

Sources in Local History
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THE LETTERS OF GAVIN HILSON,
ARMY MEDICAL OFFICER,
1808-1814

Transcribed by

Tim C. D'A. Anderson

with an introduction by

Kenneth Veitch



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University of Edinburgh
21 Buccleuch Place
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Scotland

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Front cover image:

Charles Bell, *The Wounded following the Battle of Corunna: Gunshot Fracture of Shaft of Humerus* (1809). Courtesy of The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

Sources in Local History
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PREFACE

As a child, I was brought up with stories of the doctors, military men and explorers who were our ancestors from the borders of Scotland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hanging on the wall of our home were several basket-hilted swords, one of which had part of its basket missing. A framed letter hanging below this sword explained how Surgeon Andrew Anderson had to have the basket cut away to free his hand after it had been crushed by a blow from a French cuirassier. Andrew had used his sword to parry the blow whilst tending to a wounded soldier.

Andrew Anderson was from Selkirk. His family and that of Mungo Park the explorer were intertwined: Mungo married Alison Anderson, John Anderson married Mungo's sister, and Alexander Anderson went with Mungo to Africa on his second expedition, where they both died. In researching both families, I discovered that many of their letters from that time had survived in family collections and in archives. While those written by Mungo Park had largely been transcribed and published, the more extensive correspondence of the Andersons had not. So, about ten years ago, I set about transcribing it. The vast majority of the letters were written by Andrew Anderson and concerned his medical training, his life as a surgeon during the Peninsular War, and his time in Jamaica. There were gaps in the correspondence, however, and I felt there must be other letters held in archives or by cousins – Anderson descendants were by now spread across Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States of America, as well as the United Kingdom. After a few years, I had traced almost all of my distant cousins, but no further Anderson letters were uncovered. I spent five years transcribing, researching and arranging the letters in my possession with the intention of making them available for future researchers. The fruits of this endeavour can be found in, *A Doctor at War. The Correspondence of the Anderson Family from Selkirk: Soldiers, Surgeons, and Explorers from 1793 to 1820, with a focus on Mungo Park's last expedition to Africa.*

In 2020, I was contacted by a cousin (Alison Browne) who had read the Anderson/Park letters and wanted to let me know that she had family documents that linked to my own. Amongst them was a transcript of the notes appended to an Anderson family Bible, which included a personal history of Andrew Anderson's time as a surgeon in the military. There was also a bundle of letters written by one of Alison's ancestors, Gavin Hilson.

The first of these letters was written in 1808, by which time Gavin was working as a junior Hospital Mate in an army General Hospital and preparing to join an expedition to the Baltic. Most of the letters, however, were written

between 1809 and 1814, when he was serving as a surgeon in the Peninsular War, first with the 24th Regiment of Foot and then with the 4th Dragoon Guards. These later letters provide not only a valuable insight into what life was like for an army doctor on campaign, but also vivid first-hand accounts of some of the war's major battles, including Badajoz and Talavera. In these accounts, Hilson mentions the number of troops in the field, their commanders, and the strategy deployed, showing that he had a detailed understanding of the bigger picture. While historians have many sources available to them to research what happened when and how in the Peninsular War, reading these detailed accounts can transport you to the very battlefields from where the letters were written. It was a joy to transcribe them and to feel so close a personal connection through the words on the paper with the man who had dipped his pen to preserve his experiences of such an important time in our history.

The sword with its damaged hilt still hangs at home but now, with the help of these letters, when I look at it and close my eyes, I am able to picture the scene. The cannon balls and shot landing nearby, the smoke and noise from the guns, and the French cuirassiers charging through the ranks as a surgeon battles to give succour to the wounded.

Tim C. D'A. Anderson
January 2025

EDITING

The letters have been presented in a standardised format. Headers provide the name of the recipient and a number by which each letter can be identified. The salutations and valedictions are to a large extent regularised in respect of position and spacing, while the date has been made to conform to a single pattern, e.g. '28 May 1811'.

The original spelling has been retained. For misspelled or archaic words that might be confused with another word, the correct form is given in [*i.e.*]. Sic has been used to indicate irregular spellings or constructions that might otherwise be taken for transcribal or typographical errors.

Hilson occasionally truncated words, with the terminal letter being given in superscript. Examples include 'Reg^t' (Regiment), 'Hosp^l' (Hospital) and 'Feb^y' (February). These and other abbreviations have been silently expanded, except for those that remain in common usage.

The original punctuation has been retained with the exception of the dash that Hilson occasionally added after a full stop. It should be noted that he sometimes omitted the apostrophe from possessive nouns and from the contraction 'don't'.

Some of the letters are in a poor condition. [*page damaged*] indicates where damage to the page has either obliterated the text or made it impossible to read. Where the damage is extensive, this insertion has been replaced with [...] so that the surviving text can be more easily read. See, for example, Letter 16.

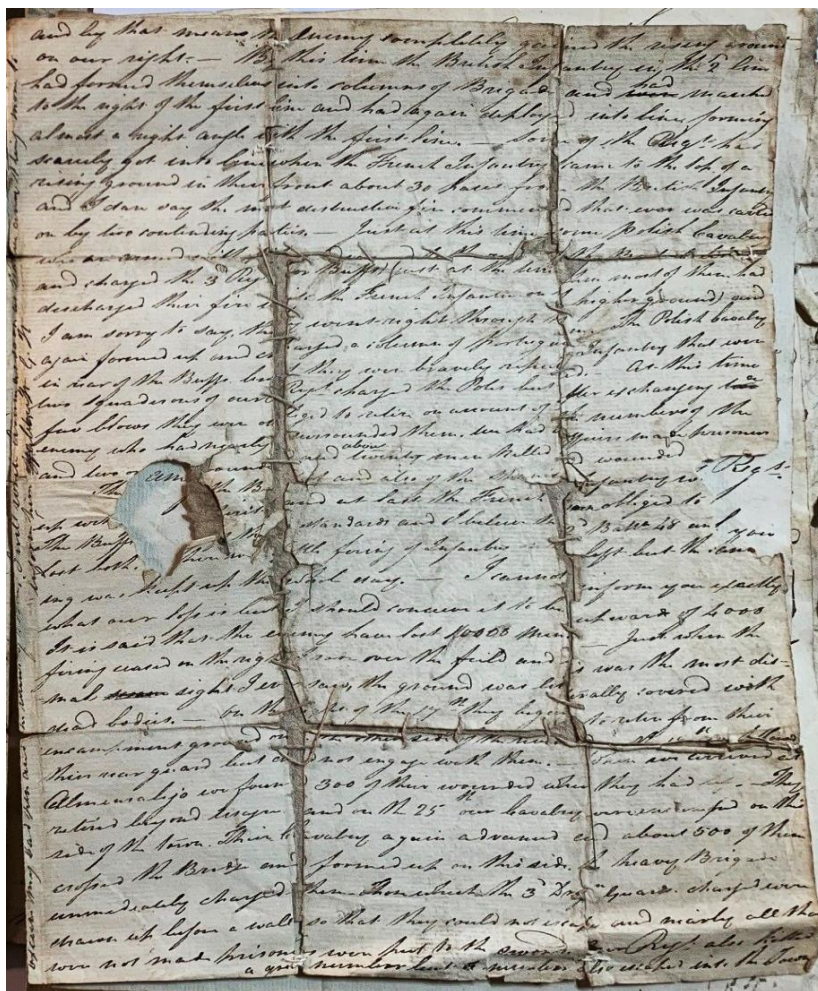
FACSIMILES



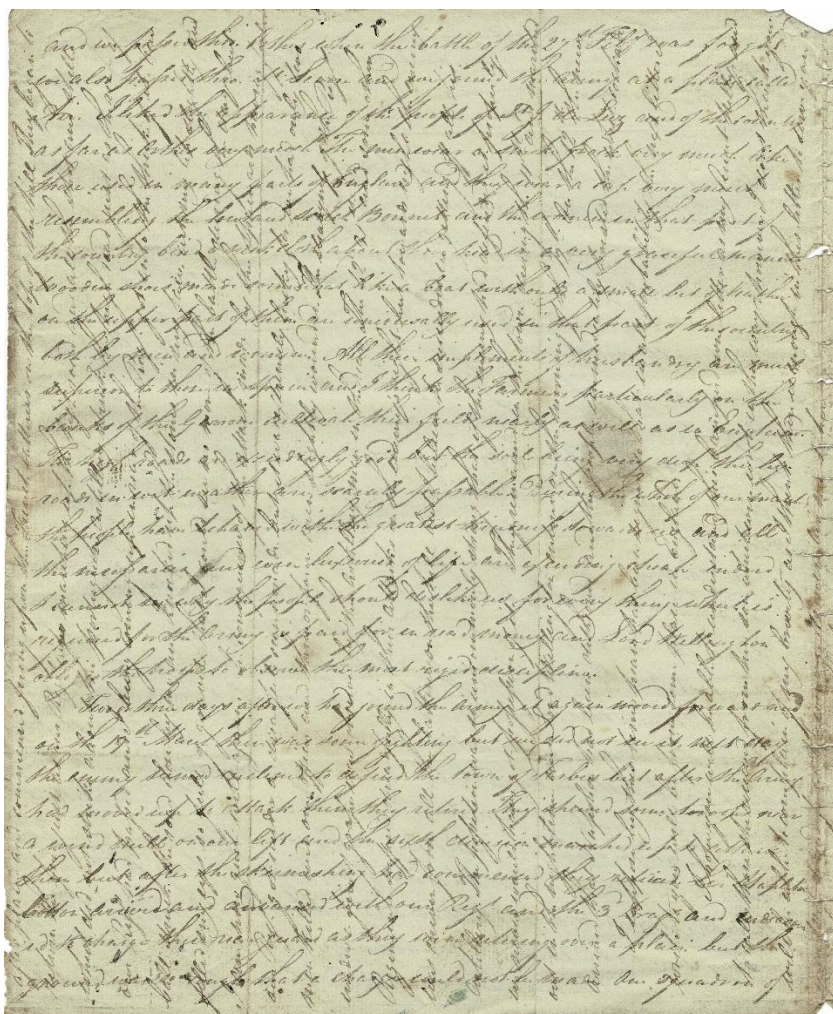
Facsimile 1. A detail from the cover sheet of the letter that Hilson wrote on 18 May 1808 while on board a hospital ship off the coast of Sweden. The postal marking at the top of the sheet simply reads 'foreign'. Note also the postage, which the postal official has written across the address. The two shillings and five pence would have been paid by the recipient, not the sender.
(Courtesy of Tim C. D'A. Anderson)

They were rather low spirits. In four or five days Marshall's ship
 returned and marched towards Salamanca and the day following
 Marshal Soult returned and remained in the town.
 Marshal's officers appeared to be very vulgar fellows
 indeed the only things which had taken from any even taken
 by the officers of this corps, but Marshal Soult's troops being
 better acquainted with the English behaved quite differently
 the Marshal himself at the whole behaved exceedingly well he
 allowed the sick plenty of bread and beer and as soon as wine
 could be got that was sent out to them.
 When the three corps marched towards the capital they left me
 I was with us so every man that was at all able to move set
 out for Portugal etc. In particular was left with 30 sick
 without a single soul even to bring them a bucket of water
 so that out of humanity was obliged to rot in the bed
 books and at last gave up the ghost but this was done
 it was able for from the great exertions caught
 in bed for upwards of twenty days
 on the first of Oct. Marshal Soult marched towards Salamanca
 and evacuated Plasencia completely so as soon as I was able
 to march set out for this place which I think is about
 250 miles distant from Plasencia. I met with very little
 hospitality indeed little around on the frontiers
 I met with good treatment all the way down I think it is a
 pity that a single British soldier should be lost upon such
 a favorable set of people as the Spaniards.
 I am not able to write any thing about home as I do not know
 in what state you are. I am never receiving any letters
 from my complements to all friends
 I am
 Yours Affectionately
 G. Hilson

Facsimile 2. The closing page of the letter that Hilson wrote to his brother Adam on 11 November 1809. His neat and regular handwriting, which was well suited to letter writing, indicates a good standard of education. The large tear on the left-hand side of the page was probably made when the seal was removed.
 (Courtesy of Tim C. D'A. Anderson)



Facsimile 3. A page of the letter in which Hilson provided his brother James with an account of the battle of Albuera. Such newsworthy letters were eagerly received, and they would have been re-read to friends and family and even circulated locally. This explains the extremely worn state of this page, which has been stitched back together after splitting along the folds. The large holes on the left- and right-hand sides, however, would have been made when the seal was removed. (Courtesy of Tim C. D'A. Anderson)



Facsimile 4. A cross-written page from the letter that Hilson wrote to his brother James on 16 April 1814. Postage on a letter was determined not just by distance, but also by the number of sheets of paper it contained, so cross-writing saved both paper and money.
(Courtesy of Tim C. D'A. Anderson)



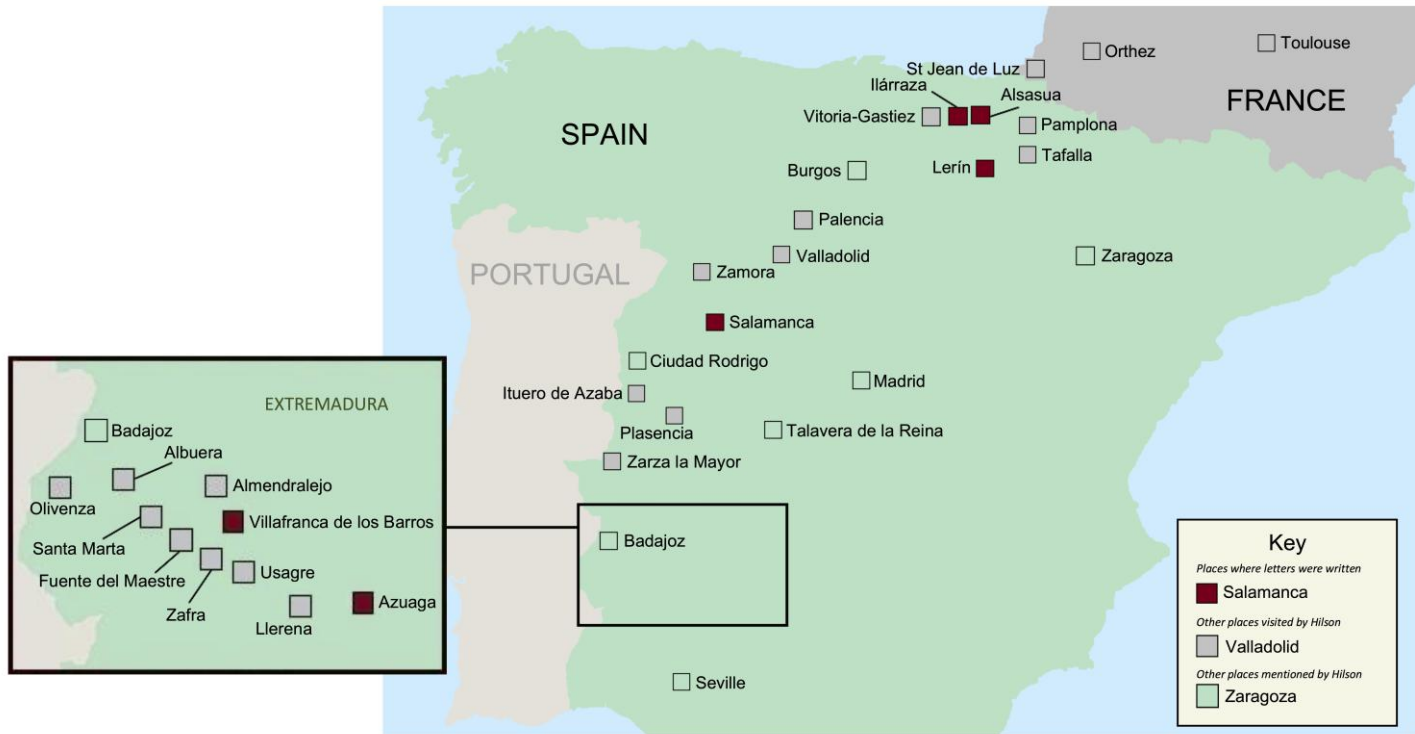
Facsimile 5. The cover sheet of the letter that Hilson wrote to his brother James on 16 April 1814. A part of the postal marking for Portsmouth, where letters from the Peninsula were first delivered, is visible above 'Hilson'.

(Courtesy of Tim C. D'A. Anderson)

MAPS



Map 1. Mainland Portugal depicting some of the places mentioned in the letters.



Map 2. Parts of Spain and France showing some of the places mentioned in the letters.

INTRODUCTION

Before the letters

Little is known about the early life of Gavin Hilson. His baptism was recorded in the parish register of St Boswells, Roxburghshire, under the date 13 December 1788. William Hilson of Crossflatt (a farm in the parish) was named as his father. The name of his mother was not given.¹ The present collection of letters shows that William and his wife had at least two other sons, Adam and James, and that the family had moved to Hassendean in the parish of Minto, Roxburghshire, before May 1808. It also reveals that William died in 1809 and that James went on to become a joiner in Carlisle. Adam also became a joiner, but in Hassendean.²

A summary of Hilson's life published in the late nineteenth century states that he attended the 'parish school, where he shewed a great desire to acquire information' and was later 'sent to Edinburgh, and finished his education at the university'.³ It makes no mention of how he spent the intervening years, but it can be presumed that on leaving school, probably at the age of thirteen years or thereabouts, he was apprenticed to an established doctor or apothecary. No record of such an apprenticeship survives, so where it was carried out is unknown.⁴ It is possible, however, that his master was the 'Dr Graham' mentioned in Letters 2 and 4, and that this man was Walter Graham, a surgeon in Hawick who is known to have accepted local boys as apprentices.⁵ How much Hilson learnt would have depended not simply on his own diligence, but more particularly on how much his master was willing to share his knowledge and include him in his daily activities. Ideally, Hilson would have emerged from an apprenticeship proficient not only in a range of basic skills, such as compounding medicines, dressing wounds, and bookkeeping, but also in the rudiments of diagnosis, prescribing and minor surgery.

Hilson matriculated at Edinburgh University in 1806, aged seventeen. The academic year for medical students began in the first week of November and was divided into two sessions. The winter term ran until the first week of April; the summer one ran from the beginning of May to the end of July. In common with most other medical students, it was not his intention to take a degree. Rather, he was there simply to gain sufficient knowledge to pursue a particular career; and as with other 'occasional auditors',⁶ he would have devised his own programme of study. In doing so, he might have consulted Johnson's *Guide for Gentlemen Studying Medicine at the University of Edinburgh*, which provided students with ready-made study programmes. For 'those who wish to perfect themselves in the Knowledge of the Practice of Medicine and of Surgery, after having served an Apprenticeship to a Surgeon or Apothecary', it

recommended the following programme: first year – anatomy, infirmary, lectures on surgical cases, midwifery, and the practice of medicine; second year – anatomy, infirmary, clinical lectures, and the practice of medicine.⁷ The absence of *materia medica* (pharmacy) from the programme is surprising, but it was perhaps assumed by Johnson that anyone who had served an apprenticeship would have been well versed in the subject already. It also omitted chemistry, which was in fact one of the most popular courses offered by the university.

Johnson's *Guide* was published before John Thomson was appointed to the Regius Chair of Military Surgery in the university in 1806.⁸ His course, which provided the only formal teaching of military medicine and surgery anywhere in the United Kingdom, would have been on the syllabus of every student seriously considering a career in the Army Medical Department (AMD). His lectures covered, among other things, head injuries, fractures, gunshot wounds, and amputation. He gave a further course of lectures at the College of Surgeons. They addressed topics such as how to stop haemorrhages and how to prevent gangrene and proved popular both with students and with AMD officers looking to improve their skills.

Aspiring military surgeons would also have attended the lectures in clinical surgery delivered by James Russell and those in anatomy and surgery delivered by Alexander Monro II and his son. The younger Monro – Alexander III – had taken the lead role in this partnership by the time Hilson matriculated, but he was an uninspiring teacher, and many students preferred John Barclay's extra-mural anatomy lectures, which were delivered twice a day during the winter session in a hall conveniently located across the road from Surgeons' Hall.

A medical student's education was not restricted to the lecture hall and anatomy theatre. He could gain valuable practical experience by 'walking the wards' at one of Edinburgh's hospitals. Most students chose the Royal Infirmary, as it gave them access to patients with a wide range of diseases and injuries, and the chance to observe operations and dissections. Its dedicated military wards were an added attraction for students intent on a career in the AMD. Johnson's *Guide* recommended that students also volunteer as 'dressers' at the Royal Infirmary, as it 'will enable them to dress wounds, etc. with neatness and dexterity'.¹⁰

Student attendance at the Royal Infirmary was restricted to one hour a day, between midday and 1pm. Admittance was by ticket, which cost two guineas for apprentices at the College of Surgeons and three guineas for everyone else. A ticket was similarly required to attend a course of lectures at the university. It had to be purchased in advance and usually cost three guineas.¹¹ Students also had to buy textbooks, writing materials and medical instruments. Those who did not already live in the city had the added expense of board and lodging, which for one of Hilson's contemporaries cost around £36 for nine months.¹² Attending university, even for a student taking a limited number of subjects, was a serious financial undertaking.

In a letter Hilson sent home from Lisbon in December 1809, he alluded to ‘the debts I contracted before I left home’ (Letter 8). The nature of these debts is never revealed, but they were probably incurred during his apprenticeship¹³ and his medical studies in Edinburgh. It can be inferred from the letter that the money was owed to his family, although elsewhere in the correspondence a Mr Usher is mentioned with reference to Hilson sending money home. To whomever the money was owed, his brother Adam appears to have been his intermediary in Scotland, a role which sometimes dissuaded Hilson from writing to him when he had no positive financial news.

