

# Women, Families and the British Army 1700–1880

In Their Own Accounts of Service in the  
Napoleonic Wars Era

Edited by  
Jennine Hurl-Eamon



WOMEN, FAMILIES AND THE BRITISH  
ARMY 1700–1880



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*Edited by  
Jennine Hurl-Eamon  
and Lynn MacKay*

Volume III

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# INTRODUCTION

There was more continuity than change in British soldiers' family experiences at the turn of the nineteenth century. Though men's pay had risen slightly in 1797, it still remained well below that of their civilian counterparts in labouring trades. At one shilling per day, soldiers' wages were barely sufficient to cover their own needs, leaving nothing to help out a wife and family. The army cut soldiers' pay back further with stoppages for things like pipe clay, used to whiten their uniform, and to purchase food to supplement insufficient rations. These stoppages could be so drastic as to reduce their net annual income to a mere 18 shillings.<sup>1</sup> This poor pay was part of a larger army policy aimed at discouraging marriage among the men in the ranks. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, private soldiers and non-commissioned officers had to obtain their commanding officer's permission to marry. Commanding officers were simultaneously counselled to look carefully into the woman's background and circumstances and withhold their consent in all but a small minority of cases. Men persisted in forming relationships with women despite these obstacles. The army kept no records of the marriages it permitted, let alone of unsanctioned unions, so it is difficult to determine how many soldiers had wed in this period. However, traces of married soldiers in various records suggest that there were at least 7,500 wives (licit and illicit) by the era of the Napoleonic wars.<sup>2</sup>

A select number of permitted wives were then carried "on the strength" of the army, receiving half rations in return for performing services such as laundry and nursing to the regiment. This number varied depending on whether the men were on active campaign or serving in garrisons. Though in 1800 the Duke of York set an official limit of six women per company (roughly one hundred men), the actual number of wives allowed to travel on the strength continued to vary. Howard Clarke's analysis of embarkation returns from Cork has suggested that factors as simple as room on ships might have decided how many married soldiers could have their families with them. In September of 1793, seventeen transport ships were docked at Cork in preparation for embarkation. They served as interim barracks, holding 745 wives and 1,628 men, plus several hundred children, from four regiments. By the time the ships sailed for Sir Charles Grey's expedition to the West Indies that November, the regiments had increased their complement of men by 935. This resulted in 392 women, and their children, being left behind.<sup>3</sup>

The luck of those granted leave to remain on board and accompany the men to the West Indies was dubious, since it often amounted to a death sentence. The West Indies garrisons were notorious for the high mortality rates suffered by their occupants. Children were especially susceptible to the deadly pathogens that flourished in tropical outposts, made worse by the crowded conditions of barrack rooms. Given these circumstances, Roger Buckley accorded it “a miracle that any infant survived”.<sup>4</sup> Despite the dangers of sea journeys, remote garrisons (in the West Indies and elsewhere), and war zones, most rankers’ wives preferred to be with their husbands than to be left behind in the British Isles.

While officers were able to return to Britain during the less active winter phases of the Peninsular campaign, the men in the ranks could not see their homelands and families until the cessation of hostilities. Even after Waterloo, men remained posted in France. It is thus unsurprising that some wives would do their utmost to join their husbands, whether permitted to travel on the strength or not. To be left behind meant that they had to solicit poor relief officials for aid. If such help was granted, wives and children often had to travel long distances to the parish where their husband had legal right of settlement. There was rarely any support from extended kin and Irish soldiers’ wives could not even turn to the parish. The most desperate women resorted to prostitution as a survival strategy. Even those on parish relief had to work for additional income, as public funds rarely covered even basic living expenses. Separation from a spouse could be regarded as worse than widowhood, because the existence of a living spouse prevented military wives from remarrying.

Rifleman Edward Costello’s account of the wife who resorted to bigamous marriage in Portsmouth should be understood in light of the challenging economic situation of the women and children left behind at embarkation. Upon discovering that his wife had taken a new husband after he had been absent without word for a decade, Costello’s sergeant friend accepted payment as a sign that he was reconciled to the new match. This was just one example among several written accounts of soldiers ‘selling’ their wives in this period. In citing some of these, Charles Esdaile has considered it “chattel slavery”, without acknowledging E. P. Thompson’s compelling arguments to the contrary.<sup>5</sup> Thompson found evidence of wives’ eager agreement to participate in the practice, and their lover’s presence as the purchaser, as a sign that this was a form of plebeian divorce.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note, however, that soldiers were one of the smallest occupational categories to engage in wife sale.<sup>7</sup> Most military marriages likely ended due to soldier’s death, or they simply dissolved during husbands’ lengthy absence, with nothing so formal as a wife sale to acknowledge it. Nonetheless, Costello’s story hints at the possibility that some couples were successfully reunited at war’s end. Soldiers’ sibling and filial loyalties defied similar obstacles, seen in the excerpt here from Robert Butler. Butler himself expressed some wonder at the fact that he and his three brothers, who had each soldiered in different parts of the world, had been preserved to unite in Scotland at war’s end.

