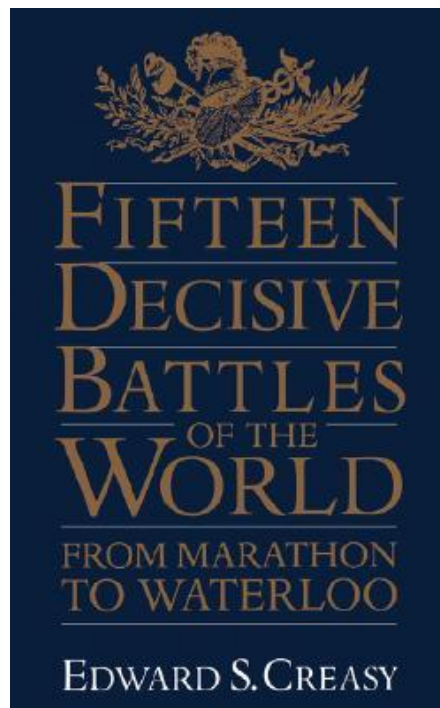




The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo

Edward Shepherd Creasy

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Undoubtedly the most famous work of military history of the nineteenth century, Edward S. Creasy's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* has been read and re-read for close to 150 years. It is not only the authoritative account of each battle that makes Creasy's work such a classic--it is his command of narrative, his interest in human struggle, his profound deductions as to effects of the battles, and his striving after truth. Furthermore, his selections seem as wise and well-considered today as when *Fifteen Decisive Battles* first appeared in 1851: Nobody since has made better ones, nor given us better accounts.

Apart from the scholarship and literary skill of Creasy's book, there is another reason it has endured: Creasy was essentially fair-minded. He had been a judge, and when he became England's great military critic and historian, he maintained a thoroughly judicial attitude. He was not a British partisan, nor French, nor German--he was a cosmopolitan observer of great events.

Out of 2300 years, Creasy only found fifteen battles which he called decisive in the highest sense. He chose them not for the number of killed and wounded, nor for their status in myth and lore, but because they fundamentally changed the course of world history. In doing so, he made his book a miniature military history of the western world, a classic that will repay continued study for generations to come, as it has for generations.

The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo Details

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Adam Windsor says

Creasy's selection of battles strongly reflects his European heritage, and any prospective reader should go in well-warned that his text also strongly reflects the prejudices of a wealthy Victorian, with frequent glowing remarks about the mission of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Are the military and political insights worth stomaching the racism? Eh, not really, I'd say. He does better with the political - that is, the establishment of the situation leading up to the battle, and the reasons why he considers it a decisive encounter - than he does with the purely military. The actual conduct of some battles is barely touched on, while others include details that I suspect have very little evidence to support them. Most notable in the latter category is the Battle of Hastings, where we get accounts of the actions of numerous individual soldiers within the melee.

If this is a subject matter of interest to you, I'd suggest looking for a more recent text, with more academic rigour and fewer - or at least less pervasive - cultural prejudices.

Chuck Shorter says

I always enjoy reading about ancient wars and the rise and fall of empires especially when they are of great biblical importance. I discovered this work while perusing the internet looking for some information on the Battle of Marathon. As you can see from the title I got fifteen battles for the price of one. Although the book was free on my Kindle. Several of the battles that were covered involved conflicts with the Persian, the Greek and the Roman Empires which is all Daniel chapter 2 kind of stuff. I read as far as the Battle of Tours (AD 732) which stopped the spread of Islam into Europe. This book was written in the mid-nineteenth century, contains a wealth of background information on the major participants, the current political and social climates and is surprisingly easy to read for being so old.

Josh Hamacher says

Edward Creasy was a 19th-century historian who is best known, it would seem, for this volume. It contains accounts of fifteen battles that he felt were crucial to the development of European culture.

I don't mind the euro-centrism; that's typical of the era in which it was written. What I do mind is his long-winded delivery. There are times, when I'm into the second page of a single paragraph, that I couldn't help thinking "just get to the point already".

