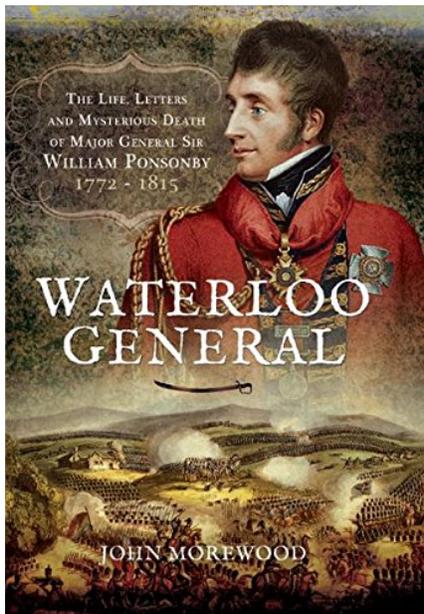


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Morewood, John. *Waterloo General: The Life, Letters and Mysterious Death of Major General Sir William Ponsonby 1772 – 1815*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2016. 267 pages. Hardcover. ISBN# 9781473868045. \$44.95/£25.



The year 2015 brought to market an abundance of books concerning Waterloo. Whilst many concern themselves with a re-telling of the battle or the campaign, there has also been a refreshing selection of books that have focused upon an individual, a formation, or a forensic study of a portion of the action of the great day, or combinations thereof. To wit, Glover with Clinton's 2nd Division, Haythornthwaite with Picton's 5th Division, Sale's defeat of La Garde, Baker-Smith's analysis of the Netherlanders. Pleasingly, this book straddles all three interest groups – the personality, Sir William Ponsonby; the formation, his Union Brigade; and the action- his famous charge and repulse of d'Erlon's I Corps.

Sir John Fortescue was no fan of Wellington's cavalry commanders, rightly or wrongly, but had this to say in summary of the Duke's cavalry brigadiers:

The Germans Bock and Arentschildt were probably the best and next after them William Ponsonby, Le Marchant and Vivian.

All of which suggests that this work was long overdue.

William Ponsonby was born in Ireland, of Anglo-Irish nobility, a couple of years younger than Arthur Wellesley. Early chapters describe his joining the 5th Dragoon Guards and, along with his great friend Denis Pack, suppressing the 1798 rebellion in his home country, during part of which William and his squadron formed Cornwallis' bodyguard. In 1811 William set sail for the Peninsula with his 5th Dragoon Guards. Their most notable feat was participating in Le Marchant's famous charge at Salamanca, after which William succeeded to the command of the late Le Marchant's brigade, although subsequent campaigns at Vitoria and in the Pyrenees provided few opportunities for action.

Throughout there is a nice balance between the martial and the domestic, including excerpts from William's letters home. His family was a mixed bag. His father died with a large estate, but leaving his heirs heavily in debt. William's older brother John was

wastrel, and banished overseas; younger brother Richard was a bishop; brother George a Member of Parliament; youngest brother Frederick a squire and responsible for the estates, which he eventually had to sell. Sister Mary Elizabeth married future Prime Minister Charles, Earl Grey, and first brewed the tea that now carries her husband's name!

John Morewood is a former editor of the Nelson Society and serves on the board of the Waterloo Association, for whom he provides lectures about the great battle. His deep knowledge of the subject is evident. The Waterloo campaign occupies roughly the second half of the book and includes Sir William's preparations for the campaign, the brief interlude of peace in Belgium, and the movements of his brigade on 15 and 16 June 1815. An entire chapter is devoted to the cavalry actions of 17 June; and then follows the 'forensic' part of the book, a detailed account of what happened in those twenty mad minutes when Ponsonby's three regiments destroyed d'Erlon's divisions. If ever there was an example of timing and surprise beating brute force, this was it – his 1,200 troopers decimating Donzelot's and Marcognet's divisions, and parts of two other divisions also. In these pages, we learn answers to: did other allied cavalry attack d'Erlon's columns before Ponsonby? Were the Scots Greys meant to be held in reserve? Did all, or only part of the brigade attack the Great Battery? And most interestingly, on the balance of probability, just how did Sir William die? (A clue here - the film got it wrong).

Wellington was sufficiently moved by the news of Ponsonby's death to add a postscript to his after-battle report to Lord Bathurst; 'I have to add the expression of my grief for the fate of an officer who has already rendered very brilliant and important services and who was an ornament to his profession.' This, from a man who doled out praise sparingly. Sadly, Sir William died leaving a wife and three infant daughters. A son, William was born on 6 February 1816, some seven months after his father's death.

Waterloo General is a fine addition to any Napoleonic, or indeed military book collection. It showcases a sensitive, gentlemanly figure who, denied many chances to show his talents in the Peninsula, found his true *métier* and paid the ultimate price on 18 June 1815.

Reviewed by [Steve Brown](#)

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