

Robert Burnham & Ron McGuigan, *Wellington's Foot Guards at Waterloo: The men who saved the day against Napoleon* (Bansely: Pen & Sword, 2018), xiv+380pp. ISBN: 1526709864. £25.

Waterloo is unquestionably one of the most written about battles in history. The recent bicentenary only added to the yards of bookshelves which can be filled with work on the topic, and these in turn have sparked ongoing discussion of the battle. In such a crowded field, it is rare to find books which offer a genuinely fresh perspective. This latest contribution, by the dynamic duo of Napoleonic historians Robert Burnham and Ron McGuigan, is a happy exception to that rule.

*Wellington's Foot Guards at Waterloo* is the fourth title to be co-authored by these two gentlemen, who have acquired a reputation for producing highly detailed and meticulously researched books. Fans of their work will be pleased to hear that this is in the same mould. Burnham and McGuigan have made a conscious decision in this work not to engage with historical debate, and instead have focused on examining these prestigious regiments of the British army, and their contribution to the Battle of Waterloo from every conceivable angle. This revelation will be a little surprising to the reader, given that the tag line of the title is 'The men who saved the day against Napoleon'. Whilst this is a commonly held perception in popular history, the precise significance of the fight for Hougoumont in the midst of the battle remains a hotly contested topic amongst historians. Equally, whilst it is undisputable that the Guards were crucially important, and conducted themselves with considerable heroism, both in the defence of Hougoumont, and in their repulse of Napoleon's Imperial Guard in the closing stages of the battle, the extent to which other units deserve credit is a further area of debate. As a result, the tag line is a little misleading, as this book does not seek to provide an emphatic analysis of the claims that the Guards were the most important units in Wellington's army during the Waterloo campaign.

Instead, the book is a literal mine of valuable information, which pays ample testament to the relentless attention to detail which have become hallmarks of Burnham and McGuigan's work. The book begins with a detailed explanation of the structure of the Guards regiments, and their service records during the Napoleonic Wars. The use of a clear writing style and carefully worded explanations means that this book is easily accessible to all readers, and the pair have taken care to ensure that everything is comprehensively explained, even being prepared to repeat points made earlier in the book in order to ensure absolute clarity. This should not be dismissed as evidence of poor proof reading, as it is deeply apparent that Burnham and McGuigan are far too careful to make such simple mistakes. Instead this is intended to overcome the sense that the uninformed reader may experience of being 'thrown in at the deep end'. The text very rapidly descends into highly detailed descriptions of transfer rates, age ranges of officers and issues of dual rank (a unique privilege of all officers serving in the Guards regiments at the time). The results of these discussions are highly valuable, but it does mean that readers require at least some understanding of the context of the Napoleonic Wars, the Waterloo campaign, and the way in which the British Army operated. In truth, however, the casual reader looking for a light history of the Waterloo campaign is not the target market for this book. McGuigan and Burnham are clearly mindful of this, and have structured their book accordingly, providing a huge quantity of data in numerous tables and thoughtful appendices which will be of huge value to the researcher. Nonetheless, it is

pleasing, and laudable, to note that they have made the effort to ensure that the text is relatively easy to follow for those who wish to very rapidly expand their knowledge by reading this book.

Despite deliberately not seeking to grapple with historical debates, this book nonetheless helps to correct some commonly held misconceptions. Whilst discussing the distribution of ages of enlisted men and officers, for example, the book effectively disproves the myth that 'drummer boys' were in fact boys (although a number were under 18, in all only 33% of drummers were under 20 years of age). Equally they contest the notion that all Guards officers were aristocrats, unearthing evidence to suggest a greater degree of social diversity, even if the officers were all drawn from those with at least some degree of wealth.

The bulk of the book is given over to a detailed narrative of the battles of Quatre Bras and Waterloo (the two principle British actions of the Waterloo campaign), told from the eyes, and quite literally in the words of those Guardsmen who fought in both actions. The authors have drawn on a wealth of recently published archival material (much of which has been made available by Pen & Sword) to tell the story of the campaign through eyewitness accounts. The resulting narrative is an engaging and balanced one, as McGuigan and Burnham and Burnham have taken care not to accept anecdotes at face value, instead seeking to determine their origins, and whether their claims can be corroborated. The text is also laced with thoughtful footnotes (which themselves are much more preferable to the endnotes often used by publishers), which add important points of clarification, additional pieces of information, and provide valuable pointers to a wide range of source material which has been consulted in the researching of the book, and which researchers will enjoy following up. It should also be said that the narrative does not simply end with the close of the Battle of Waterloo, and the authors have instead carried the narrative on to the conclusion of the invasion of France. As that campaign is rarely covered seriously by historians, this is a further valuable contribution made by this text.

Overall, *Wellington's Foot Guards at Waterloo* is a model of how to fuse regimental history with a detailed examination of a unit's contribution to a major battle. Meticulously researched and deeply detailed, this treasure trove of information on some of the most famous units in Wellington's army is exceptional value for money, and is an essential text for those with an interest in the Guards regiments, or the internal workings of a regiment during this period. Burnham and McGuigan have, once again, produced a work of such high quality that it will be referred to for decades to come.