CHARLES CORNWALLIS CHESNEY

THE HISTORY OF WATERLOO

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The History of Waterloo

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Introduction

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In The History of Waterloo, the delicate balance between preparation and improvisation, coalition resolve and national rivalry, bold decision and irretrievable mistake is pursued across roads, ridges, and villages, showing how imperfect information, weather, terrain, and the human strain of command could, within a handful of June days, compress the fate of Europe into choices made at speed, under fire, and often in the dark, and how postures adopted in moments of uncertainty reverberated beyond the battlefield into diplomacy, memory, and the contentious making of history, where narratives compete to assign credit, blame, and meaning to a campaign whose very complexity resists simplification.

Charles Cornwallis Chesney's The History of Waterloo is a work of military history that reconstructs the 1815 campaign culminating near Waterloo, in present-day Belgium, through disciplined analysis rather than romantic embellishment. First published in 1868, in a Victorian milieu fascinated by warfare and reform, it approaches a recent past with the distance of professional inquiry. Written by a British Army officer and accomplished military writer, the book occupies the rigorous end of nineteenth-century campaign studies, situating operations within geography, logistics, and political context while keeping the battlefield in clear view, and offering readers a carefully framed account of one of Europe's decisive military episodes.

Chesney narrates the movements leading up to the clash and the immediate aftermath, attending to orders, marches, and misapprehensions without theatrics. The voice is measured, the tone critical but fair, the style lean and lucid; he explains what could be known by actors at the time and what later evidence clarifies, inviting readers to weigh causation cautiously. Where drama arises, it emerges from timing, distance, and the interaction of multiple armies rather than from sensational set pieces. The book thus reads as both an engaging narrative and a study in method, rewarding attentive, reflective reading.

Among its central themes is the problem of coalition warfare: divergent aims must be harmonized while adversaries attempt to separate allies. Chesney also foregrounds the friction of war, from the reliability of reports to the delays imposed by rain, mud, and fatigue. He takes seriously the relationship between command intention and field execution, showing how orders encounter limits set by ground, time, and human endurance. A further theme is historiography itself, as he sifts competing testimonies to resist patriotic simplifications and to clarify what can be proven. These themes combine to illuminate campaign dynamics without reducing them to hero worship.

As contemporary readers confront questions of alliance management, crisis decision-making, and information reliability, the book's insights remain strikingly pertinent. Chesney's attention to interoperability, to the misalignments between political promise and military capacity, and to the stubborn agency of weather and terrain echoes in present discussions about joint operations and

multinational commitments. By illustrating how uncertainty can be mitigated but not abolished, he offers a disciplined case study in strategic patience and timely action. The History of Waterloo thereby serves not only as a narrative of a landmark campaign but also as a manual in critical thinking about force, coordination, and risk.

Readers will find a structure that proceeds from the preliminaries of the campaign through the climactic engagement and into the immediate consequences, each phase treated with careful sequencing and a firm sense of cause and context. Chesney writes with a disciplined restraint that avoids melodrama while never losing sight of the human stakes. Dates, distances, and topographical features are made intelligible rather than fetishized, and judgments are stated with clarity, often after weighing alternative explanations. The resulting narrative is accessible to general readers yet rigorous enough for students of military history, a balance that gives the book enduring pedagogical and interpretive utility.

To return to Chesney is to encounter a Victorian effort at critical military scholarship that still clarifies how campaigns actually work and why they matter beyond the battlefield. The History of Waterloo stands as a foundation text for understanding the 1815 campaign's structure without presuming the reader's allegiance to any national legend, and it models a scrupulous way of reading evidence. Contemporary audiences can approach it as both narrative and analytical toolkit, gaining an appreciation for coalition dynamics, decision under pressure, and the uses and limits

of history. It remains a demanding, rewarding guide to a conflict whose meanings continue to evolve.

Synopsis

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Charles Cornwallis Chesney offers a disciplined military study of the 1815 campaign commonly associated with Waterloo, treating it as an inquiry into operations rather than a celebratory tale. He frames the central question as how strategy, organization, terrain, and timing combined to shape events, and he measures tradition against documentary evidence. Beginning with Napoleon's return and the coalition's determination to confront him, the book situates the theater in Belgium, delineates the opposing commanders and their constraints, and explains the sources and limits that govern the narrative, thereby preparing a careful reconstruction of intentions, capabilities, and the practical boundaries within which choices were made.

