arrived at Brussels on Thursday, June 8th 1815, and was much surprised at the peaceful appearance of that town, and the whole country from Ostend,' wrote Magdalene De Lancey of the period ten days before the battle of Waterloo:

We were billeted in the house of the Count de Lannoy, in the Park, which is a square of very beautiful houses with fine large trees in the centre. The Count de Lannoy was very attentive, and we had a suite of very excellent rooms, up four stories, which is the fashion in that country. I believe. It was amusing enough, sometimes, to see from our windows the people parading in the Park.

Magdalene De Lancey (née Hall) was clearly a remarkable woman. To have decided to accompany her husband, Colonel Sir William Howe De Lancey, on the campaign against Napoleon in the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium) was brave; to have scarcely left his side as she nursed him for a week as he lay mortally wounded after the battle of Waterloo was magnificent; to have written about the experience so honestly and engagingly has proven invaluable to historians. She has been compared to her contemporary Jane Austen transported onto a battlefield, and her Narrative certainly evokes the Brussels scene from William Makepeace Thackeray's novel Vanity Fair, set at the same time.

Magdalene was a daughter of the Scottish Enlightenment. Her father, Sir James Hall (1761-1832), was the 4th baronet of Dunglass in East Lothian, described as 'That relatively rare specimen of early-nineteenth-century life: the intellectual aristocrat.' A noted geologist and inventor, he had proved that limestone could form marble without decomposition if subjected to considerable pressure during heating. Before attending Cambridge and Edinburgh universities, Sir James attended the Brienne military academy in France at the same time as the young Napoleon, who remembered him well in later life. He subsequently studied European volcanoes, sat as an MP during the Napoleonic Wars, and served as president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

In 1786, Sir James married Lady Helen Hamilton Douglas, the daughter of Dunbar Douglas, 4th Earl of Selkirk (1722-99), who had supported the Government during the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion and whose marriage to the Hon. Margaret Home began the Douglas-Home dynasty which produced the twentieth-century prime minister, Sir Alec. Magdalene's brother Basil - author, traveller, friend of Sir Walter Scott and naval captain - was also a considerable figure. Present at the death of Sir John Moore at Corunna, he interviewed Napoleon on St Helena, before dying in a Portsmouth lunatic asylum in 1844.

Magdalene's future husband William De Lancey (also spelt Delancey, De Lancy and Delancy) came from a New York military family of Huguenot descent. His grandfather had been a general and his father Stephen was lieutenant-colonel of the 1st New Jersey Loyal Volunteers, and thus found himself on the losing side of the American War of Independence. Forced to flee the nascent United States, Stephen De Lancey became Governor of Tobago. His son William, born some time between 1778 and 1781, also joined the army, and obtained a cornetcy in the 16th Light Dragoons in 1792 at an abnormally young age of between eleven and fourteen. Helped by a well-appointed uncle,
General Oliver De Lancey, he became a lieutenant the following year.

Seventeen ninety-three saw the start of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which were only to end twenty-two years later at Waterloo. For almost his entire adult life, therefore, William De Lancey knew only war. In 1795 he was transferred to the 80th Regiment of Foot and sent out to India, where he stayed for four years learning his military trade in the Mahratta Wars.

Unsurprisingly for one with connections high in the military, De Lancey rose rapidly, especially once he was attached in 1809 to the Spanish Peninsular campaign of Sir Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington. He showed remarkable bravery at the crossing of the Douro river and the capture of Oporto that year, at the siege and capture of Ciudad Rodrigo in 1811, and at the battle of Vittoria in 1813. After which he was appointed Deputy Quartermaster-General. He was made a Knight Commander of the Bath when peace came in April 1814. Or what everyone at the time believed to be peace.

It was therefore as a brave, distinguished, unmarried, handsome, titled war hero in his late thirties, with the publicly expressed confidence of the Commander-in-Chief and every prospect of future advancement, that Sir William De Lancey was posted to the army cantonment at Edinburgh, where he met Magdalene Hall.

The Hall family lived in George Street in Edinburgh and on the 9,000-acre Dunglass estate near Dunbar, to which De Lancey was invited in December 1814. It was something of a whirlwind romance: De Lancey proposed to Magdalene soon afterwards, the marriage banns were read in March, and the wedding took place on Tuesday April 4th, 1815. Although the marriage worked socially and financially for both sides — important to all nuptial alliances of the day — it is very clear from the Narrative that this was a genuine love-match.

