

‘Wargaming in History: The Peninsula War’

By Donald Featherstone

Review by Paul Le Long

The Wargaming in History series came out in around 1990 and comprised five books, all on different periods and by different authors. The series editor was Stuart Asquith. Argus Books produced the series, all of which were in a very attractive A5 format and were well priced at £5.95. The back cover of all volumes in the series said that the purpose of the series was “to offer, in detail, hints, tips and advice on specific periods and wars that are wargaming favourites. All the necessary information – campaigns, battles, weapons, tactics etc. – is included and the books are illustrated with tactical diagrams, maps, contemporary illustrations and photographs.” And I have to say that the series succeeded in its aims.

In this volume, the author, Donald Featherstone, gives us a short but thorough lesson in Napoleonic warfare – although the book is about the Peninsula War in particular, much of its content can be applied to the wider Napoleonic period, which is useful.

So what do we get? There are chapters dealing with infantry, light infantry, cavalry and artillery – how they operated and were organised, their tactics and how to handle them on the wargames table. There is a chapter on weapons and a good one on cavalry attacking infantry in square formation. There is also an interesting chapter on British line versus French column. If you’ve played Napoleonics before, then you know what all these terms mean and you will not learn much here I suspect. If you haven’t played this period before and don’t know anything about columns, squares and lines, then you need to read this book because it gives you a good introduction to all of that and is presented in an easy to read and easy to grasp fashion.

The author then describes the fighting assessment of the armies – anyone who had read volume 3 of Featherstone’s “Wargames Through the Ages” will be familiar with the themes in this chapter. The assessment of the armies concentrates mainly on the British and French as you would expect in the Peninsula War but it would have been nice to have a bit more on the Spanish and Portuguese armies. The next chapter is advice on how to wargame the period and this again covers ground familiar to those who know Featherstone’s works – military possibilities, chance cards and so on.



One of the most interesting chapters is that on rules for the period. These rules are quite unusual, especially for an author considered “old-school” by many. Essentially, he has worked out in advance the probability of success in any combat situation – for example, cavalry charging a square or artillery firing at a column – and assigned a target number accordingly; roll dice and reach the target number and you succeed – which usually means that the target unit takes a point of attrition (damage). A basic description like this doesn’t do the system justice but hopefully you get the idea. What these rules do is take the detailed knowledge of the period that the author has (as presumably you also now enjoy, having read the book!) and translate that into a pre-determined set of results that cannot help but produce an historically accurate game. In a way, I thought the rules owed something to the Arthur Taylor approach (“Rules for Wargaming,” reviewed by Jonathan Aird). I think they are a stroke of genius.



The book is finished off by 50 pages describing the battles and sieges of the Peninsula War; you get opposing forces, a map, description of the battle, result and casualties – a great resource on its own.

I think this is a very good book. Yes, the author is prone to recycling some of his material over several of his huge canon of books, and yes, some of his analysis sometimes feels a bit dated. But nevertheless, this really is an excellent beginner’s primer to the Peninsular War in particular and the Napoleonic Wars in general. You have everything here to get you started on the period. And the rules are extremely interesting and innovative.

Recommended.

Details:

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The book is out of print but the current price on Amazon for used copies starts at £12.48 – which is more than double what it cost when it was new! Ah, capitalism.