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Historia pública, patrimonio del conflicto y museos

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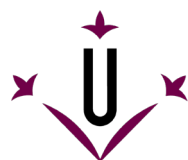
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**Public history of Waterloo's Battle
Bicentenary, June 18-21, 2015**

Historia pública del bicentenario de la batalla
de Waterloo, 18-21 de junio de 2015

SERGE NOIRET

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Public history of Waterloo's Battle Bicentenary, June 18-21, 2015

Historia pública del bicentenario de la batalla
de Waterloo, 18-21 de junio de 2015

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ABSTRACT: This paper comes from a personal experience during the Bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo, 18th-21st of June 2015. It aims to illustrate the different meanings behind an international commemoration. It looks at how a battlefield landscape became a historical heritage park between public history practices and the commercial necessities of tourism of the past. It describes the different phases of the reenactment that took place on the battlefield, qualifies the historical mutable meanings of the collective memories of the battle, and how the Bicentenary moulded a new European oriented interpretation of the battle during the commemoration. It looks also more specifically at different ways the United Kingdom and France interpreted the Bicentenary.

KEYWORDS: Battle of Waterloo, reenactment, landscape, public history, war, cultural tourism

RESUMEN: Este ensayo parte de la experiencia personal durante el Bicentenario de la Batalla de Waterloo, del 18 al 21 de junio de 2015. Su objetivo es ilustrar algunos de los diferentes significados detrás de una conmemoración internacional de ese tamaño. Observa cómo un paisaje de campo de batalla se convirtió en un parque de patrimonio histórico entre las prácticas de historia pública y las necesidades comerciales de un turismo del pasado. Describe las diferentes fases de la recreación que tuvo lugar en el campo de batalla, califica los significados históricos mutables de las memorias colectivas de la batalla y cómo el Bicentenario moldeó una nueva interpretación europea de la batalla durante la conmemoración. También analiza de manera más específica las diferentes formas en que el Reino Unido y Francia interpretaron el Bicentenario.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Batalla de Waterloo, recreación, paisaje, historia pública, guerra, turismo cultural

Last year [1861], on a beautiful May morning, a traveller, the person who is telling this story, was coming from Nivelles and directing his course towards La Hulpe. [...]

The wayfarer bent over and examined a rather large circular excavation, resembling the hollow of a sphere, in the stone on the left, at the foot of the pier of the door.

At this moment the leaves of the door parted, and a peasant woman emerged.

She saw the wayfarer and perceived what he was looking at.

«*It was a French cannon-ball which made that,*» she said to him. [...]

«*What is the name of this place?*» inquired the wayfarer.

«*Hougomont,*» said the peasant woman.

The traveller straightened himself up. He walked on a few paces and went off to look over the tops of the hedges. On the horizon through the trees, he perceived a sort of little elevation, and on this elevation something which at that distance resembled a lion.

He was on the battlefield of Waterloo. (Hugo, 1887)

INTRODUCTION: WATERLOO IS NOT A «MORNE PLAINE»¹

My family lives in Waterloo and who stays in this little town, South of Brussels, cannot ignore the battlefield park and its heritage, the museums, and the many memorials commemorating and explaining the battle. Therefore, this paper starts from a personal experience during the Bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo, from the 18th of June -the day of the battle in 1815-, to the 21st of June 2015. Like thousands of other people, I assisted in the Bicentenary commemoration and took many pictures. Some of them were published accompanying a debate on the bicentenary that same year in the *Belgian Journal of Contemporary History*. I always wanted to come back to what happened on the battlefield landscape during the Bicentenary commemoration from a personal perspective.

Four issues will be discussed in this paper: firstly, we will engage with the public history practice of reenactment and with the role of reenactors. Secondly, we will describe the commercialization of a complex public event and the international tourism of the past

¹ I reuse here the efficient title of an essay by Philippe Raxhon (2015).

surrounding the reenactment. The third important aspect focuses on the impact an international commemoration such as this one had in former belligerent countries, and on the mutable meanings of collective memories about the battle in Europe today, especially in the United Kingdom and France. The Bicentenary moulded a new European oriented interpretation of the battle through the commemoration. This third part is based on a choice between dozen newspaper articles published in 2015, and on the critical approach by professional historians, after the bicentenary took place. The fourth and last aspect deals with the historical heritage of the battlefield landscape and monuments. For today's Waterloo, the bicentenary was of course about a complex organization of three days of public history cultural events, but it was more about a long-term vision in which the refurbishment, conservation, and promotion of the whole historical heritage park of the battlefield were at stake. A worldwide, very popular public history practice like the reenactment of the different phases of the battle by thousands of reenactors who came from all over Europe, has been only one ephemeral event. The Lion Mound, the new Memorial 1815, the restored Hougomont farm, and the many historical walks that are contextualized inside the battlefield park itself, are to stay and foster a cultural economy based on very popular tourism of the past (Petraroia, 2020).²

For many years now, Belgium and its different regions, have built an economy based on its battlefield's landscapes, the many decisive battles that happened on this territory during the last two centuries and two World Wars, from Waterloo to the Flanders Fields (1916-1917) and the Battle of the Bulge (1944) (Lauwers, 2011).

