

June 18th 2015

POX BRITANNICA

Dear Sir,

I have just read your puerile, jingoistic and highly inaccurate view of the Battle of Waterloo and its legacy. Such trite revisionism cannot go unchallenged. As you yourself say: 'The Times of 1815 was highly partisan' – so are you. As you yourself say: 'the Times of 1815 observed no very clear distinction between news and comment' – neither do you.

You laud the tiny fraction of English soldiers at this battle as if they saved the world – hence your Pax Britannica. Your lack of historical context is breathtaking. Who are the office boys who compiled and wrote your inane tubthumping twaddle?

Firstly, the much vaunted grail of Hougoumont. You blow it up out of all proportion to its true importance on June 18th 1815. Napoleon's initial plan was basically to 'fix' Hougoumont on his left with a decoy attack so that Wellington would not run again as he had after Quatre Bras. The first French attack was made by d'Erlon's Corps on the Allied Centre. (D'Erlon's 20,000 men had marched between Quatre Bras and Ligny on June 16th without fighting at either battle - in a real sense losing the whole Campaign for Napoleon that very same day. Even so, 65,000 French defeated 80,000 Prussians at Ligny.)

D'Erlon's attack was repulsed by British cavalry acting without direct orders from Wellington. However, the ill-trained riders galloped on regardless until their horses were blown and they were virtually annihilated. By now, the massive French artillery barrage was causing havoc amongst the Allied lines on the ridge at Mont St. Jean.

Hougoumont on the French left was meant to be a decoy. As Tim Clayton shows in his book *Waterloo*, all the French had to do was bottle-up the troops in Hougoumont and this they could have done merely by manning the woods in front of the farm complex without attacking. French bravado and Jerome Bonaparte's misplaced zeal led to hundreds of French troops being drawn into an unnecessary conflict.

Have any of your staff actually read anything about the Battle?

Secondly, the Prussians were not latecomers to the field. Clayton's Chapter 4 (p. 378) is entitled *The Prussians Detected Rossomme, 12-30-2p.m.* And Chapter 61 (p. 465) is entitled *Lobau and the Prussians Eastern flank 4.30-5.30p.m.* By five o'clock, Wellington's Army, left and centre, had been decimated, the French artillery in particular wreaking havoc. This was Napoleon's chance. Clayton states (p. 465): 'While the cavalry charged, 7000 fresh infantry commanded by George Mouton, comte de Lobau, were advancing to deliver the knockout blow east of La Haye Sainte.' (Proving Hougoumont was a sideshow.)

It was the pressure exerted by Bülow's Prussians in the French right rear at Plancenoit that led to Lobau's men being reassigned positions to the right of the French Army to repulse this new threat. All Napoleon's reserves, including some of the Young Guard and the Old Guard were used up fighting the Prussians. The late attack by the Middle Guard on the British at 7-30 was also reduced as a result: 'the Old Guard consisting of fifteen battalions, five of which were engaged or drawn up in support near Plancenoit. There remained therefore only ten battalions for a strike force, fewer than 6000 men.' (P.530). Hence the importance of the early arrival of the Prussians to the Battle.

Thirdly, the legacy of Waterloo. You state Waterloo was: ‘the triumph of the nation state over autocracy as the natural focus of the citizens’ allegiance. It is a triumph that has endured ever since...’ Napoleon returned from Elba without a shot being fired or a drop of blood having been spilt, and resumed power. He was much more popular than Louis XVIII who had returned to Paris ‘in the baggage train of the Allies.’ What right had Wellington and Blücher to impose an unwanted King on the French people? Absolutely none! The Allies denied the French people the leader of their choice.

It is seldom mentioned that the Bourbons refused to pay Napoleon the two million francs agreed by treaty for the upkeep of his staff and small army at Elba. They didn’t pay his sister Pauline the 300,000 francs she was entitled to or the other monies supposed to go to the wider Bonaparte family. As Walter Runciman has said, Napoleon repeatedly spared the lives of the defeated sovereigns who grovelled at his feet and who had attacked him in the first place, financed by the British. He could easily have disposed of them. They had no such sense of honour and mercy. Francis of Austria even denied Napoleon access to his wife and child in Elba. Napoleon was never to see his son again.

Napoleon was an enlightened ruler who was far more popular than the useless and discredited monarchs of the day. Tsar Alexander acquiesced in the murder of his own father, and slept with his sister Catherine. George III was mad, and when he wasn’t he was so pig-headed and reluctant to compromise that he lost the American Colonies. The Prince Regent was a drunk opium addict who squandered tens of millions on his own pleasure at a time when ordinary people were in dire want. Russia and Prussia still had serfdom, in effect slavery, which Napoleon outlawed in his empire.

Napoleon believed in religious toleration. Jews had equal rights in his territories. After Waterloo Jews were again persecuted, especially in Russia and Germany – and we know what that led to. To Heine, the great German Jewish poet and writer, Napoleon was his hero. The internationally renowned German author Goethe thought that Napoleon was the greatest man of the C19th.

Napier, in his history of the Peninsula War, begins by saying that the Wars Against Napoleon were the result of privilege – the nobles and Kings fought against France and then Napoleon to defend the rights entrenched in the old feudal systems that still prevailed in most of monarchical Europe. The French Revolution cast a dark shadow over the Continent as far as they were concerned and Napoleon embodied the revolutionary changes. No wonder they had a pathological hatred for him – he was also a much better ruler than they were.

In 1815 Britain had a virtual caste system like India – a country we invaded and then milked for profit for centuries. Wellington’s older brother was an expert at this. Napier laments the fact that however brave, no ordinary British soldier would be given credit for his heroic actions under fire. Only officers got medals. And no Catholic could be a General in the British Army. Most ranks were bought. Compare that with Napoleon’s Army – nearly all his Marshals were of humble birth. Anyone, through talent, bravery or hard work could earn a Legion of Honour under the Emperor. All had equal opportunity – it was a meritocracy, unlike oligarchic autocratic aristocratic England.

Napoleon was far more tolerant and forgiving than the merciless Allies. After Cadoudal tried to murder him – in a plot sanctioned by the British Cabinet and paid for by the Bank of England – Napoleon offered him a commission in the French Army! Despite all the assassination plots upon his life financed by Pitt and the British Cabinet, Napoleon refused to respond in kind. He was far more noble than the self-serving, self-satisfied, self-seeking creatures in charge of

politics in Britain. This was a time when the poor were crippled by forced land removals sanctioned by the Enclosure Acts and the criminal Highland Clearances: a time when the leaders of starving strikers and the destitute were hanged as revolutionaries and rebels or transported to Australia for life. One clergyman was transported for merely proof reading a protest letter.

In 1819 at Peterloo fields peaceful protesters gathered to discuss the way this country was governed. Alarmed local magistrates sent in the militia who sabred and butchered men, women and children who were no threat to anybody. Castlereagh lauded the magistrates with praise in Parliament. Wellington likewise believed in keeping the people down and he became a very reactionary Prime Minister. Ironically, as Clayton mentions, a surviving Waterloo soldier died at Peterloo! A victim of the times – an unknown victim to The Times – then and now.

England in 1815 was mired in poverty and inequality and real class warfare. To the powers-that-be the poor were by definition - revolting. No wonder that Hazlitt and Byron and many other Englishmen preferred Napoleon to the rapacious heartless oligarchs in London.

So – the Times may not be a-changing – but the drivel it writes will be answered by those in the know. The Tabloid Times of 2015 is little better than the gutter press of 1815. It persists in uttering unmitigated tosh in the guise of English history. A pox be upon it!

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