



T. A. Heathcote *Wellington's Peninsular War Generals and their Battles: A Biographical and Historical Dictionary*, Pen & Sword 2010. 189 & viii pp, £19.99.

Writing to Henry Torrens in December 1811, the Duke of Wellington (as he was to become known three years later) commented that one thing he did not require for his army was generals, having already 'more than we can well dispose of.' At the time this was true, but equally the army could not have operated without the efforts of those generals to whom Wellington had assigned commands. With a few exceptions, some of these individuals are not very well known, perhaps because of the towering presence of Wellington himself, who imprinted his personality on every aspect of his army's operations. This was partly out of necessity, as he claimed that the smooth running of affairs demanded his personal supervision; but possibly some of his subordinates would have developed and become better known had they been permitted a greater level of independence.

This new study covers the careers of 41 of Wellington's subordinates and is extremely valuable in providing details, at some length, of the facts concerning their careers and the actions in which they were engaged. The selection of subjects is interesting, especially in the inclusion of some who might not be familiar to any but the most ardent student of the war. The most important and best known personalities are of course included: Rowland Hill, arguably Wellington's most trusted and able subordinate, and others who exercised some degree of independent command, like William Beresford, commander of the Portuguese forces, and Thomas Graham, together with those form the second tier of familiarity, such as 'Black Bob' Craufurd and Wellington's brother-in-law Edward Pakenham. Others, however, are less well known, and include some not even of general officer rank at the time. Examples include Commissary-General Bisset, the engineers Richard Fletcher and Howard Elphinstone, the gunners Alexander Dickson, contrasting staff officers in the invaluable George Murray and the troublesome James Willoughby Gordon (of whom Wellington was able to rid himself after a short period), and the supremely capable director of medical services, James McGrigor.

Inevitably, due to the limitations of space, there are a few omissions of officers who featured in the higher echelon of the command structure of the Peninsular army, perhaps the most notable being John Mackenzie, killed at Talavera, and Denis Pack, though in both cases their commands at that level were of brief duration. Others missing are brigade commanders of note like Nicholas Trant, and the code-breaker Scovell. But arguably the most important personalities are included, and their careers recounted in considerable and authoritative detail, information often not readily available in other sources.

There are not many anecdotes or comments from contemporaries and, although such material can be over emphasised, some insights may be gleaned from them. For example, along with Wellington's thoughts on his mistrusted second-in-command Brent Spencer, as included here, it is interesting to consider John Stepney Cowell's description of him as 'a zealous, gallant officer, without any military genius; anxious and fidgety when there is nothing to do, but, once under fire, looking like a philosopher solving a problem, perfectly cool and self-possessed' (*Leaves from the Diary of an Officer of the Guards*). Sometimes such comments are contradictory. After he was killed in Thouvenot's 'sortie from Bayonne', Andrew Hay is described in an obituary as 'a most zealous and able officer' (*Gentleman's Magazine* May



The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)

Page 2 / 2

1814, p517), whereas his fellow Frederick Robinson thought him ‘a fool ... an arrant Coward [and] a paltry, plundering wretch’ (JSAHR Vol XXXIV p168). Yet Kincaid’s description of Picton at Vitoria, wearing a round hat and swearing as much as if he had two cocked ones, encapsulates much of the character of the man. But if such insights and analyses of their abilities are not abundant, the careers of the individuals included are comprehensive, and the book is complemented by a précis of many of the actions in which they participated. To students of the Peninsular War, and of the British Army in general, this is an important and recommended source.

Philip Haythornthwaite