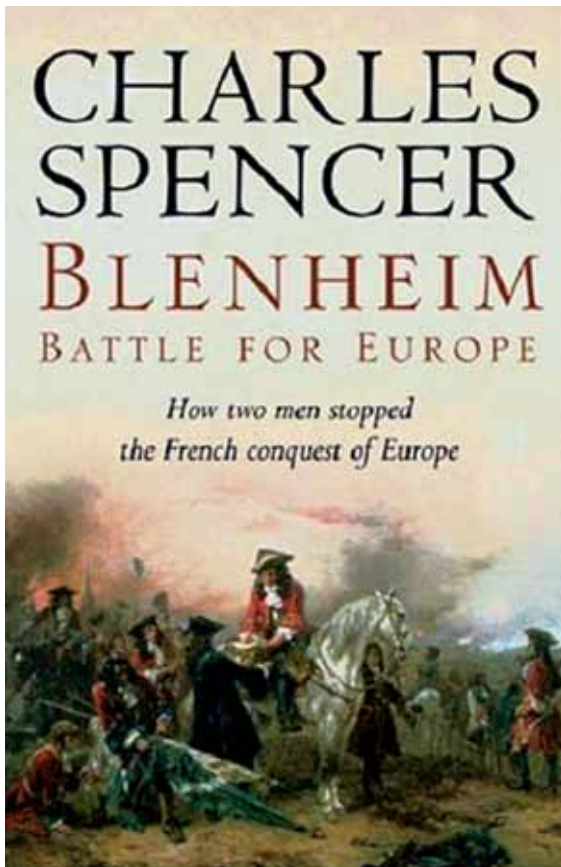


READERS CHOICE



Blenheim. Battle for Europe by Charles Spencer
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004. 352pp (Hardcover).
ISBN: 0297846094 (£20) Phoenix paperbacks,
2004. 368pp (Paperback). ISBN 0304367044
(£8.99)

Perhaps better known for being the brother of Diana, the Princess of Wales, and in particular for the eulogy delivered at her funeral in Westminster Abbey, Charles Spencer is also a first rate historian as revealed in this engaging book. A Modern History graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford, Spencer chose the subject matter due to his direct family connections with John Churchill, and to coincide with the tercentenary of the battle in 2004.

The book, drawn from original sources, tells the story of the Battle of Blenheim, along with the events leading up to it and the main characters involved. The battle was the culmination of the War of the Spanish Succession, when the mighty army of King Louis IV of France was finally checked. Blenheim, the most important English victory on foreign soil since the Hundred Years' war, was fought in Bavaria by 50,000 men of the armies of The Grand Alliance, under the command of John Churchill, and 60,000 Franco-Bavarian troops led by Louis, the Sun King, on August 13, 1704. 40,000 men were left dead or wounded at the close of play.

It is divided into five sections: Louis's Europe, The War, The Campaign, The Battle, and The Aftermath, each broken down into short, digestible chapters. A fast-paced book, it reads more like a novel than many other contemporary historical tomes, with the account of the battle itself being particularly absorbing. The diplomatic strategies and ploys in the build up to the battle are particularly well brought out in the book, serving to illustrate the reasons for the two armies forming, and the necessity of the final confrontation.

It is a praiseworthy effort, particularly from a tyro historian. My only gripe would be that more maps could have been included as I find that more is usually better in order to understand the build up to a battle. However, this does not substantially detract from an excellent book.

Marlborough's glories would, no doubt, be well known to the generations of children brought up on the glories of the Empire but are now, sadly, gradually being forgotten. Waterloo and Agincourt rightly remain as part of the collective national psyche, but Blenheim stands alongside these seminal battles in terms of its importance as it undoubtedly changed the course of European history. Winston Churchill stated that 'the destruction of the Armada had preserved the life of Britain: the charge at Blenheim opened to her the gateways of the modern world.' The estate of Blenheim in Woodstock, near Oxford, completed in 1722, was given to the first Duke of Marlborough in 1705, as a gift from a thankful nation.

In these post-cold war days, where the stability of Europe is largely taken for granted, this book is a salutary reminder of more troubled times. In the words of nineteenth-century British historian Sir Edward Creasy: "Had it not been for Blenheim, all Europe might at this day suffer under the effect of French conquests resembling those of Alexander in extent and those of the Romans in durability." Blenheim deserves to be remembered, and this book will no doubt go some way to address this imbalance.

Maj N M Walker

If you would like to submit a literary review for consideration please contact me by e-mail at paulantonyhunt@doctors.org.uk. Submissions should be no more than 500 words and must include the full details of the title, author, publisher and an ISBN number.

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