

WATERLOO

June 18, 1815:
The Battle for Modern Europe

ANDREW ROBERTS

MAKING HISTORY

Series Editors: Amanda Foreman and Lisa Jardine

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FOREWORD

The Duke of Wellington described the English victory at the battle of Waterloo as ‘a damned nice thing — the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life’. As Andrew Roberts makes vividly clear in this gripping new account of the action leading up to and during the fateful battle of 18 June 1815, throughout that day the military advantage swung vertiginously towards and then away from Wellington’s forces as the battle raged. The loss of life on both sides was devastating — this was a battle in which in some senses both sides could be termed the losers. In the end, though, the victory and the lasting glory deservedly fell to Wellington.

The outcome of the battle marked a crucial and lasting juncture in European history. Napoleon Bonaparte’s defeat at Waterloo was his final downfall and the end of his imperial dream. Wellington’s victory marked the beginning of a new English imperial adventure.

The battle of Waterloo, then, was one of those milestones in history — a marker, a turning point, an epoch-making incident, a directional laser-beam of light from the past to the future — on which our understanding of the past depends. Andrew Roberts’s sharply-focused and economical account highlights the extraordinary way in which events on the ground at key moments in history shape forever what follows.

Waterloo launches an exciting series of small books edited by Amanda Foreman and Lisa Jardine — ‘Making History’— each of which covers a ‘turning point’ in history. Each book in the series will take a moment at which an event or events made a lasting impact on the unfolding course of history. Such moments are of dramatically different character: from the unexpected outcome of a battle to a landmark invention; from an accidental decision taken in the heat of the moment to a considered programme intended to change the world. Each volume of ‘Making History’ will be

guaranteed to make the reader sit up and think about Europe's and America's relationship to their past, and about the key figures and incidents which moulded and formed its process.

Amanda Foreman

Lisa Jardine

INTRODUCTION

‘AFTER THE PUBLICATION of so many accounts of the battle of 18 June, it may be fairly asked on what grounds I expect to awaken fresh interest in a subject so long before the public.’ Those words were written by Sergeant-Major Edward Cotton of the 7th Hussars as long ago as 1849, in his preface to a guidebook to the battlefield entitled *A Voice from Waterloo*. True enough then, how much more true are they when applied to yet another book on the battle published a century and a half and over one hundred books later. The answer that Cotton gave then is the one I would also give today: that while there are still doubts, mysteries, debates and confusions about the battle — let alone tremendous national bias evident in its retelling — there is always scope for another account.

‘Never was a battle so confusedly described as that of Waterloo,’ wrote the Swiss historian (and Marshal Ney’s chief of staff) General Henri Jomini, and that is partly because it was such a momentous engagement. The Duke of Wellington himself likened the description of a battle to that of a ball — perhaps he had in mind the Duchess of Richmond’s famous one three days before Waterloo — where there is so much simultaneous movement of so many people across so large an area with so many different outcomes that to record it all from a single standpoint becomes nigh-impossible.

Yet what we can say for certain about the battle of Waterloo — that it ended forever the greatest personal world-historical epic since that of Julius Cæsar — is easily enough to drive us on to want to discover more. The political career of Napoleon Bonaparte, that master of continental Europe whose life was nonetheless punctuated by the three islands on which he was born, was exiled and died, came to a shuddering and total halt on the evening of Sunday, 18 June 1815. The Grande Armée which he had led across

the sands of Egypt, the meadows of Prussia, the plains of Iberia, the hamlets of Austria and the snows of Russia, was finally and completely routed on the slopes of Mont St Jean twelve miles south of Brussels.

Of course Waterloo did not spell the end of the entire Bonapartist epic — that did not take place until Napoleon's great-nephew the Prince Imperial was speared to death by Zulu assegais in 1879 — but it did condemn the Emperor Napoleon I to ignominious exile and a subsequent early death on the Atlantic rock of St Helena. It also finally brought to an end no fewer than twenty-three almost unbroken years of French Revolutionary and subsequently Napoleonic Wars, and ushered in a period of peace in Europe that was to last — with a few short if sharp exceptions — for a century, until those self-same Low Countries fields were churned up once more with the mud and blood consequent upon similar hegemonic European ambitions.

What Lord Byron disapprovingly called 'the crowning carnage, Waterloo', and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, with more reverence in his panegyric poem to Wellington, 'that world-earthquake, Waterloo!', brought the eighteenth century to a full stop, or rather to a final exclamation mark. Despite taking place one-seventh of the way into the calendar nineteenth century, Waterloo was nonetheless essentially an eighteenth-century phenomenon. Historians sometimes write of 'the long' eighteenth century, a period starting with the English revolution of 1688 and ending in 1815, and it is right to see Waterloo as the end of both a geopolitical and a military era.

Ghastly as the carnage at Waterloo undoubtedly was, thenceforth wars were to be fought with the infinitely more ghastly methods of trenches (the Crimea), barbed wire, railways and machine-guns (the American Civil War), directed starvation (the Franco-Prussian War), concentration camps (the Boer War), and mustard gas and aerial bombardment (the First World War).¹ By the time of the Great War, chivalry was effectively dead as an element of war-making.

By contrast with today, when an enemy head of state constitutes a

legitimate military target, Wellington refused an artillery officer under his command permission to fire his battery at Napoleon. The gorgeously-coloured uniforms worn in the Napoleonic Wars were replaced, by the time of the Boer War, with khaki and subsequently camouflaged uniforms, as troops sought to blend in with the surrounding country rather than bedazzle their enemies. For all that Waterloo was, like all battles, essentially about bringing death and maiming to the enemy, there was also a tangible spirit of élan, esprit, éclat and — at least initially — aesthetic beauty to the scene.

