



Ian Robertson, with cartography by Martin Brown *An Atlas of the Peninsular War* Yale University Press 2010, pp160 £25

Nick Lipscombe *The Peninsular War Atlas* Osprey 2010, 384pp £45

Good maps are vital to both fighting and studying wars. Given that we are firmly in the bicentenary period of the Peninsular War, which saw the liberation of Portugal and Spain from Napoleon, it is not surprising that two atlases covering the war have recently been published. While many historians hold that the Peninsular War was a sideshow of the Napoleonic Wars and that the guerrilla was a sideshow of a sideshow, the Spanish ulcer did make a significant contribution to the downfall of the Corsican ogre and it is right and proper that the war be commemorated by the British, Spanish and Portuguese.

Both these atlases do the war proud. They are very different. Robertson's is selective, short, small, light and inexpensive. Lipscombe's is comprehensive, long, large, heavy and expensive. Robertson will fit easily into your knapsack or rucksack while, in default of a bearer, Lipscombe will best be viewed in your library or study prior to embarkation. It appears that Lipscombe aspires to replace in part the classic (and equally weighty) atlas of the Napoleonic Wars produced by Esposito and Elting of West Point in 1964, familiar to the military and war gamers.

Both these atlases are handsome works. Robertson's has a preface and acknowledgements, chronology, introduction, historical context, 77 maps and plans on 53 subjects, 35 illustrations, dispersal and epilogue, glossary, selective bibliography and index to actions. Lipscombe's (which comes in its own box) has a foreword by the present Duke of Wellington, preface, chronology, introduction by Professor Charles Esdaile of Liverpool University, 161 maps and plans on 54 subjects, 7 appendices, glossary and bibliography. While one might wish that Robertson had a fuller index, at least he has got one. Lipscombe has produced a reference work without an index, missing an opportunity to rectify a drawback with Esposito and Elting.

Ian Robertson needs no introduction to students of the Peninsular War, to the study of which he has devoted much of his long life. Born in 1928, he married a Basque in the 1950s and made his base in Spain in the 1970s and 80s, compiling the "Blue Guides" to Spain, Portugal and France and exploring the battlefields of the Peninsular War. He is known as the editor of Weller's *Wellington in the Peninsula* (1962) and as author of *Wellington invades France* (2003), *Wellington at War in the Peninsula* (2000) and *Commanding Presence Wellington in the Peninsula: Logistics – Strategy – Survival* (2008).

Colonel Nick Lipscombe was born in 1958 in Angers, France. He has a degree in business studies and an MSc in defence studies. He was commissioned into the Royal Artillery in 1980. During his thirty years in the British Army he has seen considerable operational service with the British and American armies, as well as with NATO and the UN. He was awarded the US Bronze Star in 2006. A keen interest in military history followed his academic studies at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, concentrating on the Napoleonic era and the Peninsular War in particular. He is Chairman of Peninsular War 200, the UK official organisation for the commemoration of the bicentenary of the Peninsular War. He speaks German and Spanish, currently works in Portugal and lives in Spain. He published an article



“The Peninsular War: An Allied Victory or a French Failure?” in the British Army Review in 2010.

The two atlases take very different approaches to their subject. Robertson’s atlas is avowedly exclusive, Anglocentric and old-fashioned, the shades of Sir Charles Oman and Sir John Fortescue being ever present. Lipscombe’s atlas is avowedly inclusive, Iberian-centric and modern, the influence of Esdaile being pervasive. Both Lipscombe and Robertson cover the 15 actions and 4 sieges fought by the British forces under Moore and Wellington in Portugal, Spain and France between 1808 and 1814. In addition, Lipscombe covers 25 actions and 15 sieges fought by the Portuguese and Spanish.

While Lipscombe is to be congratulated for his use of Iberian sources and his countering the Anglocentric bias still present in much of the historiography of the war in English (the work of Esdaile excepted), his efforts to be inclusive of Portuguese and Spanish operations are sometimes taken to excessive lengths such as his coverage of the brave but shambolic attempt to block the French advance on Cordoba with some regulars, armed civilians and a few antique guns at Alcolea on 7th June 1808.