Memoirists like Butler, John Williamson, and William Lawrence witnessed the emotional impact on couples at the moment that their tickets were drawn. Those who learned that they were not to accompany their spouses clearly understood the financial challenges that lay ahead of them, not to mention the social difficulties of living as a married woman without a husband present to protect them. They also had little optimism that they would be able to communicate with their spouses to determine their whereabouts or safety and reunite after the end of their service. The account by Rifleman Costello referenced above, and included in the excerpts in this volume, revealed the fact that at least some of these soldiers hoped to find their wives upon their return, but it simultaneously attested to the difficulty of successfully reuniting after years of absence. Where possible, wives tried to follow their husbands despite being denied a position within the regiment. Esdaile has given a conservative estimate of “some 1,600 women” accompanying British troops to the Peninsular War.<sup>8</sup>

The barriers faced by military couples helped to foster negative stereotypes about soldiers’ unions. Officers perceived the women who followed the camp as a nuisance and a burden. From their elite position, they remained ignorant of the social and economic issues behind wives’ desire to follow the regiment. Memoirists from the lower ranks of the army shed more light on the complexity of their situation. Though they still echoed their officers’ contempt for some regimental wives, men like Private John Green, whose account appears in the following pages, offered a more nuanced picture of these women’s circumstances. Private Green talked about Sergeant Dunn’s wife, who married a new husband within a week of learning that Dunn had perished at the battle of Salamanca in 1812. Although Green did not explain that a quick remarriage was the only way she could remain “on the strength” and thus survive in a foreign, war-torn land, he did acknowledge her deep connection to Dunn by highlighting her extreme grief at learning of his death. Other authors whose work appears in the following pages, like “Benjamin”, the anonymous sergeant of the 43rd, also recognised the genuine grief that regimental widows could express at the loss of a spouse.

Despite the trauma of coming upon their husband’s mangled corpse on the battlefield, regimental wives had the advantage over distant families in knowing his fate with some certainty. Soldiers’ parents and wives who did not travel with the regiment had great difficulty learning any news of their soldier sons or husbands. Only in 1797 did the Duke of York order that commanders should report the names of enlisted men killed; they had always reported officers’ names, but listed other losses only numerically. That meant that low-ranking soldiers’ families might never know whether their sons, brothers, or husbands had died abroad, or whether it was worth holding out hope that they would eventually return home. Enlistment in the army was often for life, but William Windham introduced a radical reform in 1806–07 during his brief tenure as Secretary for War. He discarded life service as an option for new recruits in favour of seven-year terms of service instead, with an automatic right to a pension at the term’s expiry. This policy remained in place only during 1806 and 1807; its opponents’ complaints that it gave little incentive for obedience and had insufficiently improved recruitment

resulted in the restoration of the option of life service. Several of the autobiographers included here, such as John Green and “Thomas”, the anonymous author of the *Journal of a Soldier of the Seventy-First*, took advantage of this short-lived policy. Seven years was still a long time to be parted from loved ones, however.

Men’s memoirs made it clear that their parents saw their entry into the army as an occasion for mourning. Far from taking pride in their national service, families of soldiers in this period felt great sorrow and, occasionally, shame. Plebeian poet John Clare later recalled the way in which mothers bidding farewell to embarking recruits seemed to be treating them as if they were prisoners sentenced to transportation to Australia.<sup>9</sup> To some families, connection with a soldier seemed little better than having a criminal amongst their kin. Daughters who wed men in the ranks met with this same sort of abhorrence from their parents, who recognised that life as an army wife could offer little financial or social stability. Though conditions remained remarkably similar for soldiers throughout the eighteenth century, the dramatic increase in memoir accounts of the Napoleonic War era has ensured that we know far more detail of life in the ranks for this period than in earlier decades.

Where previous volumes have included writings from officers and incorporated a variety of sources from court records to fiction, this volume has concentrated exclusively on common soldiers’ own references to family in their memoirs of service in many parts of the world, but especially the Peninsular War. As a distinct genre of sources, egodocuments bring their own challenges and rewards to the study of history. The memoirs of the Napoleonic Wars, in particular, emulated literary conventions like romanticism, Gothicism, and the picaresque.<sup>10</sup> The honesty and spontaneity of these accounts has been further impugned by allegations that some were ghostwritten.<sup>11</sup> Some of those published after 1828 also exhibited the “Napier factor”, having deliberately copied parts of Napier’s famous history to aid their memories.<sup>12</sup> Most of the memoirs by private soldiers were published in the 1820s and 1830s, long after the battles around which their narratives were centred. There was also another “Napoleonic boom” in the 1880s, 1890s, and early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> This resulted in posthumous printings of manuscripts, including that of William Lawrence, whose account is excerpted here. Catriona Kennedy chose to exclude post-1815 writing from her study of the military experience of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars because they were “more likely to reflect the cultural climate in which they were written”.<sup>14</sup>

Kennedy was interested in tracing “narratives” of battle, travel, and other war experiences, but not of soldiers’ family connections. For the latter, the temporal gulf between the events and their telling could arguably serve as an advantage. Long after their discharge, freed from military control, fuelled (possibly) by the political radicalism of the 1820s and 1830s, common soldiers might have been able to write more openly about their personal lives than they could have during the war. They certainly were more likely to voice their opposition to the army’s use of flogging, an issue that had increasingly come under fire by critics in the 1820s and 1830s. The late-in-life autobiography also had the benefit of full life-cycle coverage absent from more immediate war accounts. By taking the soldier

from childhood, through his period of enlistment and service, to the aftermath of his retirement from the forces, autobiographies could reveal family bonds prevailing over regimental ties. That said, they also demonstrated the pervasive impact of the military on family life. Even wives who married retired veterans lived with the challenges posed by husbands' broken health and insufficient pension. They might also have been subject to army strictures on their movement if he served in an invalid corps, or if he had to make the quarterly trek to Chelsea to receive his pension.

