

**The Battle of Waterloo in Bicentennial: A Review of Seven Books on Waterloo.**

**B. Cornwell, *Waterloo: the History of Four Armies, Three Armies and Three Battles*. London: William Collins, 2014. 352pp. ISBN 978-0-00-753938-3 (Paperback). Price £4.00;**

**G. Fremont-Barnes, *Waterloo, 1815: the British Army's Day of Destiny*. Stroud: The History Press, 2014. 440pp. ISBN 978-0-7524-6211-0 (Hardback). Price £19.99;**

**G. Corrigan, *Waterloo: a New History of the Battle and its Armies*. London: Atlantic Books, 2014. xxvi + 341pp. ISBN 978-1-84887-928-7 (Hardback). Price £18.64;**

**G. Glover, *Waterloo: Myth and Reality*. Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014. xiii + 268pp. ISBN 978-1-78159-356-1 (Hardback). Price £15.99;**

**D. Buttery, *Waterloo Battlefield Guide*. Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2013. x + 291pp. ISBN 978-1-78303-513-7 (Paperback). Price £14.18;**

**B. Simms, *The Longest Afternoon: the 400 Men who decided the Battle of Waterloo*. London: Allen Lane, 2014. xvi + 127pp. ISBN 978-0-24100-460-9 (Paperback). Price £5.59;**

**M. K. H. Crumplin, *The Bloody Fields of Waterloo: Medical Support at Wellington's Greatest Battle*. Godmanchester: Ken Trotman Publishing, 2013. 272pp. ISBN 978-1-90741-741-2 (Hardback). Price £65.00.**

In one sense, the battle of Waterloo can be said to have been my making as a historian. Thus, I can still remember waking up on Christmas morning in 1969 to find that Santa had left me a copy of a brand new book by someone called David Howarth. Called *A Near-Run Thing*, it still has a place of honour on my bookshelves, whilst its battered state - I still have the self-same copy my parents bought me - bears witness to it having been carried around in innumerable satchels and school bags. The simple fact is that I loved it, and after some forty-five years I continue to hold it

## REVIEWS

up to my students as a model of the historical art. Some of the argument might be a little simplistic, doubtless, but as a means of rendering the unimaginable imaginable I do not believe that it will ever be surpassed. More to the point, perhaps, combined with the feature film, 'Waterloo', which I can equally vividly recall my father taking me to see for the first time, not to mention Airfix's near simultaneous release of their 'Battle of Waterloo' figure range, it sparked off a desire to find out more and this was eventually to become an overpowering interest in the Napoleonic era. What was Marshal Grouchy actually doing at Wavre? What happened at the mysterious Ligny and Quatre Bras? What did Prussian soldiers look like? And what on earth was a Gribeauval cannon? The rest, as they say, is history!

Oddly enough, having done most of my campaigning against Napoleon in Spain and Portugal, Waterloo has never been a particular interest of mine. That said, however, I anticipated the flood of works on Waterloo that the bicentenary could be expected to bring into the world with some pleasure. Yet with pleasure was mixed concern and even a degree of cynicism: could the old story be told any more effectively than Howarth had told it? And, for that matter, was it worth telling at all? It is not, after all, that long since Alessandro Barberi produced a study of the battle - *The Battle* (Atlantic Books: London, 2006) - that was refreshingly free of national bias and in many ways completely transformed the manner in which the struggle has traditionally been seen by moving it away from the usual *pièce du théâtre* in six or seven acts (i.e. the attack on Hougoumont; the advance of D'Erlon's corps; the charge of the British heavy cavalry; the French cavalry attacks; the Prussian attack on Plancenoit; the fall of La Haye Sainte; and the attack of the Imperial Guard). And not that long, too, since Ian Fletcher published *A Desperate Business: Wellington, the British Army and the Waterloo Campaign* (Spellmount, 2005).

Let us begin with the work that lies at the simplest end of the scale. This is, beyond doubt, Gordon Corrigan's *Waterloo: a New History of the Battle and its Armies*. Whilst its title is misleading - it is emphatically not a 'new' history of the battle, but rather a highly traditional one that could have been written at any time over the past fifty years - this is nonetheless a chattily-written, competent and no-nonsense account that does not descend into too much detail, and would therefore make an ideal starting point for anyone who is not familiar with the basic story. All the more is this the case as Corrigan does not restrict himself to the events of the campaign, but also spends a considerable amount of time providing a general overview of the Napoleonic Wars, the art of war at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the French, British and Prussian armies. So far, then, so basic, but, for all that, one does come across the odd nugget: Corrigan is very much a man at home in the saddle, and his knowledge of horsemanship comes through very clearly in his discussion of such issues as the problems involved handling a lance or the best way for a horseman to cut down a fleeing foot-soldier. Of such things is the reality of combat made up, and