Hilson had gained sufficient knowledge by early 1808 to apply for a post with the AMD.¹⁴ This was a common career choice among less-affluent medical students, not least because it offered a reliable income that, if carefully husbanded, would enable them to establish themselves in private practice when they eventually retired on half-pay. It is interesting to note that Hilson matched the profile of the average recruit, who was ‘most likely to be Scottish, or from a rural area, and to have come from one of a wide variety of middling backgrounds most likely in trade or agriculture’.¹⁵

All candidates for the AMD were required to travel to London to sit two oral examinations. The first was held by the Medical Board and decided whether or not the candidate was worthy of an appointment. The second, and far more rigorous, examination was conducted by the College of Surgeons of London and determined which position the candidate was qualified to fill. Hilson passed both examinations, although his examiner at Surgeons’ Hall judged him fit only for the role of commissioned hospital mate, the second lowest rank in the AMD.¹⁶ Strictly, Hilson should not have been allowed to sit the examinations at all: new appointments to the AMD had to be at least twenty-one years old and he was only nineteen. Some candidates, however, omitted to mention their age, and examiners did not press the issue, knowing that the Army was in desperate need of medical officers.

Any disappointment that Hilson might have felt at not being recommended for a more senior role in the AMD¹⁷ was no doubt mitigated by the fact that he now held a commission. Indeed, this was one of the main attractions of the AMD for men from more humble social backgrounds who had neither the wealth nor the social standing to become an officer in the Army.¹⁸ Commissioned hospital mates got to wear a smart uniform, comprising a scarlet coat adorned with epaulettes and black velvet facings, blue pantaloons, and a cocked hat with black feathers. They were also allowed to wear a sword, a privilege reserved for the officer class. Perhaps just as importantly, a commission also gave the AMD officer the right to consider himself a gentleman in society at large.

The period during the letters

Hilson entered service with the AMD on 13 April 1808. It comprised two main groups during the Napoleonic Wars: the regimental medical officers and the staff medical officers. The former were the more numerous, with every battalion being assigned a surgeon and one or two assistant surgeons. They remained with their battalion, whether in barracks or in the field, and provided the troops with day-to-day medical care and treated their wounds during and immediately after combat. The staff medical officers did not belong to any regiment and were for the most part attached to general and other army hospitals, and included apothecaries, physicians, surgeons, and hospital mates.

New hospital mates were usually sent first to the depot hospital on the Isle of Wight, or to one of the other army hospitals in Britain, where they would gain experience before being posted to an army hospital overseas. Hilson, however, found himself posted immediately to the *Osborne*, one of three hospital ships that were about to sail with a British expeditionary force bound for Gothenburg. Before leaving British waters, he was transferred to one of the other hospital ships, the *British Isles*, and it was on board her that the first two letters in the present collection were written.

The expeditionary force, which numbered around 10,000 men, had two broadly defined objectives: to deter a French invasion of southern Sweden, and to enable the Swedes to focus their military efforts on repelling attempts by Denmark and Russia to seize Swedish territories. Where it was to be deployed and who was to be in overall command, however, had not been clearly articulated; and the troops remained on the ships off the coast of Sweden until the force's commander, Sir John Moore, reached an agreement with King Gustav IV on these points. No agreement was reached, and in July the expeditionary force returned to Britain. Hilson's duties during the aborted expedition were therefore restricted to caring for the sick, first on the *British Isles* and then on the third of the hospital ships, the *Asia*.

The letter that Hilson wrote on 22 July is missing. By that time the *Asia* had returned to the Isle of Wight so that the sick could be transferred to the depot hospital. The letter probably contained the news that he had been assigned to the medical staff of the expeditionary force soon to be despatched to support the Portuguese and Spanish in their struggle against the French. When he next wrote, on 30 July, he was on board the *Asia* as she and the rest of the fleet sat off St Helens 'all ready for sea only waiting for a fair wind' (Letter 3).

The expeditionary force of around 13,000 men under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley disembarked at Mondego Bay, around 160 km north of Lisbon, in the first week of August 1808 and established a base camp nearby at Lavos. A general order was issued there on 8 August, stating that,

Each staff surgeon must provide himself, without delay, with a sufficient horse or mule to be employed solely for carrying the surgical field

equipment, for which a sum, not exceeding £18, will be allowed to every surgeon actually in possession of a mule or horse for the above purpose, and also 1s 6d *per diem* will be allowed each staff surgeon for the hire of a native, as a batman, so long as he may be actually employed. Hospital mates will be allowed 1s *per diem* for the hire of a native, as a servant, to be paid quarterly by the Commissary General, on a return certified by the head of the medical department.¹⁹

Some of the medical staff were subsequently ordered to return to the hospital ship *Enterprise* to care for the sick and others incapable of marching. The staff who were to march with the army were supplied with two carts, each one loaded with twenty-four stretchers, a case of utensils, and a medicine chest.

Two victories against the French quickly followed, one at Roliça on 17 August, the other at Vimeiro four days later. A field hospital for the army had been established under the command of Dr R. M. Shapter, Inspector of Hospitals, at the latter village. That Hilson served there (and was probably among the staff who marched with the army) can be inferred from a later statement that he had ‘disembarked in August 1808 near Vimieira’.²⁰ If Hilson was at Vimeiro, a sense of what he would have experienced in the course of his duty can be gained from two letters written in the aftermath of the battle by one of his colleagues on the medical staff, the Scottish physician Adam Neale. In the first letter, he described the scene at the small farmhouse to which the wounded had been conveyed:

Around the building, whose interior was crowded with the wounded, lay a number of poor fellows in the greatest agony, not only from the anguish of their wounds (many of which were deplorable), but from the intense heat of the sun, which increased the parching fever induced by pain and loss of blood.²¹

Within the farmhouse lay more wounded, some of whom had already been operated on by the surgeons. Neale offered what help his expertise allowed:

To several, a simple inspection of their wounds, with a few words of consolation, or perhaps a little opium, was all that could be done or recommended. Of these brave men the balls had pierced the organs essentially connected with life; and in such cases, prudence equally forbids the rash interposition of unavailing art, and the useless indulgence of delusive hope.²²

In his endeavours to make the wounded more comfortable, Neale was helped by a ‘poor Highland woman, the wife of a non-commissioned officer of the 71st regiment’, who made some gruel for them and otherwise attended to their

needs. An unnamed hospital mate was put in charge of the wounded overnight, although it was the continued 'benevolence and assiduity' of the Highland woman that the wounded praised when Neale returned the next morning.²³ Soon after, the British wounded were transported by wagons to the coast and then shipped to a hospital in Oporto. While some of the medical staff travelled with them, others remained behind to care for the French wounded.

Where Hilson went after disembarking near Vimeiro goes unrecorded, but by mid-February 1809 he was stationed at the general hospital that had recently been established at the Estrela Convent in Lisbon. General hospitals typically catered for three hundred patients, although this could rise to five hundred at times. They were staffed by physicians, staff surgeons, hospital mates and, when the need arose, detached regimental assistant surgeons. A brief description of how such hospitals were arranged was given by Walter Henry in his recollections of his time as a junior medical officer during the Peninsular War:

[...] the long corridors of the convents were occupied by a double row of beds, containing the sick and wounded, classed into wards according to the nature of the cases; with a medical officer, ward master, and sufficient number of orderlies to each – a common kitchen for the whole – a purveyor to provide supplies, and an apothecary to prepare medicines.²⁴

The ward master, usually a sergeant who had been selected by the surgeon in charge of the hospital, was a key figure in the day-to-day running of the ward. He was in charge of the bedding, utensils and other stores, and oversaw the orderlies, making sure that they kept the wards and patients clean and administered food and medicine as directed by the surgeon. He was also responsible for maintaining order among the patients.

General hospitals cared for the sick from across the army, regardless of regiment. They had been adopted at the start of the war partly so that regimental surgeons could focus on the task of treating the wounded and partly so that regiments in the field would not have their mobility compromised by having to transport their sick. There was also a belief among some senior medical officers that centralised care of the sick was both more effective and more economical. The system was to come under great strain during the opening years of the Peninsular War, however. The British expeditionary force was ravaged by disease and the sick at times numbered in the thousands. Mortality rates were also high: it has been calculated that around 75 per cent of the 33,000 or so British deaths during the Peninsular War were caused not by battlefield injuries but by disease.²⁵ In Lisbon, Hilson would have encountered a range of diseases, with chest infections, dysentery, remittent fevers, and typhus being among the most common. A lack of proper sanitation, a reliance on often tainted water supplies, exposure to extremes of heat and cold, poor diet and over exertion all contributed to the spread of disease among

the army. The medical profession, moreover, was ignorant about its bacterial and parasitic origins and how it was transmitted, and recommended treatment that would have done nothing to relieve a patient's symptoms. In cases of fever, for example, Hilson and his hospital colleagues would have doused the patient in cold water, let his blood, and administered emetics and purgatives.²⁶

While the majority of beds in a general hospital were occupied by the sick, men requiring surgery were also admitted. Their conditions ranged from serious combat wounds to hernias. When Hilson was first posted to Lisbon, he was assigned to James Lindsay, a staff surgeon who had charge of half the surgical patients in the hospital. Staff surgeons often acted in a supervisory role, leaving the actual surgery to assistants. Most of their time was spent on administrative and managerial tasks, which included allocating staff and supplies, and processing the weekly and monthly returns of the sick and wounded. Ideally, Hilson would have benefitted from Lindsay's instruction in both surgery and hospital administration. Staff surgeons, however, were often too busy or lacked the motivation to instruct their subordinates; and in many cases, mates found themselves attending to all the medical drudgery in a general hospital, from dressing sores to compounding medicines. For surgical patients, however, this was preferable to them being given a free hand in the operating room, a not uncommon scenario brought about by staff shortages. Consequently, junior medical officers in general were often viewed with both suspicion and dread by the soldiers they treated, with Joseph Donaldson, a sergeant in the 94th Regiment who went on to become a doctor himself, denouncing them as,

apothecaries' boys, who, having studied a session or two, were thrust into the army as a huge dissecting room, where they might mangle with impunity, until they were drilled into an ordinary knowledge of their business; and as they began at the wrong end, they generally did much mischief before that was attained.²⁷

There were exceptions, however, and elsewhere in his memoirs he praised the care and kindness shown to him by an assistant surgeon and described another medical officer as 'a skilful and intelligent surgeon'.²⁸

How Hilson was judged by his patients in the Peninsula goes unrecorded, but the letters reveal that he performed at least one operation when still serving as a hospital mate. Writing to his brother Adam on 19 June 1809, he recounted that while in charge of a hundred British sick and wounded at a hospital in Santarém, he amputated the left arm of a soldier who had been shot through both wrists – a procedure he would have learnt in theory at John Thomson's lectures in Edinburgh and seen performed no doubt many times while stationed in Lisbon. '[I]t has healed very well,' he proudly told his brother (Letter 6).

For the most part, what Hilson did in the course of his duties at the general hospital in Lisbon, or at any of his other postings during the Peninsular War, is difficult to determine, as his letters say very little about his daily work. They are far from unique in this respect: it has been noted that the diaries and letters of medical men who served in the Peninsula are ‘remarkably deficient in descriptions of medical practice’,²⁹ the pages being devoted instead to accounts of the scenery, the locals and their habits, and the quality of the billets. War news was another favourite topic, although in some cases this was included in letters to satisfy a curious, not to say demanding, audience back in Britain. The surgeon William Dent, for example, gave his cousin an account of the siege of San Sebastián, ‘as you are always anxious to hear of Military Matters’.³⁰ Similarly, Hilson commented in one letter that his brother Adam was ‘angry with me for not writing him an account of the Battle of Albuera’ (Letter 20).

The fortunes of the expeditionary force had risen and fallen dramatically in the months following Hilson’s first surviving letter from Portugal. The expulsion of the French from Portugal at the end of August 1808 had been followed by a calamitous attempt by the British to aid the Spanish in their fight against Napoleon’s forces. By the time Hilson wrote to his father on 5 April 1809, the French had invaded Portugal again and after a number of successes were readying for an attack on Lisbon, leading him to speculate that ‘the Hospital will be removed on board ship in a few days’ (Letter 4).

In response to this threat, the British government sent further troops to Portugal. They also returned command of the expeditionary force to Sir Arthur Wellesley, who had been replaced as its commanding officer following the initial success of the campaign. Hilson, too, found his position changed when on 28 April 1809 he was assigned to the 2nd battalion 24th Regiment of Foot, one of the new arrivals. In his letter of 5 April he had expressed a wish to take the field with the army, but now he was less certain, telling Adam that, ‘I am not wearying to be made Assistant Surgeon as I like the Medical Staff exceedingly well’ (Letter 5). His acquaintance, the Selkirk-born medical officer Andrew Anderson,³¹ shared these sentiments. In a letter written while he was posted at the army hospital in Messina, Sicily, he announced, ‘[I live] very comfortably at present much more so than if I were a Surgeon’, and further observed that, ‘with the Regt. one has to associate in some degree with men they despise and a hundred other annoyances’.³² Both men, moreover, appreciated the financial benefits of being posted to a general hospital: ‘this is the time when we can save the most, as when with the Regt. it will take almost all of it,’ Anderson remarked;³³ while Hilson similarly noted, ‘I can likewise save more money as I am’ (Letter 5). Certainly, while a hospital mate on foreign service received the same pay as an assistant surgeon, 7 shillings 6d per day, the latter had additional costs. As well as the regimental subscriptions that were automatically deducted from his pay, he had to purchase camping equipment, travelling clothes, luggage, and a horse or mule to carry it all.³⁴ If Hilson’s

temporary detachment with the 24th was made permanent, moreover, he would be obliged to purchase a whole new uniform, an unwelcome prospect, especially as he had recently bought a new staff hospital uniform.

Hilson appears to have been short of money throughout his time in the AMD. This was partly due to the expense of buying uniforms and other service essentials. Andrew Anderson spent £3 3 shillings buying his first hospital mate's uniform and a further £2 6 shillings on 'a Dashy sword to Paree the French with'.³⁵ When boots, shirts, travelling cases and other essentials were added to this list, a hospital mate's initial outlay would have been around £50, or about nineteen weeks' wages;³⁶ and many of these items had to be replaced more than once over the years either due to wear and tear or because of a change in role. The mobile nature of the campaign also put a strain on Hilson's finances. 'It is very expensive marching about in the manner that I have done that I declare for the most part that I have not been able to save a couple of dollars,' he told Adam (Letter 13). Various allowances, such as the 12d paid each day for forage, would have alleviated some of his travelling expenses, but there were additional and often unexpected costs. He had to have his horse reshod, for example, during his four-week trek across Portugal and Spain to rejoin his regiment in the summer of 1813. The allowances, moreover, were paid in arrears, sometimes by as much as six months.

Army pay was also paid in arrears, officially three months. Obtaining sufficient specie to finance the war was a persistent problem for the British, however, and in reality, the men often had to wait much longer to be paid. Hilson noted in a letter of 14 September 1812, for example, that 'I am at present nearly five months pay in arrears' (Letter 23). When he finally received his money from the regimental paymaster, it would have been minus not only the regulation Army stoppages and subscriptions, but also the money he had instructed the regiment's agent in London to send Adam. On campaign, therefore, he often had little ready money to pay for goods or services.

Hilson marched from Lisbon with the 24th Regiment on 1 May 1809. The 24th had been given the task of guarding the Tagus valley while the main British force confronted the French north of Lisbon, and the next month or so was spent moving from one town to another along its length. Hilson's letter of 19 June gives an idea not just of how mobile the war had become, with the Allied and French armies covering large distances in an attempt to outmanoeuvre each other, but also of the physical toll that this had on the troops. After one day's march of around 40 km in the heat of early summer and along very poor roads, he considered the men 'so completely knocked up ... [that] if we had been obliged to fight that night I don't think there would have been above 150 that was able to get under arms' (Letter 6).

Hilson was still officially a hospital mate during his time with the 24th and as such he was liable to be detached from the regiment whenever the need arose. When the regiment was in the Tagus valley, for instance, he was ordered

to take charge of the hundred or so British soldiers being cared for in the Portuguese hospital in Santarém. Similarly, when the Allies advanced into Spain at the beginning of June 1809, he accompanied the 24th only as far as Plasencia, where he remained to take care of the sick of the brigade. He was therefore not on hand to provide medical assistance to the large number of men from the regiment who were wounded during the battle of Talavera on 27-28 July.³⁷

Even though Plasencia is around 127 km east of Talavera, it proved to be no safe haven in the aftermath of the battle. On 1 August, a French force under Marshal Mortier entered the town, and Hilson, five other medical officers and around 330 sick were taken prisoner. Everyone else in the town had fled, including the entire native population. Hilson considered Mortier's officers 'to be very vulgar fellows indeed' (Letter 5) but admired the marshal himself. He was even more impressed with the behaviour of Marshal Soult, who ensured that the sick prisoners received sufficient rations of beef, bread and wine. This did not dissuade the more able-bodied invalids from slipping away whenever the opportunity presented itself. Indeed, towards the end of Hilson's captivity, there were only thirty or so sick prisoners left and Hilson the sole medical officer to care for them. This onerous task took a heavy toll on his own health, as he recalled twenty years later:

[...] the few sick who survived the privation of their captivity obtained their liberty, but owing to the debilitated and shattered state of my constitution, occasioned by the multifarious and unusual duties which circumstances rendered it absolutely necessary for me to perform, it was not until considerable time afterwards that I was enabled to leave the place and proceed to Lisbon.³⁸

He finally reached the Portuguese capital at the end of October 1809, after an arduous trek of a number of weeks.

During Hilson's captivity, the general hospitals had been struggling to cope with the large number of men wounded at the battle of Talavera and the even larger number of sick. Indeed, in the later months of 1809 an estimated 10,000 British soldiers, or a third of the army's total strength, were sick and in need of treatment. At first, regimental assistant surgeons were re-assigned to general hospitals, although this proved to be a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, and in September 1809 Wellington (as Wellesley was now known, having been elevated to the peerage after his success at Talavera) was obliged to write to his superiors in London requesting additional medical staff be sent to Portugal. This clearly did not elicit the desired response, as he re-iterated his request two months later, this time specifically asking for hospital mates:

It is besides very necessary that some effectual measures should be taken to increase the Medical staff, not with gentlemen of rank, but with

hospital mates. The duty of the general hospitals in every active army ought to be done by the general Medical staff, and the regiments ought to have their surgeons and assistants entirely disengaged for any extraordinary event or sickness that may occur. We have not now one surgeon or assistant with each regiment, instead of three, the others being employed in the hospitals instead of hospital mates, and we have always been equally deficient. Indeed, one of the reasons which induced me to cross the Tagus on 4th aug., instead of attacking Sault, was the want of surgeons with the army, all being employed with the hospitals, and there being scarcely one for each brigade; and if we had had any action, we should not have been able to dress our wounded.³⁹

The shortage of mates meant that as soon as Hilson recovered from his ordeal, he was not sent back to the 24th Regiment but assigned once more to a general hospital in Lisbon. He found that the surgeon to whom he had previously been assigned, James Lindsay, had died of a 'fever'. Around 25 per cent of medical officers died during the Peninsular War, most of them of disease. Serious outbreaks could lead to a sudden spike in losses as when eleven medical officers died of typhus during the retreat from Burgos. There were also combat casualties, including the assistant surgeon of the 51st Regiment whose death Hilson mentioned in a letter of March 1812 (Letter 22).

Wellington made a further appeal to London at the end of November 1809 for at least thirty additional hospital mates, as 'those attached to the hospitals have more duty to perform than they can well manage, particularly now that disorders are so violent'.⁴⁰ While the number of sick across the army decreased to around 6,000 by the end of the year, the medical facilities in Lisbon were put under pressure again in early 1810 when around 300 sick were transferred there from the hospital station at the frontier fortress of Elvas.

While Hilson did not record his impressions of Lisbon, at least not in any of his surviving letters home, many other members of the British expeditionary force did, and they echo the sentiment of visitors in general to the city during the early nineteenth century.⁴¹ Nearly all of them admired its majestic setting above the River Tagus, while some praised the beauty of its grander buildings and streets, especially those built after the earthquake of 1755. Impressions were mostly negative, however, with the irregular streetscape and dilapidated houses of the poorer quarters and the prevalence of beggars, robbers and packs of masterless dogs all attracting criticism. There was also near universal revulsion at the state of the streets. The war artist Robert Ker Porter abhorred the 'accumulated filth' that 'rendered the streets almost intolerable';⁴² one medical officer expressed his disbelief that 'a Metropolis could be so abominably filthy', while another advised visitors to be 'satisfied with distant admiration' and so avoid the 'stench and filth' of the city;⁴³ and a private in the 51st Regiment observed:

The filthiest pig sty is a palace to the filthy houses in this dirty stinking city, and all the dirt made in the houses is thrown into the streets, where it remains baking for months until a storm of rain washes it away.⁴⁴

Having lived in Edinburgh for a few years, Hilson would have been well acquainted with such conditions, although the Scottish capital had the advantage of being cleansed by rain more frequently.

Alexander Lesassier, a fellow junior medical officer and graduate of Edinburgh University, was also stationed at a general hospital in Lisbon for a short period, and his journal shows that despite its faults, the city offered British officers a range of entertainments, including promenading through the grander streets, joining the circulating library and attending the opera.⁴⁵ In fact, Lesassier considered his time stationed at the hospital 'beyond every thing serene & agreeable',⁴⁶ and certainly preferable to being billeted in a small town or village, or worse, camping in the field with the army.

Lesassier and Hilson would have had the opportunity to explore Lisbon not just in their free time, but also in the course of their duties. Sick and wounded officers were lodged in private houses, rather than in hospitals alongside the rank and file, and a junior medic's daily rounds often included traversing the city to attend them. Some of Hilson's colleagues found this an onerous task not just because of the time and effort it took to make these home visits, but also because of the unpleasant attitude of some of the patients.⁴⁷ He appears to have been more fortunate in his charges, however. During the winter of 1809-1810, he tended to the commanding officer of the 24th Regiment, Lieutenant-colonel George Drummond, who had been badly wounded at the battle of Talavera. A friendship appears to have developed between the two men, and Hilson dined with Drummond on occasion. Later in the war, Hilson similarly tended to the commanding officer of the 4th Dragoons, Lord Robert Somerset, and again the relationship developed beyond the professional. 'He and his wife behaved uncommonly civil to me and made me live entirely at their table whilst I remained with them,' Hilson noted proudly in a letter to brother James (Letter 24); and well he might: a commanding officer of a regiment was superior to a junior medical officer not just in rank but also in social standing. Indeed, the aforementioned Walter Henry recalled that Army officers considered hospital mates 'as so many hospital drudges, scarcely ranking with the ward masters or serjeants. They were despised by every raw ensign, far their inferior in every estimable quality'.⁴⁸ These instances of hospitality, therefore, demonstrated a respect for Hilson's abilities as a medical officer. They also suggest he possessed more than a degree of personability. Forging a relationship with a senior officer, either in the Army or in the AMD, was also good for a junior medical officer's career, as shown by the fact that Drummond promised to investigate why Hilson had been overlooked for promotion to a permanent position with the 24th Regiment.

