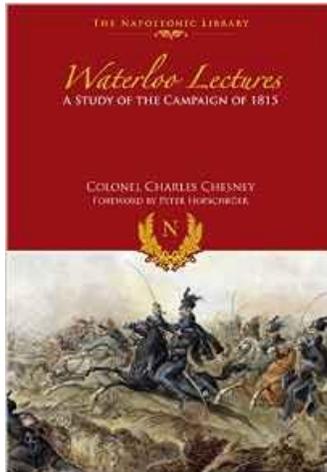


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Chesney, Charles. *Waterloo Lectures: a Study of the Campaign of 1815*. Barnsley: Frontline, 2015. 279 pages. £25 / \$40 ISBN: 9781848328334



The late 1850s and 1860s saw a renaissance in the study of not only Napoleonic history, but the Waterloo Campaign in particular. These include Alexis Brialmont's *Histoire du Duc de Wellington*, George Hooper's *Waterloo, the Downfall of the First Napoleon*, Jean Charras' *Campagne de 1815*, Edgar Quinet's *Histoire de la campagne de 1815*, and Adolphe Thiers' *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire*. Among the last to be published was Charles Chesney's *Waterloo Lectures*.

Charles Chesney was a colonel in the British Army Royal Engineers and a professor of military history at Sandhurst and the Imperial War College at time he wrote *Waterloo Lectures* in 1868. He may have been the greatest military historian of his time. His purpose in writing the book was to write a factual history of the campaign that would be devoid as possible of only giving one nation's perspective. His intention was to use all sources, including British, French, Dutch, and German to examine the Campaign. Furthermore he believed that

“Military History, if aspiring to be anything higher than the bare record of warlike transactions, must be accompanied by intelligent criticism. Of the limits of such criticism it is proposed to speak hereafter. At present our first duty is to consider what is the just and safe foundation on which both narrative and comment should rest; how, in short, we are to verify the facts on which we propose to build our theories. For surely without historic truth to light us through the past, it is vain to form judgments on it, or to seek to deduce lessons for the future.”<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Chesney felt that national pride in previous histories, including those written in the previous ten years, colored the facts, because many of the authors wrote as if either Wellington or Napoleon were infallible. While the French thought Napoleon's defeat was caused by the errors of his subordinates or the luck of his enemies, the British believed their army was the one who won Waterloo, with only minor contributions from the Prussians and other nationalities. Colonel Chesney strove to be above such things. He wrote

“We shall have in these pages to deal much with the military literature of a great neighbouring nation, whose writers sin above all others in the matter of their national defeats and victories. It is not intended, however, to assume that our

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<sup>1</sup> Page 1

own are blameless. The popular English version of that great battle which gives its name to the campaign of 1814 is hardly less a romance than the famous Waterloo chapter in Victor Hugo's 'Les Misérables,' over which our critics have with good reason made merry."<sup>2</sup>

Although the book is titled *Waterloo Lectures* they were never given as a formal lecture in the traditional sense. . . where a professor is giving a talk to an audience. Although the book was written while he was a professor, it was not published until after he left Sandhurst and the Imperial War College. It is divided into seven "lectures" and each has a similar format. He provides an overview of the topic, using specific events surrounding that topic, and provides a review of what many of the other historians thought happened, how their presentation and interpretations of the events were correct or in many cases overly influenced by their nationalistic perspective, and then combines their research to produce what he believed was an accurate summary of what happened. The seven lectures are

Lecture 1: Introduction and a critical review of the literature at the time. Here he looks at the strengths and weaknesses of many of the books listed above. Interestingly he does not praise any author for getting it all right nor condemn any for the mistakes they make. He just called it as he saw it.

Lecture 2: Covers the preparations of the national armies involved in the campaign: the number of troops available, their dispositions in the month before the campaign began and why they were where they were, the quality and experience of the troops, plus the strength and weaknesses of the leaders.

Lecture 3: Looks at the events of 15 June. The movements of the French, how the Prussians and the British received the news and reacted or not reacted to it.

Lecture 4: Examines how the battles of Quatre Bras and Ligny came about, the success and failure of all three commanders (Napoleon, Wellington, and Blücher) to fully appreciate and understand the full scope of what was going on, the poor staff work that prevented Napoleon from destroying the Prussians at Ligny or overwhelming the British and Dutch at Quatre Bras.

Lecture 5: Is about the retreat of Wellington's and Blücher's Armies on 17 June and the decisions made by Napoleon on which to follow with the main army and which to follow the other with a smaller force to contain it.

Lecture 6: Covers the battle of Waterloo and the pursuit of the Prussians by Marshal Grouchy. Not surprisingly, this is the longest lecture. Much of it is about the battle, but there is considerable discussion on what Marshal Grouchy was doing and the impact of his following his orders to pursue the Prussians instead of marching to the guns.

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<sup>2</sup> Page 3

Lecture 7: The final lecture covers the retreat of Grouchy back to France, plus a discussion of Napoleon's observations on the campaign. These observations tend to be criticism of everyone's conduct during the campaign and not a reflection of his own role in the disaster. Colonel Chesney takes Napoleon to task about his blame-casting and points out where he was wrong in many of the observations. He concludes with a short summary of the campaign and notes

“The Strategy to which Napoleon had looked to atone, as in his early glories, for inferiority of numbers, fails him utterly in face of the firm compact and mutual trust of Wellington and Blücher. The sword to which he loved to appeal is stricken from his grasp for ever. Henceforth a lonely exile, he lives only to brood over his mighty past, to paint his mistakes as calamities, his fall as the work of others; consoled, it may be, by a vision of the day when a meretricious romance, based on his own figments, shall be accepted by the French for their national history.”<sup>3</sup>

*Waterloo Lectures* is not a tactical study of the Waterloo Campaign. It will not provide you with detail information on how regiments were deployed or fought. Instead it looks at the strategy and grand tactics of the three army commanders. It examines Napoleon's goal of defeating Wellington's and Blücher's Armies before they could unite and become too powerful to beat. Colonel Chesney also looks at the Allies and their strategic goals and the problems they had. He discusses in a good amount of detail of what all the commanders did right and the mistakes they made. He concludes the book with a summary of why Napoleon failed.

*Waterloo Lectures* is a balanced study of the Waterloo Campaign. The author did achieve his stated goal of looking at all the information on the events to determine why they unfolded the way they did. He tried to be fair and assigned blame where it belonged. He criticized Wellington where it was warranted and was harsh on Blücher at times. However there was still a bit of anti-Napoleon bias in his writing. That being said, the book was ground-breaking for its time and although it has been almost 150 years since it was written, it is still a very thought provoking read on the Waterloo Campaign. It is well worth the money!

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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<sup>3</sup> Pages 250 - 251