



SIR JOHN MOORE

*From an engraving after a drawing by A. J. OLIVER, A.R.A.*



## CHAPTER IX

### THE WALCHEREN EXPEDITION

THE Walcheren expedition can hardly be described as a chapter in the history of the Peninsular War. Taken geographically, it has no relation to the Peninsula. But the expedition is a sordid and melancholy parenthesis in that history. It represents the supreme military effort put forth by England in 1809, and some brief account may be fittingly given of it at this stage.

It is the story of a failure; perhaps of the greatest failure on the English side in the long struggle with Napoleon. The Walcheren expedition itself had a wise inspiration. It was planned on a magnificent scale. But it was carried out with so much of loitering delay and of drivelling imbecility that it constitutes one of the monumental scandals of British administration. The British mind contrives to retain its self-respect by the process of diligently forgetting most of the uncomfortable facts in British history. So the story of the Walcheren expedition has grown faint, as though its characters had been written in some magical ink, which, at charity's whisper, faded

and became invisible. Yet, as an example of how a great expedition, which had every military virtue except that of competent leadership, may become the very jest of history, and as an illustration of the special vice, both of the British temperament and of the British political system, the story of the Walcheren expedition deserves to be preserved.

The Scheldt is, in a sense, the rival of the Thames. It is the great commercial artery of the Low Countries, as the Thames is of Southern England; and Antwerp, the key of the noble estuary of the Scheldt, is by situation fitted to be not only the rival of London, but the base of any great hostile expedition against the shores of England. Parma in 1588 gathered at Antwerp part of the great army which the Invincible Armada was to convoy to England, and which was to make Great Britain a Spanish province. The opening of the Scheldt by the French Directory in 1793 was the signal for the outbreak of the Twenty Years' War itself. And in 1809 Napoleon was reconstructing at Antwerp that vast plan of attack on England which Nelson had, for the moment, wrecked at Trafalgar. He constructed huge docks there capable of containing forty ships of the line. It was to be made an impregnable naval base, where new fleets, mightier than those which perished under Brueys and Villeneuve, might be equipped against Great Britain.

At St. Helena Napoleon loved to dwell on these

phantom fleets, which were to sail out of the Scheldt to overthrow the maritime power of England, and on the great fortified city, with its miles of docks, which was to be their base. And, as a matter of fact, these new fleets were beginning to take form. No less than thirty-five ships of the line were already built or in course of construction. It seemed probable that a powerful armament of fifty ships of the line would soon be in existence. "Antwerp," Napoleon said, "was to me a province in itself. It is one of the chief causes of my exile to St. Helena. If they had left Antwerp to me, I would have concluded peace at Chatillon. France without Antwerp and the Rhine frontier is nothing."

English statesmen were not likely to overlook the menace to England which Antwerp offered. Pitt himself in 1797 planned an expedition to the Scheldt, though, somehow, it was never executed. Castlereagh, who, with all his limitations as a statesman, had a clear vision of the vital point in the struggle betwixt Napoleon and England, conceived the plan of crushing this new seat of French naval power when he assumed office in 1807. In November 1808, Austria, humbled, plundered, and desperate, had resolved to try her fortunes once more in battle with Napoleon. The European rising of 1809 was about to break out. Austria communicated her plans to the British Cabinet, and it was agreed that there should be an English expedition against Antwerp. This would

serve a double office. It would be a powerful distraction in favour of Austria, and it would destroy the new fleet which threatened to become a menace to Great Britain.

As a mere effort in strategy, the Walcheren expedition had every possible merit. The French armies were scattered over half Europe. There were 300,000 in Spain, another 300,000 in Germany, 100,000 in Italy; and, at this moment, when Napoleon was waging an equal and desperate combat on the Rhine against Austria and in Spain against Wellington, 40,000 British troops were to land at the mouth of the Scheldt. Antwerp at that moment was almost defenceless; its batteries were unarmed, its garrison consisted of some 2000 invalids and coastguards, with such gendarmes and customs officers as could be hastily swept in from the district about it. The chance of destroying the city seemed easy and certain, and the British Cabinet planned its expedition on an imperial scale, a scale worthy of the Power which was the Mistress of the Sea.

