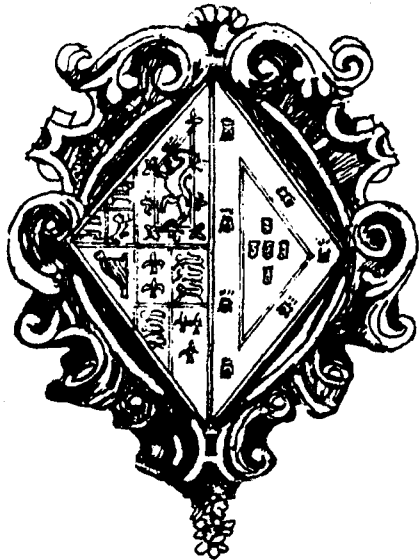


THE LINES OF TORRES VEDRAS

by John Grehan
Spellmount, 1999 - £20.00



In his introduction John Grehan writes 'The importance of the Lines of Torres Vedras and their pivotal role in Wellington's strategical plans throughout the central years of the Peninsular War, has largely been unappreciated by historians..., only two slim monographs on the Lines . . . have ever been published in English. The second, published... by the British Historical Society of Portugal, is a guide book to the present day remains of the Lines with a "patchwork of additional information". This book, therefore, fills a gap in studies of the Peninsular War and concentrates upon Wellington's overall plan. Wellington was convinced that he could beat the French by following a strategy based upon the old saying 'beyond the Pyrenees, small armies are beaten and large armies starve'. If the British, with their Portuguese allies, could hold the Lisbon peninsula and maintain their supply route by sea, they could not be beaten. Wellington believed that the Lines of Torres Vedras were, therefore the crucial defence of the capital upon which his overall plan for the Peninsular campaign depended.

Grehan gives an overview of the Peninsular War but naturally concentrates upon the planning, building and holding of the Lines, especially in the winter of 1810/11, when the French army, bloodied by the battle of Busaco, starved in front of the Lines, which Masséna, the French Commander in Chief, himself realised were too strong to attack. From this time on as Grehan points out, the French tide of invasion would retreat until, three years later, Wellington was able to take his troops onto French soil and the Napoleonic Empire collapsed.

While stressing the significance of his overall plan, Grehan points out the tragic consequences to the Portuguese of Wellington's

decision to retreat from the Busaco ridge, which he might well have held, all the way to the Lines. By doing this he exposed the centre of Portugal to the depredations of the French army and, though it is thought that 40,000 French soldiers died as a result of this campaign, so too did a similar number of Portuguese civilians, from hunger, disease and the brutality of the French invaders.

The book is well illustrated and has numerous useful maps. The story is well told and makes a valuable addition to the number of books on the Peninsular War.

Andrew Bull