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Martin Windrow. *Our Friends beneath the Sands. The Foreign Legion in France's Colonial Conquests 1870-1935*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010, 696pp, illus, maps, index. Price: £25. ISBN: 978-0-297-85213-1.

P.C. Wren has much to answer for. *Beau Geste*, his 1924 novel about English brothers enlisting in the French Foreign Legion to spare their family disgrace, and the films that it spawned have done more to shape the popular British view of this world famous regiment than anything else. Admittedly the cover of Martin's Windrow's book has a whiff of *Beau Geste* about it depicting legionnaires in immaculate white *kepis* marching across an endless desert and the title, *Our Friends beneath the Sands*, which comes from the Legion's traditional toast to its dead, would probably have earned the novelist's approval. But inside one immediately encounters a very different world from the fictional one created by Wren.

The first battles that Windrow describes took place not amid Saharan sands or Moroccan mountains but in the streets of Paris as the Legion was called upon to help in the bloody suppression of the 1871 Paris Commune. It also fought in the Franco-Prussian War and suffered huge losses in the First World War (Germans in the Legion remained in North Africa during these conflicts). But, true to its title, the bulk of this mighty piece of research by Windrow concentrates on the role played by the Foreign Legion in France's colonial expansion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It fought in Mexico, Vietnam, the Middle East and Madagascar during this period as well as in the deserts of North Africa.

One of the many joys of this book is that it is beautifully written. I have lost count of the number of books on military history I have read where the author's mastery of the subject is not matched by his or her command of the English language. Windrow elegantly captures the atmosphere of the deserts and jungles where the Legion fought and died and vividly portrays life in the regiment for which he obviously has immense affection. But this is much more than just a finely crafted regimental history. Windrow goes into the political and military background in France and further afield in considerable detail. There is depth to match the colour.

The book is inevitably dominated by the fighting in Morocco in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The parallels with the British experience on the North West Frontier of India are clear, fighting a courageous but merciless foe amid a constantly shifting pattern of tribal loyalties, and there are lessons to be learned from the French experience in Morocco for those leading the international fight against militant Islamists today. The only thing that sometimes seems to be missing from this tremendous book is more detail about the background of these extraordinary soldiers. But as many of them went to some lengths to hide their previous histories and the Legion's record keepers do not go out of their way to help enquirers this wish may not be realistic. This minor grumble aside, it is a while since I have read a book with such uncomplicated pleasure.

**Will Bennett**