There was also plenty of chivalry shown on both sides at Waterloo; witness the reaction of the British infantry during the great French cavalry attack when, according to Ensign Howell Rees Gronow of the 1st Foot Guards:

Among the fallen we perceived the gallant colonel of the hussars lying under his horse, which had been killed. All of a sudden two riflemen of the Brunswickers left their battalion, and after taking from their helpless victim his purse, watch, and other articles of value, they deliberately put the colonel's pistols to the poor fellow's head, and blew out his brains. 'Shame!' 'Shame!' was heard from our ranks, and a feeling of indignation ran through the whole line.²

Captain (later Lieutenant-Colonel) William Tomkinson of the 16th Light Dragoons similarly recorded the occasion when 'An officer of cuirassiers rode close to one of our squares with a detachment of men. He saw he had no chance of success, and by himself alone rode full gallop against the square, was shot and killed. Our men and officers regretted his fate.'³

The generation after Waterloo saw, in the title of the great work of the distinguished historian Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern*, and in one sense the battle was the midwife to this great act of world-historical obstetrics. With Napoleonic ambitions no longer subjecting Europe to campaign after campaign, Mankind could finally look ahead to a period of peace and progress.

Yet Napoleon himself had also been, at least in the early days of his rule, a great force for social and political modernisation. His absolute power had of course corrupted his regime absolutely. but

before that happened he had swept away much of the obscurantism and backwardness of many of Europe's anciens régimes. Tyrant that he undeniably became, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands though he undoubtedly was, a standing obstacle to peace as he certainly turned into, nonetheless Napoleon was not all bad, and certainly nothing like the ideological totalitarian monsters who followed him.

The battle that brought the Napoleonic juggernaut to its final halt and shattering collapse is worthy of all the exhaustive study and minute analysis that has been devoted to it. As one of its earliest and most perceptive chroniclers, General Sir James Shaw Kennedy (who had fought in the campaign), wrote in the peroration of his classic Notes on the Battle of Waterloo:

There can be no doubt that, so long as history is read, the battle of Waterloo will be much and eagerly discussed; and that, so long as the art of war is studied, its great features, and most important details, will form subjects of anxious inquiry and consideration by military men.⁴

And not just by military men. The enduring fascination of Waterloo is not just its sheer size, or its historical results, or the fact that Napoleon and Wellington had never faced each other across a battlefield before and never would again, or the strategy and tactics employed, or the tales of valour, or the famous and colourful individuals and regiments involved, or even the fact that it was 'a close run thing'; it is the unique combination of all those factors, and of so many more besides.

THE CAMPAIGN

THE WATERLOO CAMPAIGN began in earnest at 3.30 a.m. on Monday, 12 June 1815 when the Emperor Napoleon, exhibiting none of the torpor and lack of decisiveness that his supporters later claimed afflicted him, left Paris after a farewell dinner with his family and was quickly driven north in his carriage, crossing the Belgian border with an army of 124,000 men a mere three days later. He had only been in France for three months, having landed at Fréjus near Antibes from his island exile on Elba on 1 March.

Napoleon had initially hoped to regain his throne from the legitimate Bourbon monarch of France, King Louis XVIII, without a war, but on 13 March the rest of the European powers, then in congress at Vienna, had denounced him as an outlaw and a 'disturber of world repose'. Once Louis had fled Paris on 18 March and Napoleon had entered the Tuileries Palace the following day, it was perfectly clear to all that the Emperor would have to defeat at least four nations' armies to survive in power. Nor was time on his side.

Napoleon's strategy was really dictated to him by the fact that although vast enemy armies were being despatched towards France, they could only arrive at its borders piecemeal and so could, he hoped, be defeated one by one, through his employing the superior generalship that had allowed him to win all but ten of the seventy-two battles he had fought in his career.

Although it is very difficult to be accurate as to exact troop strengths throughout this period, Napoleon had roughly 20,000 troops under Marshal Davout in Paris, 85,000 guarding France's frontiers, 10,000 putting down the royalist revolt in La Vendée in western France, and 123,000 in the Armée du Nord. To add to these 238,000 effectives, around 115,000 French troops were either on leave or absent without leave. 46,000 conscripts were in training

at depots, and there were National Guard units garrisoning border fortresses who could have been called upon were Napoleon to be granted more of his most precious commodity of all: time.

To march north quickly, defeat either the Anglo-Allied armies under the Duke of Wellington or the Prussian army under Marshal Gebhard von Blücher, Prince of Wahlstadt, would have the immediate effect of re-establishing la Gloire. As one historian has summarised Napoleon's plans: 'His object was to defeat one or the other before they had time to concentrate and then, forcing both back on their divergent communications, to enter Brussels as a conqueror. Thereafter ... the Belgian common people would rise against the Dutch, the war-weary French take heart and unite behind him, the Tory government in London fall, and his Austrian father-in-law [Emperor Francis II], deprived of British subsidies, sue for peace.'¹

There were other factors that imparted a sense of urgency to Napoleon's actions, principally the knowledge that British regiments were on their way back from America, no fewer than 200,000 Russians were marching towards France along with 210,000 Austrians, and a Spanish/ Portuguese force of around 80,000 might also take the field in the south. Napoleon therefore formulated a bold plan, as one might have expected from a commander who, though he had tasted catastrophic defeat in Russia in 1812, terrible reverses in 1813, and the humiliation of abdication in 1814, nonetheless remained one of the most formidable strategists of world history.

