

Review of Gavin Daly, *The British Soldier in the Peninsular War: Encounters with Spain and Portugal 1808-1814* (Palgrave, 2013)

War with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France is usually seen as having put a stop to the Grand Tour, the model of travel and self-fashioning favoured by the British elite. As Gavin Daly demonstrates in his superb new book, this type of traveller was, rather, replaced by one that was more socially diverse and arguably more engaged with his host country: the British soldier on campaign. Around 200,000 troops were deployed to the Peninsula between 1808 and 1814, as the British came to the aid of Spain and Portugal in the war against Napoleon. Around a fifth of these troops never came back, since this was a war of peculiar horror and suffering. Daly never loses sight of this, but is keen to emphasise the social and cultural aspects of the British soldier's experience, which tend to be overlooked by the Peninsular War's many military historians. Besides combat and hardship, this long and mobile campaign also had opportunities for pleasure, including sightseeing, connoisseurship, souvenir-hunting, dining, sex and a wide range of other cross-cultural encounters that usually come under the heading of 'tourism'.

Britons in the eighteenth century had well-established images of Spain and Portugal, which informed – and in some cases were challenged by – the soldiers' experiences of the Peninsula. Daly places particular emphasis on the 'Black Legend', which presented an image of Catholic Spain as 'tyrannical, bigoted, superstitious, violent and cruel' (p.13), on the Enlightenment, which placed Spain and (especially) Portugal on a lower level of 'civilisation' than northern Europe, and on Romanticism, which celebrated their patriotic war of liberation against the French. Elements of these narratives are perceptible in soldiers' writings from the Peninsula, and it is equally the case that literary modes structured their accounts: in particular, the story of *Don Quixote* – with its chivalry, comedy and episodic structure – and the established form of the travel narrative. In a sense, Daly's book has something in common with the travel narrative, since it is unhurriedly written, rich in anecdote and follows the form of 'departure, arrival, foreign lands and returning home' (p.10).

Where soldiers' writings depart from much travel-writing of the period is in their social diversity. *The British Soldier in the Peninsular War* mines a rich seam of letters, diaries and retrospective memoirs. Whereas many of these were inevitably written by officers, who were of a comparable class to conventional tourists, an impressive proportion of Daly's material was written by rankers. There is now a growing appreciation that soldiers wrote more than virtually any other group in plebeian society, and more of it has survived, partly owing to the archiving practices of the military. Furthermore, this was the first conflict that saw ordinary soldiers publishing their experiences: as Neil Ramsey has shown in *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture* (which I recently reviewed in these pages), the modern military autobiography

was effectively born in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, and many examples focused on daily life on the Peninsula. And it goes without saying that a soldier on campaign had a much wider range of experience than his civilian counterparts back home.

A striking feature of these soldier writings is the way that they challenge many of our truisms about how Georgian Britons engaged with the wider world. Spain was second only to France as Britain's historical bugbear, but the redcoats' reactions were far more complex than a straightforward 'other'. Oddly enough, what come across most strongly are the responses not to the Spanish or the Portuguese but to the French. Linda Colley famously argued that Britishness was essentially located in opposition to Frenchness in this period, but, conversely, the British on the Peninsula often regarded the French more positively than their supposed allies, admiring their urbanity, their military professionalism, their gallantry and even their anticlericalism. For these reasons and many more, *The British Soldier and the Peninsular War* will be of tremendous interest to scholars of British society and culture, as well as to historians of warfare.