

Bruce Collins, *Wellington and the Siege of San Sebastian* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2017), xvi+268 pp. ISBN: 1783831146. £25.

Reviewed by Zack White

Military history has always faced a fundamental problem: a poor reputation. Narratives of war have often been written first and foremost by soldiers, with the result that they have an eye for detail, but allow less scope for analysis. This issue has dominated the perceptions of academics about the sub-discipline, and still leads some to view it with disdain.

The reality, of course, is that military history is just as open to debate and interpretation as any other element of historical study. Bruce Collin's new work demonstrates the value that can be derived by combining a focus on small details with a broader appreciation of the subtle debates that exist in military historiography.

Collins's publication on the siege of San Sebastian is all the more welcome considering the relatively poor attention that has been given to studying the sieges of the Napoleonic era. Although a wealth of accomplished historians have covered the events in varying levels of depth, when considering of the sieges of the Peninsular War, of which San Sebastian was the last, their comments have generally been subsumed within wider narratives of the war, and there has been little attempt to ever consider the sieges within the context of the particulars of siege warfare in the period. Those works which have explored any one of the major sieges generally falls into the 'narrative trap', recounting the well-known story of the campaign, with reference to the often-repeated anecdotes from the famous diarists of the war. Collins however, takes great care to not only set the siege within the context of other sieges conducted by the British during the Peninsular War, but to also consider the bigger picture of siege strategy in the Age of Napoleon. In this sense, the work is a refreshing one, and forms an important and valuable part of our wider understanding of the nature of warfare in this period.

This book contains a number of important passages which thoroughly recommend it to scholars of the Napoleonic Wars. Foremost amongst these is the chapter on urban warfare, which provides a fresh and interesting perspective from which to examine the sieges. If anything, the reader is left wanting more when it comes to this topic, as the approach is so novel, and contains so much potential, that it merits a book in its own right.

It is evident that Collins has reflected carefully on the most appropriate structure of this work, taking an unusual approach to its aesthetic framework by employing end notes at the end of each chapter, and breaking his individual chapters down by subheadings. These measures are by no means unique, but represent an intelligent move by the author, maintaining pace throughout the book by breaking up what could otherwise be a dense body of text.

This is not to suggest that Collins does not write well. On the contrary, his style is light and engaging, and he takes care to avoid the unnecessarily wordy and pretentious language which so many academics are guilty of. The research is richly detailed, in fact, at times a little too much so. The reader is inclined to question, for example, just how much value there is in recounting the precise numbers and origins of cannon balls used during the siege, or knowing exactly how many men the French employed to work on improving the defences of the city on a given date. Nonetheless, Collins ensures that the book is not a dry one, and his work

generally enhances our understanding of how operations in the Iberian Peninsula were planned and executed. Particularly noteworthy here is his discussion of the role of the Royal Navy, which has only recently begun to receive the attention that it deserves amongst scholars.

The book is complemented by a set of beautiful, highly detailed colour plates, which are incredibly effective at demonstrating the enormity of the task facing the British soldiers as they stormed the city. The maps, a crucial feature of any campaign history, are neat and uncluttered, although they suffer from a lack of a scale, and are not quite the best maps of the siege that exist. Nonetheless, they amply fulfil their function of helping the reader to understand the geographic context.

Full of clear, generally well supported, conclusions, and laced with novel interpretations and intellectually stimulating new approaches to the study of siege warfare, *Wellington and the Siege of San Sebastian* is an important study that forms an essential part of any study of the Peninsular War and the nature of warfare in the Napoleonic period.