Even though over 700,000 Allied soldiers were being mobilised to defeat him, only a fraction of these were guarding Brussels — roughly 116,000 under Blücher and 112,000 under Wellington — and the Emperor had crushed six enemy coalitions in the past. Furthermore Wellington needed to leave some of his troops garrisoning Brussels.

The logistical, supply and communications problems involved in coordinating the coalition's efforts would, Napoleon hoped, be exacerbated by certain political differences that had emerged

between them in Vienna. Whatever the odds against him, he was certainly not about to give up the chance of ruling France again, and of one day handing on his throne to his beloved son Napoleon, the King of Rome.

France had been exhausted by almost continual warfare since 1792, and although she despised the Bourbons and failed to support them on Napoleon's return, only a quick victory would encourage the majority — and especially the middle classes impoverished by twenty-three years of war — to return to his standard. Accordingly he set the nation to work to prepare for the coming invasion. Parisian workshops had been busy throughout April, May and the first half of June turning out over 1,200 uniforms per day and manufacturing twelve million cartridges. Muskets were produced at the impressive rate of 12,000 a month, with another thousand a month being repaired and reconditioned.

By the time his Armée du Nord crossed the River Meuse and captured Charleroi on Thursday, 15 June, it was as fine and as well-equipped a force as Napoleon had commanded in years, indeed since the loss of the flower of French manhood in the endless pine forests and frozen winter wastes of European Russia three years earlier. Yet because several of his former marshals had refused to serve under him, many of the rank-and-file of his army were highly suspicious of their officers; talk of treason abounded. 'Never,' wrote one historian, 'did Napoleon have so formidable or so fragile a weapon in his hand.'

It was a very different story for the Anglo-Allied force that had been under the command of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, only since April 1815. Although Wellington had been in overall command of the Anglo-Spanish-Portuguese forces that had fought in the Iberian Peninsula between 1808 and 1814, the army he now led had relatively few veterans of those fierce and brilliantly-fought campaigns. For the most part the heroes of Talavera, Badajoz, Salamanca and Vittoria were stationed in the far-off United States, where they had been fighting under Wellington's brother-in-law, General Sir Edward Pakenham, against the American commander and future president Andrew Jackson.

Although peace had come in January 1815, few had had time to make the long Atlantic crossing home.

‘I have got an infamous army,’ Wellington had privately complained only the month before Napoleon crossed the Meuse, ‘very weak and ill-equipped, and a very inexperienced staff. In my opinion they are doing nothing in England ... ‘It was true that reinforcements had been slow to arrive in the Low Countries, so that by the opening of the campaign only a little over one-third of Wellington’s 112,000-strong force was made up of British soldiers, of whom some had never before seen a shot fired in anger.

Yet that does not tell the whole story; in all there were thirtynine infantry battalions from the British army and the King’s German Legion (KGL), a crack unit loyal to George III that was equal in professionalism to any British one. Furthermore there were twenty-nine cavalry regiments, including several of the best in the army. As the distinguished Waterloo chronicler Ian Fletcher has observed: ‘It was a pale shadow of the old Peninsular army, but there were, nevertheless, some fine regiments present, and the British contingent was certainly not the inexperienced and raw army ... that some historians would have us believe.’² To underline this one has only to name some of those famous regiments present, such as the 1st Foot Guards, Coldstream Guards and 3rd Foot Guards, as well as the 30th, 42nd, 73rd and 95th line regiments, the 1st and 2nd Light KGL, the 1st and 2nd Life Guards, Royal Horse Guards, 1st (Royal) Dragoons, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, 16th and 23rd Light Dragoons, 7th, 10th, 15th and 18th Hussars, and both light dragoons and hussars from the KGL.³

Despite his private misgivings, Wellington was still confident that if he and the Prussians under Marshal Blücher could coalesce successfully, victory would be theirs. One day he came across the diarist Thomas Creevey in the park at Brussels, who quizzed him about his plans. ‘By God,’ Wellington said, ‘I think Blücher and myself can do the thing.’ ‘Do you calculate upon any desertion in Buonaparte’s army?’ asked Creevey. ‘Not upon a man,’ the Duke replied. ‘from the colonel to the private in a regiment — both

inclusive. We may pick up a Marshal or two, perhaps, but not worth a damn.' Wellington then spotted a British private wandering in the park, looking up at the statues. 'There,' he said, pointing out the man to Creevey, 'it all depends on that article, whether we do the business or not. Give me enough of it, and I am sure.'⁴

The French army might have feared treachery in high places, but the Anglo-Allied high command was equally concerned about whether the Dutch and Belgian contingents, which made up a quarter of Wellington's force, would remain loyal in the field, not least those units which only the previous year had been in the service of the Emperor. Wellington's German troops — which made up another third of his force — ranged from the superb King's German Legion of 6,000 veterans to the less reliable contingents from Brunswick, Hanover and Nassau.