The memoir production of the 1820s and 1830s came at a time of rising nationalism. Britain's role in Napoleon's defeat fed the broader notions of superiority that justified British imperialism. A wide body of readers purchased common soldiers' autobiographies out of a desire to vicariously experience these monumental battles. These readers were the product of a wartime generation that was more immersed in the news of the conflict than ever before. Napoleonic era newspapers offered a way for civilians to feel a part of the war effort in a time of increased circulation and readership. Daily poetry columns in these newspapers dealt with the emotional side of war: injured soldiers, orphaned children, and widows. Mary Robinson's poetry was distinct in reflecting the war's pervasive influence on every-day life in the Napoleonic era. According to Mary Favret, Robinson's poem, "The Camp", showed the impact of war in England as "a circumambient 'noise', that shape[d] the drinking of beer and whisky, the longings of maids and matrons, the movement of bodies and goods in and out of any town in England".<sup>15</sup> While there can be no question that civilians experienced war much differently than soldiers, the former group nonetheless felt itself to be profoundly involved in a different way than before.

Low-ranking authors fed that public thirst in the aftermath of the war, not only as a means to line their thin pockets, but also to improve the image of the common soldier. State commemoration of the victory over Napoleon focused on the elite, and officers' autobiographies tended to emphasise their own sensibilities and present their men as more animalistic. The common soldiers' accounts published in the 1820s and 1830s sought to redress this wrong.<sup>16</sup> Quoting an 1827 issue of the *London Literary Gazette*, Neil Ramsey argued that, in writing memoirs, "the soldier was coming to be viewed as a 'fellow citizen', even as a 'father, brother, or friend' of the nation at large".<sup>17</sup> Yuval Harari observed a long-term transformation in the public image of ordinary servicemen as autonomous, feeling individuals between 1740 and 1865, fuelled by their war writing.<sup>18</sup>

The army had its own interest in seeing soldiers produce egodocuments. In the 1810s, the Horse Guards began a strategy of increasing regimental pride by recording regimental histories. According to Kevin Linch, memoirs served in that process by recording their regiments' exploits for posterity.<sup>19</sup> Most soldiers' autobiographies expressed pride in their regiment, even if they criticised some officers or fellow soldiers. This volume has organised the memoirs into categories relating to the type of regiments in which their authors served: regular infantry (which is subsequently divided into works by privates and non-commissioned officers),



rifles, guards, and artillery. Memoirists were disproportionately represented from the non-commissioned officer ranks and from certain areas of the military, such as the rifles.

The latter, characterised by their dark green uniforms, stood out visually against the red traditionally worn by the infantry and engineers and the blue of the artillery regiments. Some revelled in this distinctiveness and saw it as making them especially attractive to women. John Harris, an illiterate rifleman whose account was recorded by an officer of the 52nd and is not one of the memoirs in this volume, observed that riflemen “were always terrible fellows” for flirting with the women they met in their travels.<sup>20</sup> The rifles were sharpshooters who gathered intelligence and provided cover for their fellow soldiers in battle. Their more autonomous duties set the rifles apart as a unit, and Catriona Kennedy accorded it more than a coincidence that they authored the majority of war memoirs.<sup>21</sup> Because riflemen were expected to use initiative and be responsible for the decisions they took on the battlefield, officers were encouraged to treat the men with more respect and use a more paternal form of discipline. Riflemen’s prevalence as memoirists, Linch observed, has meant that they became “the default soldier narrative of the Peninsular War”, despite the atypicality of their service.<sup>22</sup>

It would be challenging, however, to identify a component of the army as “typical”. Riflemen were not the only soldiers to be given more autonomy on the field. The strict linear style of combat reputedly favoured by the British had long been subverted by light infantry tactics in various battles. Members of light infantry and grenadier companies, such as James Hale, Eli Gill, and William Lawrence, are noteworthy in this volume. These tactics gained official primacy when Major General Sir Henry Torrens’s new field exercises were published in 1824.<sup>23</sup> Commanders of light infantry companies tended to select skilled veterans—just the sort of soldier more likely to survive the war and write his autobiography—for this service.

