retracted on take-off... Although it had an endurance of only four minutes at full thrust it could climb to 30,000 feet in two and a half minutes.

It had killed a lot of German pilots.

Eighty per cent of these... on take-off or landing due to explosions arising from the unstable fuels used. Losses in action were only about five per cent, and the other fifteen per cent resulted from fire in the air or loss of control in high Mach number dives. ...baling out was impossible above 250mph, as the hood could not be safely jettisoned above this speed. Another piece of depressing information... was the high rate of broken backs among 163 pilots due to heavy stall-in landings.

After the war, Brown tells us he flew this lethal aircraft not once but a series of times over some two and a half years and his findings from it influenced post-war jet development. So perhaps the risk was worth taking, but I'm not sure we'd find too many people willing to take it.

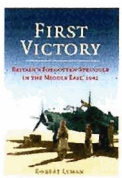
Born in January 1919, Eric Brown's studies at Edinburgh University were interrupted – as were so many others' – by you-know-who's invasion of you-know-where. His experience of it was a touch more personal because he (and his MG Magnette) happened to be in Germany just as it happened. Arrested and questioned by the SS, he sensibly didn't mention that he flew with his university air squadron and he was released over the border (with his beautiful little car). When the RAFVR had no immediate need for his services, he looked elsewhere and joined the Fleet Air Arm. In 1942, flying off the carrier Audacity, he was awarded the DSC, sunk by U-boats and saved from the sea after several hours. Having already shown himself to be an outstanding pilot, he was posted to the RAE at Farnborough, where he remained for several years. This set the pattern for his entire career, where postings as a test pilot during the first thirty years of the jet age were interspersed with the more conventional postings associated with the career of a naval officer.

He seems to have been a round peg in a round hole. 'In an era of outstanding test pilots,' says Bill Humble, Hawker's chief test pilot, 'Winkle was simply the best.' He could have earned much more working for an aircraft company, but he relished the variety of opportunities offered by service life. I'd guess he paid a price in terms of rank for remaining in his chosen niche, but only professional satisfaction shines through his writing. A happy man.

So, if you were lucky enough to meet Winkle Brown, what would be the first question you'd ask him? He answers it factually and with characteristic brevity on page 215. Having listed among his top twenty the Lancaster, Superfortress, Gladiator, Focke Wulf 190, Macchi C.205, Messerschmitt 262, Phantom, Spitfire and Viscount, he chooses the DH Hornet as his favourite piston-engined aircraft and the North American F-86E Sabre as his favourite jet. Given his place in the *Guinness Book of Records*, I don't think anyone's really in a position to argue with him!

Christopher Jary

First Victory: Britain's Forgotten Struggle in the Middle East, 1941 – Robert Lyman



Constable, 2006.
Hbk, £25.00, ppxiv + 336.
ISBN 1 84529 108 5

World War II is a much more ragged or multilayered conflict than World War I. While the Great War was clearly a Eurocentric contest in origins and termination, the Anglo-German conflict was only one element, even if it was the central one, in the hostilities that came in the 1940s. Germany and Japan were allies in about name only, and there were a number of peoples that attempted to take advantage of the United Kingdom's troubles and preoccupation with the Nazi threat. The origins of Britain's disputes with Italy and Japan can be better understood in many ways as colonial wars than as part of some plot concocted in Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo. Efforts in India and Burma to overthrow British authority were clearly efforts designed to take advantage of the opportunities that the war offered. Many of these conflicts were important in World War II only in the way that they connected back to the main European theatre. Such was also the case in the Middle East. Robert Lyman examines what were essentially a series of individual wars that had little to do one with another in *First Victory*. Of course, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Iran remain hot spots and make this book relevant to people other than historians.

Lyman, in a well-identified thesis, argues:

"the contention of this book is that through the loss of Iraq, and the German capture or domination of Syria and Iran, Great Britain could well have lost the war in 1941. The continuance of Britain's strategic position in the Middle East was therefore crucial to her survival in 1941." (pp2-3).

The reason: this region was the main source the British had for oil. Had hostile parties cut off this source of fuel, it would have been difficult for the United Kingdom to continue the

war with the United States still neutral. His argument is quite sound and well-supported.

