

British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 1, March 2020

Review of *The Allure of Battle A History of Wars Have Been Won and Lost* by Cathal J. Nolan

John Peaty

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 19 March 2020

Citation: John Peaty, 'Review of *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* by Cathal J. Nolan', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.1 (2020), pp. 66-67.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

convenient. Then again, as these books teach us in exemplary fashion, history isn't always convenient and transferable and perhaps it serves us to be cynical.

TIMOTHY FALLON
Independent Scholar, UK

DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i1.1361

Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Notes. Plates. Bibliography. Index. 709pp. ISBN 978-0195383782 (hardback). Price £20.00.

Over 16 chapters, Nolan discusses the true impact of battles in the context of the wars in which they were fought. History has tended to measure a war's winners and losers in terms of its major engagements, battles in which the result was so clear-cut that they could be considered "decisive." Marathon, Cannae, Tours, Agincourt, Austerlitz, Sedan, Stalingrad - all fixed in literature and in our imaginations as tide-turning. But were they? Nolan argues that victory in major wars has usually been determined in other ways. Even the most crushing of battles did not necessarily decide their outcomes: Rome lost Cannae but won the war. Nolan also challenges the concept of the "military genius," even of the "great captain". Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus, Frederick, Napoleon are all firmly established in published works and in our minds as such. Thus, Nolan's book directly contradicts those of Creasy, Dodge and Fuller, dear to earlier generations. In that, Nolan reflects the time in which he writes, especially the protracted and costly conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

Nolan systematically analyses the major wars between the great powers, from the Hundred Years War to the Second World War, tracing the illusion of "short-war thinking," the hope that victory might be swift and conflict brief. Nolan argues that the World Wars, the "people's wars", were characterised by stalemate and attrition and were wars in which the crucial arena was not the battlefield but the factory. Modern resource bases backed by national will can overcome a seemingly decisive first strike, as the Japanese found after Pearl Harbor.

It is true that not all great battles are decisive and not all decisive battles are great. Nolan rightly argues that Gettysburg was a great battle but not decisive while Vicksburg (fought at the same time on a much smaller scale) was decisive in that it cut the Confederacy in half. Nolan's argument that truly decisive battles are rare is a strong one. It can be argued that Marathon was merely a temporary check on Persian

BOOK REVIEWS

aspirations. It can be argued that had Napoleon won at Waterloo, he would have been defeated by other armies on other battlefields. It can be argued that Japan's defeat was inevitable even if it had won at Midway.

Nonetheless, Marathon, Waterloo and Midway are considered decisive by many historians. Marathon did not put a permanent stop to the Persians but it deterred them for a decade. Napoleon was irredeemably defeated at Waterloo and the Seventh Coalition might have come to terms if he had won. Most of Japan's carrier fleet was destroyed at Midway and the Imperial Japanese Navy forced onto the defensive.

The search for decisive battles in short wars has long been the holy grail of politicians and generals. The Wars of German Unification 1864-71 are often held up as the exemplar. But history does indeed show that they are the exception and not the rule. Nolan's study stops in 1945, yet it is pertinent to note that of the major wars since German unification, only the 1967 Six Day War and Operation Desert Storm in 1991 turned out to be the short sharp conflicts envisaged by their planners.

The book would have been better if it had been shorter. There is too much detail about battles that are irrelevant to the author's intended audience of non-military historians. There is also quite a bit of repetition. That said, Nolan's book is magisterial. In a sweeping study that ranges over Western military history, he places battles squarely within the context of the wider conflicts in which they took place. He dispels illusions that have distorted the understanding of armed conflict, demonstrating that battles are rarely decisive and that generals are rarely geniuses - and thus wars are rarely short and cheap. He replaces popular images with sombre appreciation. This challenging and controversial book demands to be read and reflected upon by everyone, including those professionally concerned with military history, military strategy and international relations. I have no doubt that it will spark debates about the history and conduct of war that will last for a long time to come.

JOHN PEATY
Independent Scholar, UK

DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i1.136