

## REVIEWS

**John Grehan, *The First VCs: The Stories Behind the First Victoria Crosses of the Crimean War and the Definition of Courage*. Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2016. Index. Maps. Illustrations. Appendices. 287pp. ISBN: 978-1-4738-5171-9. Hardback. £25.00.**

There are surprisingly few books focusing on the Victoria Cross (VC) as an outcome and legacy of the Crimean War (1854-56). Grehan's book is therefore a welcome addition to the existing literature, which comprises mainly of patriotic texts, reference works, administrative histories and biographical studies of individual recipients of the award. An important exception is Melvin Smith's *Awarded for Valour: A History of the Victoria Cross and the Evolution of British Heroism* (2008), a study that looks in detail at the inception and cultural symbolism of the VC.

Much of Grehan's book (chapters 1-7, 9-15) interweaves the stories of the first VC winners against a chronological narrative of British involvement in the Crimean War. Grehan opens with a pithy summary of the geo-political alignment of European powers at this time, the trigger events leading to the declaration of war against Russia and an overview of the state of the British Army. He then moves through the key battles of the war, including the land battles of the Alma, Balaklava, Inkerman and the Siege of Sevastopol, as well as the less familiar operations of the Navy in the Baltic and the Sea of Azov. Chapter 8, 'Distinguished Conduct' outlines the origins of the VC and public appetite for an award open to the lower ranks of the Army and Navy. Chapter 16, 'Victoria's Cross', deals with its administration and difficulties implementing the awards, due to contested notions of courage and class prejudice. This chapter makes clear Queen Victoria's involvement in the design and distribution of the VC and royal desire to maintain its prerogative over the rewards system, though the material here is covered in more depth in Melvin Smith's book. Chapter 17, which reads as an Appendix, lists in alphabetical order each recipient of the first VCs and details of his service, serving as a useful reference tool for the family and military historian. Table summaries of the number of awards per regiment and per campaign/battle would have been a valuable addition here.

Grehan not only aims to bring together the stories of the first VCs, but also to examine how the 'definition of courage' evolved over the course of the war. The book raises some interesting questions about the nature of acts rewarded, such as the saving of the regimental colours, the taking of Russian guns, as well as common features of awards as the war progressed, such as recognition for the saving of life and awards for multiple acts of courage. However, the chronological approach can interfere with the reader's understanding of the significance of the first VCs, making

## REVIEWS

for dis-jointed reading. For example, the conclusion to the infamous case of Private McGuire, introduced on p.50, is delayed until p.213 in favour of a strict chronology of the war. The cultural and social historian would have benefitted from more detailed analysis of the truism, expressed in this book and elsewhere, of the VCs egalitarian values, its focus on individual acts of valour, and how this and the humanitarian emphasis on the saving of life may have shaped Victorian perceptions of soldiering, violence and negated the war's strategic failures. A better balance could have been achieved therefore between the stated aims of this book and the events and battles of the Crimean War, which are well-narrated elsewhere.

The book contains some generalisations and leaps that would need to be substantiated or qualified in an academic context. For example, Grehen links the legacy of the VC and increased public appreciation of the Army at the end of his book with a 'rush to the recruiting stations at the outbreak of World War One' (p.220). *The First VCs* does not engage in a nuanced and critical analysis of the inauguration of the VC and its political and cultural symbolism for the image of war, the soldier and the Army. However, the book provides an eloquently written, well-paced summary of the Crimean War and the often overlooked men and deeds that inspired one of the most prestigious military awards in the British Army.

RACHEL BATES  
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**Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and the Dardanelles*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 439pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-870254-2. Hardback. £25.00.**

In 2013 Christopher Bell, Professor of History at Dalhousie University, published an acclaimed study *Churchill and Sea Power* (also OUP). In his introduction to this new volume he says that he is, in effect, dealing with 'unfinished business', as his volume had only allowed about 25 pages to the opening months of the First World War and the Dardanelles campaign. Now he returns to examine Churchill's role in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaigns in a forensic study, which, if not wholly exonerating Churchill, goes at least a very long way towards doing so, while also pinning down his weaknesses. Bell is also acute in his laying of the blame as to where the two campaigns went so wrong.