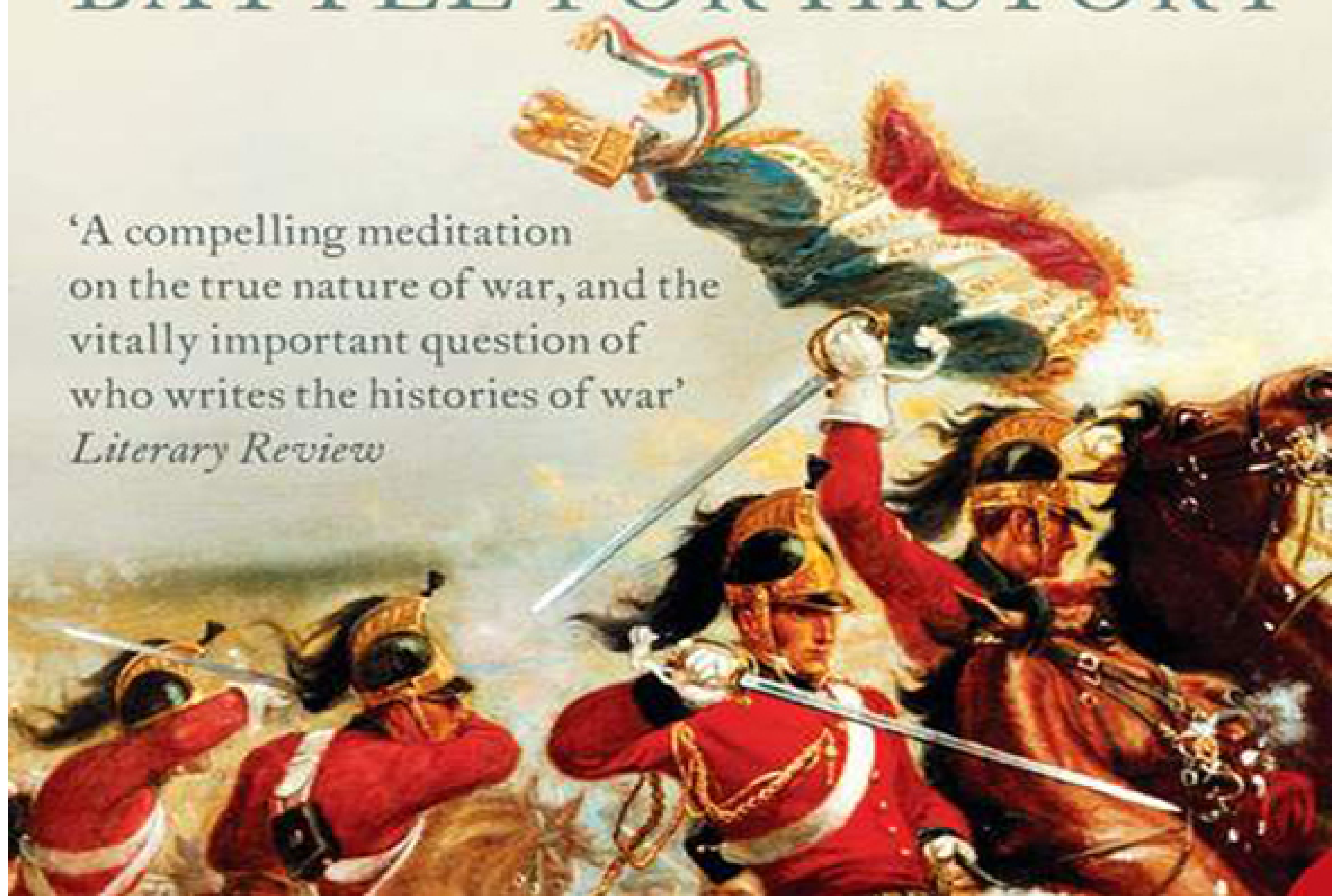
MALCOLM BALEN

A MODEL VICTORY

WATERLOO AND THE BATTLE FOR HISTORY



Malcolm Balen

A Model Victory

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A vivid retelling of the Battle of Waterloo, based on unpublished soldiers' written accounts.There were fifty thousand casualties on the single bloody day of the Battle of Waterloo: killing on the scale of the First World War. In this electrifying account, Malcolm Balen combines extraordinary first-hand accounts of the battle with the story of William Siborne, an officer who wanted to capture the moment of victory by making the perfect model.Siborne gathered together eyewitness accounts that read as if the battle was fought yesterday. But his quest for truth came up against the might of the British establishment. Who had won the day? Was it Wellington's forces or Blucher's Prussians? Malcolm Balen tells how two battles of Waterloo were fought – for Europe's future, and for the control of history.

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A Model Victory

Malcolm Balen

MALCOLM BALEN
A Model Victory

Waterloo and the Battle for History

Dedication

Henry Balen

Epigraph

The duty of the Historian of a battle … is to prefer that which has been officially recorded and published by public responsible authorities; next, to attend to that which proceeds from Official Authority … and to pay least attention to the statements of Private Individuals.

The Duke of Wellington, 24 September 1842

The communication by the media of information … on matters of public interest and importance is a vital part of life in a democratic society. However the right to communicate such information is subject to the qualification … that false accusations of fact impugning the integrity of others, including politicians, should not be made.

Lord Hutton, 28 January 2004

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I

Truth is history, and history without truth does not deserve the name; and I am anxious for the sake of the gallant men I commanded, that one day at least the truth may be known.

Sir Richard Hussey Vivian, letter to William Siborne, 18 January 1830

The advice is always to walk a battlefield, and so this is what the officer did. In itself, then, his action was not remarkable, but what was surprising to those who did not know him was the level of his commitment, a devotion to duty which was reflected in the time he spent crossing and re-crossing a few miles of rolling countryside outside Brussels. A day, perhaps, would have been deemed too short a time for most visitors, as if they were in an almost indecent haste to see the killing-fields, but a week at most would have sufficed. To go for eight months, therefore, was the sign of an interest bordering on obsession.

