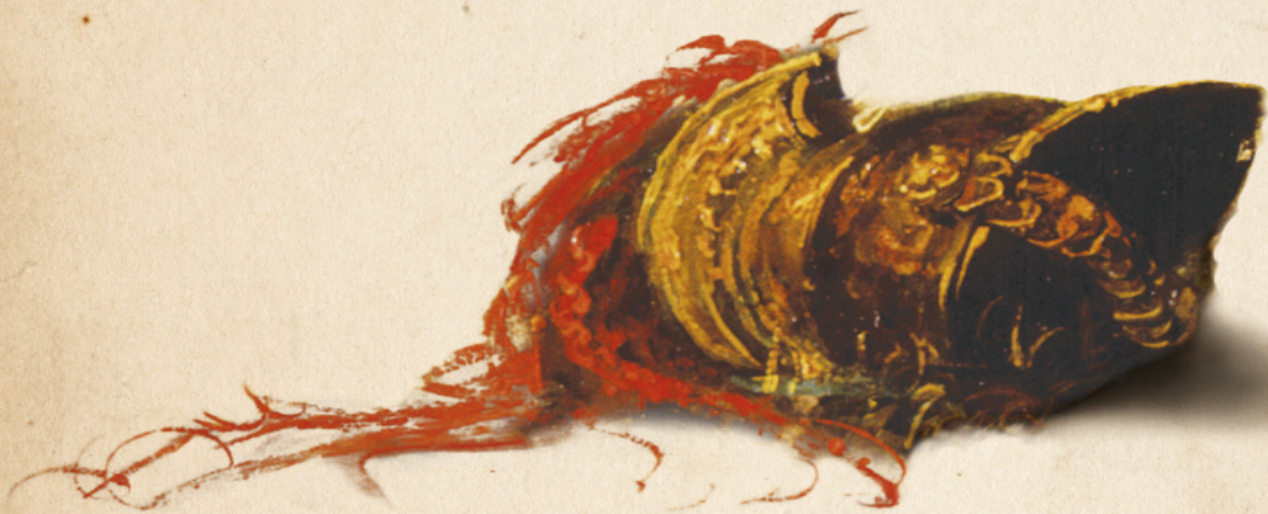


WATERLOO



THE AFTERMATH

PAUL O'KEEFFE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This was the scene after midnight, 19 June 1815:

On the battlefield more than 50,000 men and 7,000 horses lay dead and wounded; the wreckage of a once proud French Grande Armée was struggling in abject disorder to the Belgian frontier pursued by murderous Prussian lancers; caked in dust and sweat, the Duke of Wellington began writing the dispatch that would send his country into mourning and jubilation; and Napoleon Bonaparte, exhausted and stunned at the scale of his defeat, rode through the darkness towards Paris, abdication and the end of his Empire.

In the hours, days, weeks and months that followed, news of the battle would begin to shape the consciousness of an age; the battlegrounds would be looted and cleared, their dead buried or burned, their ground and ruins overrun by voyeuristic tourists; the victorious British and Prussian armies would invade France, occupy Paris and scatter the contents of the Louvre. And as his enemies closed in and his ministers manoeuvred against him, Napoleon saw no avenue ahead but surrender, exile and captivity.

In this dramatic and groundbreaking account of the aftermath of the battle of Waterloo, Paul O’Keeffe employs a multiplicity of contemporary sources and viewpoints to create a reading experience that brings into focus as never before the sights, sounds and smells of the battlefield, of conquest and defeat, of celebration and riot.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul O’Keeffe is a lecturer and writer based in Liverpool. His acclaimed books include biographies of Wyndham Lewis (*Some Sort of Genius*) and Benjamin Robert Haydon (*A Genius for Failure*).

Also by Paul O’Keeffe

A Genius for Failure: The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon
Gaudier-Brzeska: An Absolute Case of Genius
Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis

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For Will Sulkin

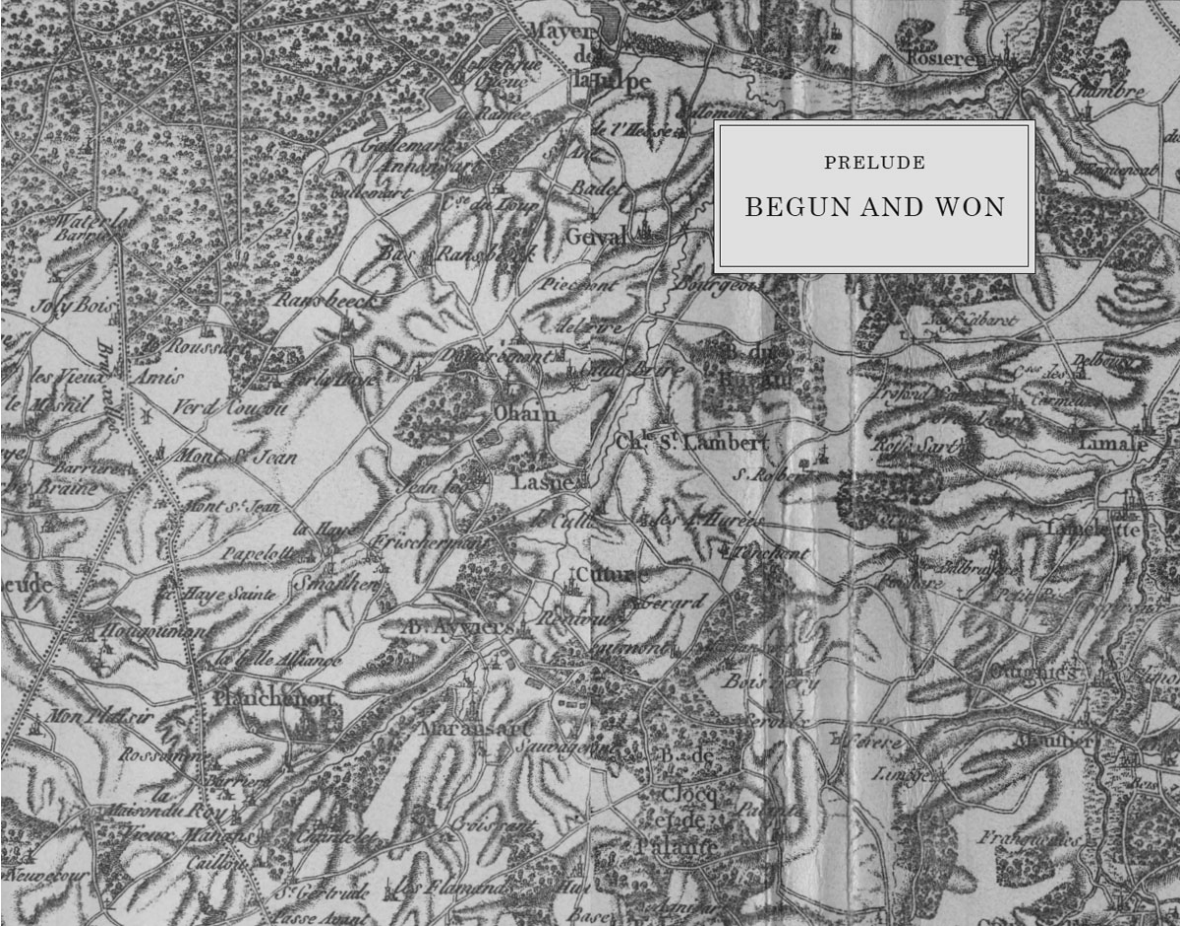
Waterloo

The Aftermath

Paul O'Keeffe



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PRELUDE
BEGUN AND WON

MARSHAL GROUCHY WOULD Grouchy would insist until the end of his life that a dispatch he received on 18 June 1815 – a dispatch written at one o'clock in the afternoon and which did not reach him until five – had declared the battle won: '*en ce moment la Bataille est gagnée*'. What Napoleon's chief of staff, Marshal Soult, had in fact written was: '*en ce moment la Bataille est engagée*' – that the battle had begun.

'A battle!' the Emperor had said to his staff the evening before in a farmhouse on the road from Charleroi to Brussels. 'Do you know what a battle is? There are empires, kingdoms, the world or its end between a battle won and a battle lost!'¹ The same might have been said of a battle begun and a battle won. But there was little more than a transposition of characters between *engagée* and *gagnée*.

Misinterpretation aside, Grouchy would also insist on the physical impossibility of his complying with the order contained in an already four-hours-old dispatch: that he was not to lose an instant in manoeuvring more than 30,000 men and nearly a hundred cannon across six miles of 'difficult wooded country, cut by ravines',² in time to support the Emperor's right flank against an approaching Prussian army. Whether begun or won – *engagée* or *gagnée* – at one o'clock, the battle of Waterloo was not to be materially affected by any action Marshal Grouchy would or could have taken at five.

*

Three days earlier, Bonaparte had launched a pre-emptive campaign against the coalition of enemies massing in Belgium to threaten his restoration as Emperor of France. At dawn on 15 June, when his Armée du Nord crossed the Belgian frontier and marched towards the river Sambre, two hostile armies lay ahead. At Charleroi, and eastwards as far as Liège, were the four corps of Marshal Blücher's Prussian

army; north of Charleroi and to the west was the polyglot conglomeration of Britons, Brunswickers, Dutch, Hanoverians, Nassauers and Walloons constituting the I and II Corps, the Cavalry Corps and the Reserve of the Anglo-Allied army commanded by the Duke of Wellington. Napoleon had calculated that, while each of these armies could be beaten separately, their combined forces would constitute an insurmountable obstacle to his principal objective: the capture of Brussels. His strategy was to keep them apart. The road from Nivelles in the west to Namur in the east – the only serviceable, cobbled route across the region, and the vital axis of communication and reinforcement linking the coalition armies – was to be seized at two points. Marshal Ney, Prince de la Moscowa, commanding the French left wing of 25,000 men and forty-four guns, was ordered to capture the junction of this road with that running north from Charleroi to Brussels. The four roads radiating from the crossing gave the place its name: Les Quatre Bras. It would be defended by Wellington's hastily mustered I Corps and Reserve. Meanwhile, the French right wing, commanded by the Emperor himself and numbering nearly 60,000 men and 216 guns, advanced on Blücher's headquarters at Sombreffe, six miles from Quatre Bras along the Nivelles–Namur road.

