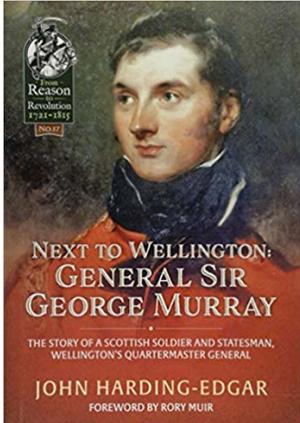


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Edgar, Harding, John. *Next to Wellington: General Sir George Murray, The Story of a Scottish Soldier and Statesman. Wellington's Quartermaster General.* Warwick (UK): Helion and Company, 2018. 408 pages. ISBN# 9781912390137. Hardcover. £35.00/\$44.00.



Across the many great houses and museums of Britain, hanging quietly amongst admired collections or in shadowy corridors are portraits of generals. Dressed in scarlet and gold, full length and three quarters, lit by gallery bulbs or by the light of a propitious window. Most will be passed by without comment, though some might recognise a name or a face, unless it is of Wellington, Nelson, Wolfe or Marlborough, or some of their most senior commanders, it sometimes seems like fame escaped everyone else.

It certainly feels that way now, where fame, at least lasting fame, like the receding light of day, has lingered only on the great captains. Yet if you were to decide notoriety from the legacy of portraiture, you would be forced to observe that subjects with names like Graham, Beresford, Hill and Murray, plus numerous others, were not as transparent in their lifetimes as

they are now.

In this book alone there are six portraits of Sir George Murray, and some were executed by the same brush that put the sword of state in Wellington's hand. It was not only the Duke that could be painted by Lawrence.

Such things give me pause to wonder; if the faces of even quiet men like Murray were notable enough to warrant multiple fine portraits, then their relative anonymity is a facet of the generations that followed them, not of that to which they belonged. Yet their neglect is real, for though some might find these paintings and wonder who these men were, biographies of them are difficult to find.

Thus the cadre of biographies dealing with the lives of Wellington's generals is a small but select club, and now this important book has joined them. Murray is perhaps one of the most authentically Scottish looking men you'll ever see in a portrait. I say this because it's quite possible to identify his sort of features on any street between Perth and Inverness. He has a face you feel that you can trust, and this is evident not just in his portraits but in his life, ably recounted here for the first time by Harding-Edgar.

It becomes instantly apparent that he and Wellington were much of the same mind when it came to what was important. When Murray wrote of the futility of war, and when we see how quickly he became associated with that most trusted of pre-Cardwell army departments, we can really see how he was one of the few men Wellington could trust to act as he expected him to. As Murray found out, Wellington was a man who did not trust easily, and in the early years of their partnership he could not abide anything that did not behave as his own mind envisioned. Though at first he kept even his excellent new Quartermaster General at a distance by 1812 he knew that with Murray there would be no surprises, and fewer mistakes. Indeed it is quite telling that on the two occasions when Murray was not present, in 1812 and 1815, Wellington came closest to defeat.

Murray's sense of duty and loyalty, two facets that made him invaluable to Wellington, in the end ensured that he slowly succumbed to the shadows of history, the man who allowed Wellington to be Wellington could not be himself. He recognised that though Wellington could not do (easily) without him, he too owed an unplayable debt of thanks to the Duke. Thus he nobly wished to live a quiet life of service. So well did he know his old chief that he refused to even ask to view the Duke's correspondence and Murray would not say a critical word against him while he lived. So the man, Harding-Edgar says was best placed to write the ultimate history of the Peninsular War, never took up his pen.

This book is majestic in its detail. Murray's letters have been lavishly used, as has the unpublished work of, Ward, and each chapter is a new revelation and viewpoint on the conflicts we think we know so well. It's not necessarily that the research is groundbreaking, but it is a focused perspective that we are not usually treated to.

Wellington was a famous micro-manager, it was rare that he allowed his officers a long leash. Thus most studies of the war, and of course biographies of the Duke necessarily focus on his remarkable efficiency to the detriment of men like Murray.

The great burden of command is naturally and rightfully reserved for the "General Officer Commanding", yet although Wellington came extremely close, no great general could have achieved anything, not least see his vision and strategy executed without the talents of his Quartermaster General. It is staggering to learn of the weight of responsibility that Sir George had to bear, and in doing so we not only gain a better understanding of an overlooked life, but a deeper look at the way British armies were managed during the Napoleonic Wars and indeed a contemporary, objective view and opinion of Wellington and the greater span of the conflict.

Of the man, Murray is not exactly a riddle, his constant battle was as much with confusion as with the French and his simple nature guided him both to respect and near disaster in his post war career. In sum the book is so good that for it to be missing from any personal library that focuses on the Duke of Wellington's army, or indeed the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars would be almost a sin.

Contents summary.

Twenty eight chapters cover Murray's life, early military service and active service in Egypt, the West Indies, many stints in Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, the first invasion and occupation of France, command in Canada, the army of occupation in France and finally his continued private and public life. The text is illustrated with 41 black and white illustrations, 24 colour illustrations, 9 black and white maps, Index, Bibliography, two appendices.

Reviewed by [Josh Provan](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: November 2018