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Review of *Who Owned Waterloo? Battle, Memory & Myth in British History, 1815-1852* by Luke Reynolds

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**Luke Reynolds, *Who Owned Waterloo? Battle, Memory & Myth in British History, 1815-1852*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 255pp, 28 figures. ISBN: 978-0192864998 (hardback). Price £65.00.**

The most popular attraction of the 1816 London season was an enormous panorama of the Battle of Waterloo, displayed at the rotunda in Leicester Square. Visitors could stand in the centre of the room and receive a 360° view of the action, which had been painstakingly painted based on sketches of the battlefield and imagine themselves at the centre of combat. Although colossally successful, the Leicester Square panorama was actually the *third* Waterloo panorama since the battle was fought, with earlier versions appearing at the Strand and in Edinburgh. Met with glowing reviews and enormous profits - the Leicester Square panorama netted its proprietors over £10,000 in the first few months alone – panoramas demonstrated the widespread public interest in Waterloo during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Waterloo panoramas are just one set of commemorations discussed in Luke Reynolds' *Who Owned Waterloo?* Indeed, Reynolds' focus is not on the battle itself – although some discussion of combat operations contributes to his argument – but rather he interrogates its cultural afterlife in Britain from the moment that the battle ended until Wellington's death 37 years later. Framing Waterloo as 'a crucial part of modern Great Britain's creation myth' (p. 1), in this telling the battle, the victory, and the mythology that sprung up around it did not solely belong to the soldiers who fought. Instead, it also became the possession of civilians up and down the country who watched plays about the battle, travelled to Belgium to collect relics, and patronised the several Waterloo Hotels which sprang up in the years after 1815. The fascination with Waterloo helped, in Reynolds' words, 'not only to establish and define national identity, but also to justify and anchor Britain's imperial century' (p. 7).

To some extent, the notion of spectator as participant in historical event is familiar ground: for example, Katie Trumpener and Tim Barringer have suggested (in *On the Viewing Platform: The Panorama between Canvas and Screen* (2020)) that the panorama's spectator was encouraged to 'tread the boards' as they imagined themselves transported to the visual sight before them. Reynolds' originality lies in his ability to tie together disparate Waterloo-related events and ephemera, from memoirs to medallions and banquets to bridges, and to build them into an argument about how national identity was formed. Significantly, British cultural creators and commentators emphasised Waterloo as a primarily British event, affording little space to the Prussian forces who were instrumental to the victory. The French, as the defeated adversaries, were permitted almost no ownership of the battle except, perhaps, by Napoleon's

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contrarian admirers such as Byron, who cast the event as tragedy in his 1816 narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Reynolds has assembled a breath-taking array of examples of how the Waterloo narrative was commemorated throughout British society. Particularly intriguing is his discussion of the development of British visits to the Waterloo battleground – a proto-dark tourism – which emerged almost immediately after victory was declared. The first tourists, Reynolds writes, ‘arrived at the battlefield before word reached Britain of the victory’ (p. 44) and were able to witness the immediate aftermath of combat. By the 1830s, Waterloo tourism was a thriving industry, with regular shuttles arriving from Brussels, guidebooks providing advice and recommendations about what to look at and where to stay, and relics for sale as souvenirs. Curious visitors could also see signatures from other famous tourists, including Byron, Southey, and Wordsworth, who had graffitied their names onto the chapel walls at the nearby Chateau de Huguemont, which had been badly damaged during the battle. Such was Waterloo’s importance in the nineteenth-century imagination that, as Reynolds puts it, ‘just as important as visiting Waterloo ... was being seen to visit Waterloo’ (p. 71).

At the centre of all Waterloo narratives, of course, is Wellington himself, who commanded a substantial informal control over which commemorations were able to succeed. Napoleon’s effigy, immortalised at Madame Tussaud’s as lying dead in his camp bed, met with his seal of approval - George Hayter used it to paint Wellington paying his respects at his foe’s bedside in 1852. Conversely, Wellington ignored Charles Siborne’s pleas to legitimise his painstakingly created diorama of Waterloo by neither providing him with financial support nor even visiting the completed piece. Despite near-universal British consensus that Waterloo was ‘owned’ by the British, individual efforts to meet Wellington’s approval demonstrate that veterans and civilians alike competed to tell the authentic version of the Waterloo story. And, although retellings rarely explicitly challenged other accounts, there is nevertheless a sense that each version sought to represent itself as definitive: battle memoirs sought to centre the soldiers’ importance to the story, for example, whereas the Waterloo tourist experience was grounded in imperialistic ownership to claim ‘several acres of another European nation’s sovereign soil’ (p. 45).

Disparate groups emerged even among army veterans, and Reynolds draws attention to the various commemorations that recognised different ranks and experience in the years after Waterloo. This is most obvious in occasions like Wellington’s annual Waterloo banquet – a magnificent event, much reported upon, held at Apsley House between 1821 and 1852, and to which only select veteran officers were invited. A more complex debate emerged when many seasoned veterans of the Peninsular War received no acknowledgment for their service, as they had not been recalled in time to fight at Waterloo, whereas many new recruits who *had* fought were honoured with

medals. The ill-feeling surrounding this perceived unfairness demonstrates how veterans of the same war vied with one another for acknowledgement in the commemorations of the combat.

Reynolds' enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, and his analysis of the variant ways in which Waterloo was commemorated is intelligent. Although no one man or group could truly claim ownership over Waterloo, during Wellington's lifetime cultural ownership of the battle shifted and spread, and by the time of his death, Reynolds shows us, it had become a truly national phenomenon.

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**Spencer Jones (ed.), *The Darkest Year: The British Army on the Western Front 1917*. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2022. Notes, Index, 514pp. + 21 maps, ISBN: 978-1914059988 (hardback). Price £35.00.**

Despite thirty years of scholarship, our understanding of the learning process that the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) underwent during the First World War remains incomplete. Though not understudied, there is much that is yet to be uncovered. *The Darkest Year: The British Army on the Western Front 1917* – the fourth in a five part series - thus seeks to in part ameliorate this by shedding new light on 'the difficulties that are often hidden behind the simple shorthand of... [that] phrase' (p. xxvii). Focused specifically on the B.E.F.'s activities in 1917, these chapters consider two fundamental themes: the complexity of operations in contrast to previous years; and the tactical improvement of the B.E.F. on the Western Front.

Various subjects are covered, including, among others a helpful, introductory overview of British strategic thinking during 1917; several case studies of individual units and their performance during important, if much-neglected, operations; an assessment of G.H.Q.'s intelligence practices; as well as an examination of the fledgling tank corps, which 'faced an uncertain future' (p. 484). The sixteen chapters concentrate primarily on the first half of the year, eschewing the infamous if overstudied first and second battles of Passchendaele. To achieve this Spencer Jones as editor has assembled a diverse cohort, including, rather refreshingly, numerous PhD students, several independent scholars as well as other familiar and prominent names from earlier monographs in this series.