

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA**   
**MILITARE**  
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

**SUPPLEMENTO**  
**2020**

**Recensioni**  
**Book Reviews**



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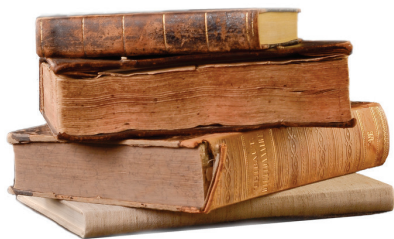
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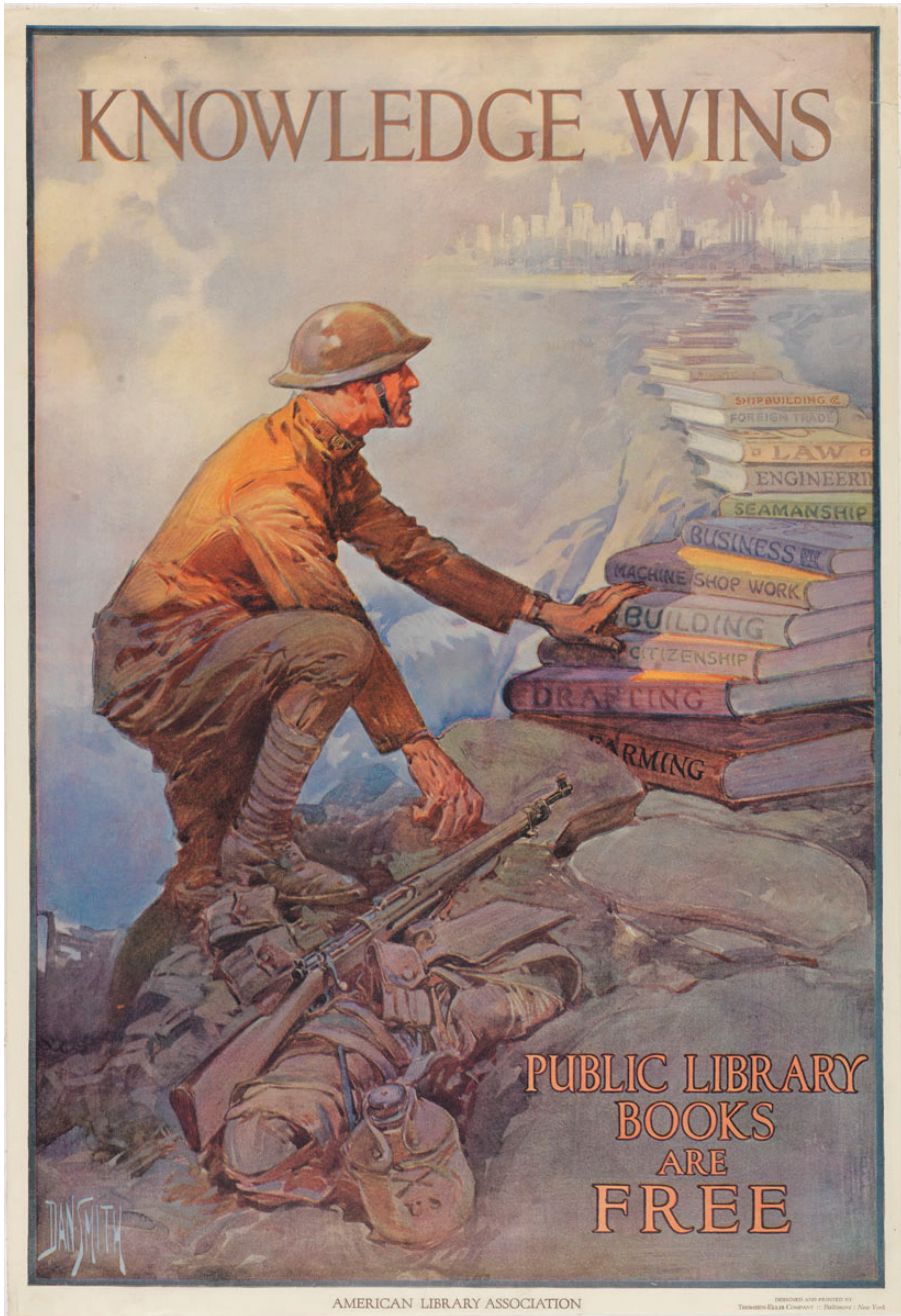
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## I

Storiografia Militare  
*Military Historiography*



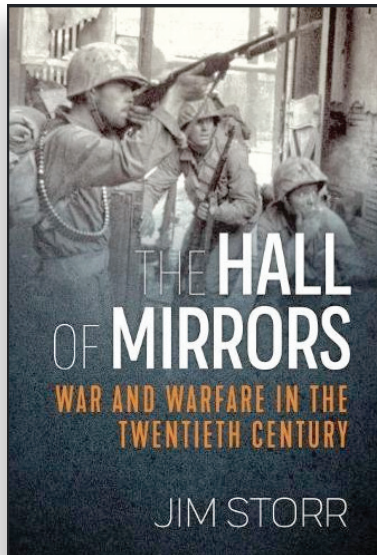


Dan Smith, Knowledge Wins, poster della American Library Association  
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JIM STORR,