But then the lieutenant, prim and proper, was no ordinary tourist, and if he was there for pleasure (and it gave him plenty, although he might have cavilled at using such a word in so bloody a context) then this was an incidental benefit of the curious military exercise that he had campaigned so hard to carry out. His task was both arduous and precise but it was made the more so by his unrelenting search for perfection, for he was not a man to tolerate a hair out of place. Perhaps we should say, given the military training which lay behind his approach, he could not abide a tunic button which did not shine as brightly as the Duke of Wellington's star still shone in the firmament of British society. It was the Duke, indeed, who was unwittingly responsible for the officer's task though it was not one which came to meet with the approval of the great commander. This was one of many curiosities which came to attach themselves to the lieutenant's project as the years went by.

That Wellington should become at best indifferent and at worst hostile to the officer's work was in itself an oddity because, in truth, the lieutenant was doing little more than paying homage to him, an act of obeisance that was charted by the pen and paper which accompanied him as he trudged across the land. For he had set out to map the ground of the Duke's most famous victory, the glory of his life, the triumph which exceeded all others in a military career which had glittered as none other: the defeat of Napoleon on the fields of Waterloo, fifteen years before.

It was entirely in character that the lieutenant intended his map to be the most accurate the army had ever seen. It may have been his military training which infused him with a taste for exactitude, so that, as he grew older, he even changed the spelling of his name as if to render it more accurate: he was called William Siborn, and why he became Siborne at thirty-seven years of age, we do not know. He was born near the century's turn, on 18 October 1797, at Greenwich in south London: a meridian child who became fascinated by maps. His father was called Benjamin, and his mother Charlotte, and he was an only son. Perhaps his upbringing gave him a taste for isolation, for self-containment, for favouring a world which was neat and tidy and above all precise.