REENACTMENTS, REENACTORS AND AN EMOTIONAL PUBLIC HISTORY PRACTICE

During the whole year, in the area of the battlefield landscape, situated in the territories of four communes, Braine l'Alleud, Genappe, Lasne and Waterloo, in the Walloon province of Brabant, it is not rare to encounter groups of historical reenactors (figure 1). Why is that so? Waterloo's battlefield landscape is each two years the theatre of a reenactment and reenactors that come from all over Europe to reconstruct some battle episodes. If reenactments focus often on military pasts and battlefields, they also, reenact ways of living in different epochs like in ancient and medieval times or during a military campaign like the last Emperor's campaign in Belgium. Historical reenactors are amateur hobbyists and history enthusiasts, sometimes though, historians partic-

² On these issues of the economic value of heritage and tourism of the past, it would be important to read the many essays in Italian and English recently published in a special issue by the open-access journal *Il Capitale Culturale, studies on the value of cultural heritage* (2020).



ipate as consultants or even reenactors. They dedicate all their leisure time and a conspicuous budget, to recreate specific uniforms and equipment. They are often members of local historical associations that focus on a specific historical event and its different aspects. They also carefully replay the movements of the troops on the ground at the exact moment of the day it happened. These serious reenactors also called «hardcore reenactors», who want to get as close as possible to reproducing costumes and objects for a better journey to the past. The American journalist Jack Horwitz, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Confederate in the Attic. Dispatches from the unfinished Civil war*, written during a whole year he lived with hardcore reenactors of the Civil War, (Horwitz, 2000, p.7) defined historical reenactments as «an educational or entertainment activity in which people follow a plan to recreate aspects of a historical event or period. This may be as narrow as a specific moment from a battle».

A reenactment is a popular event part of what Raphael Samuel called *resurrectionism* a word that summarizes how different cultural activities and popular interests revisit all pasts from ancient history to nowadays, and how they are tackled in the present within local and national communities (Samuel, 1994). Histori-

Figure 1. A group of reenactors exercising during the year near the battlefield.

cal reenactments are therefore important *glocal* practices in the field of Public History, (Cauvin & Noiret, 2017). All countries are involved in remembering their pasts in such popular way. Public History as a discipline includes the traditional methods of historians described by Leopold Von Ranke in the 19th century and by Marc Bloch closer to us, adding new fieldwork practices, new technology and communication skills, and the capacity to work with and for different publics in applied history projects. The discipline differs also from historiography, an individual academic practice, because of activities that deal with collective memories and cultural heritage in society.

Recreating the past is one of these public history practices, which nevertheless raise enormous epistemological, ethical and methodological questions (Agnew, 2007; Gapps, 2009, Radtchenko, 2006, Salvatori, 2017) but are nevertheless legitimate and authentic forms of living history used for communicating the past to ourselves as reenactors and to who's watching a reenactment. Reviving and reconstructing battle's history also became a constant in the work of the Public Historians alongside the reenactors. A reenactment raises many questions about the responsibility of the Public Historians as consultants in these reconstructions and on the veracity of the story thus recreated and represented by costumed actors. «Reconstructing history» in public poses problems of historical accuracy and truthfulness, an essential deontological element for those who look at Public History as a widespread critical and scientific service for the reconstruction of the past with and for different communities. Because «reenactors» are not only amateurs in costume, they receive a technical preparation often connected to the world of «heritage tourism». In the USA, especially for black populations, a significant job market has been created because of the maintenance of historic parks and more likely, «battlefields parks». The reenactors maintain a balance between the recreational parts aimed at satisfying a wider audience and the more sophisticated and complex parts of the interpretation of an event by the «Public Historian». Using the attraction of the public for battles to offer more elaborate interpretations of history in historical parks and battlefield landscapes also provides useful opportunities for comparing discordant memories of the past.

Sometimes public historians are themselves, reenactors, to revive the past. An international association like Bridging Ages (2020) uses the participation of amateurs and historians for reenactment as a pedagogical experiment called *Time Travel*. A public historian as a reenactor must ask himself about the limits, partiality and validity of his reconstruction.



Figure 2. Czech reenactors of the Imperial Guard.

