

Through Spain with Wellington. The Letters of Lieutenant Peter Le Mesurier of the 'Fighting Ninth'. Adrian Greenwood (ed.). The Hill, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2016, 272 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4456-5456-0

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Published in this book are the letters transcribed by the copier of the correspondence of Peter Le Mesurier, an ensign and lieutenant in the British Army between 1808 and 1813, which the editor tracked down to a “local library in Wigan.” Adrian Greenwood is also the author of the introduction, notes, and the brief explanatory texts inserted between the letters themselves. The first letter bears the date of Ramsgate, 12 September 1808, and the last was written in Vedante near Bayonne, on 20 November 1813. They were transcribed by Gordon Rigby.

The young officer, who originated from Guernsey, was born on 30 October 1789, into a secondary branch of the Le Mesuriers, “an old Channel Islands family” that “provided the army with many officers” (3). However, “Peter's branch of the family were very much poor relations,” living in “a modest home” called Les Beaucamps or Les Beauchamps. His mother’s maiden name was Rachel le Cocq (3-4). Peter was quite capable of writing in fluent French, the language that he used in certain phrases in some of his letters, in order to make it more difficult to understand their contents, which shows that he foresaw the possibility of their being read by other eyes. In Spain, he took care to hire the services of a Spanish teacher. Having been advised by British officers in Lisbon to buy a horse to travel along the difficult Portuguese roads, he preferred to march alongside the soldiers. But, like others, he was also to recognize that: “we have but little comfort on a March in Portugal” (166).

He was not in harmony with many of the other officers: he had “a touching naivety and horror at the behaviour of his fellow officers,” remarks Greenwood (2). It is likely that Le Mesurier, “unlike many young officers, never received any regular additional income from his family” (4), but he did, however, receive (or tried hard to receive) not only the letters, but the parcels that were sent to him by his family. Furthermore, he wrote from Travanca in December 1811 that we “have not drawn pay since September which will

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oblige me to draw again on my Father” (82). Such help was, in fact, planned, and in September 1813 he wrote to his brother about the need for them to send him a “great coat” and more clothes and boots (196). The sustenance of officers was, in fact, a task that was shared between the royal military administration and the families themselves.

As the editor mentions, the letters were written from a large number of different places associated with the period of the Napoleonic Wars. Le Mesurier was present in the 1808 Corunna campaign, took part in the disastrous expedition to Walcheren (at the mouth of the River Scheldt) in 1809, and in November of that same year received orders to depart for Gibraltar, where he was to be found at the time when the 1810-1811 campaign began in Portugal. At this point, he was ordered by his doctor to return to England (“I am reduced to a skeleton” 50), where he remained for some time due to illness. He was sent back once more to the Peninsula in August 1811, where he remained until his death at the end of the 1813 campaign, shortly before the end of the war, after being shot twice in the chest. Shortly before this, he dreamt about returning home to England where he would have the chance to meet “Nephews and Nieces unknown to me pretty numerous, as I understand a newcomer is expected shortly. It would give me great pleasure to take a peep in the Nursery this winter, but I suspect we shall have other kind of work” (201).

His letters were written in a familiar style, and, as he was not a high-ranking officer who would have been freed from such matters by his servants, he stressed many details of the military life of the common soldiers and their main concerns: lodgings, transportation, prices, pay, promotions.

After having initially rejected this hypothesis, he ended up buying his “lieutenancy” (36), a choice that Greenwood considered strange because, at that time, there would have been a possibility of obtaining such a promotion without any payment. In fact, the post of “ensign” was obtained on 13 August 1808, without having to buy it, “the need for officers during the Peninsular War was sufficiently high that most infantry ensigncies were free” (5).

In the letter dated 27 February 1810, he reviews his career path (43) and reveals his unease in relation to the attitudes of his fellow officers: “Those Gentlemen do not consider that a Sub must be a good economist to live decently &, like Uncle John, I like to have old Cloths on my back. All my red coats go once, sometimes twice, to the Rightabout, but I always keep one for les Dimanches & les jours de Fetes, &c” (44). Conflicts arose in relation to problems of apparently minor importance, such as the one that led to a captain being called upon to remove a horse from the kitchen where Peter used to prepare his

meals (47). Le Mesurier was a man from the English periphery: the visit that his mother paid to London was an extraordinary event. At a certain point, his father mentioned his “selling out of the Army” (60), but Peter’s response was that he would stay for another year and then leave, something that did not, in fact, happen. His regiment was the 9th Foot, and Greenwood provides us with details about its most fundamental features (5, 61-62).

In 1813, it was possible to detect a certain tension between Peter and his brother, Abraham, who complained about the great amount of work that he had to do in his business activity. Peter replied that, in his own activity, the rule was “poorer in the Pocket but richer in Honor” (197), which was the reverse of the business world. He reproached him: “It will therefore be your interest to treat me like un gallant homme doit faire,” (a phrase that is, in fact, mistranslated in the footnote).

In mid-September 1808, he was given orders to embark as part of the reinforcements for the troops that were already to be found in the Peninsula. The 9th Foot regiment was already part of John Moore’s expedition. He sailed in a fleet that he calculated to be composed of about 150 ships, and they witnessed the passage of the fleet transporting Junot’s troops after the “affair of Lisbon,” or, in other words, the famous “Convention of Sintra.” Relations with the Spanish immediately turned out to be difficult: the Xunta de Galicia did not allow the British to disembark, and later in the letter that he wrote from Astorga on 26 November 1808, he stated that “[w]e hear nothing but what the Spaniards are pleased to tell us, which in general proves to be untrue. They seem to care very little about who is to be their King” (18).