It was an upbringing which revolved around the army. A year after his birth his father became an ensign in the West Kent militia, and a year later moved into the 9th (East Norfolk) Regiment, where he stayed for two decades. Unlike his son, Siborn senior saw active service. We find him first in the 2nd Battalion under General Sir John Moore in 1808/9; then at Walcheren in 1809, under Lord Chatham; we glimpse him in the Peninsula with Wellington from 1810; and then at the Battle of Nivelles, where, on 10 November 1813, he was gravely wounded, never fully to recover. At the end of the war he sailed with his regiment to Canada, returning too late to take part in the Battle of Waterloo. The trail ends on 14 July 1819 at St Vincent in the West Indies, where Siborn was serving on peacetime duties, and where finally he succumbed to his wartime wounds.

William Siborne, brought up in a country perpetually at war and proud of his father's exploits in Spain, devoted himself to a military career, too: while still fourteen, he became a gentleman cadet at the Royal Military College, first at Great Marlow and then at Sandhurst. He was one of the first

professionally trained staff officers, and he was educated in mathematics, languages and military drawing. He was commissioned as an ensign in the same regiment as his father, the 9th Foot, in 1813, but he was too young for the great Napoleonic battles of his era, serving, somewhat less glamorously, at Chatham and Sheerness. The nearest he came to fighting was in the year after he had passed out from Sandhurst with distinction: in 1815 he joined his father as a member of the army of occupation in Paris, once the Battle of Waterloo had been fought and won. If the son ever felt the need to win the approval of higher authority (and, at the end, he came to resent it) his father's distinguished battlefield career may have played its part. Perhaps it made the son feel that while his father had seen action, his role was merely to record it, a task which made him feel part of the glorious whole which was the victorious British army, but left him curiously unsatisfied as a man.

We know what William Siborne looked like from a single surviving portrait. For this we must thank a man of many parts – Samuel Lover, sometime novelist, musician, and painter. Granted, the pose is a touch mannered, too ornamental even, as if, through the surrounding objects, the artist is trying to invest him with a status which he does not yet possess. In his blue military undress coat, William Siborne leans on a prop, a tiny cannon, and his left hand holds a plumed hat. He has a high forehead framed by brown curls; a pair of steady eyes; a long, large nose, and a round jaw, which in combination with the domed forehead, make his face seem curiously egg-shaped. A precise, exact, soft face, of which the most certain feature is the mouth: a small, pursed mouth, resolute and hard-set. It says he is a determined man; an exact man; a man who likes order; a man who likes things just so.

Fittingly, for such an exact man, the killing-fields of Waterloo were divided into areas of geometrical precision.

A large triangle with Brussels at its northern apex is formed by two long roads, one running south to Nivelles, the other, which lies further east, heads to Charleroi. The triangle's base is a shorter road which runs between the two. Heading south from Brussels, the Charleroi road cuts through the Forest of Soignes, emerging from dense wood at Waterloo, then heads for the village of Mont St Jean. Leaving Mont St Jean, a traveller can journey along a smaller triangle of roads, by stopping at the crossroads of Quatre Bras, turning west to Nivelles, and then returning north to where he started.

The base of another shape, an imperfect rectangle, is formed by the road which runs east from Nivelles to Namur, with Ligny just outside it; the Brussels to Charleroi road forms its western side, while its eastern side runs from Louvain, twenty miles east of Brussels, to Namur. In the centre of the rectangle lies Wavre. Quatre Bras, Ligny, Wavre and Mont St Jean: four places linked by the battles which determined the fate of Europe in four days of June, though all were overshadowed by the name which was given, imprecisely, to the last, the most famous conflict of them all: the Battle of Waterloo.

Waterloo has earned its lasting fame by virtue of being one of the bloodiest and most decisive one-day battles in European history. Never before had armies deployed a mixture of old and new forms of warfare with such destructive consequences. Men rode to war on horseback, their swords flashing, or formed themselves into protective squares of infantry to resist attack, but guns and shellfire were deployed too, to devastating effect. Rarely had there been slaughter on such a scale.

Though the glory of the victory soon came to overshadow any notion of its gore, nearly fifty thousand died or were wounded in the single bloody day which it took to conclude the business. A few weeks afterwards, one visitor, Charlotte Waldie, recalled how she had seen a long line of burial pits: 'the effluvia which arose from them … was horrible; and the pure west wind of summer, as it passed us, seemed pestiferous, so deadly was the smell that in many places pervaded the field. The fresh-turned clay which covered those pits betrayed how recent had been their formation. From one of them the scanty clods of earth which had covered it had in one place fallen, and the skeleton of a human face was visible. I turned from the place in indescribable horror.'