*The Hall of Mirrors:  
War and Warfare in the Twentieth Century*

Warwick: Helion, 2018, xv + 311pp, £25.00 ISBN 978-1-912390-85-4



**T**he late nineteenth century saw a flowering of the historian's craft, such that there was, at least in some quarters, a belief that a definitive account of the past might shortly be completed. While understanding of the scope of history has expanded greatly since those times, especially in recognising the value of topics beyond politics and diplomacy, anyone entering a large city centre bookshop today might be forgiven for believing this goal had surely been achieved with respect to the military history of the twentieth century, confronted as they would be by hundreds of new books on seemingly every facet of the subject. Jim Storr's central contention is that such an assumption would be far from accurate.

Storr is perhaps uniquely qualified to advance the arguments presented in this book. A former infantry officer and civil engineer, he was at one time

responsible for the development of the British Army's doctrine. In sharp contrast to the caricature of officers as anti-intellectual, Storr was the army's most prolific thinker and writer. Since leaving the forces, he has devoted himself to still deeper exploration of key issues. His first book, *The Human Face of War*,<sup>1</sup> argued military thought should be based on an understanding of combat as essentially a phenomenon of human behaviour. His second, *King Arthur's Wars*,<sup>2</sup> presented a wholly original account of the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England, based on a fundamental reinterpretation of the archaeological and place name evidence, looking at these from the perspective of a professional soldier.

Storr's purpose in his latest book is to push aside some branches in the dense thickets of current historical writing and point out the many important paths yet to be followed by researchers. The question, 'Why have historians not noticed the issue?', appears in various forms repeatedly throughout the text (for example 54, 124, 128, 132, 152, 172). In his final chapter, he seeks to provide an answer.

Storr argues the key problem is that military history is written either by professional historians, who focus on written sources in preference to analysis of maps or numerical data and have an ambivalence towards technology, or by professional soldiers, who lack historical skills and hence too easily slip into weakness in intellectual rigor through being unwilling to admit errors, maintaining myths, and failing to understand the dynamics of the past (267-272). As he notes:

«Warfare is complex. Studying it is inevitably a human activity. That will be complex and will result in some error. Better-focussed military history, more examination of maps and human behaviour, some numerical enquiry, and a better understanding of military technology are all called for. Less study of politics and international relations would create syllabus space, and result in fewer armchair strategists. Much of the subject material currently found in masters' dissertations or doctoral theses does not help the practitioner understand the conduct of war in any conceivable way» (274).

This is not just a matter of pure academic interest: 'War is hugely import-

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1 Jim Storr, *The Human Face of War* (London: Continuum, 2009).

2 Jim Storr, *King Arthur's Wars: The Anglo-Saxon Conquest of England* (Solihull: Helion, 2016).



ant. It can shape continents, and can do so dramatically quickly. [...] It is not futile, although it may appear so [to] those taking part' (viii).

The main body of the book falls into two parts. The first two-thirds of the text sets out a broadly chronological narrative of warfare in the twentieth century, drawing out key issues and unexpected facts, and raising important gaps in current historical assessments. Perhaps inevitably, the two world wars loom large, each occupying three chapters (First World War, Chapters 2-4, Second World War, Chapters 6-8). The second part takes a more thematic approach, considering conventional warfare (Chapter 11), counterinsurgency (Chapter 12), air warfare (Chapter 13), and warfare at sea (Chapter 14).

Storr's style is fast-paced and unusual. For example, in little more than half a page, he gives a summary of the Battle of Megiddo in September 1918, flags how it provides evidence of significant flexibility in British military practice, but then notes it left little trace in the organisational memory of the army simply because not a single Regular cavalry regiment was involved (82). He also in several cases presents brief accounts of decisive events, such as the sinking of the *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* when they sought to dash through the English Channel in February 1942, only to immediately reassure the confused reader that this did not actually happen (144-145). His point is to highlight that events could easily have turned out differently, had commanders taken different decisions, using the resources already at their disposal.

