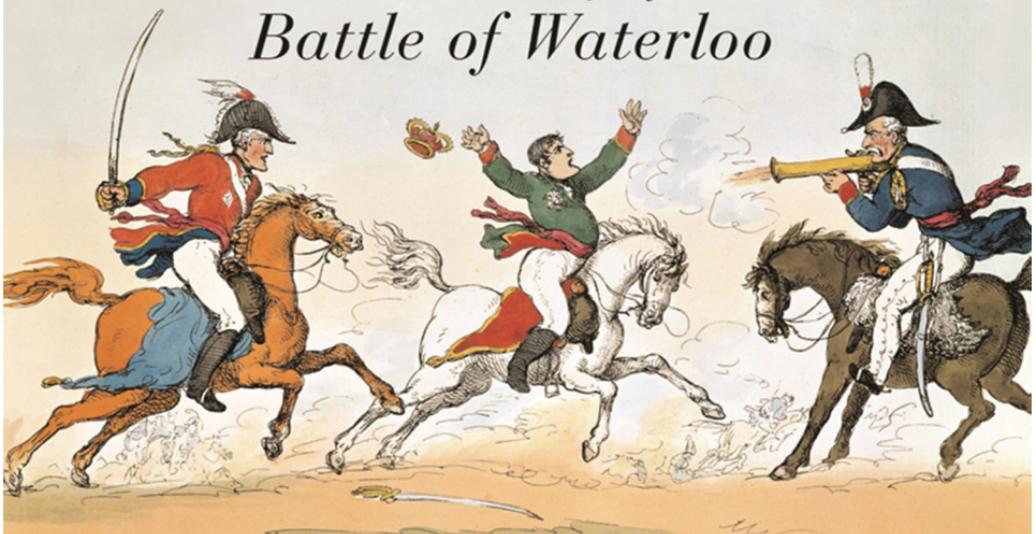


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# Dancing into Battle

*A Social History of the  
Battle of Waterloo*



# I



## ‘An economical plan’

As young Lord William heard the news of Napoleon’s escape early that chilly March morning while out with hounds, 570 miles north-west of Vienna in the cosmopolitan city of Brussels, things were beginning to stir in the household of his father Charles, 4th Duke of Richmond. At 7.30 a.m. Lord William’s three youngest brothers were woken by their twenty-three-year-old tutor Spencer Madan, so that by breakfast time at 9 a.m. they had already had morning prayers and begun their lessons. Schoolwork was recommenced at 10 a.m. and finished at 12.30, at about the same time as the Duke, having risen at 11 a.m., finished his breakfast and began his day.

In August of the preceding year, the Duke of Richmond had moved to Brussels, where his son and heir Lord March was Aide-de-camp to the Prince of Orange. Lord March, an intelligent-looking, clean-cut, handsome and popular twenty-three-year-old, had been assistant military secretary to Wellington during the Peninsular War. He was still carrying a musket ball in his chest from a wound received at Orthès, and was liable to pass out if the temperature dropped suddenly. This wound would have been a source of pride as well as pain, for the Richmond clan was strong on military tradition, as the present generation demonstrated. The Duke, a general, was often painted in uniform. Of his seven sons, six went into the Army, one rebelled and joined the Navy.

As a young man the Duke of Richmond had been rather dashing, famous for having fought a duel with the Duke of York in 1789. Now, twenty-five years later, aged fifty, jowly and with thinning hair, his kindly

good looks were overlaid with a tired melancholy air; 'he is become the most Gloomy Melancholy person I ever met with,' commented the wife of an old friend, 'but still keeps his warmth & cordiality of heart.'<sup>1</sup> Some of his melancholy, and his jowliness, could have been ascribed to his habit of sitting up till early in the morning smoking and drinking. His drinking routine was recalled by his children's tutor.

