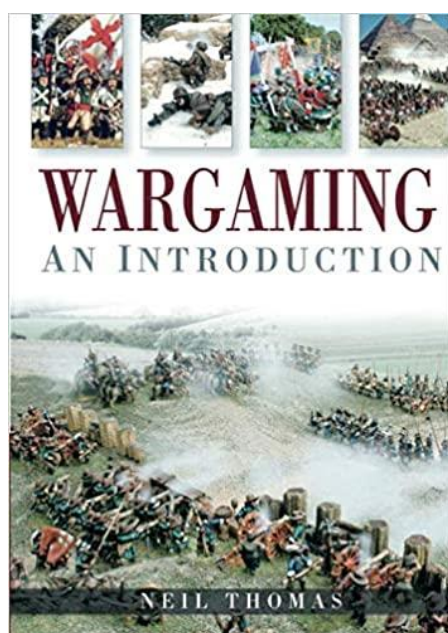


Wargaming: An Introduction

By Neil Thomas

Review by Jonathan Aird

Neil Thomas has become a well-known wargaming author in recent years, so much so that his first foray into the world of books of wargaming can now be regarded as deserving of review within the classics of wargaming series on the Lone Warrior blog! “Wargaming: An Introduction” is, after all, now fully fifteen years of age. Certainly when it appeared it was timely – there had not been a similar new contribution to take the reader from novice to fully fledged player for some years, and those previous introductory



texts of the 1980s were now long out of print and not easy for the casual reader to come across – if you’re buying from a military history bookseller or a wargaming trader then you have probably already crossed the wargaming Rubicon.

Sutton Books published a range of historical titles, many of them related to military history or archaeology, in a distinctive over-sized paperback format and Wargaming: An Introduction fitted in well with these other titles – since Sutton books appealed to those interested in Military History who better to put out a primer on historical wargaming? The book itself is different in style to earlier primers in that it consists of a couple of very short introductory chapters and a series of rulesets. ‘What is Wargaming?’ covers a potted history of Wargaming that documents a trajectory from simple Featherstonian wargame rules through the complexities

of WRG and back to “simpler times” with both WRG’s DBA and Warhammer Ancient Battles. Neil Thomas’ own rules, he states, adhere to these simpler styles. ‘Getting Started’ answers those knotty problems of picking a period, buying figures, painting and basing and sorting out a warboard to play over. The advice on the last of these is endearingly cheap and cheerful showing a throwback almost 50 years to a time when rivers could be made by cutting up an old pair of jeans, trees could be twigs from the garden, and rough rocky ground could be suitable stones similarly gathered. Unsurprisingly, no such tabletops appear in the glossy photographs at the centre of the book!

These are followed by a series of rulesets covering different time periods – Ancients, Pike and Shot, Napoleonic, American Civil War, Skirmish Wargaming (aimed at the Colonial period) and World War II. Each ruleset itself comes as three short sections – one covering the troop types of the period, the rules themselves, and a series of sample Army Lists from which the eight units to make up an army are selected, with each unit containing a certain number of bases of figures, for example a Pike and Shot unit of Arquebusiers consists of six bases each with three figures whilst a pike unit will have six bases each with four figures. There are usually fewer than a dozen troop types available – there is no fine grading of armour and troop type for the infantry in the Ancients rules, for example – just Heavy or Light Infantry, Heavy Archers or Warband. Nuance is added through the army lists – which pair up historically opposed examples and then distinguish, say Heavy infantry as having

extra-heavy armour. Cleverly, the army lists also provide a terrain guide for the battles – which means that Crusaders/Saracens/Mongols will find themselves fighting on open plains with a few hills, whilst Romans will fight their foes on mixed terrain of hills, rivers, and woods.

The rules are very similar to each other in terms of movement, missile attacks (which use a number of dice per base to calculate casualties on an opposing unit), melee (which use variable numbers of dice per base of figures depending on who they are attacking), and morale (which defines troops as one of three qualities and then requires dice rolls to prevent a unit losing cohesion under certain circumstances). Again, each period is given nuances that differentiate their rules from the other sets but the overall effect is of a very common approach – a bit like a boardgame series which might have a core set of common rules and then specific rules for a particular battle. Victory is usually achieved by reducing the enemy to 25% of their starting strength - this is achieved either through combat or by exiting one's own troops off the opponent's table edge, which then requires them to remove two units! This combination of limited troop types and the requirement to follow up units that are presumably heading to harry one's baggage train can give a slightly stilted and chess-like feel to the games, but the rules are also very easy to pick up and understand. The Skirmish rules and WWII wargame rulesets both differ somewhat from this approach due to the need to represent either individual figure actions or from the need to encompass a wide variety of weapon types – a Panzer I and a Tiger II just can't be sensibly represented by the simplistic "Tank" designation, for example.

The book is rounded out by a couple of Appendices – the first a Napoleonic Battle Report and the second a list of "Useful Addresses" which is highly selective – only seven figure manufacturers are given – but does include the SWA (albeit at the old UK address!). There is also an inspirational series of colour photographs spread over a dozen pages at the centre of the book.

Overall, *Wargaming: An Introduction* is quite a good, albeit atypical, example of the type. There is a lot less on the nuts and bolts of actually getting started on wargaming and the emphasis is very much on the rulesets. This perhaps reflects that the likely reader is not going to be a complete beginner or that no matter how much is written on, for example, making terrain it will always be less than what *could* be written. Although advice to cut plastic foam and paint it is perhaps the tersest response imaginable to help the reader to consider how to make hills for their terrain board. Having played a number of games with the Pike and Shot set in particular I am somewhat ambivalent about the rules as well as they seem somewhat constrained and artificial leading to the chess-like feel alluded to before. However, on the other hand, it is worth recalling that this is only an introduction, and Neil Thomas would go on to produce volumes just for the Dark Ages, Napoleonics and 19th Century Wargaming that expanded on the rules provided here. And I have, naturally, also bought those books, which certainly suggests there is something worth reading in this one. *Wargaming: An Introduction* provides one way of approaching the hobby and although it is now out of print it is well worth picking up for a reasonable price.

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