



## Waterloo: A Battle Worth Remembering

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The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what has been described as the most famous battle in history is being marked in a multitude of ways, from a fresh outpouring of books to a spectacular re-enactment of the battle itself, taking place on the original battlefield before thousands of spectators. For many people though, the battle is framed by the larger than life personalities of Wellington and Napoleon, as much remembered today from their contemporary caricatures as their official portraits. They too have been the subject of a mixed bag of books, television documentaries and radio programmes in the lead up to 18 June. Despite Bernard Cornwell titling his first non-fiction work *Waterloo: The History of Three Days, Three Battles and Three Armies* there has been little obvious attempt to direct attention toward Blücher and the Prussians, without the timely intervention of whom it could reasonably be argued Napoleon would have won the battle; Wellington stood and fought on the understanding that the Prussian army, some 50,000 strong, would turn up to fight alongside him. On the basis of current media coverage alone, Wellington would appear to have made a good job of airbrushing Blücher's Prussians from the pages of history; first by having them arrive much later than they did in his in his official dispatch, in which he referred to the battle as Waterloo, rather than adopting Blücher's suggestion of *La Belle Alliance*, after the inn at which the two commanders met; then, later on, he insisted that the black clad soldiers be omitted from the massive model of the battle commissioned by the United Services Museum.

But it is not just the Prussians who are at risk of being ignored or, even worse, forgotten. There has been a tendency in popular portrayals of the battle, such as the still impressive 1970 movie *Waterloo*, to overlook the fact that the British made up only a small proportion of the allied army that fought under Wellington – a modest 25,000 when compared to 43,000 Belgians, Dutch and Germans (the latter group including troops from Hanover, Nassau and the King's German Legion). Indeed, if one wanted to be mischievous it could be argued that the battle was won by the Germans and their continental allies, with a little help from the British, especially if the 50,000 Prussians are also factored in. Facetious as this suggestion is, it does serve to remind that it is vital to remember everyone who took part in that fateful battle on 18 June 1815, and this applies to individuals just as much as it does to nations. We do have a good number of illuminating accounts from lowly soldiers, including Wellington's 'scum of the earth,' but these personal testimonies represent only a tiny fraction of the up to 200,000 men who fought in the battle. A good example here would be the memoirs of Matthew Clay, a private who served with distinction in the Scots Guards during the fight for Hougoumont Farm. The names of the vast majority of men battle are, however, no longer remembered – outside the muster rolls of regiments and pension records of

survivors, but even these provide patchy coverage and many documents have been lost over the years.

The issue of identity and memory recently hit the headlines in relation to the case of the skeleton of a soldier killed during the battle that was excavated during preparatory works for the new Battle of Waterloo museum, which has just opened its doors to visitors (ironically he was found in the area destined to be the museum car park, saving him from the same fate as Richard III, with whom he shared a spinal deformity). The skeleton, which had a French musket ball lodged in the rib cage, has since found itself among the exhibits in the museum, where it resides in a glass case (along with a plastic skull to replace the original, which was lost to the plough). This public display, presumably intended to be a reminder of the human cost of the battle, has caused a degree of controversy, with one group of historians supporting a petition to the Wallonian authorities calling for the remains to be removed and given a military funeral. It is to be hoped that this soldier is given the burial he deserves, hopefully once again returning to the soil of the battlefield on which he died, but until then we must presume he will continue to undergo what could politely be described as a period of lying in state.

One reason why there has been a strong expression of disapproval of this public display - the remains of a French soldier's skeleton have long been displayed in another museum with little or no comment - is that these are not perceived to be anonymous bones but the skeleton of a named individual. It has been claimed he is Friederich Brand of the King's German Legion, identified from a piece of wood marked with these initials found beside the body. This was itself lying in the position occupied by a unit of the King's German Legion (only two men with these initials from this unit were recorded to have been killed in the battle). This evidence has been regarded as compelling by many, but is not as secure as DNA and would be far too circumstantial to stand up in court, but the association has been made and so Friederich Brand he will always be. The point is though, that it is the association of a name that increased the level of sympathy expressed over these remains and their plight. It is interesting to ponder whether the level of discontent might have been lessened if the bones had been anonymous, and conversely, whether the museum would have been as eager to put them on display if they were anonymous.

The case of the soldier's skeleton is obviously an ethically fraught one but the main point to be made here is that individual identity is important, as it permits a level of remembrance that humanises an event otherwise so easily overwhelmed by the huge numbers involved. Almost as the exception that proves the rule, the remains of an unknown soldier were used to epitomise loss and focus grief in the aftermath of the Great War, where the scale of loss reached unprecedented levels. Unlike the dead of Napoleonic-era battles, such as Waterloo, the names of the dead from the Great War at least found their way onto monuments, even if they did not have a known grave, which hundreds of thousands did not. An interesting exception here is the monument to the King's German Legion at La Haye Sainte, which bears the names of 42 officers who died defending that position. Even if the names of the rank and file are missing it is unusual to find a monument bearing lists of names at this time.

