

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Through Spain with Wellington: The Letters of Lieutenant Peter Le Mesurier of the 'Fighting Ninth'*

Edited by Adrian Greenwood. Gloucestershire:  
Amberley, 2016. Notes. Bibliography. 255 pp.

SCOTT EASTMAN  
*Creighton University*

Constituting a completely new primary source for Peninsular War history, this book is based on letters from the British Lieutenant Peter Le Mesurier to his family penned between 1808 and 1813. The editor, the late historian and art dealer Adrian Greenwood, discovered these previously unknown documents in a library in Wigan, England. Greenwood begins the text with a series of detailed maps, followed by a short introduction examining both the family's background in the Channel Islands and the regiment Le Mesurier served in under Arthur Wellesley. Tragically, the last letter in the volume is his death notice, as he was shot through the heart in action in southern France at the end of the war. In addition to insights on military affairs, this copious collection of letters shines a light on *alltagsgeschichte* and includes telling anecdotes and just enough historical context to make the protagonists come to life.

Through his correspondence, Le Mesurier wants "to give pleasure to [those] who so greatly contribute to my Happiness", and on occasion, his thoughts tend toward

the sentimental (108). He writes from Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and while on a number of leaves in England and Guernsey. Yet he also describes tremendous hardships, illnesses, and the suffering of troops on long marches. Men wear the same clothing for extended periods, some fighting and sleeping in the same coat for upwards of two years. But the officers enjoy privileges denied to subalterns. For instance, Le Mesurier smokes cigars, “most excellent things for health,” every day (104). Water is avoided because of the risk of disease—wine and spirits are preferred. Beef and potatoes are staples: “At dinner I have my allowance of Beef cooked at my Billet in one pinte of Wine, which is hardly fit to drink, and in the evening I have something at the Coffé house, so that I live for about Two shillings and Six pence a day” (39). The author notes that non-commissioned soldiers were to be paid 1 shilling a day, while ensigns would receive four, although pay often is in arrears. Tensions exist within the ranks, and Le Mesurier himself expresses disgust at some of his fellow officers. Early on in the campaign, he inveighs: “I do not like their morals” (51). He warns his sisters not to marry officers, because “it makes both the husband and wife wretched” (82). Individual women, on the other hand, seldom are mentioned in spite of their importance as auxiliaries on all sides.

Greenwood provides continuity between the documents by weaving them together with brief narrative passages. For example, he explains that the Galician Junta and the Central Junta inhibited the movement of the newly arrived British troops in La Coruña during the fall of 1808 (36). But the formation of municipal juntas in response to the French invasion and the creation of a governing Central Junta, the committee that met for the first time in Aranjuez on September 25, are not described. The liberal Constitution of 1812, written while British forces protected Cádiz, does not receive even

a footnote. Le Mesurier details its promulgation in Madrid: “The ceremony lasted near four hours [and] the illuminations . . . are to last three nights. The balconies of all the houses are adorned with silk hangings, some of them beautifully decorated. . . . Crowds of people paraded the streets and stopped us every moment to embrace us” (148). In contrast to his research on British soldiers and society, Greenwood offers little overall background on nineteenth-century Spain or Portugal. There is no sustained historiographical analysis, and important scholars of the conflict, such as Charles Esdaile, are not cited in the brief bibliography. There are spelling errors as well; the editor replicates Le Mesurier’s spelling of the name of Spanish General Javier Castaños. It appears without the tilde as “Castanos” (42).

Despite these minor shortcomings, the letters vividly portray English and peninsular attitudes toward the war and popular prejudices of the time. Le Mesurier complains that the “inhabitants [of Galicia] are very dirty” and that everything they tell us “in general proves to be untrue” (36, 41). He holds Spaniards in low regard: “We have seen some of the Spanish patriots this morning. If one judged from their appearance there would be very little to fear from them” (35). After attending a ball and masquerade, he bluntly states: “an uglier collection of ladies I never saw” (119). He also detests the “abominable” city of Lisbon with its streets filled with packs of dogs at night and beggars by day (98). In general, the Spanish appear indifferent to the war (46). They are unconcerned about the support provided by English troops and some “seem to care very little about who is to be their King” (41). Le Mesurier outlines Portuguese hostility to the Spaniards, because so many seemed to favor the French over their English allies (43, 118). Numerous proclamations, both public and private, attest to a swathe

of *afrancesado* sentiment in occupied Spain. Le Mesurier recounts a Galician nobleman definitively stating: “Charles the fourth is a fool, the Queen is a Whore and Ferdinand the 7th is a fool also. We will have none of that family, we will have Joseph Napoleon for our King” (49). Another eyewitness to the same campaigns, British chaplain James Wilmot Ormsby, found that religious difference affected the plurality of opinions encountered and helped to explain Spanish perceptions and antipathy toward the English. Le Mesurier similarly holds profound religious sentiments and is aghast that some of his fellow officers seem to mock the church (58). He righteously predicts that those who have ridiculed the clergy “will be brought to an account” (81).

Bitterness, not romanticism, pervades many of the letters, and British losses are blamed on Spanish treachery and cowardice (84). Le Mesurier disparages his allies, arguing that the only proper place for Spanish troops is in the rear, well behind the disciplined English battalions (92). He does empathize to a degree with war-ravaged villagers, however, when he reflects: “I sometime think, if a Portuguese army was in England, how sour an English farmer would look at a party of this kind going out to cut down his trees” (112). Likewise, he expresses horror at the cruelties of the war, especially in the aftermath of the victory at Ciudad Rodrigo in early 1812. But he does not sympathize with English deserters and Spanish collaborators who are marched out of the city to be executed.

Students and scholars alike should welcome this book as a useful primary source that gives voice to a participant in the Napoleonic wars that previously had been lost to the historical record.