‘emigration is a matter of necessity’: The aftermath of the Peninsular War

Susanna Moodie was the wife of a young lieutenant who was part of the general reduction in the British army following the battle of Waterloo, and she firmly believed that ‘emigration is a matter of necessity’.1 In 1813, J. W. D. Moodie had joined the 21st Regiment, or Royal North British Fusiliers; he was the fourth of five sons of Major James Moodie of Orkney and had two brothers in the Royal Navy, one in the service of the East India Company, and one who had emigrated to the Cape Colony in 1816.2 Moodie was sent to Holland, and was part of the campaign at Bergen-op-Zoom, where a musket ball lodged itself in his left wrist. Unable to continue in the army, he was placed on a small pension for a couple of years. After the war, Lieutenant Moodie, attempting to exist on half-pay like so many other British army officers, moved to the Cape Colony where he lived cheaply with his brother, Benjamin, for ten years. He then returned to England and married Susanna Strickland,3 placing himself under more financial pressure. At the time, Moodie's income was about £100 per year, barely enough to provide him and his wife with food and rented accommodation.4 Emigration seemed the only solution and Moodie chose Canada, a decision he later regretted.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, relatively few Peninsular War veterans saw a place for themselves in post-war Britain. Britain had changed radically and, while the generation that fought in the Peninsular War lacked economic opportunities in Britain itself, they were more fortunate than most because a future was available for them in the British Empire. Although I treat the Peninsular War veterans and their cohort who settled in the Australian colonies as a group, they arrived over a 20-odd-year period, and the circumstances of their emigration varied. Some came in garrison regiments and then stayed; some emigrated with their families; some came with civil appointments and
then stayed. A distinctive feature of this group was the broad timing of their arrival: they were part of a crucial transition in New South Wales during which the colony was transformed from a convict depot into a settler colony.

The differences between the British army before and after the Napoleonic Wars are examined in this chapter, as are the radical economic, social and demographic changes in Britain itself. The Peninsular War was the defining episode in the lives of many British army officers, yet the combination of attempting to live on half-pay, and the diminishing prospects for employment after the war, meant they had no future in Britain. As well, some had wounds that restricted their ability to continue a full life as an officer in the British army, and I give the example of three such officers. Emigration seemed the only avenue for many Peninsular War veterans, and when the British government introduced the military grant regulations in 1826 to encourage settlement in British colonies, their fate was sealed. Why New South Wales was the favoured destination, rather than elsewhere, will be explained. The British government had a general policy of planting ex-army and ex-navy officers in the colonies, but there were particular reasons for encouraging Peninsular War veterans to settle in New South Wales. There, they could find civil employment and reduce the numbers on half-pay, they could provide colonial law and order and they could be useful in what had become a strategic location.

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The French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars changed the face of continental Europe and that of Britain’s Empire also. During the Napoleonic Wars, for instance, Britain gained control of the Seychelles, Mauritius, Trinidad, Tobago, St. Lucia, the Cape Colony and British Guyana. Britain doubled her export trade, trebled her revenue and increased commerce with South America by 14 fold. After the Peninsular War and Waterloo, Britain was at the zenith of its power. It was the strongest military power in the world and red-coated soldiers served on every continent except Antarctica. For the first time, Britain’s power was military and this was reflected in the military component of Parliament. Nearly 1000 Members of Parliament, or almost half the politicians in the 30 years between 1790 and 1820 had served in the military.

The Napoleonic Wars also transformed the British army, not least because it was more than six times larger in 1814 than it had been in