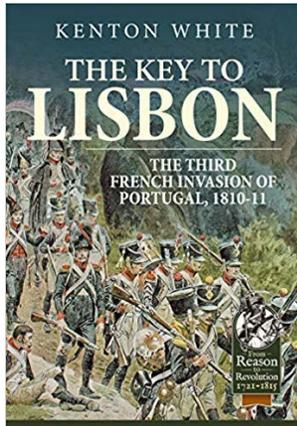


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

White, Kenton. *The Key to Lisbon: The Third French Invasion of Portugal, 1810-11* (From Reason to Revolution 1721-1815, #30). Warwick (UK): Helion, 2019. 256 pages (13 plates, 11 maps). ISBN# 9781911628521. Hardcover. \$49.95/£29.95.



The author, Kenton White is a Teaching Fellow at the University of Reading, researcher and lecturer in Strategic Studies at RAF Cranwell. This is his first book, though he has written a number of articles for military and history journals. [And he is a wargamer.] In the Preface, White states:

This book is about the preparation, planning and execution of the invasion of Portugal in 1810 by the French *Armée de Portugal* under Marshal Massena, and the response by the British, Portuguese, and Spanish allies. It also covers the practice of all armies involved during this campaign, working from original sources... In my research I have sought to return to original sources, and to present the events based on them, supported by archival sources.

That's it, fairly straightforward objectives for his work. As the campaign hasn't been given much attention as a campaign, this is a valuable area of inquiry.

The Chapters are:

“Introduction”. This chapter covers the strategic situation facing the adversaries, the communication between the various governmental decision-makers and the quality and tactics of both armies employed as well as general combat practices and organization. He also outlines his approach to studying the campaign:

Strategy, and its operational and tactical components, can also be described under the headings of ‘ends’, ‘ways’, and ‘means’. In this work the ‘ends’ are described by the political objectives set by the respective Governments.

The ‘ways’ are how the ends were to be achieved, and might not necessarily be military.”...The ‘means’ includes the employment of military force to achieve the strategic objectives, and all the ancillary requirements that takes.

White credits this conceptual approach to Colin Gray in his *The Future of Strategy*. In describing the ‘ends’, ‘ways’ and ‘means’ aspects of the campaign, he shows how those concepts mirror such contemporary military thinkers as Clausewitz and Jomini in identifying the British and French ‘ends’ sought in the campaign and the ‘ways’ chosen. White does an admirable job of explaining his approach and how it applies to his history of the campaign in just 11 pages of his “Introduction”. I appreciate that only one chapter was given over to this basic information, and that it reads not like an information dump, but as part of the developing narrative. It is common for campaign and battle histories to

use more than half their pages 'setting the scene' before getting to the supposed primary topic of the study. Generally, White is spot on with the details basic and arcane in providing readers with a foundation, such as a recognition that Allied artillery were referred to as 'brigades' and 'troops', rather than batteries, and to 'companies' by the French.

Chapter One: "Spain will not Delay us Long". This chapter discusses the plans, personalities and preparations surrounding the French decision to invade Portugal and the British efforts to meet it. The quotes and narration provide a clear description of the thinking behind the planning and actions of the major actors as well as the curious oversights, almost always from primary sources. Massena's and Wellington's relationships with Napoleon and the British government are laid out as well as the larger strategic needs faced by the belligerents. From the beginning, White provides pertinent quotes and information in the most effective places, and usually in the most succinct manner. He gives British and French quotes equal attention in a balanced fashion, picking ones that clearly drive the narrative as well as support it. As a reader, I feel I was gaining real insights into the various actors' thinking and the problems facing them without the author inserting his own conclusions. The author's experience with research and its presentation is obvious, the book a school in how to use and present research most effectively in a narrative.

Chapter Two: "Hic Sunt Leones". The issue of what the generals knew and how they came to know it is detailed in this chapter while laying out the start of the campaign. There is a close look at not only the availability and controversies surrounding the maps used by the French in the Campaign, but also both armies' efforts at reconnaissance. The detail provided makes this one of the slowest chapters in the book, but one that gives the reader an 'on the ground' sense of leading an army on campaign, particularly an invasion. Photos and drawings of most of the maps discussed are provided, but they are not all identified clearly, and never referred to [by page or map number] in the narrative, which makes it difficult to follow a number of descriptions in the chapter and later in the book.

It is interesting to see how much at a disadvantage an invading general is compare to the defender who knows the terrain and roads. The conditions facing the French, particularly after Wellington's 'scorched earth' efforts to hamper the French army are enlightening. For instance, French artillery officer Noël is quoted as writing, "I had never seen a countryside so battered and torn up as this part of Portugal. The roads were barely fit for horses."

Chapter Three: "Blowing Up Bridges". This chapter describes the first moves of the armies, but also explains the engineers tasks during the campaign, both British and French, including building and attacking fortifications and blowing up bridges. How the engineers went about fulfilling Wellington's directions on fortifying the approaches to Lisbon is a study in itself as is the monumental efforts of the French engineers to build and repair roads, bridges and infrastructure destroyed by the Allies.

Chapter Four: “I want to Enter Lisbon as Soon as Possible”. Here the major objectives, communications and logistics of the French army are presented and analyzed, including the reports the generals had to work from. I appreciated that pertinent information was detailed when it applied contextually to the current point in the campaign with minimal commentary, allowing the reader to come to conclusions based on the information presented. The author trusts his readers.