If Napoleon had cause not to fear the Anglo-Allied force overmuch, he could also feel relatively unperturbed about the 116,000 Prussians to his east. Although the numbers seemed large, over half the Prussian army was made up of Landwehr (militia) troops rather than regular soldiers, and many of them came from outside Prussia itself. Earlier in June a force of 14,000 well-equipped Saxons had mutinied and had to be removed from the theatre of operations. Yet the average Prussian regular soldier was a tough specimen, and no one in the army was tougher than the commander-in-chief, Prince Gebhard von Blücher, whose seventy-three years belied an offensive spirit second to none. His splendid nickname — Marshal Vorwärts ('Marshal Forwards') — was well-deserved.

Not everything about Blücher inspired confidence, however, since he suffered from occasional mental disturbances, including the delusions that he had been impregnated by an elephant and that the French had bribed his servants to heat the floors of his rooms so that he would burn his feet. The Prussian high command nonetheless exhibited a commendably broad-minded attitude towards these disorders; their army chief of staff General Gerhard von Scharnhorst wrote that Blücher 'must lead though he has a

hundred elephants inside him’.

The only two coalition armies ready to fight Napoleon in June 1815 were Wellington’s and Blücher’s. The two commanders had met only twice in May, when they agreed on the broad outlines of a defensive strategy should they be attacked before the coalition had had time to deploy its huge forces. Wellington was deeply cognisant of the disastrous campaigns that the coalition had fought against Napoleon in front of Paris in 1814, when they had lost battle after battle through lack of coordination. ‘I would not march a corporal’s guard on such a system,’ was his characteristically dismissive response to the failed strategy.

Napoleon’s Orders for the Day were famous for their uplifting sentiments, and that of Thursday, 15 June was no different. He reminded his troops as they crossed into the Austrian Netherlands (roughly modern-day Belgium) that it was the anniversary of his great victories of Marengo in 1800 and Friedland in 1807. ‘The moment has come,’ he stated in his peroration, ‘to conquer or to perish.’

Although British historians in the nineteenth century strove to conceal the fact, and Wellington himself denied it into old age, Napoleon’s swift operation to take Charleroi on 15 June and to advance quickly towards Brussels took Wellington and to a lesser extent Blücher by surprise. There is still considerable (and surprisingly bitter) debate over exactly when Wellington heard the first truly reliable information about where Napoleon was and what he had done, and what the first Allied troop manoeuvres were in response, but Wellington’s well-authenticated phrase ‘Napoleon has humbugged me, by God! He has gained twenty-four hours’ march on me!’ has come down to us through history, and seems vividly to sum up his understandable reaction.⁵

Napoleon himself was worse than humbugged on 15 June when General Comte Louis Bourmont, one of his divisional commanders but nonetheless royalist in his politics, rode directly over to the Prussian 1st Corps commander General Hans von Zieten and surrendered to him with five of his staff. The information he was

able to pass on about Napoleon's invasion plans was immediately vouchsafed to Marshal Blücher, who nonetheless seems to have failed to take proper advantage of it. There is even some doubt whether he passed on all the information to Wellington about Napoleon's proposed route to Brussels.⁶ (This might well have been because Blücher suspected deliberate misinformation; he certainly felt that Bourmont's actions offended his sense of soldier's honour.)

At this point Napoleon split his forces, always a dangerous thing to do at the start of a major campaign. He ordered Marshal Michel Ney to march west to take the strategically important crossroads of Quatre Bras before Wellington could reinforce it. Quatre Bras stood at the junction of the Charleroi-Brussels and the Nivelles—Namur roads, and would thus give Napoleon extra leeway when it came to deciding how to make his approach on Brussels. Possession of the crossroads would have kept French strategic options open, and Ney was under no illusions about how much Napoleon wanted to capture it.

Meanwhile the Emperor marched off towards Ligny in the east in order to engage the Prussians, who he rightly estimated had come far too far south when Blücher had decided to invest Sombreffe. (Few of these place-names were towns in the modern sense, and some villages mentioned later, such as Plancenoit, were in 1815 little more than a collection of cottages and outhouses, but any stone walls at all could be invaluable in a musketry firefight.)

Napoleon did not write down his strategic plans, nor did he vouchsafe them to subordinates, and since virtually everything he would ever write about the Waterloo campaign was factually suspect and politically motivated, it is impossible to do more than surmise what he intended on 15 and 16 June. Yet one thing is near-certain: by risking splitting his forces he was hoping to be able to drive a wedge between the Anglo-Allied and the Prussian forces, and thereby deal with first one and then the other separately, in a microcosm of his overall plans for the division and destruction of all his enemies in the coalition.⁷

In this scheme Napoleon was enormously aided by the problems

of communication during campaigns. Although semaphore and a very basic telegraph system were in existence in 1815, they were not comprehensive and did not extend across Belgium; neither were balloons in use on either side. Messages could thus only be sent at the speed of a galloping horse, and since there was much rain, and therefore mud, during the Waterloo campaign, this was consequently slower. The aides de camp who carried messages between commanders could be fired upon, captured, take wrong turnings, find that their quarries had moved on, or be subject to any number of problems that meant that messages — sometimes taken over significant distances — either never arrived or were delivered so late as to be utterly superseded by events. It was an occupational hazard of early-nineteenth-century warfare, and it seems to have struck particularly badly in the Waterloo campaign, on both sides.

Wellington might have complained about his inexperienced staff, but Napoleon too had to deal with a brand-new chief of staff, Marshal Soult, in the place of his long-standing and highly efficient Marshal Berthier, who had at first refused to take part in the campaign, and then had soon afterwards died in very mysterious circumstances, falling out of a high window on 1 June in Bamberg, Bavaria. Soult, a solidly professional soldier who had nonetheless been regularly defeated by Wellington during the Peninsular Wars, did not shine in his place.

