may well see this as a collection of battles of unsupported opinions. The battles, furthermore, are narrow slices of "big arguments," and the volume does not provide enough context to make these big arguments comprehensible to non-specialists. Thus, as an example of how historians talk to each other and think about their field this is less than ideal.

In sum, there is much that is interesting in this volume. But the audience for the book seems not to have been clearly conceptualized. As a result, it strikes this reviewer as unsuitable for classroom use, unlikely to appeal to a broad slice even of military historians, never mind academic historians more broadly, and perhaps therefore even to be counter-productive in moving military history closer to the mainstream of historical analysis. Which is too bad, because this reviewer is in complete sympathy with the volume's editor that this is where military history belongs.

Note

[1]. Stephen Morillo with Michael F. Pavkovic, *What is Military History?* (Malden: Polity Press, 2006).

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