It was fitting, then, for such a bloody confrontation, that victory brought with it such a conclusive prize, an outcome which defined the course of the nineteenth century. Waterloo was one of the most conclusive armed confrontations of the century, the crucible in which modern Europe was fashioned.

It saw Britain and Prussia emerge triumphant, the two countries eclipsing the shattered might of France. It also marked the military and political end to the career of the greatest soldier of modern times, the soldier who dared to become an emperor.

Over the years, the horror of the battle had diminished, eroded by the passage of time and the growth of legend, which dwelt more on the triumph than on the cost in flesh and blood. It is here, in this cleansed landscape, that Siborne tried to make order of the ground which had played host to the carnage, mapping the land as exactly as he knew how, an academic exercise imposed on human slaughter. First, he prepared his drawing-board as if he was following a recipe in the kitchen, to guard against the expansion and contraction of the paper in the atmosphere. 'Lay upon that side of the sheet of paper which is to be fixed to the board the white of an egg well beat up,' he told students of his methods. 'Press the paper gently and gradually down upon the board from one side to the opposite one, and paste the edges which hang over to the under part of the board.' Not even a downpour would put him off. 'With drawing-boards thus prepared,' he declared solemnly, 'I have stood with an umbrella over the instrument during heavy showers of rain, without the slightest alteration taking place in the smoothness or firmness of the paper.'

If Siborne had followed the exact sequence of the battles as he mapped the countryside, and it would have been in character, he would have started at the River Sambre, with Napoleon's unexpected crossing into Belgium, so sudden and brilliant a manoeuvre that, by noon on the first day, the town of Charleroi had fallen. The topographer in Siborne would have noted how rapidly the terrain changes, falling away into the valley of the River Orme, between Genappe and Gembloux. Within five miles, the land is broken up into hills and valleys around the River Dyle, and as the river meanders north to Louvain, the country becomes close and wooded.

Then comes the landscape of the final battle. Near the hamlet of Frischermont, there is a crossroads where a lane becomes a track, and about four hundred yards later it dips into a slope which leads, through a long hollow, to the village of Plancenoit, near the Lasne stream. Both the French and Allied positions can be seen from here, perhaps the finest general view of Waterloo that Siborne could have obtained, indeed a clearer view than the participants gained for themselves, surrounded as they were by battle-smoke and the head-high crops. At the church at Plancenoit, a few battalions of the French Old Guard held off thousands of young, inexperienced Prussians, until the Prussians finally won the day. Further north still, and the road from Braine l'Alleud to Ohain follows the crest of the Mont St Jean plateau, which formed a natural obstacle along the entire front of Wellington's army. A lone elm tree on the ridge, on the west side of the crossroads, marked Wellington's position during much of the battle. But it is the Duke's advanced defences which stand out for inspection – the farm of La Haye Sainte, and the château of Hougoumont. La Haye Sainte was the centre of the Allied line, from where Major George Baring's small band of men threw tiles at the attackers, and where, the night before the battle, they tore down the great barn doors for firewood, unaware that they would have to defend the building the next day. The enemy dead, piled up on the threshold, proved to be a barricade which was almost as effective.

Hougoumont was the key to the Allied position, a fortification whose defences never fell, despite the terrible punishment its occupiers endured, and whose resistance served as a metaphor for Wellington's tactics during that long day. By the close of battle, hundreds of its defenders had died, but Hougoumont's survivors claimed divine protection when a fire stopped, miraculously and marvellously at the feet of the figure of Our Saviour in the chapel, and barely singed His toes. Charlotte Waldie, on holiday in Brussels, visited the château a few weeks after the battle and found herself in a different world.

