British Journal for Military History

Volume 11, Issue 1, February 2025

'The Presiding Spirit of this Tempest': A Profile of General Sir James Leith (1763–1816)

Paul Thompson

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 28 February 2025

Citation: Paul Thompson, "'The Presiding Spirit of this Tempest': A Profile of General Sir James Leith (1763–1816)', *British Journal for Military History*, 11.1 (2025), pp. 2-27.

www.bjmh.org.uk

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

'The Presiding Spirit of this Tempest': A Profile of General Sir James Leith (1763–1816)

PAUL THOMPSON*
Southeast Missouri State University, USA
Email: *pthompson@semo.edu*

ABSTRACT
This article assesses the life, career, and character of Peninsular War General Sir James Leith (1763–1816). Compared with many of his peers, Leith is an overlooked figure, whose episodes in the forefront of events are punctuated by periods of obscurity. Hitherto he has been portrayed without depth, complexity, or nuance solely as an archetypal Napoleonic-era warrior. The latter part of General Leith's career, however, found him in a more equivocal situation, that of soldier-turned-colonial administrator. Recent scholarship has begun to pursue a more comprehensive approach to figures of Leith's ilk. Nevertheless, a narrowly myopic, or 'Victorian', approach to military historiography has died hard. Numerous Wellingtonian lieutenants who evolved into architects of empire, including Benjamin D'Urban, John Colborne, Harry Smith, and Stapleton Cotton, to name just a few, lack modern, multi-dimensional reassessments, and James Leith is of their number. This article aims to bring facets of both General Leith's soldiering and his colonial governing into clearer, contemporary focus.

Introduction

The name of Lieutenant-General Sir James Leith (1763-1816) is familiar to any student of the Peninsular War. As one of Wellington's divisional commanders, Leith played a significant role at the battles of Bussaco and Salamanca, as well as the sieges of Badajoz and San Sebastián. Seriously wounded at both Salamanca and San Sebastián, Leith had also earlier survived the grim Corunna campaign and endured the chronic effects of fever acquired in the miserable 1809 Walcheren expedition. At his death he was serving as Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands.

*Paul Thompson is the author of *The British Cheer: Psychological Warfare in the Napoleonic Era* as well as numerous articles appearing in the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, the *Waterloo Association Journal* and the *Napoleon Series*.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v11i1.1870

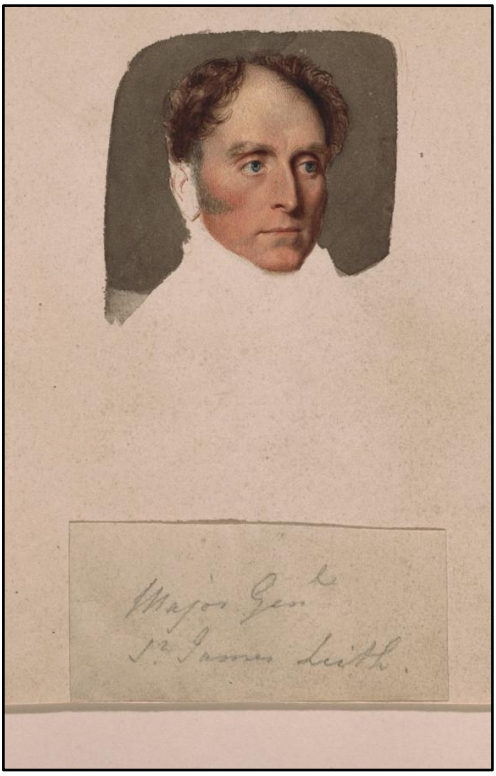


Figure 1: Major General Sir James Leith.[1]

However, and notwithstanding Leith's crowded and conspicuous career, a number of his peers and contemporaries are a good deal better known to us today. Unlike Leith, Generals Thomas Picton, Rowland Hill, and Thomas Graham, for example, have all attracted serious biographical scrutiny. Picton, for instance, was the subject of a two-volume biography by Heaton Bowstead Robinson, published in 1836, and, a century later, two further, fine studies appeared in quick succession.[2] Hill and Graham have both received comparable attention from historians also. By contrast, James Leith

[1]By Thomas Heaphy (1775–1835), Courtesy of The Huntington Library, Sir Bruce Ingram Collection.

[2]Heaton Bowstead Robinson, *Memoirs of Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Picton,* 2 vols, (London: Richard Bentley,1836); Robert Havard, *Wellington's Welsh General. A Life of Sir Thomas Picton,* (London: Aurum Press, 1996); Frederick Myatt, *Peninsular General. Sir Thomas Picton 1758–1815,* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1980).

remains neglected. The sole ostensible full-length biography of Leith, written by his nephew Sir Andrew Leith-Hay in 1818, outlines the General's origins, background, and military career efficiently, and due familial respect is regularly paid to the latter's qualities.[3] However, Leith-Hay actually spends much of his time relating the saga of the Peninsular War as a whole, and the book's title is somewhat misleading. Also, Leith-Hay conveys, unsurprisingly, a uniformly glowing, one-dimensional depiction of his uncle, as an archetypal *Hentyesque* figure of the Napoleonic era; brave, noble and beyond reproach.[4] He tells us, for instance, that the young James Leith was 'Possessed of a commanding figure, and an intelligent, handsome countenance …' and that he '… added to generosity of disposition a warmth of heart and polished deportment that stamped him as a person of no common promise.'[5] He goes on to assert that during Leith's tour of duty in the Irish Rebellion, his 'regiment was in the highest state of discipline, and its appearance upon every occasion evinced the professional knowledge of its commanding officer.'[6] At times, such encomiums and praise are corroborated by others; at other times not.[7]

From one perspective, Leith can indeed be seen purely as an Olympian figure, soldiering steadfastly and heroically against Napoleon, an interpretation that carries few attendant moral ambiguities. And, as we shall see, witnesses to his performance on campaign during the Peninsular War in particular, taking into account the snares of

[3]Andrew Leith-Hay, *Memoirs of the Late Lieutenant-General Sir James Leith, G.C.B. with a Précis of Some of the Most Remarkable Events of the Peninsular War,* (London: William Stockdale, 1818). See also Andrew Leith-Hay, *A Narrative of the Peninsular War* 2 vols, (Edinburgh: Daniel Lizars, 1831) which also contains information relative to General Leith. Andrew Leith-Hay (1785–1862) fought at Corunna, Talavera, Bussaco, Salamanca, Vitoria and San Sebastián, receiving the General Service Medal with clasps for these six engagements. He became a Lieutenant in the 29th Foot, 15 April 1808, was promoted Captain with the 11th, 15 April 1813. In all, he was with the 29th from July 1809 until March 1810, and subsequently served as aide-de-camp to his uncle from April 1810 to April 1814.

[4]George Alfred Henty (1832–1902), war correspondent, robust Imperialist, and vastly prolific author of, largely, juvenile adventure stories including *Saint George for England: A Tale of Cressy and Poitiers* (1885) and *The Young Buglers: A Tale of the Peninsular War* (1880). For a sharp, if brief, rejoinder to Leith-Hay's glowing interpretation see William Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula and the South of France from the Year 1807 to the Year 1814,* 3 vols, (Brussels: Pratt, 1839), Vol. 1, p. xxxii.

