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Louis A. DiMarco, *War Horse: A History of the Military Horse and Rider*. Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2008. Pp. xii, 415. ISBN: 978-1-59416-034-9.

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A one-volume history of mounted warfare is a bold undertaking, for the scope of the topic is immense. As Louis DiMarco remarks in the introduction to this new study, “the war horse and rider was a viable military system for more than 3,000 years, far longer than any other military system” (ix). It is a challenge that has largely defeated the handful of historians who have attempted the task thus far: G. T. Denison, in the late nineteenth century, wrote what was, essentially, a polemic advocating the then current “mounted rifleman” school rather than a history;<sup>1</sup> in 1961, James Lunt, a former cavalryman, published an elegy for his arm, too episodic to serve as a general history.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, two works, one a collection of essays,<sup>3</sup> the other a monograph by John Ellis,<sup>4</sup> attempted a more comprehensive coverage, but these slim volumes provide only superficial treatment of their topic, and Ellis’s work is marred by his ideological prejudices against those social classes who (in the west at least) traditionally dominated the cavalry branch. DiMarco’s work is different: in his history, the horse itself provides the strong, central, unifying theme. The physical characteristics of the horse, breeds and types, horse equipment, equitation and horse mastership (care of horses) in the field—these are DiMarco’s concerns as he takes his reader from the earliest years of man’s blossoming relationship with equids, up through their use by American special forces in Afghanistan today.

Familiarity with these subjects is absolutely essential to understanding the capabilities and limitations of cavalry forces throughout history, and yet military historians have often woefully, even wilfully, foregone any appreciation of the horse as a living, breathing creature. It is much easier to dismiss nineteenth- and twentieth-century cavalrymen, in particular, as technophobic reactionaries than to properly research subjects like remount services, the training of horse and riders, and the feeding and care of horses on campaign, in order to gain some sense of the factors that shaped cavalry performance in the field. Even so astute a historian as Robert Citino has characterized the cavalryman as a simple “military conservative,” “a hard to miss target,” whose continued existence was wholly at odds with modern firepower.<sup>5</sup> DiMarco’s contribution to the literature will, hopefully, deter such simplistic judgments. He argues, with some force, that the advent in the 1930s of reliable motorized vehicles, with reasonable cross-country performance and a good radius of action, and not modern firepower augured the obsolescence of cavalry. Up till then, at least, the military horse and rider must be taken seriously. The mounted arm, in a particular theater or era, must be judged carefully as a living system in its own specific context, a partnership of man and horse. In this regard, I can recommend DiMarco’s work as the best single-volume history of cavalry, but I must register some serious reservations, too.

DiMarco faces the same basic problem as cavalry’s other historians. To write a truly broad history of the arm is a daunting task requiring the author to be selective in his approach. DiMarco is honest about this from the start. He is fully aware of the crucial military significance of draft animals and gun teams, but these are not his subjects: the cavalry mount is his focus. Nor does he wish to re-tell familiar tales: the Light Brigade, Little Big Horn, Beersheba, etc. Although he illustrates each chapter with brief campaign histories to detail how the arm was used in the field in each particular era, limitations of space preclude fuller discus-

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1. *A History of Cavalry from the Earliest Times with Lessons for the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1877).

2. *Charge to Glory! A Garland of Cavalry Exploits* (London: Heinemann, 1961).

3. James Lawford, et al., *Cavalry* (London: Roxby, 1976).

4. *Cavalry: The History of Mounted Warfare* (1978; rpt. Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword, 2004).

5. *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899–1940* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2002) 42, 137.

sion of cavalry armies and battles. In some respects, DiMarco shows sound judgment in choosing what to include and what to exclude. His book is chronologically well balanced in its coverage of the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds, unlike Roman Jarymowycz's recent history of "cavalry," which devotes almost half its pages to the twentieth century and espouses the dubious notion that armored and mechanized formations are simply natural evolutions of horse-mobile troops.<sup>6</sup>

However, the exclusion of certain topics from DiMarco's work causes concern. Although his admiration for and appreciation of eastern horsemanship shines through in his handling of the Crusades and the Steppe armies, the more modern chapters are very western orientated, having far too little to say about the Mughals of India, the early modern Ottomans, or the Persian army of Nadir Shah. This may, of course, be a case of market pressures dictating content. Chapters on the American Civil War and the Second South African War will appeal to a popular audience, but both conflicts primarily demonstrate the near impossibility of extemporizing effective, mass cavalry arms out of next-to-nothing and the appalling and cruel "wastage" of horses arising from the attempt.

While clearly aimed at a wide popular readership, *War Horse* is based on thorough scholarship, as the careful footnoting and long bibliography attest. This is a difficult trick to pull off: it is not simply a question of content but of engagement in sometimes very specialized academic debates. For this purpose, DiMarco has the necessary credentials: he has taught military history at the Army Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He has a (retired) lieutenant colonel's particular insight into military organizations but generally avoids the common, regrettable soldier-turned-historian's habit of projecting modern military ideologies back into the past. He also has a very practical, firsthand knowledge of horses. Yet his mastery of the wider literature of his subject is patchy and his analyses sometimes seem dated.

