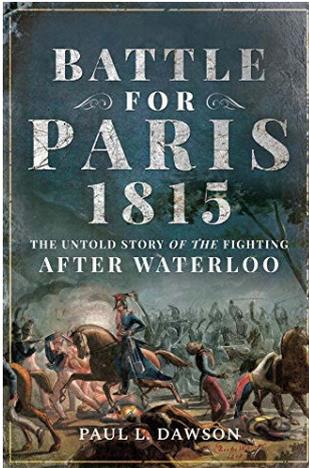


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Dawson, Paul. L. *Battle for Paris 1815: The Untold Story of the Fighting After Waterloo*. Barnsley (UK): Frontline Books 2019. 283 pages, 8 pages B&W plates. ISBN# 978-1526749277. Hardcover £25.00/\$42.00.



Though it is unfair to say that no author who writes about Waterloo ever progresses beyond late June 1815, it is certainly true that few do, and the exceptions that do so in any detail are fewer. It is therefore pleasing that Paul L. Dawson has turned to this fertile subject, adding to his previous works which have attempted to offer alternate explanations to this well covered event. Dawson very ably and professionally sets out by making the reader know that he has written this book explicitly from letters, dispatches, notes, orders and memoranda contained in the French Army Archives written between June and July 1815. In so doing he stringently chastises those who utilise later memoirs and those English speaking ‘armchair historians’ and soldiers who cannot speak or have not learned to speak French and German and have no academic training.

Having conversed and researched in these vital languages, (though mostly in the former) and being a paragon of the scholars labours, the author declares to us that though this is as unbiased an account of the later campaign of 1815 as we will find; due to ‘false memory’, which determines what an individual brain processes as important, this is a version not *the* version, and is liable to the correction of further research. The bellicose honesty is as jarring as it is laudable and no matter which side of the controversy of who should be allowed to write history you fall on, all must admit that books written from imminent source material are valuable and rare things.

In part this book is an extension of his work on Grouchy and Napoleon. In it, Dawson has found that Grouchy; the much maligned, commonly blamed, yet totally successful commander of the Armée du Nord’s Right Wing, could never have influenced the battle of Waterloo and can be vindicated of the charge of being a dull-minded strawberry-eater as portrayed in the 1970 feature film. As one who has often risen from his own armchair to defend Grouchy, I began this book with high hopes. Though I fall desperately short of his exacting standards, doubtless deserving of a disdainful sniff from the author, I find such dedication inspiring and his initial survey of officers vital to his theme demonstrates his command of subject matter.

Dawson’s style is investigative and conversational but quite inflexible. He works through a matter searchingly, trying to rhetorically show his methodology to the reader as an unfolding thought process. As such, short but detailed chapters comprise the case where he arrives at the determination that the famous gunfire heard and supposedly ignored by Grouchy was actually the beginning of the action at Wavre, and that no audible cue reached him from Waterloo until he was fully embroiled in his own battle. His finding is corroborated by an anonymous, fairly well-informed but poorly written letter created on 20 June at a place called, confusingly for a French source, *Vaterlo*. The first five chapters are more or less concerned with comparing the principle verifiable accounts and in so doing Dawson determines that Grouchy is underserving of harsh criticism for his actions, indeed he holds to the opinion that the Marshal saved a great deal of Napoleon’s army by acting as he did.

Dawson might be critiqued for judging a little too much what is and what is not a mistake, which I find generally unhelpful, but otherwise the convincing findings of his method explains the sharpness of some of his observations. Acerbity aside, by this stage the reader is asked to accept on fairly persuasive logic and evidence that Napoleon gave incompetent orders to Grouchy, and that he later did a professional job between 17 and 18 June. It never ceases to baffle me that so many books have been written about Waterloo and yet if any of them have indeed consulted the French Army Archive, they merely allude to rather than discuss some of the events and accounts discussed here, most of which offer a straightforward explanation for puzzles and controversies, if, admittedly, not all can be banished quite so easily. For my part I was able to easily accept most them, but then perhaps those better versed in the French histories of the battle will disagree.

The author comes not only to Grouchy's aid but to Soult, who, allowing for his inexperience working with Napoleon, was up against the wall in terms of resources. The crippling lack of horses for the staff was one of the biggest problems in running the imperial staff. Soult's pleas for money to buy mounts and establish an efficient headquarters began in May and did not end until the commencement of the campaign when the shortfall and resulting reduction of effectiveness led to visible problems. Dawson here turns his guns on Davout, a deified figure amongst Bonapartists as the "Iron Marshal" who could have rescued Napoleon. It is here pointed out that Davout betrayed Napoleon in 1814 and hamstrung Soult by making available only half the funds Soult required to buy mounts for the Armée du Nord.

