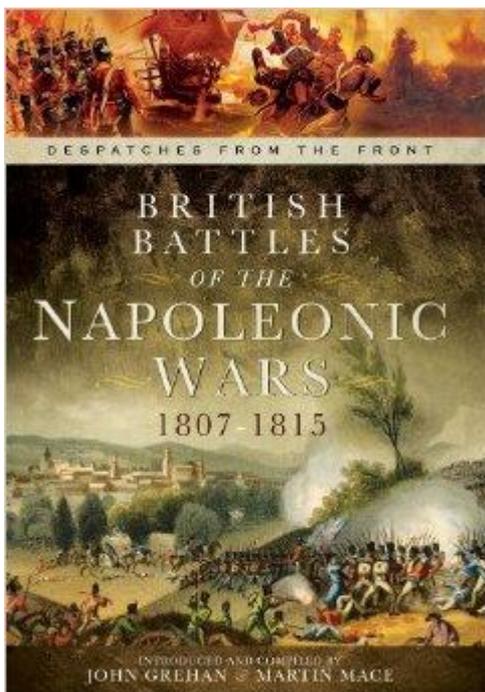


Napoleon Series Reviews

Mace, Martin, and John Grehan. *British Battles of the Napoleonic Wars, 1807-1815: Despatches from the Front*. Pen & Sword Books, 2014, 190 pages. ISBN: 9781781593349. Hardcover. \$39.95.

As one with an interest in the broader application of the term ‘Napoleonic Wars’ – considering 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 – these books piqued my interest immediately.



The fifty-three actions chronicled within Volume 1 (British Battles of the Napoleonic Wars 1793-1806, previously reviewed) start with the action 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.

Volume 2 commences with the assault on Montevideo in February 1807 and ends thirty-five chapters later with Wellington’s famous Waterloo Despatch; with no prizes for guessing that the Peninsula War makes up the lion’s share of entries. An interesting diversion mid-book is the account of the capture of the West Indian islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1809 and 1810, a case of history repeating itself some fifteen years after Grey’s capture of the islands in 1794, duly chronicled in Volume 1. Guadeloupe went back to the Bourbons in 1814 and remained to be re-taken for a third and last time in the weeks after Waterloo.

One aspect of these books 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 wildly-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 such floweriness with Arthur Wellesley's first despatch in Volume 1, 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.

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 these books 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.

As documents written by the commander on the spot, accusations of spin always linger; but there are also moments of heart-breaking honesty. Take Sir Thomas Graham's despatch after the fiasco at Bergen-op-Zoom in 1814:

It becomes my painful task to report to your Lordship, that an attack on Bergen-op-Zoom, which seemed at first to promise complete success, ended in failure, and occasioned a severe loss to the 1st division.... Your Lordship will readily believe, that though it is impossible not to feel the disappointment of our ultimate failure in this

attack, I can only think at present with the deepest regret of the loss of so many of my gallant comrades.

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 in Volume 1, unsurprisingly the 95th Rifles in Volume 2, not to mention the Royal Artillery; Ubique as always. In Volume 1 we get many glimpses of the early careers of men who would later go on to greater fame in Volume 2 – Craufurd, Moore (who appears often), Kempt, Cole, Beresford, and Wellesley.

Finding a fault seems unsporting, but if I had one it would be the fact that the introductory chapters - timeline essays that explains the background to the campaigns and serve 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 books. In this 100th Anniversary of the Great War, these books will help the reader understand the 'original' Great War of a century earlier, a conflict which defined the shape of the nineteenth century.

Reviewed by [Steve Brown](#)

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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.