The British triumphed often with meagre resources. Had these campaigns lasted longer than a few days, the situation might have been much different. The main reason for these quick campaigns, unlike those of today, is that the enemy lacked resources, was often trying to exploit the situation, and had no resolve to fight long and hard.

Lyman shows his experienced and nuanced judgments in this account. A former British Army officer and biographer of William Slim, he gives his readers an even handed account of all the significant figures in his account. Slim clearly emerges as a competent general, but in the clash over strategy between Winston Churchill and Sir Archibald Wavell in which the general clearly advocated policies that were wrong, he avoids painting Wavell as an incompetent which would have been easy given his removal from command. Lyman is likewise good at presenting the views of Charles de Gaulle fairly, which ran counter to those of Vichy, but also at times those of Britain and later the United States. Many English-speaking historians have failed to really understand that there were legitimate grounds for policy differences between the French and their Anglo-American allies. The author is also good at presenting fair portraits of people like the Shah of Iran who ran afoul of the British during the war.

The book is based entirely on British sources. Lyman's ability to present the foreign perspective is the product of a good mining of the relevant literature on this region. As a result, it is a solid, serious work that is accessible. Many people other than just specialists will find this book of use and interest. Highly recommended.

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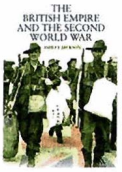
The British Empire and the Second World War – Ashley Jackson



Hambledon Continuum, 2006;
£25; pp604, 22 illustrations.
ISBN 1 85285 417 0

Ashley Jackson is a lecturer at Kings College London and the Joint Services Command and Staff College, who has previously written about the role played during the second world war by Botswana, Mauritius and other countries of the Indian Ocean. He has now expanded his field to cover the whole of the British Empire and Commonwealth. The result is a massive tome and a real labour of love, bringing home the reality of the British Empire both as an overarching concept and in a myriad of practical details.

Today it is easy to forget that before the war Britain ruled a quarter of the earth's land surface, influenced much of the rest of it, had historically dominated its oceans and was the world's greatest trading nation. It was because of Empire that Britain had to fight Italy and Japan at all. And it was after the war, a mere sixty years ago, that the British Empire reached its greatest territorial extent. Not only had Britain re-conquered all the colonies previously lost to the Japanese and Italians but had put military administrations into Italian Somaliland, Libya, Madagascar, Sicily and Syria. It had taken over southern Iran to protect oil supplies and defended Iceland to protect North Atlantic shipping. When the war ended it became responsible for the Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China, as well as a large part of West Germany and Berlin. (This little catalogue, incidentally, is typical of Jackson's method; he is great on lists.) And nowhere had the British fought without men from the Empire either by their side or forming vital rear echelons in support. It was not for nothing that the head of the British Army was the Chief of the Imperial General Staff; that the institution in Belgrave Square was called the Imperial Defence College and that the compulsory text-book of geo-politics for Staff College candidates was entitled *Imperial Military Geography*.

As Jackson says, there was an element of extremely bad luck in the way that the war played out. Britain had to face the simultaneous aggression of all three militaristic powers – Germany, Italy and Japan – with no chance to take them one at a time and then re-group. And it was quite unexpectedly bereft of allies after the fall of France. Russia had entered into a pact with Germany and later with Japan, and America stood aloof until suffering its own disastrous set-back at Pearl Harbour in December 1941. In the inter-war years Britain could have afforded to pay for a two-hemisphere navy strong enough to cope with all three aggressors simultaneously, had not the backlash from World War I brought disarmament to the fore, while appeasement (now regarded as a moral failure) had been a centrepiece of British policy for centuries. As for Japan it was thought that the chances of war were remote and there was a great failure to appreciate the quality of her battleships, carriers, fighter aircraft and tactics. Britain's defeats in the Far East damaged her prestige in ways from which it was never to recover.

But the real solvents of empire were to emerge gradually in the post-war years. The war had bankrupted Britain and thereafter economic recovery eluded her time and again, not helped by American attempts to weaken the sterling area. The expenses of the welfare state, the rising cost of overseas garrisons and small wars and the price of becoming an