As I personally have had cause to observe in the past, Grouchy's retreat from Wavre was a commendable piece of soldiering given the dire circumstances attendant. Dawson covers this in two chapters, where a fascinating number of battalion-level eyewitnesses, totally unknown (I should think) to wider readership, give tone and colour to the stresses of the 19th and 20th June; one Prussian source is particularly vivid. All of which goes towards his argument that Grouchy and his generals, except for one, knew exactly what they were doing. Indeed, to Dawson, Grouchy seems to have done mostly everything right, as opposed to Napoleon's actions.

And so to Paris, and the end of this review. There is no space left for any in depth analysis of the remaining chapters, the book continues as it has done, with much reliance on casualty and muster reports from the days in question, but delves from familiar into unfamiliar waters. Dawson forcefully argues that there were few true Royalists or Bonapartists in France during 1815, but there were many realists, from Fouché to Davout, all of them, bar a handful, did what was necessary to carry on no matter who was on the throne.

The interesting account of French operations around Paris in July show an army of 150,000 men that, much as Napoleon had hoped, were positioned more or less to possibly check or knock the Prussians, and possibly the British out of the war. Of course, that was a short-sighted pipe dream, yet a short-term victory against Blücher was more than possible. During the fighting in June, the Prussians excelled only in organisation, resilience, evasion and pursuit. Beaten at Ligny and Wavre, over the day's fighting at Waterloo they concentrated three Korps on Napoleon's vastly outnumbered right flank and then failed to stop Grouchy escaping Belgium. As Dawson points out, Davout was legitimately torn between a last glorious victory and the realism of the long-term situation.

On a more critical note, and at the risk of being dismissed by the author as a mere reactionary, I have this to say. I have not read the author's other books, though once or twice on Internet forums I have probed the defences of certain claims contained therein with him.

It is my opinion that, based on this book and such exchanges, much like the British Cavalry, Dawson tends to get a little carried away with his scholarly success. He is most obviously proud of being a pot-stirrer, and in his last chapter delights in declaring that those who disagree with how he interprets facts and allocates importance are mired in false memory and nostalgia. The adamant nature of Dawson's declarations can be trying; there is only one way to read history, and only one way to assign reliable values to source material- his way, or those that he agrees with. This, more than the grand, unabashedly revisionist, claims he makes, is perhaps the most unacceptable thing about the book.

The book, which suffers from a lack of maps, is Franco-centric, at least 96 percent of the sources, if one is generous, must be French officers. Why the author chose to edit the French accounts to use the name Waterloo rather than what the French actually called it, etc., is doubtless to simplify an already complicated book, but it gives the impression that the French had knowledge of Wellington's headquarters that few if any ever did, and casts unnecessary queries over the date of some of the sources. I draw attention to this because in other places, old terminology has been retained. For the French and Prussians usage of 'English' to describe Wellington's army has been retained, etc. Dawson also makes the risky decision to place a great emphasis on casualty returns in order to gauge how involved or effective a unit was in a given action. Is it fair either, to dismissively say the 3rd Netherlands Division alone defeated the imperial guard? Would it not be better to credit all rather than one? But perhaps in an earlier book Mr. Dawson has relegated the Guards and 52nd Foot to the graveyard of apocryphal history but this illustrates how the author has a slight tendency to oversimplify when he feels he is indelibly correct.

The admittedly sober and scholarly treatment of the subject lends itself well to the presentation of a case that the author at once declares proven and in another place warns to be subject to the vicissitude of new evidence. His rigid insistence on believing only the documents written in 1815 as opposed to even those written two or three years afterwards, which he labels contaminated by 'false memory' means that gaps appear that must be filled by conjecture, albeit educated conjecture. Nevertheless, the tangled explanations of who did what, where, when, and why, perhaps, will seem thin and bordering on illogical to some, even if in being so, certain events become more messy and human than simple, neat and clean.

*The Battle for Paris 1815* is a valuable and original addition to Waterloo publishing, plugging a gap not often filled, even if its findings, for some, will be as perplexing as they are persuasive.

Reviewed by [Josh Provan](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: January 2020