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Review of *Air Force Blue: The RAF in World War Two* by Patrick Bishop

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BOOK REVIEWS

at Fontaine-les-Clercs on 21st March. But how do such successes compare to the record of other divisions? If we are to understand the full extent of the Ulster Division's success or failure in March 1918, then that needs some attention.

Overall though, Nugent has produced a readable and engaging narrative which performs a great service to the division and those interested in its role in a relatively neglected aspect of its history. It will be especially valued by those with some family connection to the men who served. I had two great-uncles serving in the division in March 1918, one of whom, in the 15th Royal Irish Rifles, was taken prisoner. Nugent's highly commendable work will be an essential point of reference in seeking to reconstruct such individual stories.

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Patrick Bishop, *Air Force Blue: The RAF in World War Two*. London: William Collins, 2017. xxi - 410pp. ISBN 978-0007433155 (paperback). Price £9.99.

In his latest volume of a remarkable series of social histories of the Royal Air Force (RAF), Patrick Bishop has tackled the war conducted by the RAF as a whole rather than previous volumes which have concentrated on the exploits of Fighter Command or Bomber Command. As with his previous works, Bishop does not set out to demonstrate an overall argument or thesis, but instead he explores the social history through the eyes of some of those involved. The scope of the book is largely focused on the European theatre of the Second World War with the bomber offensive being one of the major areas to be explored. There are also chapters that look at peripheral theatres such as the campaign in Burma, the fighting of the Western Desert Air Force in North Africa and the oft-forgotten work of Coastal Command in the Battle of the Atlantic. The book further explores an under-researched area of the RAF's pre-war history, the social changes brought about by the expansion caused due to rearmament in the mid- to late-1930s. This was a fundamental sea-change for the RAF that, whilst more meritocratic in its selection of officers and men, still had a relatively rigid social structure that senior officers were keen to preserve.

Overall the scope of the book is a bottom-up approach to the RAF and the Second World War that places the thoughts and feelings of those conducting the strategy into greater focus. The personal and social side of the RAF is neatly interwoven with the

operational narrative that forms the framework to view how those involved in conducting the operations or repairing and re-arming the aircraft saw not only themselves and the role they were playing but how this did or did not affect how they saw their place within the wider context of the war itself. The book is also not limited to the experience of men. The voices of a selection of women can also be heard, with particular stand outs being those adjusting to military life and being able to forge a new and unexpected form of identity.

Those with an understanding of recent RAF and First World War historiography may find issue with some of the wider claims made in the book, such as that there was little co-operation in the British Empire in the 1920s and 1930s, and what little co-operation there was, was largely irrelevant and the comparisons of the RAF's bomber offensive to the attacks of the First World War. The fundamental research of the RAF's actions in the Second World War was largely based on the same, somewhat dated works, indicating that the author is not fully aware of some of the developments that have been made in our understanding of the reasoning behind the actions of the RAF during this conflict. This is certainly a book aimed at a general readership, although there are useful snippets of information for an academic audience. The one major failing of a work of this nature comes in the overwhelming use of eyewitness and first-hand accounts with little attempt to interrogate the sources used both for accuracy. This is not a direct criticism of this book, or any of a similar nature, but a healthy scepticism of sources of this nature that can be especially illuminating but require interrogation as comparison with other available sources of evidence. A book of this nature can only be strengthened by placing the experiences of those involved at the sharp end within the wider academic historical developments currently taking place. Whilst the focus on the major theatre of the RAF is understandable and is what the audience of this particular book would expect, a wider focus on different theatres would have added more colour and provided a greater depth of understanding of the pace of social change at different distances from London and if this distance had any effect on how the war was experienced. This is an engaging and enjoyable book that explores a newly developing area of historical research and should provide a platform for future study into how the Second World War was experienced by those involved at the sharp end of the fighting. It is a very welcome addition to the history of the RAF in both the inter-war and Second World War periods.

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