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Montgomery of Alamein

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BOOK REVIEWS

Chalfont, Alun. *Montgomery of Alamein*. New York: Atheneum, 1976. 356pp.

Of the many World War II marshals placed in the British pantheon by a grateful people and sovereign, only one is recognized as *the* Field Marshal—Bernard Montgomery. Since Chester Wilmot fell under the Montgomery spell and developed the Montgomery formula for victory into the sad refrain of missed opportunities in *Struggle for Europe*, we have been treated to controversy, polemic and apologia on both sides of the Atlantic which alternately adds to or dulls the luster of the Monty legend.

The latest contributor, Lord Chalfont, enters the arena with credentials of note. He was a Regular Army officer and clearly understands the British fighting man and his commanders. As Defence Correspondent for *The Times*, Chalfont was perhaps the ablest of the successors to Sir Basil Liddell Hart. The varied facets of Chalfont's career—regular serving soldier, journalist, essayist and practicing politician—add interest to *Montgomery of Alamein*; but, has Chalfont brought a new perception to the Monty story?

The author states his purpose clearly. Take a man who has practically none of the recognized and conventional requirements for the attainment of high rank in the British Army; then explain how such a man attained the highest rank while arrogantly insulting and disobeying his superiors, cruelly wrecking the careers of good officers, preening in public display and private correspondence like a peacock, openly despising and denigrating his peers, and claiming in all seriousness a strategic genius equal to that of Alexander the Great or Napoleon.

Chalfont, therefore, is not writing a military history of the Montgomery campaigns but rather is essaying an exercise in psychohistory or psycho-

biography. Predictably, the author finds that Montgomery has an unhappy childhood, is rejected by his mother who, at the same time, imposes a rigid discipline and enforces a spartan life. This very unattractive small boy learns to hate his mother, learns fear—"the fear of rejection," becomes a loner, and early develops an "obsessive determination not to be beaten" in any form of endeavor. Chalfont also finds in these early years a clearly defined "feminine side" to Montgomery's character which, the author opines, also is seen in Lloyd George, Hitler and John Kennedy (a rather strange selection one would think).

When Montgomery goes to Sandhurst in 1907 his entry into the profession of arms "savours of a reflex/swipe at his mother." The young man's part in brutalizing another cadet nearly loses Monty his chance at a military career. Nonetheless, he survives and is posted to India where, lacking private means and social standing, he immerses himself in the single-minded pursuit of his profession. At the age of 26 Monty enters the First World War, is severely wounded, promoted to captain and several times mentioned in dispatches. Montgomery was one of the pitiful handful of regular infantry officers who survived the 1914-1918 massacres but was not "turned off" by what he witnessed and continued in his all-consuming determination to master the profession of the soldier.

His career between the wars first shows him to be no more than a competent battalion commander, but nomination to Senior Instructor at the Army Staff College in Quetta gives Montgomery the opportunity to hammer out his personal military doctrine and recipe for preventing a reply of the military blunders he had seen in France. Chalfont's distillation of the Montgomery essence is clear and concise. The

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soldier in the ranks must be trained to use initiative—this is mandatory in modern war. Personal contact must be established between the man in the firing line and his leaders. Clarity in planning and the exposition of the plan requires the establishment of new and higher standards in the military staffing and information process. Training must be tough and continuous so that the few standard and easily discernible acts which win battles will be performed with surety in battle.

Montgomery, a brigadier in 1940, again distinguishes himself in action and after Dunkirk begins to catch the public eye and make a name with the troops. Why did the British soldier take to Monty? He was "colorful, eccentric and un pompous," says Chalfont; troops were impressed with his friendliness and apparent accessibility and appreciated his disregard of spit and polish.

The chapters on Montgomery's revitalization of the Eighth Army and the signal victory at El Alamein are lucidly penned, give an evenhanded appraisal of what Monty himself brought to this victory and what he borrowed from his less fortunate predecessors, and clearly trace "the progression from a somewhat awkward-looking little man to the assured, almost rakish figure which has passed into history."

