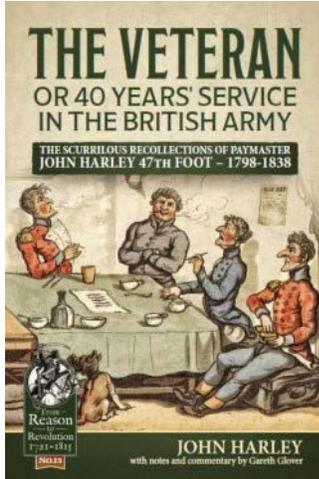


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Harley, John. *The Veteran of 40 Years' Service in the British Army: the Scurrilous Recollections of Paymaster John Harley 47th Foot - 1798- 1838*. Gareth Glover (ed.). Solihull: Helion, 2018. 308 pages. ISBN: 9781912390250 PB. £18.



The last book I reviewed was about a bandmaster in the 26<sup>th</sup> Foot. It turned out much better than I thought.<sup>1</sup> The next book on my reading list is this one. . . the memoirs of a British paymaster. Again I was skeptical about it before I started reading it, since let's face it, how interesting could the life of a paymaster be? However the editor's comments on the back of the book did pique my interest. He wrote that

“ . . . the greatest joy of these pages is to be found in the various scurrilous incidents mentioned in these memoirs, which have all been found to be fully established in fact. Duels, bigamy, abduction, women tricked into marriage, sinking boats, cowardice, larceny, murder, corruption, human tragedy,

bankruptcy, forgery, suicides, privateers, debtors prison, card sharks, highwaymen, prisoners of war, and Garryowen Boys, indeed the whole gambit. It truly exposes the seedy underside of the Georgian age both within the army and in civilian life too..”

*The Veteran* begins with John Harley's early life in Ireland in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and then covers 25 years of his military career. During that time he was in the Tarbet Fencibles and then joined the 54<sup>th</sup> Foot, during which time he served with them in the Egypt Campaign and in Gibraltar during the mutiny at Gibraltar. After returning he returned to England he joined the 47<sup>th</sup> Foot as a paymaster. He went to the Peninsula where he was stationed in Cadiz and at the siege of Tarifa in 1812. He went north with the regiment when it marched north to the main British Army under Wellington. Along the way he was captured by French dragoons, sent to Madrid as a prisoner-of-war, led a mass escape of prisoners, and led them and many deserters in a perilous journey before they reached friendly forces in the vicinity of Badajoz. He was at the siege of San Sebastian and the invasion of southern France. The book ends with his adventures in the Miguelite Wars in Spain in 1821 – 1823.

Gareth Glover promises a lot, but delivers it in spades. In addition to what Gareth mentions, Paymaster Harley is very candid about a variety of things some of them were borderline unethical if not outright criminal. He talks of deliberately recruiting men who

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<sup>1</sup> [John Westcott's Journal of the Campaigns in Portugal, Late Bandmaster of the British 1/26th \(Cameronian\) Regiment](#)

were not physically capable of being soldiers, allowing his servant to pillage and loot passing farms, and the incompetence of a fellow paymaster. He also provides sketches of many senior officers he worked for. He pulls no punches with his descriptions of them, but surprisingly, unlike many officers in the 95<sup>th</sup> Foot, he had a very high opinion of Major General John Skerrett.

John Harley had problems finding a publisher because he told tales that were considered to be best left untold. And of course, were probably libelous. He finally printed them privately and to avoid being taken to court, he often only give a rank, a first name, and then an initial for the family name. Mr. Glover spent months tracking down the omitted names and then checking them against official records and newspaper reports. This served as a fact checker for the memoirs and most of John Harley's stories can be verified.

Gareth Glover wrote about the book that "John Harley's memoirs are a total joy and a real eye-opener on many levels – once you have read them, you will never look at Wellington's army in the same light ever again."

For those who liked Augustus Schumann's *On the Road with Wellington*<sup>2</sup> will definitely enjoy *The Veteran*. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2018

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<sup>2</sup> [On the Road with Wellington: the Diary of a War Commissary](#)