On the night of 15 June, as Napoleon slept in Charleroi, Wellington and his senior officers were entertained at a great ball only thirty miles away in Brussels, at the invitation of the 4th Duke of Richmond and Lennox and his wife. It was perhaps the most famous social occasion of the nineteenth century, and any criticisms that Wellington should have been paying attention to French troop movements rather than enjoying a party were waved away with the argument that it was important to show the citizens of Brussels that there was no need to panic. ‘Duchess,’ Wellington told his hostess, ‘you may give your ball with the greatest safety, without fear of interruption.’ By the time the ball in the rue de Blanchisserie had begun, however, Wellington had received definite news from the Prussians that Napoleon had indeed crossed the border.

A letter in the author's possession is worthy of quotation in extenso (see APPENDIX 1), since it illustrates the lack of foreknowledge of many of those who attended the Duchess of Richmond's ball. Rumours were plentiful, not least when Wellington withdrew from the ballroom to confer with his most senior commanders in the Richmonds' study, but facts were thin. 'The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men,' wrote Byron of that brilliant night, and as the ball began few could have suspected that only seventy-two hours later fully four in ten of the officers present would be either dead or wounded. (Although Byron mythologised the 'high hall' of the ballroom, in fact the occasion took place, according to the Richmonds' daughter Lady de Ros, 'in an old building that had once been a coachmaker's depot in which she and her sisters played in bad weather ... A long, barn-like room; with small old-fashioned pillars.'⁸)

For all that it was held in a coachmaker's barn, the evening was a glittering social occasion, the guests including the Prince of Orange (later King William II of Holland), the Duke of Brunswick (who fell the next day at Quatre Bras), the Prince of Nassau, the Earls of Conyngham, Uxbridge (commander of the British cavalry), Portarlington and March, as well as twenty-two colonels, sixteen comtes and comtesses, a large number of British peers and peeresses and a total of twenty-two people bearing the title of 'honourable', denoting the child of a peer. Whether it was a particularly romantic evening, however, must be doubted, since of the 224 people invited by the Richmonds there were only fifty-five women, of whom fewer than a dozen were unmarried.⁹

Wellington, who had assumed that Napoleon would advance on Brussels via Mons rather than taking the more direct Charleroi route, and who stuck to his assumption despite growing evidence to the contrary, was finally disabused during the ball by important and reliable information from the Prussians, who were expecting to fight at Sombreffe the next day, and from the commandant of the Mons garrison that there were no Frenchmen in sight. He had been 'humbugged' indeed, but he made up for it by trying to concentrate

his army as quickly as possible upon Quatre Bras. 'This news was circulated directly,' recalled one of the guests, Lady Georgina Lennox, 'and while some of the officers hurried away, others remained at the ball, and actually had not time to change, but fought in evening costume.'¹⁰

The Duke of Richmond later told the tale that in his study Wellington had admitted that he would not be able to stop Napoleon at Quatre Bras, adding, 'And if so we must fight him here,' passing his thumbnail over the map and allowing Richmond to mark in pencil a village called Waterloo. To this author at least, the story sounds like a case of *esprit d'escalier*, a serviceable French phrase whose English translations smack too harshly of deliberate falsehood. Unfortunately the map that might have authenticated the tale was lost in Canada when Richmond was Governor-General there three years later.¹¹

At 8 a.m. on Friday, 16 June Napoleon was informed that the whole of the Prussian army seemed to have assembled at Sombreffe, so he left for the extreme right flank of his forces to check for himself, arriving at Fleurus at 11 a.m. Sure enough, the Prussians were there, so he ordered Marshal Ney, who he assumed would take the Quatre Bras crossroads with relative ease, to despatch a large body of his force to him to help rout the Prussians.

By the time Ney received Napoleon's rather florid instructions — 'The fate of France is in your hands. Thus do not hesitate even for a moment to carry out the manoeuvre' — he was no longer capable of carrying them out. For if Wellington had been relatively slow in concentrating his forces upon Quatre Bras, fearing that it might be a feint of Napoleon's, Ney had been still more dilatory, and by the time he started to try to take the crossroads the British reserve had already begun arriving there after a thirty-mile march. Although the credit for saving Quatre Bras must go to the initiative of General Constant Rebecque, the Dutch chief of staff, who was early on the scene and recognised its strategic importance, the actual outcome of the battle of Quatre Bras itself was due to Wellington himself.

Wellington had set out from Brussels at 3 a.m.. and by 11 a.m. he

was conferring with Blücher at the Brye windmill overlooking the battlefield of Ligny. It is said that he trained his telescope on Napoleon, the first time he had ever set eyes on the man with whose name his fame was to be forever inextricably linked. They had both been born on islands, they had both attended French military academies and spoke French as their second language; they were the same age, born within three months of one another in 1769; they both excelled at topography and chose Hannibal as their ultimate hero, yet they had never hitherto faced one another across a field of battle. Nor were they destined to on 16 June, since Wellington only had time to give Blücher his considered opinion as to the Prussian displacements before being called off to command the defence of Quatre Bras.

The Duke politely criticised Blücher's decision to present the whole Prussian army to Napoleon's view — and artillery — in the old Continental manner, explaining his own preference of trying to conceal soldiers behind the reverse slopes of hills. 'My men prefer to see the enemy,' replied the proud, brave, but in this case also foolhardy Prussian. Wellington's private estimation as he rode off was: 'If they fight here, they will be damnably mauled.' Sure enough, when Napoleon attacked, they were.