By the afternoon of 16 June, battle was joined between the French and Prussians on a four-mile-wide front from Tongenelle and Sombreffe to Saint-Amand and Wagnelée, with the village of Ligny at its centre, while six miles to the east, Ney's forces struggled to break through Wellington's position in front of Quatre Bras. The outcome of each battle was dependent upon that of the other. If the Emperor succeeded in disposing quickly of Blücher's army, he would come to Ney's assistance against Wellington and sweep in triumph to Brussels; if Ney succeeded in disposing of Wellington's army first, he was to attack Blücher's right flank and assist the Emperor in destroying the Prussian

army; however, if Wellington was able to defeat Ney at Quatre Bras, he had promised to come to Blücher's assistance and together they would drive the Emperor and his forces back across the Belgian border.

*

Everybody remembered the guns on 16 June. Sound travelled far in the still, hot air: a formidable spike of high pressure building to a storm.

'There they go shaking their blankets again,' one old soldier muttered at Enghien, just over twenty-five miles west of Quatre Bras and Ligny, as his comrades of the 52nd Light Infantry Regiment were cooking their beef ration. 'The sound of a distant cannonade', another veteran wrote later, 'is not unlike that arising from the shaking of a carpet or a blanket.'³

Twenty-five miles to the north, Henri de Merode, Belgian nobleman and philosopher, reading on a hilltop close to his ancestral home, Château d'Everberg, east of Brussels, did not at first hear the gunfire, but his studies were disturbed by an unmistakable and continuous tremor underfoot. Kneeling and pressing his ear to the ground, he could clearly distinguish explosions.⁴

They could also hear the guns of Ligny and Quatre Bras in the streets of Antwerp, fifty miles north. Magdalene - for less than three months the young bride of Wellington's acting Quartermaster General, Sir William Howe De Lancey - had left Brussels eight hours before the fighting started. Antwerp was 'a very strongly fortified town', her husband had assured her, 'and likewise having the sea to escape by, if necessary, it was by far the safest place' for her. Wishing to spare his wife the anxiety of hearing the conflicting rumours inevitable at such times, Sir William had made her promise 'to believe no reports' and she had obediently instructed her maid not to communicate any. Under no

prohibition from her mistress to listen, however, Emma waited outside their lodgings, terrified by all the latest hearsay: the French had won; the French were at that moment looting Brussels; the French were on their way to ransack Antwerp. Lady De Lancey meanwhile remained in her room with the windows closed to shut out the sound of firing. But she could still hear 'a rolling like the sea at a distance'.⁵

Ten miles to the west of the fighting, somewhere between Braine-le-Comte and Nivelles, Captain Alexander Mercer was leading his troop of Royal Horse Artillery through a forest when he 'became sensible of a dull, sullen sound that filled the air, somewhat resembling that of a distant water-mill, or still more distant thunder'. As he emerged from the trees, the sound became more distinct and, to an artillery officer especially, 'no longer questionable - heavy firing of cannon and musketry, which could now be distinguished from each other plainly. We could also hear the musketry in volleys and independent firing.' Above another forest on the horizon, 'volumes of grey smoke arose'.⁶

Mercer's 'G' Troop consisted of five nine-pounder guns and one heavy 5½-inch howitzer, nine ammunition wagons, a mobile forge, a curricule cart, a baggage wagon and a carriage loaded with spare wheels for the guns and other vehicles. One hundred and twenty draught horses were required to pull all this equipment. Then there were horses for the officers, staff sergeants, collar makers, a farrier, a surgeon, and eight horses for each of six mounted detachments. Counting spare horses, there were 226 animals overall. Guns, wagons and horses were tended by a total personnel of 193, including three shoeing smiths, a wheeler, eighty gunners and eighty-four drivers. 'Perhaps at this time a troop of horse-artillery', Mercer observed, 'was the completest thing in the army . . . a perfect whole.'⁷ The complex whole that was 'G' Troop rumbled on to join the guns at Quatre Bras.

In the borrowed Château Walcheuse at Laeken, three miles north of Brussels, Lady Caroline Capel, née Paget, sister to Lord Uxbridge, commander of the Anglo-Allied cavalry, could also hear the gunfire. 'To an English Ear unaccustomed to such things,' she wrote to her mother, 'the Cannonading of a Real Battle is Awful beyond description.' Eight months pregnant, she had not attended Lady Richmond's ball the evening before, but her husband and two of their daughters, Georgiana and Maria - 'Georgy' and 'Muzzy' - had been there, and the juxtaposition of frivolity with a deadly artillery barrage was startling: 'to have one's friends walk out of one's Drawing Room into Action, which has literally been the case on this occasion, is a sensation far beyond description'. At about two o'clock she had first heard 'the distant Cannonading which approached for some time, and awful as it was - every breath was hushed to listen the better - [she did not] think any one of the party [at Château Walcheuse] felt a sensation of fear'. It was 'Anxiety', rather, for the previous evening's dancing partners that 'predominated over every other feeling'.⁸

At Brussels, twenty-five miles closer to the battlefields than Lady De Lancey and three miles closer than Lady Capel, the gunfire was louder still. The English novelist Fanny Burney - Madame d'Arblay by marriage to a French officer loyal to the exiled Louis XVIII - also 'passed [the day] in hearing the cannon'.⁹

