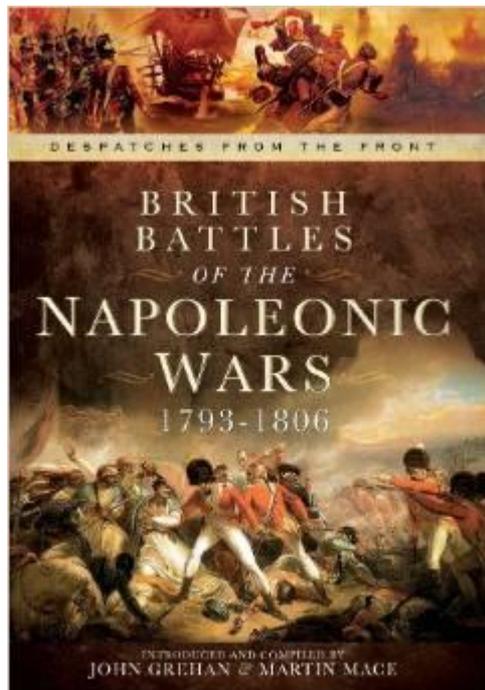


Mace, Martin and John Grehan. *British Battles of the Napoleonic Wars 1793-1806: Despatches from the Front*. Pen & Sword, 2014, 224 pages Hardcover.

As one with an interest in the broader application of the ‘Napoleonic Wars’ – feeling them to be in fact a single Great War started in Flanders in February 1793 and ended with the surrender of the Emperor’s last Republican disciples in the jungles of Guadeloupe in August 1815 – this book piqued my interest immediately.



The fifty-three actions chronicled within start with the skirmish at Famars on 23 May 1793 and end with Sir John Stuart’s momentous victory at Maida on the Italian mainland on 4 July 1806. Famars was a messy action by a multi-national force with little gained except the capture of a French baggage-train by an audacious young officer named Captain Robert Craufurd. Maida was the blue-print for many of the Peninsula actions to come thereafter. In the course of the despatches we are taken from Flanders, Toulon, to the West Indies (many times), Corsica, Italy, Wales, Ireland, Egypt, Central America, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Batavia (Indonesia), Holland, Denmark, and South Africa. Interwoven with the military actions are despatches from about fifteen naval actions and it is in the telling that we are reminded the British Army could go nowhere without the Royal Navy; any understanding of

British military strategy of the period is seriously incomplete without an appreciation of the role played by the Royal Navy in concert.

One aspect of this book I enjoyed was reading the oft-eccentric grammatical and spelling conventions used by the authors of the period. Sir David Dundas was often guilty of writing long and tortuous (not to mention oddly-capitalised) despatches, such as this example from Toulon:

For the complete Defence of the Town and its extensive Harbour, we had long been obliged to occupy a Circumference of at least Fifteen Miles, by Eight principal Posts, with their several intermediate dependent ones; the greatest part of these were merely of a temporary Nature, such as our Means allowed us to contract; and of our Force, which never exceeded 12,000 Men bearing Firelocks, and composed of Five different Nations and Languages, of which 9,000 were placed in or supporting those Posts, and about 3,000 remained in the town.

Compare this floweriness with Arthur Wellesley’s first despatch in the book, on page 173:

Sir

I attacked the united Armies of Doulut Rao Sindia and the Rajah of Berar with my Division on the 23d, and the Result of the Action which ensued was that they were completely defeated....

He was of course referring to the battle of Assaye, a note dashed off at haste to the Governor at Bombay and followed up with a fuller account of the action two days later, a despatch that nonetheless displays the economy of style and terseness that he employed after Waterloo. It is plain that those who felt slighted by his famous despatch in June 1815 were only victims of a writing style honed long before. The despatches of Sir Ralph Abercromby are likewise inhabited by an economy and directness, as are (and this will come as no surprise) those of Nelson, although he could be occasionally afflicted by the Homeric, such as writing after the Battle of the Nile:

Could any Thing from my Pen add to the Characters of the Captains, I would write it with Pleasure, but that is impossible.

Despatches are full of accounts attesting to the zest, zeal, personal exertion, and valour of the troops involved, and of individuals; regiments and vessels are likewise mentioned freely (amongst army units the 7th and 11th Light Dragoons, Royals and 23rd, 38th and 55th Foot score the most mentions in despatches, not to mention the Royal Artillery; Ubique as always) – and we get many glimpses of the early careers of men who would later go on to greater fame after 1808 – Craufurd, Moore (who appears often), Kempt, Cole, Beresford, and Wellesley.

The despatches presented subtly differ from those published in the news media of the time, being the actual words written by the commander on the spot, rather than those softened or given majesty by sub-editors for public consumption. On picking two despatches at random, I immediately discerned differences between those in this book and the ‘official’ versions. As the authors point out in the Introduction:

This then is our assembly of facts, raw and untainted. The interpretation is yours alone.

Finding a fault seems unsporting, but if I had one it would be the fact that the introductory chapter - a timeline essay that explains the background to the campaigns and serves as a linking device to tie them all together - I would have preferred as a short introduction to each chapter to set the tone for the despatch to follow. But that may be personal inclination and small beer overall; it does not diminish the utility of the book. In this 100th Anniversary of the Great War, this book and its companion volume will help you understand the ‘original’ Great War of a century earlier, a conflict which defined the shape of the nineteenth century.

About the book authors:

Martin Mace has been involved in writing and publishing military history for more than twenty years. He began his career with local history, writing a book on the Second World War anti-invasion defences and stop lines in West Sussex. In 2006 he began working on

the idea for *Britain at War Magazine*, This publication has grown rapidly to become the best-selling military history periodical. John Grehan has written more than 150 books and articles on military subjects, covering most periods of history. John is currently employed as the Assistant Editor of *Britain at War Magazine*.

Reviewed by [Steve Brown](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2014