The guards and artillery regiments were similarly differentiated from their peers. Though John Stevenson’s memoirs demonstrated their involvement in active service abroad, royal guards regiments were mainly stationed in London and performed distinct duties such as defending the Bank of England. The same sense of superiority that allowed guardsmen more stability and higher salaries also fostered an independence of mind that made some of them political radicals.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, their vaunted position in the army occasionally elicited other soldiers’ resentment. Thomas Morris, a sergeant of the 73rd Regiment whose *Recollections* have not been transcribed in this volume, grumbled that his own regiment’s efforts at the Battle of Göhrde in 1813 would have been far more celebrated “if it had been a battalion of the Guards” rather than “only a paltry regiment of the line”.<sup>25</sup> Though not perhaps as elite as the guards, artillery units enjoyed an elevated status as well, requiring a well-trained force to use its field pieces. As the artillery recruiting sergeant told Alexander Alexander in the excerpt included here, “we have superior pay, superior clothing, little marching, always riding with the guns when on expedition, &c.” (p. 73). Whether in the rifles, infantry, guards,

or artillery, many men in the army were affiliated with units that distinguished themselves from their fellow servicemen for their relative autonomy and skill. Part of the act of self-memorialising was to highlight one's individuality and distinct contribution to history.

The memoirists in the following pages were ethnically diverse as well. In addition to the European and colonial servicemen who fought alongside Englishmen, there were also significant groups of Welshmen, but particularly of Irishmen and Scotsmen. As Catriona Kennedy observed, "The image of the army as a melting pot, bringing together individuals from the component nations and regions of the British Isles, features quite often in soldiers' narratives." She went on to argue, however, that this did not (as Linda Colley has contended for the impact of war on English, Welsh and Scottish civilians) create "a crucible of Britishness". Instead, it likely fostered a sense of tolerance for cultural difference among soldiers, and a loyalty to one another as brothers in arms.<sup>26</sup>

This cohesiveness was also fuelled by the organisational structure of the Napoleonic-era British army. Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington espoused a divisional system that was not entirely new, but had been honed into a highly effective campaign strategy by 1810. With some exceptions, infantry divisions would follow the pattern of having two brigades of British troops and one of Portuguese. Each division tended to have its own contingent of light infantry and was carefully organised to contain both seasoned and novice troops. This structure brought with it its own sense of pride and loyalty. Thus, though a soldier's *esprit de corps* primarily rested with his regiment, in the Peninsular era this often extended to his division as well, and beyond this, to the army as a whole. The strength of these loyalties was connected to the esteem with which their commanding officers were held.<sup>27</sup> This was visible in soldiers' recollections of their wartime service, which frequently included favourable mention of men in different uniforms from their own.

The conditions of service had also changed when the Duke of York was made Commander in Chief of the army in the mid-1790s. In addition to considerable changes to the commissioning system, the Duke also implemented new regulations for the rank and file. He centralised control of recruitment under the Horse Guards in 1796. This established separate recruiting districts, each with its own commanding officer and teams.<sup>28</sup> Recruits were first sent to new second battalions so that home defence and training could occur simultaneously at the regimental depot. With the help of Viscount Castlereagh, the then secretary of state for war, the Duke of York's reforms ensured that more experienced soldiers were deployed for foreign service. The militia became a key source of manpower, with militiamen like memoirists James Hale, William Brown, and John Williamson being encouraged with financial incentives to enlist in the regular forces.

It was no coincidence that Hale, Brown, and Williamson were single men when they volunteered to leave the militia for the army. Though a few married militiamen may possibly have been attracted by the bounties and pensions promised to those who accepted offers of service in regiments of the line, most likely preferred

the benefits the militia accorded their families. Militiamen's wives were given separation allowances, with extra amounts to cover any children. These allowances did not extend to wives of the regular army. The new Commander in Chief had hoped to do so in 1808, but discovered that it would simply be too costly. Moreover, he formalized as a central army policy that six wives per company could travel on the strength, as noted above. This had been a popular practice for decades before this official notice came out in 1800, but it had been subject to the vagaries of individual officers. The latter were thus more vulnerable to pleas from distraught husbands and wives who attempted to reverse orders separating them at embarkation. The new official policy allowed these officers to remain firm under what were often highly emotionally-charged conditions.

That being said, the portions of on-the-strength wives on campaign continued to fluctuate—and far more wives could be found on the strength in peacetime and garrison service.<sup>29</sup> The Duke also addressed the manpower shortage of the 1790s by creating a series of “boy regiments”, consisting of lads aged 14 and under, destined for eventual service in India. This, coupled with great increases to the number of boys in the regiments of the line, ensured that there were likely about 11,000 boys in the British army by the height of the Peninsular War.<sup>30</sup>

External factors helped shape the climate of service as well. Many among the middling sector of British society gradually joined its elites in fearful opposition to French radicalism. As Kevin Lynch has put it, this was an entirely new threat compared to that of the Jacobites or the revolts in Ireland. These insurrections hinged around replacing one monarch or religion with another, while the French Jacobins instead meant “an overhaul of society” into a godless republic.<sup>31</sup> Although the British army bore a reputation for impiety and blasphemy, most men balked at the anti-Christianity of revolutionary France. The British army exhibited a certain amount of religious toleration, having officially allowed Catholics into the rank-and-file since 1778 and into the commissioned ranks (of the Irish establishment) in 1793.

It was still dominated by Protestantism, however, and certain soldiers were receptive to Evangelical messages. Men such as William Surtees and John Stevenson authored memoirs (included here) in part as a testimonial to their spiritual journey. Some memoirists tended to emphasise the sinfulness of their early army life in order to highlight the transformation wrought by their faith. Many simultaneously credited parental piety and influence with making them later repent and turn back to Christianity. With the goal of eliminating the abuses in earlier decades where regimental chaplains held their commissions in absentia and offered little or no spiritual leadership for soldiers abroad, the Duke of York established the Chaplains Department in 1796 and increased regimental chaplains' pay. “In the strongly Protestant culture of eighteenth-century Britain”, Michael Snape has written, soldiers' “fatalism generally took the form of a profound belief in the all directing hand of providence”.<sup>32</sup> This helped to draw together even the most unobservant of Christians in the British army against the godless French.