For example, DiMarco's chapter on medieval warfare, "the Knight and his Mount," in some particulars reflects current academic thinking: he has no time for that old notion that the knight and his war horse utterly dominated the medieval battlefield. He is also very sure-footed when dealing with such issues as the impact of the stirrup and the size of the medieval war horse. But he also echoes very old-fashioned ideas that medievalists have long since overturned: "it is likely that Medieval men-at-arms and commanders did not fully understand the tactical complexity of charging with hundreds, or even thousands, of armoured cavalry .... unit training was nonexistent" (83). This is simply not the case. As Matthew Bennett has shown,<sup>7</sup> some western cavalry, for example, that of the military-religious orders, was thoroughly prepared to maneuver and fight in large formations and exhibited very good unit cohesion, and command and control, in combat. Bernard Bachrach, too, has demonstrated that the Norman cavalry had "a well established tactical repertoire" that included the kind of sophisticated manoeuvre more usually associated with Steppe armies, for example, the feigned retreats employed at Arques (1053), Messina (1060), and Hastings (1066).<sup>8</sup>

Similar problems arise elsewhere in the book. In his opening chapter, DiMarco asserts that "close scientific analysis of horse bits found in archaeological digs in Dereivka, Ukraine, combined with carbon dating techniques indicates that the earliest evidence of ridden horses dates to about 4000 BC..." (2). In fact, it is not clear that the antler artefacts found at the Dereivka site were horse equipment. The dig did yield teeth from a stallion, with obvious bit wear. These were originally misdated to c. 4000 B.C., but subsequent carbon dating revealed that the stallion actually died somewhere between 700 and 200 B.C. The debate about exactly when riding first developed remains ongoing, but DiMarco does not acknowledge this. Oddly enough, Robert Drews' book, *Early Riders*,<sup>9</sup> which argues that effective riding is a comparatively recent development, dating only from about 900 B.C., though it appears in DiMarco's bibliography, is not cited in the

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6. *Cavalry from Hoof to Track* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008).

7. "La Règle du Temple as a Military Manual, or How to Deliver a Cavalry Charge," in Christopher Harper-Bill, et al., *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1989) 7–20.

8. "The Feigned Retreat at Hastings," in Stephen Morillo, ed., *The Battle of Hastings* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1996) 189–94.

9. Subtitled *The Beginnings of Mounted Warfare in Asia and Europe* (London: Routledge, 2004).

relevant chapter, nor does it seem to have influenced his thinking generally. Further, recent scholars who argue for riding on the Eurasian steppe by 4000 B.C.<sup>10</sup> seem not to have been consulted at all.

DiMarco has drawn on both popular and academic studies (he has not undertaken original research for what is, after all, largely a work of synthesis) and in many areas he has chosen his sources well, especially on the ancient and medieval periods, the American Civil War, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century British cavalry. Yet significant names are missing, particularly in the areas of early modern warfare<sup>11</sup> and modern cavalry.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, some included sources are unreliable, such as a website that trots out jaded nationalist mythology about the natural horsemanship, horse-mastery, and bush craft of Australian troopers in South Africa, as compared to their blundering British counterparts.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter Eight, “Industrial War and Cavalry,” is the weakest in the book. Overwhelmingly concerned with the American Civil War, it argues, in a frankly dated fashion, that a progressive, modern American cavalry embraced a new role as a mobile firepower resource, while the conservative European cavalry arrogantly dismissed the American experience. Ironically, having castigated those snobbish Europeans for ignoring America’s Civil War, DiMarco announces that the European wars of the period, including the Crimea and the wars of German Unification, offered few lessons because they were “small-scale” (231). At Königgrätz (Sadowa) on 3 July 1866, 240,000 Habsburg troops engaged 250,000 Prussians (compare the 75,500 Confederate and 85,500 Federal troops at Gettysburg three years earlier). The Crimean War, lasting three years, involved four major powers—Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia—fighting on a global scale in the Baltic, the Balkans, the Pacific, the Crimea, and Anatolia, at a cost of 500,000 dead.<sup>14</sup> Hardly “small scale” conflicts. Nor were they insignificant in the history of cavalry, too, from the perspective of tactics (unhappy British experiments with revolvers in the Crimea; the successful French North African cavalry in the same theater), strategy, and operations (Russian use of “independent” cavalry during the siege of Kars). Their absence leaves a regrettably large gap in *War Horse*.

And yet DiMarco has managed to cover much ground in a text accessible to a wide audience. Having honed his skills authoring army manuals, he writes in a clear and direct style, without any great literary flourish. And, too, placing the horse at the center of his analysis gives the text a dimension lacking in comparable one-volume studies of mounted warfare. Those seeking an in-depth history of the military horse and rider are best advised to read the specialist works on specific eras and campaigns. But for those wishing an introductory survey that tells the story from prehistory to the twenty-first century, *War Horse* is the book to read, but it should be read with some caution.

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10. See, e.g., David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppe Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2007).

11. Specifically: Ronald Love, “All the King’s Horsemen: The Equestrian Army of Henri IV, 1585–1598,” *Sixteenth Cent. Journ.* 22 (1991) 510–33; Robert Frost, *The Northern Wars 1558–1721* (Harlow, UK: Longmans, 2000); Gervase Phillips, “Of Nimble Service: Technology, Equestrianism and the Cavalry Arm of Early Modern Western European Armies,” *War & Society* 20 (2002) 1–21; Karen Raber and Treva J. Tucker, eds., *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline and Identity in the Early Modern World* (NY: Palgrave, 2005); and James Woods, *The King’s Army: Warfare, Soldiers and Society during the Wars of Religion in France, 1562–1576* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

12. See Stephen Badsey, “Cavalry and the Breakthrough Doctrine,” in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996) 138–74 and Antulio J. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2000).

13. In fairness to DiMarco, Jean Bou’s excellent *Light Horse: A History of Australia’s Mounted Arm* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010) was not published in time to be of use to him.

14. Winfried Baumgart, *The Crimean War 1853–1856* (London: Arnold, 1999) 215–16.