

Wellington's Smallest Victory – The Duke, the Model Maker and the Secret of
Waterloo by Peter Hofschröer.
Faber and Faber 2004.

The battle of Waterloo ended forever the imperial ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte, brought victory to England and its allies in the war against France and cemented the reputation of Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington, as a fine general and one of the greatest men of his era.

Peter Hofschröer, in this engaging little book, brings to light an aspect of the battle, and of the Iron Duke, that might otherwise be unknown to all but a relatively few military and historical experts. The author's principal focus is on the vast scale model of the battle of Waterloo made by Lieutenant William Siborne, for which he was granted an official commission.

The scale of the model, covering some 400 square feet and containing nearly eighty thousand lead soldiers, was immense, and the attention to detail with which Siborne approached his mammoth task was similarly heroic. He contacted anyone and everyone, on both sides of the battle, able to offer him personal experience, anecdote and insight into what had happened on those fateful days in June 1815. On the basis of this information and his own survey of the battle field he created his model.

Unfortunately, he chose to build his model around a stage known as the Crisis of the Battle, concerning which there was some dispute regarding the role and position of allied, particularly, Prussian troops. Unfortunate, because in the debate Siborne found himself on the opposite side to the Duke, a pitiless adversary determined to protect his role in events, the reputation of British troops, and his crucial dispatch summarising the battle.

Wellington's Smallest Victory details the events of the battle itself, the heroic story of Siborne's construction of his model, and the bitterness and damage inflicted by an argument about events concerning which he was inevitably to be on the losing side. For those who are fascinated by the Napoleonic Wars this is an excellent and highly enjoyable addition to a large corpus of books.

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