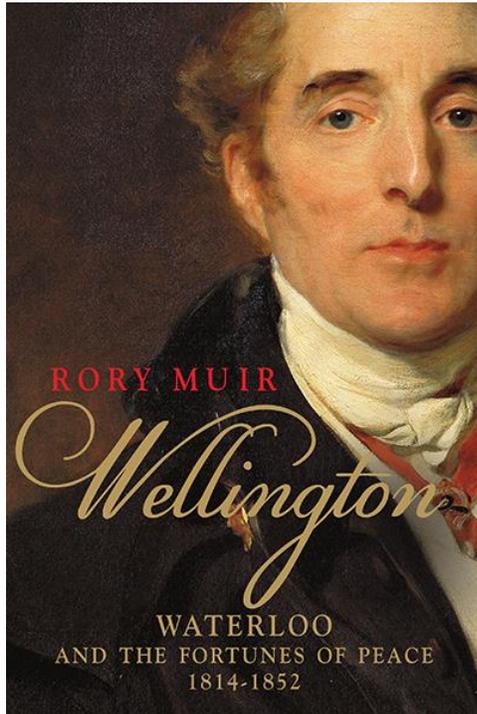


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Muir, Rory. *Wellington. Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace, 1814-1852*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2015. 713 pages. ISBN 978-0-3---18786. Hardcover. US\$28.97 (Amazon), £20.99 (Amazon.uk)



Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington, is a man about whom much has been written, but very little said. He has been the subject of numerous biographies, very few of which add to our knowledge of the man and are only too often panegyrics or vicious polemics. The standard biography for nearly the last half century has been the two-volume work by Elizabeth Longford, a biography characterized more by its enthusiasm than its scholarship. All this changed in 2013 when Rory Muir published *Wellington. The Path to Victory, 1768-1814*, the first volume of his biography of the duke. *Wellington. Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace, 1814-1852*, the volume under review, takes the duke through to his death and concentrates on his post-1818 political career. It is often forgotten that Wellington twice served as prime minister of Britain and, although he was never a political general, he was always a political man.

I suspect, however, that most readers of the Napoleon Series will be interested more in how Muir handles Waterloo than his post-1815 political fortunes. In short, Muir handles it well but then, as a biographer of the duke, he differs from other authors as he earlier produced an excellent treatise on the tactics and experience of Napoleonic warfare and a fine analysis of the 1812 battle of Salamanca.¹ Muir therefore knows of what he speaks and his account of the Waterloo campaign, from the return of Napoleon to his final defeat is succinct but complete, occupying just 62 pages.

As an historian, Rory Muir has two qualities that I admire. The first is his ability to weave the various witnesses to an event -- particularly a battle -- into a smooth narrative although they are experiencing the event at much different levels. His account of Waterloo moves seamlessly from private soldier to regimental officer up to the Duke and back, without forcing the reader to adjust his own gears. This quality shines in the chapters devoted to the 1815 campaign. It is basically good narrative history and good narrative history is becoming an increasingly rare thing in a world where only too many

¹ *Tactics and Experience in the Age of Napoleon*, Yale, 1998; and *Salamanca, 1812*, Yale, 2001.

people do their reading on a small smart phone screen and move their lips when they do.

The second quality is common sense, which is also a very rare commodity, particularly in the halls of academe. Wellington and Waterloo have been the subject of so many controversies, squabbles and sheer bloody-mindedness on the part of many commentators. Muir very wisely avoids these issues (although he discusses them in his bibliographical essay and in the commentary posted on his webpage [Rory Muir's Life of Wellington](#), which is well worth a visit. He notes (37-38) that the Waterloo campaign has been

studied so intensively that the original documents have been probed and tested beyond breaking point, with the result that trivial anomalies and inconsistencies, together with gaps in the evidence, have assumed an unwarranted significance, and even led to talk of conspiracies, fabrication and cover-ups. In fact there is nothing unusual in such contradictions in first-hand testimony, and if only the few days leading up to Salamanca, Vitoria or the battle of the Pyrenees (or Jena-Auerstadt, Lutzen or Dresden and Kulm) were examined in this detail, similar discrepancies would be revealed.

This intense scrutiny of Waterloo has had another result, it has emphasized the mistakes made by the three commanders during the campaign and battle. "Yet," Muir notes, Napoleon and Wellington were generals of the "finest quality at the height of their powers" and even Blucher was far from the buffoon that he has been portrayed to be. The three men -- and here comes the good part -- made mistakes

not because they were incompetent, but because waging war is not easy. They acted under intense pressure, generally with little sleep and amid a cloud of partial and misleading information. A common analogy compares war to chess, but for this to have some relation to reality each piece would be capable of moving at the same time; each move would need to be dictated several moves in advance; one in three pieces would not move as directed or not move at all; and the player would only get the occasional glimpse of the board! Historians necessarily clarify and simplify the story they tell, and it takes a conscious effort to remember just how much more confused and unclear was the picture facing the generals at the time.

Those words should be framed and hung over the desk of anyone who attempts to analyze a military action. I can say that with no little assurance as I once tried to re-create an unplanned meeting engagement, with continuous reinforcement on both sides, which went on into the darkness, and was fought on a hillside and partly in a graveyard by two armies that spoke the same language and wore similar uniforms. And I was a damned fool to do so.

As is well known, for one reason or another, Wellington himself discouraged attempts by others to write a history of Waterloo, comparing such a task in difficulty to writing "the

history of a ball." Muir reminds us (60)), however, that this "objection needs to be taken seriously" as,

while the broad outlines of the narrative of the battle that was gradually put together over the months, years, and even decades which followed, is probably fairly close to the truth, it is important to realise that our knowledge of the events of the day is much more provisional and uncertain than it sometimes seems from popular accounts. Purported precision, especially on questions related to the time at which events occurred, should arouse a suspicion that we have crossed the line from history, based on intractable sources, to imaginative reconstruction where the author selects the evidence to suit their fancy.

Common sense -- that's what it's all about -- and Muir has it in spades.

It is often overlooked or ignored that Wellington's military career was only part of his public service. From 1818 to his death in 1852 he twice served as prime minister of Britain, twice as commander-in-chief of the army, and was at other times master-general of ordnance, foreign secretary and Chancellor of Oxford University, as well as holding many other appointments. In one of his biographer's words, however, "when Waterloo is passed,' biographies of Wellington "nearly always falter, and the story dies away in a desultory stream of anecdote." This criticism cannot be leveled at Muir because 90% of his second volume is devoted to the post-1815 period. I suspect, however, that the intricacies of British politics in the three decades after Waterloo will be of less interest to the readers of the Napoleon Series although I for one am glad to have this volume in my library as it is an excellent source for that complex subject.

Completing the volume is a bibliographic essay and a most useful biographical glossary of the people in Wellington's world. This helps to distinguish between a historic figure's given names, his aristocratic title and his civil appointment, which can be confusing, particularly when his aristocratic rank or title changes..

In sum, this is nothing short of being a marvelous work of biography on the finest military commander of the Napoleonic Wars. It puts in the shade every previous biography of the duke and justly earns the accolade, "definitive," -- and it will be definitive for the foreseeable future. Highly recommended to all students of the Napoleonic period.

Reviewed by Donald E. Graves

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2015