there are times when one wishes that more historians were less desk-bound. Given that Corrigan's conclusions are perfectly sensible - that what lost Napoleon Waterloo was above all poor staff work on the part of Napoleon and his senior commanders, and that Wellington's importance lay not so much in what he did on the slopes of Mont Saint Jean as in the enormous contribution that he made to the successful functioning of the Anglo-Prussian alliance - there is therefore nothing to sneer at here. That said, however, it is a great shame that Corrigan should have thought that he could dispense with footnotes: in brief, these are essential to the value of his work as a contribution to the literature therefore is much reduced by their absence.

Moving on, we come to Bernard Cornwell's *Waterloo: the History of Four Days, Three Armies and Three Battles*, and Gregory Fremont-Barnes' *Waterloo, 1815: the British Army's Day of Destiny*. In many ways, these two works are not so different from *Waterloo: a New History*, in both cases the authors having produced studies of the battle that retail the linear narrative of old, and at the same time render it generally accessible. In so far as these objects are concerned, aided by a standard of production that can only be described as sumptuous (the maps, in particular, are genuinely beautiful), Cornwell, at least, succeeds brilliantly - he is, after all, nothing if not a master of narrative - whilst he has to be given credit for looking at the struggle from the point of view of the French and Prussians as well as the British. In so far as such claims to inclusivity are concerned, Fremont-Barnes is less satisfactory, but it is only fair to point out that from the very beginning he is frank in his admission that his concern is essentially with the British army. However, what is rather less easy to overlook is the standard of the writing. Whereas Cornwell is seamless in his fluency, Fremont-Barnes is more laboured, and sometimes even rather repetitious, while there are times, too, when so many personal accounts are heaped up one upon the other that it becomes difficult to follow his thread.

One would not wish to go too far here: if Fremont-Barnes had not had the misfortune to find himself being compared with the most successful historical novelist that Britain has produced for many years, these issues might not have been so noticeable. At the same time, his scholarly apparatus is impeccable - like Corrigan, Cornwell dispenses with footnotes - whilst, at least, he is accurate in his writing: throughout his work, Cornwell is in the habit of referring to English regiments in terms of their counties of origin. Thus, the Thirty-Second Foot are 'Cornishmen', the Thirty-Third 'Yorkshiremen' and so forth. This, however, is a piece of poetic licence that is completely unacceptable. In the British army of the period Irish regiments were invariably recruited wholly in Ireland and Scottish ones mostly, though not always in Scotland (the First Foot, or Royal Scots, only contained a minority of Scottish recruits, for example), but English units were generally recruited from all over the country and invariably included a substantial Irish contingent (up to forty

## REVIEWS

per cent in terms of the rank and file and as many as one third of the officers). To return to Fremont-Barnes, meanwhile, in terms of his history there is little to object to other than the fact that he is occasionally too harsh on the Dutch and the Belgians. As for the argument, there is very little ground that separates the two books in that both authors lay the bulk of the French defeat on Napoleon, albeit in slightly different ways. For Cornwell, then, what matters is above all the emperor's failure to take control of the battle himself, while, for Fremont-Barnes, it is rather Napoleon's equally glaring failure to appreciate that the one thing he could not count on at Waterloo was time. At the same time, without in any way denigrating the contribution of the Prussians, both authors are greatly admiring of the conduct of the Duke of Wellington and the bulk of his 'infamous army' alike (for good measure, Wellington is also exonerated of the charges that were ever afterwards laid against him to the effect that he somehow betrayed Blücher by failing to come to his assistance at Ligny). Whichever of these two books the reader buys, they will get a solid introduction to the battle, albeit one that really breaks little in the way of fresh ground.

