



CEW Bean Prize Citation – 2006

Dr Garth Pratten

‘The “Old Man”’: Australian Commanders in the Second World War’

PhD, Deakin University

Battalion commanders have long been neglected by Australian military histories. In part, this is due to the democratic tradition established by CEW Bean. Bean’s Official history of the Great War set a model for many histories to follow. It celebrated the qualities of the individual soldier and often overlooked the skill, imagination and courage of their commanders. But as Garth Pratten reminds us, an infantry CO was in fact the most senior ‘fighting soldier’ on the battlefield. Far from serving on the sidelines these officers routinely shared all the dangers and privations of the men who fought beneath them.

It may seem ironic that a prize that bears the name of Bean should be awarded to a scholar whose primary interest is in officers rather than men, and strategies and leadership rather than the raw experience of battle. In fact it is a measure of the growing sophistication and maturity of Australian military history. Garth Pratten’s study of Australian Battalion Commanders in World War Two has filled a significant hiatus. It is an ambitious work, ranging the diverse theatres of Australia’s involvement in World War Two and spanning all six years of that terrible conflict. Exhaustively researched, its argument is grounded in a vast historical record, unit diaries, personal papers, individual service dossiers, state records and military doctrine are carefully assessed and persuasively evaluated. Dr Pratten has written a thesis of considerable scope and impressive theoretical sophistication. His observations on the qualities of military leadership are of relevance to any age and any Army. Moreover, this is a handsome thesis, its lively and engaging narrative enriched by maps, tables and illustrations. ‘The “Old Man”’: Australian Commanders in the Second World War’ suggests a new approach to the way that we write the history of armed conflict. It is a worthy recipient of the CEW Bean Prize for Military History.