Chesney defines the strategic problem facing both sides: a French army seeking to strike quickly between converging opponents, and coalition forces aiming to concentrate before being defeated in detail. He reviews the composition and quality of the Anglo-Allied and Prussian armies, the French command structure, and the geography that channels movement toward key road junctions. Lines of communication, depots, and the political necessity of protecting Brussels are weighed against the advantages of offensive initiative. From this framework, he develops the campaign's logic, emphasizing that success would hinge on speed, clarity of command, and the ability of allies to coordinate under pressure.

The opening moves unfold with Napoleon's advance through Charleroi, a calculated attempt to separate the Anglo-Allied and Prussian armies. Chesney examines dispositions on both sides and the degree to which surprise and march discipline enabled the French to unsettle their opponents. He analyzes the near-simultaneous combats that followed, highlighting how decisions by senior commanders played out at Ligny and Quatre Bras. Staff work, orders, and counter-orders are scrutinized for their practical effect on timing and concentration. Without reducing outcomes to single causes, he shows how uncertainties in information and the friction of war influenced choices that set the shape of the days to come.

With the first shock delivered, the narrative turns to the retreats and regroupings that reoriented the armies. Chesney traces the Anglo-Allied withdrawal toward the Mont-Saint-Jean position and the Prussian movement through Wavre, analyzing the calculations behind these maneuvers. He considers Napoleon's pursuit and the detachment sent to observe and, if possible, contain the Prussians, assessing the risks inherent in dividing forces amid incomplete intelligence. Terrain, weather, and march tables receive close attention, as do the communications that linked or failed to link distant corps, all of which, in Chesney's account, conditioned what could be attempted on the decisive day.

Chesney's treatment of the main battle emphasizes posture, ground, and tactical method over anecdote. He explains how a defensive alignment along a ridge could blunt repeated assaults, and why control of farms and

crossroads mattered out of proportion to their size. Early attacks against a fortified estate on the right are interpreted as shaping actions, drawing in French resources. Subsequent infantry and cavalry efforts against the center and left are assessed for formation, timing, and support. Throughout, he relates local combats to command intent, showing how incremental decisions either preserved cohesion or created openings that could expand under pressure.

The book devotes particular attention to cooperation across armies and the stresses that coalition warfare imposes on command. Chesney analyzes the approaches taken to coordinate with the Prussian forces, the routes by which assistance might reach the battlefield, and the extent to which French commanders could prevent or mitigate that intervention. He weighs competing testimonies on critical episodes, separating reliable detail from retrospective claims. Rather than assigning simple blame or praise, he identifies recurring problems—delayed orders, misread terrain, dispersed efforts—and shows how these accumulated to influence tempo and options, while keeping his ultimate assessments closely tied to verifiable evidence.

In closing, Chesney situates the campaign's resolution within the broader settlement that followed, while keeping his final judgments carefully proportioned to the facts he has tested. He underscores the enduring lessons he believes the campaign offers: the premium on concentration, the difficulty of controlling dispersed operations, and the complex demands of coalition command. By insisting on sober analysis over legend, the work helped shape

professional military study in the nineteenth century and beyond. Its balanced approach, attention to sources, and focus on practical constraints sustain its relevance, encouraging readers to interrogate accepted stories without losing sight of what the record can and cannot show.

Historical Context

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The study addresses the climactic campaign of the Napoleonic Wars in June 1815, fought across the southern Netherlands, then recently reorganized as the United Kingdom of the Netherlands by the Congress of Vienna. Opposing Napoleon’s Armée du Nord were coalition forces under the Duke of Wellington and Prussian field marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher. The armies included British regulars, the King’s German Legion, Dutch-Belgian units, Hanoverians, Brunswickers, and Nassauers, alongside Prussian corps. The setting is institutional as well as geographic: monarchies mobilizing professional armies, diplomats fixing borders in Vienna, and a coalition seeking to enforce the European settlement against Napoleon’s sudden return.

Napoleon returned from Elba on 1 March 1815, quickly regaining power in Paris and prompting the Congress of Vienna to declare him an outlaw and renew the coalition. His strategic problem was time: Austrian and Russian armies were still distant, while Anglo-Allied and Prussian forces concentrated in Belgium. Napoleon aimed to cross the Sambre at Charleroi, drive a wedge between Wellington and Blücher, and defeat each before they could unite. The theater’s dense road network—running through Quatre Bras, Ligny, and the Brussels approaches—made rapid concentration, intelligence, and staff work decisive.

Chesney's narrative situates decisions within this compressed timetable and terrain.

