



A British Officer on Active Service, 1799

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A BRITISH OFFICER ON ACTIVE SERVICE, 1799.

THE letters here published were written by Major John Finlay R.E. to his wife during his absence on active service in the Netherlands in 1799 and form part of the Finlay papers preserved with the library of his son George Finlay, the Philhellene and Historian, in the British School at Athens.

John Finlay was the eldest of the numerous family of James Finlay, merchant and manufacturer, of Argyle Street, Glasgow, and of Abigail Wharry his wife. He was born there in 1757 on September 18th, and entered Glasgow University as a student in 1770. Later he adopted the army as his profession and received his commission in the Royal Engineers on May 25th, 1790. He served in the West Indies, and among his papers are some sketches made there and dedicated to his patron the Duke of Richmond, then Master General of the Ordnance, as well as plans for attacking various places held by the enemy in America, including Buenos Ayres. It would be interesting to know if it was John Finlay's scheme that was ultimately put into execution so disastrously. He was devoted to science and was a Fellow of the Royal Society; his books and papers show that in particular he paid much attention to botany, and the fourth letter below shews that he did not neglect it even on active service. On June 24th, 1797 he married Helen Thomson, daughter of George Thomson, merchant of Glasgow, and to her these letters are addressed. Their eldest son James Charles was born in 1798 (died June 15th, 1805) and their second son George, Philhellene and Historian, on December 21st, 1799. Further details of John Finlay's military career are not obtainable, but he lost a leg in the service, for on January 20th, 1798, he wrote to the Board of Ordnance: 'I have the honour to report that I have so far

recovered since the amputation of my Knee, as to find myself able to undertake the discharge of my Duty as Inspector of the Royal Manufacture of Gunpowder.' He seems to have been in charge of the Royal Powder Factory at Faversham in Kent from about this date, except for his short absence on active service in 1799, till his death in Glasgow while visiting relations there on June 26th, 1802.

The British Expedition to the Netherlands in which Major Finlay took part is described in some detail by Sir Archibald Alison in his *History of Europe*.¹ Napoleon was then (1799) absent in Egypt and the states allied against him had planned a united offensive along the whole front from the Netherlands to Venetia. A strong Russian army under the veteran Suvarroff co-operated with the Austrians under the Archduke Charles. The French, defeated on the Rhine and driven from Italy, were hard put to it to maintain themselves in Switzerland, the invasion of which had made them very unpopular. The allied plan of campaign very nearly met with decisive success; and, but for the territorial ambitions of the Aulic Council at Vienna which impeded the operations in Italy, and the natural jealousies between the Russians and Austrians, the French armies might have been completely defeated while Napoleon was still in the east. The right wing of the allied attack was to be formed by a joint British and Russian expedition to the Netherlands, where it was hoped to bring about a national rising in favour of the Prince of Orange to overthrow the Batavian Republic established by the French. The Treaty between Great Britain and Russia signed on June 22nd, 1799 laid down that the latter should furnish seventeen thousand and the former twenty-five thousand men, that the whole British Navy should be employed in support of the operations and that forty-four thousand pounds per month should be paid from the British Exchequer for the expenses of the Russian force. Sir Ralph Abercrombie, who was at first in command of the expedition, won some success; the Helder and the Texel were taken, the Dutch fleet handed over and a French attempt to drive the invaders into the sea was defeated with heavy loss. After the Russians arrived between September 12th and 15th the Duke of York took chief command. His first attack on September 19th though it opened successfully, failed ultimately owing to a reverse to the Russians. The Duke however

¹ Ninth edition, vol. iv., pp. 284 ff. Cf. *History of the Campaign of 1799 in Holland* (London, 1801).

attacked again on October 2nd and gained a victory, taking Alkmaar. Another attempt some days later to advance and take Haarlem in order to secure the footing of the allies in the north of Holland failed after a hot and evenly contested action. Following on this the unfavourable weather, the reinforcements received by the enemy and the news of the ill-success of the main allied offensive in Switzerland compelled the Duke of York to fall back to his old line and allow the French to re-occupy Alkmaar. The position of the Duke's army now became precarious owing to the reasons already given, coupled with the ill-health of the troops and the shortage of supplies, and after some negotiations a suspension of hostilities was arranged to allow the British and Russians to evacuate Holland. This was carried out before December 1st on terms which confessed that this great expedition, the greatest so far sent out by Great Britain during the war, had after an initial success ended in miserable failure.

