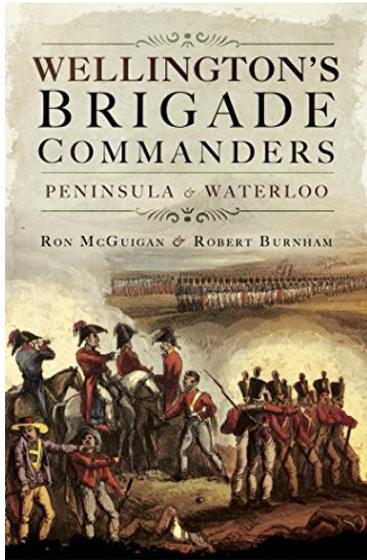


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Burnham, Robert & Ron McGuigan, *Wellington's Brigade Commanders. Peninsula & Waterloo*. Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword, 2017. 322 pages, illustrated, index. ISBN# 9781473850798. \$50/£25



The authors of this useful biographical reference, Robert Burnham and Ron McGuigan, are experts in the subject of the British army of the Napoleonic period, having co-authored *The British Army against Napoleon: Facts, Lists and Trivia, 1808-1815* and contributed to *Inside Wellington's Army*. They have long been connected with the management of the Napoleon Series and both were very instrumental in making the Lionel Challis's magisterial work on the officers of the Peninsula army available on that site. This being the case, it should be no surprise that *Wellington's Brigade Commanders* is a comprehensive and solidly researched work that will probably be the standard reference on its subject for the indefinite future.

The book contains biographies of 71 officers who commanded brigades under Wellington, either in the Peninsular and Waterloo armies, or in the postwar occupation force in France. Each entry includes a synopsis of the subject's life and career that lists birth and death dates, promotions, appointments, service under Wellington, awards, honours and distinctions and political career, if any. The basics thus covered, the remainder of the entry is an account in more detail of the subject's life and career, including his strong and weak points, personality, appearance and reputation among his superiors, peers and subordinates. The entries also include information on the postwar careers of their subjects so that we find out what happened to them in later life.

These biographies are detailed and supported by copious source notes. The two authors, being experts in the arcane and convoluted intricacies of the British army of the time (which I have often characterized as "a loose federation of tribal units known as regiments") take pains to provide explanatory notes on some of the more incomprehensible aspects of that service. I should add that their book also contains information on the many German officers who served under Wellington, either in the King's German Legion or other associated German units. Not being satisfied with just writing about these officers, the editors have very creditably assembled portraits (many in colour) of thirty-three of their subjects.

Of course, it is impossible to write a standard review of what is basically a small biographical encyclopedia. But, as Burnham and McGuigan point out, "the single characteristic" displayed by all Wellington's brigade commanders is courage: eight were

killed in action and twenty-five wounded, with nine being wounded multiple times. Furthermore, ten were forced to return home, physically worn out by their service, while eight died from natural causes. This amounts to a startling 63% casualty rate.

One thing that pleasantly surprised me was the number of brigadiers who served in North America at some time during their careers. I noted no fewer than fourteen and I may have missed a few. The most prominent among these was Major-General Robert Ross, widely credited as being the first person to introduce the concept of urban renewal to the United States, in that he burned down a good part of Washington in August 1814. Americans know Ross mainly for this incendiary act and his death in action the next month before Baltimore but Robert Ross was an outstanding professional soldier. His brightest moment perhaps was in July 1814 at Roncesvalles where commanding the veteran Fusilier Brigade, Ross held off a French division for nearly eight hours before the enemy retreated.

Human nature being what it is, however, it is often the miscreants who attract the reader's attention. In the early days of the Peninsula campaign Wellington more or less had to put up with whatever human material was sent to him, by the later stages of his career as a commander, he had more say in the choice of his subordinates. Of course, not all his brigadiers were the stars of their chosen profession -- "I only hope," Wellington once remarked about his subordinates, "that when the enemy reads the list of their names he trembles as I do." The Duke had to put up with such poor officers as Robert Burne who (p. 73) "loved to sit habitually ... swallowing glass after glass of port and never being himself the slightest degree affected except his nose ... assuming the purple colour and bottle shape which rendered him so conspicuous in the Peninsular War!" And then there was Stafford Lightburne (173) whose conduct Wellington thought was "really scandalous" and who "is a disgrace to the army which can have such a man as a Major-General." Let us not neglect fidgety John Skerrett, who (259) "was wanting in the bold decision, which, in military practice, must often take the lead of science, and established rules." There was also John Slade, who (265) "let no possible opportunity of inaction pass him" and who was "a curse to the cause, and a disgrace to the service." Thankfully, although interesting to read about, these four men and a few others were a decided minority in the armies commanded by Wellington. Most of his brigade commanders did their duty and many exceeded it.

*Wellington's Brigade Commanders* is a superb and indispensable reference work that belongs on the bookshelves of any serious student of the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns, or of the British Napoleonic army. It is certainly well worth its fairly stiff price of £25 or US\$50.

I will conclude by adding that there is a strong rumour about that Burnham and McGuigan are contemplating doing a similar study of Wellington's divisional commanders. Let us hope they do.

Reviewed by Donald E. Graves

Placed on the Napoleon Series: August 2017