A fleet mightier than that which triumphed at Trafalgar was to convoy to the swampy islets at the mouth of the Scheldt a British army stronger than that which won the crowning victory at Waterloo. The fleet, under Sir Richard Strachan, numbered more than a hundred ships of war. The military force consisted of 40,000 men of all arms, with two great battering trains; its divisional leaders — Graham,

Hope, Paget, Beresford, Eyre Coote—were experienced and gallant soldiers. It was carried to the scene of operations by more than 400 transports. England, in a word, never before or since despatched from her shores a more powerful and gallant expedition.

The spectacle when the fleet at last got under weigh, on July 28, 1809, was such as the sea has not often witnessed. The fleet, with its black hulls, its bellying sails, its forest of masts, seemed to hide the very sea. "The whole space from the North to the South Foreland," wrote an officer who looked back on the spectacle from one of the leading ships, "was one continued spread of canvas that concealed the sea and all the lower part of the land, and amongst this mass nothing appeared in any defined shape except the flashing of the guns." And this mighty expedition, it must be remembered, was striking at a point only a hundred miles distant from the shores of England. With a commander like Wellington, or Moore, or Abercromby, that expedition might well have antedated Waterloo by six years. Despatched at the right moment, landed at the right point, and led with energy and skill, the troops which perished at Walcheren might have marched on Paris itself. They certainly would have brought Napoleon back from the Rhine in alarmed haste, and saved the surrender of Vienna, the slaughter of Aspern, and the mighty overthrow of Wagram.

As a melancholy fact, this stupendous expedition, which whitened the sea with its sails as it put out from the Downs on July 28, had abandoned its task and was a confessed failure within six weeks of its start, and by the end of September its scanty and fever-poisoned survivors were creeping back to England, leaving the mud-flats at the mouth of the Scheldt sown with British graves.

The expedition, for one thing, was pre-doomed to failure by the imbecile delays which ran, or rather loitered, through all its stages. It had been proposed two years earlier; the honour of England was pledged to it in November 1808. It was undertaken to influence the fighting on the Rhine. But the mere almanac constitutes an unanswerable indictment of British administration. The expedition, it will be seen, sailed on July 28, and at that time the fighting on the Rhine was ended and the fate of Austria sealed. The British fleet, as though by a stroke of ironic humour, sailed from the Downs on the day after the news of the armistice of Zmarm reached England. The British regiments intended to take part in the expedition were practising the goose-step in their barracks when Napoleon was driving the Austrians across the Danube, or entering Vienna in triumph; and the goose-step was still being practised when the Archduke Charles so nearly overthrew Napoleon in the stupendous fight at Aspern. "We were killing cockchafers in the Deal barrack-yard,"



wrote an officer who took part in the Walcheren expedition, "when Napoleon was overthrowing the Austrians at Wagram." When the campaign was ended, Austria destroyed, and the terms of peace practically settled, then the British expedition, intended to influence these events, at last hoisted its leisurely anchors in the Downs. It was about to heroically step on to the arena when all the other combatants had left it!

It needs something more than "the invincible loitering habit," to which, in public affairs at least, the British temper so easily lends itself, to explain this delay; and the explanation is clear. British public opinion at that moment was occupied with a big military scandal. It was exploring the performances of the remarkable Duke of York, who was commander-in-chief, and who had transferred many of his official duties to his still more remarkable mistress, Mrs. Clarke, and, as a consequence, had to surrender his great post. A British community, grasping its nose and occupied in exploring a scandal so malodorous, and in dismissing its own commander-in-chief, had no energy to expend in pushing forward a great military and naval expedition. This was left to the politicians. And the politicians at that moment, as it happened, were absorbed in a scandal, or rather a plot of their own—the famous plot for the dismissal of Castlereagh! Canning, with a large section of the Cabinet, was busy with

