

By James Holland
Reviewed by Ian Shields
In this seventieth anniversary year of the Battle of Britain, James Holland's new book that looks afresh at those critical five months in the Summer of 1940 is a timely arrival. This is a long book (over 600 pages of text, together with a further 70 of notes, sources and index) and is very detailed. The book has been well received (Saul David in The Sunday Telegraph on 16 July 2010 describing it as "excellent") and I was very much looking forward to reading it. Good though the book is and it has many strengths for me its faults were rather too obvious.
However, let me start by emphasising the book's strengths. The work seeks to put the Battle in a wider context, and although the title suggests just the five month period of May to October 1940, the first third of the book deals with the earlier months of the War, and in particular the fall of France and Dunkirk. Furthermore, he seeks to put the aerial battle in the context of a much wider struggle, including aircraft production and repair, maintaining moral on the home front, the battles on (and under) the sea, and the political conflicts both within the House of Commons and between Britain and America (in this latter instance, the US Ambassador, Joseph Kennedy, is the subject of much criticism by the author). Holland also seeks to bring the narrative alive by telling the story at least in part through the eyes of participants on both sides, and not just aircrew. And he is most certainly to be congratulated for the depth of his research, which has clearly been a gargantuan undertaking.
It is this research with which I have my first of my difficulties. Holland has made extensive use of the archives, plus some interviews with survivors, although there is always a danger that they have told their stories so many times by now that they may no longer be able to distinguish true memories from imagined. However, the bulk of his sources are clearly secondary, using books and the memoirs of others, which he appropriately acknowledges. Next, although the author is good at distilling the story, he is somewhat lacking in critical appraisal or analysis, as witness his lionising of the Spitfire in the closing paragraphs of his book, while his claim that these five months changed world history when arguably there have been many more critical junctures both before and since are largely unsubstantiated. For some his use of the experiences of individuals to bring to the narrative to life will be pleasing, but I found it confusing in parts (he arguably has too large a dramatis personae) and again lacking in objectivity: he too often describes the participants whose stories he is including in glowing personal terms (good looking, muscular, attractive and so forth). Meanwhile, the maps were almost in a 1940's pastiche, and lacked clarity, and his English I found overly casual for his subject matter, being littered with split infinitives and haphazard sentence construction. However, my biggest difficulty is that the author does not stick to his own title, with too much of the book given over to events that were not within the five-month window the title suggests.
While these remarks may appear overly critical, it is important to appreciate what this book is, and what it is not. As an overview of the first fifteen months of the war it is good, and if it had been titled The Battle For Britain, 1939 – 1940 it might have been slightly more honest. There is, however, a place for this book on your bookshelves if you seek a fairly accessible read and a broad introduction to the period that includes what we now call the Battle of Britain. Alongside pleasurable reads such as Rowland White's Vulcan 607, this book holds its own, but although he may seek to emulate Anthony Beevor, James Holland is not in the same league. An enjoyable read and one that does well in linking the aerial battle to wider issues, while this book falls short of serious history it is worthy of consideration for those seeking to explore the events of the Summer of 1940 for the first time, perhaps before moving on to, for example, Richard Overy's book – confusingly also titled The Battle of Britain.