



Thomas Colley. *Always at War: British Public Narratives of War.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019. x + 274 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-13144-0.

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The wars that Britain has fought throughout its history, and the ideas that surrounded them, have long been a fundamental element in national identity construction. From the creation of “Britishness” against a French Catholic enemy “other” after the 1707 Act of Union, to the reconfiguration of ideas about citizenship around duty and service during World War I, to the celebration of national unity, equality of sacrifice, and a “people’s war” during World War II, scholars have shown that such questions as why the British fought, who they fought against, and how the wars were waged militarily and ideologically have been central to Britain’s sense of itself as a nation.[1] In *Always at War: British Public Narratives of War*, Thomas Colley asks us to consider where the specific narratives about British wars come from and how different conflicts are understood and remembered by individuals and collectives. To assess these questions about the creation of narratives and the views held about the military past within the British public, Colley relies on interviews he conducted with “a highly diverse sample” of sixty-seven Britons between October 2014 and January 2015 (p. 14). The resulting analysis should prove enlightening and thought-provoking for scholars and influential with foreign and defense policy practitioners.

Colley has two primary and interwoven objectives in the book. The first is to better understand and ultimately define what a “narrative” actually is, while the second is to then illuminate and test this hypothesis through the case study of British interpretations of war. In probing the first question on the definition of narrative, his analysis is impressively interdisciplinary and draws on narrative theory scholarship in fields ranging from international relations to literary criticism. Colley’s major contributions to this literature are to argue for the importance of “emplotment” (the selection, ordering, and framing of events) to defining narrative and to show how the ideas that narratives construct—in this case about British national identity and the collective memory of the country’s past military interventions—are produced and interpreted by ordinary people as much as by policymakers and militaries. Or put another way, these narratives are produced from the ground up as much as the top down.

The book’s analysis here is nuanced and effective. One of Colley’s goals is to move beyond quantitative public opinion data regarding the British people’s interpretations of war and to provide a qualitative study with an aim “not to determine the proportion of the population that support or oppose war, but to illustrate how similarly citizens explain their views using stories” (p. 12). While Col-

ley is careful to acknowledge the influence of political elites, the military, and the media, or dominant cultures and ideologies more broadly conceived, to shaping his interview subjects' ideas and stories about Britain's military past and present, he also highlights their agency and ability to shape strategic and national narratives. He is attentive to the variety of factors that might influence people's answers, such as age, political views, region, class, gender, race, and ethnicity, observing where ideas aligned and diverged across the interviews, and seeks "evidence of how far British collective identity is unified or contested." In this way, Colley is attuned to the complexities of his study's results, but ultimately, and rather pithily, he concludes that "contestation does not mean infinite variety" (p. 22).

In specific terms, Colley identifies two primary narratives about British military history that recurred across his sample of interviews, which he calls "Continuous War" and "Material Decline." Regardless of their backgrounds or political views, Colley's interview subjects largely agreed that Britain has been continuously at war throughout its history but has also gradually lost the ability to wage war as effectively because of its declining economic, territorial, political, and military power, most often dated to the end of World War II and associated with the end of the British Empire. However, Colley further breaks down his results to show that alongside or embedded within the Continuous War and Material Decline narratives are five sub-narratives or "genres" about British war-making, which he labels "Punching Above Its Weight," "Vanishing Force," "Learning from Its Mistakes," "Led Astray," and "Selfish Imperialist."

It would require too much space to unpack the specificities of each of these narratives, but they are largely distinguished by the perceived morality of Britain's military enterprises. As Colley puts it, "People may agree that Britain always goes to war but they disagree on whether they have been right to do so" (p. 80). Interview subjects offered differ-

ent perspectives on the extent to which the British military has made and still makes an important and productive global contribution despite its waning size and stature, if Britain has been influenced positively or negatively by its "special relationship" with the United States, and whether or not the demise of the British Empire should be celebrated or lamented.

The wide-ranging views on Britain's imperial past revealed by Colley's interviews is one of the most compelling and illuminating aspects of the analysis. This discussion is threaded throughout the book but is given particular attention in chapter 6, where Colley describes the empire as the "elephant in the room," which is variously justified, condemned, or silenced in the employment of interviewees' narratives about military history (p. 143). Some people acknowledged the violence and oppression of British imperialism, while others regarded the empire as a benevolent, modernizing, "force for good." It is worth noting that these competing perspectives on empire build on longstanding historical ideologies, in ways that Colley might have additionally unpacked through a more thorough engagement with the rich historiography on the British Empire. While this is not a work of history, there are moments in the discussion of empire and elsewhere in the book where Colley references what "historians say," but the accompanying citations could be more comprehensive.

Another part of the analysis that possesses a long history and historiography is national identity, and yet it is sometimes treated in the book as an immutable monolith. Colley occasionally pays attention to language, religion, or geography as part of Britain's self-image, but by and large he sees the British national imaginary as that of a "warrior nation," in which the country's sense of self is defined by its war-making prowess and global power. But as a historian, I would argue that even in wartime(s), British national identity has rarely been so straightforward, and like all cultural constructions and processes, it has changed over time.

To be fair, Colley is clear throughout the book that he is less interested in Britain's actual history than he is in how it is narrated by his interview subjects. Yet surely the ideas expressed in the interviews about British identity, and the different wars the country has waged, were shaped by the legacies of how those conflicts were understood and experienced in their own time. More attention to that historical context might have added richness and depth to Colley's interrogation of the contemporary narratives.

A final and interrelated question I have about the book concerns how Colley is defining "British military history." Based on the discussion, he effectively seems to mean a history of where the military went and what they accomplished. But as a historical field, "military history" is now a much bigger tent, equally concerned with battle fronts and home fronts, and the interactions between the two. Moreover, some of Britain's most defining conflicts have strongly affected and arguably been most remembered for the experience of civilians. There is a suggestion even in the evidence included in the book that some of the interviewees narrated British wars in this way. According to Colley, one individual described World War II as "a time when 'everybody helped each other' and 'we all did our bit'" (p. 98). In the context of that war, doing one's "bit" did not simply mean serving in the military: it referenced the whole host of duties and responsibilities that were socially or legally required of all Britons regardless of their age, gender, class, ethnicity, or race. Related, the so-called Blitz spirit is arguably the most prominent "British public narrative of war" of them all, pervasive most recently in the Brexit debate and as part of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic (ongoing at the time I am writing) but also at many different moments in British political and military history since 1945. Yet it is curiously absent here. Perhaps none of Colley's interview subjects mentioned it (beyond the ways it is indirectly implicated in the quotation above), and one of his methodological parameters was to not guide answers himself in the interviews by ref-

erencing specific wars or events. But if the Blitz spirit never came up once, I would find that surprising and at least worthy of note.

Colley is most convincing when he connects the narratives revealed in his interviews to more recent or ongoing events. One fascinating chapter concerns the "collective forgetting" observable among his interview subjects over the fact that 9/11 was a direct cause of the war in Afghanistan (p. 163). Another particularly effective section considers how the first major foreign policy debate to occur following his completion of data collection, regarding British intervention against the Islamic State in Syria in 2015, played out in ways very much aligned with the narratives he had identified through his research. The book thus offers both an explanation of the past and a guide for the future with respect to British policy decisions. It is also a readable book, if a little dense and theoretical early on, with an innovative analysis and intriguing conclusions. It should offer scholars from multiple disciplines food for thought and avenues for further research.

Note

[1]. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Nicoletta Gullace, *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); and Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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