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Review of *British Military Panoramas: Battle in the Round, 1800-1914* by Ian F. W. Beckett

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Ian F. W. Beckett, *British Military Panoramas: Battle in the Round, 1800-1914*. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2022. 210 pp + 87 Illustrations + Photos. ISBN: 978-1915113849 (hardback). Price £39.95.

Inspired by Beckett's longstanding personal interest in military panoramas (or 'cycloramas' in the United States), this book is a detailed summary of the development, popularity, and eventual fade into relative obscurity of this form of public spectacle over time. Having been invented by Irish miniaturist Robert Barker in 1787, military panoramas became a successful genre in nineteenth-century Britain, before being displaced in the twentieth century by the advent of cinema, plus a post-war distaste for their distinctive brand of emotive nationalism.

The book's main focus is on the production, materiality, and reception of these installations. Over six loosely chronological chapters, Beckett gives a useful overview of the domestic British side of this worldwide phenomenon, accompanied by a large number of colour illustrations. Designed to pull in wide popular audiences, Beckett argues, military panoramas often sacrificed scrupulous accuracy in favour of evoking emotion and national or imperial fervour. In general, they presented a 'sanitised' view of the experience of war, 'death often distant' and the brunt of the violence happening to the enemy (p. 26). At the same time, they may have followed a wider shift in art and literature towards beginning to include the experiences of junior officers, NCOs, and enlisted men, as well as towards conveying more openly to audiences some of the realities of wartime suffering and death. In terms of how the public responded, Beckett dashes through a range of responses from critics and visitors, noting that onlookers were often split over whether panoramas were vulgar or educational, or counted as 'art' at all: ultimately, he concludes, they were and still are 'a marriage of art, entertainment, and commercialism' (p. 180).

Beckett's work in highlighting where source material can be found and what kind of records survive will be particularly useful to anyone setting out to further study this topic, as panoramas were notoriously ephemeral: when not ruined by fire or damp, they were often discarded ('Many were simply cut up,' p. 26). However, this is largely a descriptive book, which does not delve very deeply into the analytical questions raised by other scholars of this form. Beckett responds only briefly to the now well-developed field of literature examining the relationship between nineteenth-century consumer culture and the spreading to the British public of an 'imperial message' celebrating empire, placing military panoramas as one of many formats through which this was attempted. When discussing Robert Ker Porter's 'The Great Historical Picture of the Storming of Seringapatam' (exhibited in London 1800-1801), Beckett mentions a stunning parallel in the murals commissioned by Tipu Sultan for his summer

palace to commemorate his father's defeat of East India Company forces at Pollilur, 'which the British subsequently characterised as grotesque and lacking in perspective compared to their own artistic celebrations of victory' (p. 39). Despite pointing out the clear irony here, Beckett does not go on to unpick the issues of perception and the imperial gaze at work in this comparison, nor justify why these murals – depicting battles in which British forces took part – are not considered at more length in the book. Perhaps, although it might have required a deliberately flexible definition of panorama, further similar examples could have been included in the book to great effect.

Another area which could be developed in future studies building on Beckett's work is the obvious class and gendered dimensions of popular reactions to the panoramas. The book is full of art critics' withering comments aimed at the 'middling sort', or the 'female of sensibility', or quotes that attest that 'more than one female was carried out swooning' from a supposedly particularly powerful scene (p. 41), which would be interesting to examine further. For the student of the classic and modern military panorama, however, this could be a helpful starting point – and for the traveller, a handy list of surviving panoramas around the world is included in the appendices.

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Joanna Spear, *The Business of Armaments: Armstrongs, Vickers and the International Arms Trade, 1855–1955*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 388pp. ISBN: 978-1009297523 (hardback). Price £95.

At the heart of this engaging study lie two central questions: how did Britain's most prominent arms manufacturers, Armstrongs and Vickers – amalgamated in 1927 as Vickers-Armstrongs – establish their businesses in the nineteenth century; and what kind of relationships did they foster and maintain both with the British government and with foreign states over the course of a hundred tumultuous years between 1855 and 1955? To address these questions, Joanna Spear draws upon the firms' archival records, regional archives, government documents, and newspaper coverage to examine the companies' business strategies and assess the extent to which those strategies exhibited signs of independence from – and influence over – the policies of