'The carnage here had been dreadful. Amongst the long grass lay remains of broken arms, shreds of golden lace, torn epaulets, and pieces of cartridge-boxes; and upon the tangled branches of brambles fluttered many a tattered remnant of a soldier's coat. At the outskirts of the wood, and around the ruined walls of the Château, huge piles of human ashes were heaped up, some of which

were still smoking. The countrymen told us that so great were the numbers of the slain, that it was impossible entirely to consume them. Pits had been dug, into which they had been thrown, but they were obliged to be raised far above the surface of the ground. These dreadful heaps were covered with piles of wood, which were set on fire, so that underneath the ashes lay numbers of human bodies unconsumed.

'At the garden gate I found the holster of a British officer, entire, but deluged with blood. In the inside was the maker's name – Beazley and Hetse, No. 4, Parliament Street. All around were strewed torn epaulets, broken scabbards, and sabre tashes stained and stiffened with blood.'

When it was over, the French had lost half their men, while the two opponents who had united against them, the Anglo-Allied army led by the Duke of Wellington and the Prussian army led by General Blücher, had lost a third: out of 190,000 men who took part in the battle, the French casualties totalled more than 30,000, the British and Dutch, under Wellington, about 15,000, and the Prussians lost about 7000 men. At one point, 45,000 men lay dead or wounded within an area of three square miles. Half the 840 British infantry officers were dead, and their cavalry had lost a third of its number. The 12th Light Dragoons alone lost three officers, two sergeant-majors, five sergeants, three corporals and thirty-eight dragoons.

Despite the death toll, the soldiers themselves remembered it as a glorious victory. But in the stories they told of the battle they did not forget its horror, even if none of them appeared to dwell unduly on the cost. Among the survivors was Private Tom Morris of the 73rd Foot, who described how he had roamed the battlefield in search of water after the fighting had ended: 'By the light of the moon I picked my way among the bodies of my sleeping as well as of my dead comrades … I thought I heard the man call to me, and the hope that I could render him some assistance overcame my terror. I went towards him, and placing my left hand on his shoulder, attempted to lift him up with my right; my hand, however, passed through his body, and then I saw that both he and his horse had been killed by a cannonball.' Another soldier from Staffordshire, Frederick Mainwaring, found a loaf of bread in a French officer's knapsack, covered in the brains of a British guardsman. Mainwaring was so hungry he scraped off the brains and ate the loaf. Captain Cavalié Mercer of the Royal Horse Artillery remembered that 'from time to time a figure would raise itself from the ground, and then, with a despairing groan, fall back again. Others, slowly and painfully rising, stronger, or having less deadly hurt, would stagger away with uncertain steps across the field in search of succour. Many of these I followed with my gaze until lost in the obscurity of distance; but many, alas! after staggering a few paces, would sink again on the ground, probably to rise no more. Horses, too, there were to claim our pity – mild, patient, enduring.'

Only at first light did the men begin to comprehend the enormity of their sacrifice. Captain Mercer buried one of his drivers, James Crammond, simply because his injuries were so horrifying. 'I had not been up many minutes when one of my sergeants came to ask if they might bury Driver Crammond. "And why particularly Driver Crammond?" "Because he looks frightful, sir; many of us have not had a wink of sleep for him." Curious! I walked to the spot where he lay, and certainly a more hideous sight cannot be imagined. A cannonshot had carried away the whole head except barely the visage, which still remained attached to the torn and bloody neck. The men said they had been prevented sleeping by seeing his eyes fixed on them all night; and thus this one dreadful object had superseded all the other horrors by which they were surrounded.'

An ensign, seventeen-year-old Edward Macready, calculated that of the 460 men in the 30th Foot, 279 were casualties. Sixty-nine of Captain Mercer's horses were dead, and more than 1500 in all. 'Some lay on the ground with their entrails hanging out, and yet they lived,' wrote Captain Mercer. 'These would occasionally attempt to rise, but, like their human bedfellows, quickly falling back again, would lift their poor heads, and, turning a wistful gaze at their side, lie quickly down again.'