Besides the letters we also possess John Finlay's note book from August 5th, when he first joined the expedition, to August 25th, when he landed in Holland. His kit was as follows:—

'Books: Vauban, *Conduite des Siéges*; Deidier, *Parfait Ingénieur Français*; Muller on *Attack and Defence*; Hutton on *Mathematics*, 2 Vol.; *Homeri Odyssea Gr. et Lat.* (not taken); *Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, Juvenalis et Persius*; Fourth Volume of Journal.¹

¹ 1 Pair White Worsted Stockings, 3 Pair White Cotton Stockings, 2 Pair Blue Fleecy Stockings, 2 Pair New White Silk Stockings, 4 Pair Old White Silk Stockings, 3 Pair Brown Cotton Gloves, 3 Nets, 3 Night Caps, 18 Shirts, 18 Pocket Handkerchiefs, 2 Flannel Shirts, 3 Pair Flannel Drawers, 4 Towels, 4 Pillow Slips, 2 Pair of Sheets, 2 Uniform Vests, 6 White Vests, 1 Pair of Warm Gloves, 2 Black Stocks, 2 Pair Leather Breeches, 4 Small Strips of Flannel, 1 pair Blue Overalls, 1 Pair Blue Pantaloon, 2 Pair Uniform Breeches, 1 Pair Leather Gloves, 2 Uniform Coats, 2 Razors in a Case, Shaving Box, Case of Instruments, Flannel

¹ In this is his account of his journey in Holland in 1788 (May and June) referred to in the second letter below. The passage in his Journal begins:—'The Master General of the Ordnance, being desirous of information respecting the posture of defence in which the Maritime Towns of the United Provinces at present are, directed Lieut. Col. Moncrief and I to make a Tour among them and make a Report to Him upon the Subject. Rear-Admiral Sir Charles Douglas, who had extensive Connections in Holland and who meditated a visit to that Country, was requested to accompany us and give us as much assistance as he could with propriety do.'

Roller, Spare Screws, Army List.' His Journal gives a few details which help to fill out the story of the first letter :—

' *Monday, 5th August.*—Left Norton Court soon after Two o'Clock P.M. and arrived at Gravesend about Six in the Evening. Found the Officers of the Artillery and Engineers ordered on the Expedition at Dinner at the Falcon.

' *Tuesday, 6th August.*—In the Morning I went along with the Officers of Engineers on board the Butterworth of 390 Tons Capt. Patterson which was the Transport intended for us. Returned about 3 P.M. and called upon Lt. Col. Fisher. Dined at the Falcon at Gravesend and returned to the Butterworth about Eight in the Evening.

' *Wednesday, 7th August.*—Many of the Transports weighed & sailed soon after Five o'Clock this Morning. About half past Twelve the Butterworth weighed and dropt down with the Tide. . . .'

On Friday the 9th August his ship anchored off Deal and for the latter part of that day he records :—

'About half past Seven o'Clock in the Evening in consequence of a Letter from Major Hay I went ashore at Deal to the Three Kings. About Ten at Night I received Dispatches from Sir Ralph Abercrombie & Mr. Dundas¹ for Lord Duncan and about Eleven saw Admiral Mitchell who gave directions that a Cutter should convey me to Lord Duncan's fleet off the Texel.

' *Saturday, 10th August.*—Soon after Four o'Clock in the Morning I was called upon by Capt. Houghton of the Iris, but it was Seven o'Clock before I left Deal & got on board the Hound Revenue Cutter Capt. Hockings. A Pilot for the North Sea (Mr. Cunningham) was put on board with us. We stood towards the Iris where we received Mr. Lindsay one of her Lieutenants and then having got some of my baggage from the Butterworth we made sail towards the N.E. with a fresh Breeze. . . .