Yet the De Lancys' honeymoon at Dunglass was cut short by international events. Even as the marriage banns were being read, Napoleon escaped from Elba. The Allied Coalition of Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia responded by denouncing the Emperor as an 'outlaw' who would not be permitted to retain the throne of France. Then, suddenly, Louis XVIII fled Paris. It was said that Napoleon sat down to eat the dinner cooked for the king at the Tuileries palace. The Emperor rebuilt his army and decided to march north on June 12th to take Brussels and fling the Anglo-Allied army stationed there off the Continent altogether.

The week of the De Lancys' wedding saw Wellington leave Vienna, where he had been acting as the British plenipotentiary at the international Congress, to take command of the Anglo-Allied forces at Brussels. He sacked his Quartermaster-General, Napoleon's future gaoler on
St Helena, General Sir Hudson Lowe, appointing De Lancey in his place, at least until Wellington’s old Peninsular War Quartermaster, George Murray, could get back from Canada, where he was governor-general. The removal of Lowe created a difficult situation, since Lowe was married to De Lancey’s sister, Susan. It was uncommon, though not unknown, for wives to follow their husbands to war. Brussels was a friendly capital, and the campaign had broken upon the settled social life there, but it had not led to a mass exodus, at least not until it was discovered for certain late on June 15th that it was Napoleon’s next target. There had always been a large British community there, indeed Wellington himself had lived in Brussels as a child. There was a feeling too, according to the Narrative, that the campaign against Napoleon ‘might last months’, and so on June 8th the adventurous, newly wed Magdalene De Lancey arrived in Brussels and took up residence in the house of the Comte de Lannoy at the Impasse du Parc, close to the residence occupied by Wellington himself.

As is also clear from the Narrative, in the week between her arrival in Brussels and the French army crossing the River Meuse and advancing on Brussels, Magdalene and De Lancey were somehow able to find plenty of time to entertain, enjoy one another’s company and go walking in the park.

De Lancey’s duties were nonetheless immense. He was responsible for quartering the troops, storing and moving ammunition, drafting orders, victualling the 68,000-strong heterogeneous Anglo-Allied army, ensuring that all military equipment was with the right units at the right time, and feeding the horses of a vast cavalry contingent. Magdalene’s comment in the Narrative that ‘Fortunately, my husband had scarcely any business to do, and he only went to the office for about an hour a day’ is astonishing in that context. The really frenzied activities at the Allied HQ only began, however, once the news was confirmed...
Lady De Lancey's Narrative

Magdalene wrote the first version of her Narrative in 1816 and, when relatives and friends asked for their own copies, these were written in longhand by her sisters. A total of nine of these are known to have been produced between 1817 and 1840; all are loose-leaf, tied together with string and without covers. There are minor variations between the texts, probably due to the drudgery of copying such a long document, although others may have been due to Magdalene continuing to search for just the right word or phrase.

This Full Narrative is 15,000 words long and at some time between 1816 and 1819 Magdalene prepared a much shorter version, in order to make copying easier. Known as the Abridged Narrative, 2,800 words long, it includes some minor variations in facts. It also adds a few literary flourishes, of which the following example is typical: 'I stood with my husband at a window of the house, which overlooked a gate of the city, and saw the whole army go out.'

Regiment after regiment passed through and melted away in the mist of the morning. No manuscript copies of the Abridged Narrative have been found.

Magdalene's brother, Basil Hall, tried to get the Full Narrative published in the 1820s but Magdalene's second husband, Henry Harvey, refused. In fact, it was the Abridged Narrative which was published first, appearing in the June 1888 issue of The Illustrated Naval and Military Magazine. This was followed by the Full Narrative, published twice in 1906, first in the US-based Century Magazine (April 1906), then as part of A Week at Waterloo by Major B.R. Ward, published by John Murray. Both of these reproduced a version of the Narrative which was, in fact, a copy of a copy.

In the 1990s David Miller researched the whole history of the Narrative, uncovering a trunk in the possession of Magdalene's great-great-great grandson containing what appears to be the original version in blue velvet binding with her initials embossed in gold, together with two other copies of the paper version. This led to Miller's book Lady De Lancéy at Waterloo published in 2000, although this vital decision is more usually accorded to Wellington himself, who knew the ground intimately.

On the morning of the battle, Ensign Howell Rees Gronow of the Guards was surprised and impressed when 'we heard the trampling of horses' feet, and on looking round perceived a large cavalcade of officers coming at full speed. In a moment we recognized the Duke himself at their head. Along with the Duke of Richmond, Prince William of Orange and Lord Fitzroy Somerset, Gronow spotted De Lancéy riding with the Duke, and noted how: 'They all seemed as gay and unconcerned as if they were riding out to meet the hounds in some quiet English county.' De Lancéy clearly understood the importance of maintaining high morale.