Of rather more interest, then, is Glover's *Wellington: Myth and Reality*. As the work of an author who over the past few years has published a seemingly endless stream of diaries and memoirs written by the soldiers who served under Wellington, not to mention several volumes of letters and other personal accounts specifically relating to the great contest of 18 June 1815, *Waterloo: Myth and Reality* was always likely to be among the better examples of the bicentennial literature. The story that Glover tells is no more a new one than that retailed by Cornwell and Fremont-Barnes, and, still more so, Corrigan. Yet this is nonetheless a useful work in that, without ever quite saying as much, Glover sets out to take a critical look at some of both the more recent historiography and the stories that have come down to us from the participants. In so far as the first is concerned, Glover's chief object is clearly to challenge the controversial thesis advanced some fifteen years ago by the Anglo-German historian, Peter Hofschroer, in his two-volume *1815, the Waterloo Campaign: the German Victory*. According to this view, whereas it was really the Prussians who had defeated Napoleon, in the years after 1815 Wellington and his admirers had done all that they could to hide the truth of the matter and to hijack all the glory for Britain. Still worse, during the campaign itself, 'humbugged' (as he himself put it) by the emperor, the Duke had lied to Blücher so as to get him to fight at Ligny on 16 June and thereby win time for the Anglo-Dutch army to recover from its commander's mistakes. Whilst nobody would deny the point about nationalistic bias - that this has been a major issue is admitted even by the bluff and hearty Corrigan - there was always an obvious flaw in this argument: in brief, if the price of getting Blücher to fight at Ligny was a little economy with the truth, then it was one that was well worth paying, and, indeed, one that had to be paid, for, had the Prussians gone on falling back, the campaign would probably have been lost. However, Glover takes

the argument one step further, showing that Hofschroer's case is completely specious: in brief, we learn, first, that the evidence for Wellington misleading Blücher is, at best, flimsy; second, that even if the idea is accepted, it is of no account, the fact being that Blücher was resolved on fighting at Ligny from the very start, and, third, that Wellington could not have joined him at Ligny even if he had wanted to for the simple reason that he was himself attacked at Quatre Bras.

So much, then, for Hofschroer. However, Glover has much more to add, bringing a critical eye, as he does, to many of the more iconic incidents and accounts of the battle. In this, meanwhile, he is quite impartial: if Victor Hugo's famous vision of successive ranks of French horsemen being brought to grief by the banks of a sunken road transformed into a veritable Belgian Grand Canyon is rightly rubbished, so, too, are some of the claims made by the well-known British gunner, Cavalié Mercer, claims, incidentally, which are repeated in uncritical fashion by Cornwell and Fremont Barnes alike. Nor is it the case that all Britain's soldiers emerge from the struggle as gallant heroes: no mention is made, perhaps, of the panic that at one point beset the battalion of the famous 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles stationed at the sandpit near La Haye Sainte, but we do learn that the performance of several hussar regiments was distinctly unenthusiastic. With much praise being accorded the Dutch, Belgian and German soldiers who also fought for Wellington and due credit also being given to the Prussians, it is therefore clear that we are in the presence of a work that really does struggle to be objective.

In only one point can the analysis be said to be lacking. We come here to the famous attack of the Old Guard at the close of the battle. Naturally enough, this affair is discussed by Glover at some length, and he succeeds in imposing a reasonable degree of order on a story that is extremely complex (hence the numerous controversies to which its discussion has always given rise). Yet one point in particular is not addressed. In recent years it has often been argued that the French advance was made in square rather than column, the aim being, or so it seems, to suggest that the attack was doomed from the very beginning, thereby on the one hand emphasising the heroism of the Guard and, on the other, undermining the subsequent bragging of the victors. However, this claim has always looked highly tendentious: whilst it was certainly possible for well trained troops such as the Guard to manoeuvre in square, to have attempted to attack in this formation was little short of suicide, as it would have deprived the troops concerned of both speed and firepower. In consequence, the author of this review has always put the idea down to a misunderstanding of the French term *en carré*, this being susceptible of translation 'in square', 'in chequer-board formation' or even simply just 'in serried ranks'. Given its context, the point is by no means unimportant, and yet Glover leaves the matter surprisingly vague, and, not just that, but fails really to address the point at all (ditto, it has to be said, for Cornwell and Fremont-Barnes).

## REVIEWS

However, this is but a minor criticism. On the whole, *Waterloo: Myth and Reality* is a solid contribution to the literature, and, in addition, a book that can be enjoyed for its own sake. Glover and Pen and Sword alike, then, are to be congratulated, whilst those who pick up the more flamboyant works of Corrigan, Cornwell and Fremont-Barnes should certainly aim to make sure that they read Glover's work as well. Something else that would surely provide enjoyment, meanwhile, is Brendan Simms' extremely elegant *The Longest Afternoon*. Comparatively short, but beautifully written, this is very much an exercise in micro history in that it tells the story of the desperate defence of La Haye Sainte in the face of repeated French attacks. Never stronger than 400 men at any given time and at times all but cut off from Wellington's main position, the garrison held out gallantly until it ran out of ammunition, and then managed to fall back to the ridge. Even more so than at Hougoumont, it was here that the British commander could have lost the battle, and so Simms dubs the overwhelmingly German garrison 'the 400 men who decided the battle of Waterloo'. This is, perhaps, to go too far – as Simms himself admits, for example, the farm would almost certainly have fallen much earlier in the day but for the charge of the British heavy cavalry – but the defenders certainly deserve a creditable mention in any history of the battle, while their story is certainly an exciting one: it is as certainly as good as anything to be found in the climax of a Sharpe novel. And in *The Longest Afternoon*, it is well-told indeed: Simms captures the action in graphic detail, and in addition probes deeply into the question of what motivated the men who fought it out with the French so well to behave in the way that they did.

