Practical Wargaming
By C.F. Wesencraft
Review by Jonathan Aird

Practical Wargaming is, rather surprisingly, one of the less well known of the pioneering wargaming books. By the time it appeared, Donald Featherstone had promulgated his vision through a dozen or so volumes, and the hobby had grown large enough that it could accommodate other visions. Charles Wesencraft certainly had a different outlook on how wargames should be played, and on topics such as figure scale and troop representation. The heart of the Wesencraft approach was to use “stands” of figures to represent troops, and the rules he devised were quite a revolution—single figures were not removed, movement and combat was by way of elements with either complete removal or not (no slow attrition of figures as units bled down to their 75% or 50% strength points and had to check morale). In many ways this was a precursor of the popular DBx approach that would appear more than a decade later.

Examining the chapter titles shows that Practical Wargaming set out to be quite comprehensive: it moved from the basics of wargaming through the ancient period up to the late 19th Century. The Introduction gives in a space of 10 pages a delightful history of Wesencraft’s wargaming life, a how to build a wargame table that doubles as a storage unit and still includes room for two pages of praise for those who had influenced him and his adult approach to wargames. There are names such as Featherstone, Tunstill, Brigadier Young and Joe Morschauser, the last being an American wargamer who also developed element based games but used rosters to record casualties, a paperwork chore that did not appeal to our present author: “I much prefer to see a stand removed when hit. Why prolong the agony?”

This conversational tone is prevalent throughout the book, and when discussing rules or army organisation is coupled with an understated authority; the two provide a text that flows easily and is a joy to read as well as being a positive fuel to one’s enthusiasm.

The second chapter -- Preparation for Battle — covers both the practicalities of collecting an army, as well as the construction and effect on the game of different terrain types. Swamps are very dangerous places by the way! There is also a section on weather and the use of a “funk” board — basically an additional bit of table on which fleeing troops have a last chance to rally before leaving the game — a nice thought as it effectively extends the edge of the world by 1 foot at any given point on the table — a clever idea. With all the background in place, it’s time to start thinking about the actual rules to be used — and there are chapters on
Ancient Wargame Rules backed up by a chapter entitled The Specialists -- effectively a definition in game terms of each available troop type.

That the rules are designed for a fast, fluid, game is clear from the movement rates: light infantry do a whopping 18 inches (reduced by 6 inches if they shoot and move) and light cavalry are rocketing about at 30 inches per turn! The combat system involves units facing off to each other in long bouts of melee, the morale rules are not just based on reaching 50% losses, but have a reaction element as well to allow unhurt Ñ but surprised Ñ regiments to flee in panic. Units of the same type may be stronger or weaker willed than others based on a pre-game die-roll against their range of morale. All quite sophisticated additions to the game in 1974.

There are then two chapters modifying the rules to be used both with single-figure stands, if the player prefers these, and also for Grand Manner games where one stand represents a whole regiment. This was also quite a new idea at the time, but one which has been influential in recent popular rules.

It really is that easy to make a cottage terrain piece. The use of fabric for terrain is still very popular in the rule sets from Peter Pig

Similarly detailed rules are also provided for Medieval, Pike and Musket, Eighteenth Century, Napoleonic (including an Army Corps variant), American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War. All of the rules are clear and concise, and make good sense in offering to provide a fast moving but satisfyingly historic feeling game. Each set includes some Æperiod colourÆ so the medieval period has rules for sieges, the 18th century details the use of staff officers and the Napoleonic rules make account for the differing methods of organising armies in the many countries involved.
Contour hills – especially foam ones - seem to have fallen from fashion

With all due respect to the other early writers of our hobby, I feel it is only right to conclude this review with the statement that this is probably my favourite wargaming book of all time. And I am not alone in this opinion - I understand that Paul Le Long also thinks very highly of this volume. So, whoever had reviewed it was likely to be glowing in their praises. C.F. Wesencraft is one of the more overlooked of the wargame writers of the "Golden Period" of wargaming books. This is, to me, rather odd because, as well as having a number of very innovative ideas on wargaming, he was also very probably the best writer on wargames of that period. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that his writing remains a pure joy.

In short - this is a highly recommended addition to the wargamer’s bookshelf and is quite easily obtained. Original hardback copies can be had for ~ £15 on Amazon, and the book has fortunately been reprinted in paperback as part of John Curry’s admirable History of Wargaming project.
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