Marshal Ney, the veteran of seventy battles, might have won the splendid soubriquet 'the bravest of the brave' in numerous engagements, but he was not an impressive commander when left in overall charge, and there were also fears that he had been suffering from a form of 'combat fatigue' or 'battle stress' ever since the gruelling Russian campaign of 1812, when he had been left to command the French rearguard after Napoleon had fled back to Paris. He had certainly become highly unpredictable by 1815, and was quite possibly simply burnt out as a soldier. Napoleon once complained that Ney understood less than the youngest drummer boy in the French army, and certainly piled complaint on complaint upon his actions — and inactions — during the Waterloo campaign when he was exiled on St Helena.

Ney, who had fallen for Wellington's tactic of concealing his troops in the Peninsular War, only attacked at Quatre Bras late and

half-heartedly, even though Wellington was not on the battlefield in the early stages and had not hidden any troops. Nor had Ney yet received Napoleon's urgent request that he send the bulk of his force to Ligny. Instead two battles — at Ligny and Quatre Bras — developed simultaneously only about seven miles from each other. Ney had too often in the Peninsula seen the ill-effect of attacking British infantry head on, and quite possibly feared that the crossroads of Quatre Bras hid another Wellingtonian deception, in the way that in 1810 the use of topography had won him the battle of Busaco against Marshal Masséna.

Believing that Ney could manage to take Quatre Bras with the troops already under his command, Napoleon sent a message to General Drouet d'Erlon, who was on his way to reinforce Ney from Gosselies with the 1st Corps, to march to the battlefield of Ligny instead, where fierce house-to-house combat had developed. By 5 p.m. Blücher's force was hard-pressed, and he had to commit his reserves to the struggle, a dangerous moment for any commander when facing Napoleon. Had the French emperor been able to fling d'Erlon's fresh troops into the battle, a rout would have been assured. But no such force was there, not least because d'Erlon had been counter-ordered by Ney to march to Quatre Bras instead. As it was, d'Erlon arrived on neither battlefield in time to affect the outcome of either engagement. The greatest living authority on the campaigns of Napoleon, Dr David Chandler, has stated that the importance of the non-appearance of d'Erlon's corps at Ligny and Quatre Bras was crucial, since 'in either ... its intervention could have been decisive'.¹²

By the time nightfall had descended on the battlefield of Quatre Bras it was clear that there was a stalemate, with both sides in much the same position they had occupied before Ney had originally attacked. Over 9,000 lives had been lost — roughly equally on each side — to no significant strategic advantage to either.

Yet over at Ligny a few miles to the east it was a very different picture. Even despite d'Erlon's non-appearance. Napoleon had

conclusively given Blücher the damnable mauling that Wellington had predicted. The Emperor had delayed launching an attack by his Imperial Guard — the crack regiments nicknamed ‘Les Invincibles’ — until 7.30 p.m., but when he had — preceded by a huge artillery bombardment — it had proved decisive. Crying ‘Vive l’Empereur!’ the Guard had charged the Prussian centre with bayonets, supported by brigades of cavalry. Although Blücher personally counterattacked with only two brigades of cavalry, the French could not be turned back.

Darkness turned the defeat into a rout. Sixteen thousand Prussians were killed or wounded at Ligny, and around 8,000 Rhinelanders deserted the colours that night and simply returned home. Nonetheless the decision was taken by Blücher’s chief of staff General August von Gneisenau — in Blücher’s absence, because the marshal could not be found — that the army should act in a completely counter-intuitive way. Instead of retreating eastwards towards Liège and Prussia, the Prussians would instead go north to Wavre, where they could stay in touch with the Anglo-Allied army. Gneisenau was an Anglophobe, but he had nevertheless made the crucial decision of the campaign, one that Wellington himself hardly exaggerated when he described it as ‘the decisive moment of the century’.

If Gneisenau had returned to Prussia, Wellington would probably have had to retreat north towards Antwerp and the Channel ports and probably re-embark the British army back to the United Kingdom, as had happened on so many other equally humiliating occasions over the past quarter-century. The Royal Navy were used to shipping defeated British forces back from a Napoleondominated Continent, and this time would have been no different. Yet with the Prussians still in the field, and liaising closely, there was still the prospect that they could pull off the coup that Napoleon missed at Ligny, that of bringing a fresh force onto the battlefield at the psychologically vital moment.

The Prussian retreat northward necessitated Wellington making a similar manoeuvre, giving up the crossroads that had been so hard fought over only the previous day. He could not risk having the

combined forces of Napoleon and Ney fall upon him, so Saturday, 17 June was spent retreating to a highly defensible position some miles to the north, on the slopes of Mont St Jean, which — despite the best efforts of generations of French historians — will always be generally known as the battlefield of Waterloo. Old Blücher has had a damned good licking and gone back to Wavre, eighteen miles,' Wellington said. 'As he has gone back, we must go too. I suppose in England they'll say we have been licked. Well, I can't help it.' It had happened enough in the past; whenever Wellington had made tactical retreats in the Peninsula there had never been a shortage of those he termed 'croakers', especially among the radical Whigs in the parliamentary opposition, keen to suggest that he had been defeated.

The French, too, were happy to argue that Wellington had been 'licked'. Napoleon sent back a report of the battle of Ligny to be printed in the official government newspaper *Le Moniteur* which suggested that the united Prussian and Anglo-Allied armies had been defeated. The propaganda sheet duly obliged and there were celebrations in the French capital.