Hougoumont, still smouldering, smelled of burnt flesh and death. It looked, thought John Kincaid of the 95th Rifles, as if the world had nearly come to an end. 'The field of battle next morning

presented a frightful scene of carnage; it seemed as if the world had tumbled to pieces and three-fourths of everything destroyed in the wreck. The ground running parallel to the front where we had stood was so thickly strewed with fallen men and horses, that it was difficult to step clear of their bodies; many of the former were still alive, and imploring assistance, which it was not in our power to bestow. The usual salutation on meeting an acquaintance of another regiment after an action was to ask who had been hit? But on this occasion it was "Who's alive?"'

The villages around Waterloo were filled with the injured, their churches acting as hospitals. In Brussels, the mayor launched an appeal for its citizens to take as much bedding as they could to the Hôtel de Ville, especially mattresses, bolsters, bedsheets and blankets, and to give linen or lint to their local priests. But it would take several days until all the injured had been recovered, taken by wagon to nearby farm buildings or cottages. Accidents caused the death toll to rise still further: 'Two of our men, on the morning of the 19th, lost their lives by a very melancholy accident,' Kincaid recalled. 'They were cutting up a captured ammunition waggon for firewood, when one of their swords, striking against a nail, sent a spark among the powder. When I looked in the direction of the explosion, I saw the two poor fellows about twenty or thirty feet up in the air. On falling to the ground, though lying on their backs and bellies, some extraordinary effort of nature, caused by the agony of the moment, made them spring from that position five or six times, to the height of eight or ten feet, just as a fish does when thrown on the ground after being newly caught. It was so unlike a scene in real life that it was impossible to witness it without forgetting, for a moment, the horror of their situation.'

A professor of military surgery, John Thomson, saw one patient whose neck had been cut by a sabre, revealing part of the brain which was seen pulsating for eight weeks. There were many victims with sabre wounds to the face and neck, where the eyelids, nose, ears, cheeks and lips had been divided, wounds which were held together by adhesive straps, and by bandages. In many cases, bullets had passed directly through one or both eyeballs. There were many chest wounds, too, some inflicted by the lance and bayonet; but most by musketballs. There were patients whose bladders had been penetrated by musketballs, and, in several cases, men had lost large portions of the buttocks and thighs to cannonballs.

More than five hundred amputations were carried out by the surgeons in an age without anaesthetics, their most famous patient Lord Uxbridge, whose knee had been shattered. He talked calmly to his surgeons as they cut through his flesh and bone, in a house a few miles from the battlefield, and he was heard only once to complain, when he remarked that the knife did not seem very sharp. 'Take a look at that leg,' he commanded his visitor, Sir Hussey Vivian, pointing to the severed limb which was still in the room. He regretted its loss deeply. 'Some time hence, I may be inclined to imagine it might have been saved.'

Wellington was far from immune to the human cost of victory, to the lives wrecked and to the men racked with pain in Brussels hospitals. Many of his friends and fellow-officers were dead, a mournful list which included a dozen of his senior staff. 'Do not congratulate me. I have lost all my friends,' he insisted, on his return to Brussels. Many men died from exposure as they lay on the battlefield for two, sometimes three days, waiting to be rescued, while scavengers moved among them, stripping valuables from the dead and injured before the stretcher parties arrived. 'I hope to God,' said Wellington later, 'that I have fought my last battle. I always say that, next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained.'

So intense had been the fighting that the landscape was altered by the conflict, with the trees reduced to stumps. It was killing on the scale of the First World War, a century ahead of time.

It was fifteen years after the battle that William Siborne began his great project. He was invited by the commander-in-chief of the army, Lord Rowland Hill, a Waterloo veteran, to map the ground where the Battle of Waterloo had been fought, and from this to create a scale model, with the work paid for by public funds. Over the years which followed the Model grew in size and detail and ambition so that when it was finally finished few exhibition rooms in the land were large enough to hold it.

Tens of thousands of toy soldiers, carefully crafted so that their different parts should move, came to take up their positions in the gently rolling landscape of its perfectly contoured terrain.