Reenactments are today an important form of entertainment in many countries. Reenactors «play» when they have free leisure time. As Dan Henry Andersen, an early modern historian now-famous fiction writer in Denmark wrote,

it is very easy to enumerate the imperfection of historical [...] reenactments, the historical mistakes, the unavoidable lack of authenticity, the attempts to rebuild identities in a changing and unpredictable world, etc. But for participants' viewpoint, these activities are powerful tools for [...] understanding and feeling the past with your whole body and being. (Andersen, 2011, paragraph 44)

Napoleon's battles are reenacted across Europe (Forrest 2015, 2017). During June 2015 bicentenary, some of Napoleon's Imperial Guard soldiers, who were «hardcore» reenactors came from Czech Republic (figure 2). They told me about their interest in reenacting Napoleon's battles and their travels to join other reenactors in Europe's Napoleon battlefields. Reenactments are their most serious and passionate hobby. They started dedicating their leisure time to Napoleon's Empire history when they reenacted for the first time the battle of Austerlitz, the greatest Napoleon's Victory on December 2, 1805, in today's Czech Republic.

For these Czech reenactors —not for the spectators— a reenactment becomes a full mental and physical immersion in «History».

Therefore, a historian of emotions like Ute Frevert (Frevert, 2011a) notes that reenactments are less about the complexity of history and much more about fantasies and sentiments. She focused on reenactments because they foster important emotional participation in who is involved (Verschaffel, 2015). Frevert (2011b) attended the reenactment of the Gettysburg battle of 1863 in Germany near Berlin. Many US civil war soldiers were Germans, like many Napoleonic reenactors are located everywhere in Europe.

Reenactments like the bicentenary of the battle of Waterloo are also very important event promoting popular tourism of history, a more and more frequently used formula to promote the past in Public History activities. Living history events reconstruct history and challenge the imagination of who is the spectator and who engage directly in the reenactment. In the case of Waterloo, it made the city known everywhere and attracted not only local tourism of the past but also many international visitors and reenactors.

THE REENACTMENT OF THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO: COMMERCIAL TOURISM OF THE PAST?

The battlefield area was at the centre of huge touristic planning involving public and private players (figure 3). For years now, tourists come from all over the world (Raxhon, 2013) and the Waterloo battlefield landscape has become a very important commercial attraction, first for the commune of Braine l'Alleud, then for all the communes, which have territories inside the historical battlefield, more recently for the Belgian Walloon region and Walloon Brabant province. Because of these growing interests, a website launched by the commune of Braine l'Alleud in 1996³ has been completely revised given the bicentenary events with a new domain name www.waterloo1815.be (Champ de Bataille de Waterloo, n.d.; Mémorial Waterloo 1815, n.d.)⁴. This domain is not any more accessible today because it was the website of the memorial of the battle in 2015; it offered all information about monuments, memorials and army headquarters present on the battlefield area together with all the details for booking tickets for the three days of evening events.

From the 18th to 21 June 2015, more than 5,000 uniformed re-enactors, 1,500 aides, 250 civilians in period costumes and 300 horses recreated the Battle and its context. They have never been so many re-enactors in previous Waterloo re-enactments. The event outspread across a huge area, equivalent to 22 football pitches. For the first time the four main protagonists –Napoleon, the Duke

³ The website was created by the commune of Braine l'Alleud for publicizing the Lion Mound and the Panorama. A copy of 1997 with access in four languages, French, Dutch, English and German, is available in ([Archive.org](http://archive.org), 1997).

⁴ Today the website serves the Memorial and all the historical park at <http://waterloo2015.be>



of Wellington, the Prince of Orange and Field Marshal Blücher—were represented (figure 4). Another major first in the 2015 bicentenary reenactment was the presence of the Scottish Dragoons Regiment, the Scots Greys, that ventured out of Great Britain for the first time.

The commemoration of the bicentenary was divided into four events. A theatre piece called *Inferno*, a screenplay by Luc Petit was the opening show, on the first evening of 18 June 2015, the day of the battle. It was a poetic interpretation of the battle in twelve different scenes that used the poems of Victor Hugo. All evenings were sold-out, and the public success was amazing with more than 45.000 people attending the two days of reenactment.

Reenactors were also living during the day in bivouacs and encampments that were open to public visits of course paying a ticket. In these bivouacs, it was possible to understand the daily life of the soldiers and who was following the troops (figure 5). Reenacted there, was the way of living, eating, training, cleaning weapons, preparing for the battle and being rescued when wounded.

The first day of the battle reenactment was dedicated to the French offensive, the engagement with Dutch and Belgian troops entrenched and the attack at the English troops in Mont-Saint-Jean. The second day, the Allies counterattacked, and the focus

Figure 3. An image of the entrance of the reenactors on the battlefield and the Northern tribunes during the second day of the reenactment, the French offensive.



Figure 4. Waterloo 2015
Reenactment Manifesto.

was on the Hougoumont farm defence by the British Guards until the final offensive by the Imperial Guard.

However, the whole bicentenary was boosted and had been conceived as an enormous commercial event that offered a lot of gadgets, games, printed books, reproduction of historical documents and other sources, and even comics in English and French about the battle (TemPoe & Mor, 2015). Not to forget the miniature soldiers that were sold inside the Memorial with dozens of different objects, like keychains, statues of the Emperor, mugs, bottle openers, tablecloths, aprons, beers, perfumes, guns, old coins and commemorative medals, etc. (figure 6). Being in Belgium, goodies like «pralines» had to be part of the Bicentenary. The prospect of the commemoration gave ideas to a couple of Waterlooters, proud of



Figure 5. The German Legion, reenactors during the Bicentenary, June 2015.