For a man responsible for several maxims about the importance of never losing a moment in wartime, Napoleon's relative inactivity on 17 June was almost inexplicable. He spent the day dictating letters, surveying the battlefield of Ligny and then breaking another of his favoured maxims by splitting his force just before a major engagement.

Napoleon detached his most recently-created marshal, Emmanuel de Grouchy, to follow the Prussians with 30,000 infantry and cavalry and ninety-six guns, a large force that he would desperately need the following day. The bad staff work and mutual misunderstandings that had ensured that d'Erlon had spent the previous day marching between battlefields without firing a shot further conspired to keep Grouchy away from Waterloo, where he might have made a huge difference. Added to inferior staff work was the inherently unimaginative personality of Grouchy himself. Only raised to the marshalate that April, he believed that 'inspiration in war is only appropriate to the commander-in-chief.'

and that 'lieutenants must confine themselves to executing orders'. So he interpreted Napoleon's orders to him in their most literal possible sense, and marched off towards Gembloux in the hope of harrying the Prussian rear and preventing Blücher from joining Wellington. (Blücher had meanwhile rejoined Gneisenau, having been concussed during a fall from his dead horse in the skirmishing at the end of Ligny.)

Any opportunity that Napoleon might have had to attack Wellington as he was withdrawing from Quatre Bras after ten o'clock on the morning of the seventeenth was passed up by him and Ney, and when Napoleon rejoined Ney there he shouted: 'You have ruined France!' With the rain making the transport of artillery tough going, the French army followed Wellington up the Charleroi-Brussels road, hoping for the opportunity of a decisive encounter before the Prussians — of whose exact whereabouts Napoleon (and indeed Grouchy) was uncertain — could regroup. It all came down to numbers and odds: Napoleon had a larger army than either Wellington or Blücher, but not larger than both of them combined.

The French followed hard on the heels of the withdrawing British, and a compelling narrative of the day was given by Captain Cavalié Mercer of the British horse artillery, whose memoirs of the campaign are a superb historical source. 'We galloped for our lives through the storm, straining to gain the enclosures about the houses of the hamlets,' wrote Mercer. 'Lord Uxbridge urging us on, crying, "Make haste! — Make haste! For God's sake gallop, or you will be taken!"' The thunderstorms that were developing — 'Flash succeeded flash, and the peals of thunder were long and tremendous' — put paid to French hopes of catching up with the Anglo-Allied rearguard, although there was an occasion at Genappe where the British Life Guards had to charge French lancers to cover the withdrawal, which they did successfully, 'sending their opponents flying in all directions'. There were a series of narrow escapes for the Anglo-Allied army retreating from Quatre Bras, which Mercer described as 'a fox hunt'.

The torrential downpour of 17 June continued until long after

the Anglo-Allied rearguard had halted on the slopes of Mont St Jean, a few miles south of Waterloo. Those soldiers who did not have tents slept in their greatcoats, soaking wet. A British infantry private (later sergeant) named William Wheeler of the 51st Regiment recalled how 'We sat on our knapsacks until daylight without fires. The water ran in streams from the cuffs of our jackets, in short we were wet as if we were plunged overhead in a river. We had one consolation, we knew the enemy [was] in the same plight. The morning of the 18th June broke upon us and found us drenched with rain, benumbed and shaking with cold.' An officer later wrote that it seemed as if the water was being tumbled out of heaven in tubs.¹³

Charles O'Neil, a private in the 28th Regiment of Foot who had survived the terrible storming of Badajoz in the Peninsular War, recorded his memories of the night before the battle. A thief, deserter, fugitive and conman, O'Neil was not much given to sentimentality, but his account of the emotions of the night rings profoundly true:

I was just endeavouring to compose myself to sleep when my comrade spoke to me, saying that it was deeply impressed on his mind that he should not survive the morrow; and that he wished to make an arrangement with me, that if he should die and I should survive, I should inform his friends of the circumstances of his death, and that he would do the same for me, in case he should be the survivor. We then exchanged the last letters we had received from home, so that each should have the address of the other's parents. I endeavoured to conceal my own feelings, and cheer his, by reminding him that it was far better to die on the field of glory than from fear; but he turned away from me, and with a burst of tears, that spoke the deep feelings of his heart, he said, 'My mother!' The familiar sound of this precious name, and the sight of his sorrow, completely overcame my attempts at concealment, and we wept together.¹⁴

(Sure enough, although O'Neil himself was wounded at Waterloo, his comrade was killed twenty-five minutes into the action, and O'Neil duly informed the parents of the circumstances.)

Before daybreak. Wellington received a message that would make

the gruelling night undergone by the British army wholly worthwhile. Blücher sent word that as soon as it was light enough to march, he would be sending not only Bülow's corps (which had not taken part in Ligny) to Wellington's aid, but two whole corps — virtually the entire Prussian army — leaving only one corps to guard Wavre against Grouchy coming up from Gembloux. This was about treble the numbers Wellington had been expecting and hoping for, and it completely altered his thinking about the battle that was clearly to be joined the next day.

Instead of merely a holding action in front of the large Forest of Soignes to his rear, through which there was only one road to Brussels, Wellington could now envisage doing to Napoleon what Napoleon had hoped to do to the Prussians at Ligny: crush the enemy with a surprise eruption of extra troops onto its flank in the course of the battle.