[5]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, p. 11.

[6]Ibid., p. 11.

[7]Also see Robert Chambers, *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen,* 4 vols, (Glasgow: Blackie, 1835), Vol. 4, pp. 512–521, a source that is heavily reliant on Leith-Hay's work.

bias and hagiography, make a strong case for the validity of this portrait. By contrast however, the obscure episodes, notably his service during the Irish Rebellion and especially his post-war time as Governor of the Leeward Islands, occasion more nettlesome questions and suggest a more complex picture. Today, how are we to assess appropriately the class of soldier-turned-colonial administrator that evolved out of Wellington's 'kindergarten'? These men became the very architects of empire and included, in addition to James Leith, figures such as Benjamin D'Urban, John Colborne, Harry Smith and Stapleton Cotton. A fuller, multi-dimensional evaluation is demanded, and the objective of this article is to prompt this in the case of Leith.

A repository of documents relating to Leith resides in the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester.[8] The more than three hundred documents therein comprise a broad and often intriguing archive, including communications to and from fellow soldiers such as Rowland Hill, Fitzroy Somerset, William Erskine, George Murray, and Wellington himself, as well as politicians and administrators including Earl Bathurst and the Duke of York. There are also ancillary items such as reports on the battles of Bussaco and Vitoria by subordinate officers, intelligence reports and topographical sketches, an anonymous Walcheren journal, telegraph signals, and even Leith's pay stub from 1811.[9] However, interesting as they are, these documents also reveal very little about the nature of the man himself. It is as if James Leith is a lighthouse whose beam shines only intermittently, and whose moments in the forefront of events are punctuated by episodes of obscurity. This article aims to penetrate some of the associated darkness.

Biography

James Leith was born the third son of John Leith of Leith Hall in Aberdeenshire, 8 August 1763. After studying with a private tutor, Leith attended Marischal College and the University of Aberdeen before spending 'a considerable amount of time' at a French military academy at Lille.[10] Commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the 21st Foot in 1780, Leith was rapidly promoted to Lieutenant and then Captain in the 81st Highland Regiment. Next, we find him in Gibraltar on garrison duty with the 50th Foot, and subsequently serving as aide-de-camp to the officer commanding, General Charles

[8]John Rylands Library, *Correspondence and Papers of Sir James Leith*, Ref: GB 133 Eng MS 1307. Hereafter, JRL *Leith Papers*.

[9]The author's transcription and article concerning this Walcheren journal may be found at the Napoleon Series: https://www.napoleon-series.org/book-reviews/memoirs-and-other-primary-sources/a-walcheren-journal/. Accessed 20 March 2024.

[10]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, p. 7.

O'Hara, and eventually in the same capacity for no less a figure than Sir David Dundas.[11]

Figure 2: Portrait assumed to be of James Leith as a young boy.[12]

Leith's service with both of these men, particularly the latter, must certainly have helped smooth the ascent of his career, uniting military, and dynastic patronage in an age when these counted for a great deal.[13] Leith took part in the siege of Toulon in 1793 where, famously, Napoleon Bonaparte first rose to prominence. Upon receiving his Brevet Majority, Leith returned to his native Scotland in order to raise a new regiment. This undertaking was not quite so straightforward as might be supposed since authorisation from Horse Guards was by no means a given, and moreover, a kinsman of Leith was simultaneously pursuing the same end in their mutual ancestral

[11]Charles O'Hara (1740–1802) had the peculiar distinction of having surrendered to both George Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte. General Sir David Dundas (1735–1820) was a veteran of the Seven Years War and issued his seminal *Principles of Military Movements Chiefly Applicable to Infantry*, based upon the precepts of Frederick the Great, in 1788. Dundas was Commander-in-Chief from 1809 until 1811.

[12]Copyright of the National Trust for Scotland, Leith Hall, Photograph by Beatrice Fettes-Leages.

[13]Famously, Wellington himself was able to 'leapfrog' his way to preferment and opportunity in India when his brother was Governor-General there, and likewise his connection with Castlereagh was to smooth his path greatly in the Peninsular years.

patch of northeast Scotland.[14] Nevertheless, Leith succeeded and went on to serve as Colonel of his newly-minted Princess of Wales' Aberdeenshire Fencibles in Ireland during the rebellion at the end of the 1790s.

Andrew Leith-Hay tells us that at that period,

> he was conspicuous for his activity and firmness of mind, and those qualities that found full scope for development in the mercy and forgiveness extended to many of the objects of mistaken feeling, whom circumstances placed in his power: – and it is no slight eulogium, that during scenes, where so much bloodshed was inevitable, Colonel Leith's humanity never became in the slightest degree questioned.[15]

Whereas Leith's later conspicuously laudable battlefield actions are frequently corroborated by several witnesses, here we only have his nephew's testimony and at present little more evidence as to his conduct in Ireland has come to light, other than a court martial proceeding regarding financial irregularities in the regiment[16]. It is a pity therefore that Leith-Hay omitted to cite specific examples of his kinsman's 'humanity' at that epoch. Historian Carole Divall has aptly characterised command at that time and place as 'a poisoned chalice'. Faced with a confused tapestry of internecine violence that involved the prosecution of counterinsurgency operations over and above regular open field engagements, certain officers came to condone or encourage brutal and lawless measures on the part of their men.[17] Divall, by way of example, contrasts the sanctioned, ruthless approach of Commander-in-Chief Gerard Lake, 'terror tactics, flogging men and burning property', with that of Ralph Abercromby, whose more honourable and juridical tack failed and rapidly led to his resignation.[18] Officers such as Lake and General James Duff abetted the massacre of prisoners, the torture and murder of civilians by their soldiery yet were able to pursue their subsequent careers without apparent hindrance or penalty.[19] Presumably then, Leith-

[14]J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation 1793–1815,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 136.
[15]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, pp. 10–11.
[16]See Footnote 39.
[17]The unlikely alliance between rebel Catholics, Presbyterians and revolutionary French forces is one example of the singular nature of the 1798 uprising. See Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998. Politics and War,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 17 for a lucid assessment of the complex threads involved.
[18]Carole Divall, *General Sir Ralph Abercromby and the French Revolutionary Wars 1792–180,1* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2018), pp. 116–150.
[19]Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty. The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798,* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969). See pp. 163–164 for an account of the

Hay was under no compulsion to falsely paint his uncle in a humanitarian light and, had Leith in reality adopted a savage policy, his nephew might still have held up this as something to be admired at that time. On balance, and in the absence of further evidence, we are probably justified in characterising Leith as an Abercromby rather than as a Lake; and as one who at least attempted to rein in the excesses of his soldiers. Be that as it may, towards the conclusion of his service in Ireland, he was promoted Colonel of the 13th Battalion of Reserve, and in 1804 Brigadier-General on the Staff.[20]

The period 1804 to 1808 represents a strangely quiescent episode in Leith's career. Records and correspondence are notably lacking for these years, and it is curious that Leith's biographer-nephew skips over them entirely. He seems to have spent the bulk of this period in Ireland in command of the 13th Battalion of Reserve.[21] Further research into these obscure years is called for, but it seems plain that, as the Peninsular War began, Leith's gifts were widely acknowledged, valued and employed by the men in power.

