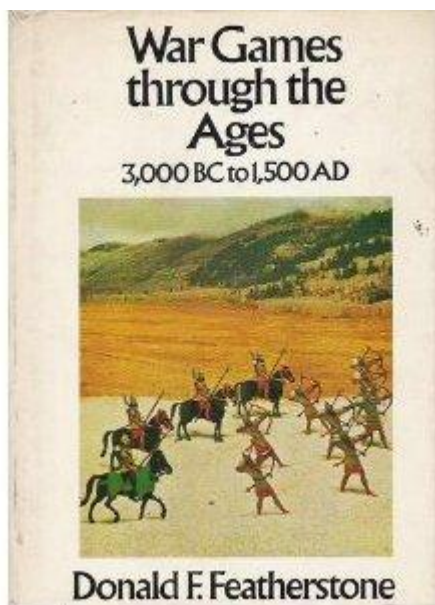


‘War Games Through the Ages, Vol. 1, 3000BC – 1500AD’

By Donald Featherstone

Review by Paul Le Long

Essentially this book is a history of warfare in the ancient and medieval periods slanted toward wargaming. The bulk of the book takes a look at historical armies – devoting a short chapter of half a dozen pages or so to each army and explaining a little of the historical background, how that army fought, what its strengths and weaknesses were and so on. At the end of each description is a “Fighting Assessment Chart” for that army which takes into account a number of factors like Bravery, Control, Discipline, Tactical Sense, Ferocity etc. A points-value is given to each of these with a total at the bottom which you can use to compare armies – the Mongols, for example, are one of the highest scoring with 50 points while the Indians score a miserable 12 points. Each chapter is headed by a very attractive line drawing of the typical soldier of that army – a nice little touch.



So what armies are covered? Going through the book in order we have: Sumerians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Macedonians, Romans, Carthaginians, Roman Civil War 50-44BC, Gauls, Germans, Goths, Britons, Cavalry Armies (everything from Scythians to Parthians), Huns, Mongols, Saxons, Vikings, Normans, Byzantines, Chinese, Franks, Japanese, Indians, Crusaders, Saracens, Ottoman Turks, Swiss, Hundred Years War, Mercenaries (an overview but concentrating on Landsknechts).

The book was published 40 years ago and I think it's fair to say that although the text is simple, clear, well laid out and easy to follow, the analysis is a bit dated. It has more in common with Sir Charles Oman (published in the 1890s and revised in the 1920s) than it does with more modern scholarship. Take the Saxons and Vikings, for instance – the fighting assessment score for the Saxons is 23 while the Vikings score 45. This reflects the traditional view that the Vikings were much better than the poor old Saxons. Read the “Viking Art of War” by Paddy Griffith (itself 20 years old) and you'll find a wildly different analysis which argues that the Vikings were beaten at least as often as they won, especially when they faced an organised enemy rather than a few defenceless farmers.

Having established that the book reflects the traditional view of historical armies – and in some cases a fairly old-fashioned view – does that mean you should avoid it? Absolutely not – I'm reading Oman at the moment and really enjoying it despite the fact that it is a bit dated and that modern scholars have presented different findings. It doesn't mean that Oman and Featherstone got it all wrong – far from it. Sure, you need to exercise some caution while reading the book but that doesn't detract from its value or appeal.



In fact, if you want a simple overview of the period (never mind the wargame element) then this would be a good place to start, I think. There is certainly a lot of information packed into its 304 pages. And it covers such a wide canvas – both in time, biblical to late medieval – and in geography; where else are you going to find Assyrians, Japanese and Swiss all covered in a single volume? That means the discussions of all these things are necessarily brief and in some cases simplistic – but that's OK if all you want is an overview and if you want more detail then you can use Featherstone as your jumping-off point for further study.

What else do you get? An introduction and some short explanations of the Fighting Assessments, wargaming the period, commanders and some appendices on availability

of figures, magazines, further reading and so on. Obviously, the appendices are well out of date.

Honestly, I love this book. Yes, it's dated but I find it oddly evocative and you get a brief, no-nonsense description of 4,500 years of military history and a description of no less than 30 armies from all over the world. Where else would you find all that in a single volume? Is it the definitive analytical bible for the period – no, of course not; it's too old-fashioned and too brief for that. But as a basic overview and starting-out point, I think it's perfect.

Details:

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The book is out of print but surfaces on Amazon & eBay regularly. The price varies from £11 to about £25.