



Wellington: The Iron Duke

Richard Holmes

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In this compelling biography, Richard Holmes charts the life of the Duke of Wellington, Britain's greatest soldier. He follows Wellington's remarkable career, from the ruins of his family seat in Ireland and the plains of India where he first gained his reputation as a brilliant commander, to the horrors of the Peninsular War and Waterloo. Holmes sees Wellington as a brilliant figure, idealistic in politics, cynical in love, a man of enormous courage and iron duty often sickened by the horrors of war.

Wellington: The Iron Duke Details

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From Reader Review Wellington: The Iron Duke for online ebook

Alistair says

This must be the "Cole Notes" version of his biography. A good read, but basic, hitting the high points.

Mike says

Aussie Rick got me reading about the Napoleonic Era 2 years ago and it has been a rich vein of history to explore. Really, how many historical figures are known by one name? In Wellington: The Iron Duke we are introduced to the man credited with ending the threat of Napoleon. The book is a companion to the eponymous BBC TV series (available on YouTube!). We follow Wesley/Wellesley/Wellington from his early childhood, to his days in India through his campaigns in the Peninsular War, ending his military days as the victor at Waterloo and then on to his political career. The book frames the man and his role in the era in an easily understood manner. A hero with plenty of warts. Read the book and then watch the series to see the battle sites and fortifications. **4 Stars** only because the final part of the book on his political career was not all that interesting.

Dale Pearl says

3.5 star review

Richard Holmes goes to many efforts to defend criticism of Arthur Wellesley. Not to take anything away from the man but he appears to be more ambitious than to be any sort of military genius. He was indeed more fortunate in war than he was in achieving victory through skill. Arthur Wellesley was not one to give out praise after the facts suggested that they were deserved, in all appearances, it would appear that the "Iron Duke" was a man who would seduce with kindness to your face and then write a scathing letter to the parliament with his real feelings. He might be a hero on British soil but he comes out in this book as a royal snob. He was an effective, albeit ambitious leader and provided with good fortune to build his family name. His seduction skills were not just in the realm of politics...I believe his well documented escapades with women, that Richard Holmes once more attempts to downplay (many of whom were married), is the exclamation on his life and bravado image.

Exceptionally well written but with clear bias.

Highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn more about Arthur Wellesley, The Iron Duke of Wellington.

David P says

A good overview of his career, covering in just enough detail for the casual reader.

Mick says

Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769 – 1852) was a colossus of warfare in the early 19th century. Volumes have been written on his life and exploits, beginning in his time and continuing today. As Holmes notes, the amount of analysis that the Duke's career has been subjected to is probably only rivalled by that of his greatest foe, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Holmes's *Wellington - The Iron Duke* is a brief and plain-language examination of the Duke's career and life. Richard Holmes, a military historian, naturally favours the military aspects of his subject's life and although Wellington's childhood and later political career are touched upon and bookend this volume, it is Holmes's examination of the wars against Mysore and the Maratha, the Peninsular War, and the Waterloo campaign which form the core of the book. The author makes no secret of his admiration for Wellington, but along the way explores controversies such as Wellington's troubled leadership at the siege of Burgos and the dispute over the respective roles played by the British and Prussian forces at Waterloo. Throughout, Holmes manages to be informative and readable, interspersing the historical narrative with anecdotes from his own experiences visiting the Duke's battlefields.

This book is an excellent if somewhat brief summary of Wellington's life and career, and I'd recommend it to anyone wanting to know more about this great soldier and general.

Nooilforpacifists says

Very basic introduction to Wellington; almost a high school book. Not that it was poorly written, but that it was so shallow. Oh, there were the occasional confusions, such as when Holmes quotes Wellington (we might as well call him that consistently; his list of titles takes a full page in the book) describing the siege of Burgos as "the worst scrape that ever I was in." Yet, though the author later dutifully quotes Wellington calling Waterloo as a "close run thing", there's nary a mention of which came closest to failure.

My greatest disappointment with the book: I had some notion on his India campaigns, and a reasonably good feel for at least the timing, geography and opponents of the Peninsular campaign, and (at this point) easy familiarity with Waterloo, but knew nothing about his childhood, and little about his political career.