There's a lot to recommend this book in terms of information, both in and of itself and as a cultural reference for the era in which it was written. I just couldn't make myself truly enjoy it though.

Rose says

I inherited this book from a family friend. It starts with the Battle of Marathon between the early Greeks and moves up through to the Battle of Waterloo. The biggest insight for the whole book is how people make the difference in every single conflict; it comes out over and over again that crucial decisions by people are what win wars. My favorites were the Battle of Hasting and the Roman's defeat by Arminius. The language can be a little difficult for modern readers, but it's well worth the effort. This is a great book for anyone who wants to understand human nature.

Ron Weddle says

Anglophilic

Definitely an anglophilic account of 15 great battles of history up through Waterloo. Too much in other languages without translation.

Sudeeksha Maheshwarappa says

Loved reading this book, specially the strategy parts of the battles.

Perry Whitford says

In his preface to this quixotic attempt to label the fifteen most 'decisive' battles in history up to the time of writing in 1850, Creasey announces himself loud and proud as a classically educated Victorian, asserting with brazen chauvanism how the battle of Marathon "confirmed the superiority of European free states over Oriental despotism", then ultimately crediting all that happens in love and war to "the design of The Designer".

The point about Marathon is subsequently echoed twice more in the chapters that focus on the battle of Chalons (AD 451) where a combined Roman and Gothic army finally stalled the extraordinary advance of Attila the Hun across mainland Europe and the battle of Tours (AD 732), where Charlamagne did the same with regards the Saracens. So, you know the eastern half of the globe won't get much of a look in here, but it's still a compelling list, beautifully written with extensive quotations from a timeless set of sources.

In truth, knowledge about the east was pretty thin to early Victorian historians. Creasey does acknowledge the (then) recent translation work of Rawlinson, which decoded the writing on the monuments of the Persian kings, conceding, rather poetically, how those kingdoms "appear before us through the twilight of primeval history, dim and indistinct, but massive and majestic, like mountains in the early dawn."

Generally though he paints all wars between east and west as straight up battles between free thinking democracies and despotism, which limits "the extent to which it shall be lawful for the human mind to prosecute its inquiries". Even pointed reference to the slaves the Athenians brought into battle with them is an irony that passes Creasey by. Yep, it's the democratism of the elite that he favours, with kings as benign heads of state and proletarians as canon fodder!

When it comes to his treatment of other historians, however, Creasey is entirely contemporary in his outlook,

or, rather, timeless. He slugs them off from the preface onwards, at one stage accusing a particular one of partiality whilst seemingly oblivious to his own shameless tub-thumping towards all things British. Of Hastings (AD 1066) he says "no one, who appreciates the influence of England and her empire upon the destinies of the world, will ever rate that victory as one of secondary importance".

Well, maybe that's true, but elsewhere he gets a bit carried away whilst drawing parallels between Victorian colonial successes and those of Alexander, then likening the sight of a British officer on the battlefield in India to the inspiration the Syracuseans took from the support of a Spartan general whilst defending themselves against the besieging Athenians in BC 413.

That said, his inherent belief in the essential rightness of all things British makes the book more than just an excellent introduction to some of the world's greatest battles, it is also an interesting period piece. Most compelling though is his mid-19th century view of the burgeoning powers of America and Russia. He marvels at their express acquisition of territory and rise in influence, taking a vicarious pride in the achievements of the english-speaking Americans whilst delivering a stern warning about the Russian's adoptive status as "protectors" of the Slavic peoples. The advent of the USSR was less than a hundred years in the future.

A seminal work, still of value and highly enjoyable, but utterly Victorian in tone and outlook.

Alex Dove says

Should be titled The Fifteen Most Important Battles for the British Empire

Dave H says

What I most enjoyed about this book was just how gloriously unfashionable it is. Creasy is all about his great men, clashes of civilization and individual deeds of valour shaping the course of history. Given the tendency in modern historical scholarship to focus on development, downplay difference and focus on 'outsider' stories (didn't you know a bi-curious, one armed Inuit dwarf accompanied Colombus on his voyage of discovery?), this was a blast of fresh air.

