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Brendan Simms. *The Longest Afternoon: The 400 Men Who Decided the Battle of Waterloo.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 160 pp. $24.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-06482-3.

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Although a general fascination with the Napoleonic Wars remains among experts and laypersons alike, it is not common nowadays for a historian to write a new battle history of an engagement that took place during this period. What makes Brendan Simmsâs current contribution even more noteworthy than his earlier work, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present* (2013), is that for this work, he chose what is undoubtedly the most scrutinized Napoleonic battle of all: the Battle of Waterloo. In *The Longest Afternoon*, Simms explores what he considers an unfairly neglected part of Napoleon Bonaparteâs final defeat. At the center of the Allied line stood a farmhouse, La Haye Sainte, which was defended by the 2nd Light Battalion of Kingâs German Legion (KGL) under the command of Georg Baring. Simms contends that this farmhouse was the lynchpin of the Duke of Wellingtonâs army and that if it had not been for the heoric efforts of the KGL soldiers, Napoleon may well have broken the Allied center and won the battle. Unfortunately, both the tactical significance of La Haye Sainte and the stories of the legionnaires who defended it are underrepresented in the literature on Waterlooâan injustice that Simms seeks to remedy.

To construct his narrative, Simms relies mostly on first-hand accounts, both published and unpublished, from soldiers who fought at Waterloo. He also draws on previously unused sources from the state archive in Hannover. Somewhat surprisingly, Simms does not appear to be overly concerned with laying out how retrospective accounts (memoirs) might differ from contemporaneous accounts (letters or diaries). Instead, he weaves them together to construct a riveting narrative that is carried along splendidly by a select number of characters.

The book consists of eight chapters, organized chronologically, and resembles a traditional, battle-and-tactics-centric military history at times. Simms discusses the movement of armies, the strategic calculations made by commanders on both sides, and the tactical deployments chosen before battle. By consistently âzooming inâ on the individual soldiers whose writings convey his narrative, Simmsâs writing is reminiscent of John Keeganâs seminal work, *The Face of Battle* (1976).

One should emphasize, however, that *The Longest Afternoon* is not merely a slightly altered retelling of the same Waterloo that has fascinated generations of historians. Indeed, Simms focuses almost exclusively on the events that transpired at La Haye Sainte, as wave after wave of French troops assaulted the farmhouse anchoring Wellingtonâs center. His main argumentâand his

chief contribution to the historiographyâdeclares that the men of the 2nd Light Battalion of the KGL held off the enemy long enough âto change the course of the battleâ (pp. 75-76). He contends that it was the KGLâs resilient defense that bought Wellingtonâs forces enough time to hold on until Gebhard Leberecht von BlÃ¼cherâs Prussian army arrived on Napoleonâs right flank to seal the Anglo-Prussian victory. Simms concludes: âIf [La Haye Sainte] had been taken earlier, then Napoleon would almost certainly have broken the allied centre, and defeated Wellingtonâs army, before the Prussians had arrived in strengthâ (p. 102). La Haye Sainte was therefore absolutely critical to the outcome of the battle, and it is for this reason that the story of the men who defended it needs telling.

One key question Simms seeks to answer concerns the motivations of the KGL soldiers. He initially concedes that systems of motivation are complex and consist of a number of different variables, including âdynastic loyalty to the King of England, German patriotism, regimental camaraderie, personal bonds of friendship and professional ethos.â More than anything else, however, Simms argues that the KGL soldiers âperceived themselves as ideological warriors against Napoleon and French domination generallyâ (p. 15). Simmsâs position on the KGL thus fits neatly alongside the findings of Mark Wishon, whose recent work, *German Forces and the British Army: Interactions and Perceptions, 1742-1815* (2013), similarly emphasizes the ideological and patriotic motivations of KGL soldiers.

Simms disagrees with scholars like Ute Planert (*Der Mythos vom Befreiungskrieg* [2007]), who contend that despite their seemingly uniquely âmodernâ character, the Napoleonic Wars were much more reminiscent of early modern wars than they were of a new era of ideologically motivated warfare. It is possible that Simms comes to his conclusions because heâlike Wishonâdoes not appear to fully account for the possible retrospective influences acting upon the authors of the memoirs on which he relies. These men, writing decades later in the context of a growing German patriotic-national movement, could have reinterpreted (consciously or inadvertently) their war experiences of the Napoleonic Wars as a fight against Napoleonic tyranny in the name of German liberation. He acknowledges in a footnote that other scholars have noted this, but it does not seem to alter his conclusions.

Simms makes the same ideological argument when trying to explain why Baringâs men defended La Haye Sainte so resolutely. It was not so much primary group cohesion, he posits, because the KGL was composed of men who came from different parts of Germany and who, at the time, would have viewed each other as foreigners. Simms also dismisses the argument that the men held on because they feared their superior, for it would have been fairly easy for many of the soldiers to slip away unnoticed amid the intense struggle. Instead, Simms asserts that the ideological fervency underpinned the defendersâ remarkable resilience, invoking his earlier points about the KGL soldiersâ incipient but blooming German patriotism and their collective hatred of Napoleonic tyranny. The weakness in Simmsâs argument here is that he does not further support it and instead relies on his application of the retrospective sources. Further, he may have benefited from applying John Lynnâs three-tiered model of soldier motivations (*The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-1794* [1984])âinitial, combat, and sustaining motivationsâto offer a more detailed overview and to engage more directly the historiography on soldier motivations.

Another fascinating issue on which *The Longest Afternoon* touches is the legacy of Waterloo. It has long been viewed as largely a British victory, but numerous factors undermine that narrative. For one, Wellington commanded a multinational force made up of Britons (English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh), Germans (Hanoverians, Brunswickers, Nassauers, KGL), Dutch, and Belgians. Indeed, Simms explains, about 45 percent of Wellingtonâs men spoke German. When also considering the Prussian formations that arrived late in the day to decisively turn the battle in Wellingtonâs favor, one might make a legitimate argument for Waterloo as more of a âGerman victoryâ (p. 125). Ultimately, however, Simms concludes that because Wellingtonâs army was truly multinational, the most sensible position is to declare Waterloo a European victory against Napoleon and to remember it as such.

The Longest Afternoon combines microhistory, battle history, and soldier history to assemble the short but enthralling account of the KGL 2nd Light Battalionâs defense of La Haye Sainte at Waterloo. Simmsâs apt integration of first-hand accounts allows him to combine skillful historical analysis with a penchant for storytelling usually reserved for works of historical fiction. His book is brief and accessible enough for the layperson but sufficiently insightful and detailed to arouse the curiosities of the Napoleonic and military expert. In sum, *The Longest Afternoon* is a wonderful addition to the recent publication of Napoleonic soldier studies and constitutes a welcome contribution to the Napoleonic historiography in general.

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