Hilson was ordered to rejoin the 24th Regiment in February 1810, although still as a detached hospital mate. It had not fared well during his absence. Ten of its officers and 355 of its rank and file had been killed or wounded at Talavera. An outbreak of dysentery during its withdrawal to Trujillo after the battle had added to the list of casualties. It had then been sent to the Guadiana valley, a notoriously malarial area, 'where ninety officers and men died of a pestilent fever'.⁴⁹ By the end of 1809, only around 400 of the 1,000 or so men who had arrived in Lisbon the previous May were still fit for active service.

The regiment was stationed at Mangualde when Hilson received his orders to rejoin it. He was again disappointed to be leaving Lisbon, and for the same reasons as before: he could live more cheaply when attached to a hospital and would be put to 'a good deal of expense in fitting out for the journey' (Letter 10). Mangualde is about 280 km north east of Lisbon and the journey took him two weeks to complete. Lesassier had been stationed there, and described it in his journal thus:

A stranger will be surprised at the great number of excellent houses & shops that this place contains. All the houses have glass windows & are neatly whitewashed. In fact it is one of the very best villages in Portugal. The greatest ornament of Mangualde is a large sumptuous Chateau.⁵⁰

Interestingly, Lesassier had not long completed a period of detachment with the 24th when Hilson rejoined the regiment. It is a pity that the pair narrowly missed working together, as Lesassier sometimes commented on his fellow medical officers in his journal. Be this as it may, his journal reveals that he had not enjoyed the life of a regimental surgeon on campaign, finding the duty of transporting the sick particularly irksome, and that he was pleased to find a post at the general hospital in Elvas. Lesassier did note, however, that the officers of the 24th were 'a very genteel set of men' and that the commanding officer was a 'mild affable gentleman [...] indeed all that a commanding officer ought to be'.⁵¹ Army officers sometimes looked down on medical officers as mere civilians in military guise, but Hilson also found those of the 24th to be hospitable, noting in his letter of 10 March 1810: 'When I arrived at this place I was very well received by the Officers of the Regiment whom I have not seen since I parted with them at Plasencia' (Letter 11).⁵²

Hilson travelled to the nearby town of Viseu while he was stationed in Mangualde. Here he had the good fortune to be invited to breakfast with James Franck, the Inspector General of Hospitals. As the senior British medical officer in the Peninsula, Franck had a significant say in promotions, and Hilson did not waste the chance to enquire about having his temporary role with the 24th Regiment made permanent. Most hospital mates spent two years in that position before being gazetted assistant surgeon and Hilson no doubt pointed out that his time had come. It transpired that Franck had already enquired about

his promotion but told him that a permanent post as an assistant surgeon with the 24th was unlikely. If this turned out to be the case, he promised to appoint Hilson to the 94th Regiment of Foot instead. At a time when personal relationships played an important role in securing advancement, Hilson's cause could only have been helped (and the breakfast made more pleasant for Franck, who was persistently pestered by junior officers seeking preferment⁵³) when the two men discovered a common interest and the conversation turned to stories of fishing on the Rivers Teviot and Tweed.

On 17 May 1810, not long after his meeting with Franck, Hilson was indeed gazetted assistant surgeon, but to the 4th (Queen's Own) Regiment of Dragoons, not the 94th.⁵⁴ To many young medical officers, the 4th Dragoons would have been a desirable posting. Throughout the nineteenth century, the cavalry was viewed as being more prestigious than the infantry, an outlook reflected both in the social standing of its officers and in the monetary value attached to commissions in its regiments. While not as fashionable as the Life Guards and other regiments of dragoon guards, the 4th Dragoons were among the more senior regiments of cavalry and had a proud history dating back to 1685. For Hilson, however, the honour of being attached to a cavalry regiment was clouded by anxieties about the expense it entailed. 'I can assure you it has cost me an immense amount of money to fit myself out to join,' he told his brother, 'I have been obliged to buy two horses which stands me upwards of 130 Spanish Dollars and a new Regimental coat has cost 56 dollars' (Letter 15). While a precise Sterling total for these expenses is difficult to calculate due to shifting exchange rates, it would have been around £35, a sizeable sum considering that Hilson was earning around £136 a year.

The 4th Dragoons had been in the Peninsula for over a year. Not long after arriving in Portugal in April 1809 with 700 men, they marched with the army into Spain and took part in the battle of Talavera. While the regiment lost only three men in the fighting, ninety officers and men subsequently died of fever when they were encamped at an unhealthy station on the banks of the Guadiana – a further example of the impact that disease had on the British war effort. After spending the winter of 1809-1810 in cantonments, the regiment was first posted to the Mondego valley and then sent north to take part in operations around the army's headquarters at Celorico.

The 4th Dragoons were still in the vicinity of Celorico when Hilson was gazetted. He did not join his new regiment for another ten months, however, as he fell ill with what turned out to be rheumatism not long after receiving his commission. A senior medical officer nevertheless considered him fit enough to attend a cavalry regiment (unnamed in the letters) near Coimbra, and he was subsequently put in charge of around 200 sick who were being shipped to Lisbon, probably as part of the evacuation of the city in September 1810 as the French once more advanced.⁵⁵ He then found himself again attached to a general hospital in the capital. His condition did not improve, however, and in

October 1810 he informed his brother James that a medical board had decided to give him six weeks' leave to go to Caldas da Rainha, a town north of Lisbon celebrated for its therapeutic hot springs.

This proved impracticable, however, as by then the Allies had withdrawn in the face of the advancing French and taken up defensive positions behind the Lines of Torres Vedras, three heavily fortified lines that the British had constructed to protect Lisbon. Indeed, when Hilson wrote to James about the medical board's decision, an army of around 61,000 Frenchmen stood between him and his spa treatment. And there they remained for the next five months or so, for even though their advance was thwarted by the Lines, and they withdrew to winter quarters further north, it was not until the spring of 1811 that they quit the vicinity of Caldas da Rainha.

The next letter in the present collection was written on 13 March 1811 in Belem, a town in the immediate vicinity of Lisbon, by which time the French had once more quitted Portugal. It was presumably not the first letter Hilson had sent home since October, as it makes no mention of his recuperation nor of the medical board that was due to assess the state of his health after his sick leave. That one or more letters are missing is further suggested by the fact that this one does not contain a summary of his doings over recent months, as was usual after a long break in the correspondence. It is not known, therefore, how long Hilson had been in Belem and to what purpose. He might have been working in the general hospital there or in the nearby convalescent barracks. He himself might have been convalescing in the town, although as an officer he would have been billeted in a house, not in the barracks.⁵⁶ He might have simply been reporting to the cavalry depot, which was located in Belem, ahead of finally joining the 4th Dragoons. Whatever the case, he informed his brother that he was now fully recovered and getting ready to set off to join his regiment the following day.

By the time Hilson departed Lisbon, the 4th Dragoons had entered Spain with the army and was now deployed against the French in Extremadura. A letter he wrote to Adam on 23 April, which contained an account of his doings since leaving Lisbon, is missing from the collection, but by then the regiment was engaged in operations connected with the siege of Badajoz. Six further letters from 1811 provide an overview of his movements from June to December. During this period, the 4th Dragoons were constantly on the move. After participating in the battle of Albuera (16 May), it formed part of the covering force for the blockade of Ciudad Rodrigo, about 220 km to the north. It helped cover the retreat from Ciudad Rodrigo following the battle of El Bodón (25 September) and then was part of the rearguard action at Aldea de Ponte (27 September). 'I have scarcely ever halted more than a week together since I joined the Regiment,' Hilson told James in October (Letter 20).

Not all of this time had been spent with the regiment. Hilson was third in order of seniority among the medical officers attached to the 4th Dragoons,

behind John F. Wylde, the regimental surgeon, and Thomas Hickson, the senior assistant surgeon;⁵⁷ and as he had found when temporarily assigned to the 24th, it was the junior officer who was detached when the need arose. Four instances are recorded in the letters of 1811: in May, he was at the brigade hospital in Villafranca tending to the sick when the regiment was taking part in the battle of Albuera; in August, he remained in Evora to care for two ill men when the regiment left for its new posting; in September, he was tending to the sick of the brigade at the general hospital in Celorico when the regiment fought at Aldea de Ponte;⁵⁸ and for a short period in October, he was re-assigned to the 11th Hussars.

In some instances, periods of detachment were planned to ensure a continuity of care for the sick and wounded. When the army was due to march from Coimbra in May 1809, for example, an assistant surgeon from each regiment had to remain with their sick until they had been properly given over to the care of the staff surgeons; and even then, some of them had to stay behind to help staff the brigade hospital. Many reassignments, however, were the result of continuing staff shortages, or to be more accurate, a shortage of what Wellington described as ‘the lower class of medical assistants’,⁵⁹ that is, hospital mates. While they remained in short supply, reassigning assistant surgeons was the only way to keep the hospitals running.

Military officers strongly disapproved of this practice, mainly because they believed it jeopardised the health of soldiers on campaign. There was also the suspicion, encouraged by the behaviour of men such as Lesassier, that some assistant surgeons put their personal comfort and professional advancement before their regimental duties by actively seeking hospital posts. This came to an end, however, when James McGrigor became the principal medical officer in the Peninsula in 1811.⁶⁰ He decreed that hospital mates alone were to make up the junior staff of general hospitals and ordered the assistant surgeons back to their regiments. The large number of hospital mates who had arrived in Portugal in the course of 1811 undoubtedly helped him in this endeavour.⁶¹

Despite the demands placed on medical staff during the Peninsular War, there were periods of comparative quiet when a junior officer could enjoy some time to himself, especially if he was stationed at a hospital. Indeed, even though Wellington and other military officers considered it essential that a medical officer be present at all times in a hospital, regulations stated that he need only visit the sick and wounded twice a day and come when required by the orderlies. Walter Henry noted that his morning hospital duties ‘generally occupied three hours’.⁶² Hilson had time after his morning rounds to go on personal errands even when serving as a hospital mate at one of the busy general hospitals in Lisbon. He apparently enjoyed yet more free time at quieter postings. The letters he sent home in 1811 offer a glimpse of how he spent his leisure hours. Mention is made of hunting expeditions in the Estrela Mountains, where wolves were known to roam, and of rides into the

countryside around Evora to watch the locals at work in the fields. Reporting on the latter activity to a no doubt curious rural audience back home, he described the local method of harvesting corn and compared it with the Scottish practice. Hilson also took time to explore the towns in which he was stationed. In Evora, he visited the cathedral, browsed the bishop's library, and whiled away the time chatting to nuns through the iron gate of their convent.⁶³

For a man from a predominantly Presbyterian country, where many people continued to view the Catholic Church with suspicion, and whose family home was in a parish where the 'Established Church is the only place of public worship',⁶⁴ being in a Catholic country was no doubt both fascinating and challenging. Some of Hilson's compatriots expressed contempt for what they saw, with one soldier denouncing the Portuguese as 'an ignorant superstitious, priest-ridden, dirty, lousy set of devils'.⁶⁵ While Hilson concluded that Catholicism was 'ridiculous nonsense' and readily dismissed the advice of his landlady to convert in order to save his soul,⁶⁶ his conversations with the nuns of Evora and religious discussions with his landlady,⁶⁷ who 'likes me so well that she wishes I would remain a twelve months in her house' (Letter 21), show that his religious views did not stop him interacting with the Portuguese.

This comparatively tolerant outlook would have pleased Wellington. Recognising that expressions of anti-Catholic sentiment might turn the local populace against his army, he had issued a general order soon after arriving in Portugal stating that the 'religious prejudices and opinions of the people of the country should be respected'.⁶⁸ It was also the case that a significant number of the rank and file were Irish Catholics; and in a further act of pragmatism, they were granted freedom of worship in 1811 while restrictions continued to be imposed on their co-religionists at home.

Only two letters survive from 1812. The first provides an account of Hilson's movements from the fall of Ciudad Rodrigo in late January (an event which he described in a now lost letter to James) to 31 March, when the army was besieging Badajoz. The fall of these two strategically important fortresses to the Allies enabled them to move north to Salamanca. The 4th Dragoons played a prominent part in the battle that was fought outside that city on 22 July but again Hilson was not in the field, as the night before he had been ordered to the rear to attend the sick of the brigade. Consequently, he was unable to offer Adam and James a description of the engagement. He was in Salamanca, however, to witness the victory celebrations, which he described for James:

For several days after the battle nothing was to be seen but illuminations and fireworks and they had one of their famous bull batings in the great square but I was so busy that I had not time to go and see it and in every street one would see the Spanish girls with castanets dancing the light bolero. [Letter 23]

Hilson was left behind in Salamanca to tend to the sick and wounded when the 4th Dragoons moved on, and he was still there when the second surviving letter of 1812 was written, on 14 September. In it, he mentioned that he was billeted in a gardener's house and that 'my man Joseph Smallwood [...] does not like the old Lady for she will not give him any vegetables for the pot without paying up for them' (Letter 23). This is the only reference in the collection to Hilson keeping a servant, and it is interesting to note that he had a British name. In the early years of the war, medical officers were prohibited from selecting a servant from the ranks of the army – only native servants were allowed.⁶⁹ While this restriction had been lifted in 1811, the accompanying allowance could still only be drawn if the servant was 'a native of the Peninsula'.⁷⁰

In the same letter, Hilson reported that he was in charge of the convalescent hospital in Salamanca:

There are upwards of 1000 of them almost all perfectly well so that my chief duty is to see that they keep themselves clean and prevent them from doing mischief which I can assure is no easy task for you have no idea what rascals are in our army. [Letter 23]

A general restlessness and boredom no doubt accounted for some of this mischief, although being free from the constraints of the regiment appears to have made convalescents in general difficult to handle. This was particularly the case when they had recovered sufficiently and were on their way, often across large distances, to rejoin their regiment. An officer who had been ordered to oversee the return of 600 former convalescents from Belem in October 1810, for example, branded them 'villains' and 'rascals' and declared that 'such a task I never had to keep [... them] together'.⁷¹

Some members of the AMD had been arguing for a number of years that general hospitals were breeding grounds for disease and that sending men to them from across the army merely resulted in cross-infection. The problems caused by unruly groups of former convalescents travelling across the countryside simply added to their belief that the sick would be better cared for at their own regimental hospital.⁷² These were small, mobile facilities that travelled with the regiment and remained under the supervision of the regimental surgeon and his assistants. Although the physician Adam Neale dismissed their arguments as 'silly clamour',⁷³ the supporters of regimental hospitals emerged triumphant following the appointment of James McGrigor. He overhauled the hospital system in the Peninsula, including its approach to treating the sick. As well as insisting on good hygienic order in all of the AMD's facilities, he created separate wards for surgical and sick patients and removed convalescents from the infirmaries to reduce cross-infection. He also ruled that all but the worst cases of sick were to be cared for in regimental hospitals, partly to reduce the spread of disease, partly to prevent the sick from having to endure

long and often harrowing journeys to the nearest general hospital,⁷⁴ and partly to discourage malingering and ensure that convalescents were returned immediately to their regiments when discharged. McGrigor's own description of a regimental hospital is worth quoting, as it provides a good picture of Hilson's experience when serving with the 4th Dragoons:

[...] however short a time a battalion or corps rested in one place, a regimental hospital was established; indeed as they carried with them medicines, bedding, stores, and all the materials of a hospital, a regiment might be said to have its hospital constantly established even on the march. It was frequently established in the face of an enemy, and nearly within the reach of his guns. When the regiment halted, after getting men under cover in some building, and constructing chimnies, the first object was to make bedsteads, getting at the same time additional mattresses of straw, rushes, &c. It was really surprising to see with what rapidity this was done; so much were regiments in the habit of it, I found the hospitals complete in everything, and the men most comfortably lodged in a few days after a regiment had halted.⁷⁵

The success of McGrigor's system of regimental hospitals can be measured in the increased number of men returning to active duty. His plan took some time to implement, however, for as Hilson's letter of 14 September 1812 shows, the sick from a number of regiments were still being treated in general hospitals almost a year after McGrigor's appointment.

The next letter in the current collection was written over nine months later, on 24 June 1813. Whether or not any letters are missing from late 1812 is difficult to say, but this was probably the first one Hilson sent home in 1813. He acknowledged in the opening paragraph not having written for an 'extremely long' time (Letter 24), and when he resumed the narrative of his movements, it started with him in winter quarters. He had been with the 4th Dragoons since then, except for a week or so spent in Oporto attending to the aforementioned Lord Robert Somerset and the subsequent four weeks that it took him to travel across northern Portugal and Spain to rejoin the regiment. He finally caught up with it near Vitoria on 19 June, just as the Allies were preparing to confront a French army under Joseph I. The letter contains a brief account of the battle of Vitoria (21 June 1813), which proved to be a decisive victory for the Allies and precipitated the collapse of Bonapartist Spain.

At set-piece battles such as Vitoria, the junior assistant surgeon of a regiment was usually assigned to a dressing station, a temporary medical facility located not far to the rear where casualties came to have their wounds cleaned and redressed, fractures reset, and any superficial in-driven foreign material extracted.⁷⁶ The 4th Dragoons, however, played only a supporting role at Vitoria, the terrain being unsuited to cavalry, so Hilson spent the day instead

riding with the men as they moved from one part of the battlefield to another. The enemy was already in flight when the 4th finally received orders to engage, and few, if any, of them are likely to have required Hilson's attention.⁷⁷

For once after a battle, Hilson was not left behind to look after the sick. Instead, he found himself riding upwards of ten hours a day with his regiment as it first pursued the retreating French in the direction of the Pyrenees and then attempted to intercept another French force that was withdrawing from Logroño, south east of Vitoria. The regiment then rested for almost two weeks at Tafalla and Laraga, villages to the south of the now blockaded fortress-city of Pamplona, before being called upon to support the infantry as it repulsed the approach of a relieving French force. In his letter of 12 August 1813, Hilson provided a summary of the various actions that are now known collectively as the battle of the Pyrenees (25 July–2 August 1813). However, as the 4th Dragoons were again employed in a supporting role, he recommended that his brother read Wellington's dispatches for a more detailed account.

The 4th Dragoons passed the winter of 1813–1814 'among the Spanish peasantry'.⁷⁸ Securing forage for the horses was a constant challenge, and the regiment eventually moved from its quarters south west of Pamplona to be closer to the army depot in Vitoria. It was granted six weeks' leave, although this had to be spent at its cantonments in local villages. During this and other settled periods, the regimental hospital was established at the temporary headquarters of the 4th Dragoons. Preferably, it would be housed in a convenient building. Failing that, a tent was used, in which case the medical staff were expected to obey the following instructions:

When an Hospital Tent is unavoidably the sole accommodation for the Sick, a Hut must be constructed by a Fatigue Party of the Regiment, to answer the purpose of a Cooking and Messing Room. A Trench is to be dug round the Tent, for carrying off the water, and when planks can be hired for the purpose, it is very desirable that this Hospital Tent should be floored.⁷⁹

These hospitals were equipped to care for up to sixty patients, with the surgeon being responsible for ensuring that it was adequately supplied not just with medicine, bandages and other medical necessities, but also with food for the patients. Only the regimental surgeon would have been based at headquarters, however. The senior assistant would have been stationed with the strongest detachment and the junior assistant surgeon with the next strongest at their respective cantonments.⁸⁰

Each of these cantonments would have had a formal mess, where the officers of the detachment would socialise and dine. They also billeted there, if the requisitioned building was suitable; otherwise, they would lodge separately or in smaller groups of similar rank and age. Hilson was quartered with two

lieutenants, for example, when the 24th Regiment was in Cardigos. In such quarters and at the mess, he would have had the opportunity to forge friendships with military officers that would make the long months of campaigning more bearable and might even prove beneficial once he was back in civilian life. As Robert Blakeney recalled of his time at mess while in the Peninsula with the 28th Regiment, 'Officers having entered their profession young, mutual attachment was firmly cemented, genuine and disinterested. Each man felt sure that he sat between two friends'.⁸¹ The basic costs of the regimental mess were paid for by a mandatory subscription, and daily rations of bread, meat and wine were supplied by the commissary. These mundane rations were usually supplemented by additional items of food and drink bought by the officers themselves, an expensive habit when wartime scarcity drove up the price even of staple foodstuffs. Hilson informed his brother, for example, that a pint of milk in Cortico was four times more expensive than at home (Letter 12), and later asked him to tell their mother that he was 'very bad off for milk and butter and also a piece of fresh cheese' (Letter 17). Medical officers who eschewed luxuries, especially costly drinks such as brandy and gin, resisted the lure of the card table and in general followed McGrigor's advice not to imitate the lifestyle of their regimental counterparts⁸² could nevertheless keep their mess costs to a minimum.

According to Hilson, the villages where the 4th Dragoons were encamped during the winter of 1813-1814 were 'poor and miserable places' whose inhabitants were 'rather uncivil and threaten to report us to the Marquis of Wellington for the least trivial offence' (Letter 26). He had commented before on the lack of hospitality shown by the Spanish to their would-be liberators. After meeting with 'very little hospitality indeed' during his long trek from Plasencia to Portugal, he was moved to write, 'I think it is a pity that a single British soldier should be lost upon such a rascally set of people as the Spainards [*sic*]' (Letter 7).⁸³ In contrast, he met with 'good treatment' as soon as he reached the border; and the Portuguese peasantry were also 'uncommonly civil to me' during his later march from Oporto to Braganza (Letter 24).