a conspiracy against the unfortunate Minister at War, and at the very moment when Castlereagh was carrying on one campaign in Spain and planning another on the Scheldt, his dismissal had been demanded from the king and conceded by him; and all this in profound secrecy! Castlereagh himself was thus, in a political sense, officially sentenced to be hanged by his own colleagues, and knew nothing, as yet, of the circumstance! The plot in the Cabinet, and the public scandal which drove the British commander-in-chief from his office, left the Walcheren expedition drifting like a derelict ship on stagnant waters where no tide stirred and no wind blew.

To this belated expedition was given a commander who was gifted, in a quite overwhelming degree, with all the evil qualities necessary to ensure defeat. Lord Chatham was the son of the greatest War Minister and the brother of the greatest statesman England has ever known; and it is an odd proof of the partiality with which Nature distributes—or withholds—her gifts, that the son of such a father, and the brother of such a statesman, should have possessed the most addleheaded head that ever wore a cocked hat. Without his cocked hat—in a purely civilian capacity, that is—Lord Chatham is understood to have had some gleams of common-sense. He had his merits in the Cabinet. But he was, without being a coward or a traitor, perhaps the

worst commander that ever led an expedition. The British army has too often been described with justice as "an army of lions led by an ass." Chatham had many asinine qualities, but the most conspicuous of these was his capacity for dawdling on a quite stupendous scale. Popular opinion described him as "the laziest man in the British army." He certainly had a fine natural genius for loitering, and had spent a long life in cultivating that gift. He was capable of being in earnest, the wits said, on only two subjects—his own health, and the flavour of his turtle-soup.

Once in those sad days, when the British army was perishing at Walcheren, the troops were roused to excitement by the spectacle of Lord Chatham visible on horseback a little after eleven o'clock in the morning. That the general made his appearance at so early an hour showed great events were about to happen. Having ridden to the east end of the island, however, and stared solemnly at the distant spire of Antwerp Cathedral, his lordship turned back to his turtle-soup, satisfied he had fulfilled the whole duty of a British soldier. Lord Chatham lives in British recollection principally by means of the well-known stanza into which the performances of the Walcheren expedition are condensed:—

"The Earl of Chatham, with his sword half-drawn,  
Stood waiting for Sir Richard Strachan.  
Sir Richard, longing to be at 'em,  
Stood waiting for the Earl of Chatham."

These lines, however, are unfair to Sir Richard Strachan. He was a gallant and energetic sailor, and, under him, the fleet did its part with skill and vigour. It was quite capable, indeed, of capturing Antwerp on its own account, if it had not been encumbered with Lord Chatham and his 40,000 soldiers. Lord Chatham supplied all the laziness of the business. He had enough of that quality, indeed, to have equipped a community of lotos-eaters. Laziness naturally breeds other intellectual vices, the chief amongst which is ignorance; and, as the inquiry held after the failure of the expedition proved, Lord Chatham set out to besiege Antwerp, so to speak, with his hands in his pockets, and without taking the trouble to ascertain whether Antwerp was fortified or not. George III. specially chose Lord Chatham to command this great expedition, a circumstance which illustrates that red-faced monarch's faculty for estimating men.

Side by side with the yawning figure of Lord Chatham, as one of the controlling spirits of the Walcheren expedition, is Sir Home Popham, a restless genius, who had almost every other gift but that of common-sense. Probably no man in that generation got himself talked about so much, and did so little, as Sir Home Popham. The Walcheren expedition, in a word, was an enterprise commanded by a drone, who was advised by a charlatan.