Leith had now attained the rank of Major-General and was promptly sent on a liaison mission to northern Spain. He would need all the optimism and energy at his disposal at this juncture, since Spanish ardour was threatening to dissipate after their defeat at the Battle of Tudela on 23 November 1808, and Napoleon's occupation of Madrid.[22] Leith transmitted a clear-eyed dispatch to General Sir John Moore in which he characterised Spanish military proceedings thus: 'Never has there been so injudicious and ruinous a system begun and persisted in …'. He did however acknowledge that, ill-led though they were, there was no 'want of spirit in the [Spanish] men.'[23] This quasi-diplomatic episode in Leith's career was then immediately succeeded by active service with Moore's army, in which Leith commanded a Brigade. He survived the Battle of Corunna, 16 January 1809, unscathed and, shortly after his return to England, took part in the calamitous Walcheren expedition in the late summer of that year – calamitous personally in that Leith was stricken with the virulent Walcheren Fever.[24] In fact he never shook off this recurring affliction, and Andrew Leith-Hay surmises plausibly that its lingering effects eventually contributed to Leith's comparatively early death.

---

massacre of some 400 rebel prisoners by Duff's force at Gibbet Rath, 29 May that year.

[20]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, p. 11.

[21]*The Royal Military Chronicle,* 3 vols, (London: Davis, 1810–12), vol. 2, p. 461.

[22]See Leith's report to Castlereagh in Vane (ed.), *Correspondence*, Vol. 7, pp. 239–240.

[23]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, Appendix p. 2.

[24]Modern medical assessments suggest that Walcheren Fever was a combination of malaria, dysentery, typhoid, and typhus. See: Martin Howard, *Walcheren 1809. The Scandalous Destruction of a British Army*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2012), p. 170.

Leith returned to the Iberian Peninsula and active duty early in 1810, and presently found himself commanding the 5th Division on the ridge at the Battle of Bussaco, 27 September. As was to be seen consistently on future occasions, Leith acquitted himself well, demonstrating swiftness and clarity of thought. When the French infantry threatened to gain a lodgement in the British position 'Major-General Leith evinced that decision of character which was remarkable throughout his military life.'[25] Wellington's official dispatch to Lord Liverpool, Secretary of State for War, confirms Leith-Hay's appraisal. 'Major Gen. Leith also moved to his left to the support of Major Gen. Picton, and aided in the defeat of the enemy …. In these attacks Major Gens. Leith and Picton … distinguished themselves.'[26] A recurrence of Walcheren Fever forced him to quit the Peninsula early in 1811. Leith then made his return almost one year later, just missing the taking of Ciudad Rodrigo, 19 January 1812. In the aftermath, Leith and the 5th Division was given the task of effecting repairs and improvements to the city's defences. In the unlikely event that Leith harboured regrets on having narrowly missed this siege, such warfare being almost universally detested, he was shortly to be more than compensated, as Wellington proceeded next to invest French-occupied Badajoz.[27] The 5th Division's part in the assault on Badajoz that grim night, 6 April 1812, was initially intended as a feint with the purpose of drawing at least some of the defenders away from the main attack, but Leith's men actually succeeded in breaking into the city, contrary to all reasonable expectation. Wellington observed that 'Lieut. Gen. Leith's arrangements for the false attack … were likewise most judicious; and he availed himself of the circumstances of the moment, to push forward and support the attack … in a manner highly creditable to him.'[28]

As we shall see presently, Leith was wounded at Salamanca later that year and, following another period of recuperation at home, had the misfortune to make it back to the Peninsula only in time to be badly wounded once more – this time at the siege of San Sebastián in September 1813. Subsequently appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands, Leith enjoyed only a brief, if militarily lively, tenure there prior to his death from Yellow Fever in 1816.

---

[25]Leith Hay, *Memoirs*, p. 37.

[26]John Gurwood (ed.), *The Despatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, during his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France,* 8 Vols, (London: John Murray, 1852), Vol. 4, p. 306.

[27]See for example Charles Boutflower, *The Journal of an Army Surgeon during the Peninsular War,* (Manchester: Refuge Printing, 1912), p. 89: '… there is so much fatigue and so little glory attending a besieging army, that it is rarely one meets a military man anxious to be engaged in such a service.'

[28] Wellington to the Earl of Liverpool, Gurwood (ed.), *Despatches*, vol. 5, p. 578.

Leith's Character and Style of Leadership

Amidst the factual narration of his uncle's progress and career, Andrew Leith-Hay imparts at various moments personal, quasi-filial insights regarding his uncle, and for certain of these, there exists collateral, contemporary evidence. During the retreat to Corunna, as the British Army turned at bay at Lugo, 7 January 1809, Leith-Hay records that his uncle placed himself at the head of his light companies and proceeded to lead a successful charge, one of various instances in which the General demonstrated a pattern of reckless bravery in order to galvanise those under his command. At the Battle of Corunna itself, 16 January, he once more depicts Leith leading from the front – on this occasion carrying the 59th Foot forward to succour the depleted 81st – and again with success.[29]

This style of leadership was demonstrated once more at Bussaco, 27 September 1810, where the General charged the French at the head of the 9th Foot.[30] Sergeant James Hale of the 9th was there and recalled,

> we continued moving on in open columns of companies, until we got within about one hundred yards of them, when we were ordered to wheel into line, and give them a volley, which we immediately did, and saluted them with three cheers and charge, taking the signal from General Leith, who commanded our brigade: – he made the signal by taking off his hat and twirling it over his head.[31]

And we have a personal account of Bussaco from Leith himself (although written in the third person), at a moment when he was called upon to rally Portuguese allies,

> Major-General Leith, on that occasion, spoke to Major [Walter] Birmingham … who stated that the fugitives were of the 9th as well as of the 8th regiment [Portuguese], and that he had ineffectually tried to check their retreat. Major-General Leith addressed and succeeded in stopping them, and they cheered when he ordered them to be collected and formed in the rear …[32]

A couple of months after Bussaco we find Captain, eventually Field-Marshal, William Gomm writing to his sister in these glowing terms. 'I am living with a most excellent man, General Leith, and a higher gentleman or a better soldier I believe is not to be

[29] Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, pp. 25–6.
[30] Ibid., p. 37.
[31] James Hale, *Journal of James Hale Late Sergeant in the Ninth Regiment of Foot,* (Cirencester: Watkins, 1826), p. 51.
[32] 2nd Duke of Wellington (ed.), *Supplementary Despatches and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington, K.G.* 15 vols, (London: John Murray, 1858–72), Vol. 6, p. 638.

found among us … I find him more and more worthy of the respect which I feel inclined to pay him …'[33] Lieutenant-Colonel William Warre, seconded to the Portuguese army, wrote to his father in the autumn of 1811, urging him to 'Remember me to General Leith should you see him. I have a great regard for him. He is generally much esteemed.'[34] The following year, an officer of the Royal Scots Regiment, John Allen, whose detachment was straggling to an embarrassing extent, was alarmed to observe 'the approach of General Leith, the general of my division, and, of course, I fully expected to be goosed, but, with all the affability and goodness that mark a really great man, after several enquiries, and my informing him that I had divided a two days march into three, I was gratified by his expressing his approbation …'. Allen goes on to comment 'With the 5th Division the arrival of General Leith will be greeted as a most auspicious omen, as it may lead to the reaping of some laurels in the ensuing campaign.'[35] Leith was plainly popular both on account of his reasonableness and his competence.

