

# The Cambridge History of Warfare

Edited by Geoffrey Parker

# The Oxford History of Modern War

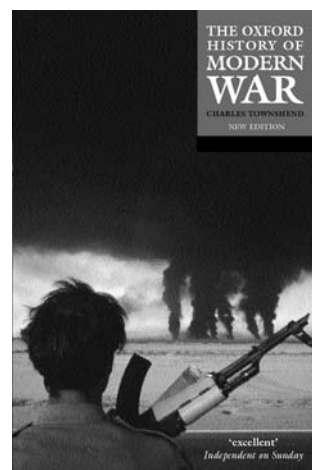
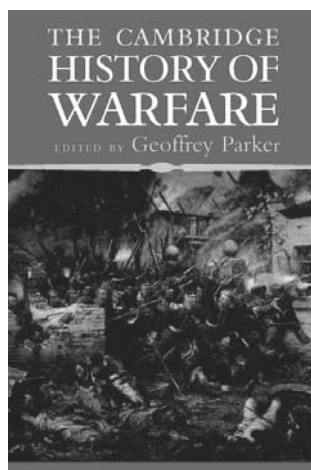
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A review essay by Professor Peter Dennis

In the last two decades there has been an enormous increase (I hesitate to say explosion) in the popularity of military history, none more so than in universities. Galling as this is to some academics, who continue to harbour the notion that the study of war somehow suggests an approval of or endorsement of war, students above all understand that the big issues – the rise and fall of nations, struggles on an epic scale, the drama and tragedy of war and its uncertain outcomes – are the ones that engage the imagination, that encompass the widest range of human experience, and that raise profound moral questions.

Forty years ago, when I was both an undergraduate and a graduate student of military history, the range of general treatments of war was limited, to say the least. There were really only two broad surveys available: Richard Preston and S.F. Wise's *Men in Arms* (1955, and four subsequent editions), and Theodore Ropp's *War in the Modern World* (1959). As it happened, both Ropp and Preston were revered professors of mine at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, while Wise became official historian at National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa, and subsequently a professor at Carleton University. Each of these works had distinct merits. Ropp's book was as much an exploration of ideas, underpinned by extensive bibliographical footnotes that, while now dated, still retain a value for the discerning reader. Preston and Wise were intent on explaining the development of warfare from its earliest beginnings in the western world, concentrating in particular on the interrelationship between armed forces and societies. Each of these books was, and is, valuable to students of military history, and in my day as a student were indispensable in any broad course.

How times have changed. There is now a plethora of surveys of military history, let alone the resources of the world-wide-web (which is both a blessing and a curse for those who teach in this area – and a trap for unwary students). Broad treatments, more specialised studies, encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, atlases; one can barely keep up with the flow of publications. As is always the case, some are much better than others, being either too general, or poorly



illustrated (especially with maps; photographs being less useful these days with the enormous resources available on the web), or written for a particular group but marketed as though having more general appeal.

How to choose? The two books under review here are, in their different ways, excellent examples of the sorts of surveys now available for teachers, students and the general interested public. Each is written by a distinguished group of academic historians, whose individual achievements must surely inspire confidence. Some of the names will be more familiar to general readers than others, but all come with substantial publications in their respective fields of specialisation to add weight and authority to their pronouncements.

*The Oxford History of Modern War* seeks to explain how the changes in warfare from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, deriving from and in turn impacting upon the changing structure of European states, gave those states a predominance in world affairs that has largely persisted to the present day. A history of warfare can reasonably be cast in terms of the history of the western tradition of warfare because, apart from the currently fashionable interest in the writings of Sun Tzu, it is the western tradition, harnessing new technology to evolving economic, social and political structures, that has given the West its pre-eminence in world affairs. (Even those countries such as Japan that have temporarily challenged the supremacy of the West, have essentially operated within the western military tradition.) The scope of the book is wider than a 'history of warfare'; rather it is a 'history of war' in its social and cultural context.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section of ten chapters is a chronologically-organised series of essays covering the changes of the period of the so-called 'Military Revolution' of the sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the developments of the eighteenth century, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the nineteenth century and the age of militarised nationalism and imperial expansion, the two world wars, the Cold War and 'people's war'. In each essay the respective authors explain the complex relationship

between evolving state systems, technological modernisation, and social and economic change that together, in different combinations and at different speeds, eventually produced the mass industrial wars of the twentieth century.

The second part of the book, eight chapters, is organised thematically around 'elements of modern war'. The chapters on air and sea power sit somewhat uneasily in this section alongside essays on technology and war, the social impact of total war, women and war, and opponents of war, with a final chapter on the transition from nuclear stalemate to the spread of terrorism. Each of these chapters is a thoughtful contribution to the literature, but the overall result is less satisfying. We might well conclude that the age of mass industrial warfare is past, and that it is unlikely that we will ever see again wars on the scale of the world wars of the twentieth century, but quite where future lies, and how modern states will combat, or even learn to live with, the threat of terrorism, remains an open question. Certainly this book provides a very valuable and accessible guide to how we have come to this point in the history of war, but it goes no further.

The *Cambridge History of Warfare* is more ambitious in scope, but also more conventional. It begins with the military traditions of Greece and Rome, and discusses, in three superb chapters by Victor Davis Hanson, the evolution of classical infantry tactics. This is entirely appropriate, not least because subsequent generations of military men, over two millennia, looked back to Greece and Rome for inspiration. The 'cult of antiquity' found in these ancient times examples of war in its pure sense; models from which clear lessons could be learned. From Machiavelli to Ardant du Picq and Alfred von Schlieffen, the military events of ancient history were a constant source of inspiration, and often in a radical, rather than a conservative sense.

Thereafter we are offered fourteen chapters covering developments in warfare from the third century AD until 2004, with an extended epilogue that has some interesting and intriguing arguments on how the West can maintain its military preponderance. These last chapters in many ways mirror those that deal with the chronological chapters in the Oxford book, but the authors, and the editor, have been able to achieve a greater degree of coherence between the parts and the whole.

Nevertheless, both of these books have much to offer the student of military history. On balance the Cambridge book is the more useful, not least because of its supporting apparatus: excellent maps (the Oxford book has none), a very useful glossary of military terms (and not just current acronyms that make so much contemporary writing such a painful experience) and a detailed chronology (again the Oxford volume lacks these), plus a more extensive guide to further reading. I would recommend the Cambridge book as the better overall treatment of the subject, and commend it especially to those who are looking for an authoritative

guide to this complex area of history. But I would also commend the Oxford volume to those who want some of the associated themes that have particularly emerged in more recent times explored in an illuminating and thought-provoking manner.

There are those who argue that war as we have known it for the past several centuries is becoming less likely, if not extinct, especially in the West. Whatever the truth of that argument, there is no denying that the historical literature on war is flourishing, in quantity and especially in quality. These two books are superb examples of the latter.

*Geoffrey Parker (ed.), 'The Cambridge History of Warfare', Cambridge University Press, 2005, Softback, pp. viii + 514, maps, RRP \$A49.95.*

*Charles Townshend (ed.), 'The Oxford History of Modern War' (new updated edition), Oxford University Press, 2005, Softback, pp. xiii + 414, illus., RRP \$A32.95.*

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