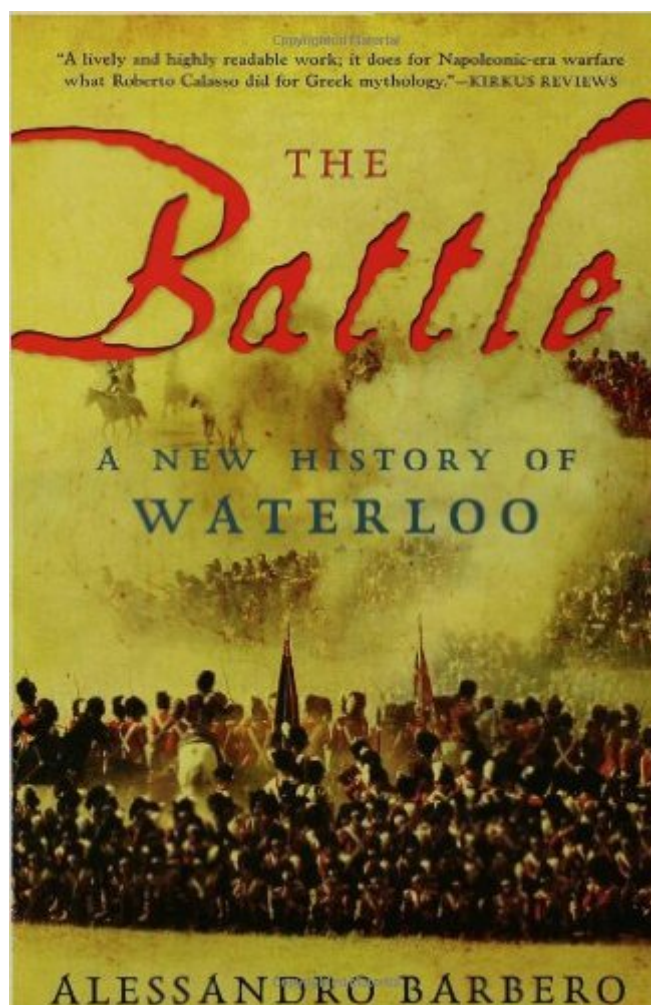


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The Battle: A New History Of Waterloo



Synopsis

At Waterloo, some 70,000 men under Napoleon and an equal number under Wellington faced one another in a titanic and bloody struggle. In the end, as John Keegan notes, contemporaries felt that Napoleon's defeat had "reversed the tide of European history." Even 190 years later, the name Waterloo resounds. Italian historian Alessandro Barbero's majestic new account stands apart from previous British and French histories by giving voice to all the nationalities that took part. Invoking the memories of British, French, and Prussian soldiers, Barbero meticulously re-creates the conflict as it unfolded, from General Reille's early afternoon assault on the chateau of Hougoumont, to the desperate last charge of Napoleon's Imperial Guard as evening settled in. From privates to generals, Barbero recounts individual miracles and tragedies, moments of courage and foolhardiness, skillfully blending them into the larger narrative of the battle's extraordinary ebb and flow. One is left with indelible images: cavalry charges against soldiers formed in squares; the hand-to-hand combat around farmhouses; endless cannon balls and smoke. And, finally, a powerful appreciation of the inevitability and futility of war.

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book after reading a reviewer's account of the book that coined it as "reads like a novel". Well, it does not read as a novel to me. However, that slight criticism does not prevent it from being an excellent book. I am by no means a historic scholar on Napoleon or the Napoleonic Wars. I am rather an interested "lay person" on the subject who has read several books on the subject. That said, I found the book very interesting in terms of understanding the battle as well as the manner of

tactics and fighting of the era. Barbero gives a good bit of CONCISE background on tactics and a few other items to help familiarize the novice with such subject matter to help understand the actual actions taken by the armies. This for me alone was worth the price of the book. As I mentioned, it is not a novel type read, but it is a great overview of the battle as well as informative on the individual actions of the battle and reads as such. Think of it more as setting the board and then giving the play-by-play of the actions taken. The chapters are short and allow for easy breaks in reading when you don't have a bulk of time for setting aside of reading. One can pick it up at lunch or in a break and read easily and arrive at convenient and natural break area. Some chapters are as few as three pages long while others at a bit longer. But again, Barbero sets each action (and background) as move by move chess match along with personal accounts from some of those involved. My only real criticism is the maps. I had a bit of trouble following the armies involved and their movements. The maps in the front are helpful at the start but lose their helpfulness once the battle begins.

This is an superb book that totally engages the reader and that not only provides a feel for what it was like to be on the field of battle, but also provides well researched counterpoints to previously accepted history. For example: The attack(s) on Hougomont were not a wasted effort for although there were no more than two thousand men in the chateau, the total number of Allied forces committed to this action was much higher. Mouton did not in fact receive orders from Napoleon to cover the French right wing from the Prussians (as Napoleon maintains in his memoirs). Mouton's troops' mission was to support the attack of d'Erlon's I Corps, and they were taken completely by surprise when the Prussians appeared on their flank. The great French cavalry charges could not have occurred without Napoleons explicit orders as the preparation was taking place only a few hundred yards from him. The French cavalry was not a spent force after the great charges but remained an effective threat and gave effective support for the remainder of the battle. The final attack by elements of the Guard was not carried out in sufficient numbers, but what in fact Napoleon was relying on was the psychological effect of the advance over his adversaries. The French retreat was perhaps conducted more orderly than has been previously portrayed as no French Eagle was captured during the retreat despite the pursuing Prussians. The book is almost written in the style of a novel and eloquently interweaves first hand accounts throughout but the author is still able to provide the grand strategy and new insights into the battle to keep the scholars happy.

Finally, a study of the famous battle which takes to account EACH AND EVERY side to the battle: British, French, Prussian, Belgian, Dutch, and the minor German states. For Barbero, Waterloo

wasn't won just because of the British units. While the Dutch and Belgians, being mostly either militia units or former members of the French army, while some of their units did give ground, some stood up and fought the advancing French to the utmost (especially the professional units which were formerly a part of the French army). The Prussians did everything they could to fulfill their General's promise of coming to the aid of their allies. Barbero even did not forget the desperate struggle of the minor German state units like the Hanoverians and the Brandenburgers in the left wing of the allied army, a place of the battle mostly being left out in other accounts of Waterloo. He shows how close... very close... the French came to breaking the allied line. "A near run thing" indeed. And takes a look at the poignant aftermath as soldiers absorb the horror of the days after. The number of dead in that single piece of land wasn't surpassed until the American Civil War. Europeans never involved themselves in a war of that scale for 100 years until 1914 when an even greater horror was unleashed. He argues against the reasons French apologists give as to why Napoleon made so many bad decisions. He give a great detailed account on the fight in famous places like Hougoumont and La Haye Saint and emphasizes the importance of each site. He especially gives tribute to the bravery of the defenders of these places particularly the Coldstream Guards and the King's German Legion.

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