He arrived in Lisbon on 22 August 1811 (73). What he wrote about the city was in agreement with the comments made by many others: the dirt, the number of beggars, the health risk from the garbage. He dined with the “Sick Gents at Belem”. But, by 9 September, he was already in Coimbra, having travelled there by sea, via Figueira da Foz, and thereafter marching through Montemor-o-Velho and Tentúgal, both plundered by the French. He could see the hills of Buçaco in the distance. He bought “a Mule” that “cost us One hundred Dollars, owing to the scarcity of every thing in this unfortunate country.” Mobility was limited because of the “great scarcity of Mules” (171).

But Peter was delighted by certain places in Portugal:

“We passed through Miseralia, a Village in the valey of the Mondego. The Scenery about this place is without exception the finest and most Romantick I ever saw.” (82)

“We are encamped on a beautiful spot of ground, the River Tua in our front abounding in fine Trout and our Tents shaded by Olive trees. The Town is about a Quarter of a mile on our Right, the country round well cultivated; abundance of Rye and Barley, the former nearly ripe.” (167)

Such an experience is now rather shocking, particularly because today this landscape is fast disappearing before our very eyes.

Wellington headed for Ciudad Rodrigo, and Marmont caused him to retreat. Le Mesurier was in the Portuguese city of Guarda on 1 October 1811. He then marched to Celorico and Castelo Bom, passing by the site where the Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro had taken place, and where he could see the soldiers' graves, the bones of horses, and also the “trou de loup.” But “the greatest pleasure was the Letter I received from my Elisabeth” (78).

Between 1812 and Napoleon's first capitulation, the Portuguese soldiers were a crucial component of Wellington's army (Costa, 2013). We find them mentioned in Le Mesurier's letters. For example, when he remarked that we “displayed English and Portuguese flags” (185).

The 1812 campaign was classified as a “Fiddle,” when he mentioned that Wellington “would not like to play a Second Fiddle” in the 1813 campaign (163). In this way, Le Mesurier illustrated the spread of an undeniably negative assessment of Wellington's actions during that year within his army. “Wellington's losses on the retreat were due to the same mixture of circumstances which had beset Moore,” we are reminded by the editor Greenwood (144). Peter Le Mesurier wrote on 29 December 1812 that during this retreat “some Reg.ts were in the utmost state of insubordination, that Off.rs lost all command over their Men,” and also that their hopes had been raised of “leaving this Country shortly, for it depends entirely on the Russians.” In this way, we can see that he was not unaware of the importance of spending some time away from the fighting in the Peninsula (145). It was natural that the men should be discontent, since they would already have formed the idea that they were pieces in a game that they did not understand.

In March 1813, Peter gave notice that there were already expectations of a peace in the near future and that the officers were already discussing their continuation in the service of the Portuguese (160). The final phase of the Peninsular War could be avoided, it was thought at that time. “Our Paper intelligence leads us to hope that the French are in an

awkward situation (...) I expect we shall move shortly to ease this part of the Country” (163).

He presents us with the reaction (cynical or disappointed by the loss of business?) of some of the provincial nobility towards their departure, but one which was opposed to that of the “camp”: “Some of the Gentry appeared verry sorry to loose such good company for we spared them as much as lay in our power in not cutting their corn, &c: However, those who had suffered in the least, prayed for being freed from such great Thieves – the appellation they honor us with” (166).

As he was writing at the “camp near Palencia” on 7 July, and while the French were retreating, good news arrived from the centre of Europe. In Gibraltar, there were again various signs of a difficult relationship with the Spanish: a regiment that had been sent to Ceuta was not allowed to disembark there; “We have very little to hope for from the Spaniards” (41); the border was being fitted with explosives; regiments were placed on alert to embark for Cape Verde and to wait there for “the India fleet” (40).

He managed to have “a sight of his Lordship” Wellington (80), who passed through the camps without any distinction, being disguised in such a way as not to be identified, and when he spoke he never stopped in order to avoid pointless encounters.

He highlighted the size of the fleet that sailed from England to Gibraltar, passing by the “Rock of Lisbon” (37), as well as stressing the presence of the Algerians in the Straits (47). He praised the “Patience” that he had gained “when I was Ill” and which proved useful for the “uncommonly slow” recruits at drill (62). The honor of entertaining a colonel that it was planned should “dine with us” (160). He attended a procession at the convent – “most ridiculous.” He reported on the mechanization expressed in the maneuvers that were already being made without any commanding voice (164); the men who re-enlisted, receiving £16/16s. and who got drunk; the lack of bread; and the Spanish, who would not accept paper money (he did, however, manage to cash a bill of exchange); the troops of Portuguese women who followed the army “with the Bagage” (170).

It is most impressive to note how the consumption of wine and tobacco was regarded as favorable to one’s health. He refers to “the wine necessary to reestablish my health” (63) and writes, I “Smoke two or three Sigars a day, which I think are most excellent things for health” (80). Later, he mentions the consumption of tobacco, the soldier’s comfort, of which there was a shortage due to the war with the USA (164).

The book has a good index.

The decision to make a transcription that was too close to the original spelling instead of developing the abbreviations in full – for example, “W[illia]m” would be preferable to “Wm:” (including the colon) – is a questionable one. The editor tried to identify the current names of the various places referred to, but there are several omissions, as, for example, “Castelo Born” (77), which was not identified as “Castelo Bom.”