The British War Office—wisely uncertain of its own

wisdom—solemnly took a plebiscite of all its generals as to the practicability of the enterprise, and being thus fortified by what may be called a majority vote of military experts, the expedition at last set sail. But every possible blunder marked its history from the very outset. English newspapers, after their manner, published all its details, so that its purpose and strength were as well known in Paris as at the British Horse Guards. The army was to land in what was well known to be a mere fever-bed; yet no doctors were consulted, no sanitary precautions taken, no proper medicines sent. Amongst the 600 vessels which constituted the expedition, there was only one belated and unrecognised hospital-ship. Regiments at Deal were marched to Ramsgate to be embarked, while regiments at Ramsgate had to plod to Deal for the same purpose. The shortest route to Antwerp is that by Blankenburg. From that port a paved road led straight to Antwerp, and the British army might have reached its destination within three days. Instead, Walcheren and North and South Beveland—the cluster of islands which plug, so to speak, the estuary of the Scheldt—were chosen; and on the evening of the 29th and the morning of the 30th, the sea off these islands was white with the sails of the great British fleet.

Chatham's instructions were explicit. His business was to capture Antwerp with the least possible delay, to destroy its docks and seize the fleet lying there.

Everything else was secondary to this purpose. He might occupy or blockade Flushing on the southern edge of Walcheren island, but at the same moment he must push on to Antwerp. The expedition, he was told, must be considered "merely as a *coup de main*" directed at Antwerp. But a *coup de main* to be struck by a loitering drone, with hands in pocket, was an absurdity. It was certain to be delivered at the wrong point, or delivered too late and too feebly; and this is exactly what happened. Lord Chatham seemed to lack energy enough to read his orders, or intelligence to comprehend them.

He nearly succeeded, it is true, in spite of himself. One division of the army, under Lord Huntly, was to land at Cadsand, on the southern shore of the estuary of the Scheldt. Had the landing been effected, the troops could have turned all the batteries on the southern bank of the Scheldt and marched straight on Antwerp. Grave and owl-eyed history records that the commander of his division saw—or imagined he saw—through the haze, "a considerable force on the beach, and did not venture to hazard a landing." Now Huntly had 7000 men in his transports, and a British general in command of such a force, who did not "venture to hazard a landing" because he saw through a fog some hostile troops, only a fourth in number of his own, on the beach, would be a very remarkable officer indeed. The British general, to do him justice, like the

British private, is usually cheerfully willing, when he sees his foe, to fight at the earliest moment possible and at any odds.

An officer in one of Huntly's regiments, who tells in the *United Service Magazine* for 1838 the story of the expedition, gives the true explanation of why the British troops did not land at Cadsand. "The soldiers," he says, "were all on deck, and everything was ready for shore-going, when it was discovered there were no boats!" He discusses the interesting question "Why such a needful appendage to the landing of troops should have been overlooked" by everybody. Why, indeed! But the fact was clear. The soldiers could not swim ashore; so while a gale rose, the regiments carried by this division of the fleet had to lie at anchor, and stare ruefully at the beach on which they ought to have landed. Amongst the soldiers themselves the cheerful plan was suggested of running the transports ashore, and landing the men at low water, if only by the process of shooting them over the side like coals; a plan which did not recommend itself to the more practical intelligence of the seamen. The night soon darkened; the tempest blew, and this great section of the fleet lay tossing at its anchors with sea-sick regiments on board unable to land. Thus the first and easiest path to success was missed, and missed by a blunder worthy only of the philosophers of Laputa.

Chatham's left wing, under Sir Eyre Coote, was duly landed on the north side of Walcheren island. On July 30, Hope with his division landed on South Beveland, and might easily have seized the fort at Batz, which commands the junction of the two estuaries of the Scheldt. In that case the French ships under Admiral Missiessy—which at that moment were off Flushing—would have been cut off. But the English did not seize that place until the French admiral had safely carried his ships past it. Even then, had the British forces moved by South Beveland, they might have reached Antwerp almost without resistance. The city, with its fleet and arsenal, lay at their mercy, being still practically without defence.