Operations opened on 15 June with French crossings at Charleroi and pressure on the allied cantonments. On 16 June two linked battles followed: Ligny, where Napoleon struck the Prussians, and Quatre Bras, where Marshal Ney engaged elements of Wellington's army. The Prussians suffered defeat at Ligny but withdrew in organized fashion, preserving their army. Wellington held Quatre Bras before retiring toward the Mont-Saint-Jean position. Liaison, notably through the Prussian representative at Wellington's headquarters, kept coalition coordination alive. Prussian chief of staff August Neidhardt von Gneisenau directed the retreat toward Wavre, maintaining contact with Wellington and enabling further combined action.

On 18 June, Wellington deployed on the ridge south of Waterloo, anchoring his line on fortified farms such as Hougoumont, La Haye Sainte, and the villages of Papelotte and Smohain. Overnight rain turned fields to mud, delaying French attacks and hampering artillery. Napoleon launched successive assaults, including infantry columns and massed cavalry, testing the Allied line with persistent pressure. British and allied infantry formed squares against cavalry, while skirmishers and artillery fought over key enclosures. Prussian columns advanced from the east through St. Lambert and Chapelle-Saint-Lambert, threatening the French right and affecting the tempo of operations throughout the day.

Simultaneously, Marshal Grouchy's wing moved against Prussian forces near Wavre on 18–19 June, fixing formations

away from the main field. The wider campaign culminated in the coalition’s success around Brussels’ approaches and the subsequent pursuit toward the French frontier. Within days, political consequences followed: Napoleon abdicated for the second time on 22 June 1815, a provisional French government opened negotiations, and Allied troops entered Paris. The Second Treaty of Paris (20 November 1815) imposed an indemnity, border adjustments, and a period of occupation. These outcomes frame the military narrative and underscore the campaign’s decisive diplomatic significance in Europe.

When Chesney wrote, Waterloo’s history in Britain had been shaped by official dispatches and patriotic narratives. Wellington’s Waterloo despatch, printed in June 1815 and later collections of his papers, provided a central documentary base. William Siborne’s History of the War in France and Belgium in 1815 (1844), and his celebrated scale model, influenced popular memory while provoking disputes over the timing and scale of Prussian support. French authors such as Jomini and Baron Gourgaud advanced their own versions. Chesney approached these sources as a serving officer and instructor, testing claims against operational facts and emphasizing the coalition character of decision-making rather than single-nation triumphalism.

The book emerged from the mid-Victorian push to professionalize the British Army after the Crimean War and the Indian Rebellion. The Staff College, established in 1858, cultivated analytical military history; Chesney lectured there, and his work drew on comparative study of British, French, and German materials. He examined staff

procedures, reconnaissance, topography, and timing, engaging critically with Prussian reports and German scholarship, including Clausewitz’s campaign study published posthumously in the 1830s. Although On War’s full English translation appeared only in 1873, British officers increasingly encountered continental methods. Chesney channeled that rigor into clear operational lessons for contemporary readers.

Consequently, Chesney’s treatment reflects Victorian empiricism and a reforming military outlook. It tempers reverence for commanders with scrutiny of communications, staff work, and coalition coordination, showing how institutions enable or constrain decisions. The analysis credits Wellington’s leadership while acknowledging Prussian resolve and the practical difficulties facing French marshals, resisting partisan simplifications. It models source criticism by comparing dispatches, maps, and eyewitness accounts, and it presents Waterloo as a case study for officers rather than merely a national epic. In doing so, the work both mirrors its era’s professional concerns and offers a measured critique of celebratory, one-sided history.

The History of Waterloo

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LECTURE I.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF THE WATERLOO CAMPAIGN.

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Military History, if aspiring to be anything higher than the bare record of warlike transactions, must be accompanied by intelligent criticism. Of the limits of such criticism it is proposed to speak hereafter. At present our first duty is to consider what is the just and safe foundation on which both narrative and comment should rest; how, in short, we are to verify the facts on which we propose to build our theories. For, surely, without historic truth to light us through the past, it is vain to form judgments on it, or to seek to deduce lessons for the future.

To show by what principle such truth can alone be secured, I would here employ the words of a late writer, universally allowed to be one of the greatest critics which this age has produced. The lamented Sir G. Cornewall Lewis**[1]**, in a notable passage of his 'Credibility of the Early Roman History**[2]**,' thus lays down the true law which should constantly guide our researches:—'It seems,' he says,'to be often believed, and, at all events, it is perpetually assumed in practice, that historical evidence is different in its nature from other sorts of evidence. Until this error is effectually extirpated, all historical researches must lead to uncertain results. *Historical evidence, like judicial*

evidence, is founded on the testimony of credible witnesses.'