He delivered his despatches the next day, when he remarks :—

'A little before Four in the Afternoon having come in well with the Fleet Lt. Lindsay & I went on board the Flag Ship the Kent. After delivering my Dispatches and having a long private conference with Lord Duncan we left the Kent about a Quarter past Eight and having got on

¹ First Lord of the Admiralty, afterwards Viscount Melville.

board the Hound made sail from the Fleet. The Ratvizan a Russian Line of Battle Ship spoke us as we went off.'

He delivered the return despatches on the 14th August, under which date he says :—

'At Sunrise we saw 4 Sail in the S.E. quarter and presently afterwards got sight of the remainder of the Expedition Fleet amounting to upwards of 170 Sail. About 40 Sail containing the Staff Horses, the Cavalry &c. have been sent to alarm the Coast of Flanders.

'A little after Six o'Clock in the Morning I went on board the Iris and delivered the Dispatches I received from Lord Duncan to Sir Ralph Abercrombie. Before Mid-day I left the Iris and I went on board the Butterworth.'

The rest of this journal is of no interest as it merely gives particulars of wind and weather while lying off the Dutch coast waiting to land, and it breaks off on the 25th August, presumably the day he landed. The remainder of the book is blank save for a few rough pencil plans of redoubts and other fortifications.

The letters are as follows :—

I.

DEAL Friday Eleven at Night

I snatch a few moments to acquaint my dearest Helen that I landed here this Evening, and am to be sent to Sea with secret Dispatches from Sir Ralph Abercrombie & Admiral Mitchel at four tomorrow Morning. When and where I shall join the Fleet again is uncertain: probably not until after they have sailed from England. God help you my dearest Helen. Kiss our dear little Boy, and believe me

Your ever affectionate Husband

JOHN FINLAY.

I shall not fail to write to You the moment I have an opportunity.

(Docketed 10th August 99.)

II.

HUIS DUIN 29th August 1799.

My dearest Helen will guess from the Paper I write upon that my accommodations are none of the best. They are however such as I am

now very glad of, for it is the first moment I have had material, or time to write since I landed. I got on Shore a few minutes after I closed my Letter to You from the Iris and a very hard days work we had. The Action was not over till past one o'Clock, and tho' our exertions have by the favor of God been crowned with complete success we have to regret the loss of a great many valuable Men & Officers. I am much grieved to say that our poor Friend Col. Hay was among the number of the killed. He fell about Eleven o'Clock and no Man ever fell more deeply regretted. My heart bleeds for Mrs. Hay and his family. Even to our Corps his loss is irreparable. But I will say no more on such a melancholy subject.

I have been fatigued to a degree You can scarcely conceive, as I have not had a Horse except during part of yesterday that I got one from Sir Ralph Abercrombie, and the whole Country we have acted in is a deep sand in which one sinks to the ankle almost at every step. We have had no Beds but the Sand, and no Covering but our Great Coats and the Sky. My leg has not been off for the last 3 Nights. I am now sent to the Helder to fortify the old Position that Col. Moncrief & I examined in 1788, and as we have now complete possession of the Harbour, I trust we shall get our Horses & Camp Equipage landed today, and have less fatiguing Service. We have now about 14000 Men, and entertain no apprehensions from the Enemy, who have suffered so severely that I think it will be some time before they venture another Brush.

I expect soon to hear from General Morse, and if my service with the Army is not to prove usefull as well as honourable, I shall beg leave to make my Bow, and return to my sweet Helen and our dear Boy, for whose advantage alone I am labouring, and the hope of benefiting them makes every labour & danger seem light.

Kiss our dearest Boy a thousand times for me, remember me to all friends, and believe me, my dearest Helen,

Your ever affectionate Husband

JOHN FINLAY.

P.S.—I expect to get William with my Baggage ashore today which will add much to my comfort, as I have been there 3 days without a Servant or Cloaths.

III.