Figure 6. Waterloo beer.

their last name and eager to mark the event originally. Sarah and Manu *Bataille* created pralines, which they called «*The balls of the battle of Waterloo*» (Peel, 2015).

Even the live streaming of the show *Inferno* and the two days of reenactments were sold: «No ticket for the Bicentenary? No panic! Watch the re-enactment of the Battle at home through our live stream» transmitted through four 4 HD cameras that captured the action on the Battlefield similarly to what on-site spectators saw. Even residents outside of Belgium were able to follow the live streaming of the first re-enactment 'The French Attack' on Friday, June 19, 2015, and on Saturday, June 20, 2015, the 2nd re-enactment 'The Allied Counter-Attack' was broadcasted live worldwide. So-called «experts» were commenting live in English and French for a cost of at least 7,50€ in pre-order.

Belgium wanted to stamp a 2 euros' coin for the bicentenary and commemoration of the Battle of Waterloo. After France objected officially to the coin, Belgium invoked a little-known European Union rule that allowed it to issue money anyway. But they printed a 2,5€ coin instead. This episode became serious because the EU countries were trying to reinforce the Eurozone at that time and the French said they still looked at the battle as a negative symbol of their national history in which more than 55.000 soldiers died (Bilefsky, 2015, Fayoumi, 2015), a nationalistic interpretation of the ceremony analyzed in the next chapter.

In June 2015, many European and international televisions transmitted the docufiction by the Belgian filmmaker Hugues Lanneau, *Waterloo, the last battle* (Lanneau, 2014). In Great Britain and Italy it was broadcast on the exact dates of the bicentenary⁵. For the bicentenary, Lanneau (has been interviewed in French), and he insisted on the fact that his movie wanted to avoid the entire romantic gaze that had surrounded the battle during the last two hundred years: «nobody is aware today of the butchery that took place during this day». His movie was tentative to realistically show the horrors of the battlefield and to dismantle the heroic image that Napoleon built of himself already during his reign, controlling all the newspapers. Such a positive myth of the Emperor lasted long after the defeat in Waterloo. His memoirs written in Sainte Hélène rewrote the events of the battles for his own sake and forged the myth that developed during the 19th century of the glorious defeat of Waterloo. Lanneau consulted historians and reenactors to gather their opinion and comments about the historical veracity of his movie (Bousmar, 2014).⁶ Produced by Willy Perelsztejn and filmed on-site in 2010 as a CGI-rich re-enactment of the battle, the movie has also been available on ARTE television's channel. «The Belgian production follows the battle ... by tracing the actions of actual documented participants, from generals to foot soldiers who fought there on both sides. [...]» (Oseid, 2015, paragraph 5).

Social media invested in the bicentenary. There was a Facebook account for Lanneau's docu-fiction and an official British Twitter account feed for the bicentenary (Age of Revolution, n.d.). Used hashtags were #Waterloo1815, #Waterloo200 and #W200Items. On Facebook, an online game was available called «play the heart of the story and become a hero of the battle of Waterloo!» (Waterloo: The Game, n.d.). Once installed, you could become a general and guide your regiments towards the battlefield. Every hour, infantry, cavalry and artillery were reinforced: each battle won would earn an increase in regiments. All players on the same side were fighting in a collaborative effort.

⁵ RTBF (Belgium) – Wednesday 10 June 2015; ORF (Austria) - 12 June 2015; ARTE Saturday 13 June 2015; TV5 QUEBEC (Canada) 15 June 2015; FOXTEL (Australia) 17 June 2015; DISCOVERY (United Kingdom) the day of the battle, 18 June 2015 like RAI Storia (Italy); SVT (Sweden) and VRT (Belgium) the Flemish television; WDR-ARD (Germany) on the 19 June 2015; TVP (Poland), 22 June 2015 like SMITHSONIAN (USA and francophone Canada) and CESKA TV (Czech Republic).

⁶ Comments on the film were positive especially because of this vision «from below», storytelling, which took care of the soldier experience and the violence of the battle.

All social media for the project Waterloo 200 were listed and described in the official UK website for the bicentenary, which disappeared today. *Waterloo 200* had several chapters for explaining the battle, its historical context and the many events and commemorations that took place for the Bicentenary, a timeline and a curious and fascinating gallery of 200 objects from all around Europe's museums and characterizing the battle and its protagonists.⁷

The Bicentenary organization official Twitter Account was also launched at Waterloo2015_BE (Waterloo 2015, n.d.), and another British Twitter account @BattleWaterloo was part of the *History press* dossier on the Bicentenary.⁸ The Twitter account had in the headband, a detail of a painting that illustrates the crucial moment of the battle for the Hougoumont farm when the French entered the farm. Hougoumont had been restored in May 2015. It was a strong point in the British defensive lines. It resisted for nearly nine hours of continuous fighting. The nearest the French came to capture the chateau was breaking through the North gate but the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Macdonell, and his Guardsmen managed to shut the gate. Thirty Frenchmen were trapped and killed inside the court. Only a young drummer boy aged fourteenth was spared (The History Press, n.d.).

