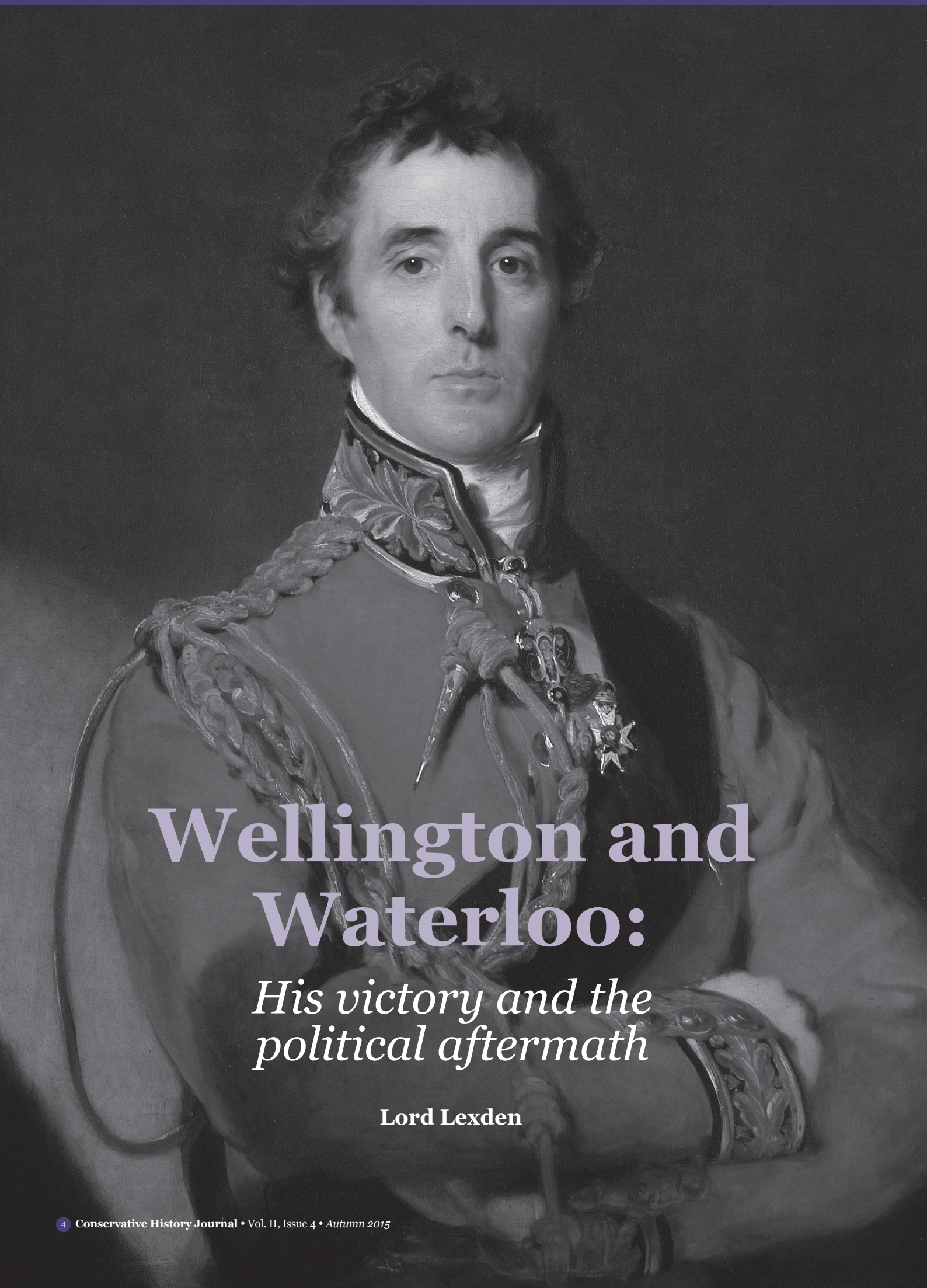


Wellington and Waterloo:

His victory and the political aftermath

Lord Lexden

'It has been a damned nice thing – the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life'.

'Well, thank God, I don't know what it is to lose a battle; but certainly nothing can be more painful than to gain one with the loss of so many friends'.

'By God! I don't think it would have done if I had not been there!'

