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Rory Muir, *Salamanca 1812*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. xiv + 322 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-300-08719-5.

Review by Michael Broers, University of Aberdeen.

Spanish warfare somehow engenders in writers the need to concentrate the angst of war into a single day. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* springs to mind when reading Rory Muir's blow-by-blow account of the intense battle of Salamanca, on July 22, 1812. Upon the blood-soaked events of half a day are projected the hopes and fears of the protagonists, set against a landscape at once banal and fraught with menace. On to the narrow compass of these hours bear down the fates of many great reputations and of even more ordinary lives. Spain has long been Europe's crucible, its tragic proving ground. *Salamanca, 1812* thus belongs to a certain tradition, even if it does not show conscious signs of it.

Rory Muir is arguably the best contemporary historian of Napoleonic battle, and there is much in *Salamanca, 1812* to add to a well deserved reputation for excellence built on two fine monographs.^[1] The comparison with Hemingway, although irresistible for a reviewer, is not facetious. Muir is a fine writer of direct, unadorned, but highly compelling prose. His ability to muster detail and then to place it in the context of swift flowing, complex events is nothing short of marvellous. All the while, he carries the reader along with no sense of ever being lost, which is more than can be said of the contemporary combatants. It is an art harder to acquire than to imitate, easy to overlook but difficult to emulate. For this, alone, Muir deserves unstinting praise.

Salamanca, 1812 is divided into thirteen chapters and five appendices, with excellent maps and charts to guide the reader. The setting of the scene in "chapter one" and the conclusion entitled "the consequences" are both brief, barely ten pages each. The rest of the book follows the course of one day's fighting from morning until late in the evening of July 22, 1812. Muir's format is not strictly chronological, however. Wisely, he moves in a broad chronological framework, but shifts from sector to sector within the battle. This is a useful, intelligent construct, as it strikes the correct balance between the passing of time and the sweep of events around and about the field of battle. There is no sense for the reader of a "tennis match;" there is little recourse to "meanwhile elsewhere," a rare achievement in battlefield histories. Muir is somewhat aided here by the ebb and flow of this particular engagement, but he turns the course of the day's events to good narrative use. As a working model of "how to do it," *Salamanca, 1812* should be required reading. Within each chapter, Muir has followed the narrative with a separate section "commentary," the purpose of which is to evaluate the strands of evidence and the sources used to construct the narrative. This is, perhaps, the least successful aspect of the book, as the division of the material is often more arbitrary than the rationale he sets out. Too often, it is a convenient "dumping ground" for material that would over burden the narrative flow. At times, the close evaluation of source material is overdrawn, with long comparative quotes from sources when a crisp distillation of the potential pitfalls of the available evidence would suffice. The "commentary" sections are strongest when they draw attention to the reflections of participants in events; placed aside from the narrative, they achieve their apocryphal status in the hierarchy of sources. In this sense,

although often more diffuse than they should be in practice, Muir's premise and the careful attention he pays to the levels of reliability of a wide range of sources is a well overdue slap in the face to those who denigrate the whole concept. This is made all the more poignant because Muir faces the impossibilities of accuracy square in the face. Time can only be a rough estimate, by modern standards; eye-witness accounts serve to reveal the chaos and confusion of battle more than they clarify actual events. The search for a general truth—if not Victorian pinpoint accuracy—is still of import, however, and it is to be hoped that it will not contract to the field of military history. That said, an occasional weakness is Muir's rambling from serious history into the realm of the buff, as in his long digression into whether a British unit actually captured a real Eagle or not (pp. 135-6; 144-5). Too much space, a little too much editorial freedom in such matters, lead even the best writers into temptation. In Muir's case, however, they are only small blemishes on the book.

