



H. P. Willmott. *When Men Lost Faith in Reason: Reflections on War and Society in the Twentieth Century.* Westport and London: Praeger, 2002. x + 288 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97665-1.



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Published on H-Diplo (December, 2003)

Reflections from Outside the Box

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In the introductory first chapter of this collection of four chronological essays, author H. P. Willmott sets out an ambitious agenda for this slim volume: to redress what he identifies as the numerous underlying flaws that have developed in historical analysis as the result of an unfortunately narrow, culturally biased, and rigid understanding, with a consequent tendency of many historians to merely describe events within the confines of pre-existing “truth” rather than actually explain them. To illustrate his point, the author offers a fine and striking example of how Anglo-American popular perception of history has affected the understanding of the relative human costs of war by noting that the benchmark first day of the Battle of the Somme, with approximately 19,000 British soldiers killed, equates very closely with the average losses suffered by the Soviets every day of the Second World War, illustrating with remarkable clarity the thrust of his argument, that “(w)e—or perhaps it is merely a writer who is the product of a rationalist, dissenting upbringing—cannot grasp the reality of the two world wars because it is beyond our experience and our un-

derstanding” (p. 5). Near chapter’s end he states that “(t)his first chapter sought to place before the reader perspectives unlikely to have intruded much upon his or her attention.” This he does throughout the book, though in the remaining pages they are unfortunately not consistently as clear nor as well supported as the example given above. Nonetheless, there are many interesting insights to be found by the diligent and dedicated reader.

Willmott approaches the twentieth century by dividing the period into four distinct epochs—the First and Second World Wars, the early post-war (1945-1974), and the modern (effectively 1975-2000, though the author does not specify this exact range)—and addressing within each a specific question or issue particular to the period. Beyond war itself, there is no underlying theme that runs through the book as a whole, and indeed the essays themselves tend to cover a fairly broad range of subjects. The latter practice is carried to extremes at times; for example, in the course of twenty pages, one finds the discussion ranging from urban guerilla movements (pp. 172-178), to the collapse of the Bretton Woods trading system and the effect of this on Third World economies (pp. 178-

185), to a brief interlude on Soviet and American strategic military doctrine (pp. 185-188), and finally an analysis of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War (pp. 188-192). While the author does attempt to draw these diverse topics together, and granting that in short essays addressing relatively long time periods such leaps may be difficult to avoid, it must be said that the rapid shifts across so much intellectual ground make for difficult going at times and tend to obscure the broader themes of the individual essays.

It should go without saying that to write useful essays of such breadth successfully requires that the author be extremely well versed across the range of material. Willmott presents a convincing display of his mastery of twentieth-century historical fact, but in doing so makes two assumptions that limit the accessibility and utility of his book for many readers. The first of these is that there is a very high standard of assumed knowledge on the part of the reader. While such a book requires a certain degree of this for the sake of brevity, given the furious pace at which these essays move and the range of topics they seek to cover, some of the references are hard to accept as common knowledge, even considering a high level of reader familiarity with twentieth-century diplomatic and military history. In chapter 3, "A Reexamination of Interpretations of the Second World War," Willmott uses the code names of various military operations with no direct explanation, which in the case of more commonly known operations such as Overlord and Husky does not present a problem, but the references to Sledgehammer and Roundup (the proposed 1942 and 1943 invasions of France, respectively), for example, remain rather vague to all but the most knowledgeable for some time before their meaning can be inferred from context. Worse are the numerous references to people by last name only, with no explanation whatsoever of their position or relevance. Witness two mentions of the mysterious "Corbett," who we are told "(was) exceptional, and (was) accepted-barely-on sufferance" (p. 139) and was a counterpart to Mahan (p. 250), who also falls victim, though the latter is certainly more widely known. Indeed we must look to the index to find that Corbett's first name is Julian, but that is the extent of the information provided. This reviewer questions the value of including such references without further explanation, as in their present form they serve only to confound the reader with less than encyclopedic knowledge.

The second problem confronting the serious reader is a woeful lack of citation, which, considering the high level at which this book is written and the use of many

specific details in the support of its arguments, seems a tremendous shortcoming. Each chapter, with the exception of the last, offers an average of only fifteen endnotes, many of them merely explanatory. The points that suffer most from this are those supported with statistics. Witness this statement, which appears without citation, supporting an investigation of the French commitment to offensive doctrine before the First World War: "In 1870 no less than 45% of the German population was under 20 years of age, and by 1914 France was outnumbered 2:1 in terms of males of military age" (p. 49). A paragraph supporting the argument that "the Soviets put emphasis on artillery reserves rather than upon the provision of strength at division level" (p. 127) quotes military strengths and unit establishments to a level of specificity that virtually demands citing their source. The last chapter offers fifty-one endnotes, which suggests that perhaps the author was required to do somewhat more extensive research on the modern period for this book, rather than being able to rely upon his knowledge of the earlier portions of the century accumulated while completing his previous works. But whatever the case, and while there is no obvious reason to question the accuracy of his statements, it is truly unfortunate that Willmott did not annotate the earlier chapters more completely, as the arguments presented would be stronger for it, and though many of the ideas presented provide stimulus for further investigation, this is complicated by the paucity of references.

These points aside, there is a vast array of unique and previously unexplored perspectives here, on both the individual conflicts of the twentieth century and on war itself, a distinction the author is careful to make. The failure to reintroduce movement on the Western Front during the Great War, the Battle of the Atlantic and its relationship to a continental invasion, attrition and blitzkrieg on the Eastern Front, Latin American insurgency, nuclear strategy and warfighting doctrine, and the evolution and application of American doctrine in the Persian Gulf War all receive thorough consideration and reexamination, Willmott trying to break through the preconceived structure that has been imposed upon our current understanding of these events. His approaches are from all directions, ranging from the traditional but innovative analysis of the viability of an Allied invasion of France in 1942 or 1943 by examining the logistical considerations to the insightful discussion of the sociological developments of the nineteenth century contributing to the outbreak of the First World War. While some of these arguments are stronger than others, none can be said to be

conforming to trend or conventional wisdom, and they do not fall in the realm of the contrarian position taken merely for the sake of difference. In fact a significant portion of chapter 3 is spent refuting the arguments suggesting that an earlier invasion of Western Europe was indeed possible, which “in recent years has been an increasingly strident assertion within sections of American academe” (p. 76). Some lines of argument are stretched a bit thin, such as the discussion of the genesis of the Gulf War air campaign planning (pp. 238-239), but most come across well and with fairly solid support, though with the aforementioned problem of insufficient citation throughout.

Willmott’s writing style is dense, and it is occasionally difficult to discern where he is going simply due to the multiple threads of information being presented. His questions and conclusions tend to be reasonably clear;

it is the supporting arguments that suffer most from this wandering. Chapters are divided into semi-self-contained sections, which mitigates the issue of direction somewhat, but also makes the chapters seem somewhat disjointed. These factors make reading a bit arduous at times, but the intriguing lines of inquiry make the effort worthwhile.

Despite some structural weaknesses, Willmott’s approach is an interesting and refreshing change, and one that succeeds in offering a useful counter to his fear “that the power of image, in fixing in the public consciousness a set view, presents the most dangerous development in that it will deny the level of objectivity and learning that will lead to new perspectives, in part because we are now so far from the major events that have shaped the history of the twentieth century” (p. 29).

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Citation: Andrej Gaspari. Review of Willmott, H. P., *When Men Lost Faith in Reason: Reflections on War and Society in the Twentieth Century*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

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