
One has to wonder if the world needs another biography of the Duke of Wellington. Recent additions to the corpus have included Patrick Delaforce’s *Wellington the Beau: The Life and Loves of the Duke of Wellington* (Leo Cooper, 2005) and *Napoleon and Wellington: The Long Duel*, by Andrew Roberts (Weidenfeld & Nicolson History, 2003), which delves into the psychological duel between these two. Roberts’s reconstruction of this rivalry is sometimes speculative, yet the comparisons between the two men are more justified than the “parallel lives” formula would suggest. Other biographies include Richard Holmes’ *Wellington: The Iron Duke* (HarperCollins, 2002), and, of course, a recent edition of *Wellington* by Elizabeth Longford, first published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 1969.

Severn’s work, however, does offer something genuinely different by exploring the relationship and careers of the Wellesley brood, particularly concentrating on three brothers: Richard—the eldest, who was later to become Marquess Wellesley; Arthur—the second surviving son, who needs little introduction; and Henry—the youngest son, destined for a lengthy diplomatic career and, later, a peerage as Baron Cowley. This is interwoven with appearances by the remaining two sons, William and Gerald, and brief mentions of Anne, the only surviving daughter.

Intellectually, the book has much to offer in adopting what can be termed a micro-prosopographical approach, as it is particularly suited to furthering our understanding of the way Britain’s public service worked in the eighteenth century. As the author puts it, in an explanation tucked away in the bibliography where only the academically inclined would look, his goal was to “put a human face” on these characters and “to explore the impact of personal relationships on careers and vice versa.”(577) The latter is particularly apt in
relation to the eldest brother, Richard: the author diligently shows how his career suffered in its later stages due to personal issues, and how familial relationships influenced some of his public career decisions. This approach of using personal correspondence to dissect family relationships and their influence on the public actions of family members has much to recommend it; families were the beating heart of the British establishment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and contemporaries were aware that the rise, and sometimes fall, of such families were significant politically. The Grenvilles, studied by John Beckett in *The Rise and Fall of the Grenvilles: The Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, 1710 to 1921* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), are an excellent example. As John Severn testifies, such an approach prompts the historian to look at evidence and events in a different way.

Severn’s method of tracking the lives and relationships of the Wellesley brothers results in a very large book. Not only were the three main protagonists close to, if not in the very centre of, public life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, they were all very long-lived, so there is plenty to write about. The work starts by offering some useful insight into the Anglo-Irish world, a world that requires some explanation to the casual reader. Because Severn’s approach is family-oriented and chronological, Richard and the Wellesley matriarch, Anne, loom large in the early part of the story. Anne had high hopes for, and a high opinion of, Richard and was determined to see him succeed and bring success to the rest of the family. Her determination to place Richard as advantageously as possible paid off, and through the connections he made during his education, he was able to get close to the inner circle of Pitt, Dundas, and Grenville in the 1790s. The family’s real break came when Richard was given the governor-generalship of India, and had the opportunity to take his hitherto unproven brothers Arthur and Henry with him. It is at this stage that one of the major themes of the book begins to emerge: the mixture of familial co-operation with outbursts and fallings-out. These litter the story of the Wellesleys, and were sometimes the result of internal disputes between the brothers due to
politics, ambition, or jealousy. Other rifts were prompted by marital scandals, of which the family seemed to have more than its fair share, with guilty parties on both sides: Richard was notorious for his numerous affairs, which left three illegitimate children, much to the ire of Arthur, who remained single for a considerable period of his life. Henry’s wife, Charlotte, ran off with Henry Paget in a very public fashion, the repercussions of which included a refusal by Arthur to let Henry Paget, an able cavalry commander, serve in the Peninsular War. All of this makes for entertaining reading, and the author does a remarkably good job of reconstructing the impact these clashes and pitfalls had on the family and the relations within it, and particularly of embellishing and expanding our comprehension of the different characters of Richard, Arthur, and Henry.

*Architects of Empire* is not a historical monograph, as the author freely admits, but is pitched as a specialized biography for a general audience. As such, the technical aspects of the book are kept to a minimum. Footnotes are restricted mainly to quotations, with the odd one directing the reader to further reading on more general themes. The bibliography takes a similar approach, mainly listing primary sources. It is clear that exhaustive work has gone into collecting material to reconstruct the lives of the Wellesley family, and Severn has drawn on papers in the British Library, the National Archives, Kew, the University of Southampton (for the Wellington papers), and—particularly pleasing to see—materials from Sección de Estado, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid. The footnotes supply archival details for Severn’s quotations, but although the work shows some awareness of wider historical issues, the referencing will not provide the reader with detailed bibliographic or historiographic pointers to further reading. This is not a criticism, as it is entirely in line with the ethos of the work.

The title of the work does strike one as a little odd, as the three brothers’ time in India only constitutes a part of their lives, and a similar proportion of the book (five chapters from eighteen). The three of them had equally significant involvement in the Peninsular War, Wellington obviously being the most famous, but Richard was
Ambassador to Spain until 1812, and was then replaced by his younger brother, Henry. It is only in the last few chapters, when the story turns to Richard and Arthur in their old age, publishing their correspondence from their time in India and becoming aware of the trajectory they had set Britain upon, that the reader begins to understand the appropriateness of the title. A tension remains, though. The details Severn presents make it clear that the Wellesley clan that went to India were not really imperialists, and certainly not architects. What was driving them was personal ambition, which was given free rein in a milieu where the ambitious were presented with significant opportunities to advance their careers far away from the direct control of London; empire was almost a by-product. The author, though, never goes so far as to state this explicitly.

Architects of Empire is a very welcome addition to the literature on the Duke of Wellington, and helps place his remarkable career into the context of the rise of his ambitious family. It also achieves the author’s aims of providing a new dimension to the history of the Wellesley brothers and offering a human face to characters that loom very large in British history of the first half of the nineteenth century. Given the historical stature of the Duke of the Wellington, this is an achievement indeed.

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