I admit to being somewhat satisfied on the first. his father went bankrupt; Wellington had to withdraw from Eaton. And Wellington had his (then more successful)brother Arthur purchase an Army Commission, because he ran out options: "his wishes, if he had any, were in favour of a civilian life." But after that, Wellington (as was custom at the time) merely transferred from the books of regiment to regiment seeking promotion, not fighting, but taking a "real" job (often as an ADC to someone higher on the patronage chain). Holmes gives good discourse on late 18th century infantry tactics, and shows how the Army became more meretricious: by the height of the Napoleonic conflict, in 1810, only one fifth of Army commissions were bought. But, based on this book, it would seem that Wellington did no more than appear at the occasional parade drill, and pass the claret at the regimental mess. Holmes agrees with historian Andrew Roberts that "while it is possible to write a long book on Napoleon's early career, not much could be said of Arthur Wesley."

His break came when transferred to India, where brother Arthur now was Governor-General. Wellington is given the 33rd regiment of Foot, leapfrogging other senior Colonels--because his brother wants a quasi-

official representative, a situation causing substantial and lingering jealousy. The goal is to take Seringapatam, the stronghold of Tipoo, something Cornwallis flunked eight years before. Again, by virtue of his brother's prestige, Wellington also commands the Sepoy (Indian) troops and places his 33rd in the lead position of one side of a pincer attack. The 33rd was the first to arrive at Tipoo's outer defenses, and routed them. Both British armies now joined the siege of the granite fort Seringapatam. After suffering a brief defeat when ordered to attack ground he had not been able to reconnoiter (a lesson never forgotten). The siege began in earnest, on different ground with better sited guns. It succeeded almost immediately, with fewer than 400 casualties among the attackers to between 8,000-9,000 dead among Tipoo's Mysore tribe. Wellington slept; his soldiers got wildly drunk, and the next day Wellington was named to garrison the fort, again over the head of the senior officer. Wellington restored order, flogging many (and hanging four) British soldiers for theft.

This only convinced the local General that Wellington was just the man to take charge of the whole Mysore province, which he did through a 5 year-old puppet, the closest surviving descendent of the former Hindu rajahs. Wellington, vice puppet, ruled fairly, and had to kill another challenger for the province, which he did (though his forces were badly outnumbered, and short of supplies).

This was my WTF? moment. The book never explained how, or why, Wellington became such a military tactician, leader, fair disciplinarian, and -- above all -- a pioneer in military logistics. Some talents, I grant you, may be innate. Others may be learned by observation. But the book makes it appear that all four were gifts from the gods. Wellington earned the (derisive) nickname "Sepoy General" from these exploits, but did his talents spring, unbidden, from the thigh of Zeus?

Anyway, now a Major-General, he is assigned to pacify the Peshwa. Starting with a complete rece, and ensuring a secure supply chain, he did so, this this sparked a wider rebellion among three other provinces. Waiting for the natives to fire the first shot, and overcoming the nervousness of the East India Company, Wellington (with help from other British forces) them each in detail, another portent of a great battle to come. One of his most famous victories relied on his gaining the other side of a river, where the enemy lay. Although no crossing was known to exist, he lead his army parallel to the river until finding a place where two villages were just across the river from each other: they could not have been built so close "without some habitual means of communications", and a ford swiftly was found; the battle joined. The British won, despite a miscommunication in orders that led to needless deaths, and despite Wellington's being shot off his horse.

The war still was on when, in 1804, Wellington ask for a transfer--he's tired, Ill and homesick. In fact, brother Arthur's term as Governor-General was ending, and the regular army would doubtlessly take its revenge. So he returns, no longer penniless, but with £42,000 and a Knighthood. And (he later was supposed to have claimed) all knowledge about military matters as I ever had since.

Life as a Major-General in London was less notorious -- aside from his famous meeting with Vice Admiral Nelson, the latter on his way to join the fleet at Trafalgar. A year later, Wellington commanded a division in the raid on the Danish Navy: he cleared the whole island of Zealand of Danish regulars and militia, at a cost of only 6 killed and 115 wounded.

But, his first efforts in Spain ended in ignominy, when The Convention of Cintra, nominally a surrender that he signed, allowed the French to take all their private property, arms and ships back to France. Only a solid Tory majority saw off that investigation, on top of fresh news of Sir John Moore's martyrdom during the otherwise miraculous evacuation onto Royal Navy vessels of besieged troops that only months before had thrust deep into Spain.

