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Andrew Stewart. *A Very British Experience: Coalition, Defence and Strategy in the Second World War.* Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. ix + 247 pp. Illustrations. $74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84519-439-0.

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Episodes in British Strategy, 1939-1945

A Very British Experience: Coalition, Defence and Strategy in the Second World War is a fascinating collection of essays from an author well versed in the strategies (and grand strategy) of Britain and its empire during the great global struggle of 1939-45. In chapters dealing with the British Empire Air Training Scheme, the preparations for home defense, the East African Campaign of 1940-41, British generalship in the Western Desert, the rocky relationship with Australia during the Japanese Southeast Asian offensives of 1941-42, the difficulties of the alliance with the United Sates, the political repercussions of the June 1942 fall of Tobruk, and the Royal Navy's expedient development of a naval base at Mombasa during 1942, Andrew Stewart teases out four prominent themes: the importance of coalitions in British grand strategy, the prominence of Africa in the overall British war effort, the 1940 decision to fight on, and the centrality of Winston Churchill in all strategic undertakings.

Stewart's work is not a comprehensive analysis of British strategy in the manner of the six-volume Grand Strategy series of official histories (1956-76), or even Brian Farrell's two-volume *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy, 1940-1943* (1998). At 247 pages (including notes, bibliography, and index), *A Very British Experience* is too short for that. Instead, Stewart has chosen an episodic approach, which allows him to dig deeply into variety of distinct strategic issues. His detailed account, for example, of the nettled negotiations with Canada for a program to train British Commonwealth aircrews on Canadian soil, highlights the difficulty British authorities sometimes had in dealing with self-governing Dominions that had their own interests to protect and occasionally drove hard bargains. At the same time, it also highlights that all the heartache and gnashing of teeth that attended the 1939 negotiations were well worth the effort; in the end, the scheme produced 131,000 flying personnel for British Commonwealth air forces, three-quarters of them passing through 107 depots in Canada. The chapter entitled "First Victory: Forgotten Success in East Africa" delves into an understudied and even less understood campaign that the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, considered a necessary action in support of offensive operations in the Western Desert–if he was to have adequate supplies at a time when the Mediterranean was impassable to British convoys, the Red Sea and its ports had to cleared of Italians and made safe for Allied shipping going the long way around the Cape. The chapter on home defense–"The Other Battle for Britain: Muddling Along on the Home Front"–is an excellent piece that traces home defense schemes at ground level. Stewart explains the 1940-41 plans of two successive C-in-C Home Forces–General Sir Edmund Ironside and General Sir Alan Brooke–to repel German raiding parties and invasion forces with a combination of Home Guard soldiers, Dominion formations in the United Kingdom, and the remnants of the British Army that had been evacuated from Dunkirk. In this chapter, Stewart is also able to demonstrate very well the importance of Churchill to British strategy. Whatever his faults, and Stewart does not shy away from them in this or any other chapter, Churchill's defiance, his compelling oratory, and his stoking of the national will to fight on were crucial to the British war effort at home during the precarious period of 1940-41.

Stewart has drawn on his many years of studying the Second World War. All his essays and arguments incorporate the best literature in the field as well as archival material that has been gathered in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the United States. And, as Stewart admits in his introduction, a number of chapters are significantly revised versions of earlier work.Two of the chapters–the one on the Empire Air Training Scheme and the one on the fall of Tobruk–are

heavily revised versions of earlier journal articles, while two others–"Twelve Tumultuous Months: Britain, the Dominions and the Politics of the Widening War" and "At War with the Old Empire: The Often Difficult Alliance with the United States"–draw heavily on material that Stewart used for *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (2008).

The shortfalls of this book are relatively minor and few. It would have benefited from better maps. There is only one map for the Battle of Keren (March 1941) to support the chapter on the broader East African campaign and there are no maps to support the chapter on British generalship during the Crusader battles of November 1941. O. D. Skelton was not the Canadian minister of external affairs (p. 16). He served as undersecretary for external affairs (1925-41) under prime ministers W. L. Mackenzie King and R. B. Bennett, both of whom retained ultimate control of the External Affairs portfolio for themselves. Perhaps the biggest shortfall of this book is the title, which should probably be *Very British Experiences* to reflect better the necessarily selective nature of the presentation. There are no chapters on Anglo-French or Anglo-Soviet relations, after all.

But these complaints are pretty small beer. *A Very British Experience* is a solid collection of essays from a solid scholar, one that should appeal to students of military history or anyone interested in the complexities of coalition warfare.

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