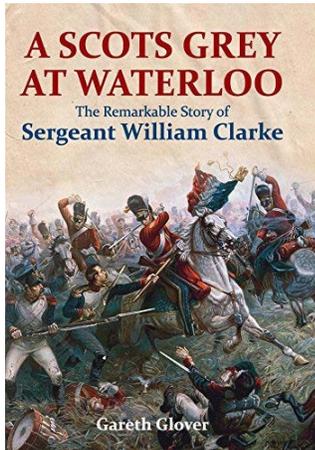


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Glover, Gareth. *A Scots Grey at Waterloo: the Remarkable Story of Sergeant William Clarke*. Barnsley: Frontline, 2017. 339 pages. ISBN: 9781473894013. £25 / \$40



A few years ago the John Rylands Library in Manchester, Great Britain received a 600 page hand-written manuscript that was supposedly a novel. A closer examination revealed that it was a set of memoirs written by a sergeant in the Scots Greys. Gareth Glover was given the opportunity to edit and bring the manuscript to life. This book is the result. The reader should be cautioned because the title is a bit misleading. Although the book covers Waterloo, it is really a memoir of the twenty-two years William Clarke spent as an enlisted soldier in the 2nd Royal North British Dragoons, better known as the Scots Greys.

The first thirteen chapters covers William Clarke early life, his reasons for enlisting in 1803, his training and the years spent on garrison duty in England, Scotland, and Ireland.¹ Much of this time the regiment was on anti-smuggling duty. In 1812 the regiment was in Manchester where they helped put down the Luddites who were destroying factories and mills. *A Scots Grey at Waterloo* is the only set of memoirs I know of that covers this.

In early April 1815, the Scots Greys received orders to join Wellington's Army in Belgium. This is where the story will garner the most interest. There is a chapter on the movement from Canterbury to their cantonments in Denderhoutem, life in garrison there, and then how they were notified that the French had crossed the border and were ordered to Quatre Bras, where they arrived too late to fight. Surprisingly there is a highly detailed account of the retreat to Waterloo on 17 June and how he spent the night before Waterloo. The men had not been fed in two days and according to his account as soon as the regiment dismounted in their bivouacs, the men dispersed to forage for food and alcohol, which they found in abundance. Sergeant Clarke was sent with a small party of men to look for their commissary and gives an epic account of his misadventures in the vicinity of Braine-l'Aleud where he was almost captured by the French.

The Scots Greys were part of the Union Brigade which was best known for its charge against, and subsequent destruction of, the French 1st Corps. He not only tells of his part in the charge, but also the stories of several of his fellow troopers. Later in the day, Sergeant Clarke was ordered to escort prisoners back to Brussels. This is one of only two

¹ Prior to deploying to Belgium in 1815, the last time the Scots Greys were on active service was in 1795.

accounts I know of by someone who had this duty.² After he delivered his prisoners he spent the next several hours wandering back to the battlefield and according to his account, appears to make no effort to link up with his regiment. He finally arrived in the village of Waterloo, where he proceeded to forage for food and drink. His description of his activity at an inn there is typical of his writing:

“The apartment appeared to have been a drinking parlour, where many who lay on the floor, as well as four Brunswickers who sat at a table and drank wine from a leather bucket, to all probability had been carousing all night. There lay three or four dead men on the floor and a greater number grunted in a state of intoxication amongst them.”³

Sergeant Clarke continued to wander around the battlefield where he arrived at Mont St. Jean, where the 1st Corps had its field hospital. There he saw appalling sights including,

“. . . several highlander’s legs, still wearing the emblem of their country; Auld Scotia’s tartan hose! As also the legs of dragoons in boots and spurs and many others which still wore a part of the garment in which they had proudly paced the causeways of their native land and supported the portly figure of a British grenadier whose exalted spirit had ever forbid him to place in the coward’s part that well-turned limb which was now consigned to a Belgic dunghill.”⁴

Sergeant Clarke and his party continued on past the hospital onto the battlefield. There they spent the better part of 19 June helping the wounded of all nations and looking for the wounded and dead from his own regiment. His account is the most vivid description I have ever read of what a battlefield looks like after the fighting ends. He not only writes of what he observed but also relates stories of some of the wounded soldiers whom he helped.

Unlike many memoirs, *A Scots Grey at Waterloo* does not end at Waterloo. Sergeant Clarke describes the march on Paris and the subsequent occupation of the city. In November 1815 the Scots Greys were ordered back England but did not arrive there until mid-January. They stayed in Canterbury until July 1817 when they returned to Scotland. They were not there long when they went to Ireland until they returned to England and then eventually to Scotland in 1821. The final chapter is a lengthy description of King George IV’s first visit to Scotland as regent and the participation of the Scots Guards in the festivities.

The book closes with an interesting appendix by Mr. Glover about allegations of cowardice against an officer of the regiment. He was able to identify the officer and presents evidence in support the allegations. The reason he added the appendix is because despite including many anecdotes, William Clarke never mentions this one. Mr.

² The other was by Ensign Rees Gronow of the 1st Foot Guards.

³ Page 205

⁴ Pages 208 - 209

Glover puts this down as Sergeant Clarke might have felt this tarnished the reputation of the regiment and it was best to forget the whole incident.

A Scots Grey at Waterloo is similar to the memoirs of Private Matthew Clay of the Coldstream Guards.⁵ It is filled with details of life in the ranks that can only be told someone who lived them. Sergeant Clarke tells the events as he remembers them, both the good and the bad. Mr. Glover does his typical superb job of editing the manuscript and provides additional information on the individuals, places, and events mentioned by Sergeant Clarke. The book is destined to become a classic. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: February 2018

⁵ Clay, Mathew. *Narrative of the Battle of Quatre Bras & Waterloo with the Defence of Hougomont*. Godmanchester: Ken Trotman; 2006.