Wellington made these famous, much-quoted comments about Waterloo to people who saw him in the immediate aftermath of victory two hundred years ago. He rarely spoke of anything at length; it was his habit always to be terse, absolutely clear, and utterly straightforward. Nothing ever clouded his realistic assessment of events. Asked whether he was pleased with the ecstatic reception that he was given in Brussels on his return from Waterloo, he replied, 'Not in the least; if I had failed they would have shot me'.

Detailed analysis of events and people bored him. He did not want anyone to write a book about his great triumph, recording every infantry engagement and cavalry charge in full. Asked to assess the respective contributions of the various regiments under his command, he replied: 'Oh, I know nothing of the services of particular regiments; there was glory enough for all'.

Of course Wellington stood no chance of persuading the writers and historians to put away their pens. Some six hundred books have been published about Waterloo. None of them, however, has taken issue with the short, sharp summary of the most important features of the battle which he himself provided in his famous comments. He emphasized three things: the narrow margin of victory, the extent of the casualties, and his own indispensability. Let us consider each of the three in turn.

First, the narrow margin of victory. Napoleon at the head of a superb army of 128,000 crack troops expected to carry all before him. As he prepared for battle on the morning of 18 June 1815 he told one of his leading Marshals that

> *Wellington is a bad general, the English are bad troops and we'll settle this matter by lunchtime.*

It was of course absurd hubris on the part of a brilliant military genius who had fought sixty battles and lost only seven, leading him to brush aside Wellington's record of sixteen battles (unblemished though it was by a single defeat). This did not mean, however, that the French army arranged its dispositions in a complacent spirit, so making life easier for its opponents. Napoleon wanted his troops to be seen at their finest as they crushed their enemy by lunchtime. Morale was high. Cries of '*Vive l'Empereur*' rang out at frequent intervals from the French lines.

'A Wellington Boot or The Head of the Army' by William Heath, 1827 (National Portrait Gallery)

Wellington never once throughout his career referred to Napoleon with the disrespect that the latter treated him. He told all sorts of people that Napoleon's presence on the battlefield made the difference of forty thousand men. That was a particularly chilling thought at Waterloo where Wellington's army of some 89,000 was already outnumbered, even before adding 'the Napoleon effect' to the balance.

Wellington reduced that advantage by choosing his battlefield and posting his troops with immense skill. His army occupied an excellent defensive position on a ridge bounded on both sides by fortifiable buildings, the farms of La Haye Sainte and Chateau de Hougoumont. They were to play a central part in the battle and acquire lasting fame.

The battle began at 11.30 in the morning and lasted until around 9.00 in the evening. Throughout, the fighting was intense and unrelenting. Twice Napoleon came close to the victory he had anticipated. In the early afternoon his magnificent first infantry corps almost succeeded in smashing through the centre of Wellington's army. The honour of Britain and the reputation of Wellington were saved principally as a result of the resilience and courage of just four hundred men of the King's German Legion defending La Haye Sainte and the reinforcements who aided them.

The Legion had been raised in Hanover (whose union with the British Crown was commemorated at the Carlton Club last year on its tercentenary). Waterloo might have been lost if George III had not also been Elector of Hanover. The decisive, heroic stand taken by his German soldiers has been described grippingly in *The Longest Afternoon*, a brilliant new short book by Brendan Simms, a leading authority on the modern history of Europe.

Napoleon seemed to be on the verge of success for the second time in the early evening during the final stages of the battle. The famous Imperial Guard, never defeated in battle, advanced in dense columns. It took the intense, sustained musket fire that Wellington

now ordered and co-ordinated to break them unexpectedly.

A little later, Wellington, who was in civilian clothes, took off his hat and waved it three times towards the French in a signal for a general advance. His confidence was now unbounded because his key ally, Marshal Blücher, had arrived on the scene at the head of the Prussian army. It is sometimes suggested that this was an unexpected stroke of good luck for Wellington, rescuing him from difficulties that might have prevented an overwhelming victory. It was, however, on the basis of a clear agreement with the Prussians, confirmed in a message at 5 a.m. that morning, that Wellington gave battle. The union of the allies was late in coming about. It was that delay which made Waterloo 'the nearest run thing', the battle in which the great Duke 'was never so near being beat'.

The second feature of the battle which Wellington stressed was the severity of the losses that his army sustained. One of his officers, Captain Johnny Kincaid, wrote that he 'had never yet heard of a battle in which everybody was killed, but this seemed likely to be an exception'. By the time Wellington ordered the pursuit of the fleeing French, some 40,000 soldiers and several thousand horses had been killed or wounded, and their bodies lay in an area of ground not much more than a mile square. Never before or since have so many men crowded into so confined a battlefield.