Moore's death was Wellington's chance. He was appointed as senior officer in defense of Portugal, where (after his usual preparations) he drove the French from Mendellin and Talavera. This brought him a

viscounty, but as there was no time to consult over the title, his brother William chose Wellington, on the ground that there was a town called Welling not far from the town of Welleslie.

The remainder of the Peninsular campaign is in some ways as tediously defensive as World War I, but

"Salamanca gives the lie to the suggestion that Wellington was simply a great defensive general. Maximilien Poy, who commanded a French division that day, thought that the battle: 'raises Lord Wellington's reputation almost to the level of Marlborough.'"

Viator, of course, can be counted as a similar offensive triumph. It broke the French grip on Spain forever, and got Wellington a promotion to full General. Wellington made it as far as Toulouse before Napoleon abdicated.

While diplomats met in Vienna to dance, tryst, and write a peace treaty, Wellington becomes Britain's envoy to France, a position Napoleon thought unwise at the time, as he would be expecting to be treated as equals by those he humbled. Although briefly enjoying the restored Salons of Mme de Staël, and trying to persuade the French to abolish the slave trade, it became clear Napoleon was right: assassination plots abounded. So Wellington went to Vienna to assist Castlereagh. Three months after arriving, Napoleon escaped from Elba, landed on France, and the Czar of all Russia placed his hand on Wellington's shoulder and said "Now it is up to you to save the world again."

I propose to skip the book's account of Waterloo, both because I learned little new, and I've treated extensively elsewhere. With this exception: when his Prussian aide Müffling asked whether he really expected Macdonell and 1500 of the Coldstream Guards to hold Hougoumont (a small farm key to his right flank), Wellington said "Ah' you don't know Macdonell. I've thrown Macdonell into it."

For me, the last quarter of the book was the most interesting: Wellington as politician, a subject I had not studied. He was bull-headed: invited immediately to join the Tory government, he was piqued when Canning, not he, became Prime Minister. So he resigned as Commander in Chief and Master of Arms. Canning's death restored him to the Tory Cabinet, as Commander in Chief, and (following a crisis in the Crimea), he ascended to the top of the greasy pole--but only after promising the King he would not push for Catholic emancipation.

Wellington, it is clear, became a reformist Tory--and, although no one would compare him with Disraeli, Wellington was one of Disraeli's early heroes. He ran the government as he ran the army--a poor delegator, unwilling to listen to other opinions. Wellington started his term with the support only of the high Tories. He fell out with them when he sided with those favoring dissolution of the two most rotten boroughs in England. Needing support from the Whigs, he turned to championing Catholic emancipation. Wellington had to outwait the King's opposition; the Royal Assent contained a postscript: "God knows what pain it costs me to write these words. G.R."

Wellington still needed approval of the Lords, where a particularly obnoxious Ninth Earl of Winchilsea spoke for hours (the word "filibuster" was not born for another 25 years). Winchilsea accused Wellington of "desiring to infringe our liberties and introduce Popery into every department of the state." These, literally, were fighting words, and Wellington demanded satisfaction. The duel was fought at dawn the next day: when Wellington turned, he saw Winchilsea's arm kept firmly at his side. Wellington aimed wide and shot, and Winchilsea fired into the air. Winchilsea's Second read a prepared statement, to which Wellington insisted the word "apology" be added, and with that, the affair of honor was done.

For a Prime Minister to break the law and duel was remarkable. But it completely changed public opinion. The Lords began to swing behind emancipation. "[T]he mob, hooting Wellington a week before, now took to cheering him." Wellington created the embryo of the metropolitan police, usually credited to his protege

Peel.

He was out of power for a while, though not out of work, as lord-lieutenant of Hampshire. He also cleaned and re-made the Tower of London, of which he had been made Constable. In opposition, he and the other Tories fought Lord Gray's 1832 reform bill to a standstill in the Lords, at the cost of two mob scenes at his own home, two attempts at changes in government and finally -- threatened by a greater evil: mass creation of Whig peers to break the stalemate -- Wellington chose the lesser of two evils, and called off the hounds in the Lords, allowing the bill to pass.

He lived long enough not just to see Victoria coronated, but to outlast the Whig Lord Melbourne, and become one of the young Queen's favorites. And, in one of his last acts in the Lords, he helped vote away the Corn Laws, so noxious to economics and to the British poor. So Holmes provides the FACTS allowing us to conclude that Wellington wasn't just the stiff, high Tory of history, but little of the reasoning.

