REVIEWS


This life of Sir John Gellibrand is part of the Australian Army History Series for which Oxford are to be warmly commended. In a field where some themes seem to be re-examined endlessly this series has succeeded in opening up some issues not previously investigated in great detail. The life of Major-General Gellibrand, professional soldier, divisional commander in the First World War, senior public servant in Tasmania and Victoria, and politician, is a good example of this commitment to historical thoroughness.

Sadler's own work must also be described as thorough. The bibliography of The Paladin makes one conscious of one's limitations as an historian. Family and public papers, school records, the opinions of contemporaries, previous research in the field, all have been searched meticulously for a complete record of the subject. At the outset Sadler claims that his work is a 'life', not a 'life and times' with 'background' kept to a minimum, and this is certainly true when we move from the military to the civilian phases of Gellibrand's career after 1919. The spotlight is clearly on Gellibrand, with the political environment, for example, being investigated to a limited extent only.

Gellibrand was born in Tasmania in 1872, the descendant of a family who had played a prominent role in the local establishment since their arrival in 1824. John (generally known as Jack) spent much of his youth and early career away from Tasmania as school, military training and army service took him to Europe, Britain and the Empire. He served in Ireland, the Boer War and Ceylon leaving the British Army in 1912. The outbreak of war brought him back to the colours and, though Gellibrand himself disparaged the significance of individual commanders in mass conflicts, he played a distinguished role between 1914 and 1918. By war's end he was commander of the Third Division and thus (although he was probably unaware of it) the divisional commander of the reviewer's grandfather.

The most significant part of Sadler's biography, about half of it in fact, deals with the First World War. An interesting theme here is the contrast the author draws with Monash. Sadler rather incautiously advances the opinion that except for some ill-luck Gellibrand might have been in charge of the Australian Corps in France in 1918. Well perhaps. Even more dubious is the thesis that Gellibrand 'could have proved a more effective commander [than Monash].in 1918.' We are not given much evidence as to how this claim might be substantiated.

Gellibrand's own personality might have prevented him being more successful than Monash. Sadler uses as a metaphor for key phases of Gellibrand's career the figure of the paladin, the paragon of knighthood. He argues that Gellibrand attempted to base his life on paladin ideals and, as a consequence, when others fell short of this
exacting standard, had trouble viewing them with equanimity. As an explanatory device for much of Gellibrand’s life the figure of the paladin is inadequate. It is lop-sided for a start; everything in this book is judged from Gellibrand’s perspective. As the possessor of this ideal, Gellibrand is immune from criticism except where his own reluctance to push himself forward hindered promotion opportunities. This self-abnegation does attract his biographer’s ire.

The inadequacy of the paladin image is best shown in Gellibrand’s public service career after the First World War. He was successively Public Service Commissioner in Tasmania, Police Commissioner in Victoria between 1920 and 1922, and Nationalist Member of Parliament for Denison from 1925 to 1928. It is fair to say that honest and well-intentioned as he was, Gellibrand was only a moderate success in the short periods he occupied any of these positions. He had a history of not working happily in bureaucracies. It is insufficient to say as Sadler says of Gellibrand’s time in the Victorian Police Force, that ‘he was conspired against and blocked at every turn by lesser, ignoble men who sought to misuse him and disrupt his life for their own purposes.’ This is to ignore Gellibrand’s own inability to compromise at the right moment, to concede where necessary or alternatively to push on rather than resign. Crucial lapses in health, wartime had taken its physical and emotional toll, played their part in upsetting Gellibrand’s plans, but so did some personal failings.

Gellibrand died in 1945. His last engagement with public life had been to lobby, unsuccessfully for the most part, for various changes to Australian defence policy, especially the need to greatly expand the militia. His health, and perhaps a sense that his time was past, reduced his effectiveness once again. Yet if his achievement was not all that his biographer thinks that he was capable of, it was still considerable, especially during the First World War. It is those years which will most interest readers of this life.

RICHARD TREMBATH
History Department
University of Melbourne

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In her preface, the author claims to have written a biography of Frank Hardy. That she has not done so, we are indeed fortunate; for the biographical aspect is subsidiary to the more important tale she tells. This book is fundamentally a social history of Power Without Glory. She reconstructs and analyses the changing constellation of people,