Edward Heeley, a fourteen-year-old groom on the staff of Sir George Scovell, wrote that the sound 'came through the air like a quantity of heavy muffled balls tumbling down a long wooden stairs - or perhaps more like a rolling ball, and causing it now and then to hop about on the head of a big drum'.¹⁰

Elizabeth Ord recalled her brother and stepfather departing for a dinner engagement near the Park - on the eastern edge of the city - and 'soon after a very heavy [firing] began'.¹¹ Having left his stepdaughter, Thomas

Creevey - former Whig MP for the rotten borough of Thetford and awaiting a change in his political fortunes while he cooled his heels abroad following a conviction for libel - estimated that it was between four and five o'clock that he and Charles Ord heard the sound of cannon. Arriving at their destination, they 'found everybody on the rampart listening to it. In the course of the evening the rampart was crowded with people listening, and the sound became perfectly distinct and regular.'¹²

Charlotte Waldie, with her sister and brother, drawn from their rooms in the Hotel de Flandres by the sound, were in the formal gardens of the Park itself. Like Madame d'Arblay, Creevey and the Ords, Miss Waldie and her family were part of the disparate British expatriate population of Brussels, made a community in the comforting democracy of crisis:

One common interest bound together all ranks and conditions of men - all other considerations were forgotten - all distinctions were levelled - all common forms thrown aside and neglected, - ladies accosted men they had never seen before with eager questions; no preface - no apology - no ceremony was thought of - strangers conversed together like friends - all ranks of people addressed each other without hesitation - every body seeking - every body giving information - and English reserve seemed no longer to exist.¹³

Madame d'Arblay devised a means of opening conversation with total strangers: 'by asking them the way to some part of Brussels of which I was nearly certain they had never heard; & on their English "I don't know" I hailed them as Countrymen: I then gave them my good wishes, with an eulogium of the Duke of Wellington, & we were Friends immediately: & the little they could tell was communicated with pleasure'. Even the domestic barriers for maintaining privacy seemed removed: 'All the people of Brussels lived in the streets. Doors seemed of no use, for they were never shut. The Individuals, when they re-entered their houses, only resided at the Windows: so that the whole population of the City seemed constantly in Public view.'¹⁴ Everyone had

watched the troops march south that morning, and by mid-afternoon they were listening, fascinated, to the sounds of a battle no one had expected so soon.

Lieutenant Basil Jackson was still in Brussels when he first heard 'the booming of distant guns' about two o'clock, and 'the cannonade soon became almost continuous, seeming very near'.¹⁵ Feeling it to be his 'only . . . proper course to endeavour to join head-quarters', his 'boyish ardour' aroused by 'the roar of the cannon', he mounted his horse and galloped towards the action. About seven miles south of the city, having fallen into the company of an elderly colonel and riding at a more sedate pace, Jackson became disorientated by the sound: 'traversing the forest of Soignes, the cannonade was so loud as to lead us to believe that the battle was raging within very few miles of us, probably near Waterloo. On emerging, however, from its glades, the firing seemed to be more distant than we had supposed.'

The same strange fluctuations of sound confused those listening in the Park and on the Brussels ramparts. No one could be sure how far away the fighting was, nor how far off the threat of marauding French hordes, should the city's defenders fail. 'Some people said it was only six, some that it was ten, and some that it was twenty miles off.' Some, to settle the matter, had gone out in carriages or on horseback several miles along the road the army had taken, and all had come back 'in perfect ignorance of the real circumstances of the case'. Reports based on that ignorance nonetheless circulated constantly among the listening crowds: that the allies had 'obtained a complete victory, and the French [had] left *twenty thousand dead* upon the field'; that conversely 'our troops were literally cut to pieces and that the French were advancing on Brussels'. Then a man returned who, riding further than the rest, professed to have actually seen a battle. He reported that the French had fought the Prussians and that 'old Blücher had given the

rascals a complete beating'. No sooner had that news allayed the anxieties of the crowd than another man arrived advising everyone 'to set off instantly' for Antwerp if they wished to escape, because 'certain intelligence had been received "that the French had won . . . and that our army was retreating in the utmost confusion"'. Miss Waldie bridled: 'such a report', she declared, 'deserved only to be treated with contempt; and that it must be false, for that the English would never retreat *in confusion*' from anything. At this the gentleman 'seemed a little ashamed of himself', she thought.

The wounded began to arrive late in the afternoon. Among the first to impress the populace was a Brunswicker whose arm had been amputated on the field. 'He rode straight and stark upon his horse, the bloody clouts about his stump, pale as death but upright, with a remarkable stern expression of feature, as if loth to lose his revenge.'¹⁶ The predominant black of the Brunswick division's uniform, relieved by a silvered death's-head badge on the shako, was said to have been worn in mourning for their commander-in-chief's father, killed fighting the French at the battle of Lena in 1806. The death in turn of their commander-in-chief, at Quatre Bras, gave the 'Black Brunswickers' further cause to mourn and avenge. Miss Waldie observed other casualties: 'Waggon loads of Prussians . . . Belgic soldiers, covered with dust and blood, and faint with fatigue and pain [coming] on foot into the town . . . and soon, very soon, they arrived in numbers. At every jolt of the slow waggons upon the rough pavement, we seemed to feel the excruciating pain which they must suffer.'¹⁷

*

The sun was setting as Captain Mercer and his troop of Royal Horse Artillery passed through Nivelles, about seven miles from Quatre Bras:

