The battle of Waterloo

Anear-run thing

Appallinglybloody, yetdecisive, the battle ofWaterloo in June 1815 deserves the

attention itis getting 200 years later

Waterloo: The History of Four Days, Three

Armies and Three Battles. By Bernard

Cornwell. William Collins; 352 pages; £25

Waterloo: Four Days that Changed

Europe’s Destiny. By Tim Clayton. Little,

Brown; 588 pages; £25

Waterloo: The Aftermath. By Paul

O’Keefe. Overlook; 392 pages; $37.50.

Bodley Head; £25

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ITH the bicentenary of the battle of

Waterloo fast approaching, the pub-

lishing industry has already fired volley

aftervolleyofweightyordnance atwhat is

indeed one ofthe defining events ofEuro-

pean history. About that, there can be no

argument. Waterloo notonlybroughtto an

end the extraordinary career of Napoleon

Bonaparte, whose ambitions had led

directlyto the deathsofup to 6m people. It

also redrewthe map ofEurope and was the

climax ofwhat has become known as the

second Hundred Years War, a bitter com-

mercial and colonial rivalry between Brit-

ain and France that had begun during the

reign of Louis XIV. Through its dogged re-

sistance to France’s hegemonic ambitions

in the preceding 20 years, Britain helped

create the conditions for the security sys-

tem known as the Concert of Europe, es-

tablished in 1815. The peace dividend Brit-

ain enjoyed forthe next40 yearsallowed it

to emerge asthe dominantglobal power of

the 19th century.

If the consequences of the battle were

both profound and mostlybenign, certain-

lyforBritain, the scale ofthe slaughter and

suffering that took place in fields 10 miles

(16km) south ofBrussels on that long June

day in 1815 remains shocking. The Duke of

Wellington never uttered the epigram at-

tributed to him: “Next to a battle lost, the

greatestmiseryisa battle gained.” Whathe

did say in the small hours after the battle

was: “Thank God, I don’t know what it is

like to lose a battle; but certainly nothing

can be more painful than to gain one with

the lossofso manyofone’sfriends.” Near-

lyall hisstaffhad been killed orwounded.

Around 200,000 men had foughteach oth-

er, compressed into an area of five square

miles(13 square kilometres).

When darkness finally fell, up to

50,000 men were lying dead or seriously

wounded—it is impossible to say how

many exactly, because the French losses

were only estimates—and 10,000 horses

were dead or dying. Johnny Kincaid, an

officer ofthe 95th Rifles who survived the

onslaught by the French on Wellington’s

centre near La Haie Sainte farm, coolly

declared: “I had neveryetheard ofa battle

in which everybody was killed; but this

seemed likely to be an exception, as all

were goingbyturns.”

Although frequently told, the story of

the battle, or rather three battles—the en-

gagement between Wellington’s Anglo-

Dutch forcesand the French atQuatre Bras

on June 16th, the much bigger battle of

Ligny on the same day, which saw the de-

featofPrussia’sarmy, and finallyWaterloo

itself on the 18th—remains tense and grip-

ping. Wellington himself thought such re-

tellings futile, observing some years later:

“The historyofa battle isnotunlike the his-

toryofa ball. Some individualsmayrecol-

lect all the little events of which the great

resultisthe battle won orlost; but no indi-

vidual can recollect the order in which, or

the exactmomentatwhich, theyoccurred,

which makes all the difference as to their

value orimportance.”

However, for straightforward narrative

accounts of what happened, combined

with convincing analysis of the decisions

and actions upon which the outcome of

the struggle turned, it is hard to beat Ber-

nard Cornwell, who isbetterknown as the

author of the fictional Sharpe novels set

during the Peninsular War, and Tim Clay-

ton, an academichistorian who co-wrote a

widelypraised bookaboutTrafalgar.

Theyare helped bythe massive archive

of letters and diaries written by the men

who were there. Itwasan age in which lit-

eracy was not just the preserve ofthe offi-

cer class. There was also a competitive

newspaper industry eager for graphic de-

scriptions of what everybody at the time

realised wasan eventofhuge historical im-

portance. Memoirs, too, were much in de-

mand for decades after the battle. Doubt-

less some of the reports and anecdotes

were embroidered, and memory can lie,

but they convey in extraordinary detail

and colourthe horror, the heroism, the ter-

ror and the sometimes dark humour of

fightingmen in extremis.