Our dining hour, called  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 5 is usually 6, and the Duke, who never allows coffee to be announced, sits after dinner as long as any one will drink with him and when the company decline his pressing proposal for another bottle of claret, he orders coffee in the dining room or upstairs, after which liqueurs are handed round. When he is tired of the party of the night he withdraws, accompanied by a select few to smoke segars and drink punch till a late or rather early hour in the morning.<sup>2</sup>

The picture of a depressive heavy drinker, if not an alcoholic, was perhaps understandable to those who knew his wife, Charlotte. The Duchess of Richmond would have driven anyone to drink; arrogant, overbearing, capricious, snobbish, and ruthless in her schemes for marrying her seven daughters to rich aristocrats, she was a difficult woman who alienated everyone from her social peers, who described her as 'a difficult person to deal with and withal a dreadful *mischief maker*'<sup>3</sup> and 'a person not to be depended on',<sup>4</sup> to her children's tutor, who wished her 'at the bottom of the pond'.<sup>5</sup>

The Duchess's volatile temper was not improved by leaving England. 'A shade of ill-humour is superadded to her usual acidity of temper by the thoughts of going abroad,'<sup>6</sup> and this acid temper already exacerbated by xenophobic ill-humour was probably inflamed by snobbish contempt for the house her husband had rented for them in Brussels. By 20 August, when the Duke of Richmond had arrived in Brussels, all the smart houses available for rent in the fashionable upper part of the town around the park had been taken by English families who had arrived earlier. Friends anticipated that the Duke would have 'the greatest difficulty in getting a House large enough' that would also be 'in an Eligible situation'.<sup>7</sup> And they were right. The house the Duke ended up in may have had a large garden and spacious outbuildings, but it belonged to the son of a coachmaker and was in the unfashionable lower town with its light industry and muddy unpaved streets.

Towards the end of the preceding century, Jean Simons had enjoyed a reputation as a fashionable coachbuilder known for his '*voiture vitrée*'<sup>8</sup> and his house on the rue de la Blanchisserie, some way from the social hub of

the park, had also been the location of his workshops and showrooms housed in the wings, their large galleried rooms illuminated by tall windows. The Napoleonic wars had killed his business and his son was happy to let the house to a visiting English aristocrat. A late-eighteenth-century engraving published in *Country Life*, now in the archives in Brussels, shows a pleasant house, with two large wings.<sup>9</sup> There was a separate cottage in the garden for the Earl of March and the large former workshops, now decorated with an appealing trellis wallpaper, served as a schoolroom and indoor games area for the younger members of the Duke's family of fourteen children. It was a big house: the garden was about 450 feet long, bounded on one side by the ramparts, and from the upper storeys there were views out to the Palace of Lacken three or four miles away. The rambling nature of the property would at least enable the Duke to keep out of his wife's way.

To understand what the Richmonds were doing in Brussels it is necessary to examine the events of the spring of the preceding year. In March 1814, Paris had capitulated to Allied forces, ending the rule of Napoleon across Europe. On 3 May the fat, gout-stricken Louis XVIII, brother of the guillotined Louis XVI, had made his ceremonial entry into the French capital. He had returned claiming that he had been King of France ever since the day his nephew, little Louis XVII, had died of tuberculosis in 1795. Even though he had spent over two decades in exile, it was almost as if the intervening years of Revolution and Napoleon's Imperium had never happened.

With 'legitimate' rule once more established in France, the occupying forces had departed and the British Army, which had fought since 1808 in the Peninsula, was shipped back to London from Bordeaux. That year the London season 'had been one of the greatest gaiety. Napoleon had abdicated the throne of the world – the Bourbons had been restored – Louis XVIII had quitted England – the warehouse for bonded sovereigns (as it had been called),' and just as Louis XVIII cleared off to reclaim his family's throne a quarter of a century after his brother had vacated it,

kings, emperors, princes, potentates, had flocked to London, which was thronged with the votaries of fashion and pleasure. Fêtes, operas, balls, masquerades, dinners, concerts, illuminations, naval and military reviews, formed the order of the day and night. Everybody was dining out, supping out, driving out, and hunting the royal and imperial lions.<sup>10</sup>

When news of Napoleon's abdication reached England, curious and intrepid travellers made arrangements to visit the Continent, excited to go

to Europe at such an historic time, 'eager to seize the chance of viewing the wreck of Napoleon's empire while the country was still ringing with rumours of battles and sieges'.<sup>11</sup> As soon as the French ports were open, hundreds began to prepare their journeys, travelling to London to get a passport, and asking influential friends and relatives to pen letters of introduction to those Britons abroad who might prove useful. Thus, on 5 June, a large family party of ten children, their parents and about half a dozen servants had invaded the Ship Inn in Dover.