Fellow Scot Sir Thomas Graham, in command at the Siege of San Sebastián in 1813, warmly acknowledged Leith's value too. 'Lieut. Gen. Sir J. Leith justified, in the fullest manner, the confidence reposed in his tried judgement and distinguished gallantry, conducting and directing the attack, till obliged to be reluctantly carried off, after receiving a most severe contusion on the breast, and having his left arm broken.'[36] Corporal John Douglas of the 1st Foot recounted this same occurrence from a humbler viewpoint,

> We had just entered the trenches below the convent when we met our old General Leith, being carried up wounded, lying on a blanket … some of the men cried out, "Oh" at this sight, and, "There's the old General"; others, "We'll have revenge for that."[37]

Given these testimonials, nephew Leith-Hay's commendations ought not to be entirely ascribed to familial flattery or propaganda.

---

[33]Francis Culling Carr-Gomm (ed.), *Letters and Journals of Field-Marshal Sir William Maynard Gomm, G.C.B.*, (London: John Murray, 1881), p. 189.
[34]Edmond Warre (ed.), *Letters from the Peninsula 1808–1812. The Correspondence of an Anglo-Portuguese Staff Officer During His Service in the Peninsular War,* (London: John Murray, 1909), p. 208.
[35]John Allen, 'Journal of an Officer of the Royals in the Seat of War', *The Royal Military Chronicle* (May 1811), pp. 39 - 44.
[36]Gurwood (ed.), *Despatches*, vol. 6, p. 728. (21 December 1813.)
[37]Stanley Monick (ed.), *Douglas's Tale of the Peninsula and Waterloo 1808–1815* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), p. 82.

Leith and Wellington

For one thing, James Leith was one of the generals Wellington evidently trusted the most. 'In December 1809 Wellington included Leith's name among the general officers for whom he was asking as replacements for the casualties he had suffered in the Peninsula, and said that he had personal experience of his efficiency, probably from Wellington's time at Dublin Castle as Chief Secretary for Ireland.[38] In addition to mentions in despatches and encomiums such as that from Wellington to Lord Liverpool, after Bussaco, and quoted above, one naturally finds instances of mild friction and disagreement also. For example, Leith unsuccessfully lobbied to have a greater proportion of British troops under his command in September 1810, and he bridled at Wellington's disparagement of the 5th Division's performance at the siege of San Sebastián three years later. Much of Wellington's correspondence with Leith, however, is of a routine form such as – Lieutenant-General Leith will be so good as to move his division at first light – and deals with workaday military concerns.

There exists one unusual communication from the Duke of Wellington to Leith, on a personal note, that contrasts with the commendations, points of controversy and the purely objective, practical memoranda. Upon Leith's assuming command in the West Indies, Wellington saw fit to pen him some advice. His letter strikes a relaxed, avuncular tone,

> 21 December 1813
> St. Jean de Luz
>
> I received yesterday your letter of the 7th, and … I am quite delighted that they have given you the appointment which you mention.[39] Nobody could expect you to decline to accept it in order to return to your division with this army; and if I could have advised you before you accepted the offer, my advice would have been by all means to accept; and I now most sincerely congratulate you.
>
> I have frequently heretofore given you a hint upon a subject over which I hope you will forgive me for taking the liberty of mentioning to you again … I hope you will put your establishment on such a scale as that your holding it will be a permanent advantage to yourself and your family. You have always told me that you were a good *manager* [emphasis in original] … but you may depend upon it

[38]T.A. Heathcote, *Wellington's Peninsular War Generals and Their Battles. A Biographical and Historical Dictionary* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), p. 78.

[39]Leith had been appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands. Evidently, Leith at once informed Wellington of his appointment, a couple of months prior to the official announcement. See *The London Gazette*, 15 February 1814, p. 367.

> that no management will make an income, however large, give a surplus, if the possessor of it does not take care to fix his expenses on the lowest scale that the nature of his situation will permit.[40]

Wellington appears to be hinting here that Leith had a propensity for lavish spending or an excess of generosity.[41] Despite the fact that Wellington was Leith's junior by some six years, a 'younger brother' rather than an 'older' in effect, he was moved to proffer this fraternal counsel. Also, it may be that Leith was not the most adept handler of matters financial, since he had become embroiled years earlier in an imbroglio regarding the accounts of his Aberdeenshire Fencible regiment.[42] At any rate, Wellington would doubtless have been more than satisfied to have employed Leith's services at Waterloo the following year, had Fate not determined that Leith should then be serving in the Caribbean instead.

Leith at Salamanca

When Leith's story reaches 22 July 1812 and the Battle of Salamanca, the degree of detail and information that is available to us suddenly increases. Leith's performance at Salamanca represents the pinnacle of his soldiering, notwithstanding his notable service at Bussaco, Badajoz, and at San Sebastián. Andrew Leith-Hay's arresting account of Salamanca is supplemented by those of other men who fought with Leith that day, as well as unpublished original documents from the John Rylands archive. This then is the moment when James Leith is best revealed to us.

The Battle of Salamanca followed weeks of intricate manoeuvring between the armies of Wellington and Marshal Marmont, including a remarkable sequence on 20 July during which both forces marched parallel to one another at minimal distance, yet without joining battle.[43] In the event, on the 22nd Wellington inflicted a crushing reverse on the French, and Salamanca has often been viewed as the pivotal moment of the Peninsular conflict whereupon Wellington definitively assumed the strategic initiative.

---

[40]Gurwood (ed.), *Despatches*, Vol. 7, p. 213.

[41]If so, Wellington's advice may have fallen on deaf ears since Leith was to request a 25% reduction in his gubernatorial salary in 1816. See Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, p. 162.

[42]George Kerr, *The Trial of Lieutenant George Kerr, of the Aberdeenshire Fencibles, before a General Court Martial, Assembled at Dublin Barracks, on Wednesday, the 15th Day of October,1800, (and Continued by Adjournment to the 21st of the Same Month) on Charges Exhibited against him by Colonel James Leith,* (Dublin: Milliken, 1801).

[43]Rory Muir, *Salamanca 1812,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 16.

Figure 3: Wellington Commanding the British Army at Salamanca, June 1812.[44]

On the morning of 22 July, Sir James Leith was in command of the Allied army's 5th Division, comprising the brigades of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Greville (3/1st Foot, 1/9th Foot, 1/38th Foot, 2/38th Foot and a company of Brunswick Oels), Major-General William Henry Pringle (1/4th Foot, 2/4th Foot, 2/30th Foot, 2/44th Foot and a company of Brunswick Oels), and Brigadier-General William Spry's 3rd Portuguese (3 and 15 Line, 8th Caçadores), totalling 6,710 officers and men.[45]

Corporal John Douglas of the 1st Royal Scots was there:

> The enemy … commenced extending their left to outflank us, on which Sir James Leith advanced our Division in double quick time on that point … The 3rd brigade on coming down did not please Sir James. He marched them back under the whole fire in ordinary time and back again to make them do it in a soldier-like manner …
>
> General Leith rode up about two o'clock. The cannonading at the time was terrible. Addressing the Regiment he says, "Royals," on which we all sprang up.

