



Peter Edwards, *Talavera - Wellington's early peninsular victories 1808-9* (First published Swindon 2005; Paperback edn. Crowood Press, Swindon 2007), £14.99. ISBN: Variouslly cited as 1 86126 767 3; 13 9781861269188, and 978 1 861269 18 8.

Peter Edwards' 'Talavera' is, alas, yet one more in a long line of anglocentric eulogies of the British in the Peninsular War. In common with all its depressing predecessors it stresses the qualities of Arthur Wellesley as a general, and the sacred traditions of the regimental system: in this case with particular reference to the author's beloved 1 / 48th Foot (which would become 'the Northamptonshire Regiment' only some 65 years later). Roman Catholic Foreigners, of course, are held in total contempt, regardless of whether they are allies, enemies or - the most disturbing category of all - somewhere in between. All their generals are incompetent, mad or, as in the case of Junot, both at once. Victor is insubordinate and Cuesta is a geriatric fool. Their politicians are of course corrupt, while their populations are wretched, backward and unpredictably 'passionate'. Brr! But at least the KGL is well washed, respectable, and reassuringly Protestant (We are reminded of Tommy Atkins' preference for the Germans over the French, in the great trench war of 1914-18).

In any contest of ethnic stereotyping Peter Edwards will perhaps be seeded a little lower than Napier and Oman, both of whom he admires and follows; but it will not be very much lower. The penultimate sentence of the book is a really masterful piece of political incorrectness that it would surely be difficult to exceed. However, the reader must wait a long time before he reaches the penultimate sentence, since the first 132 of Edwards' 256 pages (ie more than half) are not about 'Talavera' at all. Instead, they are about all sorts of earlier battles and campaigns, from Copenhagen via Vimeiro to Corunna, that have but scant direct relevance to the clash that has, highly misleadingly, been taken as the book's title. Nor, incidentally, are they supported by a campaign map that might show where the many places mentioned in the text stand in relation to each other. Such maps as we do get are merely lifted from Fortescue's history of the British army, rather than drawn specifically for this volume - and even then they are not listed in the Table of Contents. When it comes to the details of the battle, a series of small plans or diagrams is sorely missed. Add to this the lack of scholarly apparatus, the absence of orders of battle for the armies engaged, and the exiguity of the bibliography, and one will start to sense the full level of hair-tearing frustration that this volume may provoke.

Edwards does nevertheless write in an easily readable style, and he is obviously well informed about the events that he chooses to describe. He has the good sense to recognise that Talavera was no sort of 'victory' except in a very narrow tactical definition of that term. The victor was forced to flee from the battlefield almost as soon as the fighting was over, leaving his wounded to the enemy and abandoning his primary strategic objective, the capture of Madrid, for the next three years. Indeed, Wellesley was taught such a deeply traumatic personal lesson by the experience that he instantly abandoned the offensive *à l'outrance*, which had stood him in such good stead during his previous ten years as a general. In its place he adopted a 'cautious system' that was its diametrical opposite.

If you want a straightforward single-volume account of the hallowed British military myths of 1808-9, then you could perhaps do worse than read this book. Edwards also has the virtue of using 'five dozen' primary sources, although it is not made clear which of them are published and which are not (just saying 'you can find most of them in the National Army Museum' is



really not good enough). He even includes a few from the French side; but it comes as no surprise that the Spanish and Portuguese - who are absolutely central to the campaigns described - are represented by not one single bibliographical entry, and not even the accessible modern works of Charles Esdaile are mentioned. Instead, there are plaudits for Cornwell's allegedly 'properly researched' Sharpe books, which to the present reviewer amounts to adding a grotesque injury to an already deeply-felt insult. This is even worse than the sadly widespread belief that the 'Blackadder' TV show is a reputable academic source for the generalship of Douglas Haig (At least the script writers of 'Blackadder' had obviously read a few primary sources).

I trust the gentle reader of this review will understand if I skip the irrelevant bulk of Edwards' book, and fast-forward to p.170 where the battle of Talavera begins. The cover blurb promises us a 'detailed description' of this battle, which might perhaps be of considerable interest to the tactical historian and snippeteer. But does it really deliver on this promise, in the way that Rory Muir's splendid interpretation of 'Salamanca' did so well in 2001? The fact that Edwards devotes just 52 pages to the battle of Talavera, whereas Oman had taken 54, does not bode well.

In the event Edwards does bring a critically questioning eye to the battle and points out, for example, that Oman had overlooked the unexplained absence of Wellesley at the critical time and place when the French attacked late on 27th July. Equally he highlights the absence of evidence from Donkin's brigade, which was apparently 'skulking' at the time. Nor, despite an apparent denial that such a thing was possible (on p.190, because of the distinctive colours of the uniforms), does he ignore the frequent incidence of 'friendly fire'.

At dawn on the 28th the French attacked again and were again repulsed. They regrouped and made a third attempt in the afternoon, on a wider frontage, to bring the battle to its thrilling climax. Unfortunately the precise tactical circumstances of these two attacks are not greatly clarified in Edwards' text, nor do we get any clear idea about just what the British tactics were supposed to be. One source of this confusion may be the author's reliance on the works of Jac Weller, 'who is usually right about musket work' (p.90), even though in the view of the present reviewer he is even more usually 'dead wrong'. It would have helped if Weller had been mentioned in the bibliography; but alas he is not. Equally on the French side it would be nice to think that Edwards had delved deep into the Vincennes archives to find Chambray's account of the action: but alas he seems instead to have made an unacknowledged transcription of my own translation of it (not that he can spell my name correctly, in any case)...

