



# Wellington's Hidden Heroes: The Dutch and the Belgians at Waterloo

*Veronica Baker-Smith*

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The Duke of Wellington described the Battle of Waterloo as “the most desperate business I ever was in . . . I was never so near being beat.” The courage of British troops that day has been rightly praised ever since, but the fact that one-third of the forces which gave him his narrow victory were subjects, not of George III but of the King of the Netherlands has been almost completely ignored. This book seeks to correct a grave injustice through the study of Dutch sources, the majority of which have never been used by English-speaking historians.

The Dutch-Belgians have been variously described as inexperienced, incompetent and cowardly, a rogue element in the otherwise disciplined Allied Army. It is only now being tentatively acknowledged that they alone saved Wellington from disaster at Quatre Bras. He had committed a strategic error in that, as Napoleon advanced, his own troops were scattered over a hundred kilometers of southern Belgium. Outnumbered three to one, the Netherlanders gave him time to concentrate his forces and save Brussels from French occupation. At Waterloo itself, on at least three occasions when the fate of the battle “hung upon the cusp,” their engagement with the enemy aided British recovery. Their commander—the Prince of Orange—has been viciously described as an arrogant fool, “a disaster waiting to happen” and even a dangerous lunatic. According to the assessment of Wellington himself, he was a reliable and courageous subordinate.

This book reveals a new dimension of the famous campaign, and includes many unseen illustrations. For the first time, a full assessment is made of the challenge which Willem I faced as king of a country hastily cobbled together by the Congress of Vienna, and of his achievement in assembling, equipping and training 30,000 men from scratch in 18 months. During this 200th anniversary year of the Battle of Waterloo, the veneration which the Duke of Wellington justifiably enjoyed after the campaign should not be allowed to overshadow his lifelong lack of recognition of the debt he owed the Netherlanders. As he once said himself, “there should be glory enough for all,” and in these pages some of his most vital allies are finally allowed to claim their share.

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