Reviewed by Ian Shields

This weighty tomb, at nearly 650 pages, came highly recommended with dust-sheet endorsements from Professors Richard Holmes (The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French) and Andrew Roberts (Napoleon and Wellington : The Battle Of Waterloo—And The Great Commanders Who Fought It), which augured well. Physically, the book is well produced, which helps, and it proved to be both a fascinating and educative read. For once the publicity surrounding the launch and endorsements are accurate. Indeed, I found it hard to put the book down and it took me some time to read only because it demanded, and deserved, careful attention.

It feels almost churlish to criticise this book, although there are a few detractions to this important new work. First, I learnt comparatively little about Manstein the man, other than that he was very much a product of his time and upbringing, and was representative of a class, that has today if not disappeared, then become very difficult to recognise. The detail of which corps, division or battalion formation was moving where and under whose command was almost overwhelming on occasions, leaving the reader to decide whether to keep a very accurate tally of all the units listed, or just take an over-arching view (although I am sure many of my army colleagues would cope easily with these order-of-battle lists!); whichever, it is testament to the depth of research that the author clearly undertook to produce such detail. Perhaps my only serious reservation is that to understand fully the importance of this biography, one must be familiar with the concept and practice of "operational art" and the author does rather presume a high degree of pre-knowledge in this area. This is hardly surprising given that Melvin is one of the British Army's foremost experts on operational art and was involved in the 1990s with Richard Holmes in developing the concepts of "mission command" (I can still remember his lectures on the subject when I was a staff college student) although his own expertise in this field does rather assume a similar level of understanding among his readers, not all of whom may be as expert as he.

However let these comments be placed firmly into context: this book is a stunning achievement. It has been immaculately researched (as evidence by the extensive end notes), is excellently written, and is completely fair and balanced in its judgements. The author devotes by far the greatest part of the book to Manstein's period on the Eastern Front in the Second World War though charts clearly Manstein's early career, involvement in the First World War and through the inter-war period, and his successes in France during 1940. That said, the period that will be of most interest - and controversy to readers - is undoubtedly that time when Manstein was commanding on the southern sector of the Eastern Front.

His successes and failures are treated with both equal attention and judgement in this balanced account, and Melvin does not shy away from criticising his subject when he deems it deserved. He questions carefully Manstein's involvement in, and handling of, Stalingrad, and recognises the ultimate futility of the German effort against the juggernaut that the Soviet armed forces had produced by 1943. Nor does the author duck difficult questions: could Manstein, if he had been afforded the freedom of action he desired, altered the outcome of the War in the East? What

was Manstein's relationship to Hitler, and to what extent was he involved in the plot to kill the Fuhrer in 1944? Above all other considerations, the question of the discharge of the war in the East, with its brutality, treatment of non-combatants and, not least, genocide of the Jews, receives full, frank, balanced and non-judgemental coverage. Likewise, Mungo does not avoid the difficult issue of Manstein's trial and conviction for war crimes, discussing the issue fully and dispassionately. Despite what is clearly a very high regard for his subject, the author acknowledges the Field Marshal's shortcomings, not least his refusal to accept blame or criticism for the events on the Eastern Front.

The latter stages of the book, from Manstein's conviction in December 1949 for war crimes to his death in 1973 are considered in only passing detail; Melvin himself acknowledges that this period would probably be worthy of a book in its own right. Given the strength of this book, it is to be hoped that the author himself chooses to undertake such a task at a later date.

In summary, an excellent book full of detail and accurate analysis. This volume does not avoid the contentious issues, nor does it fall into the trap of following popular trends when considering Manstein's guilt and/or contrition. However, this book requires dedicated reading time and deserves no less. Alongside volumes such as Slim's Defeat into Victory, this book should be on the bookshelf on anyone with a serious interest in military command and leadership at the highest operational level.