[44]By Jean Duplessis-Bertaux (1747–1819), Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.
[45]Ibid., p. 246.

> "Lie down men," said he, though he sat on horse-back, exposed to the fire as calm as possible. "This shall be a glorious day for Old England, if these bragadocian [sic] rascals dare but stand their ground, we will display the point of the British bayonet, and where it is properly displayed no power is able to with stand it. All I request of you is to be steady and to obey your officers. Stand up men!" Then taking off his cocked hat and winding it around his head he gives the word "March!"[46]

Whether or not Leith actually employed the word 'bragadocian', this is a distinctly flamboyant performance in which the display of courage, even disdain, for enemy artillery fire combines with an almost theatrical air and demeanour - extrovert, courageous and eloquent. An anonymous account from a soldier in the 1/38th recorded a further morale-lifting oration from Sir James that afternoon. 'Now my lads, this is the day for England. They would play at long ball with us from morning til night, but we will soon give them something else.'[47]

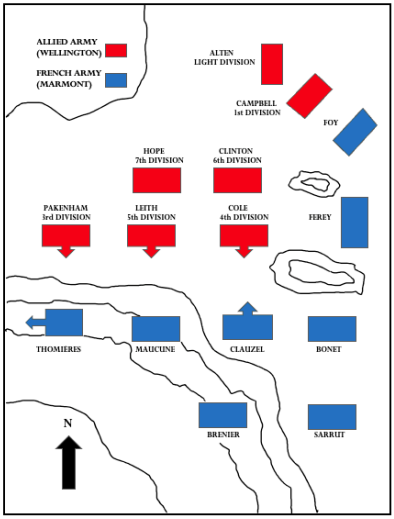


Figure 4: Battle of Salamanca. The situation around 1700 hours, illustrating the central role of Leith's division in the battle.[48]

[46]Monick (ed.), *Douglas's Tale*, pp. 44–45.
[47]Peter Edwards, *Salamanca 181,2* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2013), p. 210.
[48]Map by author.

The 5th Division had to endure a lengthy wait under French artillery fire before staff officer Captain Philip Bainbrigge arrived with Wellington's orders for them to advance:[49]

> I galloped up to General Sir James Leith, who was riding backwards and forwards along the front of his men, with two or three staff officers; the round shot were ricocheting into and over his line, and as I was about to deliver the order, a shot knocked up the earth close to his horse's nose. He took off his hat to it and said, 'I will allow you to pass, Sir!' The men heard him, and said, 'Hurra for the General.' They were at ordered arms, standing at ease. I delivered my order, and the General replied, 'Thank you, Sir! That is the best news I have heard to-day,' and turning to his men he said, taking off his hat and waving it in the air in a theatrical manner, and in a tone of voice which was grand in the extreme, said, 'Now boys! We'll at them!'[50]

Displays of courage such as this were an expectation of commanders at this epoch; a potent means of steadying and inspiring the men they led. What strikes the modern reader, and evidently impressed Bainbrigge too, is the dramatic nature of Leith's performance. William Gomm, whose admiration of the General has been noted earlier, was also present, acting as one of his aides-de-camp, and he too underscored this rhetorical tendency in Leith. 'As for General Leith, he addressed the troops with the eloquence of a Caesar, before they advanced; and he led them, like something that had descended for a time to favour the righteous side; and had this even been so, the enthusiasm excited could hardly have been greater.'[51]

As the impressively coordinated British advance began, Leith 'despatched his other aides-de-camp, Captains Belshes and Dowson, to different parts of the line to help restrain over-keenness.'[52] Leith evidently felt it imperative to maintain a judicious pace of advance in order that the troops not arrive at the hill crest before them winded and tired. Moreover, one might speculate that he knew this moment was going to afford his division the opportunity to demonstrate to all onlookers, Allied and French, exalted and humble, just how effectively, spectacularly they could manouevre - field-day exactitude executed under the real-life exigency of battle. It has been noted

[49]Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Bainbrigge (1786–1862).
[50]Philip Bainbrigge, 'The Staff at Salamanca', *United Service Magazine* (January 1878), pp. 72–73.
[51]Carr-Gomm (ed.), *Letters and Journals*, p. 278.
[52]Captain John Murray Belshes, 59th Foot, earned the General Service Medal for Fuentes de Oñoro, Badajoz, Salamanca and San Sebastián. https://www.napoleon-series.org/research/biographies/GreatBritain/Challis/c_ChallisIntro.html. Accessed 15 January 2024.

earlier, by John Douglas, that Leith was sufficiently punctilious and determined as to insist the 3rd Portuguese repeat the first portion of their manoeuvre and oversaw them execute this in a more 'soldier-like' fashion. Wellington himself was to be found in observation between the two 5th Division lines at this point and would doubtless have been impressed.[53]

Figure 5: Salamanca.[54]

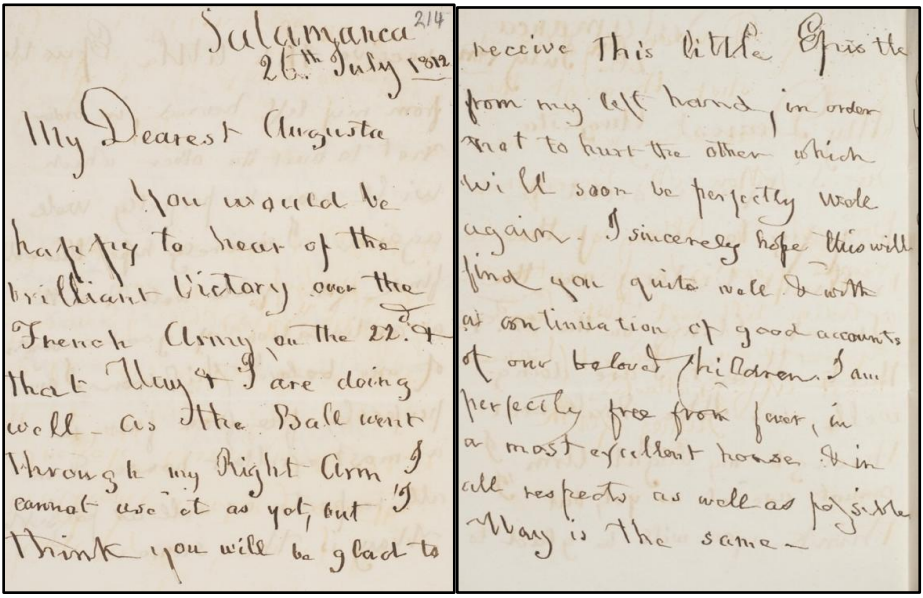
Attaining the brow of the hill, Leith ordered his men to fire a volley, then charge, the French at once replying with a volley of their own. On horseback, and leading from such an exposed position, it does not require much imagination to foresee inevitable, imminent misadventure for General Leith.[55] Andrew Leith-Hay says that his uncle was hit 'When close to the enemy's squares in the commencement of the battle …'[56] William Gomm recorded details of Leith's wounding: 'after the most important advantage had been gained, he received a musket-shot in the arm, which shattered the bone; and when he grew faint with loss of blood, I tied up his arm as well as I could,