In all probability, Napoleon could not

ultimately have won the war, because of

the size and determination of the forces

ranged against him across Europe. But

what gives the story its enduring power is

the factthatthe outcome ofthisbattlewas

farfrom certain. AsWellington said later, it

was“the nearest-run thingyoueversaw in

yourlife”.

Returningfrom hisnine-month exile on

Elba, Napoleon had quickly mobilised an

armyofnearly200,000 mento take on the

coalition forces regathering to apprehend

him. AsMrClayton argues, the conception

of this final campaign was brilliant. The

plan wasto splitthe forcescommanded by

Wellington from the Prussian army led by

the redoubtable Gebhard von Blücherand

then defeat each separately. However, its

execution depended on a speed and deci-

siveness that was beyond Napoleon’s im-

mediate subordinates, Marshals Ney and

Grouchy, and perhaps, by this stage, even

the greatman himself.

Four errors, partly the result of poor

staff work, helped doom Napoleon. The

first, entirely self-inflicted, was to deprive

himselfofhis two most effective generals:

Marshal Davout, leftbehind to guard Paris,

and Marshal Suchet, put in charge of de-

fendingthe eastern borderagainstpossible

attack by the Austrians. The second was

Ney’salmostinexplicable hesitation in tak-

ingthe strategic crossroads ofQuatre Bras,

the key to dividing the coalition armies.

The third wasthe aimlesswanderingin the

pouringrain ofthe Compte d’Erlon and his

20,000 troops between the battle at

Quatre Bras against the Anglo-Dutch and

the battle at Ligny that the Prussians were

losing. Had he intervened in either, the im-

pact could have been decisive. The fourth

was the failure of initiative by Grouchy

that allowed the regrouped Prussians to

outflankhim and arrive at the critical mo-

mentto save Wellington atWaterloo.

That said, nothing should be taken

away from Napoleon’s conquerors. Both

commanders were talented profession-

als—Wellington was unmatched in the art

of defence—who had experienced and

competent subordinates and staffs. The

British infantryand the King’sGerman Le-

gion (a British army unit) were hardened

veterans of the highest quality. Above all,

both commanders trusted each other and

never wavered in their mutual support, a

factor that Napoleon almost certainly un-

derestimated in hisstrategiccalculus.

Mr Cornwell will appeal most to those

who are not Waterloo scholars, but who

wanta greatand terrible storytold with en-

ergyand claritybya writerwho hasa deep

understandingofmen in combatand why

theydo whattheydo. MrClayton provides

a cooler, less Anglocentric approach and a

massofnarrative detail thatattimes can be

overwhelming. But his style is lucid and

hisjudgmentsscrupulouslyfair.

Foran enthrallingaccountofthe hours,

days and weeks after the battle, read Paul

O’Keefe’s “Waterloo: The Aftermath”. It

startswith an almostghoulish description

of the slaughter ground after night fell, a

“landscape of carnage, observed through

the silvered filter ofmoonlight”. Amid the

criesofdyingmen and horses, the clinking

ofhammeragainstchisel beside the burial

pitscould be heard—the sound ofteeth be-

ing removed from dead men by entrepre-

neurial camp followers intending to sup-

plydenture-makersin London.

Remarkably quickly, the battlefield be-

came a destination for English tourists,

who also flocked to enjoy the charms of

Paris they had for so long been denied. To

their disappointment, however, some of

the greatworksofEuropean arton display

in the Louvre that had been looted by Na-

poleon’sarmieswere soon beingbundled

up to be returned to theiroriginal owners.

Mr O’Keefe paints a vivid picture of a

France thathad grown wearyofNapoleon

and, with the exception ofa few old loyal-

istsand anti-monarchists, wasquite happy

to consign la gloireto the past.

Napoleon threw himself on the mercy

of the British. His second and final exile

washandled politelybutfirmlybyofficers

of the Royal Navy. They had orders to dis-

abuse the former emperor of his idea that

he mightlive outhisdaysasa country gen-

tleman in England, and to transporthim to

St Helena, an island that was sufficiently

remote to prevent him from causing any

more trouble. Napoleon and hisremaining

followersthoughtthisa greatbetrayal bya

civilised and liberal nation. The Prussians,

had theycaughthim, would have been still

less considerate ofthe great man’s dignity.

Theywanted simplyto capture and kill the

formeremperor, a fate thatmostofEurope

would surelyhave applauded.