But the loitering and bemuddled Chatham, too lazy to remember even his instructions, chose to expend his army on a perfectly irrelevant detail—the capture of Flushing. He was instructed in express terms, if he did invest Flushing, to use only part of his force in that business, and to advance simultaneously on Antwerp with his main body. But this involved too great an expense of energy for Lord Chatham, or too serious a peril to his health and his turtle-soup, and the siege of Flushing was undertaken in solemn form. Its commander, General Monnet, was instructed by Napoleon to hold the place to the last extremity, and in this way to detain the English in Walcheren till fever broke out in



their ranks, and to give the French time to arm Antwerp.

Monnet played his part gallantly; but Chatham's troops, when once they were allowed to begin the plain business of fighting, were not to be denied. Ground was broken before Flushing on August 5; on the 11th the English frigates ran past its batteries; on the 12th Sir Richard Strachan took in ten of his big ships, and on the 13th sixty guns from the land batteries, and ten line-of-battle ships from the sea front, were pouring their fire on the doomed town. On the 16th, Monnet surrendered with a garrison of nearly 6000, but not till he had succeeded in detaining Chatham fourteen days in the swamps around Flushing.

But Chatham did more even than Monnet to assist Napoleon's plans. The Emperor was gathering considerable armies for the defence of Antwerp, and was labelling them with great names—"The Army of Antwerp," "The Army of the Tête de Flandres," "The Army of Reserve"—but, on the whole, these were phantom hosts, mere skeletons of regiments, or hasty collections of gendarmes and custom-house officers. One curious letter reveals Napoleon's own estimate of these troops. "Do not attempt," he wrote, "to come to blows with the English. Your National Guards, your conscripts, organised in provisional demi-brigades, huddled pell-mell into Antwerp for the most part without officers,

with an artillery half-formed . . . you will infallibly be beaten! We must oppose to the English nothing but the fever, which will soon devour them all. In a month the English will be obliged to take to their ships." This is exactly what happened, and Chatham enabled Napoleon to carry out his programme by loitering with his divisions in the fever-breeding swamps of Walcheren, instead of pushing resolutely on to Antwerp. While that city was in a flame of agitated activity preparing for a siege, 20,000 good British troops were almost within sight of its steeples, in South Beveland; but they did nothing, and were suffered to do nothing.

Flushing surrendered on August 16, and Chatham commenced to saunter on towards Antwerp, at a pace regulated with due regard to his own turtle-soup and his health. In ten days his headquarters were at Batz, a distance of thirty miles; the average rate of advance being thus three miles a day. He might have reached Antwerp itself in five days, and found himself in its front with a stronger British army than that which fought at Vittoria or at Waterloo. He only reached Batz in ten days. Hope might have seized Batz on August 1; Chatham loitered into it on August 26, and having reached it, he concluded to go no farther.

Bernadotte was by this time in his front with 30,000 men; Antwerp was garrisoned; the French squadron was safe on its farther side. Fever was breaking out

in his rear, 3000 men were already in his hospitals, and Chatham called a leisurely council of war. His generals agreed with him that nothing more was to be done, and Chatham sauntered back to Walcheren. He had wasted fourteen days in taking Flushing, fourteen days more in doing nothing in particular; and on August 29 he reported to the British Cabinet that the expedition must be abandoned. He himself sailed early in September, with the Guards and one or two other regiments, for a land where nobody need be in a hurry, and where turtle-soup could be enjoyed in peace.

The main body of his army, now perishing by hundreds daily, remained. It was for some time intended to at least hold Walcheren, and thus, so to speak, "plug" the Scheldt; but the fever had ample energy, if Lord Chatham had none. The pest season had set in. The troops were supplied with bad water and no medicines, or almost none. Walcheren is one great fever-bed. Much of its soil and that of South Beveland was once "drowned land," and had been laboriously recovered from the sea. The process of recovery consists in building a series of embanked squares, like the cells of a honeycomb, and thus gaining acre by acre on the Scheldt. These embanked squares, while in progress of construction, are mere mud-pans, full of vegetable refuse, where malaria is generated in rankest abundance. In such an atmosphere the unfortunate British troops perished by whole regiments. By the middle of September,

11,000 British troops were fever-stricken. The sick were sent to England with more or less of clumsy despatch. They were carried to the beach, and lay there—whole acres of fever-smitten patients—under the heat of the day and the dews of the night, till they could be embarked, dying in scores while they waited.