Chapter Five: “A Cautious System”. This details the British/Allied overall constraints, political complications, how Wellington worked out his ‘cautious’ defensive strategy, communication with the British superiors as well as logistics. One thing that White does well is include the specific efforts of the navy and their challenges in supporting Wellington and the army. That is something not often explained in histories of the Peninsular campaigns.

Chapter Six: “1810”. This chapter covers the French movements from the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo to the push on Almeida and beyond. Again, the quotes and thoughts of the commanders and subordinates are presented in clear form, giving the sense they are explaining to you what they are doing...or failing to do. I can’t think of a better written narrative of campaign maneuvers. It is difficult to infuse a coherent chronology of the commanders’ thinking into a narrative of ‘this happened, then that happened.’ White does it well. Massena’s problems with his subordinates are outlined as command dynamics and a human drama rather than soap opera. Not as dramatic, but far more revealing. How Napoleon’s directions from Paris also constrained Massena’s options.

Chapter Seven: “The Prince Never Has a Single Guide”. This was an eye-opener to me. Massena never could find Portuguese locals to guide his army through Portugal. Without them, even the best maps were of limited help. What signs existed had been removed by the Allies. Without knowing the name of that small village or this road, where it goes, the army often was marching blind. The fights at *The Coa* and *Conceptción* are given some attention as the armies move towards Bussaco.

Chapter Eight: “The Portuguese Behaved Most Gallantly”. The chapter is a competent narrative of the battle of Bussaco [*Buçaco*], providing again a clear presentation of events with some surprising details when considering the limited space of one chapter. The battle maps are easy to follow and a diagram explaining open and closed columns is provided—again when it is pertinent instead of at the beginning of the book. There are some disappointments for me. White did such an excellent job researching and explaining campaign events, I had high expectations for the battle. However, when it comes to the battle, he side-steps a number of problems or observer conflicts... something he doesn’t avoid resolving for the campaign. Whether this is from a lack of sources or simply the limited space of one chapter, there are events left unexplained. One example is the description of Ney’s attacks. White himself finds this portion of the battle confusing. French General Pelet says Marchand’s 1<sup>st</sup> Division deployed *entirely* as skirmishers covering “the entire slope below the convent of Bussaco.” White describes it from the British accounts, but then concludes “Perhaps Pelet’s description explains why there

seems to be disconnected attacks and mention of large numbers of sharpshooters.” Pelet didn't ‘mention’ large numbers of sharpshooters. He says both brigades of Marchand's division dissolved into skirmishers and later was relieved and the relieving division continued the skirmishing. White cuts out the part quoting Pelet where he reports this. He basically dismisses Pelet's description and goes with the British accounts. There are ways to knit the accounts together plausibly, if never fully supported. As an example, the charge of the 19<sup>th</sup> Foot could well have been against the dispersed French light infantry. The regiment's Colonel, Macbean says ‘sharpshooters’ were in front of his regiment rather than formed troops. Even so, White provide some interesting tactical observations, such as noting how many skirmishers the French could and did field in various attacks during the day compared to the British/Allied army, providing the evidence for it. It is surprising how easily the French could outnumber the British, sometimes by hundreds of *tirailleurs*.

Chapter Nine: “The Retreat Was Ill Managed”. As it was part of Wellington's strategy to starve out the French, his efforts, successes and failures, are fascinating to follow. Wellington faced any number of frustrations. More detailed explanations of the French supply issues, sources and efforts to maintain the French army in the field are provided, which leads one to admire their resourcefulness. Even in planning the French move through Sobral and the eventual attack there, the lack of accurate maps and the British forts along the way created new surprises for the French. White writes “...Massena was furious that no information had been given to him about the topography of the country north of Lisbon...Massena reportedly responded to the excuses of his advisors by saying ‘*What the devil! Wellington didn't make the mountains!*’” The French plans and continual adapting to new information and problems, leading to the final decision to completely leave Portugal is detailed.

Chapter Ten: “A Libertaçdo”. There are some real scenes of horror as the British follow the French retreat and Wellington finds himself stymied at several points in his efforts to pursue the French and destroy them. The Chapter ends with the French army arriving in Almedia.

“Conclusion”. Here White provides his final judgments on the campaign, interspersing them with the analysis of the campaign by contemporaries. He asks:

Did the French lose the campaign, rather than the allies win? Returning to the descriptions provided in the Introduction to this work, Wellington had the ways and means to execute his strategy in Portugal, to fulfill the required ends. Massena did not.

By this point, readers have come to many of the same conclusions as the author through the narrative, though White goes on to explain what he means, which shows his skill in presenting the decisions and consequences throughout the campaign. He ends the chapter writing “It is important to remember the context of the campaign of 1810 to understand its true significance.” He succinctly outlines the importance of the campaign and the results.

Like the rest of the book, the author meets the reader at the very points where the reader has come to the same questions and conclusions, without ever making him feel like he has been lectured to or led by the nose with cherry-picked evidence. The book includes the order of battles for each army, a list identifying the important '*Dramatis Personae*' of the campaign as well as Wellington's 1809 memorandum for Colonel Fletcher commanding the Royal Engineers, describing 21 points what he wanted to engineers to address in fortify the approaches to Lisbon in preparation for the French invasion. There is a ten-page bibliography.

I can highly recommend the book for anyone, novice or expert in the history interested in the Third Invasion of Portugal or just the nitty-gritty aspects of carrying out a Napoleonic campaign. It's a good read.

Reviewed by [Bill Haggart](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: November 2019