Soldiers' memoirs included observations of many different landscapes and peoples, because armed service in this period bore the potential for extensive travel. As the autobiographies attest, open sea voyages were fraught with risks of storms, enemy engagement, disease, and declining provisions. The safest troop transport ventures still inevitably caused extreme discomfort, as soldiers, along with their wives and children, had to spend long periods crowded into the hold of the ship where the air soon became stagnant and putrid. British soldiers were deployed on a multitude of fronts in the Napoleonic Wars era. From 1793 to 1796, William Pitt the Younger's policy concentrated on defeating the French in the Caribbean, at the cost of tens of thousands of men. The British had other ill-fated engagements with the French in the Netherlands in 1793–95. By 1797, the French had an empire encompassing Holland, Belgium, the Rhineland, and Northern Italy. Fears of a French invasion on British shores were heightened when Ireland rose up in rebellion in 1798. This was suppressed, as were other more direct attempts by the French to land troops in Britain.

Arthur Wellesley was beginning to build his reputation in India at the Siege of Srirangapatna in 1799. By his final departure in 1804, he had played a key role in securing British dominance in India. France, however, still continued to triumph in Europe. Britain's victory at the Battle of Maida in 1806 "was the first incident of a British infantry in line beating off an attack by French infantry in a column, a tactic that became one of the hallmarks of the Peninsular War".<sup>33</sup> British forces were deployed in South America in 1806 and Copenhagen in 1807, but much of their attention was to be diverted to the Iberian Peninsula when the French invaded Spain in 1808. The British united with the Portuguese and Spanish in the five-year campaign that eventually drove the French back through the Pyrenees.

The Peninsular War cemented the Duke of Wellington's prowess as a military leader. It should be recognised, however, that France was an agent of its own defeat as well. French failures in the Iberian Peninsula were due, in no small part, to the lack of trained veterans in its ranks after the heavy losses it had suffered by 1809, furthered by the diversion of some of its best troops to invade Russia in 1811. Wellington deserves credit, nonetheless, for selecting reverse slope positions that disguised his numbers and defied the opening artillery bombardments from the French.<sup>34</sup> Britain's triumphs in the Iberian Peninsula loomed large in popular memory in subsequent decades, helping to create a market for the memoirs that followed.

The Emperor was forced to agree to exile on the Island of Elba in the Treaty of Fontainebleau, signed in July of 1814. Napoleon's decisive defeat was not to occur until 1815, however, when Britain and its allies met the French on the battlefield at Waterloo. This victory was to remain legendary in Britons' consciousness, in no small part because it was succeeded by decades of relative peace. The army was reduced, its remaining troops being needed now for lengthy stints in far-off garrisons. Any engagements that occurred were in the outer reaches of empire, posing little threat to the growing populace in the British Isles. It was at this time

that old soldiers began to pick up their pens to offer eager audiences the view from the ranks of the glories, and horrors, of the Napoleonic Wars.

### Notes

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Part I

INFANTRY PRIVATES IN LINE  
REGIMENTS





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[*THOMAS*], *JOURNAL OF A  
SOLDIER OF THE SEVENTY-  
FIRST, . . . FROM 1806–1815*, JOHN  
HOWELL (ED.), (EDINBURGH:  
PRINTED FOR WILLIAM AND  
CHARLES TAIT, 1819), PP. 1–15,  
17–18, 30–2, 47–52, 73–4, 77, 80,  
81–2, 88, 97–9, 106–7, 143–4,  
172–3, 179–80, 198, 213–15,  
218–20, 227–32.

*Unlike Joseph Donaldson, John Green, and many others who appear below, “Thomas” recorded the events of his army life fairly close to the time of their occurrence, publishing his memoir only four years after his discharge. Recent scholarship suggests that the book was in fact a ghostwritten account of “the experiences of at least three members of the 71st”.<sup>1</sup> It paints the picture of a boy raised by humble parents who showered him with advantages beyond their station. He flouted their wishes by opting for an acting career, but an episode of severe stage fright drove him to enlist in the 71st regiment in 1806 in a frenzy of shame and guilt at the tender age of 16. Here he found it difficult to associate with his fellow warriors, who tended to tease him for his superior manners, taunting him with names like “Saucy Tom”, or “The distressed Methodist” (p. 15). He gained their respect by vanquishing one of their leaders in a fistfight. Unlike many military memoirists, Thomas was not a career soldier, having enlisted only for the shortest term available, and he recounted some battles where the British did not emerge victorious, such as the ill-fated invasion of Buenos Aires in South America. Despite some acknowledgement of the British army’s flaws, considerable pride and esprit de corps remained in this memoir.*

*As one of the earliest Peninsular War accounts penned by a common soldier, the Journal had enormous popularity and underwent several editions. It was distinct from the spiritual autobiography common to most private soldiers’ narratives until that time, and was ostensibly (according to the editor) published to extricate its author from the poverty imposed by his soldiering life. The editor,*