It need hardly be pointed out that this law is quite as necessary in studying military events as any others**[1q]**. Indeed, there are none in which an actor is so apt to mistake mere impressions of his own for facts, and (which is very important) to note down for the use of history his own guesses at what exists and what occurs on the other side, instead of waiting to correct these from the proper source, the information which that other side alone can furnish of its means and objects. Unhappily, these hasty guesses are often more flattering than would be the truth to national vanity**[2q]**. Hence a powerful sentiment is enlisted on the side of error, and succeeding authors think they are doing their country service by shutting their eyes to the truth, and following blindly the narratives of their own party, thus accepting for history a purely onesided version of events. By and by the stereotyped statement is treated as fact, its accuracy hotly defended, records diligently searched in as far as they are likely to confirm it. This process, continued on either side, multiplies contradiction, until essayists moralise over the falsity of history, forgetful that in all disputes truth can only be sifted out by comparing evidence, and that it is the special duty of the judge to correct that partiality of witnesses which obscures but does not change the nature of the facts.

We shall have in these pages to deal much with the military literature of a great neighbouring nation, whose writers sin above all others in the matter of their national defeats and victories. It is not intended, however, to assume

that our own are blameless. The popular English version of that great battle which gives its name to the campaign of 1815 is hardly less a romance than the famous Waterloo chapter in Victor Hugo’s ‘Les Misérables,’ over which our critics have with good reason made merry. Let us select from our various school histories one of the best known, and see what is said of the Prussian share in the victory of Waterloo. Of nearly a page devoted to the battle, just two short sentences are allotted to Blücher’s part! ‘When night approached, the heads of the Prussian columns were seen advancing to share in the combat.’ ‘The Prussians, who were comparatively fresh, continued the pursuit’ [the French are described as broken entirely by Wellington’s charge], ‘and the army of Napoleon was virtually annihilated.’ What English lad, reading a story thus written, could possibly surmise that the fiercest of, all modem leaders of wax was on the ground with part of his army at half-past four, was hotly engaged with Napoleon’s reserves three hours before dark, had brought 50,000 fine troops into action at the time of, Wellington’s grand charge, and had 7,000 of them killed and wounded that evening in his vigorous support of our army! Yet these facts are perfectly patent to him who sees the battle of Waterloo, not as coloured by patriotic artists, but as portrayed by true history, and is veiling to take his account of what the Prussians did, not from the guesses of enemy or ally? but direct from their own narratives, confirmed by those of independent observers.

It has been intimated that French historians offend terribly in this matter. They sin, not merely by omission, but by wilful repetition of error from book to book, long after the

truth has been given to the world. This would matter little to us, comparatively, were French historians and French material for history not specially important to our own. Unhappily, the ease and grace of the military writers of France, and the number and accessibility of their works, have caused those of our country to adhere almost entirely to their versions of European wars, excepting always those in which English Armies are mixed up. This slavish following of guides too often blind has warped our whole judgment of Continental military powers. We could hardly, indeed, have chosen worse for our teachers. No German writer would dream of sitting down deliberately to construct a history of a war, a campaign, or even an action between French and Germans, without carefully consulting the French authorities as well as those of his own nation. A Frenchman, writing at this present time of an affair of the revolutionary or imperial period, thinks nothing of following implicitly the bulletins of the day even for the enemy’s numbers; or will take these at second-hand from some intermediate writer, with perfect good faith no doubt, but with an utter disregard of the rules of evidence. I take as an instance the latest of such narratives, from a work which, however little accurate, is yet one well suited for its special purpose, being published as a French Reader for the use of a great military college. It is written by a Frenchman who seems able in his method, perfectly honest-minded, and who, living in this country permanently, is removed above all petty reasons for flattering the national vanity of his own. He is sketching the lives of some eminent French generals, from whose writings he wishes ta quote, and among others that of Marshal

Jourdan, with his great achievement, the victory of Fleurus, which turned the tide of the war in the Netherlands in 1794. As the authorities employed are solely of the one side, one knows beforehand how the estimate of numbers will be given; ‘100,000 Allied troops were opposed to 70,000 Republicans.’ The author is but following a host of writers who reckon no French but those actually engaged, and who have never sought to verify the original guess of their countrymen at the strength of Coburg’s beaten army. Yet the numbers of the latter have been published these twenty years from official returns in a standard Austrian work, and from this source the supposed 100,000 are found, by a single reference, to be just 45,775! As to the French, their available strength under Jourdan appears from Thiers’ account (not likely to exaggerate in that direction) to have been full 81,000, when his reserves are reckoned. So the Republican general, instead of having only seven-tenths the force of his adversaries, commanded in reality not far from two to their one!