Even a Twitter account was created for interacting with the public and chatting directly with the Duke of Wellington (Duke of Wellington, n.d.). Also, Facebook hosted diaries of single soldiers based on official documents and sources like the diary of a French soldier of the Imperial Guard, Victor Lamentin:

born April 3, 1792, I fought under the orders of Napoleon during the German campaign in 1813. [...] Today, I am part of the Old Imperial Guard, I am a quartermaster sergeant. [...] For now, I must defend my country, its values, its people. (Victor Lamentin, n.d.).

Or the Facebook page of Jules De Coq, a Belgian soldier enrolled in 1814 in Wellington's army. Decoq was born on August 4, 1783, in Charleroi.

In 1807, I pledged to serve Emperor Napoleon. I took part in the Russian campaign of 1812. Two years later, following Napoleon's abdication, I decided to return home... In 1814, I enlisted as a soldier in General Wellington's army. I think I made the right choice. (Jules Decoq, n.d.).

⁷ «We've selected 200 historical objects from museums and private collections across Europe. Each tells a fascinating story of the Battle of Waterloo and its time. More objects added every week!» (Waterloo 200, a defining moment in history, 2014).

⁸ Here are the chapters dealt with in the website: «Battling with Waterloo?»; Read our frequently asked questions here; Historical background and context of Waterloo; Profiles of leaders; Our expert Napoleonic authors; The armies at Waterloo; Follow @BattleWaterloo on Twitter here; Glossary of terms; Commemoration of Waterloo» (The History Press, 2020).

THE BICENTENARY OF THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO: WHO'S COMMEMORATION?

«The Bicentenary of Waterloo is perhaps the last act of the Bicentenary of the French Revolution» explains the Belgian historian Philippe Raxhon, in a special issue of the *Belgian Journal of Contemporary History*, debating the bicentenary events at the end of 2015 (Raxhon 2015). For the British historian of the French Revolution and Empire, Alan Forrest, public ceremonies in many European states were huge and important budgets were invested commemorating the bicentenary. In doing this many nations celebrated their history together with a nostalgic memory of Napoleon (Forrest, 2017).

What has been discussed around the bicentenary was not only the role of historians confronted to commemorations and reenactments but also more widely, the role of history and memory in the process of building collective memory—or different collective memories—during the Bicentenary of the battle of Waterloo. And what the reenactment of June 18-21, 2015 made clear, is that national collective memories were not identical everywhere. They were developed during the 19th century and have changed over time until today.

Forrest asked himself whether the bicentenary had been a celebration or a commemoration of what happened during the last bloody battle that the French and Britons fought against each other. The bicentenary had been a European oriented pacific commemoration with an evident supranational goal, notwithstanding this global aim, Forrest stated that for each of the nations which participated in the battle the following:

Waterloo had a different resonance [...] French memory was dominated by two images—the last stand of the Imperial Guard and the (doubtless apocryphal) mot de Cambronne— which turned Waterloo into the very epitome of a glorious defeat, and which would, for a romantic age, help to stoke a growing cult of Napoleon. If his military ambitions had ended in calamity, for him and his country, many would argue that it was Napoleon who won the battle for history (Forrest, 2015, p. 245).

France participated in the 2005 bicentenary reenactment of the Trafalgar maritime battle with its ships even if this event had been organized by Britain to celebrate the very popular figure of Admiral Nelson. However, ten years later, France remained si-

lent about the bicentenary which was not willing to commemorate. Still today, Waterloo remains a '*morne plaine*' for France, the definition coined by Victor Hugo. Napoleon was defeated at the battle of Waterloo but his immense shadow and his symbol, the eagle, still haunt the battlefield and a nostalgic vision of the French past.

For the Belgian specialist of the battle, Eric Bousmar,

France's attitude is marked by official positions of rejection, which are reminiscent of the attitude of President de Gaulle in 1965. This rejection is based on an obvious confusion between the idea of commemoration and that of celebration. The Prime Minister says he has better things to do than mourn over defeat (Bousmar, 2015a, p. 262).⁹

⁹ My English translation.