All was confusion, agitation, and movement. The danger was impending, explosion after explosion, startling from their vicinity, and the clattering peals of musketry . . . The whole population . . . was in the streets, doors and windows all wide open, whilst the inmates of the houses, male and female, stood huddled together in little groups like frightened sheep . . . In a sort of square . . . a few soldiers, with the air of citizens (probably a municipal guard), were drawn up in line, looking anxiously about them at the numerous bleeding figures [entering town from the east]. Some were staggering along unaided . . . others supported between two comrades, their faces deadly pale, and knees yielding at every step . . . Priests were running to and fro, hastening to assist at the last moments of a dying man . . . There were women, too, mingling in this scene of agitation. Ladies, fair delicate ladies, stood . . . at the doors of several handsome houses, their hands folded before them . . . whilst ever and anon they would move their lips as if in prayer.[18](#)

On a hill beyond the town, many more citizens stood, straining their eyes to see the fighting.

In Brussels, the distant roar of cannon continued, and in the stillness of the evening air it actually seemed to grow louder and nearer, causing fresh disquiet to the people on the ramparts, who feared that the battle was moving in their direction. Then, at about half past nine, the sound became fainter and gradually died away.

*

Having ridden all day, the men of 'G' Troop arrived at Quatre Bras, their horses 'stumbling from time to time over the corpses of the slain, which they were too tired to step over'. By then the gunfire they had listened to for the previous ten miles had slackened. The last cannon rounds that flew over their heads and the occasional shell exploding nearby, Mercer noted ruefully, 'were sufficient to enable us to say we had been *in* the battle . . . just too late to be useful'.[19](#) In two days' time, the members of 'G' Troop would be more than compensated for missing the action.

Returning to her hotel after nightfall, Miss Waldie heard reassuring news from Sir Neil Campbell, who had it from Sir George Scovell, who had left the field at half past five, that

'all was well'; that although greatly outnumbered, the Anglo-Allied army 'had not yielded an inch of ground . . . and . . . were still fighting in the fullest confidence of success'.²⁰ Only one contingent had disgraced itself. A regiment of 'raw Belgic troops' had run 'like sheep'²¹ from the enemy, but Miss Waldie felt satisfaction that they had 'almost to a man' been slaughtered by the very troops they had not dared to fight. 'The fate of cowards is unpitied,' she reflected.²² Later, around midnight, Major Hamilton, 'his face black with smoke and gunpowder & his mouth so parched he could hardly speak',²³ reported to Creevey and Miss Ord that 'our Army . . . had beat the French, but as not a man of the Cavalry had arrived on the ground, no advantage could be taken of it'.²⁴ Hostilities had been postponed. 'Tomorrow the engagement will most probably be renewed,' Campbell told Miss Waldie, 'and I hope it will prove decisive.'²⁵

*

Neither battle had proved decisive so far. Dogged Prussian resistance at Ligny did not allow Napoleon to comprehensively destroy Blücher's army without reinforcement from Ney, nor was the Emperor able to offer his marshal help at Quatre Bras. Meanwhile, Wellington's initially weak defensive position, although sufficiently strengthened throughout the afternoon to prevent the French from breaking through, did not permit him to send the aid he had promised to Blücher.

The outcome at Quatre Bras might have been different had not Ney's offensive been compromised by the loss of his I Corps. Twenty-one thousand men under the command of Lieutenant General Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Comte d'Erlon - comprising one cavalry and four infantry divisions, six artillery batteries and five companies of engineers - had remained at Gosselies, a position roughly equidistant from

Quatre Bras and Ligny, ready to be called upon by Ney or the Emperor as required. At five o'clock, Ney was about to order those fresh troops into action and push forward to the crossroads when he was informed by d'Erlon's chief of staff, General Delcambre, that they were already marching away to attack the Prussian right flank at Ligny. The order for this manoeuvre had come directly from the Emperor, and Ney was neither consulted nor notified until after it had been put into effect. Nettled by the slight, and convinced that a decisive victory could still be secured at Quatre Bras, Ney sent Delcambre to recall the I Corps. Meanwhile, d'Erlon had led his men in the wrong direction, and instead of advancing on Ligny was causing panic further south among troops of the French III Corps, who feared that the unidentified force approaching their rear signalled an outflanking action by the enemy. Then, at about six o'clock, before the hapless I Corps could make any contribution at Ligny - other than to add to the confusion - General Delcambre caught up with d'Erlon and presented him with Ney's countermanding order to return to the attack on Quatre Bras. Leaving just two divisions behind to move on Ligny - insufficient to make any strategic difference to the battle - d'Erlon turned his main force around and marched them back the way they had come. It was nine o'clock when they arrived south of Quatre Bras, and darkness had brought hostilities in that sector to an end. The I Corps had not fired a single shot.