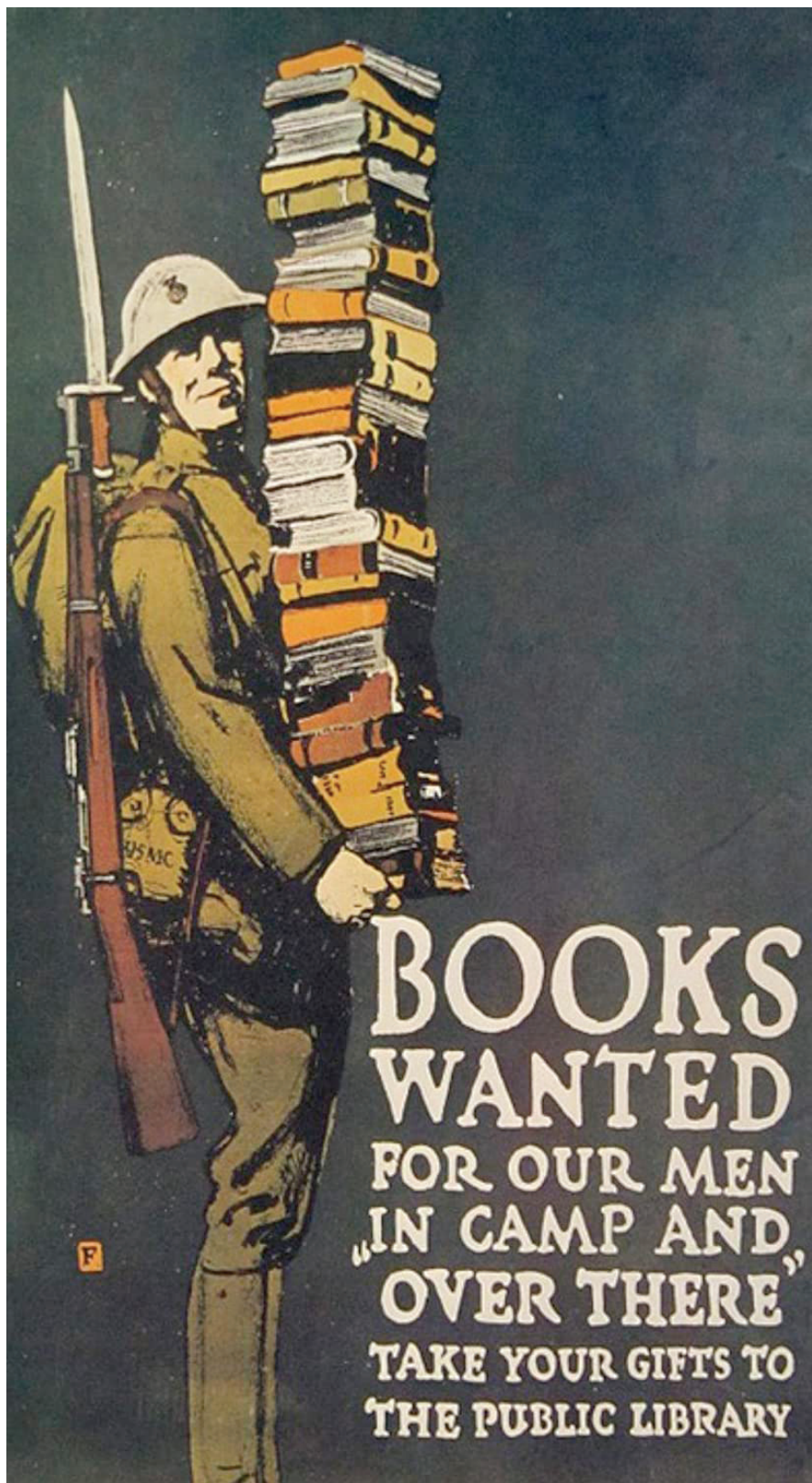
Particular mention must be made of Storr's comments about airpower. His recommendation that the Royal Air Force should be abolished within six months, with all its senior officers retired and its forces absorbed into the Royal Navy and the Army (243), might appear extreme. This could be taken as the ravings of a reactionary infantry officer. In fact, as is made clear at numerous points throughout the book, Storr is extremely conscious of the vital roles air forces can play. His core argument is that the existence of the RAF as a separate arm of service has, almost inevitably, led to a focus on organisational survival, rather than on military impact, with energy directed towards emphasising the RAF's separateness from the army and navy and hence its right to equality of status (240). He argues this produces 'logical and conceptual flaws [which have been] greatly assisted by euphemism and obfuscation' (233), flaws he suggests are endemic to air forces the world over.

The book itself is generally well presented, offering over forty tables, maps and charts, which often make a significant contribution to enabling the reader to understand the nature or context of the argument being made. Less positively, it shows evidence of poor copyediting, with numerous typos, missing or repeated words, and minor factual slips.

Although the volume includes a helpful bibliography, the near-total absence of references within the text means the reader struggles to follow up the many challenging comments, surprising facts, and stimulating asides that fill its pages. This is deliberate: ‘Two things are clear from the recent historiography of the wars and warfare of the 20th century. The first is that massive amounts of archival research move the debate but slowly. [...] The second point is that huge amounts of closely-argued academic argumentation have shifted the discussion scarcely at all’ (ix). Deliberate though Storr’s position on referencing may be, it’s correctness may be questioned.

In summary, Storr has written an extremely challenging book. It is short enough, and accessibly written, to be read by both serving soldiers and post-graduate students. Highly-challenging in its stance, it is guaranteed to stimulate many a heated debate in the officers’ mess, the seminar room, or the university bar. If, through doing so, Storr instigates a more analytical approach to the study of warfare, he will have succeeded in his aim and the benefits will be felt by both practitioners and those dependent upon them for their security. An unusual, exceptionally important book. Highly recommended, though perhaps not a volume to give as a present to friends in the air force...

MARTIN SAMUELS  
Independent Academic



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