

"Wartime Courage" – "Stories of extraordinary courage by exceptional men and women in World War Two" by Gordon Brown

Reviewed by Alan Lloyd

The merits, or otherwise, of this particular book are worthy of review and consideration on two levels, the book itself and the political journey of its author.

The book is a compendium of eleven different stories of heroism in World War Two, and is intended to be a "testimony to sacrifice". They clearly show that it is impossible to forecast who will be the bravest of the brave, until time and circumstances make their demands. Brown relates wonderful examples from each of the three services, from home and abroad, involving civilian and service personnel. Each of the stories are very different but what they all have in common, apart from the backdrop of WWII, is the personal, unthinking, selfless act of courage which separates the most heroic men and women from the rest of us.

The first stories include the first Victoria Cross to be awarded to a Royal Navy Reservist in WW2, who commanded an anti submarine trawler in Norwegian waters; then the tale of the midget submarine attack on the massive German battleship "Tirpitz"; and the physics teacher turned bomb disposal expert who was "one of only eight people to receive the George Cross and George Medal".

These are followed by the activities of officers in the raiding force which was later to become the Special Boat Squadron. Sadly they all paid the ultimate price, with one of them surviving a raid in France and helped by French patriots to escape into "neutral" Spain, only to be handed over to the Germans and later executed – another victim of British non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War which allowed Franco and his fellow fascists to defeat the democratically elected Republican Government.

Other acts of heroism include the group of British POW's who saved a Jewess from extermination in the adjoining concentration camp; a young Pilot Officer lost in the first 1,000 bomber raid, flying a hopelessly inadequate aircraft; Special Operations Executive agents in France, on what amounted to little more than suicide missions for so many of them; SAS paratroopers on a D-Day mission; and the only two brothers to hold the VC and GC respectively.

The civilian examples are that of Eric Liddell, best remembered from the film "Chariots of Fire", who was working as a missionary in China when he was thrown into one of the abominable Japanese internment camps; and the railwaymen in East Anglia who saved a whole town from a blazing ammunition train.

The final story could be seen as the odd one out, as it is not a single act of courage that Brown

wishes to recount but a "model of military leadership in a democratic society" in a testimony to General Sir William Slim. Severely wounded at Gallipoli, and then in Mesopotamia in World War One, Slim went on to spend ten years with the Indian army before being transferred to the Burma Corps in 1942, finally leading the Fourteenth Army in 1945. Brown describes the qualities of this ironmonger's son as "modesty, resilience, determination, courage, a capacity for careful analysis, and an abiding concern for the welfare and morale of all whom he led."

Other than this personal view of the qualities of Slim, which are very interesting when considering the personal qualities of Brown himself, the book is absent any political or social judgements – all the stories are told absolutely "straight". One can imagine that some reviewers, particularly those with a political axe to grind with Brown, may declare the book is lacking in emotion or passion, but I would argue that it leaves these magnificent acts of courage to be seen for exactly what they were, without any additional hyperbole.

This book is a fitting testimony for all those who gave so much in the fight against fascism, and it would be a worthy addition to the bookshelves of readers of all ages. It is also an enthralling book, with the 232 pages being relatively small and generously spaced, thus ensuring a very easy read.

For political anoraks it is also interesting to look at this book and speculate on the political passage of Brown the politician. With the style of his writing, and the subject of the book, it is not difficult to suggest that here is a classic example of a, once, left-wing socialist intent on changing the world, who is now very content and comfortable at the heart of the British establishment commentating on very safe, if also very worthy, subjects – his last book was "Courage: Eight Portraits". And yet.....

The fiery socialist was very evident in his first book about the magnificent Red Clydeside MP James Maxton. ("Maxton" - Collins/Fontana 1988). At a time when the, almost, total absence of working class Labour MP's has recently been highlighted in our modern parliament, Maxton was one of ten socialist MP's from Glasgow's fifteen constituencies who were successful in the election of 1922.

Brown's biography could not be accused of hero worship, as it is a thorough academic work, but he does not try to hide his admiration for a totally committed man, who said when leaving Glasgow for London – "People talk about the atmosphere of the House of Commons getting the better of the Labour men, they will see the atmosphere of the Clyde getting the better of the House of Commons". He also wrote that; "Maxton's view of the leadership was that the leader himself does not matter very much. He was more concerned with the content of the socialist agenda than with the men who led the movement."

There are also parallels with today's economic crisis when Brown recounts that the analysis of the 1930 Clydesiders was that the "main reason for unemployment was the lack of demand within the British economy, and that only increased working class purchasing power could remedy this".

His observation of the stance taken by the Labour Party at the time was that; "at the very

moment when events called out for a radical political response, the British Labour Party seemed immobilised, frozen by the enormity of the challenge".

Who says that politicians do not learn the lessons of history? So for those who wish to see more of Brown the socialist, just maybe.....

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