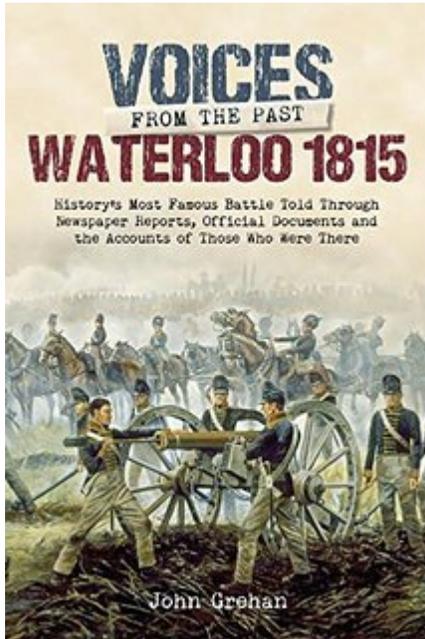


## Napoleon Series Reviews

Grehan, John. *Voices from the Past: Waterloo 1815*. Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2015.  
368 pages. ISBN: 9781783831999 £25 / \$40



My first re-action why I picked up this book was not good. Just what I did not want to read. . . another book using the same old sources to re-hash the Waterloo Campaign. However then the book's subtitle caught my eye: "History's Most Famous Battle Told through Newspaper Reports, Official Documents and the Accounts of Those Who Were There". I was still unconvinced but decided I would put my cynicism aside at least long enough to read the Introduction. Instead of the usual overview of what was coming in the book, that most introductions provide, Mr. Grehan's approach was unique. He discussed how difficult it was to write any book on a battle and then went into great lengths on the struggle William Siborne had with the Duke of Wellington on building his Waterloo Diorama. Wellington's position was that "The duty of the Historian of a battle. . . is to prefer that which has been officially recorded and published by public responsible authorities; next to attend to that which proceeds from Official Authority. . . and to pay least attention to the statements of Private Individuals".<sup>1</sup> Siborne's problem was that he hundreds of letters from British officers detailing the role their regiment played in the battle and these letters often contradicted the official version of what happened during the battle. I was intrigued and started reading. Within a few pages I was hooked.

So why should someone read *Voices from the Past*? I have over 30 books on Waterloo plus another 25 sets of memoirs that just cover the campaign. Add into this is 30 – 40 sets of memoirs that covers both the Peninsular War and Waterloo and of course that doesn't include the numerous regimental histories. So what can *Voices from the Past* add that the 100+ books in my Waterloo library does not already cover? The first thing I noticed were the numerous accounts that were from old newspapers. Many of them were written within a few years after the battle, some within a few months. Often memoirs written well after a battle or campaign include descriptions that are drawn on previously published books or histories.<sup>2</sup> However many of the accounts in the newspapers were letters written by the soldiers to their families shortly after the battle and give immediacy to their words that accounts written 20 years later do not have.

In addition to the newspapers, the author drew on sources that I was not familiar with, such as both of John Booth's *The Battle of Waterloo* volumes which were published in 1815 and 1817. These books contained numerous letters written by the participants. Other sources include *The Capel Letters*, the Earl of Malmesbury Letters, and the memoirs of Donald Mackenzie. Mr.

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<sup>1</sup> Page viii

<sup>2</sup> Some memoirs written after 1836 contain passages lifted from William Napier' *History of the War in the Peninsula and the South of France*.

Grehan also drew on French and German sources, including the memoirs of Marshal Grouchy, Generals Drouet and von Reiche, and Colonel Reiset. I would say about 50% of the sources were new to me.

*Voices from the Past* has 26 chapters, each covering a different aspect of the 100 Days. Eleven of the chapters is about the battle of Waterloo, while the others examine Napoleon's return to France in March 1815, Quatre Bras, Ligny, Wavre, the pursuit of the defeated French after Waterloo, and the Allied advance to Paris. It ends with chapters on the experience of those travelers who visited the battlefield shortly after the battle and the horrors they encountered, how the victorious countries honored their soldiers, and articles about the battle appeared in various newspapers and magazines over the next 75 years.

All the major events of the battle of Waterloo have a separate chapter. These include the initial maneuver on the morning of the battle, Hougoumont, the massive French artillery bombardment, the attack on the Allied Centre and the British cavalry counter-attacks, the French cavalry charges, La Haye Sainte, the arrival of the Prussians, and the attack of the Imperial Guard.

The author used the same methodology in each chapter. He would begin with a paragraph to set the stage for what the chapter was about and then let the words of the participants describe the action. Between these accounts, the author included a short paragraph to put the accounts in the proper context. For example in Chapter 8: "The Struggle for Hougoumont", he begins the chapter with a description of the farm that was written by Lieutenant Colonel Woodford who was one of its defenders. The initial French attack was told by Ensign Standen of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Foot Guards, General Constantine-Rebècque of the Dutch Army, and Major Bull of the Royal Horse Artillery. As the action shifted to different parts of the farm, the author uses the narration from a different individual who was there.

*Voices from the Past* delivered what it promised. It tells the history of the Waterloo Campaign as seen through the eyes of those who fought in it or experienced the aftermath. Because so many of the sources were new to me it provided a fresh perspective on the battle. Although there was a good balance between French, British, and Prussian sources at the strategic and grand tactical level, the vast majority of the accounts at the tactical level were by British and an occasional Prussian sources. For example Chapter II "The French Cavalry Charges" covers in great detail what it was like to be British and on the receiving end of those epic charges, but there were no accounts from the French soldiers' perspective. That being said, *Voices from the Past* is an enjoyable read. There is enough new material in it to hold the interest of those familiar with the battle, but because it tells the story from point of view of those who lived through the battle, it will bring the struggle to life to the casual reader.

Reviewed by: [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: July 2015