*John Howell, went on to publish more military autobiographies, leading to some speculation on the authenticity of the Journal, but the story's air of originality tended to put most of these doubts to rest. Thomas illustrated the strong connection men might feel to their home and parents. At the same time, his connection to Maria de Parides and Don Galves revealed the surrogate parental role that foreign hosts might play to soldiers missing their families. His connection to Donald McDonald also showed the fraternal role that could be played by fellow soldiers. His account also demonstrated the maturing effect that army life could have on errant teens; he described his sense of filial duty and devotion being far stronger after he enlisted than it was before.*

FROM motives of delicacy, which the narrative will explain, I choose to conceal my name, the knowledge of which can be of little importance to the reader. I pledge myself to write nothing but what came under my own observation, and what I was personally engaged in.

I was born of poor but respectable parents, in Edinburgh, who bestowed upon me an education superior to my rank in life. It was their ambition to educate me for one of the learned professions; my mother wishing me to be a clergyman, my father, to be a writer. They kept from themselves many comforts, that I might appear genteel, and attend the best schools: my brothers and sister did not appear to belong to the same family. My parents had three children, two boys and a girl, besides myself. On me alone was lavished all their care. My brothers, John and William, could read and write, and, at the age of twelve years, were bound apprentices to trades. My sister, Jane, was made, at home, a servant of all-work to assist my mother. I alone was a gentleman in a house of poverty.

My father had, for sometime, been in a bad state of health, and unable to follow his usual employment. I was unable to earn any thing for our support. In fact, I was a burden upon the family. The only certain income we had, was the board of my two brothers, and a weekly allowance from a benefit society of which my father was a member. The whole sum was five shillings for my brothers, and six from the society, which were soon to be reduced to three, as the time of full sick-money was almost expired.

I do confess, (as I intend to conceal nothing,) this distressed state of affairs softened not my heart. I became sullen and discontented at the abridgment of my usual comforts; and, unnatural wretch that I was! I vented that spleen upon my already too distressed parents. My former studies were no longer followed, for want of means to appear as I was wont. That innate principle of exertion, that can make a man struggle with, and support him in the greatest difficulties, had been stifled in me by indulgence and indolence. I forsook my former school-fellows, and got acquainted with others, alas! not for the better.

I was now sixteen years of age, tall and well made, of a genteel appearance and address. Amongst my new acquaintances, were a few who had formed themselves into a spouting club, where plays were acted to small parties of friends, who were liberal in their encomiums. I was quite bewildered with their praise, and thought of

nothing but becoming another Roscius, making a fortune, and acquiring a deathless name. I forsook my classical authors for Shakespeare, and the study of the stage. Thus, notwithstanding the many tears of my mother, and entreaties of my father, I hurried to ruin. I was seldom at home, as my parents constantly remonstrated with me on the folly of my proceedings. This I could not endure: I had been encouraged and assisted by them in all my former whims. All my undertakings were looked upon, by them, as the doings of a superior genius. To be crossed now, I thought the most unjust and cruel treatment.

I had, through the interference of my new acquaintances, got introduced to the Manager of the Theatre at Edinburgh, who was pleased with my manner and appearance. The day was fixed on which I was to make my trial. I had now attained the summit of my first ambition. I had not the most distant doubt of my success. Universal applause, crowded houses, and wealth, all danced before my imagination. Intoxicated with joy, I went home to my parents. Never shall the agony of their looks be effaced from my memory. My mother's grief was loud and heart-rending, but my father's harrowed up my very soul. It was the look of despair—the expression of his blasted prospects—prospects he had so long looked forward to, with hope and joy—hopes, that had supported him in all his toil and privations, crushed in the dust. It was too much; his eyes at length filled with tears, and, raising them to heaven, he only said, or rather groaned, "God, thy ways are just and wise; thou hast seen it necessary to punish my foolish partiality and pride: but, O God! forgive the instrument of my punishment." Must I confess, I turned upon my heel, and said, with the most cool indifference, (so much had the indulgence of my former life blunted my feelings towards my parents,) "When I am courted and praised by all, and have made you independent, you will think otherwise of my choice." "Never, never," he replied, "you bring my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave."—"Thomas, Thomas, you will have our deaths to answer for," was all my mother could say; tears and sobs choked her utterance.

I was immoveable in my resolves. The bills were printed, and I had given my word. This was the last time I ever saw them both. The scene has embittered all my former days, and still haunts me in all my hours of thought. Often, like an avenging spirit, it starts up in my most tranquil hours, and deprives me of my peace. Often, in the dead of night, when on duty, a solitary sentinel, has it wrung from my breast a groan of remorse.

Scarce had I left the house, when a sensation of horror at what I had done pierced my heart. I thought the echo of my steps sounded, "You will have our deaths to answer for." I started, and turned back to throw myself at the feet of my parents, and implore their forgiveness. Already I was at the door, when I met one of my new acquaintances, who inquired what detained me? I said, "I must not go; my parents are against my going, and I am resolved to obey them." He laughed at my weakness, as he called it. I stood unmoved. Then, with an affected scorn, he said I was afraid, conscious I was unable to perform what I had taken upon me. Fired by his taunts, my good resolves vanished, and I once more left my parents' door, resolved to follow the bent of my own inclinations.