The writer of the history of the expedition in the *United Service Magazine* describes how he went one morning to a parade of the regiment. "There was a row of sergeants, some of the band, a group of officers, but not one firelock." The entire regiment was prostrate with fever; and this was the case with many regiments. The regiment to which the officer referred to belonged had only one surgeon; but it was impossible, that functionary decided, to visit all the sick—they must visit him! So he established himself in a sort of watch-box on the quay, and the poor fever-wasted wretches had to crawl to him to get medicine. In a regiment drawn up for parade it was common to see whole companies shaking with ague from head to heel. Strong men were reduced in a few hours to the helplessness of infants. 16,000 men were in hospital at once; 7000 men died; and, according to one computation, out of the entire expedition of 40,000, no less than 35,000 were at one time or another in hospital. An attempt was made to keep a force of 15,000 men in Walcheren itself. "Before six weeks are over," wrote Napoleon, "of

these 15,000 not 1500 will be left;" and that grim forecast seemed likely to be fulfilled. It would have been fulfilled had not the British authorities at last recalled to England the wretched survivors of the mightiest and most stupidly mismanaged expedition that ever left the English shores.

Some 7000 British graves were dug on the muddy islets at the entrance to the Scheldt, and out of those who returned to England not less than 14,000 troops were wrecked in health for the remainder of their lives. When the regiments landed at Dover, and crept on the road towards Hythe, the spectacle of the staggering far-stretching procession of invalids, says "Rifleman Harris," "bore a strong resemblance to the Corunna retreat."

English history records no other military failure quite so swift and so complete. In less than eight weeks a proud and gallant army of 40,000 men was practically blotted out of existence. And the secret of the failure is clear. The expedition was despatched too late; it was under imbecile leadership; it was put in quarrel with Nature itself. An army was encamped in a pest-house, and left to perish there, almost without medicines and medical care. And this within 100 miles of English shores!

The Walcheren expedition had some grave political results. It brought the conspiracy against Castlereagh to a climax, and from that arose the historic duel betwixt Castlereagh and Canning, which drove them

both for a while from public life. But the expedition itself was finely conceived; in scale and strength it left nothing to be desired. And its history deserves to be remembered as proving how useless is the wealth of a great State, and the courage of gallant soldiers, when administered by drivelling imbecility.

It is pleasant to turn from the swamps of Walcheren, and the spectacle of an army perishing for simple lack of leadership, to the great field of the Peninsula, on which Wellington was now to begin those immortal campaigns which are the glory of English military history.

## CHAPTER X

### THE NEW CAMPAIGN IN THE PENINSULA

THERE was a touch of mystery in Napoleon's sudden abandonment at Astorga of the pursuit of Moore's army. The usual reason assigned is that he had received news Austria was preparing for war, and that a conspiracy was fermenting in Paris. But, as a matter of fact, Napoleon lingered ten days at Valladolid, after turning his back on Moore, before he finally started for France; and war with Austria did not break out till April 6.

Wellington always declared that Napoleon's surrender of the pursuit of the British army puzzled him. He judged Napoleon with hard and unfriendly common-sense. Discussing the matter with Croker long afterwards he said: "Was he disinclined *de se froter* against Moore? Did he wish that Soult should try what stuff our people were made of before he risked his own great reputation against us? Or did he despair of driving us out of Corunna? And was the bad news from Vienna (he generally kept bad news a profound secret) now invented or promulgated to excuse his evident reluctance to follow