

## CHAPTER 13

*The British Legion*

I would not give a toss up for the choice between Don Carlos and Maroto, the Queen and Espartero. They ought all to be hanged on the same tree, to avoid the injury which might be done to a second.

Duke of Wellington

ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK, depending on the time of year, a large car ferry travels from Portsmouth to Bilbao on the Basque coast of northern Spain. It sails under the red, gold, blue and white flag of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O). Red and gold are the colours of the current Spanish royal household, blue and white those of the old Portuguese monarchy. The two royal households granted the company the right to fly their colours in appreciation of its ferrying British soldiers who, in separate Spanish and Portuguese civil wars, fought on behalf of liberal monarchs against despotic pretenders. It would have taken four journeys by today's *Pride of Bilbao* to deliver the ten thousand members of the British Legion who started disembarking further east along the coast at San Sebastián in the summer of 1835. In a climate not dissimilar to that of today, the British Parliament, press and public were bitterly divided over participation in yet another foreign war. It must be noted that this British Legion was nothing to do with the Royal British Legion, the charity that today safeguards the welfare, interests and memory of those who have served in the armed forces.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, in both England and Spain it was possible for either a man or woman to ascend the throne, while neighbouring France permitted only male monarchs. Eager to ensure that Spain and France were never united by a royal marriage, England successfully encouraged Philip V to adopt France's Salic Law of Succession in 1713. In 1830 Philip's great-grandson King Ferdinand, who had no sons, announced that his father had secretly revoked the Salic Law, therefore his daughter Isabella would succeed him. The king's brother Don Carlos felt cheated and, when Ferdinand died in 1833, he and his 'Carlists' took up arms to fight for what they believed to be his throne by divine right. Isabella was only three years