

## Movie Review of Ridley Scott's 'Napoleon'



Theatrical release poster, by Apple TV+ - <https://thefilmstage.com/first-trailer-for-ridley-scotts-napoleon-starring-joaquin-phoenix/>

A paper by Robert Pocock, published by CampaignsandCulture.com

We toddled off to the opening of the new Napoleon movie today. An invitation to a special showing at Waterloo was sadly declined, due to responsibilities towards the family cats, so the Exeter Picturehouse it was.

So many disparaging words have been written by historians, even before they had seen the film, that adding our views may come as a welcome breath of fresh air. We'll do our best.

But first, a bit of context. Historians can be precious about their subject, and, sadly, a few are quite prepared to trample over others to claim that they know the truth, or that they were first with the truth, when all they have done is either muddled the facts or, worse, openly copied other's work and claimed it as their own. So historians can be full of deficiencies like any normal human being and are not to be placed on a pedestal. Their views are welcome, but not to be read as absolute.

We were personally guilty of leading much of the condemnation of Bernard Cornwell's release of *Waterloo* - 'his first factual book' - in 2015 to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the battle. The fact that his was one of the weakest of many dubious books on the topic released that year did not prevent it from becoming a best-seller, and deservedly so with his army of Sharpe fans that he has encouraged into the Napoleonic firmament. With so many copies of his book out there, historians will be seeking to overturn his errors and embellishment for the next hundred years, which put lightly is a crying shame. But that's life.

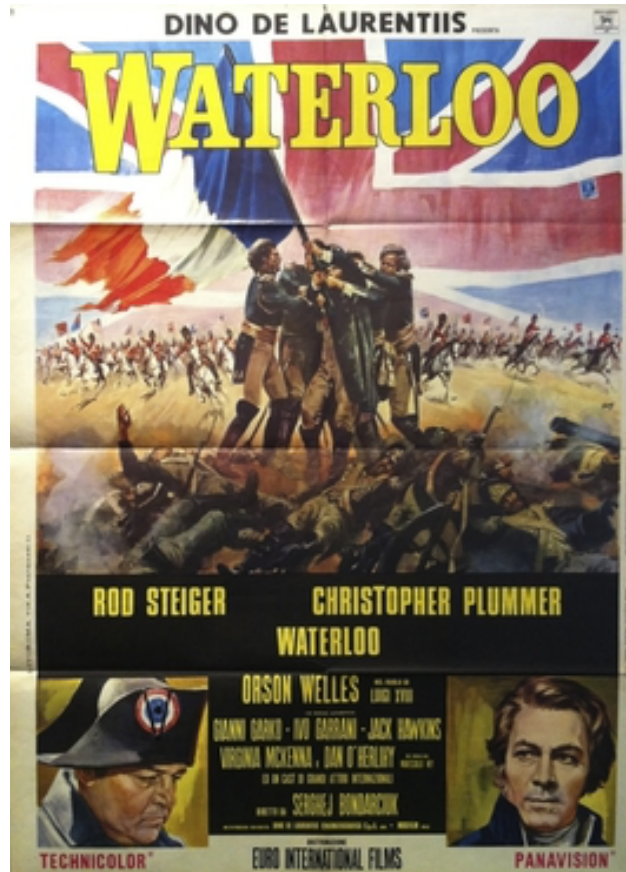
And so we come to the greatest travesty of all, shrinking the life of Napoleon into a movie!

Frenchman Abel Gance tried it in 1927, as a silent epic, a technically innovative marvel of its time, and one that every Napoleonicist should see. Intended to be a series of six films, he expended the entire budget on the first, so it only reaches as far as Napoleon crushing his enemies in Italy. The 2016 DVD/Blu-Ray version by Kevin Brownlow, pieced together from remnants, is 5 hours 32 minutes long.



*Albert Dieudonné as Napoleon, Abel Gance, 1927*

The Dino De Laurentiis Italian-Soviet movie 'Waterloo' was released in 1970, featuring Rod Steiger as Napoleon. This is what so many of us grew up with, inspiring us to greater things. Marvelled over for the spectacle, the characters, the uniforms, it transformed my life. As you'll find elsewhere on our website we've had the pleasure of leading one of the younger actors of this film around Waterloo, so six videos by Richard Heffer can be found under 'Testimonials' and 'Filming Waterloo'.



*Theatrical Waterloo film poster, Dino De Laurentiis, 1970, Postermuseum.com*

Simon Lewis' book on the filming of the film which we gently edited for historical robustness is also recommended as one of our 'Favourite Books', as is the film itself! It remains inspiring to this day, the cavalry charges against squares sequence, filmed from a helicopter long before the days of CGI, must surely illustrate the very definition of the word 'epic'.

Whilst never a great success at the time in the US, which is blamed as the reason for the cancellation of Stanley Kubrick's planned film biography of Napoleon, it is said that it inspired Peter Jackson, so maybe we have this film to thank for his marvels of 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings'. I still recommend this 1970 film to anyone about to come on a Waterloo tour - plentiful inaccuracies aside, it demonstrates much more that is good and helps give our tour guests an introductory feel for the era.

And so to Ridley Scott's Napoleon. Is it a patch on Gladiator? And what about the

lead actor, Joaquin Phoenix, who we really didn't like in *Gladiator*. I know, he was the baddie, but even so, we didn't warm to him as an actor.

Well, taken in the spirit of a spectacle, *Napoleon* is simply superb.

Squeezing the adult life of Napoleon into a few hours is bound to prove a little tight. As a result certain events are shrunk, others combined into one, many totally ignored, some made up, but this is entertainment. Having worked in the entertainment industry and being a historian, we recognise the need for trade-offs. Even the hotly anticipated streaming of the 'Director's cut' of 4 hours 10 minutes can't possibly cram it all in.

Much of the tale is told with Napoleon intertwined, literally, with Josephine, which may require a little embarrassed explanation to younger viewers, something that never happened with the 1970 film. Yet deftly using this oozing relationship throughout, and despite all the factual errors and omissions, it does a great job of weaving us from the revolution to Toulon to Egypt to the coronation to Austerlitz to Tilsit to Moscow to Elba to Waterloo to Plymouth to St Helena.

The Austerlitz battle scene has echoes of the opening scenes of *Gladiator* in the wintry German forest, perhaps a Ridley Scott trademark. At Waterloo there is a rather lovely nod to the 1970 film where this time it is a rifleman, rather than artilleryman, asking Wellington if he can take a shot at Napoleon: certainly not is the same reply!

I have lost count of the number of times I've been asked on tour about this and other film moments - and I'll be braced for more questioning - such is the hold of visual media on our minds. We'll have to introduce a movie Q&A session!

The Peninsular War does not get a look-in, and to be honest it would be better if Waterloo hadn't either - such is the epic travesty of the battle scenes - so I won't even start. It's back to the 1970 film for that, it was just soooooo much better on Waterloo!

So, honestly, where does that leave us? Well, if you have any interest whatsoever in the Napoleonic era then this film is a genuine must-see. It is a supreme spectacle, superbly and grittily played by Joaquin Phoenix as Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, and a wonderful romp through his times.

But a serious warning if you are the sort who has nothing better to do than write a list of inaccuracies, as you'll need enough reams of paper to fill the dome of Les Invalides in Paris.

I rather like the fact that filming took place in Lincoln Cathedral standing in for Notre-Dame de Paris, the Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich, and Blenheim Palace (which could all be construed as a rather inappropriate insult to the French), as well as Malta, Morocco, and that one of the juniors mentioned in the film credits was also called Napoleon! See, it's always worth watching to the end.

The film is intended as entertainment, and just like Abel Gance, Dino De Laurentiis and Bernard Cornwall before, it will introduce a whole new cast of individuals freshly interested in real history. And this, at a time when we need to be more aware of the lessons of history than ever before. For this it should be celebrated.

If you want to know what Napoleon himself would have thought, well he gives an inkling just before he keels over at the end of the film on St. Helena. And we do know what he thought of recorded history from his comments on St. Helena recorded on our 'Favourite Books' web page and repeated here, published in *Mémorial de Sainte Hélène, Count de Las Cases*:

*"... The truth of history, so much in request, to which everybody eagerly appeals, is too often but a word. At the time of events, during the heat of conflicting passions, it cannot exist; and if, at a later period, all parties are agreed respecting it, it is because those persons who were interested in the events, those who might be able to contradict what is asserted, are no more. What then is, generally speaking, the truth of history? A fable agreed upon.*

*...With respect to the positive facts, it would seem that they ought to be incontrovertible; yet you will not find two accounts agreeing together in relating the same fact: some have remained contested points to this day, and will ever remain so. With regard to moral intentions, how shall we judge of them, even admitting the candour of those who relate events? And what will be the case if the narrators are not sincere, or if they should be actuated by interest or passions? I have given an order, but who was able to read my thoughts, my real intentions? Yet everyone will take up that order, and measure it according to his own scale, or adapt it to his own plans or system ... And then memoirs are digested, memoranda are written, witticisms and anecdotes are circulated; and of such materials is history composed."*

After all that, if you really, really want to know what I thought, I'm going back to watch it again tomorrow!

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