There might still be something of a Wellingtonian memory lapse in the UK but this is not reflected on the ground in Belgium, where the allies are remembered in a number of monuments. The most dramatic of these is obviously the huge pyramid of earth topped with a stone lion, which stands in tribute to William, the Dutch Prince of Orange who earned himself a wound commanding the Dutch and Belgian contingent. At the command of his parents the ridge on which the allied army stood was scoured to produce the 400,000 cubic metres of earth required, and on visiting the site in the 1840s Wellington is reported to have said 'the have ruined my battlefield'. One wonders if his view would have been so negative if it was his name adorning the monument and not that of a foreign prince. There are modest monuments to British units, but these have tended to be more recent additions, though a more ostentatious example is to be unveiled at Hougoumont on the bicentenary.

The centenary of the Great War has inspired many to research their family histories, to discover what part their ancestors played in the 'war to end all wars'. Archives play a vital role here, though it is unfortunate that many service records relating to British soldiers in the Great War were lost during the Blitz in the Second World War. Whatever the gaps in information, researching an individual from 100 years ago is, in theory at least, far easier than doing the same for someone from 200 years ago. This is where we are fortunate with the archives held by the University of Glasgow, which have been used to create or supplement biographies for a number of people who studied at the university and went on to participate in the Battle of Waterloo.

The idea to trace members of the Glasgow University community who took part in the Battle of Waterloo was of course inspired by the bicentenary, and as such was a natural progression from the Glasgow University's Great War Project, which over the past two years has seen our team creating biographies for as many of the 4,500 staff, students and alumni who served in the Great War (761 were killed). This project builds on the university's Roll of Honour, put online by the University Archives in 2006, and which has evolved into a powerful and, as more information is added, ever growing memorial, to not only the dead, but also the survivors of the Glasgow University Great War community.

Obviously, the Glasgow University contingent associated with Waterloo was going to be much smaller, hence the biographies of just 15 people are currently accessible via this website. Nor did it come as a surprise that the pool of people is dominated by surgeons, as Glasgow University has long been a centre of excellence for medicine, and a strong association with military medicine is reflected in the Great War statistics also.

One of the exceptions identified thus far is James Hamilton, who as colonel commanded the Royal Scots Greys in the battle, and was killed leading them at the charge. On reflection, this absence of non-medical personnel should not be surprising, given that army commissions could still be purchased at the time of Waterloo, a practice only abolished in 1871. At this time a university education was even more privileged than it was a century later, and over 70% of Glasgow University community members who served in the Great War did so as officers. But the point here is that social status is no bar to being forgotten, especially when it comes to warfare on the scale of Waterloo.

Hamilton, for instance, is the only person here to have a Wikipedia entry – thanks in part to his rank but also to his dramatic death in association with a well-known regiment.

The difficulties inherent in obtaining information from 200 years ago, even from the University Archives, are compounded by the fact that matriculation (which brings with it biographical detail) was not compulsory for study until the Universities Scotland Act of 1858. Prior to this time, many students came to study at the university and paid the professor directly for their teaching and then went on to get posts with little more than a letter of recommendation. This was even true of medics, who did not need to be formally qualified to practice until the Medical Act, again of 1858. We are certain to find more of our alumni at Waterloo as research continues.

As already noted, archaeology can lead to the recovery of the lost and resuscitate memory, and it is here that we find another motive for an interest in Waterloo. The Centre for Battlefield Archaeology is currently engaged in a major archaeological project exploring the battle. *Waterloo Uncovered* is an international collaboration involving experts from a number of institutions and initially focussed on the remains of Hougoumont Farm, which was the scene of very heavy fighting throughout the day of the battle. The allied force that defended the buildings and surrounding ground was multi-national, including British and German troops. Among the regiments that played a key role in the defence was the Coldstream Guards, which won plaudits from Wellington for closing the gates of the farm against French attackers. William Hunter studied medicine at Glasgow University and went on to serve as an Assistant Surgeon with the Coldstream Guards. He was with the regiment during the battle, which probably means that he was at Hougoumont, helping to tend the many men injured as the fighting raged around him.

Several weeks ago archaeologists working with *Waterloo Uncovered* excavated a saw blade from the area of the walled garden at Hougoumont. It has not yet been confirmed, but this might be a surgeon's saw used during the battle. Unprovable as it always will be, it is nonetheless tempting to speculate whether Hunter, a member of the Glasgow University community, wielded that frightening instrument as he did his bloody work.

Waterloo was an epic event, which by the end of the day on 18 June 1815, had involved around 200,000 men. The cost was horrendous, with around 10-15,000 killed and 35-40,000 wounded (accurate figures are not available, again a reflection of our fragile grasp on individuals). There has been a long tendency to overlook those wounded in wars, with focus on the dead, but this battle like every other had a profound impact on those who survived it, wounded or not (it is, for instance, not unusual to see figures of around 50,000 quoted for the death toll at Waterloo). Just as we have done with the Glasgow University Great War Roll of Honour we have here set out to remember the living and the dead of Waterloo. We therefore offer up the memory of around fifteen of those 200,000 men, because they, like the battle, are worth remembering.