[53]Leith-Hay, *Narrative*, p. 56.
[54]From a sketch by Andrew Leith-Hay. *A Narrative of the Peninsular War*, vol. 1, p. 20.
[55]Ibid., pp. 55–56: '… namely, in front of the colours of the 1 battalion of the 38th regiment.'
[56]Ibid., p. 57 and p. 59.

and sent him in good hands to the rear.'[57] He was carried initially to the village of Las Torres, a couple of miles behind the battle lines before moving to the house of a Spanish grandee in Salamanca itself.[58]

Four days after the battle Leith was sufficiently recovered to be able to write a personal and touching letter to his wife, Lady Augusta.[59] Evidently Leith was right-handed and, since he had sustained his wound to the right arm, he was obliged to press his left hand into service to pen Augusta her note. As can be seen below, he managed to produce an admirably legible script! Anyone who has struggled to decipher the sometimes frustrating and obscure handwriting in certain Peninsular War letters may reflect on the irony that this particular document, although written in painful, straitened circumstances, is exceptionally easy to decipher.[60]

.



Salamanca 214
26th July 1812

My Dearest Augusta

You would be happy to hear of the brilliant Victory over the French Army on the 22d that Wm & I are doing well – As the Ball went through my Right Arm I cannot use it as yet, but I think you will be glad to receive this little Epistle from my left hand, in order not to hurt the other which will soon be perfectly well again. I sincerely hope this will find you quite well & with a continuation of good accounts of our beloved Children. I am perfectly free from fever, in a most excellent house & in all respects as well as possible. Mary is the same –

[57]In fact, Leith's wound turned out to be less severe than Gomm feared. See Leith's letter to his wife dated 28 July 1812 below.
[58]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 64.
[59]The life story of Augusta Leith, née Forbes, is largely obscure. She was the daughter of George Forbes, Fifth Earl of Granard in the Irish peerage, but the dates of Augusta's birth and death are unknown.
[60]JRL, *Leith Papers*, #214.

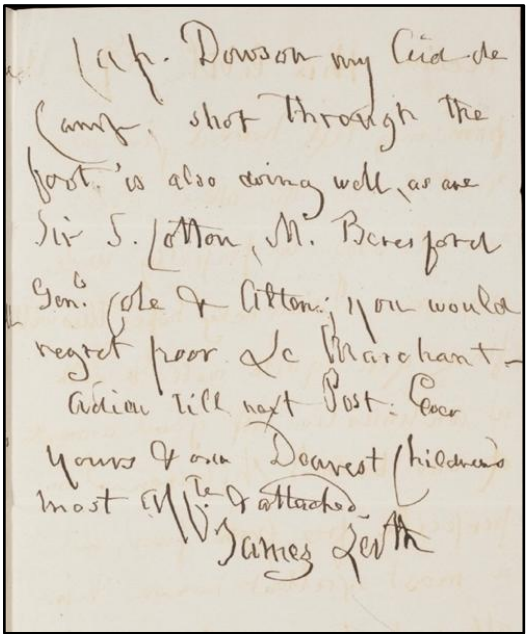

Lieut. Dowson my Aid de
Camp, shot through the
foot, is also doing well, as are
Sir S. Cotton, M. Beresford
Genl. Cole & Clinton; you would
regret poor Le Marchant—
Adieu till next Post: Ever
Yours & our Dearest Children's
most affte
James Leith

Figure 5: Letter from Sir James Leith to Lady Augusta Leith.[61]

A translation of the above follows,

Salamanca 26th July 1812

My Dearest Augusta
You would be happy to hear of the brilliant Victory over the French Army, on the 22.d & that Hay & I are doing well. As the Ball went through my Right Arm, I cannot use it as yet, but I think you will be glad to receive this little Epistle from my left hand, in order not to hurt the other which will soon be perfectly well again. I sincerely hope this will find you quite well & with a continuation of good accounts of our beloved Children. I am perfectly free from fever, in a most excellent house & and in all respects as well as possible. Hay is the same. Cap. Dowson my Aid [sic] de Camp, shot through the foot, is also doing well, as are Sir S. Cotton, M. Beresford [,] Genl. Cole & Alten; you would regret poor Le Marchant.

[61]Courtesy of the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

> Adieu till next Post. Ever yours & our Dearest Children's most affte & attached,
>
> James Leith

As he recovered from his wounding, Leith will have scanned thoroughly the report of one of his Brigadiers, Lieutenant-Colonel The Honourable Charles John Greville, who had come through the battle unharmed, despite having had his horse killed under him just prior to the time that Leith sustained his own injuries.[62] Greville opens buoyantly, with what might be interpreted as flattering words for his chief, were it not for the several other witnesses confirming Leith's inspiriting leadership that day:

> After the unfortunate circumstance which deprived us of your assistance during the latter part of the Action of the 22d. it is with much satisfaction that I can assure you that the same Zeal and Conduct which was pursued by the Brigade under my command previous to being deprived of your animating example continued throughout the day, with unabated Spirit in spite of every obstacle presented by the Enemy, and after driving back the Columns in the Charge you commanded …'[63]

Leith's official report to Wellington was written 25 July. The original is in a firm, clear script, obviously dictated. Leith at once acknowledges 'the coolness, regularity, and intrepidity' with which his men advanced upon the French line. He attests to the irresistible nature of the Allied onset and he lauds 'the conduct of every Officer and Man on that memorable occasion.' Specifically, Leith mentions the contributions of the artillery and Staff Surgeon Emery.[64] His dispatch is notable for its generosity and warmth of tone, characteristics which observers and recipients at times felt were lacking in such communications from Wellington himself.[65] For another report infused with warmth, and perhaps a whiff of hyperbole, we can turn to William Gomm's

[62]Sir Charles John Greville (1780–1836). Greville's career as Lieutenant-Colonel, and much later, Colonel of the 38th Foot in the Peninsula encompassed the very beginning and end of the war - from Roliça to Bayonne - and included action at Vimeiro, Corunna, Salamanca, Vitoria, San Sebastián and the Nive. As with so many of Wellington's officers, Greville served in Parliament, in Greville's case exclusively after the war, espousing chiefly conservative causes.

[63]JRL, *Leith Papers*, #208.

[64]Staff Surgeon Henry Gresley Emery M.D. served in the Corunna campaign and under Wellington from April 1810 until January 1813. He also saw service at Walcheren and Waterloo. (Challis, *Peninsula Roll Call*.) JRL, *Leith Papers,* #212.

