

The Napoleon Series Reviews

Murchison, Arthur. *War before Science: Sir Roderick Impey Murchison's Youth, Army Service and Military Associates during the Napoleonic Wars*. Bethesda: Academica; 2014. 648 pages. ISBN: 9782936320745. \$61

One of the foremost geologists of the 19th Century was Sir Roderick Murchison. He is noted for many accomplishments, including establishing several stratigraphic systems of geology and predicting the finding of gold in Australia. He was president of the Royal Geological Society of London twice, president of the Royal Geographical Society four times, and the Director General of the British Geological Survey. There are numerous places around the world named after him as was the moon's Murchison Crater!¹

What is not well known is that Sir Roderick first ambition was to be a soldier and hopefully to someday become a general. He graduated from the Royal Military College at Great Marlow and was commissioned as an ensign in the 2nd Battalion 36th Foot in 1807 at the age of 15. Murchison would deploy with the 1st Battalion to Portugal in 1808 and fight at Roliça and Vimeiro. He would be with General Moore's Army as the advance into Spain and survived the retreat to Corunna.

Lieutenant Murchison was well connected. His uncle was General Sir Alexander Mackenzie who appointed him his aide-de-camp. In 1809 he went with his uncle to Sicily and then to Ireland in 1811. He would stay in Ireland until 1814. In 1815 Lieutenant Murchison purchased a captaincy in the 6th Dragoons hoping that he would be able to go with the regiment when it was sent to Belgium to be part of Wellington's Army. Despite the promises of his colonel, he was left behind in the regimental depot. The writing was on the wall for him. In the summer of 1815 Captain Murchison was placed on half-pay and by the end of the year he realized his dream of a military career was not be. So he sold his commission and left the army.

There are several things about this biography that will strike the reader. The first is that the author quotes extensively from Sir Roderick's own memoirs as a junior officer and expands them with them excerpts from the diary of Lieutenant Thomas Blackwell, who served with Murchison in the 36th Foot. Both of these memoirs are relatively unknown, with Murchison's having never been published before. Blackwell's were serialized over 80 years ago in *Firm, the Journal of the Worcestershire Regiment*.² These two primary sources are a goldmine of information of the 36th Foot during the Peninsular War. (The only other set of memoirs written by an officer in the 36th Foot during the era that I know of was written by an anonymous officer and covers the 1806 expedition to Buenos Aires.³)

¹ Pages XI - XII

² Pages 522-3

³ [British Memoirs of the Napoleonic Wars: the Infantry Regiments](#)

Secondly, *War before Science* covers the years Sir Roderick spent at the Royal Military College and once again provides quotes from him on his time there. It gives the reader an excellent idea what it was like for a student at the college – the courses he took, the quality of the instructors and instruction, and an insight of the politics that were so pervasive in the early days of the school.

Over a third of the book is devoted to Lieutenant Murchison's five months in Portugal and Spain. Once again the author quotes liberally from his memoirs and it turns out the 16 year old ensign was very observant. Because he carried the regimental colors at both Roliça and Vimeiro, much of the time he was close to his battalion commander and was able to see many things a junior officer would not have. For example at the landing of the British force in Portugal he was in position to watch Wellington arrive in Mondego Bay:

"Just as I was gazing around and as our boat touched the sand, the commodore's barge rapidly passed with our bright eyed little general. Perhaps I am the only person now living who saw the future Wellington place, for the first time, his foot on Lusitania followed by his Aide-de-Camp, Fitzroy Somerset, afterwards Lord Raglan. He certainly was not twenty paces from me and the cheerful confident expression of his countenance at that moment has ever remained impressed upon my mind."⁴

One of the most memorable passages in the book is the young ensign's reaction to being under fire the first time. Captain Hubbard⁵

". . . who had fought in many a fray, perceiving that I looked rather pale, gave me a good draught of Holland's gin right out of his own canteen and patting me on the back said 'you'll never feel so afterwards my boy.' And he was quite right. The first start over and you are ever afterwards one of a united mass of brave."⁶

War before Science also goes into great detail on Lieutenant Murchison's time as an aide-de-camp to his uncle in Sicily and Ireland. This is invaluable in itself, because very little has been written about the Mediterranean Theater of War from the soldier's perspective and what life was like serving on the staff at home during the war. Capping all this was something I had come across before. Sir Roderick missed Waterloo, he was in France during the hectic days when Napoleon escaped from exile and tried to reclaim his throne in 1815! Lieutenant Murchison was able to see a review by the King of France of the troops that were being sent to capture Napoleon

⁴ Page 121

⁵ Murchison's memory was slightly off. There was no Captain Hubbard in the 36th Foot. There was, however a Captain P.M. Hobart.

⁶ Page 149

“ . . . Guards an Regiments in Paris. 10 or 12,000 men. . . fat Louis. . . who waddled out in his velvet boots to be saluted by the loyal troops. . . the soldiers of the line all cracking jokes with each other; and though they still wore the white cockade, they were evidently all dying to mount the tricolor. . . Lefebvere Desouettes. . . circulating among the old soldiers and talking to them of Napoleon and their glories.”⁷

Although this review makes *War before Science* appear to be a memoir, it is not. It is definitely a biography of the military life of Sir Roderick Murchison. The author expands Murchison’s memoirs with background information on the events that the young witnessed and the people he inter-acted with. He ably tells the story of an obscure junior officer, who despite his dreams never had much of a military career.

One of my personal goals for the Napoleon Series is to bring to life as many of the soldiers who fought during the Napoleonic Wars. . . not just the generals and colonels, but the junior officers, noncommissioned officers, and the privates. *War before Science* does this in spades! The author should be commended for doing so! The size of the book may turn off some readers, but it is a quick read and will quickly engage the reader. There is enough detailed information to hold the interest of Napoleonic scholars, but the author also does a superb job of filling in the background information on the events Roderick Murchison experienced so that a reader who is just looking to expand his knowledge on him will not be overwhelmed.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2014