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The Lessons of History

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“The Historical Process Creates the Morality of Mankind”

Dennis E. Showalter

Howard, Michael. *The Lessons of History*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991. 217pp. \$27

MICHAEL HOWARD'S position as the Nestor of English-speaking military historians rests not only on his monographs but also on his essays. His characteristic blend of clear prose, precise organization, and creative thought is an art form shown to best advantage in the finely-crafted occasional pieces that are among his professional trademarks. *The Lessons of History* collects thirteen of Howard's recent contributions, most of them written during his tenure at Oxford between 1980 and 1989 as Regius Professor of Modern History. Those that have been previously published are not widely available, and their appearance in a single volume is most welcome.

The work is structured by Howard's inaugural lecture, in which he asserts the ongoing importance of the historian's essential social function: to assist in understanding the present by explaining the past. Yet in doing so historians must remain committed to the values that enable them to study and interpret the past freely, with no interference from government or *polis* that may be committed to a particular point of view as manifesting truth.

Howard argues that freedom is both fragile and fortuitous. Its development has by no means been either obvious or predetermined. Its evolution during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the integrating principle of *The Lessons of*

History. Howard's Chapter 2, "Empires, Nations and Wars," addresses the dialectic between diversity of cultures and singularity of loyalties that has shaped the modern state. Chapter 3, "Prussia in European History," is a case study of that dialectic and its ambiguities. While conceding the central role of the Prussian tradition in the German catastrophe of 1933-45, Howard also insists that "old Prussian virtues" such as industry, self-discipline, and physical courage remain necessary for any society that hopes to survive. The next chapter, "Empire, Race, and War in pre-1914 Britain," complements those before it with the argument for the limited impact of racism and militarism on Edwardian society. Howard emphasized instead the absence of rancor and fanaticism in the British *mentalité*. In that context, Chapter 5, "The Edwardian Arms Race," argues convincingly that it was not the German navy that alarmed Britain but the intention that lay behind it—Germany would not accept Britain's naval supremacy; Britain would not yield it. The result illustrates the truism that arms races do not cause wars.

Nor is war, even modern "total" war, quite the comprehensive manifestation described in so many accounts. One of this work's most compelling essays, "Men Against Fire," denies the familiar interpretation of the doctrine of the offensive in 1914 as representing a commitment to apocalypse based on ignorance. Rather, Howard argues strongly that Europe's armies believed war to be neither impossible nor suicidal in the context of modern technology, and that offensive tactics were morally and militarily superior to the defensive. They were also more costly—but only in the short run! Victory would justify all sacrifices. Such a position depended heavily on popular support and enthusiasm. In Chapter 7, "Europe on the Eve of World War I," Howard makes the case that while the population of Europe neither rejected nor affirmed war, they *adjusted* to its demands with the "astonishing speed and stoicism" that underwrote the hecatombs of 1914-1918.

That adaptability was exhausted by World War II. Chapter 8, "1945—End of an Era?," argues that what ended was not merely a German bid for European hegemony but an entire era of nationalist-based conflict that began with the French Revolution. Howard's prophecy that "the nations of Europe, as nations, will not go to war with each other again" seems as defensible in the post-glasnost era as it did during the last stages of the Cold War.

Seen in that context, Winston Churchill might appear as a historical anachronism—at best, the "last lion" leading an exhausted country to one final victory. Yet nationalism, as we read next in "Ideology and International Relations," is not easily challenged. Neither is it a pathological condition *per se*. Chapter 10, "Churchill and National Unity," warns against conflating national identity with aggressive militarism and imperialism. Howard believes that the prospect for national unity in the contemporary context is not that it will evolve into higher loyalties but that it will vanish altogether. The result will be countries "divided, impoverished, and virtually ungovernable" save by force or fanaticism.

Chapter 11, "War and Social Change," asserts that war as an institution has long outlived the warrior societies of which it was once a part. Social change, industrialization in particular, ultimately produces systems that are dominated by technocrats who see war, especially large-scale war, as a disaster. The soldier and his values may not yet be obsolete, but they are increasingly becoming the stuff of myth and legend. Chapter 12, "Military Experience in Literature," is a brief but stimulating overview of the importance of the military experience in enriching humanity's understanding of itself and its relationship to God.

Howard's valedictory lecture dismisses his inaugural effort as "a fairly routine apologia" that he has done "all too little" to implement. His self-judgment is too harsh in both cases. His perception of history as *process* rather than *progress* is a sweeping challenge to the secular abstractions that have shaped historical thought since the Enlightenment: Nature, Reason, the Dialectic. Reification led to deification, with new priesthoods interpreting and enforcing new, secular dogmas. But history is not a "Thing." It is a dynamic generated by freely willed human activities. Free people can make hideously wrong decisions. They can also make right ones. It is the challenge to do good instead of evil that provides opportunities for growth, frameworks for criticism, and imperatives for action. Howard believes that our fate as a species depends on our skill in using our capacities for reason and judgment which in turn are largely shaped by history.

Delbrück, Hans. *History of the Art of War*. Translated by Walter J. Renfro, Jr. Vol. I, *Warfare in Antiquity*. 604pp. \$16.95. Vol. II, *The Barbarian Invasions*. 505pp. \$15.95. Vol. III, *Medieval Warfare*. 711pp. \$19.95. Vol. IV, *Dawn of Modern Warfare*. 487pp. \$15.95. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Hans Delbrück began his magisterial *History of the Art of Warfare in the Framework of Political History* in 1900 and finished the task in 1924. The present Bison Books paperback edition by Nebraska Press is based upon the third edition of the original German work of 1920, as translated into English by General Renfro for a Greenwood Press hardback publication

between 1975 and 1985. It is both well done and affordable.

Unfortunately, the Nebraska editors chose to delete the very significant second part of the original title, "*in the Framework of Political History*." Therein lies much of both the merits of the work and the cause of Delbrück's vilification in Germany during the 1920s. The University of Berlin, where Delbrück was a member of the faculty for forty years, denied him research funds because in their view he was overly critical of the "Prussian school" of history. A few blocks away the Great General Staff rejected Delbrück's work because it was too analytical for the "Schlieffen school" of military studies. Until the present