

BOOK REVIEW

A Surgeon in Napoleon's Grande Armée: The Campaign Journal of Baron Percy by Calum Johnson

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This is the first time that the *Journal des Campagnes de Baron Percy* recounting the diaries of Pierre-François Percy, the renowned French military surgeon, has been translated in to English. A brief account of the surgeon's life and an honest discussion around the challenges of translation are addressed in the introduction. The editing is minimal in the form of a few footnotes to explain some obscure or little-known words or meanings. It remains unclear whether the jotted diary was ever meant for public consumption and certainly does reflect some fairly personal comments, sometimes praiseworthy yet frequently sarcastic and damning.

This work is important, giving insight into Percy's personality, the life in mid-European urban and rural areas, unfamiliar to many readers of military history of this period, and his meetings with and affinity for (until later) his Emperor. There is plenty about wounds, therapeutics and surgical detail to interest the medical historian.

Calum Johnson is well-qualified to produce this translated work, which offers the reader, in Johnson's words, 'something of Percy's unique voice'. Percy was a first-rate military surgeon who rose to prominence during the French Revolutionary wars (1792-1802). His meticulous care and contributions to the *Service de Santé* of the French Army were outstanding. He proved a talented and superb student and doctor and was promoted to *chirurgien-major* of a cavalry regiment at the young age of 28 and progressed to become Napoleon's senior surgeon from 1799 to 1809. The Journal is written day-by-day and thus gives the reader an immediacy that often is lacking in later produced memoirs. There are some gaps in the works which narrate the period from 1799 to 1807. The campaigns discussed thus start with the Army of the Danube and the fighting in Switzerland followed by the Army of the Rhine contesting in Germany, at Jena and then in Poland. The Battle of Eylau is vividly portrayed, followed by the siege at Dantzic, then the action at Friedland followed by Percy witnessing the Peace Treaty and meeting of the emperors at Tilsit. Finally, the *Grande Armée* advanced to Berlin, where this account ends. Percy would go on to serve in Spain until the conflict at Wagram in 1809, where he retired suffering with ophthalmia and later, cardiac problems.

Born of a middle-class family with a surgical father, Percy comes across as a cultured and sensitive individual, well-read and knowledgeable about horticulture. Persistently begging proper military rank for his staff, he avidly supported his often overworked junior surgeons and derided most physicians. He consistently berates the medical administration for its inefficiency, bureaucracy and fraudulent behaviour but his complaints from a very senior position, despite being verbally supported by his respected Emperor, frequently came to nothing.

What comes across in this interesting travelogue through war, pestilence and variable climates is the intense and usually futile efforts to produce enough food, medical equipment and shelter for thousands of men suffering disease and injury. Difficulties in transporting the wounded with insufficient wagons and poor roads, during Bonaparte's rapid movements of the army through these campaigns, were rarely mirrored by adequate movement and care of casualties.

The much publicised and probably more notable surgical giant of the Empire, Baron Dominique Jean Larrey, appears here and there in the text. The reader is left with the feeling that Percy was probably not of the same surgical calibre as, and perhaps a little more modest than, Larrey. Like Larrey, Percy proved a good teacher and an industrious surgeon, yet unlike his colleague had no offspring. Percy's strident efforts also lay in the invention of his *wurst* ambulance transport vehicle and his perpetual efforts to create surgical battle groups adequately supported by *infirmiers* (orderlies/nurses) and *brancardiers* (stretcher bearers). One marked feature of the translated journal, quite sufficient to dispel any exaggerated myth of French advances and excellence in military medicine, is the frequently poor standards of surgery and logistical support suffered by the soldiers serving in the *Grande Armée*. The challenges were just too great to provide what was needed.

An account of such value probably deserves some more military and medical annotation. For this reason and for completion, the expansion of the translated journal to cover the omitted 1807-1809 period of Percy's career could really justify a two-volume publication. The now-translated work is a new and important piece of history, not published in French until 1904.

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