Meanwhile, in a desperate attempt at the breakthrough he had striven for all afternoon, Ney launched a brigade of nearly 800 heavy cavalry on a suicidal charge into the very heart of Wellington's army. Lieutenant General Kellermann, Comte de Valmy, led his 8th and 11th Cuirassiers to glory. Resplendent in thigh boots and shining steel breastplates, with two feet of black horsehair streaming from the brass crests of their helmets, they hacked their way through the 69th South Lincolnshire Regiment and scattered the 33rd Yorkshires, before being raked by musketry and nine-

pounder gunfire from the fields and farm buildings to left and right, leaving the approach to the crossroads 'literally macadamised . . . with the carcasses of the Cuirassiers and their horses'.²⁶ Many gained their objective, if only momentarily, and French cavalry hooves rattled on the cobbles of the Nivelles-Namur road for the first time that day. Then a point-blank barrage of musket fire, round shot and canister fragments ripped through them from three sides, and the vanguard of Kellermann's elite collapsed in a welter of slaughtered horseflesh, perforated steel and mangled humanity. The survivors turned and hurtled back down the carnage-strewn route to the French lines, duty done, glory won and the brigade depleted by more than a third.

At eight o'clock in the evening, the Duke of Wellington - his army reinforced, now outnumbering Ney's by two to one - judged it prudent to advance, and by nightfall the Anglo-Allied positions were approximately where they had been when the fighting started at two o'clock. It had been 'a day without result', according to a French aide-de-camp, 'a drawn battle'.²⁷ Wellington had lost 4,800 men, Ney 4,140.

The day had not been without result for Napoleon's right wing: between 20,000 and 25,000 Prussians had been killed or wounded or had deserted, at the expense of between 10,000 and 12,000 French.

The Prussian chief of staff, Graf von Gneisenau, called the struggle for Ligny and its neighbouring village of Saint-Amand 'one of the most obstinate recorded in history'.²⁸ It was an obstinacy born of grudge. The Prussians had suffered too many defeats and humiliations at the hands of the French during the previous decade to meet them on any other terms than that of the most intense ferocity. 'As if overcome by personal hatred, man battled against man . . . as if every individual had met his deadliest enemy and rejoiced at the long-awaited opportunity.'²⁹ The same commitment was apparent on the opposing side, where

French troops could be rallied by history in the same way as the Prussians: 'Soldiers, are you not ashamed', General de La Bédoyère demanded at one crisis in the battle, 'to fall back before these same men whom you have beaten so many times, who begged for mercy while throwing their weapons at your feet at Austerlitz, Jena and Friedland? Attack, and you will see them once more flee and recognise you as their conquerors!'³⁰ Again they attacked and again fell back and attacked again. Saint-Amand was taken and retaken several times in the course of that broiling hot day.

'Never so cold as in Russia,' a French veteran recalled, 'never so hot as at Ligny.'³¹ The natural heat of the day, combined with the man-made conflagration, turned Ligny into a flaming crucible. Napoleon's tactic was to draw the enemy into its own destruction, to sap its strength, exhaust its reserves, until it was too weak to attack or resist. It was a tactic that required monstrous sacrifice of his own forces. Like air sucked into a furnace, troops from both armies poured down the narrow smoke-filled streets, blazing buildings to either side. Intense heat exacerbated the very aspect of savagery, thirst causing men to foam at the mouth as though rabid.³² The town was so closely packed that the only combat possible was hand to hand, 'with clubbed muskets and bayonets . . . The French plunged their bayonets in the chests of those already falling from their wounds; the Prussians . . . killed everyone that fell into their hands.'³³ A French captain of grenadiers wrote: 'This was not a battle, this was a butchery.'³⁴ When the Imperial Guard, held in reserve throughout the day, finally attacked at half past eight in the evening, Lieutenant General François Roguet sent them into Ligny with a warning: 'the first man to bring me a Prussian prisoner will be shot'.³⁵ There was to be no quarter. The streets were by this time so thickly covered with dead that the grenadiers advanced without once treading on firm ground. Passage of the horse-drawn artillery and ammunition wagons inflicted further

injury to corpses that writhed and jerked under the crushing wheels as though galvanised into renewed, agonised life.³⁶

Ligny was taken and the Prussian army defeated, but, despite the slaughter, not annihilated. Blücher was able to retreat, regroup and finally tip the balance towards Napoleon's defeat forty-eight hours later.

On the morning of Saturday 17 June, Wellington received news that the Prussian army was withdrawing north towards Wavre. With no support to be expected from Blücher, his own position at Quatre Bras was unsustainable, and he ordered his forces to march northwards - along a route roughly parallel to that of the Prussians - and await the main French army on the ridge of Mont-Saint-Jean.

*

Very early that same Saturday morning, a Scottish gentleman drove a gig out of Brussels down the Charleroi road to view the previous day's battlefield. On the way he passed two unattended English ladies returning on horseback, 'in agonies of grief'.³⁷ Having reached Quatre Bras and paid his respects to the field, in particular to the high proportion of tartan-clad slain, the gentleman turned his gig and began the journey back to Brussels. After a couple of miles, he was disconcerted, on looking behind, to find the entire Anglo-Allied army at his heels. He was soon overtaken and his progress along the choked-up road slowed to the pace of the retreating host.

Progress slowed further as it began to rain, the oven heat of 16 June breaking into a cataclysmic storm on the afternoon of the 17th.

