

The Napoleon Series Reviews

Oman, Charles. *A History of the Peninsular War* (7 vols.). London (UK): Greenhill, 1995-1999.

How NOT to Write History: Oman's Books on the Peninsular War are an Iconic Work that Does Not Live Up to its Reputation

I bought this 7-volume collection in my early twenties, when my interest in history in general and the Napoleonic Wars in particular was already passionate. Recently, when I saw this sold as an audio edition, I decided to give way to nostalgia and go back to my very first serious book in history and on the Napoleonic Wars.

Unfortunately, the work disappoints me. After almost three decades of learning how to read, evaluate and research both in my profession and my history hobby, my mind grew less gullible and what I took at face value then, I see now very differently. Only because I wish I knew then in my twenties what I know today on how to assess and evaluate a historic work, I decided that a review of this book(s) can be of some value to others.

If you are for the Peninsular Campaign and want to get a balanced view before you delve into the enormous amount of jingoistic and xenophobic publications on it, read instead Gate's book *The Spanish Ulcer*. Napier's *History of the War in the Peninsula* is surprisingly fair towards the French (but less so to the Spanish), considering that Napier was a British officer during that war. Charles Oman's monumental work on the war is the main source for many other later books on the subject and a romantic inspiration for many Britons. His work has become part of British historic folklore, raising deep emotional challenges whenever a critical assessment is attempted.

Nevertheless, a good historian sticks to facts and leaves the reader to make his own opinion on the wisdom or foolishness of the actions taken. Decisions should be judged on the information available when they were taken and not by an author's ample display of *The Grand Wisdom of Hindsight*. Historians should also stick to analysing facts-and-consequences and avoiding speculations on intentions they believe to be behind the actions. Most of all, a historian must be, or at least try to be, *impartial* and *detached* in his narrative.

Unfortunately, this is not so with Oman, who not only uses a prose full of judgemental adjectives and adverbs, but also repeatedly applies only negative ones, such as "treacherous" or "foolish", to the French and positive ones, such as "understandably" or "daring", to the British. This repetition imprints on the reader's subconscious (as it did to me in my youth) an emotional label to the different protagonists of the narrative. These are the tools of propaganda, not the methods of history.

Napoleon in particular is hardly given anything other than manipulative ill intentions or evil ulterior motives for every of his actions, even when such actions are pardoning someone sentenced to death, or when the deemed cruel and terrible fate bestowed upon a deposed

Spanish royal family is to be sent to a luxurious life of exile in France as a host of a grandee of the realm instead of a prison dungeon, a rat-infested house in a distant island or simply murdered, as many other rulers have done and do. French conquering of countries and provinces is deemed as inexcusable imperial abuse of force while the British grabbing of islands and colonies or destruction of neutral fleets and neutral trade is passed on as a natural consequence of favourable opportunities with no attached moral or legal objections. French looting of (enemy) towns is harshly condemned while British plundering of those same (allied) towns receives long explanations and excuses. Historians should avoid moral judgements, but if they do indulge in it, such judgements should at least not vary depending on the perpetrator.

In addition, whenever sources differ, Oman adopts the principle that, although everybody might distort their story to favour themselves, English gentlemen are far less likely to lie or exaggerate, so that their version of events is invariably the one to be trusted. More than once, the only reason given for discarding the non-British version is that, since that source is always lying, it must be lying this time as well. This is, of course, a kind self-fulfilling prejudice and a blatant logic fallacy.

Besides strong partiality, such as his profound dislike for Napoleon transpiring in every page, his work lacks detachment, shown when the Tory MP Sir Charles Oman exposes a political agenda in the staunch defence of every (Tory) British government's decision and derision of the (Whig) opposition of the period. Worse, personal self-promotion lurches in his rather pusillanimous attempt of proving Napier's rival account of the conflict inferior to his own in every aspect, in spite of most of his corrections of Napier being due to later sources not available when Napier wrote, rather than any poor assiduity on the part of that writer (Napier was a Whig, by the way).

In fairness, Oman does give far more credit to the Spanish than Napier does, although he still attributes most inefficiency to gross incompetence rather than a consequence of a spontaneous uprising by an army and nation decapitated of its leadership.

In short, if you ignore his opinions of what was brave, treacherous, excusable, glorious or false, if you discard his bias for British sources and treat all sources as equally valid, and if you keep to facts and discard speculation and manipulation, Oman's book is a superb source of detailed information. But it should not be the very first book to read.

Reviewed by [George Falco de Mats](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: January 2019