Lipscombe has produced an atlas in the spirit of a multi-national alliance like NATO, with all the strengths (and all the weaknesses) inherent in a coalition. He has received the full co-operation of the Spanish and Portuguese authorities. He has also drawn heavily on the work of Esdaile, who has done much to make the undervalued role of the Portuguese and Spanish in their liberation known to the English-speaking world. Both are to be commended. Yet we should remember that while the guerrillas, the Anglo-Portuguese Army and the Spanish Army gave the British Army invaluable aid, they were largely dependent upon the British for their opportunities and we should beware of the pendulum swinging too far the other way. At the Wellington Congress held at the University of Southampton in 2010 Esdaile opined that the most famous single combatant of the entire war was a Spanish woman, Agustina of Aragon. I am afraid that at that point I could hear the words of the Great Duke echoing in my mind: “If you believe that Sir, you will believe anything!”

Neither atlas really addresses the role of sea power. As a peninsula is a piece of land surrounded on three sides by water, fighting and winning the Peninsular War were only possible because of the Royal Navy.

Unsurprisingly and forgivably given their scope, neither work is entirely free from error. I do not pretend to be an expert but I have some knowledge of the war, its battlefields and its mapping. Robertson has Henry Sturgeon as Royal Engineers rather than Royal Staff Corps (p116) and 200 yards as the equivalent of 218.7 metres instead of the other way round (p72). Lipscombe has errors in Maps 73 and 89 and appendix 3, as stated in an editor’s note on the copyright page (for editor’s note read “errata”). No doubt modern publishers regard “errata” slips as anathema. Those with time to spare and an intimate knowledge of the battles and the battlefields will no doubt find many more errors in both works.

Let us compare and contrast the coverage of the battle of Talavera, 27th-28th July 1809. Robertson has 2 maps, one for each day. So does Lipscombe plus a 3D panorama of the second day. Regrettably, Robertson has no panoramas. Both have contours. Yet while Robertson has contour tints and numerical values (with an interval of 50 metres and the



contour value facing downhill), Lipscombe has neither, though a standard contour interval of 25 metres is stated in the map legend at the front of Lipscombe's book. In neither atlas is the datum stated, whether heights are given above sea level or above river level. The former is usual in mapping. Having been on the ground, I would favour an interval of 25 metres rather than 50 metres but as Lipscombe does not give values the point is academic. What is the point of Lipscombe having contours but omitting the values? Having said that, there is a problem with Robertson's values. Those for Talavera appear to be above the River Portina and not sea level. I wonder how many of Robertson's other maps have contour values above river level rather than sea level? So the choice facing the map user is between no contour values (Lipscombe) or questionable values (Robertson). Regrettably, spot heights are given by neither Robertson nor Lipscombe. The Cerro de Medellin – Wellington's position – is higher than the Cerro de Cascajal – Victor's position - so Wellington's position dominated that of his opponent. Robertson indicates the outline of the present day reservoir while Lipscombe does not. Those not knowing the ground and relying on Lipscombe will therefore be in for a big surprise when they get there (the same goes for the battlefield of Sabugal). Robertson has the letter N and a crossed arrow to indicate north while Lipscombe just has the letter N, which can be open to misinterpretation as an N reads the same upside down. According to old maps and accounts of the battle, the olive groves extended up to the Pajar de Vergara. Lipscombe has more extensive groves than Robertson.

Following Esposito and Etling, Lipscombe uses map symbols currently in use in NATO militaries, military academies and staff colleges. However, he uses an archaic symbol for artillery, one which does not properly indicate the direction of fire. Robertson uses older map symbols familiar to readers of Oman and Fortescue. Personally, I prefer Robertson as I do not think that old battles and new symbols go well together. Moreover, to my eyes the dark blue used by Lipscombe to denote the French is not easily distinguishable from the black used to denote the Spanish. As all cartographers know, if you confuse the map user you have failed in your job. This is a black mark (or is it dark blue?) against any atlas.

To conclude. Both atlases have their pluses and minuses but both are strongly recommended. Personally, I would have Lipscombe for study at home but I would take Robertson with me on my travels. Does either surpass Wyld's famous atlas of the Peninsular War published in 1840 with stunning cartography by Thomas Mitchell drawn either during or shortly after the war? Lipscombe's clearly aspires to this, but I fear that I can hear the words of the Great Duke echoing in my mind again. How about someone producing a commemorative reprint of Wyld's atlas timed for the 200th anniversary of the battle of Salamanca next year?

John Peaty