Wellington himself was almost constantly under fire. Few members of his personal staff escaped unscathed. One of them, Lord Fitzroy Somerset, was hit in the right arm by a sniper's bullet; his left arm and Wellington's right were touching at the time. After enduring amputation without an anaesthetic, Somerset called out cheerfully, 'Here, don't take that arm away until I have taken the ring off the finger'.

In the early hours of the morning after the battle, a surgeon woke Wellington to tell him of the death of his favourite *aide-de-camp* and give him the latest casualty figures. Wellington, he wrote,

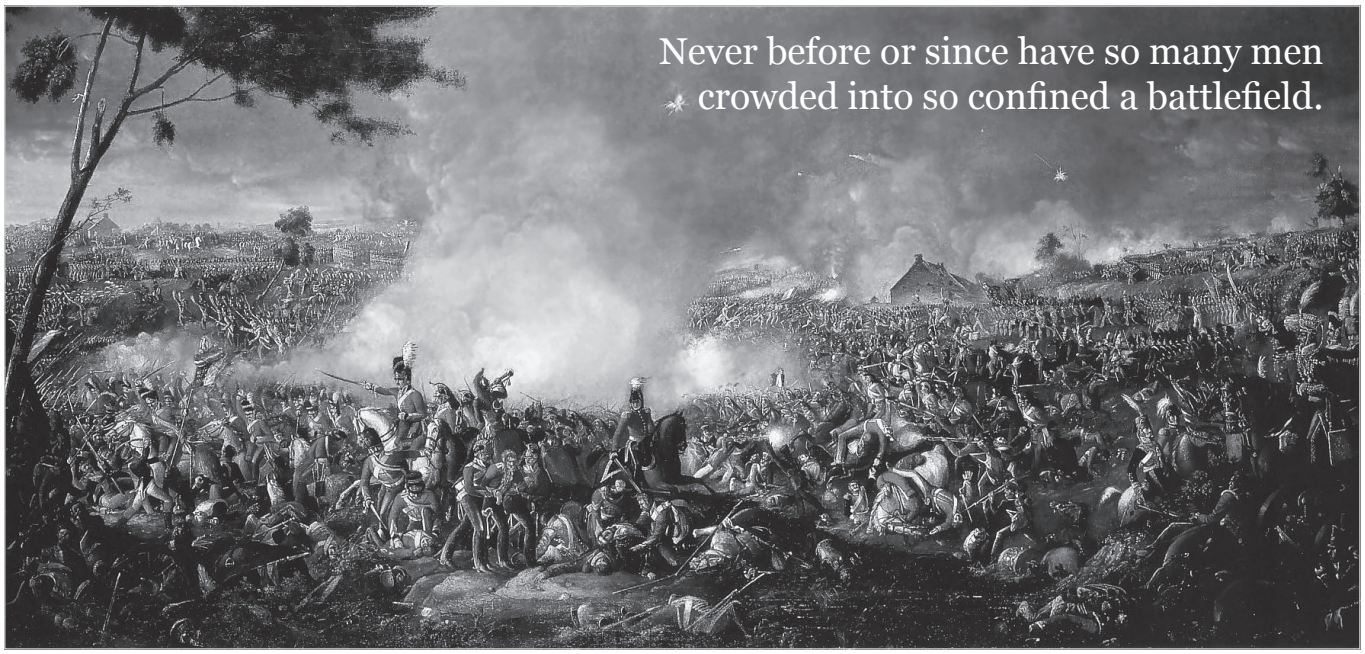
> *was much affected. I felt his tears dropping fast on my hands, and looking towards him, saw them chasing one another in furrows over his dusty cheeks.*

The incident reveals a side of Wellington that many have missed: the cool, impassive commander in the field was also a man of deep feeling.

The third point about the battle that Wellington singled out was that success would not have been achieved without him. The comment was made without a touch of arrogance or vanity. It was the plain truth. 'It is up to you to save the world', Tsar Alexander of Russia told him before he set out for Belgium. Long years of war had produced many fine generals, but Wellington stood far above them all. As an officer who had been with him throughout the Peninsular War put it, 'when his moment of difficulty comes intelligence flashes from the eyes of this wonderful man; and he rises superior to all that can be imagined'.