I went to the Theatre, and prepared for my appearance. The house was crowded to excess. I came upon the stage with a fluttering heart, amidst universal silence. I bowed, and attempted to speak; my lips obeyed the impulse, but my voice had fled. In that moment of bitter agony and shame, my punishment commenced. I trembled; a cold sweat oozed through every pore; my father and mother's words rung in my ears; my senses became confused; hisses began from the audience; I utterly failed. From the confusion of my mind, I could not even comprehend the place in which I stood. To conclude, I shrunk unseen from the Theatre, bewildered, and in a state of despair.

I wandered the whole night. In the morning early, meeting a party of recruits about to embark, I rashly offered to go with them; my offer was accepted, and I embarked at Leith, with seventeen others, for the Isle of Wight; in July, 1806.

The morning was beautiful and refreshing. A fine breeze wafted us from the roads. The darkness of the preceding night only tended to deepen the gloomy agitation of my mind; but the beauties of the morning scene stole over my soul, and stilled the perturbation of my mind. The violent beat of the pulse at my temples subsided, and I, as it were, awoke from a dream. I turned my eyes, from the beauties of the Forth, to the deck of the vessel on which I stood: I had not yet exchanged words with any of my fellow-recruits; I now inquired of the serjeant, to what regiment I had engaged myself? His answer was, "To the gallant 71st; you are a noble lad, and shall be an officer." He ran on in this fulsome cant for some time. I heard him not. Tantallon<sup>2</sup> and the Bass<sup>3</sup> were only a little way from us. We were quickly leaving behind all that was dear to me, and all I ought to regret: the shores of Lothian had vanished; we had passed Dunbar. I was seized with a sudden agitation; a menacing voice seemed to ask, "What do you here? What is to become of your parents?" The blood forsook my heart; a delirium followed, and I fell on the deck.

I have no recollection of what passed for some days. I was roused out of my lethargy by a bustle over my head. It was the fearful noise of a storm, which had overtaken us in Yarmouth roads. The looks of despair, and the lamentable cries of the passengers, pierced me. I looked upon myself as the only cause of our present danger, like Jonah, overtaken in my guilty flight. The thought of acknowledging myself the sole cause of the storm, more than once crossed my mind. I certainly would have done so, had not the violent rocking of the vessel disqualified me from leaving the bed on which I lay. I was obliged to press my feet against one side, and my shoulder against another, to preserve myself from receiving contusions. Striving to assuage the anguish of my feelings in prayer, I was the only composed person there: all around me were bewailing their fate in tears and lamentations. I had seen nothing of the storm, as the passengers were all kept down below, to prevent their incommoding the seamen. During its continuance, I had made up my mind with regard to my future proceedings. As an atonement for my past misconduct, I resolved to undergo all the dangers and fatigues of a private soldier, for seven years. This limitation of service I was enabled to adopt, by the excellent bill brought into Parliament by the late Mr. Windham.

Without further accident, we arrived safe at the Isle of Wight, where I was enlisted, and sworn to serve my king and country faithfully for the space of seven years, for which I received a bounty of eleven guineas. The price thus paid for my liberty, was the first money I could ever call my own. Of this sum, it required about four pounds to furnish my necessaries, assisted by the sale of my present clothing; of the remainder, I sent five pounds to my parents, with the following letter:

NEWPORT BARRACKS,  
*Isle of Wight, July, 1806.*

FATHER,

IF a disobedient and undutiful son may still address you by that dear and now much-valued name;—and my mother!—the blood forsakes my heart, and my hand refuses to move, when I think upon that unhallowed night I left your peaceful roof to follow my foolish and wayward inclinations. O, I have suffered, and must ever suffer, for my guilty conduct. Pardon me! pardon me! I can hardly hope—yet, O! drive me not to despair. I have doomed myself to seven years' punishment. I made this choice in an hour of shame. I could not appear in Edinburgh after what had happened. Never shall I again do any thing to bring shame upon myself or you. The hope of your pardon and forgiveness alone sustains me. Again I implore pardon on my knees. Would I could lay my head at your feet! then would I not rise till you pronounced my pardon, and raised to your embrace

Your  
Wretched  
THOMAS.

Now I began to drink the cup of bitterness. How different was my situation from what it had been! Forced from bed at five o'clock each morning, to get all things ready for drill; then drilled for three hours with the most unfeeling rigour, and often beat by the sergeant for the faults of others. I, who had never been crossed at home—I, who never knew fatigue, was now fainting under it.

[. . .]

There was one of my fellow-soldiers, Donald Mc'Donald, who seemed to take pleasure in my company. We became attached to each other. He came up in the same smack with myself: He was my bed-fellow, and became my firm friend. Often would he get himself into altercations on my account. Donald could read and write: this was the sum of his education. He was innocent, and ignorant of the world; only eighteen years of age, and had never been a night from home, before he left his father's house, more than myself. To be a soldier, was the height of his ambition. He had come from near Inverness to Edinburgh, on foot, with no other intention than to enlist in the 71st. His father had been a soldier in it, and was now living at home, after being discharged. Donald called it *his* regiment, and would not have taken the bounty from any other.

