

British Journal for Military History

Volume 8, Issue 1, March 2022

Review of *Dead Men Telling Tales, Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir industry, 1808-1914* by Matilda Greig

Simon Quinn

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 17 March 2022

Citation: Simon Quinn, 'Review of *Dead Men Telling Tales, Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir industry, 1808-1914* by Matilda Greig', *British Journal for Military History*, 8.1 (2022), pp. 175-176.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Matilda Greig, *Dead Men Telling Tales, Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir industry, 1808-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xv + 272 pp. 6 illustrations. ISBN: 978-0192896025 (hardback). Price: £65.00.

Dead Men Telling Tales tracks the production and development of the military memoir industry following the Napoleonic Wars. Developing upon the approaches laid down by Neil Ramsey's excellent *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780-1835* (2011), and Philip Dwyer's edited collection *War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature* (2017), Greig's study investigates the varied reasons behind the production of military memoirs and explores the commercial and cultural impact of military memoirs over the course of the nineteenth century. The book is divided into two parts, as the study is arranged around the memoir's journey through time. Part one deals with the veterans who were actively involved in the publication of their memoirs in the first half of the nineteenth century. Part two follows the memoirs published posthumously in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

What makes Greig's work highly appealing to scholars of the Napoleonic wars is its transnational approach. At its core, this is an examination of three case studies, concerning military memoirs published in Britain, France, and Spain. In total, the author examines more than 300 autobiographies. This impressive depth of research gives weight to the comparisons drawn between these memoirs and exposes some of the cultural differences to literary composition within each nation. It highlights the careful wording employed by veterans in each country, explaining what details were included or omitted and why. Such an insight is invaluable, providing much needed international context to the history of military memoirs. While British and French memoirs were readily bought and sold between one another, Spanish memoirs were deemed unworthy of the same attention by British and French audiences. Such findings complement the work of Gavin Daly, who in *The British Soldier in the Peninsular War: Encounters with Spain and Portugal, 1808-1814* (2013), argued for an affinity between British and French soldiers in the Peninsular Wars, and a mutual hatred of Spanish backwardness.

In the latter half of the study, Greig addresses long standing questions concerning the cultural and commercial impact of these memoirs. Readers are given a definitive picture of the military memoir industry, which was commercially successful and increasingly so in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although the profits from sales rarely enabled veterans to live entirely on a writing career, they provided a useful source of income for their descendants they left behind. Leading publishing houses, such as John Murray or Plom Nourrit and Hachette, took a strong interest in printing them, and fake memoirs and other imitations were published. The result is a

convincing image of military memoirs as objects of commercial and cultural significance that could be managed and maintained long after the author's death. Families of veterans carefully curated their public image and editors reshuffled content to highlight certain groups or individuals over others.

The ambitious approach of the Greig's book has led to a few liberties being taken. The study calls for a more flexible definition of memoir, and one suspects this has enabled the inclusion of sources that would not be considered as memoirs in the conventional sense. At no point does Greig define what a memoir is. Memoirs written by veterans in the decades following the Napoleonic Wars are treated in the same manner as edited collections of letters published after the original author's death. The different circumstances concerning the writing and composition of these documents is not discussed in detail, despite the significant impact this may have had on the content.

A harsh critic might point out that some of the chapters maintain the transnational approach better than others. Chapter four, for instance, draws predominantly from British sources in its examination of the professionalisation of the memoir industry. Although Greig highlights that more publisher records are available in Britain than in France, this reviewer feels that a deeper comparative analysis might have been undertaken. Historians of British military culture will be fascinated, but those with a greater interest in French or Spanish veterans may feel short-changed.

Despite these slight qualms, *Dead Men Telling Tales* is an exceptional study of the military memoirs industry in the years that followed the Napoleonic wars. The ambitious transnational scope of Greig's work enables it to provide fresh and exciting insights on the commercial success and cultural impact of military memoirs over the course of the nineteenth century. It is highly recommended to those with an interest in the Napoleonic wars or nineteenth century military culture.

SIMON QUINN

University of York, UK

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v8i1.1615