

# The Gempei War 1180-85

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By Stephen Turnbull; illustrated by Giuseppe Rava

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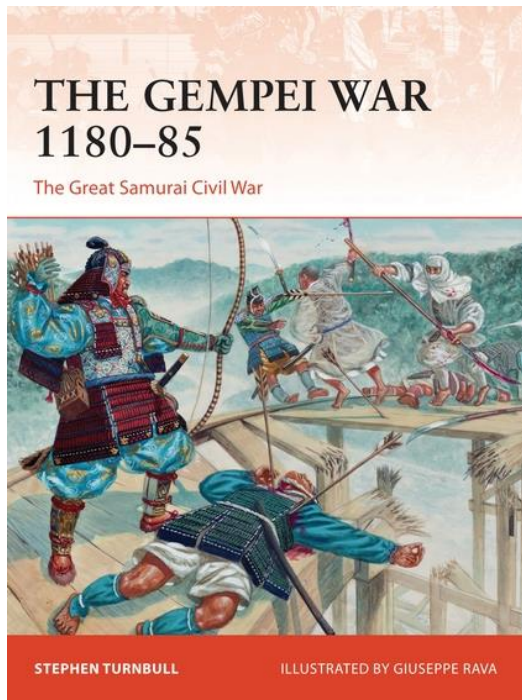
## Review by Jonathan Aird

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A span of six years is quite unusual for a campaign title, which typically concentrate on the build-up to, and prosecution of, a single engagement -- such as Agincourt -- or even for 20th century campaigns different days of battle or deployment of forces. D-Day 1944, for example, has so far required five Campaign titles -- and there may still be some more to come, surely the air campaign deserves separate coverage! Stephen



Turnbull's acknowledges this departure by himself describing the Gempei War as having three main stages -- each including several major battles. The Gempei War is, as Turnbull describes, a semi-legendary conflict in Japanese culture with tales of daring and exemplary adherence to the Samurai code at the heart of how it is recalled to this very day. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the truth is somewhat at odds with this folk-memory. The Gempei War was, in effect, a civil war focused on two clans vying for power within the existing Imperial framework ó the final victor would not make himself Emperor but instead became the first Shogun, effectively abrogating all the real power to himself.

The opposing sides in this conflict were the clans of Minamoto and Taira, each of whom had fellow travellers who fought alongside them and are referred to by the name of the clan they allied with, although they were never actually subsumed into a greater clan. Japanese hierarchies can be difficult to grasp for those not well versed in them, but fortunately Stephen Turnbull is a good guide. Naturally the opposing armies were of very similar appearance ó with the core being the armoured Samurai

warriors. There is a good chapter describing their equipment, their ways of fighting and the tactics adopted by groups within armies. This leads naturally on to the campaigns themselves, which started in 1180 with the Minamoto rebelling against the power of their rivals the dominant Taira clan under the guise of supporting Prince Mochihito's claim to be recognised as first in the line of succession to the Japanese throne. The first phase of the war is a tale of small armies facing off larger ones by clever use of terrain, and of individual combats preventing armies advancing across crucial bridges. There are routed leaders who make circuitous tours through friendly lands gathering an army to them as they continue to, apparently, flee. The Taira find themselves being bested when others join the rebellion in different parts of Japan ó splitting their forces and putting them on the back foot only to be saved by a terrible famine that strikes in 1182 bringing a lull in the fighting. It's difficult to truly feel that myth and reality are always kept separate in the retelling of the history ó but the political intrigues are compelling.

When war restarts in 1183, the successful Minamoto Yoritomo finds that he has a new problem ó his much younger cousin is a daring and successful general and thus a rival for his own clan leadership, so whilst prosecuting a war against his actual enemies -- the Taira clan -- he also starts to intrigue against his own followers! Be that as it may, it is this cousin who becomes the focus of success in battle, using deceptions to trick his opponents into overestimating his forces, and also using õsecret weaponsö such as cattle with flaming torches tied to their horns that were stampeded into the Taira lines at the Battle of Kurikara. It's stirring stuff indeed! This battle gets the full campaign treatment with a detailed topographical map of the battlefield showing troop movements. A subsequent battle is illustrated with a wonderful two-page artwork of a key moment of single combat. All very inspiring, as are the many colour artwork images taken from ancient and modern illustrations of the war made in the distinctive Japanese style.

The final phase of the war in 1184-5 has two more detailed battle maps ó one of a land battle and, as a nice change of pace, the other is of a climatic naval engagement the outcome of which swung on the treachery of one group of allies who switched sides mid-combat. Again, there are many inspiring illustrations which just serve to underline what colourful battles are offered by these Samurai clashes.

For anyone with little knowledge of Samurai warfare, this is an excellent short introduction to a pivotal series of campaigns and battles. Stephen Turnbull, of course, has already produced many other titles on the subject both for Osprey and other publishers. His classic Osprey hardback õThe Samuraiö (published in 1977) does cover the Gempei War ó but in nowhere near as much detail and the greater possibilities of colour illustration make this new volume a worthy successor to the chapter in that earlier book. Similarly, there is little overlap with his Arms & Armour Press volume on õSamurai Warfare,ö which concentrates far more on the 16<sup>th</sup> century. No ó the interested reader can safely purchase this book without dreading a rehash of earlier works, and the lavish colour treatment really serves the subject well. A very good read.