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John Severn, *Architects of Empire: The Duke of Wellington and His Brothers*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2007. Pp. xiii, 602. ISBN 978-0-8061-3810-7.

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In the book under review, John Severn (Univ. of Alabama, Huntsville) paints, at times broadly, and at times in a detailed fashion, a picture of Great Britain's most famous combination of brothers, the Wellesleys. In so doing, he starts with the father, a somewhat foppish member of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, and ends with the death of the Duke of Wellington more than a century later. The narrative, like that of any good British aristocratic family story, features a failed father and a domineering mother. There are five brothers, in order: Richard, Arthur (oddly named after a short-lived, much-adored elder sibling), Henry, Gerald, and William (later William-Pole). Severn rightly spends the bulk of his efforts on the careers and relationships of Richard, Arthur, and Henry. As might be expected, the main characters take the story to India and then to Spain, with numerous interludes in the British Parliament. The text is often a blow-by-blow account of the three brothers' interchanges with each other, mostly seen through their voluminous correspondence.

Severn is excellently placed to write this book. His first work in the area centered on the eldest brother, Richard.<sup>1</sup> Further, he makes copious use of archival material, especially letters. Often the reader can follow the interaction of the characters as if reading these directly, rather than mediated through the interpretation of the author. Since Richard and Arthur wrote constantly, the quantity of relevant source material is daunting. *Architects of Empire*, in its meticulous use of primary sources concerning the men and women involved, is unrivaled.

Writing in the present venue, I must stipulate that Severn's book is not principally a military history in any real sense. It is far more a study of the political nature of the British Empire as it was emerging during the long era of the Napoleonic Wars and the following late Georgian period. Much more space is given to the parliamentary maneuvering of Richard and Arthur than to military events in India or Spain. The battles of Assaye and Waterloo are given less than a page each. Further, the book's title is misleading: the term "architect" strongly implies that the brothers Wellesley created the British Empire by design. But we are specifically told of Richard in India that: "it must be pointed out that Mornington [Richard's Irish title] was more than an opportunist. Well schooled in the history and culture of the subcontinent, he understood to a surprising degree the intricacies of Indian rivalries, internal politics, and personal ambitions. He had some sense of what could be done and what could not. Ambitious he was, but it was an ambition tempered by realism. *He did not arrive in India with the aim of creating an empire* [my emphasis]" (89).

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<sup>1</sup> *A Wellesley Affair: Richard Marquess Wellesley and the Conduct of Anglo-Spanish Diplomacy, 1809-1812* (Tallahassee: U Pr of Florida, 1981).

That the Wellesleys set the stage for “empire” in the nineteenth century is not addressed, nor is the extent of their role in winning the war in Spain. This makes it difficult to divine a clear thesis driving Severn’s narrative. What then is the purpose of his book, other than relating many details of the relationship among the three main characters?

Despite its subtitle,<sup>2</sup> the book does not focus principally on Arthur, the Duke of Wellington, known of course to anyone with even a passing knowledge of modern Britain or the Napoleonic Wars. No, the far less known brothers, Richard and Henry, dominate the first half of *Architects of Empire*.

Richard, a man of real intellect and ability but afflicted with frailties and painful failings, is the central figure in the family narrative up to 1809. He is, in Severn’s unsparing account, almost utterly unlikable, grubbing for titles and adulation (though not money) at every turn. This egocentrism, not any plans for empire in India, motivated him: “Material gain never entered into Mornington’s calculations. Instead he thought in terms of honors and public recognition (which, to him, the honors represented). He wanted his king and colleagues to tell him what a splendid job he had done and then convince the public of their pride in and appreciation of him by conferring high honors. As governor general, he had reason to expect a reward, but for Mornington, the issue was whether the reward would match the accomplishment” (105).

Throughout, Richard, and to a degree the Iron Duke himself, often come off as petulant and angry at real or perceived slights to their abilities and the importance of their successes. In the end, Wellington’s real successes after 1810 left Richard to stew, an obnoxious, bankrupt philanderer, soon dependent on his younger brother Arthur for advancement and cash.

*Architects of Empire* is replete with interesting and informative vignettes of the brothers’ repellent personal lives. Had it not been for the meteoric success of Arthur in Spain, the entire Wellesley clan might be consigned to the dustbin of historically interesting and rather dysfunctional Englishmen. Although seemingly well-positioned, Richard and Arthur struggled to enter the inner circle of British high society. While Arthur carried his eventual success and fortune easily, Richard was a disaster. None of the five brothers had a consistently happy domestic life, making bad marriages across the board. Henry is perhaps most famous for his wife’s deliciously lurid affair with the dashing Lord Paget (later Uxbridge of Waterloo fame): the seven pages devoted to the affair give valuable insight into divorce law in England at the time. Sections of the book read like *Pride and Prejudice*. Severn even imagines Richard seeing himself in the part of the noble Darcy. How much all this applies to the actual story is left unclear.

Severn occasionally makes broad assertions that remain unqualified or go too far. For instance, we read of the brothers and Spain in 1810 that: “The arrangement differed from India in that the setting had changed. This was the main stage drama played before an alert and critical audience. That said, never before had three brothers played such a central role in the fate of a nation.... From London Richard would devise policy and promote it; Arthur would command; and in Spain, Henry would mobilize the resources of a reluctant and hobbled ally. Not only did Britain’s future role as a European power hang in the balance,

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<sup>2</sup> And its dust cover—a portrait of the Duke of Wellington <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0906.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0906.htm)>.

so too did the careers of the Wellesleys” (296). True enough, but the accomplishments of Richard or Henry would be forgettable without Arthur’s stunning victories. Worse, it is rather much to assert that the three of them were creating Britain as a power by their activities in Spain. Would defeat there really have left Great Britain a second-rate European power? Would it have ended or changed the destabilizing Continental System or English maritime dominance? Not likely.

In sum, the book is a mixed bag. First, at over 500 pages, it is often a hard read, assuming a reader with a decent background knowledge of the social, political, and military history of the period and of the biography of the Duke of Wellington. It too often descends into the complicated morass of English parliamentary debates and proceedings, with lots of historical characters coming and going. (For some reason, there are pictures of Bathurst, Castlereagh, Jenkinson, and Canning, but not of the wives of Richard or Henry.) Still, there is much to recommend the book: the image of British society and its demands on outsiders comes into focus; the constant reliance on the correspondence of the brothers, especially Richard and Arthur, gives a vivid sense of the inner workings of their minds; the *ad hoc* and rather sordid nature of British rule in India also emerges clearly. So an informed, perseverant reading will be rewarded.

In the end, the book will appeal primarily to scholars or enthusiasts of the Duke of Wellington, the British in India and during the Napoleonic Wars, and English social history circa 1800. But the conscious design suggested in the title simply does not materialize. The book might better have been titled *Agents of Empire*.