The Acting-Quartermaster-General was riding close to Wellington that afternoon when he was hit by the ricochet of a 'spent' cannonball, which smashed into his back and flung him out of his saddle so violently that Wellington later told his friend Earl Stanhope that De Lancéy had 'bounded up into the air again like a struck peashot'.

On another occasion, speaking to the banker and poet Samuel Rogers, Wellington told the whole story. 'De Lancéy was with me, and speaking to me when he was struck,' he recalled.
We were on a point of land that overlooked the plain. I had just been warned off by some soldiers when a ball came bounding along en ricochet, as it is called, striking him on the back, sent him many yards over the heads of his horse. He fell on his face, and bounded upwards and fell again. All the Staff dismounted and ran up to him, and when I came up he said, 'Pray tell them to leave me and let me die in peace'.

Wellington ordered De Lancey to be carried to the village of Waterloo, whereupon the staff lost contact with him. No fewer than half of the staff officers in Wellington's immediate entourage were killed or wounded during the battle. The Prince of Orange was badly wounded by a musket ball; Fitzroy Somerset lost an arm; Sir Alexander Gordon and Colonel Charles Fox Canning were fatally injured. Wellington himself put his own survival that day down to 'the finger of Providence' being upon him.

Writing his famous Report of the battle to Earl Bathurst the following day, the Duke listed De Lancey as 'killed by a cannon shot in the middle of the action'. In fact, he was lying mortally wounded only yards away in a separate dwelling in the same village. It was easy for Wellington to have assumed De Lancey was dead, and this partly explains the confusing and contradictory rumours that Magdalene was to receive over the following days before she reached her husband:

On Monday morning, Captain Mitchell, at nine o'clock, came to tell me that the last battle was over, and the French entirely defeated, and that Sir William was safe. I asked him repeatedly if he was sure, and if he had seen any of his writ-

ing, or if he had heard from him. He had not; but had read a list of the killed and wounded, and could assure me his name was not in it. Captain Mitchell was quite sincere; and was afterwards much grieved that he had added to the accumulation of misery, for this only made the dash down more severe. I now found how much I had really feared by the wild spirits I got into. I walked up and down, for I could not rest, and was almost in a fever with happiness, and for two hours this went on.

It was not long before she received very conflicting news, itself contradicted twice more as she made her way to her husband.

On Tuesday June 20th, the day after pronouncing him dead, Wellington had discovered the truth and visited De Lancey, finding him in 'a barn' on his return from Brussels. 'Poor fellow!' Wellington said later. 'We knew each other ever since we were boys. But I had no time to be sorry. I went on with the army, and never saw him again.'

Years later Wellington recalled that De Lancey 'was an excellent officer, and would have risen to great distinction had he lived', and Frazer reported that De Lancey was 'one of [Wellington's] favourite officers; and I believe that the Duke felt his death more than that of anyone else.' Historians have wondered how Wellington, who was born in 1769
Aabove Jan Willem Pieneman's painting (1824) of the Waterloo battlefield shows Wellington riding past the injured De Lancey (far right). The wounded Prince of Orange is being removed from the battlefield (left).

and went to Eton, could have been a boyhood friend of De Lancey, born a decade later, who went to Harrow, but the reference is probably to the period both spent in India in the late 1790s.

The cause of De Lancey's death is a matter that Wellington's assiduous interlocutor alludes to in the Waterloo section of his memoirs, *Recollections of Samuel Rogers*, where he states that it was 'the wind of the shot' that proved fatal, not metal from the cannonball itself, since the skin on De Lancey's back 'remained unbroken'.

Magdalene recorded her version of her husband's wounding in the *Narrative*:

On Sunday the 18th June, there was to be a great battle. It began about eleven; near three, when Sir William was riding beside the Duke, a cannon ball struck him on the back, at the right shoulder, and knocked him off his horse several yards distance. The Duke at first imagined he was killed; for he said afterwards, he had never in all the lighting he had ever been in seen a man rise again after such a wound. Seeing he was alive (for he hound up again and then sank down), he ran to him, and stooping down, took him by the hand. Sir William begged the Duke, as the last favour he could have it in his power to do him, to exert his authority to take away the crowd that gathered round him, and to let him have his last moments in peace to himself. The Duke bade him farewell, and endeavoured to draw away the Staff, who oppressed him; they wanted to take leave of him, and wondered at his calmness. He was left, as they imagined, to die.