Collective memory had been controlled by the Allies after the battle, in the 19th and 20th centuries. On the contrary, in Belgium and France, the «*défaite glorieuse*» became the new normal. Only with the millennium and the preparation of the bicentenary, it became clear that the commemoration would foster a peaceful recognition of the European wide friendship between old belligerents. More than a politician, Napoleon was a warrior who exported the values of the French revolution conquering territories and making alliances (Mascilli Migliorini, 2020). It is the warrior, the conqueror that the French collective memory still remembers today. He was -and remains- a national hero in France and a violent conqueror that challenged the peace in the continent after the conference of Vienna in 1814 for the rest of Europe. For most of Europe, Napoleon was a permanent threat. Patrick Boucheron's *l'Histoire Mondiale de la France* avoided to include a chapter on Waterloo and the defeat of Napoleon, maybe one of the most important examples of international relevance of a French decisive historical event (Boucheron, 2017). Besides, this missing chapter becomes instead deference towards the positive myth of the Emperor.¹⁰ When asked about the «missing» chapter during a presentation of his book in Florence in November 2017, Boucheron avoided answering. Waterloo involves still today the positive myth and memory of whom, even defeated, has his statue at the *Hôtel des Invalides* in Paris.

Pierre Nora, who had very clearly in mind, writing his *Lieux de Mémoire*, that battlefield landscapes were also important *lieux de mémoire* as well as intangible cultural heritage places, has not dedicated a chapter to Waterloo's memory and the demise of the

¹⁰ Mentioned were instead the following chapters: 1804 Code Napoléon; 1804 Sacre de l'Empereur à Notre-Dame; 1808-1814: Napoléon en Espagne et retombées en Amérique; 1811 Apogée de l'Empire en Europe.

Emperor's army (Nora 1984-1986). French collective memory consolidated the idea that the defeat of Waterloo had been a «*glorieuse défaite*» maintaining the myth of Napoleon as being the great man of the battle.

In the UK instead, Wellington and the remembrance of his glorious victory in Waterloo such as in 2005 for Nelson's victory in Trafalgar, was still present in 2015. Many events and exhibitions were organized during the period of the bicentenary at the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and Windsor. The National Army Museum has an important amount of objects and documents concerning the battle of Waterloo, many paintings for example (The National Army Museum, n.d.). Part of its «Napoleonic» archives were digitized and the museum staff asked, «interested members of the public ... to contribute in helping to transcribe and tag the documents» for further public usage which was heavily requested (HeritageHelpers.do.uk, n.d.). This was a way to crowdsource the knowledge of volunteers and enlightened «amateurs» strongly wishing to participate in the commemoration, a practice often used today in cultural heritage institutions for engaging with their audience (Noiret, 2018). Museums and archives collected everywhere enthusiastic public participation because of the enormous interest in the UK for the life of soldiers who fought the battle. This was done more easily thanks to digital means, the usage of social media and complex web sites that allowed greater public access to the material. Although, even if today, five years after the Bicentenary, many of these web sites and projects are not any more accessible online and we have to look in the Internet Archive, to view what was conceived for the web during the Bicentenary.

In Belgium, the preparation of the celebration has been mostly a local activity with four Belgian communes involved. The Walloon region started already in 1950s with the refurbishment of the two headquarters, the Wellington Museum in 1954, and Napoleon's headquarter in the farm Le Caillou in 1951. Already in the '90 when the Brabant province was divided (1995), the new Walloon Brabant paved slowly the road to an international event for the commemoration of the bicentenary. (Bousmar, 2015a).

Their horizon was not local nor regional or national, rather the international perspective was taken care of. This was done also by looking at how the reenactment took place and how the local heritage on the landscape of the battle had been restored and preserved and because Belgians invited all belligerents for the reenactment that was attended by many high European authorities.



The peaceful connotation of the commemoration could not be clearer, write Bousmar. During the official ceremony, the descendants of the brother of Napoleon I, Prince Blücher, the Duke of Wellington and the Prince of Orange, in the presence of the King of Belgians, the Grand Duke of Luxembourg and the brother of the Queen of England, made a solemn gesture of concord and reconciliation. (Bousmar, 2015a, pp. 258-259).¹¹

Figure 7. Wall of Remembrance, Memorial 1815.

¹¹ My English translation.

A Wall of Remembrance has been erected in the new Memorial (figure 7): all military corps, regiments, units in the Allies and Napoléon's armies, and from all participant's countries, have their name engraved on metal plates situated in the main corridor driving to the underground entrance of the Memorial. Again, Forrest tells us that «the presentation in the museum deliberately eschews glorification. The visitor can witness the battle as the soldiers of the different armies experienced it There is no master narrative, whether Napoleonic or anti-Napoleonic» in the museum storytelling (Forest 2015, p. 246).

Unlike the centenary that occurred during WWI, the Bicentenary was commemorated in the context of an integrated Europe, with France and Germany leading the European Union (Lierneux *et al*, 2015). The ceremonies and events of the Bicentenary reflected a context in which the narrative was not focused on national differences and chauvinisms, but, rather, on the violent experience of the Battle of Waterloo suffered by thousands of men and women, who accompanied the armies. Moreover, the commemoration of the centenary of WWI and that of the Bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo fruitfully intersected in 2015, deepening the historical knowledge of both events and fostering a more profound European reflection concerning the state of collective memories in the 21st century. (Bousmar, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). The EU parliament fostered a policy of the past (Prutsch, 2013, 2017), aimed at consolidating the cohesion of European nations around some important element of their common history selected to become part of a European oriented collective memory (Noiret, 2017a, 2017b). During the bicentenary commemorations, all participants were exposed to such memories, irrespective of their nationality, launching a model of European wide storytelling that was later chosen by the *House of European History* museum, which opened two years later in 2017 (Dupont, 2020).

