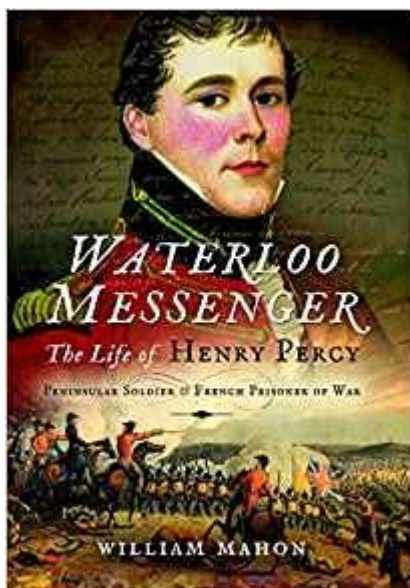


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Mahon, William. *Waterloo Messenger: The Life of Henry Percy, Peninsular Soldier and French Prisoner of War*. Barnsley (UK): Pen and Sword, 2017. 224 pages ISBN# 1473870534. Hardcover. £25 / \$50



Major the Honourable Henry Percy, 14th Light Dragoons, is remembered far more for what he did than who he was. Practically any student of Waterloo can tell you he was the officer who delivered the news of the victory to grateful Prince Regent, yet the knowledge usually stops there. By 1815 he already had a substantial military career, and William Mahon's book exists to bring this gallant officer into the spotlight.

Born on 14 September 1785, the fifth son of Algernon Percy, Baron Lovaine and later 1st Earl of Beverley, Henry was the brother of Hugh Percy, bishop of Carlisle, and of Vice-admiral Josceline Percy. He was educated at Eton, and appointed lieutenant in the 7th Fusiliers in 1804. He became captain unattached in October 1806, and captain in the 7th Fusiliers the following month. He served as aide-de-camp to

Sir John Moore in the Corunna campaign. In June 1810 he transferred as captain to the 14th Light Dragoons. He was taken prisoner with a party of his regiment during the retreat from Burgos in 1812 and was detained in France until the peace in 1814.

In 1815 he was appointed aide-de-camp to the Duke of Wellington. Described by Thomas Creevey as 'by far the best hand at conversation of the duke's young men', he was entrusted with the first dispatches bearing news of the victory at Waterloo.¹ He reached London on the evening of Wednesday 21 June and searched out the Prince Regent at a party at Mrs. Boehm's in St. James's Square. (To the hostess's chagrin, his dramatic intrusion broke up the gathering.) He laid captured colours before the Prince Regent, saying, 'Victory Sir, victory!' This was the pinnacle of his fame, for which he was given the brevet of lieutenant-colonel.

He retired from the army in 1821 as a substantive major in the 14th Light Dragoons. He entered Parliament as Member for Bere Alston in 1820 Parliament, but in political matter he was 'thoroughly anonymous.' He is not known to have spoken in Parliament and his only recorded vote was with Lord Liverpool's ministry against the disfranchisement of ordnance officials in 1820.

Percy prematurely lost his health, and died at his father's house in Portman Square, London on 15 April 1825, in his fortieth year, and was buried in the cemetery of St. Marylebone. He left all his property to 'my two sons Henry and Percy.' Although he never married, he had two illegitimate sons from Marion, a French woman while he was a prisoner of war in France. His sons were Major General Sir Henry Marion Durand and Percy Durand. Sir Henry Durand's son

¹ There were 56 newspapers in Britain at the time, but none employed war correspondents; they gleaned such news from the government, or from agencies.

Sir Mortimer Durand lived most of his life in India but was British Ambassador to the USA from 1903-1906. His great-nephew was General Lord Henry Hugh Manvers Percy VC KCB, the first person to be presented with the Victoria Cross. The Durand baronets continue to this day and many of them have had distinguished military and political careers.

Henry Percy did not leave a diary, and William Mahon has tackled the difficult task of piecing together the story of a young officer from references around and collateral to Percy's life and career, rather than from the pen of the subject himself (except in a few instances). In his Introduction, William Mahon advises us that 'This book is a *life* of Henry Percy because he had an unusual life, but information being incomplete, it would be pretentious to call it a biography'. The book succeeds well in this regard; although (and as the author warns us) one ends the book wishing to know a bit more about the private Henry Percy, a brave man whose Peninsula career was cut short through bad luck, had his fifteen minutes of fame in 1815, then died tragically young. It is recommended for those interested in the Peninsular War and the Waterloo campaign, and in particular what happened in the aftermath of the great battle.

Reviewed by [Steve Brown](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: February 2018