'G' Troop was still at Quatre Bras, under orders to 'remain in the rear with [Lord Uxbridge's] cavalry, to cover the retreat'³⁸ of the main army. It was a risky position but it allowed Captain Mercer to fulfil a cherished ambition. 'I had often longed to see Napoleon,' he recalled:

Now I saw him, and there was a degree of sublimity in the interview rarely equalled. The sky had become overcast since the morning, and at this moment presented a most extraordinary appearance. Large isolated masses of thundercloud, of the deepest, almost inky black, their lower edges hard and strongly defined, lagging down, as if momentarily about to burst, hung suspended over us, involving our position and everything on it in deep and gloomy obscurity; whilst the distant hill lately occupied by the French army still lay bathed in brilliant sunshine.

It was then that he saw Bonaparte, 'a single horseman, immediately followed by several others . . . their dark figures thrown forward in strong relief from the illuminated distance, making them appear much nearer to us than they really were'.³⁹ As Mercer watched, the horseman and his entourage were joined by squadrons of cavalry and a troop of horse artillery.

'Fire!' roared Lord Uxbridge. 'Fire!'

The guns of 'G' Troop fired.

Had a lucky shot killed the Emperor that day, the village of Waterloo might not have been memorialised by battle on the day following: stations, streets, terraces and squares in towns and cities around the world would have found other names. But Mercer's guns had no such transformative impact upon history. And yet, as though in reply to the howitzer and nine-pounders, the natural storm detonated: 'an awful clap of thunder, and lightning . . . almost blinded us, while the rain came down as if a water-spout had broken over us . . . Flash succeeded flash, and the peals of thunder were long and tremendous.' The French artillery began firing, 'as if in mockery of the elements, [sending] forth their feebler glare and scarcely audible reports - their cavalry dashing on at a headlong pace, adding their shouts to the uproar'. Meanwhile, having fired its single volley, 'G' Troop was retreating through the driving rain. 'Make haste! - make haste!' Lord Uxbridge urged them on. 'For God's sake, gallop, or you will be taken.'⁴⁰

Sergeant Morris of the 73rd Regiment of Foot was on high ground as the storm hit:

The sky suddenly darkened; and . . . we appeared to be enveloped in clouds, densely charged with the electric fluid. The rain descended literally in torrents . . . Our journey hitherto had been up hills, and now we had some very steep ground to descend; and the rapidly accumulating water came down with such inconceivable force, that it was with the utmost difficulty we could keep our feet.[41](#)

Ahead, the roads were churned to quagmire and 'in some places more like canals than anything else'.[42](#) The army 'waded through mud and water to the knees'.[43](#) Lieutenant Pattison of the 33rd Regiment of Foot remembered 'such torrents of rain, and . . . such vivid lightning, accompanied with such tremendous peals of thunder, that, though long in a tropical climate, I never beheld or heard the like before'.[44](#) From the lowest rank of Pattison's regiment, Private George Hemingway struggled to give his mother an account of it: 'and if ever it rained or ever people was exposed to the bad weather since the memory of man the poor fellows was that day and the whole of that night and marched that most of our road was fast to the knees in mud which caused a great [number of] prisoners and others killed'.[45](#)

The rain continued to fall when the army reached what would be the site of the following day's battlefield. 'We had to pass the night without tents or covering of any kind save our cloaks, many of us suffering from undressed wounds,'[46](#) wrote a lieutenant of the 42nd Foot. Another officer described his bivouac 'in a newly ploughed field, in no part of which could a person stand in one place, for many minutes, without sinking to the knees in water and clay'.[47](#) There was but one consolation as the rain sheeted down on them: they knew 'the enemy were in the same plight'.[48](#) And so they were. 'Never so cold as in Russia,' the French veteran of the 1812 campaign would tell his grandson, 'never so hot as at Ligny, never so wet as on the eve of Waterloo.'[49](#)

It took the Scottish gentleman until nightfall to reach Brussels, where he immediately began making preparations

to leave. Many other civilians had the same idea, and transport was at a premium; '100 Napoleons',^{fn1} it was said, 'were offered in vain for a pair of horses to go to Antwerp . . . and numbers set off on foot, and embarked in boats upon the canal'.⁵⁰ All that day periodic panics had swept the city as news arrived that the army defending Brussels was in retreat. Miss Waldie had been roused from bed at six o'clock in the morning by cries of '*Les Français sont ici! Les Français sont ici!*' and a 'troop of Belgic cavalry, galloping from the army, at the most furious rate, through the Place Royale, as if the French were at their heels'. For Miss Waldie - making her own arrangements to leave that day - it was always the native 'Belgic' troops who were foremost in any panic. More arrived around noon: infantry running, cavalrymen 'cutting their horses with their sabres' to make them gallop faster.⁵¹

The governor general of the Belgian provinces, Baron de Capellen, had tried to allay anxiety with the first of a series of hearty proclamations, issued at seven o'clock that morning. An officer had returned from the advanced posts bringing news that 'all was going well' and that the 'false alarm [was] without foundation'. The governor general himself had 'made no preparations to depart', and he reassured the frightened populace: 'Our armies will renew the attack of the enemy today.' Another proclamation was issued half an hour later with the heartening news that the Duke of Wellington 'was preparing to attack the French army, which was retiring'.⁵²

About four o'clock, Creevey had been told by someone who had met a man 'just returned from Head Quarters' that 'things were looking very ill'. This third-hand intelligence was confirmed during dinner by the rumble of baggage wagons and the movement of troops north, not south. 'Everything came *down* the Rue de Namur, nothing went up.' The former member for Thetford went outside and spoke to some soldiers, 'who all looked gloomy and told

