

William Webber, *With the Guns in the Peninsula: The Peninsular War Journal of Captain William Webber, Royal Artillery* (ed. by R. H. Wollocombe), (reprint by Frontline Books, 2017), 196pp. ISBN: 1473882575. £19.99.

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The great authority on the Peninsular War, Professor Charles Oman, once commented that the Peninsular War was remarkable for the rich variety of memoirs, journals and diaries which were left behind by its participants. His analysis is, of course, very true. The Peninsular War is arguably the first conflict to be thoroughly documented by those who took part, and in this sense was a precursor for the First World War, over a century later. Improving literacy meant that individuals from across all branches, regiments and ranks of the British Army which fought in the Peninsular War were able to make notes of their experiences, and this wealth of eye-witness material is part of what makes studying the conflict so enthralling.

Despite the incredible volume of journals which were written by soldiers, it is curious that relatively few journals survive from those who served in the artillery. It is therefore pleasing to see that Frontline has taken the decision to reprint one of the best diaries from the Royal Artillery during the Peninsular War: that of Captain William Webber.

Webber's diary covers the period of August 1812 to June 1813. This relatively short time span was one of the crucial turning points of the Peninsular War, which reflected the frequently waxing and waning fortunes of the Allies. In the aftermath of Wellington's victory at the Battle of Salamanca, there was a general expectation amongst the public both in Britain and in Spain that the allies would push the French back to the Pyrenees by the end of the year. The reality was very different. A complex strategic situation, arguably coupled with a lapse of judgment on Wellington's part, meant that by November 1812 the Allied army was back on the Spanish-Portuguese border – precisely where it had been 11 months earlier. By June however, bold manoeuvring by Wellington had paid dividends, and the journal cuts off just days before the crucial Battle of Vittoria, following which the French were essentially forced to abandon Spain. As a result, Webber's journal covers one of the most important phases of the war, making its contents all the more interesting.

Webber, however, did not need such assistance when it came to captivating his audience's attention. He wrote with an engaging, vivid style that fully immerses the reader in the landscape of Spain in the early 19th Century. This book is, therefore, far more than simply a dry account of leagues marched and battles fought. From the very first page of the journal Webber explores every aspect of life in the Iberian Peninsula in wonderful detail, commenting candidly on the locals and landscape. He pulls no punches, openly admitting to disdain for the Portuguese, distrust of the Spanish, and disgust at what he perceived to be the 'backwardness' of the lifestyles of the local inhabitants. His descriptions of landscape and architecture, history and contemporary developments indicate that he was a man of considerable knowledge, who was comfortable in his surroundings. Anyone looking for an incentive to explore rural Spain need look no further than this book.

This journal is much more than simply a 'good read'. From a historiographical perspective Webber's account is more useful, and potentially more reliable, than most of the

period. Due to it being a diary, which was not edited by its own author, Webber's journal is free from the influence of Napier. Napier, who served in the Peninsula, wrote the first history of the war, and his focus on heroic Brits triumphing despite the incompetence of their Spanish allies influenced the work of many who published accounts of their experiences after his work. Furthermore, accounts from the Royal Artillery are rare, and Webber's writing is so detailed that it is possible to establish a great deal about the wider strategic situation facing General Rowland Hill's detachment, which remains a relatively neglected topic of the period.

Rich in detail and wonderfully entertaining, Webber's diary is essential reading for all those seeking to understand what it was really like to be on the frontline during the Napoleonic Wars. This book therefore represents a welcome addition to the renaissance of Peninsular War journal publication which Frontline Books has led in recent years.