A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL HERITAGE: THE BATTLEFIELD LANDSCAPE AND LANDMARKS

During the last two centuries, and even more now because of a European wide cultural policy protecting cultural heritage and its economic value, started in 2005 with the *Framework Convention of the Council of Europe on the value of cultural heritage for society (Faro Convention)* (Sciacchitano, 2020), we can say that Waterloo, the name of the battlefield, became an important European site of memory which includes:

the landscape and the site as such, the various commemorative monuments erected on it, the various museum sites, the relics and memories disseminated, and finally the memory of the battle as a place of intangible memory (present in the imaginary through art, literature, politics, comics and cinema) (Bousmar 2015a, p. 275).

The bicentenary was a huge event that cost millions of euros. Public authorities and commercial firms dealing with all aspects



of the cultural tourism of the landscape of the battle and the events promoted for the bicentenary, disagreed many times and on everything, as the bicentenary was an enormous commercial initiative looking at an international public.

The battle's collective memory is all about the name of Waterloo. But the fighting took place also in other communes, like Braine l'Alleud, Lasne, or Genappe that are not part of any collective memories connected to the battle of Waterloo. Even if the battle happened mainly on Waterloo's territory with memorials and monuments dedicated to the Allies and the French soldiers, the Butte du Lion (Lion Mound), remain on the territory of the commune of Braine, like the Hougomont farm, the fortress that the British Guards never lost. Not to say about the new Memorial opened for the Bicentenary in 2015 (figure 8). Indeed, a conspicuous part of the battlefield landscape and material heritage is situated in Braine's territory. This fact raised numerous contentious between the many public and private actors when preparing the bicentenary. For example, the new Memorial, next to the old Panorama and the *Bute du Lion*, should have been called «*Memorial of the battle of Waterloo*», and not «*Memorial 1815*», «as if the site of

Figure 8. View of the Memorial and the Panorama of the Battle from the top of the Lion Mound.



Figure 9. Battlefield landscape from the Lion Mound.

memory had lost its place» stigmatizes Philippe Raxhon (2015, p. 277) who was part of the scientific committee of the Bicentenary: a site of memory cannot become a number only.

Another example of these disputes arose in 2013-2014 when the mayor of Braine opened official litigation against the publisher of the *Guides Verts Michelin* because of the name of a Guide that had to be published for the bicentenary. Historical tourism is also about a commercial promotion of territories and the commune of Braine wanted to have also its name better known publicly (Opens, 2015). The Guide Vert, «*La route Napoléon en Wallonie*», describes the Emperor's itinerary from Beaumont in France to his arrival on the battlefield of Waterloo in June 2015, not to Braine. The commune of Braine l'Alleud lost the trial in 2018 and the Guide *Napoleon's trail from Beaumont to Waterloo* (Raxhon 2015, p. 274) was finally made available three years after the Bicentenary, losing all its economic potential. The Foundation Napoléon, on its website, published an interactive map of the trail (Bruchard, 2020).

Cultural landscapes are by themselves places of memory (Agnolletti, 2013) and tourists of the past walked on battlefield landscapes. An illustrious visitor was Victor Hugo who walked

through the battlefield in 1861. Hugo tells us in *Les Misérables*, his storytelling of the battle, that some portions of the battlefield, especially where the Dutch troops, in their trenches, were hidden from the French lines, have been altered from their 1815 appearance. Hugo «knew better than anyone that nothing is less a plain than this battlefield», (Lents, 2015, p. 12). This happened in 1821 because of the Lion Mound by King William I of Holland's building. The Mound (figure 9), a giant artificial hill, with on top, a lion, had a precise signification, the monument pointed at France defeated and had to celebrate the Dutch victory. It was «constructed using 300,000 cubic meters [...] of earth taken from the ridge at the centre of the British line, effectively removing the southern bank of Wellington's sunken road» («Battle of Waterloo», 2020, *Battlefield Today*).¹² The monument emphasized the role played by the Prince Willem of Orange. It «was Holland's tribute to Willem, erected on the spot where, supposedly, he was wounded». (Forrest 2015, p. 245).