To increase my grief, I was ordered to embark for the Cape of Good Hope, fifteen days after my arrival in the Isle of Wight, and before I had received an answer to my letter to my father.

*[Thomas served in the Cape only three weeks before being posted to South America, arriving in October of 1806. As France's ally, Spain was Britain's enemy and the latter had sent its army to occupy Buenos Aires in June of 1806, taking advantage of Spain's weakened ability to supply and defend its colonies at that time. By Thomas's arrival, the occupation had failed and the British troops retreated to Maldonado (in modern-day Uruguay), which the Spanish army attacked shortly after. The British repelled the attack, and Thomas was put to work building defences. He did not participate when the army successfully stormed nearby Montevideo soon after, being posted to remain behind and protect the flank. The army then moved into the city and Thomas took on new duties in the months following. . . .]* I had been, along with the other youths, appointed to Sir Samuel Auchmuty's guard, as the least fatiguing duty. I would have been comparatively happy, had I known my parents were well, and had pardoned me. The uncertainty of this, and reflections on my past conduct, kept me in a state of continual gloom.

I was billeted upon a young widow, who did all in her power to make me comfortable, amongst with her aged father. Her husband had been slain in the first attack of our troops upon the place, and she remained inconsolable. During the seven months I remained in Monte Video, she behaved to me like a mother. To her I was indebted for many comforts. Never shall I forget Maria de Parides. She was of a small figure, yet elegant in her appearance. Like the other women of the country, she was very brown; her eyes sparkling, black as jet; her teeth equal and white. She wore her own hair, when dressed, as is the fashion of the country, in plaits down her back. It was very long, and of a glossy black. Her dress was very plain: a black veil covered her head, and her mantilla was tied, in the most graceful manner, under her chin.

*[Maria was worried about Thomas's salvation and tried to convert him to Catholicism. General Whitelock arrived with reinforcements in June 1807 and rallied the 71st along with companies of five other regiments to attempt the second invasion of Buenos Aires. This failed and Thomas was made a prisoner. Again he was encouraged to embrace Catholicism, but resisted. His release was secured after fourteen days' confinement, and Maria de Parides' priest gave him ten doubloons. Shortly thereafter, Thomas was sent to Ireland with his regiment. . . .]* It was on the 25th December, 1807, after an absence of seventeen months from Britain, that I landed at the Cove of Cork in Ireland. A thrill of joy ran through my whole body, and prompted a fervid inward ejaculation to God, who had sustained me through so many dangers, and brought me to a place where I might hear if my parents had pardoned me, or if my misconduct had shortened the period of their lives. The uncertainty of this embittered all my thoughts, and gave additional weight to all my fatigues. How differently did the joy of our return act upon my fellow-soldiers! To them it was a night of riot

and dissipation. Immediately on our arrival, our regiment was marched to Middleton Barracks, where we remained one month; during which time, I wrote to my father, and sent to him the amount of the ten doubloons I had received from the good priest. In the course of post, I received the following letter, inclosed in one from my brother. It had been returned to them, by the post-office at the Isle of Wight.

*“Edinburgh, 5th August, 1806.*

“DEAR THOMAS,

“We received your letter from the Isle of Wight, which gave us much pleasure. I do not mean to add to your sorrows by any reflection upon what is past, as you are now sensible of your former faults, and the cruelty of your desertion. Let it be a lesson to you in future. It had nearly been our deaths. Your mother, brothers, and myself, searched in every quarter, that night you left us; but it pleased God we should not find you. Had we only known you were alive, we would have been happy. We praise God you are safe, and send you our forgiveness and blessings. The money you have sent, we mean to assist to purchase your discharge, if you will leave the army and come to us again. You say you have made a vow to remain seven years.—It was rash to do so, if you have vowed solemnly. Write us on receipt of this, that I may know what course to pursue.

“YOUR LOVING PARENT.”

*“Edinburgh, 5th January, 1808.*

“Dear Brother,

We received your letter with joy. It has relieved our minds from much uneasiness; but, alas! he who would have rejoiced most is no more. My heart bleeds for you on receipt of this; but on no account, I beseech you, think your going away caused his death. You know he had been long badly, before you left us; and it pleased God to take him to his reward, shortly after your departure. He received your letter, two days before his death. He was, at the time, propped up in bed. It was a beautiful forenoon. William and myself were at his bedside; Jean and our dear mother each held a hand. Our father said in his usual manner, ‘My dear children, I feel the time at hand, in which I am to bid adieu to this scene of troubles. I would go to my final abode content and happy, would it please God to let me hear of Thomas; if dead, that our ashes might mingle together; if alive, to convey to him my pardon and blessings; for, ere now, I feel conscious, he mourns for his faults.’ As he spoke, your letter arrived. He opened it himself; and, as he read, his face beamed with joy, and the tears ran down his cheeks: ‘Gallant, unfortunate boy, may God bless and forgive you as I do.’ He gave me the letter, to read to my mother aloud. While I read it, he seemed to pray fervently. He then desired me to write to you, as he would dictate. This letter was returned to us again. I now send it you, under cover of this. Your mother is well, and sends you her blessings; but wishes you to leave the army, and come home. The money, you sent just now, and the five pounds