He died in 1852; the no longer young Queen Victoria was the first visitor to where he lay in state, but "never got beyond the centre of the hall, where her feelings quite overcame her, and whence she was led, weeping bitterly." Well over a million thronged the streets for the funeral; another 300,000 had seats in the stands.

Holmes's best analysis comes nearly at his last page:

"Wellington's death marked the passing of an age. He was born when the countryside dominated the town, industry bowed to agriculture, and Britain ruled North America. He was buried [next to Nelson--NOFP] amidst the smoke of busy railways in an accomplished industrial revolution, in a nation which ruled the centre of the greatest empire the world had ever seen, and had begun the long ascent to parliamentary democracy. He ranks, with the Duke of Marlborough, as one of the two greatest generals Britain produced."

All good. But, as everyone knows, the British LOVED Nelson and Respected Wellington. The difference is crucial. But Holmes's book won't tell you why.

Rebecca says

While some readers hoping for a more complex account of Wellington's life may be somewhat disappointed with this book, I think it is a great starting point for those interested in the life of the 'Iron Duke'. I also recommend watching the documentary alongside this book because they make great components together if you ask me.

Holmes gives an insightful account into the career of Arthur Wellesley exploring not just his victories but also the lessons he had to learn during his experience in the military. I'm also not the biggest fan of politics but the section dealing with Wellington's political career was quite fascinating, especially since he is often considered to be the worst British prime minister in history. Quite ironic for the man considered to be the greatest British Napoleonic Wars leader after Admiral Nelson.

In conclusion watch the documentary, get the book, and see what you think from there. I can understand why it won't appeal to everyone but I remember this being one of the first books that got me into military history and my fascination hasn't changed since.

Oliver says

A brief-ish account of Wellington's career. Holmes is a military historian so he tends to be rather more concerned with battle plans than Wellington's political or private life. Nonetheless he writes with a good balance of detail, summary and anecdote, often deferring to more detailed accounts. Occasionally I got a little lost in Holmes terminology (what is the difference between say Light Dragoons and Riflemen) but overall it's an enjoyable read. However Holmes fails to get inside the mind of the man - a difficult target for sure, but to have not attempted it is a failing.

Herbert says

This is a serviceable biography of Wellington and accomplishes what it sets out to do—be an accessible introduction to Wellington's life and times. Holmes is certainly an able scholar and researcher, and his prose is very readable. I was occasionally disappointed that he was not more opinionated than he was. He is at his best and most entertaining when he interjects his own voice and delivers some penetrating analysis, often with a clever turn of phrase. This style was of course his trademark in his BBC documentaries. I often thought he was holding back here in print more than he would like. One major shortcoming of the Kindle version, which is what I read, is the lack of maps, timelines, or any other aids. Kindle version is text only. Found myself going to the online atlases at West Point and doing Google searches to supplement the text. I assume the print version has maps so if you can get a hard copy, read that instead of the ebook.

R.M.F Brown says

They came at us the same old way, and we beat them back the same old way...

When reviewing any biography, I'm reminded of this Wellington quote, as it equally applies to the art of biography writing. There is a well established template that was laid down in classical times, and very rarely, do authors deviate from this.

That being said, the Iron Duke is a first rate autobiography about Britain's greatest soldier (Marlborough is a very close second) Insightful, anecdotal, and written with Holmes' keen eye for detail. Its main strength is that it's in-depth without being dense, but hinting at other areas for those who want to explore Wellington's career further.

A common criticism of this work is that it focuses too much on Wellington the soldier. Given that he was a soldier for the bulk of his life, any biography of Wellington would seem bizarre without an over emphasis on his military career.

As a final bonus, I picked this up for fifty pence at a charity shop, so it's been a win-win all round for me!

Lukas says

Considering the persona of Wellington and his life, this was although well researched but not that clearly written biography (I feel as eg. A.Roberts books flow better and go into more detail).

Robert French says

Wellington, The Iron Duke provides a brief summation of the life of Wellington. I was probably expecting a lot more, particularly after recently reading John Sugden's two volume biography of Nelson. Although, the book covers all the major periods of Wellington's life, i.e. his early years, time in India, the Peninsular Wars, Waterloo and his later political life, I definitely came away wishing for much more and for a more comprehensive treatment. I also found the structure of the book a bit disconcerting with each major period of Wellington in a long chapter, with no logical breaks. Since the book is not extremely long, these chapters are not long but they seem to go on and on with minimal structure.