One of the reasons that Siborne was commissioned to map the land which came to grip his imagination was the threat that a housing development would scar the battlefield, altering irreversibly the scene of one of Britain's most famous military victories. For eight months he stayed at La Haye Sainte farmhouse, the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting fifteen years before. Though he became obsessed by the need to map the terrain as accurately as possible, Siborne also determined to gather together the recollections of many of the surviving officers who had fought at Waterloo. His cartographic skills were unquestionable. But, to create his Model, Siborne had resolved to become a historian, too. To gather the information he needed, and arrive at what he hoped would be 'a most faithful and authentic record of the battle despite the passage of time' Siborne decided to send out a circular letter to British officers at the battle. From it, we get a clear sense of a precise, particular, man in search of historical accuracy:

Sir,

Having for some time been occupied in constructing a Model of the Field and Battle of Waterloo, upon a scale sufficiently large to admit of the most faithful representation of that memorable Action, I have accordingly the honour to request you will have the goodness to reply to the following queries, as far as your recollection and circumstances of your position at the time will admit.

What was the particular formation at the moment when the French Imperial Guards, advancing to attack the right of the British Forces, reached the crest of our position? What was the formation of the Enemy's Forces?

Would you have the goodness to trace these formations, according to the best of your recollection, upon the accompanying Plan?

If Officers will, however, but favour me with their remarks and opinions, freely and without reserve, I trust that, by fairly weighing and comparing the data thus afforded me, I shall be enabled to deduce a most faithful and authentic record of the Battle, the surest means of imparting to the Model that extreme accuracy which in a work of this nature, not dependent like a pictorial representation on effect for excellence, must always constitute its real value.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your most obedient, humble Servant,

W. SIBORNE

Lieut.-Assist. Mil.Sec.

Siborne collected and kept his replies, the eyewitness accounts of the survivors of the battle, so that today we can read the handwritten evidence of the men who fought at Waterloo. Hundreds of letters with diagrams and maps, and thoughts and views, were gathered together in six volumes, the matter-of-fact commentaries of the men who survived the killing-fields.

The replies came in angular writing, usually in black ink but occasionally in blue, on paper large and small. Some were neatly written, and were well thought out. Others were written down without forethought, and with many crossings-out. Siborne also sent out maps which he had drawn and printed, to establish the exact location of the troops, and often these came back cut into smaller pieces to focus on a relevant sector, coloured-in or marked in pencil. There were letters from as far away as Corfu, from Ketley in Southampton, from Maltings in Suffolk, from Leamington, from Derby, from Mansfield, from Belper, Knutsford, Brighton, Edinburgh, and Kelso; in London, from Carlton Terrace, Bryanston Square, Portman Square and Woolwich. He had letters, too, from the Prussian general staff and some French marshals. One envelope addressed to The Captain Siborne, Royal Military Asylum, Chelsea was forwarded to a new address in Yorkshire with the sender's name, the King of Prussia, casually written on the back. Today the large red seal of Le Roi De Prusse, bearing his crown, looks incongruous against the blue Post Office stamp which declares: Harrogate August 8 1848. A second envelope was simply sent to 'Captain Siborne at Dublin, Officer of the

Commander of the Forces' and a third addressed 'À Monsieur le Capitaine Siborne à Londres.' As Siborne's fame spread, both found their destination.

In addition to creating his extraordinary Model, Siborne came to write a history of the battle, based on these replies. In outlook, he was no different to the general run of historians of his time. He, too, was patriotic to a fault, and his history reflected his nationalism, but he was prepared to ask questions of the veterans, to list and document all their accounts. Nearly two hundred years on, these accounts read as if the battle had been fought yesterday. Siborne was prepared to go beyond a ritualistic celebration of national pride. He researched what actually happened, and then inch by inch, piece by piece, he tried to reconstruct events with the exactitude which might be expected from such a meticulous map-maker. But Siborne was to struggle with the obstacles history places in the path of its pursuers, trying to peel away the layers laid down by time, before he could begin to make sense of the material he had so patiently gathered together. For all his information-gathering, he was to find that history has a way of revealing itself, not always willingly, but obstinately, like a reluctant relative yielding up the hidden secrets of a family's past.

