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Review of *Normandy '44: D-Day and the Battle for France* by James Holland

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**James Holland, *Normandy '44: D-Day and the Battle for France*. London: Penguin, 2019. 657pp. ISBN 978-1787631274 (hardback). Price £25.00.**

James Holland is among the leading historians specialising in the Second World war with a body of work already published to great critical acclaim including books on the Dambusters, Battle of Britain and the North Africa campaign, as well as Malta, and a three volume series on the War in the West, of which two have so far been published. A fellow of the Royal Historical Society, he is a regular presenter of his own television documentaries and a key part of recent commemorative events such as D-Day 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the RAF 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. He also has written a series of novels and produces a weekly podcast.

For this new volume, the author has taken the trouble to 'walk the ground' which has given him a whole new perspective on an often well-worn narrative. Holland explores the strategic, operational and tactical aspects of the campaign, focussing on the sheer weight of force and the scale of the Allied forces which ultimately dominated the German forces. Rather than focus purely on D-Day itself, Holland has expanded his framework to include the battle for France. For even greater detail on D-Day itself the Peter Caddick-Adams, *Sand and Steel – A new history of D-Day*, would be a great companion. He also draws on a cast of eye-witness accounts from a wide variety of those involved including resistance fighters, foot soldiers, tank men, bomber crews, sailors and civilians for a truly 360-degree perspective on events.

The book itself is beautifully presented, beginning with a series of very interesting and useful maps which can be referred back to as you progress through the narrative, followed by descriptions of principal personalities and a portrait gallery. This is followed by a foreword where Holland sets out his reasons for writing the book and also the differences in approach that he has on this well-known campaign – principally that he will explore the operational level and the mechanics of war and re-insert this in to the framework of the higher level of command and those at the sharp end of battle which then produces an entirely new perspective – especially when combined with the already mentioned eye-witness accounts.

Progressing through a vividly written prologue, the narrative of the book is then split in to four sections. Beginning with "The Battle Before D-Day which covers the Atlantic Wall, Command of the Skies, Montgomery and the 'Master Plan' and Air Power, leading up to Part Two which covers the invasion itself. Holland manages to convey his obvious knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject with incisive analysis in an engrossing manner.

Part Three covers the attrition section of the campaign with vivid description of individual actions using eye-witness accounts maintaining the pace of the narrative effectively.

Part Four is entitled 'Breakout' and begins with a discourse on weapons where another myth of the campaign is squashed – that the Germans had technologically superior weapons.

A postscript follows and then a comprehensive glossary, appendices, notes, a timeline for both Normandy '44 and D-Day, sources and acknowledgements as well as a highly detailed index.

Holland certainly looks at the campaign in great detail but with a wider perspective which helps the overall understanding of the events and puts to bed many of the myths. He concludes that Montgomery in fact produced a plan about as good as it could be and was agreed as such by all concerned. He also points out the 'freedom of poverty' that the Germans had with the constrictions of numbers they had allowing comparatively easy co-ordination compared to the 'constraints of wealth' that the allied commanders had to deal with of much larger forces. The campaign strategy of the Germans is also explored as their methods were different to those the Allies experienced in North Africa and Italy following the orders of Hitler to 'stand and fight', even though a tactical retreat would in many, if not all cases, have produced a superior result. He also looks in detail and both air power and naval power as key factors in the campaign, again skilfully weaving in eye-witness accounts to illustrate the bigger picture.

This is an essential read for anyone interested in Second World War history and especially in D-Day and the campaign for France. The importance of 'walking the ground', meticulous personal research drawing on unseen archives and testimony from around the world, as well as eye-witness accounts produces a fully rounded picture and one that is written in an eminently readable manner. The author is to be congratulated on this fine piece of work.

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