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The road to Waterloo

by Jeremy Black

A review of *Wellington: The Path to Victory 1769-1814* by Rory Muir

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Rory Muir

Wellington: The Path to Victory 1769-1814

Yale University Press, 744 pages, $40.00

The state of the Anglosphere today emerges in this account of one of Britain's greatest military figures. Yale University Press, a leading publisher that spans that Atlantic, has already published three books by this gifted Australian scholar on British warmaking in the Napoleonic wars. The new book underlines the extent to which, alongside conflict within the Anglosphere between 1775 and 1815, there is a longer military tradition of shared interest and objectives. Indeed, although many Americans at the time would not have appreciated the point, America benefited from the defeat of Napoleon as it was later, far more directly, to benefit from that of Wilhelm II of Germany.

Rivalry was to the fore as Wellington made his name. Wellington's brother-in-law and protégé, Major-General Sir Edward Pakenham, was shot dead while in command at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. Wellington himself, however, followed a cautious line over the Anglo-American War of 1812, did not suggest that victory could readily be won even if he was in command, and

emphasized the cost to Britain of any war of conquest in North America. His pragmatism influenced the British government, not least encouraging it to discard demands for American territory, demands that he did not believe to be justified. Wellington, for example, was sceptical about the value of using the gains already made by British forces in Maine in any peace negotiations.

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The American government had hoped for British failure at the hands of Napoleon and indeed for the defeat of Russia. Henry Clay had declared in the House of Representatives on December 4, 1812, that there had been hope of Napoleon's success. James Madison, the President during the War of 1812, was later to say that he would not have backed war with Britain had he foreseen the French defeat. Unlike the Federalists, who appreciated both the value of alliance with Britain and the serious risks to America posed by Napoleonic success and British collapse, the governing Democratic-Republicans were sanguine on both heads and exaggerated what America could achieve. In particular, they thought that the rivalry between Britain and France gave America even greater leverage than was the case. To use an admittedly problematic comparison, there was no parallel with America's ability in the 1970s and 1980s to profit from the Sino-Soviet split because, in the later instance, America, operating in particular under Nixon with considerable adroitness, was in a far stronger position—and its military far better prepared—than was the case during the War of 1812.

Indeed, the linked failure of Napoleon and of the Democratic-Republicans was based on a preference for conflict over compromise, on strategic folly, and on the underrating of the resilience of ancien régime systems and of their capacity to respond to challenge. The last is an issue pertinent to those today who mistakenly assume that America is bound to fail; and there is a linkage to the habitual, but mistaken, tendency to assume that revolutionary forces are destined to prevail.

The first instalment of Muir's two-volume life of Wellington is a study of just such a response by an effective ancien régime society. It is a brilliant work of military history, reflecting both a mastery of the sources and a considered evaluation of the nature and problems of command in this period. The writing is good and the discussion of the skills involved in the repeated defeats of French forces in Iberia is fascinating. Wellington ably executed fire and movement tactics. He succeeded in balancing the well-drilled line, the extensive use of light infantry in battle, and the conservatism of an emphasis on linear firepower formations with a greater role for maneuverability. A fine judge of terrain, Wellington was also adept at controlling a battle as it developed.

But the book offers much more. It is an incisive biography, and a rounded account of the evolution of a man who was both a general of destiny and one of the leading conservatives of the nineteenth century. To the outsider and the critic, an élite is a monolith. Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, was, as the second son of Garret, 1st Earl of Mornington and an old Etonian whose commission in the army and entry into politics were obtained by family influence, scarcely from the lower depths of society. Wellington was not secure, however, in his social or financial position. This lack of security combined with his restless yet measured personality to ensure not only that Wellington drove himself hard, but also that he was happy to serve on the prime frontier of opportunity in the Anglosphere, distant India, where he arrived in 1797, returning to Britain in 1805.

Command in India led Wellington, while still young, to develop confidence in his military abilities. He won the very hard-fought battles of Assaye and Argaum against the Marathas in 1803, showing both bravery and a capacity to react to apparent failure. Wellington also gained an understanding that war was his vocation, rather than the politics and government offered by his time as a mp and his officeholding, notably as Chief Secretary for Ireland. This sense of vocation was, Muir argues, more significant than the admittedly strong sense of duty which Wellington both possessed and exhibited because he was conscious of how he was supposed to present himself. As Muir points out, "the strongest motive was probably the desire to be active, to employ his skills and to do the job properly, for he had acquired in India an inexhaustible confidence in his ability to accomplish anything to which he turned his hand."

Wellington pushed himself forward in the difficult politics of command, demanding, for example, that he serve on the 1807 Danish expedition. Muir is very good at discussing these politics and linking them to the interplay of strategy, personalities, and family and political links. In June 1808, Wellington expressed his confidence about taking on the French, "first, because I am not afraid of them, as everyone else seems to be; and, secondly, because (if all I hear about their system is true) I think it is a false one against steady troops. I suspect all the Continental armies are half-beaten before the battle begins. I at least will not be frightened beforehand." From Iberia, Wellington repeatedly pressed that resources be focused on his efforts. Partly as a result, Wellington urged that Britain adopt a defensive posture in Canada when it was attacked by the Americans.

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Muir captures the pressures under which Wellington operated, not least the awareness that the ministry would abandon him politically to criticism if he failed as a commander. Muir also presents the difficulties of Wellington's personal life, notably a long-delayed and then unhappy marriage. This is a world of courtship and marriage that does not match the pleasanter tones of Jane Austen. Harriette Wilson, a successful courtesan with whom he began an affair in 1808, later

described him as looking "very like a rat-catcher": she was twenty-three, he nearly forty and without the ease she appreciated.

Muir sticks closely to his task, but his excellent study raises broader questions about generalship. Skill at alliance management, both in India and Iberia, is shown to be crucial for Wellington, and, in this, he matched the ability of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, as British commander in the Low Countries from 1702 to 1710. As with Marlborough, Wellington was also energetic in confronting logistical issues. Both men worked extremely hard at command. Indeed, given the current vogue for books on leadership, it is instructive to note Muir's emphasis on Wellington's industry. His powers of concentration were prodigious and his taste for detail nearly insatiable. As a commander, Wellington also appreciated the wider context of military operations, a noteworthy point given that strategy today is a lost art.

He was also sensible, the great characteristic of the true conservative. Here is Wellington taking description as far as it should truly go:

> The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball [dance]. Some individuals may recollect all the little events of which the great result is the battle won or lost; but no individual can recollect the order in which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred, which makes all the difference as to their value or importance.

Analytical military history, not the essentially narrative type that dominates airport bookstands, has much to offer. Power does not only rest on force, but the ability to understand and use force can be crucial to the maintenance of power and is a vital capability for any political system. To appreciate what can be achieved, and what not, is a key skill for the modern statesman. Soft power is valuable, but a confidence in its efficacy should not wish away the need for hard power, and the consequences of this need in terms of domestic priorities. The military history of Britain is especially instructive because the British fought outside and within Europe, and at sea and on land. They also did so successfully and without compromising in the long term the character of their political system and culture of freedom. To focus, instead, on failure, whether Napoleonic, or Confederate or German, is to miss the point. The reasons for success are far more significant, and with Muir's *Wellington* we can approach one of the greatest of generals.

Jeremy Black's books include *A Brief History of the British Monarchy* (Robinson).

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