

Perilous Glory – The Rise of Western Military Power by John France.
Yale University Press, 2011.

The word ‘magisterial’ appears so frequently in book reviews that it has become something of a cliché, but in the case of Perilous Glory it is immensely apt.

Professor John France, Charles Boal Ewing Professor of History at West Point, has produced in one book a sweeping analysis of the development of warfare, from its earliest origins in ancient times up to and including the conflicts of today.

Perilous Glory is divided into eleven chapters: The Many Faces of War, Many Worlds of War, Horses and Hoplités, The Glory of Empire, 336 BC-AD 651, Ideology and Warfare, 500-c.1200, The Steppe Supremacy, c.1200-1683, Discipline, c.1683-c.1860, The Military Revolution, Industrial Killing, Culture and Warfare in the Age of Total War, 1919-1945 and A New Age of War.

This highly readable and informative book, about one of the most common and brutal forms of human behaviour, is made even more so by the way in which Professor France weaves into his narrative the themes of military development and societal development, demonstrating how each influenced the other at different times, so that Perilous Glory is not just about weapons technology and military strategy but about the way in which different societies grew, and how their strengths, and particularly their wealth, enabled them to achieve heights of military sophistication not available to those whom, for reasons of conquest or realpolitik, they wished to attack.

This is as good a single volume as one might wish to read on a subject which should be of interest to anyone who wishes to understand the nature of war, and especially why, over the broad sweep of history, some nations have been so much more effective practitioners of it than others.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh