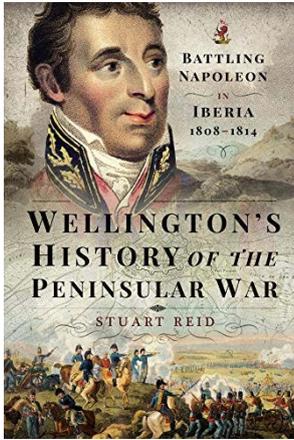


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Reid, Stuart. *Wellington's History of the Peninsular War*. Barnsley (UK): Frontline, 2019. 301 pages. ISBN# 9781526737639. Hardcover. £25.00/\$32.00



Stuart Reid writes useful books with a point to them. They aren't always what you might call in fashion, but they are routinely quite practical and diverting. This one maintains that standard. It contains 8 maps, 16 pages of images with 21 images and 2 appendixes.

Wellington didn't care necessarily for history books, he thought, with a certain logic that if one wanted to learn about a war, the correspondence of the generals and other such collections would serve just as well. In that sense the Duke's opinion was rather ahead of its time, as today authors and historians work hard to reduce the amount of handling given to eyewitness accounts, and try to tell a story from the sources, which is in the end the best way of interpreting

history.

That being said, Wellington had the benefit of having seen everything firsthand as a commanding general, so very little editing was needed for him to clearly understand the journalistic Who, Why, What, Where, When, How, etc. Therefore he didn't need military histories of his own wars, however he did read histories of other wars, and as Reid points out, his battle dispatches from 1808 - 1814, when brought together more or less do present a history of the major actions of the Peninsular War.

As a military history this book is very much in keeping with Wellington's own opinions about such books, being essentially a selection of his dispatches and he would find little wrong with it.

There are 5 chapters and about 132 reading pages not including the large appendixes and it gives a fairly clear look at the manner Wellington reported his victories. Several things stand out to a reader perusing this collection, the first being Wellington's clear and concise manner, his general lack of in-depth details and his overall goal of presenting politically acceptable narratives for Parliamentary consumption that would allow him to maintain his command. With that in mind a reader should not expect to read this book and become anything more than aware of Wellington's censored view of the battles he fought, as several officers mentioned during the war, the Duke was not above leaving out the trickier elements of battles, like Fuentes De Oñoro.

Reid's greatest toil in the writing this must be the impressive end-matter which contains the particulars of practically every officer mentioned in the reports. These are given with as much detail as possible regarding personal particulars and service records. They represent, in a way, the other element to these dispatches, which were generally about mentioning meritorious conduct amongst the officer and men of the army. Though never an impassioned writer, Wellington, contrary to popular belief and his own regret later in life, did always try to give as much praise as possible to officers brought to his attention. Writing these dispatches almost as soon as the guns ceased to fire, and as early as the first reliable casualty returns could be laid before him, these reports would often be entrusted to a hopeful officer in the early hours of the day after the battle.

More immediate appraisals of an action by a participant can rarely be found, they lack only the raw feeling, which Wellington would often, but not as readers will discover, always, successfully keep in check, of junior officers and literate soldiers to mark them amongst the most powerful records of men at war, they are certainly amongst the most important.

Wellington's History of the Peninsular War is a clever, rather fresh, take on the history of the conflict in Spain and Portugal written by its most famous participant, it is a valuable resource for students familiar with firsthand accounts written for the public at large. For who has not at some time during research wished they were not at the mercy of the many volumes of dispatches, which often distract as much as inform, and hoped for a collection such as this?

Reviewed by Josh Provan

Placed on the Napoleon Series