The Hon. John Thomas and Lady Caroline Capel were connected to the highest social circles in England. John Thomas Capel was the son of the 4th Earl of Essex, half-brother to the 5th Earl of Essex; in time Capel's son Algernon would become the 6th Earl and his other children would, by royal decree, 'be granted the same title and precedence as if their father had succeeded to the Earldom of Essex'.<sup>12</sup> His wife was from an equally illustrious family; daughter of the 9th Baron Paget (a close friend of George III and Queen Charlotte) who had been raised to the title Earl of Uxbridge. Her eldest brother, Lord Paget, who inherited the title of Earl of Uxbridge on the death of their father, was one of the most dashing cavalry commanders of his age.

While undeniably in possession of a perfect pedigree, the Capels were, like quite a number of aristocrats, virtually flat broke. During the early nineteenth century, debt carried stigma and the threat of imprisonment. Moreover, Capel was addicted to gambling. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gambling was a mania that bankrupted many grand families. Even though he was not a first son and therefore had no estate to fritter away at the tables, by 1804 he had run up the very considerable debt of £20,000 (rather more than a million pounds today).

Precarious family finances were further prejudiced by the fact that there were very few occupations, in the modern sense of an activity that would return money, suitable for the half-brother of an earl, let alone one with a chronic gambling habit. As it happened, his wife's family had been able to arrange a couple of sinecures for him, which brought in around £2,000 per annum, and he enjoyed a private income of about the same amount. But even had he not been a gambling addict, he would have found it difficult to maintain an aristocratic way of life with an ever-growing family. During the years of war with France not even the upper class was insulated from the soaring cost of living occasioned by the expense of waging a protracted war.

For much of their married life the Capels had relied on the hospitality of Lady Caroline's mother – the dowager Countess of Uxbridge. The only

other option would have been to seek a cheaper way of life abroad. However, with the brief exception of the phoney peace of Amiens of 1802, which ended abruptly but not entirely unexpectedly in May 1803, Continental travel had been an impossibility during the revolutionary and then Napoleonic wars that had convulsed Europe for a generation. The cessation of hostilities could not come soon enough for those, like the Capels, who were starved of the stimulation of foreign travel and desperately in need of a more forgiving financial climate.

For Capel, the defeat of Napoleon was the news he had been waiting for. And the French emperor had not even arrived on Elba before Capel had started looking for a house abroad where he and his family might live on what was politely known as 'an economical plan'.

Brussels had obvious benefits for the Capels and those like them, including their friend the Duke of Richmond. It offered cheap metropolitan living and the excitement of foreign travel relatively close to England: travelling with so many children (like the Richmonds, the Capels were philoprogenitive and would eventually have over a dozen offspring) and servants was a difficult, uncomfortable and, most alarming of all, expensive business.

There had been a scramble among the financially embarrassed upper classes, desperate to reduce their outgoings, as to who would get over to the Continent first to snap up the bargain properties. 'Capel would have gone to Brussels last week to procure a House,' wrote his mother-in-law, the dowager Countess of Uxbridge, on 22 April, 'but many Foreigners, and others, advised waiting a little while.'<sup>23</sup> It was as well to heed such advice, as what Capel had suggested would have been tantamount to going house-hunting in a war zone. Nevertheless it had become clear to old Lady Uxbridge that as soon as circumstances permitted there would be a huge exodus of impoverished British aristocrats to the Low Countries. 'We must make up our Minds to losing many of our friends; they will all fly to the Continent.'<sup>24</sup>

The Capels had been in the first wave of economic migrants to make the trip to Brussels. So keen were they to get away and ease the expense – doubtless part of the attraction for Capel was that in Brussels he would be beyond the reach of his creditors – that at Dover they crossed over with the Allied leaders coming into Britain for the victory celebrations in London, triumphal arches and eagles lining their proposed route.

The Capel family had been fortunate enough to meet up with Lord Rosslyn, the general commanding the south-eastern district, who was also an old family friend, and he had secured them a wonderful position from

which to see the victors who landed at two o'clock in the afternoon on 7 June: the Capel children were delighted by a string of celebrities including the King of Prussia, the Emperor of Russia, the snowy-haired, fiery-tempered General Blücher and numerous princes.