Of course Creasy's choice of battles are open to debate, but given that he was writing in the mid-nineteenth century it seems obvious that focus needs to be given to Britain's rise... And yes, do take some of his comments, especially in relation to British/European superiority and Eastern decadence with a big pinch of salt.

Chris Bumpas says

Couldn't get through the end. It slowly got more and more boring and life is too short to read boring books.

Kyle Bunkers says

This took me a good while to get through. The writing is at times quite interesting, but is marred by its age (it has a British imperial attitude) and by a tendency to write too much about each battle (in my opinion). I don't mind a good amount of explanatory material, but it felt like many battles just had too much detail on things not directly relevant to the battle. The Battle of Waterloo seemed to drag on forever for me, as I would prefer a nice summary of each battle with some extra information. If you want an exhaustive account (though no longer up-to-date) account of the battles, this should quench your thirst for such a thing.

I can't say I'd recommend this unless you really, really like reading about battles and having lots and lots of background.

Kevin Wolters says

Good Read

I gave this book four stars because it was interesting and detail oriented. I wish each battle ward accompanied with maps and/or pictures.

Marijan says

IMHO, the only proper way to read this book is to consider it not only a historical book, but a historical document itself. being written in 1851, three years after a string of revolutions shook Europe, and when napoleonic wars still were in memory of living people, it reflects the opinions of it's age and time. Even choice of battles (never mind the Marathon, or Chalons, which is not that surprising, but there are Athenian expedition to Sicily, Metaurus, Teutoburg forest, Poltava) reflects this. There is not a single battle fought outside Europe included. And on several occasions author clearly states that it's the European, germanic, and particularly anglo-saxon side that was destined to 'bring forth civilization' to the 'savage and barbaric' parts of the world. Occasionally disgusting in its blatant eurocentism, it does have it's shining moments, when gallant foe is appriciated, such as Joann of Arc, or Napoleon and his marshals. A bit dry, but enjoyable reading for someone interested in military history.

todd says

The 1851 British-centric perspective is the biggest challenge to the modern reader, but Creasy makes a convincing case for why these 15 battles ranging from early Greece to the battle of Waterloo were critical junctions where history could have taken a decidedly different turn. My own gaps in world history were clearly evident as I learned more of previously understudied conflicts.

As the battles moved closer to Creasy's own time, he imparted a more personal view of their importance. When the Duke of Marlborough defeated the French forces of Louis XIV at Blenheim in 1704 it not only permanently set back the Sun King, but effectively prevented a Spanish-French alliance from restoring a Catholic Europe. Five years later at the Battle of Pultowa, a young czar Peter defeated the invading Swedish King Charles XII, effectively preserving Russian independence and allowing the rapid progression of that country that led Peter to later be dubbed "The Great." If either of those battles had turned out differently, Creasy argues convincingly that the path of history would have been fundamentally altered.

The most interesting chapter to me was about the Battle of Waterloo, not because of the great insights about the battle itself, but because it happened only 35 years before the writing of this text. Creasy notes that in 1851, Britain had been essentially at peace for over 35 years, a remarkably long time by their standards and a state impossible to imagine if Napoleon had not been permanently removed. Though Creasy notes that not all wars are created equal:

"We have not had hostilities with either France, America, or Russia; and when not at war with any of our peers, we feel ourselves to be substantially at peace."

This perspective is not dissimilar from our own view today. Do small wars with inferior foes matter? Are tactical efforts that lack world changing importance destined to be personal tragedies for the many involved first hand while ultimately being of no importance? Why have we had no big wars with decisive world changing battles for now over 70 years? Is it an accident of history, or a result of many little wars we have waged while pretending we are at peace?

Since we cannot replay events in an exercise of counterfactual history, we shall probably never know the answer. But Creasy's history reminds us that mankind has regularly reached major crossroads that have been resolved in the most violent ways imaginable, a fact that no one making policy today should lose sight of.

Gary Howells says

a great book
