

Wayne Lee. *Waging War: Conflict, Culture, and Innovation in World History.* Oxford University Press, 2015. 538 pp. \$89.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-979745-5.



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Waging War: Conflict, Culture, and Innovation in World History by Wayne E. Lee is a fascinating, engaging, and encyclopedic book. It is broad in historical scope while using a lens that is narrowly focused on specific innovations as they are introduced in the pursuit of martial success. Each of these innovations acts as a case study and serves the author as a launch point for discussing broader social, cultural, political, and technological trends in the communities where the innovations are adopted. Lee adds an interesting algorithm to understanding how war, technology, and culture intersect through “three guiding and deliberately memorable concepts: capacity, calculations, and culture” (p. 4). Put roughly, he asks the reader to consider: Can a society commit to a conflict, can they innovate their way to success, and do their values and ideas surrounding the concept of “war” allow them to enact or value these innovations?

The book is encyclopedic in that it covers a vast span of time and technology and indicates the tremendous breadth of the author’s expertise. The

author writes as fluently about the Carolingian dynasty of the Franks as he does in describing Japanese naval expansion in the early twentieth century. A reader feels that the author is well informed across the board about the topics that he writes on, and that his wide-ranging scholarly knowledge allowed him to structure a book as deep as this one.

Lee successfully manages readers’ expectations about the book’s coverage through his acknowledgment that he is not offering a “comprehensive summary” of the history, origins, or practice of war (p. xvii). Lee’s examinations of horses on the battlefield, or the early uses of gunpowder, highlight that the text focuses on the first populations to build, expand, and rely upon a technology or innovation and the follow-on effects of its introduction to their military activities, rather than diffusing his focus to all populations who have come to innovate or use the discussed technology.

Waging War: Conflict, Culture, and Innovation in World History is substantial at 538 pages

and is structured into an introduction, and fourteen chapters. Each chapter centers on a specific martial innovation and its broad aftereffects, such as the introduction of ships into battle (ch. 6) or the role that increased firepower played in the move toward trench warfare in WWI (ch. 11). The chapters are arranged on a timeline, setting the conceptual stage by offering an overview of the origins of war and intergroup lethal violence and moving forward from the introduction of the chariot in war (circa 3,500 BCE) all the way through techniques of contemporary insurgencies.

The timeline structure of the book is an effective technique as it shows the scaffolding or progression of technologies as time marches forward through the book. Yet, for a reader, this timeline approach can create a subconscious sense of the inevitability of these developments or their adoption. Lee notes the risk of this tautological assumption as he offers a caveat about adoption of gunpowder for advanced weapons, writing that it was not “clear to peoples or individuals at the time” nor was there “an irresistible tide of European expansion” (p. 254).

Lee also avoids the common hazard of materialist approaches in which the object becomes the subject and is treated as an agential figure in its own history. A few chapters veer into this risky territory, possibly reflecting how little accurate historical or archaeological information is available about individual lives or the cultures where these technologies were used. Most chapters use the object as a starting point for a discussion about a community’s social and technological changes and resemble the genre of “biographies of objects” such as Kurlansky’s *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* or Finlay’s *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*.

The fundamental frustration with the text occurs early in the book with the author’s seemingly inconsistent thesis. Lee offers several goals of the text, such as discussing the role of conflict in the origins of the state, describing “how humans have

sought to impose their will on each other over time and around the world” (p. 1), or, broadly, “the process and consequences of innovation” (p. xvii). The strongest thesis is the earliest, that the book offers an examination in “how humans have innovated at conflict and how they have dealt with each other’s innovations” (p. xvii). For readers, keeping foremost in mind that Lee is not attempting to answer all questions about war and technology allows us to look past the main limitation in the text and simply benefit from the content.

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