[65]See for example Rory Muir, *Wellington. The Path to Victory,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 427–429.

reflections in the days immediately following the battle. It has been noted earlier how thoroughly Gomm had come under Leith's spell,

> At headquarters they are full of his [Leith's] praises; he was the Bayard or Gaston de Foix of this battle, "the observed of all observers;" he threw a truly chivalrous spirit into all those who were about him.[66] The wits say that while he was advancing he looked like the presiding spirit of this Tempest …

And later,

> General Leith, I hope, is doing well, but he is gone to Lisbon, and I fear we shall not see him with the army for some time. I regret it exceedingly, for I value his single presence at 10,000 men in any field.[67]

Clearly, Gomm is in an unashamed state of hero-worship at this juncture, making parallels between his chief and the legendary, Romantic paladins of the past, and in a sense to Napoleon himself, whose battlefield presence was apt to be assessed in similar, numerical terms.[68] How objective or reliable a witness is Gomm? His letters, while certainly revealing him to be an appropriately loyal and discreet aide-de-camp, contain numerous instances of detached, judicial assessments, one example being his characterisation of Wellington as impetuous.[69] There is nothing obsequious about him and his euphoric encomium on Leith is thus all the more remarkable.

So, from Salamanca we glean a detailed picture of Leith to a degree that is vouchsafed to us at no other time. On all sides, he had come to epitomise both the courageous soldier and skillful commander, and his showing at the battle may justifiably be regarded as his finest moment. However, a counterpoint of more nuance and complexity than this one-dimensional portrait is suggested by Leith's subsequent experience in the Caribbean. These were to close his life and career.

---

[66]Pierre Terrail, Seigneur de Bayard (c.1476–1524) enjoyed a lengthy and successful military career, attaining a reputation as a paragon of chivalry - the 'good knight'. Gaston de Foix (1489–1512) famed for dash and boldness was killed at the Battle of Ravenna.

[67]Carr-Gomm (ed.), *Letters and Journals*, p. 287.

[68]Wellington is frequently cited as having equated Napoleon to 40,000 men. See Rory Muir, *Wellington. Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace 1814–1852* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 128.

[69]Carr-Gomm (ed.), *Letters and* Journals, p. 137. Elsewhere, Gomm is critical of the engineers at the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo (p. 31) and General Sir Howard Douglas: 'I do not think he will ever shine.' (p. 289).

Leith in the West Indies

Many of Wellington's officers pursued careers in colonial administration: the bewhiskered proconsuls of Empire. Harry Smith, Henry Hardinge, George Napier, Stapleton Cotton and Thomas Picton are among the most noteworthy, and James Leith, briefly, was of their number. Posterity has endowed these early nineteenth century figures with an unsympathetic twenty-first century verdict as imperialist enablers and thus for certain of these men, reputation has swung violently from that of national hero to communal embarrassment.[70] Certainly their legacies have tended to tarnish far more than those of their peers, most notably Wellington himself, whose post-war activities were chiefly restricted to the domestic arena.

The Governorship of the Leeward Islands at that time tended to be the preserve of generals. These included Francis Mackenzie (1802–1806), Sir George Beckwith (1810 -1815) and Lord Combermere (1817-1820) as well as Leith. Given the appalling reputation for mortality that postings in the Caribbean involved, and the thoroughly reactionary convictions of the islands' slave-owning oligarchy, one might well wonder what motivated these men to undertake the job. Plainly the financial rewards were enticing, Wellington, in the letter to Leith quoted above, alludes to this, and doubtless Leith, at least in part, also accepted out of a sense of duty.

Leith arrived in Barbados 15 June 1814. He was Governor, but also Commander-in-Chief, thus combining powers both civil and military. The most pressing task he faced was implementation of the terms of the recent Treaty of Paris, restoring the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint Martin to the French crown and re-establishing Bourbon rule. His tenure began smoothly enough, as he undertook an initially serene gubernatorial tour of the islands. Yet the embers of Bonapartism were not yet extinguished and news of Napoleon's return to power in March 1815 rekindled the flames.

Leith first had to deal with incipient revolt in Martinique. He rapidly deployed a force of 2,000 British troops and succeeded in 'securing the tranquillity of the Island and preventing the designs of the disaffected.'[71] The situation at Guadeloupe, however, threatened to prove a good deal more difficult. The island openly declared for the

[70]Welshman Sir Thomas Picton's time in the Caribbean, in particular, has earned him contemporary indignation and notoriety, to the extent that City Hall, Cardiff removed his statue in 2020. Sir Harry Smith (1787-1860) is another such figure; buoyant, attractive and swashbuckling in the Peninsula, but whose later career of unsanctioned land-grabs in Africa and compelling conquered Africans to grovel before him - 'I am your Paramount Chief and the Kaffirs are my dogs!' does not sit well today. See Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire,* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 98.

[71]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, p. 148.

Emperor on, of all dates, 18 June 1815.[72] In fact, although news of Waterloo and Napoleon's second abdication did reach the French commander in Guadeloupe, Admiral Charles-Alexandre, the Comte de Linois, prior to the date of Leith's invasion, he chose to ignore it and hence Leith's operation went ahead. Leith was at once faced with a multi-pronged dilemma. Confronting the combined obstacles of serious resistance from the island's Bonapartists, a mountainous terrain favourable to resolute defence, the imminent onset of the hurricane season, and professional naval advice opposing an immediate invasion, he nevertheless pushed through an amphibious operation of boldness and speed. Having swiftly assembled an invasion force of 5,000 infantry and artillery, conveyed by an impressive fleet of more than 50 vessels, Leith effected a successful landing on 8 August. A series of nimble manoeuvres outwitted the island's defenders and prevented their occupying the defensive redoubt of Fort Matilda. Terms of surrender were agreed on 10 August, the invaders' casualties totalling 16 killed, 51 wounded and 4 missing.[73] Thus, a situation that might well have become intractable was dealt with quickly and efficiently and in the space of 48 hours. In recognition of his service at Guadeloupe, the Prince Regent, posthumously in the event, awarded the Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Military Order of the Bath to Leith. [74] Leith's Despatch noted that 'the conduct of the troops has been most zealous, gallant, and exemplary', and he summed up matters, with understandable self-assertion, as follows:

> When it is considered that this beautiful and extensive colony, with a population of one hundred and ten thousand souls, with forts, and an armed force numerically greater than ours - when it is known that every sanguinary measure had been devised, and that the worst scenes of the Revolution were to be recommenced, that the 15th of August, the birth-day of Bonaparte, was to have been solemnized by the execution of the Royalists, already condemned to death, it is a subject of congratulation to see a Guadaloupe [sic] completely shielded from Jacobin fury in two days, and without the loss of many lives.[75]

So far, so good. Leith's military duties had necessitated absence from Barbados as well as deferral of his civil administrative responsibilities. However, shortly after the triumph at Guadeloupe, he was compelled to return to Barbados following an uprising among the enslaved people there: Bussa's Rebellion or the Endeavour Revolt.[76] Much

---

[73]Denis Haggard, 'The Last Fight for Napoleon', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. 14, #56, pp. 231–232.
[74]See Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, Appendix, p. 22.
[75]*Supplement to The London Gazette*, 18 September 1815, p. 1911.
[76]David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition,* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), p. 111.