The story itself is a very exciting one, although it is perhaps unsurprising to find that the day is finally saved by none other than the 1 / 48th regiment of foot. Wellesley's wise move of this incomparable battalion (on p.211) is actually what this book is all about. It is the punch line; the *dénouement*; the final scene in the library when the detective brilliantly reveals that Mrs White did it with the candlestick after all.

Just so. The clinching evidence cited in support is a map drawn for the regimental history in 1816. Yet once again Edwards misses the chance to cite the bibliographical details, or to show us any photograph. Really this is shoddy stuff, and it is the publisher, rather than the author, who must ultimately shoulder most of the blame. If only Crowood had taken a number of



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](#)

simple steps, such as insisting on a sensible scholarly apparatus and providing us with blow-by-blow diagrams of the battle, this book could have been made into a far better contribution to our understanding than it has actually turned out to be.

Paddy Griffith

Editor's comments

I read this book before passing it on to Paddy. It was almost the only thing that I had read on the Peninsular War since I took Jac Weller's book with me to Spain in 1984. I found it to be a highly readable and quite exciting account of the campaigns and actions of Wellesley's forces in Spain over the first two years. The author does indeed spend a good deal of time on Rolica, Vimiero and Oporto but if you do not own Fortescue the maps and coverage of these actions appear very sound and I thought placed the conduct of the Talavera campaign in context. Paddy's review led to a correspondence between us about anglocentrism and what we would now call ethnic stereotyping. As someone whose early views on the Peninsular War were formed by the novels of G A Henty I personally felt that Peter Edwards actually went some way to explain Cuesta's views and to discount the old canard about his whole army running away after firing its first volley. The KGL and the Guards might be stolid Protestants (apart, presumably from the large contingent of Irishmen in the latter) but in fact it is they who go out of control at crucial points in the battle. I suspect that many readers will also be surprised to read of the successful and important Spanish cavalry charge against the Bavarians near Talavera town.

Scholarly apparatus, including a strategic map, might well be improved but if you are not a Peninsular War scholar I thought the author told a dramatic story well.

A Commanding Presence, Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814 Logistics, Strategy, Survival by Ian Robertson, Spellmount, £30. ISBN 978 1 86227 374 0.

pp 480, including 30 b & w illustrations, 14 in colour and 12 maps (9 in colour).

It is available from the publisher at Cirencester Road, Chalford, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL6 8PE (tel. 01453 883300, or e-mail enquiries@spellmount.com or sales@thehistorypress.co.uk

I bought this book following our Summer Conference last year as books on logistics are rare things indeed. As the blurb states, "*Some years after the Peninsular War, Wellington remarked: 'I made a computation of all the men I lost in Spain – killed, prisoners, deserters, everything – it amounted to 36,000 men in six years', adding that it would have been infinitely greater had not sufficient attention been given to the army's 'regular subsistence', a vital contribution to his eventual success which has not been adequately examined until now.*"

I am not in a position to say whether there has, in fact, been any earlier or comprehensive treatment of Wellington's logistic system – I have seen articles on the transport of his siege train and there is S G P Ward's still unchallenged work on his Headquarters – but I fear that



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](#)

this book does not live up to its subtitle of *Logistics, Strategy, Survival*. Rather, it is yet another populist battle-based account of Wellington's campaigns.

The author admits that the work is entirely anglocentric although his reason - that little survives from the pens of officers in allied service seems to me as yet unproven until historians look as deeply at French, Spanish, Portuguese and German records as English speaking ones have looked at ours.

But the book does not concentrate on the themes set out in the preface. Indeed, by the time we get to the index the author admits that he has decided not to include entries for weather, the transport of ammunition, artillery, equipment, provisions, supplies by bullock-cart or mule, carters, drivers, muleteers or to plundering and looting. All very essential parts of Logistics, Strategy and Survival one would have thought!

But the author knows his subject well and, in company with those memoirists whom we know and love, tells the story of Wellington's campaigns in a straightforward chronological manner. It is a pity that the book does not concentrate on Wellington's Strategy and Logistics – or should we put Logistics before Strategy – but it is a good, modern introduction to Wellington's campaigns in the Peninsular.

A note on Anglocentrism

Our first author was accused of being anglocentric and the author of *A Commanding Presence* freely admits it. I asked Paddy if he knew of many historians who adopted a broader approach and he said that he could think of hardly any, Charles Esdaile perhaps being the most prominent exception. Ian Robertson says that his reason for the anglocentric approach is that there is so little published material from the other combatant nations. But is this really so?

Certainly, to someone who is more familiar with works on World War Two than the Great War 150 years before that, it does seem a little surprising that publishers are still obsessing about Wellington's campaigns (important though they are) to the exclusion of the strategies that put him there, the naval operations that supported him and the other campaigns waged not only by other British commanders but also the French, Spanish and Portuguese, not to say Germans.

Andy Grainger

Mars & Clio 22 Spring 2008