Whilst on the subject of French inaccuracies I may with advantage refer to a notable correspondence to be found in the appendix to the first volume of the Life of sir life of that peerless military historian, the writer of the ‘Peninsular War.’ Here M. Thiers, the great master of the art of explaining away national mishaps, has fallen into the hands of an antagonist in every way his match, and is fairly worsted, even as to his French numbers, by the aid of the genuine returns, kept for Napoleon’s private use, and still existing in the Paris archives. The discussion is a model of its kind on Napier’s side; and the airy readiness with which M. Thiers,

unable to refute his adversary's facts, declines to argue further with interested or ignorant critics,' may serve to forewarn us how far the author of 'The Consulate and Empire' can safely be trusted as an historical guide.

There are errors less important than those which have been referred to, that become woven into ordinary histories from the mere careless habit of writers who, without intending to mislead, copy tamely the assertions of those who have gone before them, and take no pains to check their truth. An amusing instance of such is to be found in the popular accounts of the great cavalry combat which closed the battle of Eckmuhl in 1809. A French writer of mark, General Pelet (who served in the action, though he did not see the combat), ascribed the success of his countrymen to the superiority of the armour of the French Cuirassiers[4], who wore back as well as. breastplates, over that of the Austrians of the same arm, who were protected only in front. Pelet no doubt had some camp story for his authority for this strange assertion, which has been repeated again and again, and is recorded as an interesting fact by Alison, none of those who have borrowed the statement having enquired what help the French cavaliers really obtained in their successful charges from their armour behind, nor, what is more to the purpose, what was the actual proportion of the numbers of the combatants. It so happens, however, that there are unusually complete records on both sides, from which the latter may be extracted. Baron Stutterheim wrote a history for the Austrians, which, by favour exceptional at Vienna, was published at once, and forms a standard German authority.

Thiers, following Pelet, and using the French archives, has reckoned up the French cavalry with much elaboration. An examination of these sources shows twelve squadrons of Austrian reserve Cuirassiers, aided by seventeen of light cavalry (which had suffered very severely just before), opposed to ten full regiments of French heavy horse, aided by three brigades of allied Germans. The latter had numbered altogether 10,000 a few days before, the former little over 3,000: and, making the necessary allowance for the preceding operations, this wonderful tale of a victory due to the armour on the backs of the victors resolves itself into a hopeless stand of the Austrian cavalry against a force more than three times their strength.

It has not unfrequently occurred that the features of national policy bear the impress of false current notions of military events. Our own recent Indian history affords a very striking instance of this truth. Rather more than a quarter of a century since we occupied Affghanistan[5], to anticipate Russian intrigue on our north-western frontier. The country was held for us by three separate brigades of troops, each with distinct cantonments and administration. An insurrection took place at the capital, spreading soon to other districts; and the force at head-quarters, overcome rather by the imbecility of mismanagement than by the strength of the enemy, perished absolutely with all its camp-followers in the attempt to retreat. The other two brigades held their own with perfect success, and maintained our hold of the country until, being reinforced, they re-conquered it with ease. We had thus lost about one-third of the original army of occupation, 4,500 men in fact.

Unfortunately, in writing of such a disaster, there is a tendency in the historian to magnify his office and give the event undue proportions, and the school of writers who seek effect rather than strict truth have made the Affghan war their own. Hence it has been usual to add to our actual losses the swarm of followers who attended the combatants that fell, and to keep in the background the true proportion of the latter to the forces that held out; so that nowadays, if twenty fairly informed Englishmen were interrogated on the subject, nineteen would probably unhesitatingly admit such statements as that ‘all our army was destroyed,’ or that our terrible loss of 16,000 men in Afghanistan shook our prestige throughout the East;’ and the moral effect of the disaster upon our policy has been magnified threefold by misconception. It is not here sought to advocate any change in the pacific attitude adapted by our rulers on that frontier, but to show that it has been imposed by public opinion rooted on a misstatement of facts, and to gather from this instance the inference that a nation’s policy may be largely influenced by the incorrect history of a war.

More remarkable than any such isolated mistake, and far more important in its bearings, is the persistent error of the French nation as to its own modern military annals. By excluding from sight Peninsular failures, by treating the Republican disasters of 1793 and 1795 as of no account in the light of alternate successes, by dwelling constantly on Napoleon’s victories, and elaborating excuses for his defeats, their writers have striven to impregnate that great people with the dangerous belief that their land can produce at will soldiers invincible, and a chief that cannot err. Hence