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Military history: not just for men

'You don't need a Y chromosome to find wars compelling'

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Not long after I began writing a history of the Opium war – the first conflict between China and Great Britain, fought in the middle of the 19th century – a smart, experienced London publisher advised me to publish it under an initial, not my full first name. Only men read military history, he told me, and men don't buy books by women.

A glance at Amazon's history bestseller charts seemed to confirm a gender divide of sorts in this corner of non-fiction publishing. When I last looked, the ratio in the list of general history titles was clearly tipped towards men: Antony Beevor, Peter Ackroyd, Norman Davies, and so on. As for military history bestsellers, beyond a handful of exceptions, the chart was overwhelmingly male-dominated. (The proportions were skewed slightly by the curious inclusion of Caroline and Robin Weir's *Ice Creams, Sorbets and Gelati: The Definitive Guide*.)

Recent kerfuffles in the land of TV historians showed that David Starkey, for one, subscribed to the Niall-Fergusons-are-from-Mars, Alison-Weirs-are-from-Venus thesis. Last year, Starkey accused women of making "historical Mills & Boon", of turning serious political and diplomatic history into a "bizarre soap opera", and of exploiting on their book covers the fact that they are "usually quite pretty". He complained that fascination with Henry VIII's wives (who "complicated" the story of Henry) had pushed the big man off centre-stage: "If you are to do a proper history of Europe before the last five minutes, it is a history of white males because they were the power players, and to pretend anything else is to falsify." ("If it wasn't insulting and degrading to judge historians by their looks," Lucy Worsley – presenter of *If Walls Could Talk: A History of the Home* – swiftly retorted, "I would point out that Dr Starkey looks like a cross owl in the pictures on his own book covers.")

But I've often wondered what this publisher was getting at, in suggesting that – decades after gender equality battles in the workplace have been fought and won (except, perhaps, in oil rigs and professional conducting) – military history remains a man's world. Are women supposed to lack the necessary *Top Gear* fascination with boys' toys and tactics: with flanged maces, Brown Besses and light sabres? Are they meant to be too "empathetic" to cope with the horrors of war?

If so, this represents a narrowly old-fashioned vision of military history that has been transcended by books published over the past few decades. Since the late 1960s, the genre has been overhauled by the rise of "new military history": a multidisciplinary

approach that embeds war in its political, social, cultural and personal contexts. This evolution was exemplified by John Keegan's innovative *The Face of Battle* (1976), an empathetic reconstruction of soldiers' experience "at the point of maximum danger". And women have played a central role in redefining military history: to name only two, Joanna Bourke (whose 1999 book, *An Intimate History of Killing*, excavated the emotions that turned ordinary humans into efficient killers) and Amanda Foreman, whose *book on the American civil war* gives the reader "history-in-the-round" – a three-dimensional portrait of the soldiers, spies, diplomats, journalists and society hostesses swept up in the conflict.

Writing about war, then, has long moved on from the stiff-upper-lipped Victorian stereotype of recounting curt technical manoeuvres ("the gallant company routed the cowardly enemy with one volley, gave a brisk rendering of God Save the Queen, and were back in time for tiffin"). Whether or not you can explain the action of a flintlock musket – and, after three years of concentrating quite hard and a judicious first-draft intervention from my editor ("it would have blown your face off if you'd tried firing it like that"), I now can – the study of war offers a wealth of universal insights: not only into battlefield stratagems, but also into personal trauma and cultural clashes, into the way that governments and societies function or don't function, and into the compromises, missteps, deceptions and tragedies that people generate in desperate situations.

Writing a book about the Opium war revised almost every preconception that I had ever harboured about China. This war has long been seen as a collision of clear-cut civilisations – between expansionist, free-trade Britain and xenophobic, isolationist China. Many still assume that China, since time immemorial, has been an essentially coherent place, whose people have always identified with a single, central set of political and cultural ideas. As the country embarked on its first war with Britain, it was nothing of the sort. It was a fractious, failing empire, scattered with discontents and chancers ready to sell their services to the highest bidder, regardless of his or her ethnicity. For sure, if their lives, family or property were threatened, local Chinese populations fought the British – but these were largely personal, not patriotic fights. Others pragmatically saw the war as an opportunity to make money from the British, rather than as a clash with a conspicuously alien enemy. They sold the British supplies, they navigated and they spied for them. And while supposedly fighting the British, China was also at war with itself. During the siege of one key city, the Chinese forces were too busy plundering, killing and (in extreme cases) eating each other to put up a concerted fight.

We think of war as producing exceptional responses: extraordinary brutality, bravery and patriotism. And yet the routine idiocies committed in humdrum peacetime persist through wars too. During the Opium war, the urgent human and material costs of the conflict did not prevent tragicomic acts of bureaucratic absent-mindedness. While people were being killed and towns destroyed, the men who were running the show in China hid or lost copies of the British war demands; they told their emperor bare-faced lies about outstanding victories that were in fact appalling defeats; one general was catatonic on opium when he should have been directing battles. Two and a half years into a war that had cost his administration tens of millions of ounces of silver and thousands of lives, the emperor wrote a dazzlingly vague letter to one of his frontline officials: where in fact, he wanted to know, was England?

Wars, then, are never the tidy, clinical affairs that much of my primary source material – old-school 19th-century military histories – tried to suggest: they're full of opportunism, errors, lies and collaboration. You don't need to possess a Y chromosome to find it compelling; you need only to be human.

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