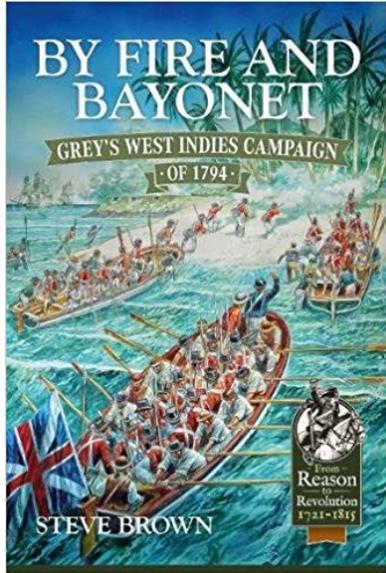


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Brown, Steve. *By Fire and Bayonet: Grey's West Indies Campaign of 1794*. Solihull (UK): Helion, 2017. 246 pages. ISBN# 9781911512608. Hardcover \$50

On 1 February 1793, France declared war on Great Britain. Except for a brief respite in 1802 and early 1803, the two countries would be at war for the next 23 years. The British had begun preparing for the war the previous year but when it was declared they were woefully unprepared. While they rebuilt their army and navy, the British government was making plans on how to defeat the French. Most of these plans were overly optimistic and often conflicted with each other. One of these plans was to capture the French possessions in the West Indies.



Seven months later, in September 1793, Lieutenant General Sir Charles Grey was appointed the commander of the expedition that was being formed to go to the West Indies. Its mission was not clearly defined and it was given a bare minimum of resources needed to take the French islands. Regiments were added to the expedition and then at the last moment taken away. By the time the expedition

sailed it was undermanned and its regiments were generally composed of new recruits. Like the army, the fleet itself was not given the assets it needed.

The expedition sailed for the West Indies on 26 November and arrived in Barbados in mid-January 1794. In early February it sailed to the French island of Martinique and soon landed troops. After six weeks of fighting, the island surrendered. Within a week, the British attacked the island of Saint Lucia, which compared to the tenacious defense of Martinique, fell without much of a fight. Shortly after Saint Lucia was captured, the British captured Guadeloupe. The expedition had captured the three largest French possessions and steps were taken to administer the islands. Before long however, the French responded and a military force under Victor Hugues arrived at Guadeloupe. By the end of the year the French had re-captured it.

The campaign, in many ways, was the breeding ground for Wellington's Peninsular Army. It was noted for innovative tactics introduced by General Grey and the close cooperation between the Royal Navy and the Army, which was almost unheard of at the time. Furthermore several of Wellington's senior officers served there, including Galbraith Cole, John Oswald, William Stewart, George Ramsay (the Earl of Dalhousie), Frederick Robinson, and Richard Fletcher.

Although the British campaign succeeded in evicting the French from most of their West Indies possessions, it came at a heavy price. The British soldiers were not acclimatized for fighting in the tropics and it was not long before they began dying in droves. The expedition arrived in the Caribbean with 6200 officers and men in February 1793. Ten

months later, 4100 of them were dead. A staggering 66% of its force. Most of the survivors were broken in health and were unable to continue in the military. What devastated the force was not combat, but yellow fever. It was not for nothing that the West Indies were known as the Fever Islands.

By Fire and Bayonet is their story. Steve Brown spent many hours scouring the archives and the book reflects this. He had access to Sir Charles Grey's personal and official papers, as well as diaries, letters, and memoirs of other participants. The story is a rare combination of "official" reports fleshed out with personal stories that brings to life many of the individuals mentioned in the narrative. These firsthand accounts make fascinating reading, because they occasionally contradict each other, especially when the writers were at odds with each other.

The book has eight appendices that provides the organization of the British forces in the West Indies prior to the campaign; the organization and strength of the expedition, down to the battalion level; the French garrison on Martinique at the beginning of the campaign; monthly strength reports for the expedition for 1794 -- which is very interesting because it shows the monthly casualties and how they impacted the force; the state of the British on Martinique at the end of the campaign; a list of all the British officers who served in the campaign and whether they survived, were killed in action, died of wounds, died of yellow fever, were prisoners-of-war, or even dismissed from the service. The final two appendices looks at the ships of the Royal Navy that participated in the campaign.

One of my biggest complaints about many military histories is maps. Many of them do not have them or if they do they are either placed inappropriately or do not contain useful information. The author obviously feels the same as I do. *By Fire and Bayonet* has five maps and all are placed where they are easily accessible to the reader – generally at the start of the chapter that covers the action the map shows. For those of us, me included, who did not know where the islands were there is a map of the Caribbean at the very beginning of the book. There are also maps that show the campaign to capture Martinique, as well as ones for the fighting on Saint Lucia and Guadeloupe. The final map details the French efforts to re-take Guadeloupe.

By Fire and Bayonet is a superb work of scholarship. As importantly it is a very readable account of an obscure campaign. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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