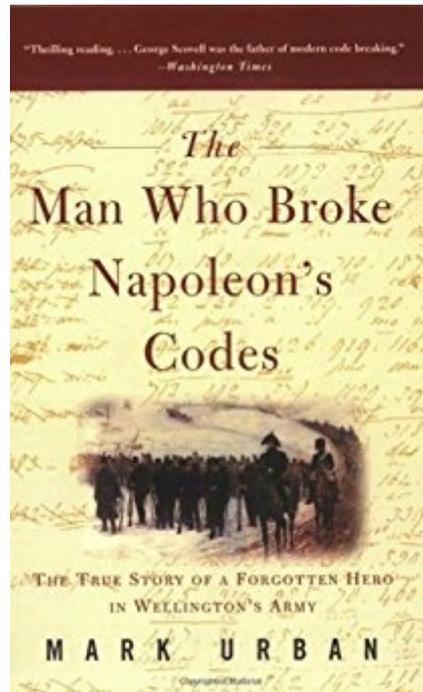# The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Codes

Synopsis

History books reportâ "and rightly soâ "that it was the strategic and intelligence-gathering brilliance of the Duke of Wellington (who began his military career as Arthur Wellesley) that culminated in Britain's defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815. Nearly two hundred years later, many of General Wellesley's subordinates are still remembered for their crucial roles in these historic campaigns. But Lt. Col. George Scovell is not among them.The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Codes is the story of a man of common birthâ "bound, according to the severe social strictures of eighteenth-century England, for the life of a tradesmanâ "who would in time become his era's most brilliant code-breaker and an officer in Wellesley's army. In an age when officers were drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the nobility, George Scovellâ "an engraver's apprenticeâ "joined Wellesley in 1809. Scovell provides a fascinating lens through which to view a critical era in military historyâ "his treacherous rise through the ranks, despite the scorn of his social betters and his presence alongside Wellesley in each of the major European campaigns, from the Iberian Peninsula through Waterloo.But George Scovell was more than just a participant in those events. Already recognized as a gifted linguist, Scovell would prove a remarkably nimble cryptographer. Encoded military communiquÃ©s between Napoleon and his generals, intercepted by the British, were brought to Scovell for his skilled deciphering. As Napoleon's encryption techniques became more sophisticated, Wellesley came to rely ever more on Scovell's genius for this critical intelligence.In Scovell's lifetime, his role in Britain's greatest military victory was grudgingly acknowledged; but his accomplishments would eventually be credited to othersâ "including Wellington himself. Scovell's nameâ "and his contributionsâ "have been largely overlooked or ignored.The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Codes tells the fascinating story of the early days of cryptology, re-creates the high drama of some of Europe's most remarkable military campaigns, and restores the mantle of hero to a man heretofore forgotten by history.

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Customer Reviews

Codebreaking is not an easy subject to make plain, or to make exciting. There have been a number of good accounts of the work of Alan Turing and the crew at Bletchley Park, accounts that were aided by the memories of the participants and an exciting tale of successful boffins who made a difference against the Nazis. Codebreaking in previous wars has not had as spectacular a story, but in _The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Codes_ (HarperCollins) by Mark Urban, we can read about a similar victory through brainpower. Oddly, Wellington's one-man cryptography staff is only now, almost two hundred years after the fact, getting his recognition.George Scovell was of humble background, a matter that was to bedevil his entire career. He was a brilliant linguist in school and got his break in the army when he was put in charge of Wellington's communications. He had a knack for decoding, but then his first efforts were easy. But when Wellington stepped up his campaign, the French started using their "grand cipher," a fiendishly difficult code in which a single word could be encoded in multiple ways, eliminating the easy patterns that made previous codebreaking possible. Urban describes the decipherment in sufficient detail to appreciate the intellectual challenge; Scovell cracked the code when teams in London could not do so. By the eve of the decisive Battle of Salamanca in July 1812, Scovell had chipped away enough at the code to be able to tell how big an army Wellington would be facing and how long before it would be reinforced with more soldiers. It is possible that because he was working with captured documents from many sources, Scovell had such information to give Wellington that it may have been more than the on-scene French general had himself.

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