Hilson was also struck by 'the sudden change of language, customs and manners' (Letter 24) when crossing from Portugal into Spain. He was not alone in this respect. Samuel Broughton, a surgeon with the 2nd Life Guards, noted:

It is an observation which I have very generally heard mentioned, by every one entering Spain directly from Portugal, that the difference between the general aspect of the two countries, and the manners and appearance of the natives, even close to their respective borders, is much more striking than it is possible to imagine.⁸⁴

Among these differences, he observed that the Spanish were 'much cleaner, better dressed, and altogether neater and more industrious' than the Portuguese,

although he shared Hilson's opinion that the Portuguese were more hospitable and showed more 'gratitude for the services rendered them by the British'.⁸⁵ The enmity between the Portuguese and the Spanish also attracted the comment of British observers, including Charles Boutflower, surgeon with the 40th Regiment of Foot, who remarked:

The difference between the two people at this short distance [between Elvas and Badajoz] is remarkable; there is such a jealousy and hatred existing between them, that each carefully avoids imitating the Manners and Customs of the other.⁸⁶

Hilson noted this as well and again drew a comparison with his experience in Scotland, telling his brother James that, 'This hatred between the bordering people has often reminded me of the people of Roxburghshire and Northumberland' (Letter 24).

Having been strengthened by remounts sent from Britain, the 4th Dragoons marched from the vicinity of Vitoria on 24 February 1814 to join the Allied advance across the Pyrenees and into France. After a succession of victories, the Allies reached Toulouse at the beginning of April. The city fell on 12 April following a battle during which Hilson was injured in the face and eyes by a shower of stones that had been kicked up by a cannonball.⁸⁷ He later stated that, '[I] have ever since found my vision much impaired', although he had recovered sufficiently by 16 April to write James a letter in which he provided a summary of his movements since 24 February and a brief account of the battle of Toulouse. An armistice was signed between the Allies and the French the day after he wrote this letter, the last one in the current collection.

After the letters

The 4th Dragoons remained in south-west France for a month or so after the armistice was signed. It was here, on 26 May 1814, that Hilson was reassigned to the Portuguese Army and promoted to the rank of brevet staff surgeon. Although this was only a temporary rank, restricted to his service with the Portuguese, it clearly indicates that Hilson's superiors in the AMD recognised his abilities not just as a surgeon, but more particularly as a hospital administrator.⁸⁸ As with his earlier promotion to the 4th Dragoons, it also suggests the backing of an influential patron, either in the AMD or in the military. His promotion brought with it a notable advance in pay and in relative military rank: a staff surgeon in the Portuguese service earned 24/ a day and was designated the equivalent Army rank of major, while his counterpart in the British service made do with 17/6 and the equivalent rank of captain. As it turned out, Hilson never served in this new role, as the British establishment in the Portuguese Army was immediately reduced when the war officially came to an end on 30 May with the signing of the Treaty of Paris.

The 4th Dragoons sailed from Boulogne to Dover in two detachments on 19 and 20 July, following a march of six weeks through France. After taking part in some ceremonial occasions, and before they left for their new posting in Dublin, the regiment was reduced by two troops (around 240 men). This was part of a peacetime reduction that encompassed all branches of the Army. Around two-thirds of the staff of the AMD were put on half-pay,⁸⁹ Hilson among them. This was ‘much against my inclination,’ he later wrote, and though he did not say why, the reason can be found in a letter he had sent to brother James in February 1814:

For my part I wish the war to continue some time longer because I think that in the course of twelve months I would most likely have been made Surgeon to the Regiment of Infantry and then if I had been put on half pay it would have been nearly £100 per annum where as if I am reduced as an Assistant Surgeon my half pay will only be about £50 per annum.

Hilson was not on half-pay for long. The four-day Waterloo campaign, which included the notably bloody battle of Waterloo itself (18 June 1815), had left around 10,000 casualties requiring medical attention,⁹⁰ and Hilson was one of many half-pay medical officers who were recalled to assist the overwhelmed AMD. He was put on full pay on 24 June, promoted to staff surgeon⁹¹ and sent to the Low Countries. It is not known where he was deployed, but if it was to one of the five hospitals in Brussels, he perhaps met his former lecturer Professor John Thomson, who had come to witness the treatment being provided and proffer his advice. Thomson’s case notes, which include pen and ink line drawings, present a vivid picture of the type of injuries Hilson would have encountered during his service.⁹²

Hilson was with the army when it entered Paris on 7 July, but where he was posted after that goes unrecorded. He was put on half-pay again on 25 February 1816, or as he later put it, ‘unfortunately once more placed on the retired list’.⁹³ His disappointment was undoubtedly prompted, at least partly, by the knowledge that the £200 per annum he was currently earning as a staff surgeon was beyond what he could expect to earn as a civilian doctor.

The reduction in the AMD following the conclusion of the war resulted in Britain being ‘choked up by myriads of half-pay medical men from every branch of the Service’,⁹⁴ and civilian jobs were at a premium. To improve their prospects when looking for work among their civilian peers, and in the hope of gaining a promoted post should they be recalled to the AMD, medical officers often took a degree in medicine after being put on half pay. Hilson was one of them, matriculating at Edinburgh University for a second time shortly after returning to Britain in 1816. A medical degree at Edinburgh required three years of study. These years, however, did not need to be consecutive, so Hilson was allowed to count the courses he had taken previously at the

university towards his graduation. No record of his second time studying at Edinburgh survives, but after passing written and oral exams, and composing and defending a dissertation in Latin, he was awarded the degree of Doctor in Medicine on 1 August 1818. As with many returning medical officers, his experiences treating the sick and wounded in the Peninsular War directly informed the topic of his dissertation, *gangraena nosocomialis*.⁹⁵

Hilson then set up residence in Jedburgh and, in his own words, ‘with my injured constitution I commenced private practice, and was, with the addition of my half-pay, thus enabled, as far as my health would permit, to make a decent livelihood’.⁹⁶ He entered into partnership with one of the burgh’s established doctors, James Grant, and tended to patients both in Jedburgh and in the surrounding countryside. The surgical skills he had acquired during his time with the AMD were no doubt valued, and in 1821 an operation he performed on an eighteen-month-old child to remove a swallowed needle was reported in newspapers across Britain.⁹⁷ Unlike some of his fellow half-pay officers, who had become accustomed to ordering about their rank and file patients and thought it ‘a sorry fate to be forced to grovelling by suiting oneself to every one’s caprice, in order to earn a petty livelihood’,⁹⁸ Hilson appears to have adapted his bedside manner to suit his new clientele.

Having been on half-pay for almost thirteen years, he was probably surprised when he was put back on full-pay on 25 March 1829, appointed surgeon to the forces, and ordered to Bristol to take charge of the depot hospital there. He was certainly disappointed to leave his practice in Jedburgh,⁹⁹ but worse was to come in November that year when he was ordered to prepare for service in Jamaica. This was one of the unhealthiest postings in the British Army due to the prevalence of various tropical diseases. Outbreaks of yellow fever in particular had taken a severe toll on British garrisons in the past. In 1819, for example, the 92nd Regiment lost 285 of its 687 men to the disease, considerably more than had been killed in all its engagements from its formation in 1794 down to the battle of Waterloo in 1815.¹⁰⁰ Those who tended the sick were especially vulnerable, as shown by the fact that almost half of the wives of the regiment had died in 1819. Rather than endure ‘a climate, I well know, inimical to my constitution, ill suited to my years, and contrary to the life I have been compelled to lead since I left the service’,¹⁰¹ Hilson tendered his resignation. He also applied for a commuted allowance,

[...] in lieu of my half-pay for 22 years’ faithful service in a profession to which I was devotedly attached, and from which nothing would have induced me to retire, bar the conscious feeling that the state of my health would prevent me from performing my duties with credit to myself or benefit to the service.¹⁰²

The application was favourably received, and his half-pay was commuted on 23 March 1830.¹⁰³

Within a year of his return to Jedburgh, Hilson proposed marriage to Elizabeth Pringle Brown, the daughter of a local farmer, and purchased Abbey Green, a large house not far from his original, more modest premises in the Canongate.¹⁰⁴ He turned one of the ground-floor apartments into a consulting room, furnishing it with a writing desk, four cane-bottomed chairs, and shelves that came to hold over four hundred books.¹⁰⁵ He also received professional recognition not long after his return when he was appointed physician to the Jedburgh Dispensary, a place where the sick poor could obtain outpatient medical care and advice either for free or for a small subscription. He informed the Poor Law Commission that in this role he supplied medicine and advice to about 600 people annually and visited the sick poor across eight local parishes.¹⁰⁶

Over the next seventeen years or so, Hilson was also able to rebuild the professional practice that he feared had been 'annihilated' by his absence in Bristol in 1829. A list of over 250 patients who owed him money when he died reveals that it too extended over a number of parishes.¹⁰⁷ Some of his patients lived as far away as Hawick, Kelso or St Boswells, or in remote upland farms, visits to which would have involved hours of travel. The list also shows that he treated patients from all walks of life, including farmers, gardeners, innkeepers, kirk ministers, local gentry, merchants, retired army and naval officers, teachers, and artisans and tradesmen of various occupations. He also attended the Kerr family, no doubt when they were resident at nearby Monteviot House, with the marchioness of Lothian and her son Lord Melgund being listed as owing him £10 4/8 and £4 3/2, respectively. That a framed portrait of the marquess hung in his dining room suggests that he was proud of this connection (and perhaps keen to remind his guests of it).

Hilson once again gained a fleeting moment of medical celebrity when in 1837 the *Caledonian Mercury* carried a report of him operating on a young farmhand whose skull had been fractured after falling under the hooves of a horse.¹⁰⁸ It was in Jedburgh and its hinterland, however, that his reputation was most firmly and enduringly established. He appears to have been held in particularly high regard by his Dispensary patients, and in a later encomium for his assistant at the Dispensary, Dr James Falla, both men were praised for being 'in every sense the poor man's doctor'.¹⁰⁹

Hilson was still considered worthy of notice in Jedburgh in 1917, when a reminiscence of him was printed in the *Jedburgh Gazette*. Part of it is worth quoting here, not least because it provides a vivid picture of his life as a country doctor and puts a face to the author of the letters presented here.

Dr Hilson, who, when in Jedburgh, resided in Abbey Green, was tall and very erect, measuring an inch or two over 6 feet. He was always dressed in the professional black suit, dress coat and tall hat. Underneath his trousers he wore a pair of Wellington boots. His nose was rather prominent and his gait from his military training bespoke attention. In

very cold weather he was often to be seen with a 10 by 10 black acid white shepherd's plaid over his left shoulder. In those days medical men made their country visits on horseback, and for those night rides he used a long drab big-coat. His eyeglass was attached by a piece of black silk mitered ribbon, and it was a sure sign of his anxiety in any case when he was seen winding the ribbon round and round till it would go no further, and then reversing the process. He had a fund of stories and was a capital crack.¹¹⁰

It was during one of his landward visits that Gavin Hilson died on 14 September 1847. After helping to perform an operation on a farmer at High Tofts, near Hawick, he sat down outside and 'almost immediately expired'.¹¹¹ News of his passing was greeted with some surprise, as he was to all appearances 'a strong and healthy man'. No cause of death was reported, but it is possible that the rheumatism he had suffered while in the Peninsula had fatally weakened his heart. According to one newspaper report, 'the town of Jedburgh and a large extent of country were thrown into a state of greatest sorrow and gloom' by his death.¹¹² This grief was further expressed on the day of his funeral, when a large number of mourners marched in procession from the town hall to Abbey Green. The funeral party then made its way to the Abbey Kirkyard, where Hilson's remains were interred.

Kenneth Veitch
European Ethnological Research Centre

NOTES

- ¹ Her surname is given in a later source as Turnbull. She was presumably the aunt of the Turnbull cousins mentioned in Hilson's letters.
- ² See Scottish Borders Archive, SBA448/1/4/16, Militia List, Minto.
- ³ Tancred, G. *The Annals of a Border Club (The Jedforest)*, Jedburgh, 1899, 256.
- ⁴ For medical apprenticeships, see Ackroyd, M, et al. *Advancing with the Army. Medicine, the Professions and Social Mobility in the British Isles, 1790-1850*, Oxford, 2006.
- ⁵ For example Andrew Smith, who rose to become the director general of the AMD. Smith's family moved to Hassendean in 1809, so he would have known the Hilsons.
- ⁶ See Rosner, L. *Medical Education in the Age of Improvement: Edinburgh Students and Apprentices 1760-1828*, Edinburgh, 1991, for a discussion on this class of student and medical education at Edinburgh University more widely during this period.
- ⁷ Johnson, J. *A Guide for Gentlemen Studying Medicine at the University of Edinburgh*, London, 1792, 63-64.
- ⁸ See Kaufman, M H. *The Regius Chair of Military Surgery in the University of Edinburgh, 1806-55*, Amsterdam, 2003.
- ⁹ Students also had the opportunity to attend clinical lectures given at the Royal Infirmary and the Public Dispensary.
- ¹⁰ Johnson, 1792, 47.
- ¹¹ Alexander Lesassier, who studied medicine at Edinburgh University for a session in 1805-1806, had to pay £18 in advance for his classes. See Rosner, L. *The Most Beautiful Man in Existence: the Scandalous Life of Alexander Lesassier*, Philadelphia, 2013, 27.
- ¹² For a discussion on the costs incurred by medical students in Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century, see Ackroyd et al., 2006, 146-147.
- ¹³ Research into a cohort of men who served in the Army Medical Department (AMD) during the early nineteenth century shows that apprenticeships usually cost around £50. See Ackroyd et al., 2006, 113.
- ¹⁴ Hilson was one of twelve medical students from Edinburgh University to be accepted into the AMD in 1808 (see Kaufman, 2003, 77). Only two of the twelve had taken a degree. Samuel Burd, who is mentioned in Letter 21, was one of them. As a fully qualified medic, he spent less than three months as a hospital mate before being made an assistant surgeon.
- ¹⁵ Kelly, C. *War and the Militarization of British Army Medicine, 1793-1830*, London, 2011, 5.
- ¹⁶ Below them were the warrant hospital mates, less-qualified men who were supposed to remain on home service until they completed their medical education.

- ¹⁷ The aforementioned Alexander Lesassier certainly was dismayed when he was similarly judged, noting in his diary that he was ‘struck [...] cold with amazement’ at such a ‘cruel and undeserved’ decision. Quoted in Rosner, 2013, 27.
- ¹⁸ It should be noted that the AMD remained a civilian organisation and its personnel held only relative military rank.
- ¹⁹ *The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington [Dispatches]*, 8 vols, London, 1844, III, 58 (8 August 1809).
- ²⁰ A copy of this statement was reproduced in a brief account of his life published in the *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917. Vimieira was a variant spelling of Vimeiro.
- ²¹ Neale, A. *Letters from Portugal and Spain; comprising an account of the operations of the armies*, London, 1809, Letter 3 (22 August 1808).
- ²² Neale, 1809, Letter 3 (22 August 1808).
- ²³ Neale, 1809, Letter 4 (23 August 1808).
- ²⁴ Henry, W. *Events of a Military Life: being recollections after service in the Peninsular War*, 2 vols, London, 1843, I, 30.
- ²⁵ Blanco, R L. The development of British military medicine, 1793-1814, *Military Affairs*, 38.1 (1974), 4-10, at 9.
- ²⁶ For a first-hand description of such treatment, see Henry, 1843, I, 73.
- ²⁷ Donaldson, J. *The Eventful Life of a Soldier*, London, 1863, 149.
- ²⁸ Donaldson, 1863, 68 and 202. He also admitted that the duties of British medical officers ‘were fatiguing and arduous in the extreme’ (Donaldson, 1863, 150).
- ²⁹ Kelly, 2011, 125.
- ³⁰ Royal Army Medical Corps Muniments Collection, RAMC/536, Typescript copies of 49 letters, 1808-1824, to his parents, brother and cousin from Surgeon William Dent, 9 September 1813.
- ³¹ The pair met again briefly in Lisbon when Anderson was preparing to march with the 79th Regiment of Foot. See Letter 10.
- ³² Anderson, T C D’A. *A Doctor at War. The Correspondence of the Anderson Family from Selkirk*, independently published, 2024, 65 and 67.
- ³³ Anderson, 2024, 66.
- ³⁴ See Ackroyd et al., 2006, 209-213.
- ³⁵ Anderson, 2024, 39.
- ³⁶ Ackroyd, et al., 2006, 209.
- ³⁷ A detailed account of the 24th Regiment of Foot’s movements before and during the battle of Talavera can be found in Paton, G, et al. *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment, from its formation, in 1689*, London, 1892, 103-107.
- ³⁸ Quoted in the *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917.
- ³⁹ *Dispatches*, 1844, III, 588 (14 November 1809).
- ⁴⁰ *Dispatches*, 1844, III, 611 (29 November 1809).

- ⁴¹ Link, H F. *Travels in Portugal and through France and Spain*, London, 1801, 201. Link's travelogue provides a detailed and vivid commentary of Lisbon not long before Hilson was resident there, and includes topics such as the climate, local diet and modes of dress.
- ⁴² An Officer [Porter, R K.] *Letters from Portugal and Spain written during the march of the British troops under Sir John Moore*, London, 1809, 6-7.
- ⁴³ Boutflower, C. *The Journal of an Army Surgeon during the Peninsular War*, Manchester, 1912, 11; Henry, 1843, I, 21.
- ⁴⁴ *The Letters of Private Wheeler, 1809-1828*, ed. B Liddell Hart, London, 1951, 49.
- ⁴⁵ The opera appears to have been a favourite resort of junior medical officers in Lisbon. Walter Henry, for example, recorded attending a performance with 'a fellow medico' (Henry, 1843, I, 40).
- ⁴⁶ Quoted in Rosner, 2013, 74.
- ⁴⁷ Smith, J G. *Santarem*, London, 1832, 208-209.
- ⁴⁸ Henry, 1843, I, 17.
- ⁴⁹ Cannon, R. *Historical Record of the Fourth or the Queen's Own Regiment of Light Dragoons*, London, 1843, 58.
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in Rosner, 2013, 82.
- ⁵¹ Quoted in Rosner, 2013, 81.
- ⁵² Andrew Anderson similarly found the officers of the 79th and 92nd Regiments of Foot 'in general very agreeable' when he was promoted to assistant surgeon of the former. See Anderson, 2024, 89.
- ⁵³ Among them was the aforementioned Lesassier, who wrote to Franck's clerk and then to Franck himself in 1811 enquiring about a promotion. See Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, Writings of Alexander Hamilton, DEP/HAL/2/5/39.
- ⁵⁴ For the dates of Hilson's promotions, see Johnston, W. *Roll of Commissioned Officers in the Medical Service of the British Army*, London, 1917, 212.
- ⁵⁵ Wellington had sent a despatch to Marshal Beresford on 17 September 1810 advising him to 'order all your sick away from Coimbra' (*Dispatches*, 1844, IV, 286 [17 September 1810]).
- ⁵⁶ For an account of officers bathing in the sea at Belem as part of their recuperation, see *The Autobiography of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Smith, volume 1*, ed. G C Moore Smith, London, 1902, 33.
- ⁵⁷ Hickson had been attached to the regiment in January 1809, sixteen months before Hilson.
- ⁵⁸ For the conditions that Hilson would have endured at Celorico, see Howard, M. *Wellington's Doctors: the British Army Medical Services in the Napoleonic Wars*, Staplehurst, 2002, 121.
- ⁵⁹ *Dispatches*, 1844, III, 611 (29 November 1809).
- ⁶⁰ He did not actually arrive in Lisbon until January 1812. For an account of his time in the Peninsula, see Blanco, R. L. *Wellington's Surgeon General, Sir James*

- McGrigor*, Durham N.C., 1974. For a more recent assessment, see Kelly, 2011, 103-126.
- ⁶¹ Sixty or so arrived during 1811. Many of them, however, were warrant hospital mates. See Note 16.
- ⁶² Henry, 1843, I, 30.
- ⁶³ The habit among British officers of talking with nuns was observed, and condemned, by one of Hilson's fellow medical officers. See Boutflower, 1912, 39.
- ⁶⁴ *Old Statistical Account*, XIX (1797): Minto, Roxburghshire, 576.
- ⁶⁵ *The Letters of Private Wheeler*, 1951, 49.
- ⁶⁶ Such attempts at conversion were apparently not unusual. See Henry, 1843, I, 74.
- ⁶⁷ Theological discussions between British personnel and devout Portuguese were apparently also commonplace. Andrew Anderson remarked in a letter of April 1812, for example, that, 'I often dispute with the Priest on the absurdity of their tenets' (Anderson, 2024, 104).
- ⁶⁸ *Dispatches*, 1844, III, 43 (31 July 1808).
- ⁶⁹ The aforementioned Walter Henry engaged a local youth as his servant not long after arriving in Portugal. His recollections of his 'trusty Antonio' provide a good idea of the sort of duties that Hilson's servant would have been expected to perform.
- ⁷⁰ *Dispatches*, 1844, V, 142 (8 July 1811).
- ⁷¹ *The Autobiography of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Smith*, 1902, 34.
- ⁷² The arguments in favour of the regimental hospital system were summarised in *The Third Report of the Commissioners of Military Enquiry*, London, 1806, 22-23.
- ⁷³ Neale, 1809, Letter 6 (1 September 1808).
- ⁷⁴ In letters written before McGrigor's reforms had come into effect, Andrew Anderson painted a bleak picture of the fate of the sick who were 'thrown upon a bullock cart' or 'tied to the mules' and sent fifty or more miles to the rear for treatment (Anderson, 2024, 102 and 103).
- ⁷⁵ Quoted in Howell, H A L. The British medical arrangements during the Waterloo campaign, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 17 (1924), 39-50, at 42.
- ⁷⁶ Some of the wounded would have already been given first aid on the battlefield by the senior assistant surgeon. The more seriously wounded would be transferred from the dressing station to a field hospital further at the rear. The regimental surgeon moved between these three locations as the need demanded. See Crumplin, M K H. The evolution of military surgery during the French Wars, 1793-1815, *Topics in the History of Medicine*, 3 (2023), 9-46, at 22; and Howell, 1924, 42.
- ⁷⁷ The official history of the 4th Dragoons does not record any casualties at Vitoria. The other regiment in their brigade, the 5th Dragoon Guards, suffered only one casualty on the day. See Cannon, R. *Historical Record of the Fifth, or Princess Charlotte of Wales's Regiment of Dragoon Guards*, London, 1839, 66.
- ⁷⁸ Cannon, 1843, 79.

