

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Forrest. *Waterloo*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-966325-5.

Reviewed by Erin Spinney (University of Saskatchewan)

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As Great Battles series editor Hew Strachan lays out, the purpose of this book series is not to produce another military history of a great battle but to situate the battle “in the context of the war in which it occurred,” and to “discuss its legacy, its historical interpretation and reinterpretation, its place in national memory and commemoration, and its manifestations in art and culture” (p. vii). In *Waterloo*, the first book of the series, Alan Forrest does just that.

The introductory chapter considers the question of whether Waterloo should even be considered a great battle. This discussion is useful not only to frame what it means to be a “great battle,” but also to understand how contemporaries conceived of the battle particularly as it contrasted with previous battles at Jena, Austerlitz, and Leipzig. According to Forrest, Waterloo’s greatness is derived from its aftermath, including the peace that lasted in Europe until the Crimean War, rather than from the battle itself. Such rationale explains the format of the book.

Indeed, the Battle of Waterloo features little. The second chapter deals with the peace settlement of the Congress of Vienna, Napoleon’s escape from Elba, his creative stylization as a son of the Revolution, and his support from the army as he successfully marched to Paris. Only in the third chapter is the actual battle discussed. This is done primarily to lay the foundations for the following discussion of memory and commemoration.

Given that the book was published on the two-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, its focus on commemoration and meaning of the battle in British, French, Belgian, Dutch, and German national memory is

particularly important. Much of the analysis on historical memory of the battle rests with the British experience. The immediate news of the battle, discussed in chapter 4, centers on the Duke of Wellington and his narrative, only briefly bringing in how the news of the battle was received elsewhere. Though as chapter 6 illustrates, “only Britain made [Waterloo] into a centrepiece of national memory and commemoration, as press and public rushed to acclaim the significance of the battle and to squeeze every ounce of glory from it” (p. 99), so this approach is perhaps warranted.

French memory, or lack thereof, is discussed in chapter 7. There is a nuanced investigation of how political developments in France altered and appropriated the battle for their own purposes. For the French, Forrest argues, Napoleon and his cult of personality would be the lingering story, not the Battle of Waterloo.

German and Dutch memory are considered together in chapter 8. Focus is given to the differing experiences of the various German states that participated in the battle. Waterloo proved difficult to integrate within the developing German nationalism of the mid-nineteenth century and was therefore cast aside in favor of Leipzig and the Battle of Nations in 1813.

Military historians, particularly those who have served or are serving in the armed forces, may find chapter 5, “Military Memoirs and Communicative Memory,” of particular interest. Increased literacy rates by the Napoleonic Wars offered an alternative source of military memoirs as ordinary soldiers told their tales in print alongside more traditional officer-written accounts. Appetites in Britain were especially ravenous for recountings of the battle. Interestingly, Waterloo memoirs were

not restricted to soldiers; memoirs were also written by women who had weathered the battle in Brussels, yet witnessed the calm before the battle and the devastation of the wounded in its aftermath.

Waterloo handles its subject matter of memory and commemoration well. It also reminds readers of the hor-

rible human cost of the battle. A traditional battle history of tactics, troop movements, and strategy this book is not, nor does it attempt to be. On first impression *Waterloo* and the Great Battles series in general may appear to be misleadingly titled, yet this book offers a much-needed melding of battle history and the imagination and reimagination of that battle in historical memory.

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