[him] things were looking but badly when they came away'. That night Major Hamilton, Creevey's most authoritative source of information, 'was graver than usual [and gave] his opinion that a most infernal battle for Bruxelles would be fought the next day'.[53](#)

On the Sunday morning, the Scottish gentleman was fortunate to secure places on a canal boat for himself and his ailing wife. From the water they could see the congested chaos of exodus by road:

When horses fell, the waggon wheels crushed the rider; baggage was thrown off and carried away by the peasants to be cut open and plundered. Great sums of money were in this way lost; and clothes and other property spread over the fields . . . The persons crushed in the flight . . . were thrown into the ditches . . . The confusion was dreadful, yet no one had seen a single Frenchman.[54](#)

Miss Waldie and her family had been on the same road the day before, having persuaded a coachman to take them to Antwerp. She reported that 'the canal . . . was covered with boats . . . and vessels of every description, and presented a scene of tumult and confusion scarcely inferior to that upon land'.[55](#)

During that late morning of 18 June, those remaining in Brussels again heard the guns, but considerably closer and louder than those they had heard on the sixteenth: 'one uninterrupted peal of thunder in their ears for ten hours'. Henri de Merode had set out to walk the ten miles from Everberg to Brussels. Several times he encountered the human debris of Ligny and Quatre Bras still limping north, but as he approached the city he could hear the artillery fire of a much larger conflict, 'one that would decide the fate, if not of Europe, then at least of France and Belgium'. Arriving at his town house, he again felt the tremors of forty-eight hours previously, this time strong enough to shatter window panes. After Mass, he collected jewellery and loose gemstones from the house to take back to Everberg, determined that if he could not get his family out of the

country, then at least they might find shelter further east in Louvain.⁵⁶

Madame d'Arblay, writing to her husband, was incoherent: 'Since I have *heard* - *since I HEAR* the cannon! Oh mon ami! - one line! *One word!* - *Daily!* Daily! - For the present awful moment!' That morning she had gone with her friends Mr and Mrs Boyd and their eighteen-year-old daughter to take a canal boat for Antwerp, only to learn that it had been requisitioned by the military authorities: 'seized for some wounded officers, & we could get no other'.⁵⁷ Returning, disappointed, to the city centre, they heard what Merode had heard: the Emperor's opening cannonade accompanying the first French assault on Hougoumont: 'The dread reverberation became louder & louder . . . Every shot tolled to our imaginations the Death of myriads . . . the destruction & devastation so near us.' They were also aware of the ramifications of the sound. Rumours circulated that Bonaparte had encouraged his troops with the promise of three days' unrestricted pillage of Brussels when the city was taken: 'The probability that, if all attempt at escape should prove abortive we might be personally involved in the carnage, gave us sensations too awful for verbal expressions; we could only gaze, & tremble; listen & shudder.'⁵⁸

By a curious acoustic anomaly not everyone in Brussels could hear the guns from Waterloo. Elizabeth Ord, who had on 16 June heard so clearly 'for several hours . . . a cannonade, the concussion of which on the Air . . . felt as it was close at hand',⁵⁹ made no mention of hearing gunfire more than twelve miles closer on the 18th. She and her sister Anne, she recalled, 'during the morning . . . tried to flatter ourselves that as we heard nothing of a very distinct firing perhaps nothing very material was going on'.⁶⁰ Their stepfather Mr Creevey, who walked some way along the road towards Waterloo around three o'clock in the afternoon, 'heard no firing' and thought 'all this was well'.⁶¹

It was also said that although the guns of 16 June could be clearly heard in Antwerp, those of the 18th could not. And yet at Ghent, temporary refuge of Louis XVIII and his court – as far to the north-west as Antwerp was to the north – the royalist historian François de Chateaubriand, sharing His Majesty's exile, was walking in the country beyond the city gates when he heard 'a dull rumble . . . now short, now long, at irregular intervals; sometimes . . . perceptible as a tremor of the air, so distant that it communicated itself to the ground over those vast plains'.⁶²

The guns at Waterloo could be heard sixty miles away to the east at Herve. They were heard a hundred miles to the south-west at Amiens. The gunfire was heard 'by many hundreds of the inhabitants' at Montreuil, 120 miles west, and described as 'resembling the distant rolling of thunder'.⁶³ It was even heard 150 miles away in Ramsgate. The *Kentish Gazette* reported: 'A heavy and incessant firing was heard from this coast on Sunday evening in the direction of Dunkirk.'⁶⁴ And yet, less than ten miles north-west of the battle, the 6,000 men of Sir Charles Colville's division stationed at Halle, securing Wellington's route to Ostend should the day be lost, 'never heard the firing or anything about the action at Waterloo, till the morning of the 19th'.⁶⁵

But Grouchy heard. Just after half past eleven at a notary's house in Walhain, fifteen miles to the east, he was called outside to the garden from his breakfast strawberries. Several of his staff officers were already there, listening to the distant cannonade.

'I believe we should march to the guns,' said General Gérard after a few moments. Commander of the IV Corps, Gérard had expected to be awarded the baton of a marshal of France before Grouchy and had difficulty concealing his contempt for the man promoted above him.

Some officers knelt, ears to the ground, ascertaining the distance and direction of the gunfire, but this undignified