Above all, he impressed people more than Napoleon in one vital respect. Andrew Roberts, author of a new mammoth life of Napoleon, compared the two great opponents in an earlier work, *Napoleon and Wellington,* published in 2001. Their 'personal activity during the battle could not have contrasted more', he wrote:

> *Wellington was forty-six, Napoleon forty-five, yet Wellington acted as energetically as a man in his twenties, Napoleon as lethargically as someone in his sixties ... [Wellington] continually rode back and forth between Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte,*



The Battle of Waterloo by William Sadler (1782–1839)

> *entering squares and constantly rallying his troops … [Napoleon] kept in one place too much, acting on others' information rather than riding out to see the situation for himself.*

It is indeed almost impossible to believe that the battle would have been won without him. Elizabeth Longford's classic biography of Wellington captures the point beautifully: 'His whole army vibrated under his inspiration'.

Waterloo settled what one historian has called the Western Question: whether Europe would be dominated by France or secure stability as a diverse collection of independent states of unequal size and importance. The maintenance of peace was made the duty of the great powers of Europe led by Britain. Wellington insisted that France should not be treated with undue harshness, and Europe avoided the mistake that was to be made a century later through the imposition of severe terms on Germany at Versailles.

Winston Churchill was struck by the wisdom of the treaty shaped by Britain and her allies in 1815. 'No intolerable humiliations were involved', he wrote. 'In the moderation of the settlement with France the treaty had its greatest success'. A balance of power was achieved which, although disrupted from time to time, nevertheless endured until the twentieth century. Wellington's central role in achieving it showed that the victor of Waterloo was also an outstanding diplomat.

He became the only British soldier ever to join the ranks of European royalty. The King of the Netherlands created him a Prince in 1815: Prince of Waterloo. The crowned heads of Europe addressed him from then on as '*Mon Cousin*'.

After 1815 the great soldier also became a great statesman, another achievement that no one else has ever matched (imagine the blimpish Field Marshal Montgomery as prime minister). Politics had always been a major strand in his career, a fact that is insufficiently acknowledged today. In 1790 he was elected to the Irish Parliament which existed before the 1801 Act of Union; still to reach his twenty-first birthday, he was below the legal age limit but it was not enforced.

He vigorously supported legislation which extended the right to vote to Roman Catholics in Irish elections, foreshadowing the greatest achievement of his later two-year premiership. As a Westminster MP after the Act of Union he held the principal post in the Irish administration – that of Chief Secretary – between 1807 and 1809. So greatly was he valued that for a time he combined the post with his command in the Spanish peninsula.

He was well prepared for his long years of government service after Waterloo. He first entered the Cabinet in 1817 as Master-General of the Ordnance; he left his last Cabinet post as Leader of the Lords in 1846, six years before his death. He was far from being the narrow right-wing Tory of popular legend. As Prime Minister from 1828 to 1830, he carried out major constitutional reforms by giving Roman Catholics and Protestant dissenters throughout the United Kingdom the right to vote and hold public office for the first time. An historic settlement made in 1688, which confined political power to members of the Anglican Church, was shattered. Many Tories were astonished, and outraged, by the Duke's radicalism.

By contrast he set his face firmly against major parliamentary reform while being prepared to contemplate some modest redistribution of seats from small, corrupt boroughs to more heavily populated areas. He was wholly opposed to the creation of a democracy in Britain. 'A democracy', he said in 1831, 'would be the strongest of all governments; but then, remember, the strongest is the most tyrannical'. A stable and free state should not have an executive with too much power. A strictly limited parliamentary franchise and rule by the traditional governing class: that was how the long-established liberties of his country should be preserved.

This view was shared across the political spectrum: only a small number of extreme radicals wanted to set Britain on the path to democracy. Wellington suffered the one major defeat of his political career – over parliamentary reform in 1831–2 – not because he was a reactionary defender of an established order that had been widely discredited, but because his Whig opponents sensed (as he did not) that the point had been reached when cautious and limited electoral change would strengthen the existing order.

When Wellington became Prime Minister in 1828, one of his Tory supporters, Lord Dudley, wrote:

> *he goes to work just as if he had his fortune and his reputation still to make, just as if there had been no India, no Spain, no Waterloo.*

Today's noisy and self-important politicians could learn a great deal from this very great man of modest demeanour, the kind of national hero that only Britain could produce.

■ ***Lord Lexden*** *is the official historian of the Calton Club. He delivered this address at a dinner held there on 11 June 2015 to mark the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo.*

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