- ⁷⁹ *Instructions for the Regulation of Regimental Hospitals and the concerns of the sick*, London, 1812.
- ⁸⁰ *Instructions to Regimental Surgeons for Regulating the concerns of the sick, and of the hospital*, London, 1803, 3.
- ⁸¹ *A Boy in the Peninsular War. The Services, Adventures and Experiences of Robert Blakeney, subaltern in the 28th regiment*, ed. J Sturgis, London, 1899, 175.
- ⁸² Howard, 2002, 22.
- ⁸³ While acknowledging that some Spaniards looked ‘coldly’ on the British, assistant regimental surgeon Andrew Anderson was more positive (and compassionate) when he added, ‘Yet I look upon them as a fine race of people [and] must pity their suffering in these times’ (Anderson, 2024, 106).
- ⁸⁴ Broughton, S D. *Letters from Portugal, Spain, & France, written during the campaigns of 1812, 1813, & 1814*, London, 1815, 131-132.
- ⁸⁵ Broughton, 1815, 198-199. More on the theme of Spanish pride and ingratitude can be found in the letters of the aforementioned Adam Neale: Neale, 1809, Letter 40 (9 December 1808).
- ⁸⁶ Boutflower, 1912, 14.
- ⁸⁷ The official history of the 4th Dragoons lists Hilson among the eight men of the regiment injured at Toulouse. See Cannon, 1843, 80.
- ⁸⁸ As Rosner, 2013, 109, noted when commenting on Alexander Lesassier’s promotion to the post of staff surgeon in the Portuguese Army, the chief responsibility of the post was ‘the allocation of medical staff and supplies, and the processing of weekly and monthly returns. Though they supervised the medical care of soldiers, they were not primarily practising surgeons’.
- ⁸⁹ Half-pay was awarded to all officers who had served at least five years at home or three years overseas, on the understanding that they could be recalled immediately to the service when they were required.
- ⁹⁰ Crumplin, M K H. *The Bloody Fields of Waterloo: Medical Support for Wellington’s Greatest Battle*, Cambridge, 2013, 26-27.
- ⁹¹ His promotion was subsequently back dated to 25 September 1814. See *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 January 1816.
- ⁹² See Crumplin, M K H and Glover, G. *Waterloo: After the Glory: Hospital Sketches and Reports on the Wounded following the Battle*, Warwick, 2019.
- ⁹³ Quoted in the *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917.
- ⁹⁴ Alexander Lesassier, quoted in Rosner, 2013, 130. Ackroyd et al., 2006, 220, estimate that over the years 1816 to 1823 around seven hundred AMD surgeons attempted to enter civilian practice in Britain.
- ⁹⁵ *i.e.*, hospital gangrene, a bacterial infection carried from patient to patient on the hands of medical staff, dressings and surgical instruments.
- ⁹⁶ Quoted in the *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917.
- ⁹⁷ See, for example, *Leicester Chronicle*, 14 April 1821.

- ⁹⁸ Alexander Lesassier, quoted in Rosner, 2013, 130.
- ⁹⁹ A document from November 1829 lists the taxable items owned by Hilson when he moved to Bristol. See Scottish Borders Archive, D48/72/6, Declaration for tax liability on removal of Gavin Hilson from Jedburgh, Co. Roxburgh, to Colledge Street, Bristol, Somerset.
- ¹⁰⁰ Keltie, J S, ed. *A History of the Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments*, 2 vols, Edinburgh, 1875, II, 767.
- ¹⁰¹ Quoted in the *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917.
- ¹⁰² Quoted in the *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917.
- ¹⁰³ It was in this appeal that Hilson made the above-quoted reference to the injury he sustained to his eyes at the battle of Toulouse, which if slightly embellished in the cause of self-interest, would not have been unique. See, for example, Rosner, 2013, 152, for Lesassier's application for a pension.
- ¹⁰⁴ The Census of 1841 records Hilson living there with his wife, three sons and four servants. Elizabeth and one of their sons, William, died later that year after contracting measles.
- ¹⁰⁵ National Records of Scotland [NRS], Wills and Testaments, SC62/44/15, Hilson, Gavin, 1847.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Poor Law Inquiry (Scotland), Analytical Index to the Report and Evidence contained in Appendices parts I, II, & III*, Edinburgh, 1844, VII, 272.
- ¹⁰⁷ NRS, Wills and Testaments, SC62/44/15, Hilson, Gavin, 1847.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 September 1837.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Southern Reporter*, 9 December 1869. James Falla was also Hilson's nephew.
- ¹¹⁰ *Jedburgh Gazette*, 20 April 1917.
- ¹¹¹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 September 1847.
- ¹¹² *North British Daily Mail*, 17 September 1847.

THE LETTERS OF GAVIN HILSON,
ARMY MEDICAL OFFICER,
1808-1814

1. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO WILLIAM HILSON

Gottenburg^[1]
18 May 1808

Mr William Hilson, Hassendean, Hawick

Dear Father,

I hope you would receive this letter which I wrote to you when I was at Gravesend. I had one or two more wrote but I could not get them on shore. Several other Hospital Mates and myself were summoned from the *Osborne* onto this brig *The British Isles* which was lying at Deptford so we sailed down to the Nore^[2] and joined twenty five other transports which were lying shore. The whole sailed next day under convoy of a sloop of war. We arrived at Yarmouth in two days and the whole expedition sailed on the 10th May. There was about 150 transports and two men of war besides gun brigs. We were 8 days on our passage between Yarmouth and Gottenburgh [*sic*] we had capital weather the whole way but I was sea sick the whole time which made me have very little pleasure on the way. All the ships are come to anchor about 3 miles from the town.^[3] I have not been in the town yet but two Hospital Mates and the captain came in the town they say that the people seemed not to be very desirous of our coming for they think we will eat all up. There are none of the sloops landed and I don't think any of them will be landed here because the transports have just got orders to take in fresh water. I cannot inform you very hopefully how to direct to me – you may direct to G H Hospital Staff Northern Expedition to the care of the Transport Board.^[4] I dare say a letter would come to me with that direction but you must pay the postage when you send it away. I have little more to say at this time, I will write again as soon as possible and send all the news.

I am, father,
your loving son,
Gavin Hilson

¹ Gothenburg.

² A Royal Navy anchorage in the Thames Estuary.

³ A British expeditionary force of around 10,000 men under Lieutenant-general Sir John Moore (1761-1809) had been sent to Gothenburg. See the Introduction.

⁴ A subsidiary board of H.M. Treasury that was responsible for the overseas transport of troops, horses, and naval and military equipment, provisions and supplies.

2. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

British Isles, Transport, Flemish Road,^[5] Gottenburg
16 June 1808

Mr Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I hope my Father will have received the letter which I sent some weeks ago. I also wrote Dr Graham^[6] some time after that. I have not received a letter from any of you yet. If you have wrote any they may perhaps be lying at Gottenburg as I have only been once in town since we arrived here. If you have not sent any yet you had better not send any till I write to you again as we will in all probability not remain above other five or six days. I have been very healthy after the sea sickness so often go ashore but shore is nothing here but rocks. Mr Moffat^[7] another Hospital Mate and I will remove from this brigg in a day or two into the *Asia* another Hospital Ship, we was on board her yesterday she is a very fine ship then we will be one Physician and five or six Hospital Mates on board of her. There is a good number of the German troops sick on board the different ships but the British are in general pretty healthy. There are about 22 sick on board the *Osborne* Hospital Ship though none in the *Asia* yet but as soon as the *Osborne* is full they will be sent there. I am going to write you the news now but I think I have nothing worth mentioning but to fill the paper I shall write something.

A few days after we arrived here Colonel Murray^[8] was sent home with dispatches, he only arrived here about 7 or 9 days ago and immediately set out for Stockholm. General Moore has also gone there and as soon as word comes back we expect to sail immediately.^[9] It is thought that we will most likely go home again but I would not like to go home without doing anything. There are four lines of battleships here the *Victory* – Sir J Saumarez,^[10] *Superb* Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Keats,^[11] the *Audacious* [*sic*] and the *Mars*. The *Superb* only arrived a few days ago

⁵ A road is a sheltered body of water near the shore where ships may lie at anchor safely.

⁶ Possibly Walter Graham M.D., a surgeon in Hawick. See the Introduction.

⁷ William Moffat, who had been appointed Hospital Mate on 16 April 1808.

⁸ Sir George Murray (1772-1846) was the Quartermaster General for the British Army.

⁹ A disagreement between Sir John Moore and the king of Sweden resulted in the British expeditionary force sailing for home at the beginning of July.

¹⁰ Vice-admiral Sir James Saumarez (1757-1836) was the commander of the Baltic Fleet. Its main objectives were to keep trade routes open between Britain and Sweden and to blockade enemy-held ports.

¹¹ Rear-admiral Sir Richard Goodwin Keats (1757-1834). Although he had previously commanded HMS *Superb*, he was now in command of HMS *Mars*.

and Admiral Keats shifted his stay from the *Mars* to her. She is a beautiful ship I dare say she carries above 80 guns although she is rated at 74 because she has two ports more on each deck than the *Audacious* or the *Mars*. The *Mars* is at this moment clearing the roads with a fine brick.^[12] I don't know where she is bound for. The *Victory* is a beautiful three decker I have been twice on board of her. She carries 102 Guns £2 pounders [*sic*] on the lower deck. It is very fine to see the Men of War start their Royal Guards every night at sunset. The *Mars* for the most part has hers drawn first. It was very fine to see them firing on the King's birthday.^[13] There are just about eleven thousand seven hundred troops on board. There are the 4th, I suppose it is a Welsh Regiment.^[14] The 28th an Irish Regiment.^[15] The 52nd Sir John Moore's, 79th Cameron Highlanders and the 92nd Gordon Highlanders. Besides some companies of the 95th Riflemen all the rest are Germans.^[16] There are about 700 of the Hanoverian Hussars, they are the finest dressed horsemen that I have seen. There are also about 100 Riflemen among the other German Troops. The hussars and I dare say most of the other German Regiments allow the long hair upon the upper lips to grow. The whole of the army have landed several times with their guns knapsacks and in the same way as if they were landing in the face of the enemy but they have not a sufficient number of boats to land them all at the same time. The 79th is a very fine Regiment. It was them that marched first into Coppenhagan.^[17]

One of the Hospital Mates that was in the ship along with me has been attached to the 92nd but I doubt he will be made Assistant Surgeon of that fine Regiment because the Adjutant is on his way from England to join them. He, the adjutant, was taken prisoner in coming from Coppenhagan last time.

My mother need not be surprised if you don't hear from me this some time because when we go away from this place it is hard to say how the letters may be got to England.

I am, Dear Brother,
yours affectionately,
Gavin Hilson

¹² Probably a reference to the brick-shaped piece of stone that was used to scrub the deck of a ship.

¹³ George III's birthday was 4 June.

¹⁴ Hilson was mistaken: the 4th (King's Own) Regiment of Foot was an English regiment.

¹⁵ Hilson was again mistaken: the 28th (North Gloucestershire) Regiment of Foot was an English regiment.

¹⁶ The King's German Legion was a British Army formation consisting of expatriate German soldiers, mainly from Hanover. It was commanded at this time by Sir John Murray (c.1768-1827).

¹⁷ The British had entered Copenhagen after a short siege in September 1807.

3. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

St Helens, on board the *Asia* Hospital Ship
30 July 1808

Mr Adam Hilson, Hassendean

My dear Brother,

I wrote you a letter on the 22 instant^[18] informing you of my arrival at this place, I desired you to write immediately which I hope you would do the very next day you receive mine. I have not received any letter yet since I came from home but I hope I will receive one tomorrow or next day if we don't sail from this place. The fleet is lying here all ready for sea only waiting for a fair wind. There is just about the same force with us just now as there was at Sweden only some companies of the 45th and I believe there is likewise a few more Artillery. The troops that embarked at Ramsgate went past without stopping on us, you will see in the papers the different Regiments that have gone and that are going out to Spain and Portugal. There will be no less than 7 or 8 Scotch Regiments in the different expeditions. I saw in the papers that the 91st is in Sir Arthur Wellesley's expedition^[19] and I likewise see in the Army List that the current Assistant Surgeon in that Regiment is filled up. You may not expect another letter from me as this place is at a great distance from Portsmouth and therefore it is difficult to get one onshore. I must write letters to several persons but I am not going to write any till I receive one from you. When Mrs Anderson of Woolwich^[20] comes to Scotland she is coming to see my mother. My mother must be very kind to her for I shall never forget her kindness to me when I was there. I wrote on the inside of the last letter after I had sealed it for you to send James' direction, if you have done it I will write him if I have time before we sail. I was on shore in the Isle of Wight. It is a very fertile Island. I have nothing more worth mentioning. Give my compliments to aunt Nelly and to Miss Trotter but I suppose I am naming her wrong as the match was certainly made up between her and the [*illegible*] the night before I left Hassendean, likewise give my compliments to Robert Scott and Cousin Nanny, William Hay and Cousin Nelly, likewise to Dr Graham and Walter but this is all Brother.

I am, Dear Brother, your affectionate Brother,
Gavin Hilson

¹⁸ *i.e.* 22 July.

¹⁹ A British expeditionary force had been despatched to the Iberian peninsula to help Portugal and Spain in their war with France. See the Introduction.

²⁰ Isabella Park, wife of the Royal Navy surgeon John Anderson (1777-1809) and sister of the African explorer Mungo Park (1771-1806).

PS I have just slept 3 months on board the 26th of this month.

July 31 – We are this moment getting under weigh, I send this by a boat from the shore. GH

4. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO WILLIAM HILSON

Lisbon
5 April 1809

Mr William Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Father,

I hope that Adam would receive the letter which I wrote about the 19th February for if neither him nor Dr Graham have received any my mother will have been thinking long ago that I am gone to the land of forgetfulness. I have not yet received a letter from any of you and if I don't receive one in a month I will give up all hope of receiving any but however as soon as you receive this letter some of you must write to me and you must also pay the postage or it will not reach me, I cannot comment how letters does [*sic*] not reach me as well as the other medical men who receive them from the very heart of England.

Ever since I wrote to Adam I have been doing duty in the General Hospital and I think I [am] likely to remain as I have been for some time attached to Mr Lindsay, Surgeon to the Forces, who has charge of half of the surgical patients in the General Hospital – but I would have liked as well to have taken the field with the Army. The British Army under the command of His Excellency Lieutenant General Sir John Francis Cradock^[21] which now amounts to nearly 15,000 men have taken up a position at a place called Lumiar about 4 or 5 miles from Lisbon but the advanced posts reach about 15 miles further. The French are now in possession of Oporto and are on [*illegible*] march towards Lisbon and it is said that there is another column coming down by Castella Branco^[22] so we shall have bloody work in a short time. I think that if this force which will engage us first does not exceed twenty or twenty five thousand we will give them a good beating but if we do not get reinforcements we will ultimately be obliged to embark. The Portuguese would not be able to muster 10,000 regular troops. I daresay there are upwards of 10,000 pikemen in Lisbon but they will be but little service. The Commander in Chief has put everything in readiness either to advance or retreat. All the heavy baggage is embarked and I dare say the Hospital will be removed on board ship in a few days.

²¹ Sir John Francis Cradock (1759-1839). He handed command of British forces in Portugal to Sir Arthur Wellesley later that month.

²² Castelo Branco.

The Portuguese are all Roman Catholics you cannot conceive how religious they are, they have been keeping a fast of forty days which was finished a few days ago. I frequently go in their convents and hear worship, it is certainly ridiculous nonsense.

I shall write you a longer letter next time when I hope I have received one from some of you by the first packet that arrives. Give my compliments to all friends

I am, Dear Father, your affectionate son,
G Hilson

5. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Lisbon
29 April 1809

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I am very happy to inform you that I have at last received a letter from you dated the 14 March and another from Jane Turnbull dated the 15 of the same month. After I had visited my patients on the morning of the 20th April and hearing that a packet had arrived I was going down towards the post office with scarce a ray of hope of getting a letter when I was met by one of the men of the Hospital who told me that he had got two for me. I am very happy to hear that my Father is still about the same state of health but I am very sor[r]y to hear that my Mother is still troubled with her old complaint. I am happy to hear that Alison and John Fallow have made a wedding of it, I hope that he will make a good husband and her a good wife, you may tell her that I am still preserving the shawl [*i.e.* shawl] for her. I hope that the thoughts of marriage which has entered so many of their heads will not enter into Agneses or I dont know what will become of my poor mother. I will endeavour before I leave this country to favour something for Agnes. Mothers packet has arrived since I received your letter but I have not received the letter which you mentioned that James was going to write. I dare say you will have been thinking that I should have mentioned something about money long ago but my pockets till lately have been almost empty. A few weeks ago I had to purchase a new uniform from my old one being entirely worn out, the coat itself has coast [*i.e.* cost] me upwards of 45 dollars,^[23] I have still remaining a considerable number but I doubt I will not be able to send you any this several months for reasons which I shall presently state. I have till yesterday been doing duty in the General Hospital when I received a letter from the Inspector of Hospitals

²³ The Spanish dollar was a silver coin worth eight *reales*. Also known in English as a 'piece of eight'.

ordering me to report myself to the Commanding Officer of the 24th Infantry^[24] and then to act as Assistant Surgeon till further orders. The Regiment marches somewhere towards Coimbra so you need not expect any more letters from me this some time. I am allowed forage for a horse and as I have nothing to carry my baggage upon I will be obliged to buy a mule or some other thing to carry it as for myself I am able to march to Madrid if they like. The Regiment has but one Assistant and as I am nearly the Senior Hospital Mate I think you may have a chance of seeing me Gazetted^[25] Assistant Surgeon to this Regiment or some other but I am not wearying to be made Assistant Surgeon as I like the Medical Staff exceedingly well and I can likewise save more money as I am. But I have not time to write any more for I am just going to get ready for to march tomorrow at 6 O'clock.

Give my compliments to Cousin Nancy and other Friends.

I am, Dear Brother, your Affectionate Brother,
G. Hilson

PS I will write a letter to Jane Turnbull as soon as I have an opportunity.

6. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Santarem
19 June 1809

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I take this opportunity of writing to you as it is nearly two months since you must have heard from me. The last letter that I wrote to you was dated the 27th or 28th April just when I was about to leave Lisbon. I have not received any more letters from you since I received the two together (the one from Jane Turnbull) but there may be some lying at Lisbon for me.

I marched with the 24th Infantry on the 1st May and arrived at this place on the 3rd. The Regiment stayed till the 18th when the Colonel received orders to march immediately – we marched that evening to a place called Golegan^[26] which is about 16 miles from Santarem. This was just about the time that Sir Arthur's army was on

²⁴ Lieutenant-colonel George Drummond (?-1811). The 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment of Foot had disembarked at Lisbon on 28 April 1809. Exclusive of officers, its strength was thirty-nine sergeants; twenty-two drummers; 778 corporals and privates; and four boys.

²⁵ A term derived from the practice of announcing military promotions in the *London Gazette*.

²⁶ Golegã.

the other side of the river Douro and about this time General Victor^[27] made some movement with his army as if he intended to push down towards Lisbon, part of his army crossed the bridge of Alcantara and it was said that there were two thousand of his men in Castelo Branco. General McKenzie^[28] who at this time commanded the troops on the Tagus had his Head Quarters at Sobreira Formosa with only three or four Regiments. We marched next day from Golegan to a small town called Punhete,^[29] just before we came into this town we crossed a very firm bridge of boats which is constructed over a river that runs into the Tagus at this place. Next day we had a very long march to a small village called Villa de Rei.^[30] The men were so completely knocked up with this days march that if we had been obliged to fight that night I don't think there would have been above 150 that was able to get under arms. We halted at this place one day and next day we set out to go to a place called Cardoso but the Colonel received orders to halt at a small village called Cardigos till further orders. The inhabitants had recently deserted this village and taken the most part of their furniture along with them. Two Lieutenants and myself took our quarters in an old house and lay down to sleep upon some straw but when we awoke in the morning we were all covered in lice for three or four days. We could get nothing to eat at this place but salt pork and biscuits but when the people presumed that the officers would not let the soldiers rob them of everything that they brought to sell we soon had plenty. I stayed at this place for some time and then I received orders to return to this place to take charge of the English sick that were left in the Portuguese Hospital. When I arrived I found upwards of 100 sick of different regiments so I have been obliged to take charge of them for nearly one month. There was one of the patients of the 27th Regiment that was shot through both wrists. I have cut off his left arm and it has healed very well. I am now relieved by another medical man from Lisbon so I will march tomorrow morning for the Regiment which I suppose is still at the place when I left them but I will call in by Abrantis^[31] and receive instructions from the Deputy Instructor of Hospitals who is there with the army. The whole army is about Abrantis and it is said that the General is waiting for orders to march into Spain. It is said that the French are still near the frontiers with nearly 40000 men and are determined if Sir Arthur advances into Spain to give him battle. I dare say the British Army does not amount to more than 24000 men. The Portuguese army I suppose amounts to nearly the same number and most of them are now very well disciplined. We have two Regiments of Heavy Dragoons and three of Light Dragoons, when the Portuguese saw the Heavy Dragoons land at Lisbon they stood with astonishment to see fellows six foot high riding upon horses like camels etc. etc.

²⁷ Marshal Claude-Victor Perrin (1764-1841).

²⁸ Major-general John Randall Mackenzie (c.1763-1809). He had newly been put in command of the 3rd Division, of which the 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment of Foot was a part.

²⁹ Now known as Constância.

³⁰ Vila de Rei.

³¹ Abrantes.

The weather is very fine just now I cannot say that it is disagreeably hot. The corn will be ready to crop in a short time and the lint pulled in about 2 weeks.

I dont think I shall be able to write you again for some time. Remember me to my mother. Give my compliments to all friends.

I am, dear Brother, your most affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

PS direct to me as usual.

7. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Lisbon
11 November 1809

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I dare say that long before this time you must have had some doubts about my safety from my long delay in writing, I however arrived safe at this place with some difficulty. I have not as yet received any more letters from any of you since I received two together, they are from Jane Turnbull and the other from you dated the 14th April. I am inclined to think that you don't pay the postage any further than London which is the reason why they don't reach me. If you know any person in London to send them under cover to them [*sic*] and desire them to pay the postage to Falmouth I think I would receive them more regular.