HELDER *5th September 1799*

MY DEAREST HELEN,

Whenever I have a moments leisure I shall employ it in writing to England. I am extremely anxious to hear from You, for altho' many Transports have arrived with Troops since we effected our Landing I have had no Letters from my love. I trust the next Vessel from England will bring me good Accounts of You and our dear Boy. I have my Hands as full of Business as I can manage, and indeed rather more than I can well get through. I am on Horseback every Morning before Six, and seldom get off till dark, when my Writing Business begins. My Mare will begin to look thin if this Bustle lasts long, which I hope it will not. I have a most motley Crew under my direction, English Soldiers & Sailors, Dutch Carpenters & Peasants, and the whole of the Dutch Deserters a Body that are daily increasing in numbers. The Works I am carrying on are charged to the Extraordinaries of the Army, so that I am Paymaster as well as Commanding Engineer, and shall have the trouble of becoming a Public Accountant, probably without making Money by it like Neighbour Montresor. Sir Ralph is very anxious I should soon put this Place in a respectable state of Defence, writes to me in a very friendly Stile, and gives me ample powers. Whether I shall get any permanent advantage by all this remains to be seen. If I am enabled by it to provide better for my dear Helen and our little Boy, I shall think my labours well repaid. If not I shall regret the sacrifice I have made of many Weeks Happiness by being far from those I love.

The Army are advanced about 16 Miles from us. The French & Dutch are in some Force near Alkmaar, and last night attempted to carry off one of our Pickets. They ran off however after a few shots were fired, & we had only one Man wounded. This Afternoon the 11th Light Dragoons went forward to the Army. They will be of great service and enable it to extend its Quarters. It has hitherto been much cramped from the superiority of the Enemy in Cavalry, which I trust will now be done away.

I suppose the Fleet will leave us in a few Days, & I trust will carry all the Prizes safe home with them. I suppose some Day we may be sharing 1^s/6^d a piece for Prize Money. The Dutch confess they had

5000 engaged on the 27th, 1000 of which were killed & wounded. They had 2000 more upon our Left in the Helder. I do not think we had above 8500 Men ashore that day, and the Enemy had as strong a Position as can well be imagined. They pretend (as the French always do) that their Generals were bribed by *de Engelsche Guinée*, and that by that means we beat them. I suppose our Army near Alkmaar will in a day or two try whether their Generals are always bribed. Tell me every thing about You and our little Darling. How does Rion do? Remember me to all friends and believe me, my dearest Helen,

Your ever affectionate Husband

JOHN FINLAY.

IV.

HELDER 22nd September 1799

A thousand thanks to You my dearest Helen for Your Letters of the 21st August, and 12th of September which I have had the pleasure to receive. The latter is just arrived. I suspect from what You mention in it that some intermediate Letter of Yours is yet upon its passage, for You speak of Your Father as having been at Faversham, without having told me of his arrival. I trust I shall receive it in a day or two,—I am infinitely obliged to my dearest Helen for Her wish to come out to me, and am sorry that I must desire her by no means to think of such a step. Not more than two Officers' Wives out of the whole Army have come out here, and You can scarce form an idea how uncomfortable their situation is. No, my dearest Helen, I will return to You the moment I can do so with credit, and without sacrificing the object that induced me to come with the Army; but I love *You* too well to wish You to come here. This place is yet too much the seat of War, and our hold of it too insecure, to be a safe or proper residence for Ladies. I am busy from Sunrise to Sunset in rendering it a safe Place of retreat for our Army in case it should fail in its attempt to penetrate into Holland; and I assure You my hopes of its success in that attempt are now much less sanguine than they were before the Duke of York's arrival. On the 19th it was repulsed with very great loss in an Attack upon the Enemy's Position. Sir Ralph Abercrombie with the Left of the Army succeeded completely & penetrated with little loss to the Town of Hoorn of which they took possession. The Russians who were upon our Right also succeeded at first & pushed

the Enemy as far as Berghen. They took the liberty however of spreading about a little for Plunder, suffered their Right Flank to be turned, gave way in confusion and lost 1700 Men killed & wounded, and about 1000 taken prisoners. The British Regiments that were brought up to support them also suffered severely, the town of Hoorn was obliged to be evacuated and the total Loss in our Army fell little short of 4000 Men. That of the Enemy was at least 6000, but they can recruit faster than we can.

