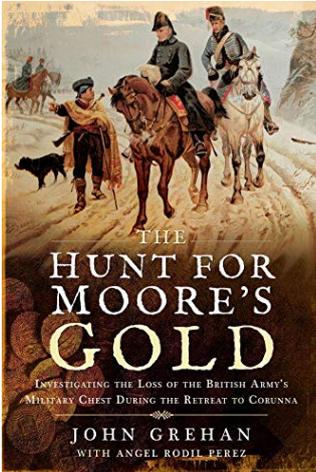


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Grehan, John. *The Hunt for Moore's Gold: Investigating the Loss of the British Army's Military Chest During the Retreat to Corunna*. Barnsley (UK): Frontline Books, 2019. 306 pages. ISBN#: 9781526730534. Hardcover. \$49.95/£24.00.



This book promises to address one of the big unanswered questions of the Corunna campaign: What happened to Sir John Moore's pay chest? Although most people take for granted what contemporary accounts claim, that it was mostly seized by stragglers and the remainder was claimed by nature in the ravine it was committed to, the legend of Moore's gold had been attracting searchers for decades. In true treasure hunting style, the author, John Grehan, a prolific author and editor, combed through contemporary evidence and followed the route Moore's army took through the mountains to try and discover if this 'lost treasure' could be found.

The question that arose immediately in my mind was whether or not there was truly any mystery here. Although the very presence of the book in my hand suggested the affirmative, only time would tell regarding what the search team would or would not find. Grehan is deliberately enticing in his brief introduction and it is clear he is a skilled wordsmith writing for a popular audience. His reconstructions and explanations are vivid and forceful, though alarm bells immediately started to ring when within the space of the second page we discover the search was initially based on a memoir written by an eyewitness published in 1899. Similarly, excitement may or may not receive a face of cold water when we discover that this book is going to begin with a detailed reconstruction of the entire campaign. To a cynical mind it seems like an excuse to retell an oft told story, but to be fair it would doubtless help an uninitiated reader to know the background and the author promises new viewpoints from hitherto unpublished sources.

The narrative in truth would seem to be the main attraction of this book, as quite shockingly the author wasn't kidding when he hinted that there was not an end in sight. Out of 260 pages of body text, (plus 16 pages of 32 colour photographs 4 maps, index, notes, source material and two appendixes) which admittedly does include some interesting contemporary viewpoints that I, personally, have not read before, 206 are dedicated to retelling the campaign. The title then was, as I suspected, something of a tease. It is quite surprising that the publisher chose to run with promoting the book as a special interest case, knowing it to be aimed at a popular readership, and that the niche examination it seems to promise plays a secondary role. However the analysis of the campaign in the second last chapter was indeed diverting and the book is, without doubt, well written, presented and researched. Overall the author is pro-Moore, though not a diehard admirer, he seems to feel pity for the legendary man, arguing that the general was unlucky rather than in error. Sadly I didn't find the argument convincing, despite his deployment of Wellington's much later endorsement to Fitzroy Somerset.

Grehan's deployment of a mountain of contemporary Spanish, French and British civil and military criticism is damning. To be honest the plaintive explanations of Moore's gallant defenders cannot quite protect him from the consequences of his decisions. The greatest argument in favour of the British lunge at Soult being that it saved southern Spain from French attention and therefore kept the continuity of the war going for another few months. As the book shows; because everyone blamed everyone else, in the end there will always

be a mystery about Moore and his decisions, and an argument about whether the campaign achieved anything a less costly retreat could have done will rumble onwards. Was Moore truly the foundation architect of Wellington's successes, or was it instead the fact he blundered so badly, ensuring Wellington could succeed him whether he lived or died?

The final chapter of the book is essentially the main subject; however, I didn't find it conclusive. It rigorously examines the surviving evidence and local lore to try and pinpoint the location of where the pay-chests were disposed. Some £25,000 in silver was tipped into a gorge when the draught animals became too exhausted to haul them. The most likely answer regarding the treasure is a mixture of being washed or buried away naturally and being looted by all parties. Grehan makes no determination as to what happened because having yet to find the treasure he cannot responsibly throw theories into the air. He merely lays out a series of possible locations and the problems with them, saying in the end that the search Moore's gold has only begun.

In sum therefore the title is misleading, the search for Moore's gold is ongoing and the book raises more questions than answers, which is perhaps no bad thing in the end. This is truthfully a sympathetic retelling of the Corunna campaign, using a large and appealing number of eyewitness accounts. It is well written and easy to read, it lays out its case for various theories and explanations with great care, and apart from a few editorial errors, it is a solid account with the promised fresh perspective. I personally found it unconvincing in its verdict on Moore, but was pleased to see that by and large it presents a case which reader can intellectually engage with rather than concluding one for them. Those seeking a Napoleonic treasure hunt should not be misled, those interested in studying the Corunna campaign will surely enjoy it.

Reviewed by [Josh Provan](#)

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