I think you will be somewhat astonished when I inform you that I was a prisoner for two months with the French army under command of the Duke of Dalmatia^[32] but before I say any more about that I shall as usual give you an account of what I have been doing since I wrote you last. In my last letter that I wrote I mentioned that I was about to leave Santarem to join the 24th infantry which I still found lying at Cardigos. I had not been there two or three days when the Regiment was ordered to Castilo Branco^[33] which place we marched in three days. The next day General McKenzie's Brigade was ordered to Spain. In three days we reached Sarsa Mayor^[34] a considerable town on the frontiers of that country and by a march of four days more we arrived at Plasencia, this is the second town in size to Badajos^[35] in the province

³² Marshal Jean-de-Dieu Soult (1769-1851), duke of Dalmatia.

³³ Castelo Branco.

³⁴ Zarza la Mayor.

³⁵ Badajoz.

of Estrimadura.^[36] When the army marched from this place towards Talavera I was left in charge of the sick of General McKenzie's Brigade which amounted to about 90. We remained very comfortably there till 30th July when we were much alarmed by hearing that the French Army was marching towards this place from Salamanca. On the morning of the 31st we received intelligence of the Battle of Talavera^[37] but our spirits were again cast down by hearing that the French were within four Spanish Leagues.^[38]

In the afternoon all the convalescents and every one that was able to move out of hospital marched to try to join our army but I and five other surgeons were obliged to stay with the sick and on the afternoon of that 1st August V Corps under the command of Marshal Mortyer^[39] entered the town. You may conceive that I was a little afraid when I heard the clang of the Dragoons sabres upon the causeway and their breaking open the doors in the neighbourhood of the hospital but my fears were soon put an end to by the Marshal being the first man that entered the hospital. He spoke English exceedingly well and asked me a few questions concerning the sick and then went away. In some of the other hospitals some of the other surgeons were not so fortunate from their hospitals being a small way of town. The privates entered them before any of the officers and plundered them [of] almost every article but next day the Marshal gave them money to the amount of what was told to him what their losses were. He is one of the handsomest men I ever saw about 7 two inches high^[40] and proportionally broad.

As soon as the guard was placed at the gate and as directions had been given not to prevent the Medical Officers for going out and in, I went to the gate and saw a small part of his army go past the camp on the other side of the town. That day the corps under command of Marshal Soult arrived and on the following day came in that under command of Marshal Ney.^[41] The three corps amounted to about 30,000 men, they all marched towards the Tagus to come in rear of Lord Wellington's army but they were rather too late. In four or five days Marshall Ney returned and marched towards Salamanca and the day following Marshal Soult returned and remained in the town. Marshal Mortyer's officers appeared to be very vulgar fellows indeed, the only things which I had taken from me were taken by the officers of this Corps, but Marshal Soult's Corps being better acquainted with the English behaved even more civilly, the Marshal himself all the while behaved exceedingly well, he allowed the sick plenty of beef [*sic*] and bread and as soon as wine could be got that was also served out to them.

³⁶ Extremadura.

³⁷ The battle was fought from 27 to 28 July outside the town of Talavera de la Reina, Spain. The British and their Spanish allies were credited with a victory over their French adversaries, although the British were obliged to withdraw to Portugal in the face of French reinforcements.

³⁸ A Spanish league was the equivalent of 4.2 km.

³⁹ Marshal Édouard Mortier (1768–1835), duke of Treviso.

⁴⁰ This should be read as 72 inches, which was close to Mortier's recorded height of 195 cm (76.7 inches).

⁴¹ Marshal Michel Ney (1769–1815), duke of Elchingen.

When the three Corps marched towards the Tagus they left no guard so every man that was at all able to move set out for Portugal so that I in particular was left with 30 sick without a single soul even to bring them a drink of water so that out of humanity I was obliged to act Surgeon, Orderly [*page damaged*] Cook and at last grave digger but this was done [*page damaged*] I was able for from great exertion I caught [*page damaged*] in bed for upwards of twenty days.

On the first of October Marshal Soult marched towards Talavera and evacuated Plasencia completely so as soon as I was able to march I set out for this place which I think is about 250 miles distant from Plasencia. I met with very little hospitality indeed till I arrived on the frontier [*page damaged*] when I met with good treatment all the way down. I think it is a pity that a single British soldier should be lost upon such a rascally set of people as the Spainards [*sic*].

I am not able to write anything about home as I do not know in what state you are in from my never receiving any letters. Give my compliments to all Friends.

I am, Dear Brother,
Yours Affectionately,
G. Hilson

8. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Lisbon
19 December 1809

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

Two days ago I was very happy to receive a letter from you dated 8th November but I was extremely sorry to find that it brought the melancholy intelligence of the death of my father indeed from the state of health in which he was when I left Scotland I have been expecting to hear for some time of his death by the first letter which I might receive. His death no doubt must have been very severe upon my poor weak mother but you must just endeavour to comfort her as well as possible. I dare say from the state in which I left you and from the changes which have taken place in the family since you must be very badly off for money. I am happy to say that although I lost upwards of ten pounds when I was with the French army yet I think I will be able in one month more to send you a sum which I hope will be sufficient to pay the debts which I contracted before I left home.

I wrote you a letter dated 11th November giving you an account of my being a prisoner with the French army, I must inform you that I was very fortunate in getting away when I did for there was an order from France to detain every medical officer

and not to exchange them upon any account whatever owing I suppose to some conduct of ours at Flushing.^[42] The sickness in the army is getting somewhat better but a number of the medical men have fallen sick within these few days four or five have died and I am extremely sorry to say that the staff surgeon (Mr Lindsay) to whom I was attached in the General Hospital before I went up the country is among the number. By the sick returns it is found that we have lost a very strong regiment every month by deaths. It is reported that the army is moving towards Abrantes and Coimbra, in my opinion the fine elevated situation of Abrantes and some of the neighbouring towns will be much more healthy for the troops than the low marshy plains upon the Guadiana. I am now put in General Orders Assistant Surgeon to the 24th Infantry. I have dined two or three times with the Colonel (Drummond) who was wounded at the Battle of Talavera and is going to England for the recovery of his health, he shewed me a return of the Battalion which has only about 300 men able to duty and when we marched up the country last May it was nearly 1000 effective. I am pretty certain I trouble you too much with news but it is owing to my receiving so few letters from you so that I have no other subject to write upon.

You must have received my letter some time ago so I may expect a long letter from you in a few days.

Give my compliments to all friends.

I remain, dear brother, yours affectionately,
G Hilson

9. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Lisbon
1 February 1810

James Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

You cannot conceive the pleasure it gave me to receive a letter from you. I suppose you have wrote several times but I never had the fortune to get any of them till I received this which is dated the 31st December. I received a letter from Adam dated 8th November giving me the sorry intelligence of the death of my Father. I am very sorry to hear that my Mother still labours under that complaint of her stomach.

Since we have lost our father I hope that our mother may be long preserved to us for nothing would give me greater pleasure than for once more to see one of the best of women.

⁴² Flushing (Vlissingen) had been bombarded and then taken by the British in August 1809.

I have been in Lisbon ever since I arrived from my last excursion and I am happy to inform you that I am now not only recovered from my former illness but I never was in better health in my life. I think I am likely to remain here for some time for the hospital is going to be broke up at Elvas and all the sick are coming down to this place.

I was somewhat disappointed when the last papers arrived to find that all the other medical men who were appointed to different regiments in this country at the same time with me have been all Gazetted but myself but the Colonel of the 24th (whom I have been attending for some time and is now gone to England) says it is owing to some mistake and he has faithfully promised to get it rectified as soon as he arrives in England. Although it is in the way of promotion to be made a Regimental Assistant yet I care very little about it as I find myself very comfortable in my present situation and besides my pay at present is somewhat better.

I have not got any news here worth mentioning, I dare say we will have the French down upon us in two or three months. It is generally thought here that we will stay till we are drove into the sea but I think there will be some difficulty in doing that for if we get (as it is reported) a reinforcement of ten thousand men that will make the British upwards of 30,000 while that of the Portuguese will be somewhat greater and I assure you that some of the Portuguese Regiments are now very respectable in point of discipline. The Cameron Highlanders and the 13th Light Dragoons have lately landed and are to proceed to the army as soon as possible.

The only reason for my not writing to you was owing to my not knowing your directions and neither of the two letters that I have by chance received from Adam had it in them you must not accuse me James of want of brotherly love. Send my respects to the people in Hassendean as I am not certain whether I shall write to any of them by this packet or not. I hope I shall have another letter from you in a short time so I remain

Dear Brother, yours affectionately B [*sic*],
Gavin Hilson

10. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Lisbon
11 February 1810

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I am taking up a few minutes to inform you that I am again about to join the 24th Regiment which is quartered near Viseu. I will set off tomorrow morning and expect to arrive at the Regiment in twelve or fourteen days, it is about 200 miles from Lisbon to Viseu.

I wrote to James some time ago which I hope he would receive for he accuses me very severely of always writing to you. I met with Mr Anderson^[43] Assistant Surgeon of the 79th Regiment a few days ago who informed [me] of several things and likewise that I am now become an uncle by Alison having a young son. I had very little conversation with him as he was busy at the time about buying a mule but just before he had bought it the Regiment received orders to embark. The 94th and the 87th have likewise embarked and have all sailed for Cadiz where I suppose they will soon have the French throwing shells among them for they have got possession of Seville and I believe by this time near Cadiz and my opinion of the business is that as soon as they have subdued the South of Spain (which I suppose is done already) they will then face to the right and overrun the province of Alentejo and the Kingdom of Algarve while the other army which is about Salamanca will march right down upon the British Army.

I like well enough to go again up the country as it is a part of it that I have not seen before but I must confess that I would have liked to stay in Lisbon as it has put me to a good deal of expense in fitting out for the journey.

You must excuse the shortness of this letter as it is now past eleven O'clock at night and I must be early up in the morning.

Give my compliments to all friends so

I remain, Dear Adam, your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

PS I will write to you as soon as I get to the end of my journey.

11. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Mangualde eight miles southwest of Vizeu^[44]
10 March 1810

Adam Hilson, Hassenden

Dear Brother,

I have begun to write you a few lines as I promised now that I have arrived at the end of my journey. I set out on the 12th February and arrived on the 26th of the same month. For two or three days at first I had very bad weather it having rained continuously but the weather afterwards cleared up so I got on very well. In the whole course of my march I found the people as in other parts of Portugal in general hospitable. When I arrived at this place I was very well received by the Officers of

⁴³ Andrew Anderson (1784-1860). See the Introduction.

⁴⁴ Viseu.

the Regiment whom I have not seen since I parted with them at Plasencia. General Cameron's Brigade^[45] is at this place which consists of the 24th 2nd battalion, 42nd and 61st Regiments. The whole brigade amounts to little more than 1000. I was over at Vizeu the other day with some sick of the Brigade and I brakefasted [*sic*] with the Inspector of Hospitals Dr Franck^[46] and he informed me that he had wrote to the Medical Board about my not being appointed to the 24th but he has promised that if there is no vacancy in the 24th which he doubts there is not he has promised to appoint me to the 94th Scotch Brigade. We had also a long discussion about trout fishing, he has frequently come from England to Roxburghshire to fish trout in the Tweed and Teviot and he shewed me some flies that he had bought in Langholm.

We have at present but little news, it has been reported that a party of the 95th had taken a foraging party of French Cavalry. The French were also before Badajos and demanded rations for Sixty Thousand men which was refused. When they appeared off Badajos General Hill's Division^[47] which was stationed at Abrantes went across the Tagus and it was also reported that Marshal Berisford^[48] had gone into Alentejo with ten thousand men.

All the way up to this place I saw nothing but preparation for war. When I came to Livia I saw three native Regiments busy learning the use of the flintlock, at Condexia^[49] was a park of Portuguese Artillery of 24 pieces and at Coimbra was stationed two Brigades of British Artillery, four Portuguese Regiments of the line and four light Battalions. Various are the opinions respecting the future events in this country, some imagine that we will be able to fight them others think that as soon as they advance we will march down to Lisbon and embark.

I have not received any more letters since I received the one from James. When you receive this write to him and tell him that I will write him as soon as I have any news. Be sure to remember me to my Mother and Alison and Agnes and be sure to write soon all the news and likewise what is become of Adam Trotter and what my aunt has made of Little Deacon and if Margaret has got married to John Turnbull Esq. So I only wish that the first letter I may receive may inform me that you are all in good health as I am at present –

I remain, Dear Adam, your affectionate Brother,
Gavin Hilson

PS Direct as before.

⁴⁵ The 2nd Brigade of the 1st Division was commanded by Brigadier-general Sir Alan Cameron of Erracht (1753-1828).

⁴⁶ Dr James Franck (d.1843) was Inspector of Hospitals for the British Army in the Peninsula from 1808 to 1811.

⁴⁷ The 2nd Division was commanded by Major-general Rowland Hill (1772-1842).

⁴⁸ Sir William Beresford (1768-1854), marshal of the Portuguese Army.

⁴⁹ Condeixa.

12. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Cortico
10 May 1810

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I suppose you will have been looking out for a letter from me for some time past. I would have wrote you sooner but the delay has been occasioned by a sudden movement in the army. About ten days ago we received an order about 4 o'clock in the morning to march towards the frontier in consequence of the French having made their appearance between Ciudad Rodrigo^[50] and Almeida. All the troops both Portuguese and English which were about Vizeu and Coimbra marched at the same time. We arrived in two days at a village called Linhares but that village being found not sufficiently large to maintain the whole Brigade the 24th Regiment marched to this village which is about 4 miles below Celorico where Head Quarters is at present. The French have again fallen back and the Portuguese army is again marching back to Coimbra but all the British troops shall keep in the same position but it is thought that some of the Brigade will be obliged to fall back as provisions are rather getting scarce. In this village we pay sixpence for as much bread as one could buy in England for two pence. Milk is about four times per pint and wine which in past times was sold for about 3d per pint is now 6 or 7d per pint.

The weather in this part of the country is as yet very bad but as soon as it clears up I dare say that the army will go into huts as there has been some General Orders issued respecting tents for the officers.

It is thought that there will be little fighting in this part till after the reduction of Cadiz as [the] most part of the enemy force is employed in Andalusia.^[51] The force that is opposite us is reported not to exceed thirty thousand which if double the number is not able to make any impression on this country.

I wrote to James some time ago and likewise have received a letter from him dated 1st April giving me an account of his losses which I am very sorry for. I also received a letter from you which was conveyed to London by the Hon Miss Elliot and was very happy to know all the home affairs which it informed me of. I dare say that my Mother thinks that I write very few letters but you must inform her that it is with difficulty that I can procure paper and besides this village is so wretched that it is some trouble to find a table to write upon. Give my respects to my mother and tell her that I am in very good health and quite ready to commence another campaign,

⁵⁰ *i.e.* Ciudad Rodrigo.

⁵¹ The Spanish naval base of Cadiz had been besieged by the French since February 1810. Contrary to Hilson's expectations, the French failed to capture it and finally withdrew in August 1812.

give also my respects to Alison and Agnes, tell the former to take good care of young John or Robert (for I have forgotten what his name was) and the latter to take good care of my mother.

I remain, Dear Adam, your affectionate Brother,
Gavin Hilson

PS I expect a letter from you soon to give me some news. I will write you again if I am able before any other event takes place. Excuse my bad pen.

13. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Lisbon
25 September 1810

Dear Brother,^[52]

You will have been looking out for a letter from me for some time past but I have never a proper opportunity till I arrived at this place.

About 10 weeks ago I wrote a letter to James informing him that I had got leave to go down to Coimbra on occasion of severe pains which I had in my loins. When I arrived that place the senior medical officer conceived that I was able to do the duty of the Cavalry Regiment which was in a village called Soure so he sent me out to that place [and] I remained there till the Depot was broke up and then [went] back to Coimbra and was shortly afterwards sent by sea to this place with two hundred sick.

I have not yet joined the 4th Dragoons but I have one of them as a patient and have also got [a] very good billet in this place. I hope I shall get physically [*illegible – ink faded*] in a short time [*illegible – ink faded*]. The army is at present little more than 3 leagues from Coimbra. The French are in Celorico and Vizeu and it is said that a battle is clearly expected at the bridge of Marcella but I don't think there will be any fighting till the army retreat and join General Hill who is said to be falling back from [*illegible – ink faded*]. The 79th had marched up the country before I arrived so I did not see Mr Anderson. The 50th 88th and 94th with the Duke of Brunswick and Oels Corp^[53] are in this town but I dare say they will march in a few days for the army. I received a letter from you about a month ago and was very much disturbed to think that Mr Usher^[54] and his [*illegible – ink faded*] should be so long

⁵² Sections of the original letter are now illegible partly due to the ink having faded and partly due to the paper being damaged.

⁵³ Frederick William (1771-1815), duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg and Oels, was the commander of the Brunswick Ducal Field-Corps. When it entered British service in 1809, it became the Brunswick Oels Jäger and the Brunswick Oels Hussars.

⁵⁴ There were a number of Ushers in Roxburghshire at this time, including Thomas Usher of Courthill, a former writer (lawyer) in Hawick and late sheriff substitute for Roxburghshire.

without money. I am afraid that I shall still be unable to send any on account of being appointed to this Regiment. From the moment I am able to join I will have to have a good horse which at least cost me thirty pounds and besides I will have to purchase the uniform of the Regiment which will be very expensive. It is very expensive marching about in the manner that I have done that I declare for the most part that I have not been able to save a couple of dollars.

I am astonished to hear that [?Gavin] Trotter has not [*page damaged*]

[*the surviving letter ends here*]

14. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Lisbon
13 October 1810

James Hilson, to the care of Mr William Jugg, Highland Laddy Lane, Carlisle^[55]

Dear Brother,

I wrote to Adam some time ago informing him of my arrival in this town. I am still troubled with the rheumatic pains which I mentioned to you in my last letter. The other day a Medical Board sat upon the state of my health and recommended me for 6 weeks leave of absence to go to Caldos^[56] to try the warm baths but on account of the retreat of the army I have not been able to go. When the six weeks leave which I have got are expired another Medical Board will sit upon the state of my health and if I am not better before that time I will apply for leave to go to England as I seem to recover but slowly in this country. I would have given anything to have been able to join my regiment at this time when they are close in the face of the enemy but I must just wait with patience.

You will be astonished to hear of the whole army being only 5 or 6 leagues from this place. After the battle which was fought near Coimbra the army continued to retreat until they arrived at the strong positions about 5 leagues from this place.^[57] There the whole army is concentrated and it is supposed will give the enemy battle as soon as they advance. Our Army occupies the different heights from a little on this side of Villa Franca^[58] on the Tagus to the sea. It is said that since the last reinforcements arrived from England and Cadiz etc. that we have upwards of 30,000

⁵⁵ Highland Laddie Lane ran between Blackfriars Street and English Street, Carlisle.

⁵⁶ Caldas da Rainha.

⁵⁷ After repulsing the French at Buçaco on 27 September, the British and Portuguese had retreated behind the Lines of Torres Vedras, a series of forts and other defences recently built to defend Lisbon.

⁵⁸ Vila Franca de Xira.

muskets in the field exclusion of Cavalry and Artillery. The Portuguese regular army and militia are said to be upwards of 40,000 and the Regiment which was engaged in the last action behave uncommonly well so I dare say you will soon hear of one of the terriblest battles that has been fought in a long time.

This town is crowded with the poor inhabitants of the country that have flocked to this place from every quarter. I am told that the distress of the poor inhabitants of the different towns through which our army retreated was beyond every thing. Every one seeking his safety by flight and leaving most part of their goods to be plundered by the enemy.

I have not received a letter from you for a long time now. Excuse me being rather brief for I believe the mail closes in half an hour.

I remain, Dear James, Your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

PS The news just now are that we have taken some hundreds of Cavalry and that the 16th Dragoons have recovered some guns that had been taken by the enemy but I cannot say for the truth of it.

15. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Belem
13 March 1811

James Hilson, Joiner, Highland Laddy Lane, Carlisle

Dear Brother

I am happy to inform you that I still continue perfectly well and am going to set out tomorrow to join my Regiment.

You will have heard before this reach you that the French are retreating so I am afraid I will have a long march before I reach my Regiment. The Head Quarters of our Army was on the 8th at Thomar^[59] and it is reported today that some of the troops have reached Coimbra. There has been some smart skirmishing with the rear guard of the enemy.

I can assure you it has cost me an immense amount of money to fit myself out to join. I have been obliged to buy two horses which stands me upwards of 130 Spanish Dollars and a new Regimental coat has cost 56 dollars.

I have not received a letter from you or Adam this long time but I will now most likely receive them more regular when I have joined.

⁵⁹ Tomar.

I believe that I am very much wanted at the Regiment now for the surgeon is going home in a short time to retire on full pay having been thirty years in the service and the other Assistant is recommended for the Surgery of the 44th Regiment which will make me the senior assistant in the 4th Dragoons.^[60]

Send my compliments to my mother (for she does not like to be forgot in any of my letters) and all other friends about Hassendean. I will write to Adam shortly after I have joined.

I remain, Dear James, your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

Direct letters Mr G Hilson, Asst. Surgeon 4th Dragoons, Portugal.

PS in one of your letters you desired me to enquire about a soldier of the 31st Regiment but having lost the letter I have forgot his name. GH

16. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Villa Franca^[61]
28 May 1811

Dear James,^[62]

A few days ago I received your letter dated the 28th April. I intended to have wrote to you some time since but when I have informed you what I have been doing I dare say you will excuse the delay.^[63]

The last letter I wrote to Adam was dated the 23rd April giving him an account of what I have been doing until that time. Shortly after that I marched with the right wing of the Regiment to a place called Usagre, from there to Lerena^[64] where we were joined by five hundred Spanish Cavalry under the Conde de Pena^[65] from there we marched to a town called Asuaga^[66] where the French had about 800 Cavalry and

⁶⁰ Hilson was mistaken in this belief. See the Introduction.

⁶¹ Villafranca de los Barros.

⁶² The original letter is torn on all its folds and has a piece of parchment stitched to the back to hold it together, which makes part of it impossible to read. Rather than clutter the transcript with repeated [*page damaged*] notes, these parts have been indicated with [...].

⁶³ Hilson's regiment had taken part in the battle of Albuera, a major engagement fought on 16 May between the Allies and the French Army of the South.