It is impossible to know whether modern battlefield medical techniques might have saved De Lancey, or to tell whether the leeches and the application of a 'blister' would have done much good under the circumstances of the severe trauma of the torso, especially once 'his breathing was like choking'. For all that he seemed to be improving occasionally during the week after Waterloo, De Lancey was probably doomed from the moment he was hit.

Read purely as a piece of reportage, Magdalene's *Narrative* is remarkable, not least for her use of English — 'my breath was like screaming', she writes — and the way she conveys the powerful impact on her senses, such as the smell of gunpowder even ten miles away from Brussels, and rotting flesh both animal and human on the battlefield. The reversals of fortune, as she thinks her husband killed, then saved, then killed, then wounded, and so on, are profoundly moving.

This is Magdalene's remarkable account of seeing her husband for the first time after the battle:

We were soon out of Brussels again, and on the road to Waterloo. It is nine miles, and we took three hours and a half. Mr Hay rode before us with his sword drawn, and obliged them to let us pass. We often stood still for ten minutes. The horses screamed at the smell of corruption, which in many places was offensive.

At last, when near the village, Mr Hay said he would ride forward and find the house, and learn whether I should still proceed or not. I hope no one will ever be able to say they can understand what my feelings must have been during the half-hour that passed till he returned. How fervently and sincerely I resolved that if I saw him alive for one hour I never would repine! I had almost lost my recollection, with the excess of anxiety and suspense, when Mr Hay called out, 'All's well; I have seen him. He expects you.'

'When we got to the village, Sir G[eorge] Scovell met the carriage,
Above The village of Mont St Jean where Magdaiene nursed her mortally wounded husband.

and opening the door, said, 'Stop one moment.' I said, 'Is he alive?' 'Yes, alive; and the surgeons are of opinion that he may recover. We are so grieved for what you have suffered.' 'Oh! never mind what I have suffered. Let me go to him now.' He said I must wait one moment. I assured him I was composed indeed—

He said, 'I see you are,' with a smile, 'but I wish to warn you of one thing. You must be aware that his life hangs on a very slender hold; and therefore any agitation would be injurious. Now, we have not told him you had heard of his death; we thought it would afflict him; therefore do not appear to have heard it.' I promised, and he said, 'Now come along.' I sat down for an instant in the outer room, and he went in; and when I heard my husband say, 'Let her come in, then,' I was overpaid for all the misery. I was surprised at the strength of his voice, for I had expected to find him weak and dying. When I went into the room where he lay, he held out his hand and said, 'Come, Magdalene, this is a sad business, is it not?' I could not speak, but sat down by him and took his hand. This was my occupation for six days.

On the sixth day, despite his wife’s best efforts to nurse him back to health, Sir William De Lancey died. He was buried in the Evere cemetery, three miles north-east of Brussels. Magdaiene remarried two years later, in 1817, to Captain Henry Harvey of the Madras Infantry, with whom, it is believed, she had children. She died in 1822.

Magdaiene’s Narrative, which was written for family and friends rather than a wider audience, remained unpublished until 1888, when it appeared in abridged form in Britain. Some people had read it by then in manuscript form, including Charles Dickens, who commented: 'If I live for fifty years, I shall dream of it every now and then, from this hour to the day of my death, with the most frightful reality.'

The Narrative ends with Magdaiene’s notes on her husband’s burial, with a final sentence that was doubtless what tugged at Dickens’ heart-strings:

General Dundas kindly executed all my orders with respect to the funeral, etc., which took place on Wednesday the 28th, in the cemetery of the Reformed Church. It is about a mile from Brussels, on the road to Louvain. I had a stone placed, with simply his name and the circumstances of his death. I visited his grave on Tuesday, the 4th of July. The burying-ground is in a sweet, quiet, retired spot. A narrow path leads to it from the road. It is quite out of sight among the fields, and no house but the grave-digger’s cottage is near. Seeing my interest in that grave, he begged me to let him plant roses round it, and promised I should see it nicely kept when I returned. I am pleased that I saw the grave and the stone; for there were nearly forty other new graves, and not another stone. At eleven o’clock that same day, I set out for England. That day, three months before, I was married.


Further Reading

David Millier, Lady De Lancey at Waterloo: A Story of Duty and Devotion (Spellmount, 2000); David Millier, The Duchess of Richmond’s Ball 15 June 1815 (Spellmount, 2005); Nick Foulkes, Dancing into Battle: A Social History of the Battle of Waterloo (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006); Jacques Logie, Waterloo: The 1815 Campaign (Spellmount, 2006).

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