Another family friend, Sir Charles Stuart, brother of one of the most able politicians of the nineteenth century, Lord Castlereagh, had been on hand to introduce them to some of the princes and generals, bringing them to the family's sitting room on the ground floor of the inn. But the moment the crowd had caught sight of Blücher shaking hands with and kissing the Capel children, they smashed the windows and broke into the room. A further visitor to the Capels was Admiral of the Fleet the Duke of Clarence, later King William IV.

While their parents had waited for a passage across the Channel, Caroline doubtless fretting over the expense of a protracted stay at the Ship Inn, the children had been kept amused by the excitement of a town packed with exotic foreigners – Cossacks and Junkers, princes and generals – all of whom who must have seemed like visitors from another planet. The rooms and corridors of the inn echoed to a cacophonous babble of different languages and dialects. 'If we stir out of this Room we must pass such a Phalanx of Foreigners of all Nations & Ranks – this is rather inconvenient as our sitting Room is on the Ground Floor,' wrote seventeen-year-old Maria Capel. 'But *I* think it *all* the best fun.'<sup>15</sup> Rockets had been fired, 21- and 100-gun salutes roared out, the horses had been unhitched from Blücher's carriage and it had been dragged along by an ecstatic crowd.

Bluff old Blücher was a particular favourite with the mob, and if they could not find the Prussian Field Marshal himself, they would seize upon any likely-looking foreigner, almost pulling him to pieces in their good-natured excitement. On hearing that Blücher was in a particular place, the mob had stormed in and hoisted on their shoulders a man they took for the hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, gambling-addicted Prussian soldier, almost ripping his coat off. The poor man was, however, the Prince of Liechtenstein and, having no idea why he was being carried bodily away by the mob, had cried out for his A.D.C. to hang on to him as tight as he could. Such scenes had been repeated throughout the summer of 1814 as the victors were received by rapturous crowds who, unable to make the trip to the Continent, had to make do with 'Emperor hunting'<sup>16</sup> around London, ripping the clothes off any unwary war hero they came across in a spirit of enthusiastic, albeit robust, souvenir seeking. 'Can the English ever be called cool and phlegmatic again?' wondered one lady who witnessed the tumultuous reception of the Allied leaders. 'It is really a pity

some metaphysicianising philosopher is not here to observe, describe, and theorise on the extraordinary symptoms and effects of enthusiasm, curiosity, insanity – I am sure I do not know what to call it – en masse.<sup>17</sup>

Through their connections the Capels had been able to enjoy a unique and privileged position at an historic moment and yet all the time the spectre of their poverty hovered over them. Every day that their sailing to the Continent was delayed meant further expenditure on accommodation in a town where rooms were so hard to come by that Blücher had slept one night in a rented carriage. 'If we are obliged to stay here we must live upon Mackerel for 9000 came in yesterday & they are of course very cheap,'<sup>18</sup> wrote one of the Capel daughters.

Eventually, after a week's wait, the Capels, their carriages, their servants and their luggage had made the crossing to Calais and then travelled by carriage to Dunkirk. Everywhere they had been followed by curious townsfolk, and their mood had not been improved by the fact that they wanted to travel to Bruges by canal barge but had been 'prevented from putting this economical manner of travelling into execution as the Carriages cannot be got into the Barge'.<sup>19</sup>

Frustration at the mounting expense of what was meant to be an economical plan had brought forth a string of complaints about 'odiously dull & stupid'<sup>20</sup> Dunkirk, and a landscape that was 'hideous, flat and like the ugliest part of Kent without its agriculture'.<sup>21</sup> And while the people had been grudgingly acknowledged to be very civil, 'their Horses are disgusting; and as for the Vehicles they *call* Carriages they would disgrace a stand of Hackney Coaches in London'.<sup>22</sup>

Out of England for only a few hours, and among the very first British civilian families to travel in Europe for over a decade, the Capels had already adopted the default position of the British aristocracy abroad: namely, reassuring themselves that everything at home is better and that there is no situation more fortunate than being born into the English upper classes. 'The little that I have already seen of the Continent makes me love & admire dear England more than I did before,' wrote nineteen-year-old Georgiana Capel. In fact the only thing that had kept them from turning back was that they might soon reach the promised land of the economical plan. 'We are all very anxious to reach Bruxelles which has, we hear from all quarters, every perfection . . .'<sup>23</sup>