Chalfont's chapters on Montgomery in the British Army are sure-footed, albeit none too friendly toward the subject. Montgomery's subsequent relationship with an Allied army seems harder for the author to manage—a fault which he sees suffered largely by the Field Marshal. Chalfont lacks a grasp of the extensive American documentation on the problems of Allied strategy and command and perforce relies on the self-serving memoirs and critical exposes of the postwar period. Montgomery, for example, is posed as the true father of the D-day invasion plans in 1944, while Sir Frederick Morgan and Eisenhower, who had outlined the whole package

before Monty came on the scene, are relegated to supporting roles. Chalfont seems to accept Montgomery's own belief that he would continue as the supreme commander of the allied ground forces following the breakout from Normandy and expresses surprise that after "victory so utter and complete" the newly made Field Marshal should be reduced on 1 September to the status of 21 Army Group Commander. In fact, Montgomery had been given no such assurance and was engaged in self-delusion (a process abetted by Brooke and the British Chiefs of Staff).

The debacle at Arnhem is charged to Montgomery's account, an assessment by the author which is superficial and not in accord with the contemporary records. As to the relative merits of Montgomery's proposed strategy for a rapid, single thrust on a narrow front to reach Berlin, when contrasted with Eisenhower's "broad front" advance and insistence on the opening of Antwerp as prerequisite to the battle for Germany, Chalfont concludes that Montgomery had shown so little skill in mobile warfare as to promise little hope of victory had he been given the nod (and 40 divisions) for the single, quick thrust to Berlin. Chalfont accepts the conventional—and convenient—view of many Britishers that Eisenhower was "the perfect coordinating, diplomatic Supreme Commander" (with the emphasis on the word "coordinating" while the word "Commander" is suitably muted). But the Field Marshal also receives only two cheers: "By the normal standards of battlefield generalship, Montgomery was a very good commander, if not one of the great captains of history."

At the end of this very readable, interesting—and somewhat disjointed—biography, the reader will find himself wondering what happened to the problem originally posed by the author, "how this man . . . reached the summit

of his profession and earned the affection and admiration of a whole generation." The method of psychohistory has failed—if indeed Chalfont ever applied it—and we are left with as good an answer as we may expect history to provide: "... the hour had come and so had the man. The situation was one which needed a Montgomery."

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Dingman, Roger. *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation, 1914-1922*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. 318pp.

Professor Dingman's thesis is that after the First World War, American, British, and Japanese politicians recognized that peacetime naval policy was not principally a matter of strategy or diplomacy, or even of economics, but that it was essentially an internal affair, a question of domestic politics. He supports this thesis by taking a close look at the developments in America, Britain, and Japan which led to the Washington Conference and the naval disarmament treaty of 1922. From this study of what he calls "the politics of national defense" of the three great naval powers, Professor Dingman has arrived at a general truth about arms control which he believes is as relevant today as it was some 50 years ago. Above all else, he concludes, "arms limitation by international agreement depends ... on careful, constantly changing, and correct estimates of the domestic risks and opportunities it presents to one's own leaders and to their prospective partners." This is a highly instructive insight, although (as I shall explain later) I have some reservations about its universal validity.

In his preface Professor Dingman tells us that when he began this work, as a Harvard doctoral dissertation, he expected to be writing diplomatic history.

He set out to discover why Japan and

the United States (to which he later added Great Britain) so suddenly turned away from their mounting naval rivalries after the First World War, to conclude a far-reaching agreement for the limitation of naval armaments at Washington in 1922. He found, to his surprise, that to answer this question he had to move out of diplomacy into the realm of domestic political decisions which determined national defense policies. Professor Dingman notes, for example how in the spring of 1921 Japanese Prime Minister Hara's preoccupation with the political implications of the Crown Prince's engagement made him reluctant to take positions on other issues, while British Prime Minister Lloyd George's preoccupation with Irish negotiations later that same year clearly affected his attitude towards the Washington Conference. Similarly, he reveals how personal political motives—his desire to succeed where Woodrow Wilson had failed, and his need to prove that the generally low estimates of his capacity were wrong—impelled President Harding to work hard and effectively for genuine naval disarmament.

From his extensive research, most notably into the official and other records in Tokyo, London, and Washington, Professor Dingman has produced a compact and carefully structured work which he insists is neither diplomatic nor naval history, but rather "a study in comparative history." As comparative history, the author's work is clear and systematic. The book's three sections deal first with the First World War, then the policy drift in 1919-1920, and finally the new policies of 1921-1922. Each section contains a separate chapter on American, British, and Japanese policy in the period. Although this arrangement somewhat breaks the continuity, it does permit the author to compare and contrast naval policy developments in each country in each period. The chapters on Japan are especially valuable, since the author's