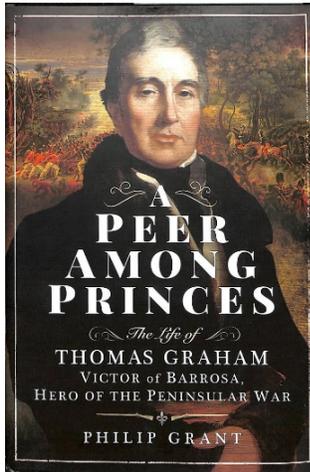


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Grant, Philip. *A Peer among Princes: the Life of Thomas Graham Victor of Barrosa, Hero of the Peninsular War*. Barnsley (UK): Pen & Sword, 2019. 238 pages. ISBN 9781526745415. Hardcover. \$50 / £25



One of the most interesting characters in the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars was General Sir Thomas Graham, 1st Baron Lynedoch, also known as Laird of Balgowan. He had no military experience prior to raising the 90th Foot Regiment in 1794. Yet, sixteen years later, he was a lieutenant general. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars he was one of two men¹ whom Wellington chose to be corps commanders in the Peninsular War. Furthermore, in 1814 he was the commander of the British expedition to the Low Countries. Despite this stellar record, Graham is relatively unknown. There have been only three full length biographies in English of him. The last was published 60 years ago.²

Graham was born in 1748 and had no interest in being a soldier. He was on a trip in the Mediterranean with his wife in 1792 when she became ill and died. Rather than face a long sea voyage, he decided to bring his wife home via southern France, which was in the throes of the Revolution. While near Toulouse, he was an easy target for over-enthusiastic French custom agents. They searched his carriages and insisted that his wife's coffin be open. Graham was outraged by what he perceived to be a desecration of his wife's body and never forgave the French for it. He made it his personal cause to overthrow the French government.

In 1794, the British government in fear of a potential French invasion called for the raising of volunteer regiments to help defend the country. Graham responded and at his own expense raised an infantry regiment, which nearly bankrupted him. He never looked back and spent the better part of the next 20 years on active service. Graham was initially an outsider trying to rise in a tradition bound service. He was determined to do whatever he could to bring the French to heel. Initially it was not an easy path. He was old and had no prior military service. But his raising of a regiment could not be ignored.

His rise through the ranks was hampered by those senior to him. To them he was a competitor for the choice positions. Just among the generals who served in the British Army in the Peninsula there were close to 100 generals. They ran the gamut of the very good to the incompetent. While most were respected by their soldiers and at least one was loved by his troops, another was hated by them.³ All were brave as lions. Yet one

¹ The other was Rowland Hill.

² The last was *General Graham, Lord Lynedoch* by Antony Brett-James published in 1959.

³ John Skerrett

was known to be insane,⁴ another was almost blind,⁵ while a third was sent home because of his drinking problem.⁶

Graham was often frustrated by what he perceived to be slow promotions, but in many ways his rise was meteoric. By 1810 he was a lieutenant general in command of the British forces in Cadiz, Spain. There he defeated a French Army under Marshal Victor at Barrosa on 5 March 1811. Soon he was with Wellington in Portugal and Spain and by 1813 led the left wing of the army in the Vitoria Campaign. During much of this time he was plagued with poor health. In November he resigned his position and returned to England due to poor eye sight. It did not help that he was 65 years old and the oldest general in Wellington's Army.⁷ He was not home long when he was tapped for command of the British expedition to the Low Countries in January 1814. After Napoleon abdicated in April 1814, Graham returned to Great Britain and to his home in Scotland. He was one of the founding members of the United Service Club and served as the Governor of Dumbarton Castle. In 1833, at the age of 85, he was offered the command of the Portuguese Army, which he turned down. He died in 1843 at the age of 95

A Peer among Princes examines all aspects of Graham's life, not just the military side of it. The first third of the book covers his youth, his marriage to his wife Mary, whom he loved deeply, and the events of 1792 that ended with the abuse of his wife's corpse and the impact on his psyche. The second part of the book focuses on his military career. Although he is best known for his generalship in the Peninsular War, the book devotes as many chapters to his early days in the military, including his service as a liaison to the Austrian Army during the Campaigns of 1796 – 1797 Italy and the many years with the British Army in the Mediterranean Theatre, as it does on the Peninsular War. The last part of the book covers his life after he retired from active service.

The book is filled with anecdotes about his life, with many quotes from his letters and memoirs. Surprisingly there are more from his early military career when he was in Italy and the Mediterranean than there are from his later years. The author interweaves throughout the narrative the theme that Graham was committed to seeing the destruction of the French revolutionary regimen and its successor Napoleon. He would pull whatever strings necessary to get active commands in order to facilitate it, no matter what the cost was to him personally. In the end the reader is left with a fascinating portrait of a man driven by the wrongs done to his wife.

Wellington wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Henry Torrens in a letter dated 28 August 1810

“Really when I reflect upon the characters and attainments of some of the General officers of this army, and consider that these are the persons on whom I am to rely

⁴ William Erskine. Henry Torrens wrote Wellington that “No doubt he is sometimes a little mad, but in his lucid intervals he is an uncommonly clever fellow; and I trust he will have no fit during the campaign, though he looked a little wild as he embarked.”

⁵ William Stewart.

⁶ Stafford Lightburne

⁷ He was 21 years older than Wellington.

to lead columns against the French Generals, and who are to carry my instructions into execution, I tremble; and, as Lord Chesterfield said of the generals of his day, 'I only hope that when the enemy reads the list of their names he trembles as I do..'"⁸

It is very apparent that Wellington was not talking about General Graham!

I only have one problem with the book. There is no bibliography. The author does include a short list of books he used in his acknowledgements, but only gives partial citations for them.

A Peer among Princes is an outstanding and long overdue biography of a key player in the British Army. Although the author has written it to appeal to those with only a passing interest in the Napoleonic Era, it contains enough detailed information on the British Army to keep the interest of those who specialize in the Napoleonic Wars. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2019

⁸ McGuigan, Ron and Robert Burnham. *Wellington's Brigade Commanders*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017. Page xii