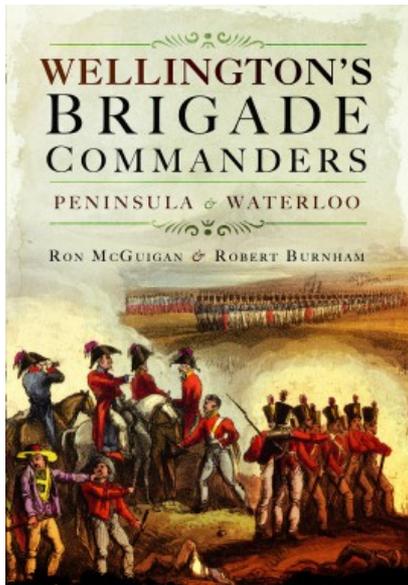


The Napoleon Series Reviews

McGuigan, Ron and Burnham, Robert. *Wellington's Brigade Commanders: Peninsula & Waterloo*. (Barnsley (UK): Pen & Sword, 2017. 8 xiv + 322 pages. 16 pages of plates many in colour. ISBN# 9781473850798. Hardcover \$50 /£25.



I cannot pretend that this review is impartial as I have corresponded with the authors for years, and strongly encouraged them to undertake this book, but the result exceeds my very high expectations. It is not difficult to find information about the Duke of Wellington or his leading subordinates in the Peninsular or Waterloo Campaigns: many of them have fine biographies and their names are well known to anyone with an interest in the subject. But if we go beyond the Pictons and the Craufurds, the Cottons and the Uxbridges, there is a dearth of information about the generals at the next level, the colonels, brigadiers and major-generals who commanded brigades of two, three or four battalions, leading them into action, and sometimes having to step up and take command when the divisional commander was killed or wounded. Few biographies have been written about these men, and it usually takes a good deal of trouble even to discover the basic outline of their military career, their family background and their life after the war, let alone get an impression of their ability and character. Ron McGuigan and Robert Burnham have done this work for us, and collected it together in a single convenient volume.

Wellington's Brigade Commanders contains short biographies of seventy-one officers who commanded brigades in Wellington's army from the beginning of the Peninsular War to the end of the Occupation of France in the years after Waterloo. It does not include anyone who went on to be given the permanent command of a division – hence the exclusion of Picton, Craufurd *et al.* A few names will be familiar to anyone with an interest in the subject: John Gaspard Le Marchant who led the great cavalry charge at Salamanca and died in the moment of victory, or Robert Ballard Long, whose letters home provide such a fascinating insight into his character and outlook; but most are much less well-known and deserve to be better remembered. There is Ronald Ferguson, who played a distinguished part in the Vimeiro Campaign, but who was also a radical member of parliament and foolhardy enough to publicly criticize the Duke of York during the Mary Anne Clarke affair the following year – something which blighted his chances of active service or honours and distinctions for the rest of the war and well into the peace. And, at the other end of the war, there is Lord George Beresford, who took command of a cavalry brigade a few days after Waterloo, and who was the nephew of

William Carr Beresford whose work repairing the Portuguese army laid the foundation stone of all Wellington's successes in the Peninsula. Alphabetically arranged, the entries begin with Wroth Palmer Acland and conclude with William Wheatley.

Each entry begins with table giving the essential facts of the officer's birth, death and military career, including – unusually – how each step of promotion was obtained, whether by purchase, exchange or appointment. There follows a short biography – usually three, four or five pages – which gives a good account of the officer's entire career, not just their service under Wellington, including their commands, their experience in action, and - wherever the evidence exists - what the soldiers who served under them, and other generals, thought about them. We are told a little of their private life and often something of their character; and when the sources are contradictory, as is often the case, we are told that as well. All the sources are given in footnotes that appear where they are most convenient, at the foot of the page. It is worth stressing that every entry is the product of serious original research, with typical sources being the *London Gazette* and Wellington's General Orders which announced to the whole army that a senior officer had been appointed to a command. Memoirs and diaries of officers and men flesh out the picture, while the later life of many officers draws on such diverse sources as the *History of Parliament* and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

There are entries for officers of the King's German Legion such as Victor Alten and George Bock, but not for the Hanoverian officers who commanded brigades in their own contingent in 1815, nor for British officers who commanded a Portuguese brigade in Wellington's army like Benjamin D'Urban. The sixteen pages of plates contain portraits of almost half the officers, many in colour; and good layout and a variety of sources make them much less repetitive than might be expected.

If we take William Wheatley as an example, we find that he was born on 14 August 1771 and that his first commission was as an ensign in the Guards in 1790, and that he remained a Guards officer. He served at Cadiz and took part in the battle of Barossa before being sent out to the main army in the Peninsula to help fill the gaps caused by the casualties suffered by senior officers at Ciudad Rodrigo. He arrived at the beginning of May 1812 and expressed a wish for a command in the First Division, which Wellington granted, giving him Stopford's brigade (Stopford having just gone home on leave). Wheatley was delighted with the brigade and gives a good account of the state of each of the regiments in it at the time he took command, but was not enthusiastic about the war and was inclined to criticize Wellington for being too aggressive and taking too many risks. (This from letters home which are quoted in the entry). Wheatley was present at the battle of Salamanca but his brigade took little part in the fighting, and he entered Madrid on his forty-first birthday, less than a month later. Sent to El Escorial he fell ill with typhus and died on 1 September, far from home and family. Among other details, we learn that Wheatley and Henry Campbell (another Guards officer included in the volume) married sisters, and that he was also

close friends with William Anson and Richard Hulse (both of whom also have entries): part of the intricate web of friendships and rivalries that animated the senior ranks of the British army, but which we can now only occasionally glimpse. The four-page entry on William Wheatley turns a simple, long-forgotten name on an order-of-battle into a real person, filling out our understanding of the war and the way the British army operated in the age of Wellington.

Wellington's Brigade Commanders will sit on the ready reference shelf by the elbow of anyone writing or reading seriously about the British army in the war against Napoleon. It is full of information that is nowhere else available and will be consulted and relied upon for decades to come. It is not a book to sit down and read from cover to cover, but for anyone with some background in the subject it is great fun to dip into, and very often one entry will lead to another, one discovery prompt a fresh query, and a new insight suggest a second look at a familiar story. It is a fine achievement.

Reviewed by [Rory Muir](#)

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