⁶⁴ Llerena.

⁶⁵ Manuel de Lapeña y Ruiz del Sotillo (1762-1820).

⁶⁶ Azuaga.

Infantry but as soon as Colonel Coburn^[67] who had a Brigade of British Infantry and some Cavalry advanced in another direction they evacuated the place and retired to Guadalcanal.

As there never had been any British Troops here before, the joy which the people received [us] was uncommonly great. The women were huzzaing out of the windows and the men and boys throwing their hats in the air for joy.

Next day we marched to a village called Valverde^[68] at the foot of the Siera Morena^[69] and having learned that the enemy had evacuated Guadalcanal (as they imagined that our whole army was advancing) we went back to Lerena where we left the Spanish Cavalry and marched back to Usagre but we had not remained there many days before we were informed that the Duke of Dalmatia^[70] had collected nearly all the forces in the south of Spain and was marching towards us for the purpose of raising the siege of Badajos. On the 11th the enemies Light Cavalry were in sight so we remained under cover all night and next morning we retired to Villa Franca where we again joined the Brigade. On the 13th we retired to Santa Martha^[71] where we were joined by the 13th Light Dragoons and Portuguese Cavalry. At day break in the morning of the 15th we began to retire as the whole French Cavalry was just in the neighbourhood. There was a good deal of skirmishes with our rear guard and the advance of the enemy but I dont think there was any loss or hurt on either side.

On the afternoon we arrived at Albuera where the whole army was collected except one Brigade of British Infantry that was still before Badajos.

Albuera is a small village situated on the left bank of a small river which runs into the Guadiana and at this village there is a bridge across but the river is fordable in many places above the bridge. The right bank has a gentle ascent and terminates in a wood where the French were encamped. The left bank is considerably higher and more perpendicular.

Our first line which consisted chiefly of Spanish and Portuguese Infantry extended from some way below the village along the heights towards some lofty mountains on our right but did not reach the foot of the mountains by a mile or two. Our second line which consisted chiefly of British and Portuguese was some way in rear of the other and completely out of sight of the enemy. The Portuguese Cavalry were on the left and the British and Spanish on the right of the line.

About 8 or 9 Oclock in the morning of the 16th the enemies Cavalry began to cross and were followed by their Infantry and Artillery. Their Cavalry advanced upon our right and a troop of British Horse Artillery that was stationed upon the height immediately opened upon them and did them considerable mischief. Their Artillery shortly after began to play and they threw shot and shells in abundance on to our Cavalry. The enemies Cavalry amounted to 4000 and the combined cavalry on our

⁶⁷ Lieutenant-colonel John Colborne (1778-1863).

⁶⁸ Valverde de Llerena.

⁶⁹ Sierra Morena.

⁷⁰ The aforementioned Marshal de Sout.

⁷¹ Santa Marta.

right certainly did not exceed 2500 so that our Cavalry were obliged to retire before them and by that means the enemy completely gained the rising ground on our right.

By this time the British Infantry in the 2nd line had formed themselves into columns of Brigade and had marched to the right of the first line and had again deployed in line forming almost a right angle with the first line. Some of the Regiment had scarcely got in line when the French Infantry came to the top of a rising ground in their front about 30 paces from the British Infantry and I dare say that the most destructive fire commenced that ever was carried on by two contending parties.

Just at this time some Polish Cavalry who are armed with [...] and charged the 3rd Regiment or Buffs (just at the time when most of them had discharged their fire into the French Infantry on the higher ground) and I am sorry to say they went right through them. The Polish Cavalry again formed up and charged a column of Portuguese Infantry that were in rear of the Buffs but they were bravely repulsed. At this time two squadrons of our Regiment charged the Poles but after exchanging a few blows they were obliged to retire on account of the numbers of the enemy who had nearly surrounded them. We had 3 officers made prisoners and two or [...] wounded and about twenty men killed and wounded.

Then [...]the B[...] and also of the Spanish Infantry [...] up [...] and at last the French were obliged to [...]. The Buffs [...] their standard^[72] and I believe the 2nd Battalion 48th and [...] ^[73] lost both. There was little firing of Infantry on the left but the can[...]ing was kept up the whole day.

I cannot inform you exactly what our loss is but I should conceive it to be upwards of 4000. It is said that the enemy have lost 10000 men.^[74] Just when the firing ceased on the right I ran over the field and it was the most dismal sight I have ever saw, the ground was literally covered with dead bodies.

On the night the 17th May they began to retire from their encampment ground on the other side of the river [...] followed their rear guard but did not engage with them. When we arrived at Almenralejo^[75] we found 300 of their wounded where they [...] retired beyond Usagre and on the 25th our Cavalry were encamped on this side of the town. Their cavalry again advanced and about 500 of them crossed the bridge and formed up on this side. The Heavy Brigade immediately charged them. Those which the 3rd Dragoons charged were chased up before a wall so they could not escape and nearly all those men not made prisoners were put to the sword. Our Regiment also killed a great number but a number also escaped into the town.

I did not see this affair as I was left [*page damaged* – ?here] with some sick and wounded. The 31st Regiment was at Albuera and was terribly cut up. As soon as I come up with them I will enquire after the young man. The Brigade has again fallen

⁷² The Buffs lost their colours at the battle, so the missing word will be 'lost' or a synonym.

⁷³ The other battalion to lose their colours at the battle was the 2nd Battalion 66th Regiment.

⁷⁴ The number of killed or wounded on each side is now estimated at between six and eight thousand for the French, and between six and seven thousand for the Allies.

⁷⁵ Almenralejo.

back to this place and I dare say we will remain until [sic] the fall of Badajos if the French will allow us. I am in excellent health.

I remain your affectionate Brother,
G. Hilson

Excuse my bad pen and [illegible] of room I will write Adam as soon as I have something more to inform him about G.H.^[76]

17. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Camp near Campo Maior
27 June 1811

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Adam,

I wrote a long letter to James about a month ago giving him the whole history of what had been going on since I wrote to you before. I shall as usual give you a short account of what we have been doing for two to three weeks.

We remained at Villa Franca until 12th June when the French again began to advance, we retired by slow marches to the Guadiana and the siege of Badajos had been raised and all the Infantry had crossed the river. We also forded it and marched to an olive grove near Elvas where we were encamped for two days and then marched to our present encampment ground.

About four days ago 1500 French Cavalry advanced close to Campo Maior, our Brigade of Cavalry immediately advanced towards them but there was nothing done as we were much inferior in numbers and they were afraid to ascend the heights which we were placed upon. It was very fine to see the two hostile parties drawn up in line within four hundred yards of one another.

We are very much harassed now on account of being obliged to turn out one hour before day light every morning.

I don't think the French will be strong enough to fight us here as it is reported that they have been obliged to detach a considerable part of their army towards Seville again to keep Blake^[77] in check.

I have not received a letter from you this long time, I got one from James when I was at Villa Franca and was sorry to hear that cousin Nanny was very bad and also of the death of Mr [illegible] wife.

⁷⁶ This post script was written along the edge of the third page of the letter.

⁷⁷ The Spanish general Joaquín Blake y Joyes (1759-1827).

I hope my poor mother is in good a state of health as can be expected. Tell her that I am very bad off for milk and butter and also a piece of fresh cheese. Give my compliments to Alison and Agnes &

I remain, Dear Adam, your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

18. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Evora
5 August 1811

James Hilson, Highland Laddie, Carlisle

Dear Brother,

The last letter I wrote to Adam was dated from the camp near Campo Maior. Shortly after that the Regiment went into two small villages St Olaya⁷⁸ and Barbacena where we remained sometime and about the 20th we set out for this place and arrived about the 23rd but the Brigade had only rested here 8 or 9 days when it was ordered to march to Portalegre and there being two men of our Regiment extremely ill and not being able to go with the Regiment so I was obliged to stay behind with them but as they are now a good deal better I will set out with them tomorrow.

Evora is by far the finest town that I have seen in Alentejo but there is scarcely anything in it worth seeing except the Cathedral, the altar of which is entirely made of beautiful marble. There is also a good collection of books in the Bishop's library but there are very few in English. Since the Regiment left this place I have had nothing to amuse myself with so I some times go to the convents and talk with the nuns through the iron gates. The chief discussion is how old are you are you married? Is your father and mother alive? How many brothers and sisters do you have etc.

I sometimes take a ride or hitch a way into the country and look at the country people bratling out their corn. I think it is about a month since they finish the cutting of the corn and they are now happily employed in bratling it out for [they] do not build it up in stacks as we do at home but they finish it all at once and for this purpose they have six or seven horses or mules tied in line and make them go round treading upon the corn until it is all tired out and thin, by the assistance of the wind they make both straw and chaff fly off at the same time.

When I arrived at this place I saw John Sharrock he was here along with attachments of the different Regiments of the Brigade that was destroyed at Albuera, you may tell his mother that he is in perfect health.

⁷⁸ Santa Eulália.

We had a little bit more fighting since last only the loss of the piquet of the 11th Dragoons, I don't think there will be any more fighting as all the Army has gone into quarters [...]^[79]

19. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Chavelhas
9 September 1811

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I wrote a letter to James when I was at a place called Alpedrinha and informed him of what has been going on since I wrote to you from the camp near Campo Maior. Shortly after I wrote to you we went into two small villages where we remained a few days and then received a rout to march to Evora where we expected to remain for one or two months but we had been there little more than 8 or 9 days when we were ordered to march to Portalegre and from there to Castillo Branco and then marched to Alpedrinha where we halted some days and then we marched for this place.

The Regiment is at present lying in three wretched villages the one that I am at is about 11 leagues from Almeida on the left bank of the Coa. I went the other day to see Almeida. The works are nearly all destroyed and most part of the houses are blown to pieces.

Some part of the army are in front of Ciudad Rodrigo and the battering train^[80] is on its way from Oporto for the reduction of that place, but it is thought that it is only a feint for the purpose of shewing the enemy from the south.

It is reported that some of the Lancers of the Vistula that were so successful in br[e]aking our Infantry at Albuera have made their appearance not far from Ciudad Rodrigo but I think they will do well to stand clear of our Heavy Cavalry that have lately arrived from England.

I have not received a letter from you or James for an immense time.

Give my respects to my mother and tell her that I am in perfect health also to Alison and Agnes

I remain, Dear Brother, your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

⁷⁹ From here on, the right-hand side of the letter is missing and the text on the surviving piece makes no sense. The truncated postscript, however, appears to report on the decision by Wellesley to besiege Ciudad Rodrigo, and to mention Hilson's move to Alpedrinha.

⁸⁰ A train of artillery for use in a siege.

20. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Alverca
14 October 1811

James Hilson, Highland Laddy Lane, Carlisle

Dear Brother,

I received a letter from Adam a few days ago but have not been fortunate to receive one from you for a long time.

I believe the last letter I wrote to you was from Alpedrinha, shortly after that we marched to some small villages on the left bank of the Coa nearly opposite Almeida where we halted some time and on the 23rd ultimo^[81] the Brigade crossed the Coa river at Castello Mendo^[82] and marched to some of the frontier villages of Spain but I was that day detached with the sick of the Brigade to Cellorico^[83] so I did not see any of the French army as I did not join until the 28th ultimo when our army was encamped in front of Sabugal. But I am told that on the 25th, the 11th Light Dragoons, 1st Hussars, King's German Legion, 5th and 77 Regiment of Foot with 21st Portuguese Regiment and a Brigade of Portuguese Artillery behaved in the most gallant manner.^[84] The troops were attacked near Fuente Guinaldo^[85] by between 30 and 40 Squadrons of Cavalry with its pieces of cannon and 14 Battalions of Infantry with some cannon. The Portuguese Artillery were cut down at their guns but the 15th Regiment charged the French Cavalry and retook them. Our troops were then ordered to return; the 5th and 77th retired in one square and the 21st Portuguese in another. The French Cavalry charged the faces of the British square but seeing that the troops could not be shaken they contented themselves by firing upon them with the artillery. The 11th L.D. and the 1st Hussars K.G.L. charged 10 or 11 times and in every charge the French cavalry gave way. I have not heard what our loss is nor that of the enemies.

On 27th our army occupied a position near Albergueria^[86] and a French General (Mont Brune)^[87] reconnoitred it and reported to Marmont^[88] that it could be taken on either flank so he brought up his army in the course of the day and shewed us a

⁸¹ *i.e.* 23 September.

⁸² Castelo Mendo.

⁸³ Celorico.

⁸⁴ Hilson goes on to describe the battle of El Bodón, a rearguard action fought on 25 September by the Allies against a much larger French force.

⁸⁵ Fuenteguinaldo.

⁸⁶ Albergueria de Argañán.

⁸⁷ General Louis Pierre, comte Montbrun (1770-1812).

⁸⁸ Marshal Auguste Frédéric Louis Viesse de Marmont (1774-1852).

front of nearly 60,000 men but our army fell back in the night towards Sabugal and the French again marched back towards Placencia. They have thrown plenty of provisions into Ciudad Rodrigo and our army has again gone into quarters so I don't think they will be any more fighting this winter.

I was sent up the other day as far as Ituero^[89] a small town to the right of Ciudad Rodrigo to do duty with the 11th Hussars as all their medical men have been detached but I was soon relieved and sent back again to my Regiment. You will see that I have scarcely ever halted more than a week together since I joined the Regiment, however I cannot say that I ever was in a better state of health than I am at present. I will not write any account of these affairs to Adam so you had better shew him this letter as he is angry with me for not writing him an account of the Battle of Albuera. Remember me to all my friends.

I remain your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

21. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Moimenta^[90]
20 December 1811

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I received your letter dated the 18th August and also from James of the date November 9th. I am happy to learn that you are all pretty well except my mother who still labours under the painful complaint of her stomach. I am sorry to say that I cannot think of anything at present that would be of service to her as she has already tried so many medicines without effect.

I was very much pleased with the news you gave me concerning Mrs Turnbull's family and I am happy to hear that James Trotter is getting forward on the medical profession but I would not advise him to come into the army without he has actually a love for it, I am inclined to think that the Navy is preferable.

I wrote a letter to Cousin Jean Turnbull which I hope she would receive. The Brigade remained in Alverca and the adjacent villages until the 23rd November when we were again marched to the front and after having remained two or three days without seeing any Frenchmen we again marched back and took up our quarters in this neighbourhood.

⁸⁹ Ituero de Azaba.

⁹⁰ Moimenta da Serra.

Moimenta and also the other villages in which the Brigade is stationed is placed close under the Estrella^[91] Mountains. The other day I went to the top of them they are immensely high and are at present covered with snow the sight of which brought me in mind of Scotland for since I left home I have not trod upon snow before. There is an immense number of wolves about the mountains and this year the peasants have killed two or three of them upon the very skirts of the villages but although I frequently go out a shooting I have not been able to fall in with any of them.

When I was quartered near Alverca I was visited by Dr Bird [*sic*] who studied medicine with me in Edinburgh I dare say you must remember my frequently having talked of him being a very well informed young man – he is Assistant Surgeon 61st Regiment and was on his way to join.^[92]

We march from this place on 28th Instant to take our turn of the advanced duty, I suppose we will be quartered in the villages within 6 miles of Ciudad Rodrigo. We will be relieved by some other Brigade in the course of one month or six weeks and I dare say we will return to our quarters in the rear as there will be no more fighting until April or May.

The Army is at present three months pay in arrears, some time ago the army was very unhealthy but the sick now decreasing 1000 per month.

You may inform my mother that I am in perfect health at present in a very good quarter and my landlord is a very civil man. My Old Landlady likes me so well that she wishes I would remain a twelve months in her house. There is only one thing in which we cannot agree viz in point of religion. She advises me strongly to turn Roman Catholic for she says that although I do profess to believe in our saviour yet unless I be baptised in the Roman Catholic Church I cannot be saved.

Remember me to John Fallow and Alison, to Agnes and Robert Scott, to cousin Jean Turnbull, to the Laird of Greenhouse,^[93] to cousin Margaret Trotter, to Aunt Milly and to Milly Dods and her husband for she must be married long before this time.

You will think that this is something strange my wishing to be remembered to so many friends but one must write something foolish near the new year.

I remain, Dear Adam,
Your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

⁹¹ Estrela.

⁹² Samuel Burd had been assistant surgeon to the 61st Regiment of Foot since 21 December 1809. He had graduated MD at the University of Edinburgh earlier that year.

⁹³ The lands of Greenhouse lay around three miles to the north east of Hassendean. They were in the possession of the Davidson family.

22. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO ADAM HILSON

Azuaga
31 March 1812

Adam Hilson, Hassendean

Dear Brother,

I dare say you will have been expecting a letter from me for some time past but I dare say you will be surprised when you see where my letter is dated from. I wrote to James when I was at Villa de Cervo^[94] giving him a short account of the storming of Rodrigo. Shortly after the fall of that fortress our Regiment marched to a town in Portugal called Covilha where we remained sometime and then received an order to march to Villa Vicosa^[95] but we remained there only a few days when we were ordered to cross the Guadiana at Juromenha and march to Olivenza here the Brigade was centred which at present consists of the 5th Dragoon Guards and the 3rd and 4th Dragoons. The 3rd Dragoon Guards which were in Brigade with our Regiment are now brigaded with the Royal Dragoons. On the 17th Instant the Brigade moved forward to a place called Alandroal and next day we marched to Fuente del Mestre^[96] from there to Los Santos^[97] and Zafra where we remained a few days. The division of Infantry also marched up with us and the whole were under the command of Sir Thomas Graham.^[98] About the 25th we again marched forward to endeavour to surprise about 1500 French who were in Llerena so we marched nearly all day and halted a few hours in a wood about 6 miles from Llerena. About 3 in the morning we moved forward but the enemy were apprised of our advance and had made every preparation to leave the place. Their piquet fired into the column of Infantry and killed the Assistant Surgeon of the 51st and wounded another officer of the same Regiment. Two days after we marched to a place called Berlanga where our Brigade drove away some of the enemies cavalry. One of our officers had his horse shot whilst commanding our skirmishes [*sic*] and would have been made prisoner if it had not been for the bravery of two of our men who galloped up to and shot a French Hussar's horse then drew their swords and succeeded in keeping back three or four French Dragoons until the officer had come to run to the rear. Next day we drove them from this place but as they are now collected in considerable force the infantry have marched to the rear and we are also ready to retire at a moments notice as soon as they appear in force. We are informed Soult is making every exertion to come to the

⁹⁴ Perhaps Villar de Cervo, which is to the north west of Ciudad Rodrigo.

⁹⁵ Vila Viçosa.

⁹⁶ Fuente del Maestro.

⁹⁷ Los Santos de Maimona.

⁹⁸ General Sir Thomas Graham (1748-1843), 1st Baron Lynedoch.

relief of Badajos but I am inclined to think that he will be too late for we are informed here that the whole of the guns upon the 2nd parallel (which is within 200 yards of the town) open tomorrow. It is now a long time since I received a letter from you or James. I still keep in perfect health. Remember me to all friends but I have time to say no more as the letters are just going and we are also anxiously looking out for the approach of the enemy.

I remain, dear Adam, your affectionate brother,
G Hilson

I will write to James in a few days.

23. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Salamanca
14 September 1812

James Hilson, Highland laddy lane, Carlisle

Dear James,

I wrote to you sometime before the battle of the 22nd July^[99] but on account of moving about I was unable to send it. I would have wrote you after the battle but it happened to be my turn of duty to go to the rear the night before it with some sick of the Brigade so I did not write you an account of the battle as I was not there.

I was detained here after the battle to take charge of part of the sick and wounded and the duty has been so very great that I never have found an opportunity before of writing.

In the letter I wrote to you I gave you an account of our march from Rodrigo as far up the Douro but as you will have seen the Earl of Wellingtons dispatches^[100] I shall not now say anything about.

On the retreat from Douro our Brigade was always in the rear so that we had the pleasure of being cannonaded almost every day, indeed one would have thought that we were making the best of our way to Portugal but Marmont committed a blunder in extending his left too much which was the occasion of our gaining the battle. I dont know whether his Lordship mentions our Brigade or not in his dispatches as the Heavy Dragoons are in general not favourites of his; but I can inform you that our Regiment as well as the other Regiments of the Brigade went at full gallop through their broken ranks for about one mile and a half and killing and making hundreds of prisoners.

⁹⁹ The battle of Salamanca, where an Allied army defeated the French.

¹⁰⁰ The public dispatches of Sir Arthur Wellesley (who had been made the earl of Wellington in February 1812) were often published in British newspapers.

I have at present the convalescent Hospital under my charge and it is the most unpleasant duty I ever had. There are upwards of 1000 of them almost all perfectly well so that my chief duty is to see that they keep themselves clean and prevent them from doing mischief which I can assure is no easy task for you have no idea what rascals are in our army.

I had a letter from Adam some time ago and also one from you the other day dated 26th July. I was very happy to find that my mother and the rest of the family are in their usual state. You dont say a word on the subject of yourself but I have heard from Adam that you are about to take unto thee a wife indeed I think it is full time for you must now be growing an old fellow for I am now either twenty five or twenty six but I am not certain which.

I mentioned to Adam that I was going to send him some money but I have not as yet been able to do it on account of my being detached from the Regiment. I have about 36£ in the hands of the agents but as they have never wrote to me about it I am in doubt whether they have drawn it or not. I cannot therefore send him a bill to draw that from the agents until I hear if it is in their hands. I am at present nearly five months pay in arrears^[101] which is upwards of 60£ not a farthing of which I am able to receive on account of being detached.

If I should be likely to join the Regiment I will not write to Adam until then as I have promised so often to send him money and have always failed. I am at present quartered in a Gard[e]ners house without the walls of the town. He is very civil and gives me the Spanish Gazette to read but my man Joseph Smallwood does not like the old Lady for she will not give him any vegetables for the pot without paying up for them. This town has been a very fine place about five years ago but it is now very much disfigured as the half of the Convents and Colleges have been pulled down by the French. The great square is beautiful and the Cathedral is by far the finest building that I have yet seen in the Peninsula. For several days after the battle nothing was to be seen but illuminations and fireworks and they had one of their famous bull batings in the great square but I was so busy that I had not time to go and see it and in every street one would see the Spanish girls with castanets dancing the light bolero. The officers describe Madrid as being a beautiful place. Our Regiment left some time since and was marching towards [*illegible*] in which place I believe Head Quarters is at present.