24th Sept.

I have been prevented from finishing my Letter, by a long Report I had to make to the Duke of York upon the Defences of this Place. The Business of the 19th has much lessened our confidence in the Russians. They are eager to retrieve their character, but I must see a little better discipline amongst them before I think them likely to be very formidable to the old French Soldiers. Their unextinguishable love of Plunder will, I foresee, create to us many Enemies, and I own I should wish to see *half their* number of *such* Soldiers as we brought out with us, here in their room.—I have just now received Your Letters of the 3rd & 6th, with that from my friend Howorth, which I shall answer the first leisure moment I have.—I must again repeat my dearest Helen, that this is not a proper Place for You. A General Attack will I believe be made upon the Enemy's Lines very early tomorrow Morning. If it succeeds, we shall get Elbow room and be more quiet. If it does not, I should be little surprized to see the Army return to the Helder, and preparations made to re-imbark for England.—I am very glad Your Father has been at Davington. If it was not too late, I would advise You to go with him to Scotland, provided You thought that the journey would not hurt You and that our House could be safely left to itself. Without we are very successfull and get soon to Amsterdam and as far as Hellevoetsluis, I am more likely on my return to land at Yarmouth than at Deal, as I do not like a long Navigation at the close of the Year. In such case I could go on to Scotland and bring You back. I think the Ordnance could not well refuse me a Month or Six Weeks Leave of Absence.—I have received a Letter from General Morse, saying that as Lord Howe (late Sir William) did not chuse to decide upon the subject of my request to be removed from the Invalids, he had referred my Letter to Lord Cornwallis. I am daily in expectation of receiving Lord Cornwallis's determination.—I am

glad You are pleased with Your Neighbours Mr and Miss Tucker. He is a sensible looking Man, and I have often felt a wish to be acquainted with him.—How delighted I am to hear of our little Darling's welfare, and how much I wish to return to You and him. Kiss him a thousand times for me, and tell him Pap will come back as soon as he can.—I hope Mrs A. Thomson has paid You the visit She promised. Remember me kindly to Her, to Your Father, and to Your Uncle Andrew. Remember me also to Miss Ruck, and to Mr Wilks.—Amidst all the bustle & fatigues of War I have contrived to add one Plant to my Hortus Siccus. A very pretty species of *Pyrola* which I saw in a Marsh as I was visiting the Posts, and tho' alone, dismounted and picked it up. In the same Marsh also grew the *Parnassia palustris*, but as I had seen it before I did not take it home to dry.—I have two Engineers with me here, Mr Chapman, (who was wounded in the Leg on the 27th) and Mr. Gossett. They are both very fine Young Men. The former is yet unable to do Duty, but is recovering fast, and will I trust in a few days be able to give me some assistance.—I continue in perfect health, and have a most voracious Appetite, which is partly caused by much Exercise, and partly by the difficulty of procuring a good Dinner. Porter sells here at 2^s/ a Bottle, very indifferent Sugar at 3^s/ a Pound, and many other Articles in proportion. You may guess therefore that we do not fare very superbly in Eating & Drinking.—Adieu my dearest Helen, take care of yourself and our sweet Boy, and believe me to be,

Your ever affectionate Husband

JOHN FINLAY.

V.

HELDER, 5th October, 1799.

I have only time to tell my dearest Helen that the Army was successful in an Attack made upon the Enemy's Position of the 2nd Instant, and that the Town of Alkmaar was taken upon the 3rd. No Officer of Engineers was hurt, but in some Regiments the loss has been very considerable, particularly in the 92nd, in which (thro a most infamous piece of treachery of the French) Lord Huntly himself was wounded, and about 350 Officers & Men killed or wounded. I believe the remainder of the honest Highlanders took *ample* revenge.

