

*War. How Conflict Shaped Us.* By Margaret MacMillan. London: Profile Books, 2020. ISBN 9781788162562. Index. Pp. 328. £20.00

Based on a set of 2018 radio talks for the wider public, this is not a book designed for readers of this journal, which, unsurprisingly, does not feature in the bibliography because presumably it is neither useful nor helpful to those who wish to explore the subject further. Instead, the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and the *New York Times* are among the periodicals cited; and there is a good discussion of the implications of war for women and for civilians. It would be an easy task to set a student to cover what has been left out (very little on Africa for example, or a serious underplaying of naval warfare, and so on), and indeed the many clichés and examples that are polished anew. However, having noted the pluses (a good use of literary material and some arresting illustrations), it is more helpful to consider the problems posed by the author: how did conflict shape us?, and what do we mean by conflict?

MacMillan proposes that ‘War is a mystery, and a terrifying one,’ but, as she notes, it is not only not difficult to define, but also inherent to the species. Indeed, she argues, ‘human beings, as far back as we can tell, have had a propensity to attack each other in organised ways.’ We therefore are in anthropological and sociological territory, and valuably so, with some discussion of cultures of war and of the willingness to cause, and experience, risk and chaos. The excitement of war indeed is one of her themes, and, linked to that, the willingness to cause wars. The 1913 observation of Pancho Villa on the 1907 Hague conference thus falls into place: ‘It seems to me a funny thing to make rules about war. It is not a game. What is the difference between civilised war and any other kind of war?’

MacMillan focuses on the experience of war, which offers an interesting account. However, less positively, there is an often facile juxtaposition of examples from wildly different settings, and with no real consideration of context or source accuracy. This is very much the fashionable approach *de notre jours*, but diachronic history can be hopelessly glib. A more grounded account, in terms both of particular geographical environments, both human and physical, and specific chronological contexts, would be far more appropriate.

Wars today can be far shorter than the time it takes to write a chapter, let alone a book, and yet there is no shortage of lengthy books that, if dropped from any height, might well be fatal to a pedestrian on the ground. A short book, however, risks simplifying the nature of war in order to provide a clear account and use a clear causal narrative to explain developments. All then falls into a pat analysis, with technological proficiency in weaponry generally the measure of proficiency, and the sorcerer’s apprentice of steadily more frenetic conflict. MacMillan more helpfully addresses causes and experience.

Overall, however, in the context of today, it may well be, however, that it is war is rather a medium of questions than the message of an easy answer. There is no clear hierarchy of military

capabilities, but rather challenges and responses set by very different taskings and environments, both physical and human. The key divide is that of wars between states and conflict within them. It is only if both the latter, and also the non-West, are given sufficient attention that a sounder understanding of war can develop. A discussion of military history ought to be as helpful for and from Madagascar and Paraguay as Germany and the United States, and, to that end, a certain amount of scattergun fact and impact of battle quotations can be left out. Moreover, it is only if this sounder understanding is pursued, that Western powers will adequately understand the non-Western environments in which they might seek to operate.

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JEREMY BLACK

University of Exeter, UK