



Age of empires

A major work offers new insights into the battle for dominance between emerging and established powers in World War II.

by DAVID LITTLEWOOD

There must be something in the water, because big books about World War II are appearing left, right and centre. Following on the heels of substantial offerings by the likes of Alan Allport, Jonathan Fennell and Daniel Todman comes this weighty tome – 900 pages before notes – by Richard

Overy. For those with enough stamina and wrist strength to make it to the end, the book offers immense rewards. Overy has produced a masterpiece that deserves to be counted among the very best general histories of the war.

It is difficult to think of a scholar who is better qualified to write a sweeping account of history's greatest conflict. In his long and distinguished career going back to the 1980s,

Overy has produced seminal works on the origins of WWII, on the war in the air, on the economy of the Third Reich and on the epic clashes that took place between Germany and the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front.

The premise underlying this book is that many other accounts of the war are too constricted in space and time. Overy situates the conflict principally as a clash between

empires – the vast and long-established dominions of Britain and France against the “New Order” powers of Germany, Italy and Japan, which each had grand imperial ambitions of its own. To understand why the war began and proved so destructive, he argues, we need to look back to at least the beginnings of the 20th century, and certainly to the events and aftermath of World War I.

New superpower: A US landing craft approaching Omaha Beach, France, in 1944.

Overy dates the start of the WWII not to the German invasion of Poland in 1939 but to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 – the first battle in a new imperial struggle.

The key outcomes of WWII were to wreck the imperial ambitions of the Axis, set the British and French empires on the road to collapse, and establish the United States and Soviet Union as the preeminent superpowers. Ultimately, the war was caused by the desire to build or maintain empires, but resulted only in their eventual replacement by today's system of nation-states. To illustrate

this, Overy portrays the war as a truly global contest, with events in Africa, the Soviet Union and the Pacific being allocated just as much importance as what took place in Western Europe and the Atlantic.

A further string to Overy's bow is looking well beyond battles and campaigns. Indeed, his chronological narrative of the origins, course and aftermath of the war covers only four of the 11 chapters. The remaining seven adopt a thematic approach to questions of how the war was fought (broadly conceived), why it was fought so hard and long, and why it gave rise to so many atrocities.

In many respects, these thematic chapters are the strongest and most revealing parts of the book. Overy not only revisits some of his older arguments around why the Allies won the war and the

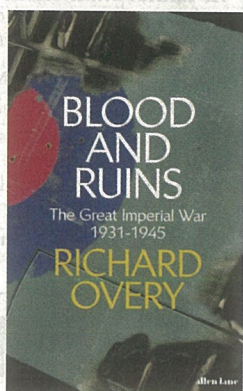
effectiveness of the strategic bombing campaign, but also provides insightful commentary on why so much of the German and Japanese population kept fighting even when defeat was inevitable.

The chapter on the "emotional geography" of the war is particularly compelling, with powerful sections on the psychiatric stresses and trauma faced by millions of soldiers and civilians in a conflict of unprecedented ferocity.

Overy does not shy away from controversial topics or from confronting national myths. While acknowledging the evils inherent in the German, Italian and Japanese war efforts, he demonstrates that the Allies themselves frequently put their own national interests before questions of justice and freedom.

Britain's decrying of German oppression sat uneasily alongside its desperate attempts to preserve its own empire, while the high moral tone adopted by the US was contradicted by its own record of racism towards African Americans. Overy also raises significant caveats to the importance of code-breaking and special operations in the Allied victory, while arguing that the scale of popular resistance against occupying powers has frequently been exaggerated.

Given the incredible range of the book, it seems somewhat churlish to identify areas of lesser detail. The decision to confine the narrative of the war itself to just two chapters does mean that coverage of certain campaigns is necessarily brief. Anyone looking for



Poetry

My Inner Aotearoa

by David Eggleton

My inner Aotearoa is smoky blue gums
in a corner of the khaki paddock,
a crunching noise underfoot from withered grasses,
the tarred road bleeding in the sun,
creek beds shoaling as a dusty river,
bush decked with trails of clematis flowers.

When I only had gorse in my pockets,
I went in fear of the spiralling arms
of Crab Nebula, somewhere overhead.
Now I escape to stamp the black bubbles
of hot bitumen as if treading grapes,
and run headlong up Breakneck Road.

My inner Aotearoa is a need to brake
to descend the incline,
and I want it steep, steeper, steepest.
A riddled leaf smites my wet cheek,
a hailstorm of lies
is illuminated in a lightning flash.

A glacier shrinks to the size of an ice-cube,
to be crunched, steadily.
But dig deep, deeper, deepest,
throw up topsoil till it rains sustenance.
The magnitude of the extra grunt
resounds, as one more raindrop falls.

My inner Aotearoa is a lake's rise
and fall, land's a heartbeat.
The transcendental meaning of flesh
is raised on a bier,

on a balsawood cross,
on a barbecue grill,
on a hospital bed.

Light thickens and sours in the milk bottle,
glugs heavily in the sinkhole,
leading to the place where all sinkholes empty.
So just hold your nose and jump,
into eternal darkness made visible.

(from *The Wilder Years: Selected poems*, Otago University Press)

detailed information on the course of individual engagements, or on New Zealand's role in the war, is better to look elsewhere. I'm also not totally convinced that the imperial aspect of the book is quite as central as Overy suggests. It features very strongly in the four narrative chapters but is much less prominent in the thematic ones.

But these are minor quibbles with a magisterial work. Overy has produced an account of the war that is almost unrivalled in its scope and richness, one that

synthesises existing knowledge and offers crucial new insights. And all jokes about the length aside, it is beautifully written and argued from start to finish. A big book in every sense of the word. ■ **BLOOD AND RUINS: The great imperial war, 1931-1945**, by Richard Overy (Allen Lane, \$90 hb)

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