I have received no official Answer relative to the Application I made

in consequence of General Morse's Letter, but I *know* that the Duke of York has written in the strongest terms in favor of my Promotion, and has desired Mr. Dundas to use his influence to effect my being immediately placed in the Acting Corps. Whether His Royal Highness will be able to get the better of the Ordnance in this point, as Sir Ralph Abercrombie did in the other, a little time will shew; but in the mean time I do not see so immediate a prospect of returning to my dearest Helen as when I last wrote. The Campaign cannot however last a great while longer, for the Weather is very bad, and it is wonderfull how the Army can get on at all thro' such execrable Roads as it has to pass along.

I continue in perfect health, and am a perfect stranger to indigestion or lying awake at night. I bear both cold and fatigue better than when I first arrived here. *Practice makes Perfect.* The House I am in, is about ten times worse than Norton Court; the wind & rain comes in almost every where. I hope soon to get to better quarters, for I have lately received a re-inforcement of 300 Russians & 500 of the Prince of Orange's Troops, to the Works here, and expect to compleat them in a very short time.

I saw little Captain Honeyman of the Dordrecht yesterday. He looks as wise and intelligent as ever, and his conversation seems equally brilliant.

Kiss our darling Boy a thousand times for me, and believe me to be,
my dearest Helen,

Your ever affectionate Husband,

JOHN FINLAY.

VI.

HELDER, 20th October, 1799.

I wrote to You a few days ago, my dearest Helen, by General Moore, and since that time, I have had the pleasure to receive Your Letter of the 7th. I have great hopes that I shall have the happiness of embracing my dearest Helen a few days after She receives this, for our Business here is fast drawing to a close. Colonel Twiss arrived two days ago. He went up for a few hours to the Army, but returned in the Evening, and some other Engineers soon followed him here. We are all busily employed in fortifying this Place, not I trust with any idea of retaining it; but to cover the re-imbarkation of the Army, and to enable us to come off with as little loss as possible.—I have had a long and very friendly Letter

from the Duke of Richmond a few days ago. There have been so many difficulties thrown in the way of my returning into the Acting Corps of Engineers, that His Grace and others of my Friends are now endeavouring to procure for me a Pension, and permanent Rank of a Field Officer in the Army. The Duke wants that of Lieut.-Colonel but I suppose I must be satisfied with that of Major, and indeed it is as much as I have a right to expect. I should wish it as a Mark of the Commander-in-Chief's Approbation of my Service, but a Pension of 10*s* or 15*s* a Day would be a Mark of it, not *less* to my satisfaction, as it would enable us to lay by something for our Darling Boy.

I have only time to beg to be remembered to all friends who enquire after me, and to assure my dearest Helen, that I am,

Her ever affectionate Husband,

JOHN FINLAY.

The letters in themselves call for little comment. The first is already sufficiently explained by the extracts from the Journal given above. There are two allusions to his wooden leg; in the second he mentions the discomfort of wearing it in bed and in the fourth we see his love of botany overcome the difficulties of dismounting and mounting alone. The second letter refers to Abercrombie's brilliant action fought soon after the force landed and the fourth to the Duke of York's unsuccessful attack of September 19th, the failure of which was mainly due to the Russians, and Finlay's comments on their lack of discipline and on the disappointment they had caused, after so much was expected from them, strike a curiously modern note. The fifth letter refers to the success of the advance of October 2nd, when Alkmaar was taken, and the sixth and last letter indicates the imminent re-embarkation of the expedition, not surprising after his cautious remarks in the previous letter about the probability that the campaign would not last much longer. There are several touches which sound quite modern; for instance the usual accusations of treachery on the part of the enemy and of bribery against a defeated general, the praise of the Highlanders and of the British infantry in general, the anxiety about his pay and pension (Finlay was a Scotsman!¹) and the desire of officers' wives to be with their husbands while on active service. There is one commonplace of modern war,

¹ And so too were Abercrombie and Dundas, on whose influence he relies.

however, which is entirely lacking, the Censorship. A Censor would surely have stopped the first letter saying he was being sent off with secret 'dispatches' and would have suppressed his fears about the prospects of the expedition under the Duke of York's command, the particulars of casualties and other military details, the shortage of supplies and the price of porter. But on the whole the letters show that while the circumstances of war and of civilisation have changed for better or for worse, human nature has remained the same.

A. J. B. WACE