I am sorry to find that old Aunt Nelly is in such a poor state of health. I am happy to hear that James has got a plan in a year or two he may perhaps be able to assist her a little. I am happy to inform you that I am still in perfect health, I was afraid that I would be sick from the confinement and hard labour as we are employed in helping the men 13 or 14 hours every day but that is now over and I still remain in perfect health. The wounded have done uncommonly well.

I remain your affectionate brother,
G Hilson

¹⁰¹ Hilson was not alone in this respect: no one in the army had been paid since April.

24. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Alsasua 8 Leagues in front of Vitoria^[102]
24 June 1813

James Hilson, Highland Laddy Lane, Carlisle

My Dear Brother,^[103]

I have this instant received your letter dated 23rd May. I must acknowledge I have been extremely long in writing you. When we were in winter quarters I delayed writing as I expected every day to receive one from you and ever since we commenced marching I have never had an opportunity, I believe I have not received one before since I was at Salamanca last year. The letter in which you mentioned the death of cousin Agnes Turnbull must have miscarried as I never received it.

I shall as usual give you an account of what I have been about since I last wrote you. We moved about during the winter months from one town to another for the purpose of obtaining forage for the horses and in the month of March we were stationed at a place called Lavos at the mouth of the river Mondego. We then received an order to march along the shore towards Oporto and marched to a place called Guimaraes^[104] where we halted until the 13th May when the Brigade received orders to march to Braganza. I marched 2 days with the Regiment but the Lieutenant Colonel was unfortunately seized with a liver complaint so I was obliged to return with him to Oporto. He and his wife behaved uncommonly civil to me and made me live entirely at their table whilst I remained with them.

I started from Oporto on the 23rd May and marched to Braganza on the 30th. In every place where I halted the people were uncommonly civil to me. The country is all the way mountains and the roads are the worst I ever travelled upon. When I arrived at Braganza I found that the Regiment was two days march in front of me but I was obliged to halt two days on account of a cursed Portuguese Farrier having pricked my horses foot in shoeing him. Braganza is by no means so fine a town as I expected to find it. On the 2nd May I passed the frontier and halted in a Spanish village. You would be astonished to see the sudden change of language, customs and manners. In every part of the frontier which I have crossed the change is sudden, you are in a Portuguese village where they speak the language nearly the same as they do in the heart of the country; you go a mile or a mile and a half further and you find yourself in a village where the houses language etc. are completely different and the jealousy of the bordering people is very great towards one another. A Portuguese will tell you that the Spainards are false and cowardly etc. and a Spainard conceives a

¹⁰² Vitoria-Gasteiz.

¹⁰³ The last page of this letter is damaged in a number of places. To prevent the transcript being cluttered with [*page damaged*] notes, these places are represented by [...].

¹⁰⁴ Guimarães.

Portuguese such an insignificant creation as not to be worth talking about. This hatred between the bordering people has often reminded me of the people of Roxburghshire and Northumberland.

From Braganza I followed the rout[e] which I think the Brigade had taken which was by Trabazos from that place I marched to Zamora which is a fine town with a good market but everything was exceedingly dear, from there to Toro and Valladolid which is by far the finest town that I have yet seen in Spain, from Valladolid I proceeded to Palencia where having learned that the French had blown up the Castle of Burgos and that the Army was moving to the left, I marched through several inconsiderable villages and arrived at the bridge over the Ebro as the rear of the Army was crossing but I was unable to come up with the Regiment until 19th Instant. The Brigade halted on the 20th about a league from the position which the French had taken up in front of Vitoria.^[105] On the morning of the 21st we got under arms and marched forward about one mile and then halted until the reserve Artillery had passed us and until the Brigade of Life and Horse Guards had joined us, we then moved a little more forward to a rising ground where we saw the whole French Army drawn up in order of battle and the Allied Infantry moving in columns to the attack. By this time the skirmishing had got very smart and the French were cannonading our people from various parts of the position. The position of the enemy was uncommonly strong he had an immense mountain on his left in the centre was a thick wood and several villages and he had several considerable hills on his right which answered well for his numerous artillery. It is impossible for me to describe the plan of attack nor could I distinguish where the different Divisions of the Army were placed as our Brigade and the Life Guards trotted completely off to the left of our Army. We marched over the ground where the 3rd and 7th Divisions had been fighting. There were lying dead and wounded great numbers of the 5th, 83rd, 74th and 88th [...] left the centre of their position they kept up the [...] cannonade I ever saw but they were forced from [...] with the loss of nearly all their Artillery. After [...] from the position they were pressed by the Light [...] Artillery. After the ground got a little more plain [...] off at full gallop and pursued them by the [...] the ground was so unfavourable as to prevent the [...] or I make no doubt the French would have [...] their Army [...] of the Light Dragoons did charge [...] repulsed [...] by their fire. It is said that we have [...] upwards of 120 pieces of cannon with an immense number of carriages of all descriptions and I believe a considerable quantity of money. It is reported that yesterday ten thousand French made their appearance within a league and a half of Vitoria being a reinforcement from Suchet's^[106] Army. General Pakenham^[107] has been sent after them with a sufficient number of men and it is expected they will all be made prisoners. The French are flying as fast as they are able towards France and I dare say we will be in front of the Pampiluna^[108] in two days.

¹⁰⁵ The battle of Vitoria was fought on 21 June.

¹⁰⁶ Marshal Louis-Gabriel Suchet (1770-1826).

¹⁰⁷ Adjutant-general Sir Edward Michael Pakenham (1778-1815).

¹⁰⁸ Pamplona.

The climate here is quite different from the other parts which I have seen. Yesterday we were on horseback upwards of ten hours on account of being in rear of some of the Divisions of Infantry during which time it rained continually and the night before we were encamped in a ploughed field and all the night it rained very much so you may conclude we did not sleep very sound among the clay. Past nights they had put us undercover in the villages which have been a good deal destroyed by the enemy. We are under orders to march at a moments notice but I am inclined to think that we will not move today as the infantry must be completely knocked up.

Remember me to Adam and tell him I would have wrote him long ago but I have been waiting for our Pay Master to receive a letter from the Agents^[109] as there has been a mistake about the money which I have transmitted to them. Tell him I will write to him as soon as we are settled in quarters in front of Pampiluna for I suppose we will remain in the neighbourhood of that fortress during the siege.

I am happy to find you are comfortable in a married state, give my kind love to my sister in law and tell her I will be sure to call upon you when I come to England. You must excuse my bad writing for I am obliged to write this on my knee as the French have neither left table or chairs [*two illegible words*]

I remain My Dear Brother,
your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

25. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Lerin
12 August 1813

James Hilson, Highland Laddy Lane

I wrote a letter dated the 23 July which I hope you would receive.^[110] I again sit down to write you a few lines more.

We left the village when I wrote you last next morning, we arrived in two days in front of Pamplona, a little before we arrived at Pamplona we found the only gun which the enemy had lying by the side of the road. We then learned that General Clausell^[111] had been cut off from the French Army so we set off full drive on the Saragoza^[112] road to cut him off from France but after we had marched two long days marches we found that somehow or other he had escaped us so we returned to a place

¹⁰⁹ See the Introduction.

¹¹⁰ This letter is missing from the current collection.

¹¹¹ General Bertrand Clauzel (1772-1842).

¹¹² Zaragoza.

called Tafalla where we halted nearly one month. We then received an order suddenly to march so we all conjectured that we were to go down to assist Lord Mr Bentink^[113] in giving Suchet a thrashing but we were wonderfully astonished to find ourselves marching towards Pamplona. We arrived on the evening of the 27th on the position which had been taken up by Sir Thomas Pickton^[114] we found the 3rd and the 4th Divisions occupying the heights about three miles in front of Pamplona and covering the road that leads to France. The 4th Division had been driven from the pass which they occupied in the Pyrenees but not until they had occasioned great loss to the enemy. We had some Regiments roughly handled particularly the 20th which lost upwards of 200 men. On the 28th the enemy made several attacks upon a hill which was the highest part of our position and which was defended by some Spanish troops and the 4th division but they were invariably repulsed with dreadful loss. On the 29th there was very little fighting and thousands of men on both sides were employed in burying the dead. On the 30th they were attacked by his Lordship and drawn for our hill to another with great loss in killed wounded and prisoners. I saw a lot of prisoners which had laid down their arms without firing a shot. It consisted of 34 or 35 officers and upwards of 1500 men. For two or three days following our Infantry got up with them and made many prisoners and lots of baggage fell into their hands. The loss of the Allies is said to be 6000 and that of the enemy is said to be upwards of 20,000. We were all the while placed on the right of the line so that we had but an imperfect view of the battle but it is ridiculous of my giving you any account of it as by this time you will likely have seen Lord Wellington's Dispatch which I make no doubt is as correct as the one of the Battle of Vitoria which I have seen. After the enemy had begun to retire we were sent into some villages near to Pamplona as we as we could be of no use among the mountains. I went one day with two or three other officers of the Regiment to see the Spainards fire upon the French who had come out to cut wheat. They threw several round shot which fell short of them but one shell which they threw fell right in the middle of them and I think it killed one man as he did not rise, whilst I [*page damaged*] the French returned the fire and hit the barracks [*page damaged*] work which we were in and several went over our heads so as soon as they had ceased a little we thought it high time to be off. In two or three days we marched down to this place where I suppose we will remain for some time unless Soult should again wish to try the fortune of war upon the mountains which he has been beaten from with such loss.

Remember me to my sister in law and tell Adam that I wrote him some time since and will write to him again in a short time to[o].

I remain, Dear James, your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

¹¹³ Lord William Bentinck (1774-1839).

¹¹⁴ Lieutenant-general Sir Thomas Picton (1758-1815).

26. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

Ilarraza within 1 league of Vitoria
10 February 1814

James Hilson, Highland Laddy lane, Carlisle

Dear Brother,

I wrote to Adam on 13th Ultimo^[115] and I told him to inform you that I would write to you in a few days but having since lost the opportunity of writing on account of my not being at the head quarters of the Regiment I have been unable to write until today. You will have been thinking that I have neglected you as it is some time since I wrote to you last but the truth is I am at best but a poor letter writer and as we are far in rear of the whole army and have seen nothing for a long time I have had no subjects to write about.

In the letter which I wrote to Adam I enclosed a bill for £35 which I hope he has received but should he not have received any letter before this reach you hope you will write to me immediately so that I may send him a duplicate of the bill.

The whole Regiment is at present badly off for money as we have not received any for nearly three months and there is 8 months pay arrears on the 26th Instant but we are in hope of receiving two months pay in a few days as we have heard that 400,000 pounds has arrived at Pasajes.^[116]

The Regiment has been granted leave for 6 weeks in seven or eight different villages all of which are poor and miserable places and the people in general (and particularly in the villages where we are quartered) are rather uncivil and threaten to report us to the Marquis of Wellington for the least trivial offence. Ilarraza is the village where the pursuit of the enemy terminated on the evening of the day of the battle of Vitoria and our own Regiment was quartered for that night in a wood about 500 yards from the end of the village.

Before the Regiment arrived at this village we were quartered in a very fine village on the banks of the Ebro called Mendavia but as Barley was very difficult to be procured for the horses we were obliged to move up to this place to be near the depot at Vitoria.

We expect to move up to the front almost every day as the report is that Lord Wellington is only waiting for the weather to clear up but I do not know how we are to get up as the whole country this to Bayone^[117] is completely exhausted of corn and straw. I must confess I am rather anxious to enter France. I hope Lord Wellington will be able to advance beyond Bordeaux and if there should be a space we will have a short passage to England.

¹¹⁵ *i.e.* 13 January.

¹¹⁶ Pasaia.

¹¹⁷ Bayonne.

We now talk of nothing but peace but I am in hope that there will be no peace until Bonaparte is dethroned which must inevitably be done if the war is carried on for a few months longer as the whole of Napoleon's army and conscripts which he is raising will be totally incapable of making head against the immense and war like armies of the allies. For my part I wish the war to continue some time longer because I think that in the course of twelve months I would most likely have been made Surgeon to the Regiment of Infantry and then if I had been put on half pay it would have been nearly £100 per annum where as if I am reduced as an Assistant Surgeon my half pay will only be about £50 per annum.

I had a letter from Adam some time since and he informed me that my mother had been to see you and your wife and I am happy to find that she is well pleased with her. Adam says my mother had told him that if her Maker had given her power to make a wife for you she could not possibly have made a better one. But I am sorry to find that my mother was not much benefitted by the Gilsland wells^[118] last time.

I wish you would think about writing me a letter in a short time as I have not received one from you for a long time. I see by the papers that the winter is very severe in England. Remember me to my sister in law. I have no more news at present but remain

Your affectionate Brother,
G Hilson

27. FROM GAVIN HILSON TO JAMES HILSON

From the vicinity of Toulouse
16 April 1814

James Hilson, Highland Laddy Lane, Carlisle

Dear Brother,

I have been waiting to receive a letter from you or Adam before I wrote to you but as I am placed now in a little village doing nothing I shall commence and give you a narrative of what I have been doing since I wrote you last.

We marched from the vicinity of Vitoria on 24th February and arrived at St Jean de Luz on the 3rd March. We had a very pleasant march as the weather was in general fine and the road excellent and we were every night well put up in the villages along the high road. The people are much the same in appearance as those in other parts of

¹¹⁸ Gilsland (Cumbria) was the site of a mineral spring and an associated spa resort. Hilson's mother had perhaps stayed at The Shaws, a hotel built in the 1760s to cater for the increasing number of visitors coming to take the waters.

Spain but they speak a language called basco [*i.e.* Basque] not a word of which I could understand. The vallies [*sic*] are very fertile and the sides of the mountains are even cultivated to a considerable height.

On the day we arrived at St Jean de Luz it blew a dreadful gale of wind and all the transports which were anchored in the bay to the number of 14 or 15 were driven on shore and completely wrecked and several lives were lost. Our Brigade also suffered from it as the whole of the hay which they contained was completely spoiled and on that account the poor horses had to starve. We halted a few days and then marched to the bridge which had been thrown across the Adour some way below Bayonne. The bridge consisted of a number of large boats placed at two or three yards distance from one another and five or six large cables extended from one bank of the river to the other over these boats and planks of wood being laid upon the cables it made a most excellent bridge. I had but an imperfect view of Bayonne as the enemy's advanced posts extended some way from the town. We continued our march and followed the rout[e] the army had taken and we passed through Orthes^[119] where the battle of the 27th February was fought we also passed through St Sever and we joined the Army at a place called Air.^[120] I liked the appearance of the people of St J. de Luz and of the country as far as Orthes very much. The men wore a smoke frock^[121] very much like those used in many parts of England and they wear a cap much resembling the Lowland Scotch Bonnet and the women in that part of the country bind a neck cloth about their head in a very graceful manner. Wooden shoes made somewhat like a boat with only a small bit of leather on the upper part of them are universally used in that part of the country both by men and women. All their implements of husbandry are much superior to those in Spain and I think the Farmers particularly on the banks of the Garrone^[122] cultivate their fields nearly as well as in England. The high roads are exceedingly good but the soil being very deep the byroads in wet weather are scarcely passable. During the whole of our march the people have behaved with the greatest kindness towards us and all the necessaries and even the luxuries of life are exceeding cheap indeed. I cannot see why the people should dislike us for every thing what is required for the army is paid for in read[y] money and Lord Wellington obliges the troops to observe the most rigid discipline.

Two or three days after we had joined the Army it again moved forward and on the 19th March there was some fighting but we did not see it, next day the enemy seemed inclined to defend the town of Tarbes but after the Army had moved up to attack them they retired. They shewed some troops near a wind mill on our left and the sixth division marched up to attack them but after the skirmishing had commenced they retired. General Stapleton Cotton^[123] arrived and advanced with our

¹¹⁹ Orthez.

¹²⁰ Aire-sur-l'Adour.

¹²¹ Correctly a smock frock, a loose and coarse outer garment traditionally worn by rural labourers to protect their clothes while working.

¹²² Garonne.

¹²³ Lieutenant-general Stapleton Cotton (1773-1865).

Regiment and the 3rd Dragoons and endeavoured to charge their rear guard as they were retiring over a plain but the ground was so rough that a charge could not be made. One squadron of our Regiment advanced very near a column of enemy infantry. The infantry fired a volley at it which neither touched man or horse which proves what little effect the fire of infantry has upon cavalry when they are affraid [*sic*] of being charged by them. Shortly after the enemy commenced firing suddenly upon the 3rd Dragoons from a vineyard and having opened three or four pieces of cannon upon our Regiment we were obliged to retire pretty sharply. Next day we moved forward the enemy not making any resistance and in two or three days we arrived in front of Toulouse. General Hill crossed the river some way above the town but he was obliged to return it was said on account of the badness of the roads. Two or three days afterwards the whole army with the exception of the troops under General Hill moved to [*page damaged*] and crossed the river below the town by a bridge made of [*page damaged*] but after three divisions of infantry and the brigades of cavalry had passed the bridge was obliged to be removed on account of the river having swelled exceedingly from the great quantity of rain which had fallen for several days before and on that account we were obliged to turn out every morning before day light expecting an attack from the enemy. Some days afterwards the whole Army was enabled to pass and on the morning of the 10th instant moved forward to attack the position which Soult had taken up. He had his left in the town covered by the canal and his centre and right on a hill which he had strongly entrenched and had placed numbers of heavy cannon in battery on the most advantageous parts of it. The 4th and 6th Divisions were sent round to turn the enemy's right whilst the Spanish Divisions under General Frere^[124] was to attack the centre supported by our brigade of cavalry. The Spainards moved up in very fine order and got possession of a rising ground on the left of the high road which leads to Toulouse on which rising ground the Portuguese Artillery attached to General Frere's division were shortly after placed and commenced firing upon the French batteries on the top of the hill. They began to return the fire just as our Regiment were marching up the high road and all the shot and shells which did not strike about the Portuguese Artillery struck the high road just as the men of our Regiment had passed and I being coming up in rear of the Regiment got into the thick of it. One ball struck the road close by me and knocked up the stones in my face, cut my lip slightly and filled my eyes so full of gravel that I could see no more of the battle during the day but I am now quite well again. In consequence of the attack made by the Spainards having failed our Regiment got under a dreadful cannonade but it was extremely lucky for we had only two men killed and one officer and three or four men slightly wounded. The steadiness of the Regiment under fire of grape was observed by the Artillery men in the rear. The 42nd, 91st and some other Regiments suffered dreadfully in their attacks on the enemy's right but towards night the enemy was clear from all the batteries on the hill but I believe he succeeded in getting off all his Artillery. The position was so uncommonly strong that if the enemy had defended it properly we never would have got possession of it. They

¹²⁴ General Manuel Alberto Freire de Andrade y Armijo (1767-1835).

remained in the town during the 11th and marched out in the night time and Lord Wellington entered on the morning of the 12th. On the 12th the news arrived that Napoleon had been dethroned and the people immediately hoisted the white cockades.^[125]

I suppose by this time peace has been signed so that in all probability the next letter I write to you will be from some place in England.

I hope you will be able to understand this Camperdown letter as my Aunt Nelly used to call those received from her son which were wrote in this way,^[126] however I dont think you will be able to complain of my brevity as I think there is enough in this letter to serve you and your wife [?to read for a whole] evening. Remember me to her.

Dear James,
Your Affectionate B.
G Hilson

¹²⁵ Napoleon had abdicated on 6 April, a decision formally recognised in the Treaty of Fontainebleau, signed five days later. A white cockade was the symbol of French Royalists.

¹²⁶ Part of this letter has been cross written. The allusion to Camperdown is obscure.

FURTHER READING

Rosner, L. *Medical Education in the Age of Improvement: Edinburgh Students and Apprentices 1760-1828*, Edinburgh, 1991, provides the context for Hilson's time as a medical student at Edinburgh University. For the wider picture, see Ackroyd, M, et al. *Advancing with the Army. Medicine, the Professions and Social Mobility in the British Isles, 1790-1850*, Oxford, 2006.

There are a number of published first-hand accounts written by AMD officers and others that shed light on Hilson's experience. The diaries of Alexander Lesassier (later Hamilton) are among the most relevant, for although his temperament and outlook appear to have been quite different to Hilson's, their careers at Edinburgh University and in the AMD followed similar lines. Extracts can be found alongside an account of his life in Rosner, L. *The Most Beautiful Man in Existence: the Scandalous Life of Alexander Lesassier*, Philadelphia, 2013. Similarly valuable are the letters of Andrew Anderson, for which see Anderson, T C D'A. *A Doctor at War. The Correspondence of the Anderson Family from Selkirk*, independently published, 2024. See also Boutflower, C. *The Journal of an Army Surgeon during the Peninsular War*, Manchester, 1912; and Neale, A. *Letters from Portugal and Spain; comprising an account of the operations of the armies*, London, 1809.

The secondary literature on the Peninsular War is both extensive and varied. Charles Oman's seven-volume *A History of the Peninsular War*, London, 1902-1930, remains the definitive work. For a more recent, concise study, see Esdaile, C J. *The Peninsular War: a New History*, London, 2003. There are also numerous detailed studies about specific battles, campaigns, regiments, and other subjects relating to the war. Too many to list here, they can readily be found in online catalogues.

For an account of the AMD during Hilson's period of service, see volume one of Cantlie, N. *A History of the Army Medical Department*, 2 vols, Edinburgh, 1974. For detailed studies of the medical care provided by the AMD during the Peninsular War, see Crumplin, M. *Men of Steel: Surgery in the Napoleonic Wars*, Shrewsbury, 2007; Howard, M. *Wellington's Doctors: the British Army Medical Services in the Napoleonic Wars*, Staplehurst, 2002; and Kaufman, M H. *Surgeons at War: Medical Arrangements for the Treatment of the Sick and Wounded in the British Army during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*, Westport, 2001. See also Kelly, C. *War and the Militarization of British Army Medicine, 1793-1830*, London, 2015, which charts the emergence and development of a professional identity among AMD officers. Many other useful studies can be found listed in the bibliographies of these works.

Other relevant works can be found in the notes to the Introduction.

SOURCES IN LOCAL HISTORY

GENERAL EDITOR: KENNETH VEITCH

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