The battlefield landscapes remained unaltered since 1821. During the 19th century this cultural heritage and its landmarks started characterizing the complex memory of the battle and this happened, notwithstanding the construction of the Lion Mound. (Van Hoorebeeck 2014). Victor Hugo, visiting the battlefield in 1861 recognized the importance of such tangible and intangible heritage surrounding the landscape when he pointed at the few but important changes made because of the mound:

Everyone is aware that the variously inclined undulations of the plains, where the engagement between Napoleon and Wellington took place, are no longer what they were on June 18, 1815. By taking from this mournful field the wherewithal to make a monument to it, its real relief has been taken away, and history, disconcerted, no longer finds her bearings there. It has been disfigured for the sake of glorifying it. Wellington, when he beheld Waterloo once more, two years later, exclaimed, "They have altered my field of battle!" (Hugo, 1887, Chapter VI).

Wellington's line of defence was based on some fortified landmarks and farms like *la Haye Sainte*, a farm still owned by private citizens, *La Belle Alliance*, *Mont-Saint-Jean* and above all, *Hougoumont* inaugurated after an important restoration, the day of the reenactment. The battlefield is full of landmarks and commemorative monuments for all participants. The battlefield was only

¹² Wikipedia is, in our case, an important source of information and documents about the battle (Battle of Waterloo reenactment, 2020; List of Waterloo Battlefield locations, 2020; Order of battle of the Waterloo campaign, 2020; Waterloo in popular culture, 2020).



four kilometres long and one kilometre distanced the British and Dutch soldiers from the French troops. Today's visitors can easily walk through the whole battlefield in a day.

After an important restoration of architectural heritage, monuments, and memorials, the Waterloo new *Memorial 1815*, with its interpretation centre and its commemorative wall to all belligerents, was inaugurated on May 22, 2015. The memorial makes use of multimedia 3D and 4D technologies, augmented reality and interactive gaming realized by a firm specializing in digital and interactive technologies.¹³ The 6000 square meters underground of the Memorial's interpretation Centre is a new form of museum (figure 10), better focused on visitor's experiences and different public expectations and needs (Filene, 2017). A new movie on the Battle was realized in 2015 by the Belgian film director Gérard Corbiau. It reenacts the violence of the battle in four dimensions on a 26 meters long screen inside the area of the underground memorial now directly connected, to the old 360° Panorama of the battlefield and the stairs of the Lion Mound.

Figure 10. Inside the memorial, Headquarters of Napoléon.

¹³ «de pinxi has been in operation since 1991 and is a pioneer in the world of interactive shows» (De pinxi, n.d.).

CONCLUSIONS: FOR A PUBLIC HISTORY OF OUR PUBLIC HERITAGE

The Waterloo's battlefield landscape area historical heritage, after the Bicentenary commemoration, gained a role as a European wide realm of memory, testifying a battle, a crucial event in Europe in the 19th century and that has become today part of the European collective memory. Apart from France still mourning the defeat, nations that always fought against each other recognized the pacific role of the commemoration and insisted on the cruelty of the battle and the suffering of soldiers. Chauvinism and nationalism were absent from a cultural event that fostered the need for a united Europe and the EU as such.

A very successful and gigantic reenactment involving thousands of reenactors has been watched locally and broadcasted remotely for thousands of people all over Europe, a fact that underlined how much public history events like these, answer to a need for popular history forms of narratives that are appreciated by a large international public. The Walloon region and local communities in Brabant, invested financially in what was a cultural capital, hoping to foster important tourism of the past largely interested in battlefield parks and museums. Many cultural firms participated in the restoration of the battlefield, the contextualization of the narrative with landmarks disseminated through the whole landscape, and the construction of the new Memorial. New cultural firms like *Tempora, our story* (n.d.), that realized the museum of the battle of the Bulge in Bastogne and renovated also the Hougomont farm, show that investments in European and national historical heritage and the commercial exploitation of a renovated cultural heritage, meet the interest of a wide public eager in engaging in playful ways with new forms of tourism of the past.

On the contrary, what has been absent from the reenactment was the active role of historians especially when commenting on the different phases of the battle for the thousands of attendees. Because of this absence, popular storytelling was missing, and the public was unable to understand, from a position surrounding the field, what was happening with reenactors playing their role.

On the contrary, the new Memorial 2015, allows for a much better multimedia interpretation of the complexity of the events, from a wider military history point of view of a battle and of the history of the most important European powers, which fought on Belgian soil. A couple of old American tourists which was looking at the map of the battlefield and the different colours of the regiments between the Allied forces and the French asked the following because they heard I was speaking in English with some

friends, also visitors of the memorial: «where were our guys?» Of course, WW1 and WW2 saw US soldiers fighting in Belgium. Such ignorance of 19th-century history should be challenged by similar investments in cultural heritage and new forms of museums, like what happened in Waterloo. Maybe, after visiting the memorial and its contextualization of the events of 1815, the historical park, and the different historic monuments, a public who ignores history would have understood better the 19th century European history. The capacity of better knowing about the past, or to become curious about it, is a cautious but essential bet when public historians engage in fieldwork and when they help organize popular re-enactments, build memorials and interpret the different historical landmarks present on the battlefield park. The future of the Waterloo historical landscape lies also in ways in which the public will be able to have fun when learning about the past in different ways.

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