Muir really begins his study with a concise account of the manoeuvrings that culminated in the battle. He underscores the fact that Wellington did not want to fight what became his first major triumph, until carefully cornered by Marmont in the week before the battle. In the course of this, Muir establishes both where the major components of both armies were, in the build up to the major engagements, and how they got there. The relative strengths and weaknesses of each army are charted with real intelligence, and it is here that Muir reveals genuine insight into the inner life of the troops. Units have very intense collective social histories, and Muir points his readers straight at them. Being "experienced" is a euphemism too often employed by military historians about active service units, without thinking about what "experience" can mean. Muir is deeply aware that experienced units are often demoralised by those very experiences. There were both British and French units at Salamanca whose men had known largely defeat, dejection, and retreat whilst having served for as long as two years in combat conditions. At crucial points in the action this "deep background" had a bearing on the course of the battle. Demoralised, if battle hardened, French units came face to face with British and Anglo-Portuguese troops with shorter combat records but measurably higher levels of morale. Units are not faceless masses for Muir. Along with Alan Forrest,^[2] Muir is good at the sociology of armies as well as their actions. Like Forrest, he has delved here as before into a wealth of material drawn from private correspondence by both officers and men, although written evidence from the latter is wholly British. Where Muir enters into his own, however, is in bridging the gap between the experience of the individual soldier and military action. That bridge is the social history, the collective experience, of fighting units, and Muir knows it. Thus, when the fighting begins, the reader is familiar with the units engaged in the events as well as their commanders and those individuals within them who left testimony.

The conclusions drawn from Muir's painstaking research are worth noting, if unsurprising. Marmont showed considerable skill in creating the conditions for battle but less in deploying his forces; his abandonment of the corps system was not entirely misconceived. Muir presents a strong case that this tactic may have saved the retreat, but his commanders were ineffective at critical moments. Many normally influential French commanders were wounded at Salamanca, Marmont among them; had it been a similar case among the British, Wellington's lack of a clear deputy might have proved even more disastrous. The significant factors in the British victory were, indeed, Wellington's generalship, in particular his ability to give clear orders and literally to follow the course of battle correctly, together with the cavalry charge by Le Marchant, from which the French never recovered. However, Muir might think more about the fact that the charge was rapidly disintegrating into mayhem when the fighting moved on. The British cavalry enjoyed considerable technical superiority over the French, having better, more battle hardened mounts, but to what extent were they better led? There was much about the British cavalry that still smacked of earlier, less professional time. Not the infantry, however. Above all, Salamanca marked the emergence of the "squad" as British soldiers are known to each other—as an infantryman well able to attack as well as defend. Muir is forced to admit that, as a battle, Salamanca may not have been among the decisive battles of the Napoleonic wars, in military terms: Madrid was retaken by the French; the British had to withdraw from their initial advances in many areas although

Andalucia was a crucial exception, and the collapse of the Napoleonic presence in Spain was yet to come. It was in forging the Allied forces that the battle of Salamanca really mattered. It showed the British and Anglo-Portuguese troops of what they were capable on the attack against French regulars, and so Muir's book proves that the lasting reverence in which the British mess holds July 22, 1812, is well merited.

In a wider context, however, one questioning note must be raised. Muir's scholarship and skill are not in doubt, yet this is a very big book about one day, and a day that, if significant, was by the author's own admission not indisputably conclusive in the wider scheme of things. Its conclusion is scant because the battle settled not that much. It says something about academic publishing in general, and Napoleonic studies in particular, that so much ink can be brought to bear on military history, however well done, when broader aspects of the period struggle to win half that space from scholarly presses.

For all that, *Salamanca 1812* is a magnificent achievement in its genre. It captures the terror, confusion, and sheer noise of battle as true now as then, while rising above it to provide a judicious assessment of the higher commands. It would be churlish for this reviewer to say anything less than that it was a thrill to read. Those who have heard certain sounds and seen certain things find it hard to use the word "pleasure" in such a context, yet Muir conjured one moment from his sources that raised these particular spirits. A British cavalry officer, John Douglas, recalled a charge in support of an infantry action against the ill-fated French left: "The cheer was raised for the charge, a general bound was made at the chasm, and over we went like so many beagles while the enemy gave way in confusion" (p.113). Shall we see their like again?

NOTES

[1] Rory Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon, 1807-1815* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996). Idem, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

[2] Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Duke and London: Duke University Press, 1990). Idem, *Napoleon's Men. The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (London and New York: Hambledon, 2002).

Michael Broers
University of Aberdeen
mike@onic01.freemove.co.uk

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