

*Dead Men Telling Tales. Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir Industry, 1808-1914*, by Matilda Greig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN 978019289602. Pp. xv+250. Bibliography. Notes. Index. 6 illustrations.

A fascinating account of the extent to which military autobiographies affected opinions. Focused on the Peninsular War and dealing with memoirs published by British, French, Portuguese and Spanish veterans, this leaves out those from other nationalities in the Napoleonic forces, but provides a convincing account of the way in which memoirs shaped the way in which multiple generations of readers imagined war. Greig, a Research Associate at Cardiff University, goes too far in claiming that these memoirs came to influence how we think about war today, a quaintly Eurocentric view, but she ably shows the significance of “war for sale” as a way to approach the created-experience of conflict. That, of course, was far from new, and there has been important work on earlier such accounts. Moreover, the factors she mentions as motivations were far from novel, whether to influence policy, control the record, defend reputations and make money.

More successfully, Greig notes changes in the chronology of publication for her particular topic. Thus, the genre that had developed in the 1820s and 1830s, providing opportunities and problems for veterans, was, after a decline in interest in the 1850s and 1860s, changed toward the end of the century as Napoleonic nostalgia gripped a larger generation of readers. That conclusion can, however, be contextualised by noting the major expansions in literacy, publishing, and the book trade, all of which contributed to there being very many more books of all types.

Greig successfully draws attention to Portuguese and Spanish war memoirs, not least because they interacted with attempts at political legitimation. This underlines her argument that the memoirs should not be considered as more-or-less objective eyewitness accounts but, instead, as carefully crafted pieces of creative writing. In particular, she discerns a “highly politicised body of literature,” much of it within established traditions of semi-judicial literature intended to advance a point of view. She argues moreover that a real tension surrounded the guerrillas. Thus, Spanish memoirs proved more contentious.

There is some instructive material on publishers’ finances and also on overtly fictional memoirs. The latter included parody, not least from veterans. Profit and fiction were linked in the case of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Brigadier Gerard stories. Doyle himself drew on already published memoirs. There is also a valuable consideration of the role of editors, including wives and children. Greig ably highlights the involvement of women in all the countries in editing, rewriting and publishing veterans’ memoirs, not least as these books were, and are, and are so often presented as quintessentially male productions. Aside from family interventions, another major inspiration for posthumous publication was the regimental history, which provided, as she shows, a way to shape memoirs. The contributions

of illustrators, indexers, educators and recruiters are also considerable. Soldiers tales were recast, as notions of style and content changed and conventions were remoulded.

This interesting book is a valuable contribution to literature in the field. The emphasis on the political nature of veterans' accounts deserves extrapolation more generally into many of the sources more commonly used to discuss conflict. Indeed, this offers a way to problematise some of the 'face of battle' literature.

(520 words)

Jeremy Black, University of Exeter