For if history is a search for truth, and it was in exactly this spirit that Siborne embarked on the enterprise which would ruin him, then there are always forces which oppose it. And, unfortunately for the good officer, the truth can be maddeningly imprecise, if not lost for ever, then at least shrouded in the fog of time and war. It certainly does not always admit of the exactness which is needed when a terrain has to be mapped. Honestly held views and accounts have to be recorded, reconciled, crosschecked against a hundred others, sifted for evasions, exaggerations and misunderstandings. 'You speak of the difficulties you have in reconciling different accounts of eyewitnesses,' replied Major Evans of the 5th West India Regiment, to one of Siborne's enquiries. 'This is only what invariably occurs. There is scarcely an instance, I think, of two persons, even though only fifty yards distant from each other, who give of such events a concurring account.'

Truth and facts in history, as Siborne would learn to his cost, admit of many interpretations, often honestly held. To map a battlefield is one thing: to record the twists and turns of the battle quite another, to impose upon it order and stratagem, to reduce it, tidily, to a clear series of linear events which join together and connect to reach their natural conclusion, is another still. In short, the witnesses Siborne had sought, whose accounts he uniquely captured, did not always tell the same story. More importantly, they did not tell the story that the high command, both political and military, always wished to hear.

More than fifty history books were written in the year of the battle alone, some of them reprinted several times, such was the public appetite to celebrate the victory. Of the many accounts written by veterans of the battle, some were vainglorious, some misleading, some ostentatiously romantic. Such accounts were, however, uncontroversial. Glorying in victory, they were personal, anecdotal, narrow, exciting books, which would cause the Duke of Wellington no harm. As Captain Mercer noted in his diary: 'Depend upon it, he who pretends to give a general account of a great battle from his own observations deceives you – believe him not. He can see no farther (that is, if he be personally engaged in it) than the length of his nose; and how is he to tell what is passing two or three miles off, with hills and trees and buildings intervening, and all enveloped in smoke? I write … only pure simply gossip for my own amusement – just what happened to me and mine, and what I did see happen to others about me.'

Siborne's history, however, in its complexity and reach, was different, ranging far and wide in its gathering of witnesses. In this way, eventually, he made a name for himself as a historian, and in so doing surpassed his previous career as a soldier and topographer. Siborne sought to describe a whole battle by sorting historical truth from the chaff of confusion, and although he relied upon, indeed courted, army testimony which was overwhelmingly officer-based, his was a unique exercise in the search for truth. But it was, in its scope and reach, far too democratic for the times.

Using hundreds of eyewitness statements, the Model he created tried to capture the exact moment of victory, the Crisis of the Battle as it was called, with the precision only he could bring to such an enterprise. But models, of course, cannot show the great sweep of history; they cannot demonstrate the irresistible tide of events which flows inexorably in one direction, towards a single inevitable conclusion. They cannot make allowances for nuances of analysis. They cannot hedge or dissemble, or allow extraneous factors or influences to intrude upon the carefully crafted conclusion they have created. They are fixed in their certainty, frozen in time, their central characters immobile, as if paralysed by the mighty forces which they have unleashed. Such a fate awaited Siborne's Model, because he dared to pose the central question: who won the Battle of Waterloo? Was it Wellington's forces, or Blücher's Prussians, or a combination of the two? Siborne was forced to provide an answer, and the question nearly destroyed him. The next decade, for Siborne, would come to be dominated by the need for money for his Model, and the military establishment's growing opposition to the exercise in historical democracy it had unwittingly unleashed. These two forces would collide, undermining Siborne's search for truth, eroding his atavistic belief in the army and his own view of the historical facts he had spent half his lifetime assembling.

'What are you to do with the Prussians?' asked the Waterloo veteran, Sir Richard Hussey Vivian, presciently, about the army of model soldiers the junior officer was assembling. His question would find an echo in the army, and among the political leadership of the country. It would reverberate among the high command and in the corridors of power. It would even tap uncomfortably at the door of the great commander himself. Sometimes tacitly, and sometimes overtly, Siborne's obstinate search for the facts would be seen as the barrier to the further, official, funding of his Model. What was he to do with the Prussians? The question pursued Siborne to the grave.

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