of the island's enslaved population had come to anticipate imminent emancipation upon Leith's assuming office, and their subsequent disappointment flared into an outbreak, chiefly targeting property in the period 14-16 April 1816.[77] From the enslavers' standpoint, a shocking and largely unforeseen irruption in what they had perceived to be a stable, enduring *modus vivendi,* provided Abolitionist 'meddling' could be held at bay, but Leith's experiences in the midst of other uprisings, albeit with differing reasons, in Ireland, Portugal and Spain may have led him to regard the situation with greater detachment than they. He arrived back in Barbados on 24 April, by which time a combined militia and imperial force had swiftly quashed the revolt and the rebels had already suffered savage reprisals. Despite enslavers' fears and the enslaved population's apparent expectations that the soldiers would defect to their side, 'the suppression of the insurrection was due in large measure to the loyalty of the 1st West India Regiment.'[78] According to his biographer-nephew, Leith immediately 'proceeded to the parts of the island where the greatest excesses had been committed, and collecting the slaves upon the several estates, addressed them with that impressive manner, which, ever at [his] command, enabled him with facility to speak to the feelings and understanding of whatever class of society it became necessary to convince.'[79] If Leith-Hay is to be believed, Leith succeeded in reconciling the enslaved population to the *status quo*.[80] On the other hand, and suggesting a less comforting scenario, Leith went on to issue a Proclamation, delivered via intermediaries, stating:

> I have already pointed out to the Slaves how impossible it would be that they should act with violence, without bringing down the severest punishment on those who should henceforward be concerned in any attempt to disturb the Public tranquillity.[81]

[77]See Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement,* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), pp. 20–21 and pp. 64-70 for a discussion of the complex skeins of motivation underlying this revolt.

[78]Randolph Jones, 'The Bourbon Regiment and the Barbados Slave Revolt of 1816', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. 78, #313, pp. 3-10 and see Alfred Burdon Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment,* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885).

[79]Leith-Hay, *Memoirs*, p.161.

[80]The Slave Trade was abolished 1 May 1817, but it would take more than three decades before full abolition was achieved in the colonies. See Royal Museums, Greenwich: https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/how-did-slave-trade-end-britain. Accessed 21 January 2023.

[81]*The Barbados Mercury, and Bridge-Town Gazette*, 7 September 1816.

Rapidly thereafter Leith went back to Guadeloupe, only returning to Barbados in August 1816 when he addressed the Assembly in conciliatory fashion, volunteering to take a reduction in salary, vowing to strengthen the military presence and reminding his hearers that he had 'lost not any time, after the unfortunate event of the late insurrection, to remove from the minds of the slave population that delusion which appeared to have been its immediate cause.'[82]

The Barbados House of Assembly, reflecting 'an unparalleled social arrogance' and 'the nearest equivalent in the Caribbean to the racist civilization of the southern United States', had unblinkingly pursued a hard-line stance, bolstered by brutal legislation dating back to the seventeenth century.[83] There are reckoned to have been some 400 active rebels and the ensuing punitive statistics are grim. Martial law had been declared prior to Leith's return from the Guadeloupe campaign but was maintained for a period of three months, during which time a harsh and pitiless litany of executions, torture and deportations was carried out. Whereas the local militia had suffered just a handful of casualties during the days of insurrection, by the end of September the Governor himself reported to Whitehall a bloody roll of 144 enslaved people executed, 70 more under sentence of death, and 123 to be transported to Honduras.[84]

Leith's precise role and motivation in this episode is obscure. As Commander-in-Chief he obviously possessed the plenary power to mount an ambitious military operation, and the natural assumption would be that he might wield the same degree of unquestioned dominance over the island's civil authorities to intervene and limit the duration of the period of martial law – which by any criterion seems a violently disproportionate over-reaction. However, this was evidently not the case or, at least, not Leith's understanding of the situation. During his absences Barbadian civil as well as military affairs were in the hands of the President of the Assembly, John Spooner, and precise division of responsibility between the two men was unclear and fraught with the potential for confusion.[85] In some measure due to Leith's chronologically patchy spells in Barbados, amounting to a total of only some 24 weeks on the island, his was a hands-off approach. Whether this was attributable to callousness, shirking of moral responsibility, a mandate from his political superiors or his own pragmatic

[82]Robert Hermann Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados,* (London: Longman, 1847), p. 400.
[83]Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains. Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 154.
[84]Hilary Beckles, *Black Rebellion in Barbados. The Struggle Against Slavery, 1627–1838* (Bridgetown: Antilles Publications, 1984), p. 88.
[85]See Schomburgk, *History*, p. 392 which suggests the ambiguity of Leith's status, pointing out that he arrived initially as 'Lieutenant-Governor' but not yet 'Governor-in Chief'.

conviction that the Governor's powers in this arena were to a large extent circumscribed, one has the impression that Leith was much more at home in his military role than the civil.[86]

Naturally, Leith is scarcely the only instance in history of a successful soldier finding themselves enmeshed in the toils of civilian administration and, although military figures can flourish in that arena, what a contrast to the relatively straightforward path of soldiering! For James Leith the available courses of action must have seemed confused, serpentine and vexing. In his assessment of Bussa's Rebellion, dean of Caribbean studies, Hilary Beckles interprets Leith the Governor as in fact little more than a hapless, marginal figure.[87] Scholar Michael Craton is inclined to be more generous, observing that Leith found the 1680s Slave Code under which the island operated as 'extremely defective' and 'was thoroughly fatigued, if not sickened, by the policy of retribution.' At any rate, practically his last act as Governor was to persuade the Barbados Council and Assembly to commute the sentences of those not yet executed to transportation.[88]

Conclusion

James Leith had repeatedly demonstrated his resilience and toughness in surmounting battlefield wounds, fevers and nightmarish campaigns, but on Thursday 10 October 1816 he fell ill with symptoms of Yellow Fever and succumbed on the evening of the following Wednesday, 16 October.[89] His remains were returned to London, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey on 15 March 1817. Echoing other *sotto voce* circumstances in his biography, Leith's passing seems to have generated surprisingly little recognition or fanfaronade. A proposal to erect a statue to him in the Abbey was refused.[90] Acknowledging the incomplete picture we have of James Leith at present, it

[86]Leith's successor as Governor, Lord Combermere, was to resign in 1820 after just three years in the post citing frustration at having met with the enslavers' enduringly bloody-minded attitudes. See Beckles, *Black Rebellion*, p. 115.

[87]Beckles, *Black Rebellion*, pp. 86–122. And, in fact, Leith's name fails to appear in the book's index.

[88]Craton, *Testing the Chains*, p. 265; and see The UK National Archive (hereinafter TNA) CO 28/85/15 and CO 28/85/11.

[89]Leith made his will on 10 October 1816. 'I James Leith being in perfect possession of my faculties do … give and bequeath … [my] possessions to my widow and my children to be laid out and appropriated for their benefit …' *Will of Sir James Leith. Lieutenant General in His Majesty's Service, Governor and Captain General of Barbados and Commander of the Forces in the Windward and Leeward Caribbean Islands of Barbados, West Indies*. TNA PROB 11/1590/462.

[90]See https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/sir-james-leith. Accessed 14 January 2024.

seems appropriate to leave him in the arena where he most belonged - and in which he comes into clearest view - as 'presiding spirit' of the tempest at Salamanca, 22 July 1812.

Figure 6: The Gravestone of Sir James Leith, Westminster Abbey.[91]

[91]Copyright: Dean and Chapter of Westminster.