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Review of *Crucible of Conflict: Three Centuries of Border War* by John Sadler

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Overall, *Templars* is a book that is strongest in its opening and closing chapters with a slightly too nebulous and messy middle that could have benefited from a thematic rather than chronological structure and a more coherent conception of what exactly its scope is. Still, there is something on offer here and the section on the trial of the Templars and its aftermath is a fascinating read. *Templars* is not a book that everyone needs to read, but it will offer a different perspective to anyone already interested in the subject.

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**John Sadler, *Crucible of Conflict: Three Centuries of Border War. Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing Ltd, 2023. xi + 227 pp. 7 maps, 25 photographs. ISBN 978-1849955423 (paperback). Price £18.99.***

The history of Anglo-Scottish conflict has been partly brought to the attention of the masses by Hollywood, in particular the stories of William Wallace in the largely historically inaccurate *Braveheart* (dir. by Mel Gibson, 1995) and Robert Bruce in Netflix's *Outlaw King* (dir. by David Mackenzie, 2018). This decade of battles from c. 1296-1307, however, is merely a small over-romanticised part of a longer, bloodier conflict spanning multiple centuries. John Sadler, in *Crucible of Conflict: Three Centuries of Border Warfare*, aims to explore this wider history – with a focus on the conflict that occurred in the areas surrounding the border of Scotland and England. Within this, Sadler argues that Walter Scott's version of border history is 'pure fiction'; and questions whether borderers are 'a harder, more contentious breed'. The blurb of *Crucible of Conflict* boldly claims that the book will offer: 'a full interrogation of primary and secondary sources' and 'an in-depth look at how this history has shaped and affected the [Scottish] independence debate'. Whether Sadler achieves these two aims will form the basis for this review, along with a more general view of its contents and tone.

*Crucible of Conflict* is a very readable account of Anglo-Scottish border warfare, aided by Sadler's vivid and evocative descriptions of battlefield encounters. Moreover, Sadler's personal connection to the area increases the appeal of his account in comparison to a generic historical re-telling. This personal aspect is prevalent in the

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introduction and first chapter, and is then applied to descriptions of battlegrounds throughout the book – adding an extra layer that engages the reader. For instance, when discussing the battle of Homildon Hill (1402) Sadler uses his experience to guide the reader using modern directions to where he believes the battle took place. Furthermore, he argues that ‘even some modern writers’ who have never seen the ground ‘fall into the old trap’ of placing the Scottish and English armies on opposing hills – which would be ‘a virtual impossibility’. This is argumentatively interesting, and shows signs of engagement with modern historiography; although, rather disappointingly, Sadler does not name or cite the historians he is disagreeing with here. This is symptomatic of Sadler’s wider engagement with the historiography, with a few exceptions, and thus limits *Crucible of Conflict*’s contribution and value to military history academically. Similarly, while there is definitely some analytical engagement with primary sources, the majority of excerpts from these sources are used as statements of truth and not questioned. Therefore, while there is no denying Sadler has researched thoroughly and made use of various primary sources, *Crucible of Conflict* does not live up to its aim of featuring a ‘full interrogation of primary and secondary sources’.

The tone of *Crucible of Conflict* is somewhat difficult to place, as it swings quite drastically from informal – seeming to appeal to a casual readership – to more formal and academic. The former can be seen more so at the beginning and end of the book, with the latter taking up the majority of the main body. For example, in the introduction, Sadler compares his childhood horse to being ‘about as friendly as [Kinmont] Will with a hangover’. Similarly, in chapter one, Sadler states: ‘I do sincerely hope the old rogue would be flattered by these portrayals’ – referring to a border warden whom the author has re-enacted on numerous occasions. The tone of comments such as these are clearly entertaining and at times comedic, appealing to a non-academic audience with a casual interest in history. Such a reader, however, may quickly get lost in the fast-paced re-telling of Anglo-Scottish border conflict that follows. *Crucible of Conflict* rapidly moves through three centuries of history, often moving between periods and people without stating so or giving context. For instance, Sadler moves from the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots to that of King James VI – without mentioning Mary’s infamous execution in 1587. Of course, it would be impossible to comprehensibly cover all Anglo-Scottish history over three centuries in one 200-page book – especially when Sadler’s focus is on the borderers. However, a casual reader enticed by the entertaining language used in the early sections of the book may quickly feel overwhelmed by the more academic discussion that follows. Thus, *Crucible of Conflict* does not seem to fit a particular audience – as those interested in academic history will tend towards works such as Alastair J. Macdonald’s *Border Bloodshed* (2000).

There are a few further issues which must be pointed out. Firstly, *Crucible of Conflict*’s promised discussion of the Scottish independence debate again fails to deliver. The

topic is alluded to in the introduction, however, disappointingly does not feature significantly throughout the rest of the book. Furthermore, specific discussion of the reivers – Sadler’s ‘main theme’ – does not feature as much as would be expected for the majority of the middle chapters. Additionally, though admittedly a more minor issue, Sadler incorrectly states that Robert Bruce’s ‘wife and sister [were] held, like captive birds, in iron cages hung suspended over the battlements of Berwick and Roxburgh’. In fact, it was Bruce’s sister and Isabella MacDuff, Countess of Buchan who were imprisoned in these cages – not his wife. Perhaps Sadler had recently watched *Outlaw King* when writing this, as this wrongly depicts Bruce’s wife as the victim of the cage punishment. Finally, even more minor but worth mentioning, Sadler repeatedly states throughout *Crucible of Conflict* that Berwick swapped hands between the Scottish and English fourteen time – to the point of being overly-repetitive and unnecessary. In conclusion, *Crucible of Conflict* offers an overall compelling history of Anglo-Scottish border conflict. John Sadler’s personal experiences and knowledge adds a significant level of uniqueness and interest to this topic. However, it must be said that the book does not live up to the expectations set by the bold claims made on its blurb. Moreover, its varying tone suggests that it may not perfectly fit either those with a casual interest in history or academics; but rather those that lie somewhere in-between – perhaps not a particularly large audience. Lastly, minor incorrections such as mistaking Robert Bruce’s wife to have been imprisoned in a cage detract from the book’s accuracy. Despite this review focusing on critiquing *Crucible of Conflict*, as there is perhaps often more to say about negatives than positives, it must be noted that Sadler excels in achieving its main aim of providing a detailed and personal account of Anglo-Scottish conflict – though it is unfortunate that its other promises were not fulfilled.

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**James Davey, *Tempest: The Royal Navy and the Age of Revolutions*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023. 426 pp. ISBN 978-0300238273 (hardback). Price £25.00.**

*Tempest* opens in 1797, *in medias res*, with a declaration issued by the leaders of the Channel Fleet mutiny at the Nore: ‘The Age of Reason is at Length arrived. We had long been Endeavouring to find ourselves Men, We now find ourselves so. We will be Treated as such’ (p. 1). This quotation sets the tone for the book, which provides a