One of the things that makes the struggle at La Haye Sainte so accessible is that the farm still exists today, and, what is more, in a form that is virtually unchanged from the state it was in in 1815. We now come, then, to David Buttery's *Waterloo Battlefield Guide*. Thanks as much to its proximity to all of the states involved as to the events that took place on 18 June 1815, Waterloo was the battle that initiated the concept of the battlefield tour, and it remains a site that is much visited. Sadly, however, it is a site that is also much changed: the wood of Hougoumont has almost entirely disappeared and the gullies and hollows that cut up the slopes around La Haye Sainte are no more, whilst the monstrous folly of the Lion Mound ensured that Mont Saint Jean was never again what it used to be (that said, it does at least afford the visitor a magnificent panoramic view). The battlefield continues to repay a visit, not least, of course, because the monuments that liberally spatter its landscape offer a wonderful means of studying how it has been remembered. To get full value out of such a visit, though, it is necessary to carry a good guidebook in one's knapsack, and Buttery has provided us with just such a work. Handy, concise and lavishly illustrated with maps and photographs, his efforts are greatly to be applauded, the only real criticism of this reviewer being that it might have been better to remove all the

material on the scene today from the main body of the text, and place it in a single appendix, whilst at the same time expanding it to include detailed itineraries. At the same time, serious readers may well wish to augment Buttery's accounts of the fighting with those of, say, either Glover or Fremont-Barnes. Yet one should not be churlish: the author has done an excellent job, and this reviewer can only agree with the verdict of Bernard Cornwell, namely that Buttery's book is an essential companion for anyone visiting the battlefields.

If this is so of the work of Buttery, it ought also to be true of that of Michael Crumplin. From whichever perspective it is viewed, Waterloo constitutes an epic tale, and it is often in this spirit that it is approached. Yet, whilst it would be mistaken simply to condemn the battle as an exercise in futility - for the sake of France as much as anywhere else, Napoleon had to be defeated - it is also a tale that is replete with horror, loss and human suffering, and it is as well that this should be remembered. As Wellington himself said, next to a battle lost, there is nothing so sad as a battle won - words, be it said, that one cannot imagine emanating from the lips of his French opponent - and one would like to think that he would therefore have approved of *The Bloody Fields of Waterloo*. Reviewing, as it does, on the one hand the inadequate medical services that supported the British army in Belgium, and, on the other, the grisly effect of sabre and bayonet and shot and shell on the human frame, this should be required reading: most of the other books that we have looked at touch on the question of the casualties and their experiences, but none do so at such length or in such detail. What a pity, then, that it is not better written or presented, much of the text constituting little more than a series of notes, some of them quite episodic and disjointed.

To conclude, then, the two-hundredth anniversary of Waterloo has unleashed the bicentennial bombardment that was only to be expected. For those readers familiar with the events of June 1815, the consequent 'hard pounding' has delivered few bomb shells, but it has at least served to draw a very firm line under at least one recent controversy, whilst at the same time generating a number of works that are a genuine pleasure to read. If they serve to awaken the same interest as that produced in the mind of one small boy in that far-away Christmas of 1969, then this reviewer will be well pleased. All the more is this the case in an era of remembrance. At this time we are united in thinking, and quite rightly so, of all the men who fell in the First World War. However, the soldiers who fell in the struggle against Napoleon are no less worthy of our pity. Unlike the men of 1914, those of 1815 did not even have the promise of homes fit for heroes, whilst, as witness *The Bloody Fields of Waterloo*, their sufferings were just as great, and in some respects even worse. Meanwhile, the enemy that they were fighting was in many respects precisely the same as the one that was faced in the trenches, namely a militaristic imperialism that sought to turn the greater part of continental Europe into a power-base serving the interests of a

## REVIEWS

single state. With the carnage involved proportionately just as terrible - it is difficult, in fact, to think of a battle in either of the World Wars that concentrated quite so much death and destruction in quite so small an area, let alone in quite so short a space of time - it seems appropriate to conclude this review with but one line: at the going down of the sun and in the morning we should remember the men of Waterloo too.

CHARLES ESDAILE  
University of Liverpool