

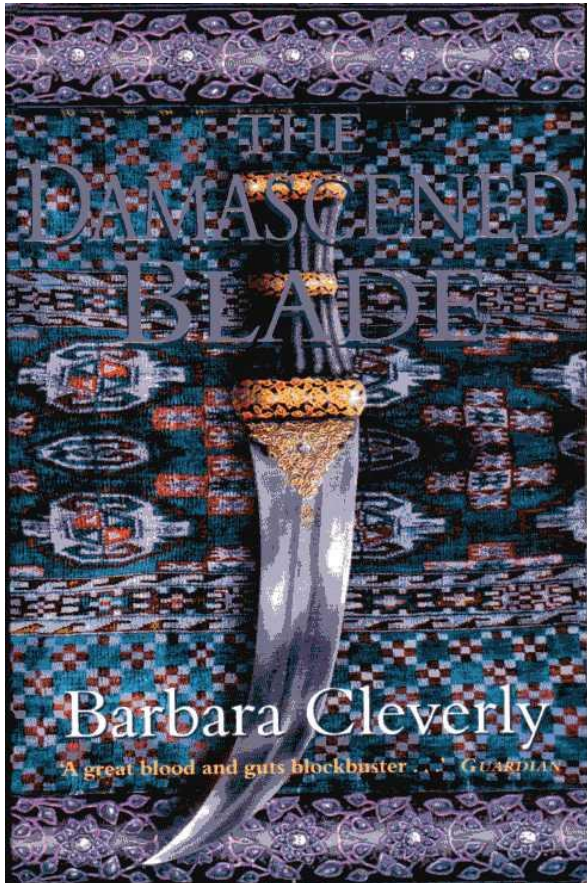
The Damascened Blade

By Barbara Cleverly
Reviewed by Derek Clark

Paperback ed. Pub. ROBINSON London 2004 (297pp.)

I am under instruction from our editor to “consider telling the readers what wargaming value the book has”. Well, that is going to be difficult because I haven't been wargaming long enough to be sure what makes a novel useful to wargamers, but I will take a stab at it.

There is a second problem and that is that I do not usually read female authors. The reason for this is because life is short and there are millions of books to read. Choices have to be made and my experience of women authors has not been happy unless they are bona fide historians. That said, I often read Edith Pargeter who is also the chap named Ellis Peters and thus the father and mother of the Blessed Brother Cadfael. She/he is also a Shropshire lass which automatically puts her above the norm.



Anyways, why Barbara Cleverley?

I am currently playing with 28mm in the NW Frontier in Wolvostan of the 1920's to 30's (don't search the map for it – outside of my head and gaming table it does not exist) and there is a dearth of novels set in the NWF. A mention, however, of *The Damascened Blade* on some part of social media quickened the pulse and I decided to give it a go. A quick Fleabay search and for £2.49 including postage a copy was mine.

For a week it sat in the pile of 10 selected for reading soon, all chosen from the pile of 40 plus for reading later than soon, while I carefully avoided picking it up until I had finished at least two of the four I had partially read. That day came, and with some trepidation I picked up the book and opened the cover and what a lovely surprise! A photograph of a lady of middling years with a beautiful smile (attached to, not separate, from the lady). Straightaway I was cheered and relaxed so I settled into my favourite recliner, put my feet up and turned a couple of pages to the dedication.

To the memory of
Great Uncle Brigadier Harold Richard Sandilands, DSO,
Legion d'honneur, Corona d'Italia,
5th (Northumberland) Fusiliers 1876-1961
General Officer Commanding, Peshawar District,
NW Frontier Province, India
1927-32

What a turn up! Barbara cleverly obviously has the NWF in her blood and I crossed paths with a Sergeant of the Northumberland Fusiliers as a boy soldier although all I remember of him was that his red and white hackle reminded me of a parakeet.

(Quiz question: Is a Great Uncle Brigadier a close relation of a Major-General?)

The foreword, written in 2001, is a gloomy reminder that Alexander the Great, the Moghuls, Sikhs, British and Russians (and Americans?) have all left graves in these hills and, by current reports, to little avail. Alexander also, allegedly, left green eyes in these hills, as is mentioned by every book on the area, which has got to make you wonder how he saw his way to Babylon, but not to worry!

The first chapter is eight pages of graphic violence. A thin and wavering scream turns to a bubbling gurgle, a skein dhu flashes twice, a Browning pistol barks, a mercy killing, a pot shot from a jezail and I thought the scene for the novel was well set but no, near to 20 chapters later I was still wondering when it would be relevant to the story.

In chapter two new characters are introduced: a Californian heiress combining beauty with horse riding and shooting skills, a Lord of business, a gung ho RAF officer, a widowed English female doctor who is trusted by the natives, the fort commander and his lady, another lord I think, an English public school educated native prince and his cousin and, lastly, a Commander of the Metropolitan Police who happens to be an ace detective and ex military.

The last is a very important character in this novel because it turns into a detective story. Murder, kidnap, a breech birth in a harem, an outlawing and escape carry the story forward until it meets with the past as relayed in the first chapter.

All is revealed and all suddenly makes sense.

Now the hard bit! What value is *The Damascened Blade* for the wargamer? Bearing in mind my earlier disclaimer, I am fairly certain that if you are a Brigadier, or better, in your wargames it has no value at all. There is no grand sweep of battle here.

If, like myself, company level and below is your cup of tea then the entry to the fort of the dignitaries in motor transport accompanied by a company of dusty lancers and met by the Frontier Scouts prompted thoughts of ambush on the journey, but this book gives no real detail to help or novel (sorry, couldn't resist) twists.

If your favoured rulesets are of the Pulp Alley, Tribal, Open Combat, Songs of Blades and Heroes, or Five Men in Normandy type, with their limited numbers and detailed analysis of each character's mind set, weaponry, stoicism, athleticism and varicose veins then there is grist for your mill here, and some plot. You can hardly go wrong for £2.49!

As a novel this is quite good (quite is above fairly and pretty but below very). It wasn't a pick up in the evening and finish at three in the morning with liberal doses of hot coffee to keep me awake, but I did pick it up each evening until I had finished. It is quite a clever story, and under threat of torture I would say it is a very good novel and not curse myself for weakness, but I will not convert it to hardback for my own library.

If, however, I see her other novels in charity shops I will read the blurbs and probably buy them.

Hth :0)