For Napoleon had not the first hint of a suspicion that the Prussians, largely through the superhuman efforts of their commander, had been transformed in less than forty-eight hours from a defeated force fleeing the battlefield of Ligny into a disciplined army ready to take the offensive against the French once again. Meanwhile Grouchy, despite the large force at his disposal, had failed to make significant contact with the Prussian rearguard. He had also taken seven hours to march the six miles to Gembloux, which even in the torrential rain was a tortoise-like speed.

Napoleon desperately needed that force to be commanded by a marshal of dash and verve, but instead he had given the job to Grouchy. The most impressive cavalry commander in Europe, Napoleon's brother-in-law Joachim Murat, King of Naples, had fled Italy and offered his services, but the Emperor had turned him down. Marshal Davout was holding down the job of minister of war back in Paris, while Marshal Suchet was commanding the divisions guarding France's eastern approaches. Most of the other twenty-six marshals were either dead, had declared for the Bourbons, or were refusing to commit themselves to either side.

The knowledge that his left flank would be protected by the Prussians encouraged Wellington to strengthen the right and centre

of his line. He also left over 17,000 men (3,000 British and 14,000 Dutch and Hanoverian) off the battlefield altogether, stationing them nine miles to the west at a village named Hal, under the joint commands of Prince Frederick of the Netherlands and Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Colville, who were both under the overall command of General Lord Hill. These troops would, Wellington hoped, be able to prevent any extravagant outflanking movement on the right flank, since he suspected that Napoleon might only be feinting at the Charleroi—Brussels road and really intended to march on Brussels via Mons.

Many historians — and not only historians: Napoleon himself fastened upon it — have criticised Wellington for leaving so large a force a two-or three-hour march away from the battlefield and for not recalling them the moment it became clear that Napoleon intended no large-scale manoeuvre but only a ‘hard pounding’ attack up the centre. They have even likened Wellington’s detachment at Hal to Napoleon sending off Marshal Grouchy, thereby deliberately absenting a large body of men who could have been invaluable at the battle. In Wellington’s defence the historian Jac Weller has argued that:

On the morning of the eighteenth Wellington did not know the exact position of all French forces. He could see by personal observation that Napoleon had detached a considerable portion of his entire army. There were about 39,000 Frenchmen unaccounted for; he knew of Grouchy’s movements in general, but not his strength. If Grouchy had only half this force, the other half could have been moving to turn the Duke’s right flank. Wellington did not underrate Napoleon, he wanted to prevent the Emperor from winning by really doing the unexpected.¹⁵

On the all-important question of the numbers present at the battle, I propose to take those quoted in Mark Adkin’s excellent book *The Waterloo Companion*, which as well as their innate scholarly worth are close to those of most of the other experts. After their losses of 17,500 men at Ligny and Quatre Bras, and Grouchy’s detaching with 30,000 men, the French army under Napoleon comprised 53,400 infantry, 15,600 cavalry and 6,500 artillerymen

servicing 246 guns, along with 2,000 support staff from medics to engineers, making a total of 77,500. After losing 4,500 at Quatre Bras, and stationing 17,000 at Hal, the Anglo-Allied army under Wellington comprised 53,800 infantry, 13,350 cavalry, 5,000 artillerymen servicing 157 guns and one rocket section, and 1,000 support staff, totalling 73,150 men. The Prussian troops available to assist Wellington if Blücher's plan was properly implemented consisted of 38,000 infantry, 7,000 cavalry, 2,500 artillerymen servicing 134 guns, and 1,500 support staff, totalling 49,000 men. Of the Prussian forces, IV Corps would arrive on the battlefield at about 4.30 p.m. with 31,000 men and eighty-six guns, II Corps would get there at about 6.30 p.m. with 12,800 men, and I Corps at around 7.30 p.m. with 5,000 men.

By the time the sun rose on the undulating plateau of Mont St Jean on Sunday, 18 June it was clear to everyone that there was going to be a major engagement that day — a battle on the scale of any of the great clashes of the Napoleonic Wars, such as Marengo, Friedland, Austerlitz, Borodino or Leipzig. 'Ah! Now I've got them, those English!' Napoleon is said to have exclaimed when he was certain that the Anglo-Allied army had not filed away down the road through the Forest of Soignes during the night. He later expressed incredulity that Wellington had fought with an impassable forest to his rear, but in fact Wellington did this on purpose. 'It is not true that I could not have retreated,' he told his friend Harriet Arbuthnot eight years later. 'I could have got into the wood and I would have defied the Devil to drive me out.'¹⁶

Napoleon underlined his extreme optimism at a breakfast meeting with his senior commanders held in the farmhouse of Le Caillou, on the Charleroi—Brussels road, where he had spent the previous night. 'We have ninety chances in our favour,' he crowed, 'and not ten against.' General Maximilien Foy tried to warn the Emperor of the likely steadfastness of the British line, saying: 'The time has come when an old soldier feels it is his duty to remind Your Majesty that while the Duke of Wellington's position is one that he cannot contemplate for permanent occupation, you are now

in front of an infantry which, during the whole of the Spanish war, I never saw give way.' Marshal Soult, who had also spent years in the Peninsula, supported Foy, but Napoleon was quick to pooh-pooh them. 'Just because you have been beaten by Wellington,' he told them, 'you think he's a good general. But I tell you that Wellington is a bad general and the English are bad troops.' The whole business would be, he assured them, 'l'affaire d'un déjeuner' (a picnic).¹⁷ Instead it turned out to be perhaps the most famous battle of world history.