

Pétain by Charles Williams. Little, Brown 2005

Charles Williams' three previous works of biography established his reputation as one of the best practitioners of the genre, and his latest, Pétain, cements that reputation.

Marshal Pétain was a career soldier from very humble stock whose military life was somewhat unremarkable until the outbreak of the First World War. Although Pétain was on the verge of retirement he continued to serve and by the war's end was a national hero with the title of Marshal and the soubriquet of 'Victor of Verdun'. After the Germans invaded France in 1940 Pétain was made Prime Minister, shortly thereafter signed an armistice with the Nazis and created the collaborationist Vichy regime of which he was Head of State.

At the end of the war Pétain returned to France from Switzerland to be tried for treason against France; he was convicted and sentenced to death though this was commuted by the victorious de Gaulle and he died in prison in 1951 at the age of 96.

Even over five decades after his death Pétain remains a highly controversial figure, not least in the way in which he and the forces under his control enthusiastically collaborated with the Nazis in their pursuit of their enemies, notable French Jews, but it is greatly to Lord Williams' credit that his biography is much more than a retelling of the shameful Vichy years.

Over the course of 29 chapters Williams tells Pétain's extraordinary and quite racy story, and only the final 11 deal with the road to Vichy, the regime and its aftermath.

This is a fascinating and highly readable account of a crucial period during 20th century European history, and of a leading figure whose actions did so much to tarnish France's reputation as a bastion of the values that supposedly underpin its Republic.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh