

British controversy: The attack of the imperial guard and the allied pursuit.

In the period between 1830 and 1871, a controversy was conducted by five British participants of the battle about the role of their units in the repulse and the subsequent pursuit of the Imperial Guard in the battle of Waterloo.

A first controversy arose in the 1830's between major Gawler of the 52nd Foot on the one side and sir Hussey Vivian, commander of the 6th light brigade of cavalry, on the other. ¹

By 1829, book and articles published about the campaign had according to Vivian not fully acknowledged the contribution of the light cavalry in general and of his own brigade in particular. Late that year, after reading an article in the Quarterly Review which was critical about the cavalry in the campaign, Vivian wrote to several former officers of his brigade asking for their accounts of the campaign.

Having gathered their replies, Vivian wrote a memorandum in January 1830 in which he hoped that "perhaps some future day credit may be given for the conduct of a brigade which, I hesitate not to assert, was principally instrumental in occasioning the very sudden and total rout of the French army which took place." ²

By 1833, both Vivian and captain Siborne were based at Dublin. Siborne was then in preparation for the proposed Waterloo model showing "the grand attack of the French Imperial Guards upon the British right wing" and Vivian realized that this would give him a unique chance to show the merits of his brigade in the battle.

Major Gawler was also stationed in Ireland at this time; he met Vivian in 1832 and 1833 but whether he met Siborne is not known. One month after Siborne's announcement of the model – in June 1833 - Gawler published an article about the battle in the United Service Journal of July 1833. ³

In his general plea for a "good detailed general narrative" of the battle, his specific purpose was to fix credit accurately, in a case in which it had hitherto been misplaced. Gawler wrote: "All the accounts of the battle which have hitherto come before the public, including those by the standard writers of the day (and general opinion, even in the army, has much followed the same current), assert more or less directly that the attack of the Imperial Guard was repulsed, and the French army thrown into irretrievable confusion, either by a charge of general Maitland's brigade of guards, or by an advance of the whole line."

Gawler, however, stated that during the first stage of the advance of the 52nd which swept the Imperial Guard towards La Haye Sainte and the Brussels road, no other allied units cooperated with the 52nd (except for a small mixed body of cavalry which crossed its advance). Further, he claimed that by the time the 52nd reached the Brussels road, no other closed body of allied infantry had advanced from behind the allied position and that Vivian's brigade was then just appearing on its summit.

Having led the advance towards the French position, the 52nd found three French squares just in front of La Belle Alliance and at that moment the brigade divided: as the 52nd crossed the road and pursued one of them there, the 71st pursued the other two along the allied right of the highroad. Further, he claimed that the main body of the allied army only advanced from its position at about the time that his brigade began to advance across and along the Brussels road which was initially made without any immediate support, but finally with the assistance of Vivian's brigade for the 71st on the right of this road near the farm of Rossomme.

If the established reputation of any corps was diminished by Gawler's article, it was that of the 1st (British Guards) brigade, and a response might have been expected from Maitland or Byng, yet neither replied to Gawler's article.

One who did reply, though, was sir Hussey Vivian as he could not agree upon specific claims as done by Gawler and a controversy between both men was published in the United Service Journal between July and September 1833.⁴

Vivian, in his turn, claimed that it was near La Belle Alliance that his brigade (having already made two charges against cavalry) met some Imperial Guard squares, and later made a third charge against one of these squares. Presuming Gawler was arguing that both Adam's and Vivian's brigade were encountering the same troops, or different troops formed on the same ground, Vivian was puzzled.

Vivian reasoned that, if Adam's brigade had led the advance and had met some squares near La Belle Alliance, it would not have left them behind and to carry on; it would have attacked and dispersed them. In that case, it was inexplicable to Vivian that his brigade could have found formed French troops here, unless Adam's brigade had passed on, they had rallied and reformed or some other troops had come along and taken their place – neither case seeming very likely under the circumstances.

Let alone this, Vivian was certain that the ground upon which his brigade had operated, on the allied right of the highroad, *no* other allied troops had got there first, and that two regiments of his brigade alone (the 10th and 18th hussars) had charged twice successfully *without* any support. Only a third charge, carried out by a part of the 10th hussars, had taken place in cooperation with some infantry.

In the process of the controversy, Gawler – as a compromise - later indicated that Vivian's brigade left from the summit earlier, thereby reaching with its head Adam's brigade in the vicinity of La Haye Sainte. At the same time, Gawler believed that Vivian charged French infantry from the low ground after the general advance of the allied army and after Adam's second stage of his advance. Basically, his claim was that both brigades had attacked distinct bodies of troops and that only when Vivian's brigade assisted the 71st did they encounter the same troops on the same ground near Rossomme.

The differences and misunderstanding would have endured, were it not for the solution eventually brought about by the evidence gathered for the construction of the Waterloo model by captain Siborne. Of course, Siborne also had an interest in solving the puzzle. For some time he was the channel of communications between Vivian and Gawler.

The fact was that during a visit in June 1834 at Siborne's model, Gawler realized he had made an error. He recognized that the "first rise" upon which the three squares of the Imperial Guard were was not about 300 meters but some 450 meters in front of La Belle Alliance (on the extension of the intermediate ridge, about halfway between La Belle Alliance and La Haye Sainte). It explained that those units charged by Vivian were further to the rear as those attacked by Adam.

Additionally, Gawler also saw that *the whole of* Adam's brigade, by wheeling left across the highroad, left the whole of the right side of the highroad open to the subsequent advance of Vivian's brigade and to its charges upon the enemy near La Belle Alliance.

The summary of the solution was the fact that Vivian had thrown into confusion those French troops formed to cover the retreat on their left of the road around La Belle Alliance, whilst Adam's brigade had before routed the body of the French reserve covering the attack.⁵⁻⁶

It was to do the former commander of the 52nd, lieutenant colonel Colborne, a "well-merited honour" that Gawler had written his original article. Gawler also recommended Colborne to Siborne as a witness. But as it eventually appeared that Colborne's testimony contradicted Gawler's case on a particular point, Gawler had to convince Siborne that, on this point, Colborne's memory had failed.⁷

Right after the campaign, lieutenant colonel Colborne believed, rightly or wrongly, that he had had a main hand in deciding the battle. On reading the Duke's despatch of the 19th of June and Bathurst report of the 23rd of June [8], he saw, with bitterness, that he had been ignored and the praise which should have come to him and to the 52nd was given to others, i.e. the Foot Guards. ⁹ But even under his sense of wrong, he uttered no complaint.

Though he had supplied Siborne with little information in 1835, Colborne wrote to him in 1843 that he had been so fully occupied since the year 1815, that he had seldom had time or inclination to read any of the accounts of the battle of Waterloo.

Additionally, he referred to what must have been his real reason: "Indeed, it has always been a most unpleasant task to refer to our past military operations, which are connected with many painful recollections. I have cautiously abstained from giving opinions on controverted points that would draw me into discussions." There is no doubt that he referred to the controversy about the share of the Foot Guards in pushing back the Imperial Guard. At the same time, he felt it was not more as courteous to assist Siborne and therefore he sent him a memorandum relating the events around the 52nd.

Factual in itself, Colborne couldn't resist at the very end of this document to hint to previous erroneous versions of these events by stating: "I have been particular in stating many unimportant occurrences, because I am persuaded several absurd blunders and stories have originated from the movements of the 52nd, and general Adam's brigade, having been represented." ¹⁰

But the strong belief he held throughout that the 52nd, "by stopping the progress of that column, made the great charge of the day," throws into brighter relief the proud self-repression with which he refused to claim that credit for himself which he believed he deserved, and the generosity with which he ever excused the defects in the Duke's despatch, deprecated the attaching of importance to the impressions of subordinate officers, and eulogized the Duke's generalship alike at Waterloo as in the Peninsula. "Never," he writes, "did any commander gain a victory more by his personal exertions and by his prompt presence at points where the efforts of the enemy had nearly succeeded. Despatches are written in haste, and it is impossible for a general to do justice to his army. Every officer being intent on some particular object, with a distinct part to perform, his eye is confined to a small angle." ¹¹

This same kind of reserve and diplomacy Colborne expressed to lieutenant Yonge in February 1852 as he wrote him: "From some questions put to me, I fear it may be the intention of Bentham, or some of our 52nd friends, to bring before the public the exploits of our old corps and its officers. Nothing can be more disagreeable or create more jealousy than thrusting continually before readers the claims, or supposed merits, of particular corps or officers long after the events, to be discussed or recorded, as a tribute to their exertions. It does no good to individuals or generals, and such notices are very properly considered as puffs, or as published for some interested motive." ¹²

This same kind of approach he repeated to colonel Dentham in October 1853, but in this case he made his claim more firm: "It may be more satisfactory to you, instead of replying to your queries, to draw your attention to the principal movements which accelerated the termination of the battle of Waterloo, and to the facts which would be admitted as evidence in support of the claims of the 52nd to the merit of having first checked the advance of the Imperial Guards at the crisis of the battle and of having completed their déroute by marching directly on their dense columns, and, by a flank movement, charging them so vigorously that the whole gave way and retired in confusion. The statements of officers engaged at Waterloo I found were generally so difficult and conflicting that it was impossible to draw up any correct account from them. Captain Siborne, I believe, consulted every officer in command with whom he was acquainted or to whom he was introduced, and endeavoured to make their versions

correspond with the facts generally known relative to the movements of divisions, brigades and regiments. I have never read his account. If you bring the 52nd into a contest with the Guards by attempting to prove from rumour that the latter was retiring at the time they are said to have charged and defeated the French troops, you will raise up a host of opponents to your account, which would rather injure the cause of the 52nd. I suppose that the Guards must have made some forward movement and that many officers must have seen it, but I contend that the French columns had been checked and thrown into disorder before the Guards moved. Till the Duke of Wellington's despatch was made known at Paris we had never heard of the charge of the Guards, and I am inclined to believe that the attack of the French had been checked by the advance of the 52nd and the movements afterwards of the whole of Sir H. Clinton's Division, before any forward movement had been made by the brigade commanded by Sir P. Maitland.¹³

By somehow merging the two French columns into one, Colborne did not make a distinction between the two confrontations of both the Foot Guards and the 52nd with them. Moore Smith wrote in 1903: "Lord Seaton's accounts of the movement of the 52nd are not perhaps as lucid as could be wished. For many years he seems to have tried to dismiss the subject of Waterloo from his mind, and when he was induced to pen his memoranda, he wrote apparently without the aid of plans and without much knowledge of what had been written from other points of view about the last phase in the great battle."¹⁴

Like Colborne, ensign Leeke (1797 – 1879) of the 52nd was disappointed with Wellington's official despatch of the 19th of June in his denial of Colborne and the 52nd of the honour of defeating the Imperial Guard.

He complained that the officers of the 52nd had always felt that "that despatch was most unjust towards that man and that regiment [Colborne and the 52nd] which very probably had saved himself and his army from an ignominious defeat."¹⁵

Much later, Leeke was also highly critical of William Siborne, who "was fully aware, when compiling his history, of what the 52nd claimed to have done; but yet, on weighing all the intricate and contradictory accounts which he received from officers of different corps, with whom he corresponded, he sought to reconcile them all by adopting this myth about a leading column having been defeated by our guards."¹⁶

Leeke was to publish extensively about the attack of the Imperial Guard and the period of the battle right after, but by the time he did so (in 1866-1867), Siborne had since long died (1849). Yet, it didn't prevent him from refuting several statements Siborne had made regarding the attack of the imperial guard by stating that the Foot Guards merely drove away the skirmishers which were in front of the column which was defeated by the 52nd regiment.

In 1836, another participant of the battle - ensign Macready (1798-1848) of the 30th regiment – had drafted a letter for lieutenant Gawler, in which he made the claim that a column of the French imperial guard had advanced towards the 30th and 73rd regiment, that it received their fire and that the French fell back immediately thereafter.

Finally, though, he decided not to send the letter as he did not want to display himself as a controversialist. Barely three weeks after the battle, in a private letter, Macready had already made the same claim.

It was with this claim, which he maintained throughout his life, that Macready was led into a controversy with captain Siborne after he had published his work in 1844. Siborne had described the attack of the imperial guard as one being executed in two columns advancing towards the Foot Guards, and not towards the one of Colin Halkett.

Both Macready and Siborne expressed their controversy in the United Service Magazine in 1845. As a result of Siborne's book, Macready had sought the support for his claim of other

fellow officers of his battalion by sending them fragments of his journal which he had kept from 1816 onwards. These officers were major Bailey, captain Howard and lieutenant Rogers. As they corroborated Macready's version of the events, Macready attempted to locate other evidence for the fact that other columns as those described by Siborne had attacked the allied frontline. Accordingly, he came up with the account of count Alava and the publications of Craan (1816) and the one entitled "Victoires et conquêtes" (1831).

Macready's conclusion was that the attack took place in two phases: a first echelon consisting of a line of columns and a second, consisting of a mass of columns. Eventually, four columns would have attacked: one upon the Foot Guards, one against the 33rd/ 69th regiments, one against the 30th / 73rd regiments and one against the Brunswickers and other units to the left of the two last battalions.

Siborne, from his side, did not recognize any authority to Craan and the French publication. At the same time, he justly regarded Alava's account as witnessing another, earlier, phase in the battle. He rather relied upon the numerous direct testimonies of British officers instead.

In the discussion, as published in the United Service Magazine, Siborne was apparently the one to have the last word. Meanwhile (probably in 1846), Macready had a personal meeting with Colin Halkett himself.

It led him to write another version of the events, but which was only published after Macready's death, in the United Service Journal in 1852. It basically still retained the existence of four French columns, but now with one directed against Adam (the leading one), one against the Foot Guards and the Brunswickers, one along the 33rd/ 69th regiment and against the Foot Guards, and finally one against the 30th / 73rd regiment.¹⁷

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¹ George Gawler (1796-1869) was a lieutenant in 1815.

² BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.108

³ The crisis and close of the action at Waterloo. By an eye-witness. In: USJ, July 1833 p.299-310

⁴ Reply to major Gawler etc. In: USJ July 1833 p.310-324
The crisis at Waterloo. Major Gawler's answer etc. In: USJ, September 1833 p.1-16
The crisis at Waterloo. Sir Hussey Vivian "in reply to major Gawler" In: USJ, October 1833 p.145-149

⁵ Sir Hussey Vivian. In: BL, Add.ms.34.703.157-162, 34.706 p.366, 34.708 p.351
Lieutenant Gawler. In: BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.163-168, 299-307 and in: A correction of some points in "The crisis of Waterloo", as cited by Cousins. In: Left wing history (6) p.30

⁶ The above part of this note is for the most part based upon the detailed article of Gary Cousins, entitled "Left wing history (6)" In: First Empire nr.84 p.26-34
It should also be noted that the majority of the letters written by sir Hussey Vivian in the Siborne files at the British Library were for me virtually impossible to read due to the bad handwriting.

⁷ In: BL, Add.ms.34.708 p.100-104

⁸ Lord Bathurst wrote on the 23rd June 1815: "Towards the close of the day Bonaparte himself at the head of his Guards, made a desperate charge on the British Guards, and the British guards immediately overthrew the French." In: Times, dated 24th June 1815. Cited by: Moore-Smith, G.C. - The life of John Colborne, field marshal Lord Seaton p.234

⁹ Cf. the (undated) questionnaire of lieutenant Yonge replied to by Colborne. In: Moore-Smith, G.C. - The life of John Colborne, field marshal Lord Seaton p.415

¹⁰ In: BL, Add.ms.34.708 p.40-49
Two months later, in April 1843, Colborne wrote Siborne that he had met officers of the 52nd who couldn't agree upon the close of the action. For that reason he requested Siborne to destroy the confidential statement he had sent him before. It remains unclear which statement this can be, as the one he sent in February 1843 was not of a confidential nature.

¹¹ Moore-Smith, G.C. - The life of John Colborne, field marshal Lord Seaton p.236
It is unclear what source he used here.

¹² Moore-Smith, G.C. - The life of John Colborne, field marshal Lord Seaton p.415

¹³ Moore-Smith, G.C. - The life of John Colborne, field marshal Lord Seaton p.416-417

¹⁴ In: The life of John Colborne p.421

¹⁵ Leeke, W. , The history of Lord Seaton's regiment at the battle of Waterloo Vol.I p.107

¹⁶ Leeke, W. , The history of Lord Seaton's regiment at the battle of Waterloo Vol.I p.86

¹⁷ Cf. On a part of captain Siborne's History of the Waterloo campaign, by an officer of the 5th British Brigade. In: United Service Magazine, no.196 March 1845 Part I p.388-404

The crisis of Waterloo. By a soldier of the 5th brigade. In: United Service Magazine, 1852 Part II p.51-54

The Waterloo campaign. Captain Siborne to major Macready. In: United Service Magazine, 1852 Part I p.565-580

The Waterloo campaign. Major Macready in reply to captain Siborne. In: United Service Magazine, 1852 Part II p.255-266

The Waterloo campaign. Captain Siborne to major Macready. In: United Service Magazine, 1852 Part II p.420-423

In: BL, Add.ms.34.708 p.253-255