I am definitely going to be looking for a better and far more comprehensive biography of the Iron Duke. The majority of the books I read come from our local regional library and I was quite surprised to find that there are a significant number of books about Napoleon, but this is the only book available about the Wellington. I find that a bit ironic.

Not my favorite biography, but it did provide a foundation about the Duke of Wellington.

Richard says

A seriously good biography of this British colossus of the 19th century. Dogged campaigner in India and Spain, the General that defeated Napoleon, and controversial statesman - Wellington was a man at the crossroads of history.

"He was born when the country-side dominated the town, industry bowed to agriculture and Britain ruled North America. He was buried amidst the smoke of busy railways and an accomplished industrial revolution, in a nation which ruled the centre of the greatest empire the world had ever seen."

Holmes has shown a deft touch in previous military histories - not least the excellent Redcoats - but this book is as much about the man as his many famous battles. His later years are equally fascinating, as he becomes a polarizing Prime Minister and a confidant of the young Queen Victoria.

When he died a generation or more after his history-changing victories, one million Londoners lined the streets of Victorian London in his honour. The Iron Duke had, like Churchill would a century later, been a talisman of an age.

Vishakh Thomas says

A decent read, covers most of the aspects of the life and career of one of Britain's best known Generals - undefeated in battle and someone who carved out many of the victories that made Britain the dominant power in the world.

I am not familiar with Holmes' other works, this seems to be the work of a military historian. The book contains fairly decent descriptions of all the major battles of Wellington's career. I was particularly interested in the Battle of Assaye where the British Indian Army (primarily the Madras regiments) beat the

Maratha Confederacy as well as the Battle of Seringapatam where the Tiger of Mysore - Tipu Sultan was defeated and killed.

Quick aside - I loved the line in the book which describes them finding the body of Tipu. "The Tiger of Mysore had snarled defiantly to the end" - Not too often that a decent non-fiction book gets to use such prose without trivialising or lionising the subject at hand.

It then goes on into the Peninsular campaign and finally to the battle of Waterloo. For all the symbolism of the battle - noteworthy that Wellington almost lost it. Had it not been for the Prussian armies that reorganised, resupplied, rerouted itself and engaged the French, Waterloo would have had a different end. Curious fact - the KGL - The King's German Legion - a Hanoverian regiment that would distinguish itself many times was comprised of German soldiers. They were not always on opposing sides.

Some of the publications of Sun Tzu's Art of War often include examples of Wellington. One of the ones that I remember was regarding the Laying of Plans and how they ought to be flexible. The Duke tells his second-in-command that he cannot reveal his plans as Napoleon hadn't revealed his plans to him. Holmes gives a different idea. He says that Wellington fiercely guarded his plans and shared them with no one at all. He was always in the thick of the action, directing the various flanks and columns and corps. But the downside was the risk. The army would be in chaos had he been shot and killed.

The last part of the book describes his years in politics and his stint as Prime Minister navigating through the fickle vicissitudes of public favour in those tumultuous times with the nature of government evolving and democracy going through its painful birth. In some ways Wellington cuts a Patton-esque figure: saying that thing that enrages a lot of people. Curious; perhaps a thing that is part of the personality of a "man-of-action".

A thing to note however, is that the book was written as a companion volume to a TV Series on Wellington. I am sure some of the colour is lost if the reader hasn't watched any of the TV shows.

Andrew says

Finally got around to finishing this last night. A well researched, well written biography of Wellington, someone I knew of only through Joyce studies and the eponymous Beef, as well as a window into the political/military complex of the British Empire at its height. Wellington participated in establishing suzerainty over India, ejected the French from Spain, defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, and later, as Prime Minister, brokered Irish voting rights into law. The little details are what make the book worth the bother: Wellington's numerous love affairs, sleeping on table tops after victories, intimidating would-be assassins with his horsemanship, and of course his legendary conduct under battle.

One particular point should be studied: Wellington the master of counterinsurgency. Wellington studied the local languages of countries where he served, studied their customs, had a direct rapport with foreign soldiers and strove to maintain the wellbeing of the civilians in conquered areas by providing them food and supplies in a culturally sensitive manner. I like to think of the British Empire as savage and indifferent. But